

BETTER THAN

your

Grumpy Bosshole



AVA MUNROE

BETTER THAN YOUR GRUMPY BOSSHOLE

THE BETTER THAN JOSH EVERTON CLUB SERIES

AVA MUNROE

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For my Grade-A grump. Glad you're Luke to my Lorelai.

CHAPTER ONE: ENZO

“If you think about it, coffee is really a fruit.” Matteo’s voice cuts over the jazz I have playing in my bathroom.

I pause my toothbrushing and reach out one hand to turn down the jazz humming from my phone, hardly daring to breathe as I listen in on my younger brother. He hasn’t been staying here long, but it’s been enough time for me to figure out that if Matteo starts a sentence with “if you think about it,” he’s probably going to follow that train of thought until it crashes right into something expensive and valuable downstairs in my restaurant.

He’s rearranged my apartment two times already. He repainted a full bathroom when I was gone for a doctor’s appointment. I’m running out of projects for him, and I’m more than a little wary about what he’ll move on to next. Matteo is bored. Maybe he needs a pet.

Chiara, my favorite produce girl, responds with a laugh. “But, Matteo, coffee is a bean!”

Well, former favorite produce girl, maybe. She’s losing points for being so easily charmed by my twenty-two-year-old kid brother. Maybe she’s too fixated on fruit like *bananas*.

“It’s actually the seed of the fruit that grows on the coffee tree,” Matteo clarifies. “Which makes coffee a fruit. Which means—”

Please, no. I frown at my reflection in the mirror, foam threatening to drip from the curve of my bottom lip.

“We should move the espresso machine closer to the produce,” Matteo says. He decides it the same way an actual coffee drinker might decide between a latte or a cappuccino. Way too casual. “If you’ll grab one side, I’ll get the other. Then we can work on the dining room—”

I spit in the sink, ditching my toothbrush before I can rinse in favor of hurtling out the door and down the stairs. The towel I used after my shower is still tied around my waist, and I have to clench it in one hand in my mad dash.

“Not the espresso machine!” I object. “And my dining room is *fine!*”

Matteo and Chiara freeze when I reach the bottom of the stairs. Matteo has one end of the heavy espresso machine, and my former favorite produce girl has the other. I put up one finger.

“*Down, boy,*” I growl. “*Dio mio,* you’re a grown adult. Don’t you have a better hobby than rearranging my restaurant? *Again?*”

Matteo doesn’t put down the espresso machine. He just narrows his eyes in that odd way he does sometimes and looks me up and down. “You’re hairy, man. Have you ever considered getting a wax? You know, if you think about it, waxing is—”

I hold up that finger again, brandishing it as I grind my back teeth together.

“Chiara?” I say without turning to look at her. “I believe you’ve got a date with my man Arlo to cover asparagus and avocados?”

She nods and, slowly—but so help me, not slowly enough considering how much that espresso machine cost—she and Matteo replace the coffeemaker where it sat before, and Chiara slips through the swinging side door. Matteo and I are left alone. My finger is still poised in the *no, no, no* position, my other fist still clenched around the towel. I clear my throat and straighten up, like I have any remnant of dignity left.

“I used to be pretty hairy,” Matteo confides with a somber face. “Between you and me, bro, after my first bikini wax, the employee told me she was shocked by my size after she cleared the Amazon down there.”

He flashes me a thumbs-up and winks. I pause, at a total loss for words. This is almost like the time my brother suggested new slogans to freshen up Alessi’s marketing campaigns. I got through “Get a mouthful of our *crème fraîche!*” and “See our chefs’ meat for yourself!” before I had to sit him down and teach him what a *double entendre* is.

“Matteo, this is the second time this week I’ve had to run down and stop you from rearranging my restaurant. Next time are you going to wait for me to be under running water before you demo my bar and repaint my walls?”

Matteo furrows his brow. “Enzo, nudity would be a health code violation. How long have you been in this business, man?”

My kid brother grins. It’s a dopey, all-in kind of smile, like what you might imagine from a golden retriever. I don’t get it at all. But damn, if it doesn’t make him all the more endearing. Even the stupidest of acts can be forgiven when accompanied by that toothy grin.

I’ve heard what some of the server girls have said about him since he started staying with me a few months ago. Matteo Barone is handsome as all get out, and apparently, the smiling thing has been labeled “adorable and eccentric.” It’s no wonder Chiara was lying in wait to help my brother dismantle my carefully curated space.

How can we come from the exact same gene pool but my brother is labeled “adorable and eccentric” when I’m the one signing staff paychecks? Wendy, my front-of-house manager, sighed about how Matteo’s grin is alluring but, in the same breath, informed me some of the customers had been complaining about the “surly guy watching them eat their entrées.”

I was just doing my job. Alessi’s is my restaurant. That was my soup those customers were eating. No, not eating—they were dissecting it. I watched them through the kitchen window, observed as one of them spit something into her napkin and the others whispered to each other about menu alternatives like they were the ones who cut their teeth working under Johannes Dlamini. I’m the one who has the right to frown. I’m allowed to get a little surly.

And Matteo? Is that a privilege extended to my dishwasher?

It was the only position I had available when he showed up on my doorstep all those weeks ago. And even if I was—

am—a surly son of a bitch and Matteo was the brother I'd never had much of a chance to know, that derpy smile had gotten under my skin and worked its magic. I'm no better than the girls on my serving staff.

Okay, maybe it wasn't just the smile. There was a chance that this black heart had looked down on the hapless kid with the \$150 haircut and the designer overnight bag (that had surely been packed by some clueless maid who was bound to be fired for aiding and abetting) . . . and I'd seen some part of myself. I mean, I'd never had Bambi eyes like Matteo, but I did understand what brought him to my door.

I know what it's like to run away from Dad as fast as your feet will carry you. I had spent months preparing to make a break for it, with my first kitchen job lined up on the other side of the globe, as far as I could get from Arturo Barone. Matteo had only decided he needed the break when he was already neck-deep in Dad's business. He'd started building his life up the way Dad always wanted both of his sons to do, so he didn't have a plan in place when he stepped away.

Maybe I'm just getting soft.

"I'm buying you a fucking terrarium," I tell Matteo. "Rearrange furniture for a bearded dragon or something, but leave my espresso machine alone."

I start back toward my staircase, noting the drips from my bare feet on the tile floor. Matteo is behind me in a moment, following me up the stairs only one step behind. My shadow.

"Have you ever considered that there might be a more effective way to channel negative energy than swearing?" he asks.

I pause at the top of the stairs and turn to Matteo. The same unblinking, over-smiley, handsome-as-sin younger brother face looks back at me.

"Is the phrase *have you considered* any different from *if you think about it*?" I ask him.

He shrugs. "I mean . . . yes?"

I nod curtly. “I’ll take it. Consider swearing reconsidered. I swear. As long as any change in me won’t inspire you to rearrange my tables into a spiral pattern or anything.”

“Bro.” Matteo shakes his head. “Come on. It’s just stuff, and yours could stand some refreshing. Do you see me freaking out over possessions? No. Because there is no ‘own’ in Barone—wait.”

I sigh, already moving on. I’ll let Matteo figure that one out for himself.

Here’s the thing: chefs curse. It’s part of our job, basically, what puts half the flavor in our food. We feel passionately about a béchamel? *Fuck*, that’s good. Someone used too much salt on the chicken? They’re a fucking idiot. We try a new restaurant and we’re jealous because of how great the appetizers were? We’d like to fuck that chef right in the ass (probably because we’re both infuriated by and attracted to their veal cutlets).

I round the top of my stairs and head into my studio apartment. I almost trip over the pullout couch where Matteo has been sleeping and send him an evil eye over my shoulder for good measure. To his credit, Matteo’s cheeks turn pink, and he kneels to fold the thing back as I head inside the bathroom to finish my morning ritual.

Okay, so most of the time, he’s been a decent houseguest. Furniture rearranging and pullout couch aside, it hasn’t been the worst thing in the world to have someone here after long nights in the restaurant. Matteo doesn’t complain about my old man music, which is more than I can say for the sparse collection of women I’ve brought back to my studio over the years. He makes a halfway decent cup of coffee when he’s not too busy trying to move the espresso machine.

And then there are the mornings. We’re both early risers. It’s a trait we must have inherited from our dad, though I’m loathe to admit I got anything from that man. The first morning after Matteo showed up outside my door, I found him on the balcony. He had my favorite “Choose Your Weapon” mug, the one featuring all the different chef’s knives. I had my

Swedish Chef's "Vert Der Ferk" cup. We'd sat out there for a full hour, watching the sun rise over downtown Button. Neither of us talked. Neither of us had to. It was kind of great.

After turning the sink water on, I cup my hand to collect a sip, and then I'm foam free. I turn off the faucet and place my palms on either side of the sink, looking up into the mirror for one too-long minute.

Matteo was right earlier. I have let myself get pretty damn hairy. I run my knuckles through my stubbled jawline, turning my chin to examine how much work will need to be done if I commit to getting out a razor.

Maybe my beard isn't the only thing that could use a little maintenance. My eyebrows have come in thick and bushy, with the slightest hint of gray peppered throughout. I'm only thirty-five, but age is coming for me. At work, I cringe when I hear some of the serving staff chatting about "self-care," but maybe it's time I got over my masculinity and tried some manscaping. I run my hands over my biceps, which are impressive from years of kneading dough and hauling stockpots. When was the last time I added to my ink collection? The black-and-gray maze on my arms has faded over the last few years.

Matteo's head pops up in the doorway, and I nearly drop the towel all over again. I slap a hand to my chest and send him a scowl. As expected, my brother ignores the expression and pushes up to sit on my bathroom counter.

"I got an email this morning." There's that grin again. Expecting something from me.

I scratch my fingertips through my beard before bending down to get under the sink. I retrieve the can of shaving cream and a razor of indeterminate age. When I'm standing again, Matteo's smile has gone from expectant to downright breathless.

"You got an email this morning," I repeat. "If it was a Nigerian prince, I sincerely pray you used Dad's account information to wire him money instead of yours."

The smile widens. “You ordered the stuff.”

I sigh and turn to look at him, resisting the urge to smile back. The expression pulls at the corners of my mouth, threatening my dignity. “I ordered the stuff.”

Matteo pumps a fist in the air. “We’re going to have carrots by early winter.”

“Grow enough of them and maybe I can save cash with the produce guys.”

“Wait—Chiara?” Matteo’s fist pump falters. “Well, hang on, if my garden is going to get in the way—”

“You can keep Chiara,” I say grudgingly, eyes meeting his in the mirror as I splash warm water on my jaw.

When Matteo’s cheeks turn pink and that preposterous grin is back on his face, my frown finally gives way. I shoo him off my counter with one hand.

“Get outta here before I lose all the bathroom steam,” I tell him.

“Okay, so if the raised bed gets here tomorrow—” Matteo starts.

“Out, dude.”

“Did you order soil and fertilizer for me, too, or will I need to make a run to Home Depot? Hey, I think they sell those cute little signs there, too. You know, the ones that tell you what you planted in which row? We can get pictures of carrots with little cartoon eyeballs or tomatoes with top hats ___”

Using one hand and never turning from the mirror to look back at him, I push my brother out by the face and lock the bathroom door behind him. I brace my hands on the counter, staring up at my reflection as I did before, but this time I’m smiling like Matteo. Good God.

He’s been asking to garden on my rooftop ever since he got here. Won’t shut up about it, actually. I guess he learned from some of Dad’s gardeners a few years ago and the hobby has gotten more and more serious ever since. He makes his

own pickles. And, yes, there have been plenty of accidental double entendres from Matteo as he's told me all about them.

But is a rooftop garden enough to make up for having to leave the life you've always known and slum it in a studio apartment? Is it enough to make up for living with a cranky older brother you never really knew?

I'm guessing no.

But it's a start. It's something to keep Matteo out of my kitchen and away from my appliances, at least. And it's a chance to give a Barone kid the help I never got when I was running away. To be the man I always wished my dad would be for me.

I'll take that.

I grab the clippers from my medicine cabinet and pinch a clump of beard hair. I've got it stretched out, scissors sharp and poised, when the bathroom door handle rattles.

"Enzo, is the raised bed—wait, did you lock the door?"

I sigh, that stupid smile threatening to overtake my mouth again. "God forbid I take a shit in peace."

". . . Are you really pooping right now?"

"No. I am not really pooping, Matteo."

"Cool, so I was just going to ask about the raised bed. The email wasn't clear. Is that package getting in today or later this week or what?"

I close my eyes, trying to remember what the website said when I made the order.

"It should be here sometime late this afternoon, I think. Before the Wynn party."

Oof, the Wynn party. So maybe Matteo's gardening obsession is good for something more than a few carrots. In the chaos of saving my espresso machine and worrying about becoming Grizzly Adams, I'd forgotten about tonight's booking. I'll blame too many late-night beers and unexpected

sentimentality for both the job and my brother's new equipment.

If it had been anyone else, I'd have laughed at the prospect of closing down Alessi's to accommodate a kid's birthday party. But Holden Wynn, a former NFL running back, had become a fixture here since he moved to Button to take care of his kids. I liked the guy, and he liked that Alessi's was fancy enough to stock the kind of liquor he'd loved in California but had never seen in small-town Georgia. I wouldn't call many people my friends, but having a regular customer probably came close.

He'd told me about his oldest, Mia, turning nine, and how Gorilla Gus's Indoor Playground only served terrible cheap beer to the parents, and I'd volunteered Alessi's. At the time, I'd thought it might be good for Matteo to get to know some people in Button that weren't me, and I figured the whole affair would be good to drum up business from people in town who normally wouldn't brave a high-end Italian place when they could just pick up dinner from a drive-through.

Now, though? The party feels like kind of a lot. Social obligations always seem bigger and scarier the closer I get to them.

I turn around and unlock the door. Matteo is practically standing nose to nose with me, and I have to step back and blink.

"Maybe . . . you can help me chop something tonight. If you want."

Matteo quirks an eyebrow. "Chop vegetables?"

I shake my head. "Nope. Chop off my head when I'm forced to interact with guests. Never let me schedule reservations this big after I've had the good tequila. *Yes*, I meant chop vegetables, Matteo."

There's that smile again. "Yeah! I mean, I'm not a chef, but I did see Chiara's guys bringing in these incredible endives."

"You're my endive guy then. Consider it done."

I'm definitely going soft.

But where had the guy been who needed his endives chopped when I was first out of the house? Ignoring the way that sounds like one of my brother's blatant euphemisms, I do wish I hadn't had to struggle so much just for basic survival. I'd come from a billion-dollar family and had zero marketable skills. I don't want that for Matteo.

I pull out an inch of my beard hair and raise the scissors again.

"Whoa, dude. You're shaving?" Matteo's face is suddenly cheek to cheek with mine. I let out a long huffing breath, knowing he's gearing up to say more. "Let's see that smile, big guy! Now I'll finally be able to tell how you feel!"

"Matteo."

"You know you don't *have* to shave," he reminds me, blathering on without pause. "But I do think you'll look nice."

"Matteo, I don't think—"

"Bruh. Come on. Give yourself some credit. We're hot men folk. There's no chill about us. Ain't no 'brr' in Barone—wait."

CHAPTER TWO: KELLY

As I walk through the living room, dress unzipped and hairspray in hand to treat a wayward red curl, I pass by our open bay window.

I stop short and backtrack. It's the truest definition of a double take.

"Well, butter my butt and call me a biscuit."

"Hm?"

My daughter, Summer, doesn't look up from the couch where she's painting her toes a cotton candy pink on the coffee table. She just got done with school for summer break, and all that concentration my little nerd usually puts into math homework is being applied to a precision edge manicure.

"Enzo Barone has shaved the old Civil War General."

"No way!" She hops up and waddles over to stand by my side.

Alessi's is in full view below us. I know for a fact that the restaurant doesn't get a good look into our second story. I've checked more than once since our move, during lulls in my shifts. For most of the day, the sun hits the window just right to keep our townhouse private.

We, however, get an excellent view below. And right now, my boss is on display with a freshly naked, dimpled chin.

"I guess he's not interested in leading a polygamist cult then," Summer muses.

"Probably not gonna be willing to play lumberjack when I ask him about chopping down the tree in our front yard either," I agree.

"Who will the theater cast in their production of *Rip Van Winkle* now?"

"Shame."

"Shame."

"Are we sure this is really Enzo?"

Still, I can't look away. I'm out of good one-liners, but I'm still transfixed.

He's like a new person. I mean, I've always known Enzo Barone was attractive. I've worked as his assistant general manager for years now, ever since he first opened Alessi's, actually. So I'm intimately acquainted with the inky curves of his honey-colored arms and his shockingly pale blue eyes. He's got all the right assets, it's just that he's always hidden them behind a mess of a beard and a boxy chef's coat.

Now, the beard and mustache have been reduced to a fine salt-and-pepper stubble. Even the hair on his head appears to have been tamed, and his usual overgrown sweep is bordering less on mullet and more on pretty-boy suave. The long sleeves of his chef's coat have been rolled up, revealing those tan and black cutouts of tight, veined forearms. My breath catches.

Of course, that's right when his heavy brow lowers and he waves his arms too many times. He comes up behind one of our sous-chefs, Scott, and shows him the *correct* way to slice whatever it is he's working on. I can almost hear the f-word coming out of his mouth from here.

"Definitely Enzo," I say with a sigh.

Summer crosses her arms and frowns as she steps closer to the glass. Like me, my daughter is still only half dressed. Summer has never been much for feminine touches, but as her freshman year of high school drew to a close and she first started showing real interest in boys, she abandoned the tomboy getup in favor of some light mascara and a little lipstick. She's gone even further tonight, cracking out my eye shadow palette and the cream blush. There's an unexpected swell in my chest as I take in how gorgeous she looks with her auburn hair pulled back and only one strap of her pink party dress in place.

"So do you think he shaved because of the party or what?"

I shake my head and cross my arms just like Summer. "He didn't shave when that critic from Augusta came in. Why would he shave for a nine-year-old's birthday party?"

“Well, it’s less about Mia and more about whichever of Uncle Holden’s famous friends he invites, right?” Summer suggests with a shrug. “Mia already had her real party, with the pool and the friendship bracelets or whatever, last weekend. No nine-year-old cares about Italian fine dining. I figured this party was just an excuse for Holden to finally propose to Josie, right?”

My stomach flips at that. Shoot, is my kid right? Is this party just an excuse for Holden to ask my little sister to marry him?

Here I’d been the liaison between our restaurant and Holden this whole time, never realizing this might be a bigger deal than just Mia’s party. I asked Enzo for the night off like it was nothing when maybe I should be down at Alessi’s right now, slaving to get the details perfect. Have I just botched my sister’s epic engagement story? Will the lighting be right for pictures? How’s the wine menu?

As soon as I start worrying, I’m distracted again by my boss. One of the serving staff walks toward the kitchen with the house phone held out for him. Enzo unbuttons his chef’s coat and shrugs it off his shoulders, waving with one impatient hand for the girl to bring him the phone. He walks over to one of the dining room tables and braces a fist on the wood, going *off* on whoever is on the other end of the line.

I’ve seen him pull this stunt a hundred times before, probably at least a half dozen times a night. But without the beard and the Neanderthal haircut, it hits a little differently.

He’s powerful. Commanding. But now that I can see his eyes properly for the first time, I realize he’s also kind of . . . passionate. I mean, that figures. Enzo Barone is a culinary legend for a reason. People travel from across the country to our little restaurant in Button, Georgia. But there’s something in his eyes I’ve never appreciated before now. It’s almost like I can see what he sees, like I have that fire in my belly to make things perfect. To go above and beyond.

His jaw clenches as he pinches the bridge of his nose. He turns a half step to face the window, and I jump back, a little

breathless.

Shoot. My teenage daughter is watching me. That head is cocked in my direction now, and Summer's expression is blatantly amused.

"Should I call Holden and tell him to wait on the proposal on the off chance you end up proposing to your boss tonight?"

I turn toward her and narrow my eyes. "Excuse me?"

"Enzo does have a good jawline," Summer comments, stealing another glance through the window. "But maybe you could hold off proposing and just, like, jump him in a broom closet tonight instead?"

"What deviant raised you, child?"

I make a show of rolling my eyes as I push past Summer and head for the bathroom. As expected, she tags along behind me.

"You know, the first step is admitting you have an addiction," she reminds me. Her tone is playful, but I know better.

Because this is what I do. It's what I always do.

I'm a love addict. I haven't even earned a chip for staying sober because I'm incapable of going two seconds without falling for someone.

The guy bagging our groceries is probably a secret poet, and when he hands me our apples, he's trying to communicate how he pines for me. Our mailman? One day I'll work up the guts to send him his own love letter, and then we'll escape to Europe together.

Whoever you are, I'm ready to give you everything. I'm ready to jump in feet first, forget to hold my breath, and embrace the euphoria of drowning.

I'm old enough to know better. I get that, I really do. At thirty-two, every last one of my high school girlfriends has gotten married and started cute little nuclear families. But I've always been this way, and I guess it's true what they say about teaching an old dog new tricks.

When I met Summer's dad, I was a sophomore in high school and convinced he was the one. Van Hastings looked just like one of the guys in my magazines, and he wanted *me*. It had taken all of one semester before I'd given him my virginity and every ounce of my good sense.

Summer arrived junior year and, with her, a reality check. While I was still head over heels for her dad, Van's parents were talking to him about how he'd be able to keep playing football with a toddler and whether he'd need to change college plans to live at home. My parents had reminded me of similar things, but all I'd seen was the cartoon heart around Van's head every time he came over to check on me and Summer. I'd had this romantic notion of being with one man all my life and getting things right on the first try.

At his parents' insistence, Van applied for community college and we got married when I was seventeen. We were divorced before I was twenty-one. While all those other girls I knew were just meeting their Prince Charmings, I was staring down the barrel of single motherhood without even being able to legally drink.

You'd think I would have learned from my mistakes. You'd be wrong.

Every boyfriend after that was going to be the one who saved me. He was going to be the love story for which I always knew I was destined.

The latest of my failures had also been the most epic. Josh Everton was younger than me—he was only twenty-seven—but he'd felt so right. He had a line for everything, a *move* for every moment, and hands that I'd think about morning, noon, and night.

And in the shower . . . Poor, poor desperate Kelly.

In the end, he'd been cheating on me with my own sister. She hadn't known he was with me, I hadn't known he was with her, and when we started digging, we found *three other women* on which Josh Everton had been using the same lines, the same moves, and the same talented hands.

So the Better Than Josh Everton Club was born, a support group of sorts for women wronged by one truly dickish man. And while most of the other members are enjoying a man hiatus, here I am, already salivating out my window at the sight of a man I've known for years. I'm hitting a new level of horny and desperate.

And because I know Enzo Barone, I ought to remember the man is a grade-A grump. In five years, I don't think I've seen him smile once. And God help any of the local high school kids who have come by Alessi's to ask for sports sponsorships or fundraiser sales.

I need to remember I'm content with the way things are, even if I haven't found my calling yet. Alessi's is home. Almost literally, considering we share property borders since we moved here a few weeks ago.

I set my shoulders back and swipe my mascara off the counter when Summer walks back in.

"Nina just texted that she was moved off the waitlist for Vanderbilt," she says, not looking up as her fingers fly across her keyboard. She wiggles back onto her butt, propping herself up on my counter. "She has to move into her dorm in, like, a month."

A strange double beat of my heart. It won't be much longer until my kid is applying to colleges and moving out of town. I'm not sure I'm ready for that.

"Any word from Hamilton Prep?" I ask, eager to change the subject.

Summer has been applying for the all-grades South Carolina prep school since she first discovered it years ago, and even though she's a brilliant kid, each year of rejection letters has been enough to dampen the dream.

"I got Terri to apply, too, this year, and she hasn't heard anything," Summer says with a shrug. "I'm sure they'll send letters out soon."

She pauses, thumb hovering over the keyboard. Then there's a small click, and she drops the phone into her lap.

Summer sucks at the inside of her cheek before glancing up at me.

“I think this could be my year,” she tells me. “I really do.”

There’s that strange double beat in my chest again.

“Oh, yeah?”

She nods. “Mr. Daniels told me my personal essay was better than some kids’ college applications. I’ve never had better grades in math and science.”

“This could be your year,” I repeat with a smile. I reach over to squeeze her knee, and she jumps and laughs like she used to when she was a kid.

“Could be.”

There’s a vibration on the counter, and we both look down to see whose phone is going off this time. My screen flashes, so I start to cap my mascara, but Summer picks it up and glances at the incoming call.

“Aunt Josie,” she says, clicking on the call. “Hey, lady.”

“Tell her to wear something that will look good in pictures,” I hiss to Summer as I paint my lashes. “I mean, just in case she hasn’t thought of a proposal.”

“Mom says to wear that low-cut black thing that shows off your boobs.”

I sigh and press the heel of one hand to my forehead. “Again, it is confirmed that some sexual deviant has been raising you, child.”

Summer holds out the phone, presses speaker, and sets it on the counter before sauntering back out of the bathroom.

“Hello?” I call.

“My nails are already black,” Josie says. “Am I going to look way too goth if I pair them with a black dress? I wanted my nails to look good when I’m showing off the ring.”

One corner of my mouth quirks into a smile, and I lower my mascara wand.

“Of course you guessed before I did,” I say. “You’re going to be the most beautiful bride, sis.”

“It helps that you and Van were married in a courthouse and he was wearing his football jersey. How could I compete if you’d been married in white?”

I snort. “I suppose that does put the odds in your favor.”

“What are you up to?”

I return the wand to my eyelashes, focusing all my energy on producing long, luscious strands. I clear my throat. “Getting ready for tonight and watching the new hot guy at Alessi’s through our living room window.”

“When did Enzo hire someone new? A parent of one of my second graders asked all year about job openings at Alessi’s, but I told him Enzo rarely opens hiring.”

“Enzo did not hire someone.” I swallow again, attempting to dislodge the hard lump thickening in my throat. I toe my way back to the living room, glancing down the hall to ensure that Summer is in her bedroom before I stand in front of the window again. “Enzo *shaved*.”

“*No, he did not!*”

“Did you know a movie star was hidden under all that facial hair? Without the beard, his I-might-stab-you aesthetic actually comes off as dark and broody. Very sexy.”

“Details. Now, please.”

“He’s got a chin dimple. And did you know he has lips? Welp, he’s got lips. Full ones, baby girl.”

Josie squeals. “Holden!” she calls away from the phone. “Holden, can we leave early for Alessi’s?”

“Don’t leave early,” I laugh. “I don’t want to tip off Enzo that he’s looking more human. He might use that information to his advantage and emotionally manipulate his staff instead of simply berating us verbally.”

My lips twitch as Enzo finally clicks off whatever call he was on in Alessi’s below. As if he was waiting on my cue, he

slams the phone back into Wendy's hands and paces through the restaurant, raking his hands through his hair. His fingertips hover at the back of his neck, like they're still looking for purchase in longer locks.

The bottom of his fitted gray T-shirt has pulled up with the gesture. Even from here, that slice of stomach is clearly hard and chiseled. My stomach knits in on itself, and my throat constricts.

"Look, if you're not going to let me come early, you're under strict orders to get your butt down to Alessi's and gather intelligence," Josie tells me.

"Intelligence regarding what?" I ask. "The name of the barber who was able to machete past all that bush to get to Enzo's face?"

"Please, we both know you'd like to know if this transformation is for a woman," Josie corrects me. My back teeth click together. "Because if it isn't, I'd place money on you showing up at his apartment door with condoms and cookies in hand before the end of the week."

I take a deep breath and make myself turn away from the window. I pad across our new carpeting to my bedroom, shut the door behind me, and lie back on the bed.

"I already told you, after Josh," I say, "no more men. Not for a long time."

"Sure."

"No more men!" I insist, sitting back up in my indignation. "I mean it."

"We'll see. When was the last time you were single for more than a week, again?"

My back teeth are grinding away again. She knows she's got me there.

"One whole year," I tell her. "Nothing formal, and I reserve the right to take back my promise if Henry Cavill shows up in Button. But I mean it: one whole year without a relationship. Mark my words."

“Are you already imagining what your children with Enzo would look like?”

They’d be Gordan Ramsay mean, but they’d also have gorgeous dark hair and icy-blue eyes and scrumptious-sweet Italian names like Guilliana or Tommaso.

“Please, Josie, I’m not insane.”

Oh my God, they’d have the honey-colored skin, too! So perfect.

“I’ll be watching tonight,” Josie tells me. “And I’ll have our girl Alexis keep an eye on you when I’m not around. We’ll just see if you’re really on your best behavior.”

Alexis is another member of our Better Than Josh Everton Club. She’s part of the serving staff and is all around awesome. I hadn’t known her much before the Josh scandal, but there’s just something about getting dicked over by the same dick you once dicked down with that makes you bond with a girl.

Say that five times fast.

Anyway, lately Alexis has been coming by my place after late shifts to share a drink and watch bad TV. I never thought I’d be bonding with someone ten years my junior, but my friendship with Alexis has started to feel more like my relationship with Josie. This club has been unexpected in so many ways.

“Hey, did you get a package from Marnie this afternoon?” Josie asks, interrupting my train of thought to bring up another member of the club.

“Hm? A package?”

“A special club anniversary gift,” she says, her tone teasing. I’m not sure I like it. “To celebrate our first quarter as a five-some, you know? She told me about it when I got coffee with her this morning. Anyway, it’s a gift that will probably do you some good if you’re really set on a man hiatus.”

“Only Marnie’s organized butt would make a point to celebrate a successful first quarter.” I laugh.

“Well, watch for the package,” Josie reiterates. “You know, if you can stop watching Enzo for even a moment.”

“I’ll see you soon, Josie,” I say, giving my sister my most cloyingly sweet tone.

“Hopefully with your panties still on,” she gives me right back.

I laugh as I hang up the call.

Still, the thought of having my panties off around Enzo Barone is doing things to me. I clench my thighs together and press my hand to my stomach to draw another deep breath. Never once have I thought this way about my hairy, grumpy bosshole. What level of horny is medically dangerous?

There’s a knock on the front door.

“Summer?” I call.

“Mid-curling iron!” she hollers back.

I sigh and get up from the bed, doing my best to banish thoughts of dimpled chins and lickable stubble.

CHAPTER THREE: ENZO

Wendy locks up after the last lunch guests leave around four o'clock. A few late-eaters show up, and I let her explain that we're closed for the Wynn party tonight. No need to do people-y stuff even a minute before I have to.

"You don't have enough salt in the water," I mention to Nico as I pass by.

"*How in the . . .*" he mutters under his breath. "You're a magician."

I flash him a rare smirk. "I can smell it in the air."

"The new look is good for you, Chef."

My jaw flexes, remembering before my brain does that it's been shaved down to a short stubble in place of the bushman thing I had going on just a few hours ago.

"Thanks, Nico. Hey Reggie, don't forget we decided to add the cream sauce on the amuse-bouche."

"On it!" Reggie calls from across the kitchen, raising a pan and spoon for me to see she hasn't forgotten. She glances back, jaw dropping. "Hey, Chef! You've got a chin over there! Looks good!"

I raise an eyebrow at her, sending her my driest expression. Reggie just snorts before turning back to the amuse-bouche.

I'm heading over to examine the next line when a hand hooks through my elbow. A moment later, there's a flash in my face. I blink too many times until a familiar smile comes into view.

Arlo, my sous-chef, is grinning as he fans the Polaroid back and forth. His face is already comprised of a million deep brown wrinkles, but they've somehow doubled or even tripled in his intense amusement.

"Heard some of the girls up front talking 'bout your cheeks." His voice is deep and smoky and bursting with throaty laughter. "I was holding out for you havin' tried Botox

or something, but this might be better. Turns out you're still a baby, man-child!"

He pats my cheek, shuffles over to the employee corkboard, and pins my surprised face under previous Polaroids. I'm sandwiched between shots of when my general manager, Wendy, thought we were all dressing up for Halloween (she spent half a shift dressed as Wonder Woman until her daughter could bring her a change of clothes) and when Nico accidentally set a fire and burned off his eyebrows.

"Hey." Arlo shrugs before he punches my shoulder and heads back for his workstation. "The pay might be low, but at least our entertainment here is good!"

He cackles as he gets back to work. Only Arlo can get away with these kinds of jabs about my shaven beard. Everyone else might have had a quip or two, but they know better than to truly poke the bear. Still, I rub at my cheeks again, wondering if I made a mistake exposing the baby face. Do I look like an idiot?

And speaking of my fashion change, I spy the impetus now.

Matteo is at a counter, sweat beading at his hairline as he frowns over his endives. I step up beside him, resting my fists on the steel as I watch him work.

"Are you sure you like vegetables?" I ask as I watch. "Pretty sure you murdered that endive."

He collapses forward, catching himself with his palms before he's face first in vegetables.

"I've ruined the entire dinner," he says. "Your restaurant is so screwed. Someone will call the paper or a critic or, worse, they'll post on Yelp."

"Whoa, Ozzy. Calm that crazy train." I slap a hand on his back.

Alright, yes, the endives have seen better days. And yes, the OCD rages in my chest like a tiny alien ready to burst out of John Hurt. But this might be the first time I've seen Smiley

Dwarf looking anything less than ecstatic. The impulse to comfort him overrides all standard grumpiness.

“Hey, you’re supposed to be the cool brother,” I remind him. “I’m the one who specializes in angsty freakouts.”

“I wasn’t ready for so much responsibility.” Matteo shakes his head, staring down at the butchered endives. “You were wrong to trust me. You’re the one who should care for the garden—”

“Matteo.”

I form a loose fist and nick the side of his jaw. I have some vague memory of a little league coach doing that to me once, and it had felt about a hundred times more fatherly than anything my own dad had ever done. The effect on Matteo is minimal, but at least he looks me in the eye. I’m left feeling like a lame dork. I shove the fist into my chef’s coat pocket and clear my throat.

“Run a few blocks over to Sunshine Market. Karen keeps endives when they’re in season, thanks to a special request from me a few years ago. Take a few dollars from my dresser upstairs and bring them back. I’ll show you how to chop them the right way.”

“You trust me to pick out the endives?” He presses his lips into a tight line.

“Well, have you noticed anything but Chiara when she brings in our produce orders every morning?”

He presses those lips tighter together.

I sigh and roll my neck, struggling to fight back the impulse to scrub my clean hands down my face. “You want firm leaves that are snug and overlap one another. Got it?”

“Got it.”

And with that, Matteo darts out of my kitchen. I blink a few times after him, reeling from the strangeness of the experience.

Sometimes it hits me all at once like this. I’ve got my *brother* living here. All those mistakes he’s making might not

be the same ones I did, but they're comparable. I have so much more responsibility than just a few weeks ago. So much more that's out of my control or beyond what I can predict.

I shake my head to clear it, then start making my rounds. In the end, running a kitchen really isn't that different from taking care of my kid brother. Although, here in the restaurant, it is a lot more socially acceptable to stab something meaty if I'm feeling overwhelmed.

CHAPTER FOUR: KELLY

Only when I get to our front door do I think to glance in the mirror hanging over our side table. Oops—dress is still unzipped, and only half my hair has been pulled back. Stray red hairs frame my face, but not in the cute way they do for my fellow redhead, Summer. They're wispy and haphazard, and my half-finished makeup adds to the wild effect.

I contort, reaching behind my back and hopping around to pull the zipper up on the back of my dress. The doorbell sounds.

“Coming!” I croak.

I go to whip open the door, stopping short at the sight of a familiar face through the textured glass windows. All vital functions stop. Is that . . .? I make myself open the door anyway.

“Matteo,” I breathe, relief flooding my veins.

For a second, I had thought the man I'd been spying on for a solid ten minutes had been cosmically transported to my doorway. With the new haircut, Enzo and Matteo look way more alike than I'd ever thought before. But the similarities stop there; Matteo is more than a decade younger and smiling sheepishly as he rubs the back of his neck.

“What's going on? Is everything okay with the party? Do you need me to come down and help?”

“Do you have endives?” he blurts.

“Endives?” I repeat.

He smacks his hands over his face and drags them down, stretching out his handsome features. “I had one job. Enzo sent me to get more endives at the store, but I couldn't remember how to get there, and I left my phone back in the apartment. I can't ask him now. I'm pretty sure he'd chop me up instead of the endives.”

I lean around him, glancing at the front patio like Enzo might come storming up at any moment to grab Matteo by his

shirt collar and drag him back to Alessi's.

"Inside." I jerk my head and start back down the hall. "I'll draw you a map to Sunshine Market."

"You sure you don't have endives?"

I snort. "Closest thing we've got is Chinese takeout or cold pizza."

Matteo sighs. "He's going to flay me and serve me to guests."

I turn back and wink over my shoulder at him. "Please, he'll only dish you up with the pork if the kitchen is short on any more ingredients. Summer!" I rap my knuckles on the hallway wall and see my daughter's head peek out before I head into the kitchen. "I need a sheet from one of your notebooks. Enzo's brother needs a map to Sunshine."

When we get to the kitchen, Matteo pulls out a barstool at my counter and rests his chin on his fists. Summer sweeps in with a notebook, whips out a page, and sets it in front of him before walking to the fridge for an apple juice. She uncaps it and takes a swig, then pushes herself up on the counter beside Matteo.

"You're Enzo's famous brother, huh?" she asks. "I heard you moved in with him a little while ago."

I hold up a finger. "Wait just a second, Summer. We don't want to give away Matteo's identity if he chooses this moment to go into hiding."

That earns a small smile of relief from Matteo. He pries his chin off his fists and places them in his lap.

"Kelly is saving me from my brother's wrath."

"Can you draw the map to Sunshine Market?" I ask Summer. "I've got to pin back the rest of my hair before I forget entirely."

Summer cocks her head and narrows her eyes. "Good hair is on the line, huh? If I draw this map, can I borrow the car on Saturday night?"

“You’re choosing now to extort me? You’re evil.” I put a hand on my hip. “And should I remind you that you only have a permit?”

“For two more weeks!” she protests.

“Ask me again in two more weeks.” I smirk. “But . . . I am willing to lend you that black dress you like for the thing on Saturday. Almost as good as a car?”

“I’ll take it.” Summer pulls out a drawer at her side, grabs a pen, and sets to work mapping out the Button streets.

Matteo looks between us, his dark brow furrowed. “Sisters are way different from brothers.”

“And better looking, too.” I wink as I finagle with a bobby pin I retrieved from my dress pocket. “But we’re not sisters. Summer is my daughter.”

Matteo takes that in, chewing on his bottom lip. I’d guess he’s doing the mental math, figuring out exactly how old I was when I made the transition from teen to teen mom. I study his face as I work on the rest of my hair, finally securing the last of my curls as Summer finishes her map with a flourish.

“So, there’s been an adjustment period with Enzo?” I ask carefully.

I don’t know Matteo well. My experience has been limited to the first introduction when he arrived on Alessi’s doorstep to the occasional re-rearranging of the restaurant furniture as Enzo glowers through the kitchen window.

But I can relate to the adjustment period. Things may have never been weird between me and my daughter, but I do remember what it was like to create a new home after Van moved out and we started over on our own.

“He’s trying,” Matteo says in a soft voice. He glances over to our living room window, his shoulders collapsing with what I can only guess is sympathy for his brother. Is there more to unpack there than I realized? “I can tell he’s trying, really. Things are already better than they were at my mom’s or dad’s houses. It’s just . . .”

“Enzo can’t stop doing his Oscar the Grouch impression?”
I provide with a half smile.

“He won’t stop making you experiment with dishes for dinner instead of letting you have leftovers or pizza like a normal person?” Summer jumps in, making a face. “Our fridge was filled with oysters Rockefeller for, like, a week once.”

“And oyster stew.” I stick out my tongue.

“Oh my God, buffalo-fried oysters.”

“Hey, maybe the most annoying thing about living with Enzo is all that hair,” I muse.

“Clogging the drain.” Summer shrugs.

“Probably on all the furniture.”

Matteo laughs. “All I was going to say was that Enzo seems just as confused by all this as I am. But I like your reasons.”

Something weighty settles at the top of my chest as I think about all our hair jokes. Can’t make those anymore, can we? Not with that freshly shorn jaw, stubbled in dark black and silver. If I made one of those jokes to my boss’s face, I could imagine him scowling at me, those full pink lips turning down in the corners . . .

I clear my throat and set my shoulders.

Matteo picks up Summer’s map and slides off the stool.
“Well, I should probably get the endives.”

“Just an FYI, I really wouldn’t count on Sunshine Market carrying endives,” I tell him. “This is the Deep South. Most of what Karen keeps in stock is pickled, salted, or barbequed.”

“*Although*,” Summer interjects, “worst comes to worst, I think Karen keeps pickled lettuce? Would that be a good substitution?”

I hold back a snort. I can picture Enzo’s face now, his cheeks blistering red as he considers even the prospect of substituting something pickled for a fresh ingredient in one of his salads. Summer and I might subsist on takeout, but I love

food enough that even I know pickled lettuce wouldn't come close to fresh endives.

"You know, if you think about it, endives are kind of like a fancy lettuce—" Summer starts.

Matteo's eyes go wide. "*Little dudette*. You're speaking my language."

Another knock sounds at the front door, and we all turn at the noise.

Matteo stiffens from his spot behind the counter. "Can he see me through your windows?"

"I'll play mediator," I promise. "You can either head out for the market right now or take a moment to collect yourself in the kitchen. But maybe . . . hide the salts and seasonings. No need to give Enzo ideas if he's in the mood to flay and cook his brother."

I head to the front door, my chest tightening unexpectedly when I catch sight of Enzo through the glass. Has he ever come to my place? It's strange to think of him out of context. That large, imposing form hulking around without his signature chef's coat or a saucepan in hand.

I open the door and lean against the frame, just now remembering the half-made-up face. "Enzo! I hardly recognized you without the sheepdog you keep on your face."

His jaw is set tight, as usual, but I do note his lips quickly quirking. My stomach jumps, knitting tighter in on itself.

"Arlo said he saw Matteo running over here when he was supposed to be en route to Karen's store."

I gesture behind me and lean in, lowering my voice. "He couldn't remember where Sunshine Market was. There was talk of his being scared he might be cooked if he came back to Alessi's without endives?"

"He shouldn't have bugged you," Enzo says. "You're getting ready for the party. I gave you the night off."

It's then that his eyes flick up and down my form, and I remember all over again my lack of penciled-in eyebrows. The

back of my neck burns.

“I don’t mind,” I promise, waving him off. “Summer and I have plenty of time to get ready. Knowing us, there’s a high chance we take down all this hair and makeup and change into entirely new personas within the hour.”

His gaze fixes on my exposed shoulder. I’m wearing a one-shoulder gown that clings to my form and stops just above my knees. With his eyes on me now, the getup suddenly feels downright immodest.

“You look . . . nice.” He’s already looking away again, checking down my hall for signs of his brother.

Still, the heat at the back of my neck has yet to give way.

And before I know what I’m doing, I punch him on the shoulder like we’re two teenage bros.

“I like the new look,” I tell him. When my comment earns me a glance from Enzo, I choke a little. “Never knew you have a face.”

“Thank you?”

We’re interrupted by Summer and Matteo, who are going over the details on the map as he heads for the door. Matteo stops short when he sees Enzo.

“Forget the endives,” Enzo says. “Come on. We don’t need to bother Kelly on her night off.”

“It’s fine,” I promise.

“We promised your family a dinner,” he corrects. “Gotta cook it to keep my word.”

“Still, it was nice to get to know your brother a little better,” I say with a shrug. “He only gave us a *few* details from your diary while he was here.”

Matteo slaps a hand to his forehead, and I repress a smile. Enzo doesn’t look too amused.

“You should come back,” I say, turning back to his younger brother. “Next time there’s something scary in your apartment fridge, swing by and we’ll have takeout here.”

“I will,” Matteo promises. “See you guys at Alessi’s later?”

“See you later!” Summer smiles and waves.

Enzo hesitates between us, like he isn’t quite sure what to do in the face of such easy camaraderie. He glances between me and his brother, sucking his cheek in on one side. Finally, he waves back at us, heads back through the door, and Matteo follows. Summer starts back toward her bedroom, and I’m left at the open door, watching my boss walk away with his younger brother.

Son of a gun. The man really does look good now that he has a face. My heartbeat is still scraping around in my ears.

“I’m definitely not imagining what our children would look like,” I mutter as I close the doors. “Definitely not.”

Although, okay, maybe I am imagining what it might be like to *conceive* said children. Never in all these years have I looked at Enzo Barone and thought about what it might be like to be more than coworkers. I’ve seen those muscles lock and ripple as he works dough. I’ve seen those huge hands move with surprising grace as he drapes a sauce to finish a dish. Or how about the way Enzo has a habit of licking his bottom lip after trying a new menu staple, all slow and thoughtful?

And now it’s like all those parts of him have new meaning.

Good God, I am not a well woman.

I swallow past the obstruction in my throat and head back to Summer’s room. Can’t eyeball my vibrator drawer when I’m hanging around my teenager.

CHAPTER FIVE: ENZO

“You could have asked me for directions,” I remind Matteo as we head back to Alessi’s. “I could have drawn you that map.”

Matteo just shrugs and shoves his hands in his pockets. “I was a little scared of being served up with dinner.”

I shoot him a wary eye as I push open the restaurant’s front doors. “I’m not going to sauté your liver for not knowing the directions to Sunshine.”

“I mean, I figured there was a good chance that while I was out, you’d finally see the rearranging I did in your . . .”

I stop short as the doors swing shut behind us. Matteo flashes me a sheepish grin.

“The rearranging I did in my drawer upstairs,” he says quickly. “Just my stuff. Nothing that belongs to you.”

I grunt and start toward my office when my brother’s hand flies out to stop me. “Uh, do you believe in feng shui, bro?”

“Do you want me to answer that question?”

That flashy grin stiffens. “. . . Maybe after I’ve had a moment alone in your office.”

I jerk my head back toward the kitchen, and Matteo falls in step behind me as I return to the preparations. Did he rearrange my office before or after the espresso machine debacle this morning? However long it’s been, he knows to be afraid of my reaction.

“Sorry,” he mumbles behind me. “It’s just that I know I’m not a chef or a waiter or anything that’s much use here. And it’s not like I was running Dad’s company for him, but at least even when I was screwing things up there, I knew I was more qualified than I am here. I just want to help, and I don’t always know how.”

I stop walking, and Matteo follows suit. My throat cinches up, and I have to cough a few times to clear it. When I turn to

Matteo, he's just as nervous and discouraged as I expected. There's a twinge in my gut at that.

"Put the HGTV instincts to use on my walk-in refrigerator," I tell him. "You can go now. Keep a low profile, but see if you can make sense of the disaster in there."

His eyes brighten a little, and I find myself having to clear my throat again.

"Oh, and I got a notification on my phone that your gardening materials should be arriving sometime before the party begins. I'll let you know if I see the delivery guy before you do."

"Sweet."

His stiff smile gives way to a real smile, and whatever was cinching up my throat a moment ago eases. I pat him on the back, more than a little awkward, before gesturing for him to follow me to the walk-in.

"Wendy!" I call to my manager as we go. "Do we have an ETA on those new place settings? I'd like to whip them out tonight if we can."

"Coming in with the shipment!" she calls back to me, never looking up from a clipboard she's studying.

I round into the kitchen, and a hundred smells hit me all at once. There's so much comfort near stoves and ovens. Maybe it was just everything with my brother putting me off my game this afternoon, but I find myself needing some recentering now. My saucier hands me the chef's coat I left behind before walking over to Kelly's place, and I slip it on, rolling the sleeves up to my elbows. There's centering in that, too.

"Scott, are those brussels sprouts looking any better?"

My sous-chef nods. "Yes, Chef!"

"Arlo?" I call. "Arlo, how are the chicken breasts looking?"

"They were nice," comes Matteo's voice.

I almost jump, not having realized my brother was still behind me. He's just outside the walk-in, hands shoved down in his pockets, staring off in that dopey, dreamy way I've seen at least a dozen times since he moved in.

"The breasts?"

"Kelly and Summer. I liked them."

I swipe at my forehead. Somehow, I've already worked up a sweat despite only being back in my kitchen for two minutes.

"Oh. The neighbors."

"Well, the breasts looked good when I saw them, too."

I blink too many times. "What?"

"Arlo's chicken breasts."

My jaw clicks. "Have you ever been tested for an attention disorder, Matteo?"

I push past him and open the walk-in. Cool air blasts me, and I breathe it down, letting it flood my lungs. Matteo is back in my ear only a moment later.

"You weren't kidding," he mutters. "This fridge is chaos. Hey, so this is their party we're hosting tonight, right? Kelly and Summer's family?"

"Don't get too excited," Arlo says as he breezes past us to retrieve more chicken. "Summer isn't even sixteen yet."

My brother's face turns the color of tomato sauce. "Oh *God* no," he croaks. "I just wondered, I swear."

Arlo flashes me an amused wink.

"It's not their family's party," I correct Matteo. "I mean, it's not their family yet. Holden Wynn is dating Kelly's little sister, and considering that he's called three times to make sure I ordered the good champagne and the special flutes, I think he might be gearing up for a proposal."

"Very cool." Matteo nods. "Makes sense that her sister would marry a celebrity athlete. Kelly and Summer are cool."

Bet the sister is too. Hey, would it help if I grabbed a handful of breast for you?”

“Sorry, *what?*”

Matteo blinks at me again. “The rest of these chicken breasts. I can take them over to Arlo at his station.”

Chest heating, I jab a finger in Matteo’s chest. “No more talking about women and chicken breasts in the same conversation thread. Your ADHD is going to get a bunch of professional chefs horny, hungry, and confused around poultry.”

Arlo cackles as I start back out of the walk-in, not giving my brother the chance to tag along this time.

The more he jumbles up food with my assistant general manager, the more likely I am to chop him up and cook him the way he mentioned. *Chicken* breasts are my priority. Not Kelly’s breasts. God. I mean, not a woman’s breasts. None of this has anything to do with her strappy dress thing that hugged curves I’d never noticed under the all-black front-of-house ensemble she normally sports. I hadn’t noticed the bare skin of that one exposed shoulder, the light from her entryway reflecting off her collarbone.

While I’d never seen Kelly in anything that didn’t have straws and spare utensils shoved into the pockets, she hadn’t seen me without my—what did she call it? Ah, yes. The sheepdog. I guess I wasn’t the only one doing a double take this afternoon.

An involuntary scowl knits my eyebrows together as I head for my recently rearranged office, and I scratch the fresh half inch of stubble at my jawline. This is why I don’t do dating or women.

I was old enough when my parents split to remember when Mom started dating again. She was a model before she met my father, and even though she’d had two kids and put on a good fifteen years since the wedding pictures, she still looked good. Men had been lining up to get their chance with her.

She'd come home after a night out, take off her heels, and head to the living room to call my aunt Sheila. I always stayed up late, even when I had a sitter who was supposed to make me go to bed. I'd be messing around in the kitchen or the hall or something, and I'd stop and listen while Mom launched into the post-date autopsy.

