



Pop and

POUR

BELLA MICHAELS

Pop and
POUR
BELLA MICHAELS

pop and pour

GRADO VALLEY VINEYARDS

BELLA MICHAELS



contents

Bella's Books

1. Cosimo
2. Brooke
3. Cosimo
4. Brooke
5. Brooke
6. Cosimo
7. Brooke
8. Cosimo
9. Brooke
10. Cosimo
11. Brooke
12. Cosimo
13. Brooke
14. Cosimo
15. Brooke
16. Cosimo
17. Brooke
18. Cosimo
19. Brooke
20. Cosimo
21. Brooke
22. Cosimo
23. Brooke
24. Brooke
25. Cosimo
26. Brooke
27. Cosimo
28. Brooke

29. [Cosimo](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Lay It Down](#)

[Become a VIP](#)

[Enjoy this book?](#)

[About the Author](#)

*Thank you to my martini-loving friend who was very
generously my guiding light for this new series.*

bella's books

Grado Valley Vineyards

Pop and Pour

Lay It Down

Sip and Savor

Horizontal Tasting

[Entry Level](#)

Boys of Bridgewater

[Overruled by Love](#)

Last Call

Billion Dollar Date

My Foolish Heart

Become a Grado Valley Vineyards VIP! [Sign up here](#) to receive Bella's twice monthly newsletter full of exclusives and fun shenanigans.

CHAPTER ONE

cosimo

GRADO VALLEY, FINGER LAKES, NY

“He is one cocky son of a bitch.”

“Cos, please.”

Shit. Didn't see Mom walk in.

I spun around in my chair. Sure enough, the one woman I'd never curse in front of stood at the entrance of my office. Arms crossed. Definitely pissed.

“I have to go,” I said, pressing the button on my phone, effectively hanging up on my brother.

“I was just telling Neo what someone said about me. I'd never use that kind of language myself.” Somehow, I kept a straight face.

“Ahh, so my son is the ‘son of a bitch’ in question? Nice.”

“At least you know it's not true.” Another straight face.

“Mm-hmm,” she said, obviously disagreeing with me, for good reason. Sitting down across from me, she put something on her lap. Looked like a magazine.

Mom frowned, which definitely didn't improve my mood. I'd just been venting to my younger brother that another of our tasting room associates quit. On top of that, our sister's

harebrained idea to hold a Harvest Festival was falling onto my lap, as if harvest season wasn't a busy enough time already. As expected. It actually wouldn't be so bad if she wasn't about to head to Italy for three months.

"Min is killing me with this festival. And I just finished an interview that didn't go well this morning, so we're still short a tasting room associate until I can find someone."

"Wish I could help, Cos-i-mooh." She smiled after emphasizing the *mooh* at the end. It was an "I know you asked me to stop saying that twenty years ago, but I'm the woman who gave birth to you so ... no" smile. I didn't bother reminding her. She would only launch into the story of how I was obsessed with cows, or "moo-moos," as I apparently called them. And would probably whip out pictures of my first cow-themed birthday party. Better to let it drop.

"When do you leave?" I asked.

"Now. That's why I'm here."

I looked down at my phone for the time. "Dad was just here this morning, said your flight was eleven tonight?"

I personally hated red-eyes, but to Italy, it made sense. It was a delayed retirement trip, and my parents were finally "going home," as my mother said. I hated to remind her that she and Dad were two generations removed from "home," and that she'd lived in upstate New York all her life.

"It is," she shrugged. "You know your father."

"He is seriously going to have you sit at the airport for the entire afternoon?"

"What do you think?"

I thought there was as much chance of convincing my father that they were unlikely to get stuck behind an accident and miss his flight as of my mother ceasing to call me Cosimoo for good.

“You have your passports? Chargers?”

“Yep.”

“You got some cash already, right? Dad said he was going to the bank last week.”

“This isn’t our first rodeo, Cos. We’re fine. I promise.” Mom leaned forward and plopped a magazine on my desk. “Did you see this yet?”

I picked it up. *Homegrown: A Guide to Wine in the Finger Lakes*. I hadn’t seen it. Completely forgot it was coming out today.

“You look good, Cos,” she said of the black-and-white photo of me on the cover. It was a headshot I had taken last year, when my parents first announced they’d be retiring this summer. Leaving me in charge. Of the whole damn vineyard. Of a legacy.

I took a deep breath, the headline making this whole thing more real, somehow, than the fact that my parents were about to board a plane leaving me solely in charge. Never mind that I’d been basically flying solo for the past few months. Or that I spent my entire life, with the exception of college, in Grado Valley. Working at the vineyard.

“You know I love you with your glasses. But you could have smiled even a little. You look serious.”

“Really, Mom?” Me not smiling or being the life of the party like my father was only one of many differences between us. One my mother was acutely aware of.

“Okay, okay. But it’s not like you don’t know how to smile.”

“Just that I don’t do it as often as everyone would like,” I muttered.

“If by ‘everyone,’ you mean your dad, that’s just not true. He loves you exactly as you are.” Unlike the face that stared back at me from the cover of the magazine, my mother’s grin reached her eyes, crinkled them at the corners. She was sunshine to my clouds. Always had been.

Reaching out, she grabbed my hand, which was still gripping the corner of the magazine. “You will be fine, Cos. Better than fine. You’ve done more for Grado Valley in the last five years than either of us have done in ten. You know all of it like the back of your hand. And you have your brothers. You’ll be more than fine.” She squeezed my hand. I held on tight, as if I was a boy of five and not a man of thirty-two.

Sixty-five acres. Two wineries. A cafe. Cottages. A budding brewery. My siblings’ livelihoods, never mind my own.

“I know,” I told her. The half-truth tasted sour in my mouth. “You guys don’t worry about a thing. Enjoy Italy,” I said. “You deserve it.”

That much, at least, was true. If anyone deserved this retirement trip, my parents did. They’d built Grado Valley Vineyards from a card table in the barn to an estate that employed dozens of people on top of my own family. It was incredible, really.

With a final squeeze, she let go of my hand and waved toward the magazine. “Read it,” she said. “Never mind you look like a model on the cover.”

I rolled my eyes.

“It’s a great article. No hint of a cocky son of a bitch at all.”

“Mom!”

“What? I can curse if I want.”

And she probably did in private, but not around us. Didn’t want to condone bad behavior. Never mind that the youngest of the four of us was no longer a child at twenty-five. Old habits died hard, I guessed.

“You better get going before Dad sends a search party.” I stood and made my way around the desk. Putting my arms around her, I pulled my mother close. Closing my eyes at her familiar scent, I said a silent prayer to Saint Christopher to keep her and my dad safe. I might not have gone to church, much to my mother’s horror. Plus, it couldn’t hurt.

“Love you, Cos-i-mooh,” she said, pulling away.

“Love you, Mom. Tell Dad not to drive like a maniac to the airport. You have more than enough time,” I said with emphasis on *more*.

“I will, sweetie. We’re just a phone call away. But I’m not worried at all. You got this.”

She fully believed that. Believed in me.

I just couldn’t fuck this up.

CHAPTER TWO

brooke

“WHAT IN THE HELL ARE YOU TWO DOING BACK THERE?” THE question came from all the way in the front seat. My poor friend Amy, along with every other girl in this seven-seater except Marian and I, were all prone to car sickness. Lucky for the two of us, we had the distinct pleasure of the third row for the entire trip. Which honestly wasn’t so bad. It was closer to the snacks in the very back.

“Nothing,” Marian and I said at the same time, giggling.

“Ooooh, how pretty,” Tina said in front of me. My friend since Freshman year of high school was looking out the window as Seneca Lake zipped past us. It was really pretty. I didn’t need to be completely sober to appreciate the beauty of this place. We’d only been here for two days and already I felt my troubles beginning to ebb.

Girls’ trips will do that to you.

“Did you open the Combos?”

I nodded and handed over the cheddar cheese goodness to Marian.

“Do I smell Combos?” Jen asked. She was in the second row, along with Tina, Debby and Leeta. Six of us for five days

of wine drinking and eating our faces off. A perfect way to forget about the dickhead I left behind in the city.

“No,” I lied as Marian and I attempted not to laugh as if Jen had just told the funniest joke imaginable. We broke out in hysterics anyway.

“Pass them up, bitches,” Tina said, sassy as usual. It was one of the things I liked most about her. When I’d first started working in the city, it was Tina who taught me how to hold my own.

I looked at Marian, who vigorously shook her head. We laughed again. Thankfully, we’d been doing a lot of that today, thanks to the vodka roadies we’d decided to make for the ride. Three wineries down, one to go.

“You know what? This is a lot better than crying on my couch,” I said.

It was my way of telling the girls how much this trip meant to me. Getting laid off probably wouldn’t have been so bad if the guy that could have prevented it wasn’t the same one I’d been dating for nearly a year. The only good thing to come of the whole mess was an impromptu girls’ trip to cheer me up.

And it was working. If only I could get my former boss/boyfriend out of my head.

“Hell yeah,” Debby yelled. “Is that it?” she asked a second later.

I looked out the small window.

Grado Valley Vineyards.

Not only had my girls cleared their schedules for an impromptu extended weekend to cheer me up, but they had done all of the planning too. I’d been to the Finger Lakes

before, but never this winery. Amy had been here a bunch of times and said this was always her favorite.

“It’s beautiful,” I said, taking in the sprawling lakeside estate. To the right of us, was the longest and second deepest of the Finger Lakes, according to our driver.

“Holy shit, it’s huge,” Amy said.

“That’s what she said,” chimed at least three of my friends at once.

I couldn’t see out the front window from back here. But at least I had Combos. Or did have them, anyway. Looked like Marian had passed them up to Tina after all. Which was totally fine. I had apparently been working on the opposite of a revenge body since the breakup and could use a few Combos in my life, but the pizza flavored pretzel snacks always called to me.

As the ladies began to pile out, I could finally see what Amy was talking about. While some of the wineries we’d been to were one or two buildings—converted barns and the like—this one was like a playground for adults.

Amy talked to the driver about pickup details as Jen and I walked ahead, checking the place out.

Behind us, we could see some of the vineyards. I wondered what it would be like to wander through them with a wine glass in hand. In front of us, two massive wooden posts, with wine barrels as their bases, supported a massive “GVV” sign. As the others caught up, we walked under it into a huge courtyard.

“Where do we even start?” Jen asked.

“I have no idea,” I said. “But does it really matter? Let’s pick a building and get to it.”

The others laughed as we did just that. I started walking. There were multiple buildings to choose from, all in different shades of green and tan, giving the entire compound a woodsy feel, like you'd just been plopped into the middle of the Adirondacks but with wine.

"That's the Brooke I know and love," Debby said.

"Taking charge," Jen added. "Happy as a clam."

"Life of the party," Marian said behind me as they piled on the compliments.

"You guys are just being extra nice because my life is such shit right now," I called back.

Silence.

I laughed. "And you don't even deny it."

But just as we were about to enter the building, Jen pulled me aside. The other girls walked past us into the building.

"They're not blowing smoke up your ass, Brooke. You are pretty awesome."

"Aww," I said, "you're pretty awesome yourself."

"Brooke," she said in a more serious tone. Like drunk-serious. Which meant I could totally trust what Jen was saying to be one-hundred percent true. "I know you've been dealt a crappy hand, but I'm glad to see you back to your old self today. You'll get through this."

"I will," I agreed. "But in the meantime, I'm really thankful for you guys." I refused to cry. How cliché. But as I thought of my mother, who had moved away again, and wasn't even within driving distance now . . . and my ex . . . and the fact that I was currently jobless . . .

No. I would not cry standing in front of a winery with the greatest group of friends ever.

“Life is too short to give him another thought,” I said, as if saying it out loud would erase everything that had happened in the last two months. “Carpe diem, right?”

“Carpe fucking diem,” she agreed. “Come on. A wine flight awaits.”

“Just what we need,” I told her, grateful for the millionth time for my friends. No drama or bullshit. One hundred percent support. I may not have done a bang-up job picking a boyfriend, but I did a much better job picking friends. “Let’s do it.”

Carpe fucking diem indeed.

CHAPTER THREE

cosimo

“COS, WE’RE SLAMMED.”

God help her, I loved Thayle like a sister, but she was killing me today. After my mom left, I attempted to actually get some paperwork in order, but one fire after another had pulled me away. The fact that our wine club manager was not in her office meant that we were scraping the bottom of the barrel to get tastings finished for the day.

“It’s the weather,” I said. A perfect Saturday in June meant everyone and their brother and sister were out and about. While some wineries stuck to reservations only, my parents had been adamant about always accepting walk-ins. A good strategy if you actually had enough staff, which we didn’t, not after losing one tasting room associate to a summer program in college and another a week later to a lifeguarding job.

“You look even more miserable than usual,” Thayle said, her characteristic bluntness out in full force. She and my sister met in kindergarten and were as close as two people could be without actually being related, so I’d had a few dozen years to get used to her. Sometimes I wished the shy girl I had known in elementary and middle school hadn’t “blossomed,” as my sister called it, into, well, adult Thayle.

On the other hand, she was damn good at her job. And as loyal as could be.

“Well? You coming?”

I stood, knowing there was no other choice. “I get no respect around here.” If either of my brothers had said that, Thayle would have laughed. But coming from me, she wasn’t sure how to take it. “I’m kidding, Thayle.”

“Jesus, Cos. You’re gonna give me a heart attack. I never know with you. Come on. We need you for a group of six.”

Ah, shit. I wasn’t in the mood. “Girls?”

Thayle rolled her eyes. “Women.”

“Bachelorette party?”

“Not from the looks of it,” she said as we walked down the hall.

“Girls’ trip.”

“Bingo.”

“One to ten?”

She scrunched her nose. “Hard to say, they just came in. Maybe six.”

I could deal with that. Anything over ten, we didn’t serve. Anywhere between eight and ten, well, that was where it got tricky. It meant the guest was more than just a little tipsy but not enough for us to refuse service.

And today, I just wasn’t in the mood.

“Maybe try to smile a little too.”

“I always do,” I said as we walked into the tasting room.

The bigger of our two wineries, this one was more popular since it overlooked the lake. With its high ceilings supported by wood beams, the 1942 Wine Cellar, “42” or just “the Cellar” as it was known by regulars, had been renovated just two years ago, my brother Marco’s brainchild.

I looked around but didn’t see a group.

“Outside,” Thayle said, jumping back into the fray. She hadn’t been kidding, we were slammed. If it was this busy inside, I shuddered to think of what it must look like outside.

“Cosimo Grado,” a voice called as I was about to head outside.

I turned, saw him and reached out my hand. “Owen Smith. What the hell are you doing here?”

Owen’s family owned half of Kitchi Falls—a general store in town and one of the most popular local bars to start. The joke around here was that if the Smiths didn’t own it, they’d probably be buying it soon. It pissed some people off, but the way I saw it, his family had done the same thing as my own. They built a legacy through blood, sweat, and tears. If they reaped the rewards of their ancestors’ hard work, good for them. But I was surprised to see him standing in our tasting room in the middle of a Saturday afternoon.

“Birthday”—he nodded to his girlfriend. “She refuses to let me work. We’re wine touring this afternoon.”

“Nice,” I said. “Hang on.”

Edging my way to a display, I looked for a particular bottle. Grabbing it, I headed back to Owen and handed him the bottle. “Happy birthday.”

“How the hell do you remember? It must have been two years since I was here last?”

I remembered everyone's favorite wines but didn't say that. "Lucky guess. That one spent two years in French oak," I said of the bottle of Sangiovese. "It's at its peak, so don't save it."

"Save it? Are you kidding? I'll be drinking it later."

"Enjoy," I told him, leaving my old friend and heading outside. Owen and I graduated high school together. As eldest sons taking over the family business, we had a lot in common. We even played football together. I played in college too, but after graduating, I took up golf. These days I was lucky to get to anything but the gym.

Jesus.

If I had thought it was busy inside, the deck was positively slammed. Most of the customers out here were sitting in Adirondack chairs, sipping wine and enjoying the view. But there were a handful of tasting tables too. One was already being manned, another was occupied by a group lingering after a tasting, and a third was mine for the next half hour.

Six women, not girls (thank you for clarifying, Thayle), stood around a picnic table, peering down at their tasting sheets. I counted at least three in cowboy boots, a trend this summer. By the end of May, I could tell what fashion trend I would be seeing a lot of over the summer. Last year, it was scarves. A fucking stupid idea in the summer. This year, cowboy boots.

I usually planted a smile on my face when it came to customers, but today I just wanted to get through the next hour until tastings were finished. As I approached, one of the women spotted me and, not so subtly, hit her friend on the arm. They both looked up, gaping. I didn't have time to be flattered.

As I approached, the three with their backs to me began to turn around, prompted by the others to have a look. If they were impressed, which they clearly were, I'd love to introduce them to Marco, who didn't just look like a model. He was one. At least, for a brief stint when he was younger. It was a constant source of entertainment for the whole family, who loved to tease him about it.

"Afternoon, ladies," I said.

A round of hellos greeted me. I moved to the head of the long table so I could talk to the whole group. The only woman who hadn't turned to look at me finally did glance up from her phone.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

She was smoking hot. Looked like ... someone, but I couldn't place it. Long brown hair, eyebrows that demanded you stare at her eyes, which was exactly why I turned away.

"Welcome to Grado Valley Vineyards. My name is Cosimo, and I'll be your tasting attendant today. Where are you ladies from?"

I said the words as if I'd done so a million times because I had. When my friends had been messing around at the docks or cruising the ten blocks that made up Kitchi's downtown, my siblings and I had been here, on the estate. Before we were old enough to serve wine, we pruned and fertilized vines, crushed and destemmed grapes, moved barrels, whatever needed to be done.

"All over," the woman closest to me said. A beautiful blonde who was probably from the city.

"Some New York. Some Pennsylvania," another chimed in.

Six out of ten on the drunk scale, my ass. These ladies were feeling good. But they weren't sloppy. Just buzzing.

“Great,” I said. “Are we ready to get started? Did you pick out your wines yet?”

The barrage of questions began. I didn't mind. Could answer them without really even listening. Wine education was a part of the job. So I patiently explained the difference between varietals and guided them toward making their decisions.

But there was one who apparently didn't need my help. Not because the hot one knew her wines, most likely. But because she was on her phone. Again. I'd never understand why someone paid to come out here, with this view of Seneca Lake behind them, to stare at a small screen.

Beautiful, for sure. And also the exact kind of woman I couldn't stand. But since it wasn't good business to tell her it might be a better idea to give her real, live friends and their surroundings as much attention as her phone, I ignored her instead.

“Okay,” I said, gathering up their forms. “Let me have a look.”

As I mentally made a note of all the wines I'd be bringing back, I listened to their chatter.

“I was thinking maybe we should stay in tonight,” one of them said. “Maybe drink some of the wine we bought and order in.”

“Sounds good. Should I cancel the dinner reservations, then? What about that bar we were thinking to check out?”

“Let's do that tomorrow night. After the vodka roadies, I'm not sure I'll make it tonight.”

Against my better judgment, I had to ask.

“Did you just say vodka roadies?”

“Um.” The blonde pointed at her friend. Look at that, not on her phone for a change. “It was Brooke’s idea.”

Brooke. The name suited her perfectly, somehow.

“Apparently there’s a law against drinking in a car,” the blonde said. I couldn’t wait to see where this was going. “Even a rental. With a driver.”

Her voice was deeper than I would have expected. God help me, I really should stay away from this one. But I didn’t. Of course.

“I have to know. What does hiring a driver have to do with it?”

“I mean, I can see if you’re driving yourself, obviously. But if you rent a limo or a big SUV to drive around the wineries for the day, I think you should be allowed to drink as a passenger.”

Cosimo, don’t ask. You have a ton of work to do.

“Count me curious,” I said anyway. “Why do you need to drink in the car on a wine tour?”

She rolled her eyes. Literally. “Yesterday some of the wineries were really far apart. Like a half hour.”

“And?”

The other women watched us as if it were a ping-pong competition. Their heads turned back and forth as I shot questions at Brooke and she answered.

“And we were losing our buzz.”

“In a half hour?”

“Maybe.”

“I see.” They were hardcore if nothing else. “And the vodka roadies?”

“Well, we asked the driver yesterday about drinking in the back seat, and he said we couldn’t. So we put a little vodka and some grape water flavoring in our water bottles, and voilà.”

Her phone buzzed. She looked down.

I was done with her.

“Well ladies, I hope you can actually taste the wine after your roadies, because you saved the best for last.” Being at the top of the lake, we were often at the beginning or the end of tour days. “Let me go grab your wines. Enjoy the view,” I said to Brooke, who was, once again, on her phone.

She didn’t even hear me.

“Sounds great,” Marian said. One of the others had mentioned her name, and I never forgot a name.

Not even two steps away from the table, I heard, “Holy shit. Did you see that guy? He’s like an even better-looking Clark Kent.”

For the first time all afternoon, I smiled. I might not have been interested in fraternizing with the clientele, but I wasn’t made of cardboard either. A compliment was a compliment, and I’d take it.

“Better-looking than Henry Cavill?”

Shaking my head, I moved out of earshot, not wanting to hear the answer to that one. Henry Cavill was a good-looking dude. Not sure I could compete on that front.

CHAPTER FOUR

brooke

“BROOKE, WHAT’S WRONG?”

I had tried to hide it, but Leeta could tell something was up.

I whispered in reply, not wanting to drag the vibe down. “Evan just texted.”

“Are you serious? Jerk. What did he say?”

The sight of our tasting guy’s ass as he walked away distracted me. The guy was so hot, looking at him was like looking into the sun.

“Oh. My. God.”

I whipped my head back to Leeta. Too late. I was caught. “What?”

“That is literally the first time in months you passed on an opportunity to talk about Evan. Not that I blame you. He’s unreal.”

“Who?” I pretended not to understand.

“What are you two whispering about? Our guy?” Debby asked.

“He’s not ‘our guy.’” Amy stretched her neck to look up at the deck where our tasting attendant had disappeared inside.

“Although I wouldn’t mind if he was.”

Since she was also single, I immediately deferred to my friend. “Go for it,” I told her. “We’re here a few more days.” I added with a wink.

“Oh no,” Amy said. “He was totally checking you out.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, you,” Marian agreed. “You didn’t see it because you were on your phone.”

I didn’t want to make a big deal out of it, but I also didn’t want them to think I was not fully present either. I read somewhere that every time you picked up your cell when you were with other people, it was basically like saying the real-life companions were less important than whatever you were looking at, and that totally made sense. But there were exceptions. Like when the guy who was responsible for getting you fired from your dream job, also the same guy you’ve been dating for months, popped up on your phone unexpectedly.

“Evan texted,” I admitted to the group. But in an effort to not make this about him, since the point of this whole trip was to pull me out of the hell that had been my life since the breakup and job loss, I quickly added, “It’s no big deal. He just asked when I’m coming back to New York.”

“He *what?*” Debby was kind enough to be indignant on my behalf.

“You didn’t answer him, did you?” Jen asked, mortified.

“No,” I assured the group. “And I don’t plan to.”

Murmurs of “good” and “screw him” turned back to a discussion of *our* guy.

“I think I’m moving to the Finger Lakes,” Tina said. “If there are more where that guy came from.”

“Speaking of moving, have you decided yet what you’re going to do?” Leeta asked me.

After I lost my job and Evan and I broke up, I’d toyed with the idea of moving out of the city. Rent was outrageous, and that job had been the only reason I’d moved to New York in the first place. “I’m not sure,” I sighed. “I applied to a few places, so we’ll see.”

“In the city?” Debby asked.

“Yeah,” I told her. “Nothing exciting, to be honest.”

The girls continued chatting as I looked out to the lake. There was something calming about the water, but maybe that was just because I grew up on a lake just like this. When we left Shohola Lake after Mom and Dad divorced and we moved for the first time, I missed it terribly. The calm in the morning and early evenings. The way the boat lights looked like sparkles on the water at night.

“Here he comes,” Jen whispered.

I resisted the urge to turn around. As he neared our table, he came into view with more wine bottles than I could ever possibly carry, then began to put them on the table. With a name like Cosimo, and by the way he looked, the guy was definitely Italian. And so damn attractive, good lord.

“We’ll start with this one,” he said, picking up a bottle. “I think the three of you have selected the pinot gris.” He began to pour. “A perfect summer wine.”

I didn’t choose the pinot gris, so I just hung back and watched. He was charming, and obviously knowledgeable, but kind of robotic. Like he’d done this so many times he wasn’t

even thinking about it. Which he probably had, but the least he could do was pretend to be enjoying himself.

Super hot, yes. But not my type at all. I liked guys like me. Fun-loving. Ones who loved life and made me smile. This one was way too serious, and not just because of the dark-rimmed glasses, which did make him look like Clark Kent a bit. Just his general vibe.

“Okay, this next one is our Silver Chardonnay. It’s typically served in thirty-one, but we moved it over here for the summer.”

“Thirty-one?” Amy asked. “What’s that?”

He gave my friend his full attention, which I did like. Eye contact was an underrated skill. “Sorry. The 1931 Wine Barn. We have two wineries on-site. You’re in the 1942 Wine Cellar building now. Or in back of it, at least. You saw the other one before you came in, on your left in the courtyard. Locals refer to them as thirty-one and forty-two or sometimes just the Barn and the Cellar.”

He began to pour the chardonnay in each of our glasses.

“What do the numbers mean?” Leeta swirled the glass in her wine like she knew what she was doing. We were all total amateurs when it came to wine tastings. We liked wine, but we were definitely not pros. But yesterday one of the wine attendees told us that swirling the wine caused some evaporation to take place, apparently a good thing, so now all of us did it as if we were total connoisseurs.

“They’re the years the owner’s parents came to the States from Italy, nineteen thirty-one and nineteen forty-two.”

I was about to ask about the owner, but as our guy told everyone to drink, I realized he forgot me. “I selected this one

too,” I said.

He looked at me from across the table.

His eyes were brown. A deep, dark, molten brown that reminded me of the chocolate that oozed from a lava cake. Maybe just because I really liked chocolate lava cake.

Breaking eye contact, he looked down at my sheet. “So you did.”

Was it me, or did his tone change? As if he didn’t like me much. Which was odd. My coworkers told me all the time I was way too nice to be working in the city. I tried really hard to have an edge, and sometimes succeeded, but I knew how to turn that off outside the office. And I usually made a good first impression.

“Can you slide your glass to me?”

Despite the tone, it still sounded dirty. I resisted the urge to say, *I can slide whatever you want to you*, and did as he asked.

My glass now filled, I pulled it back.

“So this is a full-flavored wine with notes of caramel, vanilla, and peach. Fermentation was stopped before dryness, giving it a sweetness balanced by a rich, creamy texture. See what you think.”

I took a sip, detecting only the vanilla and caramel but not the note of peach, and I told him so.

“Do you drink a lot of wine?” he asked.

“I do. But usually just pinot grigio. I don’t branch out much.”

“Same,” Amy added. “But I like this. I can taste the peach, I think.”

“I definitely can,” Jen said. “It’s yummy.”

He was yummy.

Too bad the guy was a snoozefest. Otherwise, I might have made a move after Amy gave me the go-ahead. But I thought they were wrong about him being interested in me. The guy didn’t look my way again, not even when I had the wines he was pouring on my list.

Whatever.

It was too soon for me to date anyway. I had sworn off all men for the summer. If not longer. And we were only here a few more days.

I looked up, trying hard to actively ignore Clark Kent, and I saw a little girl racing away from a group of couples. They didn’t seem to notice her, but there was a log right in her path. The girl, upset, didn’t seem to see it either. She was going to take a big ol’ tumble.

I jumped up and ran around the table toward her, yelling, “Stop!” just in time. The girl took notice of the log and came to a halt. Unfortunately, I did not. Just like that, having tripped on nothing special, I was sprawled out on the grass, my friends and Clark all circled around me.

In an effort to dispel their looks of horror, I outstretched my legs and arms and began to make snow angels. Or grass angels, as it were.

“I’m fine,” I told them. “Nothing to see here.”

Everyone began to laugh.

Except him.

Clark Kent, clearly disgusted, turned and walked away. Sayonara, sourpuss. I had no headspace for anyone who tried

to bring down my mood on this trip. We were here to have fun, and that was exactly what I planned to do, despite our very cranky wine tasting associate.

CHAPTER FIVE

brooke

“HEY THERE.” THE DOOR SQUEAKED OPEN BEHIND ME. IT WAS Tina with a coffee mug in her hand. She sat next to me in a chair on the front porch of our rental house, as she’d done each morning.

I’d just been enjoying it as well. Although there was a street in front of us, it was fairly quiet. And beyond it, a grassy hill leading down to train tracks and the lake. A clear view with nothing to obstruct it.

“How much do you think a house like this costs?” I asked.

“No idea. I’ll have to look it up.”

“Too much,” I said. Though I’d had a great job and was given a severance package, this rental house was way out of my price range. “How you feeling?”

“Surprisingly good. Thank God we thought to bring actual water too.”

“And not just vodka-filled bottles?” I smiled. “I’m feeling pretty good. Slight headache. But it could be from the four texts I got last night.”

“Are you serious?”

“Unfortunately.”

“What the hell was he thinking?”

“He wasn’t. Pretty sure he was drunk texting. Said he’s really, really sorry and misses me.”

“Good.” She gave me a sideways look. “You aren’t falling for his bullshit, are you?”

I let the warm goodness run down my throat. Coffee in the morning on the lake. It really didn’t get any better than this. Maybe an ocean view. But this was a damn close second. “Are you kidding me? He got me laid off from a job I loved. Evan is more done than burnt toast.”

“And you hate burnt anything.”

“I do.”

Tina sipped her coffee next to me.

