

Noyewr Café

Jasmine Grace



*A spicy
romantic
comedy!*

Noyewr Café

Jasmine Grace

Book one: Heartbeats in the Heat

VOYEUR CAFÉ

A Spicy Romantic Comedy

Jasmine Grace

Published by Jasmine Grace

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Cover Art by Gary Tussey

First edition 2024

ISBN 979-8-9892533-1-9 (Paperback)

ISBN 979-8-9892533-0-2 (Ebook)

JasmineGraceAuthor.com

For Gary. There wouldn't be a book to dedicate if you hadn't said, "Write, baby. I've never seen you happier than when you write. I'll take care of the rest."

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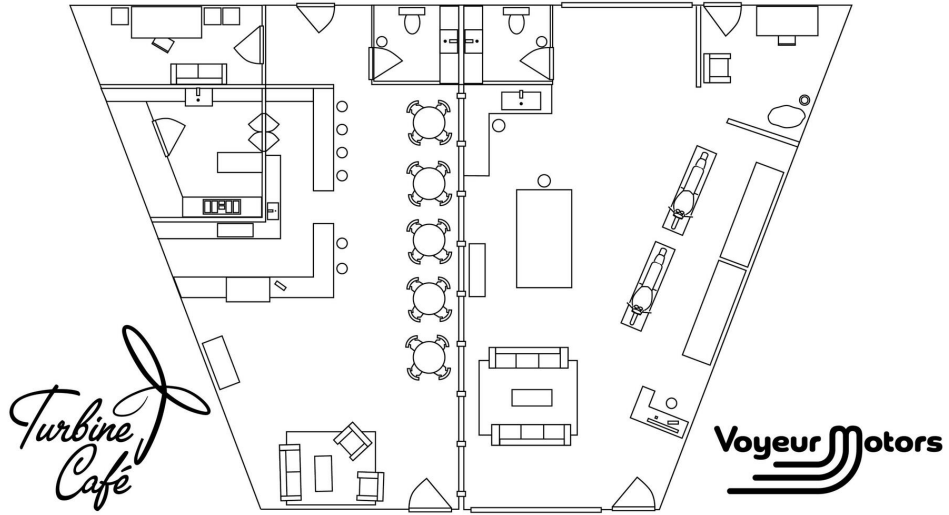
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FLOOR PLAN



AUTHOR'S NOTE

It is my intention for this book to feel like an ooey gooey romantic escape from reality. Real life is hard enough. Let's have a good time while we're reading our romance. That said, I do want to share some content warnings, so you can determine if *Voyeur Café* will be a safe space for you. Minor spoilers ahead.

Content Warnings

- Profanity
- Explicit sexual content, including voyeurism and exhibitionism
- Brief medical marijuana use
- Drinking to excess
- Mention of injury of a loved one, not depicted on page
- Mention of child neglect and death of a loved one/parental figure. Both happen many years prior to the main story, and neither are depicted on page.

Voyeur Café is a spicy, low-angst romantic comedy with no third act break-up or miscommunication. Intended for 18+

CHAPTER 1

Allie

Today will provide an opportunity to practice the art of looking on the bright side, Leo. -
Allie's Horoscope, February 1st

My mind reels as I jam my fingertip onto my phone screen's End Call button. Fuck that guy.

Pulse pounding, I close my eyes and take one long, deep breath in an attempt to calm myself. It does not work. *Suck it up, Allie. You've got a business to run.* This problem will have to wait its turn.

Fortunately, there's nothing like helping customers to take my mind off my problems. Unfortunately, there are no customers that need my help right now, so I'm left with cleaning to keep my mind occupied. I reach for one of our branded *Turbine Café* cappuccino mugs that's still on the bar from the morning rush, which promptly slips through my fingers and shatters on the floor. *How poetic.*

By the time I've retrieved a broom and dustpan from the back, Hector's already made his way up to the counter. He and his husband, Brian, spend the mornings of their Palm Springs retirement at *Turbine*. Brian reads the paper in the comfy chairs by the front windows, and Hector usually ends up sitting on the barstool next to the register, keeping me company while I work.

"You alright, Allie?" Hector leans both tawny forearms onto the counter between us. "What happened?"

The *Tur C* and *bine afé* pieces stare up at me mockingly as I sweep up the remains of the wide-mouthed cup. "I accidentally dropped this mug."

Hector leans across the counter, eyeing the ceramic shards at my feet. "Yes, Allie, I can see that. I meant what happened on the phone call."

My head swivels in his direction, sending the tail end of my ponytail tangling into my eyelashes. “You heard that?”

“You had the conversation at sharing volume.” Hector waves a hand to gesture at the rest of the shop. “We all heard it.”

Carefully unravelling my hair from my lashes, I cringe. “All of you?”

“All of us.” Hector nods.

I shouldn’t be surprised. No one’s ever described me as quiet. Loud, bold, outspoken? Absolutely.

At least, ‘All of us’ doesn’t include many people this morning. A tiny silver lining. Brian’s in his favorite orange chair next to the giant potted palm, completely unbothered as usual. Another regular, a pink-haired retiree named Daisy, draws in her sketchbook on the opposite side of the room. She can’t hear too well anymore, and even if she could, she’s slow to judge.

Actually, the only people in here who don’t bring me gifts during the holidays are a couple that’s in town from Minnesota on vacation. They wouldn’t be out of line in leaving a review to the tune of “The shop owner had a loud argument on the phone for ten minutes. One star.” *Yikes*. I’ll bring them some free cookies.

Hector waves a hand to get my attention. “You’re not getting out of telling this story. What’s going on?”

“Fine,” I sigh. “You know how Mel always said he’d sell me Station 19 when he was ready to retire? And I’ve been saving forever, waiting for him to finally give up the building?” Hector nods along impatiently, already knowing all of this. “Evidently, Mel lied.” I brace my hands on the counter in front of me and squeeze the edge. “He called to tell me I’ll meet my new landlord today.”

“New landlord? Today?” Hector’s incredulous voice carries through the entire coffee shop. *At least I’m not the only one.*

“Exactly. It’s bullshit.” I start pacing back and forth behind the register. “Some guy made Mel an offer without Station 19 being listed, and he just sold it to him. Never gave me a chance.”

“That’s so slimy,” Hector gasps. “Why would he do that to you?”

“All he said was he couldn’t turn down a good offer.” I stop pacing and try leaning back against the counter next to the espresso machine, which lasts about ten seconds before I start pacing again. “I don’t get it. I asked him every time we talked when he would be ready to sell, and all he would say was ‘someday’.”

Hector slides onto a barstool, propping his chin up with a palm while his elbow rests on the bar. “I know you wanted to own it, but would it be so bad to keep renting from the new person?”

“Mel said the new guy wants both sides. He has to honor the rest of my lease, but *Turbine Café* will be gone in six months.” Station 19 is split into two units, separated down the middle by a glass wall. My coffee shop is on one side, and Mel runs a touristy gift shop on the other. Or at least he did until this morning.

The glass wall is technically a wall of windows that start a few feet above the ground, just higher than the tops of the row of white, tulip-style, pedestal tables that line it on this side. Brass frames separate the windowpanes from top to bottom every five or six feet, but the overall effect is like having one long window between the two spaces.

Mel’s tacky gift shop was such a waste of a unique building design that no one ever bothered looking through to that side more than once. I’m just now noticing the cheap straw hats and palm tree keychains are gone, leaving only empty, dusty glass shelves. He must have done that last night when I wasn’t here, so he wouldn’t have to face me in person. *Coward.*

My best friend and roommate, Devon, was supposed to move her interior design firm next door when I bought the

building. She designed *Turbine* so it blends in seamlessly with the building's mid-century architecture, using pedestal tables, knock-off Herman Miller Eames chairs in sea-foam green, and those funky sputnik chandeliers with bulbs sticking out every which way in a spiky starburst to pull it together. She's had a perfectly coordinated design for her office in her back pocket for years. *That she'll never get to use.*

"Sounds like we have six months to come up with a solution, then." I don't miss that Hector says *we* instead of *you*. He'd do anything to help me, but he shouldn't have to. He's my customer and my friend. It's not his job to figure out my business woes. Still, he's in fix-it mode, and there's no turning that off. "What do we know about the new landlord?"

"All I know is I'm supposed to write my next rent check to Lucas Pine," I say with a sigh and a shrug.

"Lucas Pine?" Hector's lip curls into a sneer. "Sounds like a jackass."

"Lucas Pine *is* a jackass name, isn't it?" My voice is way louder than it should be for talking shit about a stranger, but professionalism is out the window today. "I hate him already."

"As you should." Hector nods emphatically. "I'll hate him in solidarity." That brings a little smile to my face. He takes the last sip of his cold brew, and I get to work making him another. His presence is the only thing besides staying busy that's keeping me from spiraling out of control, although his next question has the opposite effect. "So, do you have any ideas yet on what's next?"

My mind whirls. The shock of losing this place hasn't begun to wear off in the twenty minutes since I found out. "I have no idea." My voice slips out, lacking its usual power. "Station 19 has always been my only plan. I've never had a backup." *Holy fuck. I don't have a backup.*

Hector rushes to reassure me. "Don't worry. You don't have to have a solution yet. You have plenty of time." I wish I could believe him. Six months is hardly enough time to find the kind of solution this massive problem will need.

I know it's not unheard of to relocate a business, especially if you're renting space. But I cannot imagine *Turbine* anywhere other than Station 19. It belongs here. *Fuck whoever Lucas Pine is for taking it away from me.*

Six years ago, when I found this building, it was love at first sight. The mid-century icon oozes character and is generally cool as hell. It was a gas station in the 1950s, and the exterior still has most of its original details, including the old gas pumps on the patio. There's even an oversized triangular awning out front, in true mid-mod fashion.

This place is more of a home to me than anywhere I've ever lived. The community is my family and *Turbine* needs to stay put for them as much as it does for me. I can't relocate it. *I just can't.* I turn to my friend where he sits at the counter. "There has to be a way out of this, right?"

A boyish smile of bright white teeth takes over Hector's face, making him look younger than his sixty-something years. "Of course, there's a way." He's confident I'll figure this out, so that makes one of us.

I pop the lid onto his fresh cold brew and slide it over to him. He tries to pay me, but I insist it's on the house since he's being a sounding board for me while I process my life falling apart. "Seriously, it's on me. Go enjoy your coffee with Brian. I'll let you know if the jackass shows up."

Hector reassures me one more time before going back to sit with Brian in their spot by the front windows.

The oversized mid-mod starburst clock on the wall tells me I have five more hours before I can go home and get drunk about this. Closing my eyes, I take a few more deep breaths and start pulling affirmations out of my ass. *This shit happens all the time. Not to me, but to someone, I'm sure. This is going to be okay. Turbine is going to be okay. I am going to be okay. Every problem has a solution. I can find this solution. I will find this solution.*

One more deep breath, and I open my eyes to find a man waiting at the register. And not just any man, an unreasonably good-looking man who's watching me with focus that borders

on scandalous, sending a blush straight to my cheeks. He's all broad shoulders and sharp lines, holding a motorcycle helmet under one bulging muscular arm. Like, *whew*. I have to crane my neck to take him all in.

He wears a faded navy collared shirt, the canvas kind mechanics wear, worn jeans, and work boots. Tousled black hair falls over his forehead in a few places, but it's not quite long enough to obstruct the view of his big brown eyes or the envy-inducing lashes that frame them. *If I had those, I wouldn't be spending forty-five minutes and too many dollars twice a month to get lash extensions.* His face is framed by thick, stern brows and a perfectly square jaw that's covered with a closely trimmed beard, making the smirk pulling at his lips the only soft thing about him.

Oh god. How long was I taking deep breaths with my eyes closed and he was just standing there watching me?

Hector's voice carries over from the front of the restaurant. "So, this jackass named Lucas Pine swoops in and steals Allie's dream!" Love him for having my back, even if it is a little awkward that everyone else heard him too, including this gorgeous man. This gorgeous man who I am fully staring at. *Shit.*

Resisting the urge to ask him to come back to my place and help me get over my rough day, I ask, "Can I help you?"

He stares at me, unmoving, playful smirk gone. *Where did it go? I miss it.*

I try again. "How's your day going?"

Raising his eyebrows, he says, "It's been interesting."

Stifling an embarrassed laugh, I give him a little shrug. "It's been a hell of a morning," I offer. *How long has he been here?* He couldn't have heard my conversation with Hector. I would have seen him. Right? *Shit.* "What would you like?" I ask, unsure how to lift the awkwardness.

He doesn't respond immediately, setting his helmet on the counter before squaring his shoulders and sliding his hands into his front pockets. His forearms flex, and *damn*, what a set

of forearms they are. Firm, sinewy muscles define every inch of skin, sun-tanned quite a few shades deeper than the light-olive complexion of his face. He looks so at ease that the awkwardness must be all on my side. *Awesome*. “You were going to buy this building?” he asks. So he *did* hear my conversation with Hector. *Also, awesome*.

Not really his business, but I humor him so I can keep enjoying the view. “That was the plan.” I gesture to the skeleton of a gift shop on the other side of the glass wall. “Mel next door always said he’d sell it to me as soon as he was ready to retire. But he must have changed his mind because he sold it to some jackass named Lucas Pine and didn’t tell me about it until the deal was already done.”

A muscle ticks in his jaw, his expression tight, while he considers my answer. His hands remain in his pockets as he lifts his chin toward the gift shop. “What were you going to do with that side?”

“My friend is an interior designer. Her office should be going over there.” The man doesn’t respond, only stares through the window briefly before focusing his intense gaze back on me. *So, why’d you ask?* I try again to see what he wants. “Can I get you something to drink?”

He looks up at the menu behind me, considering it before asking, “Doesn’t that seem like an odd use of space for an old gas station?”

Okay, rude. Usually, I’m all for chatting with customers, but he keeps prying at the exact thing I don’t want to talk about. “Can I get you something?”

He ignores my question again, pulling one broad hand out of his pocket and pointing toward the windowed wall. “And the windows?” I wish Devon were here so she could level him with a proper glare. But she’s not, so my wimpy glare will have to do. *Damn my round cheeks and giant Bambi eyes*.

“What *about* the windows?” I ask him, lacing my voice with irritation, before I drop down to the bakery case to consolidate the pastries onto fewer trays.

He eyes me through the curved glass but doesn't speak until I'm standing in front of him again. "Do your customers want to watch interior designers all day?" The smirk from earlier returns, looking cocky this time instead of playful. "People sitting at computers, sifting through floorplans?"

Now he's trying to stick his nose into Devon's business? I won't be having that. "The point of the window isn't for customers to have something to look at." I retort, immediately realizing it isn't the gotcha I'd hoped it would be.

His smirk grows wider. "No?"