She was unforgiving.

It was the first time I'd considered that, while my dad was bad, Mom may have had her own faults in the divorce. No matter their wealth or status or the *People* magazine interviews about whichever date had taken her out that night, she went for the jugular. She and Sheila would spend at least an hour tearing apart the banality of his opening line at the front door, the tacky details of his try-hard designer suit, or his inability to read her mind. It didn't matter what the guy did; if he was chivalrous, he was a pussy, and if he was an alpha, he was a fucking sexist.

There was no winning. Not in flirting, not in dating, and certainly not in marriage. In the end, both parties come for each other. Both parties are determined to make each other miserable, and whether or not they succeed, they certainly make *themselves* miserable.

As I stop in front of my office, my chef's coat pocket vibrates. I pull my phone out and glance at the screen. Speak of the devil.

"Mom."

I push open my office door and close it behind me. Stopping short, I cringe and mouth the f-word to myself. The whole place has been reversed. I don't even know how Matteo managed to move my desk on his own. That thing is heavy as shit. Unless he wrangled one of my employees into doing his dirty work with him . . . I'm going to have to call a staff meeting to remind everyone which duties they're paid to perform.

"Enzo!" Mom trills my name in that way she's always done. "Enzo, baby, I'm calling to check in about your brother."

I scrub at the back of my head before retrieving a manilla folder from my filing system. I place it on the desk and thumb through it as I brace for the usual spiel.

“He’s alive,” I grunt.

“You sound overwhelmed.”

I grind my teeth together. This is how it starts. She doesn’t ask if I’m overwhelmed or offer up any help. Instead, it’s a declaration of how she thinks I’m feeling. Next, she’ll launch into all the things I *should* be doing to get back on track.

Of course, none of it really matters to her. Enzo Barone is the lost cause brother. I’m the one that ran out the day I turned legal.

I’m practically the reason Mom and Dad conceived Matteo only a few years before their divorce; he was a last-ditch effort to get a kid right. To have the son they always wanted to raise.

“I’m not overwhelmed.” I shut the folder and pick it up in one fist, the stiff paper giving way under my tight grip.

“You wouldn’t be so overwhelmed if your brother was back home where he belongs,” she tells me. And here we go. Hands and feet in the vehicle at all times, people, because the ride is going to get bumpy. “Now you know I’m the last person who would say anything good about your father—”

What an asshole.

Arturo was basically a chimp with deep pockets.

And, oh my God, Sheila, don’t even get me started on his teeny tiny dick!

Hard cringe.

“But Barone Investments is where Matteo belongs,” she continues. “He isn’t like you. He wasn’t meant to hack it on his own and live like a pilgrim.”

“Not overwhelmed, Mom,” I repeat. The wear-down is getting to me today. I roll my neck, enjoying the way my vertebrae pop and crack. I put down the folder and push out of

my office, clenching and unclenching my free hand as I pace the east window. “Look, Matteo is doing fine. More than fine, actually. He’s really started to settle in here, and he’s getting stuff to start a garden—”

“Oh God, Enzo, this gardening thing again?”

“Again?”

“Look, we’re all . . . proud . . .that you did the whole farmer thing in Africa those first few years after you left home,” she says.

“Argentina,” I correct. “And it was a cooking internship with Love Thy Neighbor Kitchens. We provided meals for more than a thousand—”

“Enzo, detailing the charity that gave you your start won’t win brownie points with me. All I care about is getting your brother out of the dirt and back on track. Leave the charity name-dropping to snobs like your father—”

“I’m not overwhelmed!” This time, my voice is too loud, and I know it. Still, guests aren’t due to arrive at the restaurant yet, and I’d rather get this out now than let it manifest under stress later. “Matteo is happy here. He’s doing great here. And the garden thing is helping him even more. If he wants to come home, he’ll come home. Leave the kid the fuck alone!”

I end the call and shove my phone back in my pocket. Steam may very well be whistling out of my ears.

“Hey, Chef!”

“*What.*”

I cross my arms tight over my chest as I send Wendy a look. The house manager’s cheeks have turned pink under my scrutiny. She holds out a box for me, gaze glued to the side so she doesn’t have to meet my eye. Guilt washes through my chest, and I make myself take a deep breath.

“That wasn’t cool of me,” I admit as I walk over to take the box. “Pretty dickish actually.”

Wendy braves a look at me from under her graying bangs. She’s older than me and an organizational force when it comes

to the serving staff and dining room, but when we're behind the scenes, she takes on a softer, quieter persona. It's one of the reasons I like having her in a commanding role; Wendy or even-keel Arlo or doesn't-take-anything-too-seriously Kelly are a good balance when I'm at peak dickishness.

I take the box and nod at her. "Do I sign my confession at HR or wait to see your report?"

That gets a small smile out of her. "Was it your mother again?"

"Again?" I raise an eyebrow, clutching the box to my chest.

Wendy bites her bottom lip. "She's called the kitchen once or twice, poking around about what Matteo is doing here."

I roll my head back and groan. "Don't tell him," I say. "I mean, you can, I guess. He's a big boy. It's just that sometimes our mother doesn't always say what needs—"

"She called Scott a fascist bastard when he told her Matteo was in the bathroom and couldn't take her call earlier." Wendy presses her lips together, clearly holding back a smile, despite the subject matter being kind of bleak. "I think we can spare Matteo the news unless he's specifically asked to take her calls."

"Thank you." I nod. "He's worked hard to get away from all that. Even though our parents are certifiable, there's an adjustment period for seeing the world as it really is. That's a hell of a lot easier when Nadine Barone isn't calling people fascist bastards and complaining so fast you can't get a word in edgewise."

"I get it."

A tear opens up somewhere in my gut as I consider my own escape all over again. Before Matteo showed up, I'd gone so long without thinking about the world I left behind. Now it's being thrown back in my face over and over, tapping into feelings I thought I'd put a cap on. There's a reason I picked up and moved across the country. There's a reason I'm married to my work instead of a woman.

“This Matteo’s gardening stuff, then?” I raise the box, giving it a once over. “Lighter than I would have expected.”

Wendy just shrugs and starts back toward the hostess stand where some of the server girls are waiting.

“Not sure,” she says over her shoulder. “But let me know if it’s the place settings. I need to get those out ASAP.”

I set the box on a table and dig my keys out of my pants pocket. Positioning the tip of one of the keys at the tape seam, I press in and slide along the seal.

Something catches my eye. A flash of movement out the window.

It’s Kelly, still in that off-the-shoulder number. She’s running barefoot, streaking across the pavement that separates Alessi’s from her line of townhomes. The hem of her dress is hitched up around her thighs, exposing a glimpse of tantalizing, pale, freckled skin I hadn’t been privy to prior to this afternoon. There’s a tight tugging against my zipper, and I lower my chin as I watch her run. Damn. Her red hair is flying out behind her, a tangled halo of big, bouncing curls lined with golden highlights that shimmer in the sun. She carries her own box, a massive oblong thing that’s making her huff and puff, and she’s yelling something.

I glance over at Wendy, who frowns back at me. Wendy motions to the serving staff and heads to meet Kelly at the front door.

I let out a shuddering breath and shake my head. God, this afternoon has got me all kinds of off-kilter. Not that I’d ever mention that to my mother. Don’t want to get painted as *overwhelmed*.

I return my attention to the box and pull back the top flap, then the other. There’s enough bubble wrap in here to cushion a sky diver. I toss it aside and dig in.

What the . . . ?

I pull out a bright pink dildo. It’s in its own box, sure, but the packaging leaves nothing to the imagination. This thing is *big* and lifelike and veiny. A laugh starts to form on my lips,

but it doesn't quite beat out my surprise. I glance up quickly, wishing desperately for my old beard since my face is on fire. No one in the restaurant is looking at me, though, so I shove the dildo back in the bubble wrap and pull out the next item, keeping it just low enough to be hidden by the box flaps.

Silicone clit stimulator. Waterproof for shower fun!

I shove that thing back in the bubble wrap so fast some of it pops. That earns a few glances from some of the serving staff, but I give them a sheepish wave as I replace the folds on top.

This box does *not* belong to Alessi's. But who the hell does it belong to?

The heat that lined my cheeks a moment ago has already worked its way down the back of my neck, around to the top of my chest, settling deep in the pit of my stomach. It's not like the packaging provided images of the products in use, or even like I have a face to picture with the online order. Not like my dick cares. It's waking up in my pants, hardening up so fast I'm fucking dizzy. I flip the box over, checking for a shipping label.

"Stop!"

I turn. The front door is open, and Kelly is spilling through with Wendy on her heels.

"Mix-up!" Kelly pants out, stumbling over chair legs and table corners as she follows the maze to me.

The box she's holding bangs around and finally jerks out of her arms to slide across the floor. She bends to pick it up, and I have to avert my eyes. My cock strains against my zipper as her breasts press up against her neckline, threatening to spill over.

"Mix-up?" I repeat, doing my best to study the cracks in my ceiling tiles.

"Oh my God," Kelly pants. She's finally made it to me. When I look at her, her gaze is trained on the open box. Her oblong package sits next to mine. "Oh my God, you already opened it."

Sweet Jesus. It all hits me at once.

Suddenly the dress that was driving me crazy a half hour ago might as well be a nun's habit compared to what I'm picturing.

Kelly Hastings in lacy pajamas, tucked into bed as she pulls out that bright pink dildo for the first time, turning to bite into her pillow as she tries not to moan while she comes.

Kelly Hastings in nothing but soap bubbles, one wet palm braced against the shower wall as she tries out the clit stimulator. Her soaked head rolling back as she tries to make it last.

Kelly Hastings in my studio apartment in a see-through bra and panty set, handing those toys over to me. The strap on her bra falling over her shoulder to expose it, as is happening to her little black dress right now. Kelly asking me to use the toys on her but to be gentle.

"They brought Matteo's gardening stuff to our house," Kelly squeaks. "Any chance you also ordered euthanasia and I'll be getting that delivered next?"

"Oh my God." All the breath spills out of me at once.

"Oh my God!" Kelly repeats.

"Hey, did my gardening stuff come?" Matteo appears seemingly from out of nowhere, his head popping up over my shoulder. Kelly swats at his hand as he reaches for the open box, but she's not fast enough. "Oh my *God!*"

"Oh my Go-o-od!" Kelly collapses over the box, using her thin body in a lame attempt to hide the sex toys. She scoops it up in a hasty, haphazard motion and barely catches the clit stimulator before it falls out. When her gaze inadvertently meets mine, pure, unabashed terror courses through her eyes. "Mail me my final paycheck. I don't need a reference. No use for a reference if I can never show my face in public to get another job again, right? Oh my *God.*"

"Oh my God," Matteo repeats, chuckling and elbowing me.

“Can we all stop saying *oh my God* like that’s the magic phrase to send us back in time?” I shoot him an annoyed glance.

When I turn back to address Kelly, she’s already hauling the box toward the exit and scrambling past chairs and tables. She’s a veritable tornado, knocking things over and screeching apologies to me and Wendy and the serving staff.

It’s almost enough to make me forget about what was actually in that box she was carrying. To make me forget what she’ll be using those toys for, so long as she doesn’t burn the box in a pyre of shame later.

But only almost.

I tug at my collar. Matteo is still laughing beside me, and I punch him in the shoulder.

CHAPTER SIX: KELLY

I sent Summer down to the party without me. This is what's going to tip me over for Mother of the Year, right? Sending my teenager down to Alessi's alone because my boss opened up my box of sex toys?

Josie and Holden won't care that I'm late, and it will take me all of two minutes to get down there once I work up the guts to look Enzo Barone in the eye again.

If I work up the guts to look Enzo Barone in the eye again.

I pace around my living room, the overhead light off so I can safely watch the party without being seen. Enzo is nowhere to be found, and I can't decide if that's good or bad. A knock sounds at my door, and I nearly jump out of my skin.

For the love of all things holy, if that's Enzo, I'm going to spring for the expensive plastic surgery that gives you a new face. Summer will have to survive at her dad's place while I start a new life in Luxembourg.

I cross to my front door, holding my breath. I crack my eyes as I scan the textured glass window.

"Josie, thank goodness!" I blurt, whipping the door open. "In! Now! Before someone sees you!"

I yank my sister in by the Peter Pan collar of her black dress, and she stumbles inside.

"Um, are you hiding out from hitmen?" she asks.

I lock the door behind her, like that will somehow shield me from memories of Enzo's eyes going wide and his nostrils flaring.

"I wish," I say to Josie. I cross back to my living room and collapse on my couch. "If hitmen were after me, I would just give myself up. Having them off me would save so much trouble."

"What happened?" She perches on the arm of my couch, crossing her arms as she looks down at me.

“It’s the plague. It’s back.”

“Kelly.”

“I’m making a career switch. Gonna write the next *Walden* and figured I’d start with some light hermitage.”

“I swear—”

“I’m sorry, sis. I can’t see another couple getting engaged.” I throw a hand to my heart and the other across my forehead. “Ever since my divorce—”

“You are so not pulling out the big guns right now. What really happened?”

I pick up a pillow and bury my face in it. “The box got delivered to Alessi’s.”

“The box?” Josie repeats.

I make myself lower the pillow enough to see her through half eyes. “*The box*. The one Marnie sent everyone for our club-iversary. *My box* was delivered to Enzo Barone, and he *opened it in the middle of Alessi’s*.”

“Oh my God,” Josie gasps.

I nod, then bury my face again. “Yeah, I established that phrase already.” My words come out garbled against the cotton.

I can see him now, like it’s happening all over again. He’s holding my box, staring down into it with his jaw basically unhinged. And when he looks up at me, his eyes flick over my body, like he can only imagine what nasty things I had planned on doing . . .

I scream into the pillow. Josie massages the top of my back, her knuckles kneading into my muscles.

“Okay, but you told him it was a gift, right? If he knew you weren’t the one who ordered it, maybe you could play things off?”

I throw the pillow across the room and press the heels of my hands into my eye sockets until I see stars.

“I didn’t even think to tell him I wasn’t the one who ordered it!”

“Well, what did you do?”

“I took the goods and ran off.”

“You just ran off?”

“I just ran off! Barefoot. No explanation. And the whole restaurant watched.”

“Oh my God.”

“We’ve covered that phrase,” I hiss.

Taking a deep breath, I make myself turn to my sister and take her hand. Josie, of course, looks radiant. She’s always been gorgeous, but ever since she hooked up with Holden Wynn, it’s like she was sprayed with human wrinkle releaser; all the lines in her face have smoothed, the kinks in her energy resolved. Unlike myself, she does not need a box full of dildos to get her through the next decade.

“Has the party started? You’ll have to come by and show me your ring after.”

She purses her lips and smirks. “*If* Holden proposes, I will not be coming over to your place to show off the jewelry. You want the ring, you’ve got to leave the cave, Gollum.”

I chew at the inside of my cheek, weighing my options. “Was Marnie invited to this party? Will I at least get to take a swing at her for sending me the box if I brave social engagement?”

“Marnie is on shift at the hospital.”

“Life isn’t fair.”

Josie slips her arm through mine and jerks me up to stand. I groan, leaning the good four inches I have on my little sister against her tiny frame to throw her off balance. To my chagrin, Josie powers through it and hauls us toward my front door.

“So, um . . . did Enzo blush when he saw what was in the box?”

I gulp. “I had other things on my mind at the time. Like how I’ll be able to sell this house so soon after a move. How I’ll find a new job.”

“It’s just—” Josie pushes open my front door and nudges me through. I walk on stilted legs, fighting her every inch down the stairs and across the sidewalk toward Alessi’s. “You weren’t kidding about the haircut. I mean, *wow*. You can actually see his face now. His, dare I say, *hot* face? So it would figure you could see him blush.”

“He might have blushed. A little.”

“*Mhmm.*”

“Don’t get excited.”

“What?” She elbows me and winks my way. “You’re hot, Kel. That’s all I’m saying. Maybe this isn’t your trauma moment. Maybe it’s your meet-cute. Maybe Enzo has been looking for a woman to test those freshly shaven cheeks on, to give him feedback on how they feel rubbing up against her thighs . . .”

“*Josie.*” I bite my tongue, trying my best not to imagine how said stubble would feel on said thighs. The seam of my panties has definitely not gone wet. I’m not clenching so hard I’ll strain a muscle. “If anything, my commitment to a year without men has just gotten more serious. I’ll forever associate men blushing with my diagnosed PTSD.”

I pinch Josie in the side, and she laughs, taking a half step away from me. Her sudden movement sends me off-kilter, and I stumble to regain my footing. We’re in front of Alessi’s now. I can see the whole restaurant through the plate-glass front.

I can see Enzo. The hairs on my forearms prickle and stand.

To his credit, he’s not blushing now. He hardly looks affected by what will certainly come up in a future therapy session of mine. He’s talking with Holden and a group of Holden’s friends—tall, muscular types I recognize from TV. He’s got his standard scowl on, but then he says something that sends the men into fits of laughter. My stomach turns over.

“I can’t do this,” I breathe. “You’re the real grown-up here.”

Josie just gives me a push and opens the door for me.

The familiar sights, sounds, and smells of Alessi’s rush me all at once. I breathe them down, letting them soothe my nerves.

This has been my happy place for so long. I might not be a chef—hell, I might not really know what I want to do at all—but food brings me peace. Alright, overreaction officially documented. I couldn’t leave a place behind that gives me so many free leftovers.

“Kelly!”

A tiny body pushes through the crowd, and then hands are wrapped around my knees.

“Mia, baby!” I get down on my knees to push back the nine-year-old’s runaway blond hairs that have slipped from her crown braids. “You know how to throw a party, woman.”

She grins, revealing a half-grown tooth poking out at the front of her smile.

“The real party had a pool,” she tells me in a conspiratorial voice. “We tie-dyed, too! This party is just a front. That’s what Dad called it, at least. It’s so he can—”

We both glance over at Josie, who is making a show of looking anywhere but at us. When I turn back to Mia, she’s grinning again, showing off that new tooth one more time.

“Kelly, you made it! We were wondering where you were.”

Holden’s ex, Trish, appears at the edge of the crowd just behind Mia, with Holden’s son, Emmett, propped on her hip, looking sleepy. They’re the only ex-couple I know on good enough terms to crash one another’s potential engagements.

“I made it,” I say, blush burning my cheeks as I stand back up. I pinch Emmett’s cheek, but all it earns me is a massive yawn. He nestles into his mom’s shoulder. “Does the

little guy want to go sleep over at my place? You're welcome to turn on the TV and hang out with him."

"And miss my ex popping the—" She stops short, eyeballing Josie. To her credit, my sister is holding back her smile and pretending to be very interested in Alessi's wine collection displayed on the wall. "Uh, popping the birthday balloons? A girl only turns nine once."

"My real cake was strawberry buttercream," Mia tells me in that whisper from before. "And the inside was rainbow layered."

"Come on, kid." Trish wraps her arm around Mia's shoulders. "Let's get you hidden away and Mommy buzzed before you can reveal anything more about your party tonight."

Josie puts up her hands. "I heard nothing."

Trish winks at her and laughs before leading Mia away. Josie sidles up next to me and pokes me in the side.

"Told you we'd ease you into this," she says. "Now let's get a drink and some of Mia's obviously kid-friendly vanilla chai birthday cheesecake, and the parade of dildos will become a distant memory."

"Parade of dildos?" A voice pipes up from behind us. "Dare I ask?"

We turn to find Alexis behind us, a platter of canapés balanced in one hand.

As usual, our fellow Better Than Josh Everton Club member is adorable, even in uniform. Her jet-black hair is pulled back into a smooth, high bun, and pink blush dots her cheeks. She offers up the platter, taking a moment to lean into us conspiratorially as Josie plucks up something with fish and knocks it back.

"Did you just come from a dress rehearsal?" I ask Alexis.

"*Swan Lake*." She nods. "It was actually a tech rehearsal that ran long because of a new guy. I almost had to call in for

my shift. So glad I didn't, now that I get to hear about a dildo parade."

Her cheeks turn even pinker as she presses her lips together and suppresses a laugh.

"It was Marnie's box," I clarify. "Nothing you don't already know about."

"Except that Enzo Barone received the delivery," Josie adds, shoving another canapé into her mouth and grinning as I shoot her a look.

"Oh my G—"

"Don't say oh my God." I shake my head. "I can't play out this bit again."

"Are you telling me he opened the box?" Alexis leans in. She glances over her shoulder, and I know she's searching for our boss in the crowd. "What, did he call you into his office and—"

"Oh, how I wish all this had happened in the privacy of his office." I groan. "Where's that wine you keep talking about, Josie?"

"He opened it here. In the middle of Alessi's." Josie covers her face with both hands, which does absolutely nothing to stifle her giggle.

"In other news, I'm looking into witness protection," I announce. "I know they usually only harbor, well, witnesses, but this might be a special case. Summer can come along if she wants, or she can finish out high school here. I'll correspond with her via carrier pigeon. Regular mail is just too risky to—"

But my voice trails off because, across the room, Enzo emerges from the crowd. He's uncorking a bottle of something red but stops short, like he can sense he's being watched.

We lock eyes, and my tongue turns to cotton. Goose bumps ripple over every inch of my skin, so powerful I'm sure he can see them.

“Kelly! You made it!” Someone else’s voice calls me away.

The breath rushes out of me all at once, and I squeeze my eyes shut for just a moment before looking back up to see Holden pushing past Enzo to get to me. I hold onto a split second of hope that my sister’s boyfriend will serve as my next distraction, but then Holden slaps Enzo on the back.

“Is that the ’84? Bring it on over and let’s get this party started.”

Holden scoops glasses off a table, holding them by the stems before he passes them around to me and Kelly, then holds two out for himself and Enzo.

“Good luck,” Alexis murmurs in my ear before disappearing with her platter.

Another ally gone. Leaving my hidey-hole seems less and less like the right idea.

“Mia seems to be enjoying her party,” Josie says coolly, shooting me the side-eye as Enzo pours her a glass of wine.

Enzo pours for me next, and our fingertips brush as he steadies my glass. My back muscles lock up, and I hold my breath.

The tip of Holden’s nose blushes. “Oh yeah, definitely. Mia’s having a great time.”

“I remember Summer being crazy for smoked salmon canapés and ’84 red at that age, too,” I offer with a wry smile.

Holden rubs the back of his neck. It’s more than apparent he’s unsure how to proceed when his ruse is so clearly transparent. Luckily for him, it’s then that Enzo fills his glass before pouring his own. Holden takes a deep pull of the wine before slipping his hand into my sister’s.

My eyes flick over to Enzo, and I catch a spark of amusement before his trademark frown returns. He lifts his glass to his lips and drains half the cup before shoving a hand in his chef’s coat pocket and training his gaze on the floor.

“What’s the schedule for the evening?” I ask Holden, swallowing past the obstruction that’s taken up residence in my throat. “We gonna bust a piñata or play musical chairs?”

“I didn’t really plan anything so elaborate,” Holden says. “I was a little focused on . . .”

His voice drifts off, and Josie sucks in her cheeks, not wanting to give away her excited smile.

“Kelly! Kelly, look what I found when I was organizing the walk-in!”

We all turn, each of us grateful for another interruption for different reasons. Matteo is pushing through the crowd, as everyone before him did. He’s holding something green and leafy.

“Endives!”

Relief courses through me. “It all worked out.”

“Something finally worked out today.” He smiles and places the loose vegetables on one of the tables, earning a low groan from his brother.

Enzo swipes them off the tabletop as soon as Matteo looks back at me. He uses his coat to wipe at the tablecloth and clear it of any loose leaves.

“Something finally worked out today?” Holden repeats. “Was there trouble getting things ready for the party?”

“Everything was under control,” Enzo assures him, just as his brother waves a hand.

“Little thing with the vegetables,” Matteo says. “And with the espresso machine before that. Don’t you think coffee goes with produce, guys? And then after that, there was the box—”

“What box?” Holden asks.

“No . . .” I pinch the bridge of my nose, hunching in on myself, but I know I can’t stop this train from crashing.

“Matteo,” Enzo growls at the same time.

“Oh my God,” Josie breathes in my ear.

“The penis box.” Matteo grins and waggles his dark eyebrows.

“More wine?” I squeak out, offering my glass up for Enzo.

His dark eyes catch mine again, and I can’t tell if apology, embarrassment, or frustration with his brother is most prominent.

“Matteo, seriously?” Enzo’s nostrils flare.

His brother just shrugs and smiles again like the comment was nothing. “What an afternoon, right? Don’t worry, Kel, the mail swap could have happened to anyone. You know, if you think about it, you could end up with Enzo’s *Maxim* in your mailbox tomorrow—”

Enzo grabs his brother by the collar while setting his wine glass on the table. He turns Matteo around and gives him a solid shove back toward the crowd. At the last second, he turns around, those newly exposed cheeks flushed.

“For the record, I don’t read . . . I mean, I don’t have a subscription . . .”

He sighs, turns on his heels, and pushes Matteo ahead of him so they can disappear.

Meanwhile, I’m clutching my glass for dear life. Those goose bumps along my arms and neck sing as I watch Enzo go, noting how the dark pants he wears in the kitchen hug his thick, muscular ass. How have I never noticed that before?

“This is my favorite party,” Josie says beside me.

When I glance back over at her, she’s watching me with interest. I press my wine glass to my forehead, wishing for the rest of the bottle to get through the night.

The proposal was exactly how I’d hoped it would be for Josie.

It was during the dessert course, which I know had thrown her off her game. Summer sat on one side of me while Josie

sat on the other. My sister's leg thumped up and down against mine as each minute passed, the party getting closer and closer to its end. At one point, I'd put a hand on her knee, saying nothing as she looked at me, her eyes swimming in anxiety.

"Nervous they'll pull out trick candles for Mia?" I whispered to her.

She'd narrowed those eyes. "Don't toy with me," she whispered back. "I mean . . . not that I have any expectations for dessert. This is Mia's birthday, after all. It's all about her."

I'd snorted at that, and so had Summer. We'd spent the evening listening to retired NFL players talk football politics and my other sister, Darla, drone on about the school system's new retirement plan for administrators. Nothing about the night screamed kid's party.

Mia didn't seem to mind, though. She was clearly in on her dad's plan, because she had her eyes glued to Josie all night, waiting patiently as her dad's old NFL friends gifted her cards for restaurants and shops she'd never heard of, probably because they had no idea how to handle a nine-year-old girl.

It happened when they brought out the soufflé. Josie was resigning herself to a perfectly good black manicure going to waste. She took one bite of the fluffy egg dish . . . and shrieked. After digging the ring out of the dessert, she bolted from her chair and turned just in time to see Holden getting down on one knee.

Mia raced around the table with a bouquet of flowers one of our serving girls had slipped her, and Trish brought a half-asleep Emmett over to present a box of chocolates.

It was exactly right. I know it was everything my sister could have wanted. And to think, just a few months ago, I never would have guessed she'd ever settle down and entertain a relationship with anything or anyone that wasn't her second-grade lesson plans.

Maybe the bigger surprise was how my heart had knocked around in my chest as I watched Holden draw Josie close and kiss her. It was so easy. So natural.

And even though I was happy for my sister, I knew that battering inside me for what it was: a split second of jealousy, of picturing myself wearing a ring again, this time with the right guy.

I had my relationship story too young. I played the cards wrong and wasted my hand, and now I still have so much to give and so much I want. But I have no prospects on the horizon. There's no one on my radar who would fake a kid's birthday party for me.

As I listen to everyone ask Josie a million questions about her decor ideas and her dream wedding dress, I stiffen in my chair and set my shoulders back. I'm not going to squander my sister's night with my anxieties.

Heck, I'm not going to squander my own night or any of the nights in the near future with these anxieties. Because I'm smarter than that. I told Josie I was going on a man fast for a year, and I ought to mean it.

This is me committing. No worries about Mr. Right. No worries about any misters at all, not for one whole year.

"You ready to go?" Summer asks me as the first of the NFL players start taking off.

I nod and squeeze my daughter's hand before pushing my chair back and standing up.

Josie turns to me, eyes shimmering with the tears that have threatened her lash line ever since dessert.

"Tell me you're not leaving already! We're just starting the celebration!"

"I'm pretty sure Mister Josie would like some private time to celebrate."

Josie glances at her new fiancé, and her ears turn red. She smiles and hiccups. "That true, baby?"

"This is still a kid's birthday party for a few more minutes," he says, nuzzling his face in her neck. "But Trish did say she's leaving in five to get the kids to bed . . ."

Josie squeals, and I roll my eyes at Summer. “Come on, kid. I’m in no mood to have our formal birds and the bees talk after this much wine.”

We wave goodbye to everyone, wish Mia one last happy birthday, then start out of Alessi’s.

The night feels good on my skin. I pull Summer close and rest my head on her shoulder as we start toward the stairs that lead up to our house.

“I knew it was brilliant to move so close to work,” I mumble into her hair.

“Do you have to work tomorrow?” she asks.

I groan, remembering the shift I have scheduled in the morning.

Then I remember the man who scheduled it for me. I’m going to have to face Enzo again in just a few hours, and there won’t be the buffer of wine or proposals to keep us from interacting. He doesn’t want to bring up *the box* either, does he? He might not be as embarrassed as I am, but it did seem clear by his interactions with Matteo that he’d rather not rehash the contents of my package.

“I’m in at nine,” I tell Summer. “I can drive you to Nina’s house if you want.”

“I’m good,” she says. “Nina said she can pick me up, and we’ll get coffee.”

“Mm, coffee. Not a bad idea right now.”

Summer laughs and pulls open our front door. “It’s so late.”

“I’ve built up a caffeine tolerance,” I object. “Besides, I think I need to come down from this wine a little before I go to bed. I don’t want to have more of those drunk dreams. You remember the one about the eggplant shipment and the rabid dolphins?”

Worse, I could have drunk dreams about a certain restaurateur. Coffee is sounding better with each moment.

When we get in the house, I kiss Summer on the cheek and send her off to her room. Keeping the overhead lights off, I pad my way to our kitchen and start up the coffee maker. The smell of fresh coffee instantly cuts through the haze. I wasn't that drunk to begin with, but it does feel good to slough off the night and clear my slate. I'll take this mug up to the roof, get in a few minutes with the stars, and maybe I'll wipe my mind enough that work tomorrow won't seem like such a crisis.

When the coffee maker clicks off, I grab my cup and head for the stairs.

When I purchased this place, part of the deal was that the former owners would leave their rooftop patio furniture for us. They had a great setup: twinkling lights, a few plants in funky vases, and this kooky replication of what I *think* is supposed to be the *Bird Girl* statue from Savannah. Tonight, I pull out a chair, kick up my bare feet on the plastic table Summer and I dragged out here last week, and take my first sip.

“That's just a mug I see in your hands, right? Not the contents of your box, brought up here for a little special alone time?”

I fumble my mug, nearly splashing coffee all over myself and the table as I turn to see Enzo Barone on the roof of Alessi's, watching me through the dark.

CHAPTER SEVEN: ENZO

“Ugh, you are *not* aiding my inner narrative that you have box-opening amnesia.”

I can barely make her out through the darkness, but then she clicks something, and a string of twinkling lights blazes to life. Kelly clasps her mug tightly to her chest and looks over at me with a grim face.

“What are you doing up here? Why are you in the dark?” She kicks one toe at the floor of her roof, determined to look anywhere but at me.

I hold up the oblong box she brought me earlier, now empty. “Matteo’s garden. I was just bringing the stuff up here before I called it a night.”

She peers over, stepping closer to the edge of her roof to watch what I’m doing.

Our buildings are separated by only a few feet, though I’ve never had to really consider that fact before. I knew Kelly had moved her daughter into the building next to Alessi’s but hadn’t had a reason to go over until this afternoon.

Now, I’m slightly mortified at the state of my roof. I never come up here, and frankly, I only relegated it for Matteo’s use because I didn’t think it would serve me any purpose. Old lawn furniture is strewn around in a haphazard state. A grill my father shipped me at Christmas a few years ago sits untouched with plastic still lining its interior.

I cross my arms over my chest, bristling a bit as I stand here knowing she can take me in. It’s only now that it occurs to me she can see my face without the *sheepdog* to hide behind. The realization only makes my cheeks burn hotter.

“It’s not a half-bad space for a garden,” Kelly says, gesturing with her mug. “He’ll like it up here.”

“That’s the hope. Anything to get him out of my restaurant and away from my espresso maker.”

“Anything to get him out of your restaurant and away from anyone who can hear him talk about sex toy boxes.” Kelly manages a funny little half smile, though from here, I can see her cheeks look about as red as mine feel.

Something about our mutual embarrassment eases a knot in my chest. My feet are moving me toward the roof’s edge, though I’m not sure why.

“He’s a pretty cool kid, when he’s not embarrassing me,” she says.

“I tend to agree.” I flash her my own twitch of a smile, which earns me a snort from Kelly. This time it’s kinked muscles in my back and shoulders that give way.

“Were you guys close before he showed up here?”

“That would involve us having known each other at all.”

Kelly arches an eyebrow, and I sigh and shrug.

“He’s more than a decade younger than me,” I explain. “Our parents divorced when I was little and he was littler. He went one way and I went the other. I guess our paths brought us to the same place, but I wouldn’t have guessed that even six months ago.”

“You don’t talk to your family?” One corner of her mouth turns down.

She glances at the staircase door leading down into her house; I can only imagine she’s thinking of Summer asleep inside.

“You know who my father is?”

“I know who your father is,” she confirms with a nod.

“Then you know his reputation.”

There’s silence for a beat. She’s thinking over my clipped response, considering the weight of its ramifications since I didn’t expound. Everyone in the country knows Arturo Barone. His name is in the news—frequently.

Kelly glances over her shoulder again, then raises her mug. “This might be the most we’ve ever talked to each other.

Tell me I don't have the box of sex toys to thank."

I expel a breath. Another twitch of a smile threatens the corner of my mouth. I walk to the edge of my roof, and so does Kelly. We sit, feet dangling over the sides, like we're kids escaping angry parents. She notices how I eyeball her steaming mug, then presses it forward.

"If we're swapping stories, we might as well swap germs."

I take her coffee, gaze pausing on the neat red lipstick stain on the rim. I resist the baffling urge to place my lips where hers have been. After a small swallow, I pass the cup back, and she downs another drink. She nods, making a motion with her hands that says *well, go on*.

I sigh and rake my hands up and down the back of my freshly clipped scalp. There's not enough hair left to satisfy my anxious impulses. If I'm going to be forced to *people*, I need an outlet for my nervous energy. I settle for shoving my hands in my pockets and kicking at her side of the roof. It's just close enough for the toe of my work boots to hit.

"When I first showed up in Button, people had questions," I tell her. "It was my last stop in a long tour of restaurants, charities, and tasting bugs in foreign countries."

She sticks out her tongue. "Tell me I misheard you just now. You did not eat bugs!"

"Whoever said crickets taste like chicken was a fucking liar," I grumble. I look up at her from under lowered eyelids, milking the moment as she cringes. "But they are nutty. Kind of smoky. Maybe I should put them on Alessi's menu as a special sometime."

"Stop!" she begs me, laughing. "Please!"

She pitches forward, and I catch her by one elbow, steadying her mug with my other hand. Kelly looks up at me then, her mouth open in surprise.

That lipstick I saw on the rim of the mug is practically purple in the twinkle lights. It outlines her soft, full lips and brings out the brightness of her green eyes.

“You can’t talk about serving crickets when I’m balancing on the edge of a roof,” she tells me. “It’s dangerous. At least hop on over and take a seat on my patio furniture.”

The word *no* is already forming on my lips. I make it a policy to keep a professional distance from my employees; it’s one takeaway from my father’s business that I actually plan on keeping. My mother was his secretary, and look where that got all parties involved. There’s a reason this is the first time I’ve learned anything more about my assistant general manager, other than her preference for day shifts. Being so close to her and that delicious purple lipstick seems dangerous.

But then I flash back to the box—the one we are not going to mention again. I’m already in too deep with the best assistant general manager I could ever ask for. I either defuse the tension between us now or commit to a month of hiring when Kelly decides it’s all too much.

She just smiles at me. I sigh again. Seems that’s all I’m good for tonight.

She waves me over and pushes up to her feet. “Get settled in and give me a second. I’ll grab you a fresh cup from downstairs.”

Kelly heads back to the door leading downstairs, and I step across the space between our buildings. With her gone, I scrape at the front of my hair and wonder how it’s falling now that it’s so much shorter. I lick my thumb and fuss with my cowlick, then smooth the front of my black T-shirt.

I stop short, freezing with my hands running over my pecs. I make myself untuck my shirt, give it a little wrinkle, and slouch down for added effect, hoping I look less presentable.

I’m the keep-it-professional type. Thank you, Arturo Barone. I’m not about to fall into something with my manager when I’ve got my younger brother downstairs desperate for a fresh start. How am I supposed to guide Matteo into his own life when I can’t even keep mine together?

The door opens, and Kelly reappears with a second coffee. I take it gratefully, and we both sit in plastic lawn chairs that overlook Main Street.

“Okay, I know this town is the size of my thumb,” Kelly starts, “but I’m not sure you could top that view in any other city in the world.”

She’s not wrong. It’s gorgeous here, all small-town charm and historic buildings. The opposite of what I was raised in. Main Street is decked out in Americana red, white, and blue for summer, with banners advertising a Fourth of July parade. It’s not Rome or Paris, but it feels a hell of a lot more intimate. More real.

Not that I let on. I just shrug and take another sip of coffee. “Not a bad view, but I wouldn’t mind an authentic French croissant to go with it.”

Kelly shoots me a smug look and shrugs, exaggerating the movement I’ve been pulling ever since we started talking. “I prefer a Cuban sandwich myself.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You care about food, Hastings?”

“I work in a restaurant!” she protests.

“Front of house.” I cross my arms and look her up and down.

Mistake. There go those purple-stained lips again, curling into a bashful smile.

“Admittedly, I would ruin a Cuban sandwich if I were the one in charge of making it,” she says. “My culinary skills are strictly the stuff of single-mom movies. Macaroni and cheese. Boiled eggs.”

I gag and she laughs. That sound is more fucking delicious than French croissants and Cuban sandwiches.

“Maybe it’s the terrible food I keep in the house that makes me appreciate good takeout,” she muses. “Because I am a fast food *connoisseur*. Drop me in a foreign city, and I’ll show you its best hidden gem. I’ll teach you how to doctor a

bad burger or mix the perfect dipping sauce. I have a very special set of skills.”

“Tell me you haven’t been fucking with the Alessi’s leftovers you take home.” I shoot her the side-eye.

Kelly just cracks into new amusement. Her head rolls back, and she laughs again.

“I would kill on *Chopped*.” She holds up her hands and strikes a pose that puts her fingernails on display. “Magic hands, baby. It’s a gift.”

I gulp, trying not to take too good of a look at those hands.

Because from the second I opened that damn box in the restaurant, I’d had straight-up unholy thoughts about what they could do. About what I could do *to* them.

There might have been a moment in my office when I collected myself after, and I’d rubbed the front of my pants a little too vigorously.

I might have had to run up to my apartment to change clothes.

And now, so help me, I can’t help but worry Kelly will take one look into my eyes and see every dirty fantasy I’ve crammed into a twelve-hour period playing out in the darks of my pupils.

Clear the air, idiot.

“I’m sorry about the mail swap,” I blurt. “I swear, I only saw one or two things, and I drank enough beer at the party tonight to obliterate all memories by tomorrow.”

She laughs, and the sound takes me by surprise. “I really thought we were going to navigate away from that.”

“Sorry,” I apologize again. “For the returning subject matter, in addition to its source material.”

She rolls her head back again, taking a deep breath. I watch as a delicate knot bobs up, then down her throat, settling as it reaches her chest.

“One day, something crazier will happen to me and I’ll forget my boss found my box of sex stuff,” she says. “Maybe if I’m lucky, I’ll fall off this roof when we call it a night?”

I bark with laughter. As soon as the sound escapes me, I straighten up again, readjusting my fists around my coffee mug. “Um, you shouldn’t be embarrassed. Really.”

“If it means anything, the box was sent over by a friend.”

“Oh, that’s what everyone says after their boss opens a box of their sex stuff.”

She pushes me in the shoulder as she laughs. I blink at that a few times, staring at the spot on my torso where her tiny hand touched me.

“The question remains. Will Matteo ever let me live it down?”

“Hey, I’m letting him live under my roof. We’ve got a bargaining chip.”

“Good to hear we’re playing for the same team.”

Another beat. We take sips at the same time, both of us watching Main Street. A car has pulled into the playground parking lot at the end of the street. A colony of ants starts up under my skin as I consider the only reason people seek out nighttime parking lots in a small town like this one.

I swallow. Focusing on Matteo wouldn’t be the worst idea.

“He’s different than I thought he’d be,” I say.

“Your brother?” She turns to me, and I nod.

“Nothing like my dad,” I clarify. “But nothing like me, either. He’s so gung ho, and he’s always making these elaborate plans, and he’s always . . .”

“Smiling?” Kelly volunteers.

I growl on cue. That earns another giggle from her, and I hide my face behind my mug.

“He got lucky, that one,” I say after my next sip. “I had a hard enough time in the old man’s house, and I spent almost as long feeling guilty for leaving Matteo behind.”

“How old was he when you packed it up?” she asks.

“Five?”

“So the alternative was plucking a preschooler out of his fancy mansion and dragging him across the world on a chef’s tour with you?” She cocks her head.

She’s so damn amused it almost makes me laugh at my own folly.

“Well, when you put it like *that* . . .”

“I had a five-year-old when I was twenty-one,” Kelly says. “And, as I’m sure you remember, baby wipes and a purse full of playdough were all the rage, but the responsibility that came with the package was probably too much to make it worth it.”

I might have chosen a career in the kitchen instead of behind a desk, but the mental math is still easy enough for me. I always knew Kelly had Summer when she was young, but I’d never gotten to know the kid well enough to put it all together.

“You were—”

“Sixteen,” she fills in. “You might have had all the guilt about leaving a kid, but I had all the guilt about being the teen who was in charge of raising one.”

“Maybe perspective isn’t the worst thing for me.”

Another silent beat passes, and she just smiles at me. Prickling tingles wash across my chest, and it all sinks in at once: I’m not just in over my head here, I’m fully embarrassed. Why am I opening up about all of this? And why is it with Kelly Hastings of all people?

“Do you feel like you’ve gotten the hang of things now?” I ask.

I'm struggling to return to pure thoughts. When Kelly swipes the back of her arm across her mouth, then licks her lips methodically, a thought crosses my mind that would very specifically be banned by any HR department. My cock stiffens in my jeans, and I have to pretend to shift around in my seat to adjust.

"It gets easier," she tells me. "You're already past the teen years with Matteo. You don't have to pry him off his prom date or worry about him smoking marijuana in the bathroom. You're coasting down Easy Street, dude."

"I just have to worry about him rearranging my restaurant or walking in on me in the shower after a decade of not knowing each other."

She laughs again and jerks her head at me. "Was he at all responsible for the shave?"

"He might have . . . said something about how I'm hairy." I try to sound cool or even disdainful about it, but it's fucking hard to accomplish when I'm still fixated on her lips.

Would she taste like coffee if I kissed her? Would she smell caramelized and smoky if I ran my lips across the skin on the side of her neck?

"It looks good," she says with a shrug.

She reaches out, taking my face between her thumb and pointer finger so I'm forced to look at her dead on. Kelly's thumb flicks out, stroking across the cleft on my chin before scratching down through the short hairs.

"Maybe Smiley Kid Brother is good for more things than just rearranging your restaurant or embarrassing your staff members."

Matteo's mail mix-up brought you here. He brought you to this roof with the stars twinkling behind you and that fucking dress from the party still cupping your tits and dipping so low I want to outline it with my tongue.

Kelly clears her throat, a moment of reality when I'm getting too far away from myself.

“Maybe you should keep it this length,” she breathes. She drops her hand from my chin.

. . . And I catch her wrist.

Her eyes are locked on mine as I smooth the pad of my thumb over her pulse point. Her heartbeat is hammering away against my skin. I draw the arm to me, holding it out in the dim light to see her slender, manicured fingers.

I catch her pointer finger between my teeth. Kelly’s breath hitches, and she leans forward the way someone might do at the climax of a movie. My gaze is still locked on hers as I wrap my lips around that finger, but I can see in my periphery how her chest heaves. How she shifts to cross her legs and clench them tight. How she bites that bottom lip I’ve been admiring all conversation.

Shit, she tastes like the coffee. I can sense the preparation of it on her skin, and imagining her working in the kitchen hardens my dick further and steels my chest. I suck her fingertip, swirling my tongue and taking it deeper until I earn a groan from Kelly.

“Enzo . . .”

It’s not permission. It’s not her asking for more. But my body responds anyway. I yank Kelly into my lap, and she straddles my rock-hard cock. She takes her hand back to grip my shoulders, and—God, is she riding me? Christ, she’s rubbing back and forth, back and forth. Her head rolls and those green eyes close, her breaths coming in tiny unsustained sips. Her chest is pressed out, and I’ve got the most insane view of two hard, beaded nipples pressing against the satin of her dress.

I need that mouth on mine. I need so much more than the taste of her fingertip. I need to crush my lips to hers, lick into her until she feels the action echoed in her pussy. I need—

A door opens.

We fall apart as fast as we came together, Kelly scrambling to sit back down.

“Yo.” Matteo’s voice carries over from my roof. “I ran out of toothpaste. You got any, bro?”

Kelly paws at her hair. When she’s got it in place, she crosses her arms tight over her chest to guard those pointed nipples, then flashes me a desperate glance. I’m too busy yanking at the front of my jeans, though, thinking back to every embarrassing moment I’ve ever had in my life in some attempt to tame this thing.

“Yeah,” I call in a gruff voice. “Yeah, I’ll be right over.”

Neither Kelly nor I say anything as I get up, step back over to my roof, and head for Matteo. I want to glance back at her—so help me, I do—but I don’t let myself. Instead, I take the stairs down, find Matteo a travel tube in my closet, then lock myself in my bedroom. I’m breathing hard, back pushed up against the door.

What the *hell*? Where did that come from?

She’s your employee. Matteo is here and he needs you. And on top of all this, what is it going to look like to Kelly if you only came onto her after opening a box of fucking dildos?

It wasn’t the sex toys that brought me to this point. I’m not sure how long I’ve been nursing this crush on my assistant general manager or even when it started. All I know is that I was tipped over the edge tonight. I was weak and I gave in.

And it can *not* happen again.

CHAPTER EIGHT: ENZO

“You know, if you think about it—”

I was half-asleep before, but now my eyes pop open. I’m looking up at the ceiling. All the lights in the studio are still out.

With a quick glance forward, I can see I’m tenting my comforter. I press my hands over it, not willing to give away the fact that I’m awake but also unwilling to subject my younger brother to such an ungodly erection. I’d been having the most amazing dream. The most blissful, erotic, off-limits dream.

It was last night on the roof. My mouth ghosting over Kelly’s. Threatening to make contact but always teasing, never quite touching. She drew me in with magnetic force, something that started deep in my core and was impossible to resist. The whole minute—had it really only been a minute I had her in my lap?—was a series of electric *almosts*. Her fingertips dancing over my shoulders but never landing. My stiff cock pressing into the apex of her thighs but never finding purchase.

And in the dream, we were just about to rectify those almosts when . . .

“Oh, yeah.” Whatever Matteo is saying, he’s getting really emphatic. His voice drops on the next line, like he only just remembered that his pullout rides up against the foot of my bed. “Yeah, I mean, if you think about it, Alessi’s serves all the same kind of stuff as the restaurants down the street. Why shouldn’t we have outdoor seating, too? I bet I could drag some tables out front—”

That gets me. I haul myself up and find Matteo sitting cross-legged on the ground, my ancient landline pressed to his ear. I sweep one hand over my bed head and gesture for him to give me the phone with the other.

“Do *not* touch my furniture,” I growl at him. “Who wants us at this ridiculous hour?”

He passes over the phone, and I press it to my ear.

“Enzo, your brother has weak wrists. You cannot let him haul around tables like a day laborer.”

It’s too early for my mother’s voice. I pinch the bridge of my nose, hard, before scratching my fingers through my stubble. The lack of a beard takes me by surprise all over again.

“He shouldn’t be hauling furniture at all,” I tell her. “He is expressly forbidden from working those weak wrists too much.”

“You know this would all be resolved if you reminded Matteo about my pool house,” she needles. “My boyfriend has the jet, and all it would take is time to file a flight plan, and I could be there to pick Matteo up by tonight.”

My brother pushes up from the ground to head to my coffee maker. It might not be the espresso machine downstairs, but my gut still tightens as I watch him fidget with the controls. He’s started humming something off-key, and the shadow of a hangover flares in the back of my brain in response. Mom’s offer of the pool house is most tempting pre-nine a.m.

But in a moment, Matteo has a fresh cup for both of us. He brings mine over with a flourish as my mother drones on and on about which wallpaper twenty-two-year-old boys might prefer and whether or not Matteo might be interested in an internship with her latest boyfriend.

He found the paper umbrellas I shove into my utensil drawer after ordering takeout from Mike’s Hawaiian. Matteo has placed a little pink one in my coffee and a little green one in his—although they’re rapidly sinking through the foam toward the bottom of the mugs. He clinks his cup to mine, takes a swig, and grins at me.

Is it emasculating? Maybe. Does the gesture kind of make me want to pull him over and give him a noogie like we’re two kids again? Weirdly, yes.

“We’re doing fine,” I tell my mother, cutting off her tangent on tailoring new business suits for Matteo. “He’s got a job here—at Alessi’s. Not an internship. A real job with real money and real experience. You can stop calling.”

She pauses, then draws in a sharp breath. “You sound overwhelmed again, Enzo.”

“Not overwhelmed,” I grit out.

But if I was, where’s my offer for a pool house? I don’t have a flicker of jealousy for my kid brother, but sometimes it does strike me all over again how fully my parents have given up on my cause. When did I become a fool’s errand to them? All memories of my father, in particular, are laced with frustration and disapproval. Was I just a kid when they decided, *Nope, Enzo doesn’t have it. Let’s hit the sack and try for a better kid!*

The phone is scooped off my shoulder, and I grapple to keep my coffee from spilling as Matteo puts the phone to his ear.

“Ma, I told you to stop worrying. Things are great here with Enzo. You should see his restaurant!”

I can’t make out what our mother is saying, but the buzz of her voice conjures up a mental image of droning mosquitoes.

“No, really, he is!” Matteo snort-laughes. “I don’t know what you remember about Enzo, Ma, but he’s not like that anymore. He *shaved* yesterday, if you can believe that. And then we had this weird thing with our neighbor, and he didn’t get all grumpy and weird about it. He was having coffee with her last night and—”

I snatch the phone before Matteo can tell Mom about the sex box.

“Reassured yet?” I ask before knocking back a swig of my coffee. It goes down a little too sweet, but Matteo looks so damn pleased with himself it’s hard to complain.

