

'Sarah Adams writes
books with heart and soul'
HANNAH GRACE

IN YOUR DREAMS



SARAH ADAMS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
BEG, BORROW, OR STEAL AND PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

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‘Adams charms with this adorable mismatched romance . . . as light and
catchy as a pop song, this sweet romance is sure to please’

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About the Author

Sarah Adams is the author of *The Rule Book*, *Practice Makes Perfect*, *When in Rome*, and *The Cheat Sheet*. Born and raised in Nashville, Tennessee, she loves her family and warm days. Sarah has dreamed of being a writer since she was a girl but finally wrote her first novel when her daughters were napping and she no longer had any excuses to put it off. Sarah is a coffee lover, a mom of two daughters, married to her best friend, and an indecisive introvert. Her hope is to write stories that make readers laugh, maybe even cry – but always leave them happier than when they started reading.

To learn more, visit: www.authorsarahadams.com or follow Sarah on Instagram: [@authorsarahadams](https://www.instagram.com/authorsarahadams/).

By Sarah Adams

*The Match
The Enemy*

*The Off-Limits Rule
The Temporary Roomie*

*The Cheat Sheet
The Rule Book*

*When in Rome
Practice Makes Perfect
Beg, Borrow, or Steal
In Your Dreams*

IN YOUR DREAMS

SARAH ADAMS



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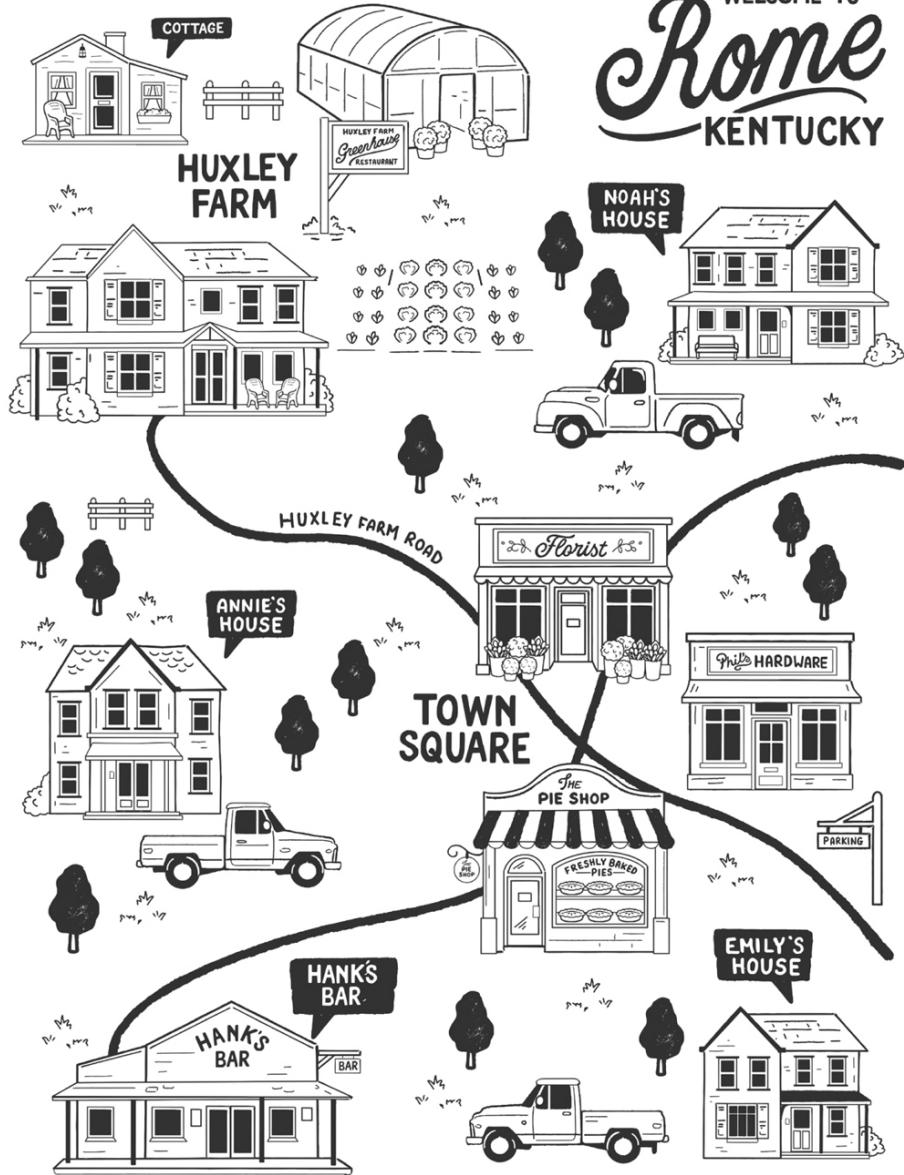
[Discover some more of Sarah Adams' delicious rom-coms](#)

This one is for the wild child.
The passionate and indulgent.
Those who burn with big emotion and dreams,
afraid no one can really see you behind the flames.
May you never burn out or fear destruction, but
surround yourself with the strongest kindling.

Success is like reaching an important birthday and finding you're exactly
the same person.

—Audrey Hepburn

WELCOME TO
Rome
KENTUCKY



AUTHOR'S NOTE AND CONTENT WARNINGS

I'm so excited for you to dive into *In Your Dreams!* Before you begin, I want to share a few notes to help make your reading experience comfortable and enjoyable.

This story includes mild themes of grief and heart attack, as well as emotional trauma that leads to anxiety and an on-page panic attack. As someone who personally lives with panic attacks, I approached this scene with care and sensitivity and kept it brief.

Additionally, please note that there are consensual on-page intimacy scenes in [Chapters 29](#) and [35](#), along with adult language and themes throughout.

With love and happy reading,

Sarah

CHAPTER ONE

Madison

NEW YORK
101 DAYS UNTIL I FAIL . . .

I have a personal vendetta against the phrase *give it your best and forget the rest*. That motto only works for a select few—the naturally gifted and the “somehow I always come out on top” success stories. I’ve never been a member of either club.

Instead, here are some of life’s rules, both silly and serious, that I’ve always found to be true:

1. If I jump off the roof of the shed with an umbrella, gravity will definitely take over, and I will end up with at least a broken leg.
2. A good cry pairs well with almost any emotion: happy or sad.
3. Nothing beats a classic chocolate chip cookie.
4. Every family has one person who is considered The Failure—and in my family, that person is me.

No matter how hard I have tried to shake off the label these past thirty years, it always seems to pull me back in. (Or more honestly, I jump headfirst right into its comforting embrace.) And though my three siblings would never call me that to my face, I know that deep down they think it. (Because it’s true.)

At first, my inevitable misdeeds always present themselves as sparkling, hopeful opportunities. A bright shining star on the horizon. *Cut your own hair; little six-year-old Madison. It’ll look so cute.* (It did not. I looked like Weird Barbie.) *Improvise your lines on the opening night of your theater*

performance, twelve-year-old Madison. It'll take everyone by surprise and make you look so funny and creative. (It was a disaster. No one laughed and my fellow castmates were furious at me for weeks for ruining the production.) *Spike the punch at prom, seventeen-year-old Madison. Everyone will love you for it.* (Well, they did love me for it, but it also got me detention for the rest of the school year and community service on the weekends.) And last but not least, *Quit your secure elementary school teaching job, adult Madison. Go to culinary school in New York and wow everyone with your high-profile chef position.* (Or develop anxiety and panic attacks that keep me from ever wanting to step foot in a professional kitchen ever again.)

And when I fail, which is often, the fallout is almost always bigger than the big bright idea that started it.

I should have listened to my gut and quit culinary school a year ago, like I'd planned before I got everyone's hopes up that I'd actually follow through with something. The city was panning out to be nothing like I'd expected, and I missed my little small-town home in a way I never anticipated.

I went back to Rome, Kentucky, intending to stay for good. But Emily, in her wise older-sister love, encouraged me to stick it out. She reminded me of my dream and how much I've wanted this, adding that I would be full of regret if I quit halfway through. It was a classically moving pep talk from someone who always succeeds in the end.

But I am The Failure—so even after returning to New York with a motivational speech under my wings and warmth in my heart, I still messed it all up.

I hoped to graduate as a badass chef like my idol, Zora Brookes. She was a small-town chef who cooked her way to two Michelin stars in New York City. She's basically the Catwoman of chefs, if you will. Efficient. Cunning. Outfitted in full leathers. (Just kidding about the leathers—though, from the photos of her in the *Bon Appetit* feature, she could pull off the look.) I had dreamed of following in her footsteps.

Instead, I'm a lost alley cat, emerging from behind the dumpster with matted fur, a broken spirit, and a fractured heart.

For possibly the first time in her life, Emily was wrong. This dream might not be for me—and I don't know how much longer I can keep hoping it is.

Reading my mind, Josie, an early-twenties classmate sitting beside me, leans in and whispers, “What are your plans for after graduation?”

My metal chair squeaks as I adjust to find a comfier position. “Red wine and a sexy book. You?”

“I didn’t literally mean after *this* graduation,” she says with a laugh, gesturing to the ceremony we are currently part of.

What Josie doesn’t know, and what I’ll never admit to anyone, is that I barely made it here. I was one percentage point—*really let that sink in*—above failing my final evaluations. The only reason I get to walk across the stage tonight? Early in the semester, my instructor offered extra credit: Anyone willing to scrub down countertops and mop the kitchen floors after labs for a month would earn bonus points toward their final grade. If I’ve learned anything in my thirty years, it’s that if your name is Madison Walker, you always take the extra credit. And this time it kept me from flunking out altogether.

Well, that and the lemon thyme risotto I cooked in the third semester that made Chef Cobalt stop talking for a full sixty seconds. Which, if you knew Chef Cobalt, was basically a standing ovation. That was back before the panic attacks really started.

“I mean after the ceremony,” says Josie, her amber eyes sparkling as she pulls her warm-brown, waist-length box braids over one shoulder. “Did you decide on a restaurant to work at?”

I nearly laugh at her implication that I have *choices*. As if restaurants all over the city are clamoring to have me work in their kitchens.

Aside from a weeklong lab exercise we partnered on early in our second semester, Josie and I haven’t interacted enough to be friends. And we didn’t intern in the same kitchen either. If we had, she would have known better than to ask me that question. Because as it currently stands, I’m considering walking away from the culinary life altogether and finding yet another career path. Now I can put *former fourth-grade teacher* and *culinary school failure* on my résumé.

The saddest truth, however, is that even if I still wanted to find a job in this industry, I doubt Chef Davis would give me the recommendation I need to get a good one. Most likely, he’d deter any interested restaurants from hiring me.

I press my lips against a smile and opt for the shortest answer I can give. “Not yet—how about you?”

Josie is like Emily. Meaning, she succeeds in everything she does. She was born for this kind of place—high expectations, pressure, perfection. The kind of girl who didn’t tense up when receiving a grade. I bet she used a mandolin slicer in the womb. So it’s not a shock when she rattles off the top restaurants (by the dozen) who have already given her a call-back interview.

Suddenly, I’m glad I never pursued a friendship with her, even if I *really* needed a friend around here. But I already have one Emily in my life, and though I love her to bits, I couldn’t stomach having another person to compare myself with.

Josie is mid victory speech when my phone goes off in my lap, buzzing wildly as my sister group chat comes alive. “Sorry to interrupt you,” I tell Josie, not actually sorry at all. “But I need to read this text.”

Her feelings aren’t hurt. She turns her attention to the guy sitting beside her and I zero in on my phone.

EMILY: I’m bored. What’s everyone doing?

ANNIE: Staring at Will because he’s so hot I can’t stand it.

EMILY: WILL GRIFFIN! How many times do I have to tell you the sister group chat is sacred and you are NOT allowed in here?!

ANNIE: Sorry. Annie’s in the shower. I’ll go get her. 😊

Ever since Will and Annie eloped a few months ago, Will has been angling to gain a place in our sibling group chats. Emily reminds him—repeatedly and sternly—that he’ll never be invited. But I think this is her way of punishing him for giving in to Annie’s desire to elope, telling no one until after it was done. (Personally, I support it. Annie hates attention, and her little sneaky church wedding with Will was perfect for her.)

AMELIA: Cool. I guess that means we won’t be hearing from her for a while . . . and I’m not busy. Just watching Jeopardy with Noah.

EMILY: As every world-famous pop star does on a Saturday night.

It's a wild story how my brother met Amelia, aka Rae Rose, world-famous pop star. But in a nutshell, her car broke down in his front yard, and she hid at his house for a few weeks to get a break from fame. They fell in love, *bing bang boom*—they're married. She loves Rome and the life of normalcy it offers her when she's not on tour, so she and Noah live there together full time. And we love having her in the family. I've never met someone so down-to-earth. Hand to my heart, I'm more conceited than she is.

MADISON: You small-towners are embarrassingly boring.

AMELIA: Oh yeah? Name one thing in the big city that's more fun than eating chicken pot pie while your husband rubs your feet after getting back from a four-month-long tour?

My heart jolts. Because as much as I'd like to say I don't want that kind of life, I really, *really* do.

When I was home a year ago, right before I came back to New York, is when I first experienced the shift. I saw what Emily and Jack, and all my siblings, had—and for once, I thought it looked nice. Wonderful even. I decided I was going to change some things when I got back to New York.

If only it had worked out like I planned.

MADISON: You haven't lived until you've known the thrill of clutching your purse against your chest and trying to make it home after dark without getting murdered.

EMILY: Maddie . . . are you trying to ruin my night with anxiety over your safety? Because it's working.

I glance up, noting that the guy three seats down from me has already been called. It's almost my turn.

MADISON: Sorry, Em! No anxiety necessary tonight. I'm actually having a quiet night at home.

EMILY: YOU NEVER STAY IN! WHAT'S WRONG? ARE YOU SICK?! DO YOU NEED ME TO FLY OUT AND BRING YOU SOUP?

ANNIE: I'm here!! Sorry you're sick Maddie!! What do you have?

MADISON: Omg, I'm fine! Just had to block out the night to take an everything-shower. Speaking of, gotta go rinse off the self-tanner!

I lock my phone as the dean calls my name over the microphone. I stand and make my way up the stairs as a sea of strangers watch me cross the stage in my white chef's coat, shake hands with the dean, then receive the chef's hat that I don't deserve but am awarded anyway because I disinfected the counters a few times.

There're only a few sparse claps in the audience for me from a few of my classmates since I lied and told my family that the Culinary Institute of New York doesn't do a formal graduation ceremony. If I had told them the truth, they would have flown out and cheered obnoxiously loud for me. Probably with a glitterized poster board displaying the phrase YES CHEF in bold font. But I didn't want that. It would have been too difficult for me to fake my way through a night of celebration that I hadn't truly earned.

Yes, I technically graduated, but it doesn't mean the same thing for me as it does for everyone else who has walked across this stage tonight. In my case, it only means I get to leave this place with a sliver of my dignity still intact.

I exit the auditorium, breaking away from the graduating students who will go prepare their last meal in the school's kitchens and then present it to their loved ones. It's tradition—one that I won't be upholding.

I find a back door and follow it out into an alley that takes me to the street. When I pass a public trash bin, I take off my undeserved cap and shove it onto the mountain of rotting fast food bags and god knows what else before walking away as quickly as possible.

The more distance I put between me and the building, the more my eyes burn. I can't cry yet. I *won't* cry yet. I need to get through a four-minute walk to the station, take two quick trains, and then a five-minute-ish walk back to my old brownstone apartment—and *then* I can let the tears fall.

All I want is to remove my contacts from my eyes, sink into some stretchy pants, curl up in a little ball, and sob my way through the night—and tomorrow I'll figure out what the hell I'm going to do with my life.

Rome, Kentucky, however much I want it to be, is not an option. I can't bring myself to sleep on my siblings' couches while I figure out how I'm going to make money. I can't look any of my wildly successful sisters in the eye as I tell them I have to start over again because all I gained from school is a meaningless diploma and an aversion to industrial kitchens.

Finally, I make it back and get through the door of my small, old Brooklyn brownstone apartment. I drop my purse on the counter, feeling a fresh sob cooking behind my eyes. And that's when I notice my roommate's closed door and signature black scrunchie around the knob, indicating she's got a guy in there, and if I'm around, I should wear headphones all night.

One point for Paper-Thin Walls. Zero for Madison Walker.

Even the loud hum of our leaky window unit usually isn't enough to drown out the sounds of her sexual escapades.

I wish I could say I was happy for Bryce, but she's a terrible roommate (which says a lot, coming from me). Works from home as a graphic designer, so she's *always* here. Never picks up after herself. Listens to her reality TV shows at full volume. Leaves clumps of hair in the shower drain and pasted to the tile walls. But by far the worst thing about her is that she has a guy over almost every other night. Normally I'm the first person to celebrate a woman's sexual fulfillment, but after two long years of this, I'm ready to bust into her room and scream, *Can you watch HGTV for like one night, please?!* I guess this is what I get for taking the freakishly cheap lease in the better part of town.

Bryce owns this apartment (her grandfather paid it off before leaving it to her) and I rent her second bedroom. Apparently, she's had issues in the past with other renters complaining about her . . . lifestyle. But instead of changing her ways, she lowers the rent a little more each time since that money is just a bonus for her.

Tonight, I only needed a few hours to fall apart in my room without hearing her mating with some guy who grunts like a caveman, but I guess that's too much to ask. So I retreat to my own space, hoping that—for once—it will feel like home. But when I shut the door behind me, all that greets me is claustrophobia. Opening the window won't help either. It faces the wall of another faded brick apartment building.

For the millionth time this week, my heart aches to go home. To the place I took for granted. To the green grass and blue sky and fresh air. To my sisters and our Audrey Hepburn movie nights.

I see Sammy, my tortoise, chomping leaves in his plastic enclosure with a hot-pink ventilated lid, and wonder if he's as claustrophobic as I am. But supposedly, living in his enclosure is what's best for him right now while I help him heal. The unfortunate irony is that New York is what cracked both of our shells. If neither of us ever stepped foot in this damn city in the first place, we'd both still be whole.

A familiar rhythmic thumping sound beats against my wall, shaking my dresser, where Sammy lives. His enclosure becomes a mobile home as it bumps its way across the surface. I reach it right before it plummets off the edge and catch it like a newborn baby.

I can't live here any longer.

A breath trembles from between my lips and I know what I have to do. It's time to call my sister and fess up. The pep talk didn't work. I still hate it here, I'm not sure I ever want to cook again, and I don't know what to do with my life now.

There was a time when cellphone calls wouldn't connect in Rome, Kentucky; but thankfully, service has come a long way in the last two years and you can reach almost every corner of my hometown now.

I plop down onto my bed with Sammy and his plastic house perched on my lap as I dial Emily's number. It rings and rings, and when it goes to voicemail panic wells in my chest. I'm drowning in here and I need her tether to pull me back to dry land.

With blurry, tear-filled eyes, I try calling her boyfriend, Jack. He'll answer, and most likely she's with him anyway, since they spend every waking second together now that they live under the same roof.

It's going to be okay. Emily will fix me.

The call rings several times, and just when I think there's no hope, the line connects.

I'm greeted with a deep "Hello?"

But . . . that's not Jack's voice.

I form my mouth around the word *hi*, but then decide to double-check my phone screen.

Shit—*shit, shit, shit!*

I called the wrong *J* name.

Apparently, I'm now on the phone with James Huxley.

CHAPTER TWO

Madison

I've known James my entire life, but this might be the first time I've ever heard his voice over the phone. Our parents were best friends until mine died shortly after my eighth birthday when a freak storm claimed their lives during a camping trip. From then on, Ruth and Martin Huxley kept us safely tucked into their family.

James and my older brother, Noah, grew up more like brothers than friends, and so, by default, we're friends too. But the kind where he's four years older than me, so I had a ridiculous crush on him while growing up, and he mostly found me annoying. Had a thing for his younger brother too—but that was different.

My crush went away eventually (out of necessity) and now, as adults, we both enjoy pissing the other one off as much as possible. But in a fun, good-natured sort of way.

I haven't had much contact with James since I moved to New York, though. We don't have that kind of friendship. I see him every time I go home to visit because, like I said, he's close with our family, but we never text or talk once I'm outside of Rome's city limits. Which is probably why I'm having trouble forming words right now.

"Hello?" he asks again. "You there?"

I pull myself together and attempt to sound less tearful. "Hi. Yes. Hello."

There's some sort of rustling in the background of his call. I wonder if he can hear the thumping and grunting in mine.

"Who is this?" he asks carefully.

See. He doesn't even have my number saved in his phone. Proof that we never talk. Proof that he has no intention of wanting to talk to me either.

Embarrassing that I used to hope I'd marry him someday. That desire ended a long time ago, but still.

I try to clear the shake from my voice. "This is the president of the United States. I'm calling to inform you that the old Carhartt hat you wear every day is gross and needs to be thrown out. It's a matter of state emergency."

"Madison?"

I smile weakly. "Hi. I'm impressed you recognized my voice."

"I recognized your humor," he says, sounding mildly amused. "Why are you calling?"

A longtime participant of the friends-by-default club, he's as confused to hear me over the phone as I am to hear him.

Unfortunately, his question seems to have tugged my emotions back to the surface. I'm frantically blinking away tears, hoping he won't notice anything different in my tone. "Oh—yeah . . ." *Unintentional sniffle.* "I was trying to get ahold of Jack to find Emily, and I accidentally dialed you. Sorry about that. I'll let you go. Bye."

I quickly end the call, toss my phone down beside me, and move Sammy's home to the mattress so I can cry into my hands. *I hate it here.* I hate the intermittent pounding against my wall, I hate the horns constantly blaring outside my window, and most of all I hate that I don't fit in here like I'd hoped.

New York was supposed to be *my* city. My own little part of the world where I would thrive with self-discovery. But now that I've lived here, all I want is to go home. The sad part is, I'm not sure I'd feel any better there either. Maybe I'm meant to be a nomad, floating from place to place, never taking root.

Not for the first time, I wonder what my mom and dad would think of me and the life I've lived so far. Would they be proud? Worried? Something tells me I'd be the daughter they leave off the list when reciting their children's achievements at their high school reunion.

My phone buzzes on the mattress against my thigh, and my body tenses when I see that it's James calling me back. I let three vibrations of indecision pass before finally answering.

"Hello?"

"Are you crying?" he asks—right to the point.

“No . . . well . . . sort of. But I’m okay. Crying is a regular occurrence for me.” I wince, wishing I hadn’t said that out loud. It’s not news to James that I’m emotionally messy, but it sucks to confess it to him so intimately on a day like today, because he is *never* a mess.

“Madison, what’s wrong? What happened?” There’s worry coloring his tone. And this is so James. He’s always been protective, even more so than my own brother in a lot of ways. Noah takes a “my sisters know what they’re doing” approach to our lives, and James is more of the “I’ll grab the shovel so I have something to bury the body with” kind of guy. It’s not special treatment. It’s how he is with everyone.

“Nothing *specifically* happened,” I lie. “But I . . .” I pause when I remember who I’m talking to. “God, sorry. No—don’t worry about it. I don’t want to take up your night. You’re probably very busy wishing on every star to wake up tomorrow with a higher IQ. I’ll keep trying Emily!” And that joke? It’s not personal either. It’s just how we talk to each other. Always have.

“Don’t you know by now I’m more selfless than that? If there’s a shooting star, I’m wishing for you to finally get a good sense of humor.” I smile into the phone, and before I can say anything else, he adds in a softer, more subdued tone, “I’m not busy, Madison.” But a horse whinnies in the background, indicating he’s in the barn.

“It sounds like you’re working.”

It’s after eight P.M. Sort of late for James to still be doing farm chores. Especially since he rarely even does the barn duties anymore. His farm is ninety percent produce, but he has a few horses and dairy cows just for fun.

“I am. One of my guys called in sick today,” he says with strain in his voice, like he’s tossing something heavy. “I took on his jobs, so I’m getting finished a little later than normal. Putting away Clover’s tack now.” He sounds tired.

“That’s the definition of *busy*. I’ll let you go.”

This entire conversation is weird. Talking to James about what’s going on in my life would be even weirder.

I mean, yes, I often wear one of his shirts, but that was technically an accident. I found it at Noah’s place at some point and thought it looked comfy, so I stole it—not even realizing it belonged to James. He knows I

have it because he saw me wearing it when I was home last year, but I informed him he would never get it back and he seemed fine with that. Because at the end of the day, we're friendly. But making him hear my sob story over the phone? That feels like a step too far.

"Since when do you give a shit if you're interrupting me or not? Stop trying to get off the phone and either tell me now what the hell is wrong, or tell me to my face after I get on a plane and show up at your door." *See . . . he's a shovel guy.* I wish I could say it didn't give me butterflies, but it really does. Only baby ones though. Little inconsequential flutters.

The bumping against my wall intensifies again and I look over at my dresser just in time to lean in and catch an unlit candle before it tumbles off. "My roommate is having sex."

There's a long, understandable pause.

James clears his throat. "And that's . . . upsetting . . . you?"

I squint my eyes shut. "Well, I do feel bad that Sammy is having to listen to it *again*."

"Who's Sammy?"

"My turtle. Sorry—*tortoise*. He doesn't have fins."

"You have a turtle?" he asks and again, another grunt pushes through his voice, accompanied by the sound of metal jingling. I picture him removing a saddle and hanging it on the wall. Oddly, this mental image is comforting and soothes a little of the ache in my chest. I know exactly where James is standing in the barn. I know what it smells like. I know that if he takes roughly fifteen steps to the left, he'll be outside and staring up at the dark, inky sky, and there will be a thousand glittering stars.

I can't see the stars very well in New York. Only one or two here and there. Something I never expected would bother me.

"*Tortoise*," I correct. "I found him half-squashed in Central Park. So I rescued him from the wide-open space and now he lives in plastic captivity with a pink Band-Aid on his shell."

"Every reptile's dream."

Obviously, it was more involved than that. I took him to a vet. They did the official mending and told me he'd need to be kept safe for about six months while he healed. Truthfully, though, I'm scared to let him go again. Maybe New York isn't what he thought it would be either.

“I’ll let him go when he’s ready. But for now he gets to enjoy a never-ending supply of top-of-the-line leaves.”

“You’re president of the United States and a saint. You’ve really changed since you left Rome.”

Not as much as I would have liked.

And then the thumping sounds are not all that’s filling the air. Bryce and her date are vocally identifying where they’re at in their naked choreography.

“Geez, you weren’t kidding about your roommate,” James says. “I don’t think poor Sammy is coming out of this one uncorrupted.”

“His therapy is going to be expensive.” I lie back on my mattress and stare at the ceiling, pretending I’m looking up at the stars above Huxley Farm.

“Is that really why you’re crying? Are you . . . in love with your roommate or something?”

“Oh god no!” This actually makes me laugh, which feels so good. I haven’t laughed in a few days. *Weeks?* Maybe months, honestly. “Even if I wasn’t solely into guys, she’s a miserable person and I think I hate her? She’s so messy, and it’s been hard going from living with my sisters and our special dynamic of chaos to sharing a tiny apartment with this stranger who I can’t stand but don’t want to get rid of because at least she’s not a murderer, you know?”

“She must really be messy if you—the chaos gremlin—are commenting on it.”

“Rude.”

“It’s just a fact,” he says easily. “How many cups are on your bedside table right now?”

My eyes slide to the surface in question. “None.” My response is smug.

“Bullshit. I’m guessing . . .” He sounds like he’s squinting and, knowing James, cupping the bill of his hat. “Four?”

“You couldn’t be more wrong.”

“Six?” He pauses.

“I would *never*.”

“Seven?!” he adds with surprised delight.

I let out a theatrical sigh. “Fine. Six glasses . . . and two old coffee mugs.”

“I knew it. Your roommate must be absolutely nasty.”

“She is!” I roll onto my stomach, feet swinging back and forth in the air behind me. “Yes, I’m messy. And chaotic. But James, she is *dirty*. Like leaving spaghetti sauce caked onto the countertop until it either rots and grows something fuzzy or I clean it. And don’t even get me started about all the used condoms in the trash can that she never takes out.”

“That’s criminal.” I hear him slide the barn doors closed and then his feet crunching over the gravel and dirt path. “Here’s what you do. Tomorrow, take the trash can and set it on her bed. Better yet, *empty it out onto* her bed.”

“I can’t do that! I still have to live with her until—”

In my silence, James asks, “Until when?”

“I actually don’t know,” I say in barely a whisper as I remember the reason for this phone call.

“Madison?” James prompts when I don’t speak again for a while. “What’s going on?”

I swallow and, for once, don’t hide the truth. “I graduated today.” There’s a heavy silence on his end of the phone. I don’t wait for him to fill it. “I graduated, and I didn’t tell anyone because I didn’t feel like making a big fuss.”

“Why? You like a big fuss.”

This makes me smile. “I do. But only when it’s for something I love, and . . . I don’t love anything about my life here. It’s not what I thought it would be—my career included.” My smile fades. “And today . . . today was an especially bad day.” I keep Chef Davis’s words from my shift this afternoon before graduation to myself: *I have let you stay on here too long, and I can’t deal with your incompetence anymore. Get out of my kitchen. You’re fired.*

“I wish . . . I wish I could come home and—I don’t know—move at a slower pace until I figure it all out. But everything here feels so urgent and overwhelming.” I have the honesty of an intoxicated person but the depression of a fully sober one.

“Why can’t you? Come home?” His voice is a soft, low rumble, and something about it has me all too aware that this is officially the longest one-on-one, genuine conversation I’ve ever had with James.

I open my eyes, and the white and yellow stained ceiling blots out the sparkling stars of my imagination. “Because there’re no entry-level

kitchen jobs available in Rome. Or even near it.”

I’ve only been searching for entry level since I have no illusions that Chef Davis will recommend me for anything beyond scrubbing dishes, but I haven’t even found a single prep cook or porter job listed either.

And even if there was a position available, I don’t know if I’d want to take it. I used to love being in a kitchen, experimenting with recipes and forcing my family and friends to taste test everything. But after this year, I can hardly stand inside the threshold of one without having a negative physical reaction.

I should probably scurry back to Rome and live on Emily’s couch while she makes me hot chocolate and picks up the pieces of my life yet again. But I’m tired of that pattern. I want to go home—but not as The Failure.

“If I come back, I need to have a secure job to return for, or I’m not sure I’ll be able to face everyone.” I immediately regret voicing that thought. Who’s to say I can even trust James with it?

There’s such a long pause that I think maybe he hung up. “James?”

“Sorry. I’m here. I just got inside the house and . . . was thinking about something.”

“Oh, yeah! Sorry!” I say, embarrassed that I’ve been boring him enough to lose his attention. This is a new level of pathetic. “I’ve taken up too much of your—”

“No, I was thinking about something that might help.”

“Oh.”

I hear him take in a long breath. “What if I were to tell you I was opening a restaurant on the farm, and . . . I want you to be the chef?”

A laugh jumps out. “I would say you’ve lost your mind. Starting a restaurant is a huge endeavor and you definitely don’t want me at the helm of that ship.”

“So that’s your answer?”

I laugh again, still thinking this is some weird joke, but when he doesn’t join me, I swallow. “What do you mean?”

“Is that your official answer to the job offer? A no?” He sounds resigned.

“James . . .” I sit up slowly. “Are you serious? Are you opening a restaurant?”

There is the longest pause in the history of long pauses before he answers. “*Yes.*” But he says it in such an odd tone. Almost like a question. But I don’t have time to consider it before he’s continuing with a more confident air. “Yes, I’m serious. I am opening a restaurant. With . . . *Tommy.*” Wait. There it is again. He said *Tommy* slowly, like I’ve never heard the name before. “We’re working together to open a restaurant on the property . . . to modernize the farm.”

Has James been drinking? The way he’s talking paired with how out of left field this news is makes me think he’s two sheets to the wind. Then again, I haven’t lived in Rome for two years. Maybe it’s not a surprise to anyone who lives there and my family has all forgotten to mention it to me.

“How come I didn’t know about this?”

“Well . . . it’s still in the building phase right now. And I didn’t originally offer the job to you because I knew how much you didn’t want to live in Rome. I didn’t want you to feel pressured to take it. But now . . . you know, if you need somewhere to find your footing after graduation, maybe it would be the perfect option for you. A place where you can have full control over the menu and the kitchen and figure everything out.”

I can’t lie—this offer is more than intriguing. But I have concerns . . .

“And what if I come home and realize I don’t want to be there after all?”

I hear him inhale as he takes the time to consider my question. “Then . . . once the kitchen is up and running, if you’re not happy, you’ll have something great for your résumé that could hopefully help you get any job you want somewhere else.”

My résumé! Meaning, if all goes well, I can completely bypass using Chef Davis for a recommendation. If I can make this job work, maybe I can salvage my culinary career. Maybe I can also find my way back to loving it. I get to go home to Rome, Kentucky . . . but with my chin held high.

I have zero reasons to turn this down. Well, other than the glaringly obvious one where I’m not at all qualified.

“You’re actually serious, James? Like *serious*-serious?”

“So serious I could cry,” he says again in that weird resigned voice. But maybe I’m reading too much into it and he’s tired. Or wants to be off the

phone with me by now. “So . . . what do you say? Will you come be our chef?”

I’m in shock. I know I should jump at the chance, but still my mouth opens and closes like a fish until finally I find a few words to toss out. “Just for my peace of mind, you do know it’s me—Madison Walker—that you’re talking to, right?”

A soft, short laugh cuts through the line. “The five-foot-tall brunette with dark brown eyes who once crashed a tractor into my pond after promising me she was a great driver?”

“Yes . . .”

“The repeat offender of stinking up my kitchen with roasted Brussels sprouts and force-feeding them to me even though I hate them?”

“They’re good for you.”

“The girl Noah and I had to pick up from the sheriff’s office her freshman year of college for a public indecency offense after she went skinny-dipping in the lake with her boyfriend?”

“Technically, yes, but he wasn’t my boyfriend. We only saw each other like two times after—You know what? Never mind.” Best to let that one go unsaid.

Despite all of this, with absolute certainty in his voice, James says, “Yep. You’re the one.”

“*James . . .*”

He chuckles. “Madison, if you don’t want the job, just say so. You won’t hurt my feelings. But if you do want it, I want you to have it. I can’t think of a better person to run my restaurant. You know this town. You’re a hell of a cook, and you also know all the trendy dishes from the city that could bring people in. So if you want this job, it’s yours.”

My heart is racing. I shouldn’t take the position for several reasons. What I really should do is tell him the truth right now. But once again, life is handing me extra credit, and since I’m Madison Walker, I have to take it.

“Okay. When do I start?”

CHAPTER THREE

Madison

ROME
73 *DAYS UNTIL I FAIL . . .*

I am a terrible person.

I've had four weeks to reflect on my choices—and they really don't look good. I shouldn't have said yes to the job. Even as a lowly intern I could barely keep my shit together in Chef Davis's kitchen, so how in the hell am I going to run, let alone launch, my own restaurant?

Knowing this, I should call James and fess up.

Buuuuut . . .

There's a reason no one has ever accused me of being the *moral* Walker sibling. How could I decline when he dangled my dream job in front of my face?! A farm-to-table concept in my hometown where I wouldn't have to work under an explosively angry chef? Incredible produce right outside the kitchen door and completely at my disposal?

Opportunities like that almost *never* come along fresh off the graduation block. It's the perfect solution to my problems. The perfect excuse to bring me home with no one ever having to know it's because I actually failed in New York.

I have no choice but to make this job work, and so I am committed to putting every ounce of fake-it-till-I-make-it into my work from here on out. Because now, it's not just my pride on the line, it's Huxley Farm's reputation too.

“Madison!” a male voice calls from somewhere in the airport pickup lane, but there must be another Madison around because I don't spot

James's F-250 pickup truck anywhere.

"Madison! Over here!" I spot the guy in a little BMW a few cars down the line. He's frantically waving at me from the open passenger's window and it takes me a few seconds to realize the guy with Gucci sunglasses pushed up into his floppy blond hair is Tommy, James's attractive, successful, metropolitan younger brother.

I guess James isn't picking me up after all. Sort of like how he hasn't emailed or called me since that night either.

We hung up, I got an email from Tommy two days later with an official job offer, and that was that. James never contacted me again. It was like our chat that night never happened.

I wish I knew why that bothers me so much.

Tommy, however, has emailed a few times about various odds and ends pertaining to the job. And now here he is, picking me up from the airport. Strange to think how long it's been since he and I have been face-to-face, as he rarely ever comes around Rome, Kentucky. He doesn't like our hometown, and our hometown doesn't like him.

Tommy is what most people would call . . . well . . . a douchebag. He's great at schmoozing, only wears designer clothes, sleeps around endlessly, and has the cutest dimple in his right cheek. Personally, I've never had a problem with him. In fact, I've had a crush on him from age thirteen until last year when my DNA rearranged itself.

Say what you will about Tommy, but the man is as successful as it gets. He was cocky enough to skip college altogether and go right into hospitality concept development in L.A. He started working with a friend of a friend's small upstart boutique hotel and then worked his ass off for years, climbing the ladder rung by rung. Now he has one of the most successful and well-known firms in L.A. Every project SaltHaus facilitates turns to gold. That he's developing James's restaurant is another reason I couldn't say no.

As I approach the car, Tommy does a double take of me through the window before jumping out to help hoist my luggage into the trunk. My entire life of the last two years fits inside two suitcases and a backpack.

"Madison Walker!" Tommy says in an enthusiastic tone after slamming the trunk shut and openly surveying me and my white T-shirt and cutoff

Levis. His Rolex glints in the light, piercing my eyes and forcing me to squint.

He tilts his head. “There’s no way to say this without sounding creepy, but I have definitely been picturing the wrong version of you while emailing back and forth.”

“Hmm,” I say, scrunching my nose and lightly tapping his forehead. “Then maybe that thought should have remained an *inside* thought.”

He clicks the side of his mouth. “Yeah, I’m not very good at those. Bottom line, you’ve gotten superhot. How long has it been since we’ve seen each other?” His grin is crooked and adorably innocent even though I know this man is the furthest thing from innocent you can get.

“Somewhere right around eight years—since you came into town and I hit on you and you shot me down.” Seeing the appreciative twinkle in his eye vindicates my younger self, who wanted nothing more than a chance to sleep with Tommy Huxley.

Thirty-year-old Madison, however, who has been out in the world and experienced guys like him more than once, is thankful that nothing ever happened between us. Not to mention this situation would have been a lot more complicated.

Tommy’s nicely manicured eyebrows shoot up. “You came on to me? Not a chance. I would have remembered.”

“I literally said, ‘You know where to find me if you’re lonely while you’re back in town,’ and you laughed and replied, ‘Yeah, right.’”

He squints. “Not ringing a bell. But if the offer still stands . . . ?”

“Not a chance.”

“Tommy, you’re a damn fool,” he says to himself with a shake of his head and a charming, self-deprecating smile. It’s almost cute enough to have me going back on my word. But I don’t, because like I said—too much at stake now and too many lessons learned.

“But in my defense . . .” Tommy says when we’re both settled in the car. “The ‘yeah, right’ comment probably wasn’t directed at you as much as it was thinking about Noah finding out I’d fooled around with one of his younger sisters. Or even worse, James finding out.” He buckles his seatbelt and gives me one last Tommy Smirk before putting the car in drive and whipping out onto the road.

“First of all,” I say, angling toward him as much as this tiny car will allow, “Noah is only loosely protective. He might express mild displeasure, but he mostly trusts my sisters’ and my judgment. And second, you’re giving James’s protectiveness too much credit.”

Tommy glances at me briefly. “I don’t think you give it *enough* credit.”

I groan. “I need to make him stand down on his surrogate brother role.”

Tommy gives a sharp bark of laughter. “He does not act like your surrogate brother.”

“You’re right. More like a babysitter. Like an annoyed adult, saddled with looking after the hellion child.” Which, I mean, isn’t far from the truth. “But I’m a grown-ass woman and I can do whatever and whomever I wish.”

He nods affirmatively. “I support this notion and am willing to offer up my body for your sexual empowerment.”

I hum a throaty sound and smile over at him. “Eight years too late, buddy.”

“Damn.”

I face forward, eyeing the road. “Speaking of my babysitter, though, why didn’t he pick me up?”

I had sent James a text earlier this week (our only communication since our phone call) and asked him if he’d get me from the airport so I could surprise my siblings at Hank’s. It’s the perfect plan since they think I’m coming back next week. James gave me a thumbs-up, so I assumed that meant he would. I’m trying not to focus on the little hum of disappointment I feel from being passed off to Tommy instead.

I just hoped . . .

Ugh. Never mind.

“He was going to, but when he was about to leave I told him I’d get you instead. I can’t sit still in Rome for too long or else my soul slowly leaks out of my bones, you know?”

That used to be me too—all I wanted was to get out of there, but since I left, I’ve been dreaming of going home. But that feels too personal to tell Tommy, so I settle for “After going nonstop for the last two years, I’m actually looking forward to some mundane days.”

“Give it a week,” he says with a sideways grin that definitely would have made my heart race in the past. Weird how it’s sitting dormant in

there now. “Maybe you’ll decide you don’t want to work at the restaurant after all.”

As we exit the airport and prepare for a long drive back to Rome, Tommy gets a work call that he takes on his AirPods. I stare out the window, watching as we speed past car after car, half of my brain consumed with why I’m so let down by Tommy showing up at the airport instead of James and the other half picking up on a reoccurring dinging sound coming from the car. It’s got to be some kind of warning? Are his tires low? Do fancy new cars alert for that kind of thing? I’m pretty sure this is a rental, so I’d assume they keep up with maintenance on it.

When Tommy finishes his call, I finally ask him. “Hey, do you hear that? What’s making that chiming sound?”

He frowns and removes his AirPods to get a better listen. He glances at his dashboard, then quickly over to me. “*Shit, Madison.* You don’t have your seatbelt on?”

“*Ohhhh,* that’s what it is!” I tug the belt around and click it into place. “Sorry, bad habit.”

It doesn’t help that my truck is so old it doesn’t have one of those handy safety reminders. I can count on one hand the number of times I wore a seatbelt back in Rome. Then again, I barely needed to get above thirty-five miles per hour around there.

Tommy glances at me again, looking frazzled now. “Please don’t tell James I let you go fifteen minutes in the car with me before you put it on.”

“*Oh my god,* not this again,” I groan, pressing my head back against the seat. “Your fear of him is unhealthy. You need to see a therapist.”

“I’m serious,” he says solemnly. “Don’t tell him or I’ll never hear the end of it.”

“Fine. I definitely won’t tell him—but mainly because *why the hell would I?* He doesn’t care whether my seatbelt is on or not.”

He grunts and stares at the road. “You’re a beautiful, delusional little woman.”

I fold my arms and stare at the side of Tommy’s perfectly chiseled face. “That was offensive and sexist. I’m calling HR. Do we have HR?”

“Technically, that would be James.” He playfully dangles his phone in front of me.

I give him a flat smile and push his hand away, not actually offended by what he said because I know Tommy. We have the kind of friendship history that allows this sort of playfulness. And truthfully, if this conversation had been taking place last year, I would have absolutely been flirting back. It's a little terrifying how much a year can change a person.

"So how long are you in town for?" I ask while leaning over to unzip my backpack and pull out Sammy's enclosure. He rode in my lap on the plane, but while I maneuvered through the airport I had him safely ensconced in my backpack with rolled-up towels surrounding the enclosure to keep it level.

Tommy sets his phone back on its magnetic holder. "Just long enough to—" He does a double take. "Is that a turtle?"

"Tortoise."

"Do I want to know why you have one?"

"Doubt it. You were saying? Just long enough to . . ."

He looks like he's still tempted to question my pet of choice but then lets it go. "To hammer down some last details for the restaurant with you and James, then I'll be out of here." A smile snakes across his mouth. "But I can be persuaded to stay a day longer if you change your mind and let me take you out?" His smile is the very picture of playboy promises. The kind of smile I used to hunt—back when I was content with hopping from experience to experience.

"Nope. But it's not personal, I just don't date co-workers." *Not anymore.*

Not since Caden, a classmate who ripped my self-esteem to shreds back in New York. I met him pretty early on in my culinary school days. He was charming and hot and available. Our free time was scarce but it lined up a lot, so we started hooking up shortly after meeting and it carried on for a solid year. We'd have sex, then order takeout and occasionally watch a movie or something. The epitome of casual. And that wasn't a problem . . . until it was.

Apparently I'm *not someone he could take home to his parents*. Someone he had no problems sleeping with, but actually spending time together in public? I guess that was a step too far.

He liked my body, but he didn't like me.

And that cut deep.

That entire last year of school I had to see him in class and pretend his words hadn't created a festering wound.

After what feels like an eternity in the car, we finally cross into Rome city limits. Tears prick my eyes as we drive through the town square, passing Mabel's inn and the Market and the Pie Shop. All the places I once couldn't wait to escape, now I consider leaping out of the moving car just so I can kiss their sidewalks. *I'm home.*

Technically, coming home means I failed, but no one here has to know it.

"Are you coming in?" I ask Tommy after we pull up in front of Hank's bar (the town's Friday-night hot spot) and realize Tommy hasn't turned off the car yet or made any moves to get out.

"Nah. You know how much this town likes me." *Zero percent.* "I'll take your bags with me back to the house. Want me to take your . . . turtle?"

"Sammy has attachment issues. I'll keep him with me."

"Right. Have fun." After I shut the door, he rolls down the passenger-side window and leans toward it. "Hey, Maddie."

I turn back.

"You know where to find me if you get lonely while I'm in town," he says with a wink, reciting my pickup line back at me.

I can't help it, I laugh. "Get out of here, asshole!"

His absurd little BMW kicks up a cloud of gravel as he tears out of the parking lot. I tuck Sammy under my arm and follow the faint buzz of the flickering neon sign hanging above the door.

Inside, Hank's is the same as it's always been—charmingly dingy. There's sticky, old cracked leather over the barstools. Christmas lights strung across the ceiling. Jukebox against the wall with outdated songs that no one ever seems tired of, and the lingering memory of cigarette smoke from days past ingrained in every inch of the place. I hunted and hunted for dive bars in New York that could replicate this vibe but always came up short. Because none of them had the people or the memories that make Hank's bar so special.

My eyes sweep across the room, noting that none of my siblings are here yet, then freeze on the man sitting at the bar. *James Huxley.* He's everything opposite of Tommy. He's rough farm hands and old T-shirts. Wranglers and dark brown hair. He's the bachelor everyone wants but no

one can have. He's also thirty-four to my thirty, and that used to seem like a big deal—but not anymore.

There's a lot of things about James that used to seem wrong to me, but now . . .

Oh wow—nope. Can't finish that thought.

He's sitting by himself at the bar, watching a muted TV with his tan forearms resting against the counter. His favorite old Carhartt hat hides his eyes, and as I stand here watching him the strangest desire sweeps through me. I want to go wrap my arms around him.

I want to hug James.

Likely this is just a side effect of missing home so much though.

After forcing this weird urge into submission, I set my shoulders and meet him at the bar. As I stand behind him, the lingering smell of bygone cigarettes grows stronger and the Christmas lights strung overhead twinkle.

Silly that these are the things that make me feel warmer.

Before he sees me, I reach around his shoulder and snag his beer bottle. James is not someone who startles easily. He's solid. Steady. And that's why he only casually looks over his shoulder at me while I raise his beer to my mouth and take two big pulls before setting it back down.

“Hello, Jamesie. Miss me?” I say, ready to take part in our usual game of antagonization.

James's brown eyes connect with mine for the first time in months, and for some damn reason my stomach swoops, jump-starting my dormant heart.

The corner of his mouth curls. “You have no idea,” he says, and I must not have detected any notes of sarcasm because of how loud the music is in here. And that smile he's giving me? It has to be a trick of the neon lights.

CHAPTER FOUR

James

I never saw it coming—falling in love with Madison.

One moment she was Maddie, Noah's annoying little sister who was always around, always causing chaos, and always in the way. And then on a random Monday in her early twenties, she suddenly didn't seem like his little sister anymore.

I first noticed it when she asked to use my pressure washer to clean the mud off her truck tires. She was wearing a baggy black T-shirt, jean shorts, and flip-flops. When she heard me approach behind her, she looked over her shoulder and smiled at me. And that's the first time I remember thinking, *Holy shit, Madison is beautiful.* It slammed into my chest, and I've been beaten up by it ever since.

I filed it away as only an attraction for a few years. But that didn't last. It grew and morphed into something significant. Something I'm worried might ruin everything. Something I haven't even been able to get rid of by dating other women.

I've never acted on these feelings because, with our lives and families so intertwined, you can't just blurt out something like that without a plan. Without knowing you're gonna make it for the long haul. And Madison has never given me any reason to think I should tell her.

Except . . . for that phone call.

The call where we talked like two adults and not like James and Maddie who grew up together. And then I made a decision that officially ruined even the slightest chance I'd ever have at being with Madison. I asked her to work for me—to be the executive chef of my restaurant.

My restaurant that didn't exist before that phone call.

The second I hung up, I dialed my brother Tommy and it went something like this:

“Let me get this straight, you want me to help you develop a restaurant—the very thing I told you to do when you called asking for money to repair that damn tractor again—and instead of taking me up on it you said ‘over my dead body?’”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

Because here's the thing. Initially, when I finally faced the music that the farm was in a steep financial decline, I wanted to try everything I could to revive it in the same way my dad would have. With extra-sticky Band-Aids and good old-fashioned muscle. Something that wouldn't involve tourists traipsing around my crops day in and day out. Something that would make my dad proud he'd handed the business over to me. But like it or not, times are different now. Band-Aids won't work this time; I have to modernize. And modernizing costs a shit-ton of money.

Tommy suggested a few solutions: open a restaurant to bring in more income; take a contract with a major food supplier. The first option I was adamantly against because that would require real time and effort from Tommy, something I've never seen him give to this farm. There's no way I could handle launching the restaurant on my own if he decided he was bored and didn't want to help anymore. And the second option was even more disgusting because it went against everything I believe in as a local farmer.

The only reason I agreed to open the restaurant with Tommy is because Madison dialed me by accident . . .

“And now,” Tommy continued, horrified, “you not only want me to develop the restaurant and find financial backers for it out of the goodness of my heart, but you want me to do it in six months?”

“Three and a half, actually.”

His laugh was so loud I had to pull my phone away from my ear, which did nothing to help the chafed pride I'd had to swallow to make the call in the first place.

“No. Even if I wanted to make that happen, I wouldn't be able to build something from the ground up that fast.”

“It's not from the ground up. I want to renovate Granny's old greenhouse for it.”

“That's . . . that's . . . well, that's actually a great idea and very compelling. Not to mention less red tape since it's already an existing structure . . . but—no!

Doesn't matter! That's an immense amount of work." I could hear his intrigue tugging against him. Tommy has never been able to resist a good concept.

"If anyone's up to the challenge, it's you. You're the best in the business."

Again he laughed, knowing me too well. "You're a piece of shit, you know that? I haven't talked to you in a year and now you call and blow smoke up my ass because you want something?"

"Is it working?"

"I mean, yeah, a little . . ."

"Great. Listen, I'm aware we're not best friends, but if you could help me make this happen, I'd really appreciate it. Also, I sort of already promised someone else that it would be happening."

I could sense his gloating before I even heard it. "Oh, this is good. You reallllly need me to do this. I'll consider it if you grovel."

"Hell no. Just say yes or no and be done with it."

"Tell me I'm actually the better Huxley son and I'll do it. And that I'm better looking. And smarter."

I rolled my eyes, barely able to hold back a groan. "Sure. Yes. You are better than me."

"And?"

I gritted my teeth. "Better looking."

"And?"

" . . . smarter."

He was silent.

"Tommy?"

"Yeah, sorry, I just . . . I can't find my damn tape recorder."

"Okay, we're done here. Email me what I need to do to get this ball rolling."

During our later emails, he told me he'd found the perfect investor, willing to put up a staggering amount of money for a very reasonable percentage of the restaurant; and in return I told him I had reached out to Madison and she had agreed to be the chef. Luckily, he didn't seem to put two and two together. In fact, no one has. Everyone I've told seems to be completely oblivious that I'm creating an entire fucking restaurant because the woman I'm unfortunately in love with said she wanted to come home but didn't have a way. I made one for her. And even though it might be the worst financial decision of my life, I can't bring myself to regret it.

Now, Madison slaps the bill of my hat down before taking the stool beside me. “I heard a rumor that the president of the United States told you to get rid of this hat.”

“Nah, it was only some fancy New York chef with an over-inflated ego.”

Her expression challenges me to a duel before she steals my beer again. “She sounds awesome. I bet she has great legs.”

I take my drink back—eyes accidentally dropping to said legs, clad only in some very short cutoff denim shorts—but then my gaze snags on the thing sitting in her lap. “You brought your turtle into the bar?”

“*Tortoise*, James. *Tortoise!*” she corrects. “Turtles have webbed feet. Tortoises, like Sammy, have the cutest stumpy little legs.”

“Okay . . . so you brought your *tortoise* into a bar?”

“Would you have rather it have been a baby?”

“Does it have to be one or the other?”

She settles onto her barstool with a grin and places the small enclosure on the bar between us. When she pats the top, Sammy retreats inside his shell—adorned with a bright pink Band-Aid across the remains of a small crack.

I can clearly picture Madison strolling through Central Park, finding this turtle—excuse me, *tortoise*—with a beat-up shell and left for dead, then canceling all her plans so she could spend the day rehabbing it. Or no, who am I kidding? She didn’t cancel her day, she just didn’t show up for any of her appointments. Probably forgot all about them in that moment and then later, while sitting in the vet’s office, said something out of the blue like, *Shit! I didn’t get the bay leaves!* And gave zero explanation after that.

“Well, look who’s back!” A sunny voice chimes in from just beyond Madison’s shoulder. It’s Jeanine, all freckles and red hair and that sunny sweet tone she always has. Her purse is slung over her shoulder like she’s just arriving.

Madison’s face lights up. “Jeanine! Hi!”

They exchange a quick hug over Madison’s barstool.

“Didn’t know you were back already,” Jeanine says warmly. Her gaze flicks to me for half a beat—something unreadable behind it—but then she’s smiling again. “Good to see you both.”

“You too!” Madison says, clearly delighted to have been spotted.

Jeanine offers a little wave and glides off.

Madison turns back to me and I relax, thankful Jeanine didn't announce we dated and broke up while Madison was away. I'm not ready to fill her in on that yet. Or the fact that she was part of the reason it ended.

"Did you get in okay?" I ask, trying not to stare at her in wonder that she's actually here. Back in Rome. Sitting beside me.

Her hair is even shorter than the last time she was home. It rests right above her shoulders now and is tucked behind her ears, lightly flipping up on the ends. It suits her personality perfectly.

"I did." She pauses. "Tommy was sweet."

I let out an unintentional grunt. Because yeah, I'll bet he was sweet. That's part of why he and I have never gotten along. I wouldn't say I'm old-fashioned, but I struggle with the way he treats women. Like they're disposable. It's one after another wherever he goes. Miraculously, he's never seemed into Madison. But he also hasn't seen her in a very long time. I'm willing to bet all my money that his tune has changed about her now.

"How long did it take him to try to get into your pants?" When I notice that I'm about to Hulk-crush my glass beer bottle, I force myself to release it.

"About two minutes," she says while casually stealing my drink again. "So we banged one out real quick in the parking lot." Before I can stop myself, my gaze is swinging to Madison—who is grinning wildly against the mouth of the bottle. "You thought I was serious! Oh my god, I don't know whether I should be upset or flattered."

Madison has never tried to keep her love life under wraps. And the only reason I've ever been upset when hearing about her going out with another guy is because I don't get to be the guy. And I think I'm finally coming to terms with the fact that I never will.

"Whoa. Put the shovel down, James. Nothing is happening between me and Tommy and nothing will happen either. Happy?"

"Shovel?"

Of course she doesn't clarify. She takes a peanut from the little tin bar-top bucket and cracks it open, popping it into her mouth. "I'm back in town as a chef first and foremost, and I am determined to treat this position with the utmost professionalism." She cracks another. "Even though it's

uncharacteristically moral of me, I have a *firm* rule of not sleeping with colleagues.”

And there it is.

I figured this might be the case, and I honestly agree with the sentiment in general. It would be a bad, messy choice. But hearing it from her mouth somehow kills a secret hope I didn’t realize I was still harboring. My stomach sinks all the way down to my boots—but still, I don’t regret helping her achieve this dream. I just need to find a way to get rid of these feelings for Madison once and for all. I already tried dating someone else this past year, and despite my best efforts over those four months, I wasn’t able to sever Madison’s hold on my system.

Who knows, maybe I’ll get lucky and discover these feelings were mostly born out of her being far away. I’m not very good at relationships (see previous relationship), so it’s reasonable to think I invented this one because it felt safe. It’s also a nice consolation that if I can’t date her, at least Tommy can’t either.

