



Bittersweet

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Category: Romance, New Adult

Description: Romy Love knows weddings. As the author of a hugely successful wedding blog, you'd think she'd have love covered. It is her last name, after all. When it comes to her big day, Romy has the flowers picked out, a dress collecting dust in the back of her closet, and a preacher on standby. There's just one problem: the groom doesn't know it yet.

Romy has eyes for the Italian coffee god and single dad who owns the bakery in her building—she also has plans for his delicious buns—but in order to get her happily-ever-after, she has a few things to check off her list first:

Lose twenty pounds

Take over the blogging world one wedding at a time

Make Coffee Hottie fall in love with me

Yeah, this shouldn't be difficult at all.

Total Pages (Source): 82

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1

Romy

Love—it's what I do. Love is why I get up in the morning, and it's the last thing I think of at night. I'm aware this makes me sound like a complete freak, and that spending my days dreaming about weddings, happily ever afters, and sweet hot nothings whispered in my ear by a certain sweet, hot barista might make me pathetic, but such is the life of a coffee-obsessed wedding blogger.

I trace my hand over the sweetheart neckline of the wedding gown. Thirteen months ago, my big day was coming.

Turned out my fiancé, Jeremy, was coming, too.

Coming inside a model named Lisa. Then one named Ireland. Then a cocktail waitress named Leticia.

My phone sounds from the kitchen, and I give the dress one last look. My symbol of hope. Because I know that someday, somehow, I'm going to find a man worth wearing it for.

Touching the dress once more for luck, I race into the kitchen, swiping my phone from the counter.

Emma: You free later? I thought I might swing by.

I quickly tap out a reply.

Romy: I'm always free.

Emma: You know if you actually told the Coffee Hottie how you felt about him, you'd never be "free" again.

Ha! I mock-glare at my phone, as if my best friend could somehow see me on the other end of it, then stash it in my purse before rushing downstairs to meet the current love of my life.

Coffee.

It's never let me down.

I can taste it on the tip of my tongue, that bittersweet mix of earth and something darker, something sexier, something altogether intoxicating. From the time I wake until I lay my head on the pillow at night, coffee consumes most of my mental real estate, right alongside weddings.

Coffee.

Weddings.

And my favorite barista.

My feet hit the final stair, and I pause at the internal door connecting my stairwell to the café below. I look through the glass door, my breath catching in my throat.

Elio.

My coffeehottie.

The gorgeous Italian barista with the dark chocolate eyes and scruffy beard might be the reason I'm out of bed and in a full face of makeup before 9:00 a.m., but it isn't just that face or body, or the way he grins when he hands me my cup of piping-hot coffee that has me here every morning.

It's also his muffins. And do not even get me started on his buns. The man is a mean baker, and I'd happily offer myself up as a guinea pig to taste test his . . . er . . . his baked goods.

But that will never happen.

Because as much as I love the idea of indulging in Elio, I know a guy as delicious as him would never go for a woman like me. I catch sight of my reflection in the glass window as I reach for the handle. Yeah, no way would a man that fine be ready for all this jelly.

The little bell above the bakery door tinkles as I enter. The smell of cinnamon, of baking, of oh-so delicious hits me in a wave of warmth. I suck in a deep breath, closing my eyes for a moment as the door behind me swings closed. This. Is. Heaven.

"Morning, Romy." My own personal god smiles at me. "What can I interest you in today?"

You.

Served up shirtless on a platter.

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Whipped cream on the side.

Please?

“Oh, just the usual. A latte, maybe a muffin. . .”

“Coming right up. One latte, and maybe a muffin.” Elio winks. We both know there’s no maybe about it.

The coffee machine clunks into life as he steps behind it, and I walk farther into the room, stopping in front of the bookshelf in the far corner. Preloved books are stacked high, one on top of the other, and I pick up the closest, an old green leather-bound volume of *Pride and Prejudice*. I flick through the pages, then place it down, reaching for the next book on the pile. *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

I chance a quick look over my shoulder. Elio’s eyes are still trained on the coffee machine, not focused on me at all.

I flick the book open, my back to the counter, landing on a page somewhere in the middle. I’ve always wanted to read this.

“How’s work?” Elio asks over the throb of the machine.

“Oh, you know, worky.” Worky? Really, Romy?

Elio doesn’t reply. He’s probably so blinded by the brilliance of my response he’s at a loss for words.

I glance down at the pages of the book again. Holy shit, it's as hot as they say it is. And now I'm blushing for an entirely different reason.

"You doing a little light reading?"

I look up. Elio's staring right at me.

No.

He's staring right at the erotic romance in my hand.

"What? No. That's not . . . it just jumped off the shelf. I barely even touched it." I shove the book back, but damn it, it won't fit. I push the paperback into the corner, but no matter how hard I try, I can't seem to slide it back into its original spot. "I'll just . . . push . . ." I grunt. Stupid book. My cheeks, my chest, they're burning up. So embarrassing.

Elio just laughs and walks across the café to my side. He takes the book from my hand, and slides it back in place, as if it wasn't a challenge at all. He grabs a worn hardback from the pile and hands it to me. "Try this one. I think you'll like it."

I take the book from his hand and run my fingers over the embossed spine. *Crime and Punishment*.

Riding crops. Whips and chains. *Crime and Punishment*.

Oh, what I'd give to explore this topic more.

But of course, I don't.

I may have the biggest crush in the world on the barista who works downstairs, but I

know the type of women men like him attract. Beautiful.Sexy.

Skinny.

And while I'm not some hideous monster, I just can't compete withthat.

I change the topic, willing the flames in my cheeks to die down. "You know most people have e-readers these days,right?"

He wrinkles his nose. "E-readers?Sacrilege."

"You prefer musty old books that previously belonged to God knows who, doing God knowswhat?"

"Of course. That's what gives them character; it's what gives them life. Besides, you can't improve onperfection."

I turn the book over in my hand. "Perfection,huh?"

"Mmm." His eyes meet mine. I could easily get lost in them. I swallow hard, and Elio shakes his head. "Your coffee's gettingcold."

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“Oh, right.Coffee.”

He lifts the cup and plate from the counter and turns to me. “Samespot?”

I nod and follow him as he heads toward the window. “Samespot.”

He sets my food down on the table and pulls out a chair, resting his hands on the seat back. I sit, and Elio leans in, his voice low and inviting in my ear. “You let me know when you’re ready formore.”

Now.

I’m so ready formore.

He walks around the table to face me. “Let me know when you’re ready for another cup.”

Nervous laughter bubbles up my throat, and I force my voice to keep level. “Oh, I will. Thankyou.”

He chuckles as he walks back to the counter to serve more customers, and I sigh.Pathetic, thy name isRomy.

I settle into the hard-backed seat and take a mouthful of my coffee.Delicious.My fingers fly over the keyboard as I log in to the café’s Wi-Fi and check my e-mails.

The usual mix of photos from wedding photographers flood in, along with an

invitation to a local gallery opening.

But one e-mail catches my eye.

One e-mail makes me stop in my tracks.

I click through, and the text fills my screen.

KENNA FINDS HER FOREVER

Local celebrity and weather reporter Kenna McPherson has finally said “yes” to her long-time boyfriend, Olympic skier Matthew O’Reilly. The popular presenter has announced that she’s “never been happier,” and that she can’t wait to plan the event of her dreams right here in Colorado Springs.

Kenna is expected to announce details of her impending wedding on Friday night during her live weather report from one of the trails over at Pikes Peak.

I look away from the browser window. Holy hotcakes. Kenna McPherson, my best friend from high school, the girl who stole my boyfriend in the twelfth grade, is getting married.

Elio laughs with a customer, the kind of warm, rich sound that’s completely infectious. Bone-meltingly swoon-worthy. Oh God. I have a serious problem.

Kenna is getting married. And here I am, sitting in a coffee shop, a dress collecting dust in my spare room, and the current object of my affection barely even knows I’m alive.

Romy

Dear lovers,

When planning your special day, you may find that you encounter mixed emotions. Perhaps a friend feels she's been overlooked for a position in the bridal party. Maybe you and the groom-to-be don't agree on the table decorations. One family member may be refusing to sit next to another family member, and that can be hard to resolve.

This can result in a lot of stress for you, and while a spa day and three mimosas are the obvious cure, not all of us have access to a personal masseuse or an understanding boss who'll let us drink our way through the day.

My advice? Take the good with the bad. Remember that this day is about you, and you should live in the moment. Don't sweat the small stuff. Consider instead sweating out any stresses between the sheets with the man or woman you are about to marry.

Love,

Romy

I hit Submit on the blog post, then roll my shoulders back and twist my neck from side to side. The door jingles. Emma. My best friend pushes her stroller through the near-empty café and over to my table, a smile on her face despite the lack of sleep I see lurking under her eyes.

"You know what I said to myself on the way here? I wonder what the chances are of finding Romy in the café ogling the hot barista. And surprise, surprise, here you are."

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I smile, standing to give her a kiss on the cheek, then prepare to lavish the little rugrat with all the kisses, but when I lift the canopy cover, he's sleeping soundly. Awww.God, babies are just life. A tiny snore fills the stroller and sends my heartfluttering.

"Good to see you too. And it's not like I spend all my time here." Just the hours from nine to three. "You had a lucky guess."

"I hope someone's getting lucky." Emma flops into the chair opposite me and shoots a look at Elio, who waves goodbye to the last of the morning rush. I roll my eyes.

"Keep it down, will you?" I ask, sinking back into my seat. "I think we both know that getting lucky with him is not in the cards."

"Romy, when are you going to just grow some lady balls and ask him out?"

"I can't!" I protest.

"Why not?" She gives me her best "mom" face, and even though Isaac is only her first child, the woman's scarier-than-thou expression is already on point. "Give me one good reason."

"Well, firstly because if it doesn't work out, I'll have to move. You can't sleep practically on top of a man once you've slept under him," I point out.

"If it doesn't work out. If things don't go well." She pauses for dramatic effect. "But if it does, you get to have a booty-call guy who spends all day beneath you. Sounds pretty

tempting tome."

"You don't understand. Elio is like . . ." I search the shop for inspiration, finally stopping on the delicate custard-filled pastry on the counter. "Elio is like one of those fogliatella. He's perfect to look at, and to admire on the surface."

"But?"

"But I don't want to know the ugly truth underneath. I don't want to learn about his past, what his bad habits are, or why he's still single when he looks like that." I gesture to his ass—I mean, the man in question—as Elio bends to pick up a stray receipt from the floor. My gaze darts back to the pastry again before he can catch me staring. "I like fogliatella. I just don't want to know how to make them, wash the dirty dishes afterward, or discover how many calories they really have and what they will do to my hips."

"That's it, huh?" Emma sighs.

"Yeah, that's it."

She shakes her head. "You're still afraid of getting hurt."

"Maybe a little. It's only been a year since Jeremy . . ." Just three hundred and sixty-nine days since I found my fiancé in bed with another woman.

"What he did was terrible, but you have to get over this fear, Romy. Embrace your new life. Go on a date."

"I've been on dates!"

"With men who are dreadful for you. You don't have to marry the first man you have

sex with after your ex. Go get naked with Mr. Hunky McBakerson over there and see where it leads," Emma says, and I widen my eyes, stifling my response with a long sip of my coffee.

"Can I get you ladies anything to drink? Eat?"

Shit! Coffee sprays from my mouth.

Elio laughs, stepping to the side of the table like some sort of stealthy jungle cat. A delicious stealthy jungle cat who I want to crawl under the table and hide from because oh my God. Did he just hear what Emma said?

My friend pastes on a bright grin. "No, I'm fine, thank you. Just thought I'd drop by and say hi to Romy while Isaac and I were on our morning walk. I'm sure she could use some attention though. Isn't that right, Ro?"

I kick her under the table, but to her credit, she doesn't so much as flinch.

"Sorry, Romy. It's been a little busy in here this morning." Concern flashes over Elio's features. "Need a refill?"

"No, I'm good, thanks." I smile up at him, then shoot daggers back at Emma. "I was just about to finish up, and then we were going to head upstairs."

"Actually, I think Isaac is waking." Emma continues to smile brightly, gesturing to the stroller.

Her baby is sound asleep.

I've never seen a better impersonation of a log.

“So I’m going to head off and leave the two of you to it. Bye.” She gives us both a tinkling wave and practically sprints out of the café, leaving me feeling even more like a desperate idiot than usual.

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“Sorry about that.” I make a face at Elio. “And for staying here all morning. Again.”

"Are you kidding? I love it when you're here."

Warmth spreads through my body. "You do?"

"Absolutely. In fact, before your friend came in, I was hoping I could interrupt your work for a moment to ask you a favor."

"Anything." I'm quick to reply, too quick, and I scold myself. Play it cool, Romy.

He glances around the empty shop, left, right, then left again, before lowering his voice as if he's about to reveal his deepest, darkest secret. "I've been working on a new recipe. It's a modern twist on an Italian lemon cake."

"You're breaking tradition?" I gasp in horror, clutching at my chest. "But what would your nonna say?"

“How did you know I have a nonna?” he asks, his head to the side.

“You’re Italian, and you know how to bake.” I raise my eyebrows. “Of course you have a nonna.”

He laughs. “You’re right, I do, and if she knew about my plans, she would be horrified. I’m trying to make the menu more modern. A little . . . sexier.” A dark glint enters his eyes. Desire arcs through me, warming my already heated flesh. “That’s why I need a reliable taste tester. Someone without bias. And, as a professional

muffin critic, I thought you would be the perfect candidate."

"It's not just muffins. I also love your buns."

What did I just say?

Oh Lord, no. Did I . . . ?

I glance up at Elio's dark eyes. They dance with laughter. "You like my buns?"

"Yes," I squeak. "Your cream buns. Not your . . . your—"

"Well, I didn't think you meant the other kind." He turns and walks around the counter, picking up a clean dish towel and flinging it over his shoulder before glancing back at me. "Now, come on. Are you going to help me or not?"

Hmm. Decisions, decisions.

Should I race into a deserted room with my hot coffee guy to taste his buns—I mean, baked goods?

Abso-damn-lutely.

3

Romy

The kitchen is big, bigger than I expected from the small café space out front. Everything is stainless steel, from the countertops to the industrial ovens and the racks upon racks of cooling trays.

I take a deep breath, and holy hotcakes, if I thought the shop smelled good, being in here is like taking that scent and bathing in it. I can practically feel the delicious warmth sinking into my pores.

"Just a sec." Elio opens the door to what looks like a small cool room. Coming out two seconds later, he's holding a white plate.

On it lies one of the most enticing treats I've ever seen.

A perfect, round pastry shell with scalloped edging houses a glossy golden curd. It's so shiny I can see my silhouette in it. I lean closer, inhaling the scent of lemon, of white chocolate, and of something else almost savory. It truly looks amazing. Delicious.

"This is just a sample. Of course, if it makes it to the menu, I was thinking of doing something special on top. You know, a drizzle of chocolate, a tuile of some sort . . ."

Elio places the plate down and opens a drawer, pulling out a knife and the world's smallest fork.

"Tuiles are very on trend right now," I contribute, because damn it, if this is what the role of cake tester looks like in Elio's life, I very much want to ace this interview and get the job.

He holds the knife out to me. "Would you like to do the honors?"

"I couldn't." It's too perfect. Too exquisite.

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"Suit yourself." He shows no mercy. The knife carves easily through the pastry, and it splits in two. Dead. Murdered. Ruined.

I pout. "You broke it."

Elio laughs. Picking up the fork, he scoops a piece from the plate, then holds it out to me.

I swallow, wet my lips. Is he . . . is he going to put it in my mouth?

The thought is so intimate, so somehow naughty, despite being so very pedestrian. His hands near my face. One finger brushing away a stray crumb. My tongue darting out to touch it.

"Uh, I'll just . . ." Elio places the fork down on the edge of the plate, then swivels it around so the handle extends in my direction.

Of course he isn't going to feed me.

Only a man who was attracted to a woman would do that, and Elio is not attracted to me. I pull the sides of my cardigan protectively around my curves, as if I can hide them from view.

I take the fork, and all my naughty thoughts are forgotten because crap, does this taste good. Like "please, sir, can I have some more" good.

"Oh . . ." I groan, closing my eyes. Wow.

I blink them open, and Elio's staring at me with a bugged-out expression. Most likely because I just impersonated a porn star while sampling a piece of cake. What is wrong with me?

Straightening, I try to pull myself together, but I can't help popping the fork back in my mouth to get every last bit. "Elio, that is delicious. The lemon and the white chocolate go so perfectly together! And the herb—is that . . .?" I wave the fork while I think. It has just a hint of an earthy flavor. God, what is it? It's not normally in dessert, that much I know.

"Thyme?" he prompts, and I grin.

"Yes! Thyme. Of course." I shake my head. "I think you're onto a winner. Truly, I do. If everyone isn't lining up around the block to taste it, they're just plain crazy because I would marry the hell out of this tart."

"Really?" The sweetest smile graces his lips.

"Really. One hundred percent." I take the fork and gesture to the tart again. "Mind if I . . .?"

"By all means." He nods to the plate, and I scoop up some more, shoveling it in my face in case he plans to take it away. "So now you know all about my risqué little tart, it's time to spill some of your own work secrets. What made you start your own blog? You seem to work an awful lot. It must be hard."

"It's not that hard." I brush his reply away like the crumbs from the side of my lips, then stop. Because I've worked damn hard to get this blog up and running, and I shouldn't sweep that minor detail under the rug just because a man with bedroom eyes and skillful hands has paid me a compliment. "I mean, it's not that easy though, either. I started it three years ago, and I've had to spend a lot of time on it, give a lot

of myself to it. While other people spend their Saturday nights with friends, or out on dates, for me, it's time to dedicate to researching other blogs and creating plans for the week ahead."

"You don't date?"

"No." Is it hot in here? "I don't."

He smiles. Wait—is he flirting with me?

My blog post from this morning flashes in my mind. Live in the moment.

Maybe it's time to take my own advice.

Maybe it's time to put a bit more of myself out there.

"I mean, I would like to date. I have dated before. Obviously," I say, because ask me out already.

He glances at my lips, then his gaze rolls back to my eyes. He steps closer. Tension thrums all around us, as taut as a bowstring. My heart hammers rapid-fire in my chest, as if trying to get out and launch itself at Elio's feet.

I run my tongue over my lower lip again. Is he . . . is he going to kiss me?

Is Elio, sex god, and baker of the most delicious lemon tart in the universe, going to kiss me in his kitchen?

He raises his hand. My thoughts race. He's going to thread it through my hair, jerk me closer. He's going to kiss me.

Please, be going to kissme.

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The bell above the shop door rings.

“Elio? I brought a little visitor to see you,” a familiar voice calls. I recognize it as belonging to Elio’s sister, who seems to be at Bittersweet almost as often as I am. The only difference is she gets paid to be here.

I don’t break our gaze. Maybe Bianca will go away. Maybe we can get this almost-kiss back. Kiss me, you infuriating man.

“I . . .” He presses his lips together for a second, and dear God, I hope he’s warming them up.

A tiny human dashes into the kitchen, wrapping herself around Elio’s leg. Brown curls bounce as she looks up at Elio, stars in her eyes. So, pretty much the same way that I look at him.

“It’s me! I’m the wittle visitor.” The child giggles, and even though she’s ruined my near perfect morning with my near perfect kiss, I can’t be mad at her because she is adorable.

“You? You’re the visitor?” Elio scoops her up into her arms, spinning her round. She shrieks, clutching at his neck. Elio twirls the little girl once more for good measure, then places her back on the ground. Seeing him and his niece side by side, there’s a definite family resemblance, and the way he just picked her up into his arms? Swoon. It’s all I can do not to lick him. “Coco, did you say hi to Romy?”

“Who’s Womy?”

“That would be me.” I give a little wave. “Hi, Coco. It’s nice to meet you.”

Coco gives me a scrutinizing once over, but before she can respond, her mom calls from the café. “I’ve told you not to muck around with her in here. She could get . . .” Bianca pushes through the door and her shrewd gaze locks on mine. A smile teases the corner of her mouth as she looks back and forth between me and her brother. “Romy, what are you doing here?”

“Er . . . I . . .”

Bianca grins like the Cheshire cat before turning back to Elio. “Are we interrupting something?”

“No. Not at all.” He glances at the tart. Of course. He doesn’t want his family to know about his sexy baking until he’s got it all wrapped up.

“I just had a . . . baking question, and Elio was helping me answer it,” I add, nodding authoritatively.

“Really?” Bianca asks, amusement dancing in her eyes. “A question about what?”

“About . . .” I search the kitchen. Oven, tray, tart, crazy hot guy, fork— “About what these little tiny fork thingies are properly called. You know?” I wave it around like a weapon, as if the quicker I move my hand, the more likely it will be that my story sells. “I’m a wedding blogger. I have to know things about forks. How best to use forks. How to choose forks.”

How to lose forks. I sound like a Dr. Seuss book, and I want to take the fork and stab myself in the eye. How best to fork? What is wrong with me? And why can’t I stop making a fool of myself in front of not only this man I have a crush on but now his beautiful sister and her gorgeous kid, too?

“How about Coco and I leave you two to finish up with all that . . . forking,” Bianca says with a wink. She ushers her daughter out of the room with a promise of cupcakes, leaving Elio and I alone again.

“Sorry.” He grimaces.

“No, it’s fine.” I step closer to him, trying to regain that connection from a few minutes prior. I look up at him from under my eyelashes, giving him what I hope is a look filled with promise. Filled with sex. “Your dirty little cake secret is safe with me.”

“I knew I could count on you for that.” Relief washes over his features, and he glances to the front of the café. “I should go. But you stay here and finish off that tart.”

He turns to leave, then spins back, as if he forgot something. “Oh! And. . .”

He steps in close. The rough pad of his thumb swipes over my lower lip. I shiver. Wow.

“You had a little something there.” Elio dusts the crumbs free from his hands and turns to leave the kitchen.

Of course.

I had food on my face.

That was what our clearly one-sided “moment” was all about. How could I have thought otherwise?

I take the stupid pastry fork—yes, I know what it’s called, I work on a wedding blog

for God's sake—and stab at the tart with renewed viciousness.

He walks out, leaving me alone with my lemon, white chocolate, and thyme-flavored mouthgasm.

It's the closest thing I've had to a sexual experience in more than a year, and from the looks of my current romantic situation, I'm going to need more of these tarts.

4

Romy

Is there anything worse than that slump that comes late in the afternoon when you still have a ton of work to do?

I'm lagging. My back hurts from sitting at my desk so long, and there's an ever-present ache in my eyeballs from staring at my laptop for hours on end.

I stretch and walk a small circle around my office space, and then sit back down. Only . . . the aroma from downstairs wafting through my window is amazing, and my stomach growls an angry protest because it's almost dinnertime and I've been so caught up in wedding pictures that I forgot to eat lunch. I need coffee. A quick glance at the time on my laptop tells me it's 5:15 p.m. Crap. I only have fifteen minutes to get down there and have my hot barista fuel my obsession. For coffee.

I run into my room and change out of my sweats. Then I fix my ponytail, run a brush through the ends, and apply a slick of gloss for just a hint of color. I smack my lips together, tasting the sweet gloss, and nod at my reflection.

Wait. Pants. I need pants. While I'd love nothing more than to be semi-naked in a room with Elio, I'm not sure walking into his café sans pants is the way to go about it. That might be coming on just a little bit strong. Not to mention, he'd likely run screaming in the other direction after one glance at my thunder thighs.

I rifle through my closet, flinging skirts and jeans aside until I settle on a pair of

harem pants and a long thick grandpa cardigan. I catch myself in the mirror as I'm grabbing my keys. I'm never going to get underneath my coffee hottie because no man will want to have sex with me after seeing this outfit.

With a sigh, I head back to my bedroom and pull out a pair of slimming jeans and a cute Modcloth top with a Peter Pan collar and little stegosaurus all over it. I pair it with a mint-green cardigan, and my favorite pair of mint patent leather Ties.

Confident I no longer look like a cave troll, I grab my keys and wallet and rush downstairs. Elio is just turning the sign in the window when I virtually slam my body against it because I was running full-tilt down the stairs, and I can't slow my velocity. He gives a startled laugh, and I flame bright red.

Elio abandons his Closed sign and opens the door. "Hey."

"Hi. Sorry about that."

"Couldn't wait to see me, huh?" His eyes burn with mischief. Desire arcs through me, because really, it should be illegal for anyone to look that delicious in jeans and a T-shirt with a dish towel slung over his shoulder.

"Ha! Yeah." I shake my head. "I mean no. I mean, coffee. I'm lagging. Please, I'm really sorry. I know you're closed and you wanna get home, and why wouldn't you? It's not like you want to stay at the shop all day when there's wine to drink and cheese to nibble and classic books to read."

He frowns. "That's your impression of me? That I nibble cheese while reading classic literature?"

"And the wine," my mouth supplies unhelpfully.

He chuckles. “You may need a crash course in what men do after work. Here’s a hint: it’s not nibbling anything. Unless, of course, it comes to earlobes.”

Oh, wow. Okay. I would definitely prefer that to an expensive gouda.

He grins. “Come on. I’ll do you better than just a coffee.”

“Excuse me?” Is squeak.

Now he laughs outright. “Relax, Romy. My nonna is here, my sister too, and a bossy four-year-old. I promise I won’t bite.”

Not even if I want you to? “I’m sorry. You have better things to do than make me a coffee when you’re closed.”

“No, come on in. Stay. We’re just about to sit down to family dinner.”

“Family dinner?”

“Yeah, we do it every Tuesday. That’s when Nonna comes to make our love knots. Most kitchens do a family dinner after hours. You gotta feed the help, and since B gives up her free time to help me run this place, and Nonna bakes, we all just kinda converge in the kitchen and feed like hungry hippos.”

I laugh at that reference. I had that game as a child, but without any siblings or parents who were interested enough to play, my hippos ate slowly. One at a time, and they were always courteous and polite.

I should work. I know I should, but that smell is amazing. And really, what's the point working for yourself if you can't push your hours back when you need to?

“Well, when you put it like that, how can I refuse?” I give him my best flirty smile and walk through the door as he steps aside. “I should warn you, though, I’m reallyhungry.”

“Mmm . . . me too. Starved in fact,” hemutters.

Was I meant to hearthat?

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When I glance back at him, the man's eyes are on my butt. If I thought I was blushing before, now I'm onfire.

I walk farther into the café and almost collide with Coco. She has milkmaid braids in her hair and wears a red bandana wrapped around her head. A pair of overalls adorn her small frame, and she reminds me of a tiny Rosie the Riveter. "Escwuse me, miss, but this cafwe is cwosed." Coco carries a large plate piled with cutlery in rolled linennapkins.

"Oh, I'm sorry. This fine gentleman here let me in." I crouch down to her level and point to Elio, who stands to the side with his arms folded across hischest.

She glances at Elio and then at me, and rolls her huge doe eyes. I would kill for those lashes. "Twypical. Always twying to make abuck."

I laugh, and Elio bends down alongside me. I'm assaulted by his scent: soap, rich dark roast, and baked goods. I wonder if any man has ever smelled this good. "Actually, I thought Romy could eat with us tonight. What do you say, MissCoco?"

"Hmm." She frowns and gives me a once-over. "Fwine, she can stay, but onwy because she has dinosaurs on her top and she's weallypwetty."

"Thank you. I love your outfittoo."

"Compwaments areextwa."

Oh my God, this kid slaysme.

“I’ll be sure to leave a big tip,” I say seriously. Bianca is so lucky. Coco is just the right amount of sugar and badass.

If I’m ever lucky enough to have a daughter, I hope she’s just like this little girl here: sweet, and full of sass. Uncle Elio is going to have his work cut out for him if he wants to help Bianca keep the boys away from his precious little niece.

Bianca exits the kitchen with her back to us, carrying two large dishes in her arms. She’s wearing the exact same outfit as Coco, only hers is adult-sized and covered in paint. “Thanks for the help, jackass.”

“Sorry, sis. We have a visitor.”

Bianca turns once she’s cleared the doors. Her mouth drops open, but she covers it quickly with a huge smile. “Romy.”

“Hi.” I give a pathetic little wave, suddenly feeling like I’m intruding. “Sorry, I hope you don’t mind me crashing your family dinner.”

“No, of course not.” She glances between me, her brother, and Coco. “The more the merrier, right, Elio?”

“Of course.”

“What are you two standing around chiacchierare about—” Elio’s grandmother comes through the doors from the kitchen and stops, staring at me as if she isn’t certain I’m real. “E chi è questa dolce ragazza?”

“This is Romy, Nonna.” Elio looks nervous. Should I not be here? “She’s one of our best customers.”

“Solo una cliente? Dovresti sposarla. Veloce. Una donna come questa non resta singola perlungo.”

“She doesn’t speak Italian, Nonna,” Biancachides.

“Thank God,” Elio mutters, and I’m lost, but he looks relieved. Oh crap. His grandmother hates me.

“Sposala comunque. Leil’imparerà.”

“Will you behave, please?” Elio asks his Nonna. She chuckles and pats his cheek before giving him a hearty slap. Then she passes him the dish in her hand and stops in front of me. I’m not sure whether to brace for a slap too, and my whole body tenses as I wince. Everyone laughs. To my surprise, Nonna kisses both of my cheeks and pulls me in for a warm embrace. She’s tiny like Bianca, but the woman gives goodhug.

“Hi, it’s so nice to meet you, Mrs. . . .” I trail off, hoping someone will fill in the blanks.

Elio’s grandmother makes a wild hand gesture as if to say forget about it. “Nonna, call me Nonna.”

I smile and nod, and I could swear Bianca is laughing at me. I’m glad everyone finds me so amusing.

“Come. Sit.” Nonna leads me to the table already set with bowls, plates, linen, cutlery, and three wine glasses. She pulls out a chair and demands that I sit in it. Coco is on one side and Elio is ushered into the other seat beside me by both Bianca and his grandmother, who brings another bowl and wine glass across, too. “Eat, eat.”

I smile, genuinely loving her insistence and that adorable thick accent. It makes me miss my own grandmother.

To avoid getting yelled at again, I take the serving spoon placed inside one of the dishes, scoop up the hearty soup, and pour it into my bowl. From the looks of it, the dish is thick with bread, vegetables, and cannellini beans. This is without a doubt what I smelled from upstairs. Elio passes me the salad, and I pass it right on to Coco. He grins and sets upon his own plate. I do too. Only I'm far more vocal about the experience because instead of bowing my head and quietly chewing like everyone else, I let out a very unladylike moan. "Oh my God, what is this?"

“Ribollita. It’s Nonna’s specialty.”

“How do you feel about adoption, Nonna?” I ask in all seriousness. Everyone laughs, but I would really like to know.

“Romy, you crack me up,” Bianca says.

Coco frowns in consternation. “What’s adoption?”

“It’s when you bring a child into your home and make them a part of your forever family,” Elio says, smiling at his little niece.

“But Womy isn’t a child.”

Bianca pinches her daughter’s cheek. “That’s what makes it funny, piccola.” She spears her brother with a look. “Though there are other ways to make someone a family.”

I purse my lips together to hide my smile.

“B,” Elio warns, glaring at his sister.

“What? I’m just saying.”

“Are you married, Romy?” Nonna’s gaze narrows on me. “Surely a beautiful, charming woman like you is not still single?”

“Actually, I am single.” I stir my soup with my spoon. “I always thought I’d be well on my way by now, but it hasn’t happened yet. If you’re asking though, I prefer Tiffany, princess cut, at least a carat, and I want a June wedding, though my offer for adoption is still on the table.”

Nonna gives a hearty laugh and glances pointedly at her grandson. “You hear that, Elio? Your friend Romy is single.”

“My ears work just fine, Nonna.” Elio shovels another spoonful of food into his mouth and chews. I blush about fifty new shades of crimson and decide I’m going to pick up papers for the adoption tomorrow.

After dinner, I stand and try to clear the dishes, but Nonna isn’t having any of it. I’m ushered toward the door, along with Elio. He sweeps out a hand and gestures for me to go first.

I step into the cold Colorado Springs air and wonder if it will start snowing soon. It’s unusually cold for the beginning of October.