“Enzo, you know I just . . .” She takes another deep breath. “I know you don’t want me to call so much. I know

you don't like it. Before your brother moved in, I don't think you let me call you since—”

I sigh and rake my hand through my stubble and down my throat. “I get it. I do.”

“I didn't see much of either of my boys when you two were growing up,” Mom says. “And that might have been my fault with you, but with Matteo . . . He still likes me, Enzo.”

“I still like you,” I promise.

“Can I get that in writing?”

I fight back amusement. “Going back to sleep now.”

“Just have him check in every now and then, and I'll call less, okay? Don't let your father continue to dominate your brother just because he's got the big business and the family name to lord over his head. Let me have something.”

“Okay, Mom. I'll do my best.”

Even now, even after all this time, there's that power struggle again. I hadn't missed dealing with the dynamic between my parents, and no part of me enjoys mediating things now that I am out of the house and navigating my own relationships.

A little professional distance between boss and secretary could have spared our whole family a *Succession*-level power trip.

And it will do me good, too. I just have to keep reminding myself of that.

Nine hours later, I spy Kelly ditching her front-of-house apron in her locker. I wait around the corner like I'm twelve years old, watching until I see her wave goodbye to Arlo and head out for the night.

All the air rushes back to my lungs at once. I brave leaving the kitchen for the first time all day, doing my best to shove last night's moment out of my memory. The bar calls to me; there's a glass of whiskey with my name on it.

“Hey, it’s the hot boss!”

I stop short, the hairs on the back of my neck raising. I turn slowly, mentally playing out every way Kelly can sue me for what transpired on her roof last night. *How* had she already told people what happened? Was she gossiping with the customers?

Two girls are camped out at the bar, one tiny with a short, dark haircut, the other tall and imposing and blond.

Both of them very, very inebriated for five p.m. on a Saturday.

“You must be the one who was mailed the box,” the tiny one says, giggling as she takes the end of her straw between her lips.

“*You’re welcome,*” blurts the blond.

That sets the tiny one off in giggles again. She elbows her friend before taking another swig of something pink and fruity. “Two Drink Marnie borders on kind. You’re not getting an honest experience from her tonight.”

“So you two are friends with Kelly?” I mutter as I round behind the counter.

My bartender, Noah, raises his hand, indicating he sees me, but I wave him off and prepare both girls glasses of water.

Damn curiosity is getting the better of me. I should walk away. Leave this alone.

Instead, I pour both women cold waters and slide them across the counter.

“Well, we’re probably not as good of friends as *you* want to be with Kelly,” the blond one purrs.

The tiny one is so consumed by laughter now she can hardly catch her breath. She puts a hand to her chest. “We came by for the end of Kelly’s shift. She’s going home to change, and then she’ll join us. I’m Rachel. You’ve met Marnie here, and if you don’t feel like you know her yet, you’ll get to know her real well when she hits Three Drink Marnie and starts weaving friendship bracelets.”

“I’m always nice!” Marnie protests.

“Kelly had to make us our drinks herself after you told the bartender to screw off!” Rachel leans in conspiratorially, raising a hand to the side of her mouth that doesn’t really mask her voice at all. “Marnie doesn’t usually drink. Marnie is also not usually polite.”

In response, Marnie mutters something and pulls her ice water closer.

I glance over at my bartender. He mouths *good luck* to me.

“Kelly will back me up. Beautiful, funny, adorable Kelly.” Marnie goes back to nursing her drink, and in a moment, her eyes glaze over and she’s settling back in her stool.

Shoot, that’s right—*Kelly’s coming to join them*.

“Nice meeting you two,” I say, waving at Noah to come on back as I start out of the bar.

But then Marnie grabs me by the collar and damn near chokes me as she drags me over to her stool.

“Well, she wasn’t wrong,” Marnie decides with a firm nod. “You’re a hot boss.”

Rachel collapses into more giggles. When do I cut these two off?

“Kelly . . . said I was hot?”

I yank at my shirt collar. I’ve been so preoccupied in the back, trying to bury all embarrassing memories, that I’m wrinkled and grease stained. I smooth my hand over the front of my hair, straighten up my posture, scratch my fingertips through my stubble again, and wonder if my five-o’clock growth is too close to the old beard or if Kelly will still think it’s cute when she sees it.

Rachel watches me with an unabashed smirk. “You missed a spot of flour on your cheek. Just figured I’d help, in case you’re cleaning up for beautiful, funny, adorable Kelly.”

“It wasn’t Kelly who said you were hot,” Marnie blurts. “It was our other girlfriend who works here, Al—”

“Tell me you aren’t letting her get to Three Drink Marnie.” One of my serving girls, Alexis, slides into the bar stool next to me. “I said you were handsome, Mr. Barone. Because I am a grown adult woman who does not gossip about boys with my girlfriends. Same reason Kelly one-hundred-percent definitely *did not* call you grumpy, Mr. Barone.”

She shoots Rachel and Marnie a look. The blond just blinks in innocence, and the brunette has to hide her giggles behind a cocktail menu.

Alexis smiles at me and playfully rolls her eyes.

I like Alexis. I don’t know the serving staff very well, but she rarely has problems with her orders, and she clears some of the best tips. She knows I’m a dick, same as everyone else at Alessi’s. But like the rest of the staff, she doesn’t seem to mind too much.

Does Kelly mind? Is that why she told her friends I’m a grump? Was last night something forced from my end, something brought on by too much people-ing and too many post-party beers?

Marnie nods, her head bobbing too many times like she’s lost control of her neck. “Sit down, hot boss. Get high on your own supply. Bartender!” She whips around, looking for Noah. He’s disappeared from view, which is probably the smartest course of action right now, and I can’t entirely blame him. “*Bartender!*”

“You told him to screw off,” Rachel reminds her in a sing-song voice.

“Don’t let Two Drink Marnie boss you around,” Alexis whispers to me. “If you do, she’ll talk you into more free booze. Next thing you know, she’ll be hitting Three Drink Marnie and trying to kiss you. We’re the Better Than Josh Everton Club, meeting for a little moral support after Josie’s engagement yesterday.”

“Moral support?” I repeat. “Josh Everton?”

“Bastard,” Marnie mumbles. “Even Two Drink Marnie isn’t nice for Josh Everton.”

“We were all stupid enough to date the same man at the same time,” Alexis explains. “We found each other and moved on. But now the first of us has coupled up again, and we’re navigating unfamiliar waters.”

I arch one eyebrow. “Kelly dated him, too?”

“She brought him home to meet her parents,” Rachel says, voice lowered. “He met ’em, alright . . . and he met her little sister, who he hadn’t realized was related to Kelly when they started sleeping together.”

My chest tightens.

Here I am again, being reminded that Kelly has a life outside of Alessi’s. She has girlfriends who have . . . discussed me before. She’s got at least one significant ex, and that’s not counting the one who knocked her up back in high school.

No, idiot, we’re moving on. We just spent nine hours avoiding your assistant general manager. You’re not going to sit through her highlight reel now, and you’re definitely not going to risk running into her on a girl’s night.

I take another step away from the bar, but Marnie still has my collar. I fight back a very emasculating choking sound.

“Not done with you, hot boss,” she announces. Thankfully, her train of thought is derailed as soon as she sees one of my waiters walking by with a dessert sampler plate. Marnie waves over the tiramisu, nearly knocking Rachel off her stool. “Gimme, gimme, gimme!”

“Have you ever thought about expanding this place?” Alexis turns to me as she tucks a lock of hair behind her ear. “Your desserts are to die for. People already make the pilgrimage from across the state to eat here. If you had a little more real estate, you’d make even more money.”

There’s a twist deep in my chest. Real estate is my dad’s area of expertise. Until a few weeks ago, it was Matteo’s, too. Never mine. I left before I had to get involved with any of that, and something inside me is so averse to having to deal in real

estate if not absolutely necessary. There's a reason I live in the shitty studio above my restaurant: it was a one-stop realtor hit, and I'll never need to worry about a landlord raising rent or upstairs neighbors driving me crazy.

My gut reaction now is to shake my head at Alexis and give her the line I've always given food critics and reporters. Expansion would bring more money, sure, but it's not something I ever saw for myself.

"Can you imagine if they had this tiramisu near the hospital?" Marnie moans as she forks off a bite and swallows. "I'd have to commandeer a wheelchair to roll in for my shifts."

"It's hard enough working here," Alexis says. She eyeballs the dessert like she wants to hold out, but a second later, she's forking off her own piece.

"Kelly must have the metabolism of a hummingbird," Rachel mutters as she takes some of the same dessert. "Every time I'm over at her place, she's got leftovers from here. I'm pretty sure she's filling the Josh Everton void with sugar and cream."

My brow furrows at that. Kelly loves my desserts. Another fact that only yesterday I didn't know, and now I'm adding it to a full arsenal of information on Kelly Hastings. Single mom. Fast food connoisseur. Member of the Better Than Josh Everton Club.

Loves dessert. Loves *my* dessert.

"I don't know," I say, shrugging and clearing my throat. "I never really considered expansion before. But if you all really like my desserts that much . . ."

"Two Drink Marnie would marry your tiramisu," Marnie tells me, face somber. "I can't say for sure yet, but I think Three Drink Marnie would do unspeakable, shameful things to it."

Expanding Alessi's would mean more people-ing. It would mean less time in the kitchen where I've hidden out for so long and more time in my father's realm. I'd be signing

contracts, checking out properties, talking branding. The entire package is something I've been running from since I was eighteen.

And yet, for some reason, the thought of a smiling Kelly Hastings forking off her own bite of tiramisu warms my fucking blood. The idea of her lifting a fork to that lipstick-stained mouth. Her tongue flicking over her lips. A soft moan of pleasure at the taste of espresso powder.

There's a chance she could compel me to build an empire. There's also a chance that my thoughts of expansion now are being caused by a certain expansion in my pants.

Then again, Enzo, no one ever started a restaurant empire because they got off thinking about a pretty girl swallowing down their sweets.

“Hey! Hey, Kelly!”

I turn around and immediately lock eyes with the redhead opening Alessi's front door. Kelly freezes, the smile still hanging on her cheeks as she realizes her girlfriends have crowded around me, and Marnie still has my collar wrapped in one fist.

I yank myself free, stumbling back as I wave at the girls.

“Be sure to come again,” I tell them. “Uh, tell Noah to get out the good tequila. And I'll send another dessert as soon as I can!”

They erupt into whoops and cheers, and I slip away just as Kelly makes it to the club. She glances back at me, and our eyes catch one more time. I swallow hard, turn, and adjust my pants before booking it back to the kitchen.

CHAPTER NINE: KELLY

I stand in front of my dresser mirror, turning this way and that, after I strip out of my work uniform.

I'd worn my favorite bra and panty set. It was a ridiculous choice, not only now but back when I bought it. At the time, I had thought I had a hot young boyfriend to impress in the bedroom. It was the very next weekend that I brought Josh home and realized he'd been screwing me *and* my little sister. I never donned the bra and panties, and for a while, I had half a mind to throw them back in their little pink shopping bag and return them.

I'm still not sure what compelled me to pick them out of my drawer this morning. I'd reached for the standard cotton panty and sports bra, but then my fingers had found these. I'd slipped them on, and each whisper of my fingertips across my skin had left tingling vibrations in its wake.

I ran my hands down my abdomen. Over my core. And it was only when I'd slipped one finger across the smooth satin of my clit that I realized . . . my body was still stuck on last night.

Part of me thought I'd dreamed it. It was so late when everything happened, and I was already riding the trauma of my boss having opened the now-infamous sex box. It would figure that my psyche would invent a steamy encounter on the roof, right?

Last night was nothing I would have ever expected from Enzo Barone. His usually frowning mouth and tight jaw were gone, replaced with parting lips, breathing in every breath I expelled. Most days, Enzo kept a perimeter around his person, an unspoken bubble intended to separate boss from employee. But in a blink, he'd forfeited that space and brought me so close I could feel his heat infiltrating under my skin. He'd rubbed me against him, nursed his need like he disdained any distance that was ever between us. Like he would set the very air on fire if faced with his isolation again.

Last night *was* real. It had to be because, with my hands still grasping my naked skin, I'd glanced at my dresser and seen not one but two coffee mugs that never made it to the kitchen sink. My muscles had tightened at the validation. Warmth flooded between my thighs.

I'd kept the lingerie on and pulled my work uniform over the bra and panties. All day it had felt like a dirty little secret, but I couldn't put my finger on why I was letting myself play out this fantasy.

Now, as I stand here and assess myself, my hands jerk back to my sides.

I know better than this. What about my one year man fast, dang it?!

There are a million reasons I should remember myself. He's my boss, I've got a kid to worry about, and—most importantly?—I'd insisted to my sister that I was giving up dick for twelve solid months. There is no greater motivator than pride.

Well, pride and the knowledge that if I gave Enzo Barone even an inch, I'd topple back into addiction without even blinking. I'd ache for the way he'd made my head rush, the way he'd surprised me, and the way he'd seized that unexpected moment between us like he'd been robbed of all choice in the matter.

Just thinking about all that now sends my head spinning again. I unclench my hands from around my middle, draw them up, and cup my breasts. I run my thumbs over my puckered nipples, sighing as the resonance starts in my core and works its way out across every individual cell.

And I wish his hands were gripping me instead. I wish we'd taken last night further. That we'd let things get messy.

I imagine all of Enzo that I didn't get to experience last night. That tongue parting my lips to taste my coffee. Him dragging one of my hands down to trail over chiseled abs. The tug of a zipper, and the relieved moan as he lets his wet head pop out between us . . .

“Son of a bitch.”

I plop down on the edge of my bed, fists twisting in my comforter.

“You have a problem, lady,” I mutter.

My phone buzzes, and I lean across my bed to snatch it off my nightstand.

ALEXIS: You need to get down here. Hurricane Marnie on her way. Going to get us fired when she assaults a bus boy. Apparently some patient made a pass at her during her shift today. Poor, unsuspecting sap.

This is what I need. A well-timed distraction. Enzo will be buried back in the kitchen like he has been all day—seriously, should I be reading into that?—and I can disappear with the club to take them to the next wine bar or the casino across state borders or maybe even the pole dancing class Alexis’s studio offers. That last one started as a gag between the five of us but has quickly devolved into something real as more than a few of us have indulged in too much club-meeting beer as of late.

Whatever’s next, it’s the right step. Distraction time is a go. Bring on the poles.

I’m standing in the doorway to Alessi’s for way too long. Flies are going to get in. Pigeons will start to roost on my shoulders.

But I can’t move. Not when Enzo is sitting at the bar *with my friends*, staring me down with that same crazy, dumbstruck expression he had on last night when we sat on the roof.

Thank God, he wrenches himself free of Marnie’s grasp a moment later and waves at the group. He’s back to normal. He’s self-contained, stiff Enzo, that frown I’ve come to expect etched back onto his features. I take a deep breath, wave at the girls, and walk over to them.

I need to get them out of Alessi’s. Stat.

“Let’s pull out the big guns tonight,” I launch in. “Pole dancing at Alexis’s studio, anyone? I’ve got leggings and sports bras back at my place that anyone can borrow.”

“We met the hot boss.” Marnie hiccups.

Great. I guess we’re talking about this.

I take her drink and finish it off myself. “I’m assuming this is drink number three. All the more reason to get our butts to pole dancing class before we get to Four Drink Marnie—”

“Only seen her once,” Rachel mutters. “Four Drink Marnie loses all her charm and goes straight back to Grumpsville. After our mutual breakup with Josh, there was a night Marnie made a PowerPoint presentation on all the reasons science should focus on creating life without sperm. It got *real* dark.”

“I want to talk about the hot boss,” Marnie insists, pouting.

Alexis shrugs and smiles at me. “The box may or may not have come up with previous company.”

I groan and sink onto the stool next to Alexis. I fold my arms on the bar and collapse my head onto them.

“Not your best timing, guys,” I murmur.

“Wait!” Alexis grips my forearm and jiggles it. “Does this have something to do with how Enzo came out to greet a patron at lunch and you performed a straight-up swan dive behind the hostess stand?”

“Ooh, gossip?” Rachel probes.

“He might have come by last night,” I concede.

I sit back up, fixing the girls with my straightest face.

“Okay?” Alexis prompts.

“And, you know, we got to know each other a little better.”

“Well, you’re new neighbors, right?” Rachel volunteers. “It’s about time. You’ve been living in the new place for,

what? A solid few weeks now?”

Alexis shakes her head and crosses her arms. “You don’t get it. I’ve worked for Enzo Barone since he opened Alessi’s. One of the serving staff girls tried flirting with him once, years ago. Asked him where he was from. What she got in return was an entire dissertation on why the American tipping system is a hack and how Enzo would—I quote—give his left effing nut to personally stab the person who first suggested service is as important as food quality. Enzo Barone doesn’t get to know staff members.”

“So what you’re saying, Kel, is that you two *got to know* each other?” Rachel waggles her eyebrows.

My cheeks could set off the smoke alarms right now. I glance back at the kitchen, paranoia spearing me right in the gut at the prospect of Enzo hearing a word of this conversation.

“We just got to know each other on a neighborly level,” I hiss at the girls.

“In a love-thy-neighborly way?” Alexis provides with a wink.

Rachel gives her a high-five.

“Turns out he’s kind of funny when he’s not ranting about produce prices or pretentious food critics,” I tell them. “And . . . and he’s kind of sweet, you know? Considering everything going on with his little brother.”

I finish off the rest of Marnie’s drink that I stole and push it across the counter.

“I was surprised he took in Matteo,” Alexis adds, nodding along with my point.

“We shared some coffee, talked about raising kids, and that was that.”

“That was that?” Alexis and Rachel repeat at the same time.

They turn to each other, laughing as they quirk twin eyebrows.

“Yeah. Sure.” I shrug and wave at Noah to get me a new drink.

“Sure?” Rachel crosses her arms. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Look, it wasn’t a *thing*,” I blurt.

“Stop the presses!” Rachel hollers.

Alexis covers her mouth with both hands.

“Clearly he regrets everything because, outside of being forced to interact with patrons, Enzo hasn’t left his hidey-hole all afternoon.”

“Oh my *God*, what does he regret?!” Alexis is on the edge of her seat.

I squeeze my eyes shut and pinch the bridge of my nose.

I’m the oldest one in the club. I’m way too freakin’ old for this drama. Why do I do this to myself?

“I might have learned why Enzo Barone is always in such a bad mood,” I squeak out. “You would be too if you had to haul around a heavy fucking elephant’s trunk in your boxers all day.”

“Hold up, did your boss whip it out without permission?” Marnie hiccups again. She moves too fast, and a fresh glass of wine spills out across the counter. She doesn’t even seem to notice. “That’s it! We strike at dawn, ladies! Chemical castration pills in the water supply!”

“God, Noah, did you give her a fourth drink?” Alexis complains.

The bartender holds up both hands in innocence.

“It wasn’t exactly without my permission,” I mutter, shifting uncomfortably in my chair. “And he didn’t even whip it out. There might have been some mutual grinding. Heavy petting. Not even a real make out though, just an *almost* kiss.”

“And how was it?” Alexis breathes.

After glancing over my shoulder to make sure Enzo isn't anywhere close, I collapse over my arms again. "I think I'm pregnant. Is it possible to get pregnant from over-the-clothes, no-kiss humping?"

They all cackle at that, even man-hating Four Drink Marnie.

When they're done, Alexis motions for the rest of us to get up. She and Rachel prop Marnie between them.

"Let's go back to our apartment," Rachel suggests. "We can dissect Kelly's drama, and Marnie can sleep off the feminist terrorism."

We start toward the door. At the last moment, I glance back, checking one more time for a dark head that might be peering out from the kitchen. When I don't spot Enzo, my stomach twists. Do I want to have another one of those strange, terrifying, electric moments between us? Am I inviting discord?

Alexis tuts as the door to Alessi's swings shut behind us. "You know there's no way you'll ever make it to a year."

"Josie told you about my man fast, huh?" I sigh. We're headed toward Rachel's sensible Honda Civic. "So, my sister gets engaged and tells you my dirt in one fell swoop. She's really betraying the club here."

"It's okay to be into him," Rachel says as she unlocks the Civic and dumps Marnie into the passenger seat. She reaches across her roommate, struggling with the seatbelt as she glances back at us.

"I'm a big girl," I remind them as I slip into the back of the car. "After more than a decade as a single mom, it should be apparent that I'm adept in the art of messing around with a dude without completing a wedding registry in our shared name."

"Ruled by the lesbian council . . ." Four Drink Marnie mutters from the front seat. "Utopia . . ."

"Anyway, it was only a one-time thing."

Rachel starts the car, and we head toward her and Marnie's apartment on the other side of town.

"Who says it was only a one-time thing?" Alexis asks beside me.

She pokes me in the ribs, emphasizing a point I refuse to acknowledge.

"I do, for one," I say. "But also . . . Enzo obviously let the night get away from him. Matteo interrupted us, and he practically threw me off my own roof. Then he avoided me all day at work. Clearly, no man in history has ever wooed a woman harder."

"We'll see if you stick to this story after wine and cheese at our place," Rachel decides.

I draw a ragged breath, squeezing my eyes closed again as I rest my forehead against the car window.

"Worst friends ever," I mutter.

The rest of them just cackle.

CHAPTER TEN: KELLY

I brave my roof again when it's the middle of the day and hot enough to kill a man. Still, I'm a sucker for taking my coffee steaming, so I stubbornly clasp the mug between my hands and focus on the street below. It's a Sunday afternoon, the one time in the week that Alessi's closes. So, sure, there's some risk that Enzo could be camping out up here, too, but that risk is minimized by the blazing sun and sky-high humidity rate.

I'm confident in my decision to come out here. This is my roof, and I refuse to be scared off it. In a massive middle finger to the universe, I even pulled out my strappy little sports bra and biker shorts, whipped out the bendiest yoga moves on my mat, then thumbed through a worn-out erotica title I'd snagged from Rachel's place last night. I'm tempting fate, daring it to bring Enzo out here to catch me. I will not become a hermit after one incident with my boss.

That doesn't stop me from nearly jumping out of my skin when a door opens and a voice comes from across the rooftop.

"Kelly! Hey!"

When I open my eyes, the relief leaves me trembling. It's just Matteo, grinning from behind a massive bag of soil. I set the book down and wave at him.

"Setting up the garden?"

"I think so. Maybe. Um, possibly."

He looks down at the rows of boxes that have appeared overnight, frowning.

"What?" I ask.

"I can't decide if I want to rearrange the rows or not," he says.

I almost burst into laughter, remembering everything Enzo told me on Friday night about his brother's addiction to rearranging furniture. I move the book off my lap and onto the side table, get up, and cross to the edge of my roof to peer over.

“Looks good to me as it is,” I decide. “I’m feeling the feng shui.”

Matteo nods, face deadly serious. “You’re right. No new rows. After all, there’s no ‘row’ in Barone—wait.”

I press my lips together, stifling the laugh that begs to burst forth.

“Can you help me pick which plants should go where?” Matteo asks. “I’m afraid that I’ll get seeds or transplants in the dirt and want to rearrange. I mean, I *think* the brussels sprouts would look nice next to the broccoli, but then when I think about it harder . . .”

“I know that phrase.” I laugh again and wave a hand at him. “Help me over. I’ll take a look.”

Matteo holds out his hand, and I step across the gap between our roofs. I’m just hopping to safety when Alessi’s rooftop door opens, and Enzo walks out with another bag of soil.

We both freeze. So much for Georgia’s unforgiving sun and hellish humidity. What good is living here if folks can’t be miserable all the time, huh?

Enzo’s brow knits together, and his eyes darken. Clearly, someone was assuming the sun would scare me off the roof, too. He didn’t want to run into me any more than I cared to run into him.

“Wait,” Matteo says, breaking my focus. He holds out his hands, framing the garden-to-be like a director would a movie scene. “Maybe brussels sprouts next to broccoli would be too much green. Because if you think about it—”

“*It’s fine,*” Enzo and I say at the exact same time.

My breath catches at the top of my chest in response.

“Kelly is helping me nail down the feng shui,” Matteo tells his brother.

He crosses over to grab the soil from Enzo and brings it over to the wooden boxes.

“I noticed,” Enzo grumbles.

It’s then that I remember the sports bra and biker shorts. In my infinite wisdom, I tempted the universe to bring this man out so I could face my addiction head-on, and now here I am, less than two feet away from him. I cross my arms tight over my chest, cursing the pale skin I inherited from my mother because the blush *must* be giving me away right now.

“Um, hey,” I croak, telling myself it’s a totally normal reaction to go into cardiac arrest when speaking with the man who made me soak through my underwear before ghosting me at our place of business.

This would be about a million times easier if he was wearing Alessi’s boxy black uniform. The frumpy no-slip gray tennis shoes. A hairnet would be so great right now.

Instead, Enzo is shirtless.

He’s got on these gym shorts that ride low on his hips, low enough that I can make out the start of a tempting V cut. He’s got a trail of thick, dark hair that washes across his chest and tapers out as it leads toward the V. God, he’s even tan.

He clears his throat loudly, clasping his hands over his crotch. We both know I was admiring the bulge. Lord help me.

“You guys don’t want to wait until it’s darker and cooler to plant?” I ask.

He rolls his neck and unclasps his hands to cross his arms tight over his chest. “I’ve got an early seafood shipment tomorrow. Gotta get to bed early.”

His dark features are indecipherable. But I do happen to know from a few chats with Arlo that the cute young guy who delivers our seafood is rarely on time and rarely not hungover. In other words, Enzo would be fine without the early night. His eyes might be difficult to read right now, but his intention to avoid me is more than clear. More proof that I was right: he sees the other night as a mistake, one he can’t afford to repeat since he’s my boss and I’m his employee.

“Well, maybe I should—”

I step to head off their roof, but Matteo stops me by catching my wrist. I send Enzo my most apologetic expression as his brother drags me through the maze of boxes.

“Squash here,” he tells me. “Carrots. Berries. What do you think so far?”

“Fantastic,” I say with a forced smile.

With each step into the rows, Enzo follows behind, quiet and stiff. And maybe it’s in my head, but . . . but I can feel his eyes on me as I walk ahead. I’m overly conscious of every small movement I make. Of every odd gesture or nervous tic.

“I’ll start filling in the soil,” Enzo says finally, hanging back as Matteo drags me around another curve.

“I want a patio like yours, Kelly,” Matteo announces. “Umbrella there. Chairs and a lounge there.”

“You want a patio like hers?” Enzo repeats with a huff. We turn to look at him, and as soon as we do, his gaze is buried back on the soil bags. “What if I don’t want a patio on my roof?”

Matteo grins and winks over at me. “So, like I was saying, umbrella here, chairs and a lounge there.”

Enzo grumbles to himself but allows his brother to amble on as he pushes me this way and that while painting a picture of his vision.

And the whole time, I can still feel Enzo watching us. He’s probably just playing out the conversation he’ll have with Matteo when I’m gone, the one where he reminds him that this is his roof and his expense. But every now and then, I get the sense he’s battling with his focus.

His gaze comes in stolen snatches I can feel like a breeze on my naked shoulders. On the curves at the top of my breasts. On my ass, perky and on display in these ridiculous shorts.

I’d never admit as much to my little sister, but it’s definitely a thrill.

Matteo claps his hands twice, and my attention rockets back to the task at hand.

“Oh my God, can we grill up here? Is that allowed?” He turns to his older brother with wide eyes. “We have to grill out here! Think of all the fresh produce. And we can invite you and Summer over, Kelly. Maybe some of the guys from the kitchen . . .”

“Why don’t you just throw a house party up here?” Enzo complains under his breath.

“Oh. My. God.” Matteo covers his mouth with both hands.

Enzo immediately straightens up, shaking his head with new vigor as he holds up a hand in protest. “Kidding,” he tells him. “I was just kidding.”

“Do you think Chiara would want to come if I invited her?” Matteo asks.

“The produce girl?” Enzo repeats, face grim. “Seriously?”

“She’ll definitely want to come.” I can’t help myself; I chime in, fighting back a giggle.

Enzo shoots me a look as Matteo shoves his hands deep in his pockets and grins.

“Thanks for the help,” Enzo mutters to me.

That one little note of recognition sends a zing straight to my core. I rub the back of my neck, suddenly having to catch my breath though my boss has been doing all the heavy lifting.

“That’s it. We’re party planning!” Matteo announces.

“For fuck’s sake . . .” Enzo sighs.

You love your baby bro, I mouth to him. The jab doesn’t register a laugh from Enzo, but when it gets a twitch of a smile in one corner of his mouth, my blood quickens in my veins.

“Can I hop over to your roof so we can sit and talk plans?” Matteo asks.

“Be my guest.”

We help each other cross over, and soon we’re taking a seat on my lawn chairs as Enzo continues to huff and ignore us

and dump soil into the rows of wooden boxes.

This time, when I sit down and retrieve the mug of coffee I discarded on my side table, I allow my long legs to stretch out as I prop my bare feet on another plastic chair. There's a twinge of disappointment when I glance back toward Alessi's roof and notice Enzo has his shoulder hunched up, a physical wall between us as he works.

That twinge is relieved, though, when I notice a clench to his jaw. It's the same as what I'd seen that night after Josie's engagement.

Like he's holding something back. Like he's having to work to check himself.

I can't help but like that he might be physically attracted to me, even if he clearly doesn't want it to go anywhere. After the mess with Josh, it feels good to be attractive to someone. It's a nice reminder that I'm still a woman, and I'm not dead just because one dick screwed me over.

Enzo Barone is the hot thing they warn you about when they tell you to stay out of the kitchen. And piquing his interest?

It feels pretty damn good.

I let the moment settle but can't help cracking an eyelid when I hear Enzo set the last of the soil bags down by the stairway door. In a moment, he's huffing his way over to my roof and taking a seat in the lawn chair beside mine.

"Already done?" Matteo asks.

"Already done."

Matteo pops right up, abandoning our conversation to jump back over to Alessi's. "I can't *wait* to get started! Be right back; grabbing my transplants!"

And just like that, we're left alone. Again.

I play it cool, ignoring my compulsion to fill the silence and instead lounge back and close my eyes. Meanwhile, I can hear Enzo beside me. He can't seem to get comfortable. He adjusts, fidgets, then finally clears his throat.

“In case I didn’t say so already, I’m sorry about Friday night,” he says. “If I crossed a line . . .”

“No lines crossed,” I assure him, opening my eyes.

It takes me by surprise that he’s looking at me, actually looking at me, for the first time in more than twenty-four hours. Enzo’s focus burns into my skin and leaves me breathless. For a second, I think he’s going to let this drop. His gaze falters, and his mouth opens and closes again.

I settle back in my lounge chair. I should not be disappointed. I’m not disappointed! *One year man hiatus, remember, Kelly?*

“Look, we work together,” he starts again. My heart feels like it stops, and I make myself look back at him. Enzo’s brow is furrowed so tight it almost looks painful. “I don’t want to give you the wrong impression.”

“Um, the wrong impression?”

“I’m not pursuing something with you,” he says bluntly. “I’m not into you that way. I’d probably had too much to drink, and the light was right . . .”

My entire countenance darkens. The new chill in the air is so palpable there’s no way he can’t feel it.

“Of course,” I reply. “Obviously.”

“So, should I play one of those HR videos for the staff again? Cover my bases? I’m so sorry, Kelly, and I just don’t want you to think I’m not doing everything I can to rectify this ___”

“No video necessary.”

“It was so stupid,” he says.

“So stupid,” I repeat.

This time I make him hold my gaze, make him look me in the eye as he tells me what happened was some kind of *mistake*.

Then I push out of my chair, stride across the roof, and hop over to Alessi’s.

“Gonna help your brother,” I call to him.
Enzo says something, but I don’t look back.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: ENZO

When I make it downstairs at the crack of dawn on Monday morning, I'm expecting Alessi's to be empty.

It's not.

"Ma!" Matteo rushes past me.

My mother stands up from the bar where she helped herself to a glass of wine, and he pulls her into a hug that nearly spills red across my floor.

I grit my teeth and set my shoulders back. When she's done with my brother, Mom walks over to me and pulls me into a stiff hug. When she pulls back, she takes my chin in her hand and turns my face this way and that.

"You're both sunburned!" she says, throwing her hands in the air. "You know where a young man wouldn't get burned, Enzo? Under the cover of *my pool house*."

"Why are you here, Mom? And was the front door unlocked, or should I be checking for broken glass?"

She frowns, her red-lined lips pursed tight. "Thought I might pick you two up for some food. I've got my guy waiting with the car just down the block."

"Food where I don't have to wash the dishes? Sweet." Matteo strolls past us, letting himself out of Alessi's to head for her car. He pauses with the door open and looks back. "Hey, let's bring something back for Kelly. A thank-you for her help yesterday."

My mother fixes me with a look. "You have my baby washing dishes?"

"It was between that or paying him to complete the twelve tasks of Hercules." I shrug and turn on my heel to head back to my kitchen.

"Hey! Hey, Enzo, hold on a second."

I stop, drawing in a deep breath that doesn't seem to quite fill my lungs. When I turn back, I give Mom my wariest look.

“He might not have run away from you, Mom, but that doesn’t mean he wants to come back to your place and be coddled. He’s ready for more. He needs more.”

“And what’s this about a woman named Kelly?”

“That would be none of your business.”

She grabs my sleeve before I can turn away.

Mom’s face has new wrinkles, ones I never expected to see. There are circles under her eyes.

She’s really worried about him. Is it possible she could be worried about . . . both of us? My stomach pitches at that, and I clench my jaw again.

“I won’t keep him long,” she promises me. “And you really ought to come with us. I think you’d like this restaurant.”

“If this is a front and you kidnap him while you’re out—”

“Matteo is twenty-two, Enzo.” Mom’s lips jump in one corner, but she presses them back into place just as fast. “It’s not kidnapping when the kid is over a foot taller than his mother. Join us. We want you there.”

I hesitate, gut spinning for reasons I don’t understand.

“We could use some getting to know one another,” she says in a softer voice. Her hand drifts across my face, thumb grazing across the cheekbone. “Time changes a lot—”

I pull back. “Matteo might not be a kid anymore, but his curfew is still at eleven. We pull early mornings in the restaurant, and I’ll need him bright and early.”

“I wasn’t planning on distracting him *all* day.” Mom sighs. Somehow those rings under her eyes look even darker. She bites her bottom lip, nods, and heads out the front door. As it swings closed behind her, every inch of my skin tightens.

What the fuck am I doing? I never engage. I keep professional distance from my employees, sure, but also from my parents. I’ve been burned enough times to know better.

And the truth is, I'm not even mad at my mom this time. She didn't do anything wrong, not really. She was the same as she ever was, maybe even nicer, if that was really to be believed. No—it's not to be believed. And that's why it's myself I'm mad at. I let Nadine Barone get under my skin. Next I'll be taking calls from my dad.

I shake my head, scrub my forehead with the palm of one hand, then head right back upstairs to my bed.

“You made it down in time to prep for lunch. Didn't expect that, considering I could hear your snores floating down from the apartment.”

I stop halfway down the stairs to the kitchen, seeing Arlo working with the lights off. I walk the rest of the way down, slide my fresh coffee over to him, then walk to the espresso machine to make a new cup.

“Are we saving on electricity?” I ask him.

“My line of interrogation first,” he says with a shrug.

“Couldn't sleep. Figured I'd work.” I shrug right back at him. “And you?”

“You get great natural light in here,” Arlo says. “This kitchen is always so crowded and loud. Sometimes I like to see it breathe.”

“We do get good light in here,” I agree, walking over to glance through the window that shows the alley behind Main Street. “Matteo made a comment about adding patio seating the other day, and I didn't take him seriously, but now I think ___”

“I'll hear enough about your brother when Gail and Lacey come in for their shifts. Why don't you use this time to tell me what's really on your mind?”

I wipe a hand down my face before reaching out for the fresh espresso. This morning I want to inject this stuff straight into my veins.

“You know, the professional line of conversation would be about this year’s crop of spring cabbage.”

“So fire me.” Arlo glances at me, not bothering to hide his wicked smile as he chops vegetables. “I think this is about misdirected mail.”

“Since when do your hearing aids work properly? You’ve been eavesdropping on staff gossip too much.” I lean against the wall, both hands wrapping around my mug. “Has the whole kitchen been talking about the incident?”

“Only in between Gail and Lacey’s discussions on whether your brother works out or is naturally toned.”

I make a grumbling noise at that before taking my first sip, which earns a dry laugh from my sous-chef.

“I might have made the situation about a million times worse.”

Arlo says nothing. God, I hate when he makes me fill in the gaps. Fucking genius.

I groan. “I said something that hurt her feelings. Because I’m a . . . what is it you told me Gail and Lacey call me again?”

“Bosshole,” Arlo provides, his mouth curving into an amused smile. “What did you say?”

“We had a moment the other night, after the engagement party,” I admit. “I don’t know if it was because of the box or what I was drinking or maybe I had a rare sentimental streak, but it happened. And yesterday I made it so much worse by telling Kelly in so many words that I could never be into her.”

Arlo stops chopping. He turns, arching an eyebrow as he places a hand on his hip.

“Son.”

“I had to say it!” I counter.

He directs the tip of his knife at me. Dangerous game in the kitchen business, but his point is taken. “You *had* to tell that one busboy he was fired because he was lifting from the

drawer. You *had* to tell Scott his béarnaise needed work. You did not *have to* say this to Kelly. What spirit possessed you?"

I turn around and bang my forehead against the cinderblock a few times before resting against it. I set my coffee mug down to massage the spot between my eyes.

"I said it because I think I might actually be interested. Against my better judgment, of course."

"Oh, please, add that part the next time you see Kelly. Being attracted to the woman against your better judgment is a line straight from a Tom Hanks movie."

I turn back around, crossing my arms over my chest again. I size Arlo up, holding my ground despite more of the lecture I can sense just behind his closed lips.

"It's just physical," I explain. "I mean, Kelly is a great worker. She's funny. Smart. And did you know she raised that kid all on her own since she was sixteen?"

"Enzo." Arlo clears his throat. "You started off this monologue by claiming it was just physical between you two?"

"I want to do things to her that no good boss would do with their employee."

"Bosshole?" he asks.

"Bosshole." I nod, miserable.

"I'm sure you've been interested in other employees," Arlo counters, returning to his chopping. "And you *are* the boss. She is a grown woman . . ."

"Just physical," I insist. "It's the only thing that makes sense. I've gone this far in my life without a girlfriend, and I can't imagine that a box of clit stimulators would change a man's entire personality."

Arlo bursts into laughter at that. He wipes at his eyes with the back of his arm.

"She had clit stimulators in her box?" he asks. "Look, that technology is beyond my generation. But it sounds like just the

kind of toy you want your future wife to share with you.”

“Not helping.”

Forget the clit stimulator. It’s just physical. It has to be.

When I saw her on that roof, the context wasn’t what really mattered. She could have shared those stories about Summer or I could have opened up about Matteo after the staff Christmas party or after a late night preparing for an event.

It was the lipstick that had drawn me to her. And the smell of her, unexpectedly warm and zesty and spicy all at once. And it was a little bit about the box, too, because I hadn’t been able to get the goddamn picture out of my brain of her opening it and dumping its contents on her bed.

And then she was on my rooftop yesterday. It wasn’t like seeing her interact with Matteo set off some primal urge to lock down the one woman who has shown any interest in helping me navigate things with the brother I never knew.

It was the biker shorts, which rode up so high I could make out the barest stretch marks slashing across her perfect, creamy thighs. It was the tight little top that dampened between her breasts as she gathered sweat.

Every last detail made me want to see what she looked like without lipstick or biker shorts or that terrible Alessi’s front-of-house uniform. Every last detail made me want to see her naked.

Consequently, every last detail had pissed me the hell off.

So I dug in my heels and relied on what I know. If this has to be purely physical, then it’s probably good for both of us to be on the same page. What happened on that roof was a mistake; I gave Kelly an apology, and that was that.

“Alright, Romeo, how are you gonna pull off the big apology for this latest screw up?”

I shake my head. “Sorry, what?”

“Ya know, for what you told her? You gonna head out to the front of Alessi’s and aim a boom box at her window?”

I shove my hands into the pocket of my chef's coat and shrug. "Doesn't an apology imply I was wrong? I'm not interested. I don't want to date her. I might not have the smoothest delivery—"

"*Bosshole,*" Arlo coughs into his elbow.

I narrow my eyes. "But it was the truth. And now we can move on."

"Son, you are a genius with a knife in the kitchen," Arlo says with a sigh. "But damn. You know how to cut a woman right to the quick, too."

"Arlo . . ."

"Who made the first move after the party? Who got whose panties in a twist?"

"I might have instigated . . ."

Arlo barks with laughter. He brandishes the knife again, nowhere near close enough to cut me but enough to make a show as he shakes his head.

"You need more than a boombox, kid."

I press the heels of my hands into my eye sockets, some of the tension in my shoulders giving way as my vision is reduced to black stars. I shake my head.

"I couldn't even bring myself to go out into the dining room and see her yesterday."

Arlo clucks. "A really big boombox. You're gonna need surround sound stadium speakers, boy . . ."

CHAPTER TWELVE: KELLY

“Wow. *Wow*. I mean seriously, wowza.”

My daughter looks up at me from where she’s doing her summer homework assignment at the kitchen table. I’m perched on the windowsill, *Pride and Prejudice* propped up by two coffee mugs so I can read while I paint my toenails.

“Do you have something to say, Harold Bloom?”

I pick up the worn-out book and wave it in the air. “This is some saucy stuff. ‘In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.’ I mean, dang! Just make out already!”

Summer bites the inside of her cheek, always a telltale sign she’s holding back a smile. Still, she’s committed to not looking amused.

“I don’t think making out was the custom in late 1700s England.”

“Does Mrs. Winterbottom realize she assigned you smut?” I tease. “I mean, really. All this talk of feelings and longing looks and tortured hand flexes . . .”

“The hand flex was a Matthew Macfadyen addition to the 2005 film.” Summer can’t hide it now. She’s full-on smiling, on the verge of laughter.

“It’s called subtext, baby. This book is bursting with it.”

She gets up, crosses the room, and plucks *Pride and Prejudice* from my hand. “Normal moms don’t read their kid’s English assignment.”

“Normal moms weren’t giving birth during the AP English exam,” I counter. I lean back against the window, stretching my legs out so my toes can dry. “I totally should have been born in Jane Austen’s 1700s. I’m all about a seductive fist clench.”

It’s good to laugh with Summer. It’s good to make jokes about romance and dashing men and everything else I’ve

sworn off for the foreseeable future. I let myself wallow with a pint of Ben and Jerry's for exactly thirty minutes after I came down from the roof on Sunday, and now it's time to pull myself back together.

A buzz comes from the table. Summer jerks too fast to check the phone, and I smile a little to myself, wondering if it's her own teenage Mr. Darcy.

"This is Shawn," she says. "Do you mind if I take this outside?"

"Take it outside." I wave her off. "But so help me, if he starts telling you how ardently he admires you, I will be calling his parents."

She laughs and clicks on the call, already headed for the front door. I return to my nails, running a fingernail around the edges to ensure the quick-dry polish comes out clean.

"Kelly?"

Down goes the bottle, spraying cotton candy pink across my tile. "Shoot! *Enzo*?"

He's already scrambling to get paper towels from the kitchen table to help me clean. We're both on our knees as he huffs and puffs.

"Summer let me in on her way out!" he defends. "I swear, I didn't . . . I'm not . . ."

He hands me my half-empty bottle of nail polish, and our fingertips brush. The tip of his nose turns pink, and it's so damn endearing that I swear my heart *flutters*.

"I was bringing over an apology Cuban."

"Cigars?" I ask.

"Sandwich. To go with your coffee." There's that frown I'm so familiar with. Enzo is clearly frustrated I didn't immediately remember the detail from Friday's conversation.

Maybe because it's no fist clench, or maybe because I just really want to piss off my boss, I force a smile.

"Thanks, but no thanks. Just had pizza."

“You’re seriously turning down a hot, fresh Cuban?” He jerks his thumb at my kitchen table from where he’s still crouched, and I look up.

Not sure how I missed it before, but a steaming, delicious, crispy sandwich is neatly presented with a packet of gourmet coffee tied in a bow next to it. My mouth waters, for more than one reason.

Of *course* I don’t want to turn down Enzo. I want the sandwich, and I want this freaking *snack* of a man here in my kitchen. He’s unreasonably hot tonight, with his short hair brushed into something close to a style and a masculine, musky, non-food-related scent wafting off him.

Not that I would let him know any of that.

“Not hungry,” I eke out.

He sighs and pushes up from the ground. He offers me a hand to help me up, and I briefly hesitate before taking it.

Once I’m up, he drops my hand just as fast as he offered to take it. Enzo reaches around to rub one shoulder, rolls his neck, and closes his eyes for a moment. He’s gearing himself up.

“I fucked up.”

“So glad you decided to come in person to remind me that the rooftop was so stupid. Did you also spell out *you were a mistake* in mustard on the sandwich?”

Enzo pinches the bridge of his nose. When he meets my eyes again, his gaze is absurdly dark and brooding. Admittedly, all this irritation and stubbornness might be doing just as much for me as a fist clench.

“No,” he corrects. “What I said yesterday was the fuck up. I was having a hard time, and I didn’t convey my thoughts in the best way.”

“Or in a remotely appropriate way?”

His brow furrows, but I do note that one corner of his mouth twitches. “If I concede to that, will you eat my sandwich?”

“Sit,” I order. “Make us some of this coffee to go with the sandwich and then split it with me.”

Enzo pauses for a moment, glancing over his shoulder toward the front door. But then he turns around, nodding his head and unwrapping the tiny coffee packet to head over to my machine. I sit down at the table, taking in all the glory that is an Enzo-Barone-specially-prepared dish.

“Man,” I sigh. “I need this tonight.”

I start in on the sandwich, and noises from my coffee maker and the crickets outside filter through the kitchen and dining room.

“Bad day?”

“Some jerk had me fill in so Wendy could get a night with her husband.” I glance back and wink. When Enzo still gives me an expectant look, I cross my legs up underneath me and shrug. “Nah, I didn’t mind pulling a double. It’s, um, actually to do with my kid.”

“I saw Summer on the way out, and she looked okay?”

I chew, thoughtful. After I swallow, I just shake my head. “I came home from my shift at the same time her boyfriend was dropping her off. I think I might have interrupted . . . a steamy moment.”

My pause for dramatic effect works as intended. Enzo winces, and I cringe all over again.

“I tried to make it better,” I explain. “I immediately ordered from the good pizza place for dinner. I tried to make jokes. I suggested she blow off her summer assignment and do some online shopping with me.”

“None of it worked the way you wanted?”

He brings the coffees around and slides one mug in front of me before taking the seat beside mine.

He’s too close for comfort. I can smell that insane cologne on him again, and his leg even brushes against mine for a moment before he tucks it back under his chair. I hide my face

by taking a massive swig of coffee. It nearly burns my esophagus beyond repair, but damn if I'm not committed.

"She's on the phone with the boyfriend now," I say with a sigh. "They're probably talking about how I ruined their lives."

"Come on," Enzo says. "You tried. Pizza goes further than you think. And teenagers move on quick." He pauses for a moment, and I have the strangest sense that he's watching me swallow. When I glance at him, his eyes are fixed on my throat. He licks his bottom lip and shakes his head. "That's what I hear, at least. Any chance you keep any whiskey to make this coffee Irish?"

"Apparently we're turning this Cuban feast into an around-the-world experience. Top cabinet next to the sink."

Enzo gets up, and the brief reprieve gives me a moment to glance down at my outfit. Heaven help me, I'm not dressed much better than I was in the sports bra and biker shorts. As soon as I got off shift, I stripped down to the tank top I wore under my work clothes and pulled on a frilly pair of lace shorts, ditching my black pants. I should change.

But hey, then again, Enzo has made it very clear that he's *not into me that way*. I'll keep the tank top, the sandwich, and my dignity. Not changing, even in light of a great Cuban sandwich.

When he sits back down, he's swirling his coffee mug around and fixing his gaze on the whirlpool. His brow is more furrowed than when he first got here.

"Um, Kelly. I didn't just come to apologize."

"Please tell me this is your segue into telling me you also brought dessert."

He looks up, and if the dark, hooded eyes got my blood pumping before, they positively leave me quivering now.

"Just because I'm not interested in something with you, doesn't mean I didn't like what happened between us."

I stop chewing.

“I make it a policy not to get involved with employees,” he blurts. “I’ve never messed with a staff member before, and I don’t want to give you the wrong impression. And then I remembered the HR video thing, and I said more stuff that just made it so much worse—”

“I promised I wouldn’t call out the HR dogs,” I say, my lips quirking into a wry smile. “You . . . might not have been the only one who didn’t hate what happened between us. And you’re not the only one who has made it a policy not to get involved with anyone from Alessi’s. I’ve got a policy not to get involved with anyone, actually. Not for a year.”

Enzo’s eyebrows jump at that. He came preparing for the future deposition. “Was swearing off men something that came about before or after you were in my lap? Because if you don’t mind my saying so, the way you were going at it—”

I laugh and hold up my hand. “No need to remind me of all the embarrassing details. We can cover those when I reach step nine and come to you to make amends. Certified love addict, present.”

He snorts and cocks his head. “Love addict?”

“It’s crippling, and we’re working for widespread recognition.” Quips aside now, I take a breath and slouch back in my seat. “Maybe other people would call me a hopeless romantic. That’s a euphemism. After the Josh Everton fiasco—” I pause, arching an eyebrow, wondering how much the girls spilled before I got there the other night.

Enzo nods. “Ah, yes, the club.”

They told him about the club? Did they also cover my period calendar and acne-care routine?

“Ah, yes, the club,” I confirm. “Well, after all that nonsense, I’m taking proactive steps to never end up hurt and disappointed again. I’ve been divorced. I’ve been cheated on. I don’t plan on ticking off the box for being Glenn Close à la *Fatal Attraction*.”

“You’ve been divorced, huh? Summer’s dad?”

“Summer’s dad.” I nod.

“And living the single life is going to prevent you from getting in with the wrong guy again?”

I take a deep breath, putting my hand to my stomach to steady myself. “It’s going to teach me I can be single and still function as a human being.”

Enzo pauses for a moment. I’m already playing out every scene from a Queen Latifah or Kate Hudson movie in which they reiterate that a woman does not need a man to complete them. I must come off like a joke.

“I think you’re making a smart move,” he says finally. He reaches across me, picking up the Cuban to take a bite. My breath catches—completely unreasonable—as his lips touch where mine were. “If my parents’ divorce taught me one thing, it’s that most people are better off on their own.”

“Maybe in one year’s time I’ll be more inclined to agree with you on that.” I sigh. “Love addict.”

“Even after your divorce? You’re not the tiniest bit jaded?”

I pause, the words right there on the edge of my tongue but caught behind my lips. I’m ready to spill. How is that possible already? And is that really a good idea? It’s too easy to talk to Enzo. It’s too easy to be vulnerable with him.