“So,” says Madison, turning to face me on her stool. “How is everyone around here? What’s the latest gossip?”

Tired of being tortured by the lingering flavor of Madison’s strawberry lip balm on the rim of my beer, I flag down the bartender, gesture toward my now mostly empty bottle, then hold up two fingers. “Fine. Everyone’s fine.”

“Fine?! That’s all you’re going to give me?” She sags dramatically against the bar.

“Yeah.” I shrug. “They’re good. Everyone’s good.”

Honestly, I don’t want to launch into everything and prolong my time with her. I think the key to managing this situation from here on out is going to be avoiding her as much as possible.

She’s appalled. “Quit acting like you’re not the biggest gossip in this whole damn town. We’re business partners now; you have to share juicy info with me.”

“Funny, I don’t remember that being in the job description I sent you.”

“That *Tommy* sent me,” she corrects, putting special emphasis on my brother’s name, eyes dropping to her fingers drumming on the wooden surface. “You never reached out again after that call.”

Seth, the bartender, sets Madison's beer in front of her with a huge smile. "Madison! Welcome home. What brings you back early?" I think the whole town had her expected arrival next week marked on their calendars.

I tense when Madison playfully lays her head on my shoulder, knowing something wild is about to come out of her mouth.

She sighs wistfully. "I'm having James's baby. I had to rush back to tell him the good news."

With a repressed smile, I shake my head. By now everyone has learned to take Madison with a grain of salt. Especially where she and I are concerned. She lives to annoy me and there isn't a soul out there who doesn't know it.

Seth laughs. "Congrats. You two will make great parents. I'll go get the parents-to-be a basket of fries to celebrate. On the house."

"Aw, thanks, Seth!" Madison sits back up, dropping the curtain and returning to her personal space the second he walks away. But my mind is stuck on what she said a minute ago.

"Did you want me to call you again?" I study her confused look. "You said I never called you after offering you the job. Did you want me to?"

Her eyes widen. "No . . . of course not!"

"Oh, okay." I drink my beer, unsurprised by her answer since she's generally disliked me every second of every day of her life.

"I didn't," she insists.

"Fine."

"It was only an observation."

"I get it."

Seth returns with the fries and we drink and eat in silence until Madison's head swivels dramatically in my direction.

"I mean . . . we've never had that kind of friendship." Evidently she's been over there churning this topic round and round. "It would've been weird to suddenly have you all up in my business every day like, *How are you, Madison?*" she says in a droll tone. "And me responding with something like, *I'm okay but sort of lonely. How are you, James?* Like, gross. Who even are those civil, communicative people? Not us."

"Definitely not us. Where's the snark?" I say, enjoying this new game.

"The condescension?"

“The rude comments about my tiny . . .” I let the sentence dangle so she’ll fill it in.

“*Brain*.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Wow. Resisting a dick joke? I even teed it up for you.”

She shrugs and sighs dramatically. “I’m feeling charitable. Or maybe I’m just tired from all the travel. Point is. We are not the type of friends to talk one-on-one. So . . . no. I didn’t want you to call me again.”

“Great,” I reply, unbothered.

“Good.”

I stare at her. At the freckles across her nose, at the curve of her neck, and at her full watermelon-pink mouth. I replay the words that just exited those beautiful lips and come to a conclusion that might actually kill me. *Madison wanted me to call her again*. But why?

That night after I hung up with her, I decided it would be essential to take a big step back. Putting her into a *Colleagues Only* box is the only way I will survive working with her every day. I’d let Tommy handle most of the day-in-and-day-out communication, and when I saw Madison around I’d be friendly yet brief.

But seeing the look in her eyes just now . . . it has me changing course immediately. Because where Madison is concerned, I think I’d be willing to set the world on fire if it made her smile. And she has no idea.

I watch her closely as I say, “We could be—you know?” My beer hovers in front of my mouth, and when she looks at me with a curious expression, I clarify. “We could be friends who talk one-on-one. Might even be a good idea since we’re about to work together.”

Whether from curiosity or horror, her eyes widen. “I’m not sure you can handle the full force of *Friendship Madison*.”

“You make it sound like a hurricane.”

She tips a little closer to me, like she’s telling me a secret. “They’re very similar.” She sits back. “Only difference is, one comes with an invasion of privacy and complete use of your kitchen whenever I want.”

“You do that anyway.”

“But now you don’t get to complain about it.”

God, I should leave this bar right now. If I knew what was good for me, I’d close out my tab and get the hell away from her.

Instead, I turn my stool so we're facing each other. "And what do I get out of this friendship?"

She thinks for a second. "To taste test a lot of incredible food?"

"Sold."

She laughs, looking skeptical that I would actually agree to this. Maybe skeptical about agreeing to it herself. We've never been direct friends. Even though it wasn't intentional, it's like Noah has always been standing between us—a human buffer. And in this brief conversation, we just pushed him out of the way. Madison is looking directly at me now.

"Really?" she asks. "You want to be *actual* friends?"

I don't mean to, but my eyes drop to her mouth. "Bring on the hurricane."

Her smile is a lightning bolt. "Great. Let me go get a knife."

It takes me half a second to register her words before I hook my hand around her biceps to catch her when she leaves her seat. "Why the hell are you getting a knife, Madison?"

"So we can make a little cut on our palms and shake on the new friendship. A blood pact." She mimes the slice across her open hand. *Casual*. Like she does this all the time. Most disturbing part of it, she's dead serious.

"I'm not . . ." I shake my head, letting out a breathy laugh. "Hell no. Sit your ass down."

"The friendship needs to be binding."

"*Does it though?*"

She folds her arms, a little pinch forming between her brows because she's second-guessing my commitment now. She's about to rip it away as quickly as she offered it. In her eyes, I'm back to being Noah's dumb friend.

So I sigh and extend her my pinky instead. "This is the best I can do."

She eyes it and then her arms loosen. "It lacks drama, but okay . . ." She wraps her pinky around mine and there it is. Just like that, a new era is born. I can feel it. Even the air seems to change in recognition.

Once our pinky promise has solidified, she demands to hear all the gossip I'm withholding from her. I go for the most fun piece of drama first: when Gemma accused Phil of cheating in the Easter bake-off. Phil swore on his life that he didn't cheat, but then Clara walked by his car and found a discarded store-bought cellophane bread wrapper in his back seat.

He publicly apologized and admitted that the stress of the holiday had been too much for him. Gemma won first place after Phil was disqualified.

Madison's smile is *wild*. She scoots forward. The gossip is a fish-hook sunk into her skin and tugging her closer and closer to me. Our knees are sandwiched together like black and white piano keys. *Mine, hers, mine, hers.*

"And what about with my family? Anything I should be aware of?"

I look away.

"You do know something! Tell me." When I won't look at her, she grabs me by the shoulders and shakes me. "You can't withhold information about my own family from me, Jameson Huxley!"

This wild and loud creature is causing a scene, and I'm just trying not to laugh. Life hasn't been nearly as bright without Madison in it.

"All right, all right, get your claws out of my arm before I catch your rabies." She smiles deeply, like she's been waiting for me to say something like that all night. It's the kind of teasing we've done for years. A barrier of my own making, because if I don't tease and annoy her, I'll accidentally worship her.

I lean in a little closer and drop my voice. "I heard from the new barista at the coffee shop that Annie has been ordering . . ." I look over my shoulder and then back. "Decaf."

Madison sits back, a shocked expression smashing her in the face. "*Decaf?*"

I nod. "And at family dinner the other night, I caught her pouring out her wine in the sink."

"Oh my god. That means she's—"

"Maybe. But hey . . . no one else in the family has seemed to catch on to it. And maybe she doesn't want anyone to know. So don't . . ." I trail off.

"Don't what?"

I picture Madison with a secret in her pocket and can't help but smile. "Don't go run your big mouth." I bump her knee with mine and she bumps mine back, harder.

"Please. You have the bigger mouth between the two of us!" As if to confirm, her eyes connect with my lips. My stomach clenches.

"You're wrong. You have no idea how many secrets I'm keeping currently."

A sly grin unfolds across her face. “And I got you to crack in mere seconds. I bet I could pluck each one from you in one hour tops.”

I bet you could.

The urge to kiss her, right here, right now at the bar unfurls in my chest like a beast coming to life. I want to slide my hand against the back of her jaw and pull her to me. I want to grip her bare thigh. I want to know what it’s like to taste her lip balm right at the source. To feel her sigh against my tongue.

“*Madison Walker!*” a loud female voice bellows from the bar’s entrance. We both turn to find Emily standing in the doorway.

“Ah, you’re home early!” Annie squeals, popping in next with Will, her husband, following right behind her. A shocked Amelia and smiling Noah surface next. The gang’s all here.

Madison practically rips her legs from where they were just touching mine, turning fully away from me. *Right.* Back to reality.

In the next moment, the three sisters (plus Amelia) are slamming into one another with hugs and squeals of delight, making quite the scene in the middle of the bar. There’s something so right about it. Like Rome has just sighed and relaxed, because . . . Madison Walker is home.

CHAPTER FIVE

Madison

I let James take Sammy back home with him after he pointed out that I'm in no state to parent tonight and would probably end up accidentally leaving my reptile-child at the bar.

It's clear James was right as my sisters and I pretty much close down the place and stumble out to the parking lot. The boys all left a long time ago and so Annie offers to act as designated driver and get us all back to Emily's house. Normally I wouldn't think anything of it, but after what James mentioned I can't help but find it suspicious.

We're all tipsy (besides Annie) as we file into her powder-blue pickup truck. We stumble, taking twice as long as usual to climb in because we can't stop laughing over the story Amelia told us of Noah getting laid out by security on tour. Apparently he had forgotten his badge and the security guard didn't know he was Amelia's husband as he opened her dressing room door.

I can't tell if I'm more drunk on alcohol or laughter.

Annie gives her best attempt at a stern attitude as she corrals me and Amelia into the bed of the truck. "Keep your butts on the floor." She points a menacing finger at us after slamming the gate shut.

"Yes, ma'am." I give a serious salute, making Amelia lose it, laughing all over again.

Emily, our mother hen, gets prime seating in the front with Annie.

As we drive, Annie rolls down her windows and cranks the Chicks so Amelia and I can hear it too. It feels so good to be home surrounded by my sisters that I'm almost guilty about it. They don't know why I'm back, not really. They don't know that I wasn't tough enough to hack it in the city. That for all my shouting about craving more than what Rome could give

me, I couldn't stand being away from here. The city was wrong for me in ways I never could have predicted.

And I don't know what that says about me.

The wind whips through my hair and I tip my head back, eyes on the sky so I can finally see the sparkling stars I've been dreaming about since I left Rome. Except . . . they're not there. I wait for my vision to adjust, but it must be too cloudy to spot them tonight. *That's fine.* Not taking it as a bad sign or anything.

A little later we pull up to Emily and Jack's house, filter out of the truck, and stumble up the porch stairs. The last time I was on this porch I was sobbing onto Emily's shoulder and confessing I wanted to quit culinary school and come home. She's the only one who knows I ever wavered in New York. And now that I have this job at the Huxley restaurant, I can't decide if I'm grateful that she encouraged me to go back and finish my degree or if it was a mistake.

"Honey, we're home!" Emily yells playfully once we walk through the door.

"We?" Jack says, coming around the corner holding their little cat, Ducky. He's in a pair of athletic shorts, a vintage Dodgers sweatshirt, and the glasses Emily is literally obsessed with. When Ducky sees us she jumps from Jack's arms and scurries down the hall to hide on their bed.

Jack doesn't drink alcohol, so even though he does go with us to Hank's occasionally, it's not as often as Emily and the rest of us. According to her, he mostly uses these Friday nights at home alone to write whatever mystery book he's currently working on. Jackson Bennett (as we learned last year) is also the *New York Times* bestselling author AJ Ranger. Thanks to his asshat of a dad who leaked Jack's identity before he was ready, the secret is out. Emily says Jack has really made lemonade out of those sour lemons his dad gave him and embraced the spotlight. He's been on morning talk shows, had an epic book tour, and still loves teaching in our small town.

But no matter how famous Jack is now, he continues to treat my sister with the love and affection of a man who knows he doesn't deserve her.

And because my sisters and I live on the same wavelength, they know to jump in front of me like a wall as I crouch behind them. In the next

minute they split theatrically and I pop out with jazz hands. If I had confetti, I'd throw it.

To his credit, Jack actually does look excited to see me, even though I know he probably doesn't care all that much. I get a nice big hug and a *Glad to have you home, Maddie*.

"Aw, yay! Hugs are great." Emily is physically pushing Jack toward the front door. "Okay now, out ya go."

"But I live here."

"Of course you do, big guy! But get out. The girls are spending the night."

He breathes a laugh, used to Emily prioritizing us like we are her children. "Just a minute. Are you drunk?" He twists around, cradling her face in his hands, assessing her.

She melts and holds up her fingers to signify an inch. "A smidgen."

Fun fact: Jack is the only person in this entire world I've ever seen Emily melt for. She's still as feisty and hard-headed as ever, but I've also noticed something new in her since she found Jack. The two are soft with each other. She lets him help her in a way that she absolutely won't let anyone else. Not even me, her favorite sister.

Just kidding: Well, sort of.

Emily doesn't actually pick favorites, but we are closer on a friend level than she is with any of my other siblings. We share the kind of bond that Annie found in Amelia and Noah has with James.

Jack grins. "Give me a minute to pack a bag," he says, kissing Emily's forehead. "I assume I'm off to Noah's?"

"Go to my house instead," says Annie. "Otherwise Will is going to act like a sad, left-out puppy and show up here."

"And Noah would much rather have alone time," Amelia adds.

A few minutes later, after filling a big glass of water for Emily and making her promise to drink it, Jack is driving off. It's only us sisters, reunited and happy and tipsy.

"Okay, Chef, tell us everything about this restaurant!" says Emily, coming back from the kitchen with a bottle of white wine in one hand and clutching four empty glasses by the stems in the other. She sets the bottle and glasses on the coffee table and then snuggles in between me and Annie on the couch. From her seat on the floor, Amelia fills the glasses.

“There’s nothing to tell. Let’s talk about your book instead, *Emmy Gold!*” Emily, in an amazing turn of events, had been secretly writing the most delicious romance book over the last few years. Jack encouraged her to finish it, and after a few bumps in the road she signed with her dream agent and publisher. The deal announcement went out last month, surprising us all with her cute pen name. Have I mentioned how ridiculously successful my sisters are? And then there’s me . . .

“Publishing moves at a snail’s pace, so the book won’t come out for at least a year. Your new restaurant, however, opens so soon!” She’s fizzing with excitement. “And I know nothing about it because you’ve been so damn busy we haven’t had a chance to talk about it.”

I *have* been busy over the last four weeks, picking up as many odd jobs as possible to store up some cash in case I screw up this chef job.

“But it paid off because you graduated!” says Amelia, bumping my knee.

“Yes, she did!” Emily smothers me in a hug. “I’m still mad they didn’t have a ceremony, though.”

Again, guilt tugs at me. “Yeah, it’s too bad. What do you want to know about the restaurant?” I ask, trying to change the subject as quickly as possible.

“First, what’s it been like working with James?” Emily asks with an odd sparkle in her eyes. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you guys interact without picking at each other.”

I shrug. “We haven’t.”

Amelia hands each of us a glass of wine. “Picked at each other?”

“No. Worked together.” I sip my drink. “Until tonight, we hadn’t talked since his initial phone call where he offered me the job. Tommy took over all communication after that.” Except for tonight, when we sat together at the bar and . . . became friends? I’m still not sure what to make of that. Or why my heart rate accelerates when I think about the way he smiled at me.

“That’s so weird,” Emily mumbles. She’s lightly swirling her wine around the glass and staring into it like it’s a crystal ball.

“Why is it weird?”

Her eyes pop up to me as if she didn’t actually mean for me to overhear it. “No reason. Just thought he’d want more involvement since it’ll be his

restaurant . . . and he hates Tommy, so I'm surprised he trusts him enough to work on this. *With you.*"

I note the special emphasis but am distracted when out of the corner of my eye I see Annie raise her wineglass to her lips. Her throat bobs lightly as if she's just taken a sip, but something about the gesture doesn't seem real. Normally Annie winces slightly after each drink, because even though she tries to like it, she still mostly hates wine. She didn't wince after that sip though. *Interesting.*

"So Nancy's old greenhouse is being turned into the restaurant, right?" Nancy is James's late grandma.

"Yeah. Supposedly, most of the renovation is already finished. If it's half of what Tommy has described to me, it'll be beautiful."

"I've seen it," says Annie. "And I can confirm it's gorgeous and will be a huge hit."

They decided to keep as much of the original structure as possible, just replacing anything that had major damage, reinforcing the parts that needed it. The greenhouse itself is where the dining room will be, and there is an entirely new space off the back that will house the kitchen and chef's quarters. It was such a relief to learn I'd have somewhere of my own to live when I came back and didn't want to intrude on any of my siblings.

"So what are the featured menu items going to be?" asks Emily with an overeager look in her eye. My chest tightens. This is not a topic I'm ready to discuss.

But the last thing I want to do is trigger Emily's radar either. . . .

"Um, I was thinking of keeping it simple and tossing in some real crowd-pleasers: Kraft mac and cheese and dino nuggets," I say easily to cover the wild beat of my heart. Because the truth is, I've been in a creative freeze and haven't been able to come up with a single dish that has felt right. And it's killing me.

The kitchen used to be my refuge, the one place where everything quieted down and I felt most like myself. Cooking was my escape, my therapy, my joy. It was something that was wholly mine. But lately? It's felt hollow. Like stepping into a room I used to love, only to find it's cold, the lights are off, and there's plastic over the furniture.

I want that warmth back.

Emily laughs, but I can tell the type A planner in her is not appeased. “And is there going to be a new menu each week, or will it stay the same through the season?”

I clutch Emily’s arm. “Wait, the menu has to *change* at some point?”

Her smile flattens. “I’m being serious, Maddie. It seems like you have a lot of unanswered questions still and the opening is in what? Like three months?” I can see bullet-pointed task lists unfurling behind her green eyes. “What about logistical stuff like bookkeeping? Who’s going to be in charge of all that? Or hiring the staff? Will you—”

“*Emily.*” I shoot up from the couch when my heart drives too painfully against my ribs. “I’ve got it all under control, okay?” *But I don’t. I really don’t.* And I hate that she knows me well enough to see that I don’t.

I should have had all these questions figured out by now, but I’m someone who tends to wait until the last minute in life. I operate out of chaos piles and at least fifty open tabs on my laptop. I’ve even been known to write a new recipe idea on the back of a grocery receipt because I know that if I wait to go find paper I’ll get distracted along the way and forget the idea completely. So *why* did I think it would be a good idea to become the executive chef of James’s restaurant? And is everyone watching from the sidelines, waiting for the moment I fail?

I walk into the kitchen and set my empty wineglass in the sink, turning when I hear footsteps behind me. Emily gives a wobbly smile and nose scrunch. “I’m sorry.” She closes the space between us and hugs me tight. “I didn’t mean to turn into the efficiency robot . . . I just—”

“*Know me?* And are you worried I can’t do this?”

She pulls back, gripping my shoulders and catching my gaze. “No! Not at all. I know you can do this—I also know that the creative side of your brain likes to take up all the space sometimes and doesn’t leave much for the administrative side. But you’re a culinary school graduate! I shouldn’t have assumed you don’t already know how to do all of this. Clearly you do. I’m sorry, and I won’t butt in anymore.”

Clearly I don’t.

I am terrified I’m going to fail—making it the worst failure of my life, because it won’t just affect me, I’ll bring James down with me.

And equally terrifying: What if I never get my refuge back?

“Hey,” says Amelia in a whisper, popping into the room. She glances over her shoulder. “We only have a second while she’s in the bathroom. But . . . have y’all noticed anything about Annie?”

“That she’s only pretending to drink her wine?” says Emily, casually leaning back against the counter. “Yeah, she’s been doing that for weeks.”

“You saw that tonight too?” I ask.

Emily looks offended. “*Of course* I did. She never winces anymore.”

I point at Emily. “Yes! I knew it!”

“And she took her beer with her into the kitchen about fifteen times during the last family dinner.”

“That’s because she was pouring it out. James saw her!” I say, excited to have inside information. “So she’s pregnant, right?”

Emily nods. “Definitely.”

“But she’s not telling us?” Amelia is heartbroken at this prospect. “What are we going to do about it?”

“Nothing.” Emily looks like the leader of a crime organization. Deceptively calm.

“By nothing, you mean somehow capture a sample of her urine so we can test it ourselves, right?” I glance between them. “Because I can do it. Don’t ask me how—just know it can be done.”

“No. We’re not going to do a single thing. We’re going to respect Annie’s privacy and wait until she feels comfortable to tell us herself.”

I grimace. “That doesn’t sound like you.”

“It’s the new me. Respectful. Understanding of privacy. Patient . . .” While she’s listing off her virtues, I’m rolling my eyes and making a yapping gesture with my hand. She finally notices and smacks it down. “Stop that!”

“Those are noble attributes, but so *so* boring. I miss slightly toxic Emily. Jack took her away from me.” I go shake Emily’s shoulders. “Give her back!”

“Give who back?” asks Annie from the doorway to the kitchen, glass in her hand—empty.

I pivot, slinging my arm around Emily’s hip. “My old Celine Dion greatest hits CD. She’s held it captive for too many years.”

“I don’t have it,” Emily replies.

“Oh yeah? So if I go out to your truck right now, I won’t find it in your CD sleeve?”

“Nope.” But her eyes betray her as they dart quickly to Amelia.

I turn slowly on her and she cracks like an egg. “Fine, yes, I borrowed it! But it’s so good. You can have it back next time I see you.”

We all move back into the living room and pile onto the couch for the next hour so we can look at photos on Amelia’s phone from her latest tour. I still regularly forget that she is a famous pop star, until these moments when I see pictures of her onstage surrounded by a sold-out stadium. Pictures of her backstage hugging mega artists who have shaped the music industry. But it’s easy to forget all of that with her because to us she’s Amelia . . . the Audrey Hepburn-obsessed woman who stole our brother’s heart with her truly awful pancakes and has loved us like real sisters from day one.

After looking through photos, we all steal clothes from Emily to sleep in. Literally *clothes*, like T-shirts and leggings, because the woman doesn’t own pajamas. Or she does, but her take on pj’s is just silk lingerie pieces trimmed in lace. Around one A.M., we all four pile into Emily and Jack’s king-sized bed like we’re the family in *Willy Wonka* and my sisters pass out almost immediately.

I’m seconds away from sleep when Emily inches closer and whispers to me, “I’m impressed by how quickly you came up with that Celine Dion lie.”

“Yeah,” I say, staring up at the dark ceiling, wishing more than anything that I had been able to see the stars tonight. “I’m too good at lying.”

And that’s the most truthful thing I’ve said to anyone in a long time.

It takes me a while to fall asleep, and when I finally do I slip into a strange dream where James and I are back at Hank’s with our knees interlaced again, but this time James smiles before tipping forward and kissing me.

CHAPTER SIX

James

“Are you purposely making your coffee shittier and shittier every day so I’ll leave sooner?” asks Tommy as he dumps a gallon of some nasty flavored creamer in his coffee mug.

“No, but I noticed your suitcases by the door.” The thought of him leaving right now has me wrestling with conflicting feelings. On one hand, he drives me up the wall and it’ll be nice to have my house back without him in it. On the other, I need him as a buffer between me and Madison. I want to be her friend—I plan to be her friend—but if it gets too difficult to be *just* her friend, it would be nice to have Tommy around to handle most of the interactions with her. Despite how much it kills me to think of him spending any prolonged time with her.

“One of my boutique hotel clients in L.A. needs me on-site, like . . . yesterday. There was an issue with codes, and . . . anyway, yeah, I’m leaving.”

“Today?”

“As soon as Madison shows up and I can go over a few things with both of you.”

He attempts another drink and then clutches his throat, wheezing out a pained choking sound. “Seriously. Do you even have an esophagus anymore after drinking this every day?”

I sip from my mug like it’s fine wine. “I don’t need it to taste good. I need it to jump-start my body when I have to wake up at five A.M.”

Truthfully, I just make it the way my dad has always made it: a can of Folger’s dark roast coffee beans brewed strong and guzzled with a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon before going out to open up the tunnels and greenhouses ahead of the rest of the staff arriving. Drinking this coffee is

one of my favorite parts of the day, but it has nothing to do with the flavor, never has. I'm one sentimental son of a bitch.

Tommy, however, as someone who had no interest in working on the farm, didn't drink coffee at all while he still lived at home. In the summer he'd wake up around ten A.M. when my dad and I were already halfway through the day and pound a glass of milk and eat a Pop-Tart right from the wrapper before leaving to meet his friends.

I always wondered two things about Tommy: Why didn't he want to work on the farm? And why didn't my dad ever encourage him to like he constantly did me? Because here's the thing. Martin Huxley is a good man and a fantastic dad who wasn't the type to pick favorites—but sometimes it felt like he had by choosing me to run the farm. I asked him about it once and he said, *Why would I force my son to work on a farm he hates? I hope he goes out and does big things with his life that make him happy.*

He never said anything like that to me. Maybe because he didn't need to. Everyone already knew I loved it here. And I really did.

Still do, despite wishing I didn't.

Every week when my mom and dad call from their retirement village in Florida, I tell them the same thing: Farm's great, I'm great, and the green beans have never been better.

It's almost the full truth.

I look at the clock and note the time. "I'm not sure when Madison is going to be here but—"

"I just got off the phone with her. She'll be here in thirty."

Oh. Yeah. He'd know . . . because they talk. Madison has been communicating regularly with my brother, who she's had an enormous crush on for years. All because I asked Tommy to be the point of contact with her. *Such a great decision. I'm not regretting it at all.*

"Which, by the way," says Tommy, hopping up onto the countertop and then leaning over to dump his coffee down the sink, "I remembered Madison as the chaos tornado always cooking something in the kitchen with Mom. You did not tell me she has gotten superhot in her adult years."

She's always been superhot, is what I don't say because I'm smarter than that.

"Be respectful."

He smirks. "Touchy?"

“No. I just don’t want you talking about my friend and chef like she’s . . . I don’t know . . . up for grabs.” I wince, not liking the way I phrased that.

Tommy raises one of his eyebrows. “Is she not, though? Do you have *dibs*?”

“I do not have *dibs*. I have what’s called human decency. You should try it out sometimes and not sleep with the women you work with.”

He tilts his head. “But what if she wants to sleep with me? Hmm? What then?”

I shrug instead of kicking his teeth down his throat. “It’s her choice. But I’m pretty sure she’s smarter than that.”

He shakes his head. “You’re still not answering my question.”

“I’ve answered it three ways. Should I do a handstand and repeat them? I’m fairly good at juggling. I could try that next.”

“None of them were the answer I was looking for and you know it. Look me in the eyes and tell me you don’t have feelings for Madison and I’m free to go after her. Because think what you will about me, but I’m not such a dick that I’d go after the woman my brother wants.”

This entire conversation is making me uncomfortable for several reasons. I answer so I can get him off my back. “Like I said a minute ago, Madison is my friend. And my colleague. I respect her and her choices. You’re free to go after her, date her all you want—I won’t be in your way.”

I set my coffee down (number three of the day) and turn to go get a shower before Madison gets here. I don’t normally work on Saturdays but things have been tight lately so I’ve been taking over where I can when we’re short-staffed.

“So to be crystal clear. You don’t want her?” he asks again, but this time all the humor is gone from his voice.

I turn back. “I don’t *want* her.”

What I feel toward Madison is more than *want*. *Want* implies lust. Implies something fleeting and satiable. What I feel for Madison might dull with some work, but it’s never going away. It’s a need I have to learn to live with. It’s complicated and covered in bickering nuances. It’s annoying and always there, and most of the time I think she might be the answer to my search for happiness. But I’ll never find out.

“One more question,” says Tommy.

“How many times do I have to tell you? Your shoulders will never fill out like mine. They’re made from a special blend of tilling the ground and the coffee you refuse to drink.”

He’s undeterred. “Are you ever going to tell Madison just how much this farm needs her restaurant to succeed?”

I don’t like his taunting tone. “No. And you can’t either.”

“Says he of great moral integrity. Where’s your human decency now?”

“It would put too much pressure on her,” I say, anger coating my words and making my heart race. “She needs some time to get her feet on the ground.”

“She *needs* to know that she signed on to run a restaurant that was created to save your farm . . . and if you have to close the restaurant’s doors in a year, it’s not because of her.” He pauses and shrugs. “Or . . . it could be because of her, I guess. Either way, she should know.”

My head spins a little. “I swear, Tommy, if you tell her about this . . .”

“You’ll what? Fire me?” He’s delighted by that prospect. “Go ahead. I’m the one connecting you to the funding for this whole shit show, anyway! Because no one listened to me when I told y’all to sell this damn farm years ago, and now it doesn’t have any money.”

“Things aren’t that bad yet.”

He laughs, but it’s pitying. “It’s pretty damn close. And you risking the entire future of this farm on the success of the restaurant might be what actually dooms it.”

My nostrils flare, knowing where he’s going with this. “Don’t suggest
—”

“Take the offer.”

“No.”

“James, I swear to god.” He grits his teeth, shooting his hand through his hair. “Anderson Food Distributions has offered you a five-year contract and you are—”

“—not going to take it! I didn’t ask for you to reach out to them on my behalf anyway!” He did it last week, and I’ve been furious with him ever since. Kind of like how he sent me the résumés of several chefs he thinks I should hire over Madison. He’s repeatedly told me that I’m making a mistake since I declined to even entertain the idea of any other chef.

“Why? Give me one good reason you won’t take it!”

“Because it’s not what’s right for Huxley Farm,” I practically shout.

But his voice booms over mine. “Great, then I’ll put that on your tombstone right next to the rest of the men who took the pride of this farm to their graves.”

“What the hell, man?” I’ve never heard Tommy say anything like that before.

Whatever fire was there a minute ago is doused just as quickly as it flamed.

He sighs then hops off the counter, composing himself while adjusting his pleated trousers. Quieter, he adds, “You need to tell her sooner than later. And while you’re at it, tell Mom and Dad too. Or I will.”

“Tommy, I swear if you—” I cut off when a wave of dizziness swamps me. My body rocks to the side and I slam my palm flat against the counter to steady myself.

“Whoa . . . what was that? Are you—”

“I’m fine,” I say when things level out. I point my finger at him. “Don’t say anything to them. Okay? They don’t need to worry about this.” *My dad’s doctor was very clear about that.* “The restaurant is going to succeed.”

And maybe then I can walk away for a few days and not think about harvest schedules, payroll, or whether the kale is curling too soon. One day I’ll get to rest. But today is not that day.

Tommy meets my eye, and I don’t see any hope mirrored back. “Maybe. Or maybe it’ll just make the collapse hurt worse. What I do know, that contract would give you more than a fighting chance. It would give you cushion and stability. It would give the restaurant time to grow into something great.”

Yes, to someone like Tommy who knows so little about the farming world, he would see it as a straightforward solution. But ever since I was a kid, I’ve listened to my dad and grandfather before him discuss the faults of taking a contract with a large food distribution company. The mission of Huxley Farm has always been to sell directly to consumers, putting the best produce directly into our neighbors’ hands. We care about the community, how we run our land, and growing for quality rather than quantity.

If I take this contract with AFD, I would be selling out. Something my dad and grandfather managed to avoid while the farm was in their hands.

“Since when do you give a shit about the well-being of this farm? I didn’t see you showing up when you were living at home, or even after Dad’s heart attack.” My voice has a quiet, menacing edge.

He’s silent.

“Right. I’m going to go get my shower. When Madison gets here, don’t start the meeting without me.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Madison

72 DAYS UNTIL I FAIL . . .

“When I die, I want to be buried with my truck,” I say, arms spread wide, star-fishing against the green steel hood.

Emily looks uncomfortable and intrigued at the same time. “What do you mean by ‘with’ your truck? Like, with the steering wheel in your hand?” We all have a morbid sense of humor. I imagine most people who have experienced tragedy at a young age do.

“I’m talking buckled into my driver’s seat and the whole thing lowered into the ground.”

She grimaces. “I was afraid that was what you meant. We’re gonna be digging for ages.”

I plant a big kiss on the hood and then peel myself up. “I’ve missed this old girl.”

“Really? I couldn’t tell,” Emily says with a grin, because nothing makes her happier than seeing one of us Walkers happy.

“You have no idea how awesome it is to decide to go somewhere, grab my keys, jump in the truck, put on whatever music I want, and hit the road. Literally whenever I please,” I say while performing each action like it’s revolutionary. But after constantly having to think ahead for the last couple years and consider train schedules, walking times, Uber prices, or whether Dan the Lock of Hair Guy is lurking outside the apartment when I’m going to leave or not, this is a dream. I just wish I didn’t feel so silly for loving this more than the city.

I slam the door shut and the familiar, heavy sound brings a wide smile to my face. Before I drive off, I roll down the window and reach my hand out for Emily's. We intertwine fingers. Her reds against my chipped rainbow. "It's so good to be home."

"It's good to have you home." Her words are kind, but there's something reserved in her expression. She looks like how I felt on Saturday mornings when I'd walk to my favorite bagel place but wouldn't let myself get excited for the salted bagel because there was always a fifty percent chance that by the time I got there they'd have sold out.

And now I know what the look means.

"I'm here to stay, Em. This is real." I say it, hoping to ease some of her fears. But my words bounce right off her flimsy smile. Emily is used to people coming and going from her life—and to be honest, I always thought I would be the person who left and never came back. I didn't realize until I was gone exactly how much of my heart lived here and wasn't willing to pack up and move with me.

After leaving Emily's, I hang my arm out the window, letting it surf through the wind as I drive to Huxley Farm. I've been covered in winter frost, but I'm finally thawing and coming back to life. It would be nice, though, if I didn't keep replaying the look on Emily's face a few minutes ago. Does she think I'll get restless and leave again? Or . . . that I'll screw up and run away?

I'm not comfortable with how both options align with my character.

But not anymore! I've changed. This is going to work. Failure isn't an option, and neither is running away.

When I turn off the main road, my breath catches. It doesn't matter how many times I see this place, I'm still mesmerized by this land and the farmhouse positioned at the front of it. It's *paradise*.

A large ivory house sits on sprawling green grass—powder-blue sky with happy little Bob Ross clouds dotted across it. Cornfields stretch out from the left of the house, and then behind it, as well as off to the right, are thriving crops and industrial greenhouses.

My dad used to work full time on this farm before he and my mom passed away. They were best friends with the Huxleys, and even though my mom worked at the Pie Shop with my grandma, she always dreamed of opening a flower shop of her own. She convinced Mr. Huxley to rent her a

little plot of land—for practically pennies—so she could start growing her own flower crop.

I hate that she died before she ever got to see her dream all the way through. But Annie made it happen for her. She still uses the same crop our mom planted and she named her shop after her: Charlotte's Flowers.

A buzz hums under my skin as I get closer to the house because I *finally* get to be part of this place.

From time to time I imagine standing in front of my parents and telling them life updates. Usually the news makes them frown. But this time they smile from ear to ear.

“Hello! Anyone home?” I shout, Sammy’s cage tucked under my arm as I make my way into the Huxleys’ house. Or no . . . it’s just James’s house now, I guess.

The scent knocks into me like a bear hug from your best friend. It’s a smell unique to this place and the Huxley family. Warm and earthy with sharp citrus undertones that mix perfectly with some of my favorite memories.

As I wheel my suitcase into the house, part of me expects to see Ruth round the corner, wiping her hands on her white ruffled apron. But she and Martin live in Florida now, in a sixty-and-up retirement community. Which is why the Huxley house now belongs solely to James. A concept that’s still strange to me.

In high school, I would come over here from time to time with Noah, but he and James would run off to do something out on the farm, and I would sit at the island, watching Ruth work around the kitchen. She was one of those hospitable ladies who would, when she heard someone walk through her front door, fly off to the kitchen to whip up a cake. Or brownies. Or a meal if you hadn’t eaten yet. You never left her house hungry—and now that I think of it, she’s part of the reason I fell in love with cooking.

The thing about Ruth, though—her hospitality didn’t stop in the kitchen. It extended to making the coziest atmosphere you could imagine. The Huxley house was where you wanted to spend your days because not only did Ruth and Martin love each other, but they saw the best in everyone who walked through their door. And they knew how to laugh.

Sitting around their table was never a polite experience. It was a lesson in cackling. It isn't hard to see why they were my parents' best friends. And because of that friendship, they always kept us Walker kids close.

That's why I couldn't refuse James's offer to run his restaurant. To live on this farm and be part of the magic I always wanted to live inside.

No one answers when I call out, but that won't stop me from making myself at home anyway.

This place is a farmhouse through and through. It has a grand entryway that leads to a big kitchen and a living room. A full wraparound porch, visible from every window. And the bedrooms are all upstairs.

It's the kind of space that demands for you to kick off your shoes, curl up on the fluffy couch, and spill your deepest, darkest secrets.

"James? Tommy?" I yell out one more time but still don't get a reply. No signs of life in the living room either.

Oh, the living room. James's mom left almost all of her previous decor because they moved into a fully furnished retirement home in Florida. And selfishly, I'm glad James kept everything mostly the same after they left, because these are not your average dusty and crusty old furnishings. Picture the female main character's home in the best Nora Ephron or Nancy Meyers film and then you almost have something as lovely as this place.

After setting Sammy on the kitchen counter and telling him to behave, I go upstairs to see if I can find James. The incredible scent that blankets the house intensifies with each ascending stair, and just as I crest the top of the landing and peek into James's room, I see why.

His bathroom door opens, releasing a billow of steam, and James walks out in nothing but a white towel. Water droplets cling to his skin, and his hip bones seem to hold the towel up with passive indifference.

I am not shy about the human body—a fact that is more than evident in this moment as I openly stare at James—but as I watch him a hot flush creeps up my neck. Because here's the thing: Real-life farmers do not live perpetually half-naked like the ones portrayed in movies. They do not bale hay with their shirts off, till crops with glistening sweat beading down their bare backs, or shower off under the hose while giving the horse a bath. Which means I've had little opportunity to see James's unclothed body.

He's tall with suntanned forearms and crowbar collarbones. His shoulders are thick with muscle and the rest of him . . . yeah, also a muscular masterpiece. There's proof in fifteen different places that he has a physical job, one he's been doing most of his life.

Luckily, he hasn't seen me ogling him, so I quickly duck back down the stairs and take a seat at the dinner table, positioned in the open space between the kitchen and living room, like I've been sitting here all along.

I open my bag and pull out my laptop so I can stare at it, but all I can see is James's body.

What the hell is wrong with me? It's just James—the responsible town golden boy who has always looked at me like I might strip naked and dance on the bar, embarrassing him to death at any moment. (*Which maybe is a fair judgment.*)

Point is, he's as far from my type as a man can be. So why am I flushed from head to toe thinking of him in that towel?

"Oh, hey." Tommy's voice makes me jump as he comes in through the side door from the porch. "When did you get here?"

"A few minutes ago," I say in a rush. "But I've been right here the whole time. Reading emails." I umbrella all ten fingers over the keyboard. "Right here."

He laughs, and I think there's something in my tone or the fact that I keep mentioning my location that's tipping him off. He rounds the table to inspect my laptop, and that's when we both register the blank, dark screen.

I smile up at him. "It died."

Tommy plants his hand on the back of my chair, then leans over me to touch a key. My little traitor of a laptop winks to full battery life.

"Hmm. Interesting lie."

James chooses this moment to walk into the room, hair still damp from his shower that I would like to forget he had been taking. He pauses briefly when he sees me at the table, and his eyes slide to where Tommy is hovering over me in what I'm sure looks like a suggestive position. I get the urge to shove Tommy's shoulders and catapult him across the room so James knows I'm not flirting with him. But that's ridiculous. Who cares what James thinks? *Not me.*

"That's strange," says James, looking away from me. "I'm not used to seeing my kitchen clean after finding you unattended in it."

“Well, she didn’t have time to mess it up.” Tommy’s tone is all play. “Because she only just got here. And she’s been sitting in this chair the whole time.”

“Exactly.” I narrow my eyes at Tommy in warning.

James goes to the fridge and mumbles, “Cute. They have inside jokes.”

One thing is for sure: James does not like the prospect of me and Tommy together. I’ve always assumed it’s because of his loyalty to Noah and a misguided belief that Tommy will leave me heartbroken.

The sheer lunacy of that idea, though.

“Okay, party people,” Tommy says with overzealous energy and a big clap that makes my shoulders jump. “I’ve gotta get to the airport soon so that I have enough time to fill my body with a long-overdue caramel macchiato. So let’s get started.”

“Wait. You’re leaving today?” I ask in a panic as he unloads folders, papers, an iPad, and a laptop onto the table.

“This is the longest I’ve stuck it out in this bumpkin town since high school. If I don’t leave today, one of two things will happen: Either he will murder me in cold blood by tomorrow morning, or I’ll voluntarily fling myself off a cliff.”

“He’s telling the truth about the murder part,” says James.

Tommy lifts and lowers his shoulders. “We can’t have a Cain and Abel situation on your hands so close to the restaurant opening. Wouldn’t look good.”

Tommy finishes up tossing various binders and papers onto the table until it’s littered with mood boards, fabric swatches, catalogues, and pictures of forks and spoons. There’s even a beautiful mock-up menu. It’s a restaurant design dreamland.

“Normally, this step would take weeks . . .” He opens his iPad and begins tapping on the screen. “But since this project is rushed, and I don’t get the time I, quite frankly, deserve to develop the next best restaurant, we have”—he turns his wrist to read his watch—“one hour.”

I eye the table and can’t imagine how we’ll go through even half of this in an hour, let alone decide on it. Decision-making isn’t my strong suit on a good day, but especially when I’m in a creative funk or I’ve just seen James Huxley in a towel.

I need ample time to make a choice, assume it's the wrong one, ask Emily what I should actually do, then pivot to her idea and repeat the process four more times. But it seems I have . . . one hour.

James joins us, taking the seat to the left of where I'm sitting at the head of the table. Tommy takes the seat to my right, and we all three stare out at the sea of restaurant options.

"Okay, so first let me show you what I had the graphic designer mock up for the branding and menus." As he's digging through the slush pile of papers, my eyes wander to James, who is only drinking from a water glass and not doing a slow-motion striptease for me, yet my body is reacting to him as if he were.

My eyes meet a wet spot on the shoulder of his T-shirt—remnants of the shower—and my mind catapults back to the sight of him surrounded by steam. And then it drags me into the bathroom and supplies me with images of James in the shower. Head tilted back so the water can run down his neck and chest. Arms flexing as he lifts his hands to push through his thick brown hair. His—

"Madison!" Tommy is waving in front of my face. "Are you listening?"

Oh my god. I zoned out, having a dirty daydream about James! This is unacceptable. Outrageous. Not only is it just James—a solid fact that can stand on its own—but he's also the man I declared an official friendship with last night. That I'm going to be working with closely, without the buffer of Tommy for the next few months, as we're preparing for the opening. Just me and James and his body that occasionally takes showers.

Get a grip, Madison.

"Sorry—I . . . Do you have to leave so soon? These are a lot of decisions to make today."

"I know." His lips form a pout. "It is sad to have to part from me this quickly, isn't it?"

Tommy smiles and then puts on his black Gucci sunglasses, pushing them up into his hair.

"But don't worry, you have my much less attractive Huxley brother to keep you company while I'm gone."

Once upon a time, I might have agreed with that statement. But today, in this upside-down world where I'm mentally undressing James at this table, I strongly disagree.

I'm also more than a little worried that life has just presented my newest shiny opportunity that could end in flames.

"I can't work alone with him," I blurt before thinking better of it.

James sits forward, concern etched between his thick brows. "Is it because I didn't do the blood pact?"

"Yes. No. I mean . . ." I swivel in my seat to look at Tommy. "We need you here because there's so much to be done and it seems like too much for only the two of us to handle. Alone. By ourselves."

Tommy is not buying it, and James seems concerned as well. I'm being too weird, which is saying a lot.

The worst thing I can do now is draw attention to my random attraction to James, which will more than likely be gone as quickly as it appeared. Besides, it's probably only a by-product of my pent-up lustiness from not having had sex in so long.

James suddenly gets up from the table.

"Where are you going?" Tommy asks.

"To get a knife," James responds with a stone-cold expression.

Tommy is horrified. "A knife?!"

"I have to slit my palm open so Madison will feel comfortable working with me."

Tommy looks at me. "What kind of shit are they teaching you guys in culinary school?"

"No. James!" I grab his hand to stop him and immediately wish I hadn't. His gaze drops to where our hands meet, and I quickly pull away.

"Sit back down. I'm fine. I'm just . . . a little hungover from last night and jittery about the opening, I guess. Let's keep going."

After a hesitant pause, James retakes his seat. I plaster my eyes on the table, where I plan to keep them for the entire meeting. And when we're done, I'll go settle my mind and get rid of this inconvenient sexual tension.

I just need more sleep. And a vibrator. *Problem solved.*

Tommy hands me a mock-up menu with the restaurant title GRAINS across the top in bold blocky letters.

"Not to brag, but I snagged us the best designers in the business to work on this at a hugely discounted rate. They've given you five samples to

choose from, but this is my personal favorite. It's trendy. It's modern. It'll add a nice contrast to the rustic greenhouse atmosphere."

I couldn't agree *less*. I hate it. I think it will absolutely contrast with the greenhouse, but not in a good way. More in a "Hey, look at me, I'm trying to be L.A. in Kentucky" sort of way. But . . . what do I know? Tommy has done this countless times, and it always works out.

So I hold the menu and say, "It looks great!"

An hour later (and countless lies told on my part), Tommy is wrapping everything up to leave and I'm working double time to not let my discouragement show. I hate the direction we're going in with the restaurant. Although I didn't have any concrete ideas for it yet, what I saw today definitely didn't feel right. I can't tell Tommy, though. If my instincts are so far off base, he'll see how unfit I really am to be taking this job. If he says it's good it must be, so I'll spend the next few months aligning my vision with his.

After shoving his iPad into his leather Louis Vuitton carry-on bag, he tells me he'll be sending time-sensitive documents to me via email and will need my response ASAP. James, I notice, doesn't thank his brother for any of this and instead looks more than ready for him to hit the road.

I don't like the thought of anyone's work going underappreciated, though. "Hey, it's fun to see you in professional mode. You're really good at your job, Tommy. Thank you for all of this."

From the corner of my eye, I see James's jaw flex.

Tommy, on the other hand, is immediately a peacock. "It's true. I am, and thank you for noticing," he says before turning a smolder on me. "Is it making you reconsider going out with me?"

"Nope." I give a toothy smile. "I told you I won't date a co-worker, and I meant it."

"I've been thinking about that—and I realized you're in luck! We're not co-workers. I am in no way attached to the longevity of this restaurant. In fact, once we hammer out all of the details and get this bish launched, I'm done with it. So dinner, Friday? Wait. I'm leaving town for a while." He mulls this over and then points at me. "When I get back, I'll take you out! Somewhere fancy. We'll have to drive to Sommerset, but—"

"Tommy . . ." I sit forward, ready to feed him through my favorite new automatic weeding system. "Believe me, you don't actually want to take me

out.”

“Are you kidding? You have no idea how much I want to go out with you.” He makes a grand show out of coming over and getting down on one earnest knee beside me. “From the second you stepped out of the airport and I saw you in those cutoffs, I think I’ve been in love with you, Madison.”

“Dear god,” James grumbles beside me, tone threatening murder.

Tommy is undeterred. “Madison Daniella Walker”—*that’s not my middle name*—“you are so beautiful I feel like I could die when I look at you. I will quit my job right now and miss my flight if you’ll agree to let me take you out.”

Charming, lying asshole.

“Oh, Tommy,” I say, playing into his theatrics by placing my hand on the side of his smooth jaw. “The truth is, I’m practicing celibacy.”

It’s comical how quickly Tommy’s playboy smile falls away. “How long do you have to practice for?”

“For however long I want.” I shrug, amusement holding strong. “I don’t owe you or anyone else a time frame.”

I can feel James’s heavy gaze but can’t bring myself to look at him and read his thoughts about my declaration. It’s one I made for myself last year, and I haven’t regretted it yet.

Tommy watches me for a long, silent moment, glances at James, then stands, smoothing out the wrinkles of his pants. “All right. A new bump in the road for me, but that doesn’t mean I’m ready to give up yet.”

“Really?” Shock has to be written all over my face.

“Sure.” He grins. “I can woo. I can do old-fashioned romance.”

My chin rests against my fist. “And what if I’m celibate for another month? A year?! Just how long are you willing to woo me?”

“We’ll see, won’t we? I don’t owe you a time frame.” He winks and I swear I’d want to kick any other man. Tommy, though, is just harmless enough to pull off a comment like that and still make me laugh.

I put my hand over my heart. “I’m touched by your devotion.”

“Oh, just you wait. The best is yet to come,” he says, giving a final Tommy Smirk before pulling his glasses down over his eyes and pushing his hand through his rich blond locks. James and I follow Tommy out the

back door and watch wordlessly as he speeds off down the driveway, honking several times with his middle finger out the window.

“There is really no one quite like Tommy, is there?” I say and James gives an annoyed grunt beside me.

And just like that, James and I are alone.

I look down, shoving my hands into my pockets, feeling awkward and unsure what to do next.

But the gravel crunches as James’s boots shift, facing me. “Madison May Walker. Are you ready to see your new place?”

And yes, that is my actual middle name.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Madison

“Close your eyes,” James commands from the driver’s seat of his truck before we go.

Apparently the greenhouse is within walking distance from the main house, but it’s a little far when also toting all my luggage . . . plus Sammy.

“Why do I have to close my eyes?”

“Because I want it to be a surprise. Come on, close ’em.”

I comply but also drape my arm out the window because I can’t get enough of the fresh air. Dogs have the right idea—I need to hang my body out and feel the wind tug at my skin.

As we amble down the gravel drive, I relax with my head against the headrest. “I didn’t think you were a surprises kind of guy.”

He’s silent for a beat, then, “One year at Christmas, when I was like ten years old, I snooped in my parents’ room and found all my Christmas presents because I couldn’t stand the wait. But then when Christmas rolled around, I opened everything and was so disappointed because I already knew what they were. I got everything I wanted that year, but it ended up being the worst Christmas ever. That’s when I realized, I like the surprise more than the present. So yeah, keep those eyes closed.”

Against my best efforts, I’m charmed. How can I have known James all this time and also not know that he’s a little squishy on the inside? It makes me wonder how many other things I’m missing from the James Huxley essentials.

“So tell me about the greenhouse.” I tilt my face in his direction, eyes closed tight.

“What do you want to know?”

“The history? It’s old, right?”

He laughs lightly. “Yeah. We always just called it Granny’s greenhouse, which I think gives people the wrong impression that maybe it was some little hobby of hers. But actually the entire farm belonged to her first. She inherited it from her parents. My grandad only started working on the farm after he married her. So this greenhouse was actually the main growing hub for a long time. We only stopped using it after a storm came through and damaged it to where it made more sense to build a new one with a more modern design and better technology than to fix this one back up.”

“But you never wanted to knock it down?”

He huffs out a breath and I imagine it comes with a grin. “After Granny passed, none of us had the heart to do it. What does it say about us that we’d rather watch something crumble and rot than risk losing her memory by getting rid of it?”

“That you’re a family of sentimental softies.” Turns out, I’m one too. When I was in New York, I missed all those little reminders of my family’s history. They were keeping me warm all along and I didn’t even realize it. “I’m glad you’re bringing it back to life. What gave you the idea to do it?”

There’s such a long pause I’m tempted to crack open my eyes.

“Necessity,” he finally says, but I get the impression I could send a search party into that one word and uncover a world of meaning. “And Tommy. He suggested opening a restaurant . . . and when I finally came around to it . . . I was looking for plots where we could build it, and then I rediscovered the greenhouse. Felt like the right thing to do.”

“And it was the comfortable choice.” I pat my hand against the outside of the warm truck door.

“What do you mean?”

“Just that you like your new experiences wrapped in a familiar, comfy old quilt. You know? To keep your sentimental squishy heart warm and safe.”

He makes a wincing noise. “Cool. That sounds sexy.”

I laugh, not at all expecting him to say that. “Is sexy your goal?”

“Of course sexy is the goal. It’s everyone’s goal. If they say it isn’t, they’re lying.”

“Fair enough,” I reply because confessing I found him very sexy in his towel isn’t an option.

I sit patiently while James comes around to open my door and help me out. His truck is high off the ground, so he wraps his arm around my waist and hauls me to the ground.

And apparently I’m now collecting new experiences with James like it’s my latest obsessive hobby. See him mostly naked. *Check.* Admire the tone of his voice when my eyes are closed. *Check.* Know what it’s like to have my body pressed against his. *Check.*

This feels dangerously close to kindling a crush, which is why I absolutely have to get a handle on this and stop looking at him with googly eyes. *IT’S JAMES*, the harmonious choir bellows in my mind.

My normal mode for curing infatuation is to ask the man, very politely, to bang my brains out. After that, I’m good to go and rarely think of him again. But I’m not operating in that mode anymore. If I want to know what’s below the surface of this life, I have to quit floating on the top.

So these days I’m just a celibate little horndog looking for my happily-ever-after. And getting involved with James would be one complicated mistake.

James gently clasps my shoulders and guides me ten steps. “Okay. You can open your eyes.”

I do and have to blink to make sure I’m seeing the world correctly.

“The door is yellow.” I process this another minute, then, when I look at him and see his smile, I clutch his arm in a desperate hold. “James. The door is yellow!”

“Do you like it?” His tone implies optimism, but his expression is cautious.

“It’s yellow!” I say, like, *Duh, of course I like it.*

He nods toward the chef’s quarters, which turns out is a tiny, adorable house. “Go take a look.”

I don’t need to be told twice. But once inside, I freeze.

Oh no. *Oh boy.* That warm tide of emotions rises behind my eyes, because this . . . is *perfect*. It’s about eight hundred square feet of charming decadence.

“James.” I beam, pure awe ringing in my tone. “This is . . . an actual cottage.”

It's furnished, sun-drenched, and darling. It is a country Pinterest board come to life.

There are gingham-print blue-and-white drapes hanging over the little sink window. A soft ruffle accent pillow on the bed. And . . . wait, is that my old bed?

James leans a shoulder against the frame of the open door like he's not totally sure if he should come in or not. I understand the feeling.

I've never once stepped foot in James's bedroom either. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious to explore his room when I was a teenager. I tried once while he was out of the house. I had been baking downstairs with Ruth and she asked me to run upstairs and grab a fresh hand towel from the hall linen closet.

To this day I can remember taking a single look at James's open door and feeling this burning desire to go inside. To poke around where I shouldn't. To see what kind of deodorant he used. Did he throw his dirty clothes on the floor or put them in a hamper?

Crush stuff.

But Tommy—who I didn't realize was home—caught me before I could take a single step inside and I had to make up an excuse about thinking it was his room. The lie wasn't hard to come up with because I did also have a crush on Tommy. But it felt different. One of those cute, shallow infatuations that had more to do with what it would be like if he kissed me than wanting to know what he was thinking.

James speaks from the doorway. "Tommy said he told you that you would have your own cottage. Did he not actually?"

"Definitely not." I go into the little kitchen and touch my fingers to the small wooden table. There's a vase of flowers in the middle of it. "He said there would be a chef's quarters. To me that implies a tiny room to sleep in . . . possibly connected to the kitchen."

He hasn't moved. "You thought I was going to make you live in a closet?"

"I wasn't ruling out a cot."

"And still you said yes?"

I gape at him. "Absolutely! You're already giving me my dream job, which I don't deserve." I hold my arms out, face beaming, embarrassing

tears bubbling in my eyes. “But an adorable Snow White cottage? This is too much. I can’t wait until the talking animals arrive.”

“Technically, it was a potting shed. I just—” He stops. Clears his throat. “*They* converted it to a cottage. It’s good it’s finally getting use instead of wasting away on the property.” His smile dims. “Plus . . . if you weren’t staying in it, another chef would be.”

“Stop trying to make this less wonderful to me.” I walk into the designated bedroom area and then look back at James. “C’mere.”

He frowns.

“Look at this,” I bait him.

Now his frown is all concern as he pushes off the doorframe and comes to stand shoulder to shoulder with me, looking toward the bed, eager to correct any flaw I’ve found. “What is it?”

“That’s my bed,” I say flatly.

“Yes.”

“You brought my old bed over from Emily’s house. And the matching side table.”

“You needed somewhere to sleep . . . and to put your eight thousand glasses of water.”

I angle my chin up at him. “My point is, would you have gone through all the trouble to bring over another chef’s bed? And furnish the place? And where is this bedding from? You went through trouble—for me—and I don’t know why you’re trying to downplay it all, but I need you to know I’m grateful.”