I turn, because I’m not expecting him to walk me out, but he shoves his hands in his pockets and seems impervious to the cold in his short-sleeved T-shirt. “You should go inside. It’s freezing out there.”

“No, I’ll walk you home.”

I laugh and point to the staircase. “You know it’s only ten feet that way, right?”

“I know. But it’s late. I want to make sure you get home safe.”

“Okay then.”

“Do you have your keys?” Elio holds out a hand, and I place them in his upturned palm. I’m almost giddy when my skin touches his. He opens the metal security gate and allows me to enter.

“So, thanks for having dinner with us.”

“Thanks for inviting me. It was the best meal I’ve ever eaten.”

Elio slides my key in the lock. Of course, this means he brushes my shoulder as he does it, and when he leans in to turn on my foyer light, I think he might kiss me, so I tilt my head up. He glances down but moves just a fraction of an inch back.

My heart plummets. Oh my God. Did I just read this interaction all wrong? Why won’t he kiss me?

“I’ll ask you kindly not to say that around my muffins.” A mischievous smile plays on his lips.

“Your muffins are jealous?”

“Only where your taste buds are concerned.”

“Well, you can tell your muffin that I will gladly be back in the morning to eat him.” My eyes widen when I realize how suggestive that sounds and Elio laughs. It’s warm and deep, throaty, and it makes me wish I could just burrow in against his body. But that would be weird since he won’t even kiss me. Really weird.

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When he recovers, Elio cups my face and presses a kiss to my forehead before turning and heading down the stairs. I stand there like an idiot blinking afterhim.

A forehead kiss. A freaking forehead kiss? What's a girl gotta do to get a man to lay one on her these days—or layonher? I sigh and head inside, and even though it was only a forehead kiss, I close the door and float for the whole rest of theevening.

5

Romy

Dear lovers,

There's one aspect of wedding planning that is often overlooked, left to the last minute: choosing your bridallingerie.

Of course, you need something that works with your gown. This is not the time for that leather Agent Provocateur number with the bolts and chains, even if your groom will be unlocking your chastitybelt.

You want lingerie that makes you feel sexy. Choose material that is soft and sensual—silks, high-end lace—and cuts that flatter your body, whatever your shape may be. Remember to choose garments that can be removed without too much difficulty. Sexy is having him unwrap you like a present. Unsexy is needing a degree in physics to get you out of yourgear.

Whatever lingerie you choose, make sure it's sex-appropriate. This is not the time for

those granny panties, ladies, no matter how much they suck your stomach in! In fact, throw those out right now, because if your man needs you to wear them, he's not the man for you.

Love,

Romy

When you're a wedding blogger at the top of your game, timing is everything.

It's not just about getting exclusives on the best weddings, showcasing the most dream-worthy dresses and knowing how to make a couple's life seem like a love story—although it is those things, and more.

It's also about being on the scene when it matters most.

Getting the scoop before the rest of the world.

That's why I lace my Alexander McQueen trainers, even if the fit is a little snug, ready for an afternoon hiking at Pikes Peak. According to her Twitter feed, Kenna McPherson is about to reveal the details of her engagement, and I plan on being the first to post about it.

I head downstairs, tugging my jacket around my body. Is this tighter than it was last season?

Nice work, Romy. You've put on weight.

Again.

As I pass the internal door connecting my apartment's stairwell to the bakery, I

glance inside. Is it really any wonder I have trouble staying away from this man's baked goods when they taste so good?

Elio wipes down the countertops, the muscles in his arms flexing with the movement. I press one hand against the glass, almost like a visitor watching an animal at the zoo.

He cooks.

He cleans.

Ladies, get in line.

He takes the cloth he was using and heads into the kitchen. That butt. . .

Before I can get caught in yet another compromising position, I turn and head to the front door, pushing it open and exiting onto the street. I have to admit, these last few days it's felt like Elio and I are . . . we're something. Making progress. Taking a step in a new direction.

I just hope it's the direction of a blossoming new relationship, and not into the path of an oncoming train.

"Romy!"

Elio?

He walks out the front of Bittersweet, pulling the door closed. "Hey."

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“Hi,” I reply, waving to him and then to B, who stands behind the coffee machine inside the café.

“Where are you off to?” he asks.

“Hiking.” I make a face.

“Hiking?”

“It’s for work. Kenna McPherson just got engaged, and she’s announcing the details tonight at Pikes Peak, on one of the trails.” Hopefully, not a long trail.

Ideally in the trail parking lot.

“Do you hike much?” Elio asks, and it’s all I can do not to laugh.

“Seriously? Look at me.” I gesture to my body and my khaki trench coat, the skinny jeans poking out underneath. “Does this look like the body of a woman who spends a lot of time engaging in physical activity?”

Elio’s gaze darkens. He steps closer. Tension sparks the air between us. “Depends on the kind of physical activity.”

My heart free falls through my chest. There’s no mistaking that. He is flirting. With me.

How is this even possible?

It must be the nonna effect, I decide. I charmed her, and now she's worked some kind of Italian voodoo on him, and he's going to be mine.

"Well, you're more than welcome to come if you want," I say, trying to inject a seductive tone in my voice.

"I . . ." Elio glances behind him at the café. Indecision wages war on his features, and maybe I've read this all wrong?

No. That line about the physical activity—how wrong could I get that?

"Just let me duck inside real quick," he says, and he pulls his cell from his pocket and walks back to the café.

I turn toward the shop window to the left of my building. Photos of houses with varied looks and even more varied price tags stare back at me. I move until I can also see my reflection, checking my hair is still neatly pulled back, my makeup still on point. My soft cream shirt is just visible through the gap at the top of my trench, and I'm thankful I decided to dress to impress today.

Checking Elio's still otherwise occupied, I pull out my phone and shoot a quick text off to Emma.

Romy: Want an Eliou update?

Emma: TELL ME ALL.

Romy: I just asked him to come hiking. With me. Together.

Emma: Hot date alert!

I smile as another text flies in.

Emma: Remember, tie your laces tight. Wear weather-appropriate outerwear and sex-appropriate underwear. Stay hydrated, and have funxx

Shoot. What lingerie am I wearing?

I bite my lip, thinking of the white sports bra I strapped on an hour earlier, the granny panties that suck my stomach in. Not even close to sex-appropriate.

You're going hiking, I remind myself. Just stay calm and think of lingerie later.

Seconds later, Elio's at my side again, an easy smile on his face and two bottles of water in his hand. "You ready to go?"

I hold up my keys. "All set."

Romy

I lead him to the alley at the side of the café. Mine's one of only two cars in the parking lot. The hand-me-down BMW sedan looks small next to the SUV parked beside it, the child seat in the back; it must be Bianca's "mom" van. We hop in my car, and I pull out of the alley and onto the street, heading toward the mountains.

As I navigate the early-afternoon traffic, I'm acutely aware of my every movement. I'm close to him—so close. The confined space has increased that sense of intimacy.

"Water?" Elio asks, handing me a bottle.

"Please." Eagerly, I remove my hand from the wheel and take the bottle. I gulp some down, desperate to have something else to concentrate on aside from how unsexy my lingerie is.

"So, how long have you lived in Colorado Springs?" Elio eventually asks, breaking the silence between us.

"All my life. My parents have had the same grand old house ever since I was born, right on the outskirts of town. I used to love spending time in the yard, a gorgeous view of the mountains in the distance . . ." I smile, thinking of days spent playing with Kenna, taking turns to be the princess trapped in the treehouse tower. "When I was a kid, I used to imagine that a white knight would come riding down those mountains and whisk me away."

"Why did you need saving?"

“Oh—” I shoot him a quick glance, but his face is curious, not judging. “I didn’t, really. I think it was just this whole fairy-tale fascination I’ve always had. I used to love Disney movies, princess stories—anything with a happily everafter.”

His eyes crinkle in the corners as he rewards me with a soft smile. “What was your favorite?”

“Sleeping Beauty,” I answer without hesitation.

“Someday my prince will come,” Elio sings.

My jaw drops. “How do you—”

“Coco.” He grins in return. “And I gotta be honest, Bianca used to love that stuff when we were kids too. I’ve watched enough Disney to earn the title of an honorary princess.”

“Wow. I never would have picked you for a closet Disney fan.” I shake my head.

“Hey! It was in the past,” he protests, laughing. “Do you think that’s why you went into weddings? The whole fairy-tale romance concept?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, isn’t that what every woman wants: to be a princess for a day? Girls grow up on Disney, find their true love, and ride off into the sunset. It’s the basic ending to every Disney film ever made,” Elio says, with just a hint of bitterness in his voice.

“I’ve never thought about it like that.” Maybe my fascination with finding happily ever after does stem from princes who likely have hero complexes and princesses who are skilled at keeping house for the vertically challenged.

Then again, maybe it's just because my parents pressure me daily to put a ring on it.

"Do you have a favorite Disney movie?" I ask as we turn onto I-25.

"Probably The Lion King."

"Aha. No dresses." I nod, and Elio laughs, but this actually makes a lot of sense. Simba was all about that single life until he learned that his family was in danger. Everything I've discovered about Elio so far leads me to believe he'd do anything for the ones he loves. "And since you've psychoanalyzed me based on my choice of Disney, I'm going to go out on a limb and say it's because of your love of family." I chance a quick glance at him, taking my eyes off the road for one second.

"Hmm."

"Uh-oh. That does not sound like a happy hmm."

"So along with nibbling cheese and reading classic literature, I'm also painfully predictable, am I?"

"Some people like predictable," I mutter, uncertain I really want him to hear me. "Some people like it a lot."

Elio doesn't say anything, but he smiles, and it's glorious. I should call him predictable more often.

We chat for the rest of the drive, and soon I forget all about the awkwardness between us, the stolen moments at Bittersweet, and the almost kisses. Talking to him here, away from his work and my work and real life, feels easy. Natural. Perhaps we really could be more than we are now, swapping pleasantries for kisses that linger longer than they should, and heated glances that promise more, so much more.

I pull into the main lot at the Garden of the Gods, one of the more popular sections of Pikes Peak. Only a few other vehicles remain, no doubt thanks to the late-afternoon hour and the clouds that loom overhead, threatening to open up at any minute.

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Elio follows my gaze to the gray covering the sky. “You think she’ll still be here if it rains?”

I shrug. “She’s a weather girl.” If anyone should be ahead of the forecast, it’s her.

We get out of the car and cross the road, heading for the trail entrance.

Soon, we’re navigating the dusty red trail. Muted green scrub sprouts from the earth on either side of us, with majestic orange crags jutting into the sky like toppers on nature’s cake.

I keep a brisk pace, wanting to stay on schedule. Kenna’s broadcast starts at five, and while she no doubt has a special pass allowing her to stay in the park when visiting hours are over, I’m not so sure the rangers will be as accommodating for Elio and me.

Heat builds in my body, this time having nothing to do with the sexy man beside me and more with the pressure of hiking in early autumn, or perhaps hiking in general. My breathing gets heavy, heavier still. Quickly, I glance at Elio.

The man looks like a god—a hiking god with the body of an Adonis and the freakishly inhuman ability to breathe normally under duress. How is that even possible?

“Want some water?” He hands me a bottle, and I nod, grasping it and drinking half down in one long gulp before handing it back.

“Thanks,” I pant, and I want to make more conversation, but it’s impossible to talk.

Finally, we turn a corner. The foliage gives way to an incredible view of the central garden. Different shades of green are flecked throughout the landscape. Rock formations reach their long fingers into the sky. My breath catches. It's perfect. The sort of beauty you can't recreate.

"That view . . ." Elio shakes his head in wonder.

"There's nothing quite like it," I say simply.

Elio takes another sip from his water bottle, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallows. My mouth waters, and not just for the drink in his hand. "So where do you think she's going to make her announcement?" he asks.

"I thought around here. Her last tweet just mentioned this trail." I shrug. We've seen a few other hikers so far, but no weather reporter along the way.

"We're bound to run into her sooner or later. Water?" Elio hands me his bottle again.

I shake my head. "No, thanks."

"Are you sure?" Concern lingers in Elio's chocolate eyes.

He should rip his shirt off, then empty that water bottle over his head. I press my eyes shut for just a second, imagining the moment in all its porn-filled glory. He'd toss that gorgeous hair from side to side, and the sunset would highlight his no doubt chiseled chest, the six-pack and the delicious V disappearing into his pants. "Romy," he'd say, a sexy husk in his voice. "Come cool down with me."

"Romy? Are you okay?"

I blink my eyes open. He stands right in front of me, only a few inches separating our

bodies. My heart speeds up again, this time for an entirely different reason.

“Romy?”

“I’m fine,” I breathe. Kiss me. Please, kiss me. I lean in, and he leans in, and this is it! It’s finally happening! And—

“I need to pee.”

Oh, God.

Did I just—

Heat flushes my cheeks.

Why? Why did I just say that?

“Oh.” Elio chuckles, a deep sexy chuckle, and steps back. “Well, I’m sure you could just . . .” He gestures to the bushes on either side of us.

I turn my head to look, because seriously, the more I think about walking farther to try to find Kenna, then trekking back down the mountain with gravity not on my bladder’s side, the worse the idea seems. Maybe I could just . . . squat. I shudder.

“It’s okay.” Elio’s laugh is gentle, and he places a hand on my shoulder. “Honestly. You’ve drunk a lot of water in a short period of time. Hell, I could go myself.”

What?“We are not goingtogether!”

“No!” His eyes widen in alarm. “I just wanted to make you feel comfortable with it. That’sall.”

It’s weird. Peeing in public, with the man I’m crushing on so very close by is strange, no matter which way you look at it.I bet Kenna never had to pee on her first date with Matthew. She probably doesn’t pee atall.

“Okay. Wait here?” I ask, although where else he’d go is beyondme.

“Of course.” He nods, and I walk off the main path, following a small trail through thetrees.

Before long I can’t see the main path anymore. Pines tower above me and yuccas scratch at my feet as I head as far as I dare into the wilderness, mindful to keep walking in a straightline.

Finally, I feel far enough away that not only will Elio not be able to see, he won’t be able to hear, and I pop the button on my fly, thanking the lord that I always carry tissues in my purse for potential emergencies. Although then, what do I do with the usedtissue?

“Harder. Yes!”

Ifreeze.

What onearth. . .?

“We should be quiet. What if the cameras. . .?”

“Fuck the cameras! I need you. I need this,” a woman pants.

I look to the left, where the noise is coming from.

The leaves dance in the wind. Through the gaps, I glimpse a clearing just a few short feet away. Oh, God. Is that . . . is that Kenna and Matthew?

She’s pushed up against a tree. He’s taking her from behind, pumping into her with such force that her whole body shudders with each movement. The round globes of his ass are tanned and toned as he thrusts and thrusts and thrusts.

Kenna and Matthew are having sex in the woods.

And I’m bearing witness.

He pulls at her hair, laying kisses down her neck. She cries out in pleasure, clutching the tree as if it’s the only thing holding her upright, as if the ecstasy she’s feeling is too intense to be contained. It’s so wrong, watching them like this, but I can’t peel my eyes away. Something about it—these two perfect people having such lascivious, dirty sex—is hot. Too hot.

“Gonna come, baby. I’m gonna come inside your tight pussy,” Matthew calls, his voice hoarse with want. With need.

I press my legs closer together. I want Elio to take me like that, in the woods, pressed up against a tree. I want him to bend me over the counter in his kitchen, decorate my chest with whipped cream and feast until we’re both exhausted by pleasure, our

bodies entirely sated. I want him to kiss my neck, to make love to me, to fuck me with the kind of urgency that can't wait for private rooms and closed doors, that has to be done now, now, now.

“Yes!” Kennascreams.

“Romy?”

I spin around.

Elio stands there, his cheeks red. “Sorry. I thought you were—you’ve been gone a while, and I’ve been calling, but I guess the wind must have. . .”

“What the hell?” Kennascreeches.

“Who’s there, you filthy pervert? Come out,” Matthew shouts. Both of them stare in our direction, their bodies still joined at the hip.

They can’t see us—we’re mostly out of sight. I’m sure of it.

But I don’t want to stick around to find out.

Elio’s eyes just about bug out of his head. “Is that—”

“Come on!” I grab his hand. “Let’s go.”

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He doesn't need to be told twice. We race from the clearing, bolting through the bush.

"Wait! You better not have that on film," Matthew's voice follows us.

"Hurry!" I call desperately, brushing past trees, bushes, leaves. A branch scratches my face, but I don't care because we need to get out of here, now. Elio's footsteps thunder behind me, his grip tight on my hand.

"Stop!" Matthew calls, and now Kenna's voice shrieks too. "Please! I'll pay you whatever you want. Just stop!"

"Should we—"

I whirl on Elio as we reach the main path. "Just. Keep. Running."

"Got it." He takes the lead.

We careen down the trail. My side tightens with a stitch, but I push through it, push past the pain. All the while, the desperate screams of Kenna and the angry cries of her lover echo down the mountain.

When we're near the trail's end, a group of six men in black, all carrying various bags and pieces of equipment, block the path.

"Excuse me," Elio says, darting left around one. I follow him, my hips knocking the tiny guy with the big camera, and he tumbles.

“Hey!”

“Sorry!” I call as we race out of sight.

We reach the parking lot, and I fumble in my bag for my keys, clicking the damn button until finally, the lights flash. Doors open. Doors slam. Seat belts click and the engine coughs into life before I gun it out of the parking lot, the wheels spinning over the dirt. In the rearview, I spot a few members of the camera crew as they run after us into the clearing.

I try to brush the hair away from my clammy forehead, but it sticks. My top is plastered to my chest, drenched in sweat. My eyes sting, the kind of pain caused by expensive eye cream running into them, thanks to excess sweat.

I don’t need the mirror to check.

I’m a disaster.

“Well, that . . .” Elio pauses. His voice sounds a little strained, as if perhaps I’m not the only one suffering after our cross-country marathon. “That could have gone better.”

Five.

They’re only five small words, but somehow, in this ridiculous moment, this afternoon that once held so much promise—the promise of a work exclusive, the promise of moving on, the promise of kisses, and sex-appropriate lingerie—they seem so fitting.

I laugh. I laugh long and loud, and Elio laughs with me, his grin splitting his face.

This doesn't feel like the end of a disaster.

It feels like something's just beginning.

7

Elio

The bell above the shop door jingles and I glance up just in time to see my oldest friend, Nico, enter the building. Ah shit. I surreptitiously glance at Romy, who's been huddled in the corner by the fire so long she looks as though she's almost asleep, and then back at him.

"There's my boy," Nico booms from the doorway in an overly exaggerated Italian accent—the way our fathers do when they greet one another. Several patrons turn to glare at him. I can't help but smile, because no matter how many years have passed since we were kids, Nico Beneventi has been my one constant friend. He's sharp-witted and he can stir shit from two counties away without a stick. He's a cocky asshole and a bad influence, and that's exactly why I keep him around.

I may be reliable, the kind of guy who's good at getting shit done and stepping up to the plate, but sometimes, I need reminding that I'm only twenty-eight and not fifty. I guess that comes from being a single dad.

"Oh joy, Nasty Nico is here," B says with an eye roll as she wipes down the pastry display cabinet.

I laugh, because my sister has never been a fan of my best friend. It probably has something to do with the fact that he kissed her and copped a feel at the winter formal in junior high and then pretended like it didn't happen immediately afterward. I lost my shit when I found out, but to be fair, we had consumed a bottle of his dad's scotch

and scoffed a whole bunch of mushrooms from his backyard in the hopes they were hallucinogenic. They weren't.

I beat his ass for kissing my sister, and then the two of us proceeded in puking up our guts in the guy's locker room. Good times.

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I come around the counter and greet him with a bro hug. “What are you doing here, man? You’re not usually up before twelve.”

Nico’s parents are filthy rich, and the man’s never worked a day in his life. Instead, he flunked business school, found a money manager, invested all his trust fund into some revolutionary dating app, and now he sleeps till noon, drinks all night, and does absolutely nothing. I’d go crazy with that kind of freedom.

“Yeah well, my sleepover turned into an actual sleepover, and I needed an excuse to get rid of her.” He shrugs and gives a lax grin. “So I pretended I had a job to go to.”

“Jesus. Not an actual job?” I shake my head. “That must have hurt. Can I get you an icepack?”

“Shut up. Not all of us can be as blue-collar as you are. Doesn’t it get boring, waking up every morning to do the same shit over and over again?”

“Not when you love what you do.”

He screws up his face and rolls his eyes, exasperated. “Yeah, yeah. I’m bored now. Make me a damn coffee.”

I chuckle and step back behind the counter, and Nico, never having the wherewithal to know when he’s not welcome, follows. “Where’s my favorite girl?”

B gives him the kind of smile that used to terrify me as a kid. “Right here, dumbass, and she’s still not interested.”

“Aww, B, is that you? I didn’t recognize you without the pointy tail and horns growing from out of your forehead.” He makes kissy faces at her. B’s knuckles whiten around the tongs as they snap together. Nico shoves his hand inside the display case—without a glove, of course—and helps himself to several small Danish pastries, and a cupcake. “I was talking about Coco.”

“She’s at preschool. Where you should be,” B fires back. My sister is ruthless.

Nico shoves one of the pastries into his mouth and chews. That’s when he finally glances around the shop.

I see the moment his eyes land on Romy because he stills. He stops chewing and his mouth tips up in the corner, just a fraction of an inch. Once he’s done masticating his food, he turns to me, his grin still firmly in place. Somehow, since Romy moved into the building above my shop, I’ve avoided the two of them crossing paths, but I know now all bets are off.

“Who’s the—”

“No,” I say automatically, hitting the switch to grind the beans. I pull the lever a little too hard when filling my group handle and tamp it longer than necessary. I may have imagined my best friend’s face beneath it.

“What?”

“No. I know what you’re thinking and she’s off limits.” I shove the handle up into the machine and slide a cup beneath it, jabbing at the start button.

“You’re sticking it to her?”

I don’t know whether to be more offended by the idea of him talking shit about Romy

or the fact that he sounds surprised. I take the metal jug and begin frothing the milk.

“No, and neither are you. She’s a regular, and I want to keep it that way.”

He laughs. “So, me fucking her would, what? Ensure she never comes back?”

“Probably.”

Nico studies me as I bang the creamer jug on the counter to dispel any unwanted air bubbles. He chuckles. Too loud. It grates on my nerves, and I don’t realize I’m clenching my jaw until he says, “Jesus Christ. You have that look.”

I don’t ask what the hell he’s talking about because I already know. Instead, I give him a glare that says “do not fucking start.”

“Ah hell, you got that same look you had when that Park Avenue bitch walked into the bar and decided that fucking a commoner would piss her parents off just the right amount.”

“Don’t talk about her like that.”

“Like what? The heartless bitch she is? She left you, man, with a fucking infant.”

I glance at Romy, relieved when I see she isn’t paying attention but is instead focused on her laptop. “Keep your voice down.”

“Why?”

“Because this is a place of business.”

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I don't miss the way my sister glares at me. I know. She wants me to hurry the hell up and make a move. I look over at Romy again. Fuck, she's beautiful. Ever since she walked through the doors to my café, I've wanted her beneath me.

I wipe my hands on my jeans and move away from the counter. I need to talk to Romy. I can't say everything I need to with B and Nico here, but I can't stay away from here either.

"Where the hell are you going?" Nico asks.

"Shut up, idiot," B says.

"Ow, ow! What the fuck, B? Let go of my balls."

"If you ruin this for them," my sister whispers in an angry hush, "I will personally castrate you. With a spatula. Leave Romy and Elia alone."

I leave the two of them to their games. One day they'll figure out that they're attracted to one another, and God help all of humanity when my sister learns that the reason she hates him so much is because she really likes him. She's always been a little on the mean side when it comes to men.

Romy watches me with a sweet smile as I walk toward her and stop by the couch. I sit and lean forward with my elbows on my knees. She yawns and sits upright, setting her laptop to the side. It's pretty unusual for her to occupy this area. She's normally all business from the second she gets her coffee until the time she leaves.

“Hey,” Isay.

“Hey.” Shesmiles.

Fuck. It’s brutal. Beautiful and bittersweet, all atonce.

“You okay over here? Want me to bring you a pillow?” I don’t mean for that to come out as flirtatious as itsounds.

Romy laughs. “Would you? And a blanket, too. That would begreat.”

“What’s going on with you? You have a hot date last night?” I grin because we both know she was with me, but as soon as the words are out, I regret them. What if she hooked up with someone else afterward? I don’t want to know if some other guy is keeping her up late. Then again, I don’t have the balls to ask her out so why shouldn’t some other guy be the lucky one to takeher?

“Ha! You’re funny. I didn’t have a date, hot orotherwise.”

“Why is thatfunny?”

“Because,” she says breathlessly, as if she meant to laugh but caught sight of my expression and it gave her pause. There’s nothing funny about her dating anyone. Romy clears her throat. “I . . . no. I didn’t have a hot date. In order to date, you have to have someone to go outwith.”

Me. I’ll go wherever you want.Do whatever you want. God damn it. I can’t even do that because asking her out means I have to be 100 percent honest about what dating a single dad means. I have to be vulnerable and open to the idea that this stunning woman, who I’ve wanted to fuck since the first day she walked into my shop, might not be ready to take on motherhood so suddenly. Yeah, that would go over really

well: “So, hey, thanks for a great first date. You wanna come home with me, do my laundry, and tell my kid to eat her vegetables?”

“Right. Well, you’ll forgive me for having trouble believing all those potential suitors aren’t forming a line somewhere.”

“Oh, they are. They’re usually hanging around outside welfare.”

“Come on. A hot piece of ass like you?”

She gives me a coy smile, and her dimples pop out. Shit. Not the fucking dimples. They slay me everytime.

“Hot piece of ass?” Her tone is incredulous, and a little amused.

“You’re right, that was a shitty thing to say—”

“No. I mean, it was . . . that is . . . most women would likely slap you for that remark, but the sentiment was nice.”

“Nice doesn’t have any place in my thoughts right now, Romy,” I say before I can stop myself.

We share a long look, one where her eyes are wide and searching, and her mouth is open, just a fraction. She’s shocked, but I’m sure she can see the desire I’m feeling written all over my face. Her throat works as if she’s preparing to speak, but I stand before she can, and before I can say anything to further incriminate myself. It isn’t fair of me to tease either one of us like this. We’ve gotta have a talk first, one where I tell her how dating me can’t just be some casual thing, because Coco’s too perfect to risk everything for. “So, can I get you anything else?”

“Er . . . no. I shouldgo.”

“Right, well, I’ll see youtomorrow?”

“Always,” she whispers. My brow quirks at her weird choice of words, and she shoots to her feet, nearly tripping over the coffee table and her oversized purse in the process. I rush toward her and reach out to keep her from falling. I crush her body against mine. She stares up at me, her cheeks flushed the perfect shade of pink, and I wonder how much more I could make her blush without our clothes in the way.

“Yougood?”

“Bad, I’m a bad girl,” she mumbles, her eyes glazed and wanting.

I can’t help it. I chuckle. “Okay, bad girl. You think you can stand on your own?”

“Huh. There goes my mouth, running away before my mind catches up.” She laughs, but her cheeks turn an even brighter shade of red. Oh yeah, I could invent a new shade of crimson on this woman’s bare skin. Fuck. And now I’m hard. “I meant . . . I’m a bad girl at walking, adulting, and you know . . . just generally existing.”

“I don’t think you give yourself enough credit, Romy. I watch you walk out of here every day,” I whisper in a low, gravelly tone, thick with longing. “I don’t think you’re a bad girl at all. I think you’re sweet.”

“Sweet?”

“So fucking sweet.” I lick my lips, unable to take my eyes off the pouty swell of her cupid’s bow. I want to taste her and see just how true that statement is. I want to lay her back on the couch and pin her beneath me, kissing every inch of her fucking stunning body, but I can’t.

Instead, I release her and walk back to the counter. She’s still standing there a beat later, looking lost, but she gathers her things and pushes through the door, the bell ringing out a final cry as the door sighs closed and my gut twists.

Nico and Bianca’s eyes are on me, and then I’m whacked in the bicep by an angry

gnat. “What the hell, Elio?”

“Ow. What was that for?”

“When a woman wants you to kiss her, you kiss her, dumbass.”

“Yeah, what the fuck, dude? She was practically begging you to tongue fuck her.”

“Don’t start,” I mutter, turning away from them both and heading toward the kitchen.

“I don’t get it. Why didn’t he just kiss her?”

“Because he’s an idiot.”

“Hey,” I say, turning to face them. “I’m right here.”

“Good, then there’s no chance you won’t hear me when I spell it out for you.” B places her hands on her hips and leans forward. “ROMY. LIKES. YOU. DUMBASS. KISS. HER.”

I rake a hand through my hair in frustration. “B, it’s complicated.”

“It’s really not.”

“How is it complicated? She’s hot and she wants you to fuck her.”

Bianca turns to Nico. “He thinks it’s complicated because he has a kid. I know you dropped out of high school, but could you try to keep up?”

“I didn’t flunk out of high school, just college.”

“Whatever,” she says, waving him away with a wild hand gesture before turning her ire back on me. “Ask her out, Elio. You’re never going to know how she’ll react until you tell her.”

“I said leave it.”

“You’re so fucking stubborn. She’s not going to be single forever, you know?”

She’s right. It’s a damn miracle Romy is single at all, but even though my little sister is right, there’s no way in hell I will ever tell her that.

“You don’t have to keep punishing yourself because that bitch-who-shall-not-be-named left you high and dry. It would never have worked out with her.”

“I’m not punishing myself.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“I’m protecting my daughter,” I snap, and clear my throat when several customers jerk their heads around to see what the commotion is.

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“From Romy?” B looks incredulous.

“From having her heart broken when another woman she loves walks out of her life.”

My sister’s tone is sharp as she says, “Her heart, or yours?”

I swallow hard and scrub my hands over my beard. “Both.”

B’s shoulders fall. “Oh, Elio.”

She steps forward, but I put my hand up to stop her from coming any closer. “I told you to leave it alone. Stop pushing.”

“You have met her, right?” Nico says, helping himself to yet another pastry.

I shake my head. “Yeah, and while we’re on the subject of ignoring our feelings, I gotta say, my sister is perfect for you.”

“Oh, eww,” B says, screwing up her nose.

Nico’s mouth drops open midchew and he makes a disgruntled face. Finally, he sets the pastry on the counter and brushes the flaky crumbs from his hands. “Come on, man, what the hell was that? You put me off my food.”

“Forget your food, Beneventi,” my sister says. “The idea of having sex with you is enough to turn me off men for life.”

“Gah! Get the hell out of my café. Don’t forget to tip your waiter.” I toss my hands in the air and push into the kitchen where the doors swing closed behind me. The idea of my sister having sex at all is not a welcome image in my head. Not while my dick’s still semihard from holding Romy close. Not when all I can think about is her skin under my hands, her body under mine, her ass on my counter, and her moans filling my kitchen.

Jesus, I need to grow a pair, and I need a fucking freezing cold shower. Outside. In December.

8

Romy

“It was a mess,” I groan, turning the car onto Mom and Dad’s street.

“I’m sure that’s not true.” Emma tries to console me, her voice clear through my Bluetooth speakers.

“Sweet of you to say, but I promise, I gave him the ‘kiss me’ eyes. I stood, I lingered, I stared longingly at his mouth and licked my lips—I couldn’t have been clearer,” I protest.

“Did you tell him that you liked him?” she asks.

“We went hiking together! I’m at his café every single day, and—”

“Did you tell him that you liked him?” she asks, that “mom” voice coming into play once more.

“No,” I concede.

“Maybe you need to make that clearer. Guys aren’t as smart as us when it comes to interpreting the signs,” she says, then changes her tone of voice. “Except for you, Mr. McChubberson. When you grow up, I’ll make sure you know how to treat a womanright.”

My heart warms. “How isIsaac?”

“Draining me like I’m a cow. I swear, I didn’t even have my boobs out this much when Drew and I first started dating.” Emma sighs. “Now, back to the subject at hand. Are you going to make a move onElio?”

“I just don’t know if I should. He confuses me, Em. He flirts with me. He said I have a hotass—”

“Youdo.”

“Thanks.” We both know my ass is far from hot. “But then I try for the kiss, and he acts as if he’s amonk.”