I plant my hands on my hips, not caring that it probably makes me look like a petulant five-year-old. I'm done with this guy. "No. It's not."

He takes half a step closer, full of broad-shouldered confidence. "What's the point of the window, then?" He thinks he got me, but he is dead wrong.

I recite the story I've told customers a thousand times before. "In the sixties, a man named Lou bought this old gas station and turned this half into a diner. He rented the other half out to a woman named Nora, who turned her side into a bookstore, and they fell in love. They were so head-over-heels for each other that they had the giant wall of windows put up so they could see each other all day long, never missing a moment of their partner serving lunches or stacking books." I watch for the softening of his posture and the "aww" face that people inevitably get whenever I tell this story, but it doesn't come.

Instead, he scoffs. "You don't believe that, do you?" What is *with* this guy? Of course, I believe it. I just told it, didn't I? Sure, the whole thing is a little far-fetched, but that's what makes it a good story.

"They used to come in all the time. Nora loved to tell the story about how they got together," I tell him, tightening my hands where they're still planted on my hips. "They're the ones who sold it to Mel. In case you missed it while you were eavesdropping earlier, Mel's the guy who sold this building to some jackass after years of promising he'd sell it to me."

He furrows his brows, bringing a momentary flash of confusion to his sculpted face before it returns to his stern stare. “Sounds like maybe Mel’s the jackass.”

My cheeks heat with frustration. “Mel is an exemplary jackass, but that’s the thing about jackasses. No one has a monopoly on the title. Lots of jackassery going around.” The black-haired man’s gaze is heavy on me. He’s thinking something really loudly, but I can’t decipher what it is. “Do you want a drink?” I ask him a final time. *If he doesn’t order now, he can fucking leave.*

His gaze narrows, considering something that probably isn’t his order, but actually answers me, “Coffee, black.”

Of course, this guy drinks black coffee. There are two types of people who order black coffee. The first type is the easiest, sweetest, lowest maintenance customer you’ll ever meet. The second category is the one he clearly falls into—condescending asshole.

“Size, room, name?” I ask. How hard is it to know your entire coffee order, black coffee man?

He doesn’t hesitate to respond, “Medium. No. Luke.” *So, he knew but didn’t say?* He must be the kind of gorgeous person who never had to develop manners. Or a personality. *I bet he doesn’t have one of those either.* The muscles in his arm strain against the sleeve of his shirt as he reaches for his wallet and a thick strand of onyx hair falls across his forehead, his deep brown eyes never leaving mine. *Yeah, definitely no personality.*

“Luke,” I repeat back to him as my blue marker squeaks his name onto a compostable paper cup with a turbine printed on the side.

“Yes, Luke.” He’s smirking again. In the five minutes that I’ve known this man, I’ve gone from being dumbstruck over that smirk to being glad it’ll be out of my life after I get him this damn black coffee, but then adds, “It’s short for Lucas. Lucas Pine.”

I almost drop the cup. Of course, this obscenely gorgeous and equally frustrating man is my new landlord. *Of course.* That is precisely the day I'm having. I should have known. He's the one who bought my building out from under me. He's the one taking away Station 19 and everything I've ever worked for.

Stopping the blush from overtaking my cheeks again is a losing game, but that doesn't mean I can't hold my ground. I plant my feet, taking up as much space as my five-three frame can.

Leveling him with my best Devon-glare impression, I say the first thing that comes to mind. "The faucet in the back leaks. The faucet in the bathroom leaks. The door to the parking lot in the back always gets jammed. It's not safe. Speaking of the parking lot and safety, there's only one light out there that isn't burnt out..." I continue to list every little thing that could possibly fall under his responsibilities as a landlord. *Turbine* is still mine for six months, and I'm sure as hell not going to make them easy on him.

CHAPTER 2

Luke

“Looks good on ya, kid.” -*Luke’s Grandad, Ernie Hudson, on Luke’s fifth birthday after gifting him his first bicycle.*

Before Allie and I ever spoke, she decided I was a jackass, and I decided she was the most stunning woman I’d ever seen.

It only took one look at her through our shared glass wall to stop me in my tracks. She’s flawless. Thick thighs, full hips and rounded breasts create an exaggerated hourglass shape on her short frame. Big green eyes pop against her pale skin, and rosy cheeks and plump lips define her sweet face.

She wears her emotions open, raw, and beautiful for anyone to see. Hands moving for emphasis, cheeks blushing at the slightest trigger, chestnut-haired ponytail bouncing along with every word she says. I was captivated.

When I walked over there to introduce myself, I realized all the heated emotion I’d seen through the window was directed at me. She believes I’ve fucked her over by buying Station 19, and she tried to punish me with a lengthy “fix-it” list. But I’ll fix anything that needs it. Saves me from doing it later when I’ve taken over her side of the building.

Allie rushes toward me when I walk behind her counter after retrieving my toolbox from the truck. “What do you think you’re doing?”

The counter forms an L-shape, with the register and bakery case on the shorter arm, parallel to the front door. The long arm runs parallel to the glass wall, almost all the way to Turbine’s back door, with the entrance to the kitchen behind it. She reaches me in a huff, grazing my arm with her perky breasts as she crosses to block my entrance to the kitchen.
Fuck me, that was nice.

With only a couple of feet between us, I have a clear view of the freckles that detail her plump cheeks and the nose that curves up a touch at the tip. I know enough about eyebrows from my little sister to understand that Allie's have been perfectly crafted into their shape. She's arching one at me now, which I'm sure she intends to be intimidating. It only makes her look sweeter, or at worst, like she's overly curious about what I'll say next.

I lift my toolbox toward the swinging door to the kitchen. "Figured I'd start with the faucet in the back."

"You can't do that." She puts her hands on her hips in another move that she means to be threatening but isn't.

She's so damn cute. "Can't I?"

"No, you can't." She moves a few paces to place herself more firmly between me and the kitchen door.

"Convincing argument." I take a step closer to her.

"You are infuriating, do you know that?" She takes a step back.

I step closer. "I've been told."

Allie moves again, letting out a frustrated snarl when she backs into the counter. *Did she just try to growl at me? Adorable.* "You can't do it today." She gestures around the coffee shop as she regains her hands-on-the-hips power stance. "I'm slammed."

There are seven people here, and we're two of them. She's hardly slammed. When I move closer this time, her lips press together and the pupils in her doe eyes flare.

Strange thing to hold her ground about, not having her faucet fixed, since it was three minutes ago that she told me to fix it. I look over her head at the kitchen door and back at her dilated gaze and remember the conversation I overheard. *She's having a shit day.*

Raising one hand in a signal of surrender, I back away from the counter. "I'll be back tomorrow." Walking away toward the jammed back door, I resist the desire to look back

for her reaction. She is incredible. Beautiful, feisty as hell, and not someone I need to concern myself with. I have mountains of work ahead of me getting two businesses off the ground. The last thing I need to think about is Allie Walker, no matter how much I want to.

The door to the parking lot is more pressing than a dripping faucet. I need to ensure it's safe. The steel lid to my army green toolbox opens with the same creak I've been hearing since my childhood. The toolbox was my grandfather's, and it went to me when he passed.

Light shines off of the glossy black-and-white photo of him that's taped inside the lid. In it, Grandad's leaning on his motorcycle, the same 1955 BMW R69 that he taught me to ride on decades later, at a gas station surrounded by desert mountains and palm trees. The photo fell off of the lid a few months ago, and I read the back for the first time.

Ernie, Station 19, Palm Springs, 1961

When I read the location, I had to go in person to see the place I'd carried around a photo of for years. Three hours later, my Honda CB had taken me from Ventura to Palm Springs. I was expecting to drive by a gas station that had been renovated to current standards or to find that it had been knocked down completely and replaced with condos. Instead, I found that not only was Station 19 still here, but it had been split into two spaces.

I had to have it. Grandad left me money that I got access to a month ago on my thirtieth. The timing couldn't have been better. The location is perfect. The fact that it comes with a stunning coffee shop owner who doesn't like me yet is just an added bonus.

It only takes ten minutes before I've fixed Allie's door and I'm crossing back into the side of the building that will soon be my shop. My phone rings as I flip the switch for the overhead fluorescent lights. The half that aren't burnt out flicker on. "Hey."

"Hey, Luke!" The energetic voice of my best friend, Cam, comes through. "How's day one of owning the most badass

motorcycle shop-slash-bar around?”

“It’s something.” I put in my wireless headphones and slide my phone into my pocket.

“That good, huh?”

“The fierce little brunette who owns the coffee shop next door has another six months on her lease, so the bar is going to have to wait at least that long.” I look around the dusty shell of a gift shop. There’s a whole wall of puke-green Formica cabinets in disrepair, worn brown carpet, god-awful wallpaper on every wall covering the original brick, and a dozen empty glass shelves and an oak desk that Mel left behind. “I’m about to start clearing out the shop side. It’s not much demo. Should hopefully be done in a few days.”

“Fierce little brunette?” he asks, unsurprisingly.

“Turns out she wanted to buy the building, and I ‘stole her dream.’ She’s pissed.” Looking through the window, I catch Allie trying to glare at me from behind her counter. *Does she not realize how cute it makes her look?* I lift my chin in her direction in acknowledgment, and she quickly turns away, cheeks flushed and brown ponytail bobbing.

“Sucks for her,” Cam says.

“The guy I bought the building from said the community wouldn’t miss her place. Looks like he lied. There was a line out the door this morning.”

“I can hear in your voice that you already feel bad about this. I won’t allow it.”

I flip on the mostly burnt-out lights in my office that currently holds three boxes of broken shot glasses, calendars for every year but this one, a stack of empty cardboard boxes, and all the tools I unloaded earlier this morning.

Cam’s voice grows even more animated than usual. “You’ve gotta look out for you for once, Luke. It’s not your fault someone you don’t know wanted the building, too. It’s business.”

“I know,” I grumble.

“You can be a charming guy if you want to be. You’ve just got to turn it up a notch for this girl. That’ll make life easier, I promise.” Cam carries on the conversation without me while I organize my demo tools, giving me unwanted advice about women and catching me up on all the racing stories I’ve missed this year. He’s in the middle of his competitive race season, and it’s the first year I haven’t been out there on the track as a mechanic.

“Cam,” I interject. “I’ve gotta go.” Love the hell out of him, but I need to get back to work.

Cam ignores me. “What are you gonna call the bar?”

“That’s what you’re keeping me on the phone for?”

“Just answer the question.”

I sigh, “Probably Ernie’s, or maybe Luke’s.”

“Very creative,” Cam chides. “But you can’t call it Luke’s.”

“Why not?” I slide my work gloves on and pick up my sledgehammer.

“Because you don’t run a diner in the fictional town of Stars Hollow.”

“Huh?”

“It’s from *Gilmore Girls*.”

“Yeah, I haven’t seen that.” I look through the glass at the people sipping their coffee and the brunette behind the counter who’s putting on a broad smile for her customers. I wonder how soundproof that glass wall is? Probably not very.

“Since you’ve chosen not to get your own pop culture education, you’ll have to trust me. Luke’s is taken.”

“Noted.”

“Also, if anyone ever asks, you’re Team Jess.”

“I can’t be Team Luke?”

“No, of course not. There is no Team Luke.”

“Wh—” I start to ask him why not and remember I don’t care. “Okay, Cam. I’m about to swing this hammer.”

“Alright, I’ve got four days free coming up next week, or maybe the week after. Fuck, I don’t know. But there’s three or four days, and I’ll be there to help you.” He’s a chaotic guy, but he’s loyal.

“Alright, boss. Later.”

“I’ll see you sometime soon. Probably surprise ya,” Cam says and hangs up.

~

It’s been almost a dozen hours of heavy manual labor by the time I lock up to head home. All I want to do is pick my dog Betty up from daycare, take a long shower, and drink a cold beer on my couch.

But I can’t. Because my truck is missing.

What the hell?

I find my answer in the form of a reflective white parking sign that I missed this morning because it’s largely covered by an overgrown bougainvillea vine.

TURBINE CAFÉ EMPLOYEE PARKING ONLY
Violators Will Be Towed at Their Own Expense

There’s a Post-it stuck to the sign, proudly displaying a single all-caps word in blue marker.

JACKASS

CHAPTER 3

Allie

Play nice today. Your gut reaction isn't necessarily your best reaction. -*Allie's*
Horoscope, February 8th

Turbine's massive starburst clock reads five-fifty-three when Bea rushes through the front door. She's running late for the six AM barre class she teaches at the gym across the street, which isn't unusual. Her dark brown hair, a perfect match for the coffee I'm brewing, is twisted into a fancy Pinterest braid that she definitely did while she was driving here. Her golden-beige skin is make-up and blemish free, and she wears black leggings and a cropped Poison t-shirt that's undoubtedly vintage.

I slide the iced oat milk, half-sweet vanilla latte that I just finished making for her onto the counter. "Morning, gorgeous."

"Bless you, coffee angel," she whispers as she hands me her card. Hugging her latte close to her chest before taking her first sip, she says, "I am Hangover Barbie today. I could never get through my class without this."

"I'll never understand how you do it," I say, copying her hushed tone and returning her card. In exactly three minutes, she'll be *on* and teaching one of the toughest workout classes in the Coachella Valley. "You're amazing."

"No, *you* are amazing." She takes another deep sip of her drink as she backs toward the door. Before she reaches it, Luke appears and pulls it open for her from the outside. Having his truck towed has not had the desired effect of making him disappear. Instead, he's been back every morning this week for coffee and working next door from sunup to sundown. "Thank you, door angel." Bea says. She silently mouths at me from behind him, "*So hot!*" before checking for cars and sprinting across the street.

A muscular blue pit bull steps in behind Luke, its steel gray fur interrupted in a few places by snowy white, including two front ‘socks’ and a thick stripe that starts at the width of its nose and narrows between its ears. “She allowed?”

“According to the FDA, it’s a hard no, but this early in the morning, I usually let it slide.” Rounding the counter, I squat down so the dog can come check me out. “New landlord’s a jackass, though, so who knows?” She ambles over and rolls on her back for me to scratch her belly. *I like this dog.*

Luke ignores my jab. “He’s good with it. “

Rolling my eyes, I focus back on the sweet face in front of me. “Who is this pretty girl?”

“Betty.” She looks up at him and wags her tail when she hears her name. I settle down cross-legged onto the slate gray concrete, the floor cooling my legs from beneath as Betty rolls her warm body into my lap. *What a sweetie.* I keep petting her and soaking up all the doggie love I can until I hear Luke chuckle from right above us.

On the ground like this, with him looming over me, he’s even more imposing than usual. I straighten my spine and square my shoulders, pushing my chest forward. I won’t be intimidated that easily. “Are we amusing you?”