He’s trying to hide it, but he’s beaming—*caught*. He wanted me to feel comfy here. “Emily helped. We got the stuff from your old room over here, and then she took me thrift shopping for some of the other furniture, like the table and chairs. She’s great at it.”

“She really is. But she never hinted at any of this to me. I wonder why.”

He shrugs, putting his hands in the pockets of his jeans. Clearly he hasn’t realized yet that friendship with me means you get to take up as much space in my life as you want. “Maybe she thinks you like surprises too.”

I stare at the side of his face. “I do. That’s one thing you and I have in common.” And then I throw myself back onto the bed. “Did Emily thrift this amazing bedding too?” It’s soft as cotton candy.

“Nah, that’s a gift from my mom. She was really excited to hear you were coming to live on the farm and told me to make sure you knew it’s a housewarming present.”

I peek up at him, aware that I’m glowing like a lightbulb. “Is it customary for the restaurant owner’s mom to buy the new chef a bed set?”

“Fine.” He huffs against a grin. “I guess it does have its perks to be friends with the owner.”

“I knew it.” I let my eyelids fall shut, feeling as close to ecstasy as I’ve been in a while. “You have no idea how good it is to be free of Bryce. And Sammy is going to sleep so good without hearing all the noisy sex every night.”

“I’m glad for Sammy.”

My palms drift over the soft fabric, realizing I have never had my own place before. I went from sharing a house with my sisters to living with the roommate from hell. There are a million things I can do alone at home! Walk around naked. Sing as loud as I want at midnight. Use up all the hot water in the shower. Arrange the fridge exactly how I want.

“Look away for a second,” I tell James, who is watching me with a bemused smile.

“Why?”

“So I can kick my feet and squeal like a child without you judging me.”

“I won’t judge you.”

“You might. Turn around.”

He complies with a dramatic sigh, and after doing exactly what I promised, I sit up and collect myself.

“All right.” He turns back. “Get up. We’re on to the next.”

“No.” I hug the ruffle pillow to my chest. “I want to stay here forever. I’m never leaving. You can’t make me.”

He tilts his head, watching me closely. “Okay then. As long as we’re just sitting around, we can talk about what happened back there in the meeting.”

My arms slacken, pillow falling to my lap. “You noticed?”

He gives me a look that says it all. “You were pretty obvious.”

“Really? I thought you didn’t see me.”

“I saw you.”

Oh god. Now what? Deny it all and make everything weird, or confess and also make it weird? Since it's going to be uncomfortable either way, I decide the truth is better. I already have too many lies weighing on me.

"Okay, look. It just confused me for a minute. I didn't know you'd be getting out of the shower when I came upstairs. And then I guess I was acting weird downstairs because . . . well, I . . . I didn't expect you to look so damn hot in a towel." His brows pull together. "But can you really blame me? Look at you! Have you always had these muscles? Good lord, you're a sex pistol, James. But don't worry, it doesn't have to be weird. I was just . . ." My head teeters back and forth. "Okay, I was a little nervous that I haven't had sex in a very long time because of my celibacy and that I might feel tempted to take things too far with you when we're alone. But I swear, I'm good now! I won't let my weird moment of attraction—"

"Madison . . ." James butts in, shifting on his feet, a tight smile pulling his full lips. "I should tell you I was referring to you lying to Tommy about liking the direction of the restaurant so far."

"Oh." And then, "Oh. Oh shit. I'm so sorry." A wave of crimson rushes over my face, and suddenly I can't stay seated any longer. I shoot up and splay my hands over my heated cheeks. "Please forget I said any of that, okay? Because I promise . . . that attraction meant *nothing*. You are and will always be just James to me. This will not get in the way of our working relationship. Besides, it's gone now. It was only a silly little moment."

He stares at me a beat, looking uncomfortable and on edge before he exhales. "Okay. Great."

"Yeah?"

He nods silently, looking like he's shoving down nausea now. Is that really his reaction to me thinking he's hot? Well, that's one way to cure my crush.

"Yeah." Another big sigh. "We're adults, Madison. Attraction here and there is a part of life. We don't have to make too much out of it."

"Exactly! And I think I just got confused because I'm . . . well, I'm not used to having guy friends. Platonically. But as you heard me tell Tommy back there, I'm sort of in a different season."

"A season of celibacy—I heard."

"Yes. And so after our phone call, and then our pinky promise . . ." I shake my head, wishing it would Etch A Sketch this moment away. "This is

unfamiliar territory for me. But I like it a lot. I'm glad we're friend-friends now."

He gives a half grin and most of the tension in the room dissolves. "Is that our official title?"

"Yes. And I'm going to overuse it but you're going to have to be okay with it because we're . . ."

"Friend-friends?"

"Bingo!"

He scoffs. "You're dreaming if you think being friends with me absolves you from any roasting or complaining." He turns and waves for me to follow him to the door.

Once out of his view, my shoulders sag with relief before I shuffle along behind him. I feel like I just outran a train. "Okay, but like eighty/twenty, right?"

"Which is which?"

"Eighty percent lavishing me with compliments and kindness. Twenty percent complaining and/or roasting."

"*Oof.* You're in for a shock."

"*No,*" I breathe out. "The reverse?"

He winces. "Afraid so."

"Is it too late to rescind my friend-friends offer?"

He clicks out the side of his mouth in an *aw shucks* way. "Sorry, yes. We pinky promised."

"Damn."

And then I almost run into his expansive back as he suddenly hits the brakes and turns to face me again. "You know the drill. Close 'em."

CHAPTER NINE

Madison

“Okay, open.”

I blink several times, squinting against the instant brightness of the room. And when my eyes adjust, my breath catches. The greenhouse is one giant arched space with windows making up the walls and ceiling, white window panes connecting each rectangular glass. The floor is a white speckled concrete.

There’s nothing else in here yet—no booths or decor, just the blue sky above with puffy white clouds and a small crop of trees on the far side of the restaurant that faces away from the farm. And yet, it feels finished. Like this is all that’s really needed.

I pivot around, taking it all in, and notice the one solid wall on the far end of the building. Assuming it leads to the kitchen, I look away from it and back toward the main dining area. *No, thank you.*

I can easily imagine what the finished version will look like. Wooden tables, each with a tiny floral arrangement from Annie’s, naturally. Comfortable booths along the perimeter of the walls. People laughing and holding hands across the table, waiting for their meals, which will be comprised of ingredients harvested straight from this land. And because of the windows, guests will experience all of it as if they’re sitting directly in the middle of the crops.

The best feature will be at night when the stars are visible through the glass roof.

It’s perfect. And I get to cultivate a food experience here. I get to be the chef. *Me.* Madison. All because James believes in me for some unidentifiable reason.

No one in my life has ever taken me this seriously. I wouldn’t be surprised to hear that even my siblings are having private meetings behind

my back, putting wagers on how long it'll take for me to run this restaurant into the ground.

“You okay?” James asks, watching me blink back a thousand tears.

I clear my throat. “Oh, yeah. I’m good.”

“You’re crying.”

“No I’m not.” A tear splats on the floor by my shoe. We both look at it. “I think it’s the ghost of onions lingering in the air here.”

“Granny *was* known for her fried hush puppies.”

“Really?” This delights me. Sparks something in my creativity that wants to grab on to that little nugget of history.

“Mmm.” He nods. “Everyone said she put too much onion in them. But I thought they were delicious.”

I point to my face, shoulders sagging. “It’s only fair to tell you I cry a lot when I’m tired.”

“I know.”

“And when I’m stressed.” I pause. “Or if there’s a strong breeze. And definitely if it’s Tuesday.” My face skews. “Are you sure you want a ball of emotions as your chef? Because these tears aren’t a rare thing. The onion ghosts are going to choke me up a lot.” I want him to fire me. Right now. *Just do it and get it over with, James. It’ll be easier on both of us if it happens now.*

James doesn’t laugh. He comes closer. “Madison. Do you think I didn’t already know these things about you before I asked you to take the job? All these years growing up together and you think I haven’t been paying attention?”

A breath snags somewhere between my ribs. “I guess I didn’t realize you were. I’ve always gotten the very strong impression that you didn’t want me around. That I’m just annoying to you. When I enrolled in culinary school, one of my very first thoughts was, *James is going to be glad to get rid of me.*”

He takes a step closer. “Okay, but you’ve always acted like I was annoying to you too. All the low-IQ jokes?”

“That’s because I’m petty! And you were rude to me first, so I was rude back. It’s the way the world turns. That’s why when you asked me to take this job, I briefly considered the possibility that you’d had a concussion. I

never thought you hated me, but I definitely didn't think you liked me either."

James frowns and looks in the direction of the doors, silent for a minute. And then, "You and I . . . we have an age difference."

"Four years," I confirm.

He nods. "And for a long time that was enough to make you Noah's annoying little sister to me."

"*Of*—" I say like he punched me in the gut. "The truth hurts."

"But . . ." His jaw flexes as his eyes meet mine. "I guess when I stopped seeing you that way, we had already solidified a normal course of interaction. I never quite figured out how to change it."

By my math and quick calculations, all of those words add up to this: James does not view me as Noah's annoying little sister anymore. But based on his reaction back at the cottage, he doesn't want me to find him attractive either. *Probably for the best.*

In my silence, James chooses his words as carefully as a surgeon picking his instruments. "I never wanted to get rid of you, Madison." He breathes in and looks like there's so much more he wants to say. And then an antagonizing smile splits across his face. "But it *was* pretty nice not having a giant mess to clean up in my kitchen after family dinner."

I air-kick him. "Jerk. I always cleaned up after myself!"

He's backing away from me. "You don't even know how to clean."

"Sure I do. Watch me clean that stupid smile right off your face!"

He's laughing now as he turns his back to me and disappears through a swinging door. I follow him, ready to show him just how annoying I can be, but then I stop dead in my tracks.

We're in the kitchen.

"These are what clean countertops look like. . . . Maybe go ahead and take a picture so you can remember the state they are supposed to return to."

I don't respond to his joke. I can't. But not for the same breathless reason as a few minutes ago.

The metal countertops are so crisp. There's this huge sink and a giant oven. Stainless-steel pots and pans and empty containers on a shelf where dry ingredients will be stored. There's even a little window above the sink, but it does nothing to make me feel less caged right now.

My heart is a hammer, threatening to crack my ribs.

My nails bite into my palms.

I can't find my breath.

The lights are so bright, they're sharp as knives.

I reach out to steady myself, but the familiar cold stainless-steel countertop meets my overly heated fingertips and jolts me back to memories I never want to relive but do all too often.

Distantly, I hear James say my name, but I've tunneled too far into my senses to acknowledge him.

A firm grip takes hold of my waist, and his breath touches my temple. "You're shaking."

"Because I'm going to die," I murmur into James's chest after he scoops me off the ground.

"No, you're not. I'm here." His voice is a life preserver tossed out to where I'm barely treading water, but I can't reach it because I'm not actually here—I'm stuck back in New York.

CHAPTER TEN

James

“Come here often?” I ask Noah as I take the stool next to him at the Diner’s bar seating.

He cuts his eyes to me with a dry expression because I say this to him all the time. Noah comes here every morning for a cup of black coffee before going to open up the Pie Shop. I try to meet him here at least once a week.

As far as he’s concerned, it’s an accidental meetup—but it’s actually pretty calculated on my end. I schedule my morning around it because even though Noah will never in a million years admit it to me, he counts on these kinds of intentional hangouts as much as I do.

When his parents died, our friendship became one of the most important relationships in his life. He leaned on me in a way he couldn’t with his sisters. I’ll always be there for him and he’ll always be there for me. Even when we’re busy and go long stretches of time without seeing each other, it will never affect our friendship. We’re brothers that chose each other, and that bond is stronger than sharing DNA. *Believe me.*

“You know, I’ve always wondered . . .” I pause to accept a cup of coffee from the server, who knows I also drink it black. “Thanks, Shirley.”

“You’re welcome, sweet pea.” She winks and walks away. I can’t help but think of another server who was friendly like Shirley (but about twenty years younger). Jeanine worked here for years before she went to work for Noah at the Pie Shop.

I used to see her a lot more over there, especially when I’d make weekly deliveries. I was lonely. She was lonely. And it didn’t take long for us to start dating.

We kept it going about four months, until we both agreed the relationship wasn’t doing what it needed to for either of us. She wanted

deep, meaningful love (understandably), and I wanted to wipe Madison from my system.

She never said it outright, but I think she suspected I've always loved Madison. Sort of like how I think she'll eventually get back with her ex. It's why we are still friends—there was just never anything special between us.

"You were saying?" Noah prompts.

"Oh. I've always wondered, why do you come here for coffee when you make and sell your own at the Pie Shop?" I down a big gulp and wince because it's like water compared to mine.

"Because mine doesn't taste as good."

"You brew the same brand of beans."

"Yeah . . ." He takes a drink. "But it doesn't taste the same over there."

"You're telling me the Diner's greasy aroma adds something positive to the flavor of the coffee?"

"It would seem."

"Or maybe Shirley blows kisses into the grounds every morning."

Noah shakes his head, fighting a smile. "What are you doing here? Hiding from Tommy?"

"No, he left yesterday morning, thankfully."

"Who left yesterday morning?" asks Will Griffin while leaning onto the counter as he takes the barstool on the other side of Noah.

He must have a mole somewhere in town, because he's started showing up every morning that I do. He hates to be left out of a hang. I was skeptical about him being happy here in Rome long term when he turned in his bodyguard boots to stay here for Annie. But my skepticism was misplaced. This guy was made for a small town. Made for Annie too. You wouldn't think it by looking at him, with all of his tattoos and brooding, chiseled face, but he's got a heart of gold. Evidence being his dream job is to be a teacher, and he has gone back to school, pursuing a degree in high school education. He'll make a hell of a teacher.

"My brother," I answer Will's question.

He laughs. "I thought there was a noticeable absence of Armani cologne in the air this morning."

Shirley, who also knows Will's order by heart, places a coffee in front of him. She wordlessly slides over a little dish of half-and-half pods and the

glass sugar dispenser.

He cuts me and Noah a dirty look as his butterfly-tattooed hand reaches for the sugar. “*Don’t*,” he warns because he’s always felt insecure about his dislike of black coffee.

Noah raises his palms. “You’re touchy about your weak-ass coffee for no reason. We’ve never said a damn thing about it.”

“You just did! You called it weak.” Will looks distraught.

“It is weak, though,” says Noah.

“It’s *enhanced*.”

I squint at him. “Is it, though?”

Another voice enters the mix from behind the three of us. “You need to lean into it like me and start drinking lattes.” We glance over our shoulders to see Jack Bennett raise his paper cup from our local coffee shop: the Hot Bean. (I swear it really is a coffee shop.)

He nods toward the large corner booth. “Let’s sit at the table like civilized men.”

Noah grumbles something about intruding on his alone time as we stand, even though we all know he enjoys this as much as we do.

Once we’re all settled into the booth and Jack and Will have ordered food, the conversation turns back to me. “So how long will you get a break from Tommy?” The question comes from Will.

I shrug. “Not long enough now that he’s tossing his hat in the ring to date Madison.”

I don’t realize my poor choice of words until Jack raises his brows. “‘In the ring’? Does that mean there’s a ring to toss a hat into?”

I scramble to clarify. “Yeah—only in the sense that every man out there seems to want to date her.”

“Not me,” states Will.

Jack doesn’t help. “Me neither.”

“I definitely don’t,” says Noah as he leans back against the bench, staring at me. “But what about you, Jameson?”

“I don’t, either, *assholes*.” And I don’t. Even if she found me attractive in my towel—a thought I can’t seem to shake. But also . . . it’s Madison. She finds most men attractive. This is not exactly a boat-tipping declaration from her. “I just don’t want Tommy dating her, and you really shouldn’t either, Noah.”

He shrugs. "I have no issue with my sister dating who she wants to date. You're the only one who ever has a problem with it, actually."

"Okay, you can go right ahead and fuck off."

"*Ooh*, he's throwing around the explicit language." Will shivers. "Someone is triggered."

I don't like this. If the guys find out how I feel about Madison, she'll know too. They'll blab to their partners and then their partners will blab to Madison. It won't take more than twenty-four hours for our working relationship to go to hell.

She needs a safe place to get her feet on the ground, one without my unrequited feelings getting in the way. I came to terms a long time ago with the fact that Madison will never think of me the way she does other men, so the last thing I need is for these idiots to start something up that doesn't exist.

And judging by whatever happened yesterday in the kitchen, Madison needs all the support she can get right now. I still don't understand what happened. She went from totally fine to a full-blown panic attack in a second, like she'd seen a ghost when she stepped foot in the kitchen. She seemed better by the time I got her back into the cottage and sat her at the table with a glass of water. But she didn't offer much explanation other than saying she wanted to rest for a bit. I got the feeling I shouldn't push her, so I made sure she was okay and then gave her space.

It's hard not to ask Noah if he knows any more about her experience in New York, but I don't want to say something behind Madison's back that she might not want spread around. And the same principle applies here that applied to them knowing my feelings. They'll blab the second they get the chance.

Our attention momentarily goes to the diner door when we hear the bell jingle (because in a small town, we're perpetually nosy). The door opens, and if you didn't live around here, you'd think a ghost floated inside, because there is no head visible over the five-foot-tall booth back. And that's how we know exactly who just came through the door.

A pair of wisdom-filled eyes framed by dark, softly wrinkled skin peeks up over the booth's wall. She's definitely standing on her tiptoes. "Oh good, you're all together," comes the voice of our favorite midseventies town matriarch, Mrs. Mabel.

Mabel is everyone's grandma, and she was best friends with Silvie Walker (Noah's grandma who raised them) until the day she died last year. Mabel is frighteningly all-knowing, does not possess a filter, and would step in front of a moving bus for any of us. And we would do the same for her.

Without invitation, she rounds the booth and scoots in beside me, her yellow capri pants contrasting nicely with my jeans. It's a tight squeeze, but she doesn't seem to mind as she picks up her menu. Mabel has historically been a very guarded person, but she's started opening up more about her life. Last week she recounted a painful memory from her younger years, before the civil rights movement, when this diner refused to serve her.

I want to hear everything she has to tell me, but a huge part of my heart clenches at the realization that she's probably sharing now because her husband died six years ago, because her best friend recently died of dementia, because aging is happening to her too and she doesn't want these stories to go forever untold. I should have been terrified of loss when Noah's parents died, but it didn't really sink in until about two years ago. When I almost lost my dad.

Now it's a terror I'm constantly hiding from.

"I'll cut right to it, children," says Mabel. "I'm sure you're all aware of the town's summer display competition coming up in a few weeks?"

"Ah, yes. My favorite town event. I have a calendar on my fridge, counting down to the beloved day," says Noah dryly.

Mabel rolls her eyes and waves him off. "Fine. Be a scrooge and don't decorate the Pie Shop. Less competition for me that way."

I lean toward Mabel. "He's surly because we intruded on his alone time."

"Fooey nonsense. Quit acting high-and-mighty, Noah, or I'll bring out the picture of you running around town in your Batman undies and frame it over this damn table."

He shrugs. "You've been threatening me with that for years, but I've never seen any evidence. I think you're full of hot air."

She grins. "Care to try me?"

They have a stare-down for a few chilling moments and then Noah's expression softens. "How can we help you with your display, Mabel?"

“That’s more like it.” She looks pleased as punch. “I need a few muscular people—I’m not picky on the gender—to help me move a few hay bales onto my front porch sometime over the next couple weeks.”

“And where . . . ?” I begin, already knowing the answer. “May I ask, where are you getting the hay bales from?”

She looks me dead in the eye. “Your farm. I need three. And now I won’t be paying you either, so don’t ask for it because I’m just a broke old lady.”

“You’re rich as hell, Mabel, and everyone knows it,” says Will, tossing a sugar packet at her.

She flutters her lashes in his direction. “Rich in beauty.”

We all look up as a chilling shadow that could only belong to one person falls over the table. Harriet, owner of the Market and Mabel’s number one enemy. Harriet is the complete opposite of Mabel. She wears her silver hair pulled back into a severe bun that tugs at the nearly translucent skin of her face. She rarely wears anything with color and delights in proving she owns the moral high ground. They’re around the same age, both grew up in this town, and I will be forever curious what their history is like. But I’ll likely never know.

“Mabel, what are you doing interrupting their get-together? You are not one of the boys. Leave them be.”

“I can be one of the boys if I want to.”

Harriet stares her down. “You never can tell when you’re not wanted.”

Mabel lifts her chin. “You’re just jealous because people like me everywhere I go, meanwhile they duck and cover to avoid your sermonizing.”

“Actually,” says Jack, sliding out of the booth, “I do have to get going. But let the record show it has nothing to do with your sermonizing, Harriet. And I think you both could stand to be a little nicer to each other.”

They both wince. He’s still too new to the town to fully understand.

A sudden thought strikes Harriet. “Wait. This is about the summer display, isn’t it? That’s cheating if you get their help.”

“I haven’t seen a sheet of rules.” Mabel’s nose goes into the air. “Appreciate you stopping by to pee in our Cheerios, but you can be on your way now.”

Harriet levels a glare at Mabel. “I’m going to find that list of rules, and when I do you’ll be disqualified.”

“Then you can get a pity win by default.” She taps her temple mockingly. “Smart thinking.” Mabel is a genius at outmaneuvering Harriet.

But Harriet can also hold her own. Before walking away, she leaves Mabel with a closing remark. “At least the trophy will only say “winner.”

To Harriet’s rigid retreating back, Mabel shouts, “I thought Christians weren’t supposed to idolize things!” Harriet grabs her to-go bag and walks out the door without ever looking back. “Dammit, that sounded desperate, didn’t it?” Mabel asks our table.

We all mumble a version of *yep*.

A few minutes later, Noah and Will tell us they have to leave. Noah nods a goodbye to Mabel because he’s not one to show affection even though she’s definitely his favorite person on earth other than Amelia. Will, on the other hand, goes around the booth, bends to wrap his tattooed arms around Mabel’s frame with a big squeeze and a kiss on the cheek. She pats his face and tells him to have a good day. His smug ass assumes he’s Mabel’s favorite. Wrong. It’s me.

“And now it’s just us and we can finally get to the good stuff . . .” she says, proving my point and twisting toward me in the booth.

“Gossip time?”

“I have tons for you today.” Her eyes drop to my wallet, resting on the table. “Oh, are you leaving already?” Mabel looks gutted by the prospect, which is odd because normally she’s the last person to let her feelings show. She has sad puppy eyes, pleading that I don’t leave yet. And now I wonder if Mabel hasn’t been sharing her stories not out of fear of death but out of loneliness. Maybe she hasn’t had anyone else to talk to.

I pocket my wallet. “Listen, I’ve been cooped up at the farm too much this week, and my supply of juicy gossip is running dangerously low. I’m not going anywhere until I hear what the hell happened with Clara and that woman at the salon last week.”

“That’s a good story.” Mabel’s eyes brighten.

“But we’ve gotta hurry because I have an appointment to get to in a bit.”

She nods. “Go get yourself another cup of this shit they call coffee and we’ll get to it.”

Before I slide out of the booth, I meet her eyes. “Mabel . . . I’m your favorite, right?”

She pats my hand several times. “*Sure.*”

“And how often have you been experiencing the dizzy spells?” asks Dr. Macky while pressing the stethoscope to my chest.

“Oh . . . you know . . . here and there. Nothing too bad.”

“And how are you sleeping?”

I situate, hating the way the paper under my ass crinkles as I do. “Like a baby.”

“Mm-hmm. And what about the headaches?”

“They come and go.” The fluorescent lights in this damn doctor’s office definitely won’t do me any favors, though. I hate it in here. It gives me the heebie-jeebies.

“James.” Dr. Macky stares into my eyes, right through my soul.

“Yes?”

Her right eyebrow arches. “You are aware that I’m your doctor, right?”

“I figured. The white coat gave you away.”

“And you’re aware that *you* scheduled this appointment because you were concerned about your dizzy spells, headaches, sleeplessness, and fatigue? Right? I didn’t break into your house and abduct you, throw you into a van and force you to sit on the crinkle paper you’ve hated since you were ten years old while I examine you.”

I tip forward. “That statement taught me a lot about your TV viewing preferences.”

“James!”

I hold up my hands in surrender. “Okay, okay!”

“Are you ready to cooperate? Because this is serious and I need your honest answers. Based on your elevated blood pressure reading, something is going on, and I can’t get to the bottom of it if you don’t answer my questions honestly.”

I look toward the pamphlet rack, filled with terrifying information about how you might die one day, and let out a breath. “My dad had a heart attack.”

I don’t need to say this to her; she has been our family doctor for decades. Sometimes I wonder if she’s actually immortal, because for as

long as I've known her she's been in her fifties.

"I know," she says softly. "And as *his* doctor, I can say with certainty that if he had been seeing me regularly before the heart attack, it might not have happened at all. Which is why it's good you're here now."

My dad always seemed so healthy to me. So strong and capable. Until a random Wednesday two years ago when he suddenly wasn't. We almost lost him to that heart attack, but he pulled through. It was a wake-up call, one that came with a congestive heart failure diagnosis.

I really had no choice after that but to step up and take over the farm for him. My mom didn't even have to beg him to release it—that was the wildest part. He had been partially "retired" for two years before that but couldn't stay away from the farm. The heart attack shook him so badly that he said he was ready to sign the whole thing over to me. Said he'd trust me to keep the legacy alive while he and Mom embraced retirement in sunny Florida.

And now here I am, facing financial ruin and putting all my faith in a new restaurant to revive it. Without the investor deal that Tommy snagged, I wouldn't have even been able to open the restaurant. Everything is hinging on it—a fact that I'll continue to absorb the weight of so Madison doesn't have to carry it.

"I don't . . . I can't have a heart attack right now. There are too many people relying on me."

Dr. Macky's head tilts empathetically. "James, if I can speak frankly, a heart attack doesn't give a shit about your schedule or how many people depend on you. It's time to take care of yourself and get your blood pressure under control before it becomes a long-term problem like it has for your dad." She pauses, letting those words soak in. When she seems satisfied that she's thoroughly shaken me, she adds, "Now. Let's start from the top with my questions and then we'll discuss next steps."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Madison

68 DAYS UNTIL I FAIL . . .

“That is not what happened,” says Noah.

“Yes it is! Oh my gosh!” Emily practically shouts. “Annie! You were there. Back me up.”

“Well . . . I mean . . .” Annie doesn’t want to get into it.

“This is not the time to be a sweetie pie!”

Is James avoiding me and that’s why it’s been so easy to not see him?

“I’m sorry, I just think that it’s not what you’re making it out to be, Emily,” says Annie.

Noah folds his arms. “Thank you.”

I haven’t seen James—not even a glimpse—in a few days. At first I thought it was because I was doing a really great job of dodging him. But now . . . I’m wondering if he’s the one dodging *me*? I guess he could be trying to give me space after what he thinks was an exhaustion-induced panic attack in the kitchen. But what if it’s not? What if it has everything to do with me telling him I was attracted to him in a towel? What if he doesn’t want me to work with him anymore because he assumes I’m going to be salivating over him every second? I should have kept my big mouth shut.

Emily sits back in her seat, rolling her eyes at Annie. “Unbelievable.”

But . . . who can really blame me? James needs to be in the next Marvel movie. Or a *Smallville* reboot, because he definitely has the body of a farmer who is also secretly Superman. Plus everyone knows I am the frisky

one in the family. It's not a surprise my libido is a ravenous thing. I can't be expected to see such a great body and just ignore it!

"Preposterous," I accidentally say out loud.

"Thank you, Madison!" Emily swings her indignant gaze to Noah. "See. She agrees with me."

I actually have no idea what they are talking about.

We are having a sibling Hearts tournament at the Pie Shop and for the last ten minutes they have been bickering about something not nearly as important as my towel fiasco.

This card game night has been a tradition of ours for forever (we have a lot of traditions, actually) and we used to get together, just the four of us, to play almost every Saturday night. Now, as adults with significant others and careers, we get together when we can. Which is why it's happening now, on a Wednesday night.

"Yep. I agree with Emily." I try to as much as possible because being on the opposite end of her viewpoint is like standing down a tornado. I'd rather not.

"Wuss," says Noah before laying down his five of clubs and then looking up at me. "How's it going over on the farm?"

"Fine." My answer pops out quick. "Good."

"Is James driving you nuts?" Annie asks.

"No, actually. Probably because I never see him." I pause before laying down my king. "Do you guys think he seems busier than normal?" *Aka avoiding me.*

"He's worked hard as long as I've known him," says Noah, coming in hot with the most unhelpful answer in the world.

"Well, yeah. But I mean . . . he seems like he's really working hard now. Is that new?"

"No." Emily plays her card, and it comes in lowest so Annie has to take the pile with her ace. I sigh with relief—not because of the hand of cards but because Emily just confirmed James isn't avoiding me. "He's been working a lot more over the last two years. I think he's had several people quit. But also he was sort of pulling double-duty there for a while as he was renovating your cottage."

My gaze shoots up to Emily, but I realize too late that it was the wrong decision. She's looking down, but her eyes are on me—waiting to see my

reaction, apparently. “You mean when *the construction crew* was renovating the cottage, right? Because James specifically said *they*—implying a crew—when he was discussing the renovation.”

“Nope.” Noah is staring down at his cards, unbothered. “It was definitely only James. I swear he worked night and day to get it done. Not sure why.” He shakes his head. “Then again, I never know anything he’s doing anymore. I didn’t even know he was building a restaurant until I heard you’d signed on to be the chef.”

My breath is caught in my lungs. “I didn’t either until he offered me the position. But apparently he’d already had it in the works.”

“Which is so strange,” says Annie while moving one card from the front of her hand to the back. “Because I had been at the farm several days a week for the flower crops and he never mentioned a single thing. There weren’t even any work trucks there until after the week you signed on. It’s almost like . . .” Annie jumps like a squirrel ran across her feet and then looks up, gaze meeting directly with Emily’s. Something transpires.

What the hell? Emily and Annie don’t share a private telepathic language. Only me and Emily have that! I feel like ever since I’ve come back to Rome, everyone has been acting strange. Making weird faces. Blatantly keeping secrets. Like they’re all tiptoeing around me.

I’m scared what they’re all thinking but not saying is that they convinced James to build this restaurant for me because everyone knew I was going to fail out there in the real world. Convinced him to build me a trampoline, so when I fall I won’t break.

It wouldn’t be the first time they anticipated my screwup and prepared for it. There was the speech I was supposed to give at Noah and Amelia’s wedding—Emily knew I’d forget, so she wrote one for me, just in case. (And yes, I had to use it.) Before that, she submitted my college essays for me, fully aware I’d forget to do it myself.

And then there was the brief stint when I was obsessed with poetry. I entered one of my poems in the state fair and won. But later I found out I’d only won because Noah bribed the judges with free pies. *Free pies!*

There are countless more stories like those too.

So what if this whole thing—the cottage, the restaurant—isn’t an opportunity but a mercy? A concession? If that’s true, then I’m not chasing a dream. I’m being babysat so I don’t screw up again. What really

guts me, though, is that it reinforces the one truth I don't want to believe about myself.

Thing is, I am damn good at cooking, and I love creating a new recipe. But I didn't love New York, and I didn't thrive in the cutthroat culinary world out there. Does that have to equal failure?

Because I want answers, I call Annie out directly. "It's almost like *what?* Finish your sentence."

"Oh. Nothing." Her cards must be very interesting for how glued her eyes are to them.

I tip forward, hooking my finger over the cards and tugging them lower so she has to look at me. "No, you were definitely going to say something."

Annie gives an angelic smile and a casual shrug. "I forget. Honestly, the thought just flew out of my head."

"I don't think honesty has anything to do with what you just said."

And then, as if my siblings are completely on Annie's side, Noah intentionally changes the subject to one we can't ignore. "I think Amelia is pregnant."

His words cannonball into the center of the room.

"What!" shouts Emily.

"Why do you think that?" I ask, trying but not entirely succeeding at keeping my gaze from Annie. She looks shocked. Poor thing has never lied well, and that extends to keeping stuff from us now. If I was on the fence about Annie being pregnant before, I'm absolutely sure of it now based on the way she's looking at Noah.

"Because I caught her googling pregnancy symptoms the other night. And then just to be sure, I looked at her browser history—

"

"Wait, wait, wait. You looked at her browser history?!" I screech.

Noah's green eyes meet mine. "Oh please. Don't act appalled. Like you're not the one who taught me to be nosy and invasive in the first place."

"Who said anything about being appalled?" I smirk. "I'm *proud*. Anyway . . . go on. You looked at her browser history . . ."

"And I found that she'd searched 'when is it safe to tell your family you're pregnant?'" He eyes each of us. "Should I ask her about it?"

“No,” Annie says with authority. And then softly adds, “I don’t think you should. It’s her body. Let her come to you with her news when she’s ready. And you shouldn’t have mentioned it to us either.”

“Okay. Yeah,” Noah says, feeling chastised because Annie is not the reprimanding type, so when it happens, it stings.

But then, almost unconsciously, Annie’s hand goes to her stomach. We all notice in our own discreet ways. But the internal conversations are *flowing* through the table. Annie, however, is not looking at any of us and doesn’t catch it.

Noah looks at Annie’s hand, and then to me in question. I widen my eyes at him: *Yes, idiot, she’s the pregnant one and Amelia was searching because we suspect Annie.* He makes an *ohhhh* expression and then I could swear he seems sad. Like maybe he wanted Amelia to be pregnant. Emily gives us both extra-wide *shut up* eyes.

And then Noah clears his throat. “You’re right, Annie. I think I’ll leave it alone and let her tell me when she’s ready.”

It’s an awkward transition, but we finally finish our round of Hearts and they set up for another, but I can’t stick around. There are too many secrets in this family right now and I want to get answers to at least one that I know directly affects me.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Madison

It's dark when I get back to the farm. Unfortunately, the drive lasted just long enough to turn me into a chicken. I don't want to confront James anymore. I want to go inside and live in ignorant bliss.

But on my way in, I stop and stare at the restaurant. What was a dream come true for me now feels hollow. Will I be able to show up confidently for work every day if in the back of my mind I'm wondering if it's actually a Madison Walker daycare?

I want to make incredible food over the coming years and succeed the pants off this restaurant. I want to prove to myself, and everyone else, that hiring me wasn't a mistake. But before I can do that, I have to make sure we're starting on equal footing. I don't want to be a pity hire.

And ultimately, that's why I end up walking from my cottage to James's house. I don't know why I'm even doing this now. It's almost ten o'clock, so there's a very small chance he's still awake. And I'm not a monster, so if the lights are all out I'll go home and stalk him again tomorrow.

Except as I make it across the property and round the barn, I have a perfect view of his back porch stairs. And there he is, sitting, elbows on his knees, hat discarded beside him . . . smoking a cigarette.

I must be seeing this wrong. James does *not* smoke. But as I get closer I can smell the distinct scent of tobacco. Which suddenly explains why the smell was hovering around him at the bar the other night. It wasn't ingrained in the wood. It was clinging to his skin.

"Jameson Huxley," I say in my best impersonation of an indignant person.

He looks up and squints into the dark. His eyes flare when he spots me about twenty feet away. And then this idiot tries to hang his hand over the

side of his opposite leg so I won't see the cigarette between his fingers. "Maddie? What are you doing here this late?"

"Never mind that." I make my way to him. "Whatcha got there, bestie?"

He has the audacity to frown. "What . . . what are you talking about?"

"Oh my god, you grew up such a good boy that you never learned to lie properly."

He's antsy as I approach. "I lie just fine." When I get closer, almost within arm's reach, he leans away and holds up a hand. "Stop. Don't get closer."

"Why?"

"Because you have cooties."

I'm getting as close to him as I can now. "*Why, James?*"

He backbends over the stair to avoid me while holding his hand behind his lower back. "Because I haven't showered!"

"James." I lean in, hands bracketing his shoulders, gripping the stair behind him.

Finally, he rolls his eyes and raises his cigarette up beside my face. "Because there's still smoke in the air and I don't want you to breathe it. It's not good for you."

"Hmm. And if it's not good for me, it can't be good for you either. So why the hell are you smoking?"

He licks his lips and the faint smell of the cigarette burns in the air between us. I can taste it. "Why the hell did you have a panic attack?" he says, rewording my question a little and throwing it back at me.

I grin softly. "Touché."

"Hold your breath." He lifts the cigarette to his lips, takes one more drag, then blows it up into the air away from my face before dropping it to the ground and stomping it out.

I move to sit on the stair beside him. We don't talk for a solid minute. Which is one minute too long for me. "I have a question."

"Just one?"

"I want a truthful answer too. Even if you think it might hurt."

He looks at me, one dark brown eye closing a little. "I already don't like this question."

I take a deep breath, gathering my nerve, and then exhale. "Did you create the restaurant just for me . . . ?" He opens his mouth, but I hold up a

finger. “Wait. I’m not done. Did you make the restaurant just for me . . . because you and my siblings thought I wouldn’t cut it as a chef on my own? Did you concoct this restaurant as my safety net?”

He angles to me now and intentionally meets my eyes. “Madison. I swear to you, I did not make this restaurant for that reason.” Relief washes over me. “First, that would be a terrible financial investment to concoct a restaurant for someone who I think could run it into the ground. I love this farm too much to do that.”

I hadn’t thought of it that way. Now I feel silly.

“And second,” he goes on, “I’ve never tasted food as good as yours. I asked you to be our chef because I genuinely believe you’re the best person for the job. Honestly, there’s no one else I’d rather have in that kitchen.”

My throat tightens. Not only because he believes in me, but because the dishes he’s talking about? They’re all ones I made before culinary school. Back when cooking was pure joy. A playful experiment in reimagining the meals we grew up on. I miss *her*—the girl who cooked for fun. Who tossed ingredients together just to see what would happen. Who didn’t second-guess every dish.

New York stripped that version of me away. It turned something I loved into something that scares me. And now I wonder . . . will I ever get her back?

“Okay,” I manage, blinking fast and swallowing hard. “Thank you.”

His brows pull together. “What brought this up?”

“My siblings tonight. They made me feel weird.” I pull my feet up a stair so I can wrap my arms around my knees. “They kept saying things that made it seem like the restaurant didn’t exist before me—like I was tied to it somehow.”

“I see.” He looks toward the crops.

“And they implied that you renovated the cottage yourself. Just for me.”

“Well . . . I did do that.”

I whip my gaze to him. “Why?”

“Why what?” He picks up his hat, shakes it out once, and places it on his head. *Backward*.

“Why would you renovate the place yourself?”

He grimaces, holding the answer between his teeth a second longer. “Because the construction crew wasn’t going to be able to get it done

before you needed it.”

My skin is tingling. “Were they behind schedule or something?”

“Not exactly.”

I close my eyes. “Was it not part of the original plans?” He’s silent. “James . . . is this actually the chef’s cottage . . . or is it *my* cottage?”

The heavy breath he drags in says it all. “Should any other chef take the position after you . . . a chef’s quarters will not be included in the job.”

“James!” I’m shaking. “You shouldn’t have done this for me!”

“You were going to need a place to stay! And you’d already done me a huge favor by coming home for this job.” He shrugs, shoulders tugging against his T-shirt. “I wanted you to have somewhere to stay without adding more to your plate.”

At this news, all I can do is drop my face into my hands and whimper, “Jamesssssss.”

“What am I missing?”

“So much. Oh my god. I do not deserve all this. You need to fire me right now and get someone else.”

“I won’t be doing that.”

I pop my head up. “Everyone thinks I’m going to screw up or get bored and leave! And for good reason! You should think this too. I didn’t even . . .” I pause and pivot away from that subject. “The panic attack in the kitchen . . . it’s not a rare occurrence. It’s sort of the norm for me lately, in fact. It’s part of why . . .” I can’t get it out. I need to, but I can’t say the words.

James, noticing the truth is lodged somewhere in my windpipe, bumps the back of my hand with his knuckles. “How about a truth for a truth?”

I don’t want to be lured by this manipulation—but I am. “Fine. You first.”

“I’ve been smoking on and off since high school. I used to smoke a lot back then and went through great pains to cover it up. I picked up the habit from my dad, even though he does not know I ever saw him smoke.”

“No way—Martin Huxley does not smoke!” I say, picturing the happy, salt-and-pepper-haired, six-foot-tall and fit man who refused to use synthetic pesticides on the farm’s produce because it wasn’t healthy. “He’s obsessed with kombucha. You can’t be into *both*.”

James laughs. "He doesn't smoke anymore. He gave it up like fifteen years ago when he had a lung cancer scare that turned out to be nothing. It scared me too, so I rarely smoke anymore. Only when I'm under a lot of stress and I can't sleep." His eyes, so dark in the night, slide to me. "You're the only person to ever catch me."

Well, this is an interesting revelation. James, the most upstanding man I've ever known, has a deep dark secret. I'm suddenly overcome with desire to see if he has more.

"I smelled it on you." I peek at him from the corner of my eye. "At the bar the other night. But I thought for sure it couldn't be you."

"Why not?"

"Because you're not the type to stress smoke."

This seems to amuse him. He leans back, resting his elbows on the stair behind him. "And what type am I?"

"You're stable. You're dependable. Wholesome. What you see is what you get."

"What you just described is an oak table."

"Yes, exactly!" I say, but then I see his disappointed expression. "... No. Wait. You make that sound bad."

"*You*," he says around a chuckle, "make that sound bad. God, excuse me, I have to go cover myself in tattoos and rob a bank before the Golden Girls ask me to come live with them." He stands, slapping his hat on his head once again.

I grab his hand. It's big and calloused and unlike any hand I've ever held before.

"I didn't mean it negatively. I meant it... opposite of negative." I stand too and forget to let go of his hand. "Can I start over? I messed that up." Apparently, I'm only capable of telling James he's either a sexpot or a docile grandpa. I need to get my balance.

His eyes track over my face. "Okay, but only because I'm dependable and don't want to let you down."

I laugh and drag him with me up the stairs. "Come inside. I'm going to explain while showing you a way to relieve stress that's even better than smoking."

He drops my hand to stretch his long arm around my shoulder to reach the door, opening it before I can. This also puts his mouth wonderfully

close to my ear when he says, “If I wasn’t so wholesome, I would think you were about to suggest we have sex.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Madison

“I’ve been wondering how long it would take you to destroy my kitchen,” says James while hovering somewhere behind me.

“Hush it, you. I’m tired of your kitchen jokes. Especially when I’m about to blow your mind.” I point a clean spoon in his direction. “And no, I don’t mean sexually. Though I bet I’d blow your mind in that area too.”

He swiftly plucks the spoon from my hand. “*Okayyy*, what ingredients do I need to gather for this meal that will cure my smoking addiction?”

I lean my hip against the counter, balancing on one foot while the other perches against my left like a flamingo. “For legal reasons, I must officially state that this is not a cure for addiction. But unofficially, it is pretty damn comforting and you might crave it more than a cigarette.”

He smiles. “Said like someone who has clearly never smoked a day in her life.”

“I’ve smoked!”

“Weed doesn’t count.”

“Oh.” I go to the dreamy walk-in pantry and grab a loaf of bread. “Just for the record, what you’re doing right now . . . *really* makes me want to smoke. I don’t like knowing I haven’t tried something. Especially when I’m challenged.”

“Let me try a different approach then.” James twists so his lower back is against the counter now, crossing his arms and ankles. “Madison. My mom called, she says you have to smoke a cigarette tonight or you’ll be in trouble.”

“Reverse psychology?” I poke him in his big shoulder and he tracks my every move with amusement. “Don’t play mind games with me, James, or you’ll make me fall in love with you.”

The moment the words are out of my mouth, I regret them. I don't even know why—they just seem to have more weight than I expected. Like picking up a paper bag you think is empty, only to find a gallon of milk inside.

"Can you get out the sugar and cinnamon?" I scurry away like a squirrel dodging a car to preheat the oven. Next, I lay a few pieces of white bread out on a plate.

James is back with the cinnamon and sugar containers and sets them near me on the counter. I spot a butter dish on the other side of the large island and lean over to reach it. My fingertips are just short of making it, but a second later James's chest is pressing over my back as he gets the dish for me. His heat against my spine is warmer than tanning on the beach.

But he's only there for a millisecond before he slides the dish closer and then returns to an upright position, stepping aside.

"Thank you," I say, but it comes out like a stupid squeak.

Suddenly I'm having all kinds of fantasies that include me, James, and this countertop. I've known him my entire life, and I've never imagined sleeping with him. So why now? Is it because I'm celibate? Practicing a sexless lifestyle the last year has definitely had an effect on me. I thought it might dull my senses, but it's only brightened them. The touch of a hand, brush of a shoulder, lingering eye contact—it's all enough to work me up these days.

"Okay, so." I rub my hands together like a maniacal scientist. "This is one of the first things I learned to make as a kid, and it's been my go-to treat ever since."

"Teach me, Chef."

His words zing down my spine.

I force my attention on my knife, dipping it in the room-temperature butter and smearing it across each piece of bread. "With this dish, you are an artist. The bread is your canvas, and the butter is your paint."

"That's a lot of paint." His eyes are glued to the bread.

"Crust to crust. Don't leave a single dry spot."

Next, in a little bowl, I combine the cinnamon and sugar until it's the right ratio and then sprinkle it across the butter-slathered bread. Once they're coated, I take each slice to the oven. "The trick is to lay them

directly on the oven rack so they get toasty all over. And also because it's like a fun game of Operation when you're getting them out with your fingers. You have to try not to burn yourself on the rack."

"I like a good challenge."

A few minutes later our treats are finished and we're hovering by the oven, each taking a huge bite. I watch James closely to see how he'll react. He chews thoughtfully, jaws working and head nodding. He's making the appropriate amount of moaning noises. But then, all at once, his mouth splits into a huge smile, followed by a laugh. The kind of laugh that is born of an inside joke.

"What?" I ask, mildly annoyed. "Is it gross or something?"

His laugh is a simmer that slowly builds into a full boil. He's laughing so hard now he has to set his toast down.

"James! What are you laughing at?"

"You."

I gasp. "Rude."

And then he does the most strange, incredible thing. Still shaking with barely restrained laughter, he lazily reaches out his arms until his hands curve behind my shoulders, scooping me to him. He cradles me right into his chest and then wraps me up.

James is hugging me.

I blink and breathe in, dizzy from his conflicting tangle of cigarette smoke, cinnamon sugar, and men's deodorant. Irish Spring, I'm betting. *Nothing* has ever smelled better.

"Madison, it's cinnamon toast." He squeezes me affectionately. "I thought you were about to teach me something you learned in culinary school, because you were so serious just now, with a frown between your eyebrows. But then you made *cinnamon toast*. I kept waiting for the big reveal of a secret ingredient."

"You've had this before?" I sound pouty, arms limp noodles at my sides as he attempts to squeeze a hug out of me.

This really sets him off laughing. I can hear it joyfully knocking around inside his sternum. "Are you serious? I ate this toast before you were alive."

"Oh my god." I pull out of the hug that I never really committed to. "You were only four when I was born! Don't make it sound like you rubbed

elbows with Aristotle.”

“Would it make you feel better if I said this is definitely the *best* cinnamon toast I’ve ever had?”

“A little,” I say, downplaying how his compliment drops into the center of my heart and fizzes like an Alka-Seltzer.

I turn away and busy myself placing the cinnamon and sugar containers back inside the pantry so he won’t see the effect he has on me. *No repeats of the towel attraction fiasco.* But then I catch sight of something bunched up at the far end of his countertop.

“Hey, what’s that?” I say, pointing to the little contraption.

James sees what I’m gesturing toward, then squints one eye. “I don’t guess you’ll believe me if I tell you it’s a tire inflator?”

I pivot and give him a hard stare. “Let me rephrase my question. James, why do you have a blood pressure cuff out on your countertop?”

His throat bobs as he contemplates what version of the truth he wants to give me. “Because I had an appointment with my doctor this morning, and now I’m supposed to monitor my blood pressure every day for the next two weeks while making lifestyle changes.” I guess he decided on the full damn truth.

Worry creeps up my neck. “Are you okay?”

He looks as relaxed and easygoing as always. “I’ll be fine.”

“You’ll *be* fine? As in you’re not currently?”

“I *am* fine. I just . . . I was having some symptoms. So I went in for a checkup. Turns out I have slightly elevated blood pressure.”

“James.”

“Madison.”

“Your dad had a heart attack,” I say, like he isn’t aware.

It happened shortly after I moved to New York. I hated being so far away during it. But Emily kept me up-to-date on how they were doing, and I called Ruth to check in on her and Martin a few times too. I didn’t, however, call and check in on James. A fact that doesn’t sit well with me anymore.

The look in James’s eyes tells me he’s reliving that terrifying day now. He’s the one who found his dad in the greenhouse right as Martin was falling to his knees. “I know he did. But I won’t. My doctor thinks it’s just . . . stress-induced. She wants me to try a few lifestyle changes and see if

that helps—Hey, whoa, why the teary eyes?” he says, coming in close again to rub his hands up and down my arms. Comforting *me* when he’s the one who owns a blood pressure cuff.

“I really . . . don’t like the idea of you having a heart attack.”

“That’s good to hear.” His hands slide *up and down, up and down*.

I meet his eyes. “And we’re just now becoming friends. You can’t die at the start of our friendship.” Maybe that’s selfish, but I don’t care. It’s true.

Having already lost my parents at a young age, and then my wonderful grandma who raised me, death is an ever-present monster, waiting around each corner, salivating to claim everyone I love most. I’m terrified of it, always jumping to worst-case scenarios and imagining—feeling—the moment that someone gives me horrible news that changes my life forever. Even if it’s not real.

For the second time tonight, James wraps his arms around me. But this time I lean into him, quietly, tucking my head against his chest. This hug feels more intimate without laughter acting as a buffer between us. His hands even seem to hesitate a little before finally splaying against my back and pulling me in firmly against him.

I slide my arms around his waist and knit them together at his lower back, savoring how soft his worn cotton shirt is against my cheek.

There. We’re hugging.

Madison and James: two hugging friends.

I want to say it’s strange—having my head on his upper chest—but it’s not. If anything, I’m now realizing how strange it is that after all my years of knowing him, this is the first time we’ve ever hugged. I like hearing his heart beat right into my ear. It’s a soothing cadence.

Most guys are either too scared or too freaked out by my emotions to sink into them with me. I could write a magazine article titled “How to Lose a Guy in One Step: Cry in Front of Him.” And that would be the entire article. No need for bodies of paragraphs . . . because that one act alone has had most guys I’ve interacted with take off running. Or . . . yell in my face.

“I promise, I’m not going to die,” James says in a quiet whisper at my ear. “Everything is fine.”

“Your elevated blood pressure suggests otherwise.”

“I think this is the antithesis of a pep talk.”

I angle my face up, resting my chin on his chest. “Swear to me you are going to take care of yourself and do what the doctor said to do?”

He looks back and forth between my eyes, seeing the ever-present shadow of loss in them. “This is nothing to worry about. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Swear it.”

A beat passes, and then he nods. “I swear.”

Satisfied, I peel out of his arms because any longer spent pressed up next to him is going to impregnate me. “Is there any way I can help with the stress part? I bet I could be a pretty good farmer. I look sexy in overalls too.”

He grins and shakes his head no. It’s hard to believe that this is the same James I’ve always known. The James who looked annoyed when I was in the same room. There’re no traces of that man here. In fact, the one looking at me with the stomach-swooping smile looks whatever the exact opposite of annoyed is.

He’s my friend now.

I track James’s hand as he lifts the toast to his mouth, taking a huge bite. “You’ve really already had this exact thing before?” I ask.

He balls up the paper towel that once held his toast and then takes mine and does the same, throwing them both away. “My mom used to make it for us all the time when we’d come in from working on the farm. But I haven’t had it in a while.”

I hop up onto the counter. “Next time I’m teaching you to make a beef Wellington.”

“Pass—I’d rather smoke.”

I playfully kick him, but he catches my foot with a laugh. Almost the second his hand comes in contact with my skin, his laugh cuts off. “Your toes are like ice. Are you cold?”

“My feet are always cold. I probably need to exercise more or something.”

He releases my foot and wordlessly leaves the kitchen. *Okay, bye.* While I wait to see what James is up to, I lean my palms back onto the counter. My fingers connect with paper, and I glance over my shoulder to find an open word search puzzle magazine. It’s bent so severely on the spine it doesn’t need any help staying open.

It's lying next to an abandoned mug, and I can only assume that James Huxley does word search puzzles over his morning coffee. My heart twists at the image. I slide the puzzle over and find where he's left off. He only has one column left to complete, and suddenly it feels like my life's mission to find these words.

James returns a minute later with a nondescript, balled-up pair of white crew socks. They most definitely came from his drawer, and before that, a value pack. I'm tapping the pen against my lips and if he is shocked by my commandeering of his puzzle he doesn't show it. Instead James—ever protective—slides a sock onto each of my feet. They're so fluffy they would never fit in a pair of sneakers. These socks are made for boots and cozying up on the couch. And apparently . . . *me*.

I straighten my legs and wiggle my toes, taking a pleased look at my little piggies in a blanket. And then I point at the page. "I found *excellent*."

He studies where I'm pointing and nods. "Cross it out."

I do as he says. "You're a menace for crossing out the words you find. Everyone knows you're supposed to circle them."

"My puzzle, my rules."

I can't keep the charmed smile from my mouth. "I never would have guessed you like word search puzzles."

"I start and end my day with them. It's relaxing."

I hum a sound of agreement. "I should do this too. I like it."

James stares at me a moment, then takes the little grocery store magazine from me and rips out the page I was working on. He folds it into a neat little square and hands it over for me to take home. I pocket it, feeling like I'm stowing away precious jewels.

"By my count, I've now told you three personal things about me and"—he pretends to count on his fingers before closing them all—"and none about you."

I let my legs dangle again. "What do you want to know?"

"Why you had a panic attack in the kitchen the other day."

I take in a huge breath and let it out through puffed cheeks, preparing to say it quickly. "Okay . . . so the truth is . . . I've been having panic attacks almost every time I go into a professional kitchen lately." I pause. "There was this chef in the kitchen where I did my internship in New York, and

he was”—I flinch as an image of his severe expression hits my mind—“brutal.”

“In what way?” James is mentally finding his shovel.

“Very much the stereotypical high-profile chef. He demanded perfection. He didn’t tolerate any softness. And he . . . hated me from the second I walked into his kitchen. I was berated a lot in front of everyone. My sauces were always a disgrace—even though I excelled at them in technicals. And my knife skills were apparently atrocious.” It was always something. Changing every day to where I couldn’t keep up or expect what he’d hate about me next.

I wasn’t enjoying New York, but I was actually doing well in school before that internship started my third semester. My decline happened rapidly after—keeping me from class, dipping out early when my hands would shake uncontrollably, forcing me to take a zero on the assignment. That anxiety bled into all areas of my life.

“Instead of firing me, he made me the official mascot for what not to do as a chef. He needed someone to take his aggression out on. When I’d take my short pee break, I’d cry in the stall, and then I’d come out and deal with his condescending comments about my puffy red eyes and lack of balls.”

James’s voice is pitched down to Batman level when he says, “Tell me his fucking name.”

“No,” I chuckle, because I know James. He will get on a flight and hunt that man down to avenge me, and then I’ll have to get on one too in order to bail him out of jail. “The point is, he made sure I—and everyone around me—knew I was not cut out to be a chef and that my imperfections and tendency to cry when under stress were downfalls.”

“Why didn’t you quit?”

“Do you know how hard it is to find an internship in an elite restaurant in New York? I kept thinking I could win him over eventually. That I’d get the hang of it at some point. And then it just became a matter of determination or pride, I don’t know. I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of seeing me quit.”

“You’re really strong, Madison.”

I scoff. “I don’t feel strong. In fact, I live in terror that my confidence is gone forever. How am I going to be an executive chef and manage other people, demanding perfection when I can’t even achieve it *myself*? Cooking

in a professional kitchen is impossible lately because the fluorescent lights and the sterile metal countertops trigger me.” I heave a sigh. “I’m so sorry, James. I don’t want to let you down. And I should have said no to this job.”

“First”—he holds up his hand, thumb sticking up—“impossible to let me down. Second”—his index finger pops up—“maybe you can’t do it.”

I frown. “Now whose pep talk needs work?”

“I’m not done!” he says in amusement. “Maybe you can’t do it like that chef implied you should, but this is *your* damn kitchen. You can run it however you want. There’re no rules that say you have to be a perfectionist to be a chef. You don’t even have to expect perfection from your staff if that’s not something you believe in personally.”

His words massage a knot of worry in my chest. The one that has set up camp in there. *I can run the kitchen how I want.* Is that true? Could it really be that simple? I’ve never really explored that idea because perfection was so ingrained in our practice at school. But maybe he’s right . . . maybe there’s another way.

He closes in a little. “I know you can do this, Madison—but I think you should do it in a way that brings you the most joy. Which is why I hated watching you lie to Tommy the other morning about liking the direction of the restaurant.”

“But . . . I don’t think I have enough experience to voice what I want.”

“Yes, you do. Be loud. Trust yourself.”