“You know, not all monks arecelibate.”

“That’s hardly the point.” I sigh. “Elio is just so confident. I can’t understand why he hasn’t made a movealready.”

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“Maybe he’s been burnt badly before,” Emma suggests. “Have you looked him up online? Checked him out on socialmedia?”

“I don’t even know his last name,” Ilament.

“You don’t?” Her voice is shocked. “Romy, he’s the only man I’ve heard you talk about in a year and you don’t know that one basicdetail?”

“No,” I mutterquietly.

“So I can’t stalkhim?”

“Afraid not. Besides, those kinds of things never mattered with us before.” And they haven’t. I’ve been so busy falling for the way he makes me laugh, the way he makes me smile, and the way he makes me coffee that I haven’t worried about the past, or last names, or anything aside from how I feel when we’retogether.

I pause by the gates at my parents’ place, dialing in the code on the keypad, then head on up to the turning circle driveway out front of theirhouse.

“What if there’s a Jeremy in his past stopping him from taking that next step?” she presses, but something about that idea just doesn’t seemright.

“I don’tknow. . .”

“Well, I think you need to get kissing, ASAP. If you don’t take a chance soon, you’re going to wind up spending the next few years enduring dinners at your parents’

place alone.”

A fork of lightning pierces the sky behind the house. Creepy. “Speaking of, I’ve arrived. Call you later?”

“Sounds good. I have to get my son off the boobs, give them a few minutes rest before the husband comes home and I have to get them out again,” she says, pausing. “Unless you want me to wait until you can come around and watch. . .”

“Shut up!” I roll my eyes, laughing. “Have a goodnight.”

“Bye.” She ends the call on a giggle, and I pull the car into park, my mood considerably lighter than before.

Maybe she’s right. Maybe all I need to do is have an open and honest discussion with Elio, one where I tell him the truth about my feelings—that he’s more than just a guy who makes the most delicious cakes and life-sustaining coffee. To me, he’s the things in between, too. He’s talking and laughing and feeling at ease. Do I really want to let that opportunity slip through my fingers?

I get out of the car and head inside the house. My keys jangle as I place them along with my handbag on the hall table, and the rush of feet padding softly over tiles greets me.

“Miss Romy, I’m so sorry. I should have been here to get the door.” My parents’ housekeeper bites her lip, taking my keys and handbag and placing them in the visitor closet directly opposite the entrance.

“Maria, this is my childhood home. I don’t need to knock.”

Worried eyes are my only reply as my heels click over the black-and-white art deco

tiles toward the parlor, straight for the drink cart. My mother stands beside it, a wine glass held elegantly in her hand. Her long red talons gleam around the stem as her steel blue eyes look me up and down and find me wanting. I saw her parents do it to her when they were still alive, and it looks like Mom's following tradition. Old money can be like that—judgment's so expensive.

"You didn't knock?" she asks.

"You didn't greet me with hello?" I ask, forcing a smile as she proffers a cheek for the customary kiss on either side.

"Darling, you know how much I hate it when you just waltz in. I could have thought you were a burglar and called the police."

"If I was a burglar, I wouldn't come into your house and stop to make myself a martini." Mom just sighs, then calls down the hall, "Beau! Beau! Come and visit with your daughter, the alcoholic thief."

I take the vermouth and gin and pour some into a crystal-stemmed glass.

A big glass.

The biggest I can find.

After adding a lemon twist, I fill a small crystal bowl with nuts from an unopened packet I spot underneath the top shelf, then sink onto a sofa. Mom relaxes on the lounge opposite. Above her head, the clock on the wall ticks over to seven.

Two hours to go.

Just one hundred and twenty minutes until this monthly obligation is done.

I crunch on the peanuts, the salty taste filling my mouth. “Nut?”

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Mom's eyebrows answer in the negative.

I place the bowl on the floor beside me.

"Is that my little girl?" Dad's voice booms. He strides across the room, pulls me to my feet and envelops me in a hug. "How are you? You look jolly."

"She does. Very jolly. Have you put on weight, dear?" Mom asks.

"Do we have to have this discussion again?" I pick up that bowl of nuts, needing the comfort food now more than I did when I first entered the room.

"Leave her be, Val. The girl just takes after her father." Dad squeezes my arm in support. I sure hope not.

I glance down at my body, my stomach. I've never loved the way I looked. Perhaps dropping a few pounds would help that. Make me feel less like a hippo when eating in front of Elio.

Can I really say goodbye to those muffins, though?

I bite my lip and place the bowl of nuts back on the tray.

I can diet. I can do this.

Mom pats the seat next to her, and Dad sits by her side. Once again, I'm reminded of the difference in their stature—Dad, so tall, so wide, and Mom, so short, so petite.

They're like a pit bull and a chihuahua, the smaller one always ready to bite.

"Did I read that Kenna McPherson is getting married?" Mom asks, her eyes narrowed. Straight for the jugular.

"Yes, she is." My cheeks heat a little. Thank God Kenna didn't recognize me the other day. Must have been my superhuman speed as I hotfooted it out of the woods. We haven't seen each other since we finished high school, and I hope to hell that it's years before I run into her again.

"Hmm. Isn't it strange, how you were both so obsessed with getting married as kids." Mom sighs, as if remembering the time fondly. "And now, she's living the dream."

And I'm just writing about it. She doesn't need to say the words; they're already front of mind.

"And on that note, we have news." Mom's hands go to the edge of her knees as she leans forward, her eyes wide with excitement.

"What is it?" I ask, wary.

"Well . . ." She looks to Dad. He nods. "We found an app that we think can help you."

"An app," I repeat, taking another sip of my martini. "Is it a dating app?"

"Sort of." Dad nods. "Well, that's what the boys at the club tell me."

"You've been discussing my single life with your friends?" Oh lord. The embarrassment doesn't stop.

"Let's not get off topic, dear." Mom places a hand on Dad's knee. "Your father has

found a solution to your problem, and I, for one, am very excited to get this ballrolling.”

“Tell me more about it,” I say, and straighten my posture, steeling myself.

“Why don’t we show you instead?” Mom picks up the remote control from the table beside her, flicking the television on. Dad taps a few things on his phone, and suddenly, the screen is a reflection of the device in his hand thanks to the power of Bluetooth.

A photo of me fills most of the screen. It’s a picture from my engagement party—twinkle lights sparkle in the background, and Jeremy has his arms around me.

Only in this image, someone has scribbled over his head with some kind of a digital painttool.

“What’s . . .?” I frown, my eyes taking in the other details.

Romy Love,²⁷

Hi, I’m Romy. Love is my name, and love is my game. I run a wedding blog to help those who’ve found their perfect match find their perfect day, and I can’t wait to meet you.

I blink. The layout looks strangely familiar. “Mom . . . Dad. . .”

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“Isn’t it wonderful?” Mom grins, her eyes alight. “This could be what you’ve been looking for! The answer to all of your problems.”

“What app is this?” I ask.

A notification announcement comes through at the top of the screen. Dad presses something on his phone and the screen changes to black, my photo and the photo of a guy in a polo shirt with graying hair in two white-bordered circles, accompanied by the words It’s a match.

Oh no.

Oh, no, no, no, no, no.

Tinder.

My parents have signed me up for Tinder.

I’ve hit an all-time low.

“Mom, Dad . . .” I shake my head. I have no words to express my horror.

“It’s this new dating app,” Mom says, excitement sparking in her eyes. “You can match with people who live locally to you, and—”

“Tinder is not just a dating app,” I rush out, standing. How is this even happening to me?

“Then what do you call this?” Dad points to the screen. “It says ‘it’s a match.’ And doesn’t this Kevin look like a nice young chap? Let’s see here . . .” A few more clicks and Kevin’s profile comes up, along with a selection of other photos featuring a man who has to be at least ten years my senior. “Says he likes golfing. Works in the military. And that he’s looking for the right girl to settle down with.” He looks up at me and winks. “Seems like a winner tome.”

I bury my face in my hands. How do I tell my parents that Tinder isn’t just for dating, and that it can often be used for . . . well, finding someone to have casual sexwith?

Dad continues to sprout the merits of Kevin by providing a running analysis of his hobbies based on the photos he’s uploaded of himself. I reach for the bowl of nuts again, stuffing as many inside my mouth as I can.

Wait.

Diet.

I’ve hit rock-bottom. My old high school friend is marrying an Olympic skier. I can’t stick to a simple diet plan to save my life. And my parents are signing me up for dating apps because I am so incredibly pathetic when it comes to finding and keeping a boyfriend.

But you’re not.

The voice is quiet at first, but it’s insistent. Jeremy cheated on me, but Elio—I’m sure there’s something there. I could swear it.

Dad stops on one particular photo, squinting. “Hang on! That fellow looks an awful lot like Marjorie’s husband down the street.”

I need to listen to Emma's advice. I need to talk to Elio. Get it all out in the open. What I feel when I'm with him—that's something real. And I'd be a fool not to chase after it and grab it with both hands.

"I have to go." I walk to the couch opposite and kiss Mom on either cheek.

"But we're just getting started." She gestures to the screen, her brows furrowed. "If Kevin isn't a success, there are plenty more men on there. I've gone through and preselected a few I thought sounded appropriate."

"Mom, Tinder isn't always used by people looking for the kind of relationship I am." I take her hands and look into her eyes, imploring her to see the truth I can't just blurt out in front of my parents.

"What sort of a relationship are they looking for?" She stops suddenly, her eyes round. She lowers her voice. "Is it for . . . the gays?"

"Mom!" How could she even say that? "Tinder is for people of any sexual orientation, but that's a key part of it. It's often used by people looking for sex."

"You don't want to have sex?" She arches one thin brow at me, skewering me with a skeptical look.

"Not sex for the sake of sex. I want real sex. Sex that means something." I think of Elio again—his laugh, his passion for old Russian literature, his favorite Disney movie. How he listens. How he cares. "I've sold myself short ever since Jeremy left me, but now, things are going to change. I'm going after what I want, and I'm going to grab it with both hands."

"I'm sure that's Marjorie's husband! But isn't his name Mark?" Dad waves his hand at the screen again, outrage on his face. "Why would Mark set up an account under

the name of Richie?”

“Perhaps he’s got a twin brother, Dad.” I kiss my father’s cheek. Let him keep the dream of his wholesome little neighborhood life alive for a moment or two longer.

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“I don’t know about this.” Dad switches his phone for the remote, turning the television off. I stand, placing my empty glass back on the cart.

“You can’t leave before dinner.” Mom’s voice is filled with alarm.

“Sorry, Mom,” I say. “Something’s come up. And besides, I think I’m going on a diet.”

Her jaw drops.

Maria swoops in from nowhere, my handbag and keys at the ready. “Goodbye, Miss Romy,” she says, and I smile and thank her for everything.

What a disaster of a night. Still, it’s made one thing abundantly clear—each second I spend waiting for Elio to hurry up and kiss me brings me a second closer to my parents hooking me up with a man they find on the Internet. So much for a dream wedding. At this point, I’ll be lucky if they don’t sell me as a mail-order bride.

It’s time to stop beating around the bush and waiting for Elio to make the next move.

This is the twenty-first century. It’s time for me to kiss him.

Elio won’t even know what hit him.

Okay, girl, you got this. You can do it. You're a reasonably attractive, smart, funny, independent woman. You're also talking to yourself in the middle of the street like a crazy person.

I stare at the café windows. I've been here for at least a minute, and I must look like an idiot. With a deep breath, I reach for the doors . . . at the exact same time as another woman. We smile awkwardly at one another, and I step aside and let her go first because I need a minute.

The bell above us jingles, announcing our arrival. Elio looks up from the counter. His eyes meet mine and they light up. My responding smile is an echo, a call across empty valleys, answering his own. I glide toward them.

"There she is," he says. "We missed you around here."

"You're home," Coco shouts, and races out from around the counter. I think she's running toward me, when the woman in front rushes forward and picks up the little girl, spinning around with her in her arms as Coco kisses her cheeks. "I missed you."

I'm already confused, but when Elio strides across the room and scoops the woman and Coco up in an embrace, all I can do is stand there with my mouth gaping open and my heart hammering against my ribcage. He blows a raspberry on Coco's neck as she fights and giggles. "Stop it, Daddy."

Daddy?

Elio attacks her again and Coco giggles, and that's when it hits me.

There's a resemblance.

The way they interact.

I always thought that she looked like him. She has his eyes, his dark hair, that gorgeous olive skin, but I thought the family resemblance only went as far as him being her uncle not . . . Oh my God. Coco is his daughter, and this woman . . . this stunning brunette with long dark hair and equally dark eyes, whose cheek he's kissing . . . she must be his wife.

How could I have been so stupid?

All this time I've been dreaming of a life where Elio and I are . . . family, where we someday may have a family. I'm so stupid, because as I'm looking at the three of them, it becomes clear he already has that covered. My eyes prick with tears, my heart shattering into a million different pieces, and I'm glued to the spot, watching my worst nightmare.

"Womy!" Coco shouts and the spell is broken. Elio's eyes turn to mine, and I swallow hard.

"Hey, Romy. Sorry. I didn't see you there." Elio sets his daughter on the floor. His smile is wide and all-encompassing. How can he look at me like that with his wife standing right beside him?

For a beat, I don't say anything at all, but when it's apparent all three are waiting for me to respond, I stutter. "I-I just . . . I forgot something."

Elio's brows knit, and he frowns. I turn. I can't look at him anymore. I can't look at any of them, and I can't breathe. "Are you okay?"

Elio. His beautiful wife. His gorgeous child. They're perfect. All three of them are perfect. "You have a . . . family," I whisper.

His forehead creases in confusion. "Yeah. I—"

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He flirted with me. He flirted with me, and the whole thing was probably some sick game to him because, at the end of the day, he went home to this.

“I have to go.” I flee, but the doors aren’t close enough. Outside and away from here isn’t close enough.

“Romy—”

“Where is she going, Daddy?”

“Who was that?” Elio’s wife asks.

I burst out into the cool fall afternoon and gulp back several deep breaths, but I’m too aware of their eyes on me. I push through the gate and take the stairs to my apartment two at a time, then stumble inside and fall onto the couch, where I’m finally alone.

Where I can break apart.

10

Romy

The following evening I’ve fallen so far into a shame spiral that I’m living in two-day-old sweats, and I’ve eaten more than half the contents of my fridge. I start on a new box of candy and pick one up, biting into it. Praline. Gross. I put it back in the tray and take another, stuffing it in my mouth.

It's late, well after midnight, and I should go to bed, but the people who turn Nicholas Sparks's books into multimillion-dollar movies all covered in lies and fairy dust have ruined me so I Netflixed the shit out of Stephen King's IT. . . and now I'm too sad and too scared to sleep.

An infomercial comes on. Some guy is yelling about diet shakes and boot camp. I pick up the remote, intending to change the channel and shut him up, because even though he's cute, I've already had several helpings of guilt today.

"I've been where you are: fat, unhappy, sitting on your damn couch surrounded by candy wrappers and Cheetos," he shouts. I glance at the discarded Cheeto package beside me and stealthily throw it over the back of the couch as if he can see into my living room. "I was you, until I took action. Until I made the hard choice to put away the food and fill my body and mind with awesome. Do you want to be alone forever? Do you?"

"No," I mutter around another piece of candy. Ooh, caramel.

"If you answered no, then join us. Get off your couch, pick up your phone, and sign up to Get More with Moretti now. Call 555-U-GET-FIT. Don't wait. DO IT NOW!"

I glance at my phone on the coffee table, at the strangely cute but ridiculously buff guy on my television, and then back at my phone again. Then I surprise myself by upending my candy all over the floor as I snatch my phone up. With shaking fingers, I dial the number. Then I hang up and stare at my screen, resolved to chalk this up to too much sugar, but the image of Elio kissing his beautiful wife slams into my mind's eye and my heart squeezes.

I don't want to be alone. Obviously, the man I've lusted over for the last year is out of the question. I can't have him, but that doesn't mean I can't have anybody. I need to do this; it might be my last shot at a future, at love, at gliding my way down the aisle

toward my own happily ever after. I dial the number again, and this time, I don't hang up, not until I've signed up as the newest recruit to the Get More with Moretti BootCamp.

After I've paid the equivalent of an entire month's rent, I write down the address for the gym and hang up the phone. Then I glance around my apartment at the empty junk food packets, and I feel sick. No wonder I'm single. Who could love a food-obsessed fatty like me?

I shove those thoughts out of my head and clean up my apartment. Then I shower and climb into bed. Before I'm even asleep, I'm dreaming of the body I'll have after this boot camp is done with me—assuming I live past the first day.

11

Romy

With nervous energy jumping along the length of my spine, I enter the gym and skulk around corners until I see a group of people gathered in the far room. As I get closer, I notice they're all in various stages of undress. I frown, uncertain if I've accidentally walked in to one of those private swingers parties I've heard so much about, when a tall and extremely intimidating black man tosses me a tank top that reads Get More with Moretti.

"Put it on," he says in a deep baritone, and I hurry to comply with the order before he decides I'd make a good protein snack.

Marc Moretti enters the room surrounded by two other ridiculously built men. He's shorter than I realized, and somehow bigger too, not in height necessarily, but stocky. He's like a bull, and he seems just as angry.

“All right, new recruits, listen up. I’m Marc Moretti. I own this gym, and for the next six weeks, I own your assestoo.”

There are moans and laughter from the rest of the group, but I move forward, drawn to him like a moth to a flame. Not because he’s cute, but because, well, I don’t mind the idea of this man owning my ass for six weeks if he can reduce it to half the size.

“We’re starting with a weigh-in. Yes, ladies and gents, you’re gonna feel the burn. Not just the burn of your pathetic muscles protesting their misuse, but of shame. You’re gonna feel every last Dorito you ate, and then you’re gonna thank me, because what we do here today and tomorrow will set you up for life.” He levels his gaze at each one of us in turn. “You follow my lead and keep up, and we’ll have no damn problem. You wanna whine and tell me you can’t? You may as well go home now. I’m not your mother. I’m not here to make you feel good. I’m here to make you work, and I demand the best. Are we clear?”

“Yes,” I mumble along with a handful of others.

Marc puts his hand to his ear. “I can’t hear you.”

“YES!” we shout in unison, except for the guy at the very back. He looks like he’s just here on a dare.

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“Get your fat asses over to the scale then.”

All moving at once, we rush over, but it’s like herding cats, confusing and noisy. One by one, we’re lined up and weighed. I do not want to do this, but as I step closer to the scale, Marc stops beside me. “What’s your name?”

“Romy,” I answer, but my voice is a small, sad thing.

“Why did you come here, Romy?”

“To lose weight.”

“Why?”

I frown and turn to look at him. I would think it would be obvious, but maybe this Marc guy is all about getting inside his clients’ heads. “Because I want to be happy.”

“And being skinny is your answer to that.”

“Um, well—”

“That was rhetoric. Of course it’s the answer. You could be a ten. You could be hot. You’ve got an impressive face—”

“Er . . . thank you?”

“But you’re lazy, and where does lazy get you?”

“Usually the drive-through at McDonald’s,” I say honestly. A few of the other boot camp attendees laugh. Marc is stoic. I step onto the scale so he won’t feel inclined to reach out and strangle me.

“Seems you got an extra helping of sass with that ass, huh?” His expression is truly odd, and I can’t read it, but I get the strangest feeling that he’s not angry about me answering back. “Get off the scale.”

Blushing, I turn and step down from the ultimate humiliation, which is made even worse by him leaning into my space to whisper, “I’m gonna enjoy riding you.”

I gulp and meet his gaze, terrified that I’ve already pissed off my personal trainer and we haven’t even made it to the hard stuff yet, but there’s a glint of humor in his eyes before he turns and yells at the next person in line. I let out a deep breath and slink away to join the rest of the group.

For the first time in my life, I may have bitten off more than I can chew.

12

Elio

She’s avoiding me.

Romy always spends her mornings in my coffee shop, yet ever since she ran off last week, I haven’t seen so much as a hint of the beautiful bombshell. I went up to her apartment once, twice, but she never answered the door.

And I was sure she was at home.

I flick the switches on the coffee machine with more force than necessary. I saw the

horrified expression on her face. Romy looked from my daughter to me then back again, a shocked understanding in her eyes, confusion clear in her words. You have a family. Every other time Romy's seen me with Coco, B's been there. Last week, she no doubt realized the truth: Coco is my daughter.

And she ran a goddam mile.

It shouldn't be so surprising. A plus-one package is probably the last thing she wants.

But I thought she was different.

I thought she might have been the one.

Memories flash through my mind like a highlights reel. Wiping the crumbs away from her mouth, longing to push my thumb inside. Her luscious lips sucking hard, as if they were wrapped around another part of me. . .

The bell above the shop door tingles.

"Daddy!"

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Coco rushes through the café and behind the counter. She throws herself at my legs, squeezing hard.

I smile, some of the tension loosening from my shoulders. It's hard to stay angry when she's around. "Hey, baby girl. You ready for some pumpkin picking?"

"Yes!" Coco gives a little jump.

B smiles. "It's all she talked about on the drive over. Pumpkins, pumpkins, pumpkins." She lets the door swing closed behind her and walks farther inside the bakery. "I can't believe old man Thompson hasn't tried to chase us off his land in what? Twenty-five years?"

"Something like that, yeah," I reply. The old man in question is our parents' next-door neighbor. Ever since me, my brother, and my sister were kids, he's been letting us comb through his pumpkin patch at Halloween, searching for the perfect pumpkins to decorate in honor of the event. Now, even though his patch is substantially smaller, and we are substantially older, he welcomes us into his field, no questions asked.

"Thanks for letting me take the afternoon off." B grins as she flips the shop's Open sign to Closed. "I need the distraction. I'm struggling to make the perfect present for Nonna and Nonno's anniversary."

"You? Struggling?" I arch my eyebrows. My sister is the definition of capable.

"I just can't seem to get the metalwork right." She shrugs, her expression downcast.

“Maybe pumpkins will be your muse,” I suggest, and she laughs.

“Maybe. Did you invite Romy?” B asks, then turns her attention to the glass display.

“Oh! Orange and poppy seed. May I?”

I take a paper bag from the top of the counter. “Of course. And no. I didn’t ask Romy.”

“Womy?” Coco asks. “Your friend with the dinosaur top?”

“Daddy’s special friend with the dinosaur top,” B throws in, and I shoot her a look.

“Daddy would have liked her to be his special friend,” I growl. I always try to be brutally honest with Coco, but my four-year-old does not need to know all the ways I planned on making Romy feel “special.”

“Oh.” Coco’s lower lip sticks out. “So you aren’t friends anymore? Why?”

“Yeah.” B frowns. “Why aren’t you friends anymore?”

I shoot her a glare. How can I say this in front of my daughter? “Because, Coco, some people like . . .” I glance around the room, landing on the baked goods in front of me. “Some people like cupcakes. They see a future with lots of cupcakes in it, and that’s great.”

Coco nods, her eyes wide. “I like cupcakes.”

“I know you do, cookie. I like cupcakes too. Very, very much.” I look to B for help but as usual, there’s none to be had. Instead, I land on the muffins in the display. Orange and poppy seed—one of Romy’s favorites. “And then other people like . . . muffins.”

“Womy likesmuffins?”

“Yes,” I agree. “In fact, she loves muffins so much that she’s not willing to try cupcakes, even though that’s a deal-breaker on being a special friend forme.”

B’s eyes flick from me to the pastry cabinet, to Coco. She frowns, shaking her head. “I don’tfollow.”

“Me either. Why don’t you lick the icing off your cupcake? Then it’s like a muffin and she can be your fwiend!” Cocoexclaims.

Shit. Kid logic. I sigh. “Because even though the icing would be gone, it’d still be a cupcake. Romy won’t accept cupcakes. She doesn’t want the responsibility. And I need cupcakes in my life, just like I need you.” I reach down and hug my little girl, my world, meeting B’s eyes over hershoulder.

This time, my sister nods her understanding, but her face is still a mask of confusion. “Are you sure she’s not into cupcakes? Because I have afeeling—”

“Completely sure.” I straighten, sliding a muffin into a paper bag and handing it to B. I take another bag from the counter, Coco’s favorite chocolate cupcake already stuffed inside, and run my hands over my jeans, checking for my wallet, phone, and keys. “Now let’s get out of here. We have pumpkins topick.”

“Yay!” Coco squeals and races toward thedoor.

“Elio, are yousure—”

“Let’s talk about it later,” I interrupt my sister, ushering her out into the cool afternoonair.

“Okay,” B says, surprisinglyagreeable.

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I turn the keys in the lock.

“Romy, hi! Over here!” B calls.

I jerk my head over my shoulder. My sister’s waving to the woman who rejected me—rejected us—and calling her over. Surprisingly agreeable my ass.

I take a deep breath and turn around. Guess I can’t avoid Romy forever.

She hugs B tightly, and damn, she’s as fucking stunning as she’s ever been. The autumn wind brushes her hair from her shoulders, sending strands of gold and brown behind her. Her lips, so full, so sweet—she worries at the bottom one with her teeth. What I wouldn’t give to steal it from her with my own, to suck it into my mouth and taste her.

But I can’t.

I can’t, because she doesn’t want to date a guy with a child.

And I really can’t blame her for that.

I lock my gaze on her face. “Hey, Romy.”

“Hi.” She looks at the ground, at her handbag, at the street—anywhere and everywhere but at me, and I don’t know why I want to wipe that guilty expression off her face, but I do. I place one hand on Coco’s shoulder, ready to usher her toward the car.

“It’s Womy!” Coco exclaims with a smile. Then her little face turns into a frown, her lips pouted. She folds her arms across her chest. “Why don’t you wike my daddy’scupcakes?”

Romy looks, understandably,confused.

B leans against the door of her car parked right outside the bakery, an amused smile twisting herlips.

“I . . . I don’t have any problem with your dad’s cupcakes,” Romy finally addresses Coco, looking up to me as if I might have theanswers.

“But Daddy said you only wike muffins. And that you’ll never wike anything butmuffins.”

Romy shoots daggers at me. “You think I have a muffinproblem?”

“No! God no.” I shake my head. “I love that you love muffins.” Watching her eat them is one of my favorite things todo.

Was.

Wasone of my favoritethings.

“Daddy said you only wike muffins. He said you only wike muffins, and that’s why you can’t befwiends.”

Romy’s mouth moves as if she’s trying to find the right words. She meets my eyes, lowers her voice. “I—I like other things, too. I really liked the tart the other day, but it came with a side dish that left a bad taste in mymouth.”

She's comparing my daughter to a badtaste?

My skin prickles. This is exactly the sort of woman I want to avoid. Women like her. Women like myex.

"Coco, why don't you hop in the car?" B says, and I shoot her a glare too because finally, she's decided to intervene, and couldn't it have happened sooner?

"Kay. But Womy, wanna come pick punkins with us?" Coco asks, not letting it go. "I have a cupcake for my special treat, but Aunt B has a muffin. She's weal good atsharwing."

B looks like she might burst into laughter.

Romy looks like she wishes the ground would open up and swallow her whole.

"Coco . . ." I warn.

"Pwease, Womy?" Coco asks, ignoring me.

"I couldn't." Romy shakes her head. "Thank you very much for the invitation, but it sounds like you're having some special family time with your aunt and Daddy. I don't want to intrude."

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“You wouldn’t be intruding.” B smiles sweetly, avoiding my gaze. “In fact, I just got a text from a client I’m doing a special piece for. I’m going to have to cancel. I’m so sorry, Elio.” Her voice says she’s anything but. “Romy, if you can go, you’ll be doing Elio a solid—pumpkin picking’s a lot harder when there’s only two of you.”

“B . . .” I growl.

Romy bites her lip and turns back to my daughter’s hopeful face. “Sorry, sweetheart. I—”

“Don’t you want to be my friend?” Coco’s lower lip trembles.

Romy’s eyes widen. She drops to her knees, matching Coco’s height. “Of course I want to be your friend.”

“So you’ll come?” Coco asks.

I shake my head at Romy over my daughter’s shoulder, mouthing “You don’t have to do this.” It’s probably akin to her idea of torture.

“Pwease?” Coco asks again, a note of pure pleading in her voice, and lord, she’s a master manipulator, just like her mother—her lower lip actually wobbles.

“I . . .” Romy’s tone falters.

“Sounds like it’s settled, then. Come on, Coco. I’ll get you in Daddy’s car.” B smiles, holding out her hand for the little girl.

“Yay!” Coco squeals. She turns to me and grins, the gap between her teeth melting my heart a little, no matter how many times I see it. She rushes to my side, looking up at me and whispering in a not-so-quiet voice, “I fixed it,Daddy.”

My chest tightens. My little girl, always doing whatever she can to make mesmile.

She links hands with B, and I press the button to unlock my car for them, parked in the alley to the side of thebuilding.

Once they’re out of earshot, I turn to Romy again. Damn, she looks good. Her trench is pulled tight around her, and I want to unwrap it, want to unwrap her and discover that beautiful body underneath. I want to run my hands over the curves of her breasts, the swell of her ass, and feel her fall apart under mytouch.

But Ican’t.

And I need to start rememberingthat.

“Romy, I’m sorry. You really don’t have to come,” I say, now that we’re finallyalone.

“I’m not the kind of woman who leads people on, Elio.” Her voice is frosty as she looks me in the eyes. “I told Coco I’d be there, so I’ll be there. Lead theway.”

I meet her cold stare with one of my own. I don’t know why she’s mad, but I can guess. She probably thinks I’m using my daughter to force herhand.

Little does she know that Coco is myworld.

Everyone else comessecond.

Elio

We climb out of our respective cars, and Coco drags Romy into the field with her. She points at the pumpkins, big, small, all orange-gold against the green vines.

Light filters through the trees at the end of the field, casting long shadows across the dry, sunbaked ground, and the warmth of the afternoon sun on my back reminds me of my childhood, of family.

Funny that I should be here with a woman who doesn't want mine.

"Pumpkins!" Coco cries, racing from the gate into the mass. She leaps over one smaller mound and crouches near another, her little face alive with excitement.

"She really does love pumpkins, huh?" Romy asks.

I turn to give her a half-hearted smile. "Yeah. She sure does."

We walk through the field after Coco, the birds the only sound in the otherwise awkward silence between us.

“Sorryagain.”

“I shouldhave—”

We both speak at the same time, and I give a small smile. “You gofirst.”

“Don’t worry about it. It wasn’t important.” She shakes her head, and we drift into silence oncemore.

I offer her the paper bag B left with me before she ducked off for her mysterious work “emergency.” Romy mightn’t want to date me, but surely we can at least be friends. This weirdness between us is driving me crazy. “Muffin?”

“Oh. I shouldn’t.” Romy shakes herhead.

“Why not?” I frown. “It’s orange and poppy seed. It’sgood.”

“Orange is my favorite. But I guess you already knew that.” Romy’s voice sounds dreamy, as if she’s tasting the citrus tang while forming the words. For the first time since we got out of the car, her shoulders seem to relax. Her eyes lightup.

She’sbeautiful.

So fuckingbeautiful.

“What else do you love?” I ask, unable to stop myself. “Flavors, I mean. What flavors do youlove?”

“Well . . .” She pauses for a moment. “Rosewater is a flavor I find myself drawn to. I think it’s because my grandmother used to have these little rose soaps in her bathroom, so perfect you could just eat them.”

I laugh. “I know the kind. I think every grandmother had them at some point.”

“Even yours?” Romy asks.

“Sure. You’ve met Nonna before. She’s definitely into those kitschy soaps. In fact, I think she has some still.”

“Just one more reason I want her to adopt me.” Romy smiles, and I want to make her do it again. I want to make her smile more than I should.

“Anything else that makes your favorite ingredient hit list?” I ask.

“Hmm . . .”

“Pumpkins?” I tease.

“No. I wish I could say they made my list, but aside from the odd piece of pie, they’re just not my thing.” She pauses, then gives a short nod. “Champagne. That’s my final favorite ingredient.”

“Champagne?”

“Yes. I like the way it tastes like fruit, like crisp mornings and special celebrations all at once.” Her voice takes on that tone again, as if she’s feeling the bubbles pop on her tongue as she speaks. “There’s something special about champagne.”