“Endlessly, but I’m here for a drink. Service is pretty slow.” Does he seriously think he’s allowed to tease me now that I petted his dog once? *No, thank you.*

“No more pets for you, Betty. Sorry, sweet girl.” I point a thumb at Luke. “All this jackass’ fault.” When I stand up and cross over to the sink to wash my hands and arms, she whines briefly and returns to his side. *How could such a sweet dog belong to Lucas Pine?*

“Jackass? Didn’t know you liked me enough to give me a nickname.” He smirks. *Cocky jackass.*

“That’s not what a nickname is.” I roll my eyes while I slide a to-go cup for his drink from the top of the stack.

“I say it counts.”

“It doesn’t count.”

Betty leans her heavy pittance head against Luke’s leg and looks up at him adoringly while he scratches behind her ear. *Aren’t dogs supposed to be good judges of character?* Maybe Betty’s too loving to perceive the truth about her human.

I place his drink on the counter between us. “Medium coffee, no room.”

Luke pays in cash and picks up his cup. “Thanks, sweetheart.”

“Oh, nope. Nope, nope, nope. I hate that already.” A smile takes over his entire bearded face, clearly pleased with himself. *Dammit.*

“Noted,” he replies with smooth confidence.

“What are you doing here so early, anyway?” I enjoy the quiet of a solo opening shift, and if he’s banging around on his side all morning, he’ll ruin it.

“You’re here,” he says. Like that’s a reason.

“I run a coffee shop. Sleeping in isn’t a part of my life. But it should be for you.”

“Not today. Too much to do.”

He’s been tearing up Mel’s old shop all week, and it’s been as loud as his presence in my life is obnoxious. “Whatever you’re doing today had better not be so damn loud. I’m losing business over it. How much longer until you—” I twinkle my fingers toward the windowed wall. I have no idea what he’s doing over there besides being a nuisance.

Luke finishes the thought. “Until I finish demo and open my motorcycle shop?”

A fucking motorcycle shop? Eew. That’s the last thing Station 19 needs. “Really? What for? Is this building even zoned for that?”

Luke takes a slow, deliberate sip of his coffee before he responds. “Sweetheart, you’re asking if this old gas station,”

he lifts his chin and leans toward me, “is zoned for mechanic work?”

I pull my lips in a tight line. “Doesn’t make a difference to me anyway, does it? You took the building.”

If my words have an effect on him, he doesn’t show it. He’s completely at ease, strong shoulders relaxed, casually sipping on his coffee and scratching Betty behind the ears.

“What’s the plan for my side?” I ask, curiosity winning out over good sense.

His face pulls into something unreadable. “This’ll become a bar as soon as you’re out.”

My heart sinks, and I know it shows on my face. *A bar?* “In the meantime, figure out a way to get your shit done over there without disturbing my customers.”

I know I’ll have to leave no matter what, but hearing the details of his plan is like flipping through an ex’s wedding photos. *If I was still in love with the ex.* It would have been better not to know how Station 19 would move on without me, but I couldn’t help myself.

Luke just stares at me for a few seconds and then turns to leave. Betty walks beside him out my front door and back through his, following him happily over to his side. *His side.* That’s what it’s become. His side and my side. Him against me. We’re on opposing sides with a wall of windows running down the middle like a line in the sand.

I pull out my phone and text Devon.

Me: Can you get me curtains for the glass wall?

Me: I don’t want to look at his stupid gorgeous face anymore.

Me: I hate him.

Devon: Just got out of my workout.

Me: Oh shit, sorry. Forgot.

Devon: All good.

Me: I'm so bummed it's him over there and not you.

Devon: Me too.

Devon: That's a lot of drapery. Take it you don't want to wait on a custom order?

Me: Ugh I NEVER want to see him again.

Devon: Got you. Be by this afternoon to measure.

Devon and I found Station 19 together. She got a job after college at a design firm in Palm Springs, and I helped her move down here from Beaverton, Oregon, where we grew up. While we were apartment hunting, we drove by this converted gas station that was half diner, half gift shop. The diner side was for rent, and we got the idea that I should open my coffee shop here and move to Palm Springs with her.

Opening my own coffee shop was my go-to daydream, starting freshman year. In high school, people didn't like me much for reasons I never understood. Although even then, no one would cross Devon. She was like a tall, blonde, resting-bitch-faced shield that protected me from teasing glances and whispered insults. The only time I felt accepted when she wasn't around was when I'd sit at *Coffee and Trees*, our neighborhood's coffee shop, to work on my homework. The baristas were always nice to me, complimented my attempts at nail art, and included me in their conversations.

Working there was my first job, and a year after graduation, I became the general manager. Everyone else in my family has a master's or a PhD, but I knew what I wanted to do, and couldn't be convinced to go to college. For four years, while Devon was away at school, I worked at *Coffee and Trees*, saved, and planned.

It took an outrageous amount of convincing, a very thorough business plan, and a lot of Devon's design help, but eventually my parents caved and let me use my college fund to open *Turbine Café*. I still can't believe we pulled that off, especially since whenever I talk to my parents now, they still ask me when I'm going to get a 'real job.'

Turbine has been my life for six years. I love my employees, my regulars, the drinks we serve, the happiness we bring people, and the atmosphere inside my sunny little shop. First, *Coffee and Trees* was my safe space, and then with *Turbine Café*, I've gotten to create my own to share with other people. Every day, I watch my dreams unfold into reality.

But I could never have pulled it off without Devon. When I was starting out, she would cover shifts on nights and weekends all the time. She did the entire interior design for free, which was dozens of hours of work. No matter how hard I've tried, she's never let me pay her. Without Devon, there would be no *Turbine Café*.

Buying Station 19 was supposed to be my turn to give back. I was going to charge her the lowest amount possible to rent the other side so I could help her get ahead like she did for me.

Devon went out on her own last year, splitting from the design firm she moved out here for, and started her own company, *Friday West Interiors*. Working out of our little three-bedroom bungalow is not cutting it anymore.

I was sure this was the year Mel would finally retire, and she could move into Station 19. The perfect solution. Turns out I was only right about half of that. Mel did retire, but Lucas Pine sucked the life out of our plan with his stupid motorcycle shop.

Fortunately, the morning rush keeps me from dwelling on these things for long. The next few hours pass quickly, with a line out the door for much of it. By the time I sit down next to Hector at the barstool closest to the register for a break, I'm dripping sweat from my temples and my face is flushed red, even hotter than I usually am after a go-go-go morning.

"Why's *Lucas Pine* so quiet today?" Hector pronounces Luke's full name in a nasally voice, making it sound like an insult. "What's he up to?"

I look past Hector and see Luke carrying a cardboard box overflowing with other cardboard boxes to the back of his

shop. “I told him to keep the noise down this morning, but somehow I doubt that’s why he’s quiet.”

Marisol, a barista who works here a few days a week while her kids are in school, hands me a giant glass of ice water from behind the bar. “You always know exactly what I need, Marisol. Thank you.”

“You’ve been working too hard, and it’s hotter in here than usual,” she says before hurrying back to work.

“She has a good point, Allie. When was the last time you took a day off?” Hector asks, arching a dark brow at me knowingly.

“I don’t have time for days off right now, Hector. You know that.” He should know better than anyone. We’ve been talking all week about options for a new *Turbine* location. Between that and running the shop, I can’t afford to take time off.

Hector shakes his head and pulls out a brown paper package with a striped ribbon, handing it to me. “Open this. It’s for you.”

A gift? Unwrapping it, I find an orange pen and a toffee-colored leather notebook, detailed with floral embossing. “What’s this?” I ask, running my fingers over the grooved blossoms.

He taps on the leather cover. “Read the first page.”

I open to that page, and on the top, in orange block lettering, it reads:

Allie’s I-Can-Do-Anything Notebook

He turns on his barstool, so we’re facing each other. “You’re starting something big and new. It always helps to have somewhere to gather your thoughts. Oh! And the pen is orange because red is aggressive and black is boring.”

I pull him in for a big hug. “Well, dammit, that is really sweet. Thank you so much.” I try to imagine my thoughtful friend sitting on a stool here when this building is a bar, not a

coffee shop. I can't decide if I'm sad or maybe jealous, but either way, I don't like it.

Hector smiles wide, his perfect white teeth shining against his rich brown skin. "Now, look at this. This is the best part." He reaches across to the journal and flips to the next page. In more orange script, he's written:

134 Cactus Ave - 9am, Feb 13

279 Paseo De Montaña - Noon, Feb 13

2389 Desert Canyon Dr - 10am, Feb 16

He's been sitting at the counter with me this week while I've been scouring online for potential new homes for *Turbine* with attached office space for Devon. These are the addresses of some of the best options. *Did he make appointments for me?* I was going to, but I haven't had a chance yet.

"A little push to get you started."

I don't need a push. I'm already working on this. I force a smile and thank him. His intentions are good, and I know the correct response would be gratefulness. On some level, I *am* grateful, but I don't want anyone else to solve this for me. I reach for my water glass and realize I've already downed the whole thing. "Is it hot in here to you?" I ask.

"Yes," Hector nods emphatically, thick hair that's more salt than pepper these days flopping forward as he fans himself with his hands. "I thought maybe you turned off the A/C."

"It's ninety-five degrees outside. Who would turn off—" My voice trails off as realization dawns on Hector and me at the same time. We turn our heads in unison to see Luke walking from the back of his shop toward the front.

"This should be fun," Hector laughs.

"For who?" I ask, already making a beeline for the thermostat.

"For me!" Hector calls to me as I disappear into my office by the back door. Sure enough, our A/C is turned off, and it's eighty-three degrees in here. There's a lot of charm with a vintage building, but it has its challenges, too. The A/C system

isn't up to par with what it should be in the middle of the desert, so whatever the temperature is at Lucas Pine's stupid motorcycle shop is the temperature at Turbine.

Throwing open the back door, I find him in the employee parking lot. He's wearing a gray t-shirt that's practically soaked with sweat, jeans with holes in them that look earned and not store-bought, leather work gloves, and dark boots. I watch the muscles ripple across his back and shoulders as he throws a roll of old carpeting into a giant dumpster that isn't usually here. *It really is inconvenient how attractive he is.*

He heads back into his shop without seeing me, and I follow behind him. "Why the fuck is my A/C off?" He doesn't respond and keeps walking toward the pile of torn-up carpeting, back still to me. I follow after him, getting louder. "Hey, jackass! Why is my A/C off?!"

Still no response. I walk around and place myself between him and the construction trash he's headed for. "Hey!" I wave my hand in his face.

Luke pulls wireless headphones out of his ears and puts them away in his pocket. Maybe he wasn't ignoring me then, just listening to music. *Somehow, that's even more irritating.* "Why are you here, Allie? Am I not being quiet enough for you?"

"You need to turn on my air. It's sweaty as hell over there." I point over his shoulder to *Turbine*.

Luke wipes sweat from his brow with a bandana he pulls from his back pocket, the tendrils of his hair falling back against his forehead in a perfectly imperfect way. "It is?" He raises his eyebrows and tilts his head sarcastically.

"Whatever, I guess it's sweaty everywhere. But that's within your power, Mr. Landlord Man. Fix it." I turn on my heel, but before I can take a step, Luke's gloved hand is grasped around my elbow, stopping my progress. "What?" I shake him off as he walks around to face me again.

"Hold on." Luke's normally harsh brows crease with concern. "It's not safe for you to walk in here."

“I walked all the way from there,” I use my finger to draw a path in the air from the garage door to my feet, “over to here, my guy. I assure you, it’s fine.”

Luke follows my gesture and stares at my feet for a moment before he reaches down and picks up a rusty nail that’s an inch away from my tan checkered slip-on Vans. He holds it out in his palm for my inspection as he stands up. “It’s a wonder you didn’t step on anything. You could have gotten seriously hurt.”

I scan his shop. Its footprint is a mirror image of mine, with the front being a bit narrower than the back. This is the first time I’ve been over here since Luke took over. The carpet has all been ripped up, the brick walls are exposed again, although some are covered with paint, and there are piles of broken-down construction trash against the far wall where Devon’s desk was supposed to go.

With the furniture from the gift shop gone, there’s nothing obstructing the view of *Turbine*. He’s got a direct view from the front door to Brian reading the paper in his rust-colored leather chair, to the plants hanging in front of the far window above the self-service station that needs napkins restocked, to Hector, watching us with rapt attention at the bar, all the way down the entire length of my white quartz counter. *Lovely*.

Putting my hands on my hips, I tip my chin up at him. “Well, I didn’t. Now, why the fuck don’t you have the A/C turned on?”

He tosses the nail into a trash can a few feet away. “It broke this morning. There’s someone coming in a couple hours to fix it.”

“A couple hours?” I throw my hands up in frustration. “It’ll be a hundred degrees over there by then.” Looking through the window shows me Hector watching with rapt attention at the bar. *Great*. “You should have told me.”

“I should have. I’m sorry about that.” His tone is patient and calm, and he doesn’t even argue back. *Doesn’t anything upset this man?*

“Fine.” I try to take a step toward the back door, and he blocks me with his sweaty muscular frame.

“You can’t walk out in those shoes.”

That nail did look nasty, but how the hell else am I getting out of here? “I will be very careful and watch every step,” I say placatingly as I try to leave again. Instead of moving out of my way, he steps in closer.

“It’s not safe for you to walk.” His voice is low, intended as a demand. *Too bad.*

“Cool. I’ll just learn how to fly real quick.” I jump in place and flap my arms in an approximation of flying before I try to step past him again.

Luke smirks. “You’re very stubborn.” Before I can respond, he’s ducked down low, but instead of picking up more sharp things from the ground to clear my path, he wraps his arms behind my knees and throws me over his shoulder.

“What the fuck?” I shriek as he makes his way toward the garage door in the back of his shop. I try to squirm out of his hold, but he has my thighs pressed too firmly against his chest to get anywhere. His shoulders lift up and down against my stomach. “Are you *laughing* at me right now?”

His body moves with the rumble of his laughter, and I feel it in every inch where he’s pressing our bodies together. “It’s hard not to. You’re being ridiculous.”

“*I’m* being ridiculous? Put me down!” *I will never forgive him for this.*

“Next time, be more careful.” We’ve reached the parking lot, and he plops me down on the asphalt, holding his hands out to help me find my balance. I ignore them. *Like hell, I’m letting him touch me again. I’d rather fall over.*

“I am covered in your sweat now.” His shirt was soaked from working in the sun without an A/C reprieve, and now I can smell him on me. It’s not awful. *What? No.* I refuse to believe that his sweat smells good. I definitely don’t like it. *Nope, not at all.* It’s not surprisingly pleasant. Or comforting. Or warm and strong. *I hate it.*

He eyes me skeptically. “A little sweat is better than a tetanus shot and bloody feet.”

I blow out an exasperated breath, trying to remember if I have a spare shirt in my car. “You’re intolerable.”