“But I don’t hate this view. Or this place. We have to get back to the little town too.” On the day I’d arrived, only Jen and Amy were here yet, and we went into town for lunch, just the three of us. “It’s adorable. Like stepping back in time. They even have a general store.”

“Sounds like an absolute blast.”

Tina was a city girl through and through, so I was one hundred percent sure she was being sarcastic.

“There’s something to be said for a small town. I wouldn’t expect that here since everything is so spread out. But I guess most of it is vineyards.”

She was looking at me as if I had three heads. “You seriously love it here.”

I’d been raving about this place since the minute we arrived. I really did love it. The stillness of it. The vibe. The

vineyards. Everything about it was, well, me. Or at least I guessed it was me. I wasn't completely sure who "me" was anymore.

"You should stay."

I looked at her the same way Tina looked at me a few seconds ago when I gushed over the town. "Excuse me?"

"You should stay. For a little while, at least."

I'd thought she'd meant forever. Nearly gave me a heart attack. "Yeah, I'll just go ahead and put an offer on this house. I mean, it's perfect. Nice view and all. And then with some of the remaining money in my bank account, maybe I'll buy a winery too while I'm at it."

"Smart ass." I smiled and took a sip of coffee. "I'm sure you could find a reasonable long-term rental."

I looked back at the lake. "And why, exactly, would I be looking for a long-term rental in a place I know exactly zero people?"

Tina, always the adventurous one, shrugged. "You don't have a job to go back to."

I peered at her through raised eyebrows.

"Sorry, but it's true. You're sitting on a pretty sweet severance package. And clearly you love it here. It could be a little summer adventure while you clear your head."

The woman was out of her mind. "I'd tear through my bank account too quickly."

"So get a summer job."

This time I laughed out loud, and then remembered the others were sleeping and lowered my voice. "A summer job?"

Like a teenager. Maybe at an ice cream shop?"

"Brooke," she said, using that tone. The one she tried to teach me to use so I didn't get walked all over in the boardroom. "You hate the city. Why go back?"

"You're there. And a ton of job opportunities are there. And—" I pretended to think, "—oh yeah. My apartment is there."

She put her coffee down in front of her, which was when I got scared. She was serious now. "One, since I got engaged and moved to the burbs, I hardly see you." Which was true. While I lived and (had) worked in Tribeca and Tina had lived on the Upper East Side, now she resided out in the boondocks, up in Westchester, and we only got together every few months or so. "Two, those job opportunities have not yet materialized. You can job hunt from here just as easily as there. Three, your apartment will be fine. I will check on it periodically."

"I don't have my stuff."

"I'll send it to you."

"I'm not sure I can afford it."

"Can you afford not to?"

My hand froze halfway to my mouth. I lowered the mug to my lap and thought about that for a second. Longer than a second, actually. It was nuts. Crazy pants. Absolutely insane. But then I looked back out to the water.

Was it nuts?

"A summer job," I mumbled.

"Part-time. For spending money. And to meet people. Or at least have someone to talk to. You're too much of a people

person to sit here and stare at the lake all summer, as pretty as it is.”

She was not wrong. “I’m sure no one is still hiring for the summer. It’s two weeks into June.”

“And I’m sure you’re wrong.” Tina looked like the cat who ate the canary, and the canary was a big, juicy plump one. Her expression scared me, actually.

“What?” I asked.

She leaned forward. “Don’t say no immediately.”

Yep, definitely scared. “Tina ...”

“Yesterday, at the winery, when we were checking out, the girl apologized if the service was anything short of excellent. She mentioned they were two tasting room attendants short and were having a hard time finding replacements.”

“Tasting room attendants? I know one wine, and that’s it. Hardly a perfect fit.”

Tina rolled her eyes. “You were the head of product development at Avec Coeur. You literally smelled things for a living. And you were responsible for developing the most popular perfume Avec Coeur has put out in years. I’m pretty sure you can talk about ‘caramel notes’ all day.”

“I didn’t smell, or taste, any caramel notes in that wine,” I said. Which, of course, made me think of that particular winery. And that particular man. The one I dreamt of last night despite his overly dour disposition.

“Beside the point. It’s perfect. Imagine sipping coffee with a lake view, working at a winery for a few hours, hitting that cute little town you adore.” She said it like the entire plan would be the worst thing in the world. For her.

But for me ...

“I wouldn’t have a lake view on my budget. And I haven’t gotten the job.”

“Yet. Call them for an interview. Tell them you’re in town for a few days. If you get it, take it as a sign from the universe.”

“The universe,” I muttered. But Tina knew, despite my hesitation, I was actually considering her harebrained scheme. The universe did have a way of working things out. If I *did* get the job and *could* find a place to stay . . .

“You’re thinking about it.”

I gave her a look. And then thought of something. “Which winery was it?”

I knew immediately from her guilty expression.

“Nope. No deal. There is no way I’m working with that guy. He didn’t like me. And the feeling was mutual.” The last thing I needed was to be fantasizing all summer about Clark Kent, who did nothing but glower at me, but I didn’t say that bit out loud.

“Everyone likes you.”

“Not him.”

“I beg to differ.”

“I am not working with a guy who glares at me through his judgy glasses.”

Tina’s exaggerated blinking refused to let me off the hook.

“No. Not doing it.” I sat back, brought the coffee mug to my lips, and put Tina’s wild plan out of my head. Live here for

the summer? Pfft. As if I could really just leave my life and move to the Finger Lakes.

It had been a fun idea while it lasted. For all of five minutes.

But feasible? Nope.

The door creaked open.

“Tell me this isn’t the most brilliant idea in the world,” Tina said to Leeta, who’d just walked onto the porch.

I groaned as my friends planned out a summer for me that simply was not going to happen.

CHAPTER SIX

cosimo

“IT’S WAY TOO EARLY FOR THIS SHIT,” I SAID. WHENEVER TWO of my siblings came into the Cellar on a Monday morning before opening, it was always bad news.

Neo looked fresh from the vineyards, as usual. Grado Valley’s sole winemaker, his job wasn’t for the faint of heart. He’d made his first wine at sixteen, before he was even legally able to drink it. His apprenticeship with Grado’s former winemaker was cut short when our dad’s best friend and the only other winemaker our vineyard has known had a heart attack and died among the very grapes he loved. It was a sad time for everyone at Grado Valley who knew and loved him, but my dad had taken it especially hard. For Neo, it had been an abrupt start to his career as solo winemaker for us.

The fact that my brother was here in the tasting room, with Dominica, was not a good sign.

“I was in the Barn when Min got the call. She’s freaking out.” He shrugged. “Figured she needed a walk.”

“I am not a dog, Neo,” my sister spat out. Three years younger than him and the baby of the family, Dominica was basically on a mission to prove herself, which sometimes manifested as an angry tornado demolishing everything in its path with a vengeance.

“I didn’t say you were a dog. I’m just saying you needed to blow off some steam.”

“Okay, but that’s not how it sounded.”

Refereeing the two of them was my part-time job. “I have an interview in fifteen minutes. Can we please cut to the chase?”

The Cellar was empty this early, and since it was Monday, it would be much slower than the weekend. But even today, in the summer, I only had two hours until this room began to fill. Basically, I needed to get this interview done, finish walk-throughs and clear out before I was sucked up again for tastings.

“An interview for what?” Min asked.

“Tasting room.” I leaned against the bar.

“Too bad it’s not an interview for a new marketing director,” my brother quipped.

Min crossed her arms like she was fourteen again and gave me a pointed look. “And now you know.”

I was confused. “What exactly do I know?”

What they were suggesting wasn’t possible. Jena had been our marketing director for more than fifteen years. She’d started as an office manager, went back to school to fulfill a lifelong dream of a college degree, and became even more indispensable than ever. We had a new admin and logistics lead, but to this day Jena’s job still crossed over. She did all of our social media, most of the marketing, and a billion other things.

“No.” I refused to believe it. Jena loved it here. We loved her. “No fucking way.”

“She’s gonna be pissed we told,” Min said. “She wanted to do it herself. I just happened to see her at dinner last night, and she looked really upset, so I coaxed it out of her.”

Fear of another kind took hold. “Is she okay? Is she sick?”

Min shook her head. “No, no. Nothing like that. She got engaged.”

“Engaged. After three months?” I needed to talk to her. We barely knew this guy.

“I know that look, Cos. Stay out of it. You aren’t her father.”

“No, because she doesn’t have one. Or siblings. Or anyone to tell her to be careful.”

“She’s a forty-eight-year-old divorcée with two awesome kids,” Neo said. “I’m pretty sure she’s not an idiot.”

“No, but you are. Who says divorcée? It’s demeaning.” Min was not pleased. Again.

“Since when is ‘divorcée’ demeaning? It just means she’s divorced. Which she is.”

“If you ever get a girlfriend, I’ll be amazed. Seriously.”

“I don’t have a girlfriend,” Neo spat back, “because I don’t want one.”

No statement could have been more accurate. The day Antonio Grado went on more than two dates with the same girl, I’d sell my cut of the vineyard. Would never happen.

“So if she got engaged, why was she so upset?” I asked, still thinking of Jena.

Min rolled her eyes, as always. “Because her fiancé is a pilot stationed in North Carolina. Duh.”

“Duh? Speaking of things people don’t say.” Neo gave our sister a shit-eating grin. “At least if they’re not twelve.”

“Duh,” she said again to irritate him.

Thank God the two of them didn’t work in the same building. When people talked about a family business being challenging, they had Neo and Min in mind. “Guys, I have an interview. Can we focus?”

Neo shrugged as if it wasn’t his problem we were now down a marketing director a week before Min was leaving for Italy for the summer. Because it wasn’t. “Nothing else to say,” he added. “Jena’s leaving.”

“In a month,” Min added.

Jesus Lord Almighty. At least Min had the decency to look guilty. I glared at her as if she had something to do with it. “This is really a bad time for you to be going,” I said.

As expected, Min didn’t take kindly to my pronouncement. “First of all, I’m totally covered.”

“Farming out your jobs, maybe. But you know it won’t be the same.”

“The fact that we had to split my jobs between three people should tell you something.”

I groaned as Neo looked up to the vaulted ceiling and said, “Here we go.”

“No, we don’t. I don’t have time for this, Dominica. Yes, you’re covered. But we’re down two tasting room associates, and now a marketing director, in the busiest time of the year.”

“For you,” Neo said.

Truth was, we all pitched in wherever it was needed. Running the wine cellar and the overall operations at Grado Valley, the summer was busy for me. But during harvest season, Neo worked like a demon. We all did, really. Not one of us minded hard work. And as Min and our parents would remind me, her travel to Italy wasn't "time off." She was going to Italy for a purpose. She was planning to bring back knowledge and ideas on ways to improve our own operations as an "Old World throwback" vineyard. But that wouldn't help me get through the summer.

I let out a breath. It was done. I was sorry to see Jena go, and Grado Valley would miss her terribly. But if she was happy, I was happy. Mostly. Actually, I wasn't happy at all in this very moment.

"No way," I said aloud as my interview arrived a few minutes early.

Thayle had only told me she'd set up an interviewee for this morning. I had no other info except that it was a woman who'd left a message yesterday about a tasting room associate job. A position we desperately needed to fill.

But not that desperately.

I stood straight up and watched as my interviewee walked into the building. No fucking way.

"Holy shit," Neo whispered. "She's smokin' hot."

Ignoring him, I began to think of ways to cut this interview short. I didn't need to talk to her to know this would not work out. On top of the fact that she was so drunk Saturday the woman was making snow angels—in the grass—she didn't know shit about wine. And admitted the fact two days ago.

So why in the hell was she here, in the Cellar, looking for a job as a tasting room attendant?

“I have to run,” Min said, smiling at Brooke on her way out.

That I remembered her name, despite the fact that I liked precisely zero things about her, was yet another reason to get her out the door now.

“I think,” Neo drawled, “the vines can wait. It’s been too long since I’ve interviewed. Don’t want to get rusty.”

“Getting rusty” around here meant not working in positions outside one’s usual day-to-day grind. Our parents firmly believed regularly stepping into jobs that weren’t typically our own was vital to running a successful vineyard. Neo may have been our winemaker, but he also worked the tasting rooms, helped with wine club pickups, and pitched in wherever he was needed. Without complaint. That was just the way of it.

“Rusty, my ass,” I mumbled as she approached.

Neo was right about one thing. Brooke was smokin’ hot.

“Don’t get comfortable,” I whispered to him. “This isn’t going to take long.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

brooke

TWO THOUGHTS RAN SIMULTANEOUSLY THROUGH MY MIND when I walked through the double doors of the 1942 Wine Cellar.

First, how was it possible two guys in the same room were that good-looking? The last time I'd seen two dark-haired men that gorgeous standing together was on my trip to Rome. Amy and I had taken a cheap flight last minute a few summers ago, and to this day I wondered what they put in the water over there, especially the water drunk by their policemen—because every single one of them was drop-dead gorgeous. As if it were a job requirement.

Second, our tasting room attendant was here and looked about as thrilled to see me as I was to see him. Was he a manager or something? Or was the other guy doing the interview? Which I still couldn't believe was happening. This was as crazy as anything I'd ever done. Maybe the craziest.

The entire house had ganged up on me yesterday, and by the time we'd finished a late morning walk along the lake, it was decided. My spontaneity had been taken to an entirely new level. We contacted the owner of the rental, and he was able to extend my stay until Friday. Leeta and Tina were even staying with me for another day too, though the others had to

head home today. After I called Grado Valley Vineyards and left that message on their machine, we agreed that if I got a call back for an interview by Friday, it was a sign. This crazy plan was meant to happen. If not, I'd stay the week, then head back to the city to job hunt.

As I approached, the jerk frowned. The slightly younger one with him didn't bother to hide his appreciation of me. He stopped short of looking me up and down, so I returned the courtesy and tried not to outright ogle him. But holy hell, they must have been serving that same Roman water here in Grado Valley.

"I'm sorry to have wasted your time coming in this morning," Clark Kent said. "But I'm not sure this position is for you."

The guy next to him looked shocked. "Cosimo," he said. "What the hell?"

My defenses went up immediately. Though only a small part of me actually wanted this job, which definitely didn't require my bachelor's and dual master's degrees, another part of me was getting used to the idea of staying in the Finger Lakes for the summer. Or at least part of the summer. As Tina said, I could job hunt here just as easily as in the concrete jungle that was New York City.

"It's okay," I said. *Kill him with kindness.*

"No, it's not." The non-jerkface stuck out his hand. "Antonio Grado."

His handshake was firm.

"Brooke Ellis," I said, trying not to look at Clark Kent.

"Come on in." He started walking to an area of the tasting room I hadn't noticed on Saturday in the far corner by the

fireplace.

The Wine Cellar looked so different empty. With vaulted ceilings and everything either composed of wood or painted hunter green, it was a beautiful space, somehow still homey despite its size. On one end, there was a massive floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace with plush oversized chairs all around it. I imagined it was a perfect spot to sip wine in the winter.

Just as Antonio sat on the chair across from me, I made the connection. Antonio Grado. Grado Valley Vineyards. He was too young to be the owner. I knew he must be a family member. I'd meant to look it up this morning, to at least read a bit about the background of the vineyard. But with most of the girls leaving, goodbyes took longer than expected and I ran out of time to do any research on the place or the region. Luckily, I had a car here, and as I didn't know the area, I left really early—and thank goodness I had. Turned out navigational systems didn't work all that well in some parts of the Finger Lakes, and I made it here just in time.

“Tell us about yourself, Brooke. Have you worked as a tasting room associate before?”

Clark Kent, aka jerkface, sat on my left. And was looking decidedly smug at this point. To be fair, he knew what my interviewer did not. I knew precisely nothing about wine. Except that I drank some of it. White wine, at least. But typically, I was a vodka kind of girl. Too bad this wasn't a distillery.

“Actually,” I started before *he* jumped in.

“Actually,” he said to Antonio. “She doesn't. I had the *pleasure*”—he said the word as if it was anything but—“of serving Brooke and her friends on Saturday.”

That definitely surprised Antonio. “Ahh, I see.”

“She knows jack shit about wine.”

Antonio looked at Clark as if he was going to kill him.

And honestly, at this point, he was really beginning to annoy me as well. What an asshole. Why the hell was he even here anyway?

“I will admit,” I said, turning my head to give Antonio my full attention, as if Clark didn’t exist, “I am not exactly a wine connoisseur.”

Clark made a sound that I promptly ignored.

“We can provide a crash course,” Antonio said. “You do drink wine yourself? Have a passion for it?”

A passion for drinking with my friends, yes.

“I have a passion for all the things I endeavor to do,” I said, evading the question. “And though I will admit to having a . . . deficit in my wine knowledge”—I can unequivocally feel Clark’s disapproval—“I have an MBA from New York University. Just left a job as head of product development at Avec Coeur. So I know a thing or two about scents, and sales, both of which would be beneficial, I think, in this position.”

Judging from the look on Antonio’s face, my elevator pitch worked pretty well. He was surprised, to say the least. And despite myself, I stole a quick glance at Clark too.

And there was nothing.

Apparently less than impressed, he sat there with his legs stretched out, arms crossed, that white tee too big to show every muscle but small enough to hint at what was underneath. Damn, the man really was sexy as hell. Maybe it was the glasses. Without them, he would probably look a lot like . . .

No.

I turned back to my interviewer. And then again to Clark.

“You’re hired,” Antonio said, surprising the hell out of me.

“No.” Clark finally uncrossed his arms. “She’s not.”

“Yes, you are,” he said to me. Then shot back to Cosimo, “Two more to go and we’re at full capacity. You’re welcome.”

This was by far the strangest interview I’d ever had. Part of me wanted to stand up, tell Clark Jerkface he could shove the job where the sun didn’t shine, and walk out. But this was the new and improved Brooke. The one told by a half dozen self-help books to think first, act second. And despite the fact that this was a totally harebrained scheme, I wanted it now.

Ignoring Clark, I said to Antonio, “Thank you so much for taking a chance on me.”

He stood. “You’re aware this is a temporary, summer, position?”

I stood too. “I am.”

“I’ll get you the paperwork this afternoon. Do we have your contact information?”

I didn’t want to chance interacting with Clark, so I dug into my purse for a card. “My email is on there. I’m new to the area and in temporary lodgings for now, but hopefully I’ll have a more long-term place by the end of the week. Can I get you my address when I do?”

“Sure thing.”

Clark finally took our cue and stood. This close to me, I realized how tall he was. And now that the thought belatedly dawned on me, I had to ask, “Cosimo . . . Grado?”

He frowned. “One and only.”

“You guys are brothers.”

“Bingo,” he said in a tone that confirmed he really disliked me.

I honestly had no idea how to manage him. Even in business, when I was on the opposite end of a disagreement, I couldn’t say anyone actually disliked me, to my face at least. I’d gotten into arguments with people, sure. And had a dickhead boss, before the real dickhead who got me laid off. But even with him, I’d been able to manage well enough. But this guy seriously did not care for me.

The feeling was mutual.

I gave Antonio my full attention, determined to pretend Clark didn’t exist.

“So what’s next?” I asked. “Aside from the paperwork?”

In response, Antonio looked at his brother. “Cos? You want to take it from here?”

I really didn’t like the sound of that.

“Not really. But since you’ve forced my hand . . .” He glared at me. “Come into the back,” he said.

“Really nice to meet you,” Antonio said as he walked away.

“But—” I did everything but reach out to grab him, to hold him back. “I thought . . .” Shit.

“I’m Grado Valley’s winemaker,” Antonio said, grinning. “You probably won’t see me much, unless you venture into the vineyards.” He nodded to his brother. “Cos is the proprietor here. He’ll take good care of you.”

Proprietor. That meant he was in charge of the whole shebang.

I was not sure how Antonio defined “good care,” but I suspected Cosimo’s definition wasn’t the same as mine.

“See you around, Brooke. So glad to have you on board.”

I waved, still in disbelief. I’d gotten the job, but did I want it? Cosimo didn’t even wait to see if I would follow him. Probably was hoping I wouldn’t. For that reason alone, I held myself tall, lifting my chin, and all but marched through the tasting room and down a corridor that apparently housed the building’s offices.

What the hell had I just gotten myself into?

CHAPTER EIGHT

cosimo

“FILL THIS OUT.” I HANDED HER TWO FORMS, NOT BOTHERING to ask her to sit.

Thank God my mother was across an entire ocean. If she'd ever seen me treat someone this poorly, she'd have had my hide. I was not actively trying to be rude, but the look on Brooke's face irked me. I didn't want her here, and she knew it. But thanks to my asshole brother, here she was, shuffling in her purse for something.

I grabbed a pen off my desk and handed it to her.

She smelled like vanilla with maybe a hint of pear. I had a good nose, and she did too, apparently. “You can take that into the tasting room and bring it back here when you're finished.”

Instead, she just plopped into the chair and leaned forward to use my desk to complete the forms. Brazen, and entirely too sexy.

Plopping myself behind the desk, I tried to ignore her. After several moments of drumming my fingers on my desk, unable to keep my eyes from straying to her, I finally broke down and addressed her directly. “Why does the head of product development at Avec Coeur with a degree from NYU, who knows nothing about wine, want a job in a tasting room in a town she has no ties to?”

Brooke looked up from her forms. “How do you know I have no ties here?”

“Because you wouldn’t be looking for a place to stay by week’s end otherwise.”

She held my gaze a second longer than necessary and then turned her attention back to the paperwork.

“I was recently laid off, so that would explain why I’m the former head of product development. Then my friends and I came for a long weekend, and I’ve sort of fallen in love with this area and thought it would be a good place to recoup.”

Recoup. Hmm. “From being laid off?”

“Yes.”

She said it in a way that hinted at more.

So not only was I hiring someone who knew nothing about wine, but apparently there was something more to the story. “Why were you laid off?”

Brooke raised her head again. This time, she didn’t bother to hide her annoyance.

“I ask as a potential employer.”

“Potential? I thought I had the job?”

“Neo should not have overstepped like he did.”

“So I’m *not* hired?”

“If you want the job,” I said reluctantly, “it’s yours. My brother offered it, and I won’t renege on that offer.” Even if I wanted to.

I left that part unsaid, but I was sure the feeling was clear enough.

She said nothing and went back to filling out the forms. I pretended to get back to work, but the bright screen of my laptop stared back at me, the words blurring together. And then it occurred to me. “We need someone immediately. If you can’t start—”

“I can start anytime,” she interrupted me. “How many hours a week?”

“We’re open six days a week, eleven to five. Shift starts at ten and ends at six, usually. Take as many shifts as you want, but we need you every weekend.”

“Every weekend this summer?”

“No, every weekend in the fall,” I said, true to form as the dickhead I was being today. I couldn’t help it for some reason with this woman. She just rubbed me the wrong way.

“You have the perfect disposition for this job, working with people and all,” she said cheerily, not bothering to hold back, despite the fact that I was now her boss. She clearly didn’t need the job, which meant she’d be a less than an ideal employee. But if I was being honest, Neo probably made the right call. With everything going on, we needed help. Tasting room associates were a dime a dozen on the lake, but by now, most people looking for summer jobs already had positions.

Didn’t mean I needed to like it, though.

“I’m usually much nicer.” I took the form she handed me.

“I see,” she said, clearly offended. Unfortunately for her, soothing my new employee’s ego wasn’t on my to-do list today.

“If you really want to start now, the staff will be coming in soon. You’ll shadow for a week and then kick out on your own. Can you come in every day this week?”

She blinked. “I can,” she hedged. “I just have to find a place to stay. But I guess I can do that after work.”

As if I needed anyone else’s two cents at the moment, my brother appeared at the door. “She can stay in the one of the cottages.”

“Back again so soon?” I didn’t pretend to be thrilled about the fact.

“Totally forgot I needed to pull some samples from the cellar. Was on my way there when I got caught up with Min.” Addressing Brooke, he said, “Sorry. I’m surprised you’re still here. I expected you’d have left already.”

With her spun around in the seat to face him, I couldn’t see her face but had a pretty good idea what it looked like. Precisely zero women looked at Neo as if he were anything but God’s gift to the earth. Truth was, he and Marco and I looked a lot alike. But while I turned some people off by refusing to tolerate anyone’s bullshit, and Marco came off as arrogant, because he was, Neo was our father’s clone. Confident, but not overly so, gregarious and always smiling, he could turn a nun away from the Church.

“I was just finishing up some paperwork. And apparently getting straight to work. Your brother asked me to start today,” Brooke said.

“Who’s working?” Neo asked me.

Monday was the slowest day of the week, so we typically had only one associate, with the rest of us lurking around if needed.

“Perry,” I said.

“I hope you like the smell of weed,” he said to her.

“I’m sorry?” Her voice was sweet when it wasn’t directed at me.

“Perry practically bathes in it.” Neo nodded to the door. “Come on, I’ll show you around. And I’ll take you down to the cottages too.” He gave me a pointed look.

Yeah, I’d thought of the cottages too. But Brooke at Grado Valley two or three days a week was enough. Living on the property? Steps away from me? Talk about a distraction I didn’t need. No, thanks.

“I don’t think any are available for the whole summer,” I told Neo, giving him a look that clearly said I would murder him for this.

“No? Well, we’ll check it out. Come on, before you suffocate in this office.”

She stood, back straight, head high. I’d give it to her, for someone who really didn’t need this job, it was a surprise she hadn’t gone running for the vineyards already. I probably would have told me to fuck off before we even made it to the back office. But not her. Brooke didn’t even give me a backwards glance as she sauntered from my office to follow Neo back toward the tasting room.

I picked up my phone to text my brother.

Do not rent her a cottage.

As usual, he responded almost immediately. Brooke wasn’t the only person with her phone attached to her at all times.

WTF?

It took me all of three seconds before I remembered this was the same brother who put a whoopee cushion on my chair two weeks ago. Neo was twenty-seven going on fourteen. He

might be able to blend grapes better than anyone I knew, but he was also an incurable prankster. I basically just gave him the starter fluid for the fire that I told him not to start in the first place.

Just to be sure, I fired off one last text before getting back to work.

I'll tell mom abt the tat

Speaking of immature. But hey, survival of the fittest.

Sitting back in my seat, I smiled imagining Neo's expression as he read my text. If our mother knew he'd gotten a tattoo on a recent trip to Vegas for a bachelor party, she'd lose her shit. She might expect such a thing from Marco. But her golden child?

My phone lit up.

Asshole

For the first time today, I smiled.

CHAPTER NINE

brooke

“I’M SO SORRY YOU HAVE TO GO.”

I hugged Tina, who grabbed her bags and headed out to the front porch as we waited for her car.

“Same,” she said. “Back to the grind,” Tina smiled, “for one of us, at least.”

“Yeah well, as soon as you leave, I’m off to work too. I cannot believe I have a job. In the Finger Lakes. It’s nuts.”

“Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.”

“Who said that?”

“I have no idea. But I definitely saw it somewhere. Fits perfectly, no?”

“This is an adventure, alright. I have no place to stay in two days, have enough clothes for one week and a job in a winery with an asshole boss. Here I thought I was done with those.”

“You’re looking at an apartment tonight after work. I am sending your clothes tomorrow, and your asshole boss is going to be your post-breakup hookup.”

“No,” I assured her, “he’s not.”

“Okay. We’ll see.”

Tina only knew the guy from our wine tasting. Hot as hell. Mildly charming in a hands-off way. But I knew the guy who *hired* me. Still hot as hell. But a jerkface with some sort of ax to grind. I should have walked out two days ago and never looked back. But instead, I would be jumping into the car as soon as Tina left and heading to Grado Valley Vineyards for the third day in a row.

To be fair, yesterday hadn't been awful. I didn't see Clark Kent, and after Neo's thorough explanation of some of the more popular wines and basic wine tasting etiquette, plus an entire day of shadowing Perry (who did smell like pot), I was pretty convinced I could do this. Thankfully, I'd found a potential apartment available.

"Here we are," Tina said as her car pulled up.

"Thank you," I said sincerely. I'd never have stayed here if it weren't for her. Whether that turned out to be a good thing was anyone's guess. But no doubt it would be an adventure.

"Don't thank me yet," she called back, tossing her bag into the trunk. Then with a wave, my friend was gone.

The house was empty. Quiet. Eerily so. After a few final sips of my coffee, I finished my morning routine and hopped in the car. Trading a morning commute filled with honking horns and crowded sidewalks for swaths of vineyards and wide-open fields wasn't so bad.

After I parked, I made my way inside the tasting room, and was surprised to see it empty. I headed to the offices, the first of which was a breakroom with a handful of lockers for personal belongings that looked nothing like a breakroom. Decorated in the same wood and hunter green colors as the tasting room, it was homey and warm with hand-carved wood tables and no fluorescent lighting to be found anywhere. That

was one of the things I hated about my old job. The office culture and godawful fluorescent lighting throughout the Avec Coeur building. But neither was worse than my boss.

“What are you doing here?”

I hadn't seen him since Monday, but I knew the voice immediately. Closing the locker, I spun toward the sound. Still somewhat in shock that Clark Kent didn't just work here but that he *owned* the place, I took in his jeans and tee, this time a faded pale green with “Grado Valley Vineyards” embroidered across his wide chest.

“Good morning to you too,” I said sweetly. “I work here.”

His head cocked to the side. “We don't open until two on Wednesdays.”

Ah, shit.

“Perry didn't tell you?”

I shook my head. “No, he didn't.”

He paused for a second, obviously contemplating something. “Did Neo take you on a tour?”

“Nope. We went through all of the wines, and then he left me with Perry for the day.”

I couldn't help but wonder what he would look like without the glasses. Given my penchant for jerkfaces, aka the kind of guy who might recommend cutting his girlfriend's position after dating for nearly a year, of course I would find this man attractive.