“There is.” I nod, since I’m not one of those guys who can’t appreciate a fine wine,

sparkling or otherwise. “Champagne is one of my favoritestoo.”

“Really?” she asks.

I add it to the list: books, baking, a drive to succeed in business, a love of Nonna’s Ribollita. Now, champagne. Just one more thing we have in common.

“Really.”

We keep walking, Coco’s giggles like music as she dances amongst the overgrown vegetables.

“She’s very cute,” Romy says, and I nod. “How long have you been picking pumpkins here?”

“Since I was maybe three. Every Halloween without fail we’d come here and do it together, just me, my brother, and my sister.”

“I’ve never met him,” she says, her brow furrowed.

“No. We’re not very close.” I tense, thinking of the past—of how he betrayed me in the worst possible way. “But B and Nonna I see almost everyday.”

“And your parents?”

“We’re okay, but they’re closer with my other siblings. Nonna and Nonno are the ones I call if I need a hand with Coco. I’m so damn lucky to have them in my life.” And thank fuck I do. In the last four years, I’ve leaned on them more times than I can count.

“Family means a lot to you, doesn’t it?” Romy cocks her head to the side, as if she’s trying to wrap her mind around the concept.

“Yeah. More than anything.”

We continue in silence. Coco flits from one pumpkin to another, pointing to the odd contender for her perfect pick.

“What about you?” I finally ask.

“Does my family pick pumpkins?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Are you guys close?”

“Kind of,” she says. “I’m an only child. I see my parents every month for dinner, so I guess we’re close, but sometimes. . .”

“What?” I prompt.

“Sometimes it just feels like they want me to be someone I’m not. Someone better.”

“Better?” How could anyone want more than her?

“Yeah. You know? More successful. More . . . skinny.”

“Are you kidding me? You’re perfect.”

“Don’t. Please.” She holds up one hand to stop me, then pauses beside one particularly big pumpkin and stares at it. “They also wish I was more married.”

Oh.

Is marriage not on her agenda, just like kids?

Maybe. Maybe it’s another reason why we would never work as a couple.

I add it to another list, this one notably shorter than the group of things we have in common. This one is full of deal-breakers.

It’s a list of reasons Romy and I will never work.

End of story.

And it’s in my best interest to end this weird pumpkin-picking session now, before I forget that. I don’t know what I was thinking when we first walked into this field. We can’t be friends. With a woman as intoxicating as her, I could never be just friends. “Listen, this is weird. Awkward. Why don’t you go back and wait at the car, and we’ll—”

“Daddy! Daddy! I found it!”

I look ahead, away from the woman who’s somehow captured so much of my heart.

Coco stands beside what has to be the biggest pumpkin I've ever seen. It spans the width of my shoulders and is as high as my mid thigh, or maybe even bigger. How the heck am I gonna carry that thing back to the car?

"Are you sure it's not a smaller one?" I'll need some kind of crane to move that thing out there.

"No, Daddy. This is the one." Coco nods.

"Christ, help me," I mutter, scrubbing my hands over my face before turning to Romy again. "Seriously, why don't you go? I'll handle this myself."

"Let's get it!" Romy cries. She doesn't meet my gaze, racing toward my daughter with wild abandon.

I stare after her. What is she doing?

"Come on!" She turns back, a wide smile on her face. "You're going to be left behind!"

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Confused, I jog to catch up. What is she playing at? We can't lift this giant hunk of vegetable.

When we reach Coco's side, Romy's already on the ground, studying the pumpkin as if she's an expert. "Hmm. Good width. And I like the color."

"I like the color too," Coco agrees. She links her hand with mine and squeezes.

"But . . ." Romy starts.

"But what?" Coco asks.

"I think we're going to have a problem." Romy bites her lip.

"What? What's the problem?" Coco's grip tightens.

"We could take that pumpkin, but see this one here?" Romy points to another. It's the size of my foot—manageable. Definitely a winner.

"Yes." Coco nods.

"It's only a baby. It needs someone special to care for it. To look after it." Romy runs a hand over the top of the pumpkin as if it truly is something unique.

"Pumpkins don't have mommies or daddies." Coco shakes her head, then looks to me for confirmation. "Do pumpkins have mommies or daddies?"

“No, they don’t.”

“Which is why it’s so sad that this baby pumpkin is going to be left here in the field, so lonely after we take this big one away.” Romy sighs.

Coco’s jaw drops. Her eyes turn to saucers. “We could take the smallpumpkin!”

“Oh, no. We don’t want to do that. Do we?” Romy says, shaking her head as if she hasn’t just laid the perfect trap.

“YES!” Coco’s curls dance around her face. “Small punkin. Wanna take the smallpumpkin.”

“Are you sure?” I prompt. Because hell, as difficult as it would be, I’ll work out a way to get the big pumpkin home if she needs me to. I’d do anything for her, give her anything if it made her smile.

“I’m sure.” Coco nods.

We walk back to our cars, me carrying the small pumpkin, and Coco with her hand linked in Romy’s as she tells her all about her plans for its carving.

“Thanks for inviting me,” Romy says to Coco when we’re stopped beside her car.

“S’okay.” Coco smiles sweetly. “You pick goodpumpkin.”

“Thank you. That’s quite the compliment coming from such an esteemed pumpkin picker.” Romy smiles. She straightens and gives me an awkward wave. Her tone changes, and any spark I felt rebuilding between us winks out. “I’ll see you around.”

“Yeah. See you.” I buckle Coco into the car. She’s still buzzing with excitement

about the afternoon's events. "And then Womy found the perfect one!" She lets out a sweet little breath and sighs. "Daddy, I'm gonna be the punkin'smommy."

My heartaches.

Seems that's the one thing I'll never be able to giveher.

14

Romy

Avoidingthe man who runs a business underneath you ishard.

Avoiding the man who supplied your addiction to coffee and sugar isharder.

After the pumpkin-picking incident—also known as The Day My Ovaries Caused A Revolt because of how cute little Coco is—I've taken extra steps to stay out of Elio's way, and Coco's, and B's. I rush down the stairs, oversized sunglasses in place and a scarf around my head, like a celebrity trying to avoid getting papped. When I reach the front door to the building, I check the street—nope, no meddling sister here—then turn right instead of left, head down, determined not to look, not to be seen by the man I've come to rely upon. I don't need him. I don't need him, or his stupid, perfectfamily.

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I glanceback.

Elio hands some money over to a woman in front of the counter, then slides a chocolate brownie into a paper bag for her. My mouth waters at the sight of those forearms, that smile. . .

That smile you can't have.

Just like that brownie, Elio is no good for me.

And drooling over things that hurt my heart and my hips won't do me any good.

I turn back in the direction I was headed and charge down the street. There are plenty of other cafés in Colorado Springs. I'll just find a new one. Easy.

My phone buzzes, and I pull it from my bag as I walk.

Emma: How's my favorite girl holding up?

Miserable. Sore, after the training session from hell.

Lonely.

Romy: Oh, you know, just the usual. On the hunt for a café that's free from married men who lead on innocent women.

Emma: I still can't believe he's married. He doesn't even wear a ring!

Romy:He's a baker. He probably doesn't want to get it dirty while he's kneading someone else's buns.

Emma:LOL!

Emma:Don't think I don't know what you're doing. You're deflecting that sadness with humor again. I know it's hard, but you're amazing! Don't ever forget that.

I smile at my phone and tuck it back in my purse. Thank God for Emma.

After passing a few cafés I dismiss upon observation—too crowded, smells too much like bleach, too many tempting treats on display in the window—I find the perfect location.

Everything is white is everywhere, from the tiles to the walls to the high-gloss tables and chairs. It lines the bottom of the display cabinet that houses the sort of treats I need to drool over—the sort of food that should be on my mind after grueling workouts like the one I completed last night.

Fruit.

Vegetables.

There's no reason why a smoothie bar couldn't become my new morning normal. This is the perfect place to work.

I head inside and shove my sunglasses into my hair, then pull my cardigan tighter around me at the chill from the air-conditioner blasting overhead. It's like an igloo in here. I inspect one of the protein balls on the counter, squinting to read the fine print on the package to see how many calories are in each one.

“Hi!” A woman pops up from under the display cabinet.

“Holy shit!” The protein ball flies across the room, and I clutch my hand to my chest to steady my heartbeat. Where the hell did she come from?

“Sorry, did I startle you?” she asks, her ponytail swinging from side to side. She looks like she’s had ten coffees already, and it’s barely nine a.m. The girl is buzzing.

I locate the protein missile and pick it up, dust off the packaging, and set it back on the counter with a sheepish smile. “No, it’s fine. I was just—”

“You wanna know the specials?” she squeaks, and I nod. “Great! We are running a pick-me-up deal today, where you get one shot of wheatgrass with every large green smoothie, and for those looking for a little something on the side, we can do a protein bar discount if you join our members’ club.”

“Oh. Okay.” I nod. Wheatgrass?

The old me would never have said yes to something like that. I’d have run a mile, opting instead for something with more chocolate, more pastry, more Elio.

No.

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I can't think like that.

There's no point wanting what you can't have.

"Sounds great." I nod to the girl, whose Colgate-white teeth gleam as she grins back at me.

"Right! You take a seat and I'll get started." She skips through a doorway to a room in the back, and I make my way over to the bench that runs along the window.

I open my computer and start my morning ritual. The Wi-Fi password is listed on the wall, and I hook up in no time. Easy. That's how my life is going to be from now on. Easy. Because I'm making the choices that are good for me. Smart choices. Ones for the best.

Loud, obnoxious dance music pumps from the speakers above me. I flinch. Um . . . did I just unknowingly join a rave? What the hell?

"Do you like techno?" Smoothie Girl yells to be heard over the music. "It's better than coffee in the morning. Woohoo!"

She dances with a smoothie jug in one hand, adding a host of ingredients from the display in front of her to it. I cringe. Maybe she'll just listen to one song like this. Maybe, just like coffee and a muffin used to be my morning ritual, one crazy song and a dance around the café is hers. Maybe this won't be as bad as it feels.

I open my e-mail app, try to block out the hideous music, and wait for the data to

load. A wedding submission. A press release about a new florist.

A cancellation from an advertiser.

Ugh.

I thread my fingers through my hair, reading the e-mail twice to make sure it's true.

It is.

It absolutely is.

"Damn it," I mutter, looking out the window to the street. They're not my only client, but they're a big one, and the fact that they don't see value in the blog anymore not only hurts my wallet, it hurts me. It's easy to say don't take business personally, but when you give so much of yourself, put so much out there, well, it's hard not to.

My eyes gaze out onto the street, the businessmen and women rushing to get to their jobs, walking with determined faces that speak of places to go, people to see. I've never been able to do that. I've always wanted to do my own thing.

I look to my screen again. Focus, Romy. If I don't focus, "my own thing" is going to become moving back in with my parents.

Tap, tap.

I startle. Marc Moretti stands on the other side of the window, his lips raised in a half smile.

"Hey," I mouth, waving, and he walks around to the door of the café.

“Fancy seeing you here.” Marc strides across the white tiles and pulls out the stool next to mine, not waiting for an invitation.

“Fancy.” I smile, because something about the way his eyes sparkle makes it hard not to. “Am I going to get in trouble for visiting a café when I’m supposed to be on a diet?”

Something dark flashes across his features. “Trouble?” He lets loose a low chuckle. “I’m sure if you were, I could find appropriate punishment.”

My breath catches. Is he . . . did he just. . .

Is my personal trainer flirting with me?

“Hey, Marc!” the blonde behind the counter calls, her high-pitched voice just audible above the music. “The regular?”

“Yes please, Angie.” He gives her a thumbs-up.

“All right!” she calls, her head bobbing in time to the music as she twirls and adds more fruit to the jug before placing it on the blender. The roar of the machinery makes it too loud to talk, giving me an opportunity to study Marc more closely, to try and get a handle on this man outside of his natural environment.

Away from the gym, Marc seems softer, as if the fluorescent lights made all the planes and angles of his face that much more severe. He looks at me, and the way his dark eyes linger on my lips . . . a shiver runs through me. One week ago, it was as if he were studying me like I was a science experiment, someone whose body—and life—was on a downward spiral, thanks to having no impulse control when it came to indulging in food. Now, the spark in his eyes says he’s a starving man and he could eat me whole.

I lower my gaze, lingering on those broad shoulders. Those arm muscles—biceps, triceps, Tyrannosaurus-reps for all I know the difference between them—they bulge out of the black tank he's wearing. Yummy.

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But they don't have that natural curve Elio's armshave. . .

No.

Do not think about him.

The blender throbs into peace, and Marc's lips lift in a smile. "Let me guess: you're writing the next great American novel."

"Huh?"

"You're sitting in a café with a laptop. I'm just running through the options here." He nods to my computer then back to me.

"Oh. No. Nothing literary like that." I link my fingers together and rest them in my lap.

"The next erotic romance then." His voice lowers, and there it is again—that flash of something naughty in his gaze.

"Actually, I focus on a different kind of happily ever after," I say, flirting a little too, and he laughs. My chest warms. I can do this. There can be life after Elio. "I write about weddings for a blog I run, Love, Romy."

"Weddings, huh?" His gaze roams to my lap. What is he looking at?

He doesn't look away. I press my legs tighter together, as if he can somehow see

through my jeans and discover what lies beneath, but it does nothing to deter him. Any thoughts of flirting I have disappear. What a creep! “Um, are you looking at my—”vagina?The word is on the tip of my tongue, but I can’t seem to say it. “My thighs?” I settle on instead.

“What? No.” He looks at me as if I’m one muffin short of a bakery. “I’m looking at your hands.”

My hands?

But my hands are—

Oh.

My hands are in my lap.

“I was checking out your ring finger. Trying to see if you were married.”

Oh.

He wasn’t trying to use his supersonic personal trainer powers to see through my layers of clothing to my lady bits underneath.

Got it.

Heat flushes my chest, and he’s still looking at me like he’s expecting an answer to his question, so I wave my fingers at him in proof. “No. Not married. I know it seems strange—I write about love all day, every day, and yet I don’t have it myself. But, here I am.” I wave around to the sterile walls of the café, trying not to sound too much like I’m engaged in a pity party for one. “Focused on weddings and perfectly single.”

“Good to know.” Marc smiles.

“Is it?” I counter.

“It definitely is.” His eyes flash with that hint of flirtiness again, and I find I don’t hate it. It’s nice to feel appreciated, wanted. Especially after my recent rejection.

Although . . . “Do you have a girlfriend, Marc?” I blurt out.

“No.” He smiles.

“A wife?” Best to be specific.

“No.”

“A live-in lover? A child? Any relationship with any woman or man that might be considered sexual or romantic in nature?”

“No.” He laughs, shaking his head. “But I wouldn’t mind changing that sometime soon.”

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And there we are once again, back on the train to Flirt Town with those sexy eyes he keeps making at me.

“So tell me more about yourself,” Marc says, angling his body toward me. “How are you finding your journey toward better health and fitness?”

I suppress a snort. Oh, it’s great, thanks. You know that feeling you get when you look in the mirror and think ‘looking this way is worth it?’

It’s not happening.

Not even close.

“Oh, you know. It’s fine.”

He nods his understanding. “It’s a good life change to make. The diet restrictions can be challenging at first, but once you get through those initial few weeks, things really open up. Now, one of my biggest challenges is finding the time to eat—I like to have six small meals per day.”

“Six small meals?” Well, that doesn’t sound so bad. “I love food. I could do that.”

Marc laughs. “My mother would adore you.” His gaze lingers a moment longer. “I’d love to introduce you sometime.”

Be still my beating heart. What a charmer. With those looks, the compliments, the fact he owns his own business and looks like a demigod—if a slightly short one—I’m

beginning to think my mother would adore him,too.

“Here ya go.” Angie bounces between us, sliding my smoothie and a small shot glass of something green in front of me. “One special with a side ofwheatgrass.”

“Thanks.” I smile at her departing figure, take the shooter, and knock itback.

Ugh.

It’shideous.

Still, with a name like wheatgrass, I expected nothing less, so I grab the smoothie to chase itand—

It also tastes likegrass.

Like grass that has been rinsed in grass water and blended with grass icecream.

I cough, covering my mouth. It’s hideous. It’s the most revolting thing I’ve evertasted.

“Good, huh?” Marc asks, nodding to thedrink.

I shake my head. “Are you kidding? This thing is trying to killme.”

“It’s a homicidalsmoothie?”

“Yes! It’s going to bore my taste buds to death.” I reach into my bag and pull out my bottle of water, then take a sip to wash the remnants of the taste from my mouth.Ugh.

“You could always come back to my place. I don’t start my next session for another

hour, and I only live a short walk away.” Marc leans in closer, his breath heating the skin on my neck. “And I won’t need an hour to make you the best goddamn drink you’ve ever had.”

I widen my eyes.

My personal trainer wants to take me back to his place for a “smoothie.” Only, I get the feeling I’m the only thing he has an appetite for.

I shouldn’t go. It’s ridiculous. I have feelings for Elio. Even though we weren’t really in a relationship, I’m mourning the loss of him in my life as if we were, as if I meant to him what he means to me.

Not only that, but I barely know this Marc guy. Sure, he’s appetizing to look at, but it’s not as if we have some deep connection.

“I don’t know . . .” I say, just as Angie skips over again and this time places a drink in front of Marc.

“For my favorite customer,” she says.

He’s her favorite customer. He’s her favorite, and he’s flirting with me.

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The guy I like has a family. My parents signed me up for Tinder. My ex-best friend is getting married.

If I don't make a change in my life, I'm going to end up as a crazy cat lady, and I don't even particularly like cats.

I snap my laptop shut, decision made. "Let's get out of here."

15

Romy

Dear lovers,

There are many different elements in a strong relationship. No matter where you stand on the virginal scale, sex will be an important part of your new life with your husband-to-be, make no doubt about it!

The good news is, we're long past the time of the woman having to "grin and bear it," administering to her man's needs on the daily because of some antiquated notion of what she's supposed to provide: a hot meal, an ironed shirt, and sex on tap, all before he goes out for cigars with the boys.

No, today, sex is much more give and take. Whether you're a giver or a taker—and let's face it, it's fun to be both!—talking about your sexual expectations for the future with your husband-to-be is of the utmost importance. There is nothing worse than being left high and dry when you're feeling wet. Sex in marriage should be a two-

waystreet.

Love,

Romy

It turns out Marc's definition of a short walk is very different to my own. Twenty minutes later, I'm in Marc Moretti's home. Marc Moretti's private sanctuary.

It's void of any personal touches. There are no photos of family on the walls, no artwork adding a splash of color to the white furnishings. The only things that qualify as decorative are the motivational messages in plain black frames lined up at equal intervals throughout the space.

Trust yourself.

Take a chance on you.

Feeling good starts from the inside out.

It's as if he's decorated his living room to remind me that I'm doing the right thing. Getting over Elio by getting under Marc is definitely a good idea.

"So, this is it." Marc gestures to the open-plan kitchen and living room. "Why don't you relax while I get changed into something more comfortable?"

Holy crap. He's giving me the "get changed into something more comfortable" line. That means he's going to get naked. We're going to have sex, and it's going to make me forget all about my coffee hottie.

"Sounds good." I nod as he disappears down the hall.

What sort of sex will it be? A man like him, he's in good shape. I wonder if I should be stretching in preparation?

I place my handbag on the floor, trying to keep my thoughts under control. You're being an idiot, Romy.

"Sorry, just one sec," Marc calls, and I swallow. Any minute now, he's going to come out here, all naked and buff and ready to fuck, and I'll be standing fully dressed and giving him the wrong impression.

Just like Elio gave you.

I won't be that person.

I won't make Marc feel as if he's gone out on a limb, and I'm shoving it back in his face.

I flip open the top button of my blouse, walking closer to one of the prints to check my level of exposure in the reflection. Good. Sexy, but not over the top. The print glares back at me in stark black and white, its message loud and clear.

Just do it.

Divine intervention, perhaps?

I swallow down my nerves. Maybe it's time I started acting more like Marc. Maybe me seeing this poster now is like fate pushing me in the right direction.

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I flip open another button. This time, the curves of my lacy red bra show, the deep line of my cleavage visible. I pull my shirt down farther still, emphasizing my bust even more. It's hardly like I'm touching myself while lying on the sofa, but it's a start. There's no mistaking that my boobs are open and ready for business.

My hand lingers over the third button when I hear Marc's feet padding down the hall.

"Sorry about that. I never like to wear the same gear to two sessions in a row in case I. . ."

I spin around.

Marc Moretti isn't naked.

He's fully clothed, his tank a navy blue instead of the black it was before.

Turns out "smoothie" really was code for "smoothie" after all.

I grab at my shirt, pulling it close together.

"Did you lose a button?" he asks, concern in his eyes.

"I . . ." No, I was trying to get ready for sex and seduction, because I thought we were a thing. "Yes," I rush out, holding my hands over the white button still firmly in place. "It's a . . . cheap top. Must have just popped off." I am an idiot. How did I read this so wrong?

“Let me get you a pin,” Marc offers, and disappears back down the hall again.

There’s no time to waste. I race into the kitchen, jerking open his top drawer. Spoons, forks, sporks—aha! Steak knives. My heart pounds as I grab one out and hold my button as far from my shirt as I can before slicing through the cotton that ties it to my clothing. I carve once, twice, and thank the lord for gym junkies and their obsession with protein and perfectly sharp protein-cutting utensils, because the button pops off and falls to the floor, disappearing under the fridge. I drop the steak knife in the sink.

“Here.” Marc walks into the kitchen, one arm extended, a gold pin visible.

“Thanks.” I lean against the counter, all casual, calm, and collected. Exactly how I feel on the inside.

He steps closer, and his eyes flick to my chest. “Damn,” he breathes. “Do you need a hand?”

“It’s fine.” I take the pin and turn away from him so he won’t see the embarrassment no doubt staining my cheeks. I won’t misinterpret his signal twice.

I stab the pin through one side of my shirt and into my skin, wincing. Ouch. Then I push it through the hole on the other side of the material, closing most of the gap.

Finally, I turn back around to face Marc. I need to get out of here before I make an even bigger fool of myself. If he was even remotely interested before, and I’m starting to seriously believe that I was imagining things, there’s no doubt he’s not anymore. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t mention it.” He turns to the fridge and pulls out a bunch of celery from the vegetable crisper, followed by a few apples, a knob of ginger, and some spinach. “Romy, I’ve been thinking about you. A lot.”

“As a client who needs a serious amount of help?” Because trust me, not only is my body in need of a workout, but apparently, my mind is too. How did I read this situation so wrong?

“No.” He pulls a cutting board out from a cupboard under the sink and places it on the counter, turning to me. His voice softens as he tilts his head to the side. “This is going to sound ridiculous, like I invited you back here to put the moves on you. . .”

“Ha!” I squawk. “Wouldn’t that be something.”

“Yeah.” He steps closer to me, his eyes dark with that teasing hint of something that I could have sworn I saw at the café earlier. “But I will make you the best goddamn smoothie you’ve ever tasted. And then, I’m going to ask you out. On a date. And I’d love it if you said yes.”

“I . . .”

I’m not ready for a date.

I’m in love with Elio.

I hate Elio.

“Sounds perfect,” I reply.

After all, it’s just one date.

What could possibly go wrong?

16

Elio

“That’s what you want to give them for their anniversary?” I ask.

“Yes.” B steps closer beside me, but I don’t look. I can’t.

I can’t tear my gaze away from the five-foot-tall sculpture in front of me.

“What do you think?” she asks, and she’s lucky she’s an artist and not a therapist, because I know my poker face isn’t strong. In fact, I’m fairly certain even Coco thinks there’s something wrong with the idea of giving a larger-than-life-sized dirty bird to her bisnonno and bisnonna.

She steps closer to the sculpture, her eyes wide as saucers when she turns around to look at me. “Can I touch it?”

B nods. “Go ahead, sweetie. But be gentle.”

Coco extends one hand up over the wheels of the trailer attached to the back of B’s car, and gingerly pokes the bird.

“Do you like it?” B asks again, and I know it’s time. It’s time to break my sister’s heart, even though I hate to do it.

“B, I’m sorry. But we can’t give this to Nonno and Nonna,” I say, shaking my head.

“But it’s a symbol of love,” she insists.

“Pigeons are a symbol of ruined picnics and the movie *Mary Poppins*,” I say, stuffing my hands in my pockets. “Are you sure you’re not thinking of doves?”

“They’re from the same bird family. And I couldn’t find any white feathers last minute.” She walks to Coco’s side, taking my girl’s hand in hers. “Don’t you think it looks lifelike?”

I nod. She’s nailed it in that department. The giant bird looks as if it could take flight at any moment, and I kinda wish it would.

“We can dye the feathers white. Or spray it.” Her eyes sparkle as she glances back at me.

“No.” I shake my head. “No way, no how, and on no planet can we give this to our grandparents. Where would they keep it? What would they do with it?”

“Maybe they could pretend it was real,” Coco suggests, her eyes pleading as she looks up at me. “I’d really love a pet dog.”

My chest clenches. I wanna give this girl the world. I wanna give her a good education, a safe home, all the clothes and toys she could possibly desire—but a dog is just too hard for us right now.

“Coco, sweetie, we’ve talked about this.” I crouch down to her level. “We can’t get a pet because we don’t have enough time to look after it.”

“Aunt B could help?” Those big brown eyes flick to my sister. “Couldn’t you?”

“I will always be here to help, but a pet dog is a big responsibility,” B replies, and I

can see her heart breaking at having to break her niece's.

"Fia?" Coco turns the charm on her next victim, our nanny.

"Of course I would help, darling. But your daddy's word is final on this." Sophia looks at her wristwatch. "Now, why don't we go get ready for bed? Then Daddy can read you your bedtime story."

Coco bites her lip, considering, then nods. "We'll talk about it another time."

She skips toward the house, and I don't have the heart to tell her that another time, the answer will be the same as it was today, the same as it was a week ago, and the same as it will likely be a month from now. A dog is too much for us—simple.

"You know, if you had a girlfriend, she could care for a dog," B says, falling in step beside me as we head toward the house.

"Sound dating advice, sis." I frame my hands in front of my face as if picturing an ad for a potential lover in a newspaper. "That's what I look for in a woman. Must be kind, funny, love coffee and baked goods, and be available to look after my child and clean up puppy shit while I'm at work."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it." She rolls her eyes. "Now, for the fiftieth time, will you please tell me what's going on with you and Romy?"

I cringe. She's been asking me the same question all week.

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“Ah! The girl from the bakery?” Sophia’s ears seem to prick up. As well as being a stellar nanny, she’s also a pretty great cousin, and it seems she’s inherited our nonna’s love for matchmaking just like Bdid.

“Yes. You should have seen them together while you were away. The chemistry was . . .” B fans her face dramatically, “inferno.”

“When I saw them at the café a few weeks back, she looked at him as if she wanted to lick him all over.” Sophia wiggles her brows, and damn it, I hate the pictures flashing through mymind.

Romy. That sweet pink tongue slowly tracing a path over my lips. Her nails raking down my back. Her pussy pressed hard againstme.

I scrub a hand at the back of my neck, trying to shake the image away. That will never be. Because, just like every other woman who’s come into my life since Coco’s mom walked out, she left once she found out I was a package deal. In fact, she ran a goddamnmile.

“Turns out she’s not my type after all,” I mumble, picking up the pace and stepping inside thehouse.

“Are you serious? She is perfect for you,” Binsists.

“Perfezione,” Sophiaagrees.

“Things were going so well,” B adds. “What happened when you went pumpkin

pickingtogether?”

“You took her pumpkin picking? So romantic,” Sophiagushes.

I turn to face the Italian inquisition. “Things were going well, and then something changed. She’s not interested in a guy who comes with a ready-made family, and she more or less said as much when I took her to the field. Afteryouforced us into it.” I narrow my eyes at B. Romy’s words still burn in my mind.I really liked the tart the other day—but it came with a side dish that left a bad taste in mymouth.

“Bitch!” Sophia’s face turns to steel. “Who could not love that littlegirl?”

“Are you sure?” B doesn’t look convinced. “I wouldn’t think she was thetype.”

“Neither did I.” If I had, I wouldn’t have let myself fall sohard.

Coco skips down the stairs toward us, her brown curls bouncing over her shoulders. Bright pink pajamas swathe her small frame, and she clutches a book tightly in her hands. “I’m ready!” she sings in this sweet-as-shit voice that gets me everytime.

While my ex, Pamela, may not have felt that parental instinct, I suredid.

I felt it every time I looked at my baby girl back then, and I feel it now. How could Romy not wantthis?

“Book in bed or on the couch?” Coco asks me, her eyes lingering on the living room behindus.

“Bed,” I say, since I know reading on the couch means she’s hoping she can sneak in some TV time afterthat.

“Okay.” Her spirits don’t dampen as she turns to her nanny. “Night, ’Fia.”

“Buona notte. I’ll see you first thing in the morning.” Sophia crouches down for a hug and Coco throws herself into it, the book wedged between them.

“Good night, my little princess.” B’s next, and Coco repeats the process, lingering in my sister’s arms a fraction longer. B’s whole face changes when she holds my daughter like this—it softens. It shines. She’ll make a great mothersomeday.

When she eventually pulls away, she looks over to Sophia. “I’m going to head home. I have a giant bird to tend to.”

“Si. Buona notte,” Sophia says, looking to Coco and then me. “Why don’t I tuck Coco in, get her ready for you and your book while you and B say goodnight?”

“Thanks.” I turn to Coco as she holds the book out for me to take. “I’ll see you there in a minute.”

“Kay, Daddy.” She heads up the stairs with Sophia close behind.

B and I walk to the door. I have no idea where she’s going to store her giant bird, but I’m sure she’s got a plan. B’s always got a plan.

“Are you sure Romy’s not interested now she knows you have a kid?” she asks again, shaking her head as if she knows she has two pieces, but they’re not adding up to make a whole.

“Sure as they come.”

“But she seemed so sweet with Coco at dinner, and again that day when I caught you two experimenting with food in the kitchen.” Her tone implies our experiment was a

lot more X-rated than it really was.

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I wish our experiment was a lot more X-rated than it had been. I wish I'd swiped the cake off the table and eaten herinstead.

"Hello? Elio?" B waves a hand in front of my face, snapping me from my fantasy. "I don't think you should just let her getaway."

"I'm not." I bristle, then lower my voice in case my daughter decides she needs just one more drink of water before bed. Anything to put off sleep. "She's the one who can't handle the idea of being with a guy who comes with a kid. And if she doesn't want us, we don't wanther."

"But that's the rub." She reaches over to place a hand on my shoulder. "You do. I haven't seen you so worked up, so emotional about a girl—"

"Since Pamela," I finish for her, glum.

"No." She shakes her head, her expression soft again. "I was going to say ever."

Ever? Is she for real?

B must read the expression on my face. "Just think about it." She reaches for the book in my hand. "Maybe you need to take some advice from this."

I glance down. The Tortoise and the Hare shines in gold foil on the cover. "Coco and I need to keep plodding along until I find someone who wants us for who we are?" Pretty depressing advice, if you ask me.

“No.” She reaches into her jeans pocket and pulls out her car keys. “You should be persistent. Give Romy time to get used to the idea of having a family and try to win her affections again.”

“B . . .” I shake my head. She doesn’t know how hard it is. How I already risked so much by letting her in in the first place.

“Slow and steady wins the race, Elio, and I don’t think that girl’s heart has fled as far away as you think.” She kisses me on either cheek, then gives a small wave as she heads to her car.

As I walk upstairs to Coco’s room, I wonder if she’s right. What if Romy just had a knee-jerk reaction? What if she could come around to want not just me, but my daughter, too?

Sophia gives me a warm smile as she passes me on her way downstairs, no doubt headed for the kitchen and a big glass of wine, as is her nightly ritual. I push open the door to Coco’s room. Her bedside lamp casts a warm glow. Coco has the pink bedspread pulled right up to her chin, a huge smile lighting her face.

“What’s got you so happy?” I ask as I make my way over to the corner of the mattress and sit beside her.

“Just finking how much I love you, and Aunt B,” she says with all the sage wisdom of a four-year-old, and fuck it. Fuck women who don’t want to accept that I come with this beautiful child, because they don’t deserve her sweetness in their life. They don’t deserve it at all.