“Thanks for stopping by, sweetheart.” He chuckles lightly and turns around, moving back into his shop. I’m staring after him in frustration when I catch the sight of Betty out of the corner of my eye. She’s lying on the cool concrete floor in Luke’s office next to her bed, directly in front of a fan. She doesn’t get up to greet me, only lifts her head and sniffs the air. “Yeah, I’m sure I smell like him. Don’t rub it in.” She wags her tail. “I do not understand how you live that with that man.”

CHAPTER 4

Luke

“You learn more about people when they think no one’s watching than you do in most conversations.” -*Grandad Ernie, explaining to nine-year-old Luke the benefit of patrons sometimes treating bartenders like they’re invisible.*

Betty and I get to Station 19 well before the sun comes up. It’s warmer inside than usual when I unlock the door. *Is the A/C broken again already?* Allie’s going to be pissed. But the lights don’t flicker on when I flip the switch, either. *Well, shit.* I check a few other switches and confirm the power is out on my side, but the red lights on the espresso machine next door and the safety light in the back hallway by her office shine in the dark, so Allie should be fine.

The breaker box on the wall by the dumpster in the back parking lot reveals a few of mine must have flipped in the night. Maybe there was a power surge. *Easy fix.*

It’s too early for overhead fluorescence, so I only turn on the dim light by the back door and move to the leather couch by the windowed wall to get some work done on my laptop. It would be a hell of a lot easier with some coffee in my system, but Allie won’t be unlocking her doors for another half hour.

The emails I rarely have to send are the worst part of my job, so I’m lucky. Normally I’m turning wrenches or mixing drinks, two things I love. Now that I have this building, I can do the same work, but for myself.

Lights flicker on next door, and loud music starts blasting. *Maybe I won’t have to wait so long for coffee after all.* Looking through the window reveals Allie pulling chairs down off of tables, bobbing her head to the beat of *Killing in the Name* by Rage Against the Machine. Her chestnut hair is down

and falls around her shoulders every time she brings her chin forward with the beat.

She plays indie rock and singer-songwriter stuff over the speakers most days, which I don't mind, but this is a welcome change. Her movements build with the music until she's fully dancing. I close my laptop and lean forward, bracing my elbows on my knees. Nothing on my computer is as interesting as Allie.

She bends to pick something up, exaggeratedly arching her back and sticking out her plump ass. Her jean cut-off shorts and simple black tank top hug her curves as she comes back up into a body roll. *Is this song sexy?* I never thought so before, but *goddamn* if she isn't making a case for it.

She sings along to the words, "Fuck you, I won't do what you tell me!" clearly working out some frustration. On the final line of "Motherfucker!" she holds up her middle fingers toward the windowed wall. Toward my shop. Toward *me*. Her eyes don't stay on the glass for more than a beat before she walks to the counter and picks up her phone. She doesn't know I'm over here. The lights must be reflecting off the glass and blocking the view.

She blames me for taking Station 19 away from her. Personally, I blame Mel. I still don't understand what he has against her, but whatever the reason, I have this building now, and Allie's hurt by it. Reaching my goals means she won't be reaching hers.

9 to 5 by Dolly Parton comes on next. What a follow-up to *Rage*. She's working behind the bar, calmer now, singing along to herself. As the song wraps up, she leans back against the counter and cradles a drink in two hands, pulling it up to her face. She closes her eyes, her chest rising and falling with each deep breath she takes.

When the song ends, she opens her eyes and takes a sip, reaching for her phone and ending her morning meditation of punk rock and good coffee. The volume goes back down to normal, and her regular acoustic style of music comes over the speakers. After tying her short black apron around her waist,

she wraps her hair up into a ponytail while she walks to unlock the front door fifteen minutes early.

Goddamn, the way she moves. The way she wears every emotion so transparently on her face. Stunning. I could watch her like this forever.

Scratching Betty behind her ear, I wake her up after she slept through Allie's loud music morning routine. She rolls her heavy head into my hand. "Come on, babe. Let's go." She doesn't move. "I need my coffee." She still doesn't move. "You want to go see Allie?" Betty pulls herself into standing and wags her tail. This dog is already obsessed with the girl next door.

When I open the door to *Turbine*, Betty looks up at me, transferring her weight between her feet and wagging her tail. "Okay." I tell her, and she runs to the front counter. Allie comes around and squats down low to pet her.

"Morning, sweet girl!" Allie says. Her voice is bright, and her smile is electric. "You're here early."

"Some of my favorite things happen before the sun comes up," I respond, even though she was talking to my dog.

"I agree with you." She cocks her head to the side. "How unusual."

I move over to stand next to Allie and Betty, who are practically cuddling on the floor. *They're adorable together.* "I can't think of one thing we've disagreed on."

She scoffs, looking up at me. "Seriously? Nothing. Nothing at all?"

"Not one, sweetheart."

She huffs and rolls her eyes before she stands up from petting Betty and crosses to the sink to wash her hands. She looks over at the currently brewing coffee and calls over her shoulder to me. "The coffee's not ready yet. I'll make you an Americano."

Spending a few extra minutes here sounds better than going back to emails. I sit on the barstool closest to the

register. “I’ll wait for the coffee to brew.”

She glares at me, or at least she tries. “The Americano’s better.”

“I know what I like.”

She eyes me from the espresso machine, brows raising and chin tipping up as she unhooks a metal piece with a thick black handle. “Have you ever had an Americano?”

“I haven’t.”

Her eyes widen, and she smiles briefly before she forces her face into something stern. “Well, you’re having one today.” We sit in silence while she makes me a drink I don’t want. She places it in front of me, lid to the side. “It’s super-hot, so give it a minute to cool off.”

We’re back to silence while I wait for the drink to cool and Allie starts on another, even though I’m the only one in here. The front door opens, and Allie’s face lights up at the sight of the dark-haired woman coming inside.

“Allie! My coffee angel!” The other woman yells.

Allie giggles and holds both of her hands over her head in the shape of a halo. “That’s me!” The contrast between Allie’s reaction to this woman and to me is striking, like she’s purposely holding her joy away from me. The other woman pays for the drink Allie just finished making and rushes back out the door.

After her friend leaves, Allie looks at me again and asks, “Have you tried it?”

“I was told it’s too hot.”

She rolls her eyes and snaps the lid from the counter onto my cup. “I didn’t realize I was going to have to babysit your coffee this morning. Hurry up.”

She watches me intently as I take the first sip, concerned with whether I’ll like the drink or not. It’s a nice change from middle fingers and ineffective scowls. I revel in this moment of her undivided attention, her teal-green eyes dancing with anticipation as she bites her lower lip. *Damn*. She was right.

This is better than my regular coffee. I bet she's insufferable when she's right. I nod slowly and drag the moment out for a few more seconds before I give her an answer. "My new favorite thing."

She throws her hands up, exasperated. "Told you."

~

"Let me see your office!" My little sister, Skye's, voice comes through the video call on my phone. She's been bugging me for a tour of Station 19 since day one, and now that the demo's finished, there's something to show her.

"It's more Betty's office than mine," I say, making a slow pan of the small space. My steel desk is pushed against one exposed brick wall, followed by open shelving for parts storage. On the opposite side, a grey drum fan points toward Betty, who's lying flat on her stomach on the cool concrete, next to a cushioned dog bed she never uses, an oversized water bowl, and a rope toy.

Skye leans closer to the camera, grinning ear to ear. "Hi, Betty girl!" Betty wags her tail at the sound of her name. "I love it," Skye continues, "all of it. I'm so proud of you. Now take me over to the other side. I want to see this coffee shop."

"No." The last thing I want to do is walk around *Turbine* while I'm on a video call with my sister, showing off the business I'm displacing.

She waves her hand at the screen. "You're no fun."

"It's okay, Skye, I'll show you later!" The familiar but unexpected voice of my best friend interjects from over my shoulder. He did say it would be a surprise when he showed up.

Skye waves from my phone screen. "Hi, Cam!"

"He will not show you later, but I'll call you soon," I say, and we hang up our call. She's in her last year of college, and we talk whenever she needs a break from studying. I'm sure we'll be on the phone again soon.

Cam tackles me into a hug, nearly knocking my phone from my hand. Releasing me, he pats the top of my head and messes up my hair. “You getting shorter?” I’m over six-foot, but Cam’s got to be four or five inches taller than me.

Stepping back, I poke his biceps. “You getting scrawnier?” He may be taller, but I probably outweigh him by twenty pounds.

“I am *lean* for racing,” Cam insists. He walks out of my office into the open space of my shop and gestures over his shoulder to *Turbine*. “If you’re so worried about it, come buy me lunch.”

I check my watch. “It’s not even eleven.” *And I was already over there once today.*

“Alright, I’ll go over there and meet the coffee-girl all by myself.” He walks up to the windowed wall, looking for Allie. “Which one is she? Baggy pants? No. Flannel shirt? Doesn’t seem like your type.”

I step in front of him to block his view. “Did you come here to hassle me, or are you going to help?”

“Can’t it be both?” His eyes light up and he grabs my shoulder with one hand, pointing through the window with the other. “High pony and Bambi eyes! That’s your girl for sure. You always were a sucker for the sweet-looking ones.”

Pushing his pointing hand down and moving him away from the window, I say, “She is not my girl, and this glass isn’t soundproof. Jesus Christ, Cam.”

“Sure, sure, but I still want a sandwich,” he brushes past me, heading for the front door of my shop. I follow behind him, not about to set him loose on Allie alone. As soon as we’re inside *Turbine*, he’s analyzing the empty motorcycle shop from this side. “Damn, you really can see everything from over here, can’t you?” He waves his hand back and forth. “No secrets between you two, huh?”

“Yeah, boss. That’s how windows work. You didn’t notice from over there?”

“I did, but it’s weird to see it from this side. What’re they for, anyway?”

“They’re left over from when it was an old gas station. Like the windows they have when you’re getting your oil changed or your car washed so you can see what’s going on.”

“Actually, that’s not why the windows are here. Your friend is lying to you.” Allie’s voice comes from behind us. When I turn, she’s standing there with that ineffective glare on her angelic face and her hands on her hips, emphasizing her curvy figure.

Cam leans against the ledge below the windows on the glass wall, trying not to tower over Allie. After I introduce them, she brings up the windows again, teal-green eyes glittering with anticipation. “So, you want to know where the windows really came from?”

At Cam’s urging, she repeats what she told me on the first day we met about the couple that used to own Station 19, getting more animated with each new detail. She seems to believe this story, but I can’t see how. Windowed walls like this are standard in a lot of auto shops.

While I was cleaning out my office, I found a black and white photo that had fallen behind a file cabinet that proved that at least the couple she’s talking about is real. It pictured a voluptuous woman in front of a lit-up Christmas tree with a note on the back.

Lou, now you can see me whenever you want. Quit staring through the window.

“Nora and Lou didn’t like each other much at first. He thought she was a spoiled princess, and she thought he was a selfish prick.” At that, Allie giggled. “Hearing an octogenarian call her husband a selfish prick will always be awesome,” she explains, sharing details I didn’t get on the first telling.

“A direct quote, then?” Cam asks, leaning forward and crossing his tattooed arms across his chest.

“Oh, definitely.” Allie nods.

“What changed her mind?” I ask. Both Cam and Allie look at me then, like they’d forgotten I was here.

Allie tilts her head to the side, chestnut waves spilling over her shoulder from the end of her ponytail. “Not interested in what changed *his* mind?”

Cam laughs and answers for me. “Nah, falling for the girl next door’s a classic.”

Allie narrows her eyes, then turns to Cam, answering my question as if he asked it. “Nora never explained it directly,” Allie scrunches her nose, considering, “but you can see in the way he looks at her, treats her, he’d do anything for her.”

A woman with pink hair and giant, thick, black-rimmed glasses comes up to Allie and wraps her in a hug, ending our conversation. She’s probably in her seventies but has the energy of someone much younger.

“Daisy, you look extra fabulous today!” Allie says, genuine delight coming through in her voice. Before walking away with her, Allie addresses Cam. “Nice to meet you, Cameron.” Then she turns to me, scowls, and hands me a list from her apron pocket. “There are a few more things in the back that you’ll need to get to immediately.”

Once she’s out of earshot, Cam turns to me. “Wow, she really does not like you.”

“I’ve been telling you...”

Cam waves it off. “She’ll come around. I have a sixth sense about these things.” Cam’s always saying shit like that, and for once I hope he’s right.

CHAPTER 5

Allie

Things are stacking up in your favor. Patience will see them come to fruition. -*Allie's horoscope, February 16th*

The property manager from the third place on my list flashes a fake smile at me as she gets into her car. We both know it's a no-go. That makes me zero for three. I pull out my orange pen to update my notes.

~~134 Cactus Ave — 9am, Feb 13~~

Too small. No windows in Devon's "office"

~~279 Paseo De Montaña — Noon, Feb 13~~

Too much \$\$\$\$\$\$

~~2389 Desert Canyon Dr — 10am, Feb 16~~

No personality. Also, too much \$\$\$\$\$\$

My phone buzzes with a text from Devon.

Devon: What was this one like?

Me: Stale air and disappointment.

Devon: Stop. It can't be that bad.

Me: It really, really can.

Devon: Don't give up. You've got this.

Me: I won't! Don't worry!

Devon: See you at barre tonight?

Me: ...

Devon: Tacos after?

Me: Okay, yes. I'm in.

Even if finding a new spot for *Turbine* in three tries was wishful thinking, I can't help being a little disappointed. Looks like I'll be spending my afternoon on my laptop searching for new options.

I turn my key in the ignition, and my car shudders but doesn't start. *Oh shit*. I do not have the energy for this today. I try again, holding the key longer this time, hoping it'll magically start. *What was the name of that mechanic again?* This is not how I want to spend my day. I flip the key back and forward again, giving it one more try, and it actually works. *Whew, false alarm.*

When I get to *Turbine*, Marisol greets me from behind the counter. "I know just what you need!" She's uncannily good at knowing what kind of drink someone 'needs' before they order.

In my experience, knowing your drink is like knowing your astrological sign or your Enneagram type. People wear 'Nonfat latte, extra shot' or 'Iced mocha, no whip' with pride, but I can never pick a favorite. It's not fair to the drinks.

A moment after, I sit down on a barstool at the counter and pull out my laptop to start my search again, Marisol puts a small ceramic cup filled with a double shot of espresso on the counter in front of me. Okay, maybe not *uncannily* good. I need something cold and refreshing that'll solve all my problems, not something hot and intense. I take the first sip, making a conscious effort to shake off the morning and bring a smile to my face. My employees know *Turbine* will have to move, but they don't need to share the weight of figuring it out.

A whirring sound comes from next door, and a look through the glass wall shows Luke and Cameron working on something below the eyeline of the bottom of the windows. Cameron is lanky with fair skin that barely shows through the tattoos that start on his hands, cover his arms, and run up his neck. Fire red hair crowns a head that manages to tower over Luke's significant frame. They're quite a pair.