Trust yourself. Those are two words no one has ever uttered to me. *Focus.* *You can do it.* *Keep going.* Those are the phrases people say to me, and even though they’re meant to encourage, they’ve always implied that I’m lacking in some way. And I’ve been so quick to believe them. But James . . . he said, *trust yourself.*

Maybe it’s the toast and the hug and the soft, warm lighting, but honesty pours out of me. “The other problem is, my mind is blank. I probably shouldn’t even be telling you this, but I haven’t been able to come up with a menu yet and the opening is right around the corner. I can’t find my creativity and it’s killing me.”

“But you know what you don’t want it to be . . . which is what Tommy was full steam ahead for?”

I cringe. “Yeah. I really don’t like the direction of those designs. They would be perfect in L.A., but here it feels like a mockery in a way.”

“I agree.”

“But it’s too late.”

“No, it’s not. Leave Tommy up to me. I’ll get you more time.”

“James. We just established that you have high blood pressure from stress. I don’t need you taking on even more.”

“Okay, then you can help me in another area to make up for it.”

I widen my eyes suggestively. “Now you’re propositioning me?! I’m so proud. Yes, James, I’ll be your lady of the night.”

He smiles in a way that has me wishing he *was* propositioning me. “Can you be ready Tuesday morning by six?”

“That’s early for sex but okay.”

“*Madison.*”

“I’ll be ready.”

James walks me to the back door, where I shove my socked feet into my thong sandals, giving them the wedgie of a lifetime, but also unwilling to take off the socks yet. When I’m almost down the back steps, I pause and look back at him. “Hey. I’m sorry you’ve been so stressed,” I tell him. “And that you’ve felt like you had to manage it alone.”

“I didn’t say I had to manage it alone.”

“But you have been. Because Tommy has never helped and your parents can’t and Noah is busy a lot now. So . . . I guess I’m saying, if the late-night cigarettes or the cinnamon toast aren’t doing it for you, I’m here to talk. Hurricane Madison at your disposal.”

The corners of his mouth tug up. “Noted.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

James

It's three P.M. when I finish spreading fertilizer on the tomato crop and check my phone for the tenth time. I called Tommy last night right after Madison left. He, of course, didn't answer and hasn't called me back. I even texted, *It's important.* But it's Tommy so I could have texted, *My limb is dangling off and I need you to come reattach it,* and it probably still wouldn't be enough to warrant an immediate call back. I'd have to say something like, *Quick, there's a model wandering the property looking lost and lonely, what should I do?* That would get an immediate ring.

Actually, should I text him that?

I stare at my phone a little too long before remembering my morality and deciding against it.

"Hey, boss," says Archie, meeting me in the middle of the row with his comically tight Wranglers and cowboy hat. He's only nineteen and essentially inherited this job from his dad—just like I did mine. I think every day he wakes up and hopes this place magically turns into a ranch that lets him live out his dreams of being a cowboy. Instead, he gets to wash and package the baby turnips.

"What can I do for you, Archie?"

He lifts his hat and pushes his hand through his sweaty hair. "I was wondering if I could leave a little early today."

"You sick?"

"No." His face redds. "I, uh—my girlfriend is coming back into town from college for the night only. But she's getting in a little early so I was hoping to get to spend as much time with her as possible."

"I see," I say, but what I mean is, *Must be nice.*

Nice to have someone waiting for you. Nice to have a night off. Nice to have a life that doesn't revolve around crops and weather and the price of

fuel.

I want to say no. God, I *need* to say no. But I see the nervous way he's rubbing the back of his neck, the way he keeps glancing toward the barn like he might bolt if I give him half a chance.

My dad wouldn't hesitate to say yes and give him the day off. But when my dad ran this farm, he had double the crew that I have now. Working on a farm doesn't pay like it used to. Because back then local farms still mattered. People walked into stores and asked where their tomatoes came from.

A guilt-ridden thought strikes me. If I were to take the contract with AFD, I'd be able to hire more help again. I wouldn't have to contemplate whether my day can absorb more work to compensate for Archie's absence. But I'd also be part of the problem. Just another farm cranking out mediocre produce to hit our target quantity in time.

Even though Dr. Macky's voice rings in my ear, reminding me I need to cut down on my work and prioritize rest, I say, "Yeah. Go ahead."

He grins, thanks me, and jogs off toward his truck. Just like that—gone.

And I'm still here.

Still watching the sun crawl over a sky that doesn't care how tired I am.

Still dragging a legacy behind me that no one asked me if I wanted to tow.

Sometimes I worry my grave will be dug beside the green bean crop. Maybe I'll decompose and make the next harvest sweeter. Who knows.

And it's all because I had the unfortunate capacity to love this place. Lately, I find myself wishing I'd hated it like Tommy. That I didn't feel responsible to keep it afloat so my dad can rest easy. Tommy drove off after high school without so much as a lick of guilt. He never looked back; meanwhile, I don't think I've ever moved forward.

It's dinnertime before I hear from my brother.

"Hey," he says cheerily, like I haven't been waiting on him all day.

I dump a can of hearty beef stew into a pot. The sound is not appetizing. "I've been waiting on you to call me back all day."

"Have you? That wasn't clear in your one hundred texts."

"And voicemail. I said it was important there too."

He chuckles. “Sorry. But last night you called while I was out on a date—it would have been rude to answer a work call.”

“Of course you were on a date.” I fire up the gas stove and stir my pot of stew a little more rigorously than needed. “And let me guess? That date spilled into the morning, which led to the afternoon, and that’s why you’re just calling me back?”

“No, asshole.” He’s not chuckling anymore. “Well . . . it did spill into the morning because I’m a grown man and that’s what usually happens when two adults like each other. You should try it sometime and maybe you wouldn’t be so grumpy. But no—I didn’t shirk my responsibilities like you’re implying. I had three back-to-back client meetings today and an on-site observation.”

“Oh.”

“Oh? That’s all you’re going to say? You know what? No. I’m so tired of you being a condescending dick to me. Call me back when you’re ready to treat me like a professional.”

He hangs up.

I stare into the pot of stew and watch as it simmers around the edges. I’m pissed off—as I usually am after talking to my brother. But the thing that really bothers me is that he seems to think I’m chronically grumpy. Ask anyone in this town and they’ll tell you my personality is sunshine. But yeah, all he’s ever seen from me is anger.

And damn it, he’s right. I was a condescending dick to him just now. He is a professional and is known as someone important in his industry and is therefore doing me a massive favor by helping me with this restaurant. But every time we talk, angry shit flies out of my mouth and I don’t entirely know why. It happens every single time.

After taking a minute to breathe and move my stew to a bowl, I call him back, determined to put a lid on my anger, mostly for Madison’s sake. I need Tommy to not hate me while I ask him for more time.

“Hello?” he answers like a smug ass.

“Hi,” I say and then steel myself to keep going. “How are you?”

“Oh, I’m great. I had an incredible coffee this morning, my favorite suit was clean, and I learned that my biggest project is coming in under budget by ten percent. Thanks for asking.” He says all of this like there’s a studio audience waiting to laugh their asses off.

“Great. Happy for you.”

“Thanks. What can I do for you, brother of mine?” It’s weird to hear him say that phrase. It’s what our dad has said our entire lives. *What can I do for you, son of mine?* And he says it in this deep comical tone like Tommy just did. It’s one of the few pieces of evidence that we did actually grow up in the same family.

I rub the back of my neck. “I need you to hold off on confirming all the choices we made with Madison the other day.”

There’s a long pause. “Why?”

“Because she might want to go another route with the concept.”

I hear Tommy take in an audible breath in the way someone does when they’re trying not to blow up at you. I imagine he’s pinching the bridge of his nose—preppy-boy hair falling back against his neck. “James. It’s too late.”

“No, it’s not. The restaurant isn’t open yet.”

“That is not at all how it works. Everything needed to be completed like last month. We’re already behind, and now you want me to delay more? Possibly affecting the opening date?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve already locked in media coverage for the opening. Some incredible food journals—we can’t move the opening.”

“Okay, then we’ll figure it out, but she needs more time.”

“Why though? The designs are good. They’ll work.”

I sit at the table next to my abandoned word search from this morning with my bowl of disgusting stew and a glass of sweet tea. “They might work, but they’re not right for Madison and she needs a little time to get it sorted out. Give us a week.”

“A week?!”

“Seven days.”

He’s silent a minute. And then, “James . . . I’m worried about this decision.”

“Don’t be.”

He stops and breathes again, but this time it sounds different. “But I am. And shit . . . I’m just going to say it. You need this to work for the farm. There’s a lot of money on the line. And it seems like you’re making a risky choice all for a girl with no actual experience.”

I rest my spoon against the side of the bowl. “Don’t ever call her a girl again. She is a *woman*, and a trained chef that I very much believe in. When she says she needs more time to consider the restaurant that her name will be tied to, she gets it. And by the way, you don’t get to start caring about this farm after an entire lifetime of not giving a shit. And you definitely don’t get to comment on how I run it.”

I hang up first this time, willing to live with the consequences of my brother mistyping me as “grumpy” a little longer.

Except he calls me back. “Got that chivalry off your chest?”

“You’re annoying.”

“Thank you. You can have the extra week. But no more.”

“Great.”

“Unless you want to heed my advice and take a look at one of those other chefs’ résumés?”

“I don’t.” I singsong it even though I’m not in a good mood.

“Fine. Onto the next. You’re still not going after Madison romantically?”

“Why the hell do you keep bringing this up?”

“Because I just want to make sure there’s nothing you want to tell me.”

Why does he sound like that?

“There’s nothing.”

I hear the back door open and the woman in question walks in holding a big bowl. She waves when she sees me at the table and walks closer. I tell myself not to notice how pretty she looks in her all-denim outfit, but dammit, it’s all I can focus on.

She’s got on a fitted, medium-wash chambray button-up with the sleeves casually rolled to her elbows and unbuttoned low on her chest. There’s no way she’s got a bra under there. The shirt is tucked into a pair of form-fitting dark blue jean shorts, frayed at the edges, stopping mid-thigh. And she has a navy-blue paisley bandanna tied around her head, Rosie the Riveter-style.

She somehow looks both feminine and tomboy at the same time. So sexy it hurts.

She’s also a little thief. After noticing the half-finished word search, she rips out the page, folds it, and stuffs it in her back pocket. I receive a challenging look, to which I raise my hands in surrender. She seems

appeased and then plucks my bowl of beef stew out from in front of me, scrunching her nose like it disgusts her, before replacing it with a giant salad. And I don't mean a salad in the bland, bagged supermarket sense. I mean salad that is definitely from the farm.

Three different fresh greens. Pecans. Feta. Shaved Brussels sprouts. Berries. And what I'm betting is a homemade vinaigrette, drizzled over the top. I don't particularly like salad, especially not Brussels, and even I think this looks delicious.

"Because it's important to what happens next," says Tommy, irritating voice reminding me he's on the line.

"Why? What happens next?" I ask my brother while also looking up at Madison in question.

The doorbell rings and she and I both look in its direction.

"*That* is what happens next," says Tommy, so ominously it runs down my spine.

Madison mouths, *I'll get it*, and then goes to the door.

"Tommy. What's at the door right now?"

"You'll see. Tell me how she likes them later!" And then my asshat brother hangs up.

I hear the door open and Madison's gasp. When I turn the corner, I see why. There's a delivery guy at the door holding a bouquet so large you can barely see him behind it. It's a rainbow, bursting with every color of rose under the sun.

She squeals and then looks over her shoulder at me, eyes bright and sparkling. "Are these for you, James?"

I grunt a laugh. "Doubt it."

The delivery guy speaks, voice muffled from behind the arrangement. "Is Madison Walker here?"

"Me! I'm her!"

"Oh, great." He shifts the bouquet so he can peek around it. He looks fatigued. "These are for you."

"Who are they from?"

"I've got a good guess," I say dryly.

She goes up on her tiptoes to pluck the little card from the top of the blooms and then reads it out loud. "*The roses are rainbow, your nails are too. This bouquet is to prove, I'm still thinking of you. From Tommy.*" She gives a

pouty lip and presses the card to her chest. “Oh my gosh, Tommy used ChatGPT just for me!”

I roll my eyes, wondering if he sent these flowers before or after his date last night. The guy is a prick and doesn’t deserve the beaming smile on Madison’s face. Especially after voting against her working for us—repeatedly.

“Do you mind bringing them inside for me?” Madison asks the delivery guy.

“Su—”

I hold up a hand, staying him. “You’re not actually going to accept these, are you?”

She shoves my hand down. “Why the hell wouldn’t I?”

“Sorry, but . . .” The delivery guy hikes the flowers up higher in his arms. “These are heavy.”

“Shit. Yeah, you can put them on the kitchen table,” she says, disregarding my glare.

He plows his way through the entry and into the kitchen, Madison on his heels and me on hers. “Are you actually entertaining the idea of dating him?”

She laughs. “No.”

“Then why are you keeping these?”

“Because they’re flowers. And I love attention. What’s the problem?” Her hands go to her hips.

The delivery guy points toward the way he came. “Okay, I’m just going to . . .”

“Sit down.” I tell him and then look at Madison. “You should send those flowers back. Reject them so Tommy will get the message.”

Madison folds her arms. “What if I don’t want to send him a message? What if I want him to keep sending me flowers?”

“He was on a date with someone else last night, Madison.”

She stares at me. “So?”

“So you’re a game to him. Don’t you see that?”

She smirks. “I thought you said you were going to stay out of it. That it’s my choice if I want to date Tommy.”

“Yeah, well, that was before we were friends. But now—as your best friend—”

“Oh, you’re my best friend now?”

“Yes. And as such, I’m telling you, you can’t date my asshole brother.”

“Is that an order?” She doesn’t seem amused anymore. I watch her temper flare in her eyes—and god, if she isn’t twice as beautiful. “And I’d think long and carefully before you answer that question, Jameson.”

“It’s not an order,” I say and watch her eyes soften. “It’s a *command*.”

Her eyes blaze anew. “That better be a joke.”

I step closer. “I don’t want you to date Tommy.”

“Why? Give me one solid reason.”

“Because I—” The rest of the sentence tangles in my throat. I close my mouth, heart thudding. She’s looking at me now, really looking. What would happen if I just told her the truth? *Because I love you. Because I can’t stomach the thought of anyone else touching you. Because deep down, I still have this absurd hope that you’ll want me back.* But I can’t say any of that.

At least not with words.

My body, however, seems to have gone on autopilot. My feet carry me a step closer, and I watch her breath catch. The floor creaks under my boots and I advance toward her even more. I don’t know what the hell I’m doing, but now we’re standing close. So close I can count the freckles across the bridge of her nose. I can easily see the moment her eyes flick to my mouth. Mine drop to her lips too, tracing the pronounced bow of her full upper lip with my gaze, and I watch those lips part on a soft inhale.

My pulse is a drum line, and my hands itch to touch her. It would only take one second. One blink.

But then—

“Uh, can I go now?” the delivery guy asks, clearly uncomfortable. “I’ve got . . . other stops.” We both jerk apart, having completely forgotten about our unwilling audience.

Madison blinks like she’s surfacing from water. “Right! Oh geez—sorry.” She glances at the flowers. “Could you help me carry this to my truck? It’s just outside, and then I promise we’ll let you go. And I will leave you a raving review on Yelp!”

The guy nods, looking more than ready to escape, grabs the bouquet, and follows Madison to the back door. She holds it open for him to walk through, and after he’s out she stands there a moment longer.

“I’m going to head home,” she says, and although nothing happened between us, the atmosphere is different.

“Sure. Need help with the flowers at your cottage?”

“No, thanks,” she says with a laugh and then lets the door fall shut behind her.

I blow out a huge breath and remove my hat so I can scrape my hand through my hair, worried that I’ve just screwed up something fragile between us.

But then the door swings back open almost as soon as it shuts and Madison pops her head back in, apples of her cheeks flushed. “Hey . . . I thought I might make popcorn and rewatch *Sweet Home Alabama* tonight. You wanna come?”

Or maybe I didn’t mess anything up. My blood rushes through my veins thinking of a night cozied up at Madison’s cottage watching a movie. How many times have I wished I could do just that with her. God, I want to. But . . . *shit*.

“I can’t. I let one of my employees cut out early, so I have to finish covering for him after dinner.”

She nods slowly, looking disappointed. “Oh, okay. No problem.”

She turns to go again, but this time I call after her.

“Madison.”

She pauses.

I scratch the back of my neck, heat crawling up it. “Thanks. For the salad.”

Her expression softens. “Stop eating trash. You literally have everything you need to be healthy growing in your backyard. And take your blood pressure. And go for morning runs. Google says it helps.”

“Mind your own business,” I tell her, grinning despite myself.

“Never,” she says, and the door clicks shut behind her.

I stare at the spot where she stood, the scent of roses mixed with whatever sweet fragrance she was wearing still in the air. And I realize: If I take that contract, I could afford to hire more crew. I could have nights off again. And just maybe, I could have someone to spend my evenings with too.

If only those weren’t selfish reasons . . .

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Madison

62 DAYS UNTIL I FAIL . . .

“Okay, I’m here,” I say, arms wrapped around myself and squinting against the soft golden rays of sun. Sleep still clings to the corners of my eyes.

Meanwhile, James looks like he’s already lived a full day and it’s only six A.M. He’s in his brown work boots, faded jeans, and hunter-green Huxley Farm logo T-shirt. As he closes his truck bed and turns to me, I catch his smile beneath his hat’s shadow. “Morning, Chef. Ready to go?”

My first answer is a yawn, followed by a question. “Go where?”

“You’re making deliveries with me today.”

“Really?” I say, only now registering the rows of stacked crates in the back of his truck. “You’re actually taking me up on my offer to help?”

“I told you I was.”

“Yeah,” I agree, skepticism in my voice. “But I assumed this would end up being some sort of ploy to take me to a cute bakery or something to get my creative juices flowing.”

“No bakery. But we can stop at the gas station on the way and get a sleeve of donuts if that helps?”

I consider this. “So I’m really coming along today to help you?”

“Yep.”

There’s a catch somewhere, I’m sure of it. James would never accept help this easily.

He hitches his head toward the truck. “Come on. I’ve got you a thermos of coffee in there too.”

I eye him, head turning slowly like an owl to keep track of his suspicious body. “Thoughtful of you.”

Really though, I’m still not used to this side of James. The one who views me as a friend. Who doesn’t look at me like I’m in his way. This James thought of me first thing in the morning and filled a thermos with coffee just for me.

Once we’re both in his truck and bobbing down the long drive that winds from the main greenhouse to the road, I take a sip of the coffee and nearly spit it out all over the dashboard.

“Hot?” he asks.

“No—*disgusting*,” I blurt, dabbing my mouth with the back of my hand. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m so appreciative you brought me some caffeine . . . but can I ask why you brewed battery acid instead of coffee?”

He groans. “Not you too.”

“Who else hates it? *Wait!* Let me guess—everyone?”

“Tommy.”

“Oh well, that doesn’t surprise me. He has good taste.”

“Does he, though? Questionable.” James drapes his hand over the steering wheel and once again I’m having to stuff down this rising tide of attraction. Just look at his wrist. If I wrapped my hand around it, my fingers wouldn’t meet. And those hands—his calluses have calluses. But when my eyes slide up his arm to his face once again, I catch a wince.

“What was that for?”

He shakes his head. “Nothing. It’s . . . nothing.”

“Tell me now or I’ll scream.”

He laughs, a big, surprised laugh, and I light up from the inside. *James thinks I’m funny.* “I realized the other day that I only think of Tommy with negativity.”

“Oh yeah. You absolutely do that.”

“Nice, don’t hold back.” He adjusts in his seat like he wants to get rid of the uncomfortable thought he’s sitting with.

“When you look at Tommy, you look like you’d rather be eating a toad than talking to him.”

“Well . . .”

“Men enjoy their urology appointments more than you enjoy spending time with Tommy. You—”

“I get it,” he says dryly. “And you’re not wrong.”

“Why though? Just because y’all are different? Because Tommy likes to run around with hotties and you like to shuck your own corn?”

He grimaces. “I’m going to hope that wasn’t a euphemism.”

“Don’t worry—it was.”

“Okay, well, that’s definitely not the reason. But . . .” His face skews up. “Actually, maybe a little of it. The . . . run around with hotties part.”

For some reason, my heart sinks to the bottom of the ocean. It shouldn’t. That’s an absurd response. He is a heterosexual male—of course he’s going to wish he was running around with beautiful women! It would be abnormal if he didn’t. But . . .

No.

No *buts*.

I’m choosing to release this thought into the wind, because James and I work together, and we are friends—and that’s all we’ll ever be.

Any day now, this attraction will fizzle out. The flames will be doused, and I’ll stop wondering what it would feel like to hear him whisper my name in the dark, under covers and skin to skin.

It has to fade.

Because James is the kind of man who builds things. He plants roots. He wakes up at sunrise and *embraces* responsibility.

And me? I’ve run from every life I’ve tried to build. I burn bright—but I burn out just as fast.

What could someone like him ever see in someone like me, besides a temporary spark?

I pull myself up straight. “I’m sure we can find a cutie around here for you to hook up with. You might have to go a little farther into the city, but —”

He looks horrified. “Shit, Madison. No. First, don’t say *cutie*. That’s weird. Second, I should’ve been more clear. It’s not that I want his life—it’s that . . . I think I’ve always resented him for having the *option* to live it.”

Relief softens my chest as I sink back against the seat. “You never had that option?”

“No. I’ve always been the heir to the farm,” he says with a dry, almost amused tone. “Ever since I asked for a John Deere tractor for my third birthday and my parents took it as an early vow of devotion.” He chuckles,

but it's laced with something heavier. "I've been all-in ever since. But Tommy? He never wanted anything to do with the farm—and no one expected him to either. My parents always knew he'd fly the coop and go places.

"Sometimes I wonder if I really love this place because it's in my blood . . . or because I've always been told it is."

The look on his face wrecks me. Brow furrowed, shoulders slumped—it's like he's carrying the weight of the world over there. And if I could peek into his brain, I'd bet everything I own and love that the heaviness he's experiencing isn't due to being stuck with the farm. It's about admitting he wishes he'd had a *choice*.

Only James would feel guilty for wanting a say in his own life.

I want to wrap my arm around his and squeeze. "Do you . . . regret staying in Rome?"

"That's where it gets complicated. I really do love the farm now. I love the work I do. But at the same time, I resent Tommy and his freedom. I resent that I love this place so much that I *can't* just leave it behind and start fresh. You know?"

"I do. I think those feelings are completely valid. And you're allowed to have them."

He nods, eyes on the road, but I can tell his mind is somewhere else. "But I don't think it's fair of me to keep taking it out on Tommy. He's a shithead a lot of the time, but maybe . . . I don't know."

I tilt my head, reading the thoughts he's not voicing. "Maybe you two could be friends anyway?"

"We'll see." He glances over at me, expression lighter, then back at the road. "What about you? Are you going to miss the life of big city freedom and casual hookups with hotties?"

"Not a bit," I say, and it's the complete truth. "I'm celibate now, if you remember."

"I do. But you never told me why." He cuts his eyes to me. "Is it a permanent thing?"

"I hope not," I say with a breathy laugh while pulling my feet up in the seat to wrap my arms around my bare knees. "To be honest, I've been using it as a weeding system."

"Tell me more."

It's funny I feel so comfortable sharing all of this with him. I've never even told my siblings. Not sure if I will either. I don't need anyone's opinion or to see their approving or disapproving faces. This choice was made for me and me alone.

In the past, James would have also fallen into the category of people I would keep it from. But oddly, not anymore. "Okay . . . how do I put this? I don't regret a single moment of my life or how I've chosen to live it so far. It's been fun. And I've truly enjoyed it. But while I was in New York, I realized I want something different out of life going forward. I want *more*." I pause, thinking back on some of those really dark months. Thinking back to Caden and how I hoped he would be someone who would care for me in my hurt, but instead he added to it. "I was so lonely out there, and I needed more companionship than just sex, but most of the guys lost interest in me if sex wasn't involved." *Caden in particular.* "So now I'm choosing celibacy until I find a guy who makes me feel important and safe. Who wants to hang out with me even if we're not having sex. Nothing serious or anything. *Oh!* But I do think it would be nice to have someone who's not sleeping with anyone else on the side either."

These all seem like reasonable requests to me until I look at James and see a smile quivering on his lips.

My shoulders sag. "Seriously? This again. Are you going to wreck the truck from laughing so hard at my silly little fantasy?"

"Not at all. And it's not a silly fantasy. I'm laughing because, Madison . ." He breathes against his laugh. "That's monogamy. What you're describing is literally a committed long-term relationship."

Shock snaps my spine straight. "Noooo." I shake my head like he suggested I'm craving cocaine. "I specifically said *nothing serious*. Just someone who . . ." I search for the words. "Gets invested in a seven-season TV show with me. Someone who I won't need to pluck that one annoying nipple hair for. You know? Chill stuff."

His lips press together, and he side-eyes me meaningfully until my list settles into place and does look a lot like a committed relationship.

"*Shit.* You're right." My zombie gaze shifts out the front windshield. I let this new knowledge sink in for a minute and then, "This is terrible news."

"Why?" James thinks this is one big amusing joke.

“Because!” I shift in my seat, angling more toward him. “I always planned to be the hot, whimsical, unattached aunt, who, on a Tuesday, might fly off to Paris and have a forty-eight-hour fling with a guy who owns a moped. When did I become this boring old person who wants stability?! I hate it.” The moment I say the word *stability*, awareness prickles over my skin. Could this be the reason I’ve found James so damn hot lately?

And does that make my attraction to him carry more or less weight?

“I’m sorry I burst your bubble,” he says in a commiserating tone. “Want to go back to pretending you don’t want anything serious?”

“Too late. Cat’s out of the bag. Madison is a snooze.”

His grin does funny things to my insides. “For what it’s worth, I don’t think it’s physically possible for you to be a—” But he cuts off when he looks at me again, all the humor leaving his face as his eyes drop to my waist. “You’re not wearing your seatbelt.”

I wave him off. “Who cares. I’ve lost my will to live.”

“Not funny.” His tone is so serious chills erupt down my arms. “Put it on.”

“No.” I’m sunk back in a grand show of despair, even though his bossiness turns me on a little—like it did when he commanded me not to date Tommy. “Just let me live on the wild side one last time.”

“You’re—” He lets out a frustrating laugh and then pulls over to the side of the road. He throws the truck in park and then stares in my eyes for two wildly hot seconds before suddenly coming in close to me, so close I can smell his soap. I note the absence of any cigarette smoke. And then he’s reaching for my seatbelt, tugging it around my chest and clicking the buckle firmly into place. But he doesn’t move away as soon as his job is done.

His voice is a soft caress as he says, “You could try your whole life—really give it your best shot, and you still would never come close to anything but extraordinary. *Boring* is your antonym.” He gives the belt a little safety tug. “Find another way to live on the wild side.”

I can’t think of a single thing to say as he leans back into his own seat, puts the truck in drive, and we rumble down the road once again. But I can feel the seatbelt burning with importance against my chest now.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

James

Madison seems surprised when I stop at the gas station, fill up the truck, and come back out from paying with a sleeve of powdered sugar donuts. Her eyes light up when I hand them to her, and she dives into them as soon as we hit the road (her seatbelt on). We drive in silence for a while, the only sound coming from the road and the crinkling donut package.

She makes all these little noises while she eats that feel so cliché for a chef, making me laugh. It gets her attention and, with a mouth lightly dusted with sugar, she looks down at her last mini donut and is so comically torn before tipping it in my direction, offering it to me. I know she doesn't want to share that donut, I can see it in her greedy brown eyes, so I make a big show of contemplating taking it. Finally, I shake my head and tell her I'm not hungry. She's relieved and tosses the donut into her mouth as fast as she can before I can reconsider.

We roll into town and park out front of the Market.

“Harriet?” I call out after we enter because I don’t see her, but she’s always here on restock days.

“Harrrietttt!” Madison trills in a high-pitched tone. “We know you’re in here! Show yourself!”

“Quit hollering. I’m over here,” she says from behind a window display where she’s seemingly materialized. Madison and I both startle.

“Holy shit, Harriet. Where did you come from?” Madison is clutching her chest.

Harriet, who is holding binoculars (*I knew I had lent mine to someone*) aimed out the window, turns her frown to Madison. “Watch your language.”

“Oh, damn. Sorry.” She winces, realizing she cursed again. “Shit.” Another wince. “Dammit!” She slaps her hand over her mouth and then

spins quickly and plants her face directly into my chest.

“Young lady!” Harriet reprimands.

I’m stunned at the feel of her so easily pressing into my chest, but I rally quickly and wrap my hand around the back of her head, shielding her from Harriet. “Just give her a second. Her filter fell off and she’s gotta adjust it back into place.” I feel Madison’s laugh, followed by her big brown eyes looking up at me, chin resting on my chest. I want to kiss her forehead. Something I might never be able to do.

As far back as I can remember, Harriet and Madison have been oil and water. Where one is draped in shades of beige and gray, the other is wearing a baggy tie-dye tee with a daisy flower illustration over each boob.

Madison clears her throat and peels away to face Harriet again. “What are you doing back there?”

“Nothing.” Using the little table in her shop window for support, Harriet stands. She smooths her hands down the front of her skirt, giving us a look like we were the ones doing something suspicious.

I’d let it go and get back to work, but Madison could never. “Bullshhhh —*crap*.” She closes the space between herself and Harriet. “It’s beyond clear that you’re up to no good.”

Harriet’s nose lifts into the air. “The Lord is nothing but good, and I am always praising him, therefore I can’t be up to anything besides goodness.”

“It’s too early for riddles, Harriet. Let me see the binoculars.”

“Sure.” She hands them over gracefully and steps aside. “I love to bird watch. It’s soul-filling. You should try it, Madison. I think your soul could use some tending.”

“Uh-huh, step aside.” Madison squats where Harriet was just sitting, aims the binoculars in the same direction. A moment later, a slow smile curls her mouth. “Why, Harriet—” She lowers the binoculars. “The bird you were watching didn’t happen to be sitting on the front porch of the inn where Mabel is rocking in her chair, would it?”

“As a matter of fact, it was.” She goes behind the counter and starts tidying an invisible mess.

Madison follows and drapes herself lazily over the counter. “Oh come on, Harriet! Admit it. You want to be friends with Mabel.”

“Bite your tongue. I could never be friends with that brash woman.”

“You miss her when you two go too long without squabbling. In a twisted hate-to-love way, Mabel is your friend.” Only Madison would have the guts to say all of this to Harriet. Even Emily wouldn’t chance it. She finds the line no one will cross and then steamrolls over it. “Or! Maybe you want to be even *more* than friends with Mabel.”

“Okay, now that is quite enough. James, please unload the stock and go about your day so you can take this one with you.”

“Actually, Harriet, I think she’s right,” I say, earning an appraising look from Madison over her shoulder that has heat curling around my spine. She’s delighted I’m backing her up. We’re on the same side finally, and it feels right. Not to mention, this might be the answer to my worries about Mabel. This potential friendship has been right in front of my nose the whole time and I never saw it. “If you and Mabel would stop picking at each other over every damn thing, I bet you’d have a lot in common.”

Madison straightens up and faces me with a grin. “They could be best friends and start a book club.”

“Get matching tramp stamp tattoos.”

“Tramp *what?*” Harriet asks but we’re too locked into each other to pay her attention now.

Madison’s eyes sparkle. “Tattoos of each other’s names.”

“And they could go to a *Price Is Right* taping together.”

She covers her heart. “And they’d make bedazzled T-shirts that say I’M WITH TROUBLE, so they’d definitely get selected and then win a car.”

“Which they decide to share.”

Harriet waves this time to get our attention. “What’s happening here, anyway? I thought you were going to be the chef of James’s new restaurant—why are you making deliveries?”

Madison leans on the counter again, and I already miss her attention. “The sun came up and I thought, *I bet Harriet has been dying to see me!* So I hopped right in James’s truck and here I am. Just for you.” Madison bats her eyes at a stoic Harriet.

“I’d find it more believable if you said you’d already been demoted to a hired hand,” she mumbles, but it’s loud enough for Madison to hear. Something about those words has me taking a step closer to the counter. I must look ready to argue because Madison’s hand clutches my wrist—chipped pink and yellow nails holding me back.

“No chance,” she says to Harriet. “And I’ll have a table waiting just for you at our opening. Can’t wait to wow you.”

Harriet lifts a mocking brow. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Madison smiles, letting me know she’s fine, before I unload Harriet’s stuff. She grabs some locally made boiled peanuts for the road.

Unfortunately, things don’t improve like I hope at subsequent stops either. Charlie Bristol tells Madison how happy he is to see her back in town, but then laughs when she tells him the reason for her return.

“You?” he says like she’s in on the joke. “The same girl who sold severely underbaked cookies in the senior bake sale and gave us all food poisoning?”

“I was seventeen!”

He squints. “But wasn’t there another incident while you were teaching over at the elementary school?”

“I don’t think so,” Madison mumbles, then turns sharply to me. “Anything else in the truck I can grab?”

Charlie claps. “I remember! You nearly burned the damn school down. Left something in the oven, right? What was it?”

Through her teeth, Madison says, “Banana bread. For the teachers’ luncheon.”

Charlie cackles. “That’s right! School evacuated and the fire department came and all the kids had to go home early. I think every elementary school parent in Rome hated you that day because they all had to call out of work early.”

“Yeah, well, the teachers loved me at least,” she says, but it lacks her usual fire.

We have two more nearly identical stops with people all giving Madison their two cents, and she doesn’t let me intervene either time. Even when one of the guys says he’s glad Madison is back because he always had a good time with her. I wanted to shove the suggestive wink he gave her down his throat.

Somehow, it seems I’m more bothered by everyone’s comments than Madison is. She laughs off every single rude statement and leaves with a different snack. She’s on her fifth one: a little bowl of green beans from the BBQ joint we just left.

She's over there singing with her hand out the window and hair tangling around her face as we drive to the last stop, and when we pull into the driveway of the house, I finally give in to the thought that's been spinning in my head. "Are you not bothered?"

Her short hair sways against her jaw as she turns to me. "About what?"

I let out a mirthless laugh. "About everything those shitheads have said to you all day. Bringing up all that negative stuff from your past?"

She shrugs. "Didn't bother me."

"Really?"

"Really."

"You swear on all of your future powdered sugar donuts?"

"James." Her eyes lock with mine, all jokes gone. Serious Madison has entered the room. "It didn't bother me because . . . it was all true. But not in a depressing way." She laughs once. "How do I explain it? I'm . . . home. I thought I was going to thrive in New York because no one would know me there. No one would know that I was Madison Walker, the girl whose parents died when she was eight. And it's true, I got to be whoever I wanted to be in the city. But all I found was my heart doesn't like being surrounded by strangers.

"I didn't have anyone that understood why I couldn't get out of bed on my dad's birthday. No one to get why I'd hunt down every slice of pie in the city, only to cringe because none of them tasted like they came from the Pie Shop." She smiles, but it's sad. "These people know me. They've seen me in my happiest and worst moments—and I know they'll still show up in droves to support me at the opening. They're family. And family roasts family. Plus . . . I guess, I'm excited to show them I can succeed at something too. Because I'm determined to this time." She pauses. "If I can get my mojo back."

I stare at her through heavy brows for another minute—looking for any cracks forming under the surface. But I don't see any. I think she's telling the truth.

"All right. I guess I believe you."

She eyes me, head tilting at whatever she finds in my expression this time. "You're upset though? Like really upset about it?"

I don't bother hiding it. "Yeah, I'm upset. They should have talked to you with more respect. I didn't like it at all. And I think it's okay to

tolerate some good-natured roasting, but only to a certain point. They each crossed over that point today.”

She’s smiling timidly at me. Something soft and secret transpiring between us that I don’t think we’ll ever acknowledge out loud. “Thank you for that. I’m not sure that anyone’s ever thought I was deserving of respect to that extent before.”

And *that* kills me.

This is the last stop for the day, and it’s a house I keep on the route because it’s been in our family for generations. I bring them a box of produce, and they never pay—because we’ve never asked them to. I’m not even sure how it started. All I know is that my dad has always referred to them as *Mamaw* and *Papaw* even though they are not our blood relations. They’re just a sweet couple, Della and Victor, who have lived in this house for most of their long, happy marriage.

Like my dad always did, I set aside a box of the best produce for them and take it by during deliveries. In return, they have a cup of coffee and a slice of cake waiting for me. And today, Mrs. Della looks a little too happy to be pouring Madison a cup alongside mine.

“It’s good you finally found yourself a good lady, James. I worry about you being alone so much,” says Della, her tremor a little more prevalent today as she pours coffee into my mug.

“Oh, she’s not—”

Madison places her hand over mine and smiles. “Well, Mrs. Della, James is definitely not alone anymore. And since I’m a chef, you can rest assured he’ll always be well fed.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” she says with a happy wink.

When Della turns to slice off a piece of butter cake for us to have with our coffee, Madison leans in close. “A mamaw should never have to worry about anyone,” she whispers in my ear, her breath slipping over my skin in a way I’ve only dreamt of until now.

Guilt creeps over me for how good it feels to hold her hand while she tells Della all the happy parts of culinary school. To run my thumb across the back of her knuckles and pretend for these short twenty minutes that she’s mine. I wonder if I can milk this and lean across the table and kiss

her? Take her to the bathroom and trace her neck with my tongue. Carry her to my truck and lay her down on the bench seat.

Instead, I finish my coffee and cake and try not to stare at Madison too much as she talks, and then when I lose that effort, I kick myself outside to bring in the crate of produce.

Per usual, Victor's out cold in his recliner, hat perched on his head—even the screen door slamming didn't wake him.

"All right, Mrs. Della. I've got some extra-special goods for you today," I say, setting the crate on the countertop.

"Oh, you're not kidding. These are some good-looking tomatoes." Della turns each one over, inspecting their color. "I've been waiting on some like this for months now. What'd you do to them this time?"

"Sang them a song and tucked them in every night."

She beams. "Told ya that would work."

Madison is curious now and hovers closer until she can peek over my shoulder. She smells like coffee and sugar. "Wow. These do look good." She picks one up, turning it over a few times in her hand. "The last chef I worked for used to make this really incredible roasted garlic and root veggie pasta sauce. If he saw these, he would have offered up his children in exchange for them."

I want to ask her if this was the chef who hurt her, and then offer to end his life instead of giving him good produce.

Della polishes one of the tomatoes on the apron she always wears around her waist. "Leave it to a chef to try to think of the most difficult and time-consuming thing I could make with an ingredient. But I don't waste my time with all that fuss when I have a piece of produce as good as this one."

"What would you make with it instead?" Madison asks, and I can see the spark in her eyes. The intrigue and ideas running rampant behind her smile. She loves food. She loves talking about food. *This* is Madison's Disney World.

"Better yet, I'll show you. Excuse me," Della says, moving into Madison's space so she's forced to back up against me. Instinct has me wrapping my hand around her abdomen and hugging her to me before I can even process what I'm doing. Madison's sharp inhale, however, alerts me to the fact that my hand is splayed across her stomach.

I start to slide it away, but her hand jumps to mine, intertwining our fingers and holding me there. *To keep up the act*, I tell myself. *She just wants us to seem natural.*

So we stay like this, Madison's breath coming faster and faster and my heart pounding against her shoulder blades as Della turns back to the cutting board, pulls down two slices of fresh white bread. She slices the tomato into delicate little slices and lays them on one side of the bread before slathering mayo on the other. Salt and pepper get sprinkled over top, after which the sandwich is cut into two and wrapped in a paper towel. She hands one to both of us, forcing me to let go of Madison. For this reason only, I hate these sandwiches.

"This is my favorite thing to make with a nice juicy tomato," says Della. "Take this with you for when you get hungry later. Tell me how you liked it next time you come to visit." She levels Madison with a look. "And I do expect you to come back and visit."

Madison wraps Della in a big hug like she's known her her entire life. "Don't worry. I'm like a stray cat. If you feed me, you won't be able to get rid of me."

A few minutes later, we both climb into the truck, and Madison is acting so normal that I wonder if the reaction I sensed back there was all in my head. Maybe it was only wishful thinking that she was breathing so heavy. I've got to stop doing that.

"I mean this in the best possible way, but how do you have more room in your stomach for any of that?" I ask Madison, who has left with not only her sandwich but also a slice of Della's cornbread and a piece of butter cake for later.

"Room has nothing to do with it. With enough determination, though, you too can fit an army's worth of food in your stomach." She bites into her sandwich, and the moan she lets out is almost enough to make me crash.

"God, Madison," I say, even though I probably should let it go. But I can't. I'm on edge. I should never have touched her. Everything she does is turning me on.

"Sorry," she says around her bite, dropping her head back against the seat. "But this is just so damn good! It's actually filling me with dish ideas."

Her head pops back up, eyes round. “Wait! This is why you had me come along today, isn’t it? You knew this would happen.”

I only grin at the road in answer.

“*How?!*”

“You always seemed happiest making food that was inspired by what we ate growing up. I figured if you weren’t feeling inspired in New York, maybe you just needed to have some of the best home-cooked food I could find. And Della . . . somehow everything she makes is magic.”

“How did you know I’ve always been most inspired by what we ate growing up?”

“Because you talk a lot,” I say, trying to deflect with a joke. But she’s not having it.

“And you listen a lot.”

“Yeah. I guess so.” I glance at her and she’s staring at me.

So many times over the last year I’ve wished she would look at me like that—*really* look at me. But now, I wish she’d look away. I’m afraid she’s going to see too much.

“Hey,” she says, still not looking away. “How come you never date?”

I turn left onto Huxley Road, the longest road in Rome, Kentucky. It not only winds past the farm but carries travelers through town and all the way to the interstate. “What makes you think I don’t date?”

“Della said she worries about you.”

I laugh. “Well, no offense to Della, but I’m not usually taking my dates with me to her house.”

“Oh, right. Duh.” She laughs and then goes oddly quiet, turning to look out the window.

“I’ve dated.” For some reason, it’s important to me that she know this. Important to admit it to myself, I think.

“Anyone I know?” she asks.

“Actually, yeah. Jeanine and I dated for a while.”

Madison’s feet, which were up on the dash, slam to the floor. “You . . . you and *Jeanine*. We’re thinking of the same one? Red hair, worked at the Diner, but now is manager of the Pie Shop? Has a little boy?”

“That’s the one.”

“Oh my god. Are you still together?”

“No.” *Because she isn’t you.*

“No,” she repeats softly, and if I didn’t know better I’d think she sounds relieved. “How long did you date?”

I tip my head in thought. “Four months.”

Madison suddenly clutches her throat like she’s choking. “Four months,” she wheezes.

I’m glancing between her and the road. “What the hell is your problem? You think I’m that undatable?”

“No. I’m just—” She stops herself and swallows what she was going to say. “I’m struggling to picture you dating anyone.” She casts her distant gaze out the front windshield. “James being a boyfriend. James walking up to a front door. James picking someone up. Picking *Jeanine* up. James kissing *Jeanine* goodnight. James—”

“Okay, conversation over.”

“Holy crap, you had sex with her, didn’t you?” She chokes more.

“I’m going to pull over and push you out now.”

“You were naked with *Jeanine*!”

“Better yet, give me your cornbread. I’m eating it all and leaving you none.”

This gets her attention. She clutches the wedge to her chest. “I’ll be good.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Madison is quiet again for all of two minutes, and I know her head is still stuck on me and *Jeanine*. “I’m sorry, I just . . . I’m trying to picture you having sex.”

“I’d rather you not.”

She tugs her lips from one corner to the other in thought. “I had a dream we kissed the other night.”

My elbow slips off the door ledge where it was resting. I want to ask her roughly a million follow-up questions. “You did?”

“Yeah.” She laughs. “It was chaste. It took place in Hank’s bar. And then . . .” She trails off, apparently deciding against continuing. “Never mind.”

“Uh, no. You have to finish that sentence now.”

“You’re gonna get weird about it.”

“I swear I won’t.”

“Okay . . .” She winces preemptively. “I asked you to take me back to your house so we could—you know—and you said no because you were

too shy. And then I woke up.”

I am silent. Dead silent. And then I pull over on the side of the road, park, leave the key in the ignition, and jump out. The door is yawning open behind me as I hike to somewhere. Anywhere.

Madison is out and behind me in a flash, laughing her ass off. “You said you weren’t going to be weird!”

“I lied.”

Her hand wraps around my elbow and tugs me to a stop. “James! Stop! It’s not a big deal.” She’s still laughing so hard as I spin to look at her.

“No big deal? I just found out your subconscious thinks I’m too shy to have sex. That’s appalling.”

“It’s probably because I’ve never thought about . . . you . . . like that.” Her voice jumps an octave. “I’ve never considered what you’d be like in bed, so I guess my brain just filled in a blank to wrap up the dream.” She shifts on her feet, hand falling away, eyes scanning the cornfield like she’s hoping to find an escape hatch hidden in the stalks.

“I mean, we’re friend-friends, right? So why would I know what you’re like—or what you like—in bed?”

But the second she says it, her gaze flicks away and her lips press tight.

I’ve seen that look a hundred times. It’s the one she makes when she’s trying to hold the truth inside her mouth.

And just like that, I know she’s lying.

She’s thought about it and is trying to pretend she hasn’t.

I should let it go. Climb back in the truck and pretend none of this happened.

But something is shifting between us. I’m almost sure it’s not all in my head anymore.

I want to chase it.

“Friend-friends or not, I know you well, Madison. I know *exactly* what you’d like in bed. And believe me . . .” I tip a little closer. “I would not be shy about giving you what you wanted.”

She sucks in a breath. So I give in, just a little, to what my body is screaming for.

I press a kiss to her temple, letting it linger only long enough to cross the line from friendly to something else.

“Good to know,” she whispers.

A truck roars past, shaking the ground beneath us, reminding me that real life still exists.

“We should get going.”

“Yeah . . .”

We don’t talk on the drive home. Alan Jackson fills the silence and we pretend the air between us isn’t charged.

But my mouth tingles the whole way.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Madison

55 DAYS UNTIL I FAIL . . .

JOSIE: Hey! Haven't heard from you in a while. Want to FaceTime and catch up soon?

“You want these in the kitchen?”

I look up from the surprising text to see my brother walk into James's house, a bag in each hand—both full of pies. Amelia follows with takeout from the Diner.

“Yep, kitchen's good.” I shut the door behind them and glance at the message again.

Josie? Why would she text me?

We'd shared a few polite lunches, but we weren't close. Okay, maybe she'd invited me out once or twice, but only after I overheard her making plans with other friends. They were pity invites.

I never went because I was filling my rare free time with Caden—investing in something that turned out to be a one-way street.

But this? This text feels intentional. *Why?*

Yeah! Let's do it! I respond, knowing it'll probably never happen, and then pocket my phone while joining Noah and Amelia in the kitchen. *James's kitchen.*

It's been a week since our delivery day, and I haven't stopped thinking.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I'd been completely blocked because I was trying to create the kind of restaurant the New York chefs I used to work for would have approved of. Something sleek. Cool. Pretentious.

Something that wasn't me.

But then I met Della. And it all clicked into place.

I don't want to reinvent my roots. I want to honor them.

This restaurant will celebrate Southern food, *my specialty*. It'll be simple and heartfelt, and every bite will taste like a memory.

That night, I scribbled ideas like jalapeño skillet cornbread, watermelon beet salad, and three different crust options for fried catfish. Then I sent it all to Tommy.

He called within minutes. He loved it, offered a few ideas of his own, and we brainstormed how to market the whole theme. We talked for two hours. And before we hung up, he asked if I was ready to take him up on that date yet. I said *never* and he replied, *maybe next week*.

So anyway, this is why I'm gathering my family here tonight. They're going to help me make a few decisions.

"Where's James?" asks Noah as he unloads the pies onto the counter and then swiftly turns to free up Amelia's arms.

"Still on the farm. I told you he's been working really intense hours lately." *Even though he's supposed to be prioritizing rest.*

Noah glances at the clock, brows furrowed, then goes back to what he was doing. Classic Noah. Full of thoughts and unwilling to share a single one of them.

"Hello?" calls Emily from the front door. "We're here!"

"In the kitchen!"

A few seconds later, Emily and Jack join us, along with Annie and Will right behind them. "I brought beer!" Will says, holding up a case. And then he raises his other hand. "And ginger beer for those who want it."

"You can just say you brought it for me," says Jack with a grateful smile as he leans back against the counter. "Everyone knows I'm the only one who drinks it."

A discreet look is shared around the room.

"Actually," says Emily, leaning into him and hugging his waist as he curls his arm around her shoulders, "I think I'll have one tonight too. Sounds good."

"Same!" parrots Amelia. "I'm not really in the mood for beer." It's clear as day what they're doing—creating a way for Annie to not have to drink alcohol without putting her on the spot.

This is what siblings are best for: enabling your lie.

“Yep, me too,” I say, even though I despise ginger beer. I’d rather drink James’s battery acid coffee. I’ve always felt like the outsider in my family, but in small moments like this I can trick myself into thinking I fit in. I’m one of them. A successful gal with her life moving in a forward direction and doing the right thing for the sake of the fam.

“Huh.” Will frowns. “Okayyyyy. I guess I’ll put the beer in the fridge?” He looks disappointed. Like he’s waiting for someone to save him, which is interesting. Does he not realize Annie is pregnant? It seems so odd to me that she wouldn’t have told him yet. He is not only her husband, he’s her best friend. So why is Will looking at her like he’d rather eat his shoe than drink a ginger beer?

Noah silently takes the case from him and shuts it into the fridge. He might as well have punted it off the cliff. None of us are touching that stuff tonight.

We all continue shooting the breeze, but I can’t focus. My mind is zeroed in on the clock. Why isn’t James back yet? He didn’t know we were going to be here, but still—he used to clock out at five o’clock almost every day. These days, I’ve noticed from my window where I’ve definitely not been creepily keeping tabs on him that his truck rumbles back up to the house sometimes as late as 7:45.

It’s 7:30 now. He should be home. He *needs* to be home, resting and de-stressing, like his doctor prescribed.

While Amelia is telling us about the juicy text a celebrity friend of hers drunkenly sent her the other night, I wander to the window and peek out. *No truck.* And as Will, Emily, and Jack are bonding over student teaching stories (Will starts his first semester in August), I check my phone’s time just to make sure the clock on the microwave is correct. *It is.*

Maybe both clocks are wrong.

My eyes hunt for a third clock and instead clash with Noah’s narrowed, speculative gaze. He’s locked on me.

“Worried?” he mouths.

I shrug. “About what?”

His response is a flat, unimpressed smirk.

Finally, around 7:50, James strolls through the door wearing his usual uniform—worn-out jeans streaked with dirt, a sun-faded tee, and that

ever-present hat pulled low over his brow. He looks exactly the way James always looks, like he could fix your truck, build you a deck, or hold you gently if you needed it.

My blood sparks, knowing he's in the room. That his eyes will meet mine any second. That the familiar dip in my stomach is coming.

If he's surprised to find all of us crowded in his kitchen, he doesn't show it. Then again, this house has been our unofficial headquarters since high school.

No, he's not surprised we're here; what he looks downright offended by is the sight of our ginger beers.

He pointedly looks at each of our hands and then asks, "What the hell kind of Nazarene college party did I just walk into?"

"We're all feeling responsible tonight. Want one?" I ask him, drawing his attention.

Our eyes connect and—*whoosh*—my stomach dips low. I have never experienced anything like this sensation before. It is alarming. Distinct. And directly tied to the man approaching from across the room.

"I've been responsible all day. I'd like a beer." He moves in, and because I'm semi-blocking the fridge, he touches my lower back with one hand, closing the other around my hip to gently maneuver me out of the way. He could have just asked and I would have stepped aside, but I like his method much better. His touch seeps through my clothes and skin and ping-pongs around my bones.

I still feel the ghost of his hands when he turns to me, gently plucks the can from my grasp, and replaces it with a beer, because he knows it's what I really wanted. *I would not be shy about giving you what you wanted.* His eyes hold mischief while he swigs his beer, as if he can see the memory of his words floating through my mind.

They've been an ever-present chorus, quietly reverberating in the back of my head ever since he said them.

And this is when I notice everyone watching us with shocked expressions. Oh god. I think my face might be screaming, *I want James!* And it turns out, when James is your friend, he kinda gives out *I want you too* vibes. Is he this way with all his friends? Has James been a fuckboy all this time and I've never noticed?

An unbidden image of him and Jeanine flashes in my mind and I hate it.

“You look tired,” I say with a specific intention. “If you want to skip this hangout and go on to bed, it’s totally fine.” Aka, *Get lost, buddy, you’re distracting me.*

A grin plays on his mouth. “Totally fine, huh?” He touches his index finger to the spot right in the center of my forehead. “Your face is so loud.”

“*Your* face is loud,” I counter, slapping his hand down, concerned that my siblings are all listening to us like this is the newest podcast they can’t turn off. So I sniff him. “And you stink. You should go get a shower.” Another sniff but longer this time because he doesn’t smell bad at all. Miraculously, he smells like mint gum and earth. Still no cigarette smoke, thankfully.

James still hasn’t looked away from me. Is he drunk already? Suffering a heat stroke? Why isn’t he acknowledging the room? “I smell so bad you had to sniff me twice?”

“Umm, excuse me,” Emily blurts out, holding up a hand. “Is something going on here? Better yet, *what* is going on here?”

Oh great. If Noah keeps all his thoughts inside, Emily is his antithesis. Every thought she’s ever had spills out in the most direct way possible. It’s inconvenient ninety percent of the time. And right now, I’d like to give her a big, uncomfortable wedgie.

The last thing I need is for my family to know I’m wildly attracted to James. I would never hear an end to their opinions. Most likely, they’d ask me to leave him alone. Not because they don’t love me but because they know my track record. They’d think I was chasing something I’d only lose interest in. That I’d hurt him.

And I’m worried they’d be right.

I’m forming the world’s worst lie when James speaks up first. “Actually, I’m glad you guys are here. We have something to tell you.”

“We do?” I direct my panicked expression at his face.

He wraps an arm around my shoulders and pulls me into his side. “Madison and I have fallen . . .” *Cue the longest pause known to man.* “. . . into friendship.”

A sigh slips away from me.

Emily lifts a brow. “Friendship?”

James winces, really getting into character. “Afraid so. It was never supposed to happen.” He looks at my brother. “And I don’t want to blame it

on you, Noah, but—you've been sort of wrapped up in your wife lately and neglecting me."

Noah's lips press together—unamused.

Now that I've got the hang of where the plot is going, I'm ready to play along. "It's true. I tried my best to resist it . . ." I say, casting my eyes up to James and patting his chest. *Oof*, bad idea. I forgot how solid he is, and now I just want to trail my hand under his shirt and experience what his skin feels like stretched over his muscles.

He finishes my sentence: ". . . But too many lonely nights inevitably lead to—"

"Cinnamon sugar toast," I say in a mocking, shame-filled tone.

And the thing is, I know we're only playing. That this is a dramatic production about friendship. But the way he's looking at me coupled with how my palm is absorbing the beats of his heart like they belong to me, it doesn't feel like we're acting. It feels like we're actually confessing something to each other under the guise of sarcasm.

Does James feel it too?

He blinks and breaks the spell, looking out at my family. "We're really sorry, guys."

"We never intended to hurt you," I add, pulling my hand away.

I half expect us to take a bow, but my family has their own encore, apparently.

Noah crosses his arms. "Oh no—they're alike. How have I never noticed this before?"

Emily nods slowly. "It's true. They both live for drama. And James . . . he suddenly looks like he has the urge to get drunk and dance on a table, belting 'No Scrubs' at the top of his lungs."

"*Hey*. That happened one time. Quit bringing it up."

"And Maddie—" Jack says, pushing his glasses up his nose to get a better look at me. Kinda upsetting how someone can look so hot in glasses actually. (I certainly don't.) "Is it just me, or does she look like maybe she's already set an alarm for the morning?"

"Not fair," I interject. "You're insinuating he'd influence me in a positive way! He has plenty of bad traits."

"You're gonna have to dig pretty deep to find them," says James with a smirk that used to irritate me. Now I dream about it.

I tip my head back and let out a loud *HA!* “If I’m becoming more like you, it means I suddenly have the urge to put my nasty boots on the table!”

“Because it’s fun to see you get annoyed.”

“To wear the same hat for ten years!”

“It’s actually a new hat every year. . . . I just keep buying the same one.”

“To work late every day covering shifts for people who should be working but aren’t.”

He ticks out the side of his mouth. “Shoot. Looks like you’re doing it too now.”

“Dammit. You’re right. You have too many good traits.”

He leans his hips back against the counter, crossing his arms. “Just when I thought I was getting upgraded to James Dean, I’m back to an old oak table.”

And then I hear Annie whisper something to Will, and the world slowly pulls back into focus and I realize the thing happened with James again. Everything else had faded away around me until it was only me and him.