“We love you too, Coco.” I press a kiss to her forehead. “Now, shall we get into this book?”

“Yesh, pwease.” She nods eagerly, and I begin to read.

But as I reach the end of the story about the tortoise finishing first despite his lack of speed, B’s words ring in my ears, and I wonder if I’m behaving like the hare after all. Coco is my world—there’s no doubting that.

But slow and steady wins the race. And maybe, just maybe, I’m quitting before I’ve even left the starter blocks.

17

Romy

I make my way to the Mad Cow Steakhouse on foot. Marc didn’t offer to pick me up. In fact, he said he had all of five minutes to shower and change at the gym after his last client, so I decided to walk. There’s not much point in driving, since it’s less than ten minutes from my apartment, and it’s nice out. Cold, but nice. Besides, it’s not like I can’t use the exercise. And hell, maybe if I burn calories on the way to the date, I can eat fries.

Hmm. I don’t want to walk so fast that I sweat all my makeup off though. I slow my roll to a clipped stroll. That way, I’m burning calories, and my foundation and highlight are still on fleek. Oh crap, I think that word already went out. Either way, I’m strolling and looking hot doing it. Though maybe the hot is on account of me actually breaking a sweat.

Two doors down from the steakhouse, I pass the window of a second-hand bookstore. I linger at the display like a kid in front of a candy store. Spines, some lined with age, others fresh and crisp, are color-coded in a rainbow-themed decoration with the pot of gold at the end, a trove of literary treasures. To celebrate the season, orange leaves have been painted gracefully dancing across the window, and a warm-looking plaid

blanket is draped over a large armchair, implying you could come right in and escape the elements, escape the world right now. I reach out to touch the glass. That's all I want to do.

What is wrong with me? I'm about to go on a date with a guy who has the hottest body I've ever seen. The only blanket I should want to get under is one on Marc's bed, with him naked underneath it.

I'm about to keep going when one of the spines catches my eye. *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Fyodor Dostoyevsky—the guy who wrote *Crime and Punishment*. Elio would love that.

I hate the thought.

I hate that I know that fact about him when I didn't know so many other important things about the man.

He led me on. He called me a hot piece of ass. That isn't the sort of thing a married man should say to someone, even if the ass in question is probably financing an upgrade to his coffee machine thanks to her serious love for muffins.

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But as I will my feet to keep walking, I find I'm stuck. Frozen.

I want that book.

I want to leave it at his café for him, because I know just how much he'd love it.

No.

Elio is a selfish, sleazy asshole who doesn't deserve a preloved book, and especially not one from a stunning window display such as this. He doesn't deserve that, and he doesn't deserve me.

My stomach is full of butterflies as I enter the steakhouse and tell the host what party I'm with. He leads me straight through to the back of the wild west-themed restaurant, past families with screaming kids, and groups of rowdy men watching the NHL game on giant flat-screens around the bar. It's not exactly where I envisioned my first date with my hot trainer, but the food here is good, and at least I'll be able to zone out and watch the Avalanches kick the Knights' butts. Okay so, that's likely not going to happen, but a girl can dream.

The host brings me to a stop at Marc's table, and my date stands and kisses my cheek. He smells good, like aftershave and normal boy smells. I sigh. I miss boy smells.

"Hi, Romy."

"Hi," I say, taking the seat opposite.

“You look . . .” His gaze rolls over me before finally settling on my boobs. “Hot. You lookhot.”

The compliment doesn’t sit right with me. It might have something to do with the fact that he’s already turned his gaze back to the menu in his hands. “Thanks. So, how was yourday?”

“Long. Too many clients who didn’t want to workhard.”

I gulp, because he spears me with a look as he saysthis.

“Sorry. I’m just . . . I don’t know. It kind of pisses me off, you know? Like I’m happy to take your money, but Get More with Moretti has a 100 percent successrate.”

“Wow. That’s a lot of people getting fit,huh?”

“Yeah, and as a trainer, I don’t accept anything less than perfect.” He continues to prattle on and on about the strong vision he has for changing the world one kale leaf at a time.

I nod as if I’m hanging off every word, but honestly? I thought we’d be able to discuss more than just training and Marc’s gym, and I’m a little annoyed that he hasn’t asked me anything yet, not even, “Didyouhave a good day?” but then I remember what Emma said:“If you don't take a chance soon, you’re going to wind up spending your lifealone.”

Up until now, I’ve been picky, finding the smallest of flaws in men and deciding a relationship was doomed before it even began, because they weren’t perfect. They weren’t Elio. God, what an idiot I was. And what an asshole he is. Who goes around pretending they’re not married when they have the perfect family at home? Did he ever once think about what he was risking by flirting with me? Or did he just not give

a damn because he's a man, and men like to play with things until they're all played out, and then discard us like brokentoys?

"Whoa, what are you doing?" Marc's harsh tone pulls me from my reverie and I glance down at the water in front of me. The one I'm sloshing all over the table by jabbing my straw violently into the ice.

I give a nervous laugh and work to clean up the mess with several of the paper napkins from the dispenser on our table. "Sorry. My hands get carried away sometimes."

"Remind me not to hand you a steak knife then."

"Ha! You're really funny. Do you know that?" Marc Moretti isn't funny, but I need an excuse to draw the attention away from my mental instability.

"I have heard it once or twice before." He shoots me a wink. "It's not my best attribute, though. Want to guess what most people think that is?"

I open my mouth and close it like a goldfish. His ego? Is that it?

Thankfully, I'm saved by the waiter.

"I'll have the steak, well done," I blurt out before the man can even announce the specials. His eyebrows shoot up in surprise, and Marc screws up his nose.

"Would you like fries with that, ma'am?"

"Sure," I say automatically. Because I do want fries. I also want to order a cheeseburger, but I figure fries are treat enough.

Marc shakes his head. “No, she won’t have fries. She’ll have a salad, and make her steak about half the size. We need a hell of a lot more cardio sessions before she can even look at fries.”

Marc gives me his stern personal trainer face and I actually cower. The server glares at my date, then he looks to me for confirmation. I give a sheepish nod and sink lower in my seat because it would be really useful if the floor just opened up beneath me right now. I wouldn’t even scream. I’d just ride that fiery Slip ‘N’ Slide all the way to hell and high-five Satan when I got there.

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The server takes Marc's order and I pout because . . . why does he get fries? This man is asadist.

When our waiter is gone, Marc's gaze zeroes in on me.

"I know that was a little controlling, but I've seen how hard you've worked this week. You can't blow it all on a bowl of fries." He smiles, almost apologetically, and it's kind of sweet. "I was gonna tell you this later. But damn it, I'm going to tell you now."

"O-kay." I nod slowly.

"My best attribute, that I mentioned before—it's my ability to motivate people. And I'm going to motivate you to not just lose weight but be a better person." He holds his hands out either side, as if he's presenting me with an award-winning idea.

Visions of a beefcake, supergirl version of me saving kittens from trees, and helping old ladies with their shopping flash through my mind. It's entirely possible I may need to be committed.

"I want you to start right now. I want you to go home tonight and write down every item of food in your kitchen, and then, I want you to write out what a typical day is like for you. You're going to start a food diary. Keeping accountable is one of the first steps to success."

Wow. I've never had homework on a date before. I wonder if Mr. Moretti will spank me with his ruler if I don't hand my assignment in on time.

Laughter bubbles up my throat and Marc stops midsentence to narrow his eyes at me. I was so lost in my thoughts, I wasn't even aware he was still speaking.

"What about this is funny, Romy?"

"Er . . . nothing. I was just . . . it's nothing. My mind gets carried away sometimes."

"That's also something we need to work on. You need to learn how to keep focused so that your body can follow suit. I can already tell you're going to be a handful for me."

"Only one? Surely you can use both hands." I give him a coy smile, attempting to bring this date around because it can't be too late. Can it?

"Oh, I'll be using both hands, Romy." Marc leans across the table and grips my forearm, giving it a playful squeeze. His eyes smolder. My breath catches. Apparently, it isn't too late. "I've been told I'm very good with them."

Marc and I really do have chemistry. Maybe I've been so caught up in trying to piece my heart back together after Elio slaughtered it that I haven't given Marc a fair chance. Instead of putting up roadblocks to protect against another head-on collision, maybe I should be opening the gate, and letting this man in.

* * *

Later, as we leave the restaurant, Marc grabs my hand and pulls me close. I'm startled, so I sort of wind up whacking him in the thigh in an attempt to get free.

He laughs. "Geez, you're so awkward, Romy."

I cringe. "Sorry."

“It’s okay. By the time Marc’s done with you, there will be no awkwardness left in sight. Just a fucking hotbod.”

My brow furrows. “Huh, okay. Well, I’m not sure awkward is really something you can change with workouts, but sure.”

“Coordination comes with practice,” Marc says, and surveys the parking lot. “So where are you parked?”

“Oh, I walked.”

“Alone?”

“Yeah, it was still light out when I left. It was nice, actually.”

“Come on, I’ll drive you. No date of mine walks home alone.”

“No, really, it’s fine. I’m good to walk.”

“You’re not walking, Romy,” he says sharply, as if I have no say in the matter. Then, because he appears to have clued in to the fact that I don’t like being told what to do, he lowers his tone and says, “Let me drive you. Let me take care of you.”

My heart squeezes. And there it is: that spark, that glimmer of hope. The desire to have someone take care of me, to cherish me, and see to my safety fills me up. The sweet promise of a man who’ll do anything to protect me shrouds me in warmth. I accept his offer and he leads me to a bright red Dodge Challenger. Not one of the really cool retro ones, but a new one, that’s shiny and that kind of looks like Lightning McQueen but without all of the stickers.

I climb in and Marc revs his engine.

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He pulls out of the lot and after an uncomfortable few minutes' drive, during which some very bad techno music blares through the speakers, we finally pull up in front of my apartment.

I give myself a mental pat on the back. I did it. I went on a date. Go me. And while it wasn't amazing, it wasn't terrible either. It was just new. Not exactly exciting, and not like walking into Bittersweet every day and seeing those gorgeous eyes, those expert hands, and that incredible smile. God, Romy, enough of the torture already. He's married.

I need to get him out of my head.

I glance at Marc as we sit curbside, but he's not looking at me. His eyes are fixed on the storefront behind me. "Hey, you live right above—"

I kiss him. It's terrible. An all-out, open-mouthed, tongue-flailing-while-seeking-his kind of kiss. It's truly awful. The worst kisser ever.

I pull away before I can embarrass myself any further, and beat a hasty retreat, throwing an awkward goodbye over my shoulder before I slam the car door. "Thanks for dinner. Bye."

He doesn't wait until I've made it safely inside before zooming off, and that irks me because I'm hit with the memory of Elio walking me to my door and waiting until I was in my apartment before he walked away. Without a proper good night kiss.

I guess I should be grateful. I feel bad enough that I've spent the year flirting with a

married man. Kissing him and then finding out about his beautiful family would have destroyed me.

Thoughts of that lying, almost-cheating bastard put me in a funk, or maybe I'm already there thanks to the lack of spark I felt with Marc. Either way, I head straight to the only two men I've relied on for most of my adult life—and some of my childhood—Ben & Jerry. I open the freezer, grab a spoon from the dish rack and dig in. It isn't until I'm halfway through the pint that the remorse and guilt set in. My stomach twists, and I set the carton down on the coffee table and pat my distended belly. Even my old pals Ben and Jerry have forsaken me. This is a truly sad day, but on the plus side, at least I'll have one less item to write on my list for Marc.

18

Romy

"Romy! I need your head in the game, kid. Focus. Determination." Marc snaps his fingers in front of my face.

All the fantasies I had conjured about donuts and non-diet cola evaporate into fat air.

How did he know I wasn't thinking gym thoughts?

I study his face as I run. From up here on the treadmill, it almost looks as if he's a villainous cartoon character, his eyes dark under his thick brows.

"Romy!" he snaps.

"Yes, Marc," I say, my hands still tight fists as my feet pump up and down, racing to nowhere in this gym.

Marc glances at the dial on the treadmill in front of me, then presses the button to increase the incline a little.

I feel it.

I feel it in my thighs, my calf muscles—I swear, even my brain takes on some of the load. The familiar ache of physical activity washes over my body. Pain in my side. Air tight and choking in my throat.

“Keep pushing for another two minutes. Come on, team. You. Can. Do it!” Marc raises a hand in the air, cheering on the group.

Around me, some of his trainees manage weak cheers, while others keep their eyes fixed straight ahead, as if they’re only on these treadmills due to the force of sheer willpower.

“One more.” Marc hits the increase button again.

“Marc,” I breathe, shaking my head. My feet race to keep up. This—this is too much. Too fast. Too soon.

“Come on, kid. Push, push, push!” he yells.

“Trying,” I breathe, but I can’t. My feet slip farther back on the ramp. My body is too weak.

I stab at the machine, searching for the button to slow it all down. I need out. I can’t keep doing this anymore.

“No!” he yells. His hands cover the dials on my machine.

“I—”

“Keep on keepinon!”

It's not encouraging.

It's scary.

My legs start to slip. "Marc, I—"

"Ah!"

I snap my head toward the long wail. Two machines over, a man in a bright pink tank—maybe he's a Trevor? We've been training together for weeks, but names never seem important—is sprawled next to his machine, clutching at his ankle. In front of him, the machine whirs, the long board racing without any passenger.

"Shit," Marc mutters under his breath before jogging to the older man's side.

I use the opportunity to turn down the speed on my machine, slowing to a walk.

My body loves me for it. It's as if all my muscles throw a party in celebration. They relax, kick off their shoes, and practically have a glass of wine as my lungs draw breath in slower, the height of my knees comes lower and lower as the machine whirs to an eventual stop. I grab my hand towel and swipe at my forehead, then the back of my neck, my chest. I'm a sweaty, heaving mess.

Marc helps the injured man over to the front desk, where a woman ducks out from behind reception and somehow lowers the giant patient onto a stretcher bed behind her chair. Does this happen so often they have a recovery mattress on standby?

“Okay, nice work, team.” Marc claps his hands, walking back to his students. “Gather ’round, gather ’round.” He waves us in, and like good little exercising sheep, we follow. “I know we’ve just seen one of our men go down, but that’s no reason to stop now. If we do that, we’re letting them win. The haters. The people who think you can’t do this.”

His dark eyes needle every member of the group as if this really is a war zone and we’re fighting for our lives. “You are here because you are determined. You are fierce. And you have . . .” He spins in a circle, his arms wide as he casts his gaze over his group of seven students. “And you haaaaaaaave . . .” He waves his hands, waiting for us to fill in the blanks of the motto he’s recited to us since day one.

“Hardcore strength,” we utter as one. A guy across the way from me fist pumps the air. A woman on her way to the locker room, yoga mat coiled under her arm, snickers.

“That’s right.” Marc nods, pleased. “We’re going to end the session tonight with some sparring work. I want you to team up and practice the combinations we ran through last week. Gloves and pads are over here.” He jumps once, twice, then heads over to the pile of blue foam and rubber in the corner. “Romy, since we now have uneven numbers, you can train with me.”

I nod, pick up a pair of gloves, and join him in one corner of the room. “How’s Trevor?”

“He’s fine,” Marc answers quietly, and I see a flicker of something in his gaze—uncertainty? Self-doubt, perhaps? “Hope he’s okay.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing. Just a shock.” I give him what I hope is a reassuring smile. “Are you alright?”

He shrugs one shoulder, looking vulnerable for a moment. Poor Marc. Maybe we

don't have that spark that I had when I was with Elio—that lying, rat bastard—but he's a good person. He genuinely cares about his clients. I rest one gloved hand on his forearm.

He shrugs me off. “Romy, that thing's not even close to clean.” He eyes the glove with disgust. “And my hand is inside it? Gross!” “And I'm sure it'll be okay. I just can't remember if I updated my insurance details when I moved to the bigger premises. So help me God, if I'm out of pocket because he was too imbecilic to operate at a treadmill. . .”

I raise my eyebrows. That's a little cold. “You'll what? Push him until he collapses from exhaustion again?”

“That mouth . . .” He shakes his head, stepping closer. His voice lowers to a dirty husk. “I don't want you giving me lip service unless you're wrapping those babies around my big, hardcock.”

Holy hotcakes. I may not have butterflies, but I have a working and sex-deprived vagina, and she is so pleased to hear those words. He gazes at me, his muscles tense. So domine.

“Let's train,” I say, more eager than usual to get this session done. Maybe we could spend some time working out entirely different muscles of our body afterward.

“Okay.” He slips the pads around his hands and steps back.

Around us, the thud, thud, thud of gloves making impact reaches me, and I lean in and strike my first punch.

“Weak.” Marc shakes his head. “Harder.”

“Okay.” I bounce from foot to foot, my tired muscles protesting as I sway. I draw back my fist, skip a little closer, and—

“Harder!”

“Kay.” I step back, tensing my muscles and preparing to strike again. He can be a real jerk when we train.

“Harder, Romy!” he yells at my next attempt. “Hit me like you mean it!”

“I’m trying!” I yell back. Anger builds in me as I tense for my next strike.

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“Harder!”

Punch.

“Harder!”

Punch.

“Harder! You’re being a pussy!” heyells.

Something in meflips.

How dare he? This may be his place of work. That may be his training method—calling us out, pushing us for more—but calling me names when he’s supposed to care about me, when we’ve been on a date, for Christ’s sake? That’s going toofar.

Since I started training, I’ve lost a fair bit of weight, but I’ve gained pounds when it comes to self-esteem.

This time, I don’t step back to prepare for my nextattack.

I launch, like a rocket, straight at hisfist.

Glove connects with pad. A resounding thud fills the air. Marc staggers ever-so-slightly, andyes. It feels good. Taking out my pain feelsgood.

“Better, but you can keep it coming,” he growls, and Ido.

Because I am better thanthis.

Better thanhim.

Punch.

You push me toohard.

Punch.

I hate wheatgrass, and kale, and your stupid smoothies aren’t even as good as
youthink.

Punch.

Why does Elio have awife?

Punch.

Punch.

Punch.

Punch.

Punch.

“Enough.” Marc nods.

But it's not.

It's not enough.

I punch at those stupid blue pads again and again. Tears prick the backs of my eyes as I let all the anger, all that rage inside of me loose. Because how dare Elio lead me on? How dare he make me think that maybe I was good enough just the way I was, then rip the rug out from under my feet with his surprise family reveal? And how dare he make me fall in love with him?

How.

Punch.

Dare.

Punch.

He?

On the last throw, I collapse. Energy leaves my body, and I hunch over on the floor. My breath comes heavy through my nose. My chest feels like a balloon with not enough air, struggling to stay inflated.

Slowly, I peel the gloves off my hands. I slump over my legs, my palms flat against the cool rubber matting. When did I get so angry? When did all that sadness over Elio turn into something else?

A warm hand lands on my shoulder, and I look up. Marc stands there, water bottle in hand, a kind expression in his eyes. "Here," he says, holding it out for me.

Grateful, I nod, taking the bottle and bringing it to my lips. I can't speak, not yet. Not when I'm unsure if words or sobs will be first to come out.

He squats beside me, looking me in the eye. "You're getting better. Stronger." He nods. "And I know that whatever it was that just made you so mad out there, you're better off for letting it go."

And as he walks away, I can't help but wonder if he's right.

* * *

I shouldn't do it.

There's no way that buying this book is a good idea, yet once again, I find myself lingering in front of the store window, staring at *The Brothers Karamazov*. The building's awning protects me from the rain pouring down onto the street behind me, and I step closer to the shop front, partly to avoid the overflow, but partly because it's still there.

No one's bought it yet. Of course they haven't. It's Elio's book, and the idea of someone else enjoying it seems foreign to me.

I've known the truth about his family for just shy of three weeks. That initial pain, that sting I felt when I realized he'd led me on, it's disappeared. In its place is just a dull sort of hurt, like a bruise that's been poked too often but is starting to fade. Maybe from all the times I imagined his face at boxing.

"The books don't bite."

I glance over to the short curly-haired woman leaning in the doorway.

"You're welcome to come inside and take a look." She gestures to the store behind her. "I won't follow you around and force you to purchase a heap of books you don't want or need."

I manage a smile and glance at my chunky wristwatch. I guess I could have a quick look before I head back home and finish work for the day.

Thirty minutes later, I'm in heaven and have no intention of leaving. This place is . . . it's everything. There are so many different titles on display, some older, some

newer, some autographed, some first editions—I even find a stunning illustrated version of *Sleeping Beauty*, and I hug it close to my chest. Mine.

But it's the book in the window, the one that screamed Elio to me when I first walked past, that keeps pulling me back. I slide it out of the display, turning it over in my hands. The leather is worn butter-soft, and the gold embossing on the spine has faded to a dull glow, the last embers of a fire burning out. As I close my eyes, run one finger over the cover, I picture Elio doing the same.

He holds it reverently, as if it's the most precious item in the world. Those long, graceful fingers slide over the cover, flicking the book open. He looks across at me with those liquid chocolate eyes, his voice low and deep as he thanks me—

And then I walk away.

That familiar anger still licks at the base of my mind, but the flames don't burn as bright. He flirted inappropriately, but he didn't cross any lines. It takes two to tango, and I all but threw myself at him. He probably figured I knew he was a family man the moment I met Coco.

And even though I know I'll never go back to those daily café visits, and even though I know the magic I found inside Bittersweet has well and truly gone, I find myself hugging the book close to my chest and walking it to the counter.

Elio would love it.

And while I may finally be making progress when it comes to falling out of love with him, that doesn't mean I can't do this one nice thing.

Romy

I can't sleep.

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I've tried meditation.

I've counted to eight hundred and seventy-two.

I've had a glass of water, a cup of milk, read a few posts by some of my favorite wedding bloggers and peed. And nothing.

Sleep just won't come.

Maybe it's because of the pain shooting through my body. Day eighteen of boot camp and diet, and I'm really starting to feel the effects.

Or maybe it's because of the text Marc sent through earlier tonight.

I open my phone and read it again.

Marc: Can't stop thinking about you. Second date??? :) :)

I don't know how to reply. I honestly have no idea what to say.

Sure, our first date wasn't exactly heart-eye emojis and butterflies, but it wasn't entirely terrible, either. And now that the intense anger I felt toward Elio is starting to fade, maybe it's something I should attempt. Going in with a clear head and a clear heart.

I tap out a quick reply.

Romy: Sounds good. How about next Thursday?

Marc: Perfect. You can come around to my place for a Moretti meal . . . and maybe some dessert.

Does he mean real dessert?

No. This is Marc Moretti. He would never endorse carbs, or cream, or carb-loaded cream.

Does he mean sex?

I don't know, and I don't know if I care.

I shuffle around the bathroom, stopping in front of the mirror. My oversized flannelette pajamas are decorated with images of hot pink dogs, the text I'm barking mad for you underneath each one. Emma bought us a matching pair on a girls' trip we did, back before she had a baby. We should do that again soon—or at the very least, have a girls' night out. I pick up my phone from the nightstand and text the idea to her.

Emma: God yes, this child is sucking the life from me. Is now good for you?

I chuckle and fire back a response.

Romy: No, crazy lady, I'm attempting to sleep. Clearly it isn't working, but I'm free tomorrow night if you are?

Emma: Can't. Drew's out of town until next Wednesday.

Romy: Then we'll do next Wednesday. You, me, wine, our pj's, and Ryan Gosling.

Emma:I was thinking: You, me, a couple of killer outfits, and lots and lots of singlemen.

I screw my nose up at my screen, her words hitting me harder than I care to admit.

Romy:I don't know how single I am. Marc wants to see me again. Take things to the next level.

Emma:Oh! You're going to get More with Moretti?

Is not.

Romy:Ha ha. And maybe. Yes. Do you think it's a good idea?

Emma:Me, your vajayjay, and probably even your mother think you having sex is a GREAT IDEA. As long as you're ready for it.

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I take a deep breath. Am I ready?

Emma: Either way, we're going on a girls' night. Bring on the singlehotties!

Romy: Did you forget the part about being married?

Seems that's going around lately.

Emma: Of course not. Trust me, Drew will be reaping all the benefits, but after being reduced to a milk machine for the last twelve weeks, I need to get out of these sweats. I need to feel desirable again. Please, Romy? I'm begging you. Let's go out. I'll be on my best behavior. Drinks, dinner, dancing, and you'll be the only person I flirt with.

I laugh and shake my head, but I'm already typing out my reply.

Romy: Fine, but you better make that a promise.

Emma: Scout's honor.

Romy: We both know you were never a girl scout.

She replies with a winky face, and I toss my phone down on the bed and stare at my sheets again. They're rumpled. Uninviting. Maybe it's time to try another glass of water. Wash my face again, clean my teeth—the bedtime routine from scratch.

But as I pass the kitchen counter, that brown paper package from the bookstore catches my eye. What if I just sneak downstairs now and drop it off? It's after

hours—no one will be there. I know bakers are known for their early starts, but it's only just gone one a.m. I don't usually hear Elio's car pulling into the alley next door until four. I could head down there now and slip the book in like a thief in the night.

A giving thief.

A book-giving thief.

I shrug, flipping the package over. Why not? I've got nothing to lose, and maybe getting out of the house for a moment will help settle my mind. Maybe this is the last piece of the puzzle. I'm a strong, independent woman. I'm not interested in Elio as anything more than a friend, and while I may not be ready to waltz into the bakery during opening hours and hand this book over in person, I'm confident that doing this is one positive step in the right direction to getting over him.

I leave my apartment and pad down the internal stairs, the book tucked carefully under my arm. I reach the internal door that connects my stairwell to the bakery and place the book on the floor.

There.

Done.

Delivered.

I turn to head back upstairs.

What if it's unlocked?

Huh. Surely it wouldn't be.

Still, my hand grips the handle just to check, and—

It's not locked.

It's not locked.

Quietly, I open the door.

It's been three weeks since I last stepped foot in here, and the place is exactly as I remember, and yet, nothing like it. The coffee machine looms behind the counter, but the man who brings it to life doesn't smile beside it. The glass display cabinets are empty, yet I swear I can smell the tell-tale hint of cinnamon and deliciousness in the air. An eerie orange glow emanates from the kitchen, spilling out from the border of the closed door. It's enough for me to see, to make my way carefully around the chairs stacked high on the tables casting long shadows over the floor that stretch all the way to the familiar bookcase.

I reach the bookcase and pull away the brown paper covering the book.

Wait.

I can't leave it here.

What if Elio doesn't see it? What if some other fan of Russian literature comes in and grabs it in a book exchange before Elio's had a chance to check if there are any new additions dropped in by mysterious book gifters overnight?

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The kitchen.

I'll leave it in the kitchen.

Glancing out at the street—no people, no cars visible—I tiptoe around the counter. It's warm in here, and I fan my face with the book before I push into the kitchen. That eerie orange glow spills out and—

The cool room door whooshes shut at the end of the room.

Someone must be here. There's a burglar in Elio's cool room.

Oh my God.

My heart gives a heavy thump in my chest.

I should run. I should race upstairs, grab my phone, and alert the authorities because someone is inside Elio's café. I should rush over to the cool room door and lock it, trapping the perpetrator inside for the police when they do eventually come.

That's what I should do.

Instead?

I scream.

The kind of loud, bloodcurdling scream they do in the horror movies. The kind of

scream that could break windows, alert all the dogs in the neighborhood, and wake up any neighbors.

If there were any neighbors to wake up.

If the neighbor in question hadn't instead alerted the burglar to her presence.

The cool room door flies open—

And there's Elio.

Air rushes from my lungs.

A red and white checked dish towel is slung over his shoulder, and pants cover his legs. No shirt, no shoes.

That's all.

Elio is shirtless.

His body is amazing. His shoulders are broad, lined with muscle, and those abs—you could bake a tart on them; they're smoking hot. Two delicious lines of a V disappear into his jeans, pointing to the Promised Land.

Sign me up.

Take me to church.

I'm converted.

My mouth runs dry. Heat flushes my chest, my cheeks, and I know it has nothing to

do with the flannelette pajamas and the crazy heat that's emanating from this room, and everything to do with the half-naked hottie standing in front of me.

"Romy?" He frowns, concern in his eyes. "Are you okay?"

No, I want to reply. No, you're not supposed to look that good without a shirt. You had me at muffins; why do you have to look even better than . . . better than Marc Moretti when you're half-naked, and not just because you're a good few feet taller?

"Romy?" He steps closer, slowly, as if I might freak out and run at any moment, and that's more than fair because I might. "Are you alright?"

"Yes. Fine. It's fine. You're fine." Oh, kill me. Why did I have to open my mouth? I take a quick breath, and try pulling myself together. "I mean, I'm fine. You're also fine. I guess. Are you fine?"

"I'm fine." He nods, and that sexy grin I remember from the time I tasted his private wares in this same kitchen lights his face.

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I'm not over Elio.

Turns out, the only place I want to be is under him.

But he has a wife.

And I deserve better than that.

Hell, so does she.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, but the question doesn't hold any anger; instead, there's a softness to it. Like he's ecstatic that I've broken and entered at one in the morning. Like this sort of thing happens all the time.

"What are you doing here?" I counter. "Don't you normally start around four?"

Oh good. If there was ever any doubt that you had a crush on him, now it's out in the open.

"Just working on my new menu." He smiles, and I lean against the counter, grateful for the support. I don't know if it's the heat or just the distraction of his body, but I'm beginning to feel a little woozy. "My grandparents' fiftieth wedding anniversary is coming up next week. It's a big deal, and I'm catering, and trying out those new dishes I told you about the other day." His face turns serious for a moment. "I know that you're pissed at me for not being completely upfront."

"Damn right I am."

A twinkle lights those molten chocolate eyes, and he holds up a hand. "But I would love my number-one taste tester to just quickly sample a dish for me before I show my folks next week." He looks at me, eyes full of hope. "Would that be okay?"

And I should say no.

I should say no because I can't let this man woo me with his muffins, but he's already taking a cone-shaped pastry from a tray beside him. "This is asfogliatella, but instead of the traditional filling, I've gone for an orange and rosewater custard cream. And instead of the usual sugar on top, I've done a champagne glaze."

I stare at the pastry.

I don't take my eyes off it.

He's made my dessert.

It's full of ingredients I told him were my favorites.

"You . . . but that's . . ." I work my mouth, but nothing comes out. I can't take my eyes off the delicious-looking treat in his hands.

"Romy, if you hadn't come here tonight, I would have come looking for you. I don't know if you've been avoiding me on purpose, or if it's pure coincidence that every time I've knocked on your door you've been out, but I haven't been able to get you off my mind."

"I just came to give you this," I blurt, and extend my shaking arm as far as it will go, holding the book between us like a barricade. Don't come any closer. Don't bring that delicious body near mine.

“A present?” He puts the pastry down and steps closer, past the book and closer still, until only a few inches separate us. “Romy, you don’t need to get me anything. The only thing I want. . .”

No! He can’t want me. He has a wife and child.

I grip at the counter behind me. It really is hot in here, and I itch to undo the top button of my pajamas, but hello, recipe for disaster. The oven makes a clicking sound; the temperature spikes. I blink. My head feels as if it’s stuffed with cotton wool. The room spins. When did I last eat a proper meal that didn’t consist of leafy greens and a small side of meat?

Elio places two hands on my shoulders, dipping his head to look into my eyes. “Romy, are you okay?”

“I . . .” I blink. My vision blurs.

My knees turn to jelly. The book thuds to the ground. I flail, reaching desperately for the doorframe, the counter, anything to keep me upright.

Elio catches me.

I’m falling, and Elio catches me, and nothing has ever felt so right and yet so wrong.

“I got you,” he husks into my ear. Tingles zip through my body.

“It must be lack of food. I’ve been exercising a lot, and it’s really hot in here, and—”

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“It’s okay.” Elio’s voice is warm and reassuring. He scoops one hand behind my knees and lifts me into his arms, carrying me through the café toward the open door. “You need some air.”

“Elio, put me down,” I croak, but my voice is weak.

“I’m not letting you go.”

“Put. Me. Down.”

He meets my eyes, as if searching for something in them, and I don’t know what he sees. I don’t know what’s left inside me because I feel as if I’ve been on an emotional roller coaster these last few weeks, and it’s not slowing down.