The whirring gets louder. How is the loud part over there not finished yet? This is getting ridiculous. Closing my eyes, I take a long sip of espresso. *This is fine.* The whirring is accompanied by a bang. *Totally fine.*

Marisol reappears, smiling broadly. “Are you ready for the best part of your day?” she asks.

“Absolutely.”

She hands me an iced orange drink with carbonation bubbling from the bottom and cream slowly easing down from the top. “Peaches and cream Italian soda. It’s tart and playful, and I’ve never seen you drink one.” She points at the espresso I’ve just finished. “You needed caffeine first, though.”

I take the first sip and can’t help but giggle. *Uncannily good at knowing what people need.* Never should have doubted her. “Dammit, Marisol. You’re right. This is a good time.”

“I know.” she tsks at me before moving back to the register.

Cameron saves me the trouble of dealing with Luke by being the next customer in line. “What are you doing over there that’s so damn loud?” I ask him.

“Not sure if you noticed, but I’m not over there,” he says, laughing at himself. “I’m over here, buying sandwiches.”

The whirring gets even louder, and I raise my open palms and jut my chin out to emphasize my point.

“It’s not me!” He shrugs his shoulders and points down his long body, to show that it is, in fact, not next door. “Take it up with Luke!”

When I look through the window again, Luke’s staring back at me and Cameron, his facial expression indecipherable. Though, I’m guessing it’s not an apology. Grabbing my new comfort drink, I hop down from my stool. “I *will* take it up with Luke.”

When I enter his shop from the back parking lot, there’s a fine layer of dust in the air of his shop, and it smells like a

parking garage. The whirring is coming from a machine with a t-shaped handle and a circular base that he's pushing across the floor. Without the barrier of the windows to dull the sound, it's more of an intense scratching sound. *Lovely*.

He continues pushing the irritating machine, not acknowledging me. Between the whirring and the ear protection, he can't hear me, but I know he saw me walking over here. Hell, I'm sure he can see me in his periphery right now.

I am not interested in being ignored, so I move to block his path, checking the floor first because I am also not interested in being thrown over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes again. No rusty nails this time, just a thin layer of water that squelches with each of my steps.

He doesn't slow down, even though I'm in his direct line of sight. So, we're playing some kind of weird game of chicken? *Fine*. I plant my feet and put the hand not holding my drink on my hip, daring him to find out what would happen if he ran into me. Right when he's about to, the noise pitters out, and the base of the machine stops spinning only an inch from my feet. He takes off his ear protection, looking at me with a mix of irritation and a smirk of amusement.

"People are trying to enjoy their coffees over there," I say to him, keeping one hand on my hip and pointing through the window with my drink.

Luke holds my gaze for a moment before looking over his shoulder at my shop. "It looks like they're succeeding, sweetheart." My cheeks flame with indignation. He only calls me that because he knows I hate it. *Fucker*.

"Of course, they're fine now, jackass. You turned it off."

He smirks. "I should be done in an hour."

"You can't do this during business hours. We close at five. You can pick it up then."

"I'll finish sooner if you get out of my way."

He starts to put his ear protection back on, but I'm not done. "No. I have a right to peace and quiet. You can't impede

my business.”

He points through the windowed wall at the people enjoying their coffees. “I’m not impeding your business.”

“You have been since your first day here.” I then list all the ways he’s already inconvenienced my customers with parking, noise, and lack of air conditioning—even if that one wasn’t technically his fault. I’m proud of myself for leaving out the fact that if he hadn’t bought Station 19, none of this would be a problem in the first place.

Luke raises his eyebrows skeptically. No one has complained yet today, or any other day actually, but how could he know that? He clenches his jaw, takes a slow breath, and concedes. “Fine. I’ll do it later.”

Looks like this peaches and cream Italian soda is now my second favorite thing that happened today. I don’t try to hide my smile as I turn and walk back to *Turbine*.

~

The last customer of the day leaves, and I have twenty minutes to rush closing before my barre class across the street. I wasn’t technically supposed to be working, but I was here all afternoon anyway, so I covered for a part-time barista, when they asked to leave early.

The whirring from earlier starts up again, and this time, I can’t help but smile. I peek at Luke through the legs of the chair I’m placing upside down on a table, so I can bask in my mini-victory.

He’s pushing what I found out is a concrete polisher slowly across the floor, with his back to me. I allow myself a few seconds to admire the definition in his broad shoulders and sculpted arms as they move under his black t-shirt. bandana hangs out of the back pocket of his worn jeans again, but it’s not enough to obstruct the view of his ass. *Of course, that’s thick and muscular, too.*

Having a win, even a small one, on Luke should feel amazing, but the sense of victory doesn't come. He shows up by at least six-thirty every morning, so that means he'll have to work an eleven or twelve-hour day while his friend is in town. The sound was, at worst, mildly irritating from my side of the windows. If I'm honest with myself, it didn't have any impact on my business. Still, he should have notified me about all the noise and other disturbances beforehand, so I'm not out of line.

Devon: Here!

Me: Meet you out front!

Fortunately, Devon's text saves me from further self-reflection. She's waiting for me by the front door when I lock up, her tall, slender frame and immaculate posture looking statuesque under the lights of Station 19's triangular front awning. Her platinum hair is styled in chic loose waves that stop at her shoulders, the only person I know who can workout with their hair down and not come out a sweaty mess.

We walk into the barre class three minutes before it starts. It's packed, but Bea is teaching and she saved us two spots right up front. *Guess I won't be phoning it in like I'd planned.*

Devon leans over to whisper to me halfway through the class, "Sadie's coming to visit." Sadie was Devon's roommate in college and quickly became a friend to both of us. She lives in Portland, but one of the joys of living in a vacation destination is that people are always willing to come visit.

"Yay!" I whisper back to Devon, "When?"

Devon whispers, "Next month."

Bea comes around and passes out those blue mini exercise balls that guarantee I'll be sore tomorrow. Squeezing these makes every exercise ten times harder. Looking over at Devon, I fake a whimper. *Somehow, this class is even harder than I remembered.*

"Try to think about margaritas," Devon whispers.

Times like this remind me I don't know what I would do without her. Sure, I never would have moved here without her.

But even if I'd never left home, life without Devon wouldn't feel right. Hell, sometimes I wonder how I made it through the years when she was in college, and I was slinging lattes back home. Me staying home, insisting I'd never need a degree, and I already knew exactly what I wanted for my career was not well received by my parents, my siblings, my teachers, or really anyone other than Devon.

She always believed in me, believed I could prove everyone wrong. She'd stay on the phone with me for hours while she did her homework and I daydreamed out loud about what my coffee shop would someday be like. It's her voice in my head that tells me to keep going when I don't think I can anymore, which has been happening more often since Lucas Pine stole Station 19.

Sometimes Devon is there for me by doing something huge, like designing *Turbine* for free. Other times, like tonight, it's the small things. There's no way I would have made it to this workout without her as a motivator to go, but the quaking in my quads is just what I needed to take my mind off my problems.

"This is the last set, I swear." Bea smiles, counting us down from sixteen.

Thirty minutes later, all thoughts of a tough workout are behind me, and there's a margarita the size of my head in front of me.

"Tell me all about your day," Devon says, before scooping her first chip into the guac.

"You sure?" I've been doing a pretty good job of keeping my shit together, smiling, and acting like nothing's wrong every day while I'm at work. But that means every night when I get home, Devon's been a sounding board for all of my stress. "Haven't you heard me complain enough over the last couple of weeks?"

"You could try not complaining," Devon says drily.

I mock a gasp. "Okay, rude." Over her margarita glass, she arches a dark brow at me that's intentionally in stark contrast

to her platinum hair. That's all it takes for me to back down. "Okay, fine. Not rude." She has a way of cutting to the point that I can't help but admire.

"Do you need to elongate your pity party?"

"No, you're right." I knock some of the salt from the rim of my glass into my drink with the tip of my knife while I figure out how to positively frame my day. "It's actually a good thing the place I visited on Desert Canyon was so expensive. If it had been cheaper, I'd have been tempted to go with it, and we deserve something with more heart."

"We?" Devon asks, waving a smooth, ivory hand between us.

"Yeah," I mimic her hand motion, "You and me."

"Wait, have you been looking for places we can share?" Devon shocks me with her question.

"What do you mean?" I ask, my voice as frantic as I suddenly feel.

Devon rolls her lips together in thought before responding, "I'm not sure how I missed that, Al, I'm sorry. You don't need to find me an office." I think through our recent conversations. Many of them have been filled exclusively with my complaining. *Ick*. But I never actually *said* I was trying to find her an office. I figured we would still have a place together, since that was the plan for Station 19, and she must have figured the opposite. After giving me a minute to process, she continues, "It would have been incredible if we could have had a building together." She leans forward, her voice a touch softer than usual. "But you're not moving until August, and I need an office before then."

Shit.

A slightly hysterical laugh bubbles out of me. I have been losing sleep over trying to find a perfect building for Devon and me *totally unnecessarily*. "Guess I should've asked you what you wanted, huh?" I ask, between bouts of laughter.

"Might have helped." She nods, cracking a smile, light dancing in her deep blue eyes.

“It’s almost like I was making a bigger deal out of this than I needed to.”

“Maybe just a little,” Devon says, joining in my laughter.

The relief of knowing that Devon wasn’t counting on me to find her an office, so I’m not letting her down, is a minor salve to my stress.

“I can help you look if you like, research places, go with you to check them out,” she offers, meaning every word of it and knowing I’ll turn her down.

“Totally unnecessary.” I take a deep draw of my lime-flavored drink. “I’ve got this.”

I catch the slight shift in her eyes the moment she decides to spare me her *you’re not any less of a person if you accept help* speech. “Yes, you do,” she says, warmth and confidence in me ringing in her voice.

CHAPTER 6

Luke

“It’s not fair that you’re the man of the house, but it’s true.” -*Grandad Ernie, when nine-year-old Luke complained that none of his friends had to do yard work.*

“That’s the last of it.” Cam collapses backward onto the cushions of the shop’s leather couch.

“Move over.” I push his shoulder to make room for me and lean back and relax, the work of setting up the shop finally done.

“This was not a very restful vacation,” he groans. Betty leans up against his leg and rubs his hand with her head until he gives in and pets her.

I fold an arm behind my head, looking over at him. “Was it supposed to be a vacation?”

“Yes! I’m in Palm Springs. I should be lying by a pool, or golfing, or enjoying the company of,” he covers Betty’s ears with his hands and lowers his voice, “a woman with only two legs and no tail.”

“Should’ve thought of that before you came out here in the middle of my remodel.”

“I’ll make sure you have a lazy week planned before I come next time,” Cam says, and we both laugh because I’ve never had a lazy week.

“It means a lot that you made the time to come here and help. Thank you.”

Cam eyes me warily. “Fine, if we’re being emotional, I’m proud of you for making this happen for yourself. You deserve it after everything you’ve done for your mom and Skye.”

Not wanting to talk about my family, I look through the window for Allie. She's leaning across the counter between two barstools, with one toe pointed on the ground and the other kicked behind her into the air, giving me a direct view of the soft, rounded ass she's squeezed into tight jeans that gap at the waist.

"Are you listening to me?" Cam asks.

"No."

He readjusts his position on the couch, so he's blocking my view of Allie. "Skye and your mom are both doing great."

"I wouldn't say Mom is doing great." I shake my head. "She keeps asking when I'm moving back to Ventura. I've only been gone a month."

"You know I love your mom, but you don't have to do everything for her."

"I know that. I don't help Mom because I have to." Cam spent more time at my house than his own when we were kids. He knows better than anyone how hard it was for my mom. My dad dipped before my first birthday, and Skye's dad was only around for a year or two after she was born. Mom had a lot to carry between me and my sister, and money was always tight.

She never asked for my help, but I hated that she was struggling, so I started working as soon as I could to take some pressure off of her. Mom struggles to keep jobs for long. She either gets overwhelmed, bored, frustrated with management, or any number of other things. We got her house paid off years ago, which is the only reason I felt comfortable leaving. Still, I kept everything in the house fixed and her car running. No one's there to do that anymore. "It's not her fault I taught her to rely on me."

Cam sighs and reaches a long arm up to rub at the back of his inked neck, pulling his lips into a tight line.

"If you've got something to say, say it."

"I've said it all before." Cam sighs again. "It's not your job to take care of your mom. It was her job to take care of you."

I sit up straighter on the couch, bringing my eyes level with his. “And she did her best.”

Cam sits up straighter, too, matching my posture. “I know she did. I know. I’m saying you don’t have to feel guilty for having your own life. She should be happy for you.” That last sentence sticks. Her response to my moving away and buying Station 19 doesn’t surprise me, but it stings that she’s not supportive.

“She’ll come around.”

Sensing I’m done with the topic, Cam suggests, “Next time I visit my folks, I’ll go by and check in on her.” The tension falls out of the room as quickly as it came.

“I’m sure she’d love to see you.” I lean forward enough to see Allie, who’s still pointing her ass in my direction, and scan the coffee shop to make sure I’m the only one enjoying the view.

Cam chuckles at me, leaning into my line of sight again. “Of course, she would. She always liked me better than you. Plus, who wouldn’t want to see this?” He holds his hands up, creating a frame around his face.

I narrow my eyes at him. “I know I’ve seen about enough of it for this week.”

“Bullshit. You love seeing this face.”

Standing up, I wave at him to do the same. “Come on, let me buy you one more sandwich before you hit the road.”

~

Allie: I need another set of keys.

Me: Can it wait until tomorrow?

Allie: If it has to.

Me: Great. I’ll get them to you tomorrow.

Me: Have you had any issues with your power going out?

Allie: No.

Allie: Why?

Me: Having some troubles on my side.

Allie: k

That was the second time she's asked me for a new set of keys in the last month. I get texts like that every couple of days, with more questionably legitimate things to add to my to-do list. If she's trying to get under my skin, it's not working. I like seeing her name light up my phone.

Cam left six or seven hours ago now, and I've just wrapped up my punch list and put the finishing touches on the shop. It still smells like a warehouse, but soon it'll smell like a proper shop. Steel, oil, exhaust, and sweat. Tomorrow, I can get back to the closest thing I have to meditation—getting my hands dirty in a motorcycle engine.

Sitting down in the center of my newly polished concrete floor, I pop the cap off of a bottle of beer. Betty lies down next to me, leaning her boxy head against my hip. "Look what we did, babe," I say as I hold my beer out and motion around the room.

The wallpaper is gone, leaving most walls in their original exposed brick, and the rest is painted a simple white. Dark brown leather couches, a low coffee table, and a vintage, traditional-style red and blue rug take up the spot closest to the glass wall by the front windows. On the opposite wall, the refinished oak desk I repurposed from Mel serves as the front desk.