“Okay, I’m officially too hungry for this joke to continue. Let’s eat!” I shout and turn away, pulling everyone’s attention to me as I open the oven, releasing an aroma that draws groans from everyone in the room. I’ve been practicing a few dishes this week in my cottage, but today I snuck over here and used James’s kitchen to try out a few of the more expansive recipes.

At first, it was like stretching sore muscles. I hadn’t cooked simply for the joy of it since culinary school—since the pressure crept in and convinced me that every slice, every dash of seasoning, every arrangement on a plate had to be flawless. But this time I let myself have fun. I let go of the need to impress and remembered what it felt like to chase a craving, to wake up in the middle of the night with a dish idea and feel an unstoppable urge to make it *right then*.

I remembered the thrill of turning on music and getting lost in the rhythm of chopping, stirring, tasting. For me, the best—and most addictive—part of cooking has always been the high of watching people I love enjoy the food I made, knowing it fed something deeper than just their hunger.

And now I'm giddy. Not nervous, not second-guessing. Excited to see how my family likes this meal. Because making it felt *so damn good*. It felt like coming home to myself.

I duck off to the side, watching with a contented smile as everyone forms a line to scoop food onto their plates.

James steps up behind my shoulder, speaking quietly when he says, "Did you make all of this in the restaurant's kitchen?" The hope in his voice rips a thread of guilt in me.

I hesitate before answering. "No . . . not yet."

I wonder if he's disappointed in me—questioning my place at this restaurant.

But instead he playfully bumps my shoulder as he steps around me to join the line. "You'll get there, Chef."

The night goes off without a hitch. We eat. We laugh. My family takes turns lavishing me with compliments about the food, and we roast one another until one of us says something that's a little too close to the truth and then we switch gears quickly. You know, family time.

Once the chaos dies down, they each take a turn circling the table I've methodically laid out with potential place settings. But these aren't any old plates and napkins. The dishes are hand-thrown pottery from our local studio, and the napkins are embroidered by a seamstress who works out of the quilt shop.

If my restaurant is going to honor my Southern roots, I want *every* part of it—down to the linens—to come from this community.

Beatrice, the potter, was just as excited about the idea as I am. She's agreed to supply plates and cups at a discounted rate, and in return we'll set up a small merch corner in the restaurant where customers can buy a piece to take home.

Which is why tonight matters. Beatrice gave me several style and color options, and I need to choose which ones will define the brand of the Greenhouse, which is the restaurant's official name. It feels right. James told me to trust myself, so I am.

A few hours later, once the votes are tallied and the last car pulls out of the driveway, I'm layering plates with bubble wrap and sliding them into boxes to return to the studio, along with my final selections. Just as I bend

to lift the first box, a pair of arms reach into view and snatch it from my hands.

“Hey!” I say, outraged.

“Hey,” James says like we’re in a bar and he’s trying to pick me up.

I have to skip behind him to keep up with his long strides as he carries the box out to my truck. “Stop that.”

“I’ve tried. Turns out my good looks never quit,” he says, sounding like Tommy and reminding me they really are brothers.

“James. You have been working all day! You don’t need to be carrying my boxes around.”

“I don’t turn into a pumpkin at eight o’clock. I can carry a box. In fact, I’ll carry *two*. And then I’m helping you unload them at your place, because they’re heavy as hell.”

“So . . . you’re saying I’m weak?”

He laughs, a deep, easy sound that rolls right down my spine. “You’re a lot of things, but muscular’s not one of them.”

“You’ve never been more wrong. Do you even know what it takes to whisk a soufflé?”

He stops midstride, turning to face me, all mock-seriousness. “Prove it.”

I raise my arm and flex, eyebrows lifted in challenge. His hand wraps around my biceps, fingers warm, and he gives it a squeeze.

“Sorry,” I say dramatically. “Did I bruise your fingers with my massive guns?” I throw in a few exaggerated poses.

He grins, hand dropping. “Spaghetti noodles. I’m getting the other box. Can’t have my chef blowing out her rotator cuff before opening day.”

“James.”

He pivots again. His eyes are still soft, but the humor’s gone. “I swear to god, Madison, if you start treating me like I’m spun glass, this friendship will implode faster than it started. Let me carry the damn boxes.”

Oof.

I wish I could say his assertiveness didn’t do things to me. But it does. And . . . I see his point.

James is not one to be coddled, never has been.

So I give in and climb inside my truck, waiting. A minute later, he joins me on the bench seat.

But I don't put the truck in drive right away. I just sit here.

Eventually, James gives me a look—one eyebrow raised, half a smile playing on his lips. But when I slide slowly across the seat toward him, the smile fades into something quieter. Warmer.

I reach around him, tug his seatbelt across his chest, and click it into place. Then I pat his chest where the belt lies.

"I need you to be safe too," I say with a grin.

He might not need coddling, but he does need someone to care for him. And although I'm not the most reliable person, maybe it wouldn't be terrible for that person to be me. *As his friend.*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

James

I unload the boxes onto Madison's kitchen table with her hovering right behind me.

"Thank you," she chirps. "You can get going now."

I don't think so.

I mosey around her small kitchen. It's compact but efficiently arranged. A countertop and stove line the left wall, while a wide window in the middle lets in so much natural light during the day it makes the space feel larger. On the right, a small counter holds the sink, and in the center of the room is a wooden table with two chairs positioned on either side.

There are dishes in the sink waiting to be washed. A wrinkled KISS THE CHEF dish towel hangs from the dishwasher. A slender vase with flowers (probably stolen from Annie's flower crop) sits by the stove. Brownies are arranged on a floral plate that I recognize as one that used to belong to her grandma, who passed away last year. And above the window, lining the trim, she's taped a row of Polaroids of her and her siblings. One of her and Mabel too.

None—I notice too quickly—of us.

But I do find the two word search puzzles I gave her (now completed), magnetized to her fridge along with several scribbled recipes, on everything from a napkin to a gum wrapper to the back of a receipt.

"Okayyyyy," she says again, tiptoeing behind me and trying to corral me toward the door. "It's getting late. See ya later." She continues her campaign to get me out of her cottage, pushing me toward the door.

I hit the brakes when my gaze snags on her countertop. "Shit—did they get divorced?" I turn to her, salt shaker in hand. "Where's Mr. Pepper? Don't tell me that son of a bitch left her."

The most sparkling smile blooms on Maddie's face. "How did you know they're married?"

"Because I've known you your entire life, and half of those years you spent cooking in my kitchen."

"I didn't realize I ever said that out loud to you, though."

I set down the salt. "You told my mom once. And Amelia another time. But I overheard."

Because that's mostly how things have gone between us. Her telling everyone *but me* about her life, and me paying pathetic, tedious attention to every word leaving her mouth.

"Mr. Pepper is on my bedside table."

"Of course he is. Do I even want to know why?" I make my way over to the bedroom section of the cottage to retrieve Mr. Pepper from the bedside table and take him back home where he belongs—with Mrs. Salt, by the vase of flowers.

"I was distracted while cleaning and carried it with me."

Her chest expands on a huge breath as her hands go to her hips. "Why are you still here, James?"

I tilt my head. "Why do you want me to leave so badly?"

"I don't . . ." She pauses. "I don't want to tell you."

"Do I actually stink?"

"No," she says so passionately it makes me smile. "Don't get your undies in a wad when I say it, okay? But . . . I've been worrying about you a little."

"Worrying about *me*?" I point to my chest.

She thumps her knuckle in the same spot I just pointed to. "Yes. You. Mr. Not Spun Glass . . . Mr. Man with High Blood Pressure."

Ah.

"Madison . . ."

"No. This is important. You promised me you would take care of yourself, but you're still running yourself ragged. You work nonstop wild hours. Refusing to go home and sleep when you should. Did you know you have dark circles under your eyes?"

"No."

"You do."

As if to prove her point, she reaches up and gently paints over them with the pad of her index finger. "You're still not taking care of yourself."

My shoulders relax. “You don’t have to worry about me, Madison.”

“Mm-hmm. But if I don’t, then who will? Because as I see it, you don’t let anyone worry about you while you’re out there worrying about everyone else.”

“Because I don’t need that.”

Her eyes go soft. “James. Everyone needs someone to worry about them.”

She rubs her palm over my chest, where my heart is beating firmly against my sternum. Like she’s trying to soothe it. Heal whatever is wrong in there.

I push her hair behind her ear before I even realize what I’m doing.

“Hey. I’m really sorry for biting your head off back there with the ‘spun glass’ comment. That was some real toxic masculinity shit. And I . . . I really wanted to come hang out with you here tonight. Can I stay a little longer?”

Her eyes are so brown at night. I look back and forth between them, happily lost in their depths.

“This . . . is the best part of my day so far. *This* is the relaxing part.” I don’t even bother to add some ridiculous line about our friendship to smooth over that statement. I let it fall like a boulder into a lake. I want her to hear the splash.

And Madison is not squeamish when it comes to unexpected feelings or emotions. She welcomes them every second of the day. Which is probably why she doesn’t back away, and instead smiles.

“You’re a touchy-feely person, aren’t you? I never realized it until recently. But . . . you’re affectionate.”

“Noah hates it,” I say, drawing a laugh from her. “I do like affection, though.”

“Me too.”

“I know.”

I’ve seen it with her and her siblings. Her and her dates. Madison would sit right in anyone’s lap if they let her. She’s always the last one to let go of a hug. And when she hugs, she squeezes, rubbing her hand against your back. I’ve watched her mindlessly braid her sisters’ hair if they’re sitting on the couch, and I’ve seen her make out with more guys in public than I

like to dwell on. She's just . . . physical, and I've always been enamored by it. *By her.*

And deeply jealous of everyone who gets to experience it.

I doubt she remembers, but once shortly after she'd turned twenty-one, we were all at Hank's and one of the siblings had dragged me out to line dance. When the song ended, a slow song came on and everyone paired up. Madison looked at me and extended her arms, saying, *Grin and bear it for one dance, will ya? I love this song.*

I wonder what she'd think if she knew I would have danced with her to that song all night if she'd asked. That getting to look in her eyes while standing that close felt like a damn gift from some benevolent god.

And now we're here, standing closer than friends really have any right to stand, and I wonder if her heart is racing as fast as mine is.

But then she pulls away and takes a few steps to the stove. "Fine, you can stay, but I'm going to make you some chamomile tea, so you'll sleep well when you get home."

"Tea is disgusting." I turn toward her "bedroom" again.

"You're going to drink it, and then as soon as you've finished it, you're going home and going to bed."

"Yes, ma'am."

I sit on the edge of her bed, resting back onto my elbows. But it's a bad idea, because the second I rest on the cushy mattress, my eyes drift shut. Between the smell of brownies and the sound of the kettle's rolling boil, I swear that if I were to lie back right now, I'd pass out in ten seconds.

It's peaceful in here.

I force my eyes to open, and when I do, I find Madison staring at me.

"You're going to fall asleep."

"Nah," I say with drowsy eyes. "Not me."

The thing I don't tell her is that, despite how tired I've been, I've been struggling to sleep at home. There's something about it. The second my head hits the pillow, my brain is wide-awake. But in here, I could sleep for ten days straight.

I think it's her.

My body feels right when she's around.

After pouring some honey into the steaming cup of tea, Madison carries it over to me. I push back up into a seated position. She stops in

front of me, standing almost between my legs, and hands me the cup.

I take it, even though all I really want to do is wrap my hand around the back of her thighs and pull her even closer to me. All the way until we're flush.

Instead, I look into her eyes.

“Tell me about your day.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Madison

“My day?” I ask, genuinely surprised by this question because usually when I’m alone with men the last thing they want to do is hear about my day. Which I’m realizing is so sad.

“Mm-hmm.” He sips the warm tea and his face says it all: *disgusting herb water.* “Tell me about it.”

“Umm. It was pretty boring. I just went and picked up the dishes from the pottery place.”

The grin that hits his mouth should be illegal. “Not possible. Tell me the part of the story you’re leaving out to make yourself seem more adult.”

I suck in a breath. “How do you know there’s a part I’m leaving out?”

“I’ve been trying to tell you, I know you.” He says this like it’s obvious. But what I’m uncovering is that he knows me better than I know him—and that thought is suddenly unbearable.

And he’s right. I did leave out a big part of my day. “I was driving with my windows down and a wasp flew into the truck when I was at a four-way stop.”

“So you jumped out?” he asks with a knowing look.

“I jumped out,” I say, casually lifting my right shoulder. “And I forgot to put the truck in park.”

“Classic.”

“So then the hateful wasp follows me out of the truck because he’s dead set on stinging me, and by the time I get a safe distance from it, I see my truck rolling away. Luckily, there was no one else at the stop.”

“I can picture it perfectly,” he says and then tips backward, stretching to set the mug on my side table. Unfortunately, there are several glasses of

water on it, so he has to twist, using both hands to play checkers with the water glasses until there's room for the mug.

"So I run after my truck and I finally catch it and jump in before it can . . ." My words dry up in my mouth when my eyes lower and connect with James's bare stomach. His shirt has ridden up with his arms and . . . I'm having flashbacks of him in the towel now. Except this is worse, much worse, because he's lying over my bed and taking up most of it with his large frame. His torso is taut and tan and he owns a navel. Good lord, James Huxley has a happy trail. And one of those cut V-shapes on his lower abs.

I've been working overtime these last few weeks to block out the fact that James is a man. Not just the guy I grew up with. But this week, I've had to work overtime to clamp down with serious intention on my attraction to him. If I had to assign myself a grade on it, I would say I've been passing with a solid B so far. But with him lying in front of me like this, I'm flunking.

Heat rushes to my core, between my thighs. I want him so much it hurts.

He finally slides the mug into an empty slot and then looks down the bed at me, aware that I've suddenly stopped talking.

I know what he sees: a woman staring at his stomach with lust burning in her eyes.

I clear my throat and blink my gaze away.

James slowly pushes himself back up to a sitting position. "Why'd you stop?"

Ogling you or talking? But the inflection in his voice tells me his question was intended as a double entendre. It's so playful it curls under my skin and encourages me to keep going.

It's now I realize that I don't think I've ever been with a man like James. Someone who exudes masculinity while embracing tenderness. Care. I think he would be very attentive in bed.

I wobble on my feet at the thought. "I was just amazed you could reach the bedside table with your feet still on the floor over here. You're taller than I realized."

He's searching my face as he says, "I've been eating my vegetables."

"I see that."

Oh no, this is not good. My skin is alive. It's burning-hot and I am familiar with this sensation. I'm usually more than happy to give in to it with the guy who kindles it. I'd push his shoulders back onto the bed and climb over him. This wanting could all be fixed in a jiffy.

But for all the obvious reasons (i.e., friendship, work, commitment, family) I can't do that. James and I could never be a casual fling.

"So you caught your truck before . . . ?" he says, reeling me back to my story.

But I'm low on oxygen, stuck in a haze of lust, hypersensitive to everything about James. His enormous hands splayed over his knees. His long eyelashes. Who knew he had those? The slight stubble on his jaw tonight. It would feel so good scraping against my neck. The insides of my thighs.

I need to go outside. Get air. Gulp it into my lungs until I'm sober again.

My voice is distant and thick when I say, "Before it could smash into a tree."

He laughs. "Madison: one. Wasp: zero."

"Well, not so much . . . it stung me. I was so flooded with adrenaline I didn't notice it until I was driving home." I twist a little and tug the hem of my shirt up to reveal an angry red mark on the back curve of my hip.

"*Shit.*" He leans so close I can feel his breath wash over the sting, and something painful has never felt so good. "This looks like it hurts. Do you need some ice for it?" He lightly touches the area just beside the welt and I swear I nearly jump out of my skin. Not because it hurts but because him touching me is suddenly the only thing I want out of life.

I release the shirt and it drapes back over me like a curtain closing. *And scene.* We're done here.

I'm not good at subtlety or keeping thoughts in my head (a trait I learned from Emily), so I take a big step away from him and release them. "James . . . I don't understand you lately."

"Me?" He frowns and god help me even the way his legs jut out at these sturdy right angles while he manspreads at the bottom of my bed is turning me on. "How so?"

I press my fingers to my temples. "I feel like I'm losing my mind. Suddenly you're like loud music playing all the time. You're blaring and I

can't tune you out. Is it . . . is it because I'm celibate and horny? Like what's happening to me? I can't process you anymore." I break off, a comforting thought taking root. "Maybe I'm ovulating."

His mouth is slightly open, eyes unblinking. He takes this information in the most James way possible: nodding and frowning in thought because he's trying to map out how to help me. "Okay, I'm going to bypass the horny comment for now. Let's talk about what's confusing you, and I'll clear it up."

Yes, good. Logical. "I always thought that you . . . thought I was vaguely ridiculous and annoying, and those concepts were easy to process. But now you're putting my seatbelt on and taking me to meet Della and sitting on my bed and asking to hear the stories that definitely make me sound ridiculous, yet you're *smiling*."

He shakes his head. "I've never thought you were ridiculous or annoying. *Trouble*, yes. But never ridiculous."

"You think I'm trouble?"

"I *know* you are, Madison."

"*You* are trouble right now, James. Not me, you." My voice is high. I must look like a caged animal pacing back and forth in front of him.

"How me?"

I make a gesture that encompasses his entire body. "Perching on my bed with all the swagger of a worldly cowboy! Reaching back and showing me your rib cage. I mean—*fuck*." I say the explicit word like a sigh, my eyes rolling back like I took a hit of something illegal.

He starts to say something and then changes his mind, beginning again. "I . . . didn't know you were interested in my rib cage."

I stop moving and stare hard at his face, willing him to understand that this is bad. "Point is, James . . . I'm in a very curious state right now, and . . ." I swallow as he stands from the bed and moves closer to me, a mischievous grin on his perfect mouth. "I also definitely think I'm ovulating and it's just making me . . . well, I'm a horndog, okay? And your boots are so . . ." He's still getting closer. "Heavy."

A grin slants his mouth. "You can't be suggesting that the weight of my boots is sexy."

"The sound would make an incredible erotic ASMR."

His smile is positively indulgent. Decadent dimples on either side of his mouth. “Should I take them off? To negate any trouble?”

My eyes are slits. “You’re enjoying this.”

He’s getting closer still. “How about my shirt? Should I take that off too, to be safe?”

Oh good. He’s teasing now. “It’s not nice to taunt someone burning up with ovulation lust.”

But actually, I can handle the teasing. It’s familiar and safe.

James gets closer still, until we’re nearly chest to chest. “You know what I think?” he says quietly, face tipping down toward my ear. “I think you should let me kiss you. See if it gets it out of your system?”

That sounds like a terrible idea. And just the sort of thing I love.

My body is already humming in agreement. *Yes.* I nod, staring at his mouth. That is just the thing to fix me.

He’ll kiss me and I’ll realize it feels like kissing my cousin, and I’ll never want to do it again.

“Is that a yes?” he asks, and I’m practically trembling now. “I want to hear you say it.”

I swallow. “Yes, I want you to kiss me, James.”

He hesitates only a beat. The air pulses around us, and I hear blood whooshing in my ears.

And then . . . James Huxley turns his hat backward before both hands come up to cradle my face, fingers dipping into my hair. He holds me like I’m fragile. Like he’s scared I might break. His dark eyes drop to my mouth, and his thumb trails across my bottom lip. I’ve never felt more alive to someone’s touch.

And I know I’m in trouble because just his thumb against my mouth feels like too much.

His head dips, mouth hovering over mine for an excruciating length of time.

“What are you waiting for?” I ask, sounding breathless. Desperate.

“I’m not waiting. I’m savoring.”

Oh my god. Why would he say that?

Then he closes the gap. His mouth presses into mine.

The first touch is heady. *It’s James*, my mind screams. But instead of it being a warning, it’s a victory cry. I’m alert. Tuned in to every detail. His

hands. His body heat. His scent. The way my body melts into him because somehow I feel both safe and alive.

He pulls away just enough to lean in again, mouth soft, head tilting to explore a new angle, but our lips don't part. I get the sense it's intentional.

This is only a sample. A little taste to curb my appetite.

Little does he know, it's got me starving.

I want to run my tongue over his soft lips. Bite them into my mouth. I want those hands, still holding my face, to slide down and scrape over every inch of me. I am burning alive.

And just as I'm about to loop my arms around his neck and beg him to kiss me harder, he pulls away.

His breathing is even, but his pupils are blown wide. He swallows, eyes dragging to my lips one last time before his hands fall away. I want to whimper at the loss of his touch.

“There.” His voice is a rasp. “Cured?”

I press my lips together and nod. I can't talk. I might never be able to again.

“Good.” He backs away, eyes lingering on me for another moment like he's assessing whether or not I'm okay, and when he's satisfied by whatever he's seen, he pulls his hat forward again and goes to the door.

“Good night, Madison.”

“Good night, James.”

I sigh and sag against the wall the moment the door closes behind him, because now I know without a doubt that I am not just attracted to James; I have a gigantic thing for him. And that makes this twice as complicated.

CHAPTER TWENTY

James

I lied to my parents again last night.

They called to see how things were going with the farm and restaurant, and instead of telling the truth—really stressful, financially tight, I have to lower my blood pressure, and I can't stop thinking about the chef—I said, "Really great."

I fed them every happy detail I could think of, because the last thing I want is for them to take on the weight of concern and come home to help. Because they would. I know it. And no matter how much I try to shake it, the memory of my dad falling to his knees in the greenhouse plays on a horrifying loop in my mind.

If I have to lie my ass off to keep them happy and relaxed in Florida, so be it.

Which is why I'm currently running.

Following Madison's instructions to look after myself, I'm using cardio to relieve stress. Or at least . . . I think that's what it's supposed to be doing? Instead, I'm just ruminating.

I've been putting space between us over the last week because ever since I kissed Madison in the cottage I haven't trusted myself. She was vulnerable, curious, sorting out whatever attraction she's been feeling, and I pushed a line I shouldn't have.

When I offered her this job, I made a promise to act in her best interest. That kiss—however incredible—was not that. She's confused, and in her word *horny*.

I want her to feel what I've felt for years. But she deserves the time to figure that out without added pressure.

She's my chef, my best friend's little sister, and most important, she's my friend. And I won't hurt her.

I'm also fighting for my life to drag in a breath on this run. Turns out, having a muscular build and practical strength does not translate to good cardiovascular health.

I'm on my final half-mile stretch, dead center of the town square, when I see Will jogging in the opposite direction. He does a double take when he spots me, then crosses the street and falls into pace beside me.

"I didn't know you were a morning runner too," he says, not the slightest bit out of breath.

I glance at him, sweat pooling against my shirt, face red, chest heaving. "I'm not."

He laughs. "I'm gathering that now. Want a running buddy?"

I eye his shirtless, barely sweaty frame. "Are you getting started?"

"No. I just finished four miles. But I don't mind tacking on a few more. Why?"

I bark a laugh, gladly using the conversation as an excuse to stop and catch my breath. "You don't look even a damn bit winded."

Makes sense though. Before going back to school for early education, he was a bodyguard. Before that, the military.

"And it's really not fair that you look like that," he says, gesturing toward me, "while having the cardio capacity of a ninety-year-old grandpa rocking on his porch. I'm going to fix it."

"I don't think I want you to?" I say it like a question but mean it as a statement.

He claps me on the shoulder. It feels like a threat. "Too bad. It's happening."

Damn. Is this how Noah's felt about my friendship all these years? He's always grunting and growling, and now I understand why. Nosy people are annoying.

But also . . . hell if I don't like it.

Even though Noah's like a brother to me in every way, he hasn't really been able to be a friend lately. I'm not mad about it, don't even need to change it. I know from our long friendship that these seasons come and go. Real friends don't have to hold tight or force anything to be solid.

We're just in one of those seasons.

Which is why it might be nice to have a daily kind of friend again. (One I'm *not* deliriously attracted to.)

We really shouldn't have paused, though, because now we're trapped in the town vortex with shops opening for the day.

Will realizes it too. "Shit. Let's get moving," he says as the sign at Gemma's bakery flips to OPEN.

Too late.

Phil, of Phil's Hardware, steps into our path—his favorite hobby. "You boys are out early today! Starting a running club?"

"Oh, not rea—"

"Todd! These boys are starting a running club!" he shouts over the shoulder of his salmon-colored polo into the store.

Todd, Phil's husband, is squatting at an endcap, arranging boxes. He doesn't say a word (as usual), probably because Phil rarely gives him the chance. These guys are the most typical middle-aged white guys you can imagine. They're slightly balding. Share a wardrobe. And wore New Balance sneakers before they were cool.

"He needs to join it!" Phil pats the side of his khaki cargo shorts. "The man never exercises, I swear."

No one points out that we've never seen *Phil* exercise either. But I don't get involved in married people's shit. They seem happy, so who am I to judge?

Except I know if Madison were here, she'd be subtly poking me in the side, alerting me we are definitely going to judge them together later.

And now I'm smiling like an idiot. Enough that Phil notices.

"See, Todd! Look how happy James is. Running gives you endorphips. I read about those once. They're important."

"So right, Phil," says Will, solemn as a priest. "And we've got to keep the endorphips flowing or they shut down."

I'm barely holding it together. *Endorphips!*

"Yes, right! Y'all get going. Enjoy the sunshine!"

We try to jog away, but Phil catches me with a subject I can't ignore. "Wait, James! How's it going with Maddie?"

My stomach knots. I already know I won't like what's next.

"Tell you what, I'm surprised I haven't heard of the farm burning down yet with her living on the property. Now, I *love* her, you know, but I can't believe you'd trust your restaurant to—"

“I’m going to stop you right there, Phil.” I step in closer. Will flanks me. He must sense the shift, because it feels more like he’s bracing for *Phil’s* protection, not mine.

“I’m not of the mindset that talking negatively about a professional woman is appropriate.” I watch Phil’s face pale. “Let alone someone I claim to care about. So I’m going to say this once, and feel free to tell everyone in town: From this moment on, the jokes and roasting—however well meant—stop. Madison Walker is to be treated with respect and encouragement as the head chef of the Greenhouse. Understood?”

I’ve never talked to Phil like this. Never had to.

“Understood,” he says, wide-eyed and embarrassed. He resembles a kicked puppy. His tube socks droop with sadness.

Now I feel bad for coming on a little strong.

“Do you need a hug?” I ask him, because it will ruin my day to know I’ve ruined his.

Wordlessly, Phil nods. I give him “bring it in” arms and he steps close, letting me give him a huge hug. I have a rule to never pull away first, so I wait until he’s ready.

After a minute, he pats my back. “Tell Madison I can’t wait to eat her delicious food. She’s going to do great.”

“Thanks, Phil.”

Mood rebalanced, he releases me. “Good seeing you, boys! Have fun on your run!”

“Always a pleasure, Phil!” Will waves.

The second we’re out of earshot, Will turns to me. “Wow. I didn’t realize . . .”

“That the town has been complete shits to Madison?”

“No.” He breathes a laugh. “That you love her.”

I falter a step and then stop. “Don’t say anything to anyone, please?”

He gives me a pitying look. “Sure. But I have bad news for you. I’m always the last one to find out about something. Which means they all already know.”

Shit.

When I get home, drenched in sweat, I head straight for the kitchen and a giant glass of water. Then I check my phone.

My heart jumps when I see the text waiting for me.

MADISON: Just letting you know, I'll be out of town July 2 & 3.

Leaving early tomorrow morning.

JAMES: Where are you going?

MADISON: New York.

I don't waste time texting. I call her, and she answers on the first ring.

"Hello?"

"You're going by yourself?"

She laughs once. "You do remember I lived alone in that city for two years, right?"

Yeah. I didn't like it then, and I don't like it now. "Why are you going back?"

"Because I talked to one of my old classmates and . . . it's kind of a long story. But all you need to know is I'll be back Thursday night."

I don't know why—it's probably a bad idea considering the space I've been trying to put between us—but I'm already pulling up my calendar. The next few days are light thanks to all the storms in the forecast, and no one has called out. I've actually got a solid crew lined up.

Maybe this is the perfect excuse to take some time off.

Get some space from this farm. *Some rest.*

"Want some company on your trip?"

She's quiet for a few beats. "You want to go with me . . . to New York?"

I want to go with you everywhere.

"Could be fun," I say, nervous I'm overstepping. That maybe she's as freaked-out about our unacknowledged kiss as I've been.

But I mentally promise myself that if I go on this trip with her, I'll put my guard back up. No pushing the limits. I'll go to New York as her friend and friend alone.

When she speaks again, I'm relieved to hear a smile in her voice. "It's going to be a lot more fun now. I'll text you my flight info. If there're no seats left, I'll change flights with you."

And just like that, I'm going away with Madison.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Madison

47 DAYS UNTIL I FAIL . . .

This morning I met James in his driveway bright and early, nervous today might be awkward since we hadn't seen each other since he kissed me. Since he *awoke* something in me that I'm scared will never go back to sleep.

He came down the porch stairs with his duffel bag slung over one shoulder, wearing jeans, a cream-colored shirt, and no hat. His dark brown wavy hair casually styled. But it wasn't the lack of a hat that had me staring.

"What are those?" I asked, stunned.

He followed my gaze down to his feet. "My . . . shoes?"

"No, *shoes* are what people call the generic, everyday things they wear. *Your boots* are your shoes. *Those* are sneakers. And they're stylish sneakers too! You're going rogue on me again, Cowboy."

James rubbed the back of his neck, caught between amusement and annoyance. "I don't see why this is such a big deal. I've worn other shoes before."

"I've never seen such a thing," I said as he gently nudged me aside. "I assumed you never took your boots off. Slept in them. Showered in them."

He tossed his duffel into the back of my truck. "Naked except for boots. Now *that's* a look."

I did not allow myself the privilege of picturing James, butt naked, standing at the foot of his bed in only his boots.

Fine, I did.

It shouldn't have been hot. Why was it so hot?

His sneakers—not boots—entered my vision again. He held out his hand. “Give me your keys.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m driving.”

“Again . . . why?”

His mouth tilted. “Because you’re clearly in no state to be behind the wheel, what with all your blood rushing away from your brain like that.”

I gasped, delighted and scandalized that he’d call out my lustng so easily. Maybe that kiss didn’t make things awkward. Maybe it did the opposite.

“So, New York, huh?” James asks now from his seat beside me on the plane while we wait for everyone to finish boarding.

Once again, I’m struck by how *big* this man is—his wide shoulders spilling into my seat, his knees jammed against the back of the seat in front of him. And I *really* wish I didn’t find that sexy. I’m a short moth sitting next to a tall flame.

I nod. “The Big Apple.”

“Are we returning Sammy to his home?” he asks, because Sammy is, of course, in my lap, safely enclosed in his mobile home. He was a big hit at security, like always. People love a tortoise.

“No.” I clutch the enclosure tighter to my abdomen. “He’s not ready yet.”

James stares at the shell, now bandage-free. “I mean . . . I don’t want to tell you how to parent, but he looks ready to me. Shell seems pretty solid.”

“Physically, yes. The vet says he’s ready. But emotionally? No way.”

“Emotionally? The vet diagnosed his emotions?”

“Of course not. *I* did that.”

Laughter fizzes behind his eyes. I poke him in the side with my elbow and he arches away.

“I know you think I’m ridiculous,” I say.

“Madison, I already told you: I never think you’re ridiculous. Big-hearted, yes. Never ridiculous.”

How does he do that? Effortlessly make me feel so . . . important.

Sometimes I think no one sees me for who I really am. My quirks distract people, and they miss what’s happening beneath the surface. But

when James looks at me, it's like he sees the whole picture. I don't have to try so hard with him—he just *understands*.

When I put my sex life on hold to pursue something more emotionally intimate, I never expected it might be with *James*. Not that he's offering—I mean, he hasn't said anything like *I like you*. And maybe he shouldn't be the first person I try an actual relationship with.

What if I'm terrible at it?

What if I'm not built for commitment?

What if I get bored and want out?

Then I'd have to keep seeing him—at work, around town, at family functions—and it would be torture.

He'd hate me. And I can't stomach the idea of James ever hating me now.

I glance toward the airplane door. The plane hasn't taken off yet. Is it too late to get off?

This was a terrible idea, bringing him along.

The woman in the seat next to me, however, seems like a nervous flier and might fully spiral if I jump up and demand to be let off. She just popped a Xanax and her leg hasn't stopped bouncing since she sat down. She's also reading a book titled *Calming Mantras to Repeat While Flying*.

I stay on the plane for her.

“Why are we going to New York?” he asks, surprisingly for the first time since our phone call. We drove an hour to the airport, waited through security, killed time at the gate buying overpriced gum, and he *just now* asks why he's here. *There's a moral in there somewhere.*

“Well . . . I'm meeting with a big-time chef.”

He sits back again, pleased grin on his mouth. “A chef? That sounds important.”

“Not just any chef. Zora Brookes.”

James humors me by appearing shocked, even though he doesn't know who she is.

Honestly, this whole adventure came on so quickly I haven't had a lot of time to consider if it will be important or not. Josie's text completely surprised me last week. Turns out, she was serious about FaceTiming to catch up. And a few days later she just . . . called to talk.

We chatted for an hour. Gossiped about classmates. City life. James's job offer.

When I mentioned the Greenhouse and the vibe I hoped to create, she offered me a chance of a lifetime: a meeting with *Chef Zora Brookes*.

I almost dropped the phone.

As everyone in the culinary world knows, Zora is a giant in the industry. A Black chef with two Michelin stars and a restaurant in New York. Her roots go back to one of the South's most iconic farm-to-table kitchens in North Carolina.

"She could cancel at the last minute." I damper my exceptions. "This entire trip might end up being a complete waste. I'm not sure yet."

"How did you get the meeting?"

"Josie, an acquaintance from culinary school, set it up. She reached out to see how I was doing, and it snowballed from there."

"You mean a *friend*?" he asks, one brow lifted.

"No. Not a friend. We talked sometimes, had lunch when schedules overlapped. She only wanted to check in."

James cuts his eyes toward me. A smile hovers at the corner of his mouth. "Madison."

"Why are you giving me the 'monogamy face' again?"

"Because that's a friend. You *have* a friend."

"No, friends are people you spend all your time with. You tell them *everything*. You're not afraid to pee while on the phone with them."

"Not always. And definitely not at the beginning. What you're describing is a best friend, or . . . in your case, a sister," he says gently. "It sounds to me like this person thought about you and wanted to know how you were doing. *Friendship*."

Oh my god. I have a friend.

That had been one of my goals for living in the city that I thought I had failed to achieve. *Make friends outside of my family*. Something I assumed would be easy since I've always been social. But away from my hometown, I felt so small. Thrown off-balance. Like I had nothing to offer.

Between Chef Davis's constant berating and Caden's rejection after I laid my heart on the line, I felt *worthless* in every way. Now that I've been coming back to life, I can see just how dried up my self-esteem had been. There was no one around to combat the negativity. And I was too

embarrassed to share the pain with anyone back home. I carried shame that wasn't mine. I carried the insecurities of pitiful men.

It's like I saw New York through dark, cloudy glasses. There was joy and friendship and potential all around me, but I couldn't see it through the hurt.

Before I can stop them, my eyes are welling up.

"Uh-oh," James says, studying my face. "You okay?"

I blink before any drops can fall. "I didn't realize I had a friend in New York. I'm just happy."

His arm settles against mine—warm, steady, intentional. "Are we going to see her while we're there?"

"Um . . . I don't know. I didn't ask." I fiddle with Sammy's lid and then peek up at James. "But I guess we could?"

"Text her before we take off," he says, nodding down at the phone in my lap.

"Okay . . ." And I do, not allowing myself to overthink it or worry she'll reject me.

She texts back immediately: *I'd love to! Text me when you land.*

I can't tell if the plane is taking off or if I'm just feeling the high of learning I have a gal pal. Either way, I'm in the clouds.

I turn to James, our faces close and my mouth humming with memory. "Thanks for coming with me. Truthfully," I whisper, "I didn't want to go back to the city alone."

He smiles and faces forward again, but his eyes flick to me. "Even if I was busy, I would've come if you'd asked, you know?"

My heart stutters. "Because the trip might help the restaurant?"

"No." His eyes snap to mine. "Because I'll do anything you ask."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Madison

NEW YORK

“And you voluntarily went back?” Josie asks, aghast, after hearing how tiny Rome, Kentucky, is.

“I know. I never thought I’d go back either. But . . .” My eyes slide to James, sitting easily in the booth beside me, where he’s been contentedly listening to Josie and me blabber on for the last hour. “I missed home.”

“Couldn’t be me!” she says with glittering eyes. “Someone would have to literally drag me back to my hometown kicking and screaming.” Her braids are out today, and she flicks her long, dark auburn hair over her shoulder.

“Where are you from?” James asks.

“A little town in North Carolina. But believe me, it’s not idyllic. It’s got a run-down Dollar General, lots of discarded tires on the side of the road, and a Sonic that doubles as an illegal dispensary. There’s not a single charming establishment in the whole place. Anymore, at least.”

Now I’m the one gaping. “I had no idea. I thought you were a native New Yorker.” The double nose ring does not scream small town.

“How could you know? You never hung out with me when I asked!” she says with emphasis but no malice.

“I’m sorry.” I wince. “I was in a weird place when I lived here.”

“You mean Caden’s place?” Her eyes glitter, then slide to James and dim. “Oh, sorry.”

James and I quickly share a look.

“Oh. No. We’re . . . not together,” I say, as James echoes something similar in a chaotic overlap.

As if to question our statement, Josie’s mouth quirks up and her eyes flick to where James’s arm is lying behind the back of my seat. He clocks this at the same moment she does and gently pulls it away.

“I’m just a friend,” he says, and for the first time hearing him make that statement drops a sharp rock into the pit of my stomach.

“I want to hear about Caden.”

“He was no one important.”

Josie gives a mocking laugh. “Could’ve fooled me! Every time I texted you or called to hang out, you were at his place. I thought you two were serious.”

“Nope,” I say, trying not to betray too much with that one word. “Just a casual thing to pass the time.” I resituate myself in my seat.

I can feel James’s eyes on my face, but I refuse to look. He knows I’m lying.

“Can you let me out? I need to use the bathroom.” I scoot out, but before he passes me James leans close to my ear and whispers, “You have three minutes to tell her everything you won’t say around me.”

My toes curl. Only James would intentionally leave to give me privacy.

As soon as he’s gone, I can sense Josie is going to ask for more details about Caden, but he’s the last person I want to talk about. So I immediately change the subject.

“Hey . . . you never told me, how did you get connected with Chef Brookes? Did you interview with her?”

“God, no—” She sips her Diet Coke, a laugh rolling from her chest. “Zora is my mom.”

“Your—what? Sorry . . .” I shake my head in disbelief. “Chef Brookes is your *mom*?”

“Yeeeeep.”

“I need you to say a lot more than that.”

She laughs and sits back. “Okay, here’s the story. My strong, creative mom met my quiet, redhead dad in college, and they fell in love and had me.” She frames her face with her hands, warm brown skin kissed by the sun and dotted with freckles, tight long auburn-tinted curls draping over

her shoulders. I've only seen her hair in braids, so I love getting to witness it natural now.

She blinks a million cute times. "In her words, she moved with him to his hometown in North Carolina and really tried her best to find happiness there. But she was so restless and needed more out of life—while my dad was utterly content, never wanting to move. She tried to make it work and opened her own restaurant there in town, which is the one you've probably heard about that launched her career. But in the end, it wasn't enough. She wasn't happy there. So they split about fifteen years ago—pretty amicably—and Mom moved here to New York. She worked her way up in the culinary world and eventually reopened her restaurant, but here in New York."

"And now it's thriving," I say, in awe of this history. I'd forgotten that Zora never went to culinary school—a fact that makes her story even more impressive.

Josie smiles, and it's clear she has a lot of love for her mom. "It really is. I lived with my mom full time in high school and visited my dad on the weekends now and then. Mom made me fall in love with cooking—and New York too."

I lean my elbows on the table. "But you didn't want to work in her kitchen?"

Josie removes an elastic band from her wrist and tugs her curls away from her face, wrapping them in a low, loose bun. "My mom and I are best friends, which is why I could never work with her. We'd kill each other."

I can understand the sentiment, but as someone who's lost her mom and feels an acute stab of longing to spend even one more minute with her, it's hard not to correct Josie. To tell her to soak up every chance she gets—especially if they have a good relationship.

But as someone who's lived with grief for more years than without it, I've learned that projecting it onto someone else isn't helpful. Better to text my siblings later and commiserate.

"Plus, you didn't need to work with her. You were so great in school and had all those awesome options right out of graduation, right?"

"Stop!" she says with a laugh, smacking her palms flat on the table. "We really know less about each other than I thought. Madison," she whines my name, "I was so bad at school."

“No.” I shake my head, unwilling to believe what I’m hearing. “You were the golden student. All the teachers loved you. You had so many interviews right after graduation!”

“Because of my mom!”

“But you just said—”

“I wanted to do it without her name. I never said I *did*, though.” She scrunches her nose. “About two weeks in, I realized I wasn’t the natural I thought I’d be—so I started name-dropping to get better treatment. And it absolutely worked. Lady, it’s a miracle I made it through school.” She gives me jazz hands. “Nepo baby all the way!” Then she pops a fry. “It’s really great. You should try it sometime.”

“I would, but my parents are dead, so I can’t.” I toss out that little gem as the true test of whether we’re compatible friends or not.

Josie pauses, mid-fry-to-mouth. Then she coughs a laugh. “Okay, you win the sympathy award! Dead parents get it every time.”

I smile, thrilled by this response. “I could start dropping your mom’s name after tomorrow though. Nepotism by association?”

“Perfect! Okay, but quick, before he comes back . . . what’s the deal with James?” She hunches over the table to say this quietly, amber eyes sparkling. “Is he single?”

My gut twists. “Why are you asking? Do you want his number?”

She rockets back against the bench and points at me. Josie and her demonstrative actions somehow make me look tame. “Look at your face! No way would I get in the middle of all that.”

“There’s no face. He’s just my friend.”

Her finger twirls in the air in front of my nose. “*So much* face. Do you love him? Are you two sleeping together? And why are his hands so big? My god, maybe I *am* changing my mind. I think I do want his number.”

I fold my arms. “You can’t have it.”

“Because you love your friend?”

I don’t answer. Just stare a hole through Josie’s face as James returns to the table. She raises and lowers her eyebrows.

“I like her,” James says as soon as we leave the restaurant.

“I do too. I wish I’d spent more time with her while I was here.”

James abruptly stops walking. I turn and see he's fallen a few steps behind. "What's wrong?"

That protective look is back on his face. "Madison. What did a typical day look like for you here in New York? You never talk about it back home."

"Because there isn't much to tell."

"Tell me anyway."

I sigh, turning to face the street, letting my mind rewind. "Okay, um . . . I'd wake up around 5:50, maybe six. Get ready. Grab a breakfast sandwich and coffee by the train station. I'd be at school by eight for my first block, then classes and labs until lunch. Then more classes. Service simulation after that."

I cringe. That part was a huge struggle approaching graduation. "Classes ended around six, and then Monday through Friday I had my internship at Chambre Blanche until midnight. Sometimes on the weekend too."

A man in a suit rushes past and clips James's shoulder, but he doesn't even flinch. He's locked in on me. "What about the days you didn't have your internship? Did you go out?"

"Move, please!" a woman snaps as she breezes past in a white silk blouse and running shoes, phone pressed to her ear.

I grab James by the wrist and pull him off to the side, out of everyone's way. "Define 'out.' "

"Did you date?"

"Define 'date' . . . ?"

He scoffs, rolling his eyes. "So you worked yourself to the bone every day, lived in a permanent state of sleep deprivation, and had booty calls on the weekends? Did I miss anything?"

I blink, trying to read his tone. "You forgot tortoise rehab. His shell had to be retaped every weekend. And I took him to the park for sunlight. What's this about?"

His jaw tightens as he looks away, then he meets my eyes again. "You didn't live at all while you were here, Madison."

That fact hits me square in the chest. "Why do you sound upset about it?"

“Because I am,” he says. Then his expression softens. “Upset at myself, I mean. For not seeing it sooner.”

“Seeing what?”

“You were basically sealed up in here with no air.” He echoes what I unearthed on the plane. “No wonder you hated it. No wonder you had constant anxiety and came back to Rome completely burned-out. You didn’t have a single moment to feed the best parts of yourself. The messy parts,” he adds with a smile, like that’s a compliment. “Your adventurousness. Your laughter. I haven’t been able to figure it out, but ever since you’ve been home, you’ve seemed . . . off. Like you’re still wearing that lid.”

I huff a confused laugh. “I’m not following, James.”

He steps closer, eyes scanning mine. “What if you needed more of New York—not less? What if you came home too early? What if . . . without the brutal schedule and the chef from hell”—he shrugs, helpless—“you actually love it here?”

I narrow my eyes. “Are you trying to fire me?”

“No. Not at all. But I am changing my terms. You can’t have the job at the Greenhouse unless you give New York a real shot before we go home.”

I lean in, stage-whispering, “Hate to break it to you, Cowboy, but I already signed a contract.”

He smirks. “Then humor me.”

I shift, thinking. Then stomp my foot once. A petty outburst. “Why can’t we go back and watch a movie? I really do hate this city. I don’t want to go out and explore it.”

“Are you sure you hate it?” he asks, gently. “Or were you just lonely here before?”

I shrug, suddenly feeling raw. “Maybe.”

His fingers brush mine, and my skin prickles. “Well, you’re not lonely now. You have me. And together, we’re going to do the most Madison Walker shit anyone has ever seen tonight.”

I search his eyes and take a deep breath. “This is important to you?”

“It’s important to me that you’re making the right choice about coming home.”

The way he says it . . . it makes me think he overheard my conversation with Josie. Is he worried I’ll grow restless again, just like her mom? That

in a few years I'll want to run?

Maybe he's not wrong.

"Okay," I say. "Let's do it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

James

2:23 P.M.

“Tell me the truth—how many attractiveness points did I lose when you saw me in sneakers instead of my boots?”

“One million.”

“Dammit!”

“Honestly, I’m cured.” Madison sips her coffee and smiles over at me, Central Park buzzing around us. “You’re basically a dork now.”

“You’re not into dorks?”

“Nope. I’m very basic. My type is tall with dark hair. Muscular and suntanned.”

The exact description of me settles between us, and somehow our joking moment turns serious. She pivots away from it. “And boots cemented to his feet that never come off.”

“Niche.”

“I’m nothing if not specific.”

We continue to walk for a bit, and I wait for her caffeine high to kick in. Everything is green. The trees are big and beautiful, and everywhere you look someone’s doing something interesting. That guy has an easel set up, painting a portrait of his nondescript, fuzzy gray dog lying on a picnic blanket. There’s a woman rollerblading in an all-pink spandex outfit.

“Look over there,” I say after we visit Bethesda Fountain. “If you lived here, you could do yoga in the park.”

Her gaze follows mine to the twenty or so people moving through a downward dog pose.

“Do I want to do yoga?” she asks, giving it serious thought.

“I don’t know—do you?”

She squints and then says, “No. I prefer to be tricked into exercise.”

“How do you do that?”

“Go outside on a windy day holding a very important piece of paper, then spend thirty minutes sprinting after it when it gets ripped from your hand.”

I bump her shoulder lightly. “Your spaghetti noodle arms are making more sense now.”

She bumps my shoulder back. “Hey. By the way, I noticed you ordered decaf coffee.”

I grunt. “Might as well have gotten water.”

“Thank you.”

“For what?” *Oh my god, there’s a person walking a cat on a leash.*

“Taking care of yourself,” she says, and I have to look down at her because I’m not sure anyone has ever thanked me for choosing myself before. Thanked me for sacrifice, yes. Thanked me for all the ways I’ve helped them, absolutely. But never for the things I’ve done to help myself.

I’m at a loss for how to respond, so I say a very pathetic, “Sure thing.”

3:45 P.M.

We catch a quick ride from Central Park to Times Square. Madison tells me this is an unnecessary stop because she’s already been.

“Yes, but have you tried to get a street performer painted like a statue to break character before?”

Her expression says I’ve made a fair point. We go on a hunt for a statue person, looking like jungle tourists naïvely hoping for a chance encounter with a tiger.

“Hey, so I’ve been thinking about your predicament,” she says casually.

“Do I want to know what you think my predicament is?”

“Your relationship with Tommy.”

“Ah.”

“I think you should text him.”

I imagine I look horrified. “About what?”

She shrugs. “About nothing. Anything. Something.”

She tosses her empty coffee cup in the trash as we pass one, then realizes mine is empty too, takes it, and doubles back to toss it out.

“Here, look at my texts with my siblings.”

Madison unlocks her phone (passcode: 1234) and hands it over to me, open to a long string of messages between the four of them.

MADISON: I had a bad dream last night.

EMILY: About what?

NOAH: I don’t want to hear about your dream. They’re always too long and don’t make sense.

MADISON: THEY’RE IMPORTANT EVERY TIME. Especially this one.

ANNIE: I’m intrigued.

MADISON: I went to the salon to get a haircut, and when she turned the chair around, I was a gorilla wearing a pink dress! But the weird part is, I *loved* it. So then I got in my truck to drive home, and it turned into an airplane and left the ground. That’s when I realized I didn’t know how to fly a plane. So it crashed. But I didn’t die because it crashed into an alternate world where the ground was cotton candy.

NOAH: I can’t believe I read that whole thing. Two minutes of my day I’ll never get back.

EMILY: Noah . . . it took you two minutes to read that?????

ANNIE: I like the bit about cotton candy.

MADISON: But what does it *mean*?!?

NOAH: That you ate too close to bedtime.

Laughing, I hand the phone back to Madison. “So you think randomly texting Tommy about my dreams is going to bring us closer together after thirty years of not getting along?”

“It’s a start. You guys don’t even know each other now. Maybe if you get to know him little by little, you’ll find something you like or relate to. Something that sticks out more than the negative.”

“I’ll think about it.”

We’re quiet for a few minutes as we push through the crowd.

“And obviously, your dream means you’re craving something new in life and transforming old habits . . . except during it all, you feel you have no idea what you’re doing—scared you’re going to crash.”

She turns to me sharply, eyes bright. “Exactly what I thought! But what’s the cotton candy mean?”

“Maybe deep down, you have hope that if you *do* crash, it’ll be okay.”

“Maybe . . .” she says thoughtfully.

Then her eyes catch something beyond my shoulder. “Oh! Over there. I found one!”

Madison spends the next ten minutes telling the limestone-green man-statue knock-knock jokes and embarrassing stories and making absurd faces at him. The man does flawless work—doesn’t move so much as a centimeter. And that’s when a woman carrying a big-ass tote bag comes over and tells us, in a tone that screams *hey idiots*, that this is not a street performer. It’s a literal statue.

I’m now the proud owner of at least a hundred photos of Madison trying to make a rock laugh.

4:32 P.M.

“Best and worst thing about running the farm—go,” says Madison as we walk away from the hotdog stand, a glob of napkins pinched between her elbow and side.

“Best: the open air and getting to literally watch my efforts pay off when the crops come in. Worst: sunburns.”

“Really? I thought for sure you’d say the early mornings.”

“Nah, I love those. Being up before the world is my drug.”

I see her grimace from the corner of my eye.

“You disagree?”

“I mean, yes. But that’s not what my look meant. I made a bad decision with my order. How’s yours?”

“Amazing.”

I pluck her hotdog covered in relish from her hands and replace it with mine—chili, cheese, and mustard topping it.

“No, no, no. I didn’t mean for you to give me your hotdog,” she says, trying to take hers back, but I turn away and hold mine above my head.

“James! Keep your delicious hotdog for yourself.”

“Quit saying ‘hotdog’ so salaciously!”

“*James!*”

“Madison. Try that hotdog and tell me you don’t want to keep it.”

She gives me a look before finally taking a bite, and then her shoulders melt and her telltale moan escapes.

“Told you.”

She chews and swallows, then rips the drippy dog in half and extends part of it to me.

I raise my brows. “You’re going to share?”

She shrugs like it’s no big deal and not actually the biggest gesture in the world, coming from her.

“What’s next on the agenda?”

I look around, hoping for inspiration to strike, since this whole thing was my idea, but I’m at a loss. Madison uses my moment of indecision to walk over to a guy in mini sunglasses (they can’t actually be doing anything against the sun), a vest sans shirt, and a pair of cream wide-leg slacks. He doesn’t look happy that she’s interrupted his reading time. But after a minute of talking, he’s laughing and showing her something on his phone.

And that’s how we end up at the Color Factory. We snagged two tickets an hour before closing.

The place is a literal explosion of color. I imagine this is what the inside of Madison’s mind looks like.

She disappears behind a curtain labeled CONFETTI ACCUMULATION ZONE, and when she steps out again she’s grinning like a five-year-old, bits of pastel paper stuck in her hair and clinging to her lashes.

“I fought bravely, and I lost,” she says, holding her hands up in surrender.

I brush confetti off her shoulder, pluck a few pieces from her hair, only for more to rain down from a ceiling chute, dousing us in color.

We wander through the scratch-and-sniff wall (sensory overload), then Madison drags me into a room with a giant ball pit that looks like someone on a sugar high designed it.

“Nope,” I say, backing away, drawing the line. “Do you know how many bodies have been in that thing?”

She lifts a brow, already toeing off her shoes. “You’re the one telling me to live it up.”

“I didn’t mean run off and contract hand, foot and mouth disease, though.”

Barefoot, she walks up to me and takes both of my hands. “Please.”

I turn to putty.

And just like that I’m tumbling in after her, embracing god only knows how many germs, surrounded by a sea of bright blue plastic balls and the scent of gummy bears.

It’s chaos. It’s ridiculous. And for the first time in a long time, I feel light as air.

This was supposed to be for her, but I think I’m gaining the most from it.

She swims over to me and makes a big show of getting yanked under into the plastic abyss by an imaginary monster. She’s shrieking and flailing, pretending to drown. People are staring. She doesn’t care—and neither do I.

Grinning, I rescue her, tugging her to the surface. She’s happy and out of breath as she loops her arms around my neck. Her eyes meet mine and her wild smile softens.

The current of attraction grips me—grips her too, I think—and even though I want to kiss her again more than anything, I remember my vow.

“They’re about to close. Should we race through the rest of this place?”

“Give me a head start,” she says, making her way out. “You have much longer legs.”

7:15 P.M.

Madison is wearing a veil and hopping from her left to her right foot over and over, hips jutting out with each sway as she belts “I Feel Like a Woman” into the microphone. The fruity pink drink in her other hand keeps sloshing over the rim, but she’s too absorbed in the song to notice.

The bride, who placed her veil on Madison’s head a few minutes ago, catcalls as the rest of the bachelorette party whoops and hollers. I’m not even sure how we ended up here, to be honest. We wandered around outside the Color Factory for a bit, googling what we should do next. A

karaoke bar in SoHo popped up in the results—and it might as well have had Madison's name in neon. We Ubered over only to find out it was by reservation only. All the rooms were booked up.

Madison went to the bathroom, came back with a bachelorette party and a bride whose dress she'd saved from a drink stain, and *bam*, we were invited to join their party. Now Madison is endearingly drunk and singing at the top of her lungs.

I'm sitting on the bench lining the plush wall, squinting now and then as the disco ball mirrors a flashing neon light into my eyes. But I don't care. I'd stay here all night to watch Madison laugh and dance like that.

Suddenly, a female form cuts off my view of Madison. One bachelorette plops down right into my lap and hooks her arm around my neck. "Hi," she says, so close to my face. "Want to make out? My boyfriend said whatever happens tonight is fine with him as long as you're gone by the morning."

"Generous," I respond, then look up and catch Madison's eye. She's still singing, but she's gone down a sad octave and her words are two beats behind. Who knows, I might be imagining it, but even in my imagination I don't like the sight of Madison hurt. So I stand slowly, giving the lady time to find her footing as she's forced to stand too. "I'm going to have to pass. I think my friend needs me to jump in on this chorus."

"Awww, that's actually cute," says the woman, who is now behind me.

I make my way to Madison, holding her gaze the entire time until I'm right in front of her. Unspoken words pass between us. *I don't want her. I don't want anyone else but you. Even if I can't have you.*

I lean down into the microphone and sing, ". . . I feel like a woman, oh, oh, oh."

Madison cackles, the bachelorettes cheer, and together Madison and I finish the song plus an encore of "No Scrubs."

10:55 P.M.

"Drink this," I say, uncapping a bottle of water and pressing it to Madison's mouth. "You're dripping sweat."

"Quit trying to hydrate me and dance," she says, still vibrating with dance moves as she wipes the back of her mouth with her hand. Her arms

are doing some sort of waves before she turns around and backs it up on me.

“I don’t like to fall into many stereotypes, but please hear me when I say I am a farmer—”

“Cowboy.”

“—and so I do not dance.”

“I’ve seen you line dance though!” she yells up at me, unable to stay still.

“Would you like me to line dance to this techno music?”

Over at the bar, a loud cheer erupts from the bachelorette party that invited us along after karaoke. They just threw back shots and Madison throws her fist up in the air out of solidarity.