If I were a *smart* love addict, maybe I would stop and rethink—

“Disappointed, yes. Jaded, no. I get that Van and I were not a good match. We had Summer when we were young and stupid, and everyone pressured us into tying the knot. We’re like your parents: better apart. But I still can’t help but think there’s someone out there for me. At least, I can’t help but hope it.”

The words are out there now. They’re just piling on top of my last confessions and certainly providing the basis for future ones. What is it about this guy that makes me spill my guts?

“You and my brother with the relentless optimism . . .” he mutters.

“I’m going to optimistically choose to believe you’ll change your mind about true love.”

He smirks at that. Earning that expression sends a trill through my core.

“Well, if anyone deserves it, it’s you two chronic smilers.”

“We’ll see in a year. Nothing committed for twelve months.”

“Nothing committed for twelve months,” he repeats.

He kicks at me under the table, and my heart stops as our eyes meet. My mouth has gone dry.

I push back from the table too suddenly, sending my chair screeching across the tile. “Um, coffee refill,” I mutter.

Enzo stands up, too, and an image rockets through my brain of Regency Era Mr. Darcy standing up, as proper etiquette dictates, when the object of his ardent admiration stands from the table first. My stomach flips.

We’re too close. If I so much as exhale, I’ll fall against him.

The evening wind presses against the windows, desperately seeking a way inside. There won’t be a storm tonight, but the summer wind is unrelenting here. And as eerily calm as this moment is between me and Enzo, I can’t help but think the weather outside is capturing everything I feel but won’t let myself say.

Maybe it’s everything . . . *both* of us feel but can’t say?

I run my tongue over my lower lip. I can’t help it—I’m fixated on Enzo’s full bottom lip. His mouth stands out, pink and lush, against the dark backdrop of his stubble.

“Nothing committed,” he repeats again. “And no love. Forever, in my case.”

“Nothing committed,” I whisper back. “One year, for me.”

He reaches up, threading his fingers through the back of my hair. He forms a fist, yanking back my head so my throat is

exposed. Enzo eyes it hungrily, and every ounce of doubt I've had about how he feels evaporates into steam.

With the way he's holding my head, I'm looking up at him. He's got a good foot on me, and he's standing close enough that his exhales whisper across the top of my head.

Then, still holding me by my hair, Enzo reaches his other shaking hand down between us. His fingertips crest the waistband of my shorts. Then my panties. A thousand thoughts that might have stolen my attention disperse into that steam when his fingers graze down my pelvis and ghost over my clit. Gentle. So damn gentle.

And then, in contrast to the gentleness of the last touch, he slides his finger in and curves it deep inside me, pulling me to his chest at the same time. Rough. So *fucking* rough. I fall against him, grasping his elbows to steady myself as I gasp against his neck.

"This feel like love to you?" he growls into my hair.

As fast as the moment happened, it's gone. He pulls away, rolling his neck like he's gotten new kinks in the last thirty seconds alone. Cracking his knuckles, he strides toward my front door and lets himself out.

I collapse into my kitchen table with one hand to steady myself and the other clutching my chest.

I don't have an office, but Enzo lets Wendy and me share what is essentially a glorified broom closet. We use it for scheduling shifts on the ancient computer, pulling aside staff members if we need a chat, or just escaping from the hustle and bustle if one more call for "*More bread!*" is about to send us into a homicidal rampage. Turns out the broom closet is great for hiding out, too.

That's what I've been reduced to. Again. Hiding out from my boss because I have no earthly idea where we stand.

I stare down at the shift sheet, wishing harder than I've ever wished before that shift scheduling would suddenly become fun. There's a knock at the door. The room is so tight,

all I have to do is reach back with one hand to turn the knob and let whoever it is inside.

“Shift scheduling?”

I turn. It’s Alexis easing in through the door and leaning against the frame. I can’t help but glance behind her, and when no raging Enzo Barone makes himself known, I let out a breath.

“Shift scheduling,” I confirm.

“Have you gotten to next Friday yet?” she asks, peering over my shoulder. “One of the girls at the studio needs the night off to visit with her parents in town. She asked me to cover her hip-hop class.”

“Consider yourself hip-hopped.” I pencil her in to have the day off, set aside my work, then turn back to look up at her. “You on your way to teach a class now?”

She holds up her dance bag, the ribbons of her pointe shoes dangling out. “Advanced ballet. Much more my speed. Why are you still here? Didn’t you get off at four?”

I steal another glance past Alexis, and this time my friend turns to follow my gaze. Alexis sends me a pointed look before shutting us into the broom closet together.

“So, you’re hiding in here.”

“It’s too risky to cross the restaurant and go to my house,” I explain. “Summer has a sleepover with a friend who’s moving, so I figured I can slump over the desk *just so* to sleep, and maybe I’ll get away with wearing yesterday’s hair and makeup on shift tomorrow.”

Alexis crosses her arms and leans back against the door. “What’s going on?”

I chew on my lip, weighing things over. “If I tell you, this is Alexis-and-Kelly news. It’s not going on the club agenda.”

She pantomimes sealing her lips with a lock and key.

I sigh and roll my head back. “The almost-a-kiss escalated last night.”

“Enzo *kissed you?!?*” she blurts, eyes wide and mouth agape.

“Not exactly.”

Alexis closes her eyes, shakes her head, and massages one temple. “Wait, what happened?”

“We might have skipped right past kissing and gotten to under-the-clothes action.”

For a full five seconds, Alexis says nothing. I slap my hands over my face and peer at her between the cracks in my fingers.

“Oh God,” I groan. “Please don’t judge me. I can’t take judgment when I’m already so dang confused.”

“Well, now what?” she asks.

“Now what . . . what? Like I said, we skipped right past kissing. He had his hand down my pants and his lips on my hair, and he made it a point to remind me what was happening was nothing like love. He’s not interested. Not in the way that counts.”

“That’s awesome news!”

I blink at her. “Um, what?”

“Kelly, you’re a few days into a *year* without commitment. No more love junkie. No more watching *When Harry Met Sally* and spending a month resenting all men because they weren’t born with Billy Crystal’s charm. You’re going to build up steam, it’s inevitable. This might be your ticket to showing Josie you can last the whole year.”

I shake my head, but that only seems to encourage Alexis. She takes my hands in hers, squeezing them and then clutching them to her chest.

“Maybe even more than blowing off steam, I think this could be good for you as a kind of personal challenge. You’re swearing off romance? Awesome. Learn to separate sex and love. When twelve months is over and the next Josh Everton tries to charm you, you’ll be able to tell the difference between good for the clit and good for the heart.”

“Like, boss and employee with benefits? Doesn’t that sound like an HR nightm—”

I stop short. This is exactly what Enzo has been toeing around since that first moment on the roof. He was so terrified I was going to think he was a creep or too forward. I can’t say for sure—I can’t say anything for sure with that damn enigma of a man—but maybe he was looking for something fun, too, but it was the boss-employee thing that was holding him back. If I made it more than clear that I was a willing participant . . .

No. No, this is crazy.

“You’re twenty-two,” I announce suddenly, taking back my hands to put them in the air. Alexis frowns and puts her hands on her hips. “No one in their thirties has a friend with benefits.”

“No one in their thirties is as smoking hot as you are, babe.” She winks at me. “Or as broody movie star-ish as Enzo Barone.”

“We’d make pretty babies,” I say with a sigh.

She flicks me in the forehead. “Remember the arrangement.”

“How would I even go about starting that?” I counter. “How would I ever get the guts to make the first move?”

“Hey, I’m twenty-two,” Alexis repeats, sticking her tongue out. “So I’m young enough to know you’ve had years to overthink this. You’re the woman! Slap on something sexy, walk by him, and let your gaze linger for longer than a second. He’ll come panting like a dog.”

“Seriously?”

“Bet on it.”

When I finally brave the walk home, Alessi’s is dark. Enzo must have assumed I’d gone home hours ago because the front door is locked and I have to unlock it, then use my emergency key to relock it. That small reminder is enough to send him to the front of my mind all over again.

The first move? Is Alexis playing a joke on me? If so, it might rival Marnie's infamous sex box. I might need better friends.

What if he thought I was ridiculous? Worse, what if it ruined our working relationship? I only just moved Summer into this new home next to the restaurant. Am I supposed to pack things up and ship off across town if my boss laughs me out of my position?

And yet here he is, still looming in the recesses of my mind. My skin has gone hypersensitive as I cross the walk and head up to my porch stairs. Goose bumps dance across my arms as I remember how he handled me in my kitchen, just as sure and adept and attentive as he is working in Alessi's.

Like I was his dessert.

"Feels like a good night for coffee on the roof," I mutter as I fiddle with my key in the front door. "In my least attractive pajamas. Without showering off the workday. No makeup either."

But with those ridiculous lace panties back on. Just in case.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: ENZO

I almost chopped off my fingers today. I ought to be embarrassed.

Honestly, though, I didn't have any brain capacity left to overthink it. I'd just passed off the cilantro to Arlo, excused myself to head up to my apartment, and locked the front door just in case Matteo wandered up from his dishwashing shift.

I'd been thinking about last night. I'd been thinking about last night ever since I left yesterday, all through the night when I didn't sleep, and into the shower this morning where I was forced to slam my fist into the shower wall and probably scare a still-sleeping Matteo half to death as I frantically jerked off thinking about how Kelly had fucking *smelled* when I touched her last night.

When I wasn't actively wishing I was touching her again, I was mad as hell at myself. I make a rule to steer clear of employees, I break it. I remind myself that a relationship never got my parents anywhere, and I come trailing after the cute redhead like I've got nowhere to be. I come by her place to apologize, and somehow I wind up throwing paperwork onto the HR bonfire.

And here I am again for some reason. On my goddamn roof. Maybe I could write that off as normal post-work behavior, if I ever did it before that first night with Kelly, and if I wasn't watching her living room window right now and wondering why the hell the light hadn't flicked on.

I'd missed her coming home from work. We were probably both avoiding each other, which would be the sensible thing to do after all the mixed messages I've sent someone I decidedly shouldn't be interested in.

But now I'm left wondering if she's gone out. Part of me hopes she's with those girlfriends of hers, though there's a twinge in my gut at the prospect of them talking about her grumpy boss over chips and margaritas. Another part of me is hoping she's out with a man.

Maybe she'll bring him up to the roof, and I can meet the douchebag. Then I'll know for sure that Kelly Hasting's preferred type is one of those cheesy, sappy, self-assured dicks she described, the kind that promises her a Hallmark movie and more. That's not me. I'll see the contrast between us, and that will serve to . . . that will help to . . .

My fist is too tight around my beer bottle. The glass squeaks beneath my fingertips.

I stand up too fast, and the movement makes me dizzy. I'm calling it. I'm going back down to the apartment to put all this behind me.

Definitely not to get back into the shower to beat off again.

I'm starting toward the stairs when Kelly's twinkle lights turn on. I turn around too fast, nearly toppling the wooden produce box I'd been sitting on a moment ago.

"Kelly!"

She blinks, using her hand to shield against the sudden brightness of the lights to look at me.

"Enzo."

Fuck—just the way she says my name, all breathless and surprised and slow, makes me hard. It doesn't help that she's wearing what must be her pajamas. They're old and faded, but they hug the lines of her body in soft curves. The button-up top dips just low enough to see a hint of pressed-together breasts. Her shorts live up to their name, revealing miles of pale white leg and, when she turns to glance back at her stairway door, a hint of curve where leg turns into ass.

"I didn't see you leave work," I say. I stop, shaking my head. "I mean, not that I was watching. I just mean I didn't see you at work at all. Um, I didn't . . ."

I stop. A beat passes between us, softened by a surprising smile from Kelly.

"Busy day for Alessi's, huh?"

I clear my throat and cradle my beer between both hands. “Yeah. Yeah, it was. Did you guys hold up okay in the front?”

She nods, digging her toe into the rooftop. It’s only now I notice she’s holding another steaming mug of coffee. This woman and caffeine before bedtime. She’d make a good Italian.

The throwaway thought settles under my skin and warms my blood.

“And the thing with your daughter? You didn’t interrupt second base tonight, did you?”

She bursts out laughing. I’m taken off guard, and some instinct inside me makes me want to turn tail and run. But then Kelly waves me off and steps closer to the edge of her roof, and I couldn’t make my feet move away from her if they were on fire.

“Pray I don’t interrupt second base ever,” she says. “Or, at least, not for a very long time. Still over here coming to terms with my kid kissing another kid. She’s at a sleepover right now, which gives me a little recovery time.”

“But everything is better, then? With Summer?”

“Um, yeah.” Kelly gives me a funny look. She tucks back a strand of red hair that’s escaped from her messy bun, planting it behind her ear. The action directs my gaze along the trail of her exposed neck. My mouth waters. “Kids are weird. She wouldn’t look at me all night after she got home, but then this morning, it was back to Pop-Tarts and Eggos like nothing happened.”

My mouth dries back up as I frown. “Tell me you two don’t really eat that shit. I sent everyone home with lox and bagels after brunch this weekend!”

“You lack all creative vision, boss,” Kelly counters. She crosses her arms and bucks out her chin. “Toast the Pop-Tart so it’s extra crispy, and slap on some salted butter. It will blow your mind.”

“I’m not taking cooking advice from someone who said their specialty dish was hard-boiled eggs.”

She points a finger at me, and one corner of her mouth turns up in the most wicked way. “Spoken like a true food snob.”

Maybe it’s the word snob, something I’ve so long associated with my father. More likely, though, it’s the challenge that hangs in the air between us. Whatever the reason, I’m setting my beer on the wooden crate and hopping over the gap between our roofs.

“I could make a homemade Pop-Tart that would make your Pop-Tart shit itself,” I say as I let myself through her stairway door.

This is so stupid. I know I should say goodbye. I know I should bolt, take an Olympic leap back over to my roof, run all the way down the stairs into my apartment, and lock the doors behind me. But I can sense the smirk on my lips anyway, and I’m powerless to stop it as I flash it back at Kelly and push through the second door into her kitchen.

“What exactly do you expect to find in here?” she asks me. “Baking materials?”

“You said you have salted butter.”

“For the *Pop-Tarts*.”

“What else do you keep on hand?” I’m rifling through her cabinets now. Part of me expects Kelly to stop me, but instead, she pushes herself up onto the counter beside the stove and watches me work.

“My parents went through a big self-reliance phase a few Christmases ago,” she says with a shrug. “There might be a massive can of expired wheat if you want to grind your own flour?”

I stop what I’m doing to turn back to her.

“You’re an adult, Kelly Hastings.”

“Which is why I can afford takeout,” she counters, laughing. “And why I don’t subject myself to my own bad cooking.”

“We’re going to Whole Foods.”

“Where do they even have a Whole Foods near here? This town doesn’t even have a Target.”

She goes on about Button’s small size and how she’d kill for a Trader Joe’s, but at some point, I stopped paying attention to the details. So much of me wants to hang onto her every word, but it’s impossible when I’m this close to her.

I’m too aware of the sprinkling of freckles across her nose. The way it might feel to trace over each of them with the pad of my thumb. To press soft kisses into them one by one.

I shut the cabinet and have to pause, looking away from her for a moment because I’m fixating on the streak of moonlight washing across her kitchen floor. It’s the only light in the place save for a dim bulb over her stovetop that clearly needs changing. And it’s making it impossible for me not to wonder how those freckles might look when she’s lying back on the tile, red hair splayed out around her, her face cast in dancing shadows from the moonlight.

“Enzo?”

I jump, turning around a little too fast. She stepped closer to me while I was looking away, and now that I’ve turned, we’re nearly chest to chest. Her cheeks flush, and she looks down.

“Was it my ode to Trader Joe’s that bored you? I’m not super religious, but Summer says I worship there.”

“Can’t blame you.” My voice is husky and broken. I have to clear my throat and massage a knot at the top of my chest. “I approve of Trader Joe’s. If they make a version of Pop-Tarts or Eggos, you have my permission to buy them.”

Kelly glances back up at me. She watches me from under hooded eyes, and her green irises sparkle in this low light. The freckles nearly disappear with the angle she’s turned from the light.

“What’s on your mind?” she asks.

The words are already on my lips. I can’t stop them. “Something I keep reminding myself is off-limits.”

To my surprise, Kelly doesn't look away this time. She holds my gaze as she steps even closer, near enough that her chest just barely grazes mine. I don't dare breathe for fear of pushing this further than it needs to go.

Her palms go up to rest on my pecs. Slowly, so fucking slowly, she scrapes her nails down my chest. They stop at my waistband, curling beneath my elastic.

"This feel like love to you?" she whispers, throwing my words from the other night back in my face.

It's nothing that's ever happened in any relationship I've ever braved before. Kelly's fingers are fully past my waistband now. They're scratching through the thick swatch of hair that trails down to my cock, and then—

"*Fuck,*" I groan, my forehead falling against hers.

This is about a million times more sensual than what I've gotten from any relationship. A sense that I don't know what's coming next. A heat of which I've never even conceived.

Her hand curls around my cock, tugging up and down.

"We should quit while we're ahead."

"Come on," she breathes against my cheek. "Why?"

"Because I'm a fucking chef, Kelly. You give me one taste, and I'll crave the whole goddamn thing."

She laughs, but her grip on my cock doesn't let up. Instead, her thumb rubs over my weeping slit, swirling around until I'm good and filthy. I hiss as her tongue glides up the side of my neck, sending me into sensory overload.

"This isn't Jane Austen's era. You can have the whole thing without having to marry me. We could have a good time."

Something about her words strikes me as not quite right, though her tone is all light and casual and sugar sweet. This isn't what Kelly was telling me about herself up on that roof. She's a—what did she call it? A love addict.

But then her thumb leaves my crown to trail down the underside of my shaft. All my blood has fled down to my erection, and I can actually feel myself pulsing against her fingertips. When that thumb tucks under my balls and she palms my sack and rolls it around in her hand, any strength I might have been clinging to is eradicated.

Her lips are everywhere as she works. Not just my neck, but spots I wouldn't have expected, too—my collarbone, the hollow of my throat, the bare stretch of skin just beneath my earlobe.

“No commitment,” she promises me. “Maybe I’m just here to have fun.”

I’ve gone completely stiff. I’m pretty sure I’m trembling, torn between the desire to touch her and the engrained habit of keeping my distance.

“Kelly . . .”

“What?” She pulls back, withdrawing her hand. “What objection could you possibly have to a little fun?” Her bottom lip quivers, and she sucks it between her teeth. “Is it . . . something about me? Am I embarrassing myself? Am I—”

So help me, I grab her wrist and pull it to my mouth. This time it’s my turn for kisses. I want every inch of her skin explored by my tongue, marked by my essence. I kiss the inside of her wrist, the outside of her fist, the dusty trail of ginger hair that picks up on her forearms. And when I’m done, I jerk her toward me and plant the last kiss square on her mouth.

She gasps against me, and instinct makes her lips part.

I seek out the heat of her mouth with my tongue. God, she tastes as good as she smells. I try my best to start with gentle, searching licks, but soon I’m taking her chin in my hand, opening her mouth wider so I can fuck her with my tongue. I sweep her mouth, suck her lips until they’re swollen against mine, steal every breath from her as soon as she gives it up. When I pull away, she crumples into me, clutching at the front of my shirt.

“Being with me isn’t fun,” I growl against her hair.

More kisses along her hairline. More deep, appreciative sniffs of her coconut shampoo. My cock is painful against the front of my pants, so hard it aches. I reach down, take her wrist again and bring her hand to my balls, guiding her to palm them the way she had before. I need this anguish milked out of me.

“Being with me is rough and unrelenting,” I tell her. “I’m a mean son of a bitch when I have to fight for what I want, but I only get uglier and more selfish when I’m given permission to have my way.”

“Please,” Kelly pants. “Yes, Enzo, *please*.”

No part of this feels like love. And it’s exactly what I didn’t know I needed.

Any composure I had left snaps, and I grab Kelly by the ass, lifting her so she wraps those long legs around my waist. She doesn’t stop moving, her needy little cunt writhing against me in search of friction. She’s trapped the tip of my cock up against my stomach, and she’s driving me crazy as she rubs out her need against it.

In another moment, my hands are grasping those curves I was admiring at the edge of her shorts. I take two delicious handfuls of ass, knowing I’m squeezing too tight but unable to stop myself. Kelly doesn’t seem to mind. She’s too busy rocking against me, and now she’s scrambling to unbutton her shirt.

It’s taking too long to come off. Her fingers fumble over the buttons, and impatience rears hot and unrelenting in my chest.

I throw her down on her kitchen table, just catching her head before she smacks against the wood. I pull my shirt over my head, then seize two fists of Kelly’s shirt to rip it open. She gasps as buttons spill across her floor.

I stop, take a step back, groan, and rub my hands down my face.

Her bra might as well be a fucking bandage. Like the pajamas she was wearing, it's worn out and thin. Maybe a size too small. Her breasts are spilling out of the thing, her tight little nipples pressed against the cups. I rip back the fabric, rubbing my thumbs in circles, which makes her back arch off the table.

"God," I mutter. "You're better than I even thought you could be."

Her hands are all over my chest now. Her fingertips twist in the thick dark hair there. Her nails scratch across my nipples, then down over my pecs.

"You're one to talk," she gasps out. "I always thought the chef's coat was so sexy. Now I think covering up this body should be illegal."

We lose our words as our lips meet again. The pace is too frantic, the need too great. She pulls out my cock, and when my slick head slides against her exposed thigh, I feel it all the way from root to tip. My pants fall to the floor, catching around my ankles but not enough of an inconvenience to stop me. I pull away only long enough to yank down her shorts and panties, too, and throw them aside. Her legs fall apart for me, but there's nothing left in me to stop and admire her, much as I might want to. I'm already fumbling for her wet heat with my fingers, and when I find it, all control goes to not spreading her too fast, not rubbing that swollen little button until she cries with a mix of pleasure and pain.

Instead, I go as light as I can. One finger, pumping in and out of her the way it did the other night. Only this time, I get deeper. I curl my fingertip until I find that soft, spongy place and Kelly is pawing at my arms, mewling in my ear, her knees butterflying back to give me more access. Another finger in . . . I can't help myself. Maybe just one more.

"More, Enzo."

Something breaks inside me.

"You want more, *amorina*?" I snarl against her ear. I'm working her pussy so deep now it's making the most

delectable fucking wet squeak. “I’m about to put this dick so deep you’ll *taste* my head as I pump.”

The last of my patience gives way. I pull out, taking Kelly by the hips to pull her to the edge of the table. I hold one of her thighs in a strong fist so she stays put as I lean down and fumble in the pocket of the pants at my feet to remove my wallet.

The condom inside is too fucking old. I’ve had it since God knows when, seeing as how I last slept with a woman God knows when. But I don’t care. I tear open the crumbly packaging and roll it down over my cock before fisting myself one more time. Kelly sighs at the sight, and a fresh bead of precum pools in the head of the condom, tempting fate before I’m even inside her.

How the *hell* am I going to last long enough to satisfy her? Because Kelly’s release is priority. I’m not squandering her one attempt to have a little fun sans commitment because her pussy is too damn tight to stand three thrusts.

My knees bend so I can get my mouth down between her legs, but Kelly grabs my arm and prevents me from going down.

“Where the hell are you going?” she pants.

It doesn’t go unnoticed how her eyes are locked on my jutting cock. It’s like she’s read my mind because she props up, reaches out, and strokes it. A quick, hard squeeze around my head makes me clench my teeth and roll my neck.

“You come first.” I try to drop down once more.

Again, she grabs me to stop me.

“You promised rough and selfish Enzo. I want what was promised.”

I narrow my eyes at her. Obstinate fucking woman. She’s still going to come first, even if I’m the only chef in the goddamn world who’s not allowed a taste of his favorite dish when he wants one.

Gripping my cock around its base, I dip the head in her opening. Even illuminated only by moonlight, Kelly is just as pink and pretty as I expected. Her knees drop open further, stretching back as I tease her with one thick inch. When I pull back out, she shudders and groans. A slap stings against my forearm.

I grab her wrist. “Who’s the boss here, woman?”

I sink the inch in again, gyrating my hips this time to circle her opening. When I pull out, I slap my crown against her swollen clit. Falling over her and placing my hands on the table over her shoulders, I run the length of my shaft over that magic button. The hiss I earn from Kelly makes my balls draw up tight.

“I’m not going down,” I tease her. “But you’re still coming first.”

“Enzo—”

“This *is* me being selfish.”

I pick up my pace. I thrust against her clit so fast my balls slap against her opening. Kelly is squirming beneath me, not bothering to hide how frustrated she is with not being filled. In another moment, though, her hands are cupping her breasts. She pinches those rock-hard nipples, and her head starts to nod. My already slick, warm ride against her gets a little wetter.

“Right there,” she chokes out. “Right over my clit. Enzo. Enzo, are you sure—”

She never finishes that sentence. Instead, she scratches at my back, pressing her naked breasts against me, and another surge of slickness coats me as she whimpers out her release.

That’s the final straw. I position myself back at her opening, tell myself I should be gentle, and immediately forget my resolve as I push in.

“*Dio mio.*”

I wrap a hand around her waist for leverage and search desperately for extra room that might not even be there. I’m

already so fucking snug, but with each tight millimeter that allows me in, I push for more, more, more. At first, her hips resist me, a little stiff and jerky. But in a moment more, she's angling to give me what I'm searching for. She's clawing at my ass, whispering filthy words in my ear.

"Did you have some grand plan?" I don't slow down to accommodate my words. I move inside her at a ruthless, relentless tempo.

Kelly just hiccups in response, nodding and squeezing her eyes shut. "I . . . I hoped we'd do this," she admits.

"And you knew just how to get what you want." I lift her hips to allow me even deeper, and she squeals and writhes. Some part of me wants to discipline her for shredding my resolve. I've always been so strong. I've always known what I wanted, and this wasn't part of my plan. "Was this part of the plan, *amorina*? Getting fucked so deep it's like losing your virginity all over again?"

I'm playing it dangerous saying such things to her. All my worries about HR, and here I am, spitting the words I only ever use when I'm in my own head. But I can't stop myself. Kelly could threaten me with a lawsuit right now or turn on a camera to record my transgressions, and I still don't think I'd be able to stop. I'd hump her like an animal, blind with passion and urgency.

Then Kelly does the unthinkable. She reaches around and squeezes my balls as I thrust in particularly deep.

"Hurts so good," she whimpers.

Tension rushes to knot in my lower back. Heat follows just as fast, and while it's concentrated in my center, it radiates out across every cell of my body. What was a sizzle only a moment ago erupts into fireworks. There's a breaking in my chest, and the night crashes over me. I release with an angry bellow, clutching and sweating and biting into Kelly's shoulder.

When the room stops spinning, I pull back. I drift my fingertips over Kelly's inner thighs, praying she won't be too

sore in the morning. While I promised her roughness in the moment, the idea of her paying for my lack of restraint later sends a surge of worry and possession through me.

She sits up, and my heart sinks.

“Shit, Kelly.” I point behind her, and she turns.

“Well. Damn.” She chuckles.

Her kitchen table has been decimated—salt and pepper shakers turned over and pushed to the edge, tablecloth wildly askew, what looks suspiciously like high school paperwork now crinkled and ruined. It’s not that Kelly’s reaction to the mess is wrong in any way, but suddenly I’m bothered by the moment not being perfect for her. After I’ve ditched the condom and pulled on my pants again, I retrieve a dustpan and brush from the room’s corner and start in on the mess. When I’m done, I walk to the sink, wash my hands, and dry them on a dish towel hanging by the window. I flick on the kitchen light, and Kelly hisses.

“Sit down, I’m rectifying your sad food situation.”

“There are Pop-Tarts in the pantry—”

I hold up a hand. “You really want me to go on another Pop-Tart tirade?”

She sits dutifully, fidgeting with the strap of her bra as she watches me rifling through her cabinets and then her pantry.

She wasn’t lying—she really has a whole lot of nothing. I’m working with canned everything, some questionably old condiments, and unlabeled takeout containers in the fridge.

It’s an episode of *Chopped*.

The corner of my mouth curls up, and I turn around. “Your chance to shine, Chef. Grab an apron and come join me.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

She sets off to find a T-shirt (there may have been a lecture from me about bare skin and working with hot oil). For

the next half hour, we set to work. Moving around the kitchen with Kelly is surprisingly easy. She might not have the skill or nuance of a trained sous-chef, but when I reach out a blind hand and grunt for salt, she's ready to go. I'm sure it helps that this is her kitchen.

But still. I don't work well with sous-chefs. It's a miracle Arlo has stuck around Alessi's for as long as he has. Even then, there is a string of former chefs who will likely testify against me if I ever come up on murder charges.

In the end, we have a very palatable bean, pepper, and potato hash. Breakfast for dinner. It's no Cuban sandwich, but Kelly looks impressed. The idea of that shoots a new thrill through my chest, and I have to concentrate on the evenness of each breath.

She sets the table, and I dish us up. We sit across from each other and start in.

"You know, I would have been happy making a McDonald's run." I make a face, and she laughs before chewing down another bite of hash. "Then again, you wouldn't have been able to show me your *Chopped* skills."

"And you wouldn't have been able to show me yours," I admit. "I was impressed when you knew how to boil the water."

She snorts, having to cover her mouth before taking a drink. "I was impressed you took the time with me at all. I didn't think Enzo Barone *bothered to teach when that's what culinary school is for.*"

I cringe. I might have thrown that line at one or two chefs on their way out of the door. Okay, I might have screamed it.

But as Kelly smiles at me now, there's not a hint of resentment in her features. It's like she's genuinely touched that I took a moment with her. That I stuck around after the act, sure, but also that I did something more than rip her panties off.

Lightning strikes through my chest as I consider how she's right. I don't take the time with people. Not usually. In

fact, I make it a policy to keep my distance from everyone.

But especially from beautiful assistant general managers.

“Who taught you how to cook?”

Kelly’s voice brings me hurtling back to the moment. I blink a few times, then busy myself by shoving down a forkful of hash. She, however, is more than willing to wait me out. She just cocks her head, the smile lingering on her lips as she waits for my answer.

Once I’ve swallowed, I make myself take a deep breath. I lean back in my chair, crossing my arms tight over my chest.

“That would be Arturo Barone.”

She arches one red eyebrow. “There is no universe in which I can picture your old man in a kitchen apron.”

“If I wasn’t there myself, I’d hardly believe it either.”

An ancient memory flashes through my brain. Dad didn’t wear aprons, actually. He usually just rolled up his sleeves and went to town, and if he ruined a shirt, he’d have some employee sent out to buy him a new one. That’s the Arturo Barone I would expect. The one who insists on doing things his way and solves every minor problem with his pocketbook.

But then I remember him standing me up on a stool when I was little. Holding my arm out over the counter as I grasped a brown egg.

“Every man knows how to make an omelet,” he’d muttered, more to himself, I think, than to me. “So you have to learn how to crack an egg.”

“Was that a special thing just for you two?” Kelly asks me now.

My brow furrows. “I really don’t know if he ever worked in the kitchen with Matteo. And I haven’t had much contact with my father since my parents’ divorce to ask him myself.”

“He’s got to be proud you opened a restaurant.”

Another pause as I turn that over in my head. I’m the Barone who let Arturo down. I didn’t go into the family

business. I didn't inherit his business prowess. Never once in my life have I even considered a reality in which he could be proud of Alessi's.

"Nah." I shake my head. "No way."

"Do you ever think about making him a reservation—"

"No." I cut that train off before it goes anywhere. I stare Kelly down from across the table.

But to my surprise, she's still unrelenting. She just studies me and bites her lip for a second before poking at her hash with her fork.

"You know this is a lot like the first dish you ever sent me home with from Alessi's."

I set down my fork at that. "You remember a meal from half a decade ago?"

"I remember a very cute chef getting seriously pissed off when someone returned their hash to the kitchen and requested less spice."

She grins, and there goes my fucking chest again. Another bolt, straight through to my cock.

"It was sweet potato, though," she clarifies. "And black beans and—"

"Poblanos." I nod. "I remember now."

"And it was one of the greatest meals I'd had in years," she says, voice low. "I hold that patron who sent their dish back personally responsible because I haven't seen you make a variation of it since. Well, I hadn't until tonight."

"Until tonight." My lips jump. I realize with a start that I kind of want to smile. "You really thought I was a cute chef?"

Kelly makes a big show of shrugging, getting up, and sweeping up our dishes to deposit them in the sink. "That was before you went full ZZ Top. And you must know you're at least fifty percent sexier when you're cooking for me as my private chef."

My lips crack at that. "Oh yeah?"

“Don’t get excited,” she clarifies.

In response, I grab her by the elbow and yank her into my lap.

Her breath hitches as she straddles me, placing her hands on my chest. “I’d like you even more if the dish you provided was something that could be licked off my body.”

Christ.

“You’re a demanding dinner date.” I chuckle.

“And you’re critical.”

“I’m not exactly looking for feedback.”

“Neither am I.” She kisses the tip of my nose and winks. This time it’s me who’s stumbling over my next breath. “Not looking for commitment, remember? This was a benefit, without even the *friends with* part.”

“Ouch.” I feign a wince.

Kelly giggles and strokes a hand through the front of my hair. In response, my fingers are inching around her waist. My thumbs slip under the edge of her T-shirt and work slow, soft circles into her skin.

“Okay, *maybe* I’ll concede to the friend part. As long as you never yell at me the way you did with that patron.”

“Don’t tell me my food is too spicy.”

“I’m not insane, Enzo.”

“This is real, then?” I ask. “It’s all just fun? Not a formal relationship?”

“I would never let a real boyfriend dirty up my kitchen,” she says with a somber face. “I’ve got a perfected state of disuse going on in here. I’d have to ice you out. Ghost you.”

“Hey, I made you another meal.”

“You can really make it up to me with another one of those Cubans . . . or another orgasm.”

“I think I can handle that.”

We just smile at each other. It's stupid and goofy and there's no rhyme or reason to it when we just agreed that we were officially *unofficial*, but here we are anyway.

"So, isn't this the part where you remind me about an early produce shipment tomorrow morning?" she whispers.

I nod, my tongue dry and too large in my mouth.

I don't want to bail. What I want is to drag Kelly down to the ground this time and ravage her there, because I'm pretty damn sure I wouldn't make it to a bedroom if I tried.

But twice in one night? And staying late enough that we risk chatting like a couple all night? That's all very official, and we just established we weren't doing that.

Thank the Lord we're together on this.

Kelly stands up and waves for me to follow her to the front door. We walk together managing to keep our hands to ourselves, falling into step. She opens the door, welcoming in a warm summer breeze.

"So I'll see you the next time you've got food for me?" she asks. "Or just on shift at work?"

"Well, it's not a date."

Her eyes sparkle at that.

I have the most unreasonable urge to sink my lips onto hers one more time. To stroke my tongue into her mouth again and press her body into mine so she can feel where I'm already growing hard again.

I shake my head to clear it and wave one hand at her.

"Night."

"Night, Enzo."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: KELLY

“Someone’s happy this afternoon.”

I stop soaping up dishes at my parents’ kitchen sink and do my best *who me?* persona. Josie just stares me down from where she’s drying and puts one hand on her hip.

“This is the first time anyone has smiled through dish duty on Mom’s lasagna night,” she says. “That stuff is notoriously hard to get off plates. Three weeks ago, Holden and I got into a petty argument over what color to repaint my living room. I knew Mom was making lasagna, so I volunteered him for dish duty as payback. What gives?”

I shrug and pretend to give a nasty marinara stain all my concentration. “I’m particular about my glassware.”

“You and Summer registered for paper plates as a housewarming gift when you moved.”

“Actually, we registered for gift cards to all of Button’s fried chicken joints. The paper plates were a fallback in case none of you took us seriously.”

Josie smirks. “You’re happy,” she repeats. “Spit it out.”

There’s a quip on the tip of my tongue. More deflection. But when my little sister sets aside her Pyrex to cross her arms and lean one hip against the kitchen counter, I can’t help myself.

“Okay, so under threat of having to clean out Mom’s lasagna dishes for the next three dinners she makes it, you cannot tell Holden about this.”

Her eyes widen. “I can’t tell Holden about what?”

“About what happened in my kitchen last night.”

Josie grabs her dishrag and whips it at me; it makes a *whirring* sound before leaving a tidy pink spot on my wrist where it smacks. I cradle my arm in my other hand and stick my tongue out at her.

“*What did you do in your kitchen last night?*” she hisses.

“. . . I did Enzo Barone.”

My sister makes a show of smacking her hands to her forehead, dancing around in a circle, then hopping from one Doc-Marten-clad foot to the other.

“Point A to Point B,” she finally manages, waving her arm for me to continue. “Walk me through it.”

“Well, Point A was the roof . . .”

“The girls mentioned in the text chain that you two kept meeting on the roof. I have *got* to stop getting engaged and going lovey-dovey at inconvenient times.”

“. . . Point B was my kitchen table.”

Josie fans herself. She bites her lip and nods. “Summary judgment?”

“I’ve burned my fingers on Alessi’s cast iron that was less hot than that man.”

She crumples over, hands covering her face. Josie lets loose a muffled scream, and even though I’m grinning and giggling, I have to glance back over my shoulder to make sure none of our family members are racing into the kitchen to find out what’s going on.

“This is how it starts,” she decides. She stands up, wiping away actual tears from her eyes before taking me by the elbows. “Point A for Holden and I was spewing venom at the school pickup line, and next thing we knew, we were getting down and dirty in the back of his minivan—”

I put my fingers in my ears. Josie’s grin widens, and she yanks my hands down.

“Aren’t you supposed to be the older sister?” She laughs. “The mature one?”

“There’s a difference between us and you guys,” I say. I pause and shake my head. “The difference is, there is no us. Anyone with a pulse could sense the chemistry between you and Holden, even before you two idiots figured it out. Enzo and I are just friends. Not even friends! Coworkers.”

Josie presses her lips tightly together and nods. I swear I can *feel* the smirk she's holding back.

"Mhmm," she agrees, nodding more. "You two work so well together. You really know how to break into a sweat and put your back into it. How to get your hands dirty on the job."

I reach into the sink and splash her with dirty water. Josie yelps but laughs.

"It was a one-time thing," I insist.

"Course." Josie shrugs and crosses her arms again. "So, you're going to go back to work tomorrow and act like nothing happened? You'll both be totally cool because you enjoyed a little *staycation* before getting back in the saddle?"

Of course not.

I could hardly look at Enzo at work after sitting in his lap that first time. How am I supposed to do my job when all I've been able to think about all night and all day was how that trademark frown looked so much more intense and focused when he was hovering over me? If I so much as blink, I trip into daydreams about his delicious stubble and strong hands.

"Holden!" Josie calls. She pushes open the swinging kitchen door and sticks her head through. "Something came up, babe, can you finish the dishes?"

She grabs me by the elbow, not giving me even a moment to dry my hands before she yanks me through the door, down the hall, and up the stairs.

"Anticipating another fight with Holden?"

"Nah, he's just a necessary sacrifice." She turns back to me, grinning. "Because if ever there was a moment to blast Pat Benatar and dance around your childhood bedroom like we're in high school again, this is it."

I'm working the hostess stand when I spy Summer through Alessi's front window. I pass off an elderly couple to Wendy before walking to the front door and pushing it open.

My daughter darts down our front stairs, her feet still bare as she waves an envelope at me.

“It’s the big envelope,” she pants as she dashes over to meet me. The door to Alessi’s swings shut, and I wave to Wendy that I’ll be another minute before turning back to Summer. “I couldn’t open it without you, Mom.”

“It’s the big envelope,” I repeat, taking it from her to run my fingers across the postage.

Hamilton Preparatory. 1606 Terpin Avenue, Bellevue, South Carolina.

I shove the envelope back at her. “I don’t think I can look. You’ll have to read it to me.”

Summer furrows her brow before nodding and sliding a finger under the seal. She takes a deep breath and holds it at the top of her chest as she pulls out a creamy white page.

“Dear Miss Hastings, We are pleased to inform you—”

“You’re going to Hamilton!” Screw the rest of the pages; they fly up over Summer’s shoulder as I yank her toward me and into a crushing hug.

“Mom!” she squeaks out, laughing. “I think one of those pages was, like, a textbook list.”

“Oh my God, you’re right!”

I let her go, and we both scramble to retrieve the papers. We collapse onto the front lawn of Alessi’s together, neither of us caring as families and couples pass us by to meet Wendy at the hostess stand. We’ve each got a piece of paper, and we pore over the words like they’re Christmas lists for Santa.

“Composition notebooks, leather preferred,” Summer breathes. “It’s like we’re in *Harry Potter*.”

“Ballpoint pens,” I read. “Black ink only, blue not to be accepted.”

“Uniform may be purchased through our website . . .” Summer drops the paper to her lap and fixes me with a bewildered gaze. “Is this real?”

I can only smile at her. The warmth that started in my chest just a minute ago has blossomed across my body, and I'm buzzing with it now. I wrap an arm around Summer's shoulders and pull her close before planting a kiss on the top of her head.

"You did it, kid."

"Mom. We did it."

She pulls back, pinning me with those intense green eyes. She definitely inherited them from me, but I can't imagine how anyone would ever dare disagree with me if I had a gaze like hers.

"Shawn's going to freak," she says, biting her bottom lip.

"Shawn's going to have to step aside," I reply. "You're about to be pursued by men in blazers. Ties. *Ascots*."

Her lips quirk at that.

"So, do they tell you how to accept the offer?" I ask.

Summer turns, fishing around in our haphazard pile of retrieved paperwork. As soon as she turns away, I take what has to be my first breath since I ran outside to meet her. It fills up an empty system, one that's been totally deprived of oxygen. In fact, the breath rattles my rib cage and leaves me shaky. When Summer turns back, smiling, I have to make myself take another breath and smile back.

We're moving to South Carolina. We've got one more season here in Button, and then we're on our way up and out. It's everything Summer has been working toward for so long and everything I've wanted for her since I blew my own high school experience.

So why do I feel like a clock just started ticking?

". . . I should call Shawn," Summer says. Her voice comes back into focus out of nowhere, and I realize I must have disassociated for a second. She pushes up from the ground, collects the rest of the papers, and holds them to her chest. "And you probably need to get back into work."

“Meh. I was thinking of bailing on this job after the summer.” I wink at her.

Summer laughs and offers me her hand. I take it and stand, then start toward the door.

“Dinner after my shift?” I ask her.

“We can fawn over the school supply list some more!”

With that, my kid is heading back toward the house. I watch her for a moment longer as she takes the stairs up, and her long red braids bob the way they used to when she was six because she wouldn’t sit still long enough for me to properly French braid.

I chew the inside of my cheek and push back into Alessi’s.

Wendy waves at me from the hostess’s stand. But between the lunch and dinner rush, it’s slow, so I find myself holding up a finger for *one more minute* as I pass, then rounding the tables and heading to the back of the house.

Alexis is by the lockers, her apron halfway over her head as I approach. She smiles when she sees me and waves.

“Do you have a second?” I ask.

I scan around us, not super sure what I’m looking for. I just . . . this is private conversation stuff. And even though the kitchen staff at Alessi’s knows all about me and Summer and her application for Hamilton Prep, something feels wrong about telling them everything before she’s even confirmed her acceptance.

Alexis nods her head for the back door. She grabs her dance bag, pink pointe shoe ribbons still hanging out the side, and pushes open the door for us to head through. When the sunlight hits me all over again, another too-late, too-shallow breath rattles my throat.

“I have another forty-five minutes until I have to teach a class,” Alexis says. She crosses her arms and leans up against the brick wall. “What’s up?”

“Summer got into Hamilton Prep,” I blurt.

Alexis's eyes widen. "Kelly, that's awesome! It's still early. I thought she wasn't supposed to hear back for another week or two—"

I nod, swallowing hard. "Yeah, that's what we thought. She must have made quite the impression at that interview I drove her out for."

"She's kind of a prodigy," Alexis says with a laugh. "So, what's the plan with your new townhouse? You going to finally give in and consider Marnie's requests to let her and Rachel buy it?"

"What if I'm not sure about all this?" I blurt. "Does it make me a bad mom after all the time I put into helping Summer with her application?"

Alexis pauses. There's no obvious judgment in the millisecond break, but there's a weight to it nonetheless. She's mulling over my admission, same way as I am. Because until I actually said those words out loud, I wasn't positive I felt them.

But now they're out there in the universe. I'm the bad mom sabotaging her kid's success because of . . . what? A few butterflies for the boss she's not even dating?

"You're overanalyzing," Alexis says. "Cut it out. You're not a bad mom."

"I should be buying her monogrammed backpacks and pencils and stuff though, right?"

"Just take a second."

Alexis puts a hand on my wrist, and all that shaky energy rockets to where her hand touches me. I make myself take another deep breath, and this one actually goes down clean and soothing.

"Why aren't you sure about Hamilton?" she asks.

"I don't know," I admit. "Maybe because we just moved? Maybe because I've never lived more than a few blocks away from my parents? Who will do my laundry now?"

Alexis does her best to hide an amused smirk at that. Her grip on my wrist tightens.

“What if I built this up too much?” I ask her. “I’ve been telling Summer she should do the elite private school thing since she was a toddler.”

“We’ve all seen the pictures of her in her baby Harvard sweatshirt.” Alexis’s smile softens.

“What if she struggles there? What if she hates it? What if I was wrong about everything?”

When did my heart start pounding in my ears? There’s another stupid, shaky breath. I have to close my eyes and concentrate hard on getting my breathing back under control. When I open them, Alexis is shaking her head.

She pulls her phone out of her pocket, and her fingers start flying across the keyboard. I reach out to stop her. She arches one dark eyebrow at me.

“If ever there was a night for an emergency Better Than Josh Everton Club meeting . . .”

“Marnie is back on night shifts for a while,” I remind her. “Rachel has that big project for work. And Josie—”

Alexis fakes a gag, then winks. “Ugh, how dare she be happy?”

She pauses, then puts her phone away. She slips her hands back into mine and squeezes.

“If this is about Josh, you should just remember that he was a bad one. So you build up love? That’s not the same as building up Hamilton—”

“I build up everything,” I correct. “How do I know I won’t be let down again?”

Alexis narrows her eyes, searching mine. My stomach turns over, and for the briefest moment, I’m terrified she’s about to ask me something more. But then she squeezes my hands again, brings them to her lips, and kisses them.

“You can’t. But you have to keep trying. Because God knows we’ve all heard the baby Harvard sweatshirt story too many times, and you need some new material.”

I allow myself a small smile back at that.

After dinner, Summer grabbed her weekend overnight bag, filled it with the usual toiletries (RIP her lipstick, which I’ve been stealing every day for a week now), and headed toward the front door.

“See you in two days!” she called over her shoulder.

I got a glimpse of Van’s truck through the open front door. He waved, I waved, and she was out in a blink.

And just like that, I was alone with my thoughts. With the thoughts I hardly wanted to confront with one of my best friends, much less with me, myself, and I.

I head to my cabinet and grab a bag of mini muffins. I rip them open with my teeth and wolf them down as I pace in my living room.

We talked about Hamilton over dinner. Obviously. But even seeing my daughter happy as she talked about the achievements that brought her here, I still had that pit in my stomach. I found myself turning over every possible reason we should stay in Button, though I’d spent Summer’s entire damn life working to get her out. And because I’d spent a lifetime pouring over the pros list, I quickly ran out of cons.

I also quickly ran out of distractions to keep me from thinking about Enzo. With Summer gone, I turned off all the lights except for the funky stained glass lamp in my living room, and now he’s living in every shadow. I pace by the kitchen table and remember how his fingertips were so sure on my skin. I grab a cup of coffee and wonder what the man says on a real date. What he might say to me if given a moment to slow down and think things over.

The night is warm and humid, and my windows are pulled open, but a quiver starts low in my belly anyway.

God, who was the woman who threw Enzo's words back at him and reached into his pants? I never make the first move. Too much risk. Too much on the line. But last night, I was so fearless and seductive. I hadn't just made the first move—I'd leaped right into it with no fear of not being caught.

Maybe this is like the married woman who shows up at the bar wearing her wedding ring. She knows nothing is going to come from the flirting, so she has a quiet confidence every single man picks up on. By the end of her night, men are flocking to buy her drinks.

Maybe it's knowing Enzo Barone isn't my true love that makes it easy to channel Confident Kelly. I've been in love before. Jeez, I must have been in love a million times. I know what that feels like, and—like he said himself—this isn't it. With Enzo, everything is blurred motion and breathless impulses and white-hot, nerve-exploding *touch*.

I could get used to this. Coworkers with benefits has a nice ring to it, maybe even better than friends with benefits.

A knock sounds at my door, and I nearly spill my coffee across the floor. I hadn't realized my grip on the mug had gotten so tight or that all my muscles seem to have stupefied at once.

Any semblance of cool I was just channeling evaporates into nothingness as I glance at the familiar dark shadow in my front window. After ditching the mug on the table, I paw a hand through my humidity-ridden hair and smooth the front of my tank top. Here I am, casually striking a pose and re-posing to open the door, whereas my daughter answers Shawn Diaz at the front door with a "Hey, man. See you later, Mom!"

The knock sounds again.

I settle for whipping the thing open, eyes probably wide and terrifying since I was in-between poses.

"Hey, man."

Did I seriously just steal Summer's pickup line?

Enzo is on my front step, hands shoved into his pockets as he blinks up at me.

He's changed out of his chef's coat, and it's just as startling as when I saw him dressed down that first night on the roof. Combined with the shaved facial hair, he really is almost a new person.

Enzo has on a tight-fitting navy button-down. It hugs the curves of his arms and is downright obscene with how it stretches across his chest. The top button is unbuttoned, and—Lord help me—I get a glimpse of dark hair beneath.

My mind rockets back to that shadowy night in the kitchen. Feeling, but not properly seeing, that hair as my fingers explored his pecs and abs and happy trail. I'd tugged at it, twisted in it, nearly yanked it out as I approached my climax, and this little peek is jolting the memory back into my cells.

“He's singing to his plants up there.”

I have to shake my head. “Sorry, what?”

“Matteo,” Enzo says. “He's up on my roof, planting by moonlight because he got some tip from my produce girl. He got one off-key minute into ‘Tiny Dancer,’ and I had to find an escape hatch.”

He looks past me into the house, and his body sways like he wants to lean and get a better view. It hits me then, knocking me square in the chest and sending a satisfying *zip* of heat between my legs. *He wants me to invite him in.*

“You can't hear Elton John from here,” I promise, stepping back to wave an arm behind me. “I was about to open some beers, though, and if I get more than a few in me, I've been known to channel Aretha Franklin.”

Enzo steps across the threshold, then glances back over his shoulder. Part of me wonders if he's second-guessing his decision to enter, but in another moment, he looks back at me, his eyes finding and fixing on the stretch of skin where my low-slung sweats expose my waist. Another one of those thrilling zings hits my gut.

“Come on,” I say, doing my best to forget he might be watching as I lead him in and toward my kitchen. “They're not

light beers, promise.”

“Summer here tonight?”