About halfway back—parallel to Allie's counter closest to the glass wall—is the wide wooden work bench where I'll disassemble, clean, and rebuild engines and parts. We added new black cabinets with butcher block countertops and a utility sink, with easy access from the workbench. On the opposite side are two motorcycle lifts, toolboxes, and loads of open shelving storage. Above that, a massive green neon sign shines *Voyeur Motors*.

The wider back section is still split into three areas like it always was. There's a small bathroom that shares a wall with *Turbine's* bathroom, a large open area with a garage door that opens to the back parking lot, and Betty's office on the opposite side. "First half of our plan is in motion."

I raise my beer to the sky, in a sort of cheers to Grandad. Building the shop is for me, but running the bar will be for him. I'm one step closer to honoring his memory the best way I know how.

Grandad ran a biker bar by the beach in Ventura until the day he died. I spent more time behind that bar than a kid has any business to because he couldn't drop work to raise me. He died when I was fifteen, but before that he helped my mom with everything.

She sold the bar almost immediately after he was gone. I had to know what the new owner did with it, so I rode over on my dirt bike—a Yamaha 125 two-stroke with a duct-taped seat and bald tires, that I'd bought from a friend's dad with money I'd saved up doing odd jobs and mowing lawns.

When I got there, the building was boarded up and marked for demolition. Whoever bought it felt the community would be better served by a strip mall than a classic biker bar. They knocked down his legacy, and I decided then that I'd open a new one to honor him one day.

I knew cheap beer, leather cuts, and lines of Harleys wasn't what I wanted, which is why I knew I had to have Station 19. I'll have a bike shop and a bar that work together, but each will have their own identity. *Voyeur Motors* can be entertainment for people at the bar, but they won't have to be bikers to enjoy a drink there. The windowed wall between is the key that makes it work, and the reason I moved to Palm Springs.

Betty and I sit in relative silence for quite a while, her sleeping with her head against my hip, and me resting my forearms on my bent knees, holding the beer suspended loosely between my fingertips while I reflect on Grandad. The

only sounds are the subtle buzz of neon and Allie's Taylor Swift playlist coming through the windows.

Her place is closed, but she hasn't left yet. She was already here when I showed up at six-thirty this morning, making this the third time this week we worked simultaneous twelve-hour days. She's dancing to the music, ponytail bobbing to the beat, lighting up the whole place. She's got to be exhausted, but her mouth is stretched into an electric smile, anyway.

I wait to leave until she heads out, so she's not in the parking lot alone at night. I wave to her, and she lifts her hand in the least enthusiastic version of a wave a person could muster. Chuckling under my breath, I open the passenger door for Betty. I've earned myself a place as the only exception to Allie's kindness.

I shouldn't let myself dwell on it. She won't be the girl next door for long, but I spend the whole drive home trying to figure out how to get in her good graces without giving her the one thing I have that she wants—Station 19.

CHAPTER 7

Allie

Take time today to reflect on this saying,
'Can't see the forest for the trees' -*Allie's*
Horoscope, March 12th

"You need a break," Devon says to me over her laptop screen.

I take a quick scan around *Turbine*. "Seems like it's about that time, doesn't it?" Grabbing my latte from behind the counter, I sit down on the barstool next to Devon's.

She holds her hands palm-side up and swivels on her stool. "No, you need a break from *Turbine* in general."

"Yeah, that won't be happening," I laugh.

Devon rolls her lips together, thinking before she responds, "It needs to."

"Why, though?" I copy her earlier motion with my hands palm-side up, gesturing around me at *Turbine*. "I want to be here."

She narrows her eyes at me. "When was the last time you went twenty-four hours without coming through these doors?"

"When was the last time *you* took twenty-four hours off of work, Ms. Friday West Interiors?" Devon is the last person who should be lecturing me on work/life balance. "When was the last time you ignored an email or a text from a client?"

"I can't ignore my clients." Devon's tone is unamused.

"You could let them wait for more than twenty minutes."

"You know I'm trying to hire an assistant designer. After that, I can consider a day off." Devon has been conducting interviews at *Turbine* all week since she hasn't found an office yet, either. "Quit changing the subject."

I try to glare, but it comes out more like a pout. “I like it here.”

“You haven’t answered my question. When was the last time you spent twenty-four hours away from this place?”

I consider it for a moment and can’t remember. *Dammit.* “I don’t know, Dev.” I wave my hand dismissively.

“You’re more than *Turbine.*”

“Of course, I am.” I snap back, my tone more defensive than she deserves.

She isn’t fazed. “Name one thing you’re passionate about that isn’t this coffee shop.”

This shouldn’t be hard. I’m a passionate person. I’m passionate about lots of things. *Except none of them are coming to mind at the moment for some reason.* If I wasn’t on the spot, I’d have a long list of passions. Devon’s face gets a teensy bit smugger with every second that passes. I look down at the drink in my hand, and it comes to me.

“Coffee! Making people drinks. Making people feel safe and at home.” Three solid things. *Take that, smug-face Devon.*

“You just explained why you’re passionate about *Turbine.*” She shakes her head. “Doesn’t count.”

“Why are you pushing me so hard on this?”

“Because I care about you. You’re wearing yourself out trying to solve the problem of what happens when this lease is up. You need a break.”

“Let me get this straight. Last month, you told me I needed to quit moping and move on. Now, I’m spending too much time trying to move on?”

Devon takes a measured breath. “There’s got to be a middle ground. You did a 180. You’re pushing too hard in the other direction.”

“No one else is going to solve this for me. I can’t ignore the problem and hope it goes away.” I push my chin forward and look through the window to Luke’s side, and Devon’s gaze

follows mine. That big, muscular pain in my ass has been over there all morning, working quietly, so I can't even complain that he's fucking my shit up.

"Spending every waking minute here won't make him go away, either."

"I'm not taking a break, Devon." Heat rushes to my cheeks as I get more frustrated with this conversation. "*Turbine* is mine. I *need* it, and I don't know if I'll get to keep it after my lease is up. I've been searching for a new building, and there's nothing. I'm not wasting a moment of the time I have left with this place."

My voice threatens to crack if I keep talking, so I pull out *Allie's I-Can-Do-Anything Notebook* and show her the latest updates. It turns out that finding a building without Devon is not any easier.

~~367 Red Vista Ln 9:15am, March 6th~~

Reasonable price. Vibes are off.

~~124 Quail Nest Drive 3pm, March 10th~~

Not worth the drive.

~~89 Sunny Day St 8:45am, March 11th~~

Too much \$\$\$\$\$

~~323 Vista View Way 10am, March 11th~~

Guy never showed. Ugh.

Devon looks it over. "This is only proving my point that you need a break."

"Fine, but you have to do it, too."

Her posture is always perfect, but somehow, she straightens further. "I'm serious. I cannot take a break right now." Her voice is firm, not allowing room for argument. "Sadie will be in town next week. It's perfect timing for *you*. You'll get three days off, not just one."

"How did we get to three? And don't think I'm letting you off the hook about this."

“Nope. This is about you, but I can try to be on my phone less,” she nods her head to the side, like she’s making some great concession.

“If *I* can, then *you* ca—”

Screeech!

A loud metal scraping sound comes from the covered patio out front. Devon and I exchange a *what the fuck* look and then hustle outside together.

Screeeeeeech!

Screeeeeeee—

The sound stops as we come out the door. Luke is standing under the large triangular awning, broad tanned hands braced against one of my metal patio tables, obscene forearms flexed. *He’s moving my outdoor seating.* Heat spreads from my neck up to my ears. I squeeze my hands onto my hips and knock my head to the left, leveling him with my best *don’t fuck with me* glare.

It doesn’t land. Luke stands up to his impressive full height. “Hey, sweetheart.” He is totally fucking with me. *I’ve got to work on this glare.*

“Sweetheart?” Devon asks me, raising a brow.

“Devon, I swear to god—”

Luke interrupts me and reaches out to Devon for a handshake. “Devon, lovely to finally meet you.” *Lovely? Finally? Who the fuck is this guy?*

“And you are?” Devon shakes his hand, but keeps a scowl on her face, not giving him an inch.

“I’m Luke.”

“Mm.” She loads the single hummed syllable with unmasked judgment.

“So, what the fuck?” I ask, pointing at my displaced furniture.

Luke has the audacity to act confused. He looks back and forth between Devon, me, and the tables and chairs. He furrows his brow. “You know you have furniture in front of my shop, right?”

“I have furniture on *my* patio.”

Luke braces one hand on the table behind him, leaning back against it. “And *also* in front of my shop.”

“The whole damn patio is *Turbine’s*.” I barely resist the urge to stomp my foot.

His brown eyes spark, and his brows raise in a look that oozes arrogance. “Not anymore.”

This fucker. “You can’t just decide it’s not mine anymore.” My hands clench into fists at my hips. My ears, cheeks, and neck are all hot with an angry blush, but I’m holding my ground.

“I didn’t just *decide*.” He crosses his arms low over his hips and drapes one foot casually across the other. “I own this building. It’s all my patio.”

I’m about to lose my shit on this guy. I know he owns this building. It’s all I can think about. That doesn’t mean he can take it away from me early, though. “And you have to honor my lease.” My voice is barely concealing my anger, volume just this side of yelling. “I am here for four and half more months, so for four and a half more months my tables will stay right where they were.”

“Allie, I am honoring your lease. It doesn’t include the patio.” The look on his face borders dangerously on pity.

“Of course, it does.” I enunciate each syllable.

Luke closes his eyes and presses the heel of his hand into his forehead. “It’s not my fault you never read your lease.”

“Don’t tell me what I have and haven’t read, you jackass.” It’s been years since I read it, but I shouldn’t have to memorize it. *Fuck’s sake.*

He points at a seam in the sidewalk that follows the same line as the windowed wall, effectively separating the patio into

two. “You can keep using the patio from this line over.” Before I can respond, he stands up and starts walking away.

“You can’t touch my stuff!” I yell after him.

Devon breathes a silent laugh, and only loud enough for me to hear, she says, “Are you five? ‘Don’t touch my stuff?’”

“That’s not helping,” I admonish her, but I’m giggling too. “I hate that motherfucker.” I whisper-yell at her and point in his direction.

Devon looks across the patio to Luke, and she gives him her version of a *don’t fuck with me stare*. It’s way more intimidating than mine. I wish she was here all the time to do that. “We’ll move the rest,” she says, making one swift sweeping movement with her hand, shooing him inside the building. He nods and disappears inside the door.

“It’s like he’s taking everything he can away from me,” I say to Devon, my mind beginning to spiral, heart beating faster. *This is actually happening. I am losing my building. I’ve lost my building. I don’t have a new plan. I only have four*

Devon interrupts my impending breakdown, stepping between me and the door Luke just disappeared into. “Allie. This is okay. You are okay.”

I nod, taking a deep breath. *Fuck. Maybe I do need a few days off.*

“I’ll make this work. It’ll be a cozier patio situation now.”

“It’s fine, Dev. I’ll find places for everything.”

“Can’t let you do that,” she scoffs. “*Turbine Café* is featured prominently on my website. I can’t have people driving by and thinking I just threw the tables out here haphazardly into corners.”

“I wouldn’t throw them haphazardly.” I say with some level of defeat. We both know I have no design sense.

Devon surveys the area, finding solutions I don’t have the skill or current mental capacity for. “I’m helping. Deal with

it.” She walks around the patio, humming to herself meaningfully while she considers the new layout.

She points to the large window next to Turbine’s front door. “We can put three tables together right there, so it’s like one long community table.” Then she points to an empty space in the corner. “I’ve always felt that needed a potted plant. Now’s the time.” We spend thirty minutes rearranging furniture and trying out different ideas before she folds her arms across her slender waist and smiles in approval. “There, it’s perfect.”

It may even look better than before, but I’m not about to admit it. We have one table pushed right up against the line that Luke pointed out on the sidewalk. I move it three inches across the line, just to fuck with him. “There, now it’s really perfect.”

CHAPTER 8

Luke

“It’s still not fair that you’re the man of the house, but it’s still true.” -*Grandad Ernie, to ten-year-old Luke, after Skye’s dad left.*

The breaker box creaks as I pull the door open. It’s common enough for sections of my power to go out during the night that I check the box before I even go inside the shop now. Six on my side are flipped today, and like usual, none on Allie’s. *Doesn’t she realize how obvious that is?*

Me: Still no issues with your power?

Allie: I’d tell you.

Allie: Keep the noise down today.

Me: Noise?

Allie: Engines and stuff.

Me: I have to test motors.

Allie: Customers are complaining.

Me: No they’re not.

Allie: How would you know.

Me: Allie. I know everything.

~

“Looks great over there. Really came together.” The man waiting next to me for his coffee says, pointing through the window to my shop. He looks to be in his late sixties, about my height with fair skin and iron gray hair accented with streaks of silver. His thick, black-rimmed glasses and light blue oxford shirt give him a distinguished quality. We haven’t

met before, but I see him every day reading his paper in a leather chair by the front window.

“Thank you,” I nod. “Feels good to have that part finished and finally be working on bikes again. I missed it.”

“I’m Brian,” he says, offering his hand. “I don’t think we’ve met officially.”

“Luke,” I say, smiling as I return his firm handshake. He’s the first regular to introduce himself to me. Everyone is fiercely loyal to Allie, which I can’t blame them for.

“Join us for a bit?” Brian offers warmly once we both have our drinks. He points toward a man with copper-brown skin and full, graying black hair, who I imagine is his husband, sitting by the front window. He wears a navy button-down polo with white stitching and tailored khakis. I recognize him, too. Allie was talking to him the first time I heard her call me a jackass. He shot me some dirty looks in those first couple of weeks, but right now, his expression is neutral.

“Hi, Luke. I’m Hector.” He introduces himself as I take the seat across from him and Brian takes the one next to him. He acknowledges the surprised look on my face before I realize I’m making it. “Of course, I know your name. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“So, Luke, tell us about yourself,” Brian says, interlocking his fingers and leaning forward in his seat. The conversation immediately takes on a *meeting the parents* tone I wasn’t expecting, and I instinctively run my fingers through my hair like a nervous teenager. This seating area even lends itself to a living room feel. A large, decidedly mid-century modern, green and blue, geometric rug anchors four rust-colored leather chairs arranged around a coffee table that holds Brian’s discarded newspaper and a few art and design books.

“Where are you from? What’s with the motorcycles? Why Palm Springs?” Hector elaborates. “Allie mentioned you want to turn *Turbine* into a bar.” His voice is kind, but his shoulders stiffen.

“That’s part of the *why here* answer.” I give them a brief explanation of growing up in Ventura and my reasoning for moving to Palm Springs. Neither is surprised I’d move out here for Station 19.