As if someone had prodded him, he blurted, “Come on.”

Though he made no effort to ensure I was following before he walked away, I started to trail after him but then

remembered my phone, still in my locker, and pulled back. Tina was supposed to text when she got home safely. My mother might have partially screwed up my childhood by getting divorced three times (which might have been fine if we hadn't moved after every one of them) . . . but she loved me, and in many ways, I'd learned how to love from her. She'd always wanted to be reassured I was safe after I'd taken trip, and it seemed I'd adopted the expectation in my own relationships too.

“Clark,” I called out. “Hold on a sec. Need to grab my phone.”

By the time I'd gone back for it and rejoined a very displeased-looking boss, it dawned on me. “Your name isn't Clark.”

“No, it isn't.”

“Sorry about that. I meant Mr. Grado.”

He looked as if he wanted to throttle me.

“Cosimo or Cos is fine.”

He wanted to say something, but instead he waved his arm toward the tasting room.

“This was the first building on the property. My grandfather bought 200 acres of farmland in 1933.”

“Two years after he came over from Italy? Impressive.”

For the first time since we met, Clark—or rather, Cosimo stopped glaring so hard at me.

“Right,” he said. “Most of it was sold during the recession, but my father retained sixty-five acres. Still farmland. Fast-forward to nineteen eighty-three when my parents took a trip to Napa. They were already wine lovers, both being from the

Finger Lakes, but after that trip, their interest in wine kicked into high gear. By nineteen eighty-nine, they had planted their first vines. Chardonnay, riesling, pinot noir and gewürztraminer. In nineteen ninety-four, the year before I was born, they were open for business.”

“In here?” I asked, wondering why he was talking to me without being a total asshole.

“Sort of. It was a barn at the time. They operated with a card table and a cash register for nearly a year. This was built in nineteen ninety-five and just recently renovated.”

“A brand-new business and a newborn.”

The look on his face was the first thing I liked about Cosimo Grado besides his freakishly good looks. He was clearly very proud of his parents.

“Lots of newborns. Within the next eight years, we were a family of six. The Wine Barn”—he nodded toward the entrance—“was built during that time. Mom wanted to pay homage to the area’s roots, and the women of our family, with a distinct winery of her own.”

We left the 1942 Wine Cellar and walked toward the courtyard, which was the center of the Grado Valley “campus.” He looked up at the very barn-looking structure.

“Was it ever actually used as a barn?”

“No. But it was modeled after the original one on the property way over there.” He pointed to a distant area of the vineyard.

“You said she wanted to pay homage to the area’s roots?”

Clark was back. He seemed annoyed again, likely because I was ignorant about the area. To be fair, I didn’t exactly

research the place. I was here for a weekend of wine tasting, not to stay for the summer.

“Two towns over, the first women’s rights convention was held in eighteen forty-eight. Some call this area the birthplace of women’s rights.”

I put two and two together. “Which is why all of the wines in the 1931 Wine Barn are named after women.”

“You got it.” He walked away from the Barn toward a wide-open field. “Did you get over there when you were here Saturday?”

I shook my head. “Nope.”

“Too busy drinking vodka roadies?”

I caught up with him as he stopped just in front of a covered bocce ball court. Beyond it, there was a stage and a wide-open field littered with firepits and Adirondack chairs.

“You’re annoyed”—I knew this was dangerous territory but went for it anyway—“that we didn’t take our tastings seriously.”

He seemed genuinely surprised by that. “Not at all.”

“Then why did you say it like that?”

He inhaled and then exhaled, his broad shoulders lifting up and down, demanding my attention. “Wine isn’t something that needs to be taken seriously. There are way too many misconceptions about it, mostly perpetuated by wine snobs. There’s only one cardinal rule when it comes to wine. It should be enjoyed as individually as the person drinking it. If you want to get technical and look at vintage charts before you even consider opening a bottle, go for it. If someone else

enjoys getting hammered and not tasting their wine, good for them.”

“But you were annoyed with me on Saturday.”

He didn’t deny it.

Finally, after an awkward silence, Cosimo nodded to the phone in my hand. “You must have looked down fifty times in the last ten minutes.”

Without thinking, I brought the phone up and glanced at the screen again. Though I didn’t owe him an explanation, I felt like we’d entered into a mini truce this morning. So I gave him one anyway.

“A friend of mine is on her way home. She’s supposed to text me when she gets there, that she’s safe.”

“Is she sixteen?”

“No. Twenty-nine.”

“Did she just get her license last week?”

I made a face. “No.” I kept the *smart-ass* to myself. “She’s actually being driven back into the city. And probably won’t get there for another three hours.”

“I don’t get it.”

Neither did anyone else, which was precisely why I should have kept my mouth closed. Too late now.

“It’s just . . . a thing with me. My mother stressed out whenever I traveled. Still does. And I have to text her when I arrive. I sort of inherited her anxiety in this area.”

His arms crossed. “You’re saying that you know your friend, who’s being driven by a professional driver, is still three hours away from her destination, and that’s why you

keep looking at your phone? Because you're nervous for her safety?"

God, it sounded so dumb. I shrugged. "Guilty as charged."

I waited for his derisive laughter or sneer. From a guy like him, it was inevitable.

Instead, his expression softened. "That's thoughtful. If not incredibly odd."

"Show me one person who isn't odd in some way, and I'll show you . . ."

He waited, but there was nothing else in my brain.

"You'll show me?" he prompted.

"So that's another thing about me. I'm terrible at analogies."

It was hard to tell behind those dark glasses, but he was focused on me, and he wasn't frowning or smirking or otherwise seeming disgusted by me, so it seemed like maybe we had turned a corner a little bit. In fact, he stared at me for so long, I had to remember my confidence training. Do not look away. Do not fidget. Chin up, shoulders squared.

"You're a strange one, Brooke Ellis. Come on, we've got a lot of ground to cover still."

I followed him and pretended my name rolling off his lips didn't make my heart skip a bit in my chest. Whatever good pretending did me. Another thing I was not good at? Lying to myself.

CHAPTER TEN

cosimo

DESPITE THE FACT THAT I SHOULD HAVE BEEN CALLING AN entomologist about lanternflies or talking to Marco about the marketing director problem on our doorstep, I was giving a damn tour. But after having been skewered by Neo Monday night for treating Brooke like shit, I now felt compelled to make some sort of effort with her. I'd almost felt badly enough to seek her out yesterday, actually.

Obviously, I hadn't, but I knew Neo was right. Not that I'd admit it to my brother, but the stress of fully taking over had finally caught up to me. I refused to let my parents down. They had set the bar high, working themselves to the bone building this place into what it was today. They'd definitely earned their retirement. The transition had been in the works for a long time, years really, and I knew this trip to Italy was as symbolic as it was rejuvenating. My parents had as hard a time walking away as my siblings and I were having adjusting to this new normal. So they decided their retirement trip would no longer wait. It was now or never.

And now we were on our own.

"You own all of this?" Brooke asked as we reached the edge of the lawn overlooking the entirety of Grado Valley Vineyards.

“My family does,” I clarified. “My parents just recently retired. My siblings and I are all part owners.”

Her thick eyebrows drew together. I liked that they weren’t completely perfect like some of those hand-drawn-looking ones. “I thought you were the proprietor?”

“I am, which basically just means if I screw up, my brothers and sister pay the price. I oversee all the operations, whereas the others have specific positions.”

“Like Neo, the winemaker.”

I looked for the familiar twinkle in her eyes that most women have when talking about my brother. He had clearly been flirting with her on Monday, which I forgot to talk to him about. The no-fraternization policy hadn’t been a problem in a while, but maybe he needed a reminder. “Like Neo and my sister Dominica, who you also met. She manages the Barn and is our events coordinator. And Marco, who you didn’t meet yet, is Grado’s VP.”

“A true family business.” She turned to look in the opposite direction of the estate, toward the lake. “And down there? There are even more buildings on the lake?”

I might have cooled my jets since Monday, but I still had no desire for Brooke to rent a cottage. For one, I lived down there. Unlike Min, who still lived in the house with my parents—the one on the very edge of the property, where we grew up—I stayed in one of the twelve cottages. (Though mine and the others with lakefront views had been upgraded to log cabin homes, we still called them cottages.) Having her as a neighbor was a bad idea.

“Yes, the cottages Neo was going to show you,” I told her, walking back toward the Cellar. “We all live in the cottages

except Min, who still lives with our parents. She likes Mom's cooking way too much. I suspect she'll stay there until she gets married."

Brooke chuckled. "Who will feed her while your parents are in Italy?"

"Don't remind me." I headed toward a path that led to the back of the Cellar. "She's leaving next week to join them."

I peeked at Brooke out of the corner of my eye and noticed the way she was gaping at the view. The back of the Cellar was our premier location on the property, the view from here on par with that of the lakeview cottages. A two-story building, the top floor housed the tasting room, our offices, and an on-site cafe with a massive wraparound deck. Down here, on the ground floor, the view of lawn seats and firepits for colder days led into the namesake of the building.

"This way." I led Brooke to a locked lower-floor door, and we made our way into the actual cellars.

"Holy shit. It's like a full-blown factory."

"I guess that answers my question. Neo didn't take you down here either?" An image of the two of them wandering the wine cellars blasted unbidden into my brain, making me twitchy. Which made no sense. I hardly even liked this woman, though admittedly she was more tolerable today than usual. Around other people, Brooke lit up like a house on display for Christmas. But not an understated one trimmed with white lights and candles in the windows. She was more like the Griswold family house, flashy and annoying to all the neighbors.

In other words, not for me. On so many levels. Except . . . she ran her hand along one of the barrels. The

gentle stroke was one I'd have dearly liked to see her replicate somewhere else.

So there it was, out in the open. An attraction to Brooke Ellis was a problem I didn't need at the moment, but one my brother had so kindly laid on my doorstep.

"He didn't." She began to wander through the barrel room. "There's wine in all of these?"

"It won't be bottled for a few years, but yes. There is. That one you're touching now is a two-year-old cabernet franc. French oak barrel."

"French oak?"

"We use both French and American oak barrels." I pointed to another barrel. "That one is American oak."

"What's the difference?"

Brooke was way too close for comfort. Although she seemed genuinely curious, I was ready to move on and quickly explained, "French oak barrels are made from oak trees grown in France, and American oak barrels are made from oak trees grown in the U.S." I gestured for us to keep moving. "Shall we?"

"Wait," Brooke said, stopping me.

I all but groaned, having taken a step toward her. At this point we were almost uncomfortably close. Stepping back would have made it obvious I was restless, so I stood my ground. That same vanilla scent wafted toward me.

Today, her hair was pulled back into a ponytail. I wondered how she'd feel about me grabbing it to pull her head back for better access to her neck, and lower. Undoing just one or two

buttons on her crisp white shirt would give me all the access I needed.

Fuck. This was not good.

“That can’t be the only difference.”

Brooke gave no indication that our nearness made her uncomfortable at all.

“It’s not. French oak barrels are known for giving wine more subtle and spicy notes, with silkier textures. American barrels tend to be more potent in their flavor, often described as giving notes of vanilla, cream soda, and coconut, with a creamier texture.”

“Spicy and silky versus vanilla, my favorite scent, and coconut, my second favorite.”

“You forgot creamy,” I said, against my better judgment.

“How do you decide which to use?”

One big step. That was all it would take.

I really needed to cool myself down. “That’s a question for Neo. Are you ready to finish the tour?”

She blinked, turned from me, and walked away. Precisely what I wanted. But now, once again, I felt like a total dickhead. “I’m not sure if anyone told you, but we have a no-fraternization policy at Grado,” I said, with thoughts of Brooke and my brother floating about in my head. “Things tend to get messy otherwise.”

Brooke spun on me so fast it was a wonder she didn’t fall down. The hellcat was back. Her eyes narrowed. “Any relationship that interferes with the company culture of teamwork, the harmonious work environment, or the

productivity of employees is discouraged. Yeah, I read that part clearly in the employee handbook.”

Read it and memorized it, apparently. “There was a pretty specific reason it was put in place. But it remains a good policy.”

“A fantastic policy,” she said, definitely pissed now. “Maybe we should end the tour here,” she said. “I wouldn’t want to be tempted to develop a relationship with the boss that might interfere with the company culture of teamwork.”

With that, Brooke turned on her heel and walked away.

She thought I was talking about me. With good reason. Probably the way I’d been looking at her.

In all my years at Grado, I couldn’t think of even one employee who’d ever spoken to me, or to any member of my family, that way. But I also couldn’t remember having said what I just had aloud before. A bit harsh? Maybe. It seemed like a good way to push her away. And had nothing to do with the vision of her and Neo touring these very barrels that had popped into my head.

I hadn’t been proprietor of Grado Valley without my father lurking in the shadows for all of a week—I really couldn’t screw this up already. No matter how tempting Brooke Ellis and her vanilla perfume was.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

brooke

“YOU’RE NOT LEAVING, ARE YOU?” NEO STOPPED ME JUST AS I was about to leave for the day.

“I am.”

We moved to the side as the main entrance doors opened again. An older man with a guitar strapped to his back waved to Neo as he walked by.

“The entertainment?” I asked, even though it was obvious he was.

Turned out the reason for Wednesday’s late start was that the Cellar stayed open until eight p.m., unlike the other weekdays when it closed at five. It was a tradition, apparently, dating back more than twenty years. Whereas the weekends were for tourists, Wednesday night was geared toward locals. A midweek respite, Perry called it, though I couldn’t imagine what he possibly needed a respite from. He’d admitted that working at Grado, smoking weed, and “chilling” were pretty much his entire life. And he loved it.

Kudos to him. I could see the appeal.

“Yep. Which is my cue to get out of the fields.”

I didn’t understand, but Neo explained.

“It gets so crazy around here, especially since the Barn was opened, that my parents found themselves never having time together to enjoy what they’d built. So every Wednesday, they would shut down 1931 but keep the Cellar open, inviting a small group of friends. As each of us rejoined the family business after college or whatnot, we made a pact: Wednesday was for family. No work, besides in here.” He nodded toward the moderately busy tasting room. “If you had a date, you’d come here. Literally the birth of a child or a vacation are the only excuses for missing Wednesday night.”

That was so frickin’ cool. “I love it,” I said sincerely. “You guys are really tight.”

“Most of the time. We have our moments. But our family motto is work hard, play harder. So this is us playing harder. Why don’t you stay even if your shift is over?”

I’m not sure if anyone told you, but we have a no-fraternization policy at Grado.

I wondered if Neo had gotten the memo. He wasn’t overtly flirting, but he wasn’t not flirting either. God forbid. From his comments, I assumed Cosimo was the fraternization police. As if I’d ever, ever get involved with my boss again. Even one as temporary as Cosimo.

“I have to head out to look at an apartment. The owner of the house I’m renting needs me out by Friday morning. It was only supposed to be a four-night rental.”

Neo shook his head. “That’s nuts that you decided to stay after a long weekend.”

“Nuts is an understatement,” I said as a steady stream of customers began to come in.

“Where’s the apartment?”

“Right in Kitchi Falls.”

“Downtown, hmmm. The only apartment I can think of is the general store.”

“That’s the one. The listing said something about a store downstairs.”

“The owner’s name is Owen Smith. Nice guy. His family owns half of Kitchi Falls. Including the store. You’ll like him. Tell him I said hello.”

“Will do.”

Not knowing what parking was like downtown, I said goodbye and left Neo to his Wednesday-night gathering. I couldn’t help but feel a stab of . . . maybe jealousy? I hated being jealous. It was a waste of time. But with my dad out of the picture since I was five, my mother on husband number three in North Carolina, and no siblings to speak of, the closest I could get to family life was an aunt and uncle in Lake Shohola, where I grew up.

“Brooke.”

I was halfway to the parking lot but stopped dead when I heard my name. Cursing myself for being excited at the sound, I took a deep breath and tried to pretend I was not affected. Didn’t work, of course.

I turned to see my other boss, the big boss, jogging toward me.

“Did I forget to punch out?” I asked, still annoyed at his presumptuousness in the barrel room.

“Neo told me you’re renting a place from Owen Smith?”

Apparently he only answered the questions he liked.

“We’ll see.” I tried to keep my annoyance out of my tone. Aside from having to deal with him, I actually really liked working at GVV. It was like a big extended family, and even when I was working, it felt like hanging out. I’d tasted all of the wines by now and was even finding some I liked that I wouldn’t usually drink. If I could get the apartment situation settled and get my stuff, this adventure could really get started.

“Potentially,” I added. “I’m headed there now to check out a place.”

No, he did not just clench his jaw. If there was one thing I couldn’t resist, it was that. Not quite the *Pride & Prejudice* hand flex, but on a guy like Cosimo with a more defined jawline than Daniel Sharman . . . just no.

“Tell him you’re not coming.”

“Oh,” I said. “I see.” He was firing me. To be honest, I probably deserved it after the way I’d lashed out at him. Still, it took some effort not to lash out yet again. I worried my lip, fighting back my worst impulses. “But even if I don’t work at Grado—”

“I’m not firing you, Brooke.”

He sighed as if I was the biggest pain in the ass. Well, guess what, buddy? That honor goes to you.

“Text him to say you’re not coming and meet me in the courtyard in five minutes.”

“Cosimo,” I started, about to put him in his place. “I need a place to stay by Friday.”

“You’ll stay at the cottages,” he called back, already halfway back to the estate.

What in the ever-loving hell was that all about? I stood there, undecided. On one hand, a cottage rental would be ideal. They were right on the property and very much in line with this whole Finger Lakes experience, living on a vineyard and all. On the other, I'd honestly never met a more arrogant, high-handed man in all my life, and doing something because he asked—no, told me to? It stuck in my craw.

My phone buzzed in my hand.

You coming?

The unknown number could only have been Cosimo's. He must have gotten it from my application. I texted back.

I don't typically take orders from men.

For a moment, there was nothing in response. And then . . .
too bad

What in the world did that mean? For a hot second I thought he was flirting with me. Until I remembered Cosimo Grado didn't flirt. Especially with employees. Or me.

Now what?

I thought there were no available cottages?

A few seconds later:

Wouldn't have pegged you for someone who punctuates texts.

He was seriously maddening.

You are too.

I began to walk toward the estate, already knowing I'd prefer to stay in a cottage on-site than a stuffy apartment above a general store in the middle of town.

Another text comes through:

You know what else we have in common?

I could only imagine.

What?

After several moments, there was still no answer. Ugh. Since I was already halfway there, I went ahead and texted Owen Smith, or the number of whoever was renting the apartment out, apologizing for canceling at the last minute. I really hoped I wasn't making a huge mistake.

By the time I finished and looked up, Cosimo was standing in the courtyard between the Barn and the Cellar. With two glasses of red wine in his hands. I could have sworn I'd never met anyone more confusing than him in my life.

"Meritage." He handed me a glass. I instinctively went to take a sip when he stopped me. "Smell first."

I already knew what I'd smell. It was the same wine I'd told Perry earlier today was my new favorite. Usually a white wine drinker, this one just did it for me. I took in the scent, to remind myself.

"Blackberry. Cola," I said.

"What else? Take a few extra seconds to let the alcohol volatize."

I swirled it around and tried again. Ahh, I'd missed it before. "Mint and . . ."

"White pepper," he chimed in, helping me out.

"Yeah, I can smell it now."

He took another sip. "This time, just enjoy."

I did, following him as we walked, for the second time that day, through the estate. This time, toward the cottages. “I like this one, even though I’m not usually a red wine drinker.”

“Everyone is a red wine drinker. It’s like reading. If you don’t enjoy it, you just haven’t found the right book. Or in this case, wine.”

“This one is a mix, right?”

“Blend, yes.”

“I have questions. A lot of them actually,” I admitted.

“Such as?”

Such as? He was so damn serious all the time. “Why are we drinking wine right now?”

“It’s what we do here, especially on Wednesday nights.”

“Family night. Neo told me.”

Strangely, he seemed less than pleased by that.

“What else do we have in common?” I asked, changing the subject. “You never answered me.”

He lifted his glass. “Meritage. You told Perry it was your favorite. This is mine too. Neo hit it out of the park with this blend.”

“How do you know I told Perry it was my favorite?”

“Because I asked.”

Asked? What did he ask? Why did he ask? Cryptic as usual. “Why is there suddenly an available cottage?”

“Pleading the Fifth on that one.”

I wasn’t going to let him get off that easily, but as we cleared the trees surrounding each of the cottages, I gasped. It

was the same view as from the back of the Cellar. From the courtyard, or even the open lawn we'd toured earlier, it had looked like the cottages were more inland. But three of them, which looked rather like log cabins, sat right on top of the lake. Separated by trees and enough shrubbery to make each cottage semiprivate, each one a lakeside oasis of its own, all were the same size roughly, but styled a bit differently.

"I'm on the end. Neo and Marco share the one in the middle. The one on the far left is being renovated. We were hoping to have it finished by summer." He turned and looked up the hill to our left. There was a naturally worn path, which Cosimo headed up now.

"This one is also just finishing renovations," he said as we stood in front of a smaller but absolutely beautiful wooden cottage. "If you can stand a few workmen lingering for the next week or two, it's yours."

I made my way up the steps onto the porch and turned back around. "I can see a bit of the lake from here."

"Not much of it. But some," he agreed, joining me.

That damned traitorous heart of mine started thumping again.

Cosimo held out his hand. "The keys."

I barely noticed as he dropped them into my hand. I was too busy looking at his eyes. From this close, even behind the glasses, their dark brown depths drew me in. Quickly looking down, I closed my hand around the keys.

Again, he was on the move. Not bothering to tell me where he was going.

"Wait," I said, catching up. "How much is it? I'm working on a tasting room associate salary."

He walked back toward his own cottage, which was not all that far from my own. Fantastic. More of Cosimo Grado was just what I needed.

“Take on full-time hours, and it’s yours for the summer.”

Was he serious?

“That’s incredibly kind”—the word nearly stuck in my throat. “But I was sort of hoping this summer would be the calm before my storm, so to speak.”

He climbed up the stairs of his wraparound porch, substantially bigger than mine. Not that I was complaining. “Part-time, with weekends, and pick up shifts when we need you.”

He gestured for me to sit on one of the two Adirondack chairs off to the side, and I couldn’t help but wonder why he was being so nice all of a sudden.

“That’s really generous,” I said, sitting. “Too generous. What’s the catch?”

He sat on the chair next to me. “Does there have to be a catch?”

“There usually is.”

“You’ve spent too much time in the city.”

He had no idea.

“You are a businessman. That cottage probably goes for . . .” I tried to imagine what a place like that, practically on the lake, would rent for.

“Three thousand a week.”

“Exactly. Makes no sense.”

“I can’t rent it out yet with incomplete renovations. And at the moment, we’re still short-staffed. Having you up in the Cellar when needed is worth any lost revenue.”

“You could have squeezed something from me. I’d have paid rent.”

Cosimo took a sip of his wine, apparently deep in thought. “I should have offered it to you Monday.”

“So why didn’t you?”

He looked at me like the answer was obvious. “Because I didn’t like you.”

I laughed, his honesty refreshing. “I mean, tell it like it is, I guess.”

“The feeling is mutual, no?”

“One hundred percent,” I admitted. “You said didn’t. Do you like me now?”

“Not really.”

What a guy. I pried my gaze away from the *GQ* model casually sitting in that chair with his wine and sexy glasses, his bicep flexing every time he lifted the glass to his mouth, and stared at the lake instead. As I watched the boats go by, it occurred to me, “There’s a dock here, but none at the Cellar.”

“A bone of contention between my parents and brother Marco. They always refused to put one in. Said they wanted customers to enjoy the beauty of the lake and not the business of a dock in summer.”

“Does it hurt business? That no one can come in from the lake? My friends and I toyed with the idea of a winery by boat excursion, so I know they have them.”

“Of course you did,” he muttered.

“You might not be a tourist,” I defended myself, “but I am. Some of us aren’t lucky enough to have this”—I gestured toward the view—“in our backyards.”

“Touché.” He raised his glass. “And yes, it hurts business. Marco has been pitching me hard to reconsider.”

“Will you?”

He sighed. And for the first time, I thought about the weight he carried, running this entire estate. It must be a lot of pressure, wanting to do right by your parents’ legacy. “It would be a kick in the pants to my parents. But at a time when we could use the influx of cash, Marco makes a good argument.”

We were silent for a bit. I was just about to say something nice, to thank him for the cottage, when he stood. “Are you coming up to the Cellar?”

“I don’t think so. I’ll probably head back to the rental to get my things. I also have to get in touch with my friend in the city to tell her to reroute my stuff here.”

“Feel free to finish your wine first. It’s a nice view.”

Nice? This wasn’t nice. It was world-class. But not more so than my new view of Cosimo walking down the stairs in front of me. I’d have given up half of my lip gloss collection to grab that ass just once.

At the bottom of the stairs, he lifted a hand in parting and then walked away, toward the Cellar.

Do you like me now?

Not really.

Cosimo Grado might have been smart, a savvy business owner and hot as hell, but he was also a stone-cold liar.

CHAPTER TWELVE

cosimo

“THERE’S MY SWEET BOY.”

“Morning, Dorothy.” I braced for it as the door to Devine Bakery closed. I breathed in the smell of fresh-baked everything, already trying to decide what a little indulgence might cost me. Maybe an extra mile run? It would be worth it.

“Why don’t I see you more?” the owner of Kitchi Fall’s oldest bakery chastised me as I walked up to the counter.

“You know exactly why,” I told her.

“Hmm,” she said, disapproval in her tone. “Too busy running a vineyard for church, I guess.”

The only reason Devine Bakery wasn’t overrun at this time of the morning on a Sunday was because of church. I’d planned it perfectly. In a half hour, the line would be out the door.

“My mother got to you,” I guessed.

“She did mention something about it,” Dorothy admitted.

Our poor mother tried hard to save our souls, but I wasn’t sure such a thing was possible. Surely Marco was a lost cause. Neo and I, questionable. Only Min still dutifully sat next to my parents in mass every Sunday, not two blocks from where I

stood now. It was a wonder they hadn't given the entire vineyard to her.

"I'll take some donuts and muffins, enough for ten people. And toss in a cupcake or two."

"Just like your dad," she said, grabbing a box. I couldn't help but think she was rather off the mark with that one, but I held my tongue. Every Sunday after church, he would come here and get baked goods for the staff. Usually either I or one of my siblings tried to carry on the tradition. On the rare Sunday nobody made it into town, we usually paid for it with grumbles and constant refrains of "would love a cinnamon donut from Devine Bakery right about now."

"So," the plump, gray-haired woman said, trying to sound casual, "I hear you hired a girl from the city?"

Here we went.

Make no mistake, every retired teacher, like Dorothy, in Kitchi Falls and its outlying communities on the north end of the lake would know within days every word of what I was about to say. Not only did they gather for lunch every Thursday, but the quarterly wine tour—a busload of retired teachers, current teachers, and all of their non-educator friends—was happening again in two weeks. I knew because Grado Valley had to prepare for the invasion of nonstop wine-fueled gossiping.

Brooke and her friends had nothing on these ladies.

"We did," I said, watching her fill the box, waiting for cinnamon donuts. Dorothy knew I wouldn't leave here without them.

"I heard she's a looker."

Of course she did. Brooke *was* a looker. I'd been hiding in the office—aka actively avoiding her—since Wednesday. The fact that I'd changed my mind about the cottages on the spot when Neo told me she planned to rent from Owen, a more notorious ladies' man than my brother Marco—had been enough to keep me away.

Last night, just before closing, I'd ventured into the tasting room for the first time that day and saw her in action. Brooke never saw me, or at least she'd pretended not to see me, as she moved from inside the room to the deck, carrying bottles like she'd been doing it all summer.

“No comment,” I said, earning a stern look from Dorothy.

“So when is *Dominica* leaving?” she asked, apparently taking the hint, for once, that a particular topic was off-limits.

“This week,” I said. “Couldn't come at a worse time.”

“I did hear about *Jena*. Sorry you'll be losing her.” Dorothy looked up to the customer who had just walked in. She leaned across the counter to whisper, “Don't you think it's a bit soon to be engaged?”

As if I'd fall into that trap. If I said yes, tomorrow's newspaper headline would read, “Proprietor of Grado Valley Vineyards Loses Longtime Marketing Director to What He Calls a ‘Hasty Engagement.’” We were that hard up for news around here.

“I think if *Jena*'s happy, I'm happy.”

Finally, the cinnamon . . . but Dorothy was frowning as she added them to the box. She liked that answer even less than the one about Brooke. “Well, I hope you find someone soon to replace her. I hear *Sunset Vineyards* just bought the *Baker* property.”

Sunset Vineyards was Grado's closest neighbor. Unlike us, they had a dock. A busy one that brought hordes of wine drinkers to its shore. Their "Sunset Wine Cruise" was one of the most successful marketing campaigns in years.

She had me. I could come in here fully intending not to gossip, but if this was true . . . well, suffice to say, it made my day a whole lot worse. Unlike most of the wineries in the area, who saw each other as a part of one big community, cross-promoting and working together to bring new visitors to the region, the owners of Sunset were transplants. Which might not be a problem if they weren't also assholes. Two friends who knew less than Brooke about wine had bought the vineyard five years back out of bankruptcy. They were savvy businessmen, but neither played nice.

"The Baker property wasn't for sale," I said of the lakefront land south of Sunset. It had been in the same family for generations. Once used for farming, it hadn't been utilized for years. The current owners lived in Michigan and seemed to have no interest in it, or even in selling it. Until now, apparently.

"I guess everything is for sale, sweetie, if the price is right. That'll be twenty-two sixty-three."

I handed her thirty dollars, with a growing pit in my stomach. If this was true—and Dorothy and her ladies rarely got gossip wrong—it was not good news.