“She’s at her dad’s.” My heartbeat sounds in my ears as I open the fridge and retrieve two drinks for us.

I pass one to Enzo, and he opens it and downs a grateful swig. When he’s done, he does that thing I’ve seen men do in movies, where he swipes his arm across his mouth and glances down at the bottle like it’s done him a favor. It’s an expression not unlike what I remember from that first night in the kitchen, and there goes the damn *zip* again. He starts toward my living room to settle in, but I’m a beat behind him, over-thinking as usual.

Here it is, Kelly. Here’s your chance to channel Coworkers with Benefits Girl, Cool Girl, Girl with the Non-Committal Tattoo.

“You know, if you wanted to come over, you could have just said so.”

I sit in one of my easy chairs, cross one leg over the other, and try to act casual. For whatever reason, Enzo hasn’t made himself at home on the couch yet and is still standing just at its edge. His lips twitch as he watches me, and the effect is unsettling. He glances down at the ground, scrubbing at the back of his neck, and the tips of his ears tinge pink.

“You think I made up an excuse to come over here?”

He looks back at me and pins me with those dark eyes.

Shit. I gulp.

“I think that busybody Penny Nicholson from the bakery next door to Alessi’s would have phoned in a complaint right now if Matteo was really all in on Elton John.”

He furrows his brow, and an unexpected smirk dances across his lips. Enzo walks to my open kitchen window, pushing it back further. I can make out the vague, warbled notes of “Goodbye Yellow Brick Road,” and my blood runs cold. I stare down hard at my own beer bottle, vowing never to

look at another man again if God will only make this one disappear right now.

Enzo shuts the window. I'm still looking down, but I hear his boots walking along my kitchen floor and passing back onto the living room carpet.

"To be clear, I wasn't looking for an excuse," he says, surprising me again. He takes my chin, turning my face up to meet his. "But Arlo told me that normal people—his fucking words, not mine—don't just barrel down their neighbor's front door because she wore their hair the way they liked on shift today."

"There is way too much to unpack there." I blink too many times. "*Arlo* knows about this? And . . . and you like my hair?"

My fingers go to the long waves tucked behind my ears. Enzo didn't just notice something about me; he paid enough attention to have a favorite.

"And what's this about barreling doors down?" I continue, more than a little unsteady, even in my chair. "You wanted . . . You . . ."

"Look, I got through the door with the wood intact, didn't I? Don't question a good thing."

In a heartbeat, he's got me back on my feet and my drink set aside on a coffee table. His hips have found mine, and now they're anchoring me to the wall. Enzo has his weight thrown into one hand that rests on the wall just above my shoulder while his other hand plays with the hem of my tank top. He twists the fabric, pulling it taut over my chest. A moment later, he lets it go to dance his fingers up my stomach and then my rib cage. His fingertips whisper across the bottom curve of my breast, tightening every muscle inside me until I'm frozen in place.

"Don't listen to Arlo," I pant. "Summer and I have been meaning to get a new front door anyway."

His mouth finds the side of my neck, and his tongue is hot as he licks teasing circles there.

“You distracted me at work today,” he growls against my skin. His other hand leaves the wall as the first starts to tug and tease at my nipple. He brings his fingers to the stretch of my exposed tummy now, sliding back and forth along the elastic of my waistband. “Nothing tasted right. Nothing was sweet enough. There was this elusive fucking flavor, this thing I never got to taste, but it consumed me like my goddamn Moby Dick.”

His fingers are past my waistband now. They caress over my mound, and I can’t help but lean into him as he circles my clit and then dips into my heated center. Enzo’s teeth nip at my neck as I shiver and clutch at the back of his shirt.

Then he pulls his hand out and leaves my neck alone long enough to make eye contact with me. He slips two fingers into his parted lips, and his eyes close. He hums as he savors the flavor, and there’s a gratifying *pop* as he sucks the tips.

“Mmm.” His groan is low and appreciative and yearning. “There it is. That’s what I’ve been craving.”

“Y-you want to taste me?” I stutter over my words. It’s a miracle I have any voice left.

Enzo rewards my efforts with another long, slow lick up my throat. When he reaches my jawline, he takes my chin in his hand and holds it firm. My lips part obediently, and the barest tip of his tongue flicks out into my mouth.

He pulls back, smirking.

“You’re fucking delicious,” he mutters. “I’ve never wanted to eat anything more in my life.”

Okay, so I’ve always been a little weird about letting men kiss me after they’ve had my stuff in their mouth. But the way Enzo feeds me his tongue now, like he just can’t fucking handle how delicious I am, so he has to . . . *has to* share it.

A moment later, I’m sucking on his tongue. I’m practically climbing up his body, guiding his thick, solid erection against my pussy as I swallow him down.

Somehow Enzo’s fist has found the back of my head. His hand knots in my hair, and he pulls my head back. My mouth

opens further, and now he's fully fucking me with his tongue. Soft, slow strokes at first, but they get more desperate and more intense and more deliciously sloppy with each passing second.

"When I finally get back inside you, I'm going to put my mouth right back here on yours while I fuck you," he growls against my mouth. "I want to feel how your lips part when I slide into you. I want you to choke on my tongue as I bring you to climax."

Freaking *filthy*. I want this tongue over every surface of my body. I need it to slide down the insides of my thighs, raking up my stomach toward the valley between my breasts, flicking my nipples with teasing strokes.

I'm unashamedly humping into him now. Enzo has me straddling one thick, solid thigh, and I'm riding it, getting a little higher each time my stomach rubs up against his jutting erection to find his pants getting damper and damper.

"Need it now," I pant. "God, I'm too empty. Fill me up. Please."

I still my hips and grapple for his waistband. Lightning fast, Enzo pins both my wrists up against the wall. I slide down when his thigh gives from underneath me, and now I'm even emptier than before, positively aching with the need to be filled.

"Uh-uh," he mutters, nipping at my earlobe. My head rolls in response—I can't control it. "I told you before, I'm selfish. If I'm hungry, I'm going to fucking eat."

He drops to his knees.

My breath catches as Enzo rips down my shorts. My back slams against the wall as he slings one leg over his shoulder, then the other.

I can't stop watching. With any other man, I'd be running through the mental checklist: Did I shave? Do I smell nice? Is this what he expected?

But Enzo curses, and the checklist is annihilated. He rolls his neck back, and for a second, I think he might spit over his

shoulder. Instead, one of my legs shifts as he punches into my wall. He rakes a hand down across his face.

“Goddamn,” he mutters before diving in.

Everything I felt in my mouth a minute ago is repeated between my legs. Just as before, Enzo starts slow and soft, like he’s feeling things out. A moment later, though, his fingertips are digging into my legs as he plunges so deep my eyes cross. He laps at me like I’m sweet as sugar, like he’s getting life from each lick. And when he swirls the tip of his tongue across my clit and gives it an unforgiving, overstimulating suck that *pops* between his lips, stars explode across my vision.

“Yes,” I pant. “Please, Enzo, *yes*.”

I can’t get enough of watching his tongue disappear and reappear. His stubble is wet, and it scratches against my skin as he buries his face. God, I want him fucking coated and slick when he finally stops.

I’m getting too close. My core has drawn in so tight my movements have gone rigid. My nipples are hard enough to damn near cut through my tank top. I let go of Enzo’s head only long enough to shamelessly stroke my thumbs over the swollen buds.

“I can taste your fucking orgasm.” His words are muted against my pussy, and the vibrations ripple inside me. “It’s so close. Now spread your fucking legs wider, and let me get to it.”

A lightbulb goes off in the back of my brain. I make myself take a deep breath, close my eyes tight for just a second, then thread my fingers through Enzo’s hair again. I rip back his head. His dark eyes smolder at me, and his nostrils flare.

“Kelly . . .” he warns.

He licks his lips. *Actually* licks his lips, all slow and deliberate, the way I’ve seen him do in the kitchen.

It only serves to firm up my resolve. I push Enzo away, and in his precarious position, he falls to the ground and onto his elbows. By the time he’s getting his bearings, I climb on

top of him, pull his pants down to stretch across those massive thighs, and snatch out that thick rod that's consumed my every thought since our first time, positioning it so my slit hovers over his weeping head.

Enzo grabs my arms now, a new desperation to his expression.

“Okay, time the fuck out,” he says. “Seriously. My condom is in my wallet, which I was stupid enough to take out and leave on your table.”

“You're not coming in me,” I tell him. “A quick ride, then I'm on my back, and you get to see what I taste like after I've been fucked.”

His eyes darken. I drop down, letting his thick head spread me open. We both groan as we settle into a slow, grinding pace.

“Okay,” he pants. His jaw is so damn tight I can see a vein dancing at the side of his throat. “Before I come, Kelly . . . You've got to . . .”

He's swearing and grunting. Shaking his head like the ride almost pains him. Sweat beads at his temples and shines across his Adam's apple. The sight makes me so slick that his cock pounds into me with an obscene, wet slap.

Then he pushes me off him and onto my back, yanking his pants off his thighs and back up to his waist before spreading my legs with both hands. My cunt immediately misses him, and I'm left spasming for his girth, but I don't want for long. In a moment, Enzo yanks me closer, and that tongue sweeps across my clit.

“Goddamn,” he curses again. His tongue dips into my pussy, stroking me relentlessly. “Come for me now, *amorina*. Let me taste what my cock does to you.”

I can't help but do what I'm told. Hey, he's the boss.

The climax wrings me out and leaves me empty. I am paralyzed and exploding, on fire and shocked with ice. My core clenches and my teeth grind. I know I'm saying words, but God help me if Enzo were to quiz me on what they were.

When it's done—when it's over, and he's rolling down onto my living room floor next to me, and we're both just staring up at my ceiling, numb—he clears his throat.

“Holy hell. That was something.” He sighs, the sound rich and deep.

When he's not looking at me, it's harder to read him. I can't help myself; I roll my neck and watch his shadowy profile.

“But you liked it?”

He barks with laughter, then turns to look at me. “Kelly —”

Enzo starts to sit up, then falls back down. He covers his face with both hands.

“*Dio mio*,” he mutters. “Thank God I live next door.”

There's a twinge in my gut. “So you can just pop back to your house now that we're done, right?”

He laughs again, and I chew my lip.

“What?” I ask.

He shakes his head, turning back to stare up at the ceiling. “I can't look at you right now.”

I sit up, indignation flooding me just as fast as my orgasm from a moment ago. “Excuse me?”

He covers his face again. “Don't make me say it, woman.”

“Say what?”

He mutters something.

“Huh?”

Enzo sighs, slaps his palms down on the ground, and stares up. “I came in my pants.”

I slap a hand over my mouth. Any worry or indignation is gone as fast as they came, replaced with a strange sense of triumph.

“Next time, we do this at my place,” he says. “I’m kicking Elton John out for the night. Or I learn how to fucking control myself.”

I settle back down on the ground beside him. Not cuddling him—that would be decidedly couple-y of us, and this isn’t that. Still, I grin up at the ceiling.

So there’s going to be a next time.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: ENZO

A few days later, Matteo's karaoke take on "Bennie and the Jets" carries across the summer air as Kelly pulls open her front door for me before heading back into her house.

She pauses, turns back with a sheepish smile, and asks, "More beers? Summer and I have at least three entire recorded seasons of a drag show competition on the TV."

She disappears for her fridge, leaving me to let myself in and shut the door behind me.

"Do you remember when TVs were black-and-white and had one channel?" I grunt as I take my seat on the edge of the couch.

Kelly is on the other side now, her legs crisscrossed underneath her as she sips at her beer. The show on TV is a ludicrous combination of pop songs and colors and eye makeup. Kelly glances over at me, raising one amused eyebrow.

"Uh, do *you* remember when TVs were black-and-white and had one channel? How old are you, Enzo?"

"I don't watch a lot of TV," I say with a shrug before knocking back another swig of my drink.

"Come on, not even cooking shows? You referenced *Chopped!*"

"I know *Chopped*. Everyone in the business knows *Chopped*."

"So you didn't watch *Game of Thrones*?" She probes. I shake my head. "*The Office? Breaking Bad?* Come on, not even *America's Got—*"

She pauses. I do my best to stare straight forward, but her chuckle reveals she's on to me. I sigh and send her a chastising look, which does nothing to abate the truly riotous laughter that follows.

"So Enzo Barone is an *America's Got Talent* fiend."

“Some of their stories are really inspirational.”

Kelly gets on her knees, shuffling closer to me on the couch. I can smell her coconut shampoo when she’s this close, but I don’t let on.

“It’s the little kids who sing, isn’t it? You’re totally a sucker for little kids who sing, I can tell.”

She relaxes back onto her end of the couch, and I’m still smiling over at her like a dork. I clear my throat and press my beer to the back of my neck.

“So where’s Summer tonight?” I ask. I glance back at her bedroom, hoping it doesn’t look like I just came crawling over for sex.

“Last night at her dad’s for the weekend,” Kelly explains. “Hey, do you want snacks?”

She sets down her beer and gets up.

“More terrible junk food?” I ask.

I watch as Kelly walks to the kitchen, sweeping her hair up and expertly knotting it. She pulls open a drawer, retrieves a pair of disposable wooden chopsticks, hip-bumps the drawer shut, and spears her bun into place.

“Okay, seriously,” she continues. “What did a Pop-Tart ever do to you, buddy?”

I swallow hard, unable to search for the proper response, as I notice that stretch of creamy neck that had been hidden under her coppery hair. There are barely-there red marks, the kind no one would take notice of if they didn’t know to look. But seeing them now instantly leaves my lips buzzing with memory. I’m already replaying how it felt to lick up that throat. To taste us all jumbled up together on her tongue. To catch her kiss and pin her in place as she lost control of her faculties and spasmed beneath me.

I already want her again. Not my brightest idea if we’re keeping this casual. Repeat offenses come dangerously close to relationship territory.

When Kelly returns to the couch with a box of something bright and sugary, my gaze rockets back to the TV.

When she sits down, she cracks open her cereal, retrieves a handful, and tosses the box to me. I catch it, holding it up in the light of the TV to find myself face to face with a cartoon peacock.

“Did you know the only fruit that is naturally blue are blueberries?” I ask. I replace the folds at the top of the box and set it on Kelly’s coffee table. “What you’re eating now could be anything. Blue corn. Blue cheese. Hey, cyanide is blue.”

“So are calla lilies, oceans, and sunny skies.” She crunches down and grins, revealing a mouthful of the blue stuff.

She grabs the box off the coffee table, takes my hand, and dumps a fistful of cereal into my palm. It takes way more control than I’d like not to catch her by the wrist, as I have a few times now. Make her slow as I enjoy how her breath catches. Maybe I’d even eat the damn cereal just so she could watch my mouth work.

I might as well be a kid going through fucking puberty. I swallow past something thick in my throat.

“If you think about it, by eating this cereal, you’re—” I pause and shake my head. “Christ. I did not just use the phrase *if you think about it*.”

“What?” She turns to me, cheeks full of cereal, and the look is way too fucking endearing considering what she’s shoveling into her mouth.

“It’s my brother,” I say, shoving my hands under my thighs. I second-guess the gesture and wrap them around my beer bottle in an attempt to look more normal. “Matteo loves that phrase. Every time he uses it, he ends up fucking something up in my apartment.”

Kelly snorts and tucks her legs underneath her, the same way she had them before she got up for the snack.

“How’s everything going with him this week?”

I pause to consider. “My mom showed up the other day. She wants Matteo to move in with her.”

As soon as I say the words, I blink in surprise. Where did that come from?

“And you want him to stay,” Kelly says. “Told ya, you have a thing for kids singing . . .”

That earns a smile from me. When I glance over at her, she’s grinning. She turns to look at me, resting her beer in her lap and her head on the couch.

“Well? Is he going to move?”

“I hope not,” I admit. “I might have . . . gotten used to having him around.”

Kelly crosses her arms and sizes me up. “You admit to something, I admit to something. That makes us even, right? Not relationship-y?”

“Not relationship-y,” I confirm.

She takes a deep breath. “When Summer was little and I was splitting up with Van, it wasn’t like he was super enthused to have a four-year-old cramping his bachelor style. But his parents were another story. They had money, and they liked to butter Summer up when she was staying with her dad. All the expensive toys. They let her repaint her bedroom and pick out a fancy canopy for her bed and purchase one of those dolls that looked just like her. Do you remember those?”

I shake my head, and Kelly shrugs. She knocks back another swig of beer.

“Anyway, they had me beat when it came to money. So I played the experience angle.”

“The experience angle?”

“They gave her stuff, I gave her adventure.” She taps the side of her nose. “We bonded. Summer developed a crippling addiction to amusement parks, and the expensive doll got played with maybe three times in total.”

“I won’t sing ‘Kumbaya’ with the kid,” I tell her. “You heard his Elton John. And we live way too far for Disney World to be practical.”

She rolls her eyes. “Hey, I know! My friend Rachel just did some tech work for an adult playground company.”

“What are adult playgrounds?”

“Like, laser tag and trampolines and stuff. Anyway, they gave Rachel a bunch of free passes, and she gave some to me and Summer. Let us take you guys!”

“Seriously?”

Our conversation is interrupted by a sudden burst of song from the TV. A man in a bright blond wig and pink high heels has stepped on a stage, and he whips his head in aggressive circles. Kelly laughs and elbows me.

“Seriously.”

I mull over that proposal for a second. We both watch Blondie strut his stuff and lip-synch to Madonna, but my mind is back on the kid one roof over.

“I think that could be good for him,” I decide. “Even if one weekend out doesn’t convince him to stay in the one-room apartment with his asshole brother.”

“Is Matteo not liking Button or something?”

“No, it’s not that.”

I take another swig of my beer, letting it swish around at the back of my mouth for a moment before I swallow.

Here I am again, about to say more than I should to Kelly Hastings. But even as I chastise myself for letting the conversation get this far, the confession is already coming out of my mouth.

“We had a pretty pampered existence,” I say. “I mean, you could have guessed that, considering who our father is. I think it could be good for Matteo to have some real-world experiences if he’s just going to go back to our mom in a few weeks. Maybe it won’t be enough to have him striking out on

his own again within the year, but maybe he will remember, and who knows? In another year, if Dad is on his back again, maybe he'll remember that life can be better. That he can choose his own path, do his own things, just have fun, and be a twenty-two-year-old for a minute. I'd like that for him."

Kelly nods along. "Yeah. Yeah, let's take him out then. Summer will love it. She's wanted me to take Rachel up on these passes since we got them."

"They serve beer there? I'll let you lot embarrass yourselves on the laser tag and—"

"No way. Uh-uh." She shakes her head, grinning. "You're not getting out of laser tag, buddy."

Her eyes widen, and she presses her lips together.

"Um, I mean, not that you even have to come with us if your only goal is to socialize Matteo," she backtracks. "If you're too busy or laser tag is too lame, it's not a problem."

"Not too busy."

A beat passes, the kind loaded with so many almost things to say. I realize I'm smiling, and I scratch at the back of my neck like I've got a reset button back there.

"Oh, hey!" Kelly adjusts, sitting back on her heels again. "I forgot to tell you Summer's big news!"

"*Third* base with Shawn Diaz?"

Kelly unearths a throw pillow from beneath her ass and chucks it at my head. I catch it, placing it carefully in my lap to hide my growing erection.

"She got into Hamilton Prep. It's, um, this private school in South Carolina."

"Wow. Way to go, Summer."

Kelly smiles, and her cheeks blossom a soft pink. She nods, tucking her hair behind one ear.

"I might have been encouraging her admission since she first found the place," she admits. "My friends give me a hard

time for having planned out her doctorate degree before she graduated elementary school.”

“You care about your kid.” I shrug. “More than some parents can say.”

More than mine could.

“Yeah, well, it was always the big goal we were working toward. I don’t know if I ever thought Summer would really get in, but I wanted to try for more than I had, right? I barely made it to graduation with a newborn, and the college year I was supposed to spend up north played out at community college. And now it’s here. Now she’s in.”

She draws a deep breath, but it doesn’t quite sound like it makes its way to her belly. Kelly puts a hand to her stomach, steadying herself.

“So, now you two move?”

“So now we move,” she repeats. Her eyes flick up, meeting mine for the barest moment.

I nod, unsettled by the way my insides wring themselves out as I consider Kelly moving to South Carolina. We’re non-committed. Like she said before, we barely even qualify as friends. What should this matter to me?

“Is this your two weeks’ notice?” I ask her.

“Hardly.” She laughs, and the sound breaks something fragile that was hanging in the silence. “Though that is a conversation to have soon, I suppose. I mean . . . if Summer ends up going. We didn’t consider her actually getting in, so we hardly considered follow-through.”

“Why wouldn’t you guys go?”

There’s that flick toward my eyes again. My breath catches, and my gut twists in on itself. Kelly opens her mouth to say something but stops short. She glances down at her lap and plays with the hem of her shirt. There’s more here, something she isn’t saying.

“You know, taking a risk was the best thing I ever did for myself,” I tell her. “A move could be good for Summer. And

you.”

She looks back up. Those green eyes cut me to the quick.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I always wanted out from under Dad’s thumb, but actually making it on my own was pretty terrifying when the time came. But it gave me the chance to challenge myself. To prove my salt.”

“You own your own restaurant now.”

“And it’s the best food on the East Coast.” I begrudge her a small smile.

Her face lights up in response, and my chest lightens with it.

“Debatable. You still haven’t had my buttered Pop-Tart.”

“You’ll like South Carolina, Kelly. You’ll be awesome out there. Don’t let your doubt stop you from something great.”

Yet another lull in the conversation. The quiet hums between us. Only this beat is different; this time, I could swear my face is pulling toward Kelly’s. That quiet hum is actually a magnetic force, and each second spent fighting it only exhausts my energies and further perplexes me.

“Well.” I clear my throat, set down my beer, and slap my knees. “Something, something, I probably have a produce shipment coming early tomorrow.”

“You need to get going.” She nods, understanding.

I need to get away before I kiss this woman. It’s already dangerous to sleep with her, but it would be damning to give her more when our terms are already so easy and clear.

We both get up, and I follow Kelly down the hall to her front door.

Does this feel like love to you?

I’m ending things without a kiss. I’m not spending the night. And I just encouraged Kelly to move away and leave Alessi’s behind.

“Hey, so, want to make laser tag happen tomorrow?” Kelly asks me. “I’m not scheduled to come in, and since Alessi’s opens late on Mondays anyway—”

“I’m the boss,” I interject. “I can have Arlo cover for me in the afternoon. Laser tag. Yeah. Sure.”

Not one of my smarter moves. Here I was just praising myself for keeping my distance when it comes to Kelly, and now I’m making plans with her?

Then again, this could be an opportunity to prove to both of us that we’re “just friends” material. We can keep the day light and carefree, and we wouldn’t even have the chance to get naked together.

“Tomorrow,” Kelly repeats, sending me a soft, warm smile.

“Night,” I say, waving a hand behind me as I start for home.

“Night, Enzo.”

“So, how did the crow taste?”

I stop at the bottom of the stairs, blinking too much. I’m still in my wake-up haze. When I got up this morning, Matteo wasn’t out on the balcony with coffee, so I decided to come downstairs for the espresso. I should have anticipated Arlo lying in wait for me since he had the last few days off and didn’t get follow-up on my Kelly situation.

“Sorry?” I ask.

The old man hip-checks me as I pass him to get to the coffee. I growl at him, which only earns me an amused laugh.

“The crow,” he prompts. “You went over to apologize to the lady, didn’t you? Haven’t had a moment alone with you lately.”

I stop short, memories from last night fighting for limited room in my sleep-addled brain.

“The crow tasted . . . like an improvised dinner.”

He arches one gray eyebrow in my direction. “Bringing the woman food is a solid start.”

“Yeah, I mean, it would be. Except that it was actually the finish line. After we . . . did things on her table.”

Arlo’s chopping stops. Then he ditches his knife and whisks his way toward my pantry. He pulls out sugar and flour, piling ingredients on the counter.

“Arlo?”

“It’s cake day, my boy!” he announces. “When the day comes that Enzo Barone finally settles down . . .”

“There was no settling down,” I correct. “There was inappropriate kitchen behavior. And, um, inappropriate living room behavior. And roof behavior before all that.”

He stops and turns to me, skewering me with slanted gray eyes under discerning caterpillar eyebrows.

“You aren’t dating Kelly?”

“She’s still my employee,” I say. I pick up the sugar and flour and replace them in the pantry, shutting the door behind me. “She’s still my neighbor. And I still don’t do relationships.”

Which is all true. So why is it the declaration comes out sounding stilted and strange? Am I hungover from the singular amount of pussy I’ve gotten in years?

Arlo sighs and kneads at his temple. “Okay, you need something bigger than a stadium speaker this time. I know a guy who’s a skywriter, and if you pay him enough to write out an apology . . .”

I laugh at that. “It’s an arrangement between us!” I promise. “She’s totally fine with it.”

Arlo still gives me a particularly evil eyeball.

“Kelly proposed a friends-with-benefits arrangement,” I tell him. “She’s the one who came up with it, and she has more reasons than me to stay single.”

“I’m keeping the skywriter on hold.”

“Arlo.”

His narrowed gaze finally gives. Arlo heaves a big sigh, shrugs, and slips his hands into the pockets of his coat.

“Gloria is making a casserole for dinner tomorrow.”

I grimace, and he shrugs again.

“She thinks she’s doing me a favor by not allowing me to cook,” he explains. “You and Matteo are still coming over for dinner?”

“We’ll be there.”

I’d forgotten about dinner with Arlo and his wife. For nearly as long as Arlo has worked for me, we’ve had a standing appointment at his place once a month. Gloria cooks something terrible—but usually nothing as offensive as casserole—we all drink too much to make up for it, and I end up offering a serving job to one of Arlo’s thousand grandkids.

“Feel free to bring a plus-one,” Arlo says, all casual like, as he turns back to his chopping. “That way Gloria won’t have enough casserole and will have to concede to me making a salad.”

I can hear the blood in my ears, sifting through my veins entirely too quickly.

My pocket buzzes, and a heat I hadn’t realized was there recedes from my cheeks as I check my phone. *MOM.*

“You’re some kind of evil,” I tell Arlo as I hold up my phone screen for him to see. I click on the call, walking over to the empty front of house to talk. “Hey, Mom.”

“Enzo, baby!”

I make for the laundered pile of tablecloths and start folding. “So, is Matteo not picking up his phone or something?”

“I wanted to talk to you!” I stop folding and perch the phone between my shoulder and my ear so I can cross my arms. “I’m coming back through town for an appointment. I was wondering . . . I wanted to see if you two were free to

spend a weekend in Savannah with me? We could eat down by the river front, listen to live music. It will be like all those trips to Venice Beach growing up.”

My shoulders stiffen, and for whatever reason, I find myself glancing through the window and up at Kelly’s townhome. The words “sorry, no” are already forming on my lips, and I almost swallow them down.

Almost.

“Sorry, Mom,” I say. “We’re busy that weekend—”

“You don’t even know which weekend it is.”

She’s got me there. I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose, and pull out a chair to collapse into it.

“Okay, you don’t have to come,” Mom amends. “Just Matteo. I won’t force anything on you. Can you do that for me? Can you talk to your brother?”

“It’s not about having you forced on me,” I say. “It’s about giving the kid some distance. It’s about respecting the fact that he needs time and independence—”

“This isn’t me trying to modify his independence,” Mom says, her voice just a little bit quieter. “And I’m inviting you along not just because I want to see both of my sons but because that way, you can keep an eye on him. Watch out for him the way you always want to.”

I stop at that. She almost sounds genuine. Everything that made me take pause when she showed up at Alessi’s the other day is suddenly amplified. I bite the back of my tongue as I mull things over.

“You can text me the dates,” I tell her. “I’ll look at them. No promises.”

She breathes a sigh of relief. “And no setups with any of my girlfriends’ daughters while you’re there or making you come with me to my favorite barbecue restaurants.”

That gets a chuckle. “I hadn’t considered either of those things.”

“Thank you, Enzo,” Mom says. “Just . . . thank you.”

“Did you reach out to Matteo first?” I ask.

“There might have been a call.”

“Of course.”

“He told me I ought to run it by you,” she says. “He said something about how you have more of a handle on this time of life. Something about how he makes impulsive decisions, and you don’t. And then he said something about beets in top hats and tomatoes with eye patches or something, I wasn’t really listening anymore.”

I smile softly, remembering the dorky signs Matteo wanted for his garden. I spied them when I went up to the roof last night after Kelly’s place. He’d been asleep on the pullout, and I’d needed some fresh air. I’d ended up staring out across downtown Button after a cartoon tour of our new garden, complete with monocled broccoli and mustachioed cabbage.

“I’ll get back to you, Mom.”

And I mean it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: KELLY

I wake up too early to a horn honking in the drive. I throw back my comforter, stare up at my blank expanse of ceiling, and remind myself of the coffee maker waiting just outside my door.

It's Monday morning. Alessi's always opens later on Monday mornings; Enzo's little way of letting us recover from Sunday brunch madness.

The horn honks again, and I make myself get up and straggle to the window. I prop it open and wave one hand.

"Thanks, Van!" I yell through a yawn.

Summer sees me from halfway across the lawn. She's entirely too awake for—I check my Fitbit—well, shoot. It's already nearly ten.

And just like that, last night cuts through the morning fog. That now-familiar zip races up my spine as I tuck away the memory of another late night spent with one of my new favorite house guests. In fact, he's becoming less house guest and more permanent fixture. My heartbeat rings in my ears.

In the distance, my front door opens and closes. I pull my robe off the bedpost and stagger out my door.

"One shot or two?" Summer asks, already busying herself at the coffee maker.

"Other parents mocked me for my strictness, but I raised the best little barista in Button," I mutter.

I hold up two fingers and collapse at the kitchen table.

There's a knock at the door. We glance at each other.

"Uh, who the heck is that?"

I wince. "I probably should have started with a debrief. We've got plans today to go with Enzo and Matteo to Rachel's laser tag place."

"Laser tag?!" Summer lights up, hopping from foot to foot. Way, way too awake.

I make a show of stretching like a cat before I will myself to get up and answer the door. There's too much light filtering in through the front windows. I hold up one hand to shield my eyes as I pull back the door.

"Come on in, Matteo."

My young neighbor holds up two lumpy bags and grins. "We have radishes!"

I reach forward and pinch his cheek. Matteo frowns before shifting his bags to rub at the red spot.

"What was that for?"

"You're here with radishes before ten a.m. Just had to see if I was dreaming."

He nods somberly, not even questioning that I just pinched him instead of myself. I wave Matteo in, and he follows me with his radish bags into the entryway.

"Summer, we have radishes!" I call.

She pokes her head out from the kitchen. "Like, for cooking?"

"Like, for cooking?" I repeat my daughter's question, putting my hands on my hips and cocking my head at Matteo.

"They were the first thing I planted," he gushes. "Before Enzo even put the raised beds on the roof, I had them in these baby planters in the kitchen. I figured I'd bring you some for salads or roasting or crostini—"

"Can you put it on a Pop-Tart?" Summer asks, taking the question right out of my mouth.

I smile a little to myself.

Matteo blinks. "I'm not sure that would taste super awesome."

"She's kidding," I explain. "It's just that neither one of us is much of a cook."

"Oh!" Matteo laughs. "Well, I've been sent to collect you two for brunch. We'll just bring these back to Alessi's and

have Enzo put them in something good. And he's real creative, so I bet he could incorporate Pop-Tarts into a salad or something if that's how you like it."

Summer starts to interject with further explanation, but I hold up a hand.

"We'll meet you at the restaurant in five," I explain. "Just give me a second to get dressed."

Five minutes later, my heart is doing that thing that makes me extremely worried I'm going to have a midthirties heart attack. Summer is blissfully ignorant as Matteo greets us at the door, a platter in hand.

"Hey!" she calls to him, waving. "We brought coffee."

She holds up the pot and four mugs looped through her fingers.

"Enzo made you an appetizer," Matteo says. "I mentioned the Pop-Tart, and he said he knew your favorite amuse-bouche, Kelly."

He holds out the plate. Stupid heart, I swear it stops for at least five seconds as I take in the dish.

Tiny, bite-sized Pop-Tarts are fanned across the tray, revealing their gooey cinnamon innards. They're toasted to perfection and slathered in . . .

"Homemade apple butter," Matteo provides.

Summer pops one in her mouth and hums in approval, flashing Matteo a thumbs-up.

"This beats the salted butter, Mom," she says through a mouthful.

I take my own bite and follow her in. We snake past tables to where the dining room gives way to the open kitchen. And thank God I have a full mouth because I don't have a second to collect myself after the little apple butter surprise.

Enzo is at the massive island, working just in front of the plate-glass window that shields the rest of the industrial kitchen. No chef's coat, nothing formal. He's got his flannel

sleeves—who the hell wears flannel in the summer except for unreasonably hot men?—rolled to his elbows, revealing a mismatched quilt of faded black ink. His hair is curlier than usual, a little lopsided even, like he rolled out of bed and just ran his fingers through it. I can picture him waking up that way, scratching through his stubble as he looks in his mirror and deciding, “Oh hell, this is good enough.”

He looks up from his work and waves.

“*Buongiorno!*”

“Buongiorno,” I manage to stutter back, Pop-Tart crumbs spittling out. Lord.

Matteo and Summer round the island to cross from the dining room into the kitchen, but I hang back for a half second of space. I need it to collect myself before I get too close to Morning Enzo. I was tempted to think of him this way last night when I’d imagined what it might be like to have him stay over. But to actually see him now, still a little bleary-eyed and mussed . . . it’s doing things to me.

“Um, you made my Pop-Tarts,” I say as I finally brave the kitchen.

He glances my way. Is that a smile hiding in the corner of his mouth?

“I’ll admit they were better than I thought they’d be.”

“You did something nice.” My smile is stupid and giddy and careens its way onto my features.

Enzo’s eyes narrow, firmly cementing his familiar grump face. “Don’t tell the masses.”

“We don’t have to actually eat radishes on Pop-Tarts, do we?” Matteo asks. “I mean, since you had Pop-Tarts already.”

“Something else is fine,” I agree.

“Avocado toast?” Summer suggests.

Enzo nods at her. “Your kid has vision, Hastings. No wonder she got into that preppy school.”

Summer glances back at me, and there goes my breath, tripping me up again.

But above any weirdness I might feel about this next stage in my kid's life, I'm more so pleased that Enzo remembered the little detail from what we talked about. He remembered buttered Pop-Tarts. He was paying attention.

"That reminds me that I need to send back my acceptance today, Mom," Summer says, popping another Pop-Tart bite into her mouth.

"You boys mind if we make a trip to the post office before we head to laser tag?" I ask. I stiffly take the spot at the counter next to Enzo, letting my fingertips rest on the steel.

"No problem at all." He elbows me where the others can't see.

When I steal a look at him, he's still got on his grump face. But I'm smiling big enough for the both of us.

Enzo gives the rest of us jobs in the kitchen. None of us are as adept as him. In fact, it's lucky none of us loses a finger. But he's more patient than I thought he'd be, and he circles around to each of our stations, giving the occasional grunt of approval. When he makes his way to my station, I have to swallow that sappy smile and shove it as far down as it'll go.

Because what's it there for, anyway? So he did something nice for me. That's neighborly. That's good boss-employee relations, even. He's not coming around to show me how to hold a knife properly, like you might see in some Sandra Bullock rom-com. He's not lingering longer than he should or praising my radishes any more than the others.

None of it is what I've experienced in other real relationships. We're not doing the dance I know so well, where I say something flirty and he comes back with his own cutesy one-liner. Enzo isn't buttering up Summer, and he isn't making some not-so-subtle hint that I can pay him back for the Pop-Tarts with gross favors in bed.

He's just . . . doing his usual thing. Chef-ing. This isn't what love feels like.

Right?

Laser tag is everything I assumed it would be, plus a lot more sweat and men in their forties taking the game way too seriously. It's all purple lights and space sounds and these big black bunkers to hide under so you scare the poop right out of your opponents.

And it's fun. Insanely fun. Summer ends up being ridiculously good with a laser gun, Matteo somehow shoots himself several times right out of the gate, and Enzo takes the whole thing about as seriously as those forty-year-old men who brought their own play gear. He's ducking around all the bunkers, sneaking up behind me, and slashing across his throat threateningly when I glimpse him. He's the Italian Terminator.

We end our afternoon at a snack station on-site that sells cardboard pizza and sugary drinks. Summer and Matteo beg for round two, but neither Enzo nor I are biting. We agree to watch the game from the viewing level up top, and Enzo heads back to the snack station to grab us beers as I catch the start of play.

"Drinks are on me," he says as he passes off my thin cup. He takes a long pull from his drink, but that doesn't prevent me from catching his self-satisfied smile. "Had to make it up to you after beating your ass out there."

"You like this way more than I thought you would," I laugh.

"How much do you think annual passes are?" Enzo asks.

My laugh turns full donkey bray. I look at him, balking. "Seriously?"

He stiffens up, clearing his throat. "I mean . . . for Matteo . . ."

Still, the hint of a smile is tucked in the corner of his mouth. Seeing it and knowing he's trying to hold it back fills me right up to the brim. I know it's stupid and against my own rules, but I'm positively giddy right now.

Enzo is quiet for a moment, and I realize the smile has started to fade. He's tracking Matteo's movements below as his brother stalks one of the guys from the big group of older men.

"My mom called me at Alessi's again," he tells me. "She wants to be more involved in his life. In our lives, actually."

"Enzo, that's great," I say. "Isn't that what you wanted and what you want for your brother?"

"I don't want him to get let down," he replies. "And . . . And maybe I don't like the idea of someone taking Matteo away so soon. All that change can't be what he needs right now."

The puzzle pieces start locking into place. "You need a bro to come to the laser tag place with you?"

He swallows, and I watch the lump pass down his throat and disappear into his chest. He's still fixed on the game below.

"You know you're allowed to want him to stay," I say. "You're allowed to admit Matteo being here is more than just about keeping a roof over his head. He worships you, Enzo."

"I've just gotten used to having him around," Enzo says. His voice is quiet, especially under all these stupid space and laser noises. He's choking over the words, though his stoic face gives nothing away. He's still so concentrated on the game, his eyes narrowed and his jaw set. "My mom isn't the same as my dad. But she's still flighty. And she's still got a helluva lot of money to throw around and lead Matteo right back to that life he left behind."

"Enzo, do you know that Summer gets sick on roller coasters?"

He turns to me, eyes a little glassy. He shakes his head. "What?"

"I spent all that time taking her to amusement parks to prove I could do fun things like Van," I say. "But my kid gets motion sickness."

Enzo stares at me. So help me—I inch my hand along the railing. Our fingers aren't quite touching, but my pinky is only a hair away from his. Somehow it's even more intimate of a gesture than any of the time spent in my kitchen or living room with him. It slows my nervous system to a crawl. Sets the whole world in slo-mo.

“We bonded over the food stands mostly,” I explain. “And now that she's older, Summer will tell you what she loved the most was that I actually talked to her. I played with her instead of throwing toys at her. I mean, not to toot my own horn here, but—”

“But you put in the time.” Enzo nods. “. . . I didn't expect to want him to stay.”

“I know what it feels like to have your expectations bucked.” I chew my bottom lip, hoping he can't see how red my cheeks must be getting.

Right now, all I want is to wrap an arm around this man who bucked my expectations. His hair is even more mussed than when we got to the kitchen, and it's raked forward from the ridiculous helmet we had to wear for laser tag. I want to run my fingers through it, smell his shampoo. His beard is growing back down his throat, and when his Adam's apple bobs for a swallow, I have this unreasonable urge to run my fingertips over the spot.

But I don't. I make myself shut up and listen for a second. Because that's the friend part of friends with benefits, and this is something with which I happen to have a little experience.

“Thank you,” he says. “This isn't a formal concession that you were right about my being a sucker for kids who sing or anything, but I am grateful for the insight.”

“Hold up, why don't I get a formal concession?”

“I conceded about the Pop-Tarts earlier. That's enough for one day.”

I laugh. “You're impossible.”

“You're easy to talk to.” He pins me with one of those dark gazes, and heat builds at the base of my neck.

Enzo turns back to watch the game again, and my heart is still in my throat. When he turns to me like he might say something, my pulse points start singing, only for him to turn back and watch again just as fast. Eventually, I make myself take enough deep, even breaths that my spirit finally returns to my body.

*Get a grip, woman. This is going exactly as it should.
Don't fuck things up.*

But as soon as I think that—

“Um, Kelly, any chance you and Summer want to extend our plans into dinner tomorrow?”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: ENZO

“Bro, just admit it already. I schooled you in Skee-Ball.”

“That’s debatable.”

I’m letting us into Alessi’s, and Matteo is still all over me. We only said goodnight to the girls a minute ago at the edge of their driveway, and my brother immediately started in on his ESPN-worthy recap of the afternoon’s plays.

His eyes are bright, and his cheeks are flushed. He keeps rocking back and forth between his heels and the balls of his feet, all this happy, buoyant energy having to course somewhere.

It must be contagious ’cause I’m smiling like an idiot, too. We walk into the darkness of Alessi’s and start toward the stairs up to my studio.

“Hey, Enzo?”

“Yeah?”

We’re at the bottom of the steps when Matteo catches my sleeve. When I turn to look at him, I swear he’s that five-year-old kid I left behind.

“Today was fucking cool.”

I laugh out loud. Hearing the curse come from such a dopey, innocent little mouth just seems wrong.

“You’re allowed to say it was stinkin’ cool or totally cool. I won’t mock,” I promise.

Matteo’s cheeks turn a new shade of pink, and then he’s playfully shoving me up the stairs before him.

“You know, if you think about it, cursing is—”

“Not tonight.” I hold up one finger to stop him as I continue my climb without looking back. “Just bed, Matteo. No furniture rearranging or lessons in gardening when I’m still sore from laser tag.”

That earns a laugh from my younger brother, but he concedes, and when we get to my apartment, he dutifully

waves a hand and heads for the bathroom.

With the place quiet and the main lights still off, I grab an open bottle of wine from the fridge, pour a glass, and head out to the balcony where Matteo and I share morning coffee.

Orange, purple, and red streak the sky from the fading sunset, with blackness creeping in around the edges. The Button town skyline looks as close as it'll get to the view from an Atlanta high-rise. I settle back in a chair, doing my best not to glance at the glowing windows next door or—worse—up at the roof.

It's physically paining me not to look. Not to wonder if Kelly is out tonight, too, sipping her ridiculous nighttime coffee and watching the same skyline. Should I go up there? And if I did and she was there, do I tell her to hop roofs and come share the bottle with me?

If she took me up on the offer, could I keep my mouth on just the wine glass?

I let out a half sigh, half grumble, the kind of garbled animal noise that gives away too much to be uttered in anyone else's presence. I hold my glass to my forehead, enjoying the chill.

Laser tag proved to be the worst kind of activity for keeping Kelly off my radar. There were too many accidental brushes, too many strange, heated tightenings in my chest when I ran after her and she squealed. The room had been dark and loud and hot, and despite the other players with us, it had been too close a simulation of everything I wanted from her. Her teeth lit up when she smiled. She rubbed the back of her neck when her heavy laser tag vest became too much, and it was easy to admire the lines of her arms, the way her red hair curled in runaway pieces around her throat, how delicate her fingertips were when she massaged her skin.

It had all been too much. So much *too much*, in fact, that I went ahead and invited her to Arlo's dinner. What was I thinking?

I want to blame all that laser tag stuff and call it an impulse. But then I remember everything else about the day, and my muscles tense: I know there's more to it.

I like being around Kelly. She's sweet and funny. She lets me talk, even about things I wouldn't think she'd be interested in. When I'm the bleak darkness tugging at the edges of the sky, she's that last hurrah of orange and purple and pink.

And, okay, it helps that she has those fucking mile-long legs she showcased in jean shorts today, that pouty bottom lip perfect for the purple lipstick, and the most knock-out, sinful, lust-worthy tits that I know were hiding under her oversized Alessi's T-shirt.

I finish off my glass and stand too suddenly. I must have had more to drink than I realized because I'm swaying a little as I finally allow myself to glance over at her roof. I must have been expecting to see Kelly there on cue, waving down at me and smiling. But instead, the light behind her kitchen curtains turns off and no one calls from the roof.

I draw a deep breath and head back inside. Maybe Kelly is putting the friend part into our friends-with-benefits thing. And that's what I'm feeling now. That unfamiliar twinge of desire to see a friendly face, to end my night with someone else who's lived the same day as me. Because this can't be disappointment.

Right?

When Matteo and I walk over to grab the girls on Tuesday night, Kelly is in a dress.

This is new territory. It's not her all-black Alessi's uniform with the no-slip shoes. It's not even the jean shorts that gave me a peek at her full, round ass.

This dress is flowy, sky blue, and it cuts low in this wavy kind of neckline that highlights the swell of her tits. Her hair is in a loose ponytail, and there are those runaway curls again, clinging to her ears and chin and neck. My blood runs so fast I swear I can feel it.

“You know this dinner is at Arlo’s house, right?” I remind her. “Same old crotchety mother fu—”

Summer appears behind her mom in shorts and a T-shirt, and I swallow the curse on the edge of my tongue.

“Mother fudge maker,” I correct. “Er, because he’s a master dessert maker in our kitchen. That’s what we call Arlo.”

Summer and Kelly glance at each other, then burst into laughter.

“God, you’re awkward.” Summer elbows me as she breezes past.

A horn honks behind me; that would be Matteo in my ancient pickup, even though I told him I would drive and he would be the one squeezed onto the bench with Summer.

It’s just me and Kelly at her door now. She smiles before glancing down at her feet and turning her toes in.

“You’re going to make me look like a hobo,” I grumble, gesturing at my faded T-shirt and ripped jeans.

“Please, I’m a great accessory. You’ll look fabulous.”

Kelly slings her arm through mine, shuts the door behind her, and pulls me toward my truck. It’s a simple action, but I go all stiff and warm at how she commands me.

The drive to Arlo’s place is short. He and Gloria live behind Sunshine Market, which is managed by one of their grandchildren. We probably could have walked here, but there was something about escorting Kelly in the dark that left me tense, excited, and very sure it was a bad idea to be caught under the stars with her.

When we get to the house, Arlo opens the door. He pauses at the sight of the girls, then shoots me a smile that is entirely too knowing.

“Plus-ones,” he comments. “Glad you took me up on the offer.”

I scowl.

We all head in, with Arlo hanging back to catch me as Gloria calls to Matteo and the girls from the kitchen.

“Well, if I had realized this would be a triple date—”

“I will chop you up and cook you in Gloria’s casserole, Arlo.”

He just laughs and smacks my ass with the oven mitt hand. I yelp and end up biting my tongue. When I’ve straightened my collar and taken a breath, I elbow him in the ribs.

“Besides, Summer is fifteen. Please don’t ship my brother with an actual teenager.”

“Ah, yes. I suppose the double wedding will have to be postponed until she’s of legal age.”

“*The casserole, Arlo.*”

He doesn’t bother to hide his howling laughter from the rest of the group.

Dinner isn’t much better when it comes to Arlo, but there is a marked improvement in my table mate. Kelly is a fucking charmer in the seat beside mine, ready with sweet questions to ask Gloria about the grandkids and funny anecdotes about times she and her girlfriends had too much wine. She and Summer have this banter thing I’ve only ever seen on TV. They finish each other’s sentences and have all these inside jokes about movies they love, celebrities they’d date, and places they want to travel. Hearing them talk is like this insane game of improv where I’m one part fascinated and another part frantic to keep up.

And when it’s all over—the queens of gross takeout food and shitty boxed meals saw to it that no terrible hashbrown casserole was left—Gloria mentions she forgot to make dessert. Kelly lends her help and asks what she has in her cabinet. They disappear with Summer for a minute, and I’m preparing myself to head in and offer to whip something up when Kelly dashes back into the dining room. She tosses me an opened box of brown sugar Pop-Tarts.

I groan. “You’re enabling an addict,” I shout to Gloria.

“You liked them the other day!” Kelly sings, taking the Pop-Tarts back before she skips out of the room.

“We should clean,” Arlo says, pushing back his chair to stand. “The women folk can’t make dinner and dessert all on their own with no reminder of our worth. Eventually they’ll realize that thanks to internet pornography, they really don’t need us anymore.”

“Speak for yourself,” I say with a chuckle.

Matteo and I get up and start piling plates.

“You talked more than I’ve ever heard from you before, Enzo,” Arlo remarks, careful not to make eye contact with me from across the table as we work. “Did you have to drink more than usual to get through the hashbrown casserole, or are you invested in our lovely assistant GM?”

“You’re sure asking a lot of questions,” I reply. I raise an eyebrow meant to chastise the old man, but my own stupid smirk gives me away. “Did *you* drink more than usual to get down the casserole?”

“What do you think, Matteo?” Arlo asks my brother. “Think you’ve finally met your future sister-in-law?”

“Not unless Enzo is relocating Alessi’s to South Carolina,” he answers. “Summer is starting at a school there next year.”

The metallic clink of utensils on empty dishes pauses, and even though I’m staying busy scraping one dish onto another, I can feel Arlo’s gaze on me.

At last, he sighs. “Well,” he says, “I guess it’s a step that we got you here with a plus-one. It’s a start.”

“I’m buzzed just enough on casserole wine to give you that,” I concede as I carry the dishes away from the table. “Is Gloria particular about how she likes her dishwasher loaded?”

“One more thing, kid. Um, one more thing for both of you, actually.”

Arlo’s voice stops me in the doorway. My skin tightens, and I turn back around.

“What?”

“Your father called into the restaurant,” he says. My stomach drops. “You two had gone up for lunch. I took the call myself.”

“Dad called?” Matteo repeats.

I don’t like the tone of his voice. “Arlo, maybe now isn’t the time—”

“What did he say?” Matteo asks, stepping forward. His eyes are too big and round. There’s a lump in his throat, fully visible.

“Well, it was one of his staff actually,” Arlo clarifies.

I let out a slow breath through my nostrils. “Of course it was.”

“But what did he want?” Matteo pushes.

“He’d like to schedule a reservation,” Arlo says. “A time he can sit down with both of you.”

“When was the last time you talked to Dad?” Matteo turns to me.

“We don’t need his business,” I say. For some reason, I grab my brother’s arm, like leading him out of the dining room will magically put this to rest.

“Enzo,” Matteo protests, stopping so I jerk against him. “He probably just wants to talk or make sure we’re okay with the new living arrangements—”

“The same way he was always checking in on our welfare when we were living with him?” I ask. “Since when does he care how we’re doing? This is an exercise in control, Matteo.”

He furrows his brow and shakes his head. “Enzo, the dad I know is different from the dad you know. And, yeah, he was harsh enough that I needed to strike out and do my own thing. But he’s not dead inside. He would still care if you ended up throwing me out on my ass and I was sleeping on a park bench. He would still care if I was too much of a burden for you and you needed help.”

“I dealt with burdens for eighteen years,” I remind him.
“There was plenty of time to check on me.”

“Maybe we should think about it,” Matteo disagrees.