But I won’t let him win.

I can’t let that caring look, those strong arms fool me. I can’t let his sweet words, his sexy abs, or his thoughtful gesture—making my dessert—take away what’s important to me. My principles. My pride.

My self-respect.

I press my hands against Elio’s naked chest. Oh God, he feels delicious. Still, I press, needing space.

He places me gently on the ground, his lips a thin line.

“Thanks.” Cool night air is bliss against my cheeks. “Thank you for your concern, but I’m fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

No. I’m so far from fine, but I can’t tell him that. It’s not fair to either one of us, and it’s not fair to his wife. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, it’s time I went to bed.”

He doesn’t say a word as I walk back through the bakery and slip inside the doorway to the internal stairwell.

It’s not until I’m lying in bed that I let those final tears fall.

For the emotion of the last twenty-four hours.

For the pain that shoots through my body, so exhausted from the last few weeks.

And for Elio, the man I’m trying so desperately to get over, only to fall back in love with again.

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Elio

I glance at the sign above the door, and then back at my supposed best friend. “The Latin Quarter? Really?”

“What?” Nicos shrugs.

“For one, neither of us know how to salsa—”

“I got moves that would astound you,” he says, opening the door to Colorado Springs’ only Latin nightclub and gesturing for me to go inside. I’m overwhelmed by the music, laser lights, and the flagrant smell of pot, body odor, and desperation. I’ve never been here; this is the place you come when you’re looking to hook up. And, unlike my good friend Perverted Pedro here, I don’t have time for hook-ups.

“I’m astounded you managed to fit into that shirt,” I yell over the noise. “You know it’s two sizes too small, right?”

Nico grins. Goddamn, he’s a handsome bastard. “Hey, the ladies love this shirt.”

We push through the throng of bodies toward the bar. There are tables and chairs lining a dance floor packed with bodies, and a row of booths at the back of the club. Nico gives a head nod to several of the other patrons. As we cross the room, a small brunette who looks just like my sister sashays over, sliding between us and unabashedly running her palms over Nico’s torso.

“Nico freako, you’ve been avoiding me,” she says in a voice that’s equal parts sultry and sass.

“Never. But I’m afraid I’m out of action tonight, sweetheart.”

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“Really?” She jerks her hands away from his body, and places them on her hips.

“Don’t be like that,” Nico says with a grin. “Tonight I’m here with my boy. He’s heartbroken.”

“No. I’m really not.”

“He’s also a shitty liar.”

“Well, you boys let me know if you want to have a little fun. I have just the girl in mind for you, Nico’s boy.”

“It’s Elio, and thanks, but I’m—”

“He’s interested.”

“He’s really not,” I say, already growing tired of this shit.

“You’re right. He is a shitty liar.” The woman winks and backs up a step, pointing at Nico. “You owe me a dance, guapo.”

“Absolutely.” Nico nods, and turns to me.

I raise my brow as the woman walks off.

Nico frowns. “What?”

“Nothing . . .” I trail off. “Just . . . does she remind you of anyone?”

“Leticia?” His brows knit. “No. Should she?”

I grin and decide that while my problems with Romy are fucked up, at least I’m not as clueless as this unlucky bastard.

“Four shots of your finest tequila, my good woman.” Nico slams a credit card down on the bar, his voice loud even over the thump, thump, thump of the music.

“Our finest? Or the one at our finest price?” The bartender narrows her eyes, and wow, Nico really has been here a lot. Clearly, they know him well.

“The latter,” he mutters, and I try to act enthused as she pours the shooters then slides them across the bar.

“To getting women out of our head.” Nico raises a glass in toast, encouraging me to do the same. “May you never think of Romy again.”

“Cheers,” I say. I’ll drink to that, but I’m already drowning in her. Romy is firmly cemented in my head, and she’s not going anywhere.

We settle into a booth. Soon, Leticia joins us, along with her “friend” who turns out to be pretty. But I don’t want “pretty.” I want long golden-brown hair, dark eyes, and curves for fucking days.

More tequila.

More women.

The temptations keep coming, and I couldn’t give a shit. This isn’t my scene, and

while B all but forced me out the door—“anything to get that limone expression off your face, fratello”—I’m beginning to think this wasn’t just a bad idea. It was a fucking terrible one.

When Leticia asks Nico to give her poor shoulders a massage, her tits heaving as if holding them up hurts her far too much, I’ve had enough. I excuse myself and head to the bathroom. I could sneak out while Nico’s distracted, but I’m not sure I’m ready to go home and face my sister’s questions, and there will be questions. Though maybe I should pose a few of my own, like what the fuck she and Nico are doing delaying the inevitable. I may have tried to beat his head in when we were in high school for kissing her, but I knew even back then they’re perfect for each other.

I walk the dimly lit hall and head into the men’s room. I piss, wash my hands, and glare at my expression in the horrible fluorescent lighting. There are dark circles beneath my eyes. I need a haircut, and my beard—hell, maybe I should just shave my beard off. I splash my face with water and run a hand over it.

Drying my hands on the paper towel, I toss it in the trash, yank open the door, and walk down the hall. The shitty music pounds. Sweat beads on my forehead again. Fuck it. I’m leaving.

But there she is.

Romy.

What the fuck?

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She's here. She's standing two feet away from me, and she looks like a goddamn angel. Or a devil. A temptress.

She wears spiked heels and a dress that should be illegal. Not because it's too short, or too revealing, but because it leaves a lot to the imagination—and mine is running riot.

My body moves of its own accord. I don't give a shit that I'm half drunk and that she's been avoiding me, despite her middle-of-the-night visit late last week. I don't give a shit that she rejected me—rejected us. I don't give a fuck about any of that, because I need her. I need her like I need air, and seeing her means I can breathe for the first time in days.

I step closer. She opens her mouth as if to speak.

I crash my lips into hers. She startles. Her body freezes, but it only takes a beat and her tongue is lashing at mine, her hands on my torso as greedy as my own. I push her up against the wall, threading my fingers through her hair, kissing her as if I'm dying and she's the cure. In a way, that's true. I didn't realize how lost I was without her. How alone. How in love I am with this incredible fucking woman. And I do love her. I didn't know it before, but it's as clear as day now. I love her, and there's not a God damn thing I can do about it.

I trail my hand from the nape of her neck down her side, holding her waist as I wedge myself between her legs, wanting her closer. Needing to possess every inch of her body, a body that's a hell of a lot smaller now. She's lost weight, too much. Her curves are still present, but nowhere near as dangerous as they used to be.

Romy moans and hooks her thigh around mine. My cock pushes against the thin fabric of her skirt, her body molding to me, so pliant, so needy. So sweet. I want more. Yes.

“No!” She shoves me away. Her eyes are wild and livid, her lips full, too red from my beard scratching at her skin. “Don’t you dare touch me. You lied to me.”

“Romy—”

“You make me sick. God, I can’t believe I fell for your games.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry. I should have told you. I—”

“Did you really think I wouldn’t find out? That she wouldn’t know?”

I blink in surprise. That who wouldn’t know? Coco?

“I’m seeing someone.”

My whole world comes crashing down around me. “What?”

“I’m trying to forget you, Elio.” Tears well in her eyes, and she schools her features as if she’s trying to hold them at bay. “I’m trying to move on, and if you have even one shred of decency, you’ll stay away from me.”

She walks away, and I watch her go because she’s right. I should have talked to her about Coco a long time ago. I watch her go because it’s clear I don’t deserve her, and now it’s too late.

Romy

I take a deep breath, staring Marc's door down. Date number two. You can do this.

I need to.

I need to do anything and everything I can to get the taste of Elio out of my mouth and the feel of his body from under my skin. I can't believe I let him kiss me. I can't believe I let a married man light a fire inside me like I've never felt before.

I raise my hand to knock, once, twice, three times.

All the more reason to be here, on a date with someone who has no skeletons in his closet.

The door swings open. Marc stands there, a big cheesy grin on his face. "Hey, baby," he says, leaning in to kiss me on the cheek. "You look good enough to eat."

"Thanks," I reply, surprised.

His words should make me feel warm. They should make me feel good.

They don't.

"Come on in." He gestures to the room beyond, and I step through and into his temple of motivational prints. "Is everything okay?"

"It's fine. Why do you ask?" I'm just upset because I kissed a guy who was a total douche. Obviously.

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“You seem a little strange.” He gestures to the couch, and I settle into it. “Is it because of what I said?”

I wrack my brain. What he said? He’s said plenty of things to give me cause for concern before, but none of them have happened during the last two minutes of my life. “What did you say?”

“You looked good enough to eat.” He takes a deep breath, sinking onto the couch beside me and taking my hands. “Romy, you look amazing. You’ve worked so hard these last few weeks, and the results are finally starting to show.”

“Thank you.” I smile, because damn it, that might just be the nicest thing Marc has ever said to me.

“And that’s why I was thinking this might be a good time to take our relationship to the next level,” he continues.

I stop breathing. He wants to have . . . sex?

I’m unsure how I feel about that. On the one hand, I’m ready. I’ve been ready to have sex with someone who isn’t my ex for a very long time.

But at the same time, I always imagined that someone would be Elio.

This time last week, I wasn’t even sure I wanted to go on a date with Marc. Is it really time to get naked together?

“Wow.” I nod slowly. “Tonight?”

He laughs as if I’m being ridiculous. “Tomorrow. I wouldn’t just spring it on you likethat.”

My eyes widen. I needwarning?

Surreptitiously, I glance at his jeans. Is it because he’s so big I need to . . .stretch?

No. It can’t be. I’ve seen him in gym shorts before. If there was an anaconda lurking in his jungle, I’d have had some indication of it bynow.

What if it’s so big he straps it when he workouts?

“Tell me more,” I say, not willing to agree without checking the details first, especially after the I-thought-smoothie-meant-sex incident. Clearly, interpreting his signals is not my strongpoint.

“I want you to meet myfamily.”

Oh.

Oh.

That kind of nextlevel.

“I know this is only our second date, but we’ve seen each other every day forweeks.”

“You want me to meet your family?” I ask, bringing the conversation back to safeground.

“Yes. I’ve told my mom all about you. She can’t wait.” He leans closer, takes my hands in his. “Seriously, babe. It would mean a lot to me.”

“I—”

A sharp rap on the door interrupts me.

“That’ll be dinner. I ordered before you came. Sorry, I was really hungry,” he says, jumping from the couch and heading to the door.

My mind reels, trying to process it all. Marc Moretti likes me. He wants to introduce me to his family. He wants to take care of me.

“Let’s eat.” Marc closes the door and dumps a plastic bag unceremoniously on the table. “I’m starving. Marc had a big day of clients.”

Marc talks in the third person and doesn’t give me goosebumps.

But maybe goose bumps aren’t real. Maybe they only exist in the places I first found them—fairy tales and Disney movies.

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I walk over to the table and sit opposite him. “Tomorrow sounds great.”

“Great! I’ll text Mom now, let her know to prepare some extra food. She’s a stickler for getting the right numbers,” he says, picking up his phone and shooting off a quick message. He seems so happy, almost thrilled to be introducing me to his folks. Have I read things with him all wrong? Is he more into me than I’d first thought?

“My family are real excited to meet you,” Marc continues, placing a plate in front of me then one opposite him. “I haven’t taken a girl home in a long time. They can’t wait.”

A warm flush races over my chest. I’m . . . I’m special to him. This is a big deal.

“Okay, here we go. One salad, hold the dressing and the cheese.” He places this close to my plate. “One steak, rare, and one half-size steak, medium well.” He distributes the protein, giving him the rawer, bloodier piece, and me the more petite one. “Enjoy.”

As he sits and serves food onto his plate, I look at the unappetizing dishes in front of me. Limp lettuce. A piece of tomato. A chunk of steak so small and thin it could fit in my purse if I took out my store loyalty cards.

“What’d you get up to today?” Marc asks, diving into his steak, which I have to say, looks thick and juicy enough to get a prize spot on Ultimate American Barbecues.

“Just more work on the blog. These last few weeks, I’ve been more assertive about dealing with clients, and I’m starting to make serious traction,” I reply.

“Because Get More with Moretti isn’t just a workout of your body. It’s exercise for the mind, too,” Marc says, clapping himself on the chest. “I got your back, babe.”

“Yeah,” I reply slowly. I’d put my renewed drive down to the fact that I was no longer spending so much time mooning over Elio, but maybe Marc’s right. Maybe being mentally fit and physically fit go hand in hand.

“And how did your workout go today?” Marc emphasizes the question with his fork, speaking the words around his mouthful.

“Fine. I cut it a bit short. I had a lot on my plate and knew we were hanging out tonight, but it was . . . fine.”

“Short?” He narrows his eyes.

“Short like I ran two miles instead of six.” I study my plate, push a lettuce leaf around. I don’t mention the fact that I also skipped the weights session he had listed on my schedule.

“Romy.” Marc puts his cutlery down and reaches across the table for my hand. “Are you okay?”

I tilt my head to the side. “Uh, yeah. Sure I am.”

Aside from kissing a married man.

“It’s just you know how much working out means to me. How much it should mean to you.” He purses his lips, presses his eyes closed for a moment. “You can make it up next week.”

“I can?” Over my dead body.

“I’ll train with you. We’ll do an extra private session together.” He squeezes my hand. “And I won’t even charge you for it.”

“Oh! That’s . . .” Hellish. The worst idea I’ve ever heard. “Sweet.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He releases his grasp and attacks his steak again with gusto.

We spend the rest of the meal making small talk about the gym, his business, clients who’ve impressed him today, and his training schedule for the week ahead. All the while, my mind races.

Is this it for me? Could Marc Moretti possibly be . . . the one?

No. Things would have to change a lot for me to consider him happily-ever-after material.

Still, I try the name out in my head. Romy Moretti. It sounds good on paper.

And in a weird way, Marc kind of does, too. He owns his own business and his own apartment. He doesn’t have a wife, a child, or any strange skeletons lurking in his closet that are absolute no-nos for me.

He’s without question the most eligible bachelor I’ve dated since Jeremy—eligible being a key word here—so why am I still resisting?

Maybe because I haven’t felt those goosebumps.

But maybe that’s because I haven’t given goose bumps a chance.

“Let’s have sex,” I blurt.

Marc looks at me, surprised.

“Sorry. I just mean . . .” I glance down at the plates in front of us. “Things are going well between us. Right?”

“Right.” Marc nods, confusion in his eyes. Does he need a written invitation?

“So I think it’s time we took this relationship to the next level. Not just with your parents.” Oh God, what am I saying? “I don’t mean I want to have sex with your parents.”

“I know.” Marc laughs, his eyes sparkling.

“I just . . . I want to have sex. Don’t you?” I ask, looking at him from under my lashes.

Marc glances down at his steak. “You’re ready?”

“Yes,” I reply.

“Okay. Good.” He nods, then attacks his steak with his knife and fork as if it’s a race. “Didn’t want to push you, but if you’re there. . .”

“Oh, I’m there.”

“Eat up.” He nods toward my plate. “You’re going to need all the strength you

canget.”

A deliciously naughty shiver runs through me. Now that’s what this relationship has been missing. Sex.Passion.

Hot kisses up against the wall in anightclub.

No.

Just thinking about that betrayal makes me feelsick.

We finish our meals, and Marc takes the plates to the kitchen and cleans up. He leaves me alone in the living room, and this time I have no hesitation. I flick the buttons on my blouse, exposing my white lacy bra underneath. I undo the zip on my skirt then wriggle out of it, sliding it over my hips and placing it on thecouch.

“Do you want . . .” Marc’s voice trailsoff.

I spin around, ready.Waiting.

He looks at me, his gaze running over my near-naked body. I push my chest forward, dart my tongue out to wet my lips. I’m a seductress, a black widow, and he’s fallen into myweb.

“Okay.” He nods simply, then gestures down the hall to the bedroom. “Give me oneminute.”

He turns and walks away, leaving me standing there in a state of I-don’t-know-the-hell-what. Confusion?Anger?

I glance to my clothes for help. I hadn’t expected him to sweep me off my feet, but

I'd thought the sight of me in lingerie would at least have him acting somewhat excited.

The poster glares at me from above my discarded clothes.

Yes.

Just do it.

It's time.

I follow Marc down the hall to the bedroom.

When I enter his room, my heart melts. Two large candles on either bedside table are lit, casting the room in a romantic glow. Marc shakes his hand, the match he was holding winking out, and in the half-light, he offers me a smile, those brilliant teeth almost glowing.

"Oh, Marc." I walk toward him and press my mouth to his. How did I doubt this? We may not have everything in common, but things like this—romantic lighting so our first time could be perfect—how can I question it?

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“Romy.” His breath is hot against my lips.

He wraps his hands around my body, pulling me close to him. I trace my fingers up under his shirt and tug it over his head, flinging it across the room. His chest is—

Wow.

His chest is wow.

I’ve seen him without a shirt on before, in the posters for his gym, and after the occasional workout. Now, up close, those muscles gleam, and I run my hands over them almost reverently. Lust fires through my veins. Come to mamma.

My hands dance over his abs, up his chest and—

Ouch!

I jerk my hand back.

“Are you okay?” Marc asks, concern crossing his features.

“Yeah, I am. I just . . .” Your skin just bit me, I want to reply, but that’s ridiculous, because whose skin bites people? “Let me just . . .” I return my mouth to his, wrapping one leg around his body and pressing our pelvises tight.

“Yeah, babe. That’s what I’m talking about,” he groans, his mouth working its way over my chin, across my jaw, down my throat.

I run my hands along his back and feel that little prick again, but this time, I'm ready for it. It must be—he must be really hairy. He must shave his back and chest, only it's been too long in between grooming sessions, and I've snagged my finger on a sharp end.

I stifle a giggle. Grooming sessions. I wonder if he can reach himself or if he pays someone to shave his body for him?

“Lemme at those boobs,” Marc groans, pulling one strap of my bra from my shoulder. His mouth works over my flesh and to my nipple, and I tense in anticipation of what's coming next. Touch me. Make love to me.

He unhooks the clip at the back of my bra, then steps back to let it fall from my body. “Oh, yeah. That's what Marc's been waiting for.”

Oh, good. Marc's referring to himself in the third person again, this time during sex. Sweet baby Jesus, save me.

He steps closer and, without warning, motorboats my breasts.

His hair gel is slimy on my skin. His stubble scrapes at me. His head moves so fast, I'm surprised he's getting any enjoyment out of this, because I sure as hell am not. It's like an over-enthusiastic dog has buried his face in my boobs, searching for a treat.

“Wow, Marc,” I breathe, not wanting to hurt his feelings, but needing this to stop. “That just—that turns me on so much. Too much. I need you, now.”

I grab at his hips, jerking them forward so he has to move his face. Thank God he does, a wicked glint in his eyes.

“No woman can resist the Moretti motorboat.” He grins, unbuckling his belt, and I don’t gag, so high-five tome.

God, what am I thinking?

As Marc undresses, I count all the reasons I should stop this before we go any further. He’s not turning me on. He’s a nice guy, but that zing, that spark you should feel with someone—it’s not there.

Marc drops his pants.

Hot damn.

His cock is . . . wow.

Now that’s an anaconda.

I lick my lips in anticipation. Marc may lack in foreplay skills, and he may lack in height, but when it comes to things below the belt, he’s girthy, long, and ready to play.

“You like what you see?” he asks, his chin in the air.

“Uh-huh.” I nod, enthusiastic. Sex. I’m going to have sex with a man with a beautiful body and a beautiful penis. What more could I ask for?

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“Take off your panties,” he orders, and like a good little girl, I do, because hello, lovely cock. I will do whatever you wish. White lace is discarded on the floor.

“Get on the bed.” He points to the black silk sheets. I slide onto them, arching my back ever so slightly to entice him with my boobs since he’s clearly a tits man, and I will even consider putting up with the Moretti motorboat again if it means I’m getting a full-service downstairs.

“Like this?” I ask.

“Yeah.” He steps closer, running his tongue over his lips. “Now get ready to hold on, because you’re in for the ride of your life.”

A shiver runs through me. Goose bumps prickle my skin—goose bumps! I can’t wait.

Marc grabs a condom from his bedside table, sliding it on quickly.

“Here comes Marc,” he cries out, and bam.

He slides inside me.

I tense, waiting for the pain that’s sure to come from a year of no sex and a serious lack of foreplay, but maybe those candle lights cast deceptively long shadows, because inside me, Marc’s dick doesn’t feel that big. It feels kind of . . . lacking.

“Feels so good,” he grunts at me.

Uh, yeah. Sure it does.

“Fuck me, Marc,” I say, trying to inspire him with dirty talk as he’s previously inspired me. “Show me how you use that great big cock of yours.”

“Gonna do that. Gonna make you scream,” he whispers, and his mouth latches onto mine.

We kiss, then he shifts his hips, pumps once, twice, three times, building up a rhythm. This is good. It’s not fireworks, but it’s nice to ease into things. It’s been a while since I had sex, so maybe I just need a little warm-up. Maybe I just need a little—

“Marc’s coming! Marc’s coming!” he yells, as if we’re on a ship and he’s calling for a man overboard.

He collapses in a sweaty heap on top of me.

Oh. My. God.

What just happened?

If I was to count the number of times he thrust into me, I wouldn’t run out of fingers.

Fingers.

Maybe he’s just . . . a little rusty. Maybe his plan was to get that first nervous sex out of the way, then explore my body farther with his hands, his mouth, letting those long fingers take me to new pleasure-filled heights.

“Be right back.” He rolls over and gets off the bed. The light from the en-suite bathroom flickers on, and I hear the sound of a tap running.

When he comes back, he collapses onto the sheets beside me.

I tilt my body so my breasts are right in his eye line, then run my hand along his chest, tracing long circles, eager to get things moving again. “How are you feeling?”

“Wiped. Good session.” He nods, as if rewarding me for training hard at the gym. He clamps one hand over my finger, stopping its movements. “Don’t do that, baby. Marc’s trying to sleep.”

I open my mouth to say something, anything, but no words come out. That’s it? Six pumps, a Moretti motorboat special, and we’re done?

“You can stay the night if you want,” Marc murmurs, rolling onto his side and facing away from me. “Was good, wasn’t it?”

I don’t have words to reply. Good wasn’t the adjective I was thinking of.

How terrible for this man, to have gone through his life thinking that constituted as good sex.

And how terrible for me.

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I stare at the ceiling, the candles casting shadows across the roof. Marc's nice when he wants to be, and motivated, and successful. He likes me, and there are no secrets with him. What you see is what you get. But we don't have that connection. There are no sparks, and he's a total dud between the sheets.

Plus, he refers to himself in the third person. Can I live with hearing "Marc's coming, Marc's coming" for the rest of my life?

No, I decide. That's not the real me. The real me—

The real me is a lot like the things I liked about Marc. He's successful, owns his own business—and so do I. He's motivated, and while I haven't always been what you'd call inspired when it comes to goal-setting achievements, these last few weeks I've started to turn things around.

The only thing I don't like about me is the fact I kissed a man who has a family.

But I won't let that crush me again. I won't lose myself in depression.

I don't need Elio to be happy. But I also don't need Marc. Neither of them will make me feel better about myself. Only I can do that.

I'm going to move on. This time, I won't do it the unhealthy way—trying to replace my addiction to Elio and muffins with Marc and protein shakes. This time, I'll do it on my own, and I'll be stronger for it.

As Marc's breaths even out into the long sighs of near sleep, I hear him mumble.

“S’lucky we waited to do this till now. Any earlier, and I would have been drowning in rolls.”

Any sympathy I felt flies right out the goddamn window.

22

Romy

I’m angry.

No, that word isn’t enough.

Fuming.

Furious.

Fucking ready to rip Marc Moretti to shreds also works.

I stomp along the pavement, pulling my jacket closer around my shoulders against the cool fall air. A car drives past, loud bass music thumping. A group of young girls wearing clothes that would look more in fashion at the beach than on the streets of Colorado Springs at this time of year giggle, waving to the boys through the window of a local bar.

I should feel like one of them. I’ve been out to dinner. I’ve had sex. This is dating. This is being on the scene.

I feel old.

Maybe times have changed, because as I unlock the door to my building then take the

stairs one heavy step at a time, I don't think I've ever felt as dejected as this.

Marc's words linger in my ears, and sure, I could give him the benefit of the doubt. He was drifting off to sleep.

But to comment about my body like that . . . it's left me feeling flat. Empty.

And angry.

Definitely still mad.

As soon as it's morning, I'll call and end things with him. There will be no dinner with the family tonight.

* * *

I sleep.

After weeks of what feels like endless nights, I sleep like a log. It's as if my soul is finally at peace, resting, instead of searching for answers to questions about men I can't possibly find.

I inhale a coffee and a muffin for breakfast—not Elio's, of course, but still, not bad—then call Marc to cancel dinner, but he doesn't answer.

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That's okay.

There's someone else I need to call.

Someone else I need to end things with before they get any worse.

"Hello, Love household, Maria speaking."

"Hey, Maria. It's Romy. Is Mom around?" I ask, then hold my empty coffee cup to my lips in the hope I can steal any last minor bit of sustenance it may be able to give me.

"One moment please."

Seconds later, the line clicks, and Mom's voice comes through loud and clear. "Ah, my long-lost daughter. How are things?"

"Long lost?" I ask, resting the cup back on the coffee table and relaxing into my lounge.

"Yes. You know it's not a crime to keep in touch with your parents, Romy." Mom sighs. A note of hope enters her voice. "Or have you been just so busy out on dates that you've not had time to pick up the phone?"

I take a deep breath, steel myself. "Actually, Mom, that's what I'm ringing to talk to you about."

“You are?” I can practically hear champagne corks popping in her tone. “Wait, I’m going to get Beau. He’ll want to be in on this. Beau? Beau! Your favorite daughter is on the phone.”

“Mom . . .” I groan, but don’t argue. It’s probably a good thing that he hears this too.

“How’s my Romy girl?” Dad asks a few seconds later.

“Good,” I reply. “Actually, I’m the best I’ve been in a long while.”

“Tell me everything. His name, his age, where he lives . . . I want it all,” Mom says, and I can imagine her with paper and a pen, ready to take notes.

“That’s just it. There is no special man in my life.” I stand and walk down the hall to the spare room, opening the door.

My wedding dress gleams. The morning sun shines in through the window, catching on the diamond belt. I still feel that pang in my chest when I look at it. It’s so beautiful. So perfect.

So not anymore.

“I’m letting go of getting married,” I say. Sorry, beautiful gown. Maybe one day.

“What?” Mom gasps.

“Not forever. I’m not saying I’ll never walk down the aisle, but before, I was fixated. Obsessed. It wasn’t healthy, and it made me try things with men I never would have let myself do in the past.”

Silence stretches on the other end of the line.

I gulp, and go on. “It’s taken me a long time to realize this, but I’m actually pretty great. I have a fabulous best friend. I’m successful in my job. I live in my own place, and maybe I don’t have the husband and the two-point-five-kid American dream underway, but I’m happy. And I don’t need a man in the picture to completethat.”

A strange sound comes down the line. Is that—is Momcrying?

“Val, are you okay?” Dad asks, and I wonder if he’s in his office and she’s in the parlor, this big grand empty house separating them. “She said she didn’t need a man. That doesn’tmean—”

“I’m also not saying I’m open to lesbianism,” I expand, just in case there’s anyconfusion.

“Ah.” Dad doesn’t say anythingfurther.

“I’ve appreciated all your help when it comes to dating in the past”—slight lie, but doesn’t hurt to butter them up since I’ve clearly ruined Mom’s dreams—“but now I need to do things just for me. And that means no blind dates. No constant questions about my relationship status. And certainly no setting me up onTinder.”

“Got it,” Dadsays.

Mom mumbles something, but I can’t quite make it out. “Sorry, Mom? What did yousay?”

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“Just that . . .” She sniffs. “Just that we only ever wanted you to be happy. And if this is what makes you happy. . .”

“It does.” I run one hand over that beautiful white material one last time. This is a dream I’m finally ready to let go of. “It really does.”

“Good,” she says. “We’ll support you however we can.”

And I know they will, because at heart, despite the pushing and the digs about me still being single, my parents are good people who only want what’s best for me. I don’t know what that is yet, but for the first time in a long time, I can’t wait to find out.

We end the call, and I stare at my wedding dress. The one that brought me so much happiness, so much hope for the future.

Then I walk back to the door, pulling it closed. It’s time to keep the room shut for awhile.

Just as the lock is about to click, I race back in and grab those Jimmy Choos. There’s no need to say goodbye to them just yet.

* * *

Five hours later, my house is clean. I’ve washed, dusted, and aired everything, getting rid of the old and inviting in the new. I did it all in sweats and crystal heels, because what’s the point in saving them for a day that might never come? What’s the point in stopping myself from living in the now?

I've called Marc and left three messages, but he hasn't replied. He probably had clients all day. Looks like I have to meet the parents after all.

I'll break up with him in the car on the way home. Then I'll never have to see Marc Moretti again.

I check the time. Thirty minutes to go. I pull out my laptop. My Jimmy Choos thunk down on the floor as the computer hums to life. My fingers itch for it to open.

It's times like these when I love what I do.

It's times like these when I'm inspired to write.

Dear lovers,

A wedding is a time when you celebrate the love you have for your husband-to-be. It's a time when you begin your new journey together, full of dreams for the future—dreams that are all about *we* and *us* and *together*. Dreams that I hope will come true.

In all this *coupledom*, this focus on union during your big day, it can be easy to lose sight of one other person—yourself.

You've found the man of your dreams, but never stop believing you're good enough without him.

He's promising to be with you forever, but never doubt your strength if something should go awry.

You're discovering a new and beautiful side to your relationship, but you're also discovering a new and beautiful side to yourself. Your ability to love will grow. Your

ability to compromise will,too.

So, my dear bride-to-be, please live in the moment. Dance like no one is watching. Take every opportunity that comes your way, and eat that tart you've been lusting after at the bakery. You deserve it. You've earned it.

Your wedding is a time to celebrate love, but love for yourself is important,too.

Love,

Romy

23

Romy

I stare up at the house. It's gorgeous, all dark wood with a shingled siding and roof. It looks like something out of a fairy tale. Like Aurora's cabin, only bigger. Much bigger. It's hard to believe people actually live here. I take in the mountains surrounding us and breathe the crisp, cool air. "Wow."

Marc smiles. "You like it?"

"What's not to like?"

"Good," he says, falling into step beside me. "I expect one day it'll all be mine."

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“What?” I stare at him, my mouth agape.

“Well, I’ll have to share it with my siblings of course, but I can be pretty persuasive when I wannabe.”

An uneasy feeling slides through my gut. Something tells me Marc always gets what he wants. Like last night, when he fell asleep immediately after he came, without once making sure I was okay, or whether or not I’d even gotten off. A shudder runs through me. Just a few more hours and I will never have to see Marc Moretti again.

The front door opens, pulling me from my thoughts, and an elderly man in a bow tie and suspenders steps out. He holds his arms wide and Marc tugs me toward him. Once we’re on the porch, he abandons me to hug the man who I assume is his grandfather. Beyond them, more people are coming down the hall. Marc lets go of his grandfather and I’m swept up in a huge hug and kissed all over my face. It’s like being greeted by an over-excited puppy.

“All right, Nonno, hands off my woman,” Marc says, steering me away from his grandfather. A pang of guilt hits me in the stomach. Maybe I should have broken up with him last night, left a note. Sent a text. Hired a freaking Mariachi band.

“Ah! It’s true. He has a fidanzata?” a woman’s voice calls and I’m spun away from Marc’s nonno and find myself face-to-face with an adorable little nonna.

Not just any nonna.

Elio’s nonna.

My stomach flips and bottoms out as she studies my face and clearly her shrewd mind comes to the same conclusion mine does: I'm here with the wrongman.

This is Elio's grandmother. The nonna I begged to adopt me. I've shared a meal with this woman. She practically shoved her grandson at me and forced him to propose. All of the blood drains from my face as she studies me with a stern expression.

"Nonna, this is my girl, Romy," Marc says.

"Romy," she says with her thick Italian accent. Her eyes bore into mine, but her tightly knit brows tell me she's just as confused as I am right now.

"H . . . hi," I say sheepishly.