"Thanks for the extra cinnamon," I said, taking the box, "and the tip."

"For a Grado, anything, sweetie."

By the time I'd made my way back to the estate, it was beginning to come alive. I headed to the Barn first. Unlike the

wide-open space and vaulted ceilings in the Cellar, the 1931 Wine Barn was a more intimate space. Decorated to emulate a Tuscan converted barn, it pulled in more rustic-looking elements that our mother and Min worked meticulously to curate. Requiring fewer staff than the Cellar, it also boasted a courtyard in the back that was one of the most beautiful at night, even without the lake view. White bulb lights crisscrossing a shrub-enclosed area made it our second most rented spot for engagements and wedding pictures.

As usual, my sister sat behind the tasting room counter. At the moment, she was jotting down some notes in her planner. She had an office but never used it.

“Special delivery,” I said, plopping the box on the counter.

“I’ll pass today, but leave some for the others,” she said.

Min was the only person I knew who still used a physical planner. With so many stickers and colors, I had no idea how she could actually make heads or tails of it.

“I peeked at some of the applications for Jena’s job,” she said. “Nothing stands out.”

“Agreed. So are you packed yet?”

At least Min had the grace to look guilty for abandoning us. “Partially. At least Marco is coming back tomorrow.”

Our brother had been pushing hard to have a brewery on-site for years, and when we transitioned ownership, we agreed the time was right. He was currently in Long Island visiting a brewery that a friend of his started a few years ago.

“More importantly, I have some pretty disturbing news,” I started but was interrupted by the sound of the door opening. Since we were an hour and a half from opening, I assumed it

was one of the workers. And I was right. But not just any worker.

Brooke.

The look she gave me when I'd handed her the keys to her cottage still haunted me. If jerking off every night knowing she was just a three-minute sprint away could be considered "haunted." Tormented might be the right word.

"Sorry," she said, pausing. "Thayle said I should shadow over here today. But I can come back."

"Come on in," Min said. To me, she whispered, "Why do you look like someone just shoved a stick up your ass?"

I didn't qualify that with an answer.

"Cos was just about to tell me some pretty disturbing news. Nothing pairs better with bad news than donuts from Devine Bakery and some coffee." Min gestured to the pot behind the counter. "Help yourself."

She did just that without sparing me a backward glance. I couldn't say the same as I snuck a quick peek. With a white Grado Valley tee, canvas sneakers and a side braid, she should not have looked so fucking hot.

But she did.

"Earth to Cos," Min whispered.

I gave my sister a dirty look, but she ignored it.

"So about that earth-shattering bad news?" Min asked.

I considered buttoning up, for Brooke's sake. But it wasn't like she could use the information against us in some way. Pretending she wasn't standing next to Min now peering into the box of baked goods, I relayed Dorothy's information.

“How the hell does she know *everything*?”

“Who is Dorothy?” Brooke asked.

“Dorothy is sort of Kitchi Falls’s adopted grandmother. The bakery has been in her husband’s family for generations. Since she retired, you can pretty much find her there six days a week.”

“She didn’t always work there?”

“Nope. Dorothy was an elementary school teacher. She always said she didn’t want to work with her husband. Even now they usually take separate shifts. Which I get. I like my siblings and all.” Min nodded to me—“well, most of them.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“But if we were all working in the same building, I’d have killed someone by now.”

“It must be cool, though. Working together. Your Wednesday tradition.”

“Cool?” Min made an extremely unattractive face but then laughed at her own silliness. “I’m just teasing.”

“Take it from an only child. It’s pretty amazing.”

So she was an only child? I couldn’t imagine life without my siblings. I wanted to strangle at least one of them at any given time. When I was away at college, the distance from my family felt ... freeing. Until it didn’t. By the time I’d graduated, I missed Grado Valley, and my family. There was never really any question of coming back. Just one of being able to do the job as well as my parents.

Min grabbed a donut, obviously changing her mind. Could have predicted that. “Take one of the cinnamon,” she said to Brooke. “They’re amazing.”

Oddly pleased she didn't hesitate, I pretended that watching her take a first taste didn't affect me at all. The "mmm" the treat elicited did it for me.

"To answer your question," I said to Min, "I have no idea. I'll make some calls this morning. But if it's true . . ." I let the words hang.

"What does it mean, exactly. If it's true?" Brooke asked.

I couldn't help but look at her as I answered. "The owners are a bunch of assholes. They don't play nice with anyone up here, despite the fact that nearly every other owner works together well. When one vineyard or winery does well, attracts business, we all benefit."

"Sunset," Min summed up, "is the bane of our existence."

"And owning the Baker property means they will be able to expand?"

"Right," Min said. "Which wouldn't be a problem except —" She and I exchanged a glance. "It's lakefront. An expansion of their popular Sunset Wine Cruise wouldn't be great news for us."

"Because of the dock thing."

Min seemed surprised Brooke knew about that. "Right. Which means we're in for some tough discussions. If it's true."

Tough was an understatement. Min and I agreed that maintaining Mom and Dad's vision was an important part of our philosophy. Marco and Neo, on the other hand, didn't want to get "stuck in the old ways" and pushed hard for changes they thought would bring Grado into the future. The brewery had been a compromise. Dad was against it. Mom felt ambivalent about it. And knowing Marco needed a sense of

ownership here, feeling sometimes left out as he did, it had been one of the first decisions I'd made as proprietor. I was already in the shithouse with Dad for that one. Adding docks would be a five-alarm fire.

"In other news, how was your first week?" Min asked Brooke.

She immediately looked at me. And hesitated. "Eventful," she said, taking a sip of coffee. "But when you start out at a place after making snow angels in the grass, it can only go up from there, right?"

"I heard about that," Min admitted. "We've all been there."

"Oh," Brooke said. "I wasn't drunk." I gave her a look, so she amended, "Well, not *that* drunk. I'd been tasting away, minding my business, when a little kid went running across the field. She was looking at the sky and didn't see a log in front of her. I could tell she was going to run headlong into it. Instead," she shrugged, "I took a bit of a tumble."

"Oh my goodness, I had no idea. Was the girl okay?"

"Not a scratch," Brooke said. "Wish I could say the same." She showed us both the back of her arm. I'd seen the bruise and knew where it came from. Even if I'd totally misconstrued the reason for it.

Shit.

"Do you have time for a chat later today?" Brooke said suddenly to me. "I'm thinking of something and want to hash over it a bit first. An idea."

Double shit.

"I'm off the property most of the day, but I can catch you afterwards."

“Sounds good,” she said, as casual as could be. As if she was completely unaffected by the idea of having a private talk later.

“Take what you want,” I said to the ladies, finding my voice. “I have to get the rest of these pastries back to the Cellar before I head out.”

Min took some for her workers and damned if Brooke didn’t snag a second one too. I liked a woman who wasn’t shy about eating actual food. And who saved little girls from near catastrophes. And who held her own, as Brooke had with me after I’d been an asshole pretty much since the moment we’d met.

Renting the cottage to her was my way of apologizing. But maybe I needed to offer a real one, having clearly misjudged Brooke Ellis somewhat.

She was still my employee, though. And hating her had been a lot easier than admitting the truth. A truth that would get me into some serious trouble . . . the last thing I needed more of right about now.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

brooke

FINALLY, AFTER A WEEK OF UPHEAVAL—LEARNING THE ROPES in the tasting room, moving into the cottage, finding the grocery store and stocking up—I felt relaxed for the first time. Sitting on my deck with a glass of chardonnay, a white I never thought I liked until this week, I saw a hint of the lake peeking through the trees. Definitely better than an apartment in town above a general store.

As always these days, my thoughts drifted to the man who had arranged for me to stay in this cottage. I'd seen so little of him this week, probably by design. And though I no longer felt as if I wanted to throttle him every time he walked into a room, I couldn't say he was my favorite person to be around anyway.

People that serious made me nervous. I had tried so hard at Avec Coeur not to have diarrhea of the mouth. Evan would tell me all the time to keep my thoughts closer to the vest. But I'd just found it impossible, like climbing an icy mountain wearing nothing but a wet suit.

Giving myself precisely sixty seconds to dwell on the fact that Evan was no longer my boyfriend, a good thing, and that I was no longer head of product development at Avec Coeur, a not so good thing, I pushed both thoughts from my mind and

tried to be present. Enjoy the surroundings after a long day at the Cellar. They hadn't been kidding about how busy it got on the weekends here. My last day shadowing, I tried to imagine doing it all solo. By now I'd tasted all the wines many times. Knew the fragrance notes, an easy enough feat. Knew the difference between "in glass" wine characteristics and "in mouth" interpretations. But still, it was a lot. Acidity, texture, body. There was so much more to it than I'd initially realized.

My phone vibrated.

Was it him?

Pretending I hadn't been waiting on pins and needles for Cosimo to get in touch about that chat I'd asked him for had been fun while it lasted. I picked up my phone.

Talk tonight or wait for tomorrow?

Shit. Now what? Did he *want* to wait until tomorrow?

up to you

After a moment, still no response. I refused to be disappointed. I hardly liked the guy, he was my boss, and in two and a half months, my time at Grado would be a distant memory. If not sooner. I already had a half dozen job offers sitting in my inbox. At first glance, none seemed to be perfect fits, but I needed to sift through each prospect a little more.

On my porch, come anytime

My heart raced despite the fact that I didn't really care one way or another if I saw Cosimo Grado tonight. I texted back:

Be down in 5

I cared so little to see him tonight that I reapplied my lip gloss, fixed my hair, and nearly stumbled twice on the walk

down to his cottage. Which really was more like a log cabin mansion.

When I rounded the corner and saw him on the massive wraparound front porch, I willed my feet to keep moving rather than standing in place to soak it all in. The contrast between his white Grado tee and black-rimmed glasses, the casualness of him in that chair . . . dear lord.

“Wine in hand, good girl.”

As I walked up the stairs, I resisted the urge to ask him to repeat that last part in a slightly lower bedroom voice.

“Chard,” I said. “Never thought I liked it before.”

“Malolactic fermentation gives it a nice creamy texture,” he said as I sat.

He could have said “creamy texture” five more times and that would have been fine with me. “That sounds so sexy. Malolactic fermentation.”

“You’d be surprised how sexy wine can be.”

He said it casually, as if we were talking about the view. Or the weather. So I tried to appear as unaffected as him and I climbed the steps, wondering what he had in his glass. Actually, I wondered a lot of things about him, but that was the only question I’d let my mind explore.

“I’d call wine lots of things, but sexy?” And now I was flirting.

Fantastic, Brooke. Great idea.

Cosimo looked at me out of the side of his glasses. Then he stood up and walked over to me, these Adirondack chairs making me feel all cozy, like I was still on vacation. He squatted down, his head no more than a foot from mine.

“Take a sip.”

I could have told him to knock it off with the commands. Or to keep them up. Instead, I said nothing and took a sip.

“Have you learned about the finish of a wine yet?”

I nodded, unable to speak. He was so damn close I could smell him.

“Then you know,” he said, his voice low and decidedly very sexy, “the finish of a wine includes how long the taste lingers. And how long the texture of the wine lasts in your mouth.”

I was pretty certain my heart stopped.

Then, as if nothing happened, he stood up and resumed his former position, sipping wine like he owned the place. Which, of course, he did.

“I thought—” my voice did not sound normal, but I couldn’t help it, “—you had a very strict no-fraternization policy at Grado Valley,” I said boldly.

“We do.”

“So you typically sip wine on your front porch while whispering about tastes and textures and mouths to your employees?” My question, even bolder.

“In fact,” he said, “I don’t.” That was it. No further comment. And now he’d managed to make me feel special somehow. Unique.

A totally counterproductive thought if ever there was one. “Hmmm.”

“You wanted to talk to me?” he said as if that incident never occurred. Which it totally did. He’d been flirting. One

hundred percent.

Focus, Brooke. “The CEO of Avec Coeur loved reminding everyone we were a luxury brand. That meant the right visuals, a compelling brand story, credibility, and a quality experience.”

“I’m with you.” Cosimo sipping wine on the porch of his lakeside cabin was pretty much the only visual enticement anyone would need to come to this particular vineyard, but I skipped that part.

“You have all of that here. Its exclusivity makes it easy to market Grado Valley as a luxury brand.”

“Exclusivity . . .”

“Yes. If Sunset becomes a problem. I know you don’t want to add docks—”

“Two of my siblings do.”

“But you don’t. I can tell. And I’m sure there’s some pressure from your dad not to make such changes, intentionally or not, as you transition into the new role. Also, I kind of agree with him. Adding a dock would create the kind of chaos that is the opposite of what Grado has going for it. A sort of old-world, laid-back charm. As if, when you’re here, you really are away from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the world and maybe have stepped back to a simpler time.”

“Not that Kitchi Falls could be considered hustle and bustle.”

“No,” I agreed. “Locals don’t need that escape. They have it already. But we’re talking about the tourists. People like me who would be happy never to hear a honking horn again in their natural lives.” He gave me a quizzical look, but I plowed on. “So compromise. Build one small dock off to the side, like

the private one you have here but on the other end of the property, out of the sight line of the Cellar deck. Instead of the masses coming and going on something like a Sunset Wine Tour, offer a very exclusive private tour with one of the owners of Grado Valley. If you each did one or two a week, that would take you through the summer. Go to your personal favorite wineries, aside from Grado. Sample our wines on the boat, of course, and end up back at the Cellar. A ‘part of the family’ slant to the whole thing. You could charge a premium for it without the crowds of people at fifty bucks a shot Sunset offers.”

He hadn’t hinted even once what he’d been thinking as I talked. But now, Cosimo sat up in his seat, blinked and then stood. He walked to a table with a wine bottle on it, poured himself a glass and then eyed my empty one.

“Amateur,” he said. “Didn’t bring the bottle?”

“No,” I answered, still waiting.

“I’ll grab it for you while I process your idea.”

What was there to process? It was brilliant.

“Wait,” I said, stopping him. “The keys.” I extended them out to him.

Cosimo looked at me strangely. “You locked it?”

“You don’t lock your door?”

“No,” he replied immediately. “Never.”

I dropped the keys into his hand. “Thanks. It’s in the fridge.”

He glanced back as if to say, *Of course it is. I knew that. I’m sexy as hell and know everything there is to know about wine. Including how the finish is supposed to be. In your*

mouth. When Cosimo returned, I was surprised to realize I'd thought about his mouth the entire time he was gone.

He poured me a glass, his eyes never leaving mine. Not one word since he came back. And then he sat. "I love the idea."

It was as if I'd won the lottery. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," he said. "It's a good compromise and very 'on brand,' as Jena would say."

"I'm sorry about her," I said. "I finally met her Thursday. She seemed really sweet. And savvy. Sucks to lose her."

"It does," he admitted. "Especially with Min leaving this week."

"I heard you hired another tasting room associate, though. That's good."

Cosimo didn't answer. He seemed deep in thought. Until he wasn't and his entire attention shifted to me. The guy was scary intense.

"I was wrong about you, Brooke," he said, shocking me to my core.

"How so?" I managed, trying to keep it light.

"I thought you were drunk as a skunk last weekend when you fell. Which, no judgment, I've been there. But then you were on your phone the entire time—"

"Answering my ex, who texted me for the first time since we broke up."

His jaw clenched. "When did you break up?"

"A month ago." I took a deep breath and dove into it. "When I first started working at Avec Coeur, he wasn't my

boss. We started dating, and like two months later, he was promoted. It's a huge company, and since one hand doesn't talk to the other, his boss didn't realize our relationship could be an issue."

"That's awkward."

"Tell me about it. I didn't report directly to him or anything but ..." I shrugged, trying to keep it casual. "When the company consolidated, lists were submitted. Decisions were made. And ..." I lifted my glass. "Here I am."

Cosimo leaned forward. "Are you telling me your ex was responsible for you being laid off?"

"He didn't try to prevent it, let's put it that way."

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

I couldn't lie. I loved the fact that Cosimo had defended me. "I wish I was. The real kick in the pants, though, was that Evan couldn't see why I broke up with him."

"Idiot," he mumbled. "Did he feel threatened by you?"

I smiled. "My friends all think so, but they are totally biased."

Something was going on in that pretty little head of his, but I couldn't tell what, exactly. I just knew that something had shifted between us.

"I'm sorry, Brooke."

"For what?"

"Misjudging you. Being a total dick to you."

"Water under the bridge, Cosimo."

"Cos," he said. And then, "What days do you work this week?"

“Thursday through Sunday. I have tomorrow and Wednesday off.”

“Pencil me in for Tuesday afternoon.”

“We’re closed Tuesday.”

“The estate is closed, yes. But I work seven days a week. It’ll be a good day for a private tasting.”

My jaw dropped at that one.

“Learning about wine from Perry is like learning how to cook from someone who doesn’t own a stove.”

“You know how to cook?” I asked, despite myself. I loved a man who could cook.

“I know how to do a lot of things,” he said.

This time, I didn’t have to guess. He was one hundred percent flirting with me.

And I liked it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

cosimo

I WAS FUCKED.

This was as bad an idea today as when I asked her Sunday night. What the hell had I been thinking?

“You’re not even planning to say goodbye?” Min walked into my office and sat across from me.

“Oh shit.” I’d told her I’d come over to the Barn by noon. I’d been so wrapped up in work, or trying to focus on work knowing Brooke would be coming soon, I totally forgot.

“No worries. I’m only leaving for the summer. No need to concern yourself with something so trivial as saying ‘safe travels’ to your sister.”

I lowered my pen. “I’m so glad you’ve matured, Dominica. I love that you’re not as dramatic as you were when we were kids.”

“Sarcasm does not become you.”

“Yes,” I disagreed. “It does.”

“A smile. Well, would you look at that. The man’s lips do know how to curve upward.”

Rolling my eyes, I asked if she was ready for the trip. “Don’t forget your passport.” I looked at her pointedly. “And

maybe check your ticket for the date.”

“Ugh, no fair. That was the very first flight I ever booked myself.”

“Still. May, June. Two totally separate months. Not sure how you get them confused.”

“Easy. Online it’s just one number different.”

“This time you’ve actually booked your ticket for June?”

“Yes, asshole. Thanks for the reminder.”

“No problem.”

“Seriously though, will you be okay?”

Only Min could go from calling me an asshole to looking like she would cry on my behalf. “I will be fine. Marco’s got the Barn. We filled the tasting room spots. And”—I leaned back—“do you have a second before you leave?”

“Sure. Driver doesn’t come for a half hour, and I’m completely packed and ready to roll. Just making the rounds before I head out.”

“You know Brooke? The new associate?”

I knew Min would give me that look. “The one you couldn’t stop staring at Sunday over donuts? The pretty, super nice, and highly overqualified associate? That Brooke?”

“And you accuse me of being sarcastic.”

She ignored me. “What about her?”

“She actually had a really good idea about the docks.” I told her Brooke’s idea, which as it turned out, would be useful since the rumor, unfortunately, turned out to be true. Sunset had managed to grab the Baker property. “I think if we get

ahead of it, maybe it could be up and running for the Harvest Festival. Or even before that.”

“Speaking of, with everything else going on, maybe we should shelve that idea? Now that Jena’s leaving? The last thing you need is something new on your plate without her to plan it.”

“Part of me thinks we should. But I do think it’s a good idea. Especially if we can get a contractor to start working this summer on a dock. It would be a perfect time for a big push.”

“I suppose I will be back by then to help out. But we would need to get the ball rolling right away. Any hits on a replacement for Jena?”

“No, but I just had another idea. Not sure it’ll work, though.”

“What?”

Instantly, I began to second-guess myself. Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut.

“Cos? What is it? What’s your idea?”

I checked the time on my phone. She would be here soon. Listening for sounds in the corridor and not hearing anything, I confided in my sister. Good idea? Probably not.

“You said it yourself,” I added before Min could respond to my idea. “Brooke has an MBA from NYU. What if we contracted with her to help with the festival as a one-off project?”

“Oh my god! How did I not think of that? I love it.”

Of course Min would see through me. She was a smart cookie. Indeed, she studied me, no doubt wondering why I

wasn't more excited about the prospect. And then she put two and two together. "Oh."

"Yeah, oh. It was a hell of a lot easier when I didn't like her."

"But now you do?"

Sunday night we'd kicked back nearly two full bottles of wine. Brooke told me about her mom and how often she'd moved around. I talked about growing up on the estate. By the time she left, I was kicking myself over having offered to meet up with her today.

"I can't screw this up." My shoulders actually felt as if there were literal weights on them and not just metaphorical ones. Just this morning Dad had called asking about the estate. He hadn't said anything that should have put me on the defensive, but it seemed like I always did just that when we talked. Defended the decisions I made. Waited for him to approve, or worse, disapprove. Here I'd thought him being an ocean away would help. Not so much.

"Cos," she said, sounding exactly like our mother, "you will not screw this up. You've been preparing for this your entire life. And you're not doing it alone. You have us."

Thank God for that.

"I think it's a great idea. But I don't have to tell you . . . it's gotta be hands-off."

"Of course," I said, as if there was any question.

"Maybe after the summer," she shrugged. "Who knows?"

"After the summer she'll be back in the city."

"Probably. And maybe that's for the best, no?"

Definitely. “You’re right.”

Of course she was right. I knew all of this already. When Brooke came, I’d tell her it had been a mistake to ask her here for a private tasting. We could do that another day.

“You’re always right,” I said. “It’s fucking annoying.”

Min stood, so I did too. Giving her a squeeze, I said, “Be safe. Let me know when you land.”

“I will.” She pulled away.

“Need help with your luggage?”

“Marco got it. He’s out there probably cursing me as we speak. I told him to stay with it.”

“Go ahead then before he comes looking for you.”

Min turned toward the door and nearly ran smack-dab into Brooke.

“Oh hi,” Min said to her. “Sorry I nearly bowled you over.”

“No worries,” Brooke said, looking like she belonged here. Jean shorts and a Grado tee, hair down today.

“It was so good to meet you,” Min said.

“Oh, that’s right, you’re leaving to join your parents?”

“Literally right now, yep.”

“Well, safe travels. It was great meeting you too.”

With a final warning glance, which Brooke couldn’t see, Min waved as she walked away, leaving the object of our discussion standing in the door.

“Come on in, Brooke,” I said. Knowing what I was about to tell her—the truth—I added, “And maybe shut the door

behind you.”

“You’re scaring me,” Brooke said.

The fact that I stared at her ass as she closed the door was exactly why we couldn’t do this today.

She turned, sat down, and looked at me with a *well, go on then* expression.

“Didn’t mean to scare you. I’m sorry to have pulled you up here on your day off, Brooke.” I pulled the Band-Aid right off. “I think today is a bad idea.”

“Today? You mean the one that was *your* idea?”

“That one.”

She gaped at me as if I’d lost my mind. Which, in fairness, was possibly true.

“You are an employee,” I started.

“And Grado Valley has a very strict, ironclad, no-fraternization policy,” she teased.

“One I initially mentioned because I thought you were attracted to my brother.”

Brooke’s smile fell. Her eyes widened.

“He’s a likable guy, so I wouldn’t blame you. But that day . . .” I shrugged. “It was a dumb thing to say. But people do dumb things when they . . .” Fuck me. This was more truth than I’d expected to let fly today, but so be it. “When they’re attracted to someone they shouldn’t be. When they say things like, ‘Come up to the Cellar for a private tasting.’”

For the first time since we met, Brooke was speechless. I was about to continue to explain myself, why today and long

chats on my porch were a bad idea, when she finally spoke. “That was the last thing in the world I expected you to say.”

“The truth?”

She blew out a breath, appearing overcome. “I guess, yeah. Most people are a little coy than that.”

“I’ve been accused of being many things, but coy has never been one of them. I hate playing games.”

“Clearly.”

“You work for me, at least for the summer. And hopefully, not just part-time as an associate. I’d love to have you full-time, with Min leaving, to take over planning and marketing the Harvest Festival.”

“Wait, what?”

“I know it’s somewhat outside the scope of what you’ve been doing, but with your background, it should be a walk in the park. You’re clearly capable, and definitely overqualified to spend all of your time on the floor. Although we would still need you there too. And before you say no, I want to show you something.”

Not taking any chances, since Brooke really was our best shot at salvaging this festival, I walked around her and opened the door. A shocked Brooke followed me down the hall in the opposite direction of the tasting room, toward an empty office that I knew would seal the deal. Or at least, I hoped it would.

Unlocking the door, I pushed it open and walked inside. Brooke joined me, her jaw once again dropping. “Are you serious right now?”

“It was my mother’s office. When she retired, she moved everything out, knowing that if she left even one of her

favorite pens she'd be tempted to use it as an excuse to come back. And probably start working again. Best view on the estate, in my opinion."

I headed to the sliding glass doors, pushed them open and walked onto the balcony, where Brooke joined me.

"This was the first section of the building that was renovated. The only office that has a private balcony." From here, a split in the trees offered a clear view of the lake. To the right, vineyards. Straight ahead, the lake. To the left, the lakefront lawns. "It's far enough away that you can't really hear customers unless there's live music. But we tend to have that on the big lawn."

"Except on Wednesdays," she said, gripping the railing and taking it all in.

"Right. Except that."

"Holy shit, Cos. This is incredible. Like the view from your house, but better. With the vineyards and all."

The look on Brooke's face was so pure, I wanted to cup her cheeks in my hands and somehow soak all that joy in for myself.

"This would be your office if you agreed," I told her, in case it wasn't clear.

"Why aren't you or your brother in here?"

"I haven't gotten around to moving my things. Neo doesn't have an office. Doesn't want one. He spends most of his time with the vines."

"And in the winter?"

"Traveling, visiting other vineyards. Researching. When he's here, he likes to flit around the estate, mostly bothering

us.”

“He has no home base.”

I shook my head. “Neo has ADHD. The constant change of scenery is good for him, he says. A lot of times he’ll set up shop in the tasting room with a laptop, like Min does in the Barn. I would think that would be pretty distracting, but who am I to say? I long ago stopped trying to figure out his brain and just roll with it.”

Brooke didn’t say anything for so long, I began to worry about what she was thinking. I was about to ask her when she blurted, “I’ll do it.”

My shoulders relaxed. It was the best news I’d gotten in a week. “Great. We can talk specifics and compensation—”

“On one condition.”

I braced myself. It had only been a little more than a week since Brooke Ellis stormed into my life, but I already knew to expect the unexpected with her. “Shoot.”

“There’s no weirdness between us.”

I met her gaze with a straight face. “After what I told you back in my office?” I grinned, adding, “Never.” Then, more seriously, “How do you define weirdness?”

“Not giving me a private wine tasting, which I could probably use, because of a mutual attraction between us.”

Damn. I wasn’t the only one dropping truth bombs today. But because I was a responsible business owner and didn’t fancy playing with fire, I ignored the “mutual attraction” part of her declaration. “Any other stipulations?”

“I’m serious, Cos. After what happened at Avec Coeur, you can be sure I will never, ever again test the ‘can two

people be in a relationship and work together' theory. Especially if said person is my boss.”

“Fair enough.”

“If we can't share a glass of wine on your deck, or be in a room alone without the possibility of something inappropriate happening, then this job probably isn't for me. Especially since I'll be here more often working even closer to you than before.”

Even closer. Man, I was a glutton for punishment. “I just think it's smart not to put ourselves in ... trying situations.”

“Is this a trying situation? Standing out here, alone, negotiating my position?”

Yes. And if there was any position I'd want to negotiate with Brooke, it had nothing to do with a job at Grado. But I kept all that to myself. I wanted her here. Could use her quick mind and expertise. So I was willing to agree to just about anything.

Including this.

I stuck out my hand. “Deal.”

She took it, the contact exactly what I'd have expected it to be. Electric.

Brooke knew it too. She was wading in and just asked me to jump in with her. So what did I do? Ignored the sharks and dove in headfirst.

“Deal,” she said, shaking my hand and letting go much too soon. “Now, about that tasting.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

brooke

“HOW COULD I POSSIBLY HAVE WORKED HERE ALL WEEK AND not know this existed?”

We walked into a barrel room unlike the one Cos showed me before. That one had been pure utility. Barrel after barrel of wine. A true storage facility. But this one was totally different. As unexpected as the office. And his admission. And his offer.

Pretty much everything about this day had been bonkers.

It had started with a bang. A job offer I hadn't been expecting from a headhunter I never contacted. But there it was, sitting in my inbox. A higher salary than at Avec Coeur and, the kicker, in the same neighborhood as my apartment. Basically, a no-brainer. If one wanted to be the brand manager for a NYC-based, clean haircare company. It was a solid company. A solid job offer. But it excited me about zero percent.

Shutting the lid on my laptop and still marveling that the adorable cottage I'd moved into was mine for the summer, I'd sat on the front porch this morning thinking about my future.

Ok, fine. I sat on my front porch thinking about Cosimo Grado. And trying to think about my future.

If I said anything other than that I'd gotten dressed for our private tasting with butterflies in my stomach and an anticipation of this tasting on par with my excitement prior to this girls' trip—and nothing was more exciting than the prospect of a wine-filled weekend with my besties—I'd be a stone-cold liar.

At this point, seeing this beautiful barrel room was child's play after the shock of Cosimo flat-out admitting he was attracted to me, after his offer of a full-time job, and me accepting it, but still. It was amazing.

“There was a private party in here the day you came with your friends,” he said, flicking on another switch. It illuminated little white bulb lights, like the ones in the Barn courtyard. “And this last weekend I worked it myself.”

“It's so cool.” Stone pillars with well-placed barrels, both decorative and serving as table stands, ran from the floor to the ceiling. White linen-covered tables led to a small bar at the end of the narrow room, with just a handful of stools. Behind it, shelves of wine bottles.