I can’t help but smile down at her flushed face, sweat-damp hair clinging to her temples. A little drunk from her steady stream of drinks. I stopped after my pink drink at karaoke so I can make sure Madison stays safe.

“Are you having fun?” I ask her, pretty much acting as a human pole for her to shimmy and bump against.

“The best time! I can’t believe all of this was under my nose the whole time and I never experienced it!”

It’s good, I tell myself. This is what I wanted for her—to see this city differently, to feel like she could actually belong here if she wanted. But I didn’t plan for my heart to sink down into my gut at the thought of her actually staying, choosing a future I’m not in.

And for one selfish minute, I wish I hadn’t made this night happen.

11:32 P.M.

We’re in the back of our new friend’s Mercedes, headed to a drag club. Some guy Madison was dancing with mentioned he and his husband had a babysitter for the night and were going there next. They invited Madison to come.

(And me, by default.)

They’re nice guys—currently belting old-school Britney Spears from the front seat. Rich, too, judging by the model of this vehicle and the fact that they can afford to own a car in New York City.

“What’s that?” I ask, peering over at Madison’s phone just as a cartoon monkey swings across the screen and plants a kiss on the glass.

“An e-card from Tommy.” She grins and tilts the screen toward me. The note attached reads: *Let me swing by and pick you up sometime?*

I groan. “Is he still harassing you?”

He sent her a diamond necklace the other day. *That* she returned to him, saying she didn’t feel right keeping it.

Now she gasps, mock offended. “How dare you! This is classic wooing. He’s doing a great job.”

“In what world is *that* good?”

She laughs. “Okay, fine. Tommy’s pursuit is kind of like if a thirteen-year-old suddenly came into a lot of money. But that doesn’t mean it’s *bad*. He’s being sweet.”

“He’s being a relentless pain in the ass.”

She slides her phone back into the crossbody purse she’s had slung across her chest all day. “You’re just jealous because you don’t want to share my attention.”

It’s a joke. But the guys in the front don’t know that.

The tall one in the passenger seat turns around with a wistful smile and a dramatically pursed lip. “You two are so cute. I miss being young and in love,” he says, reaching across to squeeze his husband’s biceps.

Neither of us corrects him.

1:00 A.M.

“I can’t believe I met Audrey Hepburn in real life!” Madison says, slumped against me on the sidewalk outside the drag club we just left.

“She was pretty awesome,” I say, steering Madison in the right direction.

“I can’t wait to show Amelia. She’s going to be so jealous.” A huge yawn tumbles out of her. She switched to water at the start of the show, so I think she’s mostly sobered up at this point. Exhaustion is setting in now.

“Where should we go next?” she says, eyes closed, head resting against the outside of my biceps like this is completely normal for us. And oddly, it does feel normal—just as every second of the day has so far.

“Next? I’d say sleep.”

Her groggy eyes pop open. “We can’t call it a night yet! I haven’t even been arrested.”

“We have to leave something for next time,” I say, checking my phone to verify the car pulling up is our rideshare.

“Can we at least tell everyone I got arrested?”

“Sure.” I gather her wrists behind her back and she grins up at me. After opening her door, I place my hand that’s not holding her “cuffed” wrists on the top of her head and guide her through, down into the seat. She scoots over, making room for me. The driver—with a *Star Trek* emblem hanging from his rearview mirror—looks concerned that he’s just picked up two people who are into kinky stuff. I give him the code and we’re on our way now to the apartment where Madison used to live.

Fatigue is heavy after our nonstop night, and Madison has gone into full zombie mode, her dazed eyes staring out the window, head tilted back against the seat, absolutely silent. A rarity for her. All I want to do is sleep for a million hours. When we’re about five minutes from the destination, a slow rain trickles down onto the car, followed by a full-on shower.

Suddenly, Madison rockets forward. “Hey, sir, can you stop and let us out here?” she asks the driver.

Again, he looks concerned. “Here? It’s raining. You’re still a few blocks from your stop.”

“Yeah, I know. Stop here!”

He does, with a “whatever, lady” shake of his head.

She leans around me and opens the door, exposing us to a wall of rain.

“Madison. What are you doing?” I ask as she attempts to shove me by the shoulder out of the car. “That’s the wet world out there. The wet world is a bad place.”

She laughs. “Come on! One last adventure together in New York. Let’s run in the rain.”

That word—*together*—sticks. Lodges somewhere beneath my ribs.

I loll my head in her direction, and she combats my protest with big anime eyes. “Fiiiiine.” I unbuckle and jump out into the rain first. I extend my hand and she takes it, joining me out here in the ocean.

For three heartbeats she looks up at me, water dripping over her smile, and I feel the kind of happy that scares a person. The kind I’ve been terrified to experience, because then I’ll know the lack of it. But then the

driver peels away like we're psychopaths he's afraid are going to try to stuff him in the trunk and steal his car, and the moment is shattered.

We laugh, and then it's like the sky opens and the real downpour begins, so heavy it's hard to see a foot in front of us.

"Oh my god!" Madison yells, laughter spilling out with the rain. "This was a bad idea! Seemed cuter in my head—Wait, is it hailing?!"

I grab her hand. "Let's run!"

So we do. Feet sloshing through quickly flooding sidewalks. Free hands hovering above our heads to protect us from the small, but definitely present, hail.

Finally, drenched and exhausted, we make it to the brownstone apartment building. Madison shoves a key into the old, rickety lock while telling me how glad she is she forgot to give her key back to her landlord. As soon as the lock clicks up we burst inside, letting the door fall shut behind us.

The sound of the rain fades, and after one final sigh we look at each other—half-drowned and deliriously happy. Water drips off our clothes, splatting on the old hardwood floor, and I'm not sure where to go from here. And I don't just mean in this apartment.

"You know . . . I don't normally do this for guys who aren't wearing boots, but . . . do you want to come up to my place?" she says in a dramatically sultry voice that is one hundred percent playful but also, unfortunately, one hundred percent turning me on.

I gesture toward the stairs with my hand. "After you, Chef."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Madison

It's weird bringing James into the apartment even though I don't live here anymore. I've never brought a guy back here. Never once. Mostly because I knew I'd have to apologize for a thousand things Bryce does, and that seemed too exhausting. Plus, for hookups, I like to be able to leave whenever I want.

Anyway, this is not the kind of place you bring someone back to. The overflowing piles of laundry we have to step over by the door serve as proof. Mind you, the washer/dryer is nowhere near here. It's actually in the bathroom closet. I guess I can thank Bryce for curing me of my messiness though.

And for letting us stay the night here for free.

"Super weird that she hasn't been able to rent the place since you left," James says in a dry, sarcastic tone while stepping over a loose, oily takeout bag. "How did you live here for two years?"

"I mostly stayed in my room."

He points. "There's a thong hanging on the fridge handle."

"Do you want to know how long that's been there?"

"Nope."

As we pass the bathroom on the way to my old room, we hear the shower water running behind the closed door. I give it my signature "shave and a haircut" knock. "Just letting you know we're here!" I yell through the door.

"Make yourself at home!" she yells back. "There are brownies on the counter. But they've got weed in them, so beware."

I look over my shoulder at James. "Nice of her to warn me. Last time she did not."

His eyes widen, and a grin splits across his face. “Did you call 911 thinking you were dying?”

“No, worse. I called Emily,” I say while opening the hall linen closet and finding it empty of towels. Not surprising since I was the only one who ever washed them.

James and I drip-drop our way down the hallway and into my room. My *old* room. My heart rate picks up as he steps inside. A sense of monumental change sweeps over me when I close the door behind us.

The space is clean, just as I left it. But with James in here, it’s completely different. There might as well be a crackling fire in a fireplace for how cozy I feel watching him prowl around the room. Every time I’d come in here—lonely and heart-bruised from the day—I’d hope that the apartment would finally feel like home. Like somewhere restful and warm. It *never* did.

Not until now.

“Mind if I change?” he says casually. “These wet clothes are disgusting.”

“Yes, good idea.” I turn to leave the room and give him privacy, but his laugh stops me.

“I’m not shy, Madison. You can stay. Change too if you want. I won’t look.” He’s already peeling off his soaking-wet shirt and my god the muscles of his torso are something out of a medical textbook. The kind doctors in training expect to find in the real world—every muscle and ligament defined—only to realize that average bodies don’t actually look so chiseled.

James’s does.

So I turn away and unzip my bag (also wet from having dragged it along on all our adventures tonight). I dig out the big sleep shirt I brought and toss it onto the bed. I don’t even bother to make sure James isn’t looking because 1) he’s so respectful there’s no way he’s peeking when he said he wouldn’t, and 2) I’m not scared of nudity. If someone dared me to walk through New York naked for a million dollars, I’d laugh knowing I would have done it for twenty.

My shorts hit the floor in a loud wet thud, followed by the echo of James’s jeans doing the same. Chills I shouldn’t have flood my skin. I attempt to peel my shirt up overhead as gracefully as James did, but it’s so

wet it gets stuck around my face and shoulders, arms straight up in the air. The harder I tug to free myself, the more stuck I get. I'm a human finger trap right now.

As much as I don't want to . . .

"Uh, James."

"Hmm?"

"Can you . . . help?"

"Help with w—" His voice goes dead silent.

I can imagine what I look like to him at this moment, standing here in my underwear and bra, hands sticking up over my head with my shirt covering everything from my wrists to my neck. I hope it's sexy—but I'm betting it's not judging by the soft laughter James is trying to hide.

"How the hell did you get stuck in there?" His voice is closer now.

"You know how we nineties kids have been preparing all our lives to get stuck in quicksand?"

"Sure."

"We've been training for the wrong situation. Sopping-wet shirts are the real problem."

"Clearly." He tugs at the fabric around my elbows, but it just suctions tighter around my head and neck, drawing a squeak from me. "Damn. Okay . . . let me . . ." Another tug but no freedom. "Wait, I have an idea. Come with me."

And then his bare hands are gently wrapping around the naked curve of my hips, pulling me with him a few steps. I will never recover from that touch. *Never.*

"I think this is gonna be the trick." There are sounds of James shifting his weight and then an acute tug at the top of my shirt. The fabric budges, and between whatever he's doing and my wiggling, the shirt comes off.

Light floods my eyes as I reenter the world and blink into focus: James's stomach. For some reason, I am eye level with his navel. I stare at his taut, gorgeous abdomen and the soft, subtle dusting of hair that leads down into his . . . gray boxer briefs.

James clears his throat, stepping down from the bed. "I needed leverage."

As his feet hit the floor, he tosses my shirt onto the pile of his wet clothes and somehow it feels intimate. Not nearly as intimate as how

closely we are standing in our underwear, though. Neither of us attempts to step away either. James is somewhere over six feet tall—I'd guess six-three—and I'm right at five feet. So that puts me level with his collarbones.

My greedy eyes want to explore the mostly naked man terrain in front of me, but I keep my gaze pinned there, on his right collarbone, so pronounced I could drink water from the divot between bone and shoulder muscle. My heart is something wild, jumping in my chest, and for once I don't think it has anything to do with my lack of sex but has everything to do with the *man* who is creating this reaction.

James breathes out and I feel his breath against my forehead. "Do you"—my gaze drops to James's hand, flexing and then tightening at his side—"have some clothes somewhere?" he says, and this is when I realize his voice sounds odd.

I look up only to find him with his chin in the air, eyes pinned to the ceiling. *That gentlemanly son of a bitch.*

"James," I say on a laugh. "You don't have to look away. I'm not shy either."

He nods thoughtfully, pressing his lips together, but doesn't look down at me yet. "Yeah."

"But you're not going to?"

"Nope."

"Because you're afraid you'll be overcome with desire when you see me in my plain gray cotton bra and panties?" The sarcasm in my tone is undeniable.

"Yes," he rasps, and the seriousness of his tone is also undeniable.

Suddenly, I have never wanted anyone to look at me as much as I want him to. Which is a dangerous line to walk.

And yet . . . "Here I thought you were a cowboy, turns out you're a chicken," I whisper.

I watch a tiny smile crawl over his mouth before his eyes slowly scrape down to lock with mine. The powerful set of his jaw tells me he's exercising all of his will to keep them pinned on my face.

I don't know how to handle this mounting tension. I want both to throw myself against him and to resist it with everything in me . . . because James is easily the best thing that's ever happened to me, and I

don't want to lose him. I don't want to mess up a single bit of what we have.

No matter how sexy he looks in his underwear.

So with a willpower I didn't realize I possessed, I lean around James, shoulder brushing the scalding skin of his torso, and snatch the oversized shirt off the bed. He *watches* as I slide it on, the cotton fabric falling slowly over my chest and hips and landing against my thighs.

"Nice shirt," he says, tightly—because it's *his*. The one I stole and will never return.

I can sense his desire coiling around me like a python as his eyes eat up the sight of me wearing something of his.

"You next." It comes out breathless.

He strides over to his backpack, crouches, giving me the most achingly beautiful view of his lean, muscular back as he digs around, pulling out a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt. He tugs them both on, glides his hand through his damp hair, and makes a ta-da gesture with his hands.

We're both clothed. We deserve trophies.

James clears his throat. "Should we get some sleep?" he asks, and I am going to need him to stop giving me that crooked grin and bedtime voice or else I will combust.

When did James Huxley become irresistible? When did he morph into the standard against which I judge all other men?

"Sleep sounds good." I hate sleep.

He nods. "I'll take the couch."

"Ha! Sure . . . have fun with that."

He faces me again with a questioning stare. "Are there spiders in it or something?"

I think back to all the noises I've heard coming from that sofa over the last two years. "That would honestly be preferable to what's really there."

His face skews. "Do I want to know?"

I give him a look. "You already do."

He flicks up the comforter. "Well, looks like we're bunking together tonight, Chef."

"Totally fine with me." *Fine, fine, fine.*

We both hesitate on either side of the bed for a millisecond—make eye contact, smile tensely, then slide in under the covers. We're grown-ups. We

can be mature about this. We can exist together under the sheets without having sex.

James turns out the light on the side table and I see in the sliver of moonlight that he lifts his hand above his head. “I know I should be tired, but I’m not.”

“Me neither.”

“I also kinda want a cigarette.”

I turn my face to him, surprised by his easy admission. “Are you stressed?”

“I’m . . . *something*.” There’s a long pause. “I’ve got a lot on my mind. That’s usually when I want one. When I can’t sleep, have a lot on my mind, or . . .”

Or:

Turned on is what he doesn’t say, and what I won’t voice. Because if I do, I’ll say it while straddling him.

I turn onto my side, facing him. “Tell me what’s on your mind.”

His face angles my way and I wish the light was on. I wish I could see the lopsided grin I know he’s giving me. “Better yet, tell me about Caden.”

Is it my imagination or did James all but spit his name?

“Ugh. Caden is a nobody that I met in class and slept with on the weekends.”

“Try again.”

“Caden is an idiot.”

“Closer.”

I breathe in and let it out. “Caden . . . hurt me.”

James stiffens. “What did he do to you?”

“He hurt my feelings, I should say. So don’t go end his life.”

“You say that like hurting your feelings is not still a murder-able offense.”

I chuckle and James’s hand brushes mine, resting above our pillows. His fingers shift to lightly grasp a lock of my hair. “Remember when I told you I was lonely here? That I realized I wanted someone who didn’t just want to have sex with me but wanted to spend time with me too? Well . . . I hoped Caden would be that person.”

“Did you ask him?” His touch is still gentle against my hair, delicately running it back and forth between his fingers.

“Yes. One night after we—well . . . you know—I was getting ready to leave his place, and I asked him if he would want to date me for real. Be something. Outside of the bedroom.” I cringe thinking back to that raw moment. “I really laid it all out on the line like I was in a rom-com movie, and it was my grand gesture moment. I was cute and witty and listed out all the ways I’m fun to be around. And he said . . .”

“What did he say?” James asks so quietly it’s almost like he’s scared to hear the answer too.

“He said I was cute and really great in bed . . . but that he was looking for someone he could take home to his parents. Someone put together and professional. He said he didn’t think I was that kind of woman—and even worse, said it with a laugh like I should be in on the joke with him.”

“*Shit.* And what did you say?”

“Nothing. I just stood there like an idiot and laughed along because it hurt so bad, but I wasn’t sure why—he didn’t say anything that was untrue or that I hadn’t thought about myself before.” I pause, jolted back to feeling disgusted by Caden’s smile for the first time. “So then he gave me a kiss, and a pat on the ass, and said he’s always down to fuck though.” *So vulgar.*

I’d never once felt cheap in all my days of hooking up with guys, but I felt cheap and used and discarded in that moment. I’ve been carrying that feeling around ever since.

“Madison . . .”

“No. It’s okay. I don’t need you to say anything about it. But honestly, that was how my entire experience was here. Lonely. Belittling. And suffocating.”

No sooner than the words finish leaving my mouth do we suddenly hear Bryce’s door slam shut, followed by her giggle and the low hum of a man’s voice.

“Oh and there’s that,” I say, less than thrilled by what I know comes next.

I guess Bryce wasn’t alone in that shower like I assumed.

James is going to say something but cuts off when he’s suddenly treated to the groans and grunts of the Caveman. “Oh god,” he whispers, horror drenching his voice. “You weren’t kidding about them.”

“It’s gonna get worse too.”

“How could it—” He cuts off because sounds that humans don’t usually make begin filtering through the room. James and I lie here in tense silence for a minute as the violent thud of Bryce’s headboard bounces against the wall.

James covers his ears, but I know that’s not doing much to muffle the sound. “This is the furthest thing from sexy I could ever experience.”

“It’s bad. It’s real bad,” I say, making us both laugh. And that laugh tumbles into another one, and before I know it we’re both shoving our faces into our pillows to stifle not screams of ecstasy but rolling, belly-aching laughter. And this, I realize, is the first time I’ve ever lain in bed with a man and laughed.

It’s wonderful.

Finally, Bryce and Caveman climax and things quiet down, along with our laughter.

“There. Finally, it’s done,” James says on a relieved sigh.

“Oh, James . . . sweet, naïve James.”

“It’s not done?” he asks with dread.

“It’s only begun.”

With a groan, James swings his legs over the side of the bed, rounds the bed to my side, and holds out his hand. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?” I ask, sliding my hand easily into his and standing.

“Somewhere we can breathe.”

“How have I never thought to come up here before?” I ask after James opens the door leading to the roof and I step through. The rain has finally stopped, and it’s turned into a beautiful night. Humid, but beautiful.

I don’t think we’re supposed to be up here (which gives me a jolt of delight), but also there’s no one around to actually care either. This isn’t the kind of apartment building that comes with security and a doorman.

“I’m surprised you didn’t either. I would have thought the DO NOT ENTER sign would have been a flashing green light for you.”

I laugh and follow him to a dryish spot on the ground, where he spreads out the comforter we snagged from the bed and drops the two pillows on top next. We settle onto the blanket and James immediately lies

back against the pillow, arm above his head again, eyes closed. *Cowboy sleeping pose*. He just needs a campfire and a horse.

I'm not ready to lie down yet. I'm full of restless energy that I don't know what to do with. After pulling my knees up to my chest, I tug my loose shirt over them.

"Hey." I nudge his shoulder. "Today was fun. Thank you."

He peeks an eye open. "Fun enough to stay?"

I pause, take in a big breath, and look around. The question deserves thought and I know he won't accept anything less. "Fun enough to replace some of the bad memories." I pause. "But I want to be home. I want my life to be in Rome."

His eye closes again, but a smile opens. "Fair enough."

And then I go out on the scariest limb I've ever balanced on. "Besides . . . you wouldn't be here if I stayed." Both of his eyes open now and find mine. "And I have a hypothesis that tonight was so much fun because you were with me." I let the silence stretch for half a second before I chicken out. "My *best* friend."

He stares at me and then stares some more. I don't know what he's staring at, what he's seeing. Everything, maybe. Finally, he reaches out and gently wraps his fingers around my forearm, tugging me down so I break out of my T-shirt cocoon and lay my head on the pillow beside his.

"He was wrong, you know . . ."

I know exactly who he's talking about. "Caden? I'm not so sure. I think he might have been more correct than I'd like to admit. I haven't been 'bring home to Mom' material. But I'm trying to be now."

"You're too quick to believe the negative about yourself. It's not true. And you don't need to change a damn thing."

"Oh come on, James. You've known me my entire life. You've seen all the mess-ups. You're the one who helped Noah drag my ass out of jail that night I went skinny-dipping in college!"

"Who cares? You were a kid. You were *living*. And you're forgetting all the amazing stuff you've accomplished too. No, don't give me that look."

"Excuse me if I don't believe the hot air you're blowing at me. My track record is full of more failure than success."

"You really don't see it, do you?"

I frown at him.

“Madison, other people lean into the one thing they are good at and stick to it because it’s the surest way to success. Take me, for example. . . . I was raised to be a farmer, and I’m good at it, so I never quit. I just kept going with the path that was laid out for me.”

“And now you own an entire farm!”

His brown eyes slam into mine. “But at what cost?”

“James . . .”

“But you have always been brave enough to throw yourself into whatever it is you love. Even if you’re not naturally good at it. If it inspires you, excites you, you try it. You have more instances of ‘failure’ on your list because you are resilient and you’re not afraid to live—and you’ll likely never know just how inspiring I find you.”

How does he do that? How does he so easily manage to make me feel ten feet tall with pride? And it means even more to me knowing he’s not searching for the right line that’s going to get me to sleep with him. I get the sense he’s saying what’s on his mind.

This good, kind man finds me inspiring.

And I suddenly wonder if anyone has ever given him the chance to bet on himself like he’s betting on me.

“James . . . have you ever thought about moving here to New York or someplace else and starting over?”

He closes his eyes again. “Yes. But only once in my life.”

“When Noah was here?”

“No.”

And that’s all he says about it.

I eventually lie down beside him and curl my knees up again, pressing lightly into James’s side for warmth. It’s not cold out here, but my bare legs are chilly. Without hesitation, James’s hand moves to my outer thigh and he rubs up and down it, generating heat. *So much heat.*

I’m delirious from staying awake all night and drunk off James’s smile and the quiet honesty that’s unfolded between us over this trip. Which is why I’m staring openly at the side of his face. Studying the slope of his nose and the angle of his jaw. The scruff and the light curl of his lashes. And his mouth, full and mesmerizing.

I lay my face on my hands. “So, you’re not scared of what will happen if I fail and take your restaurant down with me?”

James's head lolls again in my direction and his hand stills, flexed against my leg. "To be completely honest, Madison, I'm only scared of what will happen when you succeed."

That is the absolute best thing anyone has ever said to me.

Feeling satisfied in a completely new way, I turn over onto my back and look up at the sky.

And would you look at that. Here in the heart of the place that nearly broke me, I finally see a sky full of stars.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Madison

46 DAYS UNTIL I FAIL . . .

I'm sitting in a coffee shop, drumming my nails on the table. I haven't blinked in five minutes. I'm afraid if I do I'll miss Zora's arrival and be caught off guard. I need all of my guard intact when meeting my hero.

Josie told me roughly fifteen times not to stress today, but what does she know?! She knows Zora the mom, not Chef Brookes. I don't even know what I'm hoping to gain from this. Maybe I'm afraid to hope for too much. But I think I'll know it when I feel it.

I hold my breath as the door opens, sunlight beaming in and splitting my hungover headache wide open again—and a white lady steps in, toddler in tow. Not Zora.

I glance at the clock on my phone, thinking it must be past our meeting time and she's standing me up. But no. It's been two minutes since I last checked. For once, I'm just super early. How do people do this? It's excruciating.

Normally, I'd still be on my way—hopping down the sidewalk, shoving on a shoe, holding a tube of lipstick between my teeth. I'd do my hair on the train while scarfing down a granola bar. And that's how I know I've changed, at least a little. This matters to me. So even though I only got a few rocky hours of sleep on a roof last night and woke up to a bird landing on my feet, I still got my ass up, showered, dressed, and grabbed a breakfast sandwich with James before catching the train to the Lower East Side.

And now I'm sitting here like an overeager toddler, bouncing my leg and rehearsing my opening line again and again: *Chef Brookes, hi! I'm Madison Walker. It's such an honor to meet you, and I'm so grateful for this time you're taking to talk with me.* It's honest. Professional. The opposite of messy.

I glance down at my phone, check my emails just in case she canceled—and that's when a voice says my name.

When I look up, my eyes lock on the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

Zora Brookes.

Shit. She caught me off guard.

"Hi! Zora—" I stand, fumbling with the chair behind me. "I mean . . . Chef Brookes!"

Zora is tall and lean, her frame graceful but strong with powerful shoulders and a striking bone structure that makes it hard to look away. I see Josie in her amber eyes, but her features are unique—her nose is different, her complexion deeper, her presence quieter but somehow more commanding. Her hair, like Josie's, is a crown of curls. Zora's coils are even tighter, styled into a shoulder-length Afro with a blue silk scarf tied neatly as a headband. Chunky gold earrings catch the light as she moves. She wears billowy black palazzo pants, a black tube top, and an open, flowing cream linen button-down.

Standing in front of her, I'm completely intimidated. In awe.

Instead of preying on my timidity like so many professional chefs have, Zora glows with a smile and tugs me in for a hug. "Madison! It's so good to meet you."

Her hug is brief but effective—a squeeze that wrings out any lingering awkwardness.

"Did you already get something to drink?" she asks as she releases me.

"I did, yes."

"Great! I'll just be a minute." She orders at the counter. It's clear the baristas know her—they laugh about something—and in no time, Zora is back at the table.

She sets down her iced latte with a huge, settling sigh. "There. I've been running all morning. It's good to sit down."

"Oh. I'm sorry if I disturbed your day!"

“Not at all. But I appreciate you meeting me here. I spent the morning at a farmers market buying some incredible produce and needed to drop it off at the restaurant before I came this way. It’s right across the street.”

That explains how the staff here seems to know her. But what strikes me is how they not only know her but like her. Chef Davis had a reputation that followed him everywhere. Most chefs do, actually.

“So,” she says, laying her forearms on the table. “How long are you in New York?”

“I got in yesterday and leave tonight.”

“Wow. Quick trip! What brought you in?”

I make an awkward face, and Zora seems to read my answer from it.

“No,” she breathes. “This meeting?”

I nod. “I hoped to play it cooler than that, but yes. I flew in to meet you. I’ve been following your career for a long time, and you’ve inspired me more than I can tell you.”

“Oh my God, you are so kind. Thank you.”

We talk for a little while longer about my friendship with Josie and my time in school—and I think she’s loosening me up.

“Did you intern at any restaurants?” she asks, sipping from her straw.

“I did. Uh, at Chambre Blanche.”

Her face falls. She sets her coffee down. “With Chef Davis?” She says his name like it tastes bad. “He is the most insufferable, pompous ass I’ve ever met. That must have been hell.”

A weight lifts off my chest. All this time I’ve worried I made up his personality in my head, or that I blew it out of proportion. It’s affirming to hear her say it.

I clear my throat. “It was a horrible experience. It really . . .” I trail off. “Well, I’m still recovering.”

She reads between the lines. Her brows furrow as she studies my face. “I’m sorry. This industry . . . it’s not always kind. Especially not to women. Though few industries are.”

“Josie might’ve told you about the restaurant I’m helping start?”

“She did.” Zora smiles. “Sounds incredible. And it got me in my feelings a bit about my first restaurant. There was so much joy in it—but also a lot of fear and inadequacy. You’re miles ahead of where I was, having your culinary degree and having done an internship.”

“I don’t feel miles ahead. I’m scared to death I’m going to run it into the ground because there’s no way I’ll be able to command a kitchen like Chef Davis did.”

She scoffs. “Chef Davis runs his kitchen like a coward. Only insecure, small-minded people belittle others to gain power.” She leans forward. “Listen, Madison. I’m tough on my kitchen crew, and I expect a lot from them—but never at the cost of their dignity. I want people to give me their best work because they respect me, not because they’re scared of me. And you have the unique opportunity to begin your reputation as an executive chef the same way if you want.”

I expected Zora to highlight her successes during this coffee, but instead she spends most of it laughing with me about her most embarrassing moments. Like the time she forgot to pay the electricity bill during her first month in her New York restaurant and the lights cut off halfway through dinner service. There was no salvaging it. Everyone had to leave, and Zora absorbed the cost of their meals. She and Josie lived off Top Ramen, PBJs, and the restaurant’s leftovers the rest of that month.

I am a sponge, soaking up every story, feeling fuller and fuller by the minute.

As our time winds down, Zora gives me her personal number and tells me to call anytime. I almost cry. Actually—fine—I do cry a little. But Zora doesn’t make fun of me or call me weak. She squeezes my hand and tells me she’s been in my shoes. She understands.

“Okay, any last burning questions before we leave?” she asks. None of my original timidity remains, but my awe of her has doubled.

“Actually, yeah.” I look into her confident eyes. “Does the feeling of inadequacy ever go away?”

She smiles. “No. At least not for me.” Her gaze drifts, searching for the right words. “I think some people reach that point, but only if they’re content to stop growing in their craft. I’ve always been the type to want more. To change. To experience new things.” Her eyes sparkle as they meet mine. “I get the impression you’re the same way. So no, the feeling doesn’t fully go away. *But*,” she says with emphasis, “it gets easier to manage. It becomes a friend that pushes you to be better, not a chain around your ankle.”

I’m buzzing as we leave the coffee shop and step onto the sidewalk.

We hug again and then, almost as an afterthought, Zora asks, “Do you want to come see the kitchen?”

The knot in my chest that had loosened tightens again. The last thing I want is to taint this incredible day with a panic attack.

“I would, but I’ve got to get back to meet my . . . friend,” I say, though the word doesn’t settle quite right. After this trip, James feels like so much more. But will that last when we go back home?

And that desire Zora mentioned—to change and experience new things—I’ve always seen it as a flaw. But she framed it as something beautiful. Maybe it’s not something I need to chisel out of myself.

For now, Rome is where I want to be. It makes me happy. It’s where I’m the most driven. But will I always feel that way? I don’t know. And I want a partner who won’t be afraid to take risks with me—to explore, shift, grow.

Could that be James?

Before our flight, I needed to take care of one more thing.

“You sure?” James asks from beside me as I drop to my knees on the grass.

“I’m ready.” I lift the lid of Sammy’s enclosure and gently scoop him into my hand. Tears collect in my eyes as I hold my little tortoise friend to my face. “Hey, pal. Thanks for everything. Honestly, I think I needed you more than you needed me. But you’re healed now, and it’s time to let you go live your life.”

I place him in the grass near the lake in Central Park and stand. James wraps his arm around my shoulders and holds me for a minute as a tear slides down my cheek. Sammy doesn’t move quick—he’s a tortoise, after all—and James seems content to stand here and let me soak in this moment.

But then, as Sammy starts to move, James steps forward, bends, and scoops the reptile up again. I watch as he places him back inside the enclosure.

“James, what are you doing?”

He gives me an apologetic look. “I didn’t want to ruin the moment and what it symbolizes, so I thought we could go through with the ceremony here. But we need to let him go back in Rome like you originally planned.”

“Why?”

“I did research yesterday about releasing wildlife into Central Park—specifically tortoises—and the odds are not in this little guy’s favor. He’ll most definitely get trampled again.”

In this moment, watching James’s gigantic hands carefully handle my little reptile, preparing to take him back home so we can release him somewhere safe . . . is when I realize, I think I’m falling in love with James Huxley.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

James

We're sitting at the gate, waiting to board our flight. Madison unzipped my backpack a while ago and pulled out the word search puzzle. She's been glued to it for thirty minutes, brows furrowed, pencil tapping against her bottom lip.

Her bottom lip that I will not stare at.

I take the opportunity to pull out my phone and send a text before I chicken out.

JAMES: Hey

TOMMY: Hey?

JAMES: What's up.

TOMMY: Are you dying???

JAMES: What the hell? No.

I let out a quiet breath, thumbs hovering. Off to an excellent start.

But Madison said it didn't need to be anything big—it just needed to be *something*. If I keep initiating these random check-ins, maybe someday it won't feel so weird. Maybe it'll be something we regularly do.

TOMMY: Why are you texting me? It seems like you're drunk.

JAMES: I'm not drunk. Do you want to hear my dream from last night?

TOMMY: . . .

TOMMY: Okay?

JAMES: I went to pick green beans and there was a Snickers growing on the vine.

TOMMY: Wait. That's it??

JAMES: It was a short dream.

TOMMY: I'm walking into a meeting now and I hope you know I'll spend the rest of the day wondering what the hell is wrong with you.

Madison stifles a laugh beside me, failing at pretending she's still invested in the puzzle. Nosy little spy.

She leans her head on my shoulder, warm and familiar. Something big changed between us during this trip. And I hope it never goes back.

“Nice job,” she says softly. “It’ll get easier.”

I sigh, letting my head tilt toward hers for a beat. “I don’t know if this is gonna work.”

“Maybe not.” She grins up at me. “But I liked the dream. Did you eat the Snickers?”

“Definitely.”

“Oh good.”

Her phone lights up in her lap with a new message, and she holds it up to where we can both read it.

TOMMY: I think James is high???? Also hey:) What are you wearing? JK. Sort of.

I roll my eyes. “You know, I regret trying.”

Madison just bumps her shoulder against mine, still smiling. “No you don’t.”

We’ll see . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Madison

ROME
34 DAYS UNTIL I FAIL . . .

“Here it is,” I say, slapping a piece of paper onto Emily’s desk.

“What’s this?”

“Evidence that I’m taking care of shit, since I know that you’re sitting in your little house sweating your cute little ass off over it.”

My type A sister looks up at me with a practiced air of disinterest, but I can see it in the brief flick of her eyes to the paper on her desk that she very much cares. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I trust you completely.”

“Since when?”

“Since . . .” She shrugs. “Forever. I’ve always trusted you to take care of yourself.”

I laugh so loudly that if her students were here instead of in music class they would have jumped out of their seats. “You’ve never trusted me! And rightfully so, I’ve been kind of a mess. . . .” But I don’t finish that thought because it’s time to stop talking so negatively about myself all the time. I had never even considered myself brave until James suggested it. And now it’s all I can think about.

It was almost two weeks ago that we lay on the roof of the apartment building and he told me I inspire him. I can still feel the way those words tingled across my skin as if he’s whispering them in my ear right now.

When we got back, he helped me find the perfect place to let Sammy go, and ever since we have both been so busy with our respective jobs and

annoying adult shit that I've barely seen him.

I miss him. *Aggressively.*

We haven't been completely apart, though. There've been hints that we're still best friends. (Or whatever we are.) Occasionally I find a word search puzzle taped to my door. A bowl of fruit salad placed in his fridge. Drinks at Hank's on Friday nights—and passing him and Will running together early one morning when I had to drive into the town over for some ingredients the Market doesn't carry.

Emily closes her eyes, looking like an alcoholic trying to resist a bottle of her favorite liquid. "First, you're not a mess. I know you are a capable woman and I don't need to read your menu as proof that you can manage your restaurant."

"Okay, fine." I slide it off her desk. "Then I'll just leave you to your school day and take this with m—"

Her hand slaps down on the paper just before I pull it away. "You came all this way . . . so I can take a quick look."

"Mm-hmm. Great. While you're at it, pick which menu you like better. There's two on there."

I've been playing around with several different options, cooking deep into the night, destroying my small cottage kitchen in the process, and rekindling so much delight in cooking that I find myself giggling and laughing like a maniac to my audience of mixing bowls. It's been a tough decision, but I've whittled the potential menu down to my favorites. And Emily—my incredibly strong and wise sister—is the only person I trust to help me make this final decision.

While she reads over the menu, I stroll to the window and glance out at the kids on the playground, shrieking and running wild during recess.

I used to stand here at this exact window, counting the minutes until my students returned from specials, dreading the second half of the day. I wanted to love this job—god, it would've made everything simpler if I had—but there was no joy in it for me.

I've looked back on that time, wondering if I was just lazy or selfish or ungrateful, but now I can see that it's just not where I was meant to be. And that's okay. Emily—she was built for this. Her whole heart lights up when she talks about lesson plans and the design of her classroom themes.

I've always admired that about her. But the only part of this job I loved was being around her.

For a long time I thought I didn't fit the job. But now I think maybe it didn't fit *me*. Maybe I'm not a quitter or a failure, maybe I'm actually pretty good at listening to my heart.

The fear I have now—that being a chef will turn out the same way as my other jobs and I'll have to start over again—still lingers. But it's quieter. And I can thank Zora for that.

But just as soon as I gain some confidence, my eyes snag on a particular little redhead boy playing on the swing set. *Jeanine's son*. My mind flies back to the thought of James dating her and my stomach twists.

Did he end their relationship, or was it Jeanine? For some reason, that fact is very important to know. Because Jeanine and James—it makes sense. I can see it perfectly. The three of them as a happy little family, rooted here in Rome. Jeanine is someone you take home to Mom and Dad. Jeanine is someone to build traditions with.

So what happened between them?

“Okay . . .” Emily cuts into my spiraling thoughts. “These are all great options. I've had several variations of these dishes from you and they're all incredible.”

“But?” I narrow my eyes.

“No buts.”

“But?” I ask, firmer, more intentionally, and Emily relents.

She treats me to a massive eye roll along with a groan. “You need to mix and match these two menus until the greens are with the—”

I hold up my hand and stop her and then point my finger like a wand. “Use that favorite red pen of yours and mark it up.”

While Emily draws little circles and connecting lines across the paper (and tiny hearts to soften the blow), I wander back into my thoughts about Jeanine and James and have the most startling revelation so far: *They could even be a J-name couple!*

“Emily . . .”

“Hmm?” She's finishing up on the menu but giving one last note.

“Did you know James dated Jeanine?”

Her pen drops to the desk and she looks up at me, attempting to blink her shocked expression away. “Yes. Why are you asking?”

I shrug, taking my turn at nonchalance. “No real reason. He mentioned it to me the other day, and I thought it was curious.”

“Curious that they dated?”

“Curious that they broke up.” My eyes drop to the floor, pretending to scuff a nonexistent smudge off the tile. “She seems perfect for him. Beautiful. Funny. Reliable. A redhead.”

“And James just screams ‘I love redheads?’”

“You know what I mean! On paper they seem great.”

She hums a light understanding sound and sits back in her chair, crossing her legs. “I think Jackson could tell you a thing or two about trying to make it work with someone who is great for them on paper.” Emily’s boyfriend was in a multiyear relationship with a woman—even getting engaged and moving away with her—until he realized he didn’t love her and she wasn’t the one for him. “Despite looking good on paper, maybe James realized early on he could never love Jeanine.”

“So you’re saying James broke up with her?”

“I don’t know,” says Emily with a measured calm, tapping her pen softly against the desk.

I step closer. “How long did they date for?”

“Also don’t know.”

“Who asked who out first?” I’m right up at her desk now, chin angled down at her.

Emily looks me straight in the eyes and over-enunciates, “I. Don’t. Know.”

I bang my hands flat onto the desk like a skilled interrogation officer. “Then what do you know, Emily Walker!” I’m sure my eyes resemble a cartoon character’s when they bug out of their head.

My sister, who could make a bull cower, only smiles at my outburst. “Not much, Madison. James is a pretty private person, as you well know—especially, I would imagine, as of late.” She sits forward and rests her forearms on the desk. “Now tell me a few things. . . . Why are you so interested?”

“Because we’re business partners. I deserve to know if a Mrs. Huxley is going to swoop in randomly and change everything.”

“Seems like a question you should ask him then.”

“Um, no.” I pivot away.

“Well, I don’t have the information you’re looking for.”

“That’s fine. I bet Mabel knows.” I snatch the menus from Emily’s desk and start backing my way out.

“Or you could just *ask James*.”

I scrunch my nose. “Doesn’t sound like me. Hey, by the way, sorry about taking up your grading time. I’ll buy you a few extra minutes.”

“How?” She’s frowning, skeptical.

I raise and lower my eyebrows.

“No. Madison! Halt your ass right there. I forbid you from doing whatever it is you’re considering!”

“Oh, Emily,” I say at the edge of the door. “Don’t you realize by now the more I’m forbidden from doing something . . .” I let the sentence dangle, daring Emily to finish it for me.

“The faster you do it,” she says with a resigned sigh.

I’m grinning, showing my teeth. “Don’t say I never did anything for you!”

Again, Emily senses danger. She stands quickly. “*Maddie . . .*”

And that’s the last word I hear before going into the hallway and pulling the fire alarm.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Madison

26 DAYS UNTIL I FAIL . . .

The door to the Greenhouse's kitchen is humongous. I mean, in reality it's a normal height, but in my mind—the land of anxiety—it's a freaking castle door. And just on the other side? A fire-breathing dragon. Or at least that's what my brain seems to think every time I step in there.

Since my initial introduction with James, I've avoided this kitchen and only cooked at the cottage or his house. Logically, I know everything will be okay in there. There is a less than two percent chance Chef Davis will pop out of a cabinet and scream at me for being worthless. But the thing is, my nervous system doesn't seem to operate on the same wavelength as my logical brain.

Which is why even now just thinking about going in there and feeling the sterile countertops and squinting against the fluorescent lights has my lungs pinching and heart thundering.

I back several steps away from the door until I land in a puddle of sunlight, beaming in through the overhead windows. The warmth is enough to keep me from running from this place completely.

Like a cat, I sit down on the concrete floor, soaking in the rays and staring at the kitchen door. Maybe if I sit here long enough, it'll become less intimidating. But after an hour passes and the pool of sunlight shifts completely away from me, I am no closer to stepping foot in that kitchen.

Movement at the restaurant entrance catches my eye, and I sigh with relief when James walks in. His brown boots gently thud across the floor

as he comes to stand in front of me, frowning down at where I'm sitting, surrounded by tote bags of ingredients and produce.

"I think in order to have a picnic you're supposed to unpack the food and eat it," he says with a lopsided grin.

"Ohhhh. My bad. Want some?" I dip my hand into a tote and pull out my middle finger, flashing it up at him.

He laughs and then lowers himself to sit beside me, so close his shoulder presses against mine. I haven't seen him much since New York, but apparently the easy air of affection still lives between us. It's . . . soft. Life turns into a land of marshmallows when he's around.

James sits back on his hands and eyes the door. "We feeling heavy today?"

We. I bite my lips together and nod.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Do I? No. I don't want to let the words out. I've gained so much confidence lately, and I hate how this feels like a step back. When I packed these tote bags full, ready to chop, slice, and season my way through the night, I was sure I would breeze right into the kitchen and get to work. I was excited to cook in there.

But then—the door.

My confidence dried up on the spot.

So I shake my head no and we sit in silence for a minute before I ask him, "Do you think I'm just being dramatic?"

It's what I've been called plenty of times before.

"You're asking if I think you're being dramatic for having a physical response to a traumatic incident in your life?" His brown eyes slide to me.

"Well, when you put it like that . . ."

He presses in a little more against me. "No, Madison. I don't. I think the fact that you're still sitting here, working up the nerve to go in, proves how strong and determined you are."

There he goes again. . . .

"Hey. I'm sorry I didn't tell you from the beginning about . . . this." I gesture to the vicinity of my head. "I should have been honest with you from the start about the panic attacks."

He shrugs a shoulder. "Wouldn't have changed anything."

"But we weren't really friends back then."

“Sure. But I wanted to be.” When he can tell this announcement has made me stop breathing, his gaze finds mine again. “I just never knew how to get us there. You gave me the perfect window when you called that night.”

I’m speechless even though a thousand thoughts are soaring around my mind. He wanted to be friends. All along. *Did he ever want to be more than friends?*

That kiss hums in the back of my mind. The way he held me so delicately.

Because I don’t know how to respond to that without being a little too honest about rising feelings, we sit in silence for another minute. And then . . .

“Hey.” James bumps my shoulder with his. “Have I ever told you I’m a terrible cook? I try but it always comes out disgusting or I slice my finger and gush blood. It’s awful.”

“Sounds bad. But I’m not surprised seeing as you’ve been living off of canned beef stew.”

“Maybe we can fix that. Maybe . . . you could teach me how to make something tonight?”

I raise my eyebrows. “Teach you to cook?”

“Yeah. We’ll go in there together, unload all this stuff, and then, whatever you were planning to make, walk me through it step-by-step.” He pins me with a look, then slowly reaches over and locks our fingers together. “Let me go in with you.” And then he amends. “I want to go in with you.”

I breathe in and out. In and out.

“Okay.” I stand from the floor, readying myself to pick up a tote bag, when James’s hand catches mine again.

“Before we go in, though, give me a few minutes. I smell like shit from the farm, so I’m going to go wash up first. I’ll come get you at the cottage when I’m back.”

Wash up, my ass! I mean, he did wash up because he smells incredible, but he was doing much more than that.

Emotion stings my eyes as I take in the softly glowing kitchen. The harsh fluorescent lights are off—unnecessary, since James has filled the

room with the gentle warmth of every lamp he owns, lighting the space just for me.

He studies me as I walk inside. And when I don't say anything, he rubs the back of his neck and asks, "Was this dumb? I thought it might help your *reintegration*. I remembered you saying the lights were sometimes triggering for you. But . . . if it doesn't help, we could always just go back to my house and cook. Or—god, Maddie . . . say something. Are those good tears or bad tears?"

A laugh slips from my throat even as tears trail down my cheeks.

James watches them fall, then *finally* relaxes.

"Good tears. Thank you," I say, but it doesn't feel like enough.

It was over a month ago when we made cinnamon sugar toast and I told him that little fact about the lights. He not only remembered it but came up with a way to fix it.

"How do you feel in here now?" He's being so gentle with me, and my knee-jerk reaction is to assume that inside he's actually laughing at me. Pitying me. Thinking I'm making too much of it.

"Good!" I chirp out a bright answer to throw him off.

"Mm-hmm. So why are you still standing in the doorway?"

"Because I'm just taking it all in."

"Come on." He steps closer to me, bends a little toward my ear, and whispers, "When are you going to believe me when I say, 'I know you, Madison.' That means I know when you're lying too." He lifts the tote bags from my hands, skin brushing against mine. "Take as long as you need."

He carries the bags to the long worktable in the middle of the kitchen, where he sets them down and begins unloading.

I've always thought those industrial islands look like surgical tables. Sharp. Threatening. Where you'll lay your hopes and dreams and either come off healed or with your heart carved out.

But James is there. My eclectic tote bags. Farm produce and the shadow his body casts.

It doesn't look so scary.

"I think I'm ready to move," I finally say.

He looks up at me, a wry smile in place. "Today, or . . . ?"

“Actually, next week sounds great! Maybe after the opening! By the way, I quit! Bye!” I pivot to run, but James is behind me in an instant, forearm hooking around my abdomen and pulling me back in. We’re both laughing, playing, as he turns me around and plants my feet back on the ground.

I like the press of his chest against my back. But then his hand slides down to hold mine, and I think I like that even more? I like everything he does all the time. It might be a problem.

“You can’t decide to quit before we’ve even reached step two.”

“You have an itemized process?! How many steps are there?”

“Somewhere between two and a hundred and eight.” He leads me to the countertop where the bags are all laid out and begins talking—one hand holding mine, the other unloading produce. I don’t have the heart to tell him I’m actually doing well. That my heart rate is steady and the usual panic isn’t showing its face. That he doesn’t have to hold my hand anymore.

I keep these thoughts to myself because I’m selfish and it feels so damn good to have his hand clasped possessively around mine.

I would say that I’ve missed having this physical contact with a man, but that would be untrue. I’ve never experienced *this*—whatever it is—with anyone else. It has nothing to do with hormones and everything to do with the organ thudding leisurely in my chest.

Reluctantly, I pull my hand away and help unload. I don’t need to feed this desire more than I have already.

“Did you bring any flour, by chance?” James asks casually.

“I did. It’s in that green canvas bag,” I say, pointing to the one on the far side of the counter. “Why?”

“No reason.” He pulls it out, opens it, and scoops his hand directly inside the bag. I’m horrified. Even more so when he hurls it onto the empty stretch of stainless steel.

My mouth falls open. “James. What the hell are you—”

I don’t get to finish. Flour explodes in the center of my chest. White powder mars my black T-shirt, and I stare down at the stark contrast. *I’ve been hit.*

I raise my eyes to the man with flour-covered hands. “*Why?*”

His only response is to sprinkle more around himself, like rose petals at a wedding. Deliberate. Defiant. Never breaking eye contact.

The more flour he dispenses, the harder my heart pounds.

I try to keep them at bay, but there's a breech in the walls. The memories rush inside.

My elbow knocking the sauce ladle. The arc of red across the line, the ruined plate. Chef Davis's face in mine, voice like a knife. "That sauce took two hours. Your stupid, clumsy hands ruined it in five seconds." And then: "When will you ever prove to me you're worth keeping on here? My guess? Never."

The whole kitchen listened.

No one said anything.

I lurch forward, grabbing his wrist as his hand dips inside the bag of flour again. "Stop. You can't do that!" My voice is hard. Devoid of any playfulness.

"Why?" His tone is a mirror of my own.

I scan the ruined kitchen, and my breath trembles like I'm balancing on a shaky tree limb. "Just—! You can't!"

James inches closer, voice softening. "Because *why*, Madison?"

"Because . . ." I'm blinking quickly, tears clogging up my eyes. "Because! I'll get in trouble!" My answer cracks through the air, ringing like a strike of lightning in the dark.

I want to curl up in a ball and hide. Scurry into a hole where no one can find me. This shame was my shadow in New York, and it's found me again.

"Who is going to get you in trouble?" He phrases this like a question, but in his eyes I see that he already knows the answer.

It rises in front of me.

"No one," I whisper, barely audible. "I won't be in trouble with anyone. There's no one in here but us."

"Exactly. This is your kitchen." He sets the bag of flour aside and moves in close to me, brushing a smudge of flour off my cheek. "*It's yours, Madison.* No one else's. There're no rules yet for how you can behave in your own kitchen—because you're the one to set them. And that prick, whoever he is, has no power in this kitchen. Never will." His voice is impossibly tender, like his thumb running against my jaw. "Tonight, make a mess if you want. Have a hell of a good time. You've earned it."

New York taught me that imperfection equals pain. That it's a flaw to be chiseled away, one brutal critique at a time.

It's hard to remember that imperfection once meant joy. Creativity.

It was the spark behind late-night recipe experiments, fueled by cheap wine and lit with my sisters' laughter.

Imperfection used to be my friend. Maybe it's time to take it by the hand again.

I find the bag of open flour sitting on the counter and dip my hand inside. The fluffy powder is soft against my palm as I scoop it out and toss it into the air.

We're in a snow globe, and James's smile is something I'll never forget.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Madison

“No, you’re rolling those way too small! No one wants a small cookie.”

James laughs as I take the ball of dough from his hand and add more to it, rolling it into a suitable size. “One night of cooking in this kitchen and you’re a maniac.” He wipes his hands on a dish towel, then picks up the wine bottle we’ve been drinking from, bringing it right to his mouth.

We’ve been in here for hours now, days. Who knows? I expected James to get bored and leave by the fourth dish, but I underestimated him. He’s stuck with me, washing, dicing, and plating our way through the menu. It helps we’ve been sampling (devouring) everything as soon as it comes out of the oven or off the stove, burning our mouths and laughing. He took it upon himself to wash the dishes between each meal while I look ahead, prepping for the next one.

After the first round of dinner options, James stepped out and returned with a bottle of wine. He forgot the glasses though, so we’ve been drinking straight from the bottle.

Now we’re onto the dessert courses. Keeping with the hometown memories theme of the restaurant, I want this cookie to pay homage to my grandma, who made the best damn chocolate chip cookies in the world. Rarely a school day went by that she didn’t have them waiting on the table for us when we got home. They’ll be served with a heaping scoop of homemade bourbon vanilla ice cream.

I roll out three more cookies and put the tray in the oven.

“I’m debating making these cookies in mini skillets instead.”

“Yeah?”

“Could be a fun added experience,” I say while wiping my hands on a dish towel.

James hands me the bottle of wine. “I agree.”

I wonder if he can see it. The dazzling joy sweeping under my skin, through my veins. I feel reconnected with myself after tonight. Not a single minute over the last few hours has felt like work. It's been decadent playtime—even better than I remember it.

I stare at him over my long drink, studying his contentment. The easy way he's leaning back against the counter. He doesn't look like he's in a hurry to go anywhere. It's how he always looks around me. Or maybe that's just the sweet buzz from the wine coating my senses.

"Now that we're done, what's your final verdict on the menu?"

He tilts his head. "My verdict . . . it's going to be a huge success."

"You're not just saying that? Because I can take honesty." I pause. "I mean, if it's negative, I'll cry for sure, but I can take it."

He laughs and comes closer to steal the bottle back from me. "Here's my brutal honesty: I want to eat these exact dishes every day for the rest of my life."

Oh shit.

I watch his mouth connect with the rim of the bottle. He tips it, jawline sharpening, throat working as he swallows. In the history of the world, drinking wine has never looked so sexy.

Probably I should let his comment pass me by without waving at it.

Probably I should pretend I don't sense the deeper meaning.

"Maybe that can be arranged . . ." I say.

His chest expands on a sudden breath like he wasn't expecting me to acknowledge the truth so easily. He sets the bottle on the surface just behind me, placing his body a little closer to mine. "You made it look easy tonight."

I rest my hips back against the counter to look up at him. "It *felt* easy tonight. It hasn't felt that way in a long time."

"I wish I'd known you were struggling so much in New York."

This makes me laugh a little. "What would you have done?"

He studies my amusement, eyes raking over my features. "I would have called. Often. Come visit and taken you out like we did last weekend." The intensity in his voice tells me he's serious. "I would have tried everything to help. I told you, I've wanted to be your friend for a while."

It's a nice thought, but I don't want to tiptoe around whatever this is anymore. I'm ready to bring honesty to the table. "You had every chance to

come visit me over the last two years, and you never did.”

“Did I?” He pauses. “Because I think without that breakdown, you never would have let me through the door.”

“Untrue.” I retrieve the wine and take a big swig. “I’ve always wanted to be friends too.”

“You have a funny way of showing it.” James takes the bottle from my hand and drinks from it.

“Oh, if that isn’t the pot calling the kettle black!”

“How do you figure?”

I gawk at him. “Because any time I’d call home and FaceTime with the family, you’d leave the room.” I noticed. *Every time*. But I didn’t realize until this moment just how close attention I was paying to James all these years. “And even when I was here in person, if I so much as hinted at a story of something that happened in New York you’d get up and leave.” I shrug and steal the bottle back. We’re playing tug-of-war. “I took the hint.”

James’s face is startlingly serious, a debate happening behind his dark brown eyes. “You took the wrong hint.”

“What does that mean?”

“It wasn’t New York I didn’t want to hear about, Madison.”

I lightly shake my head. “I don’t understand.”

“When you first got there, you found a tiny bookstore on your walk to the train station. It was full of vintage romances and you found the best pirate one for Annie and mailed it to her.”

And he’s not done: “Last winter your window cracked during a snowstorm and your room was freezing. You duct-taped the crack, and it took your landlord an inexcusable amount of time to get it fixed.” I’m about to interject, but he continues. “You found a random dog outside your apartment building a few months ago and you knocked on door after door for two hours until you finally found his owner. A sweet older lady who was distraught at losing him. She gave you a five-dollar bill as a thank-you.”

I’m speechless. Can’t find a single word to voice how I’m feeling.

He leans in the smallest bit closer. “I’ve always listened, Madison. I only got up and left the room when you’d start talking about the chef you were sleeping with.”

I’m shaking, but James is steady as ever.

“Ask me why,” he says, those three words enough to set my heart on fire.

“Why did you leave the room, James?”

He steps closer. Body heat crowding me. I want more of it. “Because I have been so damn jealous of any other man in your bed.”

I can’t breathe. James Huxley has been jealous of the other men in my life? What does this mean?

I know what it means. . . .

My gaze drops to his mouth and catches there. Everything shifting and irrevocably changing.

I watch his words form, quiet and heavy with tension. “Say something.”

“I . . . have contemplated putting a laxative in a certain redhead’s coffee lately,” I admit quietly so maybe he won’t hear. But this seems to encourage him to get even closer to me. The front of our bodies touching ever so slightly.

“You’ve been jealous of Jeanine?” His eyes have sparklers in them.

I nod.

“Don’t put laxatives in her coffee, please. She’s nice.”

I scrunch my nose. “Ugh, she’s nice! You’re making it worse.”

“You don’t want her to be nice?” The back of his knuckles skim cautiously against my jawline. I want to arch into his touch like a cat.

“No. I want to hear that you broke up because she was rude and tacky or something like that. Because *I’m* not nice.”

“That’s not why we broke up,” he says, still giving away no hints about how their relationship ended. Or who ended it. “What else are you thinking?”

“That your kiss didn’t cure me.” I say this to his mouth. “It made everything worse.”

“For me too.” His hand cradles my jaw and his thumb sweeps across my bottom lip, tugging with the slightest roughness—evidence of his pent-up desire.

