



Mid-Thirties, Flirty & Forked

ABOUT

My new billionaire boss has a "one fork" rule: never date employees.

Too bad we broke it the night before my interview when I thought he was just a hot guy at a wine bar.

Now culinary billionaire Christian Finn is my boss with no clue his new "authenticity consultant" is the same woman who rated his... skills... five stars.

As his cameras follow me around NYC's hottest kitchens, my sisters keep video-calling at the worst moments, Nonna's planning our wedding from Seattle, and that kiss in his penthouse kitchen definitely violated company policy.

HR nightmare? Absolutely forked...

Includes:

- ✓ One-Night Stand with the Boss
- ✓ Food Consultant/Billionaire CEO
- ✓ Italian Family Shenanigans
- ✓ Second Chance at Love
- ✓ Characters in Their Mid-Thirties
- ✓ Spicy Contemporary Romance

The first stand-alone rom-com in the Mid-Thirties and Flirty series. For fans of billionaire rom-coms, meddling grandmothers, gorgeous men in suits, and HEAs guaranteed.

Chapter 1: When Life Gives You Lemons, Order Wine

LUCIA

"No, Sofia, I'm not coming home."

I wedge the phone tighter to my ear, trying to drown out the curated hum of money and murmurs inside Château Marmont's rooftop bar. Beyond the wall of windows, Manhattan sprawls like a lit-up fantasy—gold and glass and everything I used to think I'd conquer.

"Because I'm friggin' thirty-six years old. And crawling back to Seattle after my career crash-landed once was humiliating enough," I explain, flicking my half-empty wineglass with a chipped nail.

My oldest sister Sofia's voice crackles on the other end, all the way from Seattle. "Lucia, you can't live off ramen and spite forever."

"Wanna bet?" I take a sip of the wine that's technically the last purchase I can make without overdrawing. "Besides, I've got an interview tomorrow."

"With who?"

"Some culinary consulting firm. Super hush-hush. Might actually be run by Gordon Ramsay in disguise."

"Do you even know the name?"

"Nope. Don't need to. Hell, this might actually be my last shot before I become a barista again." I pause. "And not the good kind. The apron-wearing, tip-jar-counting kind."

"Lucia—"

"Love you too. Give my niece and nephew big kisses from their Auntie Lucia. Byeeee."

I hang up before she can press further, breathing out slowly, like that might settle the nervous energy fluttering under my skin.

Celebration might be too generous a word for what I'm doing.

Coping, maybe. Performing emotional triage via overpriced wine and curated lighting.

Because I'm not here tonight, at this wine bar, to explain my self-destruction.

I'm here to drink enough alcohol to feel less like a walking cautionary tale.

Speaking of "cautionary tales"...

I drop my phone onto the bar, face-down. Not before catching a glimpse of the screen. A paused YouTube clip still loaded.

Family Table — Season 2 Trailer.

My stomach knots.

I didn't mean to watch it. Not really.

Just...morbid curiosity. Or emotional self-flagellation.

"Another Barolo?" the bartender asks, already reaching for the bottle.

"Why stop now?" I swirl the last sip in my glass before draining it. "I've officially invested more in this night than I have in my 401(k)."

He smirks and starts to pour.

"That's three glasses," he comments, eyebrow lifted. "Either you're celebrating or you're mourning."

"Bit of both," I say, taking a sip. "Interview tomorrow. And the death of my dignity."

"You know," I hear as I tip the glass even farther into the air, "if you're going to emotionally spiral through wine, you might as well do it with a vintage that doesn't punch quite so hard. That vintage of Barolo is like a kick to the chest. Or to the nuts, depending on what kind of night it is."

The voice doesn't come from the bartender.

It's smooth. Low. Confident without trying too hard.

I glance sideways...and promptly lose the ability to speak.

The man beside me is tall.

The kind of tall that makes you sit up straighter without realizing it.

He's dark-haired, the strands just long enough to curl slightly at the edges.

Clean-shaven jaw, sharp and cut like glass. And his eyes—molten amber, framed by lashes no man has any business possessing—meet mine like he's already decided I'm interesting.

Shit.

Finance bro, I think reflexively. Except this one's too well-fitted, too tailored.

His suit isn't flashy—it's lethal.

Quiet money.

Legacy money.

The kind that buys entire blocks of Manhattan and then leases them back for sport.

"And you are?" I ask, brows lifting as I turn toward him on my barstool, already regretting it when my knees brush his.

"Wondering why you're knocking those back like they're jello shots," he says, motioning to my nearly empty glass. "You've got good taste. Barolo's bold. But I'd go Brunello. 2018. Smoother. Less likely to leave you crawling on the bathroom floor."