“We used to hold private tastings and small events in the actual barrel room. This was just an old storage room that we had converted a few years ago.”

“I think it's my favorite place on the property,” I said. “With the exception of my new office balcony. And your front porch. And the tasting room deck.”

Cos headed toward the bar, with me walking behind him, and gestured for me to sit. “Sounds like Grado Valley has gotten to you.”

“I think it has.” As had its proprietor. “Can I tell you something, since today is apparently the ‘let's get everything

off our chests' day?"

He pulled out a bottle and two glasses. "Oh boy. This sounds ominous."

"I thought you were a total sourpuss when we met."

He poured a touch of white wine in each glass. "You don't say?"

"I feel like you're not surprised."

"Because I'm not. It was a crazy day. My parents had just left, the tasting room was swarmed, and Thayle dragged me out to you guys. I'm sure I wasn't at my best."

"You weren't."

When Cosimo smiled, I knew it was genuine. He was so serious most often, it was like winning the lottery every time those deep brown eyes crinkled at the corners. Which was a totally normal reaction to have about one's boss.

What a stupid plan. *No weirdness between us. Let's just play it cool.* All words that sounded good until you strung them together in a stupid-ass sentence.

"On top of that, I *can* be a sourpuss. Just ask my siblings."

I pulled the wine glass he offered toward me. "I haven't met Marco yet, but you do seem to stand out from the gene pool a bit."

This time, he outright laughed. "If you think Min and Neo are different from me, I honestly can't wait for you to meet Marco."

I'd heard enough about his brother to understand what Cosimo was saying.

“Okay, first things first,” he continued. “Take a look. What do you see?”

“It’s white wine.”

“Good start. Viscosity?”

“Those are the wine legs, right?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“The droplets are flowing pretty slow.”

“Which means?”

“I’m dealing with some information overload this week,” I admitted. “Umm—”

“Let me make it simple for you. They don’t matter. Everyone loves to talk about wine legs or tears of a wine, but in fact the only thing the drops tell you is how much alcohol is in the wine. Information you can get from the bottle’s label.”

“So it was a trick question.”

“Sort of.”

“Sort of, my ass,” I muttered.

“Next?”

“Next I swirl it to bring out the aroma.” Doing that, I said, “Pineapple.”

“Good. This part is easy for you. Always think big to small. Start with primary aromas like fruits and floral notes, and then smell again. The secondary aromas, which come from winemaking processes, include cheese rind or nut husk or—”

“Stale beer,” I said, smelling again.

“Very good.”

He leaned forward over the bar, watching me so intently my breath caught as our eyes locked. I understood what he was trying to tell me upstairs. This was way too intimate. Cozy, like a blanket that just came out of a dryer. But hot too, in a way that made me want to crawl across the bar and tell Cos to forget everything I said about our relationship.

Had I learned anything at all from the disaster with Evan?

Apparently not.

“Last but not least, the tertiary aromas, which come from aging. Think savory, like roasted nuts or baking spices.”

“Maybe cedar,” I said. “Like the cologne you wear.”

Oops. Didn’t mean to say that.

He wasn’t going to let it go either. I could tell by the look in his eyes, even behind those glasses.

“Or vanilla,” Cos said, his voice husky. “Like your perfume.”

I was becoming flushed even before taking a single sip of wine.

“Now what?” I asked, to break the silence.

“Taste.”

He didn’t move. He didn’t pick up his glass. He didn’t drink the wine. He held it, stem between his fingers, watching me.

“We use our tongues to observe the wine,” he said, very much in a tone that made me imagine how else he could use his tongue. “Once you swallow the wine . . .”

I pushed aside a vision of me on my knees in front of him.

“ . . . the aromas may change.”

I wanted to kiss him.

I wanted him to kiss me.

I wanted to know what it was like to see Cosimo Grado lose control. And I was pretty sure he knew I wanted that, and I thought he wanted that too.

Hell, he admitted to being attracted to me.

“Go ahead,” he prompted. “Taste.”

Trying hard to hold the glass steady, I took a sip. It was sweet. The kind of wine I might have liked when I’d started my wine journey, but not one I was a fan of now.

“You didn’t taste it,” I accused. “Why?”

He didn’t blink. “Because I’d rather taste you.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

cosimo

IN TERMS OF INAPPROPRIATE THINGS YOU COULD SAY TO AN employee, that was a doozy. Not like we hadn't had pretty women working at Grado before. But never, not even when I was in high school, had I found myself unable to separate the person from the position.

"I'm sorry—"

"Do it."

We talked at the same time. Which was why I needed Brooke to repeat herself. "Excuse me?"

"Do it," she said again. This time, her words were crystal clear.

"Brooke, I can't," I said with a headful of regret. "We agreed not even a half hour ago it was a really bad fucking idea."

"We did," she admitted, setting the glass aside and jumping from the stool. With every step she took, I could feel myself getting harder and harder. I could feel the noose of my parents' expectations tightening.

But most of all, I could feel Brooke, even though we weren't touching. She was close enough. If I reached out, she'd be in my arms.

“I’ll be leaving in two months,” she said.

“But this is still incredibly inappropriate.”

“Agreed.”

We were at an impasse. Then, out of nowhere, Brooke reached up and clasped the rim of my glasses. With a deft hand, she pulled them off. Which wasn’t at all what I’d been expecting.

“I’ve always wondered what you would look like without them.”

Every fiber of my being wanted to grab Brooke by both shoulders and kiss her so hard her lips would look like she’d been kissed from even half a mile away.

“And?” I asked.

“I didn’t think it was possible you could get any hotter.”

Screw it.

I closed the small gap between us, reached for the back of Brooke’s neck, and pulled her into me. The first touch of our lips was mind-blowing. It shouldn’t have been anything more than a kiss. Two people whose lips met, whose mouths simultaneously opened for each other. Whose tongues immediately tangled.

I used the leverage of my hand to draw her closer, as if such a thing was possible. Her soft moan undid me. Brooke’s hands, suddenly on both of my arms, elicited a groan of my own. One that told her I wanted this, even if I shouldn’t have. One that made her open even more for me.

Our kiss wasn’t gentle at all. It hinted at a passion between us that was anything but contained. Fucking her would not be

soft and sweet. It wouldn't be slow and sensual. If this kiss was any indication, it would be explosive. All-consuming.

“So I'm guessing this is a bad time?”

Just as I was about to slide my free hand down to Brooke's ass, and pull her into me, to have her feel how much I wanted her right now, the voice dumped an ice-filled bucket on us both. I stepped away, but the damage was done.

Fuck.

Brooke looked between us, recognition replacing confusion as the newcomer strolled past wine barrel tables toward us.

I wanted to bury my face in my hands, kick the bar in front of me and curse, badly, all at once. Instead, I said, “Brooke, I'd like you to meet my brother Marco. Marco, this is Brooke.”

Because my brother was the biggest asshole on the planet, he didn't hold back. “As in Brooke, the new tasting room associate who Min mentioned may be coming on full-time for a one-off project this summer? That Brooke?”

He completely ignored my warning look.

“Way to make a good first impression,” I said.

“Not as good as yours, apparently.” He turned to Brooke. “Nice to meet you. Sorry for the intrusion. I was looking for my brother and,” he smiled, “it appears I found him.”

“I should go—”

“No.” I didn't want her to leave like this. “Stay. We'll finish the tasting.”

“Ooh, a private tasting. Sounds like fun. Mind if I join you?” Without waiting for a response, Marco sauntered behind the bar, grabbed a glass and set it next to Brooke’s. “Looks like you started with the Accursia White. Not my favorite, so I’ll pass on that one.”

As if anyone asked him.

By now Brooke had made her way back around the bar. I could tell she was hesitant about staying, but I really wanted her to. Partially because I simply liked her company, and partially because I didn’t want her to feel awkward.

Or more awkward, at least.

“Cos without his glasses.” Marco picked them up. “Now there’s a rare sight.”

I didn’t bother asking for them, which would have been a surefire way to ensure Marco wouldn’t hand them back.

“He barely needs them,” Marco told Brooke.

She appraised me as if to ask if it were true.

“The eye doctor said I could get away with wearing them only when I’m straining my eyes,” I explained. “So I started wearing them in college to see the board better. And never really took them off.”

“Did your eyes get worse?”

“No,” I admitted, unsurprised when Marco handed them to me. I put the glasses back on. “But now I’m just used to wearing them.”

“Another fun Cosimo fact,” Marco said as I pulled another bottle from behind me. “Did he tell you he took ballet?”

I opened the bottle without blinking. Marco loved telling everyone that fact. By now he should have realized it didn't bother me. But he still tried to rile me anyway.

“Seriously?” Brooke asked.

“Seriously,” Marco said, giving me a generous pour knowing it was a favorite of mine. He slid the glass toward me.

And that was my brother in a nutshell. One second, attempting to embarrass me. And in the next, doing something so subtly thoughtful that it took years to even notice he was being kind. As if being kind was a sign of weakness. Someday Marco just might actually mature enough to realize sharing vulnerabilities was a strength, not a weakness. But that day was not today.

“No one forced him into it either. Took it for what, Cos? Five years?”

“Six,” I said. “Helped with football.”

“I think it's incredibly cool,” Brooke said. “Do you still like to dance?”

“I do,” I said, trying hard not to think about our kiss. If Marco hadn't interrupted, I had no doubt in my mind neither of us would have stopped. Despite how utterly terrible of an idea it was, having sex with someone who worked for me.

“And what do you do,” Brooke asked Marco, “aside from trying to embarrass your brother and failing miserably at it?”

Brooke said the words so casually, neither Marco nor I fully registered them for a hot second. When we did, he burst out laughing while I stared at her, wanting nothing more than to kiss her again for defending me. And because it was one hell of a kiss.

“Now where were we?” I asked when Marco continued to laugh, unable to answer.

“Taste. We were talking about how to properly taste the wine,” she said. To which Marco burst out in a fresh laughing fit, shaking his head.

“I’m sure you were,” he muttered.

Even I smiled at that one.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

brooke

TWO WEEKS.

Fourteen days.

I could probably count the hours too, but honestly, I was too tired. I just knew this outing was exactly what I needed. The second Thayle had mentioned heading to the bar in town for a change of scenery, I was on it like a fly on honey. Or was it a bee on honey?

I had no idea. But what I did know was that, after this past July 4th weekend, I was looking forward to having the day off tomorrow. And getting away from GVV.

Getting away from *him*.

It had been impossible to ignore him completely. Even though Cos locked himself in the office half the day, our paths crossed in the tasting room. Luckily Grado's admin and logistics lead, Maci, had helped Dominica with events in the past. And though Min typically took the lead on them, Maci and Min tag-teamed big ones, like this Harvest Festival. A forty-eight-year old, divorced mother of two teen boys, Maci was also one of the nicest people I'd ever met.

Even though I was able to coordinate with Maci most often, I had to speak with Cos about my new job from time to

time. After the Marco incident, we never talked about the kiss. Not once. Cos had pulled me aside that day afterward, and I'd been sure he would say something about what happened. Instead, he just asked if I was okay.

Wasn't the answer obvious? No. I wasn't okay at all. The only thing that kiss accomplished was stoking my desire for him to the point of no return. I could not look at him now without seeing behind those glasses. Which I was now certain he used to differentiate himself from his brothers. Not that I'd go so far as to accuse Cosimo of hiding behind them—though no one could blame him if he had wanted to hide. It was no secret the weight of his position and the expectations placed on him as Grado's proprietor contributed significantly to his stress. But that day, in that moment, he'd let go. For once.

And I wanted him to do it again.

Of course, he couldn't. Shouldn't. Which was why I was not encouraging such foolery. I avoided him as much as possible, even pretended not to see him walking down to his house. As if I didn't lie in bed replaying his kiss in my mind as if it were the most epic of all Netflix binge watches. I texted my friends. Dove headfirst into what a wine harvest festival should be like, worked the tasting room when needed and, most enjoyable of all, took my coffee every morning out on the balcony of my temporary office and breathed in the fresh air.

I dreamt of what it would be like to stay and not go back to the city. Dangerous thoughts, which nearly always led to even more dangerous ones. Jena's job. One I was more than qualified for, especially after I finished working the winery this summer. If I applied for that job, what would that mean for me and Cos?

“Two light drafts, on the house.” Thayle slid one of those drafts over to me.

“On the house?” I asked.

She pointed her chin toward the bar. Standing behind it was a sandy-haired man, good-looking, though not in a “Grado boys” kind of way. I’d learned that was what Cos and his brothers were known as. If I’d thought I’d been the only one to recognize their unusual good looks, I was mistaken. Not surprisingly, the Grado boys were considered prime real estate in the bachelor market around here. Thayle’s words, not mine.

“Owen Smith,” she said. “His family owns the bar.”

I raised my pint glass to him, and Owen nodded, smiling. More accurately, flirting.

“They’re the same ones that own the general store too?”

“Yep. And half of Kitchi Falls. Owen’s the same age as Cos, or maybe he’s only thirty-one. Not sure. But his dad recently retired too. Owen manages the store and the bar.”

“KC Taphouse,” I murmured, mulling over the name. “Is the ‘KC’ derived from Kitchi Corners?”

“Yep. The store came first. Not sure when the bar opened, but it’s been here as long as me. Back in the day, my dad would bring me in here when I was still underage. I sat over there.” She pointed to tables in the corner by the pool table. “And did my homework.”

“I can’t imagine it was easy to concentrate on homework in a bar.”

“It wasn’t. But my mom died when I was six and my dad was an alcoholic. So,” she shrugged, “I spent a lot of time in here.”

Jesus. "I'm so sorry, Thayle. I had no idea."

"It's fine. I'm fine." I could tell she didn't want to talk about it. "How about you? Mom? Dad?"

"My parents divorced when I was young. After about ten years old or so, I didn't hear from my father much. He kind of moved on."

"From his own daughter?"

Like her, it wasn't something I loved to discuss. "Yep. Mom remarried twice. She's with number three in North Carolina. I like the new one, though. Hopefully third time's the charm."

Thayle raised her glass. "Here's to not having a perfect childhood and coming out on the other side."

I clinked glasses with her and drank. "Do you actually know anyone who did have the perfect childhood?"

She thought about that as a new song came on the jukebox. And I didn't mean a digital one. It was as old-fashioned as you got, just like the inside of this bar. And the entire town. Kitchi Falls was like taking a step back in time. When I'd first arrived with Thayle and headed to the ladies' room, I'd stopped short as I encountered a cigarette machine. Thankfully, it was a nonsmoking bar, but the machine was completely stocked. I tried to imagine seeing that in the city.

"No. I mean, with the exception of the Grados."

"Are they really as perfect as they seem?"

"Well," she said, "I wouldn't say perfect. Mr. Grado Senior can be tough at times. GVV is his baby and I think there's a lot of pressure there because of him, even after he retired. But you'd never know it as an outsider. He's one of the most

gregarious guys you'll ever meet. And Mrs. Grado keeps him in line."

"What's she like?"

I noticed Owen looking at me from the corner of his eye. Didn't someone say he had a girlfriend? I reminded myself to ask Thayle.

"You met Min, right?"

"Yep."

"Then you've met Mrs. Grado. They are literally like the same person separated by a few decades."

"And you guys grew up together?"

"We met in kindergarten and have been friends since. She's more like a sister to me. But I swear, I never in a million years imagined I'd end up working at Grado. Min, on the other hand, has known forever that she wanted to help run the family business."

"But here you are."

Thayle took a big swig of beer, so I did the same.

"Here I am." She glanced around the bar. "Kitchi Falls. Love it or hate it, this town, the lake, all of it, gets into your soul. I just have to shake off some of the cobwebs of my past still. Otherwise, it's really not all that bad. Especially working with your best friend."

"So why the hesitation to work here at Grado in the first place?"

Thayle clammed right up. There was something she didn't want to tell me.

“Lots of reasons,” she said, dismissing the question. “Will it be hard for you to leave at the end of the summer? Or are you starting to get anxious to get back to the city?”

We’d talked a little about my decision to stay here, but I’d also told Thayle the same as what I’d texted the girls when Tina asked in our group thread if I ever wanted to come back.

“It’s complicated.”

She appeared thoughtful. “Hmm.”

“What?” I laughed. Before I could say more, I found myself getting distracted, catching sight of Owen again. He was looking my way. “Doesn’t he have a girlfriend?”

“Not anymore. They broke up last week.”

Ahh, so that explained the drinks and flirty looks.

“Want me to introduce you to him?”

“Nah,” I said, “that’s okay. Was just curious.”

“You sure? He’s been eyeing you up since we walked in.”

I shook my head. “I’m good. No use starting something when I’ll be leaving next month. What about the two of you?”

Thayle looked appalled. “No, thanks. I know too much about him.” She leaned forward, lowering her voice, as the table next to us wasn’t all that far away. “But you don’t. And there’s no need to marry the guy. You should know he *can* tie a cherry stem with his tongue.”

I nearly spat out my beer at that. And was about to tell her I’d love to see him try—though I didn’t really want to encourage her further—when a voice behind me asked, “What’s so funny?”

Immediately sobered, I sat up on the stool. Swallowing, I tried to play it cool, wondering if Thayle noticed the new flush in my cheeks. This was exactly why I'd been trying to avoid him. Pretending Cos didn't affect me in any way was just about impossible.

"I was just telling Brooke that Owen could tie a cherry stem with his tongue."

Oh my god. No, she didn't.

Cos came into view then, at the side of our high-top. He was with Neo, who was already walking toward the bar.

"It's not all that difficult," he said, looking straight at me.

What the hell was he doing here? I'd been trying to avoid him.

"You're saying you can do it too?" Thayle asked. "No way. I'd know that already."

His brows rose at her as Neo joined us with four beers.

"Owen said the ladies are drinking lights?" Neo slid the new beers toward us and sat down next to Thayle.

"Thanks," she said with the casualness of someone who had known Neo all his life. Which she had. It really was like Thayle was a family member. "Did you guys know we were coming to KC's?"

Neo looked at Cos. "I don't know. Did we? It was his idea."

In answer, Cosimo put his beer down on the table and walked over to the bar. All three of us, confused, watched him talk to Owen briefly and then saunter back to us. Even here, away from Grado Valley, it was like he owned the place. As if he felt perfectly comfortable here, in this hometown bar, just

as well as at a multimillion-dollar vineyard estate that he did actually own.

Cos sat back down, opened his mouth and then slipped a cherry stem inside.

No fucking way. He tilted his head back, concentrating, and I imagined what was happening inside that mouth of his. Although, I didn't really have to imagine it. I remembered quite clearly what it was like to kiss him.

A few seconds later, he opened his mouth again, reached inside with his thumb and forefinger, and then pulled out a tied cherry stem, holding it up.

“Haven't seen you do that in years,” Neo said.

“Impressive.” Thayle leaned forward to get a better look at the cherry stem, as if making sure it was indeed tied.

“In answer to your question,” Cos began, very clearly holding the stem between his fingers still. He turned first to me, made eye contact, and then gave his attention back to Thayle. “Yes. I knew you ladies were coming. Heard you mention it to Perry.”

Thayle obviously thought nothing of it. She started chatting with Neo and Cos while I tried to put the pieces of the Cosimo Grado puzzle together. We'd hardly talked for two weeks. When we did, it was all business. And then he came to KC's, knowing I'd be here, and promptly put his superior tongue skills on display before even sitting down to drink his first beer.

What the hell did it all mean?

Hard to say with the man in question talking to the others as if he didn't have a care in the world. As if his insides weren't doing somersaults like mine.

Dammit, Cos. What was going on in that sexy head of yours?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

cosimo

“INTRODUCE ME TO YOUR NEW EMPLOYEE, COS.”

As if resurrecting the cherry trick weren't enough to make me look like some college frat boy, I was about two heartbeats away from telling Owen to fuck off. And I liked the guy.

All night he'd been eyeing Brooke. Whether or not she'd noticed, I couldn't tell. But knowing he was newly single, and that she and Thayle were coming here tonight, had been enough for me to ask my brother if he wanted to head to town.

It was crowded by the time Neo and I had gotten here, even though it was a Monday. But the second I walked through the door, I found her, despite the fact that Brooke sat with her back toward the door. She was like a magnet for me. If Brooke was about to step into my office, I looked up almost anticipating it. I could tell before I saw her that she was in the tasting room. Even last weekend, when we'd been slammed for the Fourth, it took me all of a half second to home in on her through the crowd.

At night, though. In bed. I knew exactly where she was. The thought of jumping up, heading to her cottage, and knocking on the door was such a recurring one that, in my sleep, I was convinced it already happened. I could see her opening her door. Feel her body as I pressed mine to her. I

could taste her. The craving for another kiss literally kept me up at night.

Being reminded she was, in fact, my employee didn't help matters.

"Brooke," I said through gritted teeth. "This is Owen Smith. His family owns the bar and Kitchi Corners. And two wineries. And—what else am I missing, Owen?"

"Nothing," he said, more humble than usual, because his family owned a hell of a lot more than that. Land. The only parking garage in town. The list went on.

"This is Brooke Ellis. She's from the city on an extended stay for the summer."

"Ah damn," he said, "you're not here for good?"

The look Brooke gave me was so fleeting, I didn't think it meant anything. Unless . . . could she possibly have been thinking of staying on? Of course, the thought of her taking Jena's job had occurred to me. But since we hadn't talked much since that kiss, I hadn't asked. And honestly, I wasn't sure if I should. If Brooke did leave, there would be nothing keeping us apart. Except three and a half hours.

"No," she said. "Just the summer."

"It's a great little area." He didn't bother hiding his interest. That, plus the fact that Owen was a good-looking guy, had me on edge.

"Brooke has a degree from NYU," Thayle said like a proud friend. "Was the head of product development at Avec Coeur."

"No shit?"

“Don’t even think about it, Owen,” my brother said. “If anyone were to snag Brooke if she decided to stay, it would be Grado.”

Again, Brooke glanced immediately at me. As if to gauge my reaction. She was thinking about it. I could tell. Which changed everything. After my display of jealousy, hopping into the car with Neo to come into town though neither of us planned to come out tonight, I’d thought about throwing in the towel. Telling Brooke that even though the kiss may have been a mistake, there was something between us worth exploring. Despite the distance that would be between us when she left.

But if she had even an inkling of desire to stay . . .

Everyone loved her. Neo, Thayle, Perry, Maci. Even Marco, after warning me to cool my jets that day, had fallen under her spell. Min still asked about her. My parents, if they were here, would adore her. And the ideas she had about the festival? No one would ever know that a few weeks ago she didn’t even know what ‘pop and pour’ meant. A quick learner, friendly with customers, a savvy businesswoman, Brooke would be beyond perfect for Jena’s position. If we could afford her.

Except for one thing.

Me.

Brooke laughed. “I wish I could stay,” she said, “but the city calls. I have a job offer from a company that has gotten serious about hiring me. They’re even willing to wait until the end of the summer.”

It felt as if Brooke had tossed her pint glass at my chest and a piece of glass lodged itself in my heart. Not only did I

know nothing about this offer, this also meant I'd been wrong. She wasn't considering staying.

Which was good? Right?

This woman had me tied in knots trying to figure it all out.

"Our loss," Owen said. "And Grado's too. In the meantime, I'm glad to have you. If you ever need anything, I'm here most nights. At the store most days."

"You work as much as this guy." She nodded toward me.

"Occupational hazard of being the boss," Owen said. "Right, Cos?"

"Unfortunately," I agreed, though at the moment it wasn't the worst thing about being in charge.

"The boss," Brooke said. The meaning behind her words apparent only to me. "With great power comes great responsibility."

"She quotes Spiderman," Owen whistled. "Brooke Ellis, you are one fine woman."

He wasn't even being subtle about his flirtation now.

"I'm pretty sure Spiderman got it from somewhere," Neo said.

"Voltaire," I added, drinking half my beer in one swig.

Brooke peered at me over her own glass, not quite as impressed as she had been with the cherry, but with some measure of admiration. I'd start reading more philosophy tonight if she continued looking at me like that.

"If you'll excuse me," Brooke said. "Have to hit the ladies' room." Then to Owen, "It was really nice meeting you."

"Same to you."

Owen was about to say something to me when I decided it was indeed a good time to hit the little boys' room too.

“Doing the same,” I said. “Beer’s going right through me.”

No one paid much attention as I followed Brooke, which meant, shockingly, Marco had kept his mouth shut about the kiss. Otherwise, Neo would be giving me the evil eye right about now. I felt bad not mentioning it to him, but the last thing I wanted him to know was exactly how flawed his older brother was. Neo had always idolized me, and it was a standard I’d mostly lived up to.

I reached her just in time. As Brooke was about to push open the door to the ladies' room, I stopped her, grabbing her free hand. Then, pushing open the exit door between the men's and ladies' rooms, I pulled Brooke outside with me.

The door to the bar had barely closed behind us before I pinned her against it.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

brooke

HIS MOUTH COVERED MINE BEFORE I HAD A CHANCE TO EVEN think about the fact that this man was currently my boss. A man who kissed like he'd been doing it every day since puberty. And given his looks, I might not have been surprised if that were true.

Except, I didn't want it to be true. Unless he was kissing me.

Which Cos did, hungrily. A kiss that came from two weeks of denial. From the brush of our legs earlier as he got up from his stool. From Owen Smith even, the jealousy I suspected over his attentions now confirmed.

No man kissed like this for any reason other than to claim a woman. To sear her brain with the memory of such a feeling so thoroughly that she'd never want to kiss another man again. His hands grabbed both of my wrists, pinning them above my head. That we would surely be missed inside seemed to bother him as little as it did me at this moment.

As if I'd try to move my hands, which I would not, Cos tightened his grip, his thumbs pressing into each wrist, almost massaging them. The length of his body covered my own. He was hard, and needy, like me. When Cos finished devouring my mouth, his tongue slashing against my own with a fervor

that reminded me our time alone was coming to an end, he broke away. Looked at me with a very clear expression. One that anyone in their right mind could read.

I want to fuck you.

And guess what? I wanted that too.

He backed away then, released my wrists, and took a deep breath.

“Don’t you dare regret this again,” I warned him, my lips still wet from his kiss.

“You think I regret our first kiss?”

“Don’t you? Why else would you pretend it didn’t happen? For two full weeks.”

“Why? I think you know exactly why, Brooke.”

I did. But that was beside the point.

“They’re going to miss us,” I said, with more regret than I’d had while packing up my stuff from the apartment I’d shared with my boyfriend for three months. Having to separate from Cos should not hurt more than breaking up with Evan. But it did. With Evan, I’d felt betrayed. Hurt. Angry. But the idea of not being in Cosimo’s arms again, immediately, was something entirely different. Like he was ripping my heart right out of my chest.

“I’ll go first,” he said. “You’d take longer.”

He went to reach for the door, but I stopped him. “Oh no, you don’t. I’ll have you know I can out-pee anyone. It’s a particular talent of mine.”

“Out-pee?”

My god, on those rare occasions Cosimo smiled, I wanted to put him in my pocket and never let him out.

“Pee faster than anyone. Even guys. Trust me on this.”

He let go of the door handle. “I’ll take your word for it.”

Feeling like Rose on the front of the Titanic, which was probably not the best analogy being that it sank and all, I paused just before heading back inside. The gloves were off. If Cos could pull me into a dark alley and kiss me silly with his brother sitting just inside, then I could flirt with the man even though I wasn’t supposed to. “You’re not the only one with hidden talents, Cosimo.”

I could tell that one hit its mark. He groaned, a low, masculine sound that I could imagine would be similar to the one he’d make after slipping into me for the first time.

“Show me.”

I froze, just as I’d been about to open the door. Our eyes locked.

“When?” I asked, not wanting this to end the same way as our first kiss, with another two-week period of silence.

“Neo is staying over tonight,” he said. “As Marco is bringing a date home. And if I come to you—”

“He’ll wonder where you’re going.”

At least Cos seemed as bummed about the fact as I was.

“We’ll talk. Figure it out,” he said. “You better go.”

Without another word, I opened the door a crack, peeked inside, and saw nothing. Although I really did have to pee, realizing I’d already been gone too long, I headed back inside. Holding my breath, aware we were gone way too long, I

prepared for strange looks from Neo and Thayle, but they were gone. Our table was empty.

What the hell?

I sat back down and noticed them then, playing darts in the corner of the bar. Quickly grabbing my phone to look as if I'd been here for a while, I stared at it. Unable to focus.

“Cos isn't back yet?”

When I looked up, Thayle was standing next to me. “I guess not. Spoke too soon—here he comes now.”

As Cos walked up to the table and grabbed his beer, as casual as could be, I had to give him props. He looked nothing like the guy who pinned me to the door a few minutes ago. In his place was the cool, collected Cosimo Grado. Proprietor of Grado Valley Vineyards. Eldest son and loving brother. Mr. Serious. Clark Kent, if you will.

But I knew better now. When Thayle asked us to play a round of darts, we agreed. We walked across the bar, not looking at each other. Not even acknowledging the other's presence. When we reached Neo, I put my beer on the same high-top as Cos and Thayle and looked at my phone as it buzzed.

It was a text. From Cos.

Game on

I fired off a quick text before we got started.

I suck at darts!

“Play 3-0-1, teams?” Thayle asked, as if that was supposed to mean anything to me.

“We weren’t all raised in bars,” Neo said, taking a swig of beer.

“Neo,” I chastised, forgetting for a moment he was my boss instead of a friend. It felt like he was becoming both.

“It’s fine,” Thayle said. “Not mentioning the whole situation is like not saying Voldemort. Neo knows I don’t mind talking about it. Takes away its power to hurt me.”

For a casual, throw-away statement, it was incredibly profound.

“What she means to say is, we’ll play on teams. You and Cos and the two of us. Thayle, you start.”