The woman must decide to take pity on me because she envelopes me in a hug and whispers, "I think you came with the wrong Moretti."

Yeah, no shit, Nonna.

I give her a weak smile, forcing down the lump in my throat, and blinking back tears that I refuse to shed. I would have been here in a heartbeat with Elio, if only he wasn't married.

Within seconds, I'm ripped away from Nonna's warm embrace and passed between Marc's parents. They each greet me as if I were family, kisses on both cheeks, hugs that are so warm, so welcoming. It's vastly different than the greeting I receive at my own parents' house, and it makes my eyes burn hotter with unshed tears.

From beyond Marc's mother down the hall comes another familiar face. I can't do this. I need to get out of here. I need to be far, far away from Marc and Elio, and his perfect wife. I can't look her in the eye after what I did.

And then I find myself face-to-face with her gorgeous smile, and despite the aching in my heart, and the guilt worming its way through my stomach, I can't help but smile back because she's just that lovely. No wonder Elio married her.

"Hi, you must be Romy. I'm Sophia," she says, in an accent so glorious and exotic that I wonder how Elio ever could have taken a second look at me. She extends her hand. I look at it, and then up at her beautiful face, afraid she might bite . . . Oh, God. Does she know?

"Romy?" The question comes from behind her, and I glance away from Elio's beautiful wife to see Bianca running toward me. "Oh, santa merda. Did you come here with Elio?"

"Pfft." Marc makes a face. "Why would she come with Elio?"

"Why indeed?" Nonna adds, and I want to die. I seriously contemplate throwing myself down the mountain.

"What the fuck?" B demands, glaring at Marc. Her brows knit together in agitation.

"Bianca," all of the older adults chide her at once. Elio's wife looks confused. Marc does too as his possessive arm wraps around my waist. B's eyes are narrow and furious as she tracks the movement.

"This is not good." She stares at me, and then at her . . . brother. Oh God. How could I have missed this glaringly obvious detail? "You're here with Marco?"

"I-I. . ."

"What the fuck is the matter with you?" Marc snaps. "Of course, she's here with me. She's my girlfriend."

His girlfriend? I feel sick. I close my eyes, trying my best to ignore the sweat beading on my forehead and the way my head and stomach swim.

“Hey, cuz,” Marc says to Sophia, and that’s when I lose it—my grip on reality.

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“Cuz? As in cousin?” I don’t realize I’ve said it aloud until everyone turns to look at me.

“Yeah. Sophia is my cousin. She's over here playing nanny to my brother's kid. Why? Do you two know each other?”

“No. Not really,” Sophia says. “I’ve seen her only once, in your brother’s bakery.”

Oh God. There it is again. Affirmation that I’m the world’s biggest idiot. Sophia’s not Elio’s wife at all. She’s his cousin, and I . . . I had sex with his brother. I came here with his brother.

Marc frowns. “At Bittersweet?”

“Si.”

“Oh yeah, you live upstairs, right?” Marc turns his gaze on me, but I can’t answer. I glance at B, who looks like she’s ready to slap me, or Marc, or . . . both of us. She might be small, but the woman is truly terrifying.

“Romy is Elio’s . . . regular customer,” Bianca says.

I close my eyes, wishing she hadn’t finished that sentence, wishing I hadn’t been such a fool.

“Well, no wonder you were so fat when you walked into my gym,” Marc says, patting my ass.

“Marco!” comes the exclamation from all the women on the porch

My jaw drops, my face turns crimson, and I lower my gaze to the sun-bleached boards of the front porch so I won’t open my mouth. If I do, I’m not sure what will come out.

Marc grins and shrugs. “What? Romy knows I’m kidding, don’t you, babe?”

I give him a half-hearted smile and follow him inside when all I really want is to run in the other direction.

God, I can’t wait to ditch this egotistical ass.

24

Elio

“My anna-conna don’t want none unless you’ve got buns, hun,” Coco sings at the top of her lungs, and I shut off the stereo and glare at Nico.

“Daddy!” she protests.

At the same time, Nico shouts, “What the fuck, man?”

“Yeah, what the fu—”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence, young lady.” I hold her gaze in the rearview mirror as she pouts and turns in a snit to look out the window. Then, I shoot a quick glance at my supposed best bud. “Will you stop teaching my daughter inappropriate songs, please?”

“What? This is a classic. Besides, it’s better than that indie folk you listen to. Jesus, I’d get all hyped up about Sir Mix-A-Lot too if I had to have that hipster shit lull me to sleep.”

I roll my eyes. “Remind me why you’re here again?”

“Because Nonna loves me. I’m an honorary Moretti.”

“More like an honorary asshole,” I say under my breath.

“That’s what Aunt B says. That Uncie Nico is an asshole.”

“Coco!” I use my mirror to give my child death stares. I glance back at the road—shit! I’ve run us right off it. I jerk the wheel suddenly, bringing us back onto my grandparents’ long drive.

Nico turns in his seat and frowns at my daughter. “She does not say that.”

“Yep, she does.”

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“Well.” He straightens and smooths down his sweater as if he’s insulted by that remark. “That’s just because she’s an evil harpy who needs a long,hard—”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence,” I say as I navigate the tail end of the switchback and pull up to the house.

“And speaking of harpies . . .” Nico says, as my sister comes into view, running out of the house and toward my car like an escaped mental patient on a mission.

I barely have time to shut off the engine before she’s opening my door for me. “I need to talk to you.”

“Hey, sis, good to see you. How are you? Me? I’m well, thanks so much for asking.”

“Aunt B,” Coco says, making grabby hands.

My sister opens Coco’s door and unfastens her belt. Coco wraps her chubby arms around B’s neck as the woman squishes her up in a big hug and pulls her from the car.

“Uncle Nico says you’re an evil harpy.”

“Does he now? Well, that’s because he wouldn’t know a real woman when he sees one. Also, he has a piccolo cazzo, so he feels threatened by strong, powerful women.”

I let out an exasperated sigh. “Is it too much to ask that both of you try not to teach my daughter to swear like a sailor?”

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with teaching a girl that size and girth are important. She should be able to tell the difference between a man who is a little shit, and a man who is king shit.” B sets Coco down at her feet and ruffles her hair. “All right, princess, why don’t you and Nico run along and let the adults talk. Bisnonna has a surprise for you.”

Coco shrieks and grabs Nico’s hand, dragging him toward the house. I turn and head for the trunk to retrieve our overnight bags. I hand Coco’s to B, and she takes it and sets it down with a huff. “I have to tell you something.”

“Okay.”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“B, just say whatever it—”

“It’s about Romy.”

Now she has my undivided attention. I turn and face my sister. “What about Romy?”

“She’s there.”

I laugh. “Yeah, okay. Quit fucking around.”

“I’m not joking, Elio.”

I study her face. She doesn’t look as if she’s lying. In fact, she looks crestfallen. My brows practically shoot up into my hairline, but I can’t shake the feeling she’s fucking with me.

“She really is here. Inside,” she says.

“Did you set this up? Did Nonna?”

“No.”

“Would you quit screwing around and tell me what the hell is going on?” I demand, but decide I can’t wait anymore. I forget about our bags, about closing the doors, or pulling the keys from the ignition, and stalk toward the house.

“Elio . . . she’s dating Marc.”

My blood runs cold. I stop in my tracks and stay perfectly still, certain I’ve misheard her. My sister touches my arm and I yank it away. “What did you say?”

“She’s Marc’s date. The new girl he told Mom he was bringing? Well, Romy is that girl.”

My jaw drops. Romy’s face at the club the other night when she pushed me away, the sweet taste of her still in my mouth . . . “I’m seeing someone.” What the fuck? That someone was my douche of a brother? “You gotta be kidding me.”

B exhales noisily. “I wish I were, fratello.”

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“So, what? Coco and I aren’t good enough, so she decided to go after the next best thing?”

“I don’t think she had any idea. She looked sick when she saw me. She’s been in there for the last hour enduring the date from hell.”

“He can’t have her. Not after . . . He can’t have her.”

“He already does.”

I lace my hands behind my head and crouch down in the middle of my grandparents’ yard to keep from stalking in the house and beating the shit out of my little brother. Seeing him during the holidays is bad enough, but this? He brought the only girl I’ve cared about since my ex-wife as his date. Why her? Did he know? Did he do it just to piss me off? This is too much like history repeating itself. “I can’t go in there. I can’t see him with his hands all over her.”

“You have to. It’s Nonna and Nonno’s anniversary. Besides, they already know you’re here. It won’t be long before they come to find you.”

“This is bullshit, B,” I shout, and then lower my voice. “You really think our brother deserves someone as perfect and sweet as Romy?”

“It doesn’t matter what you or I think. If she wants to be with Marc, then we can’t stop her. Now come on.” My sister gives me a hard squeeze and tugs my hand. “You know if he sees you like this, he’ll use it to his advantage, and that woman you care so much about will become nothing but a pawn to him.”

She's right. I may not want to see my brother touch her, or look at her, but he will use her against me if I can't pull it together. I always did have a shit pokerface.

I pick up our bags, grab the keys from the ignition, and close the truck, following my sister inside. I dump our bags in the foyer and enter the living room. My parents get up to greet me, Nonna and Nonno dotoo.

And then they stop crowding me. They move back to their seats, and there she is, tucked between the arm of the sofa and my brother's beefy side. Romy.

She looks different. Her face is drawn, and her nails clutch the edge of the couch like she might tear a hole in it any minute. My first instinct is to ask what's wrong, but then I realize I already know. Marc is wrong. My brother is wrong. It should be me at her side bringing her to meet my family.

"Look, Dadda. Womy's here."

I swallow hard and stare at the woman in question. I can't take my eyes off her, not even to look at Coco, who must be confused as hell right now seeing Romy here at Bisnonna's house. "I see that, babygirl."

"Sup, bro?" Marc's words draw my attention away from Romy.

"Nothing," I say with a forced smile. "Excuse me. I gotta take our bags up to the room."

Without waiting for anyone to respond, I grab mine and Coco's bags and head upstairs.

Traveling with a four-year-old for just one night is the equivalent of trying to pack your whole life into a Mini Cooper. There are stuffies and several different kinds of

pyj's, Disney princesses, books, and ten different outfits and dress-ups in case Coco's feeling a little extra and deems it necessary to put on a show for Nonna and Nonno. All of this means that our bags are plenty, and heavy as shit.

I'm midway down the stairs when Romy appears at the foot of them, her hands balled by her sides, the toe of her sparkly heels scraping the floor in what looks to be a nervous gesture.

"Hi," she says in a small voice, as if she's afraid I'll startle.

"Hey." My response is brusquer than I mean it to be.

She winces, and then covers the expression with a smile as forced as my own. "How have you been?"

"Good. You?"

"Good." Romy shakes her head. "Actually, that's not really true. I've missed you. I mean, I miss the bakery, and B, and seeing Coco. She's really sweet, Elio, and . . . and unforgettable. You should be super proud."

I open my mouth to tell her I am, but apparently Romy isn't done.

"I've been spending all my time training, and dating your brother hasn't exactly been a piece of cake. Huh. Cake, what's that, right? I don't even know what cake or processed foods or white sugar are anymore. They are not in this girl's diet, that's for sure. This girl only eats kale and chokes down wheatgrass, and your brother's hideous smoothies. Man, I miss your muffins, and well . . . I thought she was your wife."

I blink at her, stare at the blush creeping across her cheeks. I watch the rise and fall of

her chest as she sucks in air, as if she hasn't taken a breath for months. "What did you say?"

"Which part? I said a lot. Kind of wouldn't shut up." Romy grimaces. "Much like now, really."

"You thought who was my wife?"

"Your cousin."

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My frown deepens. “You thought Sophia was mywife?”

“Uh-huh.” She smooths her palms on the skirt of her dress, as if wiping them free of sweat. “Guess I shouldn’t jump to conclusions,huh?”

I shake my head, taking several steps closer. “I don’tunderstand.”

“I was coming to see you, a few weeks back. I somehow got it in my head that you and I, well . . .” She glances down at her feet. When she looks up again, her eyes are glistening with tears. “Why didn’t you tell me you were adad?”

My shoulders sag in defeat. “I thought you knew. I wanted to talk to you about it, about us, but I didn’t want to scare you away. And I didn’t want to put Coco through losing someone she cared about likethat.”

Tears spill over Romy’s lashes and roll slowly down her cheeks. I cup her face, brush the saltwater from her skin with my thumbs. “Why are you here withhim?”

“I didn’t know he was your brother. I didn’t even know your lastname.”

“And now that youdo?”

“Elio,I . . .”

“Well, don’t you two look cozy?” My asshole brother steps from the shadows of the long hallway and glances back and forth between the two of us. I jerk my hand away from Romy’sface.

“Marc,” Romy shrieks and steps away from me. “I was just um . . . looking for the bathroom.”

“It’s upstairs, sweet cheeks.” He studies her flushed face and glares at me. “Did Elio say something to make you cry?”

“No. He didn’t do anything,” she says.

She’s right about that. I’ve spent the last year doing nothing where this woman is concerned.

“Excuse me.” Romy bows her head as she brushes past me on the stairs and hurries off to the bathroom. It takes everything I have not to turn and watch her go. Instead, I eye my brother’s lecherous gaze on her ass.

“I made that,” Marc says proudly, as if he had some part in her creation.

“Then it’s kind of creepy that you’re looking at her like you want a taste.” I shrug as Marc turns his ’roid-raging gaze back on me. “Little incestual, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know, brother. You tell me. What the hell were you doing touching my girl just now? Why is she crying?”

“I imagine it’s because she’s here with you.”

“Ha. You think she’d rather be here with you? Some deadbeat dad who’s grown soft around the middle?”

“Deadbeat dad?” I brush past him. “Oh, brother, the only thing gone soft here is your brain after all the steroids you’ve fed it. Although, you do look like you’ve gained a little extra.”

My brother scowls. I smile back and walk away because if I don't, I'll likely beat the shit out of him for taking my girl.

Again.

25

Romy

I wash my hands in the sink and glare at my reflection. I'm a mess. My eyes are bloodshot, my nose is puffy, and my face is red. I can't cover the redness because I left my concealer and powder in my purse downstairs and as much as I'd like to, I can't hide out here forever.

I open the bathroom door.

Marc startles me. He glowers. "What did Elio say to you?"

"Nothing."

He huddles close, pushing me farther into the bathroom. "You're lying."

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“No.” I shake my head. He grabs my wrist in a vise grip and tugs me toward him so hard that the air whooshes from my lungs when I hit the wall of his muscular chest. “You’re hurting me.”

It’s more than that though. For the first time since we met, he is actually scaring me. Marc makes a show of glancing at my wrist, which he still grips far too tightly. “With this?”

“Yes.” I try to pull free, but he tightens his hold. I squirm harder, and he grins and pulls me closer, laying a kiss on my lips. I can’t get away. I can’t breathe.

I do the only thing I can with my body pressed between his and the bathroom vanity.

I bite him.

“Jesus, Romy. What the fuck?” he hisses and backs away, and that’s all the time I need to run. I thank God for those long sessions on the treadmill when he pushed me to dig deeper, go faster, longer, because it helps me now as I race down the stairs two at a time. Marc’s heavy footfalls follow close behind. With tears flowing freely down my face, I hit the last stair and turn the corner. I collide with Elio.

He cups my face and forces me to look at him. “What the hell’s going on?”

“Marc. He . . .” With the adrenaline and fear coursing through my body, I’m panting hard, and feel the crushing weight of a panic attack eating all the air from the hall around me.

Elio doesn't have time to respond because Marc is behind me. I can feel him there, like an angry bear coming to claim back what's his.

Elio gently pulls me closer, shielding me from his brother. "It's okay. I got you."

"Let go of my girlfriend."

"Back off, brother." Elio's voice rumbles through his chest. I feel the reverberations through my own ribcage.

"Romy, get over here, now."

I open my mouth, but Elio's low growl stops me. "She's not going anywhere near you."

He pushes me behind him, blocking me from Marc's line of sight.

"And you're, what? Going to stop me? Last time you hit me it didn't even leave a mark," Marc scoffs.

"Yeah well, there's a lot of bad blood under that bridge since. I've been begging for another go."

"It must just eat you up inside, huh? That I stole your wife, and now I've got Romy too."

"The only thing you've got, little brother, is the wrong idea about what it means to be a man and how to treat women."

"Oh please. I made that ass. Before me, she was nothing. She was fat and pathetic, a miserable excuse for a woman, and Marc Moretti made her into a fucking champion."

And you should hear the way she whimpers when she comes ‘Oh, yes Marc, just like that.’ She couldn’t wait to tear my clothes off—”

Elio lunges, grabbing his brother by the shirt collar and pounding his fist into his cheek. Marc’s head snaps to the side with the brutality of the blow, and he goes down. Out like a light.

Elio stares at his brother, his shoulders tense as they rise and fall with his angry breaths. I reach out and grab his arm and he turns to face me, the blackness of rage still evident in his gaze. His hand is bleeding and already showing signs of swelling. He pulls out of my grasp and cups my cheek, tilting my face up to him. “You okay?”

I don’t have words, so I simply nod as tears well in my eyes and spill down my face.

From behind us comes a shriek in Italian, and I don’t know if it came from Nonna, B, or Elio’s mother, but the hall is suddenly full of bodies, and Coco screams. Elio releases me and hurries over to his daughter, scooping her up and walking away. I have no idea what to do, so I attempt to melt into the wall as the family erupts into harsh, biting words in Italian. What I assume are insults fly all around the room. I have no idea if any of the vitriol is directed at me.

A beat later, someone tugs on my hand. I glance up and Elio is looking at me, his daughter wrapped around him and crying on his shoulder. “Come on. I’m taking you home.”

“Just what is going on here, Elio?” his mother demands.

“Maybe you need to ask your son that.”

She places her hands on her hips, her face a combination of fury and disappointment. “Well I would, but he’s out cold. And don’t you take that tone with me, young man.

You can't just come in here, steal your brother's girlfriend and—”

“He fucked my wife, Ma,” Elio shouts, and everyone falls silent. My gaze darts to each member of Elio's family, and then back to the man in question. Guilt roils through my stomach. “He slept with my pregnant wife, in my bed, in my house, and tonight he shows up here with the only woman I've cared about in a really long time and treated her like property. So, I'm taking Romy and Coco home, and I don't wanna hear another goddamn word about myfratello. He is no brother tome.”

Oh God. PoorElio.

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The family all remain silent, except for Coco's whimpers. Elio tightens his hold on her, and pure anguish crosses his face before he takes my hand and leads me toward the frontdoor.

Once outside, the cool mountain air washes over me and my nerves calm a little. Elio opens my door for me and I scramble inside the SUV. I can't meet his gaze, so I stare straight ahead at the mountains as he sets Coco in her car seat and whispers assurances in her ear. He doesn't say anything as he climbs in and slams the door, and then he throws the stick in reverse and zooms down the driveway, turning so abruptly that our tires screech on the loose gravel. I lean over and turn on the heat, almost afraid to move, but it's freezing in here. Without it, Coco will likely be a human Popsicle by the time we make it back to Colorado Springs. She's sorry.

Several minutes into the drive, she pipes up from the back seat. "Daddy, why did you hit Uncle Marc? I thought we weren't supposed to do hitting."

I dare a glance at Elio. He closes his eyes for a beat and then sighs as he opens them. "Daddy shouldn't have done that, baby. And I shouldn't have said those bad words, either. But Marc hurt someone I care about. Someone I care about a whole lot."

His gaze meets mine for a beat before he looks back at the road. My heart pounds a staccato stop-start rhythm. I keep seeing him knock his brother out cold. Guilt surges through me. Marc stole his wife.

"Who did he hurt?"

"He hurt Romy, too."

Butterflies explode in my belly. It's stupid really, but I'm reduced to a twelve-year-old girl with his admission. Elio cares about me.

"Why?"

Elio's hands tighten on the wheel. A muscle in his jaw pops as he grinds his teeth.

"It doesn't matter," I say, but those deep brown eyes meet mine again, and I quickly shut up.

"It matters. Uncle Marc said and did some things that were unforgivable to Romy."

"Daddy?" Coco's words are cut short by a yawn. "Is Womy gonna be my new mom?"

"Oh," I say.

At the same time, Elio says. "No, baby."

I don't know if it's relief or hurt that washes over me, but my stomach is suddenly roiling and I'm speechless. I've always wanted kids, a family, and I adore Coco, but this is . . . unexpected. All of it is fast, too fast. Too much. Not fast enough.

No, baby.

For Elio to just blurt it out like that—not "maybe," or "we'll see," or "I don't know," but no. It's as if it's written in stone. Maybe I misinterpreted our whole interaction on the stairwell back at the Moretti house. Perhaps I read more into what he said to his family in the hall.

"Romy is—"

“A friend. I’m your daddy’s friend,” I finish, giving him a pointed look. Even if what he said had just a small kernel of truth to it, this whole situation is a mess. His parents must hate me. His whole family is likely gathered around Nonna’s living room discussing how much of a tramp I am. I ruined her fiftieth wedding anniversary, caused her only grandsons to attempt to beat each other to death, and I didn’t even bring a present. Pretty sure I’m not going to be getting any more invites to Moretti family events.

Elio’s jaw ticks again and I turn my attention to the window and the mountains blanketed in gold and the burnished amber of fall.

A short time later, when the gentle rocking of the car lulls Coco to sleep, Elio’s gaze darts from the road to me and back again. “I’m sorry.”

I study his handsome face lit by the dash. I can’t read his expression, but his eyes are hooded with dark circles beneath them. He looks bone tired, and I wonder if all these years as a single parent and successful business owner have been exhausting. I could be his respite. I could have been all along. If only he’d let me in.

“You don’t have to apologize.”

“I’m sorry my brother’s a dick.”

“Elio—”

“I’m sorry you had to watch me beat the shit out of him.”

“Stop,” I whisper.

“I’m sorry I didn’t make you mine when I had the chance.”

Romy

Elio slows the vehicle and turns off on a small unmarked road before town. I wonder where we're going, but I don't ask because I'm pretty sure it's to his place. I'm afraid if I open my mouth, he'll find a reason to drive me home, and I don't want that. I don't know where we go from here, but all the feelings I've harbored for him in the past are still present, and they're still just as overwhelming as they ever were.

He pulls up to a small, slate gray house. The porch light is on. There are flowers in the garden beds, and discarded toys litter the lawn. I smooth my hands over my dress, but I don't look at him. I'm afraid he'll see the desperation in my eyes and take me home. Worse still, I'm afraid he won't, and we'll wind up doing something stupid that we can't come back from. "Where are we?"

"Home."

I close my eyes and attempt to tamp down the thrill that runs through me at hearing that word coming from his lips. "Why did you bring me here?"

"Because you haven't eaten, and I haven't eaten, and I'm not ready to take you back to your apartment."

"Elio . . ."

"Are you hungry?"

As if on cue, my stomach growls. I consider telling him I'm not, but what's the point

in lying? Miscommunication hasn't done either of us any good so far. "I could eat."

He grins and unbuckles his belt, opening the car door and climbing out while I sit perfectly still in my seat and try to remember how to breathe. Elio opens Coco's door and lifts her from her car seat, carrying her toward the house. Eventually, I vacate the vehicle and hurry behind him up the porch stairs.

Once inside, Elio whispers that I should make myself at home while he takes Coco up to bed.

I glance around the foyer and move farther into his home. His furniture is an odd mix of rustic woods and vintage hipster, and there are books absolutely everywhere. It's like a library for the dastardly hip, yet I still see him in every furnishing, every painting on the wall and every knickknack on the TV stand.

I stroll around the room and peruse the shelves, picking up a copy of *The Brothers Karamazov*. My heart trips all over itself. He took it home. He keeps the copy I bought him here in his house. I flick through the yellowed, dog-eared pages and then bring the book to my nose, smelling ink and paper, and all the reasons Elio prefers books over a Kindle.

This is how he finds me, in his living room with my nose inhaling the book like a pothead smelling cannabis.

"I was just . . . um. . ."

"Smelling Dostoyevsky?"

"I was seeing if you were right. If you really can't improve on perfection."

"And what did you decide?"

“That you’re prettysmart.”

Elio’s smile is smug as he takes the book from my hands. He leans against the bookshelf, penning me in. “Romy?”

“Yes,” I say with conviction, because I would do anything he asked.

“Yes?” he asks with a quizzical expression.

“Whatever it is, yes.”

“What if I said I want to show you my big. . .”

My breath catches.

Elio licks his lips, and he grins. “Kitchen.”

I frown and whack him on the arm as his deep, throaty laughter fills the room around us. He pulls me close and hugs me, pressing a kiss to the top of my head as his laughter shakes his body. “Come on. Clearly you’re too hangry to see how hilarious I am.”

I roll my eyes and reluctantly follow him into the kitchen.

He’s right; it is big. Huge, in fact. It’s rustic, with exposed beams and acid-polished concrete floors. There’s a large dining table made from what looks like reclaimed barn beams, with long bench seats on either side just beyond the kitchen island, and more counter space than I’ve ever seen. The lighting is low and dim. It’s the kind of kitchen you could make love in, and I’m not entirely sure he didn’t bring me in here for just that when I glance back and find him watching me.

I inhale sharply. “Wow, you weren’t kidding. It is big.”

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Elio's mouth tips up in a smile. He mutters something that sounds like, "And getting bigger by the second," but I may have just imagined that.

"Okay. What are you in the mood for?"

You. "What are you good at?"

"Everything," he says with an eyebrow raised.

I don't doubt that at all. Not one bit. "Then make me whatever you like."

With another salacious grin, Elio gets to work grabbing ingredients from the refrigerator and pantry. "Take a seat," he says when he turns and almost collides with me in front of the sink.

"You don't want me to help?"

"No, I want to cook for you. All I want you to do is watch, and then when I serve it up to you, I want you to make those little noises you make when you're eating muffins at the shop."

I balk, embarrassed. "I don't make little noises."

"Yes, you do. It's downright distracting."

I duck my head to avoid meeting his eyes as a smile teases my lips.

Watching Elio cook is the equivalent of watching a shirtless Jason Momoa work out. He moves like a dream. He's fluid, confident and graceful, though no less masculine. It's mesmerizing, and I'm amazed at how quickly he throws a meal together using just two pans.

I haven't had long enough to really get my creeper on when Elio collects a little of the sauce from the simmering pan and offers me the spoon. I wrap my fingers around his wrist to steady his hand and watch him as I taste it. Garlic rolls over my tongue, burned butter, lemon, and thyme. It's simple, yet the flavors work so well together. I close my eyes and moan. When I open them again, he's watching me closely.

"God, I've missed pasta."

"You shouldn't deprive yourself of the things you want, Romy."

"Shouldn't I?"

"No. It's not good for the soul."

I let out a humorless laugh and take the glass of wine he offers, gulping it back before I do something stupid like try and kiss him.

Elio fills two bowls with pasta and hands one to me. I follow him to the couch, and he grabs the remote and turns the gas fireplace on, bathing the room in a rich golden glow. He sits across from me, setting his bowl of pasta down on the table along with his wine. He doesn't say anything. He just stares.

"What? Do I have something in my teeth?"

"Just my heart," he murmurs.

It's so quiet I'm not sure I hear him right. "What?"

"Romy, I don't know where we go from here. I don't know how you feel about kids, about Coco, and having us both in your life but—"

"You don't know?"

He shakes his head.

I smile coyly, embarrassed that I have to spell it out for him. "I'm crazy about you, Elio."

He smiles, but it's short-lived. "Coco and I are a package deal. She's my whole world, and I won't let anyone hurt her."

"Then it's a good thing I'm crazy about her too."

He stares down at his swollen hand, brushing his fingers over the bruised knuckles. "I need you to be sure. I need you to be 100 percent certain that you really want that, because the last thing she needs is another woman she loves leaving her. I won't put her through that again."

"I would never do that to her."

“You can’t knowthat.”

I set my pasta down. I really want to eat it, but I want to kiss this manmore.

I get up and walk over to him, then stand between him and the coffee table. He leans forward, his finger tracing the bare flesh of my thigh just above my knee. I break out in goose bumps as he leans in and presses his lips to my skin. I close my eyes and slide my hands into his thick hair. His hands glide up my thigh beneath my skirt to the waistband of my panties, and I’m suddenly self-conscious. I’ve lost a lot of weight, fast, but on the inside, I’m still the girl who wasn’t good enough. The girl with stretch marks and cellulite. The girl who Marc humiliated with barbed words and passive-aggressive insults that I’ve heard before, too many times tocount.

“Wait,” I say.

“What’s wrong?”

“I . . . um. Are you sure? I mean, I’m no prize pig.” Really, Romy? God, what is the matter with you?

“Romy, you’re beautiful. You’ve always been beautiful.”

I smile, but the voice inside my head tells me he’s just being nice, that he doesn’t really mean it. How can he?

Elio frowns. “You don’t believe me?”

“No, it’s not that . . . it’s just. . .”

“Jesus, my brother really fucked with your head, didn’t he?”

“Well, to be fair, it wasn’t just him.”

“Who else do I have to beat the shit out of?”

“Um . . . well, let’s see . . .” I trail off with a sigh. “There’s my parents, and my ex Jeremy, all of society, and then there’s . . . me. So . . . that could take awhile.”

“You’re right. Why don’t I just prove it to you?”

“Prove it to me how?”

An immoral smile tips the corner of his mouth. “By showing you.”

He runs his hands around to my ass and grabs my cheeks, squeezing hard. I gasp, startled by the ferocity. He hooks his fingers in my panties and slides them down my legs. They fall to my ankles and I step out of them.

Elio pulls me closer and lifts the hem of my dress. It’s made of a soft jersey so of course, it doesn’t stay, but that doesn’t seem to matter to him once his head is under there and his hot breath washes over my thighs.

He doesn’t touch me, but teases instead with his warm breath. It’s too much, too cruel, too arousing. He slides his hands between my legs and separates my thighs. My breath catches in the back of my throat as he finally brings his mouth to my hot, aching flesh. It’s nothing more than the sweetest of kisses right over the hood of my clit, but he deepens the kiss, parting me with his tongue. My ability to breathe, to think, to protest and beg is gone, and I pull my skirt out of the way so I can see him

and drive my hands into his hair, bringing him closer.

When I'm weak in the knees and desperate to come, he pulls away. He looks up at me with those dark eyes, and I lick my lips.

Elio opens his mouth to speak. "We shouldn't—"

"Do this? You're right. That would be a big mistake because you're um . . . you're Marc's brother, and he and I . . . that is . . . we're . . . broken up. Or I planned on breaking up with him right after dinner—"

"Romy, I was going to say we shouldn't do this here where Coco can find us."

"Oh." I exhale loudly.

Elio's brow creases. "You think we shouldn't do this?"

"No, that's not it at all. I just meant if you think we shouldn't do it, then I understand and I . . . I'm rambling, aren't I?"

"You really are," he says, standing so that I'm forced to take a step back. He doesn't let me go far though. Instead, he takes my face in his hands and leans down to kiss me.

It's not an open-mouthed kiss, but a soft meeting of our lips. I can taste myself on him, and it's as shocking as it is enticing. He deepens the kiss until his tongue is slipping inside to tangle with my own. We take several stumbling steps back, knocking the bowls of pasta off the coffee table. I break from his lips and turn to look at the mess, but Elio captures my mouth again with his own and threads his hands through my hair. I kiss him back, wanting more, needing more.

When he pulls away, I whimper. God help me, I actually whimper like a sadpuppy.

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Elio laughs. I turn about ten different shades of red. He takes my hand and leads me toward the stairs. I follow, unable to let go as we reach the end of the hall.

He pushes the door to our left, his bedroom, but something shiny in the room on the right catches my eye. It's a silver picture frame glinting in the half-light. I take a step forward. My heart races as my gaze flits over the floral duvet, the fluffy pink cushions, the Parisian artwork and the feminine touches all throughout the room. My eyes settle on the makeup resting on the vanity. I swallow hard.

Elio is living with another woman.

Just when I'm about to turn and confront him, strong arms wrap around my waist and he leans in and whispers, "Sophia's room."

All the air leaves me in a rush, and I relax back against his chest as he nibbles the sensitive flesh of my neck.