Brian tries to hide a smile by taking a sip of his drink.

“Dammit,” Hector says, throwing his arms up in the air. “That’s sweet. It’s inconvenient for us that you’re not actually a jackass.”

I can’t help but laugh, feeling like I passed a test. “How so?”

Hector leans back in his chair, crossing one ankle over the opposite knee before he responds. “Aside from the fact that we can walk over here from our house to spend all morning drinking coffee,” he pauses and takes a deep breath, “We love Allie.” Brian nods in agreement as Hector continues. “She’s a special girl. She’s got such a big heart. It’s crushing to see her lose this place.” He’s pulling no punches, and I appreciate him for it.

The ‘living room’ grows quiet with the facts laid out. This is Allie’s place, as much as I don’t want to think of it that way. It’s important to more than just her. *Turbine* is the home of a community, and Allie is its cornerstone. No matter how you look at it, my being here is the catalyst for an unwelcome change.

“Listen, we’re not trying to make you feel bad,” Brian says.

“Well, maybe a little,” Hector adds. Brian sends him a scolding glare, but I smile at him. I get it.

“We’re worried about our girl,” Brian says. “She’s been—”

“So, what’s the deal with all the motorcycles?” Hector cuts Brian off at a volume much higher than we were using before, clearly changing the subject. I don’t have to turn to know Allie is walking up behind me.

“I fix bikes that don’t run, so that’s most of what’ll go on inside the shop,” I say, pointing toward it with my shoulder. “I

also build bikes on spec and sell them, mostly café racers. Those are the ones out front.”

“The ones that made it so necessary for you to take over the patio?” Allie asks from behind me, voice thick with irritation. I have to suppress a grin before I turn around to face her, resting my arm across the back of my chair.

“Hey, sweetheart.”

“You’re the worst. You know that?” she asks, hands propped on her hips.

“I know you think that, yes.”

“If it weren’t for Betty, I’d never let you over here.” Allie rolls her eyes, then looks around and realizes Betty isn’t with me today. “Where is she?”

I point through the windowed wall. “I put a bench on my side under the window for her, so she can watch.” Two high schoolers sit at a round white table on the *Turbine* side, right underneath the window, waving at Betty through the glass.

“That is one patient dog,” Brian’s voice surprises me. I almost forgot he and Hector were sitting with us.

“She really is,” Allie says, speaking over my shoulder to Brian. She’s standing close enough that the warmth radiating from her heats my neck. “I adore her. I have no idea how this jackass has raised such a lovely creature.”

Brian gives her an indulgent smile. “Oh, he’s not so bad.”

She opens her mouth in protest, but Hector stands up and wraps her in a big hug before she can respond. He whispers something in her ear, and she tries and fails to stifle a laugh.

“Allie,” Brian says, “sit with us for a little bit.” She eyes the empty seat next to me and hesitates a moment before crossing in front of me to sit down, giving me a tempting view of her lush ass on the way.

“Luke was about to tell us what the fuck a café racer is. Weren’t you?” Hector asks, returning to his seat.

“Never tried to define it before.” I’ve got three lined up on the patio by the front door of my shop, but I know if I asked them to come and see for themselves, Allie would stay behind, and I’m enjoying her closeness too much to lose it.

“It’s a type of motorcycle, right?” Brian asks.

“Yeah.” I nod. “Most café racers start as vintage bikes, and then they’re modded to make them simpler, faster, lighter.” Hector and Brian both listen intently. Allie is the quietest she’s ever been, but I doubt it’s due to interest. “Once I’m done with them, they’re naked bikes, stripped of their bullshit. Mostly vintage leather and chrome. Nothing that comes out of my shop will have a windscreen, a radio, or a fucking heated cupholder.”

“So, you’re an artist who likes to get his hands dirty,” Brian says, thoughtfully tapping his coffee mug.

“Didn’t take you long to figure me out.”

“Brian is annoyingly good at reading people,” Hector says, smiling over his shoulder at his husband. “It’s impossible to hide anything from him.”

“That’s true,” Allie chimes in for the first time, agreeing with Hector.

“I pay attention. That’s all,” Brian says.

“You are hard to miss,” Hector adds, sharing a look with Allie that’s too brief for me to decipher.

Sometimes I forget that my view of Allie is a package deal with everyone at *Turbine* having a view of me. Turning my head, I point my chin toward Betty, who’s now snoozing on her bench next to the teenagers on the other side of the glass wall. “I guess I set us up as the unofficial entertainment for the day.”

Allie’s mouth widens into a knowing smile. “Not for long, Pine.” She pats my knee, then stands up and walks back to the counter, leaving Brian, Hector, and I to exchange confused looks. *She doesn’t want me here, but she can’t think that it’s enough to make me leave.*

CHAPTER 9

Allie

You'll burn brighter if you allow others to add sparks to your flame. -*Allie's Horoscope*,
March 23rd

Luke's truck isn't here yet. *Good*. I get to play my favorite little game. The man is stoic, steady, and unbothered *all the fucking time*. No matter what I do, there's never a twitch of irritation. But he's asked me a couple of times if I'm having issues with my power, so I think this is getting to him. If I keep at it, he might even call an electrician.

Locking my car, I rush across the parking lot, so I can do this before he shows up. The metal door of the breaker box creaks open, and my smile drops. There's a post-it note stuck carefully above the top line of his breakers, written in a simple, clear hand.

Morning, sweetheart.

~

This is a little precarious, I'll admit. My arms are full of the curtains that finally came in after Devon ordered them for me weeks ago, and I'm standing on one of our white, plastic tulip tables trying to hang them on my new curtain rod. The table is circular with a singular pedestal base, so when I lean my weight too far in any direction, it wobbles.

Not being tall enough to reach, I've resorted to hopping on top of the table and swinging the curtain rings toward the rod. So far, three of them are hooked. The three-day *Turbine* hiatus Devon is forcing on me starts tomorrow, and I need to be at the airport to pick up Sadie in an hour so I'm in a hurry to finish. With a little more oomph than last time, I jump to hook my fourth ring.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Luke’s voice sounds from the front door, startling me mid-hop. I miss the rod with the curtain ring and lose my footing, throwing the table completely off balance. Time slows as the polished white surface rocks out from under me, my head careening backward toward the concrete floor and my feet flying up toward the ceiling. *This is not going to be good.*

I squeeze my eyes tightly shut. *If I can’t see the crash, it can’t hurt me.* The curtains drop from my hands, and I flail for purchase, but find only air. *This is going to hurt.* The crash of the table hitting the concrete floor echoes around me, and I brace for impact.

My body doesn’t hit the ground. Instead, it slams into a solid, muscled body. Luke’s arms grapple around me, pulling me clear of the fallen table. He keeps me pressed tightly against his chest as he pulls himself upright, adjusting me in his hold until his thick arms cradle me under my knees and shoulders.

Luke’s chiseled face is inches from mine, tendrils of wavy black hair falling loosely across his stern brow. His gaze locks firmly with mine, a wildness in his deep brown eyes. Pressed up against my ribs, his heart beats hard and fast, almost as intensely as my own.

He must have run from the door to catch me in time. I try to crane my neck to gauge the distance, but he pulls me tighter into his warm embrace, surrounding me with the smell of soap and steel. A muscle ticks under the thick stubble of his square jaw.

He releases my gaze, slowly scouring my face and body. “Are you alright?” he asks, voice low and husky.

I blink a few times, but words don’t come to me. I nod in agreement. *Get it together, Allie.*

“Did you hit your head?” Luke leans his forehead toward mine in question.

Words still don’t come, so I shake my head *no*.

He looks down at where my hip is pressed firmly against his stomach. “Am I hurting you?”

Your abs aren't that hard, Jesus. But apparently, being pressed against his chiseled torso does make it difficult to speak. I shake my head *no*, again.

His heart continues to thunder against my ribs, holding me against him protectively, like there'd be a danger in putting me down. He speaks slowly, deliberately. “You have to be more careful with yourself.”

He's scolding me? All at once, I'm thinking straight. My entire body is wrapped up in his arms, and not for the first time. *This is ridiculous.* “Put me down.” He narrows his gaze at me, like he's considering if he'll comply. “Put me down. Now.” I wiggle against his hold, but just like the last time he held me against my will, I'm unsuccessful in freeing myself. *Why on earth has this happened more than once?*

He smirks—*that fucking smirk*—and walks me a few feet away from the fallen table, setting me down on a chair and lowering himself in front of me, so his eyes are level with mine. He carefully rests his broad hands just above my knees. *Dammit, why is that so comforting? I do not need to be comforted.* “You're not dizzy, are you?”

“I told you, I didn't hit my head. Why would I be dizzy?”

He glares at me, grumbling, “Reckless,” under his breath before standing up. “What the fuck were you doing up there, anyway?”

I stand up too, following him across the room. “What was I doing?” *Is this guy serious?* “What were you doing? You basically knocked me off the table!”

“If it wasn't for me, you would have fallen off on your own. I caught you. Or have you already forgotten?” he asks as he rights the table he made me knock over.

“I wouldn't have fallen at all if you hadn't snuck up on me.”

“Snuck up on you?” Luke holds his arms out at his sides. “The door was open.”

“And now, thanks to you, I have to start over,” I say, pointing an accusing finger toward the pile of curtains now crumpled on the ground.

“You’re trying to hang curtains by jumping up and down on an unsteady table? That’s your plan?”

“What else am I supposed to do? It has to get done. I have to do it.” Stress and adrenaline have my pulse pounding loudly in my ears. The curtains are the only line of defense I have against Lucas Pine until I find a new building. *But what if I can’t find a new building? I’ll lose my business—my safe space, my purpose—to this jackass.*

Luke presses a flat hand to his t-shirt clad chest and points through the windows to his shop with the other. When he speaks his voice comes out with an irritating level of calm. “I’m right next door. I can help you.”

Squaring my shoulders, I move close enough he has to tilt his head down to look me in the eyes. He may be taller than me, but that doesn’t mean I can’t take up space. “I don’t need your help. I don’t *want* your help.” The words pour out of me, fast and loud, like the dam holding my self-control has burst. “I don’t want you here at all. I don’t want you next door. I wish you’d never moved here and taken everything away from me.”

His face goes stony, the muscles in his jaw flexing underneath his short-trimmed beard and the wildness in his eyes flattening out into cool indifference. He presses in even further, our foreheads almost touching. “Is that what you think happened, Allie? That I took everything away from you?”

“It *is* what happened. This building was my dream.” Heat has flooded from my neck to my ears, and I know I’m flushed red with frustration, unable to hide my feelings from anyone. I fucking *loathe* that my voice cracks on the next word. “Everything was hanging on it.” It’s not his fault that pursuing his dreams happened to randomly fuck me over. *But if I don’t blame him, who do I have to blame?*

Luke stares at me for a long moment before he steps back, leaving me blinking against the bright lights I hadn’t realized

he was blocking with his height. He heads toward the door without a word. I should feel vindicated, but something in my chest tightens instead. The brief moment of catharsis that came with speaking my mind fades into guilt. *Fuck.*

I'm still staring out the door that Luke disappeared through when a welcome and joyful figure appears. "Allie!" Sadie squeals and rushes toward me from the doorway, rolling a sensible black carry-on suitcase behind her and balancing a canvas bag of groceries stuffed to the brim on her hip. Her long golden hair is styled to perfection in loose curls that are supposed to look effortless, but I'm sure took at least thirty minutes to create.

"Sadie!" Her presence is like a burst of sunshine that breaks the heavy cloud hovering over me after my interaction with Luke. She sets her grocery bag down on a table and pulls me into a tight hug. "You're early, right? I was planning to pick you up in an hour. Did I mess the time up?" My mind races. Did I have it on my calendar wrong? Was she waiting at the airport for me, and I blew her off? *Fuck, how long was I working on these curtains?*

"No, no, no, you're wonderful!" My joyful friend rushes to reassure me, "I got an earlier flight and wanted to surprise you." She holds her hands out by her sides and spins in a circle, sending her sunset-colored floral skirt into a twirl. "Surprise!"

I pull her in for another hug and let her familiar scent of vanilla and orange blossom flood my senses. "I love this surprise. What do you need? Are you hungry? Do you need a drink? We get to start *Turbine* girls' night early now!"

Turbine girls' nights have been a tradition since the night before our grand opening. Devon, Sadie, and I popped a bottle of champagne, or three, in celebration and stayed up laughing and talking in the empty café until the late hours of the night. We all worked my opening day together, hungover, on three hours of sleep. Over the years, we've repeated the event every time Sadie's in town, with a couple of tweaks. Now we include food and make sure no one has to be up early the next day.

“I’m good. Just happy to be here. I’m *so* overdue for a vacation.” Sadie walks over to the table and opens the canvas bag of groceries. “I brought the yummiest charcuterie spread.” She pulls ingredients out one at a time to show me. “You will not believe this aged cheese I just discovered, and I got this honey the last time I was visiting my family in Idaho. I’ve been saving it for you to try.”

“You’re so good to me.” At some point, I decided a charcuterie board was my favorite meal, and no one has been more supportive of that than Sadie. “Tonight’s cocktail special has Sadie written all over it. I’m making lavender gin sours.” Coffee is my job, but there’s a special place in my heart for a craft cocktail, too. “Even made lavender syrup from scratch.”

“That sounds incredible. I truly...” Sadie’s voice trails off as Luke’s impressive frame casts a shadow through the glass front door. He props it open and a moment later walks in with a full-sized ladder under his arm. He doesn’t say anything or make eye contact with either of us. Sadie gives me a confused look, and I wave a hand to say, “I’ll tell you later.”

Unfolding the ladder, he sets it right where the problematic table was, perfectly lined up for me to hang the curtains. Sadie and I both blink at him, silently, as he walks past us again and back out the front door without saying a word.

CHAPTER 10

Luke

“If you quit running around, I’ll show you how this works.” -*Grandad Ernie, to five-year-old Luke, while he was tightening the chain on his BMW R69*

“Wow, looks incredible in here,” Brian says as he walks in the front door of *Voyeur Motors*. He tucks his hands into the front pockets of his neatly pressed chinos and tilts his chin up, taking in the space’s exposed brick walls, functional wooden furniture, buzzing neon sign, and the latest addition—a fern in a matte black pot on the front desk that my friends, Kiara and Rick, sent as a congratulations gift.

I thank him, rounding the Triumph I’ve been working on all morning. “It’s good to have you in here.”

“Can barely remember what the gift shop looked like.” He walks up to the Triumph and leans down to inspect it. “Looks like you’re already busy with work, too.”

I wipe the grease from my hands with a shop rag. “People were more ready for a motorcycle shop than I anticipated. I’ve got a queue of work lined up that’ll last me all month.”

“Glad to hear it. We want you to do well.”