This is really happening, isn’t it? I’ve been trying to keep a lid on my feelings for him, constantly reminding myself that we are intertwined in too many ways to pursue something casual. But it hasn’t been enough to overpower what’s right in front of me. What’s palpable between us. This isn’t casual.

We are good together. I feel good with him.

“James . . .” I say, breathless, sliding my hand up his chest. “I think we should—”

His head dips, and he kisses me—hard—before I fully get the words out. It’s not the same as the one we shared in the cottage. It’s not measured or restrained. It’s desperate.

But just as quickly as we connect, he pulls away. “Shit. You were gonna say *kiss*, right? I should have asked—”

I grab the back of his neck and pull him down. *More. Again. Yes.*

There is no hesitation. James captures my mouth like a storm. It is thunder and lightning and wind. Both his hands sink into the back of my hair like he’s trying to hold on to me for dear life. I grip the front of his shirt, wanting him as close as possible.

Our mouths are open, pressing and devouring. Angling and then angling again—and it’s so good I don’t even realize we haven’t used tongue for this kiss until James’s sweeps into my mouth.

A shot of adrenaline strikes through my veins.

I’ve never kissed someone I know so well before. It’s heady. I know when this man is smiling out of politeness and when he’s smiling because he’s happy. He’ll eat almost everything I make, but any Brussels sprout gets exiled to the edge of the plate. He wants to repair the relationship with his brother. He loves this farm and simultaneously wishes he didn’t. And now I know wine tastes delicious on his tongue.

James is sunlight. And I am toasty warm, already scheming up ways I can hold his attention forever.

Our teeth clank together, spurring a new sense of urgency in us both. My arms slide around his neck. Our noses bump. His forearms loop behind my back to haul me off the ground, feet dangling, chests pressed together. I feel his smile tug before he laughs—mouth to mouth. “Wrap your legs around my waist,” he urges, hands clutching behind my thighs to help.

It’s hysterical he has to prompt me. I am an alternate universe Madison right now—so lost in the feel of James that technique is nowhere near my mind. And oh god, once I’m up here, legs knotted around his torso, a pulse of heat flames at my center.

He pivots us, not resting me on the counter but pressing my back to the wall, holding me firmer against him. His mouth leaves a hot trail down my

neck. I've never loved making out with someone more. Felt it this much.

As he sucks at my jaw, the pressure between my thighs grows, sparks building behind my eyes. I tip my head back, resting it against the wall as James's tongue dances circles behind my ear.

I whimper as he adjusts to a new angle, using the wall to help hold me in place. Hearing it, he pauses.

"Oh . . . I see," he says into my ear. "Does this feel good?"

Keeping me pinned between his body and the wall, he dips and rises. Intentionally slow. I am choking on my desire, unable to form words as the muscles of his abdomen rub against where I'm aching.

I nod.

"How long has it been?" he asks.

"About twenty-four hours," I answer honestly, drawing a low chuckle from him.

"I meant . . ." He moves to the other side of my neck, wringing a fresh round of sensation as his lips crawl across my clavicle, over my shoulder. "How long has it been since someone else gave you an orgasm?"

Just hearing him say that word is practically enough to tip me over. He's stopped moving, withholding the friction I so badly need.

I squeeze my legs around him as I answer, "A year or more."

When I open my eyes, he's staring at me, pupils dilated and lips parted. "Do you want me to fix that?"

In the past, fun, reckless sex is all I ever really needed. But not anymore—not where James is concerned. "Not if it's going to mess up what we have."

"Oh, Madison. This is only the beginning."

I suck in a sharp inhale, and his lethal smile is all I see before his mouth claims mine and I close my eyes. We're kissing again. Soft caresses to needy pulls. I bite his lip into my mouth like I've been dreaming of for months. He groans, the sound mounting the furious pressure between my legs.

He kisses me harder. Deeper. Feral.

My arms and legs coil around him so tightly that he doesn't even need to hold me up, so his hands move to my ass. He squeezes me. Urges my body up and down, to move against his taut stomach. Once my body is on

autopilot, rubbing against him, his right hand moves up my side, under my shirt, to palm my breast. Squeezing. Kneading over my bra.

I think I might pass out.

The sensation mounts, my blood twists through my body, his hands squeeze and press, tongue begging and giving as I rock against him until all at once the pressure shatters and vibrates through me. I gasp, clutching at his shoulders as my body rings with bright, long-awaited pleasure. A kind I've only experienced now, with James.

"That's it," he whispers, movements soft and comforting as I come down from the high. Reality is waiting for me at the bottom, and it's now I realize I just rode James's stomach to orgasm, upright and fully clothed.

And somehow it was better than any sex I've ever had.

Slowly, he lowers me to the ground. My muscles twinge with soreness like I ran a marathon. And James—his hat is gone, discarded god knows where in this room. Sweat dampens his hair. From helping me or from holding himself back?

I've never in my life felt so needy. So wanting. Even now, I want it again. *More*. He never even unzipped my pants. Embarrassment prickles its way up my neck, where James's mouth had just been.

But he doesn't hesitate a second, doesn't give me time to sink into that feeling.

He hooks a finger under my chin, forcing my gaze up to his. He kisses me, once, firmly. "That was . . . the best thing I've ever experienced. Thank you."

"You're thanking *me*?" I say against a nervous laugh. "You didn't even get to—"

He presses his finger to my mouth. "I don't need anything from you tonight. Except maybe . . ." He pushes my hair back from my face. "For you to say yes to dating me. If you want to, I mean."

It's so endearing how this man who just obliterated me against the wall without ever taking his pants off looks shy right now.

"You want to date me?"

He nods. "Exclusively. Monogamously. I'd like to watch all seven seasons of a show with you. Hang out and feel bored together. I'll fill your truck up with gas when you don't want to. And I promise I'll never give a shit about a nipple hair."

A breeze swirls in my stomach, making me laugh.

“What do you think?” He kisses my temple and I melt against him, feeling so safe and cared for.

I don’t have the answers yet to whether we’re capable of making it for the long haul. I don’t know if I’m any good at commitment or if he’ll ever be willing to grow and change with me. This is brand-new territory, but I do know one thing for sure: James Huxley is my favorite person, and he could never be a wrong choice.

“I’d like to do all of that too. With you.”

He sighs like he’s waited for that answer for longer than just this moment. He kisses me softly, lighting my blood again. But before I lose my nerve, I need to align our expectations. “James. Would you be okay with keeping it quiet for now, though? Letting it stay between us until the restaurant is launched?”

“Okay,” he says quickly, taking my hand and kissing the back of it.

“Wait,” I protest as he kisses the inside of my wrist. “You didn’t even hear my reason yet.”

“I don’t need it.” A kiss on my forearm.

“But it’s not because I’m ashamed of us or anything.”

“Okay.” He gently sinks his teeth into my biceps, unbothered.

“It’s because there’re a lot of eyes on me right now, and the pressure is heavy. I don’t want to add another reason for the town to talk about me. Or inflict their opinions on my life. I want to enjoy us without any commentary.”

He’s smiling now, holding my face in his huge hands, looking for all the world like he just found treasure. *No one has ever looked at me like that before.*

“I like you a lot, Madison. I trust you. And I already told you, I’ll do anything you want.”

And looking into his dark, beautiful eyes, all I can hope is that I don’t mess this up.

CHAPTER THIRTY

James

Guess what sucks? Finally getting to date the woman you've loved for years, only for you both to be so busy launching a restaurant and running a farm that you don't actually get to date.

It's been two weeks since the most incredible night of my life, and I've seen Madison twice, only briefly: Once when she was rushing out of the house to hold interviews with her potential kitchen staff at the coffee shop. I didn't even get to kiss her because a couple of my crew were around. And another time when we "accidentally" met at the Diner for lunch. I did kiss her then, but it was in the hallway on the way to the bathroom and so quick it barely counts.

We've talked on the phone every night for a few minutes, but I'm always exhausted from my early mornings and she's distracted with restaurant prep: cooking, writing something down, or researching on her laptop. It's okay, though. When we agreed to keep this under wraps until after the restaurant launch, it was also an unvoiced decision to let it stay on the back burner (no pun intended) for now.

I'm content to wait for her as long as needed.

But tonight I got off work a little early, and after showering I put my new skills to work and whipped something up for us at my place. Her cottage lights are glowing against the night as I walk over, hoping this surprise appearance will be okay.

She opens the door, eyes wide to find me here, then launches herself at me. Kissing me into her house.

The door clicks shut behind us and her lips haven't left mine yet. It's not passionate or sexy. It's the best clumsy, giggly welcome I've ever received. I need to pinch myself to make sure this is real.

"It's okay I'm here?" I ask against her mouth.

She smiles, all teeth. “Never leave.” Madison snatches the reusable bag from my arm and takes it to the counter, poking her nose inside. “Did you bring me presents? Smells good.”

No contacts tonight. She’s wearing her at least eight-year-old teal-framed glasses, black leggings, and a Culinary Institute of New York shirt. It swallows her whole. My socks on her feet.

God, I’m gonna lose my mind she’s so cute. And I get to be here. See her like this.

Wildest part: She wants me here.

Dislodging the words from my throat, I meet her at the table. “I tried my hand at cooking. Don’t expect much though.”

Not a second is wasted.

Madison drags everything out onto the wooden surface. Two wrapped tomato-and-mayonnaise sandwiches. A container of fresh blueberries. And a bag of chips, because I know BBQ is her favorite. Lastly, on a gasp, she reveals the chocolate chip cookies. The recipe she taught me.

“They’re a little burned,” I say.

She cuts a scolding look at me, opening the lid. “They’re perfect.”

“They are far from—What are you doing? You can’t eat the cookie before dinner!” I lean across the table, trying to snatch it from her hand, but she dips away, crumbs raining from her mouth as she all but shoves the whole cookie inside.

“Dessert before dinner is always the best!” she says through a full mouth.

I’ve experienced a lot of different moments, modes, and situations with Madison now. But this—eating a casual meal together in her cottage, swapping stories about our week—might be my favorite. I’m tired. She’s tired. Being together though . . . it’s peaceful. It’s perfect.

After we eat, I go lie on her bed, boots hanging off the side so I don’t dirty her blankets. This might seem like I’m trying to start something up, but in reality I’m so tired I can’t keep my eyes open. She curls up beside me, and I listen, eyes shut, while she reads me her notes from the round of interviews she just held.

“I don’t know,” she says, paper crinkling in her hands. “I really like Jeremy. He has a lot of experience. But Amiya . . . we jived. She even finished my sentence at one point. An ideal trait in a sous-chef.”

“I think you have your answer then.” I stroke her head, leaning back against my chest.

I feel her head tilt up and then a poke in my cheek. “Are you asleep?”

“Nope.” But pretty damn close.

“Am I boring you?” she asks, an edge of insecurity in her voice. A history of too many people discarding her if she wasn’t entertaining them, giving them something, fills the air.

I crack an eye open. “Being comfortable enough to doze off with you in my arms is not a bad thing. It’s the dream.”

“The dream,” she repeats, like she’s mulling it over. *“Monogamy.”*

I laugh. Like it’s our code word now.

She sits up, leans over, and tugs at my boots until they hit the floor with a loud thud. One and then the other. A blanket gets tugged from the foot of the bed up over our bodies as she settles close to me again. She’s warm and her hair smells like girly shampoo. I love everything about this.

I love her.

The words are balancing there on the tip of my tongue, but I don’t say them yet. It’s too soon, and I don’t want to scare her away.

We laze here together, snuggling and kissing every now and then until there’s a firm knock on Madison’s front door. She tenses, then shoots upright. Neither of us says a word, but we share a glance like maybe the unwelcome person will go away.

But then: “Madison Walker. Let this old lady in. It’s dark and scary out here.”

Wild eyes connect with me over Madison’s shoulder, and not even a second later she’s shoving me out of the bed. “It’s Mabel! Hide!” She raises her voice above the sounds of me sliding to the floor, elbow knocking into the bedside table and knee slamming into the bed frame while trying to unhook the blanket that’s snagged around the ankle of my jeans.

“I’m coming! Just a second!” Madison calls.

I would crawl under the bed, but my shoulders don’t fit. I have no choice but to lie here on the floor and hope Mabel doesn’t walk this way.

Madison cracks the door open, but that doesn’t deter Mabel. She pushes her way in. “I was home tonight and realized . . . I haven’t seen your new place yet!”

“So you just popped over.” Madison is reaching for a positive tone, but lands a little shy of it.

Something is digging into my shoulder. I reach behind me to dislodge a pair of sunglasses.

“I did. And you should have invited me sooner.”

Madison laughs. “You’re right. I’m sorry, I’ve just been busy with the restaurant.”

“No excuses.” I hear her clap, then watch Mabel rock back on her black leather therapeutic loafers. And then I realize . . . shit. My boots are right there on the floor. Sitting in plain sight.

“I like the kitchen,” Mabel says, voice wandering in that direction.

Madison must notice the boots because she scurries over and plants herself in front of them. “Me too! James did an excellent job with it.” She’s kicking at the boots, trying to shove them under the bed. I reach through and grab them.

“How’s it going with you and James?” I know Mabel’s tone. It’s her kick-back-and-stay-awhile one. She’s intending to set up camp. Which is so odd for her at this hour. Normally, she’s hunkered down in her recliner watching TV by now.

“It’s . . . going well.”

“You two are getting along?”

“You could say that.” I wonder if Mabel can detect the laughter in Madison’s voice as well as I can right now. I wish I could see her face. Would she blush at the memory of grinding against me in the kitchen? *Oof—nope.* This is not the time to relive that moment.

“I heard about what he said to Phil in town the other day,” Mabel confesses, voice scratchy from smoking years ago.

I wince, knowing she’s about to throw me under the bus.

“What *did* he say to Phil?” I don’t need to see Madison to know she’s crossing her arms. I do, however, see one of her feet point in my direction. Who knew an angle could be so accusatory?

Mabel huffs a laugh. “Scared him shitless after he gave him lip about making sure you don’t burn down the restaurant. Jameson made sure that Phil and them would never disparage you again.”

“Lord.” I love how Madison’s accent comes out thick when Mabel’s around. “I told him not to do that.” Her foot taps. “You’d think he’d listen.”

“I think he’s more interested in making sure you’re taken care of.”

There’s a long pause, and I imagine Mabel is waiting for Madison to fess up. Maybe she knows I’m under the bed.

When Madison doesn’t offer up any juicy info, Mabel continues, “But I wanted to set the record straight so you know that I’ve been on your team since the get-go. Your restaurant is going to be big stuff, mark my words.”

“Thank you, Mabel.” Madison floats around the bed, stopping just at my feet but never looking down at me. “Now . . . Mabel, I know you better than to believe you suddenly had a hankering to see my place.”

I lean forward and touch Madison’s ankle, running my finger up the length of her outer thigh. When my hand almost reaches her hip, she swats my fingers down.

“You’re right,” Mabel says from the kitchen. “You caught me. What I had a hankering for was some of your cookies.”

“Perfect! I can box some up for you and—”

“And it’s nice over here,” Mabel says, quieter. Almost like she doesn’t want to say it but knows she has to. “My place is so quiet sometimes. . . .”

There’s a sharp stab in my gut. I worried that Mabel had been lonely, and this confirms it. I’ve been so busy with the farm and Madison that I forgot to check back in on her and—

Almost as if Madison can sense my thoughts, her eyes cut down to me. Gaze intent on mine. Her eyes say: *Don’t take this on.* And then she smiles: *Let me help.*

She breathes in and then out. “Uh, Mabel. While you’re here . . . can I actually get your input about whether you think a shelf would look good in my bathroom?” She gives me a regretful “get out of here” nod, then her voice trails off as the two ladies go into the bathroom. As I’m stealing my boots back from beneath the bed and tiptoeing out the door, I hear Madison invite Mabel to stay for a while and have some tea and cookies.

And it’s hard to put a finger on what I’m feeling right now.

But I think it’s something close to relief.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Madison

3 DAYS UNTIL I FAIL . . .

“Okay, but why does mine look like a pile of weeds and y’all’s look like wedding-worthy bouquets?”

“Because you can’t be a masterful chef and a florist,” Annie says, completely unbothered, sliding a bold orange ranunculus into a short vase already brimming with chamomile and something pale and elegant I think is called delphinium.

At least that’s what I’m told they’re called. To me, they’re the round orange ones, the tall cone-y blue ones, and the little daisy guys.

Which is why I’m eternally grateful Annie offered to handle the flower arrangements for the soft opening. (Sibling discount included.) My sisters showed up tonight to help prep, and once we’re done Annie will cart the arrangements back to her shop until Sunday.

“I would agree with your theory,” I say, eyeing my green foam brick packed with floral mastery, “except . . . look at Amelia’s.”

We all glance toward her. She’s in a striped boatneck tee, her brows knit in concentration as she gently inserts a stem, sculpting a work of art. Annie gave her one of the big centerpieces for the hostess stand. Which feels like favoritism, but okay.

I pout. “Not fair that she can be a Grammy-winning singer-songwriter *and* a floral prodigy.”

Emily haphazardly stabs a flower into her own vase. “Just like how I’m an exquisite teacher, a thriving author, *and* an incredible florist, right?”

She gestures dramatically at her bouquet, which looks . . . honestly, like it's been through something traumatic. The stems are uneven, there's no balance, and even I can tell she's overdone it on the cone-y ones.

Annie bites her lip, physically holding herself back from fixing it or blurting the truth. Amelia suddenly becomes very interested in her own arrangement, pretending she didn't hear.

It's up to me. I reach out and pat Emily on the back. "You are absolutely two of those three things."

Her mouth falls open. "Rude!" She smacks me on the shoulder with a long-stemmed something.

I predict she'll spend the rest of the night trying to master floral design out of pure spite. If I'm used to failing, Emily has no concept of it.

"Hey," Annie says, gently taking the stem from Emily's hand like she's disarming a toddler. "Let's not hurt the flowers. They didn't do anything to you."

Amelia props her chin in her hand, zeroing in on me. "So, about the restaurant. You've been training all week, right? How are you feeling about the staff? Ready for Sunday?"

Sunday. I can't believe the soft opening is already here.

Part of me feels the responsibility and wants to strap on my running shoes and take off. But a larger part—the bit that's now outgrown and outsized the other—it's *ready* for this. Champing at the bit to get this show on the road.

"It's gone . . . surprisingly well." I shrug, leaning back in my chair and letting the weight of that truth settle proudly in my chest. "We're a small but mighty crew. Everyone's talented and catching on quickly. It actually feels"—I search for the right word—"functional. In a good way."

I glance at the vase in front of me, letting my fingers trail along the rim while I think of the last few weeks. "There've been a few hiccups on the line, stuff I hope will work itself out with more repetition. But overall, it's working."

I've been tempted more times than I can count to give in to insecurity. Let the voice in my head win, the one that whispers I'm not enough, not ready, not deserving. But I shoved those thoughts away to make room for what Chef Brookes said, about fear being a sign of how much I care rather than a sign of my inadequacy.

And it's true. I *do* care. Deeply. Which is why I've been twisting and stretching those chef muscles lately, testing how I want to lead that place.

I'm not Chef Davis, and I'm not Chef Brookes. I'm . . . something in between. Or maybe something entirely different.

I care about plating—not fussy, but intentional. Our meals that resemble the comfort of home must look just as beautiful as the memories they are inspired by.

I care about collaboration—wanting my staff to have a voice. I care about saying *please* and *thank you* and making sure no one's tank is running on empty by the end of the night. I won't coddle during service—we'll have to move too fast for that—but at the end of every night we will decompress together. What worked, what didn't. What could've gone smoother. They know they can come to me privately too. Those are the things that matter to me.

"That's so amazing, Maddie," Emily says, her voice warm. "I guess Tommy picked the right candidates."

I look up. "Oh, no. I picked them."

Her brow lifts. "You did?"

I don't like the surprise in her tone. Those two words, packed with so much meaning they come with a U-Haul.

"By yourself?" Annie asks, and that's the nail in the coffin.

Even though I've done more than enough to earn some credit lately, their surprised expressions make something small inside me shrink even more. I feel like Sammy, longing for a shell to disappear into.

Normally I would meet a feeling like that with even more shame. But this time I hold it with compassion. Gentleness. A sprinkle of pride. I've earned the right to look my sisters in the eyes and show them my strength.

"Yes. Me," I say firmly, wishing I had some liquid courage to say the rest, but of course we're all not drinking again tonight. "I chose them. Because it's *my* kitchen. And only I know what kind of people will work well in it."

Each sentence is a shot, cracking through the air.

Emily raises her hands in mock surrender. "Whoa. Okay. Sensing some hostility. Want to unpack that, Maddie?"

Emily and I are no strangers to fighting. As sisters closest in age and also relationship, we have had some knockdown drag-out feuds in our day. But I don't want this to be a fight. I want her, and my other siblings, to *understand* me.

I take a breath, then another.

"I know I don't have the best track record. I know I've started things and not finished them. But I'm really trying here, and sometimes I feel like . . . like you all are waiting for me to fail. Preparing for it. And I need you to be my biggest fans, not my biggest critics."

"Oh, Maddie," Amelia says softly.

"I'm so sorry," Emily chimes in, shoulders slumping, because if there's one thing Emily hates more than anything, it's herself if she thinks she's hurt us. "I didn't even realize—"

"I know you didn't," I say quickly before she can take on too much. "I know you love me and want to see me succeed. But there's already so much pressure. I don't need reminders of all the ways I've failed before. I need what James gives me—someone who sees *what I'm capable of*, not just what I've screwed up."

There's a long pause, the kind that makes the air thrum.

"You think James believes in you more than we do?" Annie asks.

I nod. "I know he does. He doesn't leave space for doubt. He sees me as strong. And somehow, being around him . . . I see it too. I don't have to shrink. I don't have to apologize for who I am. He makes me feel"—I pause, heart suddenly racing—"inspiring. And he's funny. God, I've never laughed so hard in my life. And he's . . . affectionate like me. And—"

I stop, realizing I've lost the thread.

My sisters are all staring at me. The silence, tangible.

Emily leans in, blinking slowly. "Uh, Madison . . . ?"

I blink back.

Oh no.

I just launched into a monologue about all of James's incredible qualities, and they didn't even know we were dating. My heart races. A flush creeps up my neck as a decision takes root in my chest. This thing I wanted to keep hidden between us now feels very impossible to conceal. Don't even want to conceal.

"I . . . I'm in love with James."

Screams. Chairs. Pandemonium.

The room explodes as they launch to their feet and swarm me like I just won the championship game.

“I knew it!” Emily shrieks.

“We *all* knew it.” Annie grins. “But does James know?”

“Not yet,” I say, cheeks flaming. “I mean, I think he has an idea. We’ve been secretly dating for a month.”

Emily gasps like I slapped her. “What! Have you—have you *slept* together?!”

Amelia elbows her. “Weren’t you working on being less invasive?”

“To hell with that! I want details, Madison!” She jostles my shoulders.

I laugh. “We . . . haven’t.”

Emily stumbles away, collapses dramatically onto the couch. “I need a moment.”

“Is he too scared of you?” Annie asks, totally serious, making us all frown curiously. “What? You’re a sexual goddess. It could be intimidating.”

“He’s *not* intimidated,” I say, and it’s loaded enough to make them all perk up. “But it is intentional,” I add quickly. “I didn’t tell you all, but I’ve been celibate this past year.”

Emily throws her hands in the air. “The secrets never end! This is Jack’s fault, isn’t it? I’m breaking up with him. He takes up all my space and now you don’t tell me things.”

I slide onto the couch beside her, leaning into her shoulder.

“I kept it to myself because it was something I needed to do. Just for me.”

“I hate adulthood,” she admits, kissing my head.

“Me too. And this change was so uncomfortable at first. I was ready for more out of relationships, but it felt like sex kept getting in the way.” It’s the simplest answer I can give without launching into Caden and that hurt.

They’re all quiet now, which rarely happens, so I go on.

“James knows about the celibacy thing. Knows how important it’s been to me. So he’s never once pushed. He just . . . shows up. Over and over. Like that’s enough.”

Emily’s eyes are glistening. “You deserve that.”

Annie wipes at the corner of her eye. “So why keep it quiet?”

“I didn’t want the town in our business. And . . .” I glance at them. “Maybe I was nervous you guys were going to encourage me to stay away from James or something.”

They all groan and launch throw pillows at me.

“We’re going public after the opening,” I say, laughing and batting them away. “One big event at a time.”

“Mabel’s going to be *livid* that she wasn’t in on the secret,” Emily says.

“Not as much as Tommy when he realizes all his efforts were in vain,” I mutter.

They freeze. “What does Tommy have to do with it?”

And so, I launch into the story—the airport pickup, the declaration to woo me, the flower deliveries and e-card flirting. Amelia jumps up midsentence, eyes glowing.

“This is *perfect*. I have just the movie for this.”

Five minutes later, *Sabrina* plays quietly in the background. We’ve seen it a hundred times, but it hums along behind us, Audrey Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart gently falling in love while I answer every nosy question my sisters ask.

And somewhere between “When did it start to change for you?” and “Was your first kiss weird?” my heart burns with love.

He needs to know. *Now*. No more waiting or going slow. James has proven he is more trustworthy with my heart than anyone I’ve ever known.

I stand abruptly. “I’m sorry, but—I’ve got to go.”

I shove my feet into my shoes, grab my keys from the table, and bolt for the door.

Because I’m in love with James.

And I’m done keeping it quiet.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Madison

Which brings me to now, parking, diving out of my truck, stumbling in my Hunter boots across the gravel driveway. I don't stop until I'm up on James's back porch and standing outside his door. The lights are on so I know he's still awake.

My momentum falters when I reach for the doorknob. Dramatic entrance abandoned, I knock—mainly because I haven't actually planned out what I'm going to say to him and I need the extra thirty seconds to prepare.

But he opens the door immediately, ruining everything.

"No," I blurt in lieu of a greeting.

He was stepping out, but at my command, he rocks back. "No? Should I go back inside?"

I'm going to hyperventilate. "If you could close the door, count to thirty, and then come back out, that would be great."

He doesn't even hesitate before saying a simple "Okay," then softly closing the door in my face just as I've requested, giving me a handful of time to come up with a way to tell him: *Hello sir, I love you.*

Last time I laid my heart on the line I was practically laughed at. Even though I know James is nothing like Caden, a sliver of fear gapes open. What if he's gotten to know me more over the last month and doesn't like me as much? What if that's really why he hasn't tried to have sex with me? I still don't even know why he and Jeanine broke up! Is there a chance he's harboring feelings for her still?

Shit, this was a bad idea.

I should have thought this through longer.

Far too soon, he opens the door. I'm not ready, and I'm preparing to tell him this when he comes out, stopping in front of me. He raises his hand

and his finger brushes the bottom of my ear.

“Are these new?” He’s referring to my earrings. Which, yes, are new. They’re silly little whisks, handmade from clay and ordered from a small shop online.

They were a little present to myself. A “Good job, Maddie, you’re kicking ass” gift.

“You look really cute in them.” An adoring grin underlines his words.

Somewhere between him immediately noticing my earrings and calling me cute in them, all of my protests melt away.

“James . . .” I adjust on my feet. “I have something to tell you. A big something. But I don’t know how to say it or if I even should. I only know that if I keep it inside any longer I will explode like a confetti cannon.” I’m somehow both breathless and nearly shouting.

Which is probably why James suddenly presses his finger to my lips. For a second, I think he just wants me to shut up because he can read my mind and knows this is a terrible idea and wants to save me from myself.

But then he leans in, angling his face like he’s going to kiss me, mouth hovering just in front of mine and whispers, “I want to hear whatever it is, more than you know. But not right now, because my family is sitting right inside that door, most likely listening to everything you’re saying, and I’m guessing you don’t want an audience for it.”

My eyes widen and his finger slides away. “Impeccable timing, Madison,” I say, taking a step away from him. “God, I’m sorry! I’ll leave you to—”

He catches my wrist. “Where are you going?”

I blink. “Back to the cottage.”

“Yeah, but why? You don’t want to stay?” It’s the hope I hear in his voice that has my heart clenching.

“Do . . . you want me to stay?”

His grin is all innocent dimples. We are just two kids on the playground. “I’m guessing you didn’t see my text?”

I look over my shoulder to my truck, like I can magically see all the way to my cottage and inside to my phone, which I accidentally left on my kitchen table. “No. I haven’t had my phone on me all night. What did it say?”

“That Tommy surprised me and brought my parents in for the soft opening—and that you should come up to the house and hang out.”

“Oh.”

I have to let that invitation digest. It’s a lot to comprehend. Layers and layers of past hurt and insecurities crumble off of me.

I rock a little closer to James’s chest and tap it right in the center of his hunter-green cotton T-shirt—just to make sure he’s still real. “Are you sure you want me to crash your family time?”

He catches my hands, clasps them together, and tugs me in close to him by my wrists, resting them against his chest, forcing my chin up as I try to look him in the eyes. “I hear what you’re not saying . . . and Madison Walker, I need you to know . . . you’re someone I would always want to bring home to meet my mom.” His thumb glides against my skin. “Come inside. I really want you here.”

And then the door behind James is flying open and Ruth steps out. “Is that Maddie I hear? Girl, get in here!” And by “in here” she means her arms.

James is hip-bumped out of the way, and then for the first time in years and years and years, I’m being squeezed to death by someone who feels like my mom.

Ruth dumps a cup of chocolate chips into the brownie batter she began whipping up nearly the minute she pulled me inside. “Well, I would ask how New York was but I feel like I already know so much.”

“Really? How?” I lean my hip against the counter, studying her recipe but trying not to be overt about it.

“From James. He’s been keeping me informed during our weekly phone calls.”

I don’t know what prompts me to clarify, but I ask, “You mean he’s filled you in since I’ve been home?”

Ruth swirls the wooden spoon around in the batter. “Lord, no. He’s been keeping me informed since”—she pauses, shoulders resting, and looks up like she’s thumbing through her mental calendar—“heavens, since you started culinary school, really. I heard all about that awful roommate of yours—Bryce was her name?—and that time you were late to class and someone smashed right into the front of you and knocked your bagel to

the ground! Shoot, I was never so mad as when I heard that.” She shakes her head and resumes her mixing, expression turning mischievous. “I reckon I’ve heard all the stories. Even the ones you probably wouldn’t want me to.”

Ruth is glowing and tan as a biscuit from her days at the beach. She seems thrilled to be standing here with me, but I’m reeling.

James has been talking about me? Not just since we became friends, but . . . for two years.

“Well, I’m sorry he’s apparently been yapping your ear off about me. You probably didn’t want to hear half of it.”

“Oh, honey, I love to hear it all.” She smiles, warmer than a cast-iron skillet off the stove. “I love your wild heart. Reminds me of your mama. I miss her every day.”

“Wait. My . . . wild heart reminds you of my mom?” This is the first time I’ve ever heard anything like that. I’ve heard my mom was passionate before, but the word *wild* has never been used.

“Heavens, yes. Do you know how many times that woman got detention growing up?” Sometimes I forget that Ruth knew my mom even longer than my dad did. She and Ruth had been close since seventh grade. “I thought Char was never going to settle down. But then she met your sweet dad in college, and the rest was history.”

“She settled down after that?”

“Hell no!” Ruth says with a laugh. “But she did marry Daniel and have babies. They were so happy. And honestly, I think her stories make yours sound tame.”

It’s nice to hear that. The other side of Zora Brookes’s coin.

Sometimes love doesn’t work out—but sometimes it does.

“How am I just now learning this?” I ask, having to lean over the counter for support. I’ve often felt so *other* in my family and in this town, and to know that I get this fire from my mom is a treasure, a gift I’ll always hold close.

“When y’all were little, it was hard to talk about your parents without upsetting you. Especially Emily. The more we brought them up, the sadder you all got. So we all started keeping stories to ourselves until you asked about them, to protect you from that pain. But now . . .” She meets my eyes and covers my hand with hers. “I think we did you all a disservice. All we

protected you from was grieving. And as I've gotten older, I've learned a heart is gonna grieve no matter what. We just learn to keep it from everyone so we don't make them uncomfortable. I'm sorry for my part in that." She squeezes once. "But anytime you want to know anything about your mom or dad, give me a ring and I can tell you some stories that will make your head spin."

I am warm, head to toe. "Thank you. I'd really like that."

Ruth pours the batter into a glass baking dish, attention drifting somewhere in her mind. A moment later she says, "But as for James telling me all your stories, I'm used to it by now. He's been talking about you for years and years."

Now my stomach jumps into my throat.

And judging by the way Ruth has stopped working and cuts her eyes up to me meaningfully, she just intentionally let me in on a secret. A big one.

James has been talking about me—not since culinary school but *for years and years*.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

James

I'm on my way to the kitchen when Tommy stops me in the hallway. "It's time to tell them."

"No," I say, ripping my arm away from his hand.

To say I'm pissed at Tommy is an understatement. He showed up a few hours ago with my parents in tow without any warning. But I think that was his intent—to catch me off guard before I could get things in order and have to tell them about the state of the farm. Why there's half the amount of crew here these days. Why I work way past quitting hour.

"James," he says, eyes sharp, voice louder than it needs to be. "It's the *perfect* time. They're both here. You've got nothing going on."

"Shut up," I whisper, letting my temper flare in my tone. I step closer and lower my voice even more. "It's not a perfect moment just because you manufactured one. Because that's actually why you brought them home, isn't it?"

He grins like the little shit he is. "They were missing home. They wanted to attend the launch."

"Missing home, my ass. What exactly did they say that led you to believe they were missing home so much that you should buy them two plane tickets for the next day to surprise me?"

Tommy shrugs. "Something about the sand being annoying. But it was all in the tone."

I roll my eyes. "I've been trying to close the gap between us and you're scheming to trap me with Mom and Dad. Classic."

He huffs a laugh. "And just how have you been trying to do that?"

"I've been texting you," I say, like it's the most obvious thing in the world.

And he looks at me like I'm out of my mind. "Is that what those texts were for?"

"Yes. What did you think they were?"

"A call for help!"

A bubble of laughter pulls our attention toward the kitchen, where Mom and Madison are baking.

Tommy's thoughts follow mine. "They seem happy to see Madison."

Just at the mention of her name, warmth seeps into my chest. She came here tonight to tell me something. *Something important.* I'm scared to let myself even imagine what that something could be.

"Yeah . . . they really do."

And then he takes a needle to my balloon of joy. "It makes it easier for when she agrees to date me. Integration into the family will be smooth."

My glare cuts to him. "Right. Well. Best of luck . . ." I say, still tasting her on my tongue and not knowing whether that makes me more or less angry that my brother is pursuing her.

I aim toward the kitchen again, where I hear Mom and Madison laughing, but am stopped again, this time by my dad coming down the stairs. "James! Meant to tell you, I stopped by the restaurant earlier. It looks good, son."

"Thanks. It's nice to see the old greenhouse in working condition again, isn't it?"

"It is. It's also good to see you two boys working as a team." My dad is standing tall in front of us, arms crossed and shoulders looking as sturdy as ever. But I know that appearances can be misleading sometimes.

"Yeah, James *loooves* that part. Just like he *loved* the idea of starting this restaurant."

My eyes cut to my brother as he pushes his hand through his fluffy blond hair. "Why are you being such a shit right now?"

"Because I want you to tell him." His gaze squares with mine, and I see a new set to his shoulders I've never seen before. It's antagonistic, but also something else. . . .

"Tell me what?" asks my dad, moving to lean casually against the doorframe, looking so strong I think his body could hold up this entire place on its own if needed. I hate that I know it's not true.

"Nothing," I say, aiming the word and ominous tone at Tommy.

He scoffs. "Lies, lies, lies."

I take a step toward him. "Would you *please* shut the hell up already?"

"You're babying him," Tommy says, glare cutting through me and all hints of amusement gone.

"Okay, boys," my dad says, pushing off the wall. "Now I really need to know what's going on."

Tommy's glare never wavers from me. "He is stronger than you give him credit for, and he wouldn't want you to be shielding him out of fear for his health."

I swear I'm going to knock Tommy's teeth down his throat. "You better start running now so you get a head start."

My dad steps almost between us, a hand pressing to my chest, holding me back. "James. What's going on?"

But I don't answer, Tommy does. "The farm is in bad shape—"

"You piece of—" I advance against my dad's hand but he holds me back.

"James reached out to me for a loan," Tommy says quickly and loudly. "But I told him I wouldn't do it unless he found a way to modernize the farm and bring in additional funds. *Such as a restaurant.* He didn't make the restaurant because the farm is doing so well he wanted to expand. He's making it because without it—or possibly because of it—the farm is going to fail." I flinch against that word. "And not only that, but he's gotten an offer that he won't take."

"Stop talking."

He doesn't. "Anderson Food Distributions has offered him an *incredible* five-year contract that will give the restaurant time to grow enough to be something that could support the farm. But he won't take it because he's afraid he'll let you down, and he's keeping all of this from you because he's scared you're going to drop dead from the sudden truth."

"Dammit, Tommy! Why are you doing this?"

"Because the men in this family are too damn stubborn for their own good!" he shouts, a vein surfacing across his temple. "You're all going to put yourselves in an early grave trying to keep all your secrets, and I'm sick of it. I gave you every chance to tell the truth over the last few months and you were never going to because you're too proud. You are following in Dad's exact footsteps over this damn farm and you can't even see it!"

His words startle me enough to stop pushing against my dad's hand.

Dad looks at me. "Is all of this true, James?"

I swallow against a lump in my throat. "It . . . it's true. All of it."

I can't read my dad right now. His brows are pinched together, eyes searching mine, but he doesn't look angry. I think it would be easier if he *were* angry. If he told me he never should have left the farm to me in the first place and reminded me of what a legacy it is.

Instead, he asks, "If you didn't want the restaurant, why are you launching it? Seems like that would only tighten things more for a while."

In my silence, searching for the right words, Tommy speaks for me. "*Madison* changed his mind. She was graduating, and by my calculations, he figured out a way to bring her home." Tommy smirks at me. "You didn't think I put it together, did you? Well, I did. Immediately. Because contrary to what you seem to think, I'm not an idiot." My heart is pounding. "And by the way, if you ask me, I still think it's a terrible idea to open a restaurant that you desperately need to do well with a chef fresh out of culinary school. And I told you I called and talked to the chef she interned with in New York, right?" No. "Apparently she has a track record of being overly emotional at work. Which is why I tried to get you to hire one of the other chefs, but—"

"That's enough, Tommy." This time it's my dad who speaks, and with so much of an edge that even I wince.

But I forget all about Tommy and my dad when I look down the hall and find Madison standing motionless, lips parted in shock. She just heard everything we said. . . .

She pivots on her heel and rushes out the back door.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Madison

I'm running for my life—not in any particular direction, just running.

The nighttime humidity presses in, and James is right behind me, gaining ground every second. I need to outrun this feeling. These claws. This pain.

Tommy called Chef Davis. He knows everything. He never thought I should be the chef.

And James, he . . .

God, I can't even think about it without wanting to hurl.

As he gets within arm's reach, I zigzag through fireflies, pivot to the left, and take off again, repeating the cycle until my lungs burn and tears clog my vision. My legs are screaming, and it's painfully clear James is in much better shape than I am and could do this all night. Damn him and Will and their morning runs.

So I finally give up and break.

Not expecting the sudden stop, he collides with my back. His arms wrap around me to steady us after the impact, but he doesn't let go once I'm upright.

“Madison . . .” His voice is an apology. A plea.

I don't relax into him. I can't.

“Is what you said back there true?”

“Yes.”

My breath rushes out.

“You told me you wanted to modernize the farm.”

“Which is true.” He holds me tighter.

“But you left out the massive part about gambling your entire family farm on me!” I rip out of his arms now, and he lets me. “That Tommy—

who does this for a living—told you to hire an experienced chef instead of me! I don't even know what to think right now.”

I hate that I'm crying, especially after what Tommy just said about me being overly emotional. But I am who I am, and I can't stop the tears.

He takes a breath.

“Ask me anything, and I'll tell you the truth. No more secrets. Let me clear everything up.”

My voice is weak when I ask, “Was there ever a restaurant in the works before I called you by accident that night?”

He's quiet. Then, “No.”

My eyes shut against the word.

“Tommy had suggested it, and I told him no. I was planning to find a different way because I didn't want a restaurant. I didn't like the idea of tourism coming to the farm, or having to rely on Tommy's help in any way.”

“So then I called and cried, and you offered me the job. What did you do when you hung up?”

He breathes deep and lets it out. “I called Tommy and told him I was in for the restaurant. That it needed to be built and launched in three and a half months. And also . . . that I already had a chef lined up.”

I wrap my arms around myself. “Why? Why the hell would you risk so much for me? Because I was so pitiful you felt sorry for me?”

“No. Pity never crossed my mind. It was only ever because I wanted to see you . . . happy. And selfishly, I wanted to be the one to make you happy.”

He put the well-being of this farm on the line to make me happy. The weight of that threatens to crumple me.

“Is it also true that Tommy sent you other chefs to consider instead? And you didn't even talk to them?”

He nods. “It's true.”

“That night, sitting on your porch stairs, I asked if you made the restaurant as a safety net for me and you said no! You gave me your word, James.”

He makes a face, and then I hear it before he even says it out loud. *The loophole.*

“I meant what I said that night, Madison. I didn't make the restaurant because I thought you needed a safety net. What I didn't tell you—but

should have—is that I only moved forward with the restaurant because you were signing on to it. The risk wasn’t worth it to me with anyone else running the kitchen. But with you? I knew it would succeed. I thought I was protecting you from unnecessary pressure by keeping that from you, but—”

“But you were *wrong*. You should have told me, James! I needed to know how much was at stake for you. And more than that, Tommy is right. You have to stop shouldering everything to protect everyone else from discomfort. It’s going to hurt you in the end.”

His face twists into a grimace. “I know. I’m so sorry, Madison.”

“How bad are things financially? Give me the whole truth. No filters.”

He swallows and looks out into the night. “. . . Bad. The restaurant needs to be booked solid for the first six months to prove it’s sustainable.”

I’m hyperventilating now, arms clutching my stomach, hunching over to get air.

Restaurants need six months just to pick up steam! To book out solid like that—especially in a rural area—is almost unheard of.

I can’t do this. I’m not the person to make this happen.

“Hey, it’s okay! Everything is going to be okay,” he says, impassioned, bending to catch my eye, rubbing his hand up and down my back.

His attempts to soothe me only make it worse.

“No,” I weep. “It’s really not okay! Because I’ve also been lying to you! But mine wasn’t a kindness like yours.”

His hand stills for a beat, then resumes. “Okay . . . tell me what you lied about.”

“I shouldn’t . . . oh god, James, I shouldn’t have graduated culinary school.”

“What does that mean?” His voice is so soft compared to my frantic storm.

I tear away from him and pace forward, then back, digging my hands into my hair, desperate to claw out of my skin.

“It means that in usual Madison Walker fashion, the only reason I graduated is because I cleaned the lab after class for a semester. It was the extra credit that bumped my grade up just enough to pass. I didn’t deserve it!”

I'm yelling. I'm crying. I'm spinning out like a wildfire hit with strong wind.

"Chef Davis knew it. I knew it. My professors all knew it. And I was too ashamed to tell anyone that I had once again failed at something, so instead I let you hire me thinking I deserved to be here." I clutch my chest like I could scoop out my shameful, aching heart.

When I look at him, I expect disgust. Hurt. Betrayal.

Instead, his face is impossibly soft, a crooked smile touching his mouth.

"Is that it?"

I shift on my feet. "What do you—Yes . . . that's it. And it's a big *it*! You should be upset, James!"

"I'm not. I don't care about any of that."

I drop to my knees and scrape my hands over my face, groaning into them.

"I am not the person for this job. Why can't you see that?!"

He follows me to the ground, kneeling in front of me.

"Because I do see you." His voice is low and clear. "What you heard tonight changes nothing. Don't let Tommy's ignorance steal your strength. You are not overly emotional; you feel deeply. You are not a culinary school failure; you are a resilient woman who didn't give up during the hardest of times. You're not inexperienced; you're just getting started. And shit, Madison, look at what you've accomplished already! The menu, the theme, the heart of the restaurant—it's all *so good*. And I'm more convinced now than ever that *you* are the reason this restaurant will thrive. With anyone else, it would have been a risk. But with your heart in it? It's going to be *so good*."

His voice softens, cracking with emotion. "I'm begging you to believe in yourself."

I want to. I want to grab on to the confidence I held a few hours ago. But I'm scared. I've never been the person people trust with anything, let alone *everything*. And it's enough to make me wonder if James's lie wasn't actually a small mercy. Wrong, but still . . . a mercy. I never would have gotten this far if I'd known. I would have declined immediately.

But he's right—I *have* overcome so much. Accomplished so much. I get in my own way too often.

And now that I know how much is riding on me, can I still lean on this new confidence and believe it's enough?

"This is lunacy, James!" Desperation runs through my voice. "*Lunacy!* You made an entire restaurant because of me! That is too much to do for one person's happiness."

But then a soul-curling smile spreads across James's mouth and he cups my jaw.

"I don't think you understand just how much I'd be willing to do to make you happy, Madison." He thumbs away a tear. "When you called and gave me a chance that night, I decided that if having you as a friend was all I'd ever get, it would still be one of the greatest things to ever happen to me. Because, Madison, you are so"—his eyes drop to my mouth—"compelling. Wild. Inspiring. Adorable. I have wanted this—you—for a long time."

A while.

Ruth's secret in the kitchen rings in my ears.

"Yearning doesn't skim the surface of it. For a decade, I've been dying inside, wanting you."

I'm silent. Fresh, unshed tears pool in my eyes.

"You never asked me why Jeanine and I didn't work out," he murmurs, his thumb brushing my cheek. "It's because I was in love with someone else. Someone I've tried to shake from my heart for so long, because I never saw a chance she'd feel the same way. But it didn't matter. She was all I could think about. All I wanted. And that's when I realized—you were it for me, Madison. My heart was yours, even if yours was never mine."

My breath catches. The wind around us stills. And suddenly every moment—every glance, every soft silence between us—rewrites itself.

I think about his quiet loyalty, the way he stood behind me in the kitchen, the way he believed in me when I was struggling to hold myself up.

I should still be mad. But I'm not. Because I understand him the same way he understands me. The way no one else ever has—or ever will.

Certainty presses against my chest.

"I love you too. Have my heart, James—it's yours."

He kisses me. So hard we're knocked from our knees to the ground, but he catches me softly in his arms. Rolling me to my back and laying his

body halfway over mine. I feel nothing but joy as his mouth presses into mine. Nothing but peace as his fingers curl into my hair.

Slowly, like a tide rolling into shore, I realize that James is *mine*. All mine.

I press my hand to his strong jaw, deepening the kiss, roughing it up. His body presses harder into mine. My heart pounds against his sternum. I let my hands glide up his arms, hot skin dotted with goosebumps.

I pull away just enough to see his eyes and the bright stars behind him. “Take me to bed, Cowboy.”

His grin tilts and he presses my hair away from my forehead. The tenderest, sweetest of gestures. “You do know I’m a farmer, right?”

“Shhhh.” I lean up and kiss him. “Show me those boots again.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Madison

He wraps my arms around his neck and piggybacks me all the way to my cottage. We're laughing, my body jolting against his as he jogs.

At the door he shifts me in his arms, my legs wrapped around his waist, so he can kiss me hard. His mouth crashes into mine as he kicks the door shut behind us, his tongue slipping past my lips.

He swallows my gasp in the dark, turning to press me against the door. My hands roam up his chest, curl around the back of his neck, tangle in his hair. He groans, low and rough, and my stomach twists into delicious knots. I want more. I *get* more.

I get to have James.

The kiss is wild. Desperate and hungry. His hands are everywhere, holding me tight as I cling to him, still wrapped around his body. His solid hips press between my thighs.

Months—*years*—of longing surge to the surface, all of it crashing into us at once.

He carries me to my kitchen table and sets me down, leaning over to place both palms flat on the surface, mouth devouring mine. I get my hands under his shirt to run up his burning-hot torso. Trace every ridge and swell of his muscles. He flexes against my hands like he's trying to capture my touch.

I want to see it. *I want to see everything.*

I tug at his shirt and he appeases me, breaking away from my mouth to rise and rip his shirt over his head. My bones turn liquid seeing the way his jeans hang on his hips, straining with desire. My teeth ache to sink right there in the jut of his hip.

I just need a few hours to sit here and stare at him. Soak up every detail of his body.

He wets his lips and leans over again, forcing my face to angle up.

“You have no idea how long I’ve dreamed of doing this.” He pushes my hair from my face—a brief pause in the madness—softly and sweetly lifting my shirt off over my head.

Air rushes over my breasts, along with his realization that I’m not wearing a bra. His breath hitches as his eyes take me in, fingertips floating up the outside of my arm, centimeters from my chest. Not touching yet.

“How many times I’ve fantasized about you like this,” he says, leaning, lips teasing mine again.

“How many?” I’m breathless with anticipation. Aching. Inching my fingers to the waistband of his jeans.

His mouth brushes mine with every word. “It’s not a respectful amount.”

“Thank god,” I groan. “Disrespect me, James.”

He pulls back to stare at me, eyes sinfully touching me in all the places his hands haven’t yet. He unbuckles my shorts and shucks them down my hips, past my knees—then lets them fall to the floor.

“If that’s what you want, Madison, you’ve got the wrong guy.” He lowers, dropping to his knees in front of me at the table. “I don’t want to disrespect you even a little.” He lowers his face until he’s between my thighs, lacing my sensitive skin with soft kisses. His voice is gravelly—a shot of whiskey to my stomach—when he says, “I want to worship you. Here on my knees, if that’s okay with you?”

I swallow, feeling nervous for the first time in years. But I manage to get the words out. “Yes . . . I want that.”

A grin.

A kiss on one thigh.

A kiss on the other to match.

And then he’s pulling my underwear aside, and his hot mouth presses there, where I’m dying. I fall back to my elbows, spineless as his tongue tastes and plays. So attentive. So loving.

“Beautiful,” he rasps. And I have never felt sexier, more in tune with and proud of my body. Turns out, this man makes me feel important not only in public but also while naked on a table.

I’m gasping for air when his hand slides up my body to cup one of my breasts, calluses on his palm rough against my nipple. Tides of pleasure

threaten to break over me as he licks and sucks. But I don't want to break apart yet. Selfishly, I want this to last forever. Never end.

"James," I gasp. "Wait. I want—"

He lifts his head, moving his kisses to my thighs again as I struggle to speak. "Yes?"

"I want it with you." I'm not making sense, but he knows what I mean anyway.

He rises to his feet, gets out his wallet, tugs a condom from it (wonderfully prepared), and tosses it beside my hips as he unzips and pushes his jeans off. I watch— leaned back, legs open—and oh my god, when his underwear is off and I finally see all of him, I fall in love all over again. He is . . . perfect.

Leaning up, I take him in my hand. His head falls back, throat bobbing on a rough groan. It's a delicious sound. I return the tasting with a lick and a kiss—but a sample is all I get.

"Madison, I've waited for this so long. I won't last," he pleads and gently lays me back against the table.

He rips the foil.

Rolls it along his length.

Pulls my hips to the edge of the table, panties discarded.

Nudging against me, he asks, "Okay?"

My heart cracks open. Even in this—even when he knows I'm ready and wanting—he still asks.

"Yes. Now," I beg.

The wood creaks below me as he pushes in slowly, and I cry out from ecstasy. He fills me completely, and nothing has ever felt so good. When we're fully meeting—hips joined, my legs wrapped around his lower back—he looks down, looks at *us*, and I imagine that is what ultimate yearning looks like. He is gutted with pleasure.

"Fuck," he grinds out as he moves again, in and out, so slowly I'm splitting apart at the seams. It's overwhelming, being so intimate while in love. No one warned me it would feel like this.

So warm, I'm burning.

So loved, I'm screaming.

So free, I'm shaking.

I move my hips, but his fingers bite softly into my sides, pinning them to the table. His look is a warning. “I mean it—I will be done for in two seconds flat if you keep that up.”

But I’m turned on to a level I’ve never reached before, so I take that comment as a challenge.

Feeling powerful, I rock against his hands and his eyes roll shut.

“Madison,” he warns through gritted teeth.

I smile and rock again, but this time it hits me right where I want it most. A pulse of pleasure teases my core and I need more. I grip his shoulders to bring him down to kiss me, but the angle isn’t right.

“Bed,” I pant, writhing against him.

He withdraws, scoops me off the table, and carries me to the bed. I’m not laid down gently; I’m tossed. And he’s back on me in a second, prowling over my body in a way that promises incredible destruction.

“Open your legs for me,” he commands, and I do—because I want nothing more than to have him there. All night. All day. I’m never leaving this bed with James.

His large body settles between my thighs and this time, when he pushes in, he doesn’t go slow. I gasp at the feel of our chests pressing together and grip at his back, holding on. And then he gives me what I really want—*all* of him, plus his mouth on mine. Once he’s fully seated, he rolls his hips against me while swirling his tongue in my mouth, mounting this sensation to something so acute, so absolute, I think it will consume me. Singe me. Brand my body.

He drops from my mouth to my throat, hand coming up to grip my breast, rolling his hand over my nipple in time with his hips.

“Oh . . . I’m . . . so close,” I pant out, rocking, thrusting, begging.

“Do you want it like this?”

“I want it like this—and a thousand other ways.”

He laughs against my throat. “Deal. We’ll start here.”

And he lets go of his restraint.

He rocks into me—over and over—faster and harder each time. The headboard pounds the wall and my blood surges through my body, pooling between my legs where James is pushing in and out. And then I’m hitting that ultimate climb—gasping, reaching, tugging to reach the peak.

James grunts a strained noise, and I know he's holding off, waiting for me to go first, but it's taking all his willpower.

My fingers bite into his sweat-slicked back and I clamp my teeth down on my bottom lip.

"No," he rasps, and his thumb pulls my lip from my teeth. "I want to hear it when you come. I want to hear my name on your lips when you—"

I shatter, and cry out exactly what he wanted, and clutch his back, urging him to keep going, to ride this pleasure with me. His pace continues, but the set of his jaw hasn't loosened. He's not done. His hand slips between my legs now, where we're joined, and he puts his fingers around the base of him, gently swirling a new rhythm as he thrusts. And it has me approaching orgasm all over again.

I drag in a breath, arching and whimpering as the sensation builds again. And when he rasps, "That's it. Give me one more," I do.

And then James shifts onto his arm, pulling my knee up by his rib cage, a new angle to finally chase what feels best to him. His body tenses and he drops his face into my neck, groaning deep and low as he comes apart. I've never been happier. I've never wanted someone to enjoy something so much.

But it's James. *My* James. And together, we made this happen.

"Want to do it like five more times?" I ask against his dewy chest after we've both settled.

He chuckles softly and squeezes me. "Give me like two minutes."

"You get one and a half."

I end up giving him thirty—and in that time, James discovers I'm hyper after sex. I clean up, pop on a tank top and underwear, and whip up some snacks. While James sits propped on my bed, munching seasoned popcorn, I give him a one-woman show: delivering a monologue from my favorite movie, *Pretty Woman*.

"When I was a little girl . . ." I start, and end with, ". . . I'll put you up in a great condo."

James is a rapt audience. He claps, and I bow.

And then he has me naked again in a blink, and we're making up for all the times we wanted to do this over the last three months but resisted. There're new angles, tricks up James's sleeve I never would have guessed he knew. He's got me folded over the bed at one point and on the floor at

another. *It won't always be like this*, I warn him, because I don't want him to think I'm some never-ending sexual spring of energy. He reminds me he's a farmer, up at five every day, and it's okay if our nights are not always so sensually prolific. He says this with my legs slung over his shoulders.

What a joy.

And the very best part of this night, I realize, is how much we talk along the way. We laugh. We play and find what feels good together without preamble or theatrics (other than my monologue). It's just comfortable, and exciting, and lively—but oh so cozy. I am cocooned in undeniable safety at every turn, not worried about what he's thinking of me, because he's voicing it. Not for dirty talk or because he's trying to outdo anyone I've slept with previously but because he's my best friend. And best friends tell each other everything.

I love him, and I love that when we're thoroughly exhausted and ready to sleep, he's too big for my bed but stays with me anyway.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

James

I didn't set an alarm, but judging by the slightest peek of light, I suspect I woke up at five anyway.

For a minute, it seems like I'm alone in bed and I think maybe I dreamed last night. But then I breathe deep and smell that sweet shampoo smell that always clings to Madison. I'm under her fluffy comforter. And when I stretch my legs, I accidentally bump hers.

There she is.

She's curled up on her own side of the bed, but when she feels me stir she wordlessly scoots over and slips into my arms.

Hello, naked Madison.

Last night rushes back to me, and it must hit her at the same moment because, without ever opening her eyes, she's nuzzling in, kissing my chest. Her stomach is hot against mine. I run my hand over her soft, bare shoulder, down her back.