“You want to meet with the old man? You can do it on your own.”

“Now, Enzo—” Arlo tries to step in, but I hold out a hand.

“We’re not signing contracts to work for him—” Matteo starts.

“Look, I’m sorry. I’m not thinking about this.”

With that, I head to the kitchen, gritting my teeth so tight my jaw aches.

The Pop-Tarts aren’t anything like the apple butter concoction I made the other day. In fact, they taste like shit. Granted, just about anything would taste like shit right now. Like sawdust in my mouth. It’s impossible to imbibe any sense with the pure, festering burn in the center of my chest.

Kelly sat in the same seat beside me for dessert, and once or twice she rested her fingertips on my thigh and glanced at me in that way that’s supposed to prompt an explanation. I just ignored her, ground down my ridiculous buttered Pop-Tart, and excused myself to put my plate in the dishwasher as soon as I’d wolfed it down.

She followed me, catching me alone in the kitchen as I ditched the plate.

“Hang on,” she said, putting her palm to my chest.
“What’s going on? You’re different than you were at dinner.”

“I’m fine,” I grind out. I try to push around her, but her fingertips pinch the front of my shirt and knot there.

“Enzo, I think by now I know a little bit about you. And something is definitely off—”

“You don’t,” I correct, my voice too loud for this tiny kitchen. “You don’t know a little bit about me.”

The creases in her forehead smooth, and the tip of her nose turns bright pink. All at once, her eyes are shiny, and she glances back and forth between her feet and my face, like she can't decide where to look.

"Enzo," she starts. "I thought—"

"Well, you thought wrong," I snap. "We're just benefits, remember? Not even friends. I don't owe you one of your girlfriend's gossip sessions, and I definitely don't owe you a boyfriend's explanation. Just leave it alone."

I push past her and head back to the dining room. I take my seat, fully aware of the black cloud separating me from the rest of the dinner party. The anger is still licking through my chest, and even though I know it's my own damn fault, I lean into it.

Kelly returns a minute behind me, and she's too stiff and quiet. My chest aches, but as she slides back into her chair, I make myself stand up. I dig into my pocket, find my truck keys, and toss them to Matteo.

"I think I'm going to walk home," I announce. "The night air sounds good right now."

They all stare at me. Even Gloria, who isn't in on what just went down, is giving me the evil eye, and I suspect I'll get an earful later about how I ditched her dinner party.

I head out the front door anyway, down the front steps, and onto the sidewalk, starting the few miles back to Alessi's. I need this walk. I deserve a fucking moment to lean into my anger.

My father called the restaurant.

Matteo isn't just wrong to consider calling him back—he's crazy. I'm right and he's wrong.

My brother says his dad and my dad aren't the same person. Like my father magically changed for round two of parenting. Maybe that's true, but that also means he can't know how much of a bully our father was. How he never hesitated to tell you everything you were doing wrong and every way you'd disappointed him. Maybe Arturo Barone

changed, but that doesn't mean he earned my forgiveness or that he deserves my brother's time and respect.

I was right, damn it.

. . . But maybe I shouldn't have gone off on Kelly like that.

Because honestly, I sounded like a fucking bully myself.

I shove my hands deep into my pockets as I walk, willing myself to forget how injured she looked when I said those things to her. Maybe even worse was the stiff, quiet way she'd returned to the table. That had made my lungs collapse in on themselves.

But what am I supposed to do? I can't run over with another apology Cuban. As Arlo so kindly pointed out, apologies and grand gestures have never been my forte. I might have been acting like a Barone Bully, but I'll focus more on changing my future behavior than coming up with a way to apologize for the past.

Maybe I should cut myself some slack. Everything I said to her was true. I used the wrong tone, sure, but Kelly was the one who first made a joke about us not even being friends.

Did I really justify this to myself with a "she started it"?

I groan, rolling my neck back and then kicking at a rock in my path. Our terms were clear. I didn't ask for anything more than the benefits, not even for Kelly's friendship.

This is why keeping my distance is the one Barone trait I latched onto. I've got a system, and it never failed me before. When my father is in play, I have enough to deal with to not get worked up over some neighbor's crush.

But by the time I get back to my place, Matteo has the pickup parked in front of the restaurant and Kelly's lights are all out. My stomach coils tight, and my breaths are shallow and unsteady. And I hate how much I want to go to that roof and see if she's sitting in the dark. I hate how much I want to apologize.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: ENZO

I avoid the kitchen the entire next morning, knowing Arlo will be camped out in his usual corner chopping vegetables for tonight's ratatouille. Thankfully, we have a catering gig booked across town, and I set out with the catering crew for an hour to get them set up.

Unfortunately, my avoidance made things even worse. Arlo in my head was more harsh than Arlo in real life could ever be, probably because he was using *my* voice.

When the catering gig was up and I couldn't hole up in my office any longer, I finally braved the kitchen and sought out Arlo directly. I found him tasting a sauce. He set the spoon down as he saw me coming, said something to our saucier about adding more tarragon, and walked over to me, arms crossed.

"I'm ready to talk about last night."

He arches one eyebrow, and I can't tell if he's holding back a smirk. He shrugs. "Your office?"

"I'd appreciate that." I sigh and roll my neck as we walk. When we get to my office, I hold open the door and let him pass. "I was a jerk yesterday. To you and Matteo. To Kelly."

"Don't forget Gloria," Arlo reminds me. There's that wry smile. "She had a nervous breakdown that the five-star chef disapproved of her casserole."

". . . Did she think I liked her casserole before?"

"I'll never tell her the truth. So what happened with Kelly?"

"I said something I shouldn't have," I admit. "I'm not good at saying sorry."

"Well, you're getting plenty of opportunities to practice," Arlo says. "Her shift is almost over, you know."

I sigh and start right back out my office door. "You're not much more helpful than Arlo in my head."

“Hm?”

“Nothing.”

I can't bring myself to go to the front of house. When Arlo heads back to his corner, I go back in and spend more time pissing around in my office, playing a game of solitaire that goes nowhere and rearranging our bills on my desk. I end up going home for the night, alone, refusing to even draw back my curtains so I can see if she's home.

The next morning, Matteo is taking Chiara out for breakfast across town, so I call in for the morning and hole up in my studio. I bake too many pastries. I watch too much TV—that is, until a rerun of *America's Got Talent* comes on, and I turn it off and chuck the remote to the other side of the couch.

This nervous energy is eating me alive. It's catching me right in the chest and strangling me until I can't breathe. Desperate for a new distraction, I head to a home improvement store.

It takes me a while to find the umbrellas I want, but I don't mind killing the time. I buy them, get them home, and haul them to the roof. The Georgia sun is hot and unforgiving today, crisping the back of my neck until I feel stiff and achy all over. It feels like the right kind of punishment. I set up the umbrellas over Matteo's garden, carefully placing them so they can retract and unfold at his pleasure.

Absolving brotherly guilt as a way to distract myself from friends-with-benefits guilt? Check.

There are signs of life behind Kelly's windows below. I notice them, even in trying hard to look anywhere else. But my phone never goes off. The door at the top of her roof never opens. When there's a noise below and I spy Summer waving and heading off to a friend's car with a duffel bag in tow, I know it's too much to ask for a redhead to peek out the front door and glance up at me.

It's quite the feat she's pulling off, actually, considering the racket I've made trying to set up these damn umbrellas.

Kelly hasn't forgotten about yesterday at Arlo's, and there isn't a garden I can fix up for her to make things better.

When the sun starts setting and her kitchen light clicks on, I swallow the hard lump of pride in my throat and brace myself for confrontation. I head downstairs, let myself out of the restaurant, and cross over to Kelly's front door. I knock three times in quick succession, gritting my teeth the whole time. If I keep this up, I'm going to give myself lockjaw.

She opens the door in paint-splattered cutoffs and a worn-out tank top. Her hair is flecked with lavender, and there's even a little on the tip of her nose. It's endearing as hell, and it immediately makes me regret so much as even frowning in her direction. And when she furrows her brow and the lines around the corners of her mouth deepen, I remember exactly how stupid I was last night.

"I came over to check in since I didn't catch you at work today," I try.

"Try again," she says, putting a hand on her hip.

"Matteo wanted me to stop by and—"

She starts to shut the door, but I stop her with a fist in the crack. When Kelly opens it again, I swipe a hand down my wary face.

"I'm sorry about dinner at Arlo's," I say. "I was a prick."

"That's right. You were."

"I'm sorry for what I said. You didn't deserve any of that."

"Oh, I'm fully aware that my benefits only extend to the bedroom," Kelly says. "I shouldn't have expected generosity anywhere else."

Her tone is clipped, but the lines around her mouth are easing. She wants to smile. Maybe she even wants to invite me in.

"You were making sure I was okay," I provide. "You're a good friend."

Kelly makes a show of cupping her ear. “Come again?”

“We’re friends with benefits.” I sigh loudly, giving her my best glower.

Whatever weirdness has been between us, it gives way as quickly as it came on. Air fills my lungs, and a familiar sizzle settles in my belly.

“Can I come in?”

“I’m in the middle of painting our living room,” she says. “But if our benefits extend to you doing manual labor for me . . .”

“Actually,” I say, peering in. “Yeah. Sure. The first week he was here, I woke up to Matteo having repainted my living room and rearranged all the furniture to maximize feng shui. This is nothing.”

Kelly lets me cross into the house and shuts the door after me. We start toward her living room, and she lets down her messy ponytail to rake her fingers through the long, red hair.

“Maybe this apology would *feel* better with the right feng shui,” she says, side-eyeing me.

That earns a laugh from me. “I can handle that. Give me a paintbrush, and then we can move your furniture wherever you want it.”

“Apology accepted.” She grins.

Kelly’s living room floor is covered in plastic and lavender paint drips. The furniture pieces are covered in drop cloths and shoved up against one wall. I do note, however, that a space has been left by the window that looks toward Alessi’s—one just big enough for someone to stand and peer through the blinds. My lips twitch, wanting me to smile.

“Are you . . . repainting so you can sell the place?” I ask.

She glances up at me, eyes narrowing. “Is this how you want the conversation to go already?”

I clear my throat to try again. “So where was Summer off to?”

Kelly smirks as she passes me a paintbrush and points toward a paint can on the floor. “Was someone watching my place?”

I growl. She laughs.

“Sleepover,” she explains. “She has a friend who is moving to Texas next week.”

“You gonna throw her a big party before she heads out to South Carolina?”

I can’t see Kelly directly from her spot beside me, but I sense her stiffening.

“I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

“Did you accept her position at Hamilton?”

She draws a deep breath. “Yeah. Yeah, we did.” She brandishes her paintbrush toward the lavender. “Your guess was spot-on.”

“Congrats,” I say, even though my insides twist at the reminder of her moving. “She’s got to be so excited, and you must be so proud. Maybe you can throw her going-away thing at Alessi’s.”

She glances over at me, biting her lip. But then Kelly smiles, and something loosens in my chest.

“I think she’d like that,” Kelly says. “And I’d like some real food. During our last moving week, we subsisted on Chinese takeout. I mean, that’s our primary food group, sure, but usually, it’s at least broken up by the occasional microwaveable meatloaf or Top Ramen.”

I cringe. “God, Hastings, I’ll teach you to cook yet.”

“It’s a big change,” she continues, voice a shade quieter. “I thought our move into this place was intimidating, but moving to a new state? It’s almost unthinkable.”

“Can’t know if you’ll like it unless you give it a try.” My breath hitches. My fingers tighten around my paintbrush, and I put its tip to the wall, pull it back, then set it down on the rim

of the paint can and cross my arms. “At dinner, Arlo told me and Matteo that our dad wants to see us.”

To her credit, Kelly takes a moment to reply. At last, she turns to me, reaching out to rest her fingertips on my forearm. “I didn’t realize.”

I shake my head. “How could you? The guy hasn’t tried to get in contact with me for years. He’s probably only getting in touch now because he wants Matteo back and knows my opinion will matter to my brother. He doesn’t care about seeing *me* at all.”

Kelly doesn’t say anything. She just keeps those fingers poised on my arm.

“Matteo wants to give him a chance,” I spill. “He knows my dad isn’t the greatest, but he thinks he deserves a second chance to get things right. He didn’t know the Arturo Barone that raised me. But it fucking sucks seeing Matteo all excited at the prospect of his leaving home finally working out. He gets the reunion and forgiveness from Dad, all without a blowup fight or having to commit his life to the family business after all. Maybe Arturo isn’t the cold, disapproving father I remember anymore, but that doesn’t mean he’s going to play Dad of the Year for my little brother. There are still a thousand ways to disappoint Matteo or get his hopes up or—”

“So you’ve got a choice to make about meeting your dad,” Kelly volunteers. “Meet with Arturo and risk him hurting you and Matteo, or cut off the meeting and be the bearer of your brother’s disappointment?”

“Maybe I’ve liked being the guy who gives Matteo his independence,” I mutter. “Maybe it’s been nice knowing I made someone in my family happy for once.”

“And you’re sure he hasn’t changed?”

“I can’t even let myself entertain the thought,” I say. “What does that say about me? Mean as a fucking snake until the bitter end.”

“It says you’re working through a sucky childhood,” Kelly says. “It says that you have a lot to sort through. And

you're entitled to take a minute to sort through your feelings."

I don't want to look her in the eye, and Kelly doesn't compel me to do so. Instead, she slides her hand around my forearm, tightening her grip. She steps closer, and then the fingertips of her other hand brush lightly across my lower back.

"Matteo is a nice kid. He wants this to work out. I kind of want to shake him."

"What's wrong with a little optimism?"

My lips pinch to one corner, and I chew at the inside of my cheek. "Next you'll be hinting that I should forgive my dad. Which will be very hard to ignore if you keep stroking my back like that."

She chuckles, but her fingers never stop their slow, soft circles near the top of my ass. Even now, even talking about Arturo Barone, I'm stiffening far more than is decent.

"Maybe forgiveness isn't the worst thing. Maybe it's a nice break."

I glance up at Kelly, and to my surprise, her gaze is far away. She's not watching me at all but staring out into the living room. Her brow has furrowed up tight again. I wonder if she's thinking of her ex, the guy that left her to single parent Summer alone.

I guess Kelly would know a thing or two about abandonment and forgiveness. Our situations might not be exactly the same, but she does understand what it might take to move on.

"Well, I'm still going to advise Matteo not to meet with my father," I decide. "And I won't meet with him, obviously. Forgiveness might not be the worst thing, but that can be accomplished with plenty of red wine or a good therapist. I don't need to see Arturo Barone in person."

"And that's okay," Kelly says, eyes still far away. "Matteo is your brother. Arturo is your dad. You're just doing what you think you have to do to protect your family."

I sigh, sliding my arm around Kelly's back to pull her body flush with mine. She looks up at me then, and when her green eyes catch mine, something melts in my chest.

Damn it, why does she have to leave for South Carolina now? When we're just getting started? She knows exactly what to say to me, even when it's clear she might not completely agree.

"You're good at this brother thing, Enzo," she whispers.

"Still figuring it out," I say. I run my fingers through the front of her paint-flecked hair, twisting one curly red lock around the end of my pointer finger. "Still figuring out the friend thing, too."

"Getting better," she says with a small smile.

I rub my thumb across that lock of hair, admiring its shine. Everything about this woman is soft and silky and inviting. When she smiles up at me, her lips are free of the purple lipstick I like so much, but they're still plump and full and pink. They're marked from where she's been biting her bottom lip, and there's a twinge in my gut at the thought of her abusing that lip because of me.

I can't help myself—I lean in, my lips just grazing across hers. Kelly's breath catches with a sharp sound, and those fingertips at the back of my shirt twist in the cotton.

"Am I getting any better at apologies?" I ask.

"There's always room for improvement." She pulls back, just keeping my lips from touching hers, and smiles.

Her tongue flicks out then, teasing my lips open and leaving me aching for more. Goddamn.

"I welcome practice," I tell her, sliding my thumbs under the edge of her tank top.

I glide them across the skin at her waist, then dip down under her waistband, teasing her hip bone. Kelly arches into my touch, pressing her body into mine and taking my hands in hers and moving them under her shirt to find her braless tits.

This time, when my thumbs slide across her perked nipples, she groans.

“I like practice,” she agrees. “Very on board with practice.”

She wraps one of her legs around my hip and rocks her heat into me, teasing my cock until it’s as hard as it’s ever been. I strip her shirt off and over her head, discarding it in a paint-free spot on the floor, then dip down to suck a puckered nipple into my mouth. Kelly squirms, her breaths short and choppy as she feeds me her breast.

“I bought condoms,” she admits breathlessly. “I mean, not to be presumptuous or anything, especially when we were in a fight—”

I pull away from her breast, and her flushed face falls.

“We’re not going to need a condom, Kelly.”

“Oh my God,” Kelly stutters. “I didn’t mean. I just—”

I yank down her shorts, freeing them over her bare feet and tossing them in the same spot as her shirt. Then I scoop her up by the ass, but not to walk her anywhere; instead, I place her down on her back on the ground and crawl over her. I rub my thickness against her naked thigh, letting it tease her through my clothes as I reach down to dip into her pooled desire.

“I—what?” she pants out. “Enzo, I haven’t taken birth control since high school. And, I mean, even when I did, you saw what good that did me—”

“You don’t need birth control for what I want.”

I pull her legs up and hook her ankles over my shoulders. Kelly’s first instinct is to cover herself, but I take her by the wrists and tuck her hands behind her back. I lick straight up her pretty, ginger-dusted pussy, satisfaction rocketing through my system as her back arches and her knees shake.

“Holy *shit*,” she curses.

I grin as my tongue flicks into her center.

“Been fucking craving this pussy,” I tell her. “I’d see the light in your window and pant like one of Pavlov’s dogs.”

“God, Enzo . . .”

She’s rocking into my mouth now, ass coming clear off the ground. It’s too much work for her, with her abs straining and sweat lining her hairline.

Can’t have that.

I slide an arm under her back and flip us over, her knees landing on either side of my head. I lift my neck, dragging my tongue across her folds one more time before Kelly’s thighs can lock together.

“Ride my face, baby girl,” I instruct, “I want your juices dripping down my chin.”

To hammer my point home, I twist my face back and forth, dragging my stubble across her smooth skin. Kelly gasps, her legs giving way so she slides down the slightest bit, and that sugar-sweet cunt grazes my upper lip. I sip at it, and she hovers there for a moment, letting me taste her, memorize her, and develop a fucking addiction to a meal that comes at a very high cost—admitting I’m sorry. Still, I’d do anything for this pussy. I can’t control my tongue anymore, and I lap at her opening, my hands gripping her ass cheeks and pulling her down so she rests squarely over my face.

Her control is slowly slipping. In a moment, she’s writhing, bucking over my mouth, her thighs shaking.

“Your turn,” she pants. “Seriously, Enzo, let me—”

She starts to get up, but I drag her back down and lock her in place. That’s what does her in: Kelly shudders, and I can taste the wave rocking through her. I get this incredible view of her hands on her tits, rolling and squeezing her breasts as she takes her pleasure.

I can’t help but reach down and adjust the fabric of my pants over my hard-on. It’s not enough. I need more friction, more tightness, more *wet*. My cock lives vicariously through my mouth as I lick Kelly through her orgasm, aching with each sweet new wave that crashes on my tongue.

I hiss against her pussy; she's reached back to grab my dick with one hand. She holds eye contact with me as she fumbles with my zipper, then my waistband. Then my cock springs out, and she strokes it sloppily with one hand behind her back.

No.

I grab her waist, flip Kelly onto her back, and hover over her with my hard cock barely dotting the inside of her naked thigh. I wipe back her hair, calming the strands clinging with sweat to her temples.

I surprise her—and maybe myself even more—when I lean forward and place a barely-there kiss in the center of her forehead. When I breathe her in and commit the moment to memory. When my heart hammers against my rib cage.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: KELLY

Something switched.

I don't know why, but I could feel it when Enzo flipped me over and looked into my eyes. Something was different. Something had changed.

His tempo slowed. And even though his eyes still shone in that starving way and his bare cock head still stroked against my thigh with the evidence of his desire . . . he held back. He was soft. Tender, even.

As I'd seen him do a hundred thousand times through the window at Alessi's, I watched his face as he dipped a finger into what he wanted to taste. His eyes never left mine; they blistered into me, setting me on fire without ever having to strike a match. His fingers brushed across my sex. Between my legs. Then a single finger inched inside, slow and curious. Deeper. Deeper still. And when he pulled out the finger and it was shining and wet, he kept holding my gaze as he slipped it between his lips and sucked it clean.

"You're the best goddamn thing I've ever tasted," he whispers.

And then he does it again: that strange, slow, titillating kiss right in the center of my forehead. Enzo pulls back, locks eyes with me again, and returns his hand between my legs. He has two fingers poised there now, impossibly gentle and restrained.

And just as strongly as I can feel the second orgasm coming for me, I can feel myself falling to pieces.

I choke up, covering the moment with a strange little laugh.

The corner of Enzo's mouth twitches.

"This funny, *amorina*?"

I shake my head and smooth the lines of my face. "Believe me, I am *very* invested. It's just . . . you just . . . I'm not sure I've ever seen Enzo Barone taking so much care. At

least, not with anything that wasn't made from sugar or expensive produce or—”

“God, stop talking.” He laughs. There’s that kiss in the center of my forehead again. “No more talk of produce.”

To emphasize his point, he strokes that high, soft part of me that sends my toes curling.

“Try something sexier,” he growls into my ear.

“Like, telling you how torturous it is to have your cock out but not inside me?” I pant.

Enzo’s face is still low, his mouth next to my ear, and I can feel each hot pant painting the side of my neck.

He makes a snarling noise I’ve never heard, even from the king of grunts and growls.

“That’ll fucking work,” he mutters. “Come on, Hastings, you know damn well I take my time tasting delicacies.”

A million butterflies are fighting against one another to fly their way up from my stomach and out through my throat. I can *feel* my cunt pulsing, squeezing around his working fingers.

I have to take a chance.

“Then you know it tastes better when it’s had you inside,” I murmur, stroking his hair with my hand that isn’t knotted in the back of his sweat-soaked T-shirt. “If we just put this on pause to run upstairs for condoms—”

There’s that snarl again. His fingers flex inside me, quickly jutting deeper and curling in an involuntary come-hither motion that leaves my voice knotted somewhere at the top of my chest.

There’s Enzo’s rough impatience again, that same desperate neediness I felt the first night in my kitchen. It’s just what I need to remind me of the nature of our relationship. This isn’t about tenderness. It’s not about sweet kisses in the center of my forehead.

His fingers slip out of me, and the barrenness makes me cry out. Enzo grabs me by the waist, pulling me closer to him. He wrenches back my thighs, and my legs curl around his back automatically.

“Enzo,” I remind him, but my voice is weak. “Seriously, the pack is just upstairs.”

“I won’t make it,” he grunts. He fits his thick tip to my opening, and I’m scratching at his lower back like an animal.

Every ounce of reason in me knows better than to take chances with a cock like this. My stupid pussy has her own agenda.

“I won’t come inside,” he promises. “I just . . . I need to . . .”

His head is pushing inside, that lone inch sending my back arching off the floor. Enzo circles his hips. He supports my lower back as I writhe against him, my body begging to be filled.

But true to his word, he only gives me the tip. He rubs the ridge of his cockhead around my opening until I’m completely undone, arms splayed out on the floor beside me, eyes rolling. When the climax washes over me and I scream like I haven’t in years, Enzo pulls out his cock. He holds it over my naked stomach, fists it with two solid pumps, and sends hot, white ropes shooting out across my skin.

When it’s over, he rolls onto the floor beside me. We’re both still half naked, staring up at a blank expanse of ceiling. I clear my throat, never looking over to him.

“Just a tip,” I say. “Next time, we *start* in the bedroom so I can get the whole thing. Capice?”

He rolls over, smirking as he props himself up on one elbow. “Just a tip? You’re giving the boss a performance review, assistant GM?”

I boop the tip of his nose and laugh as he goes a little cross-eyed. “You gave me just the tip. I’m returning the favor.”

Enzo stays for a while after to help me finish painting. I didn't expect anything after the incredible house call I just got on the floor, but it's a nice surprise to have some company on a night Summer is away. He takes the edges I can't reach without a ladder, and I work below him near the baseboards.

"Matteo is gonna be upset you're moving," he tells me. "Between you and me, he's been photoshopping this fancy salad menu to invite you girls over when his garden is ready for harvest."

"Stop!" I put a hand to my heart. "Believe me, I'm sad to go. Time with the cute younger Barone brother"—Enzo kicks me gently in the ribs for that—"and a homecooked meal that isn't some weird oyster thing you're trying for Alessi's? Game on."

"Have you started looking at places in South Carolina?" he asks. "How much time do you have left here?"

"I've put my feelers out," I say. "I figure we've got about a month until we need to get out there and start prepping Summer with all her school supplies. I'd like her to meet some of the students so it's not throwing her into the deep end on the first day of fancy private school."

"That's a good plan," Enzo says. "You're a good mom."

He pauses, then lands another teasing half kick to my butt as I stick it out to paint baseboards.

"But don't let that compliment go to your head," he says. "Remember my bar is low. My own mother left me in the Sea World parking lot for two hours once."

I look up to stick my tongue out at him, and Enzo surprises me with a paintbrush to the nose. I blink, shocked at the dot I can just make out if I cross my eyes. The laugh is already bubbling up out of my mouth, and my fingers flex around my paintbrush with the stupid desire to slash across Enzo's pants and make him get down on my level to pay me back.

It's too easy to be silly with him. I never would have guessed that only a few weeks ago. There's a safety and simplicity with him that makes it easy to talk about the move, even joke about it.

A knot forms in my gut, and I swallow. Hard.

I make myself put away my paintbrush and stand up like a sane person. I take Enzo's brush and put it away next to mine.

"Come on." I jerk my head at the door. "You've got an early produce shipment."

"Isn't that supposed to be my line?" he cracks.

"This is Kelly Hastings 2.0," I tell him as we start toward the door. "Take the sex, take the free labor, then give the dude the boot."

He snorts and shoves his hands in his pockets. "Doesn't feel like love."

"Definitely doesn't feel like love," I agree.

I open the door, and he waves before starting off into the darkness. But his shadow hasn't even disappeared all the way before that knot clenches in my stomach again.

Doesn't feel like love.

But it's getting way too close.

"Ladies and gentleman, hold your breath. This requires a gentle touch." Matteo waves before curling his fingers around the base of the cucumber.

It's Thursday morning, and we're welcoming the sunset on top of Alessi's roof.

I glance across the plant at Enzo, who has not made the sex joke I, for one, was thinking about regarding his brother's cucumber harvesting technique. Still, his eyes twinkle. When he winks at me, my breath catches.

"We . . . have . . . cucumbers!" Matteo swings up the vegetable, holding it so Summer and I can get a good look at

his handiwork.

“Chiara brought in some delicious tomatoes,” Enzo says. “We can throw them in the salad, maybe cook up some of that salmon to go with it?”

It was his idea to move Matteo’s celebration salad to tonight after work. South Carolina plans are picking up faster than I expected, and Summer might even head out early to stay with a cousin of mine until I can find a more permanent place to rent.

Matteo plucks a few more cucumbers and deposits them in a bowl before standing and waving us over to the staircase. Summer tags along beside him as Enzo falls back to walk beside me. He’s got his arms crossed tight across his chest, but my skin still gets a little thrill when his forearm bumps into mine.

“Are these not the most gorgeous cucumbers you’ve ever seen?” Matteo asks Summer. “I mean, the length is insane. And they’re so thick! I mean, they were seriously hard to get off.”

God bless my kid. Summer smiles dutifully and says nothing. Matteo holds the door open for her, and the kids slip through to head downstairs. I start to follow, but Enzo grabs the back of my collar and spins me around, catching me in a surprise embrace.

“The cucumbers had some real girth on them,” he says with a straight face.

He kisses my forehead the way he did the other night. When did that become a thing? Whenever it did, my stomach is *not* used to it. All my senses rush at once as he grunts and looks over my shoulder where the kids just disappeared.

“Nothing?” he asks me. “No comment on how you’ll be feasting on Barone cucumber this evening?”

I manage a laugh at that. My cheeks burn as I look to my feet to collect myself.

When I make myself look back up at Enzo, something has changed in his face. He runs a thumb across my cheekbone, so

light I can hardly feel it.

“I cooked my parents dinner for their anniversary when I was eight,” I say to him. “Porkchops, mashed potatoes, and asparagus. My old man ate every bite and asked for seconds. I was so damn proud of myself.”

“Musta been,” Enzo says with an amused smile. “If you remembered the exact dinner you prepared them.”

“Easy to remember,” I say, shrugging. “The vomit was bright green when Mom and Dad had food poisoning the next day. Turns out you might not want an eight-year-old searing pork.”

“Especially if that eight-year-old is Kelly ‘Buttered Pop-Tarts’ Hastings.”

Enzo dissolves into laughter, his usually stiff, sullen features crinkling in a way I’m getting too used to. Contentment floods my system, and just as fast, the hairs on my arms stand on end. I pull back the slightest bit but don’t make myself give up the comfort of his embrace entirely.

“He’s a pretty rad dad,” I say. “And so are you. Er, brother, I mean.”

“Thank you.” His reply is simple. Curt. But it packs a punch that leaves me breathless.

“Is this us being friends?” I ask.

“I think maybe.” He nods.

I look toward the door. “Well, don’t want them setting up incredible ‘that’s what she said’ jokes and we’re not around.”

I start off again, but once more, he grabs me and pulls me back. Enzo doesn’t hold me this time. Instead, he guides me to the chairs he’s set up on his roof. He put them out a day or two ago and never said a word about them, but I noticed from my place. I’m pretty sure they’re the same brand as mine, and the thought made me smile when I considered that he might have liked my setup.

Enzo collapses into a chair, and I take the one beside him. We stare out at downtown Button together, neither of us saying

a word for a solid minute.

“You think that if we’re maybe friends, we can tell each other secrets?”

Was that my voice? There’s a thickness in my throat I was so sure I couldn’t speak around. I keep staring straight ahead, not daring to look over at Enzo.

“We can tell each other secrets,” he concedes.

“Van didn’t end our marriage,” I say. “I did.”

He sits on that for a moment.

I don’t know what I expected from him. I’m not even sure why I told him. It’s not like the idea of leaving my ex had been weighing on me since we first started sleeping together, and I certainly didn’t owe Enzo a full accounting of my romantic history. He’d made that clear during our first argument.

Still, the words had been on the tip of my tongue for the past few days. They were all wrapped up in the kind of confession that insisted on itself, and the more I was around Enzo, the less I could resist it.

“We weren’t soulmates, but we were happy enough. My kid had two parents. Life was about as good as I could ask for as a teenage mom.”

The next words don’t come as easy. The explanation. The deep dive into what I never like to say out loud.

But then Enzo reaches over. He doesn’t quite grab my arm; instead, his fingers just whisper next to my skin. I can feel the heat but not the touch. It’s enough.

“I wanted something more than good enough, so I walked away,” I continue. “And ever since, I’ve been terrified that someone could do the same to me. I’ve been terrified that if I don’t throw everything I have at a relationship, jump in headfirst, leave all my cards on the table, that they’ll walk. I’m a love addict, and when I find someone who gives me an inch, I go for the mile. Every time I see Van picking up Summer, I remember what I did. I remember how I walked away from

something good. I know it's toxic. My friends know it's toxic. And so I made myself a promise: no men for at least a year."

"Just friends," Enzo says.

I nod, making myself look him in the eye. "Just friends."

"You're not just good enough," Enzo says. Those fingers finally wrap around my forearm, and he holds my gaze.

"You're a hell of a lot more than good enough to this friend."

I stare into his eyes a moment longer than I should let myself. I clear my throat and nod, swallowing past the cotton at the back of my mouth.

"So maybe what we have doesn't feel like love," I whisper. "But it's made me realize I don't have to throw myself at relationships in order to keep them. Maybe when I'm ready for something that . . . feels . . . more like love, I won't devalue myself and act so desperate. When it's right, we'll both know it. I won't be scared he'll leave. He won't be scared I'll leave."

Another beat.

"And, um, I think you're doing something similar for your brother," I say, voice a little too loud. "I mean, just to bring the point back home. You're showing Matteo he's worth something just the way he is. He doesn't have to conform to your dad's world or give up his independence to be with your mom. He's accepted just the way he is. You love him just the way he is."

"I love him," Enzo repeats.

Another goddamn, white-hot, terrifying beat.

Enzo pushes out of his chair. He offers his hand to help me get up, and I take it. To my surprise, he holds it all the way to the stairway door, onto the first steps, and down into the apartment. We head down to Alessi's kitchen that way, and even when Summer pauses chopping veggies to eyeball us and give me a knowing smirk, he doesn't let go.

We end our night long after Summer left to go to bed and Matteo got called to go out with Chiara and some of her friends. Enzo and I are still laughing at one of the high tops in Alessi's, our fingers intertwined on top of the table as we sip wine and trade single parent—er, single brother?—stories.

At a certain point, looking at him fills me up with too many bubbles and fireworks and Boeing 747s to function properly. Each sip of wine goes more and more to my head, until I'm floating and the only tether I have back to this earth is his hand on mine.

Doubts about South Carolina creep in again. Selfish, putting-my-feelings-over-my-kid's doubts. Curiosity about whether Enzo and I could have really made something work if my sudden exit date didn't cement the benefits as friendly.

We're natural together. I'm the sunshine to his grumpy. He's the anchor when I float too far away. And when we're together, we bring about these unexpected sides of each other. We're vulnerable and honest.

A small hiccup sobers me up, and I put a hand to my stomach where I can feel my gut tightening. I extricate my fingers from Enzo's, slide my half-empty glass toward him, and push my stool back from the high top.

"Leaving so soon?"

"Early produce shipment." I shrug and smile.

He smiles back. Enzo's eyes are a little glossy from all the wine, and his cheeks are a little red.

"You should come over and do this again tomorrow night after work," he says. "I'll keep a bottle of this wine out for you."

"Sure," I say, already heading toward the door. "Sure."

The knot in my stomach turns over and twists.

CHAPTER TWENTY: ENZO

I don't know Van Hastings, but I've had a pretty good mental image of him in my head.

He always has greasy hair. Teeth that are a little too crowded for a wide mouth. Adult acne, *definitely* adult acne.

But that wasn't the picture Kelly painted for me tonight. Okay, so she hadn't broken down his physical description or anything, but still. She'd talked about him being a good guy. A decent father, too.

And she admitted that she was the one who walked out on their marriage.

There was Kelly Hastings in my dining room, the self-confessed love addict and Miss Practically Perfect in Every Way, and she was admitting to being her exact opposite. Leaving a man who was good enough had made her see her shortcomings, and she *never* wanted a man to do to her what she did to her ex.

In a weird way, I related to her.

My father and I had a shit relationship. Maybe he was different with my brother, I don't know, but it doesn't really matter. He was still a terrible dad to me.

And because I had such a sucky childhood, I put up walls. I didn't want to allow anyone to let me down ever again. I was going to protect myself. I was going to protect Matteo.

Kelly learned from her mistakes and went too far in the other direction in her journey to course correct. Me? I became my father. Mean, impatient, and closed off. I'd seen the problem, and instead of heading the other way, I'd leaned right in.

It wasn't long ago that I received that package of sex toys and became suddenly aware that my small corner of the universe might involve more people than just myself. And . . . and I think I've changed.

I'd like to think I've changed.

Could Dad have changed, too? Is that really possible?

I'd been sitting on the couch in my studio, finishing off the rest of the wine, when Matteo let himself in through the front door and collapsed down beside me. He splayed his arms out over the back of the couch and manspread without a care in the world.

"She kissed me, bro," he says, running a hand through the front of his hair. "Chiara kissed me, and it was so smooth. I think we're BF and GF now."

". . . Boyfriend and girlfriend?" I provide.

"From your mouth to God's ears." He kisses two fingertips and points to the ceiling. Matteo scrambles to get on his knees, and then he takes me in with big doe eyes and an excited smile. "You know, Chiara told me tonight that her roommate is getting married and she has to look for a new place. And, if you think about it—"

"We are not rearranging the studio apartment to accommodate three grown adults," I interject before my brother can finish his sentence.

Matteo just shrugs, giving me the dopey grin again. "It was worth a shot."

He settles back onto his ass again, manspreading the way he was a moment ago. I pass him the wine bottle, and he takes a deep pull.

All this time passed, and we still haven't spoken about our conversation at Arlo's yet. The thought only occurs to me now. I've been so preoccupied thinking about the girl next door that I forgot about our argument and Dad's reservation at the restaurant.

But Matteo had moved on anyway. He'd let me tear his head off, and he hadn't held so much as a flicker of a grudge. He was still singing off-key Carly Rae Jepsen along to his headphones every day when he washed the dishes, like nothing had happened.

I grit my teeth.

“Did you, um, call Dad back?”

Matteo glances over at me. “There have been a few texts. He canceled his reservation here, but I’m sure you already knew that.”

I didn’t. That night at Arlo’s, I’d determined not to check the books, and that notion had just kind of stuck through my preoccupation with Kelly. I grind my back teeth together again, holding back the natural next question to ask how Matteo’s contact with Dad has been. I will not give in to my curiosity on this front.

“He’s coming into town to sign the paperwork on a business acquisition.” Matteo fills the silence.

“He never does that shit in person.”

“Well, he had a reason to show up in person this time.”

You and Matteo, dummy.

“He wanted to get dinner, but I only promised drinks,” Matteo continues. “We haven’t firmed up a time or place yet if you want—”

“I’m good,” I say, nodding too many times. I grab the wine bottle back from Matteo and finish it off. I swipe at my mouth with the back of my arm. “I’ve got a busy month ahead of me anyway. Plenty of catering gigs.”

I keep my eyes trained on the empty wine bottle, swirling around its dregs like they’re the elusive contents of the universe. A flicker of curiosity burns in my chest regarding Matteo’s conversation with our dad, but I bite my cheek until I taste blood and squash any interest.

“I’m not making plans to move back home, you know,” Matteo says. “I mean, I won’t tell you anything about it, if that’s what you want. But I didn’t want you to think I was completely delusional. I’ll keep a safe distance, but I want to hear him out. Sometimes I see what Kelly and Summer have, and I want . . .”

He shifts in his seat. *I want what they have.*

I feel it, too. That yearning for a life I never led. And in Kelly's own words, the closest I've come to that has been this new life with my kid brother. Not only do I balk in the face of reconnecting with my father, but I flinch at the idea of giving him the little bro who has worked his way under my skin.

I run a hand over my face, smushing my skin this way and that as I try to collect myself. The idea that my kid brother has an easier time facing off with the shadows of our past leaves me unsettled and irritated.

"Do what you want," I grumble finally. And then, because something feels wrong about being so clipped with Matteo, I turn to him and punch him on the shoulder. "If I wake up to Chiara and company arranging their dishes in my pantry, know that you'll *have* to move back to Dad's place."

It's an out-of-character move. Too cavalier and chummy. Matteo's brow crinkles with surprise, but he doesn't call me out.

"I'm heading up to the roof for some night air," I say, starting toward the staircase. "Some alone time will be nice."

My footfalls weave a little on the carpet, but again, Matteo doesn't call me out.

"Night," he calls.

I wave a hand in his general direction before starting up the stairs.

It's dark up here. No twinkle lights tonight, and not so much as a lamp on in the Hastings girls' living room window.

I shrug—actually shrug, although no one is here to see me—like it's no big deal. Like I'm not disappointed to be up here alone like I told Matteo I wanted.

I wait for a minute at the edge of the roof, shamelessly staring down the dark windows and half hoping Kelly will look out and see. When she doesn't appear, I kick at Matteo's box garden with the toe of my boot and let out a shaky exhale.

I turn around and head back down the stairs, strengthening my resolve not to need rooftop company when that was never

one of our agreed-upon benefits.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: KELLY

“Whoa, wait. Is Summer rethinking the big move?”

“Did Shawn Diaz drop the L-word on her? I’ve seen that kid. Teenage Rachel would have given up plenty of things for dimples like that.”

“It’s not you, right?” As usual, my sister hits the nail right on the head. “Are you nervous about the change?”

About a week has passed since I confessed to Enzo that I left Van, and now I’m sitting in the center of a club meeting, trying my best not to blush.

I wave her off as quickly as I can. “No way. None of that. And so help me, Rachel, if Shawn Diaz drops the L-word on my daughter, I’m going to have to start sending them off on dates while I wait on the front porch with a shotgun. It’s nothing. Really. Just . . . a little textbook anxiety.”

“Nope!” Alexis declares.

At most meetings, she doesn’t imbibe much—something about her body being a temple. Ballerina talk. Tonight, though, she has a week between the end of her last classes and the start of new ones, and she’s been nursing the good wine we pilfered from Alessi’s on our way out of our shifts together.

“That’s Kelly’s lying face, not her anxiety face,” Alexis declares. She contorts her face and puts on a deep Southern drawl. “*So sorry, folks, we just don’t have a table to spare!*”

“Is that supposed to be me?” I snort.

She nods enthusiastically, her wine threatening to slosh past its rim. “Don’t ever try to boss a hostess, ladies. If this GM gets a whiff of your douchery, you won’t be having dinner that night.”

“So it’s not anxiety,” Josie repeats, turning toward me. Her eyes bore into my skin, though I won’t turn to look at her directly. “What is it?”

“Turns out my new home has a few amenities I only just learned about.”

“So it’s Enzo?” Josie asks, raising an eyebrow and allowing herself a smirk.

“It’s Enzo.” I slap my hands over my face and slouch down into my seat.

“Two Drink Marnie might be the romantic one, but even Sober Marnie acknowledges the validity of your attachment.” Marnie waggles her eyebrows before polishing off the rest of her water. She eyeballs Alexis’s wine glass with unmasked jealousy. “And Three Drink Marnie would tell you to do nasty, *nasty* things while he’s wearing that little white coat.”

“I’m losing my grip,” I insist. I make myself look each girl in the eyes, daring them to question my certainty. “Enzo is just proving to be a surprisingly chill friend, and we have fun. It’s nothing to keep me in Button.”

“How often have you been seeing him?” Rachel asks.

“Only when we’re both off work.”

Alexis brays, and that wine finally breaches the rim of her glass to slosh on her dark jeans. The other girls look at her, and her grin is beyond amused.

“They’ve been working the same schedule!” she explains. “What Kelly is saying is that she and Enzo see each other *every single night*.”

“I see you all the nights I’m not with Enzo!” I counter. “And I’m not falling in love with any of you.”

Marnie shrugs. “Take my shift at the hospital tomorrow morning, and Two Drink Marnie might argue about that.”

“Enzo Barone is not a reason to deny my kid her dream school,” I insist. “And he’s not a reason to give up the man hiatus.”

My tone is clear and final. The girls offer up a few more objections, but eventually, they quiet down and accept it. Marnie launches in on some tirade about a new documentation policy at the hospital, and all is forgotten as she gets creative with her expletives.

But Josie is still looking at me. Even when I don't make eye contact with her, I feel it on my skin. The interaction leaves my hairs on end and my stomach doing backflips. I keep repeating to myself everything I just told the club a moment ago.

Enzo Barone is not a reason to deny my kid her dream school.

He is not a reason to give up the man hiatus.

And nothing about being with him feels like the love I've built up in my head. He's not Prince Charming with zero therapy-worthy issues, ready to commit to me for time and all eternity. He's not obsessed with me in a way that will keep him from ever bailing.

I mean every word of this. Totally. Completely. Um, duh.

When the Uber drops me off at home, I'm mostly sober again. I have enough control of my faculties to resist glancing over at Alessi's and up toward Enzo's studio.

When I get inside, though, all bets are off. After I slip off my heels and take off my jacket, I head toward my kitchen. On my table is a foil-wrapped dish that smells unreal.

Enzo dropped this off for us. Scrawled in my daughter's tidy penmanship. ***Baked ziti.***

My mouth waters.

I'm already glancing down the hall, taking note of Summer's bedroom light being off. When I hold my breath, I can hear her snoring. I let myself back out through the front door and pad my way, barefoot, over to Alessi's.

"So, what really happens at these club meetings?" Enzo asks as he plays with the curling end of my long ponytail.

We're draped across his bed, made decent only by a thin LA Galaxy blanket that covers our asses. When I arrived at his

doorstep, I was assured that Matteo would be out with friends until late, and we'd have the apartment to ourselves.

Reconnecting with Enzo after even an afternoon apart felt like coming up for air.

Simultaneously essential and terrifying.

We fucked like it was the first time all over again. We didn't make it up the stairs and out of Alessi's before he ripped my shorts and had my ass in the air so he could have a midnight snack. We'd taken each other on the staircase, his couch, his balcony, and, now, his bed.

The whole time we were together, I replayed my sister's voice in the back of my head. She knew as well as I did that if I wasn't already falling for this man . . . I could.

It would be the easiest thing I'd done in forever.

More than satisfied and both of us thoroughly worn out, I take the opportunity to clear my head. I let Enzo keep playing with that lock of hair, but I don't curl up against him and spoon until I can feel the beginning of a hard-on. I don't kiss his fingertips or brush his hair out of his eyes or rake my fingertips through his stubble, though God knows all those things seem vital right now.

"Mostly we talk about mundane stuff at club meetings," I tell him, finally remembering to answer his question about the club. "Work. Local gossip. The occasional date."

He raises one thick eyebrow, and I can sense the question before he asks it.

I roll my eyes. "Yes, you've come up once or twice."

"Alexis goes to your get-togethers, right? Should I be concerned that one of my employees is learning all my secrets?"

"I think I gave up all credibility when I described you as funny and sweet." I wink, and he tugs that lock of hair. "Everyone at Alessi's only knows the grinch."

Enzo stabs a finger that hits the tip of my nose. "You wound me."

I roll onto my back, still looking at him as I pull up the blanket to cover my bare breasts. He lets go of that lock of hair, and there's a twinge under my ribs.

“Actually, your reputation got a boost when you brought on a certain loveable dishwasher.”

His cheeks redden for some reason. “We look the same. We were raised under the same basic circumstances. How is it Matteo is a shot of sunshine and lollipops straight up the ass while I'm the fucking enema?”

“Could be because you use descriptors like ‘the fucking enema.’”

I send him a wry smile before reaching out to lace my fingers through his. I know I shouldn't, but in this moment, I can't help it. There's a note of honesty in his jab about Matteo, and for maybe the first time ever, I wonder if Enzo doesn't like being the grump to his brother's eternal sunshine.

“You didn't know Matteo when he showed up at your door,” I start, caution lining my voice. “And I'm sure he had a credit card to pay for his own place, even if Daddy didn't like it. Your mom has volunteered to take him in. What made you give Matteo a job in the first place?”

Enzo rolls onto his back like me, staring up at the ceiling. He keeps our fingers intertwined and places our hands over the center of his chest. He rubs his thumb in small, slow circles over the back of my hand.

“An explanation will only add to the grinch thing.”

I squeeze his hand. “I want to know.”

“Honestly?” He clears his throat. “I think it was mostly another fuck you to add to my laundry list. When Matteo first showed up at my doorstep, I saw the perfect opportunity to prove I could get everything right that my father had gotten wrong. I didn't care about connecting with Matteo so much as using him to show off.”

He's stiff, waiting for me to react. But instead of chastising him or assuring him that he must be misremembering his motivations, I just nod.

“It’s not that different from how I gave my kid experiences when Van’s family gave her toys,” I tell him. “My good parenting started off with some very vain, point-proving motivations.”

“I don’t want him to leave now,” he admits. “My Mom and Dad are coming at me from both sides, trying to get Matteo to leave here and return home, but I’m used to him.”

“You like him,” I correct. “You love him.”

“I love him,” he agrees.

“Unconventional start, good results.”

“Kind of like when your boss gets your box of sex toys and you end up friends with benefits?”

I laugh as Enzo rolls on top of me. He pins me to the bed, bringing my wrists above my head to hold them there. He leans forward to kiss the center of my forehead in that way we both like, and my heart melts, its heat diffusing through all the veins in my body to flood every corner of my being.

“I was hoping you’d show up after your club meeting tonight,” he tells me. “I ruined a perfectly good soufflé at dessert tonight because I was thinking about you.”

I raise an eyebrow and purse my lips. “What were you thinking about, exactly?”

“About how I’d like to butter your Pop-Tart.” Enzo grins. He howls as I jerk to smack him on the chest. He catches my wrists again and pins them back down before I can actually carry out my mission, then drags his tongue up the side of my neck and circles my ear lobe. *Shit*. “I’ve gotten used to having the same work schedule as you lately, and you getting off early to be with the girls threw me. I need a tangible Kelly to ogle or my daydreams get out of control. My imagination is slutty.”

I wrench my arms and sit up, forcing Enzo to sit on his heels so we’re chest to chest.

“Apparently there are benefits for me when your imagination runs wild,” I say. “I’ll get going now so your

slutty brain can think up new and exciting things to do to me next time we meet.”

I push away from his hold, but Enzo’s cries of protest start before I’ve even broken my wrists from his grasp. More laughter consumes me as he flips me onto my hands and knees. His heat settles against my ass as it did before, and if I thought I’d been exhausted and ready to call it a night a minute ago, I’m eating my words now as I writhe against him in search of friction.

Enzo’s hand snakes across my front, down over my belly, then between my legs. One finger dips in, slow and tentative and torturous.

The softness of his touch knocks me right in the chest.

I wrench back again, cutting off the squirming to try and playfully bump him back with my butt. In response, Enzo only tightens his grip at my waist and slides that finger the rest of the way to the knuckle. There’s nothing teasing about this touch. No part of him wants jokes right now.

And all at once, whatever benefit package we both signed up for as newfound friends is left behind. We’re leveling up. Trading in. And for the first time ever, no part of this feels temporary.

Then his hot breath is between my shoulder blades as he works another finger in. He thrusts against me, tempting me with a heft he’s not giving up yet.

So the next level of our friends-with-benefits arrangement includes . . . what? Trust? A knowledge of each other’s tics?

It doesn’t feel like love. It doesn’t feel like love. It doesn’t feel like love.

And I almost work up the nerve to say so out loud—at least so I can hear it from my own mouth—when Enzo turns my chin so he can lean around and kiss me.

And I’m so lost in feeling that there’s no sorting anything out.

When the night is really over and we're both so dizzy and strung out, I lean into Enzo as we walk toward his stairs, and he doesn't give a word of complaint . . .

I'm still repeating the mantra to myself. I haven't gotten the nerve to say that this doesn't feel like love to Enzo yet.

But it's not for lack of trying.

I keep attempting to clear the air, to make a joke, to bring us back to that light and airy place. But every time I do, my heartbeat kicks up in my ears, the world tilts on its axis, and my skin goes so tight and hot that all I can manage to do is just breathe.

And I know what this is. I know it in the same overpowering way I know that I can't bring myself to say this doesn't feel like love.

Because it is.

When we get to the door, Enzo turns to me.

"Hey, so Kelly—"

"Did you know that if I didn't keep my ex's last name, my full name would still be Kelly Greene?"