Elio turns with me in his arms, and leads us into his bedroom. It's as mishmashed as the rest of his house. Hipster meets Hemingway recluse. There's a huge four-poster bed in the center of the room with a red plaid flannel coverlet and rich teakwood walls. It looks like the set of every romance novel I've ever read, yet it's even more perfect, because this isn't a romance novel: it's real life. And Elio is all I've wanted since I first laid eyes on him. This moment is all I've ever wanted, and it's finally here. I have to repress the urge to squeal in excitement.

I let go of Elio's hand and step around him, inspecting his room. There's a stack of paperwork on the desk in the corner, a cowhide chair with a Mexican woven blanket

thrown over it, and a huge fireplace with an empty mantle. I stare at the artwork on the wall. Elio lets out a low chuckle, and I turn to see what's so funny.

"When you're done inspecting my room, do you think you might want to come get naked and roll around my bed with me?"

Again, I blush. I've got to do something about that. "That's what you want to do? Just roll around?"

"You're right. That was the wrong choice of words. I'd like to fuck you, Romy," he says with a serious face, though he grins when my eyes bug out. "I just thought I'd soften the blow."

My heart beats double time as I say, "Don't . . . don't soften it."

"No?"

I shake my head emphatically. "No."

"Good, because nothing about my feelings for you are soft. In fact, you're making it very hard."

I glance at his crotch, and he's right. He's straining against his jeans.

I take a step forward and he takes several toward me until he catches me up and kisses me stupid. We stumble through the room, our tongues tousling, hands grasping at clothing, at body parts, bumping into things in an effort to get closer. I tip my head back as Elio kisses my throat to my collarbone and dips his head beneath the neckline of my dress, pushing my bra aside, cupping my breast and taking my nipple into his mouth. I slide my fingers into his hair as a moan escapes me. His beard tickles my sensitive flesh, and I want to feel it all over my body. I want his kisses and sweet

caresseseverywhere.

Elio grabs the hem of my dress and lifts it. My heart swells with fear, with pride for all of my hard work, and with nervous excitement. He lifts the fabric over my head and lets it fall to the ground. Then he steps back, and I cringe and close my eyes, afraid he won't like what he sees. Weight loss takes a toll on your body, and I'm far from perfect.

“Jesus,Romy.”

I squint one eye open because the reverence in his tone confuses me. “Jesus,what?”

He yanks off his shirt and I'm suddenly praising the gods too, and then I get it, because his hands and mouth are on me. They need me as much as I need them.

He walks us toward the bed, and we fall backward onto the mattress. Elio quickly rolls us so that he's hovering over me. I stare into those incredible eyes and feel a strange sense of courage overwhelm me. I slide my hand down his hard pectorals and abs, along the line of that sharp V leading into his pants. A groan comes from him, and my hands work the button on his jeans. Once I have his fly open, I slip my hand inside and find him rock hard and completely commando. My palm brushes the silky tip and his whole body stiffens. I use the opportunity to take hold of his shaft and stroke it with a firm hand. Elio closes his eyes and bites his lip as his whole body strains against me. I work my fist faster around him, but he groans and pulls away. “Wait, wait,Romy.”

I don't wait. I've waited too long already. “What?”

“Stop. I need you tostop.”

My heart sinks.Oh.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, but my throat is choked with embarrassment. Did I move too fast?

“It’s been a while.” He kisses my forehead, and I tamp down the urge to touch him again because I see he’s struggling with this. “You’re the first woman I’ve been with since Coco’s mom.”

“Oh.” My eyes widen. “I’m the first woman you’ve slept with in four years?”

He grimaces. “Is that a turnoff? That’s a turnoff, right?”

“No, no it’s not.” I screw up my nose in disbelief. “Four years, really? How is that possible? You’re hot.”

He chuckles. “It’s hard to find someone who’ll have sex with you when you have a kid.”

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“Really?” I’ve seen the way he is with his daughter, even before I knew Coco was his. Elio’s dedication to her is heart-warming and honestly, ridiculously hot.

“Okay, that’s not true. You’re the first woman I’ve wanted to fuck.” There’s that word again sending shivers down my spine and a thrill through my lady parts, and now I have no idea what the hell else he just said because I can’t stop thinking about him wanting to fuck me.

“I want to have sex with you,” I blurt out, a little bit lost in his eyes.

“And here I thought you were half-naked in my bed because you wanted me to teach you how to cook.”

I laugh. “Nope. I’m just here to hit it and quit it.”

“Really? What makes you think I’ll let you leave?” Kicking his shoes to the side, he pushes his jeans the rest of the way off. Elio settles his weight between my legs, his erection a hot and heavy weight against the thin fabric of my panties. He pivots his hips, and I groan. “What makes you think you’ll want to leave after I’m done with you?”

He’s right; I doubt I’ll ever want to leave, especially when it feels so good to be in his arms.

Elio leans up on his elbow and slides a hand down my body, pushing aside my panties until we’re skin on skin and his fingertips trace delicate patterns over my slick flesh. He delves lower, easing a finger inside me. I inhale, contract my inner muscles

around him, and allow my head to roll to the side. The rest of my body is taut like a bowstring, on edge with need.

“Please, Elio. I need you inside me.”

A small smile tips his lips as he adds another finger and continues to fuck me with his hand. “No.”

“Please?” I beg, sounding anything but myself.

“Not until you come for me.”

“No, I can’t . . .” My hands reach for him, taking his cock and stroking it with a ferocity that matches his own. “Please. I need you.”

He groans, his eyes falling closed as he ceases his own ministrations and gets lost in mine. “Fuck.”

A beat later, he’s gone from the bed and fumbling through his nightstand. He pulls out a foil packet, and tears it open with his teeth. I smile at that, at seeing him so eager, so desperate to be inside me.

He rolls the condom down his thick shaft and crawls across the bed toward me. He wedges himself between my legs, but doesn’t climb on top. Instead, he kneels on the mattress and slowly pushes into me. The angle doesn’t allow for him to thrust too deep, but he grabs his cock with his hand as he pushes inside, caressing us both. I toy with my nipples as he thrusts into me, his eyes watching my fingers pluck the taut buds.

“Jesus Christ, Romy. You’re so fucking hot.”

“I need you closer,” I beg. Elio slides his hand under my ass and pulls us both upright, so I’m straddling his waist, my legs wrapped around his hips, my fingers laced together behind his shoulders. He holds me tight as we rock into one another. We breathe one another’s breath, staving off orgasm until the rocking becomes too much. Heat builds in my core, and I tumble headfirst into ecstasy. I lose myself to his lips on my neck, his full cock coming inside me, and his arms circling my body, holding me as if I were the most precious thing on earth.

Sated, we stay like that for a long time—kissing, touching, exploring one another with our hands and lips, as if we have all the time in the world.

Eventually, Elio falls back on the bed. He discards the condom, tossing it in the trash, then pulls me on top of him. I link my hands with his, and he brings them to his lips before kissing all the way up my arm to my clavicle. “You were kidding about that quitting it part, right?”

“Well, that depends.”

“On what?” His expression is serious.

“On what you’re cooking for breakfast.”

Elio presses a kiss to my shoulder. “Anything that will make you stay.”

“Pancakes, bacon, pastry. Anything with carbs,” I say, grinning like a fool because for the first time in weeks, I don’t have someone breathing down my neck telling me I’m not allowed to eat this or that. After all, weren’t Sundays invented for vices?

“Done.”

I laugh as his breath washes over my neck. “For the record, I would have stayed for

boxedcereal.”

“And I would have made every recipe in my arsenal to keep you here.”

I smile and tilt my head so that his lips meet mine. The kiss quickly turns from soft and sensual to an all-out blaze, igniting our desire for one another. Once again, our hands and lips are everywhere, and there is no place in the world I would rather be.

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Romy

Asleepy moan escapes me, and I slide my hand across the top of the sheet, snuggling closer to the warm body beside me. “Goodmorning.”

“Morning, Womy,” a small, giggly voice replies. A tiny arm tightens around my waist and that’s when I realize that I’m not cuddled up to Elio at all. Instead, I’m snuggling his four-year-old daughter.

“Coco!” I sit bolt upright and remember too late that I’m naked. “Oh myGod.”

“You have big boobies,” she says.

I laugh in exasperation and pull the sheet toward me, unseating her from her place on top of it. Coco giggles again as her tiny body bounces all over the bed.

“Did you have a sweep-over wif my daddy the wholenight?”

“Er . . . yes, but he slept downstairs.”

“But he was in bed wif you when I came in at darktime.”

All the color drains from my face. I am so not ready for this conversation. Not before coffee. I adore this little girl, and I meant what I told Elio—I’m all in—but we haven’t discussed telling Coco. We didn’t discuss anything past “Don’t stop!”

“Did you have sweep-overs wif Uncie Marc too?” Her big earnest eyes stare up at

me as if it's the most innocent question in the world.

"Oh God." Heat floods my cheeks, and I bury my head in my hands.

"Coco, that's enough." Elio stands in the doorway. His smile is barely there, but his eyes tell me he finds his daughter's question somewhat amusing.

Nothing about this is remotely funny.

"Daddy!" Coco sits up. Her dark chocolate curls have formed a bird's nest in the middle of the night. It bobs, taking on a life of its own as she shakes her head. "Womy and me were hawving big-girl talks. You're interwupting."

"Oh, really?" Elio says, shooting me a questioning look. I shake my head emphatically. "Well, don't let me stop you. I just came to tell you that your pancakes and babycino are ready."

"Ooh, cino," she crows, and her words are flecked by the most adorable Italian accent the way her Aunt Bianca and Sophia speak. Coco jumps off the bed and runs through the door. "Later, Womy."

A startled laugh escapes me as I watch her go and then turn my attention back to her father. He's doing some watching of his own, his dark eyes hooded with lust. A thrill runs through me, and my insides tighten.

"And you, young lady, I have coffee for you," he says, crossing the room and climbing on the bed.

"Really?"

"Mmmhmm." Elio crawls up the length of my body and lowers his hips, wedging

himself into the space between my thighs. “And sausage.”

“Sausage?”

“Mmm, big, thick, hot sausage.” His throaty whisper brushes the shell of my ear.

“Oh,” I moan. “Sausage is my favorite.”

“Is it now?” He pivots his hips, eliciting another moan from me as his scratchy beard brushes my neck and his teeth nibble my earlobe. My head falls back against the headboard and I bite my lip. Elio’s cock is hard as he pushes against me, the fabric of his sleep pants offering little protection against his heat.

“Yes, oh God. I love sausage.”

He chuckles, low and deep, and his hips do another full revolution. The ache in my core intensifies. The pressure of his crown against my clit turns my insides to jelly and I rock against him, seeking more, wanting more, desperate for him to slide into me. He’d meet no resistance because I’m wetter and hotter than I’ve ever been for any man.

“Are you two coming or not? You’re slower than the hare, Daddy.”

Coco’s words douse us in ice water. A second before she cried out, I was flame. I was heat, and passion, and I’m really going to have to get used to not letting this man touch me when his gorgeous daughter is awake.

“Slow and steady.” Elio sighs as he collapses against me and then presses a kiss to my neck.

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“Yeah.”

“Tell me you’ll stay another night?” he whispers, leaning up on his forearms and brushing the hair back from my face. “I’ll cook for you. I’ll do anything, but I need you to stay with us, with me. I need you tonight.”

I smile, loving the way he can be open and honest with me now. Vulnerable. “I’ll stay.”

“You will?”

“As long as you want me, I’ll stay.”

Elio’s eyes light up like it’s Christmas morning. He kisses my lips. It isn’t erotic, or even really romantic. It’s as if he needs to kiss me, like he’ll die without feeling his mouth on mine. “Come on. Your pancakes are getting cold.”

Pancakes. Elio. Awesome, awesome sex. It’s too much. “I love you.”

He stills.

Shit. I said it too soon. Oh God. I’m going to have to find a new barista, and I just got this one back.

“You . . . love me?”

Be brave, Romy. Just tell him. “Yes.”

"I love you too," he growls, then tugs me off the bed. "So fucking much."

I hold the sheet close, but it gets ripped away by his hands and shortly after, my nipple is in his mouth. He rolls his tongue around the taut flesh. He groans as he devours me, and my insides tighten. Elio's fingers slide over my body and dip between my thighs to stroke my clit. My legs shake, and between his earlier rocking, his lips on my breasts, and his fingers with their merciless teasing, I'm close to coming. Too close.

God, we can't do this with his daughter just downstairs, and the door wide open. "Wait, wait, stop. We can't do this here. Not with Coco awake."

"Fuck." He pulls away with an aggravated sigh. "God, I can't keep my hands off you."

"Well, you have to. At least for another . . ." I let my words trail off as I try to clear the fog from my head. "When do four-year-olds go to bed?"

His responding grin is perfection. "Early."

"Well, until then, you and I will both need to be patient."

"I think we've been patient enough."

I laugh. "No, we've been idiotic."

"That's true." He nods in agreement. "Okay, you gotta get dressed. I can't keep looking at you naked just a few feet from my bed and not do something about that."

"You have a shirt I could borrow?"

He crosses the room, pulls an oversized white T-shirt and a pair of cotton boxers from the wardrobe, and tosses them at me. My panties are still downstairs, so I slip into Elio's clothes. Two months ago, I never would have fit. I grab a fistful of the soft cotton and bring it to my nose. God, even his clean clothes smell amazing. I know I'll need actual clothing at some point, but for breakfast with Coco and Elio, it should suffice.

Elio lets out another exaggerated huff and shakes his head. I push him, so he'll get moving out the door. "I didn't know what to say to Coco this morning. I don't want this to be weird for her, or for her to think I'm trying to replace her mom."

"Well, to be honest, you wouldn't have to work very hard to accomplish that."

I stare quizzically at him, almost afraid to ask my next question for fear it will make things between Elio and me more complicated. "Do you see her often?"

"No. She ran out on me when Coco was just a week old. I found out my brother had been fucking my pregnant wife while living in my house."

"Oh my God, Elio. I'm so sorry. I didn't know until last night."

"It's okay. We're better off without them both," he says. "That's why I didn't make a move on you earlier. Coco and I . . . our situation is complicated. Dating me will be complicated. It'll mean making sacrifices. It'll mean knowing my daughter comes first."

I nod in earnest. "I understand, and I would never hurt Coco. I know she needs to come first."

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He doesn't need to worry about me, because as much as I love Elio, I would rather be without him than hurt that little girl. I don't understand how a mother could run out on her own child. How she could run out on Elio. Or worse, betray him by sleeping with his brother.

Guilt stabs at my heart. He must have thought I was a monster showing up at his grandparents' house yesterday. "I'm so sorry. I had no idea he was your brother."

Elio cups my cheek and presses a kiss to the tip of my nose. "I know. And don't worry about it being weird for Coco. She already loves you, and she'll sure as hell tell you if she doesn't."

"I'd expect nothing less from your daughter."

"Well, she takes after her aunt." He wraps his arms around me as we walk toward the stairs.

The house smells amazing, and I'm starved. I hurry downstairs like a new bride at a Badgley Mischka clearance. Before I can get too far, Elio pulls me against him from behind and kisses my neck. His beard tickles my sensitive flesh. I shriek and attempt to pull away as we enter the kitchen and dining room, but he won't allow it.

Coco glances at us and rolls her eyes as she squirts more syrup on an already drowning blueberry pancake.

"Gwoss," she says, setting the bottle on the table.

Elio takes my hand and leads me over to the long bench seat. “Hey, I plan on kissing Romy a lot more, so you better get used to it.”

I cringe, worrying my bottom lip with my teeth because if Coco doesn’t want me around her daddy, it might devastate me.

She rolls her inscrutable gaze over me from knee to nose and scrunches up her little face. “Boys have cooties, you know?”

“That’s right,” Elio says, proudly beaming like an idiot. “And don’t you ever forget it.”

I shake my head and sit beside him, opposite his beautiful daughter, and as she mirrors my exasperation and shakes her head at her father, I know we’re going to get along just fine.

28

Elio

I’d do anything for the woman I love.

Maybe that makes me sound pussy-whipped, or like a complete and utter sap, but I spend all my days thinking about her, dreaming of orgasms, sweet hot things whispered in each other’s ears, and happily ever afters of the not-so-Disney variety.

Love is why I get up in the morning. The last thing I think of at night.

Well, that and my beautiful daughter.

Luckily, the two can go hand in hand—and are often hand in hand, thanks to Romy’s

love for mychild.

I flick the coffee machine on. The familiar hum fills the kitchen as I get to work, pulling out the flour, mixing bowl, eggs, strawberries and banana. Coco's out walking with Sophia, and I promised them breakfast when they returned. I just happened to feast on Romy first, setting me a little behind in myplans.

Kissing along her neck, her sweet tits, and lower, lowerstill. . .

Oh, fuck yeah. Waking her up with my mouth is one of my favorite things to do. I only wish it happened more often. While she spends most nights of the week here, she still insists on returning home every now and then to do menial things like check the mail. Water plants. Do laundry. Tasks I could do forher.

Tasks I want to do forher.

I crack the eggs into the well I've made in the bowl of dry ingredients, then add a splash of milk. I take the whisk and begin to beat. Yeah, I have an electric one, but some things are just better by hand. More personal. More . . .connection.

My mind gets lost in thoughts of other things I like to do with my hands forRomy.

“Do you know what I love most about having sleepovers with a man who owns a bakery?”

Romy.

I turn from my spot at the kitchen counter, keeping the whisk securely in the bowl in front of me. My mouth waters. Even hidden behind her silk robe, that body has the power to take my breathaway.

“Is it the fact I have great buns?” I ask, since she’s still waiting for an answer and I’m starting to doubt my willpower to finish this batch of pancakes if I get lost in thoughts of what’s under that mulberry material for one more minute.

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“No.” She walks farther into the kitchen, stopping right behind me. The heat of her body sends a rush through me as one hand hovers over my ass. “Although you’re right. They are pretty great.”

I let the whisk fall loose into the bowl, then turn around. One small step and any space between us vanishes. I curl my arm around her waist, jerking that body closer. A small gasp escapes her lips. “Is it because I own my own business, and that makes you hot . . .” I lean in, pulling away the lapels of her robe to reveal her décolletage, “. . . under the collar?”

“No,” she says, and this time her voice is a little breathier, a little less certain than before.

“I see.” I press a kiss to the shallow of her throat, take a deep breath in. Champagne. She smells like champagne, and maybe I’m drunk on her because pancakes be damned. I can’t take this anymore. “So it must be the discount I give you on your morning coffee then.”

“No.” She raises her chin to meet my gaze. Lust clouds her dark eyes. “It’s not the coffee special. And besides, I believe I pay for that in other ways.” She walks her fingers up my arm, leaning close to whisper in my ear, “And today, I can pay in full.”

Lust stirs my cock to life. Oh yes, she can.

“I love that on Sundays you have time off,” she says. “And the only coffees you make are for me.”

“Well, that’s not entirely true. I do make Coco a mean babycin—” My voice is lost as Romy’s mouth reaches mine in a scorching-hot kiss full of lust, of want, of need. I tangle one hand in her hair, arching her head back to expose that creamy skin of her throat. My lips explore it, kiss it, relish it; she’s the most delicious treat and I’m enjoying every bite. I want more, more,more.

“They’ll be back any second,” I groan as my hand moves to the tie of her robe. “We don’t have long...”

“Then it’s a good thing I came prepared.”

Romy steps back, flicks the tie at her waist, and the silky material falls away. My mouth runs dry. Hotdamn.

She’s not wearing a thing. Her tits are full and glorious, the rosebud nipples peaked and demanding my attention. Her hips, her ass, the perfect curves of her waist are calling to me, demanding I explore. That hot, bare pussy needs my attention, and I can already taste her on the tip of my tongue.

In front of me is the body of a goddess, and I want to worship at her altar.

“Damn.” I shake my head. It’s been two months of bliss, yet she takes my breath away.

Every. Single. Time.

“You like what you see?” Romy’s eyes hood as she steps closer in full seductress mode.

“You know I do.” I tuck her hair behind her ear. “More than anything.”

In one swift move, I curl my hands on her butt and lift her onto the counter. The bowl of pancake mix clatters as I shove it out of the way, because breakfast be damned. There's only one thing I want to eat in this moment, and it's not the kind of meal I'll share with anyone. Mine.

I lower to my knees, my face in line with that perfect pussy, then look up at her. Her chest rises and falls fast, her breath coming in short pants of anticipation.

"Elio . . . we don't have much time. . ."

"Oh yeah?" I ask, kissing along her thighs and stopping right at the juncture. I ghost a breath over her lips, and she quivers. "So I should stop?"

"You . . . we should . . ." She shakes her head, but I see the permission in her eyes. I hear her body telling me yes, more, more, more.

I lick her, one long lick through her folds, over her clit.

She shudders. "Elio. . ."

"You were saying?" I tease. I move in again, this time gently tracing one finger over her clit, hovering in front of her core. "You want me to . . ." I lick her again, giving her everything and nothing all at once. "Stop?"

"I . . . no," she breathes. Her hands move to my hair.

"Tell me what you want, Romy," I order huskily. Her shyness slays me. My cock is hard as steel.

"I want. . ."

My tongue flicks her clit.

She groans. “I want—”

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I blow cool air over the sweet spot. Her grip in my hair turns vise-like.

“Fuck me with your mouth, Elio,” she begs, her voice, her words the hottest things I’ve ever heard. Two months is time enough for her to have grown confident when it comes to ordering me around, and I like my dirty goddess. I like her alot.

And so I do.

I feast like a starving man who hasn’t eaten for days.

I lick her fast, my tongue dancing with her clit. She moans, her pleasure so loud in the empty house, and I love the way that sounds—I can never get enough. I thrust one finger inside her, then another, another, and she’s so damn wet, so damn ready that it takes everything I have not to stand and just sink my cock into her delicious pussy, fuck her until we’re both sated, sweaty, drunk on our own sex.

But that wouldn’t be my style.

After all, why give her one orgasm when she could have two?

At least.

At least two.

I lick, and I suck. I fuck her with my mouth and my hand. The taste of her—the taste of my woman is intoxicating. It’s better than any coffee, any liquid that’s ever passed my lips. I drink like I can’t get enough.

Her moans of pleasure send bolts of lust along my spine. I reach up to cup one of her breasts, so full, so perfect in my hand, and when my fingers gently tease one nipple, she grabs the other, an erotic show all for my pleasure.

“I’m going to come,” she breathes, raspy.

“Come for me, Romy,” I urge. I hum against her clit. “Come on my mouth.”

“Elio, yes!” she screams. She thrusts against me, fucking my face with wild abandon. Her thighs tighten around my jaw. I don’t stop, don’t lessen my assault on her body as she cries my name over and over, her orgasm twisting her face into the most exquisite mask of beauty.

“Elio!” she cries one final time. She comes in my mouth, and I drink it all in as her head tips back. Her legs relax. Her breathing relaxes, those pants turning longer, smoother.

Slowing my kisses, I watch her, stare at the most beautiful woman in the world. Her lips are swollen from my mouth. Her cheeks are flushed. Her hair is wild around her shoulders, and I need her.

Now.

I stand, cupping one hand around her neck. My eyes meet hers as I tell her the one thing I love more than anything. More than coffee, more than sex—more than it all.

“I love you, Romy.”

“I love you too,” she says, reaching down to stroke my rock-hard cock.

“I love making you come,” I say, and damn it, I can’t wait to do just that again.

“Me too,” she says, her finger flicking at the top button of my jeans.

“I love you in my kitchen.” I groan as she slips her hand inside, running one finger over my tip before pushing down my clothing.

“Me too,” she breathes.

“And I love—”

She slides one hand down my shaft. It’s the sweetest torture. The most exquisite pleasure. I want more, more, and more.

But they’ll be here any minute.

And there’s something I need to say first.

“I love you in the mornings,” I groan. Fuck. I can’t stand it much longer. “Move in with me.”

She stops.

Blinks.

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Looks at me. “Wh . . . what did you just say?”

“I love you. I love you in my life, in our life. And I want you here all the time. You’re part of my family, Romy. I want you to move in with me,” I say, and why isn’t she saying yes already? “I want you to bring that laptop you’re surgically attached to, your collection of Disney movies—even that old wedding dress. I want them all here, all the time, because that means you never have to leave.”

She doesn’t say a word.

“Romy?”

“Did you just . . . did you just ask me to move in with you?”

“Yes. Sophia can stay with my folks. Or she can stay here. Whatever you want. But I want you in my bed every night when I go to sleep and every morning when I wake up.” I study her face. It’s a mask of confusion. Have I read the situation wrong? Is this not what she wants?

“Knock, knock!”

Romy stills.

This time, her face turns white.

“Hello?” the voice calls again.

Romy freezes. “Isthat. . .?”

I nod. Now, my romantic gesture seems like the worst idea ever. “Yes.It’s—”

“Do you have help to open the door here? Or should we just come in?” Romy’s mother calls from the entryway.

“Mom!” Romy squeaks. She slides off the counter, pulls her robe around her. “You invited my parents for breakfast? And I’m in myrobe?” she whisper-hisses, and I shrug.

“I thought it’d be nice. Give you the opportunity to have them in your space on your terms.” I shrug, reaching down to pull at my jeans.

“Hi! You must be Romy’s parents. I’m Bianca, Elio’s sister,” B says from the front door. Did they just hear their daughter’s climax?

I can’t help the slight puff of pride that courses through me. Can’t say I care if they did.

“The kitchen’s just through—” B stops abruptly. She looks at me, fastening the top button of my jeans, Romy, her cheeks as red as the strawberries on the counter as she clutches her robe. Her lips twist in a smirk, but thank God for my little sister, she turns around, stopping Romy’s parents at the pass. “Why don’t I show you the living room first?”

“The living room?” Nico’s voice reaches us. “What kind of tour guide are you?”

“One who actually knows her way around,” B replies.

“I know my way around,” Nico counters.

“Not from what I’ve heard the ladies say,” B says. Romy’s mother gasps.

Romy giggles, lacing her hands around my waist.

I rest my forehead against hers. “Surprise,” I whisper.

“I have to say, I am totally surprised.” She laughs.

“Ciao,” I hear Mom call from the door, and I grin. “I’ve brought some of Nonna’s love knots for you. And more strawberries. And—”

“And everything but your brother,” Dad grumps, and I smile.

“I wanted to invite everyone you loved here so we could tell them the good news together. If you want to. If moving in with me, with Coco, works for you,” I say, our foreheads still resting against each other. “I know we haven’t had the most traditional start to a relationship. And I know that when you planned how this moment would occur, it probably wasn’t with a guy who had a child, a family, but—”

“Daddy! Womy!” Coco squeals. She rushes into the kitchen, wrapping her arms around our legs. “Fia said we had to wait longer, but I’m starving. Are the pancakes ready now?”

“Yes,” Romy says. She presses a kiss to my lips, and it’s the best kiss we’ve ever shared. It’s happening here, with our friends and family in the next room. And it’s going to happen again and again and again. She’s the love of my life, and no miscommunication will ever get in the way of that again.

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There will be muffins though, because they're her favorite.

And she's mine.

Epilogue

ROMY

Dear lovers,

When planning your wedding, it's good to start early. Leaving things till the last minute can result in disappointment and rob you of the joy you deserve on your special day.

Sometimes, though, things that don't go according to plan make the best plans of all. Sometimes, you may think you want something in life, only to discover that you want something else.

When I started this blog, all I wanted was to get married. It was like a benchmark for success in my life—one I couldn't see past.

Now, I'm not married, but I have something else. I have a man who loves me. I have a little girl who'll need someone like me in her future, and I can't wait to be there for her when she does. For now, I'm content with giving her all the love she could ever want, and a new member of her family. She doesn't know it yet, but she will soon be hearing the pitter-patter of little feet.

I'm starting a new era in my life, and while I'll always love weddings, love, and you, my beautiful readers, I love my man, my little girl, and myself, too. And nothing's more important than that.

Love,

Romy

I hit Submit on the blog post. Done.

Leaning down, I ruffle the fur of the Labrador's neck. I can't wait to introduce this little guy to Coco.

I swivel in my new office chair and stare at the boxes in Elio's room—our room—that I've yet to unpack. There are a few pieces of clothing that I still have to hang in the closet, but there's one that just doesn't belong here. My wedding dress. I hop up off the chair and walk to the bed. Unzipping the white protective covering, I pull out the dress that I'd planned to wear while marrying Jeremy and decide I can't stand the sight of it. I mean . . . crystals and a train? What the hell was I thinking?

This dress isn't me. This dress is the girl I wanted to be, but as I crumple up several thousand dollars' worth of fabric, failed hopes and dreams, I realize that girl is long gone, and this dress needs to go too.

Fueled by excitement, I grab my phone and head downstairs, followed closely by an over-excited puppy whose teeth nip at the gown in my hands as it trails across the floor. Apparently, my mood is contagious. I hurry through the kitchen, collecting one more necessary supply from the junk drawer—matches. Elio and Coco will be back from the store soon with hot dogs to grill, but I have other plans.

My phone buzzes with a message, and I swipe to open it.

Emma: We're still on for this barbecue tomorrow night, right?

Ha. I head out onto the deck and empty the bottle of lighter fluid on the coals. I kiss the dress goodbye, throw it on the Webber, light the match, and watch it burn. Laughter bubbles up my throat as I snap a few pictures on my phone. These will make an awesome blog post. And Emma will lose it when she finds out what I've done.

I tap out a quick reply to her text from before.

Romy: About that barbecue . . . we may want to eat out.

Emma: That's what she said!

Romy: Get your mind out of the gutter. I'll pick you up at six.

Emma: I thought you wanted me to try Elio's sausage?

Romy: *glares at you*

Emma: Okay, okay! Mind out of the gutter. See you tomorrow, killjoy.

Smiling, I grab the bottle of lighter fluid, snatch up the puppy, and head into the kitchen. Elio and Coco come around the corner and the little girl screams.

"Womy got a puppy?"

Her daddy's eyes are wide with what I'm sure is shock, but they're not focused on the new addition to the family—they're focused on the fire behind me.

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“Correction, little lady,” I say with a huge grin. “You have a puppy.”

Her jaw drops. The little guy squirms in my arms, desperate to get to Coco and no doubt see what she’s all about. I set him down on his feet and he runs to her, licking her face as she squeals.

“Er, babe? Why is there a bonfire on our backdeck?”

I set the lighter fluid on the kitchen counter and wrap my arms around him. “Because I just set my wedding dress on fire.”

He blinks. I can see the shock isn’t registering, and then his eyes widen just a fraction and he pulls back to study my face. “But you love that dress.”

“No, I loved the idea of that dress, but you know what?” I kiss his lips as he finally relaxes and wraps his arms around me. “I got something better than the wedding I always wanted.”

Those deep brown eyes study mine. “Really?”

I nod. “I got a family, a place, and people to belong to.”

He kisses the tip of my nose, his beard tickling my face. “Hell yes, you did.”

“And you know what else?”

“What?” he asks in a low, rumbling whisper.

“Life couldn’t be more perfect.”

Elio kisses my lips. It’s sweet and chaste, but his eyes tell me it was more for Coco’s benefit because the kind of kisses he wants to give are definitely not suitable for four-year-old consumption.

When he pulls away, I glance at the adorable kid in question. Coco and her new puppy are sharing a few kisses of their own. She has what I assume are happy tears streaming down her cheeks as he sits on her tummy and licks the saltwater from her face to a soundtrack of giggles.

I smile to myself and turn in Elio’s arms so that I’m facing the deck. The bonfire is still roaring, the black smoke rising high into the chilly, winter air. “We may want to eat out tonight.”

“I’m gonna be eating something out tonight, and it’s not food,” Elio whispers, as he nuzzles my neck.

A chuckle escapes me. I lean back into his warmth and watch the last shred of the old Romy Love go up in smoke. Maybe someday Elio will get down on one knee and ask me to be his wife. One day I might put on a new dress and walk down the aisle toward this incredible man and his unforgettable daughter. We’ll make this thing official, but even with his ring on my finger, I don’t see how life could get more perfect than it is right now.

Between miscommunications, muffins, and madness, the path that led us here wasn’t exactly smooth, but now? Now I have everything I ever wanted: a child, a family, and a hot baker who can’t get enough of my buns.