As she tossed out a dart, hitting the board with a shout of “doubled in, baby,” my phone buzzed.

Wasn’t talking about darts

I resisted the urge to look at him. Instead, I put my phone on the table and took a drink, only turning around to see him taking aim at the dartboard. The sight of a six-foot muscled god with his signature white tee and dark-rimmed glasses, whose bicep flexed as he took aim, didn’t bother me at all. I wasn’t weak in the knees. I wasn’t affected in the least.

The thought was so absurd I actually laughed out loud as his dart hit the board.

“Nice,” Neo said, despite the fact that Cos was his opponent. Though I had no idea why it was a nice shot or what was happening beyond the obvious. The darts had to hit the board.

Speaking of hitting, or missing your mark, Cosimo and I were heading into dangerous territory. No, I’d never intended to get involved with someone I worked with—scratch that,

worked for—but this was entirely different. In less than two months, he wouldn't be my employer. The fact that this job was temporary was the only reason I was already picturing Cosimo's naked body hovering over me.

I needed to get my mind off that mental picture before Neo and Thayle guessed what was happening. We'd already dodged one bullet tonight.

Neo pulled the darts from the board and took his turn.

"I'm thinking about what you said, Thayle. Maybe that's part of my problem," I mused.

"Shoving the past into a drawer and never opening it makes the drawer seem pretty scary."

"What's something that's in your drawer?" Cos asked. He stood right next to me, drinking his beer ever so casually, as if that kiss did not just happen.

"I mean, Evan, obviously."

"Blech," Thayle said. "I can see why you wouldn't want to talk about him."

Agreed. "My dad is another obvious one."

"You never talk about him," Cos said as Neo took aim with his second dart.

"Exactly. There aren't many good memories. I mean, the guy basically got remarried and just moved on, as if I didn't exist. Usually, I just catalog him like anyone else in my life I don't have contact with anymore. But I'm sure there are residual feelings. Buried somewhere, in the drawer."

Neo took his final shot, gathered up the darts and walked back to the high-top, where the rest of us stood.

“I’m sure there are,” Cos said. “I can’t imagine on some level you don’t feel abandoned, even if not consciously.”

I thought about that for a second. It definitely wasn’t a conscious thing. In fact, like I told the group, I didn’t give my father a second thought most days.

“Or not,” Thayle said. “I didn’t come up with this on my own. I have a fantastic therapist, and we’ve talked about this before. Because even though my dad was there, he kind of wasn’t too. And then he died. But I had a male role model who filled the void. A neighbor was, still is, one of the greatest guys in the world. That, my therapist says, made a huge difference.”

“Who’s the neighbor?” I asked, curious.

“Rich Williams. He and his wife own Devine Bakery. He’s basically my de facto grandfather.”

“I have my uncle.” I held my palm out for the darts. Neo gave them to me. “My mother’s brother. He’s an architect in Pennsylvania. We always stayed close, no matter where my mom was moving us next. He and his family live in the house where my uncle and mom were raised. Always told me there was a place there for me. Now that I think about it, maybe it’s time for a visit.”

“Your uncle sounds like a great guy,” Cos said. “Maybe thanks to him, that drawer isn’t so scary.”

“I think you’re right.” I expelled a breath, feeling oddly better despite the brevity of our conversation. “But that’s enough drawer talk for the night. Someone please tell me what’s going on here. I don’t know a thing about darts.”

“Come on,” Cos said, walking back to the dartboard. Thayle asked Neo what was in his drawer she didn’t know

about, to which he responded, “Nothing. You know everything about me.”

As the two of them argued the point, Thayle saying there must be things she didn’t know, Cosimo stood behind me.

“You know how to hold it,” he said of the dart. “That’s a good start.”

“But every time I throw one, it goes flying across the room.”

“Stand with your feet hip-width apart. You should be facing sideways, but that’s okay if this feels more comfortable.” Cosimo slid in closer. Too close. He grabbed my arm as if to guide me. His breath tickled my right ear, the lover’s caress I hadn’t asked for but wanted desperately.

“In three-oh-one, the goal is to get down to zero. So you want to hit high numbers.” He pulled my arm back, his hand covering mine. “Don’t grip the dart so tightly that your fingers turn white. Darts is a game of touch rather than force.” His voice lowered for only me to hear. “You want it just tight enough that you can maintain control.”

I couldn’t breathe. If Thayle and Neo were looking at us right now, we were toast.

“Okay,” I croaked out. “Now what?”

“Keep the dart at eye level. Your shoulder, elbow, and hand should all be aligned, forming a ninety-degree angle, like this.” His voice was like silk in my ear. I imagined him kissing it, kissing my neck.

“Okay.”

“Tilt the tip slightly upwards.”

“Cos,” I whispered, “you’re killing me.”

“Good,” he whispered back. Then louder, “Use your dominant eye to focus. We’re aiming for the bullseye. You’re going to pull it back, like this,” he said, demonstrating, “and then snap your wrist as you release forward. Got it?”

He stepped back. I resisted the urge to tell him that, no, I didn’t have it. Because if he did that ever again, I was going to throw myself at him rather than the dart at the board. Instead, I nodded. Did as he said. And hit the twenty.

“I missed the bullseye,” I said, looking at him.

“Maybe,” he said, “but you hit the board. And twenty too.”

“Now what?” I asked, wondering if I went again or if it was someone else’s turn. I hadn’t really been paying attention to the game.

“That really is the question, isn’t it?”

CHAPTER TWENTY

cosimo

“PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS?”

Neo was an early riser, like me, even after a late night. We got home after two a.m., but like clockwork, I was up at six-thirty this morning. He sat next to me, coffee in hand. I loved this time of day on the lake. It was quiet, the water like glass.

“I was just thinking about taking the day off.”

“Taking the . . .” Neo looked at me like I’d expect after such a statement. I didn’t take days off, ever. He and Min complained about it, saying I was too much like Dad in that respect, and they never meant it in a good way. “Are you sick? Dying? Talk to me.”

“Neither. But what good is this”—I waved my arms toward the lake—“if we don’t ever enjoy it?”

“As if I haven’t said that a million times before.”

I ignored him. “Besides, today’s a good day for it. We’re closed,” I said, stating the obvious.

“Going out on a real limb there, taking an entire day off when there are no customers. You rebel.”

“If you knew the shit that I should be doing today—”

“Let me guess: Harassing Lakeside to get their asses down here to start working on the dock. Reaching out to distributors because you don’t trust Marco to actually do his job. And while we’re on the subject, you probably have bills to pore over just to make sure Maci is doing hers too.”

I stopped him, knowing Neo would go on all day. “It’s not that I don’t trust them to do their jobs.”

“No just that you’re a control freak. Like Dad. I get it.”

Was I a control freak? Or did I just like to ensure everything was running as smoothly as it should be? Maybe a bit of both.

“Why are you really taking the day off?” Neo asked, cutting through the bullshit.

I looked at my brother, wanting to tell him. But this was different. Admitting it would be admitting I was weak. No one could argue that getting involved with an employee was a good idea. Not even Neo, who stuck up for me when I hid all of Marco’s green army men and then couldn’t find them, enraging our younger brother and earning a tongue-lashing from Mom, who found the little fuckers two years later. Yes, I had known Marco adored those plastic men, but I’d stepped on one too many of them and had had enough.

“I need a break,” I said lamely.

“I’ll take one with you.”

That wasn’t at all what I’d been expecting. “What?”

“We’ll go out on the lake. Grab lunch at Southpoint. Do some waterskiing.”

Not exactly what I had in mind.

“That way it’ll give you more time to see where she’s at before you really lose yourself to her,” Neo added.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Really? Come on, Cos, give me some credit.”

“Fucking Marco. He told you.”

“Told me what?”

Neo really didn’t know?

“What were you talking about?” I said, testing him.

“Brooke, obviously.”

“And Marco didn’t tell you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“If Marco didn’t tell you, then how do you know my taking the day off has anything to do with Brooke?”

“I don’t know, Cos. Maybe because I have eyes.”

Shit. “It’s that obvious?”

“To me, yes. I suspected you liked her. Pretending to hate her was always a front.”

“I did hate her.”

“Okay, whatever you say. But after last night, I knew for sure.”

“I didn’t touch her.”

He gave me a look.

“I didn’t touch her in front of you.”

“If you don’t count the very intimate dart-throwing lesson. And maybe if I ignored the way you looked at her, and she at you. And all that after the two of you disappeared into the

bathroom together for way longer than it should have taken. And, let me see, were there any other clues? Oh yeah, that you were about three seconds from clocking Owen if he continued to flirt with her. Other than that, it was not obvious at all.”

Here I’d thought we’d been subtle.

“Does Thayle know?”

“I don’t think so. Didn’t mention it. So what did Marco not tell me?”

I took a deep breath and spilled. “He caught us kissing in the back barrel room. It was the first time, last night in the alley our second.”

“The alley. Classy. You do know how to wine and dine a girl.”

“She works for us.”

“Clearly.”

“I know it’s fucking stupid. But . . .” But what? I was an asshole, putting a girl over the well-being of our family business.

“As usual, you’re being way harder on yourself than necessary. Is it a good idea in this day and age to have a relationship with an employee? Obviously not. But clearly, she wants you as much as you want her. And she’s not permanent. Brooke is leaving next month. Right?”

“I guess.”

“Not that it wouldn’t be awesome to have her stay. She’s really good. Did I tell you . . .” Neo turned pensive, hesitating. “Never mind. Anyway, if she were, I don’t know, someone like Thayle who is full time, I’d say yeah, it was a huge problem. But cut yourself some slack on this. The woman is

actually responsible for you taking a whole day off, the first one in, I don't know, how long? Years?"

"You're being dramatic."

"Point is, like I said, we'll have an outing. Get to know her in a non-boss, non-employee setting. See what she's thinking." He smiled. "And Thayle and I will be there to be sure nothing questionable happens."

"Now Thayle is coming too?"

"I figured we'd ask her. Marco too, though I doubt he'll want to peel himself away from his date."

"If she's still there." Marco had a habit of not staying much beyond sex with the women he "dated."

"It'll be fun. I could use a day off too." For all Neo's lectures, he worked seven days a week more often than not.

Putting his coffee on the table between us, Neo pulled out his phone.

"What are you doing?"

"Texting Thayle. I'll tell her we'll meet her at the boat at noon."

Between my house and Neo's, we shared a small dock. Two boats, a pontoon and speedboat, plus a jet ski, went unused during the busy summer months more than they should. This would be good. Provided, of course, Brooke could make it.

Pulling out my phone, I texted her. Asked if she were interested in a boat day with Neo and Thayle. And then, knowing we'd been a bit tipsy last night and sober Brooke could easily realize this wasn't a good idea, I waited for her to respond.

It was during that wait, in those minutes, that I knew.

I was totally screwed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

brooke

IT WAS ALL FUN AND GAMES UNTIL I HAD TO TAKE OFF MY cover-up.

Sorry, but anyone who just let it fly in front of a guy they liked was some kind of psycho. Or they didn't eat. Or they walked around with protein powder in a baggie. I actually had a friend who did that. At any given time, she would proudly show off the glutes she'd worked hard in the gym to achieve.

I wasn't any of those.

So, unlike last night at KC's or this morning when I got Cosimo's text, this wasn't exactly a cloud nine moment. No sooner had we pushed off the dock, the pontoon boat's first use since I'd been here, as far as I could tell, then Neo pulled out the water skis. Which was fine. I grew up on a lake and could probably hold my own, even though it had been years since I'd skied.

But now, after all three of them had gone out, Cos just now climbing the ladder after nearly giving me heart failure by taking off his shirt earlier, it was my turn. With no glasses in sight—just him, a pair of swim shorts and nature's blessing, which surely favored the Grado family—he hopped back onto the boat deck.

“He knows,” was all he’d whispered to me when I’d first shown up at the dock. He and Neo were already removing the cover from the boat, so I’d assumed the *he* in question was his brother.

“You told him?” I’d whispered back. Cos shook his head as his brother yelled from the other side of the boat, “Are they all unbuttoned?”

“No,” Cos responded, continuing to unbutton the boat cover and looking at me without even bothering to hide his appreciation.

Fantastic. I’d already been avoiding Marco as best as I could after the mortifying way we’d met. Even if he did make me laugh through that entire tasting. And now Neo. Pretty soon I’d have to lock myself in my office and not come out, which, to be honest, would not be the worst thing in the world, given the view.

“Your turn, Robin Hood,” Neo said. Last night, one of my darts stuck to the other after I threw it. Apparently, it was called a “Robin Hood,” and was extremely rare, so Neo took to calling me by this nickname. I sort of liked it. Neo had a pet name for everyone, and I felt like I was part of the in crowd by having one.

Ugh. Here went nothing. Whipping off the white cover-up, I reached for a life jacket and put it on as quickly as possible. As I headed to the back of the boat, intending to jump in, Cos stopped me. Neo was behind the wheel, and Thayle was popping open a can of seltzer.

“You are so fucking hot,” he whispered.

I froze. Confidence wasn’t something I lacked—until the clothes came off. For him to say that now, after seeing me . . . I

didn't know how to respond. So I blurted, "So are you."

The corners of his mouth turned up slowly. His eyes narrowed. It was a cross between pleasure and promise. And I was here for all of it. Smiling back, I jumped into the water, giddy. Now it was just a matter of getting my sea legs, or lake legs, back.

Neo had clearly grown up on the lake too. He knew how to navigate a boat and how to steer a skier. To my surprise, I was up on the first pull. Even more surprising, it all came back in a rush. By the time we were halfway around the lake, I was ready. Was I being a show-off? Absolutely. Would I look like an idiot if I fell? Sure.

But that was life.

I'd just get up and try again.

After I'd made a half-turn, I knew I was doing well. Getting started had always been the hardest part for me. Once I'd committed to the trick, I knew the rest would be a cakewalk. Sure enough, when I'd completed the turn and was facing the boat again, Cosimo and Thayle were clapping. I ignored them knowing Cos was the ultimate distraction, especially half undressed. Concentrating, I enjoyed the ride. By the end, as I swam back to the boat, I was riding high.

"I forgot how much fun that was," I said, climbing back up.

Cos reached out a hand. I took it, relishing the too-quick contact.

"You are a closet water-skier," Thayle said, handing me a seltzer.

"I grew up on a lake," I said. "I've always missed that house, but being out here . . ." I sat and took a deep breath of

fresh air. “I don’t think I realized how much.”

“I think if I lived right on the water, I’d never be able to move away from it,” Thayle said.

“How many times have I offered you the east cottage?” Neo asked. “It has a great view of the water, especially in the spring and fall. And if you want, we’ll take down some of the trees.”

Thayle rolled her eyes. “How many times have we talked about this?” she asked him.

“Why wouldn’t you want to stay in the east cottage?” I asked, confused. The cottage was farthest from the estate, but it still had a beautiful view, as Neo said. And it was certainly closer to work than where she lived now.

“So many reasons,” Thayle said. “More importantly, I’m starved. Are you guys ready for lunch?”

A chorus of yeses had Neo turning the boat around.

“We’re heading to a place called Southpoint,” Cos said. “It’s right on the water, all the way at the—”

“Let me guess. The south point of the lake?” I finished.

“See, Cos,” Neo said. “I told you she was a clever woman.”

Everyone laughed. Even Cosimo. Out here, the serious guy I first met was a million miles away.

When we got to Southpoint, we put on our tees and cover-ups, and tied up the boat, and then Thayle literally ran into the restaurant to hit the ladies’ room.

“Meet you inside,” Neo called, wandering off, having spotted someone he knew.

“You are so different when you’re away from the estate,” I said to Cosimo. “Last night. Today.”

“It’s the glasses,” he said, stepping over a life jacket on the dock.

“It’s what the glasses represent.” I stepped over it too.

The restaurant was right in front of us. Literally, right off the docks. The entirety of the lake-facing wall was a garage door, now wide open. Palm trees had been planted everywhere, and beach music played. It was as close as you could get to a Caribbean vibe, I supposed, in the middle of the Finger Lakes.

Cosimo stopped before we made our way inside. “I stick to my original apology, Brooke. I was a total asshole that day.”

“You won’t find me arguing that point.”

He slipped on a pair of sunglasses.

“I like this Cosimo better.”

“Unfortunately, you’ll be seeing the other one tomorrow. I rarely take a day off and will be overloaded for sure.”

“If you let people do their jobs, maybe—”

“Not you too.”

“One last thing and then I’m done being serious for the day. Promise.”

He stopped walking. “Shoot.”

“You need to forge your own path. Obviously, the way your father and mother did things worked incredibly well. And they trusted you enough to make you the proprietor of Grado Valley. Now it’s your time to shine. On your own terms. Like

the VIP tour. I'm amazed at how quickly that's coming together."

"Have you been talking to my sister in Italy? Because you sound exactly like her right now."

I smiled up at him. "Maybe it's just because we're both clever women."

"Clever," he said. "Fun. A terrific water-skier, though not so good of a dart player. And," he lowered his voice, "smoking hot."

Time to throw caution to the wind. "Hot enough to visit tonight?"

Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god. I really just said that.

"Brooke Ellis, are you asking me, your boss, to come to your cottage this evening? For what I can only assume will be highly inappropriate activities?"

His tone was teasing, and sexy, and serious, all wrapped in one, like a burrito that you knew was so wrong, with enough calories for the entire day, but that you also knew you'd eat anyway because it tasted so damn good.

"I am."

In response, he turned to the restaurant and lifted his hand, as if summoning the waiter. "Check please? We're done here."

I laughed all the way into the restaurant.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

cosimo

“VINES LIKE A VIEW,” MY BROTHER EXPLAINED TO BROOKE AS we covered up the boat. “Nicely exposed vines and proximity to the lake help moderate cold temperatures.”

“I thought you meant the vines literally like to look at the lake,” she teased, buttoning up the front. She knew her way around the boat and hadn’t hesitated to pitch in when we docked.

“Not exactly.” Neo climbed under the cover back into the boat to erect the cover poles. Thayle and Brooke grabbed bags that carried wet towels, and we made our way down the dock, Neo eventually joining us.

“I think I learned as much today about the vineyards as these past few weeks,” Brooke said as we stepped back on land. “I can’t believe right now the crop yield is being determined when there aren’t even any grapes on the vines.”

“You can’t see them from far away,” Neo explained, “but small grape berries are developing as we speak to protect the seeds during the fruit set.”

“Fruit set,” she repeated. “Which comes after fertilization.”

“Exactly.”

“You haven’t been to the vineyards yet?” Thayle asked as we walked toward the cottages.

“I haven’t,” Brooke said.

I zoned out while they talked. Thinking about the day, I wondered why I didn’t do this more often, although I knew the answer the moment the thought popped into my head. Also popping often into my head? Thoughts of a very naked Brooke, that yellow bathing suit leaving little to the imagination.

“I’m starving,” Neo said. “Who wants pizza?”

“Neo’s one request,” Thayle explained to Brooke, “when they updated the lakeside cabins to make them more livable year-round—”

“Our mother’s way of luring us to stay on the property,” I added.

“Exactly,” Thayle said, bolstering the bag on her shoulder. Neo took it from her to carry. “Was a pizza oven in the back. Tell me you haven’t smelled it yet?”

“She’s too far back,” I said. “It’s a miniature version of the one in the cafe. The same guy who installed it twenty years ago is still working. Put in an outdoor pizza oven just for my brother.”

“That’s really cool,” Brooke said, looking at me.

It was very cool. And Neo made great pizza. But pizza wasn’t what I wanted at the moment. “You guys go ahead. I think Brooke is overdue for a vineyard tour.”

“Aren’t you starving?” asked Thayle, who was always hungry.

I didn't dare glance at Brooke. I was starving, but enough people knew about Brooke and me already. I wasn't prepared to add Thayle to the list.

"Brooke, what do you think? Pizza or vineyard tour?"

For a heartbeat, I thought Brooke would go for the pizza as she looked up to the sky, thinking about it. "Let's do the tour. And then eat."

"We can wait for you," Thayle said.

When Brooke and I answered, "No, thanks," at the same time, Neo looked as if he'd burst out laughing. I was glad my brother found enjoyment in my descent into debauchery. A handful of months in charge, and I was already breaking one of Grado's cardinal rules.

"I could be a while," I said, catching Neo's eye. As much as I didn't want to disappoint him, I wanted to be with Brooke more.

With a wave of goodbyes, we walked in the opposite direction.

"I cannot wait . . ." Brooke looked slyly, teasingly, at me. "To pee."

"Not what I thought you were going to say," I admitted.

"Oh yeah? What did you think I was going to say?"

"Mmmm," I half groaned at the thought of Brooke talking dirty. I wouldn't be able to make it to the vineyards if we kept up this banter.

"I'm going to pop into the Cellar first. I'll meet you on the lower patio."

Brooke headed upstairs to the ladies' room, and I let myself into the back barrel room, where I grabbed a wine that I'd never expected to open so soon. Pouring two glasses, I brought the bottle with me. Brooke was already waiting.

"It's so strange to be here without any people at dusk."

I handed Brooke a glass of wine as we made our way toward the vineyards. I smiled as she held up the glass to look at the color and then swirled it, smelled it, and took a sip.

"I love the estate when it's empty," I admitted. "Don't get me wrong, I love all the people too. Without them, there would be no Grado Valley Vineyards. But there's something special about this too."

I'd meant the calmness of the estate, but the words held a double meaning I was finding increasingly difficult to ignore.

"I get it," she said. "What is this? It's delicious."

"You tell me," I said as we walked side by side.

"Well, obviously a cab. Savory, with an herbal touch. I'm tasting more tannin or acidity."

"By design. It sits on a razor's edge between both." I showed her the bottle.

"I heard about this cab reserve. Perry calls it four point o. There are only a handful of bottles of it."

"Not anymore," I said. "This is my last one."

She stopped walking. "Excuse me?"

"My dad gave it to me the day he officially retired. He gave each of us one."

"And we're drinking this now because . . .?" We began to walk again.

“Because I know it’s a good wine. For a special occasion.”

“Yeah, like your wedding. Or birth of a child. Not”—she waved her free arm toward the vineyards in front of us—“this. A random Tuesday with a woman you hardly know and couldn’t even stand a few weeks ago.”

“I’m not one for pinning happiness on future events or desired outcomes. Peace and joy are here. In the present moment.”

“Tomorrow might not come.”

“Precisely.”

“Kind of morbid, isn’t it?”

I took another sip. It was a damn good wine. “Just the opposite. It reminds us to live. Besides, you aren’t a woman I hardly know.”

“You know I’m from PA. And live in the city. That I lost my job, have a shitty ex, and love wine tasting with my friends. What else?”

“Well, I know you are incredibly smart and are probably thinking of a way to capitalize on this conversation in your marketing efforts as we speak.” I’d caught her red-handed. “Spill it.”

Sheepishly, Brooke said, “I was thinking of an ‘Open that Bottle’ night, where people bring the bottle of wine they’ve been saving and just open it. Or something. I don’t know. I have to think it through.”

“See? I knew it.” I took another sip of wine. “Okay, what else? I also know you are born to be on the water and the city does nothing for you. I know you are the life of the party and everyone loves you, with good reason.” We walked into the

first section of vines. “I know you hated moving around so much even though it probably helped you develop skills, like meeting new people and making friends. I know you adore your mother, and your girlfriends. And are a better wine drinker than the day we met. Although,” I relented, “that may have something to do with not drinking vodka roadies first.”

We slowed to a stop.

“I could keep going,” I said, putting down the bottle. “But we’re here for a reason.”

I watched as Brooke’s chest rose and fell, as her eyes narrowed.

Surprising her, I reached for a vine. “To look at the grape berries.”

“Ugh, you are maddening. I thought that was an excuse.”

As I was about to answer, she looked up. “Why does it feel like it’s about to rain?”

“Because it is.”

Brooke’s gaze snapped back to me. “What do you mean?”

“Cumulus clouds. They’ve been forming since we got off the boat.” I pointed back up to the sky. “Those fluffy, cotton ball guys. Which can also be a predictor of a thunderstorm, but not today. No drop in temperature. No change in wind direction.”

“I feel like you know . . . everything,” she said, right as I felt the first drop of rain.

“When you grow up on a vineyard, you develop a solid relationship with the weather.”

“Shouldn’t we, I don’t know, head back?”

I nodded toward her wine glass. “Finish it,” I said, doing the same. I only gave each of us an ounce or two, figuring we’d be getting wet out here.

“Ugh, bossy Cosimo.”

“I notice that you listened.”

She shrugged. “Maybe sometimes I don’t mind it.”

“Sometimes?” I took her glass and put it with mine on the ground next to the bottle. “Like when?”

“Like when you tell me to do something I want to do anyway.”

“Like finishing your wine to free up your hands?” I closed the distance between us.

“Yeah,” she said, as more drops fell. “Like that.”

“For future reference, I’m curious . . .” I reached for Brooke’s neck and pulled her toward me. “Anything else?”

She swallowed, looked into my eyes, and nodded. Her lips parted.

“Tell me.”

“You’re going to make me say it?”

No, I wasn’t. It didn’t matter if she said it aloud or not. Brooke had just given me exactly what I needed to ensure this would be one night she’d never forget.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

brooke

IT WAS AS IF MOTHER NATURE KNEW THIS NIGHT WAS BIG. AS she unleashed, Cos did too. He pulled me into his arms, and our mouths slammed together. His hands were everywhere at once, but I was okay with that.

My hands were too.

I'd ached all day to run my fingers over the lines that separated the muscles in his biceps. A few hours ago, that alone would have been heaven. But now, with the feel of his lips against mine, his tongue teasing and coaxing my own, I groaned as he tore himself from me, the rain falling steadily now.

Cos ripped off his tee, and before I could fully appreciate each ridge of his abs, wondering how he could drink so much wine, eat pizza, and look like that, he leaned down to the bottle. He folded his tee and placed it over the bottle opening, standing.

"Can't let water get in there."

Without his glasses, or shirt, this very wet man could not possibly have looked more different than the one I met. That Cosimo had been stressed, uptight. This one looked as if he was about to ravage me. And I was here for it.

“We could take it inside,” I said.

He pulled me back to him. “That doesn’t sound as much fun.”

“As?”

Cos reached down, splayed his hand on my upper thigh, and pushed the material of my cover-up aside. “As making you come in the middle of this vineyard in the rain.”

Oh my god. My bikini bottom was no match for Cosimo’s fingers. Watching his expression behind drops of rain as he slipped inside me was as erotic as it got. No, scratch that. What he was doing with those fingers took the top prize.

My head sank back, and I didn’t care that drops of water fell onto my cheeks.

“Look at me.”

He wasn’t asking, but demanding. And I was feeling indulgent.

I did as he asked.

“I want to see your face,” he said, now using his thumb too. “I want to see the eyes that lit up when you talked about your friends at lunch today light up again, for me.”

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. The sight of him . . . I just couldn’t. I couldn’t hold on much longer. But I didn’t want to come either, because then it would be over.

“I need you to kiss me,” I managed.

“I will.”

I’d meant now. But instead of making demands of my own, I said, “I really, really like kissing you.”

At that, Cos pulled me closer to him so his entire palm was pressed against me.

“I really . . .” he circled expertly, “. . . really like kissing you too. Just think of it as an incentive. The sooner you come for me . . .”

He let the words trail off.

An incentive. As if I needed one.

“Cosimo,” I breathed, begging. “Please.”

“Your wish is my command.” He circled his fingers, pressing against me in a way that made me powerless to do anything but let go.

I screamed to the open fields, and this time when my head dropped back, Cos didn't say a word. Instead, he stilled his hand, keeping it there. Surely, he could feel the aftereffects of what he'd done. When I came back to earth, I didn't have to guess. His expression told me that, yes, he could feel it. And yes, he wanted me as badly as I wanted him.

“I don't have a condom,” Cos said. “Otherwise, I'd take you right here.”

He pulled his hand from my bathing suit bottom. And then made good on his promise. His kiss was just as wild and uncontrolled as before. But it was also filled with such need that I knew we had to get back.

“We could run,” I said, reluctantly pulling away.

“I'm not sure I could run right this second if you paid me.”

I reached down for the wine. Grabbing it, along with his tee, I grinned at a surprised and dripping wet Cosimo. “Grab the glasses? I'll meet you inside.”

With that, I took off.

“An incentive,” I called out.

Faintly I heard him yell, “My office.”

And while I did wonder why he had condoms in his office, I tried not to think too hard on that. Instead, I ran away from my boss, in the pouring rain, with a bottle of reserve cabernet sauvignon, feeling freer than ever before in my life.

By the time I got to the covered patio, Cosimo was already at my side despite my head start.

“Couldn’t run, eh?” I asked.

Cos opened the door to the first floor, putting on his phone light. “I’m surprised my phone works. Thought for sure I’d killed it.”

We made our way through the barrel room and headed upstairs. “I can’t believe you had your phone with you.”

“You didn’t?”

“No,” I said. “Haven’t had it all day. I left it at home.”

Cos stopped just as we entered the empty tasting room. “Come to think of it, I didn’t see you with it. You seriously left it behind all day?”

“I did. I figured if you could take the whole day off, I could live in the present a little bit. Not,” I added quickly, “that I think I’m on my phone a lot.” I followed him down the hall, toward his office. “We’re getting everything soaked.”

“I couldn’t care less.” He opened his office door. “I’ll be right back.”

I’d been in here enough to know the layout. Clicking on the lamp, the storm having made his office pitch black, I made

my way to the windows and lifted one of them.

I loved the sound of falling rain.

“Towels,” Cos said. He tossed one to me, turned, and locked the door.

I probably didn’t need it, however. In less than three seconds flat, I was already in Cosimo’s arms. This kiss was different from the one in the vineyard. That one had been frantic and needy. This one was pure seduction.