He blinks and shakes his head. "I . . . what?"

"Kelly Greene, like the color but spelled differently. It's kind of like naming a kid Scarlet Red or Cornflower Blue. I always gave my mom hell over not thinking that one through."

Enzo's eyebrows pinch in the middle. He scrubs at his forehead with the heel of one hand, and I can't tell if I'm exasperating him with my redirect or if he really is beginning to second-guess catching feelings for me. Either way, I plow on.

"Chartreuse Yellow. Heliotrope Purple."

"No one is naming their kid Heliotrope."

I waggle a finger at him. No man is turned on by finger wagging. "Don't speak so quickly. Summer had a kid in her kindergarten class named Sir with an older sister named Madame. Two grades above was a kid named Sharpain, and I

am *convinced* she was named that because her mother had a terrible labor and felt a sharp pain—”

He cuts me off with a kiss. It’s brief and close-lipped and a way to get me to shut up, but it leaves my veins buzzing nonetheless.

And there it is again. The Big Feeling.

“Get some sleep, psycho,” Enzo says as he shuffles me out the door with a half smile on his lips. “And, for the love of God, don’t tell my patrons these stories or no one will make it past the hostess booth.”

After he shuts the door, I stop on my way down the path and stare back at it.

I wasn’t wrong. The rattle is still in my chest. The prickle is still under my skin. And my stomach dances around, twisting and turning and never giving me relief.

The next morning, I get a knock on my door before nine a.m. I straggle out of my bedroom in a threadbare robe with no bra on, praying it’s Enzo or Josie but mentally preparing for an Amazon delivery guy. When I open it to Matteo, I have to shake my head to clear it.

“Button wants my big pickle!”

I frown. “Say that again. Slowly, this time, so we’re both clear on what you just announced.”

Matteo pushes past me. He’s already whipping a flyer out of his back pocket, spreading it out to hold it up, and brandishing it at a dented corner.

“Button Farmers’ Market!” he repeats. “Chiara and I made a batch of quick pickles with Enzo’s help, and I brought samples to the last market. This booth, Pickled Pepper Pete, said they would order a bunch of jars if we could make them with full-sized cucumbers. Isn’t that amazing!”

“Well, it makes a lot more sense than what I thought. Coffee, Matteo?”

“Is Summer here?” he presses on. Matteo walks up to my daughter’s bedroom door, holding out a fist to knock. At the last second, he stops short and whispers her name into the crack. “*Summer!* Summer, get out here so I can talk about my pickles!”

I snort and shake my head.

Another knock sounds at the front door, and we both turn to look. Meanwhile, Summer’s door opens a slit, and her bright eyes peer through the shadows like she’s a cave creature.

“Did Matteo just say—”

I shut her door closed again as I walk past to get back to the front door. “Get dressed, and I’ll make coffee!” I call.

When I pull open the door, everything I put on pause last night at Enzo’s place hits the play button again. He’s standing on my front porch, still in his wrinkled white sleep shirt, hair mussed to one side like he just woke up. My pulse points light up again. My tongue goes thick and cottony. Damn it, Matteo, you choose now to go silent about your big pickle?

“Sorry,” Enzo says as I let him in. “I made him promise not to wake you up too early with the news. He wanted to come by last night, but I had . . . other plans. I tried to tell you, but I ended up with an earful on Sharpain and Madame.”

My cheeks blister. Here I was battling the Big Feeling last night thinking Enzo was having a come-to-Jesus moment, too, when all I thwarted was a warning for my wake-up call.

“Well, come caffeine with me,” I say, waving him in and turning quickly to hide my burning face.

“So we sampled a standard dill recipe with them, but I think I’m going to pitch some sweet heat pickles next.” Summer is at the table, head buried in her arms as Matteo talks excitedly from the chair beside her. “Hey, you guys should sample for us. You a fan of big hot pickles?”

“Help,” Summer mutters into her arms. “Too many jokes. Not enough coffee.”

“So Button does the weekly farmers’ market every Sunday, but we’re going to launch the pickles next month when the county gets together for their big combined market. You two have to come!”

I glance at Enzo as I fill the coffee pot chamber. His eyes catch mine. “Um, what day next month?”

“At the end,” Matteo says. “They’re gonna make a big hullabaloo for back to school.”

Something flips in my chest, and I’m more than a little surprised at this first pang that isn’t directly related to the older Barone brother. “I’m sorry, Matteo. We’ll have moved by then.”

Summer looks up from where she’s buried her face in her arms. She glances at Matteo, then at me, and winces for the same reasons I am: we both know we’re letting him down. Even though I’m not Matteo’s family, I still feel partly responsible for showing him he can have a life in Button. I’ve had *fun* gardening with him. I like hearing him go off about vegetables—even the big pickles. Not being around to witness the results of all his hard work leaves my stomach sour.

Matteo pauses and purses his lips. Then he clasps his hands on my table and straightens his back.

“You know, if you think about it, Summer, prep schools don’t give you much of an advantage academically. I went to a prep school, and I didn’t even go to college.”

“There may be unrelated reasons for that,” Enzo grunts, stepping up to put a stop to this. “I told you when you first proposed coming over to leave the Hamilton Prep thing alone.”

Matteo isn’t convinced. He untwines his fingers to lay them flat on the table and looks at me with the most serious expression I’ve ever seen from him.

“You know, if you think about it, all prep schools ever gave us was fodder for a Britney Spears music video and a really sad Robin Williams flick.”

“And Jack Kerouac and Anderson Cooper and John F. Kennedy . . .” Enzo mumbles.

Matteo’s eyes narrow, but he won’t look at his brother. “And if you really think about it—”

“And if you really think about it,” Enzo interrupts. “One more *if you think about it* from Matteo and his track record says he’ll rearrange your house right into moving boxes for you and accidentally ship you out to South Carolina himself. Come on, kid. Leave the girls alone. You can talk pickles with me.”

He grabs his brother by the arm and hauls him back to my front door. Enzo gives me a cursory nod before he’s gone, and then Summer and I are left alone in our pajamas with too much coffee brewing.

It was weird to let Enzo go without a side hug or at least exchanging a quip or two. And even though Summer and I have done every morning together before this one with absolutely no need for any more company, I can’t help but hate how quiet it is now that the boys are gone.

“I’m going back to bed,” Summer announces.

Smart move. Maybe I should go back to bed, too. But my still-pounding heart tells me there’s no chance I’ll get back to sleep. The Big Feeling has taken hold, and there’s no ignoring it now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: ENZO

“Someone was out late last night.” On Monday morning, Arlo clucks at me without looking up from his vegetables. “I can tell.”

I swear he never came in to chop veggies this early before. I get the feeling he’s making a point to check in on me these past few weeks, and instinct reminds me to buck against it.

“How’s the lady friend?” he asks. “She as tired as you?”

He hoots at that, shaking his head and mumbling as he goes to town on some cauliflower.

“She’s not my lady friend,” I start with the usual retorts. “She’s my . . . okay, so she’s a lady and a friend. I’ll concede to that one.”

“Your sugar boo, then?” Arlo corrects. “Your sweet Georgia peach? Your amore-adillo?”

I flick the back of his head on my way to retrieve a stockpot, and Arlo howls with more laughter.

“You gotta admit that last nickname was original!”

“Kelly is *fine*,” I grind out. “That’s spelled f-i-n-e, not b-a-b-y or h-o-n-e-y.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Arlo’s self-satisfied hum is almost worse than his jokes.

And, okay, I guess I can see where he feels pretty confident in his assessment. Over the last few weeks, Kelly and I have followed the relationship cadences. I see her almost every night after work. When I don’t have a good excuse to head over to her place, all I have to do is mention trying a new pickling recipe to Matteo and he’s racing over to give the girls more fodder for their dirty jokes. Kelly brought me soup (store-bought, thank God) when I was sick last week, I fixed a leaky sink for her yesterday morning, and we’ve got a standing date to watch the reality singing show I still pretend to hate.

When Matteo and Summer are on the scene, we're pros at being just friends.

When we're alone, those benefits start insisting on something more.

But even when she's not wearing my high school soccer jersey that hangs past her butt, I love the time we spend together. Even when I'm not considering how each of her lashes is full and long and her mascara rarely covers all the hints of titian and strawberry and blond. Even when I'm not counting the freckles on her neck, knowing they aren't a treasure map, but wanting to follow wherever they lead anyway.

Sometimes it's all so easy. Easy enough that I almost wish circumstances were different. I allow myself a moment to curse South Carolina in my head and curse my father all over again for imparting the one life lesson that stuck because it just made too much sense: don't get too close. But when the moment is over, I bottle it all away and shove those thoughts into a dark corner.

Circumstances aren't different. Things are the way they are. And it's fruitless and increasingly torturous to consider anything different.

We're coming up to the end of July already. In only a few short days, Kelly and Summer will be gone.

They made a trip last week to get Summer's school supplies and tour the campus. Of course, that was the weekend Matteo finally took Mom up on her offer to hang out. I clung to my pride and stuck to myself but instantly regretted it. Alone with my own miserable company, all I did was cook way too much food I couldn't get through alone and check my phone. I couldn't let myself think about what things would be like when the move was permanent.

I ended up making three puff pastries, one strudel, and a cherry turnover . . . all of which were essentially variations on the Pop-Tart.

“Gloria says she’s ready to forgive you for your bad behavior if you bring over that quiche she likes for dinner tomorrow night.”

Arlo’s voice brings me back to reality. Was it really almost time for another Tuesday night dinner? I hadn’t been over since that public spat I had with Kelly. I know Gloria isn’t one to hold a grudge, but I also know the woman is old-school Southern enough to require a gift of apology.

“I think I can—” I pause, considering again how this is Kelly’s last week in town.

Arlo anticipates my objection before I voice it.

“Bring Kelly with you,” he suggests. “That will give Gloria someone to complain to about your previous behavior. You know she’d just lecture you personally if not. When is Kelly out of here?”

“Friday.”

He nods, turning away from the cauliflower to cross his arms and take me in. His face is somber. Too somber. I don’t like thinking he feels bad for me.

“That’s what I thought I heard from some of the girls up front. Wendy is looking for a replacement already?”

“Yeah.”

“And are you two going to try long—”

“No.”

Whatever waking up I did between coffee and coming downstairs is undone in one fell swoop. The haze is back as my fingers itch toward the phone in my pocket, and the cloud around my head sours as I take that realization in.

“You know,” Arlo starts, voice lined with caution. “I think Kelly might be open to—”

“No,” I repeat.

Then I head back for the stairs up to my apartment, knowing full well that now I owe Arlo an apology as well as his wife.

“Don’t say a damn word,” I mutter to Arlo as he lets me and Kelly into his house.

Arlo’s lips tighten and twitch around the corners, but all he does is nod and wave us by. Kelly glances back at me as Arlo follows us in, takes my quiche, and heads to the kitchen.

“You okay?” The words are casual, but her eyes search every pore of my face as she says them.

I scratch at the back of my head and brush past her toward the kitchen. “Sorry, guess I’m in a fog today. My sleep hasn’t been the best.”

She grabs my arm, and the curl of her fingers sends a bolt branching out through my veins.

“Hey,” she says. “What’s going on?”

I shrug her off and take her hand off my arm to tuck it into my own. “Just worried Gloria will botch my quiche during the reheat.”

“I heard that!” Gloria calls from the kitchen. “Now you owe me another quiche for your indecency!”

I wince as Kelly pulls me back toward the front door. She crosses her arms and cocks her head at me. I wonder, briefly, if this is how she interrogates Summer—and then I wonder how Kelly’s daughter gets away with hiding anything.

“My mom took Matteo out apartment hunting.” The admission comes easily, and it isn’t a lie. Just not the entire truth. “Surprisingly, they looked in Button. Her way of playing a role in his life, but also giving me something back, I guess.”

Kelly arches one red eyebrow. “Wow.”

“Wow.”

I rub the back of my neck. I could tell her about Mom sticking around Alessi’s for a nightcap after that first day of apartment hunting. That would be big news. There were a million things awry with the restaurant, too, as there always

are. I could even complain about Matteo, and that would probably be a believable reason as to why she senses I'm off.

But then I'm drawing a deep breath and letting go of more. "I can't bring myself to ask Matteo about his visit with Dad. He's been cool enough not to bring it up."

Kelly has uncrossed her arms, and her fingers find mine in the space between us. She doesn't take my hand in her own, but the pads of her fingertips brush across my own—a gentle reminder that she's here but not pressing.

"I didn't know it had happened already."

"It happened last week. You were in South Carolina."

Adding that bit about Kelly and Summer being out of state feels like a jab, though I couldn't say why exactly. And, on cue, her brows knit together for a half moment before they relax again.

"Do you want to know how the meeting went?" she asks.

"I don't know," I breathe. "Yes? No. I mean, I keep seeing my mom around the restaurant, and it's clear something has changed in her. I never gave her credit for being a decent mother, but it's like she's really trying. So wouldn't a decent person make themselves get over their resentment and give Arturo another chance?"

Kelly says nothing. Which is simultaneously what I need and what I hate, because it compels me to spill more.

"Maybe I'm not a decent person," I mutter. "Maybe I'm the person who takes the easy way out because ignoring my dad is far more appealing."

"You're more than decent," Kelly assures me. She takes my hand, letting my fingers curl around her palm to form a fist. She holds it to her cheek, closing her eyes as she rubs its callouses across her silken skin. "You're watching out for yourself and your brother. There's good reason for that. If anyone can relate, it's the neighbor who went too far the other direction."

She glances at me, then her eyes break away and she sucks in her bottom lip.

“Take it from the love addict who overcompensates because she was the one who first did the hurting,” she continues. “I get it.”

Kelly is the furthest thing from someone like me, but these tiny moments where she finds a way to bridge the gap between us . . . they’re insane. They make me want to tell her more, to show her my wounds and trust her to stitch them back together. I almost want to admit that I’m terrified of following up with my father because I don’t want to let myself change my mind about him. That would require too much chance, too many feelings, too long a journey for someone who got lucky he even made it this far in the world.

I want to tell Kelly I’m terrified of a world where someone else’s feelings matter to me.

I want to tell her that it was a big enough journey to care about my brother again, but to care about her now and to have her on the precipice of leaving is scaring me shitless. I’m going to miss her so much my muscles ache. I want to tell her that her feelings matter more to me than anyone in the world, and somehow I knew it was going to be love the first time I kissed her and made her promise we wouldn’t be anything more than friends.

It’s love for want of a much, much stronger word.

What I feel for Kelly Hastings is umami. It’s that thing you can’t pin down, that hit to the receptors that tells your brain there’s something big, that flavor that makes the whole goddamn world taste better.

“Better check on Gloria.” The words have sharp edges as I swallow them down and make myself walk away, back toward the kitchen.

For the rest of the night, I sit on the thoughts I had in Arlo’s foyer. The words roll around my tongue, leaving my most prized appendage blistered and wrought out.

And all night long, I watch Kelly and wonder if I should have said more of them out loud.

She tells a bawdy joke that sends Arlo and Gloria rolling, and my heartbeat sounds in my ears. She glances over at me and blushes before launching into an embarrassing childhood story, and those three little words almost spring past my lips on their own accord. So many times I find myself gripping her knee possessively or hooking the tip of a finger in her pocket so I can ground myself, so I can scratch an itch that runs so deep under my skin it's torture.

I'm mentally speeding the night up. I'm already playing out the first seconds of our crashing through Alessi's darkened doorway. Matteo is out with Chiara again, and I'll have the place to myself for a few solid hours. We'd laugh through kissing each other. Maybe, if I were reckless enough, we'd greet the sunrise together from my rooftop.

The thought leaves every one of my cells bursting with desire.

The problem is, this little fantasy is just the beginning. After those words threatened my lips only a short while ago, indulging myself in these delicious moments will be a tipping point. There is no tasting Kelly and coming back occasionally—there is only senselessly, blindly drowning in her and loving every moment.

So each time I ground myself with a touch of her elbow or a deep breath of her coconut shampoo, the reminder is what keeps me from losing myself to the fantasy. It beats a steady, pulsing rhythm behind my eye sockets, nestling in as the deepest kind of headache. I'm so torn between wanting more and wanting to pull back that my fucking joints ache.

When the time comes for dessert, I'm more than ready to get up at Arlo's invitation for the girls to keep chatting while we prep the toffee pudding.

"Alright, if the quiche didn't endear her to you, the pudding might," Arlo says as he leads the way to his island. "Don't tell Gloria, but one night I woke up to her making moaning noises. Thought she was dreaming of another man."

Turns out she was dreaming about the pudding I'd brought home from Alessi's that night."

He turns to me, flashing his gapped smile. It's endearing, and usually, these post-dinner conversations are the biggest reason I keep coming back for Tuesday night get-togethers, but tonight I'm still replaying the Kelly Hastings highlight reel.

And this time, instead of thinking about the highlights in her hair or the slight crookedness of her smile, I'm thinking back to our conversation about my father.

My heart turns over in my chest.

"Uh, did Matteo mention anything to you this week?" I ask, making sure to busy my hands prepping the pudding.

Arlo snorts. "Well, he did start one of his *if you think about it* lectures, but I reminded him that the dishwashing sink is connected to a main line and there will be no moving it."

I almost smile at that. My lips twitch like they might, but then I swallow to follow up for the next part of the conversation, and I realize my mouth has gone Sahara dry.

"I meant, did he say anything about . . . well, about our father, actually." I try to clear my throat and bring some life back into it, but the resulting sound is choked. "Matteo met with him last week. I know my brother sometimes likes to talk while he's doing dishes. God knows I've had to tell the busboys to ignore him and get back to the front enough times."

Arlo's head cocks the smallest amount, but he doesn't turn my way to reveal any interest. Like me, he busies himself with putting the final touches on the pudding.

"I'm hard of hearing," Arlo reminds me.

"I shouldn't have ask—"

"There might have been mention of retirement," he says. "Or, at least, something about stepping away and letting his board handle more work."

My hands pause midair. They're fucking shaking. I won't let myself care. I won't let myself worry about Dad's

motivations for taking time away or even if there's any truth to his claim. Allowing myself to care about the feelings of someone who has proven again and again not to care about mine is a recipe for disaster. It's not only exhausting, but it's futile, too. I don't have space in my life to care about Arturo Barone. I don't—

I put down what I'm doing and march to the fridge. I grab a new beer, crack open the top, and drain half the bottle in one pull. Again, Arlo does me the service of staying silent.

Laughter filters through the crack in the kitchen door, and we turn. Arlo resumes his work, and it's like the beat before never happened.

"I like that Kelly. She almost makes you bearable. Wish she and Summer had longer to stay."

I take another swig of my beer.

Arlo isn't so kind as to stay silent this time. Instead, he eyeballs me as he works. "You sad she's moving?"

The salty, acrid sting of blood floods my mouth, and I realize I've bitten too hard on my cheek. I just press my lips tighter together and take a deep breath through my nostrils before I open my mouth again. I chug down the last swig of beer, toss it in the trash can, and cross my arms.

"I'm good," I promise. "We both knew this was temporary. Besides, she's a great girl. Great girls deserve a lot better than the likes of me."

"Very true," Arlo says. "But try telling her that. She wouldn't give George Clooney the time of day if you were around."

"Arlo . . ." I warn.

He just shrugs and smiles to himself. "You don't scare me, boy. And now that I can see your weak-ass boy face without that beard, I know you ain't intimidating."

"She's *moving*," I remind him, a little too sharply. "Bring on George Clooney. Nothing is happening between us."

"Okay, but let's say she wasn't moving—"

I slam a palm down on the table, and the pudding jiggles. “Damn it, Arlo, don’t try to convince me there’s something there that isn’t. I was too careful for all that. I always took the right precautions and kept the right amount of distance.”

“Nobody made you do that, boy,” Arlo lectures. He flicks a spoonful of toffee sauce at me, and it lands with a sticky dollop on the end of my nose. That adds more fuel to the fire in my belly, but Arlo is too smart to give me the chance to speak first. “You put up all these silly rules because you’re scared that if you let anyone get close, they’ll let you down. I know enough about the relationship you had with your daddy to know that much. But you’re not him, Enzo.”

“You know, my old man had a policy.” I’m yelling at Arlo now. I’ve never yelled at Arlo. “He always said it was to keep some distance between yourself and your employees, but really it was to keep some distance between yourself and the rest of the world. It might have been what ruined our relationship, but it sure as shit proved to be my saving grace in preventing another Arturo Barone from entering my life.”

“Yeah, and it’s also the one rule that makes you intolerable as shit as a boss.” Arlo points his spoon accusatorily at the center of my chest. “I like you, Enzo, but we both know you only kept me around long enough to get to know you proper because I can sauté you under the damn table.”

“Well, that’s debat—”

“You argue with me more and you’ll get the backside of this spoon to your face,” Arlo tells me. “Try some of the good wine we keep down in the cellar. Maybe take a vacation now and then. It’s all good for you, just like admitting you’re afraid to care about this girl because you’re afraid of being let down.”

“She’s done it before!” I snap.

I can’t stop myself. The words are pouring out of me—white-hot acid that burns a trail up my throat and between my lips. I’m choking on them, but I invite them anyway. They consume me until my whole world is red, red, red.

“Your perfect girl left her husband,” I tell him. “She’s done it before. Just walked out on him. Ended a perfectly good marriage for no reason at all. Not so stupid now, am I?”

“Son, if we were to judge every person by their first big screwup, you’d be soufflé on the night Augusta Review came to Alessi’s.”

I blister at that. “There is nothing between us, Arlo,” I snarl. “We’re friends with benefits. No, not even friends! She said that herself, and I couldn’t have put it better myself. So stop inventing a relationship where there isn’t one. Kelly doesn’t mean anything to me, and when August rolls around, all I’ll be missing is a neighbor whose kid plays their music too loud and whose burned dinners can be smelled up in my apartment. We’re *nothing*.”

I shove away from the island and start back for the dining room. I push open the door, and it swings ahead of me.

Kelly is standing there—of course she is, though my tirade had made me forget she was so close—and the injury evident on her face makes my heart crack so hard I swear I can almost hear it.

“*Shit*.” I curse.

I pinch the bridge of my nose as I push past her and to the front door. I toss my keys on Arlo’s entryway table so Kelly can drive herself home, then set out to walk the few miles back to Alessi’s in the dark.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: KELLY

It's late when the knock comes on my door. I can't decide if I want to open it or not.

Part of me had been expecting Enzo to come crawling back. Not expecting—hoping. I guess I can admit that to myself now. I'd wanted him to pull out the white knight theatrics and bring even more than a Cuban sandwich this time. I wanted flowers, I wanted John Hughes songs, I wanted that simple confession that, *yes, none of this was in your head, Kelly! Yes, I was lying to myself and to Arlo! Marry me! Have my babies! Let me rename Alessi's after you!*

Oh, God.

And really, he might not be crawling back at all. This might be the dreaded situationship wrap-up. Enzo took that long walk through downtown Button and got together his perfect speech to end things with the messy, ridiculous girl next door. This knock could be our end calling. It could be a fight or one of those sad pats on the back or even Enzo telling me not to come back to work, that he'll train my replacement himself.

The knock comes again.

"Mom!" Summer moans from her bedroom. "'Ere's someone at the door!"

"Thank you, Summer," I say through tight teeth, pacing as I eyeball my entryway.

How did I get here? This was the year of the designated man hiatus. I had rules. I had a club of girlfriends to keep me accountable. I'd gone into this so sure that things would be different and I could just have some fun.

And is this fun? Hearing about the shittiest thing I ever did to a partner as it's yelled through a coworker's kitchen door? As I replay Enzo saying *we're nothing, we're nothing, we're nothing* over and over again?

He was a giant asshole for saying that. But I'm an even bigger idiot.

I'm not sure when the tears started, but they cloud my eyes now. My lash line burns so much that I know fighting the tears is pointless. They roll down my cheeks, collecting in tiny pools along my collarbone. I swipe at them with the back of my sleeve as I walk to my door, but it does little to stop the fresh tears as they come in waves.

I open the door.

"Kelly."

Enzo is standing there, dressed in the same clothes as when he left Arlo's. So he hasn't been home to change. It's been longer than it would take to get back home from dinner. What have all these empty hours done for him?

"Kelly, look. I . . . I think I need to apologize."

"You didn't say anything that wasn't true."

"Kelly—"

I hold up one hand. "It's late," I say. "I thought you might come by, so I figured I'd let you say your piece and get out what you needed to. But I'm fine. Really. We both knew what we were getting into when we started this thing."

I start to shut the door, but Enzo blocks it. He takes my wrist in one hand, clutching it to his chest. The gesture is almost too much to bear; any tears I'd managed to hold back for the duration of this conversation come tumbling out, and then I'm sniffing and shaking and unable to look him in the eye.

"It was all true," I repeat. "Everything you told Arlo was true."

"Sure," he says in a quiet voice. "It was all true when this thing started. But what about now? Look at you. Fuck." He wipes a thumb under my eye and smooths it away on the front of his shirt. "You're crying."

More than anger at what he said to Arlo, more than sadness at losing something that was never mine to lose, it's

embarrassment that rocks me to my core now. It's shame.

He's calling me out, right?

"I know what I told you when we started this," I say. I can hardly hear my voice. "And you're right. It was all true when I first said it. I tried hard to keep it all true. Really, I did. I don't *want* to be the pathetic basket case who throws herself at every man with a pulse because she's scared of having karma pay her back for past behavior. I didn't want to fall—"

He shakes his head quickly. "Kelly, wait. I didn't mean —"

"I didn't want to fall in love with you," I whisper. "But I did. And now I've gone and broken my own heart."

His fingertips brush across my lips, preventing me from saying more. Enzo shakes his head again, and he steps close enough for our chests to almost touch.

"I didn't mean that *you* were the only one of us whose feelings changed since all this started." He's not saying he loves me back. Still, I can't help but catalog how the lines of his face strain and a thick swallow passes down his throat. How his fingertips quiver against my lips. How his breath rattles in and rattles out. "I said what I did to Arlo because it felt better than admitting the truth. You're leaving, Kelly. We can't change that. I'm not going to change that. And it's not even just about you, it's about your kid . . ."

I scramble to grab his wrists, pulling them to my beating heart so he can feel the desperation I don't know how to properly voice.

"Long distance isn't impossible," I say. The tears are still streaming down my face, salt tainting my mouth with each word I say. I press on anyway. "If you're in for it, we can make something work. We can *try*."

He shakes his head, and I almost cry out. "Come on, Kelly. We both knew what we wanted before these feelings got in the way. You have to go."

"Enzo," I start. His name is a prayer on my lips, and I know we both sense it. I draw his hands up to my mouth.

Almost cover my lips as I ask the next question. “You know how I feel. You know I lo . . . What do you feel? For me?”

His face gives nothing away. For a millisecond, he might as well have that stupid beard again for all I can’t read in his expression. Enzo’s eyes are steady and more gray than blue as he pulls his hands back and shoves them in his pockets.

“Does this really feel like love to you, Kelly?” he asks me. “Having your heart turned inside out and then putting it on the table for someone else to do with as they please?”

I choke. “It’s trusting the other person to take care with it. And I do, Enzo. I really—”

“But I don’t.” He looks to the ground. A vein in the side of his neck jumps ferociously. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay and tell you I was sorry for making a scene at Arlo’s. Have a good night, Kelly.”

As soon as I shut the door behind him, I collapse against it. Summer is out in a moment, her arms around me before I hit the ground.

God knew what he was doing when he gave the sixteen-year-old the baby girl. She’s so much more than a daughter; in this moment, I’m sure Summer is my best friend and the only person I can *really* trust with my heart when it’s splayed open on the table. She is love, and to think I could have something quite like this with anyone else is ludicrous.

But none of that comforts me as I cry into her shoulder. None of it helps when I sniffle and sob and remember full well that this is a grave of my own making.

I wake up to bodies in my bed.

“Cheese and rice!” I scramble out from under the covers, scanning my bedroom frantically for the baseball bat I usually keep next to my dresser.

“My spleen!” someone whines.

“Protect the wedding nose!” comes a familiar voice. “This thing has engagement pictures in a few days!”

“Summer promised waffles. I don’t smell any damn waffles.”

My friends are all in my bed, fully dressed for the day and lying on top of my covers. It would appear I’d been nestled between them, and when I’d woken up to bed intruders, my natural klutziness had proven to be the best defense against would-be criminals.

Josie is turning this way and that for Rachel, who is examining her nose.

“I mean, I’m not the surgeon among us, but it doesn’t look broken to me,” she says.

“Waffles,” Marnie repeats, pulling my pillow over her face and groaning. “I was told that if I got here pre-nine a.m., there would be waffles.”

“You’re here,” I stammer. “You’re all here.”

“You’ve got a good kid,” Alexis says with a sympathetic smile. She’s the first to stand and come to my side to take my hand. “And we’ve got one heck of an effective club group text.”

I put my hands over my face and lean back on the dresser. “God, what did Summer tell you?”

Josie has walked over to pull my hands away from my face. “Why don’t you tell us what happened?”

“I’m sure you already know it’s over between me and Enzo then.” Bitten bottom lips, pinched brows, and sad little nods are all the confirmation I need. “So it’s exactly the same as my usual MO. I tell myself I’m going to keep my distance, then I dive into the shallow heart-shaped Jacuzzi and end up with a head injury.”

Rachel rubs at the side of her head like my analogy physically pained her.

“And there’s no chance—” Alexis starts.

I shake my head, cutting her off. “There’s no chance of us getting back together. I gave him every opportunity and put it

all on the line. He let me know in so many words that he had no interest in a future with me.”

The words go down like horse pills. My lash line burns again, and I swallow hard to keep the tears from falling.

“I’m sorry.” It’s my sister this time, slipping her fingers through mine.

At my other side, Alexis takes my other hand. “Me, too,” she says.

“I don’t know where to go now,” I admit. “I don’t know how to start over this time. You’d think I’d be used to this, with how many times I’ve been in this place before.”

Rachel shakes her head and frowns. “No heartbreak is the same. You’re allowed to be confused for a while.”

“And besides, that’s why your daughter called us,” Josie adds with a smile. “What good is a Better Than Josh Everton Club if we can’t remind each other that we’re a million times better than Josh Everton or any other dick out there?”

Marnie sits up suddenly, eyes flashing. “Oh! I just had an idea! Mimosas!”

“Um, okay?” Rachel laughs. “A short-term solution, maybe.”

Marnie waves her off. “Just give Four Drink Marnie a chance to see the light of day. This is a problem she can fix. She’ll have a PowerPoint with all the reasons Enzo Barone will die penis-less and alone completed in thirty minutes, tops.”

We start our morning in my kitchen and stay there for most of the day. We watch ’80s romance movies, and Marnie throws pillows at the screen during the kissing scenes. Josie calls Holden on speakerphone and has him give me an NFL-worthy pep talk on why I’m better off without a man holding me back. Rachel and Alexis spend way too much time weaving these ridiculous friendship bracelets out of twisted-up Pop-Tart wrappers. They’re held together with hot glue, and they scratch at the inside of my wrist, but just like the others, I swear never to get rid of mine.

When the sun sets and we've finally run out of booze and snacks and energy, we all fall asleep together on my couch. At some point, Summer must have brought in a blanket, because when I wake up at three a.m. and blink out into the darkness, I realize my legs are covered.

Alone with no distractions, my thoughts return to the man next door. And even though I've had so many great distractions, my chest aches all over again as I wonder if he feels any semblance of my pain.

Where did I go wrong? Could I really have misread every moment between us and created a connection that wasn't there?

No matter how many times I replay the memories, I can't quite make myself believe that.

Somehow I fall asleep again, leaned up on Josie's head, but I only dream of him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: ENZO

When Mom shows up unexpectedly on Thursday morning and invites me and Matteo out for coffee, it's an easy, grumpy no for me and a relief when Matteo agrees to go. Arlo is working a shift downstairs, and, as far as I know, Kelly has come in for her usual schedule in the front of the house. So I hole up in my apartment, keep the curtains drawn, and stew in a silence only occasionally punctuated by the clatter of dishes below. I don't have to endure much more time of Kelly working downstairs before it'll all be over.

I couldn't face anyone. I can hardly look in the mirror and face myself after everything I said the other night.

Come on, Enzo. Some familiar voice cuts its way through the silence to needle at the back of my brain. *Kelly made the rules, too. You don't have space for her feelings, same way she doesn't have space for yours. It wouldn't do either of you any good if you told her the truth about how you feel now.*

Because I know it now. Because an entirely unfamiliar, still, soft voice would sometimes make itself heard over the old voice and tug at the center of my chest: *you love her, you idiot.*

I know which voice I have to listen to. These feelings aren't something on which I can depend. I've felt this before—not the romantic version, but still, I know I recognize the feeling. I loved my dad once, and look where that got me. It wasn't something I could count on. It only left me dependent, tired, and let down.

Let down.

I wince, even though there's no one here to see me in the darkness. I can hear Arlo's words from before.

You put up all these silly rules because you're scared that if you let anyone get close, they'll let you down.

No. I'd done us both a favor. There was no chance Kelly and I could have made something work, even if we hadn't been trying for long distance.

Arlo would take a break and come upstairs if I asked him to. We have plenty of staff on call to fill in, and his arthritis would welcome a reprieve. But I didn't answer his calls on my cell after I stormed off from the dinner, and the taste is still too bitter in my mouth to swallow past and find my voice.

Every small noise is my phone buzzing or a soft knock at my door. It's a repeated hope that Kelly might call and want to talk things over. And when I'm not willing her contact into existence, I'm considering reaching out to her to see how she's holding up.

What's our status? Has she given up on an intolerable asshole like me? Will she work her last shift at Alessi's and disappear, leaving her black apron on my desk instead of giving it to me in person? Sometime this afternoon, my stomach coiled into a tight, heavy ball.

I get up, pull ingredients out of my fridge and pantry, and stare at the mess I've created on my counter. Inspiration never comes, and my stomach rumbles, wanting to be fed. Eventually I put everything back in place, ignore my body's protests, and settle for a beer I take to my couch.

Lunch.

It only makes my mood more sour.

If I hadn't said what I did, I'd be taking Kelly back to her place when she's off in an hour or so. I'd help her pack. She'd have that terrible talent competition playing on the TV, and I'd be insisting I didn't enjoy it but secretly rooting for some underdog teenager from a flyover state. Kelly would clap extra loud if the kid did well, knowing without my admitting as much that I'd been pulling for them.

After the house was packed and Summer was off to say her last goodbyes to friends, I'd pull Kelly close. I'd let myself breathe in the scent of her hair—only once, any more and I wouldn't be able to stop. I'd follow the trail of freckles up the back of her neck with my fingertips until I reached the one I was sure she didn't even know she had since it was tucked along her hairline behind her ear. I'd kiss that spot, a secret communion.

My body comes alive thinking about it now—and about everything that could have followed. Every part of me aches with the desire to go to her place. To admit everything. To grovel, if I had to.

Maybe I'd kiss that spot behind her ear and whisper against the skin there that I only told that lie because I knew Kelly's biggest fear was being abandoned in that karmic way she did so long ago. I knew it was the way to keep her safe because history says that if a Barone man lets you close, he'll let you down. Better to cut ties now than let her get even more invested and watch me turn into my father.

I bury myself under a mountain of blankets on the couch, close my eyes, and pretend to sleep, although no one's watching.

Sometime around six, there are heavy footsteps on the stairs. I stare at my shield of crocheted cotton, cringing as I anticipate my brother's entrance.

The door flies open, and Matteo is already talking. "What do you think you're doing?"

"It's called sleep. AKA what I've been trying to do ever since you moved in and started rearranging my shit predawn."

The covers are thrown back. Matteo is towering over me, his face contorted into the closest thing to a scowl I've ever seen from him.

"What happened with you and Kelly?" he asks. "She spent half her shift in the bathroom."

I draw a deep breath, not wanting to picture Kelly wearing that same wounded expression I saw yesterday all shift. Yesterday's headache comes rattling back.

"It's over."

Matteo bops me on the head. "What did you do?"

I grit my teeth and make myself look at my brother. "Look, Kelly is moving hours away."

“Did you tell her how much you want her to stay?”

“Matteo, this move is for her kid. I can’t ask her to stay.”

“You’re great at being an asshole, bro. Pull out your best skills now and go be selfish! Make her stay!”

“There are more reasons than Summer that this wouldn’t have worked. I have a business here that requires all my extra attention. Kelly has to be a mom. We’re on entirely different tracks. If I wanted her life, I would have started the family thing years ago—”

“But instead, you started it a few months ago,” Matteo says. “When I showed up on your doorstep.”

I blink. I’m not sure what to say to that.

“Come on, Enzo,” he says. “You’ve given the family thing a go. It might not have been what you thought you’d get out of life, but it’s worked out anyway. You and I both know you’re not on that different a path from Kelly.”

I bristle at that. Chewing my tongue, I flip through my inner Rolodex of grumpy comebacks.

I’m not a family guy. I chose career over children. I chose late nights in the kitchen over late nights in a woman’s bedroom.

But, somehow, in the last few months, Matteo moved into my place and made himself at home anyway. We started drinking coffee on the balcony together every morning, and it only took me a few days to form a habit of brewing enough for both of us instead of just myself. He’s barged into my bathroom enough times that I’ve started bringing my clothes in with me, so I can change right after my shower and run less of a risk of getting caught naked. His clothes hang next to mine in the closet. My refrigerator is in a constant state of flux.

We became a family, and I didn’t even see it happening. He let himself in, and it was the most unexpected but most natural thing in the world.

But I can’t admit as much right now. Not when my argument is on the line, and one word of concession from me

will result in Matteo flashing me a dopey grin and swinging his arm through mine to walk me over to Kelly's place as he says, "You know, if you think about it . . ."

"This isn't because I'm afraid." I didn't decide to say that, but the words are coming out anyway, giving away my true feelings.

Matteo nods. "Of course not."

"Seriously," I insist. "I'm going to get past this. Just give me some time."

The words hang in the air between us. They dissipate into nothingness, their emptiness exposed as soon as I've given them voice.

Matteo sighs, looking between me and the window that faces Kelly's townhouse. Finally, he crosses the living room and opens the blinds. The sunshine leaves me cringing.

Matteo pokes a finger against the glass. "How long does she have?"

"They leave tomorrow."

My feet are getting me up before I can stop them. I cross to the window and spy Kelly's parents' minivan. I've only met her folks a handful of times, but I recognize her dad loading boxes into the trunk and her soon-to-be brother-in-law, Holden, bringing them in from the house. My heart sinks.

"We'll bring her some vegetables from the garden for their road trip," Matteo decides.

He starts up the stairs to the roof, leaving me behind at the window. Cauliflower. Exactly what everyone wants to eat on a road trip. Still, my capacity for joking is long gone. Kelly pokes her head out the front door to yell something to the boys, and my lungs seize.

A few minutes later, Matteo has a grocery bag full of garden goods and we're crossing the path to Kelly's place. My back teeth click together as my jaw ticks. As if on cue, Kelly and Josie step out of the house, loaded down with duffel bags and rolling suitcases.

My blood reverses in my veins, and I nearly drop my grocery bag. Kelly is moving-day ready with a soft pair of shorts that look like they might have come from her daughter's closet and an oversized Alessi's T-shirt. I can't look away. Something about the combination of irresistible girly shorts and the mark of my restaurant leaves me aching to grab her and make her promise not to leave.

"Kelly!" Matteo yells, waving a hand.

She and her sister look over at us, and it takes all my focus to center myself and remember to breathe. It only takes another moment for Kelly to notice me coming up behind my brother, and her features immediately flatten. The sunshine zaps from her face.

"You're keeping my least healthy child pumped full of vitamins," Kelly's dad, Vince, says as he crosses behind us into the house. He gives us a cursory wave. "You sure you girls want to move? You might be the first modern women to die of scurvy."

He disappears through the door, and I swear my ribs crack from the pressure of my pounding heart. *Listen to your dad. Don't go.*

Kelly catches my eye, and the complete lack of recognition kills me.

"You can come in for a sec," she says to Matteo. Her eyes flick away from me and to her sister, like she's checking in. "We were just thinking of taking a break. You can come in, too, Enzo. If you have a second."

This might be worse than her careful coolness. It's not a dig to let me know I have the choice to come in, but to imply that I'm not dying to be around her, to talk to her, just to breathe her in feels so wrong. Damn it, I want to push her backward through that front door, kick everyone else out, and pin her against the wall to make her admit she loves me again.

Instead, I grunt my approval and follow my brother. I can feel Josie's eyes on me as I pass by, and the first self-consciousness I've felt in years zips down my spine.

“Enzo said vegetables aren’t a road trip snack,” Matteo starts. He lets himself into the kitchen and is already unloading his goods for examination. The action expresses a level of comfort that surprises me; somehow, in the short time Kelly and I have been together, Matteo has made himself just as much at home here as he has in my apartment. “I found some ranch packets in Enzo’s pantry, so I packed them. Figured whoever is in the passenger seat can dip celery or broccoli.”

“Thank you,” Kelly says, crossing to the other side of the table.

She glances at me for a moment—is that the smallest flash of shared amusement? My chest throbs.

“We might have some of this with dinner tonight, actually,” Kelly says. “My folks are having a get-together in the old neighborhood. Might be more convenient than dipping in the front seat, and this way, the whole family can enjoy your garden. They’re going to be so impressed.”

Matteo beams at the prospect of others admiring his work while I stew further.

I know Kelly and Summer should get to say a proper goodbye to their family, but I can’t help but want to have this last night to myself. Having been deprived of the last few nights that I could have been drawing out my goodbyes, my fists curl and uncurl at my sides so I don’t blurt out how badly I need this time with Kelly.

“Mom makes this incredible salad with cauliflower,” Josie chimes in, smiling at my brother. “Maybe you two could drop by and—”

Kelly elbows her. She probably thinks I didn’t see it.

“If you need more, Matteo had a great crop,” I say. “You two can head to my roof and take the lot. Matteo has been bugging me to get more seeds and transplants, and this could be the excuse he needs to make a trip to the garden center. Besides, I’d like to talk to Kelly for a second.”

The sisters exchange another one of those glances that floods me with foreign embarrassment. My cheeks heat, and

for at least the dozenth time since I shaved it, I wish for my old beard to act as a barrier.

At last, Kelly nods, and Josie disappears with Matteo in tow. Kelly stands in that same spot across the kitchen with the table between us, making no move to come around to my side. Her arms are crossed to create her own barrier, but that cool composure from outside is gone. I'm not sure how it happened so quickly, but her lower lash line is brimming with glistening tears. My stomach and heart are tripping over each other on their way up my throat to strangle me, but I force myself to be the calm one. I start to step around the table.

Kelly shakes her head. She closes her eyes for a moment, like she can't even bear to look at me. "You don't need to do that. You shouldn't. I've already cried all I care to."

My chest deflates. My limbs twitch to disobey her, to cross to her side and embrace her even though she's expressly forbidden it. I make myself still.

"I can't let you go without saying my piece."

She shakes her head again, biting that bottom lip so hard her skin turns purple-white.

"What piece?" she asks. "We already established how I feel. We already established what you don't feel. You can't expound on . . . nothing."

God damn it.

"You have to understand that this isn't just about feelings," I tell her. "We both made rational, logical choices before sex was involved—"

"You mean, before I knew what it was like to love you," she says. "There's a difference. No choice I made could have been informed if I didn't know what I was passing up. I was telling myself when I went into this man hiatus that the next string of boyfriends would only be *good enough*—"

"I'm not even good enough," I correct. "I'm not even sure I'm good."

I can't help it. My feet are moving me toward her now, and neither of us has the energy to stop it. In a moment, I'm so close I can smell that intoxicating coconut shampoo. I can count the freckles that spill across the bridge of her nose.

"I want to be extraordinary for you," I tell her. "But you know about my parents. Everything about my past says I can't be that guy."

"Really?" Her voice breaks over the word. "Because I think everything about your past says *I* can't be that person for you. It says that I'll let you down. That I'll run away. Heck, my own history says I did it once and can do it again. But one of us wants to try again, Enzo. One of us feels something so strong and so special here—"

I clench my jaw and shake my head as that last bit of life fades from her eyes.

"Can we part as friends, Kelly?"

"We were never just friends," she whispers. "Or, I was never just friends with you. It's going to take me some time to learn how to be your friend."

I nod. It's all I can do. There are no moves left in my arsenal.

And that's fucking miserable.

"I left my apron with Wendy," Kelly tells me. "So I won't see you again before I leave. But I'll be back in town every now and then. My sister is getting married, after all."

It's not enough. No number of visits will make this right. I want permanent. I crave the endgame, even if I can't have it.

I start toward her front door, waving as I go. But I stop in the hallway, so I'm out of Kelly's line of sight and she's out of mine. It's easier this way.

"It feels like love," I admit. "It has for a while. And if this comes with the territory, then I think I hate love as much as I always thought I would."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: KELLY

“Where did you have these printed?”

I almost laugh as I stare down at the bright pink T-shirt. It’s my first smile in at least a day, and the expression is strange after so many hours of near tears. I hold it up, stretching it wide so I can read the swirly lettering.

“I designed them online,” Rachel says. “But Alexis had the hookup for printing.”

Alexis shrugs and settles in her corner of my couch, tucking her bare toes underneath her. “My studio uses a guy sometimes for costumes. He’s cheap.”

The whole gang is here for my last night. I was telling Enzo the truth—my family really did have dinner together. Afterward, though, the night was mine, and I didn’t know what to do with myself since all the packing was complete. There was too much temptation to wander next door or scroll to a certain contact on my phone. Instead, I texted the girls, and Summer joined us for the cannoli Alexis brought back from the night shift.

Summer sets aside her dessert and holds out her hands for me to toss her the shirt. She snorts reading it.

“Better Than Josh Everton Club: South Carolina Chapter Head. Are you all expecting to find more of Josh’s betrayed exes in SC?”

“It’s always possible with that dickbag,” Marnie grumbles, swiping another cannoli from the Styrofoam container.

“I’ve decided I should assume the worst with men and go from there.” I slide down against the couch cushions, despondency washing through me again.

I only ever get two minutes of forgetting about my situation before Enzo Barone comes racing back into my brain.

“Group vote: was Enzo telling the truth before he left today?” Josie asks.

They all look at each other. The *yays* are clear without a formal vote needing to be taken. I groan and slide down further, massaging my temples.

“I don’t get it.”

“It’s pretty lame that he’d tell you that as the last thing he says before you move away,” Marnie comments. “I mean, no chance for debate?”

“I think it just came out,” I mutter. “Same way my feelings just came out for him that night after Arlo’s.”

“So he loves you, but he doesn’t *want* to love you.” Rachel sucks on the inside of her cheek as she mulls that over. “I get that.”

“He doesn’t want to love me because he doesn’t trust me not to abandon him,” I tell them. “I’m the worst person in the world he could fall for.”

“Oh, please, that’s an excuse if I’ve ever heard one.” Marnie rolls her eyes, and Josie nods in agreement.

“He’s scared, Kel,” she says. “It’s always darkest before the dawn. He can’t see the light at the end of the tunnel. Pick your metaphor. I went through this with Holden, remember? Only I was the asshole who couldn’t see past my own fears.”

“Maybe you’re right,” I admit. “Maybe Enzo isn’t an ass. But dang, it would be so much easier if he was. Kudos to Josh Everton for at least giving us all a good reason to hate him.”

The other girls murmur in agreement.

“Shawn broke up with me yesterday.”

My head rockets around to look at my daughter. “Excuse me?”

Summer shrugs and grabs another cannoli. “He said it was the distance. Kimmy Vanderbilt said it was because he’s been talking to Madison Weeks. You’re right. It’s nice having a reason to hate him.”

“We should burn some shit.”

We all look back at Marnie. She suggests it so innocently, like it’s totally normal to propose arson.

“Like . . . Enzo and Shawn’s houses?” Rachel asks carefully.

“No, psycho. Like, their stuff. Sappy love notes. Dried flowers. All the shit I would never have accepted from a man anyway, but I just know you lovelorn pups keep close to your hearts.”

“I like it.” Summer is nodding and pushing up to her feet. “I have Shawn’s favorite jacket. I’d love to watch that thing go up in flames.”

A strange laugh escapes my lips. “You guys are nuts.”

“Come on, how about an Alessi’s takeout menu, at least?” Alexis suggests. “It could be cathartic!”

“It could draw attention from the one neighbor I don’t want seeing me right now!”

Josie takes my hand and grins. “We can paint lipstick on our cheeks like war paint and sing at the top of our lungs.”

Alexis laughs. “That’ll make Enzo so grumpy.”

That gets a half laugh from me and another twinge in the corner of my mouth for my second smile of the day.

“I can live with that.”

We all get up, heading out to different corners of the house to compile the odds and ends that will end up in our bonfire. As the others pass into the hall, Summer catches my arm.

“Hey, Mom.”

Something twinges in my gut. Is my daughter really okay with the club shenanigans?

“You don’t really have to burn anything,” I tell her.

She shakes her head. Summer furrows her brow and tightens her fingers around my arm.

“If Enzo had asked you to stay and I had been cool with it, would you have considered sticking around?”

My heart gives a double beat. I search Summer’s eyes but don’t find what I’m looking for.

“I don’t know,” I say finally. “But I do know it would have taken more than just his asking to keep me around. I mean, that should probably be good enough for most women, but I want—”

“More,” she supplies.

“More,” I repeat.

I sling my arm around my daughter’s shoulders and follow the other women toward our bedrooms.

More, my heart pounds out with each beat. *More. More. More.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: ENZO

I wake up to not-so-muffled sounds of excitement from Matteo. I keep my eyes closed and listen for a moment, trying to judge if it's excitement about messing with my shit again or something else. Is this worth frustration before it's even nine a.m.? At last, I crack an eye.

He's already at the edge of my bed, holding up a picture for me to see.

"They've got the backyard of my dreams!" Matteo announces. He cradles his phone to look at the little photo again. "Way bigger than the roof. They put in tomatoes and watermelon!"

I sit up, heart calcifying the same way it has every morning for the last two weeks. It's a routine I've come to expect since the day Kelly's car pulled out of the townhouse with the last of her and Summer's stuff. I forget for a few hours while I sleep, and as soon as I wake up, everything hits me all over again. It never gets any easier, even though I keep telling myself it will.

"What am I looking at?"

"Kelly and Summer's new garden," Matteo says, flashing the picture again.

I'm looking at the back of a small house. The lawn isn't very large, but it's bigger than our rooftop box garden, just like Matteo said. The grass is green and lush and blooming in a thousand different shades.

"Summer texted me a picture," Matteo explains. "Her mom had questions for me about how to care for the tomatoes."

I know better than to ask follow-up questions. I don't want to hear about this. Hell, the mere mention of Kelly is enough to tighten up my chest a little more, and I deal with that enough at Alessi's, where we're still struggling to train her replacement.

How has it only been two weeks apart when it feels like a lifetime? This is its own hell, and I don't want to know if I deserve the real place after every mean thing I said to Kelly before she left.