We haven't even said good morning yet, but we're having sex. It's sleepy and sweet. A slow, lethargic caress that's better than dreaming. I want to spend all day like this. Kissing her. Making her gasp and moan. But I have to get to work.

Even worse, I have to face my family.

After I've cleaned up and dressed, I go to the bed and kiss Madison's cheek. She's already fallen back to sleep, and the sight of her like this, knowing I get to be in her life in this way, it's more than I ever could have hoped.

"I'll see you later," I whisper, and she hums her acknowledgment, eyes closed, smiling.

I slip into the house a little after six. My plan is to run upstairs, rinse off, then head out to the farm—even if I’m running late. Because the crops don’t give a damn if I’m in love or not. They still need water.

As I ease the door closed behind me, trying not to make the hinges creak, I turn and startle at the sight of my dad sitting at the kitchen table. Chair angled toward the door, like he’s been waiting. There’s a steaming mug in front of him, and I wonder if he’s been up all night or if muscle memory still pulls him out of bed before sunrise.

“Morning,” he says, voice rough like gravel. “Coffee’s in the pot.”

“Thanks.”

I pour myself a mug—thick, dark, and strong—and slide into the seat catty-corner from him. The shower can wait.

“Madison okay?” he asks gently, and I love that he’s worried about her. Cares about her enough that she might actually be the reason he’s up before the sun.

“Yeah, she’s okay.” I try to keep the smile out of my voice, not wanting to reveal just how okay we left things. Although I’m guessing my walk of shame in yesterday’s clothes already gave that away. “Where’s Tommy?”

My dad’s eyes glint with amusement. “Booked a hotel near the airport last night. Said he had an early flight this morning.”

I snort. “No, he didn’t.”

“No, he didn’t,” my dad agrees with a smirk.

“What a little chickenshit.”

He chuckles, used to our feuds, then leans back in his chair, face growing more serious. “He was right though, you know.”

“Yep,” I say without missing a beat. “I definitely would’ve beat his ass if he stayed.”

He shakes his head. “Not that. I mean he was right to push you to tell me what’s been going on. I know you were trying to protect me, doing it out of love. But I don’t appreciate being kept in the dark. That’s not fair to me.”

The guilt is immediate, heavy. “You’re right. It wasn’t.”

He tilts his head, trying to catch my eyes. “And it’s not fair to you either.”

I scoff, shrugging off any undeserved sympathy. “I don’t care about me.”

My dad sits forward, eyes steady, voice quiet but firm. “That’s another thing we need to talk about. You have to start caring about yourself, son. You can’t fix everything for everyone by carrying it all alone. Trust the rest of us to help. Trust *me*. If something’s too much, I’ll tell you. I’m not made of glass, James. But when you keep things from me like this, it feels like you think I’m useless. Like the diagnosis defines me. And that . . . that’s what kills me.”

His hand lands on mine—solid, grounding. He’s never shied away from affection, and today is no different.

I stare at the tabletop, eyes burning, throat too tight to speak. When I finally manage it, the words come out barely above a whisper. “I almost lost you. And *that* almost killed *me*.”

When I look up, he sees all of it. Everything I can’t say out loud.

You were my first best friend. Without you . . . I don’t know how to keep going. I need you.

“It scared the hell out of me, Dad,” I whisper. “And I—I’ve been trying to make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

He presses his lips together, blinking fast, fighting back his own tears. “I know. But unfortunately we don’t get to control those things. So please, let me live. Let me show up for you. Let me take care of myself and tell you when I can’t. Because besides loving your mom, you boys are the best part of my life.”

He squeezes my hand—and just like that, I break. The tears come fast and I drop my head to his shoulder as he wraps his arms around me.

I didn’t cry the day he went to the hospital. My mom was a wreck and needed me to be strong for her while we waited to hear if the doctors had been able to stabilize him or not. Waited to hear if my dad was alive. And then once we found out he was going to pull through, there was a lot to be done right away. I went home and got his clothes. Packed the things my mom needed. Brought meals to the hospital and worked on the farm in between.

There was no time to cry. To feel the entire weight of what had happened.

I’m feeling it now, and I’m crying. Not quietly. Not politely. It’s an outpouring.

My dad doesn't let go through any of it. "I love you, James. I'm so proud of you. You're a good, good man." His voice is rough but strong, like he's trying to put me back together with every word. "And I'm proud of what you've done with the farm. I never meant to put so much pressure on you."

I pull back, wiping my face with the back of my hand and willing these damn tears to stop. "You didn't. Not really. I just knew how much it's always meant to everyone."

"Yeah, but I should've told you more often that *you* matter more. You're more important to us than any legacy. If this farm is hurting your health or your heart . . . let it go. Life's too short to let anything break you."

"I appreciate that. I do." I draw in a shaky breath. "But I *do* love it. I'm not ready to walk away from it yet."

"Okay," he says simply.

"But . . . I am going to take the contract with AFD." I watch him carefully, gauging his reaction. I thought about it while falling asleep next to Madison last night. About how I want to have more freedom to live my life without being strapped to this farm. How I want the restaurant to have a fighting chance.

So I tell my dad, "I know it's not the way you or Grandpa did it, and maybe the community will see it as selling out . . . but the economy is different now. I need the stability, at least until the restaurant gets off the ground. Later on, maybe I can go back to direct sales. But for now, Tommy is right. This needs to be done."

I hold my breath.

My dad doesn't hesitate longer than a blink. "It's a good thing I handed the farm over to you and that you have a smart brother who cares enough to push you toward change. You're the first one strong enough to follow through with it."

The air finally rushes out of my lungs.

I will carry those words with me for the rest of my life.

He knocks his knuckles once against the table, then stands, coffee in hand, and walks to the counter. He grabs something and brings it back, setting it gently in front of me.

My word search book.

"I finished the last column for you," he says with a wink.

And just like that, I'm eight years old again, watching him sit on the porch in the early morning light, pen in hand. He's the reason I do these puzzles. And he's the reason I always will.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Madison

0 DAYS UNTIL I FAIL . . .

I wake up with James today, too jittery to sleep a second past the first rays of the sun. While I shower, James says he'll make coffee and put a bagel in the toaster for me. I get a soft kiss on the temple, and I wonder if that will ever stop feeling like heaven.

I doubt it.

Everything has been leading up to today: the Greenhouse's soft opening.

Our friends, family, and most of the town will be coming out for a free meal. The goal is to build buzz and smooth out any kinks before the real opening, which is a week from today.

James is going to take the contract with AFD, which takes a lot of pressure off me to make this restaurant boom immediately, but now I feel a little competitive. Maybe I *can* make it boom? Why not try? For James. For me.

So I took Josie's advice. I pulled the nepotism card—aka I called my super-famous pop star sister-in-law and asked for a favor. Of course she was willing (eager) to help and had her manager leak it to the press that she'd be attending the soft opening and paparazzi were encouraged to attend. Since they'll be there foaming at the mouth to catch a glimpse of Rae Rose walking in and leaving the restaurant, she's called in more bodyguards. All of this will help put the Greenhouse on the map, and I'm just trying not to hurl.

After showering, I tie my navy-blue bandanna around my hair, cottagecore style. Later, I'll slick my hair back in a stubby little ponytail and don my chef's coat, but for now I'm in my comfy cutoffs and James's baggy T-shirt to gather produce.

When I come out, he's at my table eating breakfast. Hat on, word search open, too big for the table, coffee steaming. It's a sight to cherish.

When he looks up he smiles, and my heart flips. I think I might be glowing. Or blushing. Or melting.

I pad over to the coffeepot, pour a cup, then take the seat across from him at the table. "It looks like coffee," I say, staring down into the cup. I sniff it. "Smells like coffee."

He lifts a brow, smirking. "Taste it, I dare you."

I stare at him as I sip. The flavor that hits my tongue is . . . "Delicious."

"Mm-hmm." He sits back, proud. "I got a fancy coffee at the store. And I even watched a YouTube video on how to actually make it instead of just dumping a shit-ton of grounds into the basket."

I bat my eyes. "For me?"

"For you." He smiles, bumps my knee under the table.

Fireworks explode in my belly. "Hey, do you live here now?"

He laughs. "I've stayed with you two days."

I grin over my cup, shrugging slightly. "Longest anyone has ever stayed over."

"I have my own house," he says, but it's not really an answer. After a short pause, he adds, "I like yours better, though."

I look around. "Mine is pretty great. But arguably yours is better."

He doesn't look like he agrees. "Mine is too big and empty."

"Ah." I had wondered. It's a large space that used to be filled with family. When he's in there alone, I imagine it's gaping.

"Doesn't feel like mine either. Feels like my mom and dad's."

"For now maybe. But maybe one day you'll fill it up with a wife and kids."

"Do you want that? Kids?" he asks, like I'm the wife in question. And I have no idea why but it fills me with so much joy I want to go give him a lap dance.

I shrug. "I don't know actually. I've never really seen myself that way."

"Me neither."

“Really?” I’m shocked, eyes wide and bugging. I thought for sure James pictured himself driving a tractor with a James Jr. in his lap.

“I’m not big on kids. But I could be, if that’s what you want.”

I’m so pleased by this answer I could pop. Pleased with this whole conversation, actually. This whole relationship so far.

I sip my coffee, face warming with tinges of pink delight. “We’ll see. For now, you can stay here with me in my cozy cottage as much as you want.”

He gives me a smile that feels like a sweet, lazy kiss. And then he rips out a page of his word search and slides it across to me.

And there it is. I think I’ve found the secret I’ve been looking for: I’d like to be restless with adventure, go out and see and do and be, and then come *home*.

To this.

To him.

I think this is what I’ve always wanted.

I should have known the easy morning was a red herring.

I’m greeted with chaos the moment I step foot through the kitchen doors.

“The stove is out . . .” says Amiya, my sous-chef.

Her dark brown eyes are wide, and don’t be fooled by her nose ring and sleeve of tattoos—she is the most type A, pleasure-to-have-in-class person I’ve ever met. She moved here from Birmingham, Alabama, to take this job and came with a glowing recommendation from the restaurants where she previously worked. I can’t help but think she should be the executive chef instead of me. Point being, she was here before me this morning.

But she said that’s never been her dream. She feels strongest in this role, and I feel stronger with her in it, so I won’t fight her on it.

“Actually, the stove is out *and* Bradley called out sick,” she adds.

But instead of panicking I take a calming breath and look at my phone, noting that I still have eight hours until opening. No problem. I’ll call a handyman for the stove and see who else from our alternate staff is available to cover for Bradley tonight. Or better yet, I’ll have our manager, Tess, find someone! I like her. To quote her from her interview, she’s “menopausal and brash. Just the lady to get stuff done.”

So this is no big deal.

And it isn't . . . at least it's not compared to when she tells me we are having software issues and our POS system isn't working. And then again to say no one is available to cover Bradley's shift—oh, plus we have a walnut allergy reservation to look out for tonight.

But I keep my cool. I don't let anyone see the panic on my face, because I can do this.

I can do this, I repeat to myself as I head for the back door, planning to go outside and scream in my truck.

I can—AH!

An arm snakes out from the pantry and loops around my waist, pulling me into the giant food storage closet. But it's not any old arm. It's James's. And with my heart racing and panic hovering under the surface of my skin, I'm pressed gently back into the shelves and kissed. One of his hands slides against my jaw and the other is holding my hip.

“Sorry. Just wanted to say hi,” he says, voice gravelly.

“I’m glad you did. Hey, question: When’s your brother getting here?”

“Not really something a man likes to hear while kissing his girlfriend’s neck.”

Despite the chaos swirling in my head, that new title is a wind chime in my ear, making my skin prickle with pleasure.

“What did he do now?” James asks.

“Nothing.” I breathe out. “But it would be nice if he were around. To make sure this is all going like it should be going? I’m worried I’m doing it wrong already.”

Neither of us has seen Tommy since the incident the other night. He did email me the next morning, though, saying, *I hope I didn’t hurt your feelings. It was nothing personal—just business. But hey, I’m still up for that date if you are:)*

Only Tommy would possess enough self-delusion to think a woman would ever consider dating him after the things he said. But again, because it’s him (and because I never harbored a smidge of feelings for him), I laughed it off and responded: *You’re dreaming.*

Tommy is uniquely Tommy.

James pulls away to catch my gaze. “Madison. You can do this.” He pauses, a soft smile growing. “But if you want me to, I’ll call him and get

his ass down here.”

“Yes, please.”

Eventually, I leave the pantry and James’s safe arms and I put out what seems like a thousand fires (including one real one—small at least).

Tommy is nowhere to be found.

In a blink, it’s go time.

Guests are arriving, and we’re short-staffed. Guests are being seated, and we can’t find the box of our custom linen napkins, so we’re scrambling with paper. Guests are trying to sneak back into the kitchen to say hi—the ones who have known me since I was in diapers—and suddenly I feel like I can’t breathe.

I’m informed by a bodyguard who swoops into the kitchen and checks the storage closet that Rae Rose (Amelia) is on the premises and about to exit her vehicle. Paparazzi are apparently swarming outside. It still catches me off guard to see her like this: as a celebrity. The version of her that belongs to the rest of the world. But I don’t have time to dwell on it. Life is moving at warp speed around me.

Tess plays bouncer at the kitchen door. Every now and then I hear her, over the clatter of pans, telling Mabel or Phil or even Emily to go back to their seats—*Chef Walker will greet everyone after service.* I could kiss her.

As the night goes on, I expect to find my rhythm. I never do.

We’re moving too slowly. My kitchen hand is working double duty—plating and washing dishes—and it’s dragging down the whole line.

It feels like a haunted house where everything is a warped version of what it should be, and I want to scream around every corner. Something’s scorching. Something’s boiling over. Counters are a mess, and even though someone’s yelled “BEHIND!” at least ten times in the last twenty seconds, we’re still colliding like bumper cars.

I want to hide in the pantry to catch my breath, but a saucepan of our citrus-infused rémoulade hits the floor. We have to make it again, while still being behind on the orders that needed it in the first place.

My confidence is a drooping sail, and life shows no mercy. The printer continues spitting out tickets like it’s alive. Like it hates me.

A young waiter bursts through the doors, sweaty, pale, and wide-eyed. “Uh, Chef. Tiny problem.”

“Jason,” I say ominously as I bend over the heirloom and fried green tomato stack, carefully drizzling black pepper molasses sauce over a goat cheese mousse. (Della would still call this dish too fancy-schmancy, but I dedicated it to her anyway.) “I don’t have time for tiny problems.”

“Okay . . . how about huge ones?”

I lift my eyes and glare. “You’ve got ten seconds.”

“Sort of like table twelve,” he mutters, with a weak attempt at humor.

“What about table twelve?” I grit out.

Jason winces. “Remember how he has a walnut allergy . . . ?”

“Oh my god. Tell me he didn’t get the sweet potato gnocchi.”

Jason cringes. “He got the sweet potato gnocchi.”

“Shit!”

I barrel past him. “Tess!” I yell, though I don’t need to—she’s right there. “EpiPen! Now!”

She doesn’t flinch. Just reaches into her half-apron and pulls one out.

“You carry one on you?”

“I’ve worked in restaurants for fifteen years. Of course I carry one.”

And I do kiss her this time. But only on the cheek, because HR and all that.

Then I’m hurtling through the dining room toward table twelve.

“Hi,” I say to the man who I’m pretty sure was my third grade teacher, looking like something is tingling on his tongue. I smile and extend the EpiPen. “So sorry, but you’re going to need this.”

I turn to his wife. “We’ll be sending you home with an extra dessert.”

Tess appears behind me. “Go back to the kitchen. I’ll take care of them.”

I weave through the throng of tables. If this were any other night, I might pause to take it all in: the sight of my restaurant full of people I love.

My family and Mabel are tucked into a corner table, hidden from paparazzi lenses. They’re laughing, waving when they spot me, oblivious to the shit show that’s happening in the kitchen.

Phil and Todd are center room. James’s parents are in the cozy booth on the far wall.

Everywhere I look, I see someone I care about. And I can’t enjoy a single second because only a quarter of the tables have food, and a server

just dumped water in Todd's lap, and something smells like it's burning.

And then it gets worse.

On my way back to the kitchen, I see them: *James and Tommy*.

They're right outside the restaurant, visible through the massive windows. I can't tell what's happening, but they look tense. Arguing.

And then *bam*—James's fist slams into Tommy's face.

A collective gasp ripples through the restaurant, and my stomach bottoms out.

I fly out the doors just as Tommy rips off his jacket and throws himself shoulder-first into James's stomach. They go down with a thud and flashing cameras light up the sidewalk.

The brothers are rolling, wrestling, shouting, but I can't hear them over the ringing in my ears.

I turn. Every single person—my family, my friends, Amelia, the damn paparazzi—are all watching, gathering to see what's happening. James's parents are trying to make it through the crush of bodies, but they're not going to get here fast enough.

"Hey! STOP!" I shout at the brothers. They don't.

James has Tommy pinned. There's dirt on his jeans, blood on his lip.

"You're such an asshole!" he growls.

Tommy sneers. "Please. If I am, I learned it from you!"

Noah, Will, and Jack make it outside first. Will, showing his former bodyguard roots, dives in and peels James off Tommy like it's nothing.

It's all happening so fast.

Noah helps Tommy up, and Jack touches my shoulder like he wants to comfort me. But I shake him off. I'm about to break, and I *cannot* do it in front of them.

She is overly emotional.

She doesn't have enough experience.

You're a disgrace to my kitchen.

Both brothers are panting, looking ready to launch at each other again. Only when I say their names do they look at me.

James's expression softens as he sees my face, sees how upset I am. He takes a step toward me.

I raise a hand. "Get out of here. Both of you."

They hesitate.

“Now.”

I don’t wait to see if they listen.

With tears clouding my eyes, I turn and bolt—straight to my cottage—while every person I’ve ever wanted to impress stands and watches me fail.

Again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

James

15 MINUTES AGO

The restaurant is in full swing.

I wasn't going to take up a seat tonight, but with my mom and dad in town, I joined them. I don't know how things are going for Madison because I've forced myself to stay out of her kitchen, even though I'm dying to see how it's going back there. Plates are coming out pretty slow, but no one minds. Tonight is for supporting Madison and the farm.

But I know how much she wants to blow everyone away. Prove herself. So I'm on pins and needles.

And where the hell is Tommy?

I pat my pockets for my phone and then remember leaving it in my truck.

"I'll be right back," I tell my parents and head for the parking lot. When the door opens, a few sparse cameras flash before the paparazzi realize I'm nobody and aim their lenses at the ground, sinking back against the wall again to wait for Amelia to leave.

Just as I'm closing my truck door, phone in hand, a BMW whirs into the parking lot. It's black instead of white. A rental, of course. A whole new car for a whole new return every time.

Tommy shuts the car door with a smirk that immediately pisses me off. Also annoying—his linen pants.

"Finally find some balls to face me?" I ask, leaning into my bad mood stemming from his late arrival.

He pushes his sunglasses into his hair and shrugs. “I don’t know. Did you finally grow a pair big enough to discuss your feelings like an adult?”

We meet halfway between the parking lot and the restaurant entrance. Out of range of the cameras, but not out of sight. He knows that too.

“That was so low, Tommy—dumping everything on me and Dad, then ghosting. You knew what kind of hell you were leaving me to clean up and you left anyway. Just like always.”

“Oh, fuck you. Don’t act like I’m some unhelpful son or brother who disappears when people need him.”

“That’s *exactly* what you did! Skipping town is your favorite hobby.”

“Have you ever stopped to ask yourself why?! You don’t exactly make it conducive to stay. I have acquaintances who care about me more than you do.”

I cross my arms. “That’s the shittiest excuse I’ve ever heard. You’ve done nothing but complain about this town and this farm since we were kids. Forgive me if I don’t feel like laying down rose petals to make you comfier while you’re here dumping drama on the family before you vanish again.”

Our voices are getting louder.

“You need to get over yourself,” he says.

“And you need to grow the hell up.”

That sets him off. “Grow up? I’m the one who flew our parents home, James, because I knew you needed them here. I’m the one who finally said what you’ve been too chickenshit to say for months! I’m the one who reached out to AFD on your behalf!”

“You made everything more difficult.”

“Did I?!” The tendons in his neck are straining against his throat as he yells, aiming his hand at the restaurant. “Because from what Dad told me, you guys made up, you’re taking the contract, and you’ve been staying over at a certain chef’s cottage every night. Seems to be a lot less difficult from where I stand.”

My hand balls into a fist at my side. Distantly, I’m aware of the paparazzi’s attention shifting in our direction. “Because I cleaned up your mess! You basically threw a brick through a window and I’ve been sweeping up the glass.”

“What I did was light a fire under you! You were content to drown in stress just like you’ve silently mooned over Madison for years until I put pressure on you!”

That comment cuts through the tension, like a dart thrown at a map. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?” My voice is a low warning.

One he doesn’t seem to heed.

He smirks, defiantly. “You still don’t get it, do you? You really think I’ve been trying to win her over?”

My blood simmers.

“You told me you liked her. You told *her* you liked her.”

“I do like Madison. Just not like that.” He has the nerve to look proud. As if he’s pulled off a heist.

I blink, feeling my skin crack from the heat bubbling under it. “So . . . what? This has all been some twisted game to get me to admit I’m in love with Madison?”

“In love!” His eyes widen. “Well, that’s a bonus, but yeah. Basically. I’ve had to watch you moon over her for so damn long. Listen to you blabber on about her to Mom and Dad for too many hours. It was painful. This needed to be done.”

I laugh bitterly. “Do you hate me that much?”

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “Believe it or not, I love you. And I’m so sick of watching you deny yourself the life you want. You have a real shot at happiness and you’re too damn scared to take it. So yeah—I nudged things a little. Or a lot. Knowing that if I made you jealous, you’d finally step up to the plate.”

“What are you expecting me to do with this news? Thank you?” My nostrils flare. “She’s not a game, Tommy. She’s not some chess piece for you to move around for your entertainment.”

“It wasn’t for my entertainment. It was actually pretty annoying having to remember to send shit and text her.”

I take a step closer. “You messed with her feelings just to manipulate mine.”

I’m still waiting for him to deny it somehow. Show a little remorse. Anything.

Instead he shrugs. “Relax. She didn’t like me back. No harm, no foul.”

I stare at him, stunned. “That’s . . . the shittiest thing I’ve ever heard.”

He lifts his hands like *it is what it is*. “I’m kind of a shitty person who also possesses a heart. You already knew that.”

My voice climbs. “She deserves more than that, Tommy. What if she had liked you back? What then?”

“She didn’t.”

I’m getting closer to him now and he doesn’t seem to be as alarmed by the action as he should be. “That’s not the point! And with Dad—what if you had really hurt him with the way you dropped the news about the farm and me and Madison? Did you stop for even one second to consider that real people’s feelings were at stake here? No. Because in the end, you always take off and leave it all behind.”

“Again. Nothing bad did happen. You got the girl and she got some pretty flowers and a whole entire restaurant out of the situation. So no big deal, right?”

“Wrong.”

BAM.

I punch him in the face.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Madison

I hear my front door open tentatively from behind my hands, which I've been crying into for the last five minutes.

"Go away. I don't want to talk to you right now."

"Well, damn," says Mabel, making me look up. "That's not a nice way to greet an old lady."

"Sorry. I thought you were James."

"A fair reaction then. That boy needs to be punished for that foolish display back there. Mind if I sit?" she asks, already making her way to the bed.

I scoot over and pull my knees to my chest, suddenly feeling ten years old again. Wishing I *was* ten years old again.

"Well," she sighs. "That was an event."

"Mabel, please forgive me for how rude I'm about to be, but I'm not in the mood for sympathy. I'm angry and sad, and I don't want coddling or to hear how I'll get it next time."

"Oh, good. Because that's why I told your sisters they couldn't come in. I'm not here to baby you. I'm here because I know—and you know—that you're strong as hell, child."

I cut a glance to her.

"There's no waiting for next time. Honey, you have a restaurant full of people waiting for their orders. You have a staff trying to stay afloat without you, and right now, they're underwater. It's not the day you dreamed of, but it's the day you got. And now . . . you've cried, which is good and makes a person feel better. But you know what comes next. It's time to get up and show what you're made of."

"You think I'm strong?" I ask, resting my chin on my knees.

She narrows an eye. "I thought you didn't want any coddling."

“Okay, fine. I want a little dollop of coddling to go with the tough love.”

She smiles. “Let me put it this way, Maddie. A weak person wouldn’t have stared down those Huxley boys and kicked them off the property with one pointed finger.”

“They left?” I don’t know why this makes my heart drop—it’s exactly what I told them to do, and what needed to happen. But the thought of James not being there the rest of the night kills me. Will we be okay after? Is he reconsidering if I can actually do this now that he’s seen me mess up so much?

She nods. “They left immediately. But James looked like he’d rather swallow his own boot than walk away from you upset.”

I don’t have time to worry about that yet though.

“I just wanted today to go smoothly. I didn’t want to give anyone a reason to say, *We knew this would happen*. I wanted this to be the event that finally made this town, and my family, take me seriously.”

Mabel bumps her shoulder against mine. “If you want everyone to take you seriously, then look them straight in the eye when you demand it. Night’s not over.”

She’s right.

And maybe a younger version of me would have used this moment to quit. To wait for someone else to rescue me and make everything easier. But Mabel’s right—no one’s coming to do that. Not only that, but I wasn’t waiting for it this time. Even in this bleak moment, I was always preparing to go back out there. Dreading the fix, but knowing I was the one to do it.

And just to make myself feel better, I briefly picture a young Zora Brookes standing in a busy kitchen when the lights went out because she forgot to pay the electricity bill.

I smile.

Pity party’s over. Time to go finish this night.

I lay my head on her shoulder. “Thank you, Mabel. I love you.”

“I love you too, sugar.” She pats my leg.

I stand, tug the hem of my chef’s coat back into place, and walk to the mirror. My mascara’s a mess, hair askew. I lick my fingers and wipe under my eyes the best I can, then gather my hair and freshen up my ponytail.

My chest still feels tight, but I can breathe again. And that’s progress.

Before I leave the cottage, I glance back at Mabel, sitting alone on my bed. She looks so small suddenly. This strong woman, always giving strength to the world around her, seems tired. Who's checking up on her?

I pause in the doorway.

"Mabel . . . you're always the one swooping in and giving us the pep talks and tough love speeches. But it's your turn."

She twists on the mattress to see me. "Oh, I don't need—"

"Zip it and listen up," I say, hands on my hips. Mabel's mouth snaps closed. "My grandma—your best friend—died last year. And as we both know, she was gone a long time before that, thanks to the Alzheimer's. Your husband is no longer on this earth either. But you . . . you're still here. You've still got a lot of life left. And you need a companion. A friend to walk with you through the rest of it. Someone to call for coffee. A buddy to watch *The Price Is Right* reruns with. And although we appreciate your place in our lives as the Oracle"—we both grin—"you need a shoulder to cry on too."

I expect her to protest, but she doesn't. And that tells me I'm spot-on.

Mabel, tough as nails, crosses her arms. "Well, do you have a friend-dating service I can use or something?"

I smile. "Even better. I already have the perfect person in mind for you."

In my silence, Mabel seems to register who I mean. Her eyes narrow. "No way. Not her. I hate Harriet."

"I don't believe that for a second. I think you love to hate her, and she loves to hate you. You also know each other better than most people do. And take it from someone who just spent the last two years surrounded by people who didn't know the first thing about me: Being known is beautiful. Especially when they know the worst things about you and choose you anyway." I think of James and how my many faults haven't stopped him from loving me. "Give Harriet a shot and see what happens."

She grunts but doesn't say no.

I take that as a win.

"I gotta get back to the kitchen."

"Oh, but Maddie." She sighs dramatically, letting her shoulders sag. "Please . . . for the love of God, announce your relationship with James already. The town is getting sick of pretending we don't see y'all making out behind every corner."

I laugh. "You knew he was here that night, didn't you?"

"Heavens, yes. His big boots were sticking out from under the bed."

"I fear we'll never get anything past you, Mabel."

She winks. "Not if you're lucky."

With my head held high, I march back into the restaurant. All eyes are on me, and the restaurant is silent. I look out over my friends and family who I've known my entire life. I realize the people I was most scared to fail in front of are actually the most supportive of my failures. And maybe the act of failing isn't actually a finite thing. It's not an event on a timeline but a swipe of paint on a paper. The more strokes of paint, the more beautiful the picture.

In the center of the room, I raise my voice so everyone can hear me. "Well, I bet you didn't know you were getting dinner and a show!" Everyone laughs and the tension breaks. "Thank you for coming out. Thank you for being here for me and the Huxley family as we embark on this new adventure. I'm so happy to be part of it, and I'm so grateful to be doing it here—at home. I love you all, and I'm going to go make your food now because I know you're starving."

I turn to walk away, but cheers erupt so loudly I'm forced to turn around. Everyone is standing. They are on their feet for me, Madison Walker.

CHAPTER FORTY

James

The ice pack on my jaw is cold, but not cold enough to numb the shame burning underneath.

I got into a fistfight with my younger brother. Outside a restaurant. Madison's restaurant. The farm's restaurant.

I blow out a puff of smoke, knowing I'll never forget how she looked when she told us to leave—tears building, chin wobbling, heartbreak written across her face.

It was selfish, giving in to my anger like that. Noble intentions or not.

And the longer I sit here on the porch, reliving every second of it, the louder Tommy's words echo and I begin to see the truth in many of them.

I'm the older brother, and I haven't always acted like it.

The porch door squeaks behind me.

Tommy walks by, crusted blood still clinging under his nose, and disappears into the house. A second later he's back—with a bag of frozen peas mashed against his eye.

He drops into the chair across from me, my lit cigarette burning in the makeshift ashtray between us. A thin vine of smoke weaves into the air as we study each other. His eyes drift to my jaw. Mine to the split at the corner of his lip.

My mouth twitches with an unexpected smile.

His nostrils flare with a stifled grin, followed by a scoff. Then a chuckle from both of us. Then a full, rolling laugh.

God, it hurts—but I can't stop. It's the kind of laugh that cramps your abs and waters your eyes.

Tommy clutches his stomach. We've completely lost it.

Two grown-ass brothers fought in a parking lot today.

Both destroyed.

Both ridiculously immature.

Both . . . maybe finally starting to understand.

Slowly, like taking a pot of boiling water off the stove, our laughter dies down.

“I’m sorry,” Tommy says. No sarcasm. No humor.

“Me too.” I adjust the ice pack on my jaw. “I shouldn’t have hit you like that.”

He waves it off. “I deserved it.”

Silence again. And then—

“Honestly? It felt kind of good. I think I’ve been waiting too long for someone to care enough to call me out.”

“You don’t think we care?” I ask.

Tommy stares at the cigarette but doesn’t mention it, or the fact that I’m smoking on the porch we grew up on. “I’ve wanted you to want me around for years, man. Since we were kids. But you had Noah, so you never needed me. I’d come home to visit, hoping it’d be different . . . that we’d finally click or something. But it never happened. I always felt unnecessary. That’s when I’d leave.”

The words settle like sharp rocks in my stomach.

“Tommy . . . shit. I’m sorry. I definitely made the wedge worse. I’ve resented you and your freedom to leave whenever you wanted. Hated you for it at times. But I didn’t know how to say that. Or that I really could’ve used your help after Dad’s heart attack.”

I pause. “I let that resentment grow.”

And just like with Madison, I didn’t know how to rewrite the relationship after years of letting it stagnate.

We sit silent for a while, both processing. Lost in thought.

Then Tommy lets out a scoff. “How messed up is it that we’re so disconnected the only way I knew how to help you was by manipulating you?”

I move the cigarette to my lips, take a drag, and blow it out the side of my mouth. “How messed up is it that I’ve been so jealous of you I’ve avoided you for years?”

He laughs, and I extend the cigarette to him.

He pinches it, takes a breath in—and immediately coughs so hard he doubles over.

Guess he didn't inherit Dad's and my propensity for smoking.

When he finally catches his breath, I take the cigarette back, draw in once more, then stub it out on the plate between us.

"You were right, back there," I say quietly. "I've been too scared to take control of my own happiness. Scared to lose people. Scared to fail. Scared to hurt. It's been easier to just . . . avoid anything that might actually make me happy."

Tommy sets down his ice pack and stares at the cigarette. "We need to fix our shit, man."

"Yeah." I nod. Turns out fixing the things physically wrong with my body was the easy part. Now it's time to deal with the inside stuff. The hard stuff. Sharing my feelings and all that.

He smiles and extends his hand across the table. "Friends?"

"Friends." I shake his hand, and I'm tempted to ask him to make a blood pact with me.

"By the way, I'm glad you're taking the contract. As the financial investor of the restaurant, it makes me feel a lot better."

I look sharply at him. He just smirks and shrugs a shoulder. "You were too much of a financial risk. No one else wanted to invest."

"Tommy, that was a lot of money."

"It's fine. I'm rich. But I wanted you to know, not only because I'm a selfish prick who needs constant recognition but because I didn't want you to doubt that I do care about you . . . and this farm."

I stare at him, genuinely feeling excited about the prospect of getting to know him better. "Thank you. Truly."

The porch screen door slams open, ricocheting against the wall.

I whirl in my chair to find Mom and Dad standing in the doorway like two grim reapers ready to collect their idiot sons.

Mom's gaze locks onto the cigarette. Her fury ignites.

Tommy points at me across the table. "It's his."

Real nice. Right out of the gate.

She stalks forward, slow and menacing. My dad promptly backs away, heading toward the barn. Choosing inner peace.

Ruth Huxley looms over us, a judge ready to sentence.

"I hope you're comfortable," she says. "Because you're about to sit here and listen to me explain the meaning of family until your ears bleed."

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Madison

The rest of the night has its minor bumps and hiccups, but they don't overshadow the magic this time. I take them in stride, and when I can I jot them down in a notebook to review later—so maybe we don't hit these same bumps on the actual opening night. (Now I just have to make sure I don't misplace the notebook.)

Soon, it's all over. I did it. I soft-launched the *shit* out of my restaurant and got nothing but glowing reviews on the food and the ambiance. We also completely sold out of our pottery stock. And maybe it's just because they're all friends? But you know what? Who cares? I'll take the win.

Night has fully taken over when I leave the restaurant, lightning bugs illuminating the dark.

I haven't seen or heard from James since I told him to leave, and the weight of that crashes over me. I've never been in a relationship before, so I don't know what happens next. Is he pissed? Should I be pissed? Is it a break-up-able offense to yell at your boyfriend and tell him to get off his own property? Is it a break-up-able offense for him to get into a fistfight during the trial run of your restaurant while gathered paparazzi snap photos from every angle?

Still . . . something in me whispers that I *know* James. And I know Tommy. If James punched his brother in the face like that, Tommy must've said something awful. Something deserving.

Is that what real love is? Knowing your person so deeply that empathy wins out over misunderstanding?

I don't get to think about it more, because the moment I step out the back entrance of the restaurant, I'm bombarded by my siblings.

They cheer.

Thrust a beer bottle into my hands.

Raise a glass of who knows what.

Some of my drink sloshes out as they jostle, shake, hug, and kiss me. I'm congratulated on my success and my perseverance, and I'm an erupting volcano of love.

"Mom and Dad would be so proud of you, Maddie," Emily whispers in my ear, pulling tears to my eyes. "But not just because of tonight. Because of the person you are. So vibrant. So powerful. So warm." She kisses my temple and squeezes my shoulders. "We're all proud of you."

After a bit, I float all the way home to my cottage.

I open the door, and there's James.

A few lamps are on, casting my little cottage in a warm, cozy glow. The air smells . . . I sniff—sweet. I locate the reason piled high on a plate, center of the kitchen table. *Cinnamon sugar toast*. The place is tidied and all of my half-empty glasses of water have been replaced with one tall fresh glass, just for me.

So many little things, all adding up to: I know you.

And James—he's standing a few feet from the door, balancing a plastic enclosure in the palm of his hand.

"James . . . Is that a tortoise you're holding?"

"Turtle," he corrects gently. "It's all the pet store had."

"Pet store? Like . . . the pet store that's an hour away?"

He nods. "I was going to get you apology-slash-congratulations flowers, but that didn't feel like a big enough gesture."

"But a turtle felt right?"

His nose scrunches adorably. "No. A turtle did not." He pulls his other hand from around his back—holding *another* enclosure. "So I got you two."

I bark out a laugh, too stunned and delighted to speak.

He tips his head with a smirk. "Well, technically, one is mine. Because giving you two turtles to take care of felt like a lot. But I know how much you loved Sammy."

A new laugh bubbles up from my chest. "I was over here spiraling, worried we were about to break up, and you were out buying his-and-hers turtles."

That gets his attention. The turtles are carefully set aside as he straightens, all seriousness now.

“You were thinking about breaking up?” he asks. “Because I punched Tommy?”

“No,” I say, voice softening. “I was afraid *you* were. Because I yelled at you to go away.”

His shoulders relax, a knot loosening. He takes a slow step closer, and even after all that’s transpired and the stress of the day, my skin hums. *Anticipates.*

“Madison.” His voice is so steady. “I deserved to be yelled at. I *still* deserve to be yelled at. I’m so sorry for making a scene like that tonight. And I completely understand if you’re upset with me.”

“Depends,” I say slowly. “Did you have a good reason for the punch?”

He nods but doesn’t speak right away, like he’s weighing whether to tell me the truth or protect me from it.

“Was it something mean about me?” I ask, nudging. “Were you defending my honor?”

He smiles faintly. “In a way, yeah. It *was* about you. He, uh, he never intended to date you. He was trying to get to me. Trying to make me admit my feelings for you.”

I gasp. “That little dill weed! Go punch him again. How insulting.” My face falls in sudden mock horror. “*Wait.* Does that mean I’m losing my touch? Oh no. Does this monogamy make me look ugly?”

James’s eyes spark with mischief. “I don’t know. Take off all your clothes so I can find out.”

He’s getting closer, but I hold up a hand. “Not yet. You’re still in the doghouse.”

“Okay.” He folds his arms like he’s prepared for bad news. “Tell me what I need to do.”

“I have a very specific atonement.”

“How long do I have to stay in here for?”

James is wearing nothing but his boxer briefs, boots, and a smile as he stands in my shower, water cascading down his ridiculously sexy body. Not totally naked—because I like a tease.

I’m perched in a chair I dragged in here and I’m munching on cinnamon sugar toast like this is my own personal show.

“Until I say you can get out.” I slowly suck the last bit of sugar from my fingertips. “You’re not done atoning yet. Rub that loofah over your neck again.”

His boots slosh as he steps forward, stopping at the edge of the shower door. He plants his hands on the frame and leans out, water dripping from every sculpted inch of him. *Good lord, this man is massive.* His rib cage alone is the size of my truck’s engine. And his shoulders? Edible boulders.

I drink in the sight of him. Wet hair slicked back. Muscle and sinew showing off. Powerful thighs and brown boots. The man is a work of art in boxers and Timberlands.

This started out as a joke but has quickly evolved into an actual boots-and-underwear shower kink. One I’ll be revisiting again and again.

“Get in here,” he says, voice low and rough.

“You’re not in charge,” I say, sinking back against my throne. “I am.”

Softer now. Deeper. More dangerous. He says, “Get in here, Madison.”

A full-body shiver rolls through me, but I hold my ground. “No.”

That’s when his wet boot steps out onto the tile.

My gaze travels up his thigh, over his absurdly chiseled torso, to his face, his eyes dark, locked on me. He’s dialed in now. Predator mode.

I squeal and bolt from the chair, but I’m not fast enough. His drenched body presses against my back, arms locking around my waist. He lifts me, flipping me over his shoulder as I squirm and laugh.

He carries me under the stream, and even though the water is warm, I’m still squawking like a bird. He sets me on my feet and makes short work of peeling the soaking-wet layers off my body.

“Finally,” he mutters, pulling me close. Every inch of us presses together, skin to skin. But he doesn’t push this moment past a hug.

Because one thing about James Huxley: He loves a naked hug.

“Hey,” he says, brushing wet hair from my face. “I need to tell you something.”

I tilt my chin and rest it on his chest, looking up into his eyes, waiting.

“I love you, Madison.” His voice is warm. “And when I said I’m all-in on you, I meant *all-in*. You’ll never have to wonder where you stand with me. Be mad at me. Tell me when I’m being a jackass and make me sleep on the couch. Chase your wild heart—and when you come home, I’ll be here. Always.”

My throat burns. “And what if I want you to chase my wild heart with me sometimes? Will you go? Or is this where you stay—home?”

He cups my face, leans down, and kisses me so deeply I already know the answer before he says it.

“You’re my home,” he whispers. “I’ll go with you anywhere.”

We kiss in the shower like we’re rewriting that night in New York when I fell in love with him in the middle of a storm. I tell James I love him at least forty-two times and make sure he knows he’s my home too. He hoists me up, and we have sex against the wall—sexy boots still on.

It’s absurd. It’s incredible. It’s everything.

Later, when I’m practically asleep standing upright from exhaustion, James gets me into a big T-shirt, slides his generic white socks onto my feet, and tucks me into bed like I’m precious to him.

“I forgot to tell you,” he murmurs as I drift closer to sleep from the sound of his heart beating against my ear.

He picks up my hand and lines our palms together, fingertip to fingertip, like it’s instinct.

“You were amazing tonight.”

“At sex?”

He laughs, warm and low, and pinches my side. “The restaurant, Chef. You were incredible. Everyone was raving about the food.” A beat passes. “But yes, also at sex.”

I thread my fingers through his, and in a deliriously happy, half-asleep state, I float a few turtle name suggestions.

James Jr., obviously. (He hated it.)

And Turtellini. (Big fan.)

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Madison

6 DAYS SINCE I FAILED . . . BUT KEPT GOING

It's been a long week of prepping for the official restaurant opening tomorrow. I *should* be there right now, double-and triplechecking everything. Does the stove work? Is the fridge staying cold? I'm tempted to call each and every employee and make them swear to me with a Bible in their hand that they're not feeling the slightest bit ill.

Instead, I'm at Hank's, gathered around a table with my family.

As if James can sense my growing restlessness and predicts me hurtling out of the bar any second, he lays his hand on my thigh. Squeezes once, tenderly. Grounds me.

I breathe in deeply through my nose and release it.

Everything is going to be okay.

But then Annie gasps and looks into her full beer. "A bug just flew in here! Gross."

James and I share a look before I blurt, "Okay, I give up! Annie, are you pregnant? I can't take it anymore!"

She looks panicked for a moment before her eyes catch something—or *someone's*—across the table, and she smiles like we're in the middle of a murder mystery and I have accused the wrong suspect. "Nope. I'm not pregnant."

"What! But you've very clearly not been drinking alcohol for months. Actually . . ." I say, blinking and turning to Emily. "You're not the only one who hasn't been drinking."

"Don't look at me." She raises her hands. "I'm not pregnant."

“If it’s not Annie, and it’s not you or me, that means it has to be . . .” We all slide our eyes to Amelia, who’s sitting back in her chair, Noah’s strong arm around her shoulders, holding her like he has everything to protect now.

“It’s me,” she says with a quiet, satisfied smile. “We’re pregnant.”

My mouth falls open. “But . . .” I swing my gaze to Annie. “You . . .”

“Suspected me all along?” Annie asks, delighted to have pulled the wool over our eyes. “So, this is what happened. I wasn’t supposed to know either. But I came over one day to see Amelia, and she forgot she’d left her pregnancy test on the counter.”

Amelia takes over. “I told Annie I didn’t want anyone to know yet because . . . well, to be honest, we’ve been trying for a while, and it’s been difficult. I wanted to keep it on the down-low until I knew it was safe.”

“Understandable,” Emily says, and it immediately makes me skeptical of her. She sees my look and laughs, leaning in to whisper, “No babies on the horizon for me. You’ll be the first to know if that plan changes.”

“Before Jack?” I need reassurance.

“Duh.”

I nod, satisfied by this answer, and turn my attention back to Amelia. “It’s nearly impossible to keep a secret in this family, so me and Annie concocted this plan to get everyone’s eyes off of me and onto her instead.”

“Which,” says Will, interjecting with a dimpled smile, “let me tell you, was very confusing to me for a minute. Nearly sent me into an early grave when I realized what y’all were suspecting. Not because I’d be upset if Annie was pregnant, but because I was really freaking out that she didn’t want to tell me. I got the truth out of her one night though,” he says, that dimpled grin aimed at Annie and insinuating all kinds of ways he extracted the truth from her.

“Brilliant,” I say with deep affection as I look to Amelia. “You’re both absolutely brilliant little liars, and I am so proud to call you my sisters.”

“What about me? I knew too.” Noah kisses her temple. “Well, she told me the night I came home from playing Hearts with y’all. She’d been waiting for a BUN IN THE OVEN shirt to arrive in the mail. She was wearing it when I got back.”

“I’m proud of you too, big guy,” I say, leaning to shove his shoulder.

“We would’ve told you sooner, but it sort of became a fun game,” Amelia says proudly. “I wanted to see how long I could keep up the alcohol gag before any of you caught on.”

“You gorgeous, devious woman,” says Emily, and it takes her all of thirty seconds to turn into Mother Hen. “Have you had enough water today? Need me to get you some? I’ll get you some.” She’s off like a shot to the bar.

“James, did I see you leaving Dr. Macky’s office yesterday?” asks Noah. Ever since the Tommy punch, Noah has been hovering a bit. I don’t think he realized just how out of the loop he’d been until that moment. All week he’s been popping in or calling at inconvenient times to make up for it. James has begged him to stop. *I’ve* begged him to stop.

He hasn’t.

Emily returns to the table with an ice-cold water for Amelia at the same moment James says, “Uh, yeah.” He rubs the back of his neck. “Was there for a blood pressure recheck.”

“Recheck?” Noah and Emily both ask at the same time.

They glance at each other, and Emily looks offended that Noah is encroaching on her overprotective territory.

James makes a shooing gesture to both of them and then lays his arm over the back of my chair. “I’m fine. I had high blood pressure a few months ago. But it was perfect yesterday.”

“Because I’ve healed him,” Will says like a mystical guru. “Through the power of our morning runs. I’ve given this man the gift of cardio. And inner healing via deep conversations.”

“Gift of cardio, my ass,” James mumbles.

Jack leans around Emily to ask me about the launch tomorrow. “Feeling good about it?”

“No. And thank you for reminding me.” I look to Emily and roll my eyes. “Control your boyfriend, please.”

She glances at him, and the slightest smile touches his mouth: *Dare you*, it says.

Emily swivels back in my direction, cheeks flushed. “I actually want to know the answer to his question too.”

My eyes narrow. “Traitor.”

And then they regret asking when I launch into a half-hour-long diatribe about the woes and wonders of restaurants. My nerves are high, and it doesn't help that Tommy lined up two different food journals to cover the launch and Zora and Josie are coming as well.

The Chef Brookes will taste my food tomorrow, and if she hates it, I swear I will quit and never cook again. I'll start a whole new life in some remote part of the world.

But I have a sneaking suspicion she's going to like it. Because . . . well, turns out I'm a pretty damn good chef.

It's the time management and leadership I have to continue to work on.

Speaking of food, though, Amelia tells us she hasn't been able to stomach much of anything lately. Still, she was craving pancakes earlier today and decided to give her recipe another shot. The poor woman has been trying for *years* to perfect her scratch-made pancakes, and although I'd never say it to her face, it's a little concerning that she still can't quite get them right. But hey, nobody's perfect.

"Anyway," Amelia says, reaching into her purse and drawing a few worried glances from us. "I thought they tasted *terrible*, but I saved one so y'all could try it and tell me what you think."

"Goodie," Will mutters, eyes filled with dread.

Amelia shoots him a look sharp enough to draw blood—clearly pregnancy hormones are doing some heavy lifting. "Since you're *so* eager, Wilbert, you get to be the first to try it."

He looks like he wants to protest but also doesn't want to risk facing Amelia's wrath . . . or potential tears.

With a tight, polite smile, he takes the single pancake sealed in a Ziploc bag, opens it, and gives it a cautious sniff. Then he pinches off a bite and slowly brings it to his mouth. The second it hits his tongue, he frowns.

"Bad?" Amelia asks, eyes wide, leaning forward in anticipation.

Will chews. And chews some more. Then, finally, after swallowing, he gives her a beaming smile. "They're *so, so* good."

In an instant, the rest of us scramble for the bag, tearing off bites and exchanging amazed looks as we confirm he's right. She's finally done it—Amelia has made a kick-ass pancake.

"Why do you look so sad?" I ask, noticing her shoulders slump.

“Because I think they taste like *battery acid*,” she says, groaning. “I finally make a delicious pancake and I can’t even enjoy it with you guys because of this damn food aversion.”

There’s one little sliver left in the bag, and before James can grab it, Noah snatches it away. He aims a tender smile at his wife. “I’ll freeze this last bite. It’ll be waiting for you when you’re ready.”

“Thank you.” She rests her head on his shoulder. “Maybe tasting it later will help me remember how I made it too.”

“You didn’t write down the recipe?” I ask, panic creeping in.

“I forgot.” She grimaces. “But that’s okay, I’ll figure it out.”

The rest of us siblings exchange a look that says it all: We’re in for another long journey.

Hours pass, and after drinking and laughing and even a little line dancing, the night winds down. Yawns make their way around the table, and my eyelids are heavy.

Knowing I have an early morning tomorrow, James leans in close and whispers softly in my ear, “You ready to leave?”

I look around the bar, noting that our bunch is pretty much the last group in here. The jukebox is still playing George Strait. The bar is getting wiped down. And the neon sign above the door flickers like it’s ready to turn off. “Yeah. I guess it’s time to go.”

We say our goodbyes and file out to our various trucks, each headed home with the people who love us most.

But on our drive back through town, with one hand intertwined with James’s and my other arm out the window, we slowly roll past Mabel’s bed-and-breakfast. And that’s when I see something I never thought I’d see.

The curtains are open, and through the living room window I spot Mabel and Harriet sitting together on the couch watching a rerun of *The Price Is Right*.

James squeezes my hand, and when I look at him he smiles.

STARGAZE EXCLUSIVE!

CHAOS AT SOFT OPENING: RAE ROSE SPOTTED, HUXLEY BROTHERS THROW DOWN, AND A RESTAURANT LAUNCH GOES UP IN SMOKE!

Though not a typical culinary hot spot, Rome, Kentucky, experienced an exciting event Sunday: the Greenhouse's soft opening. And let's just say it served up more than home-grown food. We're talking a celebrity sighting, behind-the-scenes meltdowns, and a brawl between two hot brothers. And yes, we were there to catch the chaos.

First up: The pop princess herself, Rae Rose, was spotted out for the first time in months since ending her tour, on-site and dressed to impress. Donning a denim flare miniskirt dress and leather platform sandals, she looked like sexy, Southern royalty, leaving fans to wonder: Is a country album on the horizon? Security kept the press outside, but insiders say Rae was seated at a private table with family, sipping something citrusy and fizzy, enjoying herself with food and boisterous laughter.

As for the restaurant? Reports say it started strong—jalapeño cornbread? Yes, please!—but things went off the rails fast. “The chef was in a tizzy at one point, coming out to give a guest an EpiPen!” claimed one guest who asked to remain anonymous (but he definitely lives for drama). Dishes were delayed, the kitchen was slammed, but nothing compared to the drama cooking outside.

In the parking lot, the *main course* was served: a full-blown sibling tussle between James Huxley (farm owner) and his brother, Tommy Huxley (owner of SaltHaus) right outside the main Greenhouse doors. Video clips show raised voices, some finger-pointing, and a shouting match that boiled into a fist-throwing brawl. Staff scrambled, guests gawked, and Rae Rose? She reportedly stayed sequestered behind a wall of her security team.

So what sparked the throwdown? No confirmation yet, but we're hearing rumors of power struggles, long-standing family tension,

and maybe—just maybe—a romantic rivalry that's heating up faster than that skillet chocolate chip cookie guests were raving about. This journalist has to wonder, is it a coincidence the feud took place in the same location where Mrs. Rose was present? Or perhaps—could her marriage to pie shop owner Noah Walker be on the rocks while she's at the top of a love triangle affair?

No statements have been made, but trust us, the drama's only getting started. Though the staff may still be finding their rhythm, the Greenhouse is officially the hottest ticket in town. Whether you're there for the honey butter or the spectacle, one thing's clear: **You won't leave hungry.**

THE GATHERER

A Taste of Comfort and Creativity: The Greenhouse Opens in Rome, Kentucky

After a flurry of headlines and controversy surrounding the soft launch of a new Southern-inspired restaurant by restaurateur Tommy Huxley, *The Gatherer* made it a priority to secure a seat at opening night to experience the buzz firsthand. What we discovered? Rome, Kentucky's culinary scene has officially leveled up with the debut of the Greenhouse—a cozy yet elevated eatery tucked into the heart of Huxley Farm.

Helmed by local chef Madison Walker, the restaurant leans into seasonal ingredients, many harvested from the farm steps from the kitchen. And though *TMZ* reported high drama during the Greenhouse's soft opening two weeks ago, what we found on opening night was nothing but Southern comfort at its most delicious.

Guests were treated to cast-iron jalapeño cornbread and buttermilk biscuits accompanied by whipped honey ricotta and house peach preserves, a crispy cornmeal-crusted catfish served over

charred scallion grits, and a showstopping heirloom and fried green tomato stack layered with goat cheese mousse and finished with a black pepper molasses drizzle. With greenhouse-style windows, hand-thrown pottery from a local artist, and warm, golden lighting, the space strikes a seamless balance between rustic charm and refined elegance.

What truly sets the Greenhouse apart, though, is its mission: This is food with heart and memory. Chef Walker, who returned home after graduating from culinary school in New York, brings both skill and soul to her menu. Each bite feels personal, almost like a love letter to the town that raised her. The service is warm without being cloying, and the staff's pride in the restaurant is palpable.

When asked to comment on the gossip surrounding the soft launch the week prior, Chef Walker replied with a knowing smile: "That was a night to remember, and the truth of it will stay buried in the soil of this farm. But to anyone curious for answers, I invite you to book a reservation and come find them for yourself."

The Gatherer's verdict: The Greenhouse isn't only a new spot to eat—it's a place to gather, linger, and feel at home. It's a must-visit hot spot.

Dear Reader letter from Sarah

Dear Reader,

We have just taken our last trip to Rome, Kentucky, together, and I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for exploring this town and family with me for so long. What started as a scary, unknown project for me soon turned into a deep exploration of my own heart. I will always think of this series as a pivotal moment in my life. With my therapist holding my hand, I leaned into a lot of the questions I had about my own existence in these pages.

During these four books I experienced loss, depression, and love to a greater degree than I thought possible; faced a cancer diagnosis in my family; welcomed a new fur baby; built a backyard office of my very own; gained beautiful new friendships; and learned that I am incredibly resilient.

I'm crying now, thinking of how much I've discovered and processed about myself through these Walker siblings. Rome, Kentucky, gave me a place to better understand joy and sadness and how they often go hand in hand. I hope it's done the same for you. I hope you've laughed and cried when you needed it. And if you were walking through a dark time, I hope you felt incredibly supported by my little fictional town—and I hope it's somewhere you can return anytime you need a boost.

I am so endlessly thankful for you, readers, and for my entire publishing team at Dell and Headline Eternal, my literary agency crew at BookEnds, as well as my loving and supportive family.

And, of course, Chris—my heart and soul—none of this would exist without you and the inspiration your wild, delicate, unending love gives me.

Hugs and kisses to all of you!

Love,
Sarah

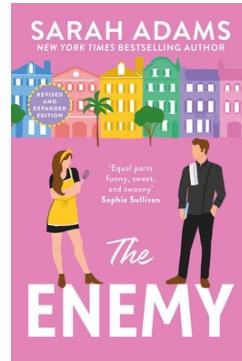
Don't miss the rest of the Rome, Kentucky series!



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Dear Reader,

We'd love your attention for one more page to tell you about the crisis in children's reading, and what we can all do.

Studies have shown that reading for fun is the **single biggest predictor of a child's future life chances** – more than family circumstance, parents' educational background or income. It improves academic results, mental health, wealth, communication skills, ambition and happiness.¹

The number of children reading for fun is in rapid decline. Young people have a lot of competition for their time. In 2024, 1 in 10 children and young people in the UK aged 5 to 18 did not own a single book at home.²

Hachette works extensively with schools, libraries and literacy charities, but here are some ways we can all raise more readers:

- Reading to children for just 10 minutes a day makes a difference
- Don't give up if children aren't regular readers – there will be books for them!
- Visit bookshops and libraries to get recommendations
- Encourage them to listen to audiobooks
- Support school libraries
- Give books as gifts

There's a lot more information about how to encourage children to read on our website: www.RaisingReaders.co.uk

Thank you for reading.



¹ OECD, '21st-Century Readers: Developing Literacy Skills in a Digital World', 2021, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/21st-century-readers_a83d84cb-en.html

² National Literacy Trust, 'Book Ownership in 2024', November 2024, <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/book-ownership-in-2024>



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