With no shirt and having discarded his flip-flops, the only thing Cos wore was his bathing suit. The only thing I wore, as Cos stopped kissing me long enough to lift a soaking wet cover-up over my head, was an equally wet bikini. Even that didn’t last long. As his mouth moved over mine, Cos groaned and deftly untied the bikini straps tied around my neck. When both breasts sprang free, he took full advantage.

As he kissed a trail first to one, taking the nipple between his teeth, and then the other, my fingers moved through the strands of his thick black hair. I held on, encouraging Cos, until the need for him to be inside me had me holding on maybe a tad too tight.

To ensure it wouldn’t be much longer, I slipped my own hand into his suit, not surprised at all that he was thick and extremely hard. Stroking him, I was relieved when Cos finally broke free, reached into his back pocket, dropped his suit and then placed a foil wrapper between his teeth, never taking his eyes from me.

The soft glow of the lamp and steady pounding of rain made it all seem very surreal. Was I really about to have sex with my boss? In his office?

“Where did you get that?” I asked, knowing he didn’t have it a few minutes ago.

“More importantly, why are you still wearing a bathing suit?”

As Cos tossed aside the wrapper, I tore off my bikini top, which was already, conveniently, untied. And then, lowering my bikini bottoms, I watched him roll the condom onto his extremely large cock. The whole time, he watched me as he had earlier on the boat. But this time, he didn’t hide the desire that I’d been longing to see in his eyes for weeks.

Backing me up to his desk, he did the one thing that ensured I would never, ever look at this room the same again. As if we were in a damn movie, he cleared a pile of legal pads off his desk with one sweep of his arm. They went crashing to the ground as he easily lifted me onto the desk.

And just like that, Cosimo Grado was fingering me, testing and teasing. Satisfied, he reached behind my head, held my neck in place, and then slowly inched himself inside. Spreading my legs wide, he kissed me.

And began to move.

This was it. This was where I would die. Right here, on this very desk.

“Fuck, Brooke,” he murmured. “You are so unbelievably sexy.”

Not gonna lie. I liked hearing those words from his mouth. I liked pretty much anything that came from his mouth, apparently. Because even before Cos pressed his thumb into me, I was seconds away from coming. Already.

Which was insane.

It usually took an act of God, a vibrator, or both, with Evan. Maybe it was the way Cosimo's tongue timed perfectly to the rhythm of his movements. Maybe it was because I sat on his desk, imagining what everyone would say if they knew. Maybe it was because Cos was so much more than I'd expected him to be and continued to surprise me every day.

All I knew was that I could not hold on much longer.

"I'm going to come," I said, just before my buttocks clenched against his hardwood desk. My legs began to shake. I held on for dear life as Cosimo pumped into me harder and faster than ever. As a heat wave washed from my head down to my toes, I gave in to the most intense release of my life, barely registering his own roar of pleasure.

To cap it all off, instead of pulling out immediately, Cosimo pressed closer. After kissing my forehead, he engulfed me in his arms. I could hear the erratic beating of his heart as he continued to hold me against him.

Which was when I knew with one hundred perfect certainty.

I wasn't leaving Grado Valley.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

brooke

“SOMETIMES I FIND IT HARD TO BELIEVE THE THREE OF YOU are brothers,” I said to Marco and Neo. It was the last Wednesday in July, and aside from the fact that Cos and I had been forced to sneak around these past few weeks, I was on cloud nine.

We sat in a circle on the deck listening to music. The rule was, on Wednesdays, no tastings. Only one person worked the desk, Perry tonight, where visitors could buy bottles to drink. The cafe stayed open for pizzas only, giving everyone a chance to kick back and actually enjoy themselves. Grado family included.

There had been so many perfect nights like this one. I had always thought the adage of “if you love your job, it’s not really work” was a crock of horse manure. Who *loved* their job enough to do it even if they weren’t forced to do so? No one I knew.

At least, no one I knew before Grado Valley.

Everyone worked incredibly hard here. More often than not, seven days a week. When the day was done, the tasting rooms closed, on some days, it was just the beginning of round two. Dinners were filled with talk about the estate. Even on

Wednesday nights, the star-filled sky was a background to more work talk.

Yet no one complained. No one said they were sick of talking about the weather, everyone's hope for more warm, dry days like this one. To the customers, this was nice wine-sipping weather. To the Grados, it was the difference between good yields and disaster.

"Most people say just the opposite." Neo waved to someone in the distance. "That we all look alike."

"That's only because they don't know you," I said. "To me, you guys are like night and day."

"It's pretty simple," Neo said. "Cos, the uptight eldest brother. Marco, the perennial bachelor and biggest asshole of the family—"

"Hey," Marco obviously disagreed. "No one says that."

"Everyone says that," Neo shot back. "And me. The one everyone loves."

Marco was looking at Neo like he'd gotten some of it wrong. "Yeah, buddy, I don't think so."

"Okay then, you try." Neo took a sip of wine.

"Cos, you got right. I might throw 'type A' in there too. And you're the mama's boy, baby of the family and all."

"You forgot about Min," Neo said.

"Of the boys. She doesn't count."

I listened as they went back and forth, not seeing Cosimo anywhere. He went inside to get a case of wine for the employees to drink and hadn't come back out.

“And how would you categorize yourself? God’s gift to women?”

Marco thought about it for a second. “Actually, that sounds about right.”

“Excuse me,” I said, standing. “Be right back.”

If they suspected I was going to look for Cos, neither of them let on. I knew they probably didn’t approve, and why would they? But neither of his brothers had said anything to me, even though they had harassed Cos about it a bit.

The whole situation just sucked. And what was worse, Cos and I rarely talked about it. Pretending August wasn’t a few days away was not a good strategy. Coupled with the fact that I’d put off potential job offers long enough, something had to give.

Yesterday I’d talked to Tina, who’d checked in on my apartment. Everything was fine, she said, and ready for me to return. It was the first time I’d paused when the topic came up. Tina knew about Cos, but since I hadn’t let on that it was more serious than a simple summer fling, she hadn’t been harassing me.

Until now.

One simple pause and she’d been all over it, asking a million questions. Including the big one.

“Brooke? You are coming back, right?”

Of course I was. Cos hadn’t asked me to stay on, which would have been a pretty impossible decision anyway. It was one thing to carry on a fling with your boss of two months. But if I applied for Jena’s position, something which had crossed my mind more than once, what would happen to Cos and me?

I had been too afraid to explore the possibilities. So instead, I said, “Of course,” and tried my best to avoid the topic any further.

“There you are,” I said, finding Cos behind the desk next to Perry.

“I was just coming back out,” he said. “Actually, I want to show you something first.”

“You’re not wearing your glasses,” I said, following Cosimo to his office.

“I’ve got my contacts in.”

“You have contacts?”

We went into his office, and Cos closed the door. He didn’t even bother turning on the light. The second the door was closed, he pushed me gently against it. His lips covered mine in a claiming kiss that had been too long in coming today. We’d been busier than usual for a Wednesday.

His hand slipped under my shirt, my bra not a hindrance to him at all. He pulled down the lace fabric and used his thumb to make my nipple peak. Then, lifting my shirt even more, Cos replaced his hand with his mouth. Circling, teasing and drawing one, and then the other, breast into his spell. They had a mind of their own, showing Cosimo how eager they were to play.

I was too. But we’d be noticed missing soon.

Reluctantly, I pulled his head up. Our exchanged glance was one of lust, but also regret for a situation that, at times like this, sucked.

“We could leave,” he said. “Go back to my place.”

“Too obvious.”

Cos groaned, lowering my bra and shirt back in place.

“Later,” he said. “You’ll come over?”

As if it was really a question. Most nights we were either at his place or mine, with the exception of the nights he went out with his brothers. Except for one night last week when there had been a benefit, hosted by Dorothy and her ladies, that he’d wanted to take me to. But I told him to go without me, that it would be good for me to spend some time alone.

To think. To attempt to sort out this mess. I’d resolved that night to confront Cos directly the next day about where things stood between us. But it had been a Tuesday and Cos surprised me with another day off. This time, the boat had been filled with both Neo and Thayle, as well as Marco and his current girlfriend. We winery-hopped by boat, which had been so much fun. The more serious talk would have to wait. And it did, indefinitely. Every time I wanted to bring it up, I also knew it could be the beginning of the end too.

“Of course,” I said. Maybe tonight I’d bring up the job, see what Cos said. But when he kissed me one last time, and I thought of this being our last one, I changed my mind.

I’d confront him tomorrow.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

cosimo

“YOU HAVE TO ASK HER,” MARCO SAID FOR THE MILLIONTH time, sitting down in my office.

“I can’t.”

“You can’t, or you won’t?”

“Ask me what?” Brooke strolled into my office wearing my favorite sundress of hers. She knew I loved that dress.

Shit.

This ticking time bomb that was July, now over as of today, meant that Marco was right. I couldn’t avoid it any longer.

These past few weeks had been the best, and worst, of my life. Late nights sneaking off to Brooke’s cabin. Private late-night wine tastings, this time uninterrupted. Whenever Brooke came into a room, like now, the world felt right. As if everything was in its place.

And yet, the black cloud of Brooke’s return to the city hung over us. Last week, Brooke had a new job offer she would be crazy to refuse. I was torn between begging her to stay, knowing it would jeopardize our budding relationship if I did, and letting her go, which would mean I was no longer her boss.

After weeks of wading through applications, and with Jena now officially no longer an employee of Grado Valley, my siblings had begun a full-court press to ask Brooke to stay on. Even Min, who wasn't in the country, had joined the others in ganging up on me.

Once the words were out of my mouth, I wouldn't be able to take them back. It had been bad enough I'd already tried to unhire her once, and I couldn't do it again.

Marco gave me *the* look. The one that was supposed to be a clear reminder of the question he'd asked me on Wednesday. He'd caught me staring at Brooke from across the tasting room and pretty much did what Marco had been born to do. Rattle my cage until I had no choice but to lash out.

The discussion had been civil until he laid it on the line.

"Brooke is perfect for Grado, and you know it. You're not asking her to stay because you can't continue to fuck her if you do."

I'd nearly punched him. I could count the number of times I'd wanted to punch my brother over the years, and it wasn't many. But that night, the urge had been strong.

"She's more than a fuck buddy, asshole," I'd said.

"Seems to me you have three choices then. Let her leave and try to date her from three and a half hours away. Ask her to stay and set a bad example for your staff. Or put a ring on it."

I'd been pissed because Marco had been right, even if his crass delivery left a lot to be desired.

I'd already thought of all three options, and none appealed.

If Brooke left, there was no way we could make it work. If she stayed, this sneaking around couldn't continue. I was a shitty example as it was, and if anyone other than my family found out, my credibility would, understandably, be shot to hell.

And marriage?

Yeah, I'd thought about that too. And promptly dismissed the idea. One simply did not marry a woman they'd known for a few weeks. Maybe if she went back to the city, and we continued to date, to get to know each other . . . but in my heart I knew that wouldn't work. Brooke was one hell of a catch, and some guy who wasn't a total dickhead like her ex would surely snatch her up. But I couldn't have my cake and eat it too.

Which left the only one viable alternative.

If Brooke stayed, our relationship had to end. The thought of seeing her, not being able to touch her . . . it made me physically ill. I said that very thing to Marco, but he'd had a thought about that too.

"You aren't the only factor in this equation, Cos. Let Brooke decide what to do. It's her life."

Of course it was. But I'd be a fool not to at least consider all of the consequences.

"Give us a sec," I said to my brother now.

He didn't need to blast another warning look my way. I was fully aware something had to give.

"You really are scaring me," Brooke said, sitting. After Marco left, I didn't go to her, even though I wanted nothing more. There was no way I could think clearly with her in my arms.

“No need to be scared,” I said. “But we do need to talk.” By her expression, it was clear she knew what this was about. “I have a board meeting tonight, the Seneca Lake Wineries Association.”

“As far as talks go, that wasn’t so bad. You have a meeting. Great.” She pretended to stand. “Have fun.”

“Brooke,” I sighed, and she sat back down.

“Crap. I totally thought that was it.” Her smile was sad, echoing my own thoughts about this long-overdue discussion.

“I wish,” I said. Drawing it out wasn’t helping matters, so I just laid it all out for her. “Marco wants me to ask you to stay on as Grado’s marketing director. That’s what he wanted me to talk to you about.”

“Marco wants me to stay?”

“And Neo. And Dominica. And Thayle and Maci. Everyone, basically.”

“Everyone except you?”

My eyes dropped to the edge of my desk. Since that night, I’ve never looked at it the same. And never would.

“I’d like nothing more than for you to stay. To move to Grado Valley permanently. To be our new marketing director.”

“But?”

“You know what the ‘but’ is, Brooke.”

I had no idea if she’d actually entertained the idea. For all I knew, it was a nonstarter. Brooke had a lucrative job offer in the city. Not to mention a life there. Maybe she couldn’t wait to get back.

Except, if that were true, it meant I'd completely misjudged her these past few weeks. Brooke didn't love the city. But she did love Grado Valley. I knew it in my bones, which scared the hell out of me.

"I think the reason I actually went along with Tina's crazy plan in the first place," she said hesitantly, "was because I knew, in my heart, city living wasn't for me. A few mornings on the front porch of our rental home was all it really took for me to fall in love with this area. And that was even before I came to Grado Valley."

The resignation, and determination in her voice, put me on edge.

"If you stay and work for Grado permanently," I said, steeling myself, "we can't keep doing this."

Brooke never flinched. She raised her chin, looked me in the eyes and said, "I know."

Was this really happening?

"You didn't even ask about the salary," I said stupidly, unable to find any other words.

"I already know you'll pay me what I'm worth."

We'd planned on it, of course. But that was beside the point. "So that's it? Just like that you're going to leave the city and move to Grado Valley?"

"At least two of my job offers were too good to pass up. There was nothing stopping me from taking them except . . ."

"Except what? Grado Valley? Or me?"

"It doesn't matter."

“It does matter, Brooke.” Why was I angry that she was taking it all so calmly? I couldn’t help being irrational.

“You’re upset with me because I want to stay?”

I wanted to go to her. Pull her into my arms. Kiss her and make love to her on this very same desk as that first glorious night. Unfortunately, that was the last thing in the world I could do right now. “I’m upset because you don’t seem to care about us.”

“Don’t care?” Now she was mad. Good. That made two of us. “Are you kidding me? These last few weeks have been some of the best of my life. I told you that. Did you think I was lying?”

“I don’t know,” I lashed out. “You just seem remarkably calm about all this.”

How could I possibly work with her?

“You won’t have any problem being here, working at Grado, and seeing me? But not being together?”

“Of course I will. It’ll kill me.”

We were at an impasse. “It’ll kill me too,” I admitted. “Which is why I didn’t want to ask. I think I knew you would say yes. But I also knew what that meant for us.”

“I don’t think I can go back, Cos.”

I knew it. Brooke had thrived out here. “Maybe another job will come up.”

“I thought about that too,” she said. “I’ve looked.”

It was my turn to be surprised. “You looked for jobs out here?”

She nodded. “There’s nothing in marketing or even remotely related.”

I hated to admit it. “I doubt there’d be a more perfect fit than Grado.”

“Agreed.”

So that was it. No more Brooke and me. *You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.*

“You’re not wearing your glasses again.”

It was not what I’d been expecting her to say. “No. I’m not.”

“Hmmm.”

What the hell did that mean?

“I’m going to need a few days off,” she said. “For the move.”

I couldn’t believe this was really happening. “Okay.”

“There’s an empty office in the Barn. That’s probably a better fit for me.”

Brooke loved her office. She’d told me more than once one of her favorite parts of the day was having coffee on the balcony.

“Fine,” I said, knowing it was probably true. No way I could have her right down the hall and stay away. Hell, it would be hard enough as it was.

She stood. “Let me know when you have all the paperwork ready. I’d like to have it all in writing before I actually ditch my apartment and move out here.”

She was acting like the end of us was no big deal. How was she dealing with this all so much better than I could

possibly manage?

“Of course,” I said, my stubbornness preventing me from saying anything more.

“Okay then. Is there anything else?”

“Jesus, Brooke.” She just stood there. Waiting. Emotionless. “No,” I admitted. “I guess there’s not.”

With that, and not so much as another word, she left. Closed my office door and was gone. A victory for Grado. But not for me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

brooke

IRRATIONALLY, I THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE HIM. EVEN THOUGH Cos had a board meeting tonight, I basically all-out sprinted to the door. Whipping it open, my shoulders sagged in disappointment. It was a Grado brother, but not the one I wanted standing on my doorstep.

“You look like shit,” Marco said.

“Thanks,” I said, imagining he was right. I’d been crying on and off all night.

“Can I come in?”

I stood back, waved Cosimo’s brother inside and closed the door.

“It looks great in here. Big improvement from pre-renovations.”

I moved to the kitchen counter. “Glass of wine?”

“What do you have?”

“Premier Red.”

“A club exclusive. Did you join?”

I gave Marco a look, but he, as usual, was not repentant.

“Working here has its . . . perks,” he said.

I poured two glasses.

“And I hear you’ll be enjoying those perks full-time with us?” He lifted his glass to me. “Salute,” he said. “Welcome aboard.”

I took a deep drink. “Thanks.”

Marco took a seat at the bar, making himself right at home. There really were no flies on this guy.

“So you’re celebrating your new job and a big move by drowning yourself in red wine,” he said, nodding to an empty bottle.

“To be fair, it was half gone already.” Of all the Grado siblings, I was least close to Marco. He was the last person I expected here tonight. I couldn’t help but ask, “So why are you here?”

“A woman who doesn’t dick around. I knew I liked you for a reason.”

“You like me because we’re going to kick Sunset’s ass, and you, more than anyone in this family, are competitive.”

“That’s actually very true.”

He was a piece of work. “I know it is.”

“Okay,” Marco conceded. “I like you for that reason. But a lot of others too, Brooke.” His voice softened in a way I was not used to with Cosimo’s brother. “I can see why Cos fell in love with you. You’re the whole package, Brooke. I’m really sorry about how things turned out.”

What in the ever-loving . . . ?

“I’m pretty sure your brother is not in love with me,” I countered.

“I’m pretty sure he is. I’ve known my brother a long time,” he teased.

“His whole life?” Marco made it impossible to keep a straight face with him.

“Exactly.” He smiled. “I can’t say I’m not happy to have you on board. You’re perfect for Grado Valley, Brooke. But it kills me to see my brother in so much pain too.”

“Would he want you here, saying all this to me?”

“Probably not. But it needs to be said. I know the two of you are in an impossible situation. And I have no idea how it will all play out. But he told me what happened, so I wanted to make sure you were okay. And tell you where my brother’s head was at, because I know he’s probably too stubborn to do it himself.”

Why did Marco’s kindness surprise me? “I appreciate that.”

“You’re part of the Grado Valley family now. We take care of our own.”

I knew that too. “Don’t you think it’s going to be awkward, with me working here? With everything with your brother?”

He appeared thoughtful. I’d been so devastated after leaving Cos’s office, knowing every day we’d been marching toward that very moment that I hadn’t sufficiently thought everything through. I just knew, without a doubt, if I took a city job and moved back, I’d be miserable. More miserable than being here and seeing Cos, day in and day out? That remained to be seen.

“I can’t tell you what to do, Brooke. But I will say something I know Cos wouldn’t want me to. My brother is scared.”

It felt like Marco was bestowing a gift on me that not a lot of people got from him. An honesty that I never expected from a guy who'd always seemed so flippant before. "Of?"

"Of not meeting my father's expectations. No matter how many times I tell him to do his own thing, forge his own path, the differences between him and Dad seem to weigh him down. At least they did, until you."

"I'm not sure what you're saying," I said honestly.

"I'm not either. I just thought it was important for you to know where my brother is coming from. He loves this place as much as any of us and wants to see it succeed. It's easy for the rest of us to tell him what to do because, at the end of the day, he's on the hook more than we are. We may have equal shares in Grado, but he was put in charge for a reason."

Something occurred to me as he talked. "You said he's scared?"

"I'll deny it if you repeat it to him."

"Of not living up to expectations?"

"Sure," Marco said.

"Or of something else?"

Marco stared at me. I could tell he wasn't going to say any more.

"He idolizes your father," I said.

"He does."

"And doesn't think he'll do as good of a job with Grado Valley as your parents?"

"Deep down, yes. I think you're right."

“Your brother *is* scared,” I concluded. The wheels in my head spun to the point that I was sure steam was coming from my ears.

“No, Brooke, he’s not scared. He’s terrified. And I don’t blame him.”

Marco had all but admitted Cos needed me.

“And you think Cos is in love with me?” Heart hammering in my chest, I waited for his answer. It was the most important one I’d ever asked. It was crazy, what I was thinking. But some things were more important than a job. On the other hand, this also felt as right as moving here, making the change in my life that had been a long time coming.

“Without a doubt,” he finally answered, “yes.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

cosimo

BROOKE WAS GONE.

When she'd said she needed time off to move from the city, I hadn't expected her to do it immediately. She'd told Marco she was taking the day off today. For all I knew, Brooke was already back in Manhattan, packing up her stuff.

Wandering from my office to the tasting room, I found Perry about to start a tasting with a group of women, not unlike Brooke and her friends the day we met. This group was smaller, just four of them, the ladies probably in their early to mid-thirties, but judging by their matching T-shirts, they were on a girls' trip too.

Thinking about the shitty mood I'd been in the day Brooke first came, overwhelmed by all the things my mother would call "secondary" because they didn't involve the most important part of Grado Valley Vineyards, the people, I told Perry I'd take care of them.

"Good afternoon, ladies," I said, standing behind the bar. The light drizzle outside had driven them in, and I knew they were probably disappointed. I'd turn this ship around. "I'm Cosimo Grado, proprietor of Grado Valley Vineyards. Is this your first time here?"

Two of the ladies, likely the unmarried ones in the group, immediately perked up, making their amorous intentions toward me quite clear in their demeanor. One took a step toward me, tugging her collar down to expose more cleavage, and the other, a pretty blonde, smiled in a way that left little to the imagination. Ignoring their overtures, I listened to their chorus of nos and asked where they were from.

“I’m sorry about the rain,” I said. “But since we couldn’t order up some nice weather, I thought we’d take a quick tour of the barrel rooms after the tasting. How does that sound?”

“That sounds great,” the blonde said. “Looking forward to it.”

I smiled politely and continued with the tasting. By the time they’d finished their wines and I’d returned to take them on the tour, I’d looked down the hall toward Brooke’s office at least five times. Knowing she wasn’t there hadn’t stopped me.

“This is the back barrel room,” I said, surprised to see it set up for a party already since it was only Wednesday. I’d have to ask Marco, who’d taken over events from Min, about that. “As you can see, we use it for private parties.”

“Do you have weddings in here?” one of the women asked.

“Small ones,” I said, explaining the origin of the room and that the wine barrels along the walls were more than decoration. As I talked, my gaze kept returning to the bar. My mind, returning to that first kiss. I replayed it over and over until my chest actually ached.

I’d had girlfriends. And breakups. But never, not once in all my life, had the thought of being without a woman provoked the kind of pain I’d felt since she walked out of my office yesterday. When I tried to take a breath, it felt as if I

couldn't fully fill my lungs with air. I'd never had a panic attack before, but Marco had. It was scary as hell—at one point we'd actually thought that he was having a heart attack. While it had been terrible to experience, even secondhand, I'd learned to look for the signs and understood what was happening with me, and after taking a few deep breaths, I was fine. Today, the pain felt completely different. Just an emptiness I knew wouldn't be filled until she returned.

“So I see you're not married,” the blonde said as we made our way back upstairs.

One of her friends smiled knowingly, while the others pretended not to hear her question.

It was surprising, with so many women coming through Grado Valley's tasting rooms, how few girlfriends I'd met this way. Usually, flirtations like this rolled off my back. They were here for a day, and nothing would come of it. If I were more like Marco, their advances might be more welcome. But I wasn't. One-night stands were never really my thing, so I'd had to learn how to manage flirty customers without making them feel slighted.

But today I was off my game.

“I have a girlfriend,” I said.

I had a thousand other ways to turn her down gently. Lying was totally unnecessary and not like me at all. She smiled politely and rejoined her friends.

“Thank you so much for the special tour,” said one of the friends.

“My pleasure,” I said sincerely. “I know you ladies are from out of town, so if you do purchase any bottles, we're happy to have them shipped.”

“I’m interested in the wine club,” one of the women said. “How do we sign up for that?” Then, before I could answer, “If I join, you said all of our tasting fees are waived?”

“They sure are. And Perry will toss in an extra bottle of your choice too, something you can enjoy back at the house tonight.” They’d mentioned having rented a lake house.

I raised my hand to Perry, who was free, and as soon as he joined us, I introduced him to the group. After waving goodbye, I smiled at their chatter about the barrel room being “so cool.” I agreed. It was cool. This place was cool. My job, so fucking cool.

I just had to remember this part of it, when I got to connect with new wine drinkers, as well as seasoned connoisseurs. Instead of heading back to my office, I made my way out to the deck. It was easy—too easy—to take it all for granted. To get wrapped up in the day-to-day operations and forget about what made Grado Valley Vineyards tick.

The wine. And the people. A simple two-part equation, as Mom often said.

“There you are,” Neo said from behind me. I didn’t turn. Or even respond. The rain had stopped, and I’d been looking at the droplets on the grass so intently, I hadn’t even heard him approaching. “I have an idea for a new blend I want to run by you.”

When I looked at him, my brother’s eyes widened.

“You are not okay.”

“No,” I admitted, “I’m not.”

“Marco said she went back to the city.”

“I assume she did. Said she was taking the day off, and she’s off again tomorrow. She probably knows we really need her by the weekend and headed home to pack.”

“I doubt she’s packing everything up in two days.”

“Her car’s gone,” I said.

“Stalker.”

I didn’t deny it. “I told a flirty customer I had a girlfriend,” I blurted.

“Why?”

“Good question.”

Like me, Neo didn’t need to lie to fend off customers. We’d gotten pretty proficient at it over the years. “That’s weird.”

I thought about the group of women, about how much I enjoyed showing them something they’d never seen before. Brooke had been right. Running Grado Valley had nothing to do with trying to do as good of a job as my parents. It was about taking the lessons they’d taught me and simply introducing new people to good wine. Making them feel like a part of our extended family. I’d been overcomplicating the hell out of it.

Just like I’d been overcomplicating the hell out of my relationship with Brooke.

“Maybe not,” I hedged.

Neo disagreed. “Except that you don’t have a girlfriend. And aren’t usually prone to lie. Until Brooke came along, and honestly . . . never mind. Too soon.”

“I’m a fucking idiot,” I said, realizing how true that statement really was. I nearly laughed out loud at the absurdity of it. Thinking I could go a month or even a week, never mind a lifetime, with Brooke working here and not being by my side. It hadn’t even been one full day.

“I don’t disagree.”

“What time is it in Italy?”

“What the hell kind of question is that?”

I did the math, then took a deep breath, and was not surprised at how easily my lungs filled. At how easy the decision was to reconcile as soon as I stopped fighting it. “I’ve got to talk to Mom.”

“Okay,” he said. “I’m not stopping you.”

This was insane. Bonkers. It made no sense, except it did. Marrying Brooke was the rashest, most unplanned, craziest thing I’d ever considered in my life.

“I love her,” I said, daring Neo to disagree.

“I know.”

“And I’m going to marry her,” I said, waiting for the pushback. But there was none.

“That’s the only good idea you’ve had since Mom and Dad put you in charge.” Neo ruined the effect of his rebuke by smiling.

“Asshole,” I said. And then, in true brotherly fashion, a second later I added, “I’m gonna need your help.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

brooke

“YOU’RE INSANE,” TINA SAID ON THE PHONE.

“You think so?”

I dropped my stuff on the kitchen counter and made my way to the fridge. Grabbing a bottle of water, I took it out to the porch.

“I know so.”

There was no movement at Cos’s place. He usually didn’t return to the cabin until dark, unless we were doing something special. But I’d just texted to ask if he would stop by on his way home.

“Are you nervous?”

“Extremely. But it was necessary,” I said. “In other news, did you find someone to get the couch out?”

When I’d told Tina I was moving and that she could take any furniture in my apartment she wanted, provided she could get it out of there, the only thing she’d claimed was my couch and end table. They were fairly new, but I still had zero desire to get a moving truck from the city out here. I’d deal with furnishing a place later. Aside from the items Tina had claimed, most of my stuff was years old and could use a replacement anyway.

“I did. It’ll be gone by this weekend. You sure you don’t want me to pack anything up while I’m in there?” she asked.

“You’re cleaning out my fridge already. That’s plenty, thank you. I’ll be down as soon as I can string a few days together.”

“I seriously can’t believe you’re moving.”

“You can’t?”

Tina paused. “Actually, I can. But it’s still so crazy.”

“Cos just texted back.”

“And?”

“He asked me to come up to the Cellar. Probably working late, as usual.”

“Oh boy. Moment of truth.”

I put down the water and headed inside.

“I hope I didn’t just make a huge mistake,” I said, knowing it didn’t matter. What was done was done.

“You’re the one who always says to trust your gut. So this is just you taking your own advice.”

A quick brush of my hair and lip gloss reapplication, and I was ready to do this. “The last time I said that, you were trying to decide between buying a mango and a bag of cherry wine slushie mix.”

She laughed. “But the principle is the same. Wine slushies, life-altering decisions. Works like a charm every time.”

Laughing, I grabbed my wristlet and headed out. After hanging up with Tina, I shoved my phone inside and walked slowly toward the Cellar. It was after hours, which meant most of the cars were gone. But the lights were still on, not

surprising since at least one of the Grado siblings usually worked well past dark. Unless it was Wednesday.