The home button on my phone is worn from where I've refreshed the screen over and over again. I hope for a text or call from her, flirt with the idea of reaching out to her, then chastise myself for the weakness since she made it clear she doesn't want to be friends yet.

Well, that, and I know that if one of us bridges the gap and activates the damn phone, I'll hear her voice and crawl all the way to South Carolina if I have to. No way I trust myself.

Still, I'm going insane, wanting little details of her new life. Is she settling in okay? Finding friends? I hope she's not lonely, and *God*, I hope she's not only subsisting on buttered Pop-Tarts.

Matteo's phone goes off again, and he stiffens. I brace myself, schooling my features and training my eyes ahead as I wait for more news.

"What?" I ask. "Everything okay with Kelly and Summer?"

"Um, that wasn't Kelly and Summer."

I glance his way, stomach twisting further. "Who was it?"

"Dad."

Just what I need this morning. I swing my legs out from under my comforter and draw a deep breath. I never make the conscious decision to ask the follow-up question, but for some reason, my lips are moving, and I'm studying Matteo's face as he avoids looking me in the eye.

"Did you meet with him again? What did he want?"

"Well, he was in town to sign some paperwork," Matteo starts.

"I'm familiar with the pretext."

“And he’s also passing through because he and his new wife are on their way to a family reunion for her side.”

“New wife?” I repeat. “How did he pick this one up? I didn’t think Dad believed in marriage.” A bitter laugh escapes me. “I didn’t think he did *family*—”

“She’s pregnant,” Matteo says. “Twelve weeks.”

I don’t have anything to say to that. I just sit here, dumb, as the blood rushes like a churning river in my ears.

“Sherry was an attorney the firm used,” Matteo rushes. “I met her at brunch. Blond, looks nothing like Mom. And, no, Dad was clear that he’d rather not be at the reunion, but I guess she wants to tell everyone about the baby at the same time—”

Another dry, cutting laugh comes from me. I shake my head and cross to the coffee maker, the need for caffeine suddenly needling its way past everything else.

“She worked with him,” I scoff. “The one life lesson I take from the old man, and he doesn’t even keep to his own advice.”

“He’s different now,” Matteo concedes. “And maybe . . . maybe that’s a reason to see him. To try this again.”

“I’m not rolling over and showing him my bare ass.”

“Neither am I, but—”

“Matteo, here’s his next chance to play daddy and get it right. He doesn’t need to see me. I don’t need to see him.”

My brother fiddles his thumbs. His lips pull and pinch to one corner.

“What? You think I’m overreacting?”

He looks up and fixes me with eyes so like the ones I see in the mirror that I’m taken off guard.

Matteo exhales and spreads his palms. “I think you deal in black-and-white, Enzo. Sweet and bitter. You’ve assigned Dad his side and that’s that. You’re allowed to do that. But I also

think there's a middle ground, an in-between that comes with intense relief for letting go and moving on."

Umami. It's that thing you can't pin down, that hit to the receptors that tells your brain there's something big, that flavor that makes the whole goddamn world taste better. It's in between sweet and bitter. It's something . . . unexpected.

"I'm coming in late." My voice is a whisper this time, and I hardly recognize it. "I said a lot of shit I shouldn't have, and now I've probably screwed up any shot of making things right."

Matteo just shrugs. "So what?"

"Matteo."

"You just have to try," he argues. "It'll work with Dad. He's done the hard work, putting himself on the line after so many years where he knows he screwed up. And it'll work with Kelly, too. I saw how she looked at you. Besides, Summer says she's miserable."

". . . She's miserable?"

"Apparently she bought four straight seasons of *America's Got Talent* online, and she's just been bingeing them and eating ice cream every night."

The pinch deep in my gut is coming back. I rub a hand up and down my side, nursing the pain. *Don't say it out loud, idiot. There's no taking these words back.*

Damn it, I do anyway.

"I think maybe Kelly wanted to meet me halfway. The stubbornness might have gotten in the way there, too."

Matteo sits beside me on the bed, flattening his palms over his knobby knees. "Bro, come on."

When I look him in the eye, that small smile from before has blossomed into a grin.

"If you think about it, making big changes are kind of my thing." He puffs out his chest.

“You can’t rearrange my life and move me out to South Carolina, Matteo.” I sigh, running both my hands through the front of my hair. “I can’t do anything now.”

“You can tell her how you feel, dummy! Call her. Text her. Hire that skywriter Arlo is always going on about.”

I huff, getting up from my bed to pace around the room. “I did tell her how I felt. I told her, and she left anyway. She *had* to leave—it was for her kid more than it was for her. There wasn’t a choice in the matter.”

Matteo stands up, clearly already buzzing with the energy of a new plan.

“We’re not going to take this lying down,” he announces. “What about long distance? What about you moving to South Carolina? What about—”

“Matteo, it’s not going to work.”

Even now, even after I’ve thought these exact words a hundred times to myself, they make me shake as I say them out loud.

“She’s already gone,” I mutter. “This isn’t like with Dad. At least I’m related to him. There’s nothing that’s going to happen in Kelly’s future that will make her turn around and think of me again. What’s done is done, and now I have to learn how to live without her.”

Matteo doesn’t have a response for that. For a moment, we just look at each other, saying nothing.

He probably thinks I’m stewing. After all of his (fair) accusations of stubbornness on my part, I’m sure he thinks I’m just standing here thinking about how right I am and how wrong he is.

He surprises me, though, when he walks to my coffee maker and pulls out the pot.

“Balcony?” he asks, already pulling open the cabinet to find us two mugs.

For the briefest moment, I’m not consumed with the grief of loving Kelly and letting her go. I’m infused with a warm

flicker of satisfaction at having this morning ritual with my brother, and that through everything that might have pulled him away from me, even when I'm a stubborn asshole douchebag of a man, he cares to keep this small tradition alive.

"Balcony," I agree.

When Matteo is gone, I make myself take a shower and get ready for the evening shift. I'm going into Alessi's for work, and I'll be damned if I talk myself out of it.

While the bathroom is still steamy, I grab my razor from the cabinet and foam up with some shaving cream. My beard has started to come in since Kelly's been away. Thick, dark stubble crawls up my throat and across my jawline. All at once, my body remembers how difficult it is to fight through a shave. Maybe it's the Italian blood in me, maybe it's something else, but I tend to grow a small forest on my face. I should put the razor back, call it a day, and no one downstairs will fault me for embracing the mountain man now that my girl is gone.

But . . . but I think I liked the way it looked shaved. I liked the way it felt when Kelly's fingernails would scratch through the start of stubble. The way her breath was able to dance across my exposed neck when she got close.

I shave the beard. The mirror is still a little fogged when I reach over and pick up my phone. My fingers shake as I type the words, a detail I'll be omitting when Matteo grills me about this later.

Dad. It's Enzo. If you want to grab coffee, I'm free on Friday.

I stare at the screen for at least a minute until I work up the guts to press send. Even after I do, the instinct is strong to google a way to delete the message before it ever reaches Arturo.

In the end, what's done is done. Same thing I said to Matteo about what happened between me and Kelly, only this time it's actually true.

The second message is somehow harder to compose than the first.

Hey. Holden wants me to tag along for their cake tasting to give my professional opinion. He mentioned that you and your sister will probably be there for Josie. Wanted to give you the heads up. Maybe I'll see you soon?

Scratch that. I erase the last line. My thumb hovers over the keypad.

I really hope I'll see you soon.

After that message, I can't bring myself to stare at the phone the way I did with the first. Instead, I toss it across my bed and cover my eyes.

Stubborn asshole douchebag. No one would be giving me credit for any of that if they could see me now, obsessing over a text message like a teenage girl.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: **KELLY**

Summer is stiff when she gets into the car after orientation. I'd wanted to go with her, but she'd met a few of her new classmates at the marina the other day, and they'd told her none of the cool kids invited their parents to Meet the Teacher night. This was strictly a get-together to find out who had a glow up over the summer, who had which teachers, and whether you got the good locker spot.

"Everything cool?" I ask as she shuts the car door.

She's tight lipped and staring straight ahead. I get a glimpse through her window of classmates in unofficial cool girl uniforms—nearly identical tank tops, ripped jeans, sparkling white shoes, and jewelry, each piece carefully selected to appear unique, which is laughable in concept.

"Did you run into the kids you met the other day?" I ask. "Got any classes with the cute blond I saw coming out of the bait shop?"

There's a vibration on the console between us. Summer picks up her phone from where she just stashed it in the cupholder.

"That the cute blond?" I wink.

Summer's face is white when she looks at me, and her expression makes my stomach drop.

"Mom," she starts, voice shaking. "I am *way* out of my element here."

I pull the car over in an empty lot, unbuckle, and turn to her. "Alright, talk me through this."

Having been given permission, she lets the tears spill down her cheeks. "They all know each other!" Summer says. "The website and brochures make it seem like the school is international, but really all the kids who get scholarships like me are total outsiders."

“But the kids at the marina wanted to be your friends, right?”

She shakes her head. “The kids at the marina were with their parents that day. They said the nice, polite thing because families that can afford Hamilton Prep are the kind that are bred to say the nice, polite thing to your face. When I was in the school just now, I was already a pariah, and I wasn’t even in classes yet.”

I draw a deep breath, putting a hand to my stomach. With my other one, I reach across the console and take Summer’s hand.

“I’m not a quitter,” she insists. “I’m *not*. And I kept telling myself when I was in there that I was going to march into class next Monday morning and show all the kids how wrong they are about me. But then my friend from home texted me when I got into the car. She texted just to say she was getting coffee at our favorite place, and she missed me and . . . and . . .”

Summer collapses forward, resting her forehead on my hand as she sobs. I rub her back, at a total loss for the right thing to say.

This is uncharted territory. Hamilton Prep is everything Summer has been working toward for years. She was the one who first found the school online, who did her research, and came to me when she was ten with a PowerPoint presentation on how Hamilton could improve her chances of getting into an Ivy League college. Letting her quit over a little social matter feels like I’m falling into some kind of parenting trap.

But then again, I don’t think I’ve ever seen Summer this way. I don’t think I’ve seen my kid so defeated before she even started a new project. My sunshiney girl is crying in my car over the opinions of complete strangers. Life lesson to be had here or not, I don’t like seeing what this place is doing to her. Do I make her stick it out and learn how to be tough, or do I take care of my girl’s feelings and both of us accept that maybe she was wrong?

The console buzzes again, and Summer snuffles as she sits back up. This time it's my phone. I wince in apology as I pick up the device, ready to quiet it. My breath catches as I glance at the screen.

I read Enzo's brief message twice and put the phone down. Only to pick it up one more time to read it again.

Salt itches at the corners of my eyes, which surprises and infuriates me. How can this man make me cry when I have much bigger issues to take care of? My kid is upset, and Summer is my priority. I don't have time for my own tears. I put the phone back in the cupholder and scrub at my temples.

"Is that Enzo?" Summer asks, hiccupping.

"It was nothing," I promise. "It was . . . I just . . ."

I take both of her hands in mine. Make myself recenter.

"Look, we go shopping this weekend, get you a killer back-to-school wardrobe, then you go in on Monday looking like a ten and making those townies eat their words about scholarship kids. You'll get the best grades—because you're Summer Hastings, duh—and even if they talk crap, they'll have nothing to back it up. Hamilton will be everything you thought it would be and then some."

Even as I give the instructions to my kid, I'm mentally applying them to myself. I have this vision of buying a killer outfit to wear back home to Button for the cake tasting. I'd have made friends here at my new work. Maybe I'll have been on a date or two I can mention to my sisters. Anything to make Enzo regret everything he'd ever said to me and about me.

Anything to make myself forget.

"So, what did Enzo want?" Summer asks in a small voice.

I send her the hairy eyeball, but she doesn't back down or look away. I sigh, scratching at the back of my head.

"We're both going to be at Josie's cake tasting when I drive back to Button next week. He doesn't want things to be weird." I clear my throat, making myself sit up a little straighter. "But I tell you what, I'm going to march into that

tasting with my head held high. I'm going to look fabulous, act fabulous, feel fabulous. He's going to regret walking away. He's going to—"

"Doesn't he already regret walking away?" Summer asks. "Isn't that what this text means?"

"*I really hope I'll see you soon?*" I roll my eyes. "Summer, if the man wanted a reconciliation, he could give me more than the standard end to the family Christmas card."

"Mom, when has Enzo ever been expressive about anything other than great steak? *I really hope I'll see you soon* is like the dog rolling over to show you his soft underbelly."

Okay, that's an image that almost makes me smile. I've seen Enzo Barone's belly plenty of times, and it's hairy and cut and kind of hilarious to imagine him offering it up for scratches.

Is that really possible, though? Enzo has spent his whole life digging in his heels, and it was barely a few weeks ago that he was insisting we weren't anything long term. Really hoping that he'll see me soon might be a lot for him to say, but it's hardly anything positive from someone else.

Still, I can't help but cling to this tiny ember of hope in my chest. Before he left, he said he loved me. He didn't say he wanted to lock me down or give up his entire way of life or anything, but that *was* even more of a surprise than hearing Enzo confess that he *really hoped* he'd see me soon.

I want to believe in him. I want to believe in both of us, together.

But . . . my life is still here in South Carolina. And while I might have a flicker of excitement at the prospect of Enzo wanting something committed from me, it's silly to get invested when I have this kid who has spent her whole life excited about a commitment from Hamilton Prep. I ought to be encouraging her to stick with this. I should be presenting her with my best ideas about throwing parties to impress her peers or hosting study sessions. Summer will always be priority one, and part of me thinks that was part of what Enzo liked about

me in the first place: I'm a parent who gives a shit about my kid when his own parents never did.

I turn back to the steering wheel, swallowing past the lump in my throat as I stare ahead.

“Want to stop somewhere and get food that’s terrible for us?” I ask as I peel out of the parking lot.

“Never sounded better.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: ENZO

“Hey, I need to take five.” I hear Wendy before she pops her head into my office. She’s still looking more over her shoulder to wave at someone than really looking at me.

I sigh, trying not to glower. It’s the middle of Alessi’s dinner rush.

“Make it a quick five,” I say. “And be sure to tell Marlene. What’s going on?”

“Kelly dropped by!”

Wendy tears off, already yelling across the restaurant for Kelly. My heart hurtles its way up to my throat, and I stand up too quickly. Papers slide off my desk, and a paperweight turns over, but I can’t care. I book it out of my office, fingers scraping through my thick head of hair to tame it into something presentable as I run.

“Hey. Hi. Um, howdy.”

Fucking *howdy*?

I’ve almost knocked over Wendy on my way to Kelly. Every part of me is filled up and ready to explode, positively rattled with the desire to touch her again.

My jaw clicks. “What are you doing here?”

“Uh, I promised some of the staff girls I’d say hi when I got into town.” Kelly glances back over her shoulder, eyeballing her mother’s van parked on Main. “I won’t be here long.”

I nod along, though Kelly’s actual answer is secondary to her actually being here. She’s so close I can touch her. I could smell that damn coconut shampoo if I wanted. And she’s so gorgeous, it hurts. It’s like somehow I forgot the extent of her beauty. Absence might make the heart grow fonder, and I may have spent a fair amount of time remembering her soft curves and porcelain skin, but to see it in person now . . . Did she always blush in this delicate blooming way? Did her hair always shimmer this much in the light from the sunset?

“Kel,” Wendy interrupts. “Alexis is on break out back. Wanna come—”

“Did you drive?” I step forward, blocking Kelly’s path. “Or fly?”

It doesn’t matter. None of it matters. I don’t really want to talk about anything at all. All I want is to bridge this gap between us. I want to pull her to me by the waist and feel the heat of her against me.

Kelly bites her lip as she looks up at me, and an insane urge washes through me. My fingers twitch at my sides, then they lift to take her face, and—

“I should really go see Alexis,” Kelly tells me. “I already texted her that I made it into the restaurant.”

Wendy starts toward the back and waves for Kelly to follow her. Even though Alessi’s is crowded tonight and clearly Kelly has plans, I shoot an arm out and grab her to make her turn.

“Hold up a second.”

She blinks back at me, and when I notice her eyes shining, my throat squeezes tight.

“Come upstairs when you’re done,” I say. “Let’s talk.”

“Talk about what?” She shakes her head. “Enzo, we already said everything there is to say. Now I really need to get back to Alexis.”

Unexpected irritation filters through me.

“Rewind,” I say. “Before you left, you were the one asking if we could talk things through and figure something out. Before that, you were the one who proposed a friends-with-benefits arrangement. No feelings, no expectations.”

“God, I know that.” She places her palms over her eyes, and instant regret racks my body.

I grip her shoulders, pulling her closer. She resists for a moment, but soon Kelly crumples against me. Who cares if we

make a goddamn scene? All I want is this woman against me. All I want is to make her *stay*.

“Just come upstairs,” I say, softer this time. “Come upstairs, and I’ll show you—”

“Show me what?” She pulls back. Her eyes have narrowed. “What’s changed since the last time we had this conversation?”

I’m grasping for straws here. Desperation courses through my veins, and my mouth has gone too dry to form the proper response.

“Kelly, maybe I’m not ready for marriage and babies, but I swear what I can offer will be good enough if you’ll just let me—”

“No.” She steps back.

No more touching. No more closeness. It’s like we’re ending things all over again.

“No more good enough,” she whispers.

Then she pushes past me, knocking into my side, but she doesn’t look at me as she heads for the back of the restaurant.

I stand there, numb, in the dining room for far too long.

She’s still in my restaurant. Kelly is back in town and under my roof, right here for the taking. And I had her for a moment. She was right there, waiting for me to say the magic words and let her in, but somehow I’d screwed things up again.

I curse loudly as I turn on my heel and head back to my office. A few patrons glance my way, but I can’t be bothered. This is who I’ve always been. This is the way my restaurant has always run. Why change things now?

Besides my brother, who is already asleep upstairs, I’m the last one in the restaurant when it’s time to lock up. A minivan pulls into the dark of Main Street, and my heart speeds up for the half second I think it might be Kelly

returning to talk with me now that Alessi's is closed. When Holden Wynn gets out of the car waving a hand, I'm disappointed but relieved it's at least a familiar face. I unlock the front door and hold it open for him.

He holds up a garment bag on his approach. "Try it on," he commands, shoving it against my chest. "Josie's mom thinks she got the measurements right this time, but she wants to know if you like the fit."

I wince at the reminder of Josie's wedding. The cake tasting is tomorrow morning, and I'll have to see Kelly all over again.

Still, I follow Holden into Alessi's. He lets himself behind my bar, already searching for the good beer. He pulls out two bottles, slides one across the counter, and opens his own. He takes a long pull, then wipes his mouth on the back of one shirt sleeve.

He pauses, looking me over.

"Have you seriously lost weight since the last time I saw you? Are you trying intermittent fasting, bro?"

I shake my head. "A chef? Please."

I take a swig of my beer, then prop both elbows against the counter.

"Okay, to be fair, I might have forgotten to eat breakfast once or twice. Dinner, too. It's been easier to lose myself in my work since K—"

Holden winces, and I don't bother to finish that sentence.

"She's staying at our place," he provides. "If it means anything, she looks miserable, too. What happened? We haven't really talked since my engagement."

I groan and rest my head on my arms for a second. The action does nothing to reinvigorate me. I shake my head as I look back up at Holden, then shrug.

"What we had was supposed to be casual. All benefits. Not even friendship, according to Kelly in the beginning."

Holden snorts. “That woman could make friends with a Disney villain.”

“So I have learned.”

“So, how did you screw things up?”

I finish off my beer, then chuck it at the trash can. The bottle crashes into the wall, and the glass pieces slide into the trash with satisfying *clinks*.

“She made friends with the Disney villain,” I sigh. “Before she left Button, she asked if I wanted more. She even suggested long distance. I might have freaked out.”

“Might have.” Holden snorts again.

I glower at him.

“That’s it!” he announces. “You’re coming back to my place with me. The kids are asleep, and I’ll take Josie out for dessert. She’s been craving some alone time since the engagement anyway, with all the wedding planning meetings and stuff. You’ll get Kelly alone, tell her you’re an absolute jerk, beg forgiveness, then ask her to come back—”

“I’m not asking her to come back.”

Holden just blinks at me, so I put my hands up.

“Look, this isn’t just about Kelly,” I explain. “She’s got a kid involved. If there’s one thing I learned from my own parents’ screw-ups, it’s to protect your kid even when it goes against your own interest. Even if I thought we could make this work, I could never ask her to come back.”

“And what about her long-distance proposal?”

I skip over my next breath, my heart giving a double beat. This time I have to swallow before I can speak. I have to swallow *hard*.

“What if we put in all that effort and it still doesn’t work? I don’t do relationships. Not romantic, not many friendships, not even much with my . . . with my family. I keep myself safe. I’m really good at watching out for myself. What if I

don't know how to handle someone else's feelings? What if I'm not good at this?"

Holden spreads his palms out flat over the counter. His fingertips tap the wood as he thinks things over.

"If you don't try, you're never going to know," he tells me. "The only way you get the girl back is if you put in some effort. If you screw things up, you screw things up. But at least you tried."

For what must be the dozenth time today, my mind goes back to my dad. Wanting to meet with me. Wanting to make things right after all this time. How are thoughts of my father and the girl next door so tangled up with one another? It doesn't seem fair.

It really seems fucking terrifying.

"I'm really good at doing what I've always done," I protest. "Not so great with change."

Holden smirks and pats my bare cheek. "Hey, you shaved your beard. For all we know, you could have looked like a monster under there. Took a risk, made a change, it paid off. Maybe you can try that again."

I scowl but can't ignore the twinge in my chest. "Maybe."

A noise from the kitchen makes us both turn. Matteo emerges from the shadows, and then the light over the stovetops flickers on. He waves with a hand that holds his cell phone.

"Holden? Is that you?"

"Just heading out."

Holden nods his way before ditching his empty beer in the trash. He waves at me, mouths something I can't make out that I think is meant to be encouraging, then lets himself out through the front door. I follow to lock up behind him, then turn back to my brother.

"You're awake."

“I figured I’d see you upstairs after closing and we would talk. You didn’t show up, and I thought I should check on you.”

“I’m alive,” I grumble. “Although being six feet deep doesn’t sound too bad right now when I’m so damn frustrated and flustered.”

I start to pass by Matteo on my way to the stairs but stop short. He’s chewing at the inside of his cheek again and dancing between his feet.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“I went out with Dad again tonight,” he spills.

Instant chest deflation. I can’t go into any more of this tonight.

“I’m tired,” I mutter, starting for the stairs again.

I pause to open my mouth to remind Matteo that there’s nothing I need from our father, but to my surprise, curiosity prickles in the back of my brain. I should go to bed. I should be smart about this and remember all the rules I’ve set up over the years to keep myself safe.

“What did you guys talk about?” I can’t believe this is my own voice I’m hearing.

“Soccer, actually.”

My brow pinches as my brother smiles a little to himself. Well, that wasn’t the answer I expected to hear.

“Soccer?” I repeat.

“He’s pissed with the Galaxy this year,” Matteo says. “I mean, he does have a small investment in the team, so there’s that.”

“Monetary reasons, then?”

Matteo shakes his head. “Nah, I think mostly he’s just really invested in their run this year. He went off on their rivalry with Houston for at least thirty minutes.”

I open my mouth. Shut it again. Clear my throat.

“I . . . He . . . what else?”

“I convinced him to try my tea.”

Both of my eyebrows raise. “Mr. *Black Coffee Maketh the Man?*”

Matteo nods and laughs. “Arturo Barone sipped a chai tea in the middle of Brew-tiful Button Café like it was the most natural thing in the world.”

“No fucking way.”

Matteo scrubs at the back of his neck as he recalls the details of the night. “God, we talked about everything and nothing. A lot of soccer, like I said. Sherry has big plans for a baby shower. And he told me a little about his childhood, too. A little about his dad and what it was like trying to prove yourself as the son of an immigrant who came from nothing.”

We start up the stairs together, and Matteo provides me with little one-liners and funny moments from the evening. He paints a picture of a man I’ve never known but . . . maybe want to know? Arturo Barone has a sense of humor. He has regrets, even. A plan for a new future.

When we get upstairs, we part ways, and I head into the bathroom to take a shower before I go to sleep. I set my phone down on the counter, and as soon as I do, it rattles against the ceramic.

Coffee sounds great. I’ll meet you Friday at your restaurant at three? – Dad.

I can’t quite seem to catch the normal cadence of my breathing. I look away from the text and up at my mirror, studying my reflection as I think things through.

When years have gone by and I consider these days, will I be proud of this ability to protect myself? Will I cling to my stubbornness and have full faith that I was doing the right thing in distancing myself before people could let me down?

Or will I be stewing in regret? Will I be reaching out to them, just holding onto the faintest prayer that they can let me have a second chance?

Exactly why is it that I'm protecting these feelings when Kelly has shown me I could feel so much *more*?

I can't know what will come of taking a chance on Dad. I can't know what will come of taking a chance on Kelly. But God, do I love her. And maybe, even considering how much she's shown me I can feel, maybe I care about her feelings more.

Now I've got to figure out a way to tell her and make her listen.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: KELLY

“Stop sweating.” The door to Sweet on Me bakery clatters closed with the tinkling of a bell, and then my sister plops into the seat across the table from me. Josie wears one of her signature black-and-white ensembles, this one in the form of a cake-tasting-appropriate sundress. She smooths the front of it as she props her elbows on the table and looks me over. “Seriously, you’re going to make the buttercream taste like fear or sadness or something. Essence of sweat is not this place’s specialty.”

I pull out the fabric of my shirt from under my armpits and fan myself as I glance over my shoulder.

“Where’s the fiancé?”

“Holden is parking the car,” she explains. She puts a hand on my knee, which I hadn’t realized was bouncing until now. “Okay, seriously, what’s going on?”

“Josie.” I roll my neck back, groaning as I glance over my shoulder again. I love my soon-to-be brother-in-law, but I’d rather not have him witness my pre-tasting sweat show. “*You invited Enzo.*”

Josie’s face loses an ounce of color. “Shit. Shit, we did. Can I blame newly-engaged bliss for forgetting Holden reached out to him?”

I grind my teeth and flash her my best frustrated look. But my sister just sends me an over-the-top bashful smile, and I break down into my own nervous almost smile myself.

“You’re forgiven. Assuming you can help me get rid of these pit stains before my old friend with benefits walks through those doors.”

“Okay, yeah, hang on. Let me fan you with this tasting menu.”

“Really get in there.”

Shuffle. Flap.

“Any chance you have a jacket in the car? Another shirt?”

“Josie, seriously?”

“Oh my God, I have a bralette in my purse! You can totally get away with that with your high-waisted mom jeans!”

“My high-waisted mom j—wait, Josie, why are you just carrying around a bralette?”

“... There might have been post-wedding-venue-booking canoodling.”

“I do not want to wear your sex bra!”

“But you’re sweating!”

“Josie, no! Put my shirt back on! Stop unbuttoning my—”

“Wow, I got to this bakery at *exactly* the right time. Thank you, Google Maps.”

Josie and I freeze in the worst tableau. She’s got my shirt half-unbuttoned, and if my jeans are mom-style, then my bra might be grandma-style. One arm is out, and I’ve got an open palm raised to swat at my younger sister if she tries anything more.

Our older sister, Darla, stands in the doorway, arms crossed, as she leans against the frame and snickers.

“I’m definitely the sister with her shit together.”

A hoot sounds from behind her. For all of two seconds, I think I’m going to hurl while still half naked. Then Holden emerges from behind Darla, and he’s got his hands in front of his face.

“Didn’t see anything!” he announces, shuffling to the seat beside his fiancée. “Definitely not the start of that one really great dream I had that one time!”

“Holden!” Josie lets me go to swat at Holden, and I use the opportunity to slide my arm back into my shirt and do up my buttons as best I can.

“You had a dream about my sisters?” Darla asks skeptically.

“Nah, I just like to get the old lady riled up.” Holden has removed his hands to grin at us. “It was a dream about all three of you.”

“Do you *want* to get married?” Josie asks.

Darla takes the seat next to mine as I clean myself back up, and for a moment, my nerves from before take a back seat. My big sister gathers my hands in hers, the way she used to when we were kids, then holds them to her chest.

“Okay, seriously though, what crisis did I walk in on?”

“It’s nothing,” I say, right as Josie loudly whispers, “*Enzo Barone is coming.*”

I shoot her another look.

When everyone looks at me expectantly, I glance back to check the parking lot again before scrubbing my hands down my face.

“We love South Carolina,” I insist. “It’s beautiful there. Summer starts school next week, and she’s already super into the assigned reading. I mean, what kid likes their homework? It’s just . . . I don’t know. It’s not home yet. Coming back here, coming back to the middle of everything I left behind, has me feeling all sorts of wrong. Enzo Barone is just icing on the cake.”

Another glance over my shoulder. My stomach twists so tight it’s like I have an ulcer.

Talking about this isn’t helping. It might even be making things worse. All I have to survive is this cake tasting, then I can hop into my car, meet Josie back at her place, survive one more night in Button, then hit the road. It’s just that surviving this cake tasting suddenly seems like the hardest thing in the world.

I can already picture Enzo in a tasting. He’d take those tiny, savoring bites he does when he’s sampling back in the kitchen. Maybe he’d close his eyes the way he does sometimes. Maybe he’d breathe deep through his nose and run his thumb over the sharp line of his jaw—that was always a favorite tic of mine.

And it would make me crazy. It would make me physically hurt to see him doing all those small, simple things I loved and couldn't have anymore. And to combine all that with the interaction after our weird altercation at Alessi's? It's intolerable.

Panic grips me, and then I'm rubbing my hand over my chest and shaking my head.

"You know, he's very aware that he screwed up."

We all look over at Holden, who just shrugs.

"I saw him last night," he explains. "I told him in no uncertain terms that if he wants the catch"—he throws his arm around my sister's shoulders—"he has to show her. He's got to do something and prove something if you're going to make this work."

My stomach immediately drops. Because he hasn't done anything, has he? He's not even here at this tasting yet, holding awkward, get-to-know-you-all-over-again conversation yet. He's put off seeing me. He's dug himself deeper into that hole he loves.

Holden's advice might be generic, but I'm sure it would ring true even to Enzo. But Enzo isn't here. He's not fighting for me.

I can't breathe. I rub my hand across my chest over and over again, trying to breathe new life into myself, but between the despair and the lingering panic of my sister walking in on an embarrassing moment, I just can't seem to function.

A truck pulls into the lot. His truck. I guess everyone else must see something change in my face because the rest of the group turns to look with me.

I stand up, sending my metal chair screeching across the bakery floor.

"Nope." I shake my head. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry, Josie. Um, you know, I would vote for whatever cake is chocolate. Text me? Send pics? I've just . . . I've got to . . ."

I'm already scrambling out the side entrance, darting away from the bakery and away from my car. It's blazing hot outside, typical for a late Georgia summer. But I don't care. I shove my hands in my pockets, train my eyes on the ground, and try not to cry as I run to a destination I haven't picked yet.

CHAPTER THIRTY: ENZO

All my vital systems stop when I see that flash of red hair disappearing through the bakery's side entrance. The flower in my right hand is crushed in my fist, and I curse as my palm smarts from thorn pricks.

"Whoa. Timing." Holden is sitting at a table with Josie and her sister Darla, and he's smacked a hand to his forehead.

"Where the fuck did she go?"

I let the rose drop to the table and start for the exit, but something catches my shirt sleeve.

Josie is standing beside me. "I think she needs a second, Enzo. She's pretty freaked out. I mean, when I got to the bakery—"

Darla cuts her off with a snort. "Yeah, you missed the real show. You'd be offering her a lot more than a single flower if you caught that strip tease."

"What?"

I'm almost nearly as irritated as I am confused. Darla just keeps laughing. I start toward the door again, but this time it's Holden who holds me back.

"Okay, wait, we really do need you for this," he says. "You're a food guy. Kelly was, like, our dessert junkie, and now she's run off to God knows where. We need a professional opinion so Josie and I don't choose Funfetti for our cake flavor."

"Holden's daughter Mia has started an *aggressive* campaign," Josie adds, nodding.

"No." I shake my head, roll up my sleeves, and pace around the tiny bakery. "No, it doesn't just get to end with her running out and not giving me another chance. I'm going to make this happen."

"Enzo, what can you say now that you haven't said already?" Josie asks.

I stare after that door, willing Kelly to come running back. God, did I really only bring her one stupid flower? Like that was going to make the magical difference in getting her to forgive me and letting me back into her life?

“I have to tell her I was wrong,” I mutter. “I have to make her listen.”

I start again. This time it’s Darla who holds me back, and I nearly growl at her. She steps back, raising her hands.

“Let me just add that Kelly will still be at Josie’s place when this is over. But if you bail on this cake tasting now, there’s a chance my new niece gets her way and all we eat at this wedding is Ho-Hos and Pop-Tarts.”

I stop short.

I just got my big idea. *The* big idea. I know how to get her back, and I’m in just the right place to make it happen.

“Good morning!” The baker chooses now of all times to pop out from behind the counter with a tray in tow. “Which one of you lucky ladies is Josie Greene? Let us eat cake!”

I pull out my wallet and rifle through to the credit card I don’t use unless I absolutely have to. I pull it out and slap it on the table.

“You rent out your kitchen?” I ask. “I’m sure you keep a lot of pie crust on hand?”

“Are you trying to get our baker overthrown by the health inspector?” Holden asks. “What’s going on?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Holden, we both know you’d rather I make my chocolate ganache for the wedding. Spare yourself the deposit and go with me. I’ll take my payment from your pantry.”

“I . . . what?”

The baker shakes his head. His cheeks have gone all ruddy, and he steps between us, putting up a hand.

“You can’t come in here and—”

I pull my card back up, slip it into my wallet, and start for the door before any of them can snag me again.

“I’ll text you what I need!” I holler back to Holden. “You just text me cake dimensions, and I’ll make it happen!”

“Where are you going?” His voice makes it through just before the door can shut.

I catch it with one hand. “Look, maybe I’m not used to saying I’m sorry or letting go of my pride or *not* being the world’s biggest stubborn douchebag asshole. But I can sure as hell butter this girl’s Pop-Tart.”

“Is that a euphemism?” Darla’s voice catches on the wind as I make it back to my car.

Can you come outside for a second?

I stare at my phone for a good minute, praying I’ll see those three stupid dots appear in the corner of the screen. When they finally do, feeling returns to my extremities. *Just give me an in, Kelly. All I need is one little in.*

The dots disappear.

A vein jumps in the side of my neck as I stare up at Holden’s front door.

I know she’s in there. I double-checked with Mia when she came outside with the delivery I asked for. Her Auntie Kelly has been inside all afternoon, watching some kind of game show on her TV and eating all the good popsicles.

I’d like to talk to you. Please, Kelly.

Nothing.

For the love of God, woman, don’t make me sing like something out of an ’80s movie. I like the singing brothers on AGT. I was never meant to be one of them.

Please don’t.

A rush rockets through me. A familiar zip shoots through my spine.

Matteo got the voice in the family. Don't make me prove it.

I can't, Enzo. Seeing you just makes things harder.

One more chance. I've got a sweetener to make it worth your while.

Enzo, I really don't think I can. I'm sorry.

I swallow hard. Brace myself.

When I open my mouth and the first warbly notes of Elton John's "Your Song" come tumbling out, a window finally opens. I stop short as a red head pokes through.

Kelly's eyes are swollen with tears. Her makeup is long gone, and her freckles shine through with nothing in the way. Even from here, my fingers twitch with the urge to reach out and touch her, to warm her, to urge life back into her skin.

To fucking kiss her.

Something in her face changes as she looks around me.

"Oh, Enzo."

The window closes. My heart slams against my chest for the few seconds it takes before the front door opens.

Kelly stands, dark against the brightness from inside. Two little forms show up behind her—Mia and Holden's two-year-old, Emmett—then Holden and Josie farther behind.

"Is that—" Kelly starts, taking one tentative step out.

"Every Pop-Tart I could scrounge up," I tell her. "I bought out Sunshine Market. Cleaned out Josie's pantry, too, because Holden snuck the boxes out to me. And because your sister insisted on giving you some time to calm down by yourself, I made a bunch of homemade ones, too. Apple butter. Peanut butter. Cinnamon butter. All the butters."

The pastries are in a haphazard display on folding tables from Alessi's. They take up at least half the driveway behind me, and they've started to gather a crowd of pedestrians that follow the smell of butter and cinnamon. God, I hope it's enough.

Kelly takes another tentative step toward me. My veins sing.

“Enzo,” she breathes. Her eyes are shining again, but thank God, they don’t look broken the way they did before. There’s something in there I can work with. Something I like. “Enzo, what is this supposed to mean?”

“It means I love you,” I blurt. “It means I probably loved you for a really long time, but I was too fucking stubborn to admit it. I love you, and I’m sorry I was such a coward before.”

When she stays standing there, I close the distance. It’s a risk. Maybe it’s too much, but I have to try. Kelly lets me take her hands in mine, and I clutch them like I’ve never held anything before in my life.

Tears are streaming down my face. She can see every last one of them since my beard is gone, but I can’t fucking care. I don’t let myself care. I bare it all for her to see, and I pray she wants to see some more.

“I’m not too set in my ways to change,” I tell her. “I want Pop-Tarts with my fine dining. I want rooftop gardens thriving in the middle of Main Street. I want you, Kelly.”

“Enzo.”

When she says my name this time, she reaches out to run her fingertips through my five-o’clock shadow. The tiny gesture sends a fire licking its way through my nervous system, and I clutch her fingers tighter in mine.

“I’m sorry,” I choke out. “God, I’m so sorry.”

“Enzo,” she repeats.

My core quivers. I kiss her knuckles.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Wh-what about everything you told me before I left? Your objections meant something, Enzo. And I really did move to South Carolina . . .”

I shake my head so fast I get a little dizzy. “No. No. I always said I was keeping my distance from people because it was the one piece of advice from my dad that worked, but really it was just because I was freaked out. I couldn’t make you stay. I couldn’t make you love me back, and that was terrifying. So I thought it might be better not to love you at all. I was wrong, Kelly. I was so damn wrong it makes me sick to think about it now. I’m sorry. God, I’m sorry. I’m sorry so much I feel it in my bones.”

She rests her forehead against mine, and in this moment, I can’t tell what this is. I can’t tell if she’s bridging that gap between us, if she’s feeling sorry for me, or if, like me, she’s just too damn exhausted to keep her head up any longer.

“Say you’re sorry one more time,” she whispers.

“I’m so fucking sor—”

She shakes her head. “Tell me you’re sorry you ever insulted buttered Pop-Tarts. Admit to me now that they’re an amazing, chef-worthy dessert. Maybe I’ll call it even.”

I crush her into a kiss.

And what I feel in this moment for Kelly Hastings is pure umami. It’s that thing you can’t pin down, that hit to the receptors that tells your brain there’s something big, that flavor that makes the whole goddamn world taste better.

When we finally break apart—and, seriously, we must have been kissing for a good minute and a half—Josie and Holden are hooting and hollering behind us. Mia’s nose is wrinkled up, and she waves a dismissive hand before muttering that she’s going back to her video games.

It’s hard to notice any of them. It’s hard to notice anything in the world that isn’t Kelly. She consumes me, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. I kiss her forehead, then rest our heads together again. Our lips are still so close they brush against each other when I whisper to her.

“We’ll figure out South Carolina. I’ll move Alessi’s there or open a new restaurant or we can do the long-distance thing or—”

“Of course we’ll figure it out,” she agrees, nodding. Another kiss to my lips, this one so gentle I can hardly stand it. “I love you, Enzo.”

“I love you, Kelly.”

When we kiss again, she tastes of salt and popsicles and addicting, addicting sugar. I kiss her nose. Her cheekbone. Her fucking eyelids. I want it all.

She laughs as I have at it, and we end things by pulling each other close, and she buries her face in my chest.

“Enzo?”

“*Amorina?*”

“You never conceded that buttered Pop-Tarts are rad.”

I laugh. “Buttered Pop-Tarts are pretty rad.”

“Thank God because you’ve compiled, like, a thousand of them here in the driveway. We’ll be eating them until it’s our wedding.”

She jerks back, eyeballing me with a hint of that fear I remember from before. But I just pull Kelly close again and run my hand down the back of her silken hair.

“As long as I’m eating them with you, I’m happy.”

EPILOGUE: KELLY

Three years later... ish

Here's what they don't show in all my favorite rom-coms: the inner workings of a successful long-distance relationship. Because you know what would have made a really funny addition to a Nora Ephron film? The main characters trying to have phone sex when the chick has a teenage daughter, and the dude has a brother sleeping on his pull-out couch.

How is it Enzo and I can get so hot and heavy in person, but when forced to rely only on dialogue, I just keep desperately clinging to the phrase "I'm a dirty, dirty girl"?

"Deep breaths. In through the nose, please," Summer reminds me here in the present, reaching over to squeeze my hand as our Uber takes us from the airport back into the old neighborhood. "You get this way every time we go back to visit Button, and every single time it's like not even a second has passed between you and Enzo."

"This time is a little different," I counter. "You know that."

"Come on, they're gonna like you, too. And if by some freak chance they don't, they'll definitely fall in love with me." She grins, and I push her on the shoulder.

"Don't get cocky, kid." I roll my eyes and cross my arms, watching out the window as we turn down a familiar street. Sunshine Market flashes by, and my heart skips a beat. "The kid gets on *one* Homecoming Court her senior year and suddenly she's the people's queen."

"Ahem, transfer student on the Homecoming Court," she corrects. "And believe me, the crown is heavy."

Our Uber stops in front of a black and white building with new wrought-iron tables out front.

Alessi's has been in the middle of new expansions every time we've come to visit. Because we have the triple connections of friends, family, and boyfriend being in Button, we spend every summer here, as well as every holiday we can justify. In all those visits, the renovations have never let up. Enzo just keeps building, and now his restaurant has spilled over into a mini culinary school and a cooking lesson date night spot several doors down. He practically owns the street, save for the old townhouse complex we used to live in.

Summer lets herself out, thanking our driver, and I follow suit. We each only brought small duffels, and we fling them over our shoulders now as we stare up at the restaurant. My breaths come in shaky and shallow as I consider entering. It's unusually dark, and I can't see past the front windows.

Beating me to it, the front door opens. That vise around my chest crumples as a dark face emerges from within.

"You've let yourself get hairy," I lecture, dropping my duffel to run to Enzo.

"Meh, if I was too perfect on this visit, you'd never want to take Summer back to school for her last few weeks." He grins, scooping me up. My legs wrap around his waist, and I waste no time burying my face in the side of his neck against all that scruffy stubble.

"Summer! Kelly!"

Matteo knocks against us as he barrels through the front door. Enzo manages to catch us, pinning me against the front of the restaurant. We share a secret smile before he kisses my favorite spot in the center of my forehead, then my bottom lip.

"Okay, we probably ought to rein this in," I tell him, hating myself even as I say the words. "I don't want your dad's first impression of me to be that I'm some kind of sex-crazed maniac."

"Still here," Summer calls from where she's started chatting with Matteo on the edge of the patio. "Your teenage daughter can still hear you."

I blush, resting the tip of my nose to Enzo's as he lets me slide down.

"He's going to like you regardless," Enzo tells me. "That was one of my conditions, remember? He wants in on my life, he takes it exactly the way it is. And that includes you. I'm not letting him mess with the one thing I love."

My breath catches at the top of my chest.

Yeah, that never gets old.

"Say it again," I order.

Enzo rolls his eyes. "I love you..." he mutters.

"I'm sorry?"

"I love you."

"Loud enough so your old man can hear it through the glass, please?"

"*Dio mio*, woman. Get your butt inside. Everyone is waiting on you."

Enzo nips my nose between his teeth before he steps back to let me walk to the front door. He pinches my ass before grabbing my duffel and motioning for the rest of us to let ourselves in.

"Why is it so dark in here?" Summer asks.

Anxiety scratches its way under my skin. "You don't think your dad saw us outside and bailed, did he? Was I really being that inappropriate with our reunion?"

"Yes," Summer groans in my ear.

"He didn't leave," Enzo assures me. He finds my hand in the dark, and I hear him fumbling for the light switch.

"*Surprise!*"

I blink into the brightness. All feeling has left my extremities. I yank my smug boyfriend to my side, holding him tight by the collar.

"This is so much worse than just your father watching me hump you against that window!" I hiss.

Everyone we know is here. My girlfriends from the Better Than Josh Everton Club wave from their spot by the bar. My parents are seated at a table in the front, and Summer has already walked over to greet them. Holden and Josie have even brought their kids; I spy Mia running around with the new baby balanced on her hip.

Wait a mother loving second.

My joints go stiff and I practically creak as I turn to Enzo, eyeballing him up and down. This scene is way too familiar. It's way too similar to a party I remember from around a few years ago. He couldn't be... There's no way...

"Um, Kelly? I'd like you to meet my father and stepmother."

I turn, the deep breath I conjure never quite making it to my belly as I plaster on my best smile.

Arturo Barone is different from the pictures I've seen in magazines. He's grayer. A little more wrinkled and stooped. There are deep lines around his mouth, though he's not frowning now. Instead, he looks nervously to his wife and offers me a hand. When he actually smiles, Enzo's hand stiffens in my own.

"We're so happy to meet you, Kelly."

"To be honest, I thought this was going to be a more intimate dinner," I admit. "I would have dressed nicer for the occasion, Mr. Barone. I would have—"

"I like the jeans," the new Mrs. Barone interrupts. "You know I bought Arturo his first pair a year ago, and he called them *dungarees*? Old man."

I laugh out loud at that, then smack a hand to cover my mouth. I glance between Mrs. Barone, Enzo, and his father, but, to my further surprise, they're all sharing knowing smiles, like this is a joke I'm the last to be in on.

"Is that your daughter with Matteo?" Arturo asks.

"Enzo told you about Summer?"

He nods. “At one of our first times meeting for drinks, he played a clip from a poetry reading night at school?”

I blink, glancing over at Enzo and struggling to contain my surprise and pleasure.

“That was the sophomore talent show,” I say, nodding along. “Wow, you really do know all about us.”

“We had to live stream the Homecoming Game when she was on the court this year,” Mrs. Barone confides in me with a wink.

“And then, of course, he asked me for painter recommendations for her—”

Enzo elbows him.

Swear to God, all vital functions have ceased. That *cannot* be another teaser leading me to believe this party might be...

“Kelly!”

I turn at the sound of my sister’s voice.

“Um, excuse me. I’ll just be one moment!” I hold up a hand to Mr. and Mrs. Barone, then make a mad dash for Josie.

She’s flush-cheeked and a little sweaty as she pulls me to the side of the crowd. Josie licks her thumb and starts in on my untamable cowlick.

“Do you have a nicer shirt in your duffel?” She asks me. “Something that buttons, maybe?”

“I’m so excited to see you, too,” I laugh. “What is this?”

She grabs my hand and inspects my nails. “I put Summer in charge of the manicure,” she mumbles. “She’s already mentally checked out for college, I assume.”

“Josie,” I breathe. “Josie, what are you getting at—”

“Hey, everybody?”

We both turn. Enzo is in the center of the room. He’s waving to get everyone’s attention, then specially beckons to me. Josie pulls me into a quick, crushing hug, robbing me of

whatever oxygen I had left before she pushes me to the center of the room.

“I’m so grateful you could all make it here tonight,” he says.

“Now, *why the hell are they here?*” I mutter into his ear, standing on tiptoe. Enzo promptly ignores me, but I note a smile tucked into the corner of his mouth.

“We’re all so excited for Kelly and Summer to visit, and we can’t wait for the move back to be permanent in just a few weeks. This is the greatest ‘welcome home’ party I could have planned. But there is one exciting event on the docket, and if you could all come outside now, we can mark this item off the agenda and move on to some snacks and cake.”

A welcome home party. The dreamy daze of my vision starts to sharpen back to reality, then instantly gives way to fuzziness again as I realize I’ve just built a mountain out of a mole hill. Enzo didn’t bring all these people here to propose. It was just an excuse to party with friends, introduce me to his father’s side of the family, and celebrate our impending reunion.

I let him pull me close as he guides me along with the crowd through Alessi’s front door. The night outside is warm and humid, not too different from that first night we shared on our roof. My chest squeezes as I glance up at our old townhouse—Rachel and Marnie’s home now—and remember the events from nearly two years ago that brought us together.

This is good. This is right. I’ll take a welcome home party and just be happy with that. As long as I have Enzo Barone in my life, I’ll take him whatever way I can get him. I love this man, and there’s no way the world could feel more perfect.

“Hey, Arlo,” Enzo calls.

Out from the crowd pops a familiar graying head. Arlo waves a hand at me, then gestures to his phone.

“Peterson left on time,” he calls. “You’re all good.”

“Who is Peterson?” I ask Enzo. “What are we out here for?”

The crowd gasps as a plane zooms overhead. It's far above us—too far to scare anyone or even for us to see many details—but the group tonight clearly expected it. I glance around, watching faces on the ground as my heart rattles around in my ears. Enzo squeezes my hand again.

The first puff of exhaust freezes my blood. The second, the third, the fourth, and I'm squeezing Enzo's hand so tight, I must be cutting off his blood flow, too. He just pulls me closer, slings that arm around my shoulders instead, and kisses the top of my head.

M.

A.

R.

R.

Y.

“Yes,” I breathe, before the plane can even start in on its next letter. “Yes, yes, yes. How did—What did—”

He's grinning as I turn and he drops to one knee. The ring box is small and velvet and everything I ever imagined.

“Arlo has been saying for years that he knows a guy. I booked him the first weekend after we got together.”

I squeal, trying to pull Enzo up by the shoulder so I can wrap him in my arms and give him a kiss. He just laughs and paws me off.

“Woman, will you let me propose already?”

I'm sobbing now, and I couldn't put a pin in this if I tried. I turn to our friends and family, and catch my girlfriends watching from the edge of the crowd.

“Does this count as a relapse?” I ask.

“A condoned one.” Alexis winks.

“Move in with me when you come back to Button,” Enzo says. “I expanded the back of the restaurant so Summer will

have her own room when she visits. Matteo, too. No more pull-out.”

“You thought of everything!” I sputter and hiccup.

Enzo takes my chin, redirecting it to look back up at the sky. Our smoke message is complete: *Marry Me*.

“Say yes,” he whispers in my ear. “Tell me this feels right.”

“It feels right.” I kiss the tip of his nose as the crowd cheers. “It feels like love to me.”

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ava Munroe is a former television critic who is currently living in Arizona, but pining away for her dreamy childhood in small town Georgia. When she's not forcing her husband and twin toddlers to travel back to the East coast with her, you can find her chugging Coca-Cola, spoiling her German Shepherd, or binge-watching Yellowjackets (seriously, you have to start watching that show if you're not already). Her sexy small town romances pack in the humor and heart, while also providing a mental escape to Ava's favorite place on earth: the deep south.

Find her at www.avamunroe.com