"I'll try to take that into consideration."

"Chris."

"Man-splaining." He blinks, and I smile. "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought we were throwing out the first words that came to mind."

He lets out a low, amused chuckle.

"My name is Chris," he says, offering his hand like he's closing a deal.

"Lucia," I say, placing my hand in his.

Warm. Firm.

The particular brand of handshake that says I'm used to being in charge.

"Lucia," he repeats, like he's rolling the syllables over his tongue.

His gaze drags over me—slow, deliberate—but it doesn't feel sleazy.

It feels like being studied. Noted.

Filed away under "intriguing."

He motions the bartender and orders the Brunello before his gaze slides back to mine. "Beautiful name. Italian?"

"My family is, which means I've been raised on gnocchi and generational guilt."

He laughs again, and it hits low—an unfiltered sound that coils through my belly and settles somewhere indecent.

I study him—his mouth, his confidence, the way he doesn't fill silence just to kill it.

Most men in suits are so desperate to prove something. He wears his power like he doesn't need to.

Feeling bolder, I swivel towards him on my velvet barstool, leaning in. "And for your information, I picked the Barolo because it reminds me of my Nonna's Sunday sauce." I swirl the last of it in my glass. "Sometimes comfort trumps finesse."

"Spoken like a chef."

"Former chef." I shrug, pretending the words don't taste like ash.

Chris tilts his head, eyes sharpening. "What happened?"

The answer's too close, too raw.

But something about the way he asks—curious, not prying—loosens my tongue.

"Trusting the wrong person with my recipes, my family's restaurant, and my heart."

His expression flickers. "That's...a hell of a triple threat."

"Tell me about it."

He doesn't pry. Doesn't offer hollow sympathy. Just lifts his glass in a quiet toast. "To rebuilding."

I clink mine against his. "And avoiding the bathroom floor."

He grins, the expression cracking just briefly. Something about the haunted look in his eyes when I mentioned trusting the wrong person makes me want to pry.

But the moment is gone—interrupted by the bartender, who sits my new glass of Barolo beside my hand.

I reach for the new glass just as Chris shifts on his stool, and somehow—I swear this is his fault—our elbows collide.

My precious Barolo goes spinning through the air.

The wine flies.

Time slows.

Crimson arcs through the air and crashes spectacularly across his crisp white shirt like some kind of ironic murder scene.

"Oh my God," I breathe, grabbing for the cloth napkins like a woman possessed. "I am so sorry—I never spill things. Ever. I'm literally known for my coordination—"

"Lucia."

"—I mean, unless you count that one time in culinary school, but it was one glass and I was drunk and—"

"Lucia."

"—this is clearly my fault, and your shirt looks expensive, and I should pay for dry cleaning except I can't even afford a dry spell right now, let alone dry cleaning—"

He catches my hands in his.

Warm. Steady. Still.

"Breathe."

I freeze.

He's smiling.

Not pitying, not annoyed. Entertained.

"You're not upset?" I ask.

"I'm drenched in wine and talking to a beautiful woman. I'm many things right now, but upset isn't one of them."

Beautiful. He called me beautiful.

When was the last time a man called me beautiful and didn't follow it up with criticism about my "intensity" or suggestions about how I could be "softer"?

"I've survived worse," he says, glancing down at the red splotch spreading across his chest. "Though this does give me an excuse to change." His bourbon-colored eyes raise to mine. "So, are you coming?"

My pulse trips. "Excuse me?"

"I live a few blocks away," he says, calm as ever. "I make incredible midnight pasta. And you seem like you could use something with carbs and garlic."

Every rational thought in my head screams that this is a terrible idea. I don't know this man.

He could be a serial killer. A puppy-kicker. A food blogger who uses words like "mouth-feel" unironically.

But there's something about the way he's looking at me—like I'm fascinating rather than havoc-wreaking—that makes me want to throw caution to the wind.

"I should probably go home," I hear myself saying. "Early morning tomorrow."

"The interview?"

I nod.

This is dangerous.

This conversation. His smile. The feeling blooming in my chest like just maybe I'm still allowed to want things after the loss of so much this last year and a half.

And honestly? I'm so goddamn tired of being sad.

Being potentially kissed by a sexy guy at the bar sounds a hell of a lot better.

"If you turn out to be a serial killer," I murmur, sliding off my stool, "I'm posting terrible Yelp reviews about your pasta from the afterlife."

He chuckles, drops cash on the bar without even glancing at the bill. "I promise to make you a meal so good, it'll be worth the haunting."

As we step out into the glittering city night, I feel it in my chest —that stupid, gut-deep flutter that says this might be the moment everything changes.

But for the first time in months, I'm looking forward to finding out if that's true.

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