As I approached, I could see something was going on though. The bulb lights that typically were reserved for evening events or parties on the back deck were all lit. Was something scheduled for tonight I didn't know about?

Instead of heading inside, I made my way around back. There, at the very same table as that first wine tasting, under the lights with the darkening sky above him, was Cosimo. Soft music played in the background, more noticeable now than usual, with no other people around.

As I got closer, I could see a tasting was set up.

“What’s going on?” I asked Cos as I walked up to him. He looked achingly gorgeous, made more so because this was the longest I’d gone without touching him since we got together. Though he was dressed as usual in jeans and a GVV tee, he wasn’t wearing his customary glasses. I liked the Clark Kent look, but he was just as handsome without them. Especially now after the hellish twenty-four-plus hours we’d spent apart.

“A tasting,” he said. “Go ahead and sit.”

“A tasting,” I repeated as Cos sat across from me. Usually, he would stand at the head of the picnic table, doling out wines. But it was just the two of us, and four tasting glasses were already filled in front of me. “Okay,” I hedged.

“I thought you’d gone back to the city,” he said as I sat.

“No, I had another errand to run today.” Not sure why I didn’t tell him about my day right away. Except that . . . something was off. Something told me to wait.

“I see.” He seemed to be in much more jovial spirits than I’d have expected after what happened. Then again, I was too.

But I had an ace up my sleeve.

“I have to ask,” I said, not wanting to misinterpret what I saw in Cos’s eyes, but knowing him well. Gone was the dark void that was there when he sat behind his desk and so dispassionately offered me a job. Instead, he looked at me, dare I think it, with love in his eyes. There was no other way to read his expression. “Why?” I finished simply, with no other words seeming sufficient.

“Just trust me,” he said, showing me a bottle. “We’re starting with Accursia White. Composed of one hundred percent Vidal grapes, it’s a little sweet for your palate now. But named after my grandmother, who was the sweetest woman anyone had ever met.”

I tasted it, knowing all about it. “White wine with a golden color in the glass, the palate full of apricots and pineapple. It was the first family-named wine and the one that gave your mom the idea of a second winery celebrating the women of the Grado family.”

“And thus, the 1931 Wine Barn was born.” As he moved on to the next wine, I could have sworn I saw a movement up on the deck. But when I looked closely, there was no one there. “This one”—he pointed to the glass—“is Arlene Blush.”

I finished for him, as if I were doing the tasting myself, “A lovely shade of pink in color, this wine is a beguiling combination of strawberries and cream. With a satisfying clean finish, it’s named after Arlene Grado, one of the founders of Grado Valley Vineyards.”

It was another sweet wine. Apparently, they chose this one to name after his mom not because she loved blush wines but because pink was her favorite color.

“Precisely. Two more to go,” he said. “This one”—Cos showed me a bottle, though I already knew what was inside —“Dominica Riesling. A fun, fruit-forward, easy-to-drink wine.”

“Named after your sister, who considers herself the most fun Grado sibling.”

“A claim Marco vehemently objects to,” he said.

As far as I knew, there were only three family-named wines in the Barn, and we’d tried all three.

“What’s this one?” I pointed to the glass. “Where’s the bottle?”

Cos looked at me and reached down to the bench. He pulled out a bottle with a label I’d never seen before. Instead of spinning it forward, he kept the back label showing. “This one is brand new. A red blend Neo just perfected. It’s only our second wine to be fortified with spirits from Kitchi Distilling, this spunky red wine has soft cherry notes, but underneath, an easygoing nature.”

I picked up the glass and took a sip. “Cos, this is really, really good.”

“I’m glad you like it,” he said, spinning the bottle around. The label read, *Brooke Blend*.

I looked up, confused.

“Keep drinking,” he said.

I did as he said and drank—this glass having more wine than a typical tasting pour—trying to understand why they’d named a wine after me. It made no sense. I wasn’t family. And though he didn’t know it, I no longer even worked at GVV.

Then, as I finished the wine, something clinked within my glass. Peering inside, it took me a second to determine what it was.

A ring.

I pulled it out, my hand beginning to shake. No. It couldn't be.

But as I lifted the simple gold engagement ring, its diamond understated but beautiful and delicate, I tried to stay calm. And hardly registered the fact that Cos had left his seat and was now standing behind me, taking the ring from my shaking hands.

"It's my grandmother's ring," he said. "It might not be appropriate for my girlfriend to work for me," he said, "but I'm pretty sure it would be fine if you were my wife."

I could no sooner stop the tears from streaming down my face than I could register fully what was happening right now. Cosimo was asking me to marry him.

"I love you, Brooke, more than anything in the world. There is no fucking way I could work here with you and not be with you. And before you ask," he interrupted before I could form a sound, "I'm not doing this for that reason alone. I want you to be my wife. To be a part of the Grado family, for real. I want us to run this place together, like my parents did. And for you to let me love you. That is if you'll forgive me for taking so long to ask."

"So long," I said, knowing my answer but feeling like I should say this anyway. "It hasn't even been three months that we've known each other. But," I rushed to add, "it's long enough for me. Cos, I love you so much. Yes!" I held out my

hand. “A thousand times yes, I will marry you. Yes,” I said again, just in case he didn’t hear me the first time.

Through my tears, I could tell the ring wasn’t going to fit, so he put it on my pinkie. Cosimo lifted me into the air and spun me around, kissing me to applause and cheers from the deck above us.

When we finally did break apart, his lips on mine feeling as if I’d come home from a years-long trip, I looked up to the deck. There was his family, the movement I’d seen earlier obviously one of them. Marco, Neo, who was holding up a phone, hopefully recording the proposal. Thayle was next to them, the only non-Grado of the group.

“I can’t believe this,” I said, looking down at my hand. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“I’ll get that fixed for you, obviously,” he said of the ring. Then, yelling up to his siblings, “Get out the champagne,” he said. “It’s a yes,” as if they couldn’t already tell. I laughed and looked down at my ring again, remembering.

“Um,” I said as Cos grabbed my hand, about to lead me up to his family. “There’s just one thing I have to tell you first.”

I was sorry he looked worried and quickly tried to reassure him. “It’s nothing terrible. Just. Well. I took a job as the wine club manager at Three Sisters Winery today.”

His jaw dropped. “The hell you did.”

“That’s why I took the day off. I saw the listing and then, after I talked to Marco—”

Cos’s eyes narrowed.

“Never mind that. I just knew I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t be without you. It wasn’t a perfect fit, but they were nice enough.

And I figured I'd take it and keep looking for something else."

He was already shaking his head. "We'll call them tomorrow and give them the bad news. That they'll need to keep looking for a new wine club manager."

I nodded. "Agreed. I feel so bad."

Cos stopped walking, the celebration above us already in full swing, it seemed. "You were going to take a job there, as a wine club manager, for me?"

"No," I said, "for us. Although I'll admit to being glad I don't have to leave. I really do love it here, at Grado Valley."

"And we love you," he said, kissing me again to Marco yelling "get a room" down to us.

"I love you too," I said, the words coming so naturally, it was hard to believe I'd never said them before. "So very much."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

cosimo

“THERE’S A GROUP OF WOMEN OUT THERE,” I SAID, CLOSING the door behind me. “Asking for you.”

“They’re here?” Brooke shot up from her desk. “I told them to text me when they were close.” She looked down at her phone. “Oh crap, they did and I didn’t even hear it buzz.”

My fiancée tried to stand up, but I guided her shoulders back down into the seat. “Not so fast,” I said, wheeling her chair around so that it rested on the desk behind her. For this to work, Brooke couldn’t be moving around on me.

“Cos, what are you doing? They’ll be waiting for me.”

“Three things,” I said, first leaning down and drawing Brooke into a slow, lingering kiss and then kneeling in front of her. “First, Marco’s with them.”

“Marco? What’s he doing in the Cellar?”

Without Min, he’d been running the Wine Barn, which made Marco sightings during tasting hours fairly rare. “He wanted to come over to meet your friends. Everything is fine out there.”

“That’s really sweet of him.” Brooke watched me as I placed both of her hands on the arms of the chair.

“Second, don’t move your hands from there,” I said, not even bothering to comment on Marco. Only Brooke would call him sweet. She had a soft spot for my brother, which I could barely understand. Although, admittedly, I didn’t try very hard. She was so much a part of the family already. I just couldn’t wait for Min and my parents to get back so we could really celebrate our engagement.

“I guess if they’re with Marco, they can wait a few minutes,” she said, finally realizing what I was about as I got into position.

“Third, you told me last night how you got butterflies in your stomach every time you looked at my desk. That you thought it was hot, what we did in there.”

“To which you replied that your new mission was to make memories in every single place on the estate, to which I replied that it seemed like a good way for us to get caught.”

I pushed her sundress up, and understanding finally dawned.

“This is why you told me to wear a sundress this morning?” she asked. Reaching up with both hands, I pulled Brooke’s panties down. “And you wait until my friends are here to do it?”

Her voice hitched, a good sign. But by the time I was finished with her, Brooke wouldn’t be able to speak at all.

“I want to see you go out there,” I said, running my hands up the back of her legs, “and explain where you were.”

Finally reaching my goal, I started with one finger. And then two.

“Will you say, ‘Sorry, ladies, my fiancé was licking me dry in my office?’”

“Cos.” She melted into the chair.

“Or maybe, ‘Sorry for the delay, I was distracted by Cos’s tongue.’”

Using my thumb now, I teased her a bit more.

“You are the devil,” she said. In the three weeks since our engagement, she’d said that more than once. Usually in reference to some compromising position I’d put her in, as she became extremely embarrassed by public displays of affection, especially in front of my family. Which, of course, was the reason I’d amped it up, just to see her squirm. Which she did, quite deliciously, right now.

“Would the devil do this?” I asked, leaning into Brooke as I used my hands underneath her ass to shift her forward. At the first touch of my tongue, she nearly came out of the chair. At the second, she let go of the chair’s arms and grabbed my head. At which point, I stopped.

“What did I tell you about your hands?”

I’d pay for this later. Her eyes were murderous, but I didn’t care. I waited until Brooke moved her hands back, and then I made it my mission to have her fall apart in this chair. As I licked and used my tongue to elicit sounds from my fiancée, sounds which most certainly did not belong in an office, I set a new goal.

To make her scream.

Flirting with unprofessionalism, which would surely get me in trouble at some point, I also told myself that if Brooke and I couldn’t have fun here, then we were doomed. We’d had more than one discussion already about what it meant to be married to the estate. She got it, I knew, after working here this summer. But Brooke hadn’t been through a harvest before.

There were so many times my parents talked about how much easier their lives would have been without Grado Valley. There were challenges ahead of us for certain. Might as well make sure the family motto was alive and well in this office.

Work hard. Play harder.

“Oh my god, Cos. I can’t. I need to touch you.”

I responded with a full-court press. Using my tongue, and now my fingers too, I knew Brooke was close. Her legs began to shake. Her breathing was beyond erratic. It was perfect. She was perfect. And would be ready to come soon.

And since her friends were outside waiting for her, I did the one thing I knew would ensure a quick end to this, even though I’d go on all day if I could. Anything that brought Brooke pleasure, I was into. And would definitely need to find my own relief in the form of, I don’t know, maybe a good ol’-fashioned walk in the vineyards this evening with my fiancée.

But in the meantime, I stopped just long enough to look up and tell her, in a dead-serious tone, “Don’t you dare fucking come. Do you hear me?”

Her shoulders sagged. And nearly the second I put my tongue back to her, Brooke began to spasm. She started to call out my name too but then clasped her own hand over her mouth. Good thing I hadn’t wanted her to actually listen to me. Brooke liked being ordered about in bed, but she didn’t actually enjoy following orders.

As she found release, I continued to ply her with my tongue, my hands splayed on each thigh. Only when Brooke began to relax, her breathing returning to normal, did I completely stop. When she gave me that look, like I was the

sexiest man in the world, I wanted to alternately kiss her, make love to her, and thank her for coming into my life.

Regrettably, her friends were waiting. So I grabbed her panties, guided one foot and then the second inside, and slid them back up. She lifted herself up and finished the job as I stood, reaching for her.

When she kissed me, I was sure Brooke could taste her own sweetness. I'd have asked, but she so quickly reached down to cup me that I was momentarily speechless. It didn't help matters that Brooke was already unbuttoning my jeans.

"Brooke," I warned as she unzipped me too. "Your friends."

She smiled sweetly. "Are with Marco. Likely completely enamored."

"A good reason to get out there," I said as she began to wriggle my jeans down after springing me free. Not surprising, I was hard as a fucking rock.

"Can't leave you like this," she said, kneeling. "Besides, it'll be quick." Then, without preamble, her mouth was on me.

Quick was an understatement.

With the taste of my fiancée still on me, and the sight of her kneeling in front of me, not to mention the feel of her lips as they closed and then suckled, her hand at the base of my shaft . . . yeah, this wasn't going to be long at all.

In fact, it was a record for us, I thought. Almost embarrassingly quick, but I didn't care about that now. Her mouth gliding up and down, it was too much. I grabbed Brooke's hair with both hands, thankful she didn't make the same demands as I had about keeping my hands in place, and guided her as she finished the job.

I came with such a ferocity that I almost felt bad Brooke took it all in. But she did, and I wasn't complaining. By the time she'd stood back up, I was ready to scrap the whole idea of a fall wedding and marry this woman on the spot. I kissed her, wanting to be inside her so badly that I was already getting hard again thinking of it.

Brooke must have felt it too because she pulled away. "I really have to get out there. They're going to wonder what happened to me."

I laughed deep in my throat. "You think?"

"Oh my god," she said, fixing herself as I pulled up my underwear. "No, they won't. They're definitely going to know."

We weren't two steps from Brooke's office when she broke into a jog. Never doing anything halfway, she full-on sprinted into the tasting room, where her friends were indeed with Marco. It wasn't raining, but a lightning storm had forced us inside. With luck they'd be able to get back out soon to enjoy their bottles of Brooke Blend. Though not yet ready for prime time, Thayne had helped me get labels on the bottles and gift bags together for each of her friends. It was something we did for high-profile guests, which I thought would be a nice touch for the friends that could make it.

All the girls from the original trip came back for the weekend except Tina, whose job made it impossible to get away. When we moved Brooke's stuff up last week, I'd taken her friend to dinner in the city as a thank-you for all of her help. And, of course, for suggesting the job to Brooke in the first place.

"Holy shit, I didn't think adult women squealed," Marco said as the women greeted Brooke.

I gave him a look, and he separated himself from them and amended his statement. “Not outside of the bedroom, anyway.”

“You are so predictable.”

“That’s not good. I better up my game a bit. They’re looking for you,” he said.

Indeed, every single one of the women was now turned toward me.

“Tell us everything,” Debby said. By now I knew all her friends by their pictures, though we’d only met in person once.

“About the engagement?” I asked, taking over for Marco and pouring their last tasting. My brother muttered a thanks and moved on, saying goodbye to the women. He made a beeline to the front, likely to get back to the Barn.

“No,” Jen said. “We know all about that already. Tell us about your brother.”

They all laughed except Brooke. “Okay, that’s actually not funny. None of you are allowed to look at him.”

“Why?” Marian asked. “I thought you liked him.”

“As a soon-to-be brother-in-law? Sure. As a boyfriend or object of your fantasies, no way in hell.”

“Unfortunately,” I added, “I have to agree. He is my brother but . . .” I shrugged, not wanting to incriminate poor Marco any further.

“What about the other one?” Leeta said, looking around the tasting room.

“Neo is—” I exchanged a look with Brooke, “—more available.”

“Did you guys come up here to snag a Grado brother or to see me?”

They all burst out laughing at once. I shook my head, smiling. “Until Neo finds us, how about one last tasting? It looks like you have the all-clear to head outside, and I know Brooke can’t wait to catch up.”

“We’re ready,” Amy said. “What’ve you got for us?”

“This”—I showed them the bottle—“is our newest blend.”

“Brooke told us all about it. I can’t believe you named a wine after her.” Leeta was the first to take a sip.

“She’ll be a Grado soon,” I said. “Every Grado woman has their own wine. Brooke can tell you more about the cellar, and its origins, but see what you think about her wine.”

Murmurs of “it’s really good” and “yum” pleased me. When I first pitched the blend idea to Neo, he’d been too shocked by my proclamation of “I’m going to ask Brooke to marry me” to say much about the pairing. But now he loved the idea of Brooke Blend being sold in the Barn as a part of the Grado Women collection. Like the other wines in the collection, Brooke would choose a charity for a portion of the proceeds, not yet decided.

“I’m glad you like it. There’s a bottle in each of these bags.” I pulled a gift bag out from behind the counter. “Along with some other Grado Valley Vineyards goodies.”

“I do love swag,” Debby said, “and those tees are really cute. Thank you, Cosimo.”

A chorus of thank-yous was only a small part of my reward. Brooke sidled up to me as the women began to gather their things. “Thank you,” she said. I assumed she was talking about the bags.

“You’re welcome. I’ll have them brought down to the cottage.”

“For the bags too, but also for giving up your place for my friends to stay. And for the wine. And for making me the happiest woman in the world.”

I leaned down to whisper to her. “You can thank me later. Any chance you can sneak away from your friends for a quick walk in the vineyards?”

Her eyes gave me the answer I’d hoped for. “A literal walk in the vineyards or . . .?”

“Or what?” I teased. It had been slow going to actually get Brooke to talk dirty to me. She was a wildcat in bed, but when it came to actually saying the words, she clammed up every time. I really shouldn’t have teased her about it.

“You know what,” she whispered back.

“I don’t,” I said. “You may have to spell it out for me.”

“Not nice.” She swatted my arm. “We’ll see,” she teased back but then ruined it with a wink before turning back to her friends. “What do you think about heading outside with some of this wine? I’ve got the rest of the day off.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Leeta reached out as I handed her two bottles of wine.

“Start with these,” I said. “I’ll bring out some more, and snacks, in a bit.”

“Thanks.” She and the others waved and began to walk away.

I caught Brooke’s hand before she could follow the others. “Not so fast, Robin Hood.”

I pulled her into me for a quick kiss on the nose. Then another on the lips, for good measure. “Have fun. I’ll see you in a bit. Love you.”

“Love you too. See you outside—” Brooke smiled mischievously, “—Clark.”

My laughter filled the tasting room.

Everything was as it should be.

epilogue

Neo

“OUR INAUGURAL VIP WINE CRUISE,” MARCO SAID, HAVING finally shown up. The reason for his delay hung on his arm as if he were some sort of god. Which everyone knew was far from true—everyone except Marco’s new girlfriend.

I used the term loosely. They’d been “dating” for a few weeks, and from the look of it, my brother was about as interested in her as he’d been in the last half dozen of them. Meaning, not very much. He’d been complaining about her always being late, so I assumed that was the reason we all had stood around waiting for him.

“So sorry,” she purred. “It was all my fault.”

As usual, the girls were polite. Brooke engaged her in small talk as Cos readied the boat to leave. With the dock completed, this boat newly purchased, we were one step away from offering actual VIP tours. And just as Brooke had predicted, they were booked solid for the rest of the season. I didn’t know how she’d done it, but my soon-to-be sister-in-law had drummed up a fervor for the “highly exclusive experience.” If Sunset did come in with a whole fleet of new boats, they would have to give thirty tours to our one for the same revenue.

“You’re driving?” Cos said as I put the key in the engine.

“The boat? Sure,” I said. “But not the ship. That one is all yours,” I teased.

There had never been any question as to who would be Grado’s next proprietor. Our parents had worried about it being an issue, but to us, it was always Cos, hands down. Only one person could do what Mom and Dad had done, pulling us all together—and sometimes back from the brink of an all-out family war—when there were disagreements. Even-keeled, patient, and now, with Brooke, as confident as ever, Cosimo was perfect for the position.

“Thanks,” he said dryly as Marco unmoored us from the dock.

It was the first time we’d be taking the boat out together, and after one hell of a busy summer, this also felt like the perfect day to unwind, with Labor Day weekend behind us and harvest just around the corner.

“Not sure about the VIP part of these tours,” I said to Brooke. “Or why people are paying so much to spend a few hours with us.”

“Speak for yourself.” Marco opened a bottle of beer, handed it to his date, and then opened his own. I tried hard, but failed, not to roll my eyes at how attentive he was being to her. A sure sign this was early stages and wouldn’t last.

Marco’s attention typically didn’t last long with any woman.

“I agree,” Thayle said, plopping herself onto the seat closest to me as we made our way out to the open water. “In fact, I talked a woman out of a tour yesterday. Told her if you were the only brother left, it totally wasn’t worth it.”

Luckily, I was wearing sunglasses. As my sister's friend uncrossed her legs to lean forward into the cooler, I'm sure my gaze held for too long. It had been bad enough seeing her from time to time with Min. But since she started working at Grado, my life had been hell.

Here Cos thought he'd been alone in his battle against the "can't touch that girl" demons. If only he knew. But no one did, and no one ever would. Thayle was like a second sister, and for Min's sake, and Grado's too, she'd stay that way.

"Did you really?" I asked, not believing her but asking anyway.

"Yeah," she said, thanking Cos, who'd handed her the bottle opener. "The woman was like, 'I'm looking at that VIP tour thing. My sister's birthday is the second weekend in October. That could be a really cool surprise. Do you have any openings? I heard it books up quick.'"

"Who did she hear that from?" Brooke asked. "It's so new, I'm thrilled to hear word of mouth already doing its thing."

"I asked her that." Thayle smiled, and I wondered, as I did often, how a girl with such a crappy childhood, with all the odds stacked against her, could stay so pure. Giving. Kind. Never a bad word to say about anyone. "Because I knew you'd want to know."

And smart too.

"Must have been my brilliant marketing campaign," Brooke said, smiling at Cosimo as if to say, *See? You did good by bringing me on board.* As if everyone, most especially my brother, didn't already know that. She was a gem. For Grado, and more importantly, for Cos.

“Not that your marketing campaign isn’t brilliant,” Thayle hedged, “but she actually heard it from Marco. He’d apparently been talking it up when she and her friends did a tasting in the Barn. They’d come over to the Cellar to just check things out.”

Marco waited for Brooke to praise him, which she did. Brooke was so indulgent with my brother it made me laugh. She credited him with helping bring her and Cos together, and I had to admit that he, by basically forcing Cos to lay his heart on the line, had helped speed things along, even if Cosimo had wanted to throttle Marco for interfering.

“Oh my *god*.” Thayle pretended to nearly slide out of her chair. Looking closer, I could see she was eating one of Brooke’s specialties. Her dark-chocolate-covered strawberries had been a huge hit on the girls’ night she and Thayle had last week in the Wine Barn. They were talking about making it a regular thing to drum up business on Mondays, when we were slower. “I could eat these things all day.”

Look at the lake. Watch where you’re going. Ignore. Ignore.

Thayle’s legs now stuck out in the aisle as she pretended to be passed out from the sheer pleasure of Brooke’s strawberry. And honestly, I couldn’t deal. I’d known as soon as I’d heard Thayle was coming today, I’d be totally screwed. Luckily, boat outings with her, and Thayle wearing a bathing suit, were coming to an end with the cooler weather sneaking up on us. And not to mention harvest. It was good I’d been working like crazy. The distraction was exactly what I needed.

Bounding up, she left her seat and made her way to the back of the boat. At least now I could turn my head in all directions. Cos replaced her, sitting next to me. While the

others were distracted, mapping out the first official VIP route, which Cos would take this weekend with a bachelorette party, he watched me. He reminded me of Dad, and I told him so.

“You always talk about being so different from Dad,” I said. “And you’re right, he is more outgoing and a better people person.”

“Loving this conversation so far,” my brother said dryly.

“But for a second, when you first sat down, I could have sworn you were him.”

Cos was unimpressed. “We do look alike.”

“True. But it’s more than that.”

Cos took a sip of his beer, saying nothing.

“We always knew you’d take over. But I think . . . I think Italy was a good idea. Mom was right. Them getting out of Dodge helped you settle in.”

“You know, it’s been more than five days since Dad called.” At first, he’d been getting in touch multiple times a day. And then every day. And then every other. It didn’t surprise me at all. “I think it was easier for him too, being away from Grado Valley. Out of sight, so to speak.”

“Have you ever known him to forget about the estate on vacation before?”

“He isn’t forgetting about it,” I clarified. “He’s realizing you’re doing it. We’re doing it. Grado hasn’t just survived this summer. We’ve thrived.”

“We have,” he said, a little amazed. “A lot of it has to do with Brooke.”

The way he looked at her . . . I said a silent thank-you to the universe for bringing Brooke to the Finger Lakes. To my brother. “Agreed. But a lot of it has to do with you, Cos. You guys might have different styles, but the way you manage the estate,” I shrugged. “I don’t know. It just reminds me of Dad. Everyone is at ease, even when things go to shit. We know it will be okay with you at the helm.”

My brother smiled, as he seemed to do more often these days. “Thanks.” He turned reflective, studying me. And then, “What has you all sentimental today?”

“Six months exactly,” I said.

Cos’s eyes widened. “It is. Holy shit, time flies. Have they really been retired six months already?”

“Yep,” I said as we approached the first stop on this weekend’s tour. “Ready to go schmooze?”

The owners of this winery were old friends of our parents. They made great wine, and they were the first people we contacted when we put together the tour.

“I’m ready,” he said.

And for the first time since he’d taken over, Cosimo really was ready. He reached his hand out to Brooke, who took it and squeezed. I couldn’t wait for our parents to meet her. The woman who had helped Cos come into his own. Who had helped make him the best version of himself.

Suddenly, thinking of the harvest, I was excited too.

Excited to see what the fall would bring for Grado Valley Vineyards.

Excited to know the best was yet to come.



JOIN the Grado family as Brooke meets Cosimo's parents for the first time. [Click here](#) to read the *Pop and Pour* bonus scene.

THEN GET ready for more Grado Valley Vineyards goodness with Neo and Thayle's story in *Lay It Down*. [Download now](#) or keep reading on the next page for a sneak peek.

lay it down

SNEAK PEEK



NEO

I started to reiterate once again why I was too busy to go on this wine tour, but Min cut me off, blurting out, “Thayle!”

We both turned to look at her.

“You should take Thayle,” she explained, grinning.

I stared at my sister, not fully hearing her. It sounded as if she’d said I should take Thayle on a nearly two-week wine tour around the Finger Lakes.

“That’s a good idea,” Cos jumped in. “She’s never been. I think it would be great for her to chat with some of the other wineries about their clubs.”

No, no, no. “She does plenty of research online. Thayle knows about every wine club on the planet. She doesn’t need to go to actual wineries for that.”

“I heard my name.”

Fuck.

Bergamot and grapefruit. I knew her perfume well.

“We just had the greatest idea,” Min said. “Cos and Brooke were supposed to do the post-harvest tour, but they have a

wedding next weekend now, and everything is already arranged. Neo is taking their place, and I said you should go too. It's a great way to take some time off while getting to know local wineries and their owners. You can chat with them about their clubs and all."

Thayle didn't bat an eye. Instead, she introduced her friend, who'd just come up behind her. "You guys know Garrett, I think. We worked together at the bank."

We exchanged pleasantries and everyone shook his hand. He had a firm grip and an easy smile. The exact kind of guy Thayle liked. She always said she'd had enough drama in her childhood to last a lifetime, and her taste in men reflected it. If a man didn't make her smile, she had no "space for someone like that" in her life.

I watched the way Garrett looked at her. Thayle might not have realized it, but he liked her as more than a friend. I'd have bet my life on it.

"So what do you think?" Min asked her, ignoring the fact that I hadn't yet agreed. But I would, and both Cos and Min knew it.

She shrugged as if the choice were between drinking pinot noir or cab. As if it didn't really matter.

But it did to me. I wouldn't survive it.

"Thayle's been covering at Devine Bakery. And I'm sure she has things on her calendar."

"Actually," she hedged, "Rich is back tomorrow. Today was my last fill-in."

She caught my eye. There was nothing but innocence and friendship there. I refused to let my gaze wander even though it was almost physically painful to keep looking at her. I could

peripherally see her costume, and knew I had to get away from her.

“Cos was supposed to leave tomorrow,” I said, realizing it would at least get her away from Garrett for a while. Actually, maybe leaving tomorrow was not so bad an idea. “We’d want to hit the road fairly early. I think we’re supposed to start over at Skaneateles tomorrow.”

There was no way Thayle was coming on this trip with me.

[Click here](#) to keep reading *Lay It Down*.

become a vip

BECOME A GRADO VALLEY VINEYARDS VIP! [SIGN UP HERE](#) TO receive all of Bella's book bonuses including additional scenes.



GET Bella's personal wine list and chat with other readers in [Books & Brawn](#), a Bella Michaels/Cecelia Mecca Facebook reader group.

also by bella michaelis

Grado Valley Vineyards

Pop and Pour

Lay It Down

Sip and Savor

Horizontal Tasting

Entry Level

Boys of Bridgewater

Overruled by Love

Last Call

Billion Dollar Date

My Foolish Heart

enjoy this book?

Reviews are extremely important for any author and an essential way to spread the word about Grado Valley Vineyards.

If you enjoyed this book, I would be extremely grateful if you could leave a short review. You can jump there now by clicking the links below.

[Review on Amazon](#)

[Review on Goodreads](#)

[Review on BookBub](#)

about the author



Bella Michaels is the pen name of steamy small town books. While not writing historical romance as Cecelia Mecca and contemporary romance as Bella, she loves dreaming up new sassy heroines and alpha heroes for readers to enjoy. Firmly Team Gryffindor, Stark she lives with her husband and two pre-teens in Pennsylvania.

Sign up to be a [Bella Michael's Insider](#) to receive bonuses and updates via email.