He must mean him and Hector, because Allie sure does not wish me well. She was livid with me the other night when she fell off that damn hazard of a table, and I haven’t seen her since. The next morning, the curtains were hung, and one of her baristas dropped the ladder back off to me. The curtains have been drawn ever since, leaving me isolated inside *Voyeur Motors*. Brian’s visit is a welcome surprise.

He takes a step back, continuing to check out the shop. “We mentioned my dad’s motorcycle to you the other day,” he pauses briefly, glancing over his shoulder toward *Turbine*, probably deliberating Allie’s parting statement from that

conversation. It's pretty clear now that she was referring to these fucking curtains. "I was hoping you'd have time to talk about it now."

"I'd love to hear about it." I keep my mouth shut about the salty brunette next door.

"My dad had a motorcycle when I was a kid," Brian starts, adjusting his black-framed glasses where they sit on his nose. "He bought it brand new in 1959." My eyes grow wider at that. "I remember my brother and I would always sit in the front room before dinner so we could hear it coming down the street. It only had one seat, no room for someone to sit behind."

"A lot of the old bikes are like that," I chuckle.

"He used to put me in his lap and take me for rides through the neighborhood." The look in his eyes is wistful as he recalls the long-buried memories, and the story brings up similar memories I have with Grandad. "He probably never went faster than thirty-five or forty, but to a five-year-old boy it felt like flying."

Brian smiles, and his clear blue eyes meet mine, coming back to the present. "After he passed, the bike ended up in my garage. It's been out there for decades. Last time I checked, it didn't run." He laughs at himself then. "It probably didn't fix itself since then, so I'd imagine it's still not running. Would that be something you could fix?"

"I bet I could. Do you know what kind of bike it is?"

Brian laughs again. "A black BMW. That's all I know."

We make arrangements for me to bring it into the shop on Tuesday, so I can get a better idea what needs to be done.

Brian nods thoughtfully on his way out the door. "Good to see you today, Luke. Don't be a stranger."

As soon as I've been back to work long enough to dirty my hands again, my phone buzzes. Then it buzzes again. And again. I wipe my hands off and pull out my phone to see my mom's number flashing across the screen.

“Luke? Are you there?” Her voice comes through as soon as I answer.

“Hi, Mom.” I put my wireless headphones in, so I can work.

“What took you so long to answer?”

“I’m working.”

She huffs, unhappy with that answer. “Cameron came by yesterday. He is such a vibrant young man. Handsome too. His hair is green now. Did you know that?”

“No, must be new. Did he help out with your list?”

“Yes, he’s so sweet. Not quite as good at fixing things as you are, but he makes a much better margarita.” *Sure he does.* I’m the one who spent over a decade bartending, but Cam makes a better margarita. “He mixed us a whole pitcher and told the funniest race stories. You know, I got my hair cut two weeks ago, and he’s the first person who noticed.”

“He’s a charming guy.”

“He gets that from me.”

“From you?” I ask, torquing down a head bolt.

“Yes. I spent more time raising that boy than his own mother did. Lucas, don’t act like you never heard me say nurture is more powerful than nature. You know that.”

I hear her screen door slam in the background. It shouldn’t be doing that. The slow-close mechanism must need to be replaced. I take a break from the engine rebuild while Mom moves on from Cam stories to filling me in on the life of every girl I went to high school with, including extra details for the ones that still live in Ventura.

“How do you know that Marissa’s single?”

“Social media. I’m friends with all of your old girlfriends.” *Should’ve known.* The screen door slams again.

“I just ordered you a new hydraulic door closer for that screen. It should be there by Wednesday,” I tell her.

“Thank you, honey, but it won’t do me any good. I can’t fix the door myself, and you’re not here anymore to help me.” I check my watch. We made it a whole forty-five minutes before the guilt trip kicked in. Impressive.

“Cam should still be in town. I’ll ask him to come by again. Maybe he’ll make you more of his *amazing* margaritas.”

“That sounds nice, but it’s not the same as having you home.” Her voice is sweeter than normal, laying it on thick.

“I know, Mom. I’m sorry I can’t be there.”

“It’s okay. I understand you have your *priorities*,” she says, the last word dripping with condescension. The temptation to argue with her is heavy, but I know it won’t get me anywhere. And part of the guilt she’s throwing my way is sticking. She has to be lonely with Skye and me both gone.

“I’ll visit you as soon as I can, definitely for your birthday.”

“That’ll be nice,” she sighs. “I just never thought we’d be one of those families that only see each other on birthdays and holidays.”

My phone buzzes again, and I’m grateful for the excuse to get out of this conversation.

“Alright, Mom. I have to go.”

“Okay, little goat.”

“I love you.” I convey as much warmth and sincerity as my voice will hold.

“I know. I know. I love you too.”

I feel like shit about how sad she sounded, but my life was stalled out in Ventura. I couldn’t live fifteen minutes away from her forever. She’ll have to come around, eventually.

When I pull out my phone, Allie’s name lights up the screen. She hasn’t been here for three days. What could she have to complain about?

Allie: Luke.

She starts and stops typing a few times, and then the next texts come through in rapid-fire succession.

Allie: Lucas

Allie: Im sorry im mean..

Allie: I lov you

Allie: you dog

Allie: i love you're dogg

Holy shit. She's drunk texting me. At three o'clock on a Monday.

CHAPTER 11

Allie

Share your energetic spirit with those around you, Leo. -*Allie's horoscope, March 25th*

Devon, Sadie, and I show up at our favorite boutique hotel pool shortly after it opens for a Monday of poolside day-drinking. We snag a spot with the perfect mix of sun, shade underneath lemon-colored umbrellas, views of desert mountains, and proximity to the bar.

“This drink is pure sunshine and happiness,” I say, admiring the yellow tiki concoction in my hand. Devon was right. I needed a break. This is the third full day I’ve been off from *Turbine*, and my stress level has lowered with each one.

“You told me an hour ago that *I* was like sunshine and happiness,” Sadie says.

“You are! You and this drink are kindred. That’s why I love you both so much.”

Sadie settles back into her lounge. “It’s only eleven-fifteen; Isn’t it a little early to start drinking?” she asks, eyeing her own tiki treat warily.

“Absolutely not,” I say. “First of all, late morning is a perfectly acceptable drinking time in any social circle that I care to be a part of. Secondly, you’re on vacation. And thirdly, you look adorable with that drink in your hand.”

Sadie giggles and beams under the brim of a chic Panama style straw hat, striking a pose and taking an indulgent sip of her drink. She *is* the embodiment of happiness and sunshine, wearing the hell out of a yellow high waisted bikini that shows off her slightly curvy frame. I snap a few pictures and show her on my phone. “See? You belong here.”

“I do look really good,” Sadie says bashfully.

“You want to send one to your man?” I ask.

Sadie nibbles her glossed-pink lower lip. “No, he won’t—he doesn’t need—no...” She starts her sentence three different times but never lands on an answer.

“Sade, you’ve been here four days,” Devon says, leaning forward in a taupe one piece only she could pull off, “and you haven’t said Jared’s name once. Are you going to tell us what’s happening, or are we all going to pretend he doesn’t exist together?” Sadie has been dating Jared since they were in high school, so they were already together by the time we met her when she was in college. There’s nothing necessarily wrong with the guy, but Devon and I have always shared the opinion that he’s not good enough for Sadie. And Devon is always quick to say as much.

Sadie sighs and takes a deep draw from her drink.

“To be clear, I’m all for pretending he doesn’t exist,” Devon adds, sending Sadie and I into a fit of giggles.

“No, no. I should talk about it. He just,” another sigh and another long sip, “We’re not...things aren’t,” she pauses to consider before landing on, “We’re good.” We stay quiet, waiting for her to continue. “He takes care of me. I live in his house. He takes me on vacations, and we have all the same friends back home. It’s uncomplicated.”

“Is that all you want, uncomplicated?” Devon asks.

“Not really.” Sadie drags out the word, holding her hands in the air like opposing scales. “I’d like it if he were more interested in the things I am. And he’s honestly not a great listener. And the sex is blah. But otherwise, I have it pretty good.”

Devon’s wearing dark-lensed tortoise-shell designer sunglasses, but I know her eyes narrow into a judgmental glare by the disdain that radiates from her slender frame. It can probably be felt by Jared all the way up in Portland. “Not a great listener? Blah sex? That’s not pretty good. That’s an idiot who doesn’t understand the gift he’s been given by being with you,” she says, slicing harshly through Sadie’s statement.

“Jesus, Dev,” I hiss at her.

“No, it’s fine. She has a point,” Sadie says, resigned. “We’ve been together for so long, and he loves me. He *does*. He’s a part of me, and I can’t picture my life without him.”

Her heart-breaking confession hangs heavily in the air around us. Sadie fidgets with the edge of her black and white striped towel, clearly uncomfortable.

“Okay, I’m going to say one thing, and then we can move the fuck on,” I say.

“Yes, let’s please move on,” Sadie breathes out, relieved.

“Sade, you are a magical, thoughtful, kind, beautiful person. You deserve everything in the world, and you don’t have to stay with anyone who doesn’t believe the same.” I watch her for a reaction, and she only tugs her lips into a weak smile. “Okay,” I clap my hands, closing the subject for now. “If there was ever a time for tequila shots, it’s now.” I jump up, adjust my cheeky pink gingham bikini around my tits and ass, making sure I’ve at least got the goods covered, and rush over to the bar.

When I return, Devon is filling Sadie in on the latest updates for *Friday West Interiors*. “I signed a lease for an office. We start moving things over the middle of next month.”

We went to check out the building last week. It’s in a sweet little office park with a courtyard in the middle, close to a few design showrooms. It’s perfect, and it pains me to admit, but it’s better than Station 19 would have been for her. No matter how much my world was rocked by losing the building, at least it was the catalyst for Devon finding her right thing.

“I haven’t told you this part yet, Al. Bea’s going to be my assistant,” Devon says with a rare, excited smile broadening her lips. “We finalized everything after her class yesterday.”

“What? I am obsessed with that!” My voice comes out loud and boisterous, even more so than usual, the alcohol starting to take effect. “I had no idea she did interior design.”

“She’d never mentioned it to me before either, but her portfolio is impressive. She’s precisely what I’ve been looking for.”

“Dev, she is so fucking cool.” A selfish thought finds its way to my lips. “Wait, is she going to quit teaching barre now?”

Devon tilts her head, giving me a censuring look from behind her sunglasses. “No, she loves that. No need to give it up.”

“Ooh, you know what I want to hear about?” Sadie interjects, a little buzzed herself. “I need more details about sexy ladder guy.”

“Is she talking about Luke?” Devon asks.

I glare at them both and make a show of tightening my lips to indicate that I’m keeping all words on this subject to myself.

Sadie’s straw sputters loudly as she sucks up the last of her tiki drink.

“You know what? I’m getting more drinks,” I say, pushing up from my lounge, and settling my pink bottoms back into place on my hips once more.

“I’ll catch Sadie up,” Devon says as I walk away.

And she does. When I return, she’s deep in the details of me having his truck towed on that first day. Then she continues to spell out every interaction with Luke I’ve told her about. *It takes quite a while.* Evidently, this man has been taking up more space in my life than I realized. Hearing Devon’s perspective on the whole situation adds to the twisting feeling that I’ve been unnecessarily mean to Luke. *Dammit.*

“There. Dev’s got you all caught up.” I wave a hand when she finishes explaining why we had to move my patio furniture.

Sadie shifts on her lounge to pull one leg up against her chest, turning toward me with an expectant look in her caramel-colored eyes. “No, I want to hear what *you* have to say. Let me live vicariously through your work crush,” she pleads.

My jaw drops open. “He is not my work crush. How did you get work crush from,” I tick off each offense on my fingertips, “he stole my entire building, stole my patio, stole my damn *dreams*, and is the loudest work neighbor ever?”

Sadie smirks at me under the brim of her hat. “Sounds like you’d better set me straight.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “Fine. But I will require at least one more tequila shot and another one of these sunshine magic tiki drinks immediately.”

“On it!” she squeals and runs over to the bar.

I turn and glare at Devon. *Why did she have to say all that?*

“You’ve got to narrow your eyes more if you want to look mad. And you’re smiling. Did you know that? Flatten your lips.” I try both. “This isn’t working. Maybe suck in your cheeks?” I try that too and end up in a comical fish face. We both double over laughing. She coaches me on how to look intimidating while we wait for Sadie to return with the next round of drinks.

“You need to reapply,” Devon passes me a tall white spray can of sunscreen after another failed attempt at glaring.

The spray comes out like a fine foam and disappears into my sun-warmed skin without leaving a greasy sheen. “Are you sure this is sunscreen?” I ask.

“Yes, I got it from my dermatologist.” Devon *would* have fancy dermatologist sunscreen.

Sadie returns with the drinks, and I hold the can out to her. “Sadie, you’ve got the check out this sunscreen sorcery. It doesn’t even smell bad!”

Once our SPF is reapplied to Devon’s satisfaction, we throw back the round of tequila shots.

“Now, details about sexy motorcycle guy, please,” Sadie chimes.

“He *is* sexy, isn’t he?” I agree and then gasp, throwing a hand over my mouth when I realize what I’ve admitted. The

second tequila shot has eased my apprehension, and the third tiki drink doesn't hurt either. *Hmm. That's kind of a lot of drinks. How long have we been here? A few hours?* Words flow easily, and pretty soon I'm spilling every detail that's happened between Luke and I. Sadie eats it right up, and Devon smiles knowingly as my stories go on.

They indulge me with my usual complaints. The smug smirk he always wears and the fact that he's impossible to upset. He's a cocky know-it-all. He's always around. Like *always*. He acts like he owns the place. Devon interjects to point out that he does own the place. *Not helpful*. He doesn't know anything about Palm Springs. Sadie points out that I didn't either when I moved here. *Again, not helpful*.

"In the moment, when he threw me over his shoulder because the floor was *unsafe*," I interrupt myself, "which, by the way, I call bullshit. The floor was fine. I fucking had on shoes." *Does that make sense?* "Had fucking shoes on." *That's better. Right?* "My feet were fine! He just wanted an excuse to manhandle me. Anyway, I was livid. But I haven't stopped thinking about that strong, sculpty" *Is that a word?* "Sculpted. *Sculp-*ted** body ever since. And then when he was holding me again the other night—"

Devon cuts me off. "Again?"

"What other night?" Sadie asks.

Trying to avoid this exact interaction, I've kept my mouth shut about the whole falling-off-the-table incident. Now, though, I can't remember *why* I didn't want them to know. They're my best friends. *They should know*. I giggle to myself, and then I give them every detail, even how it gave me butterflies when he walked back in with that ladder.

Something clicks, and for the first time in months, I run out of insults and bad shit to say about Lucas Pine. The alcohol releases the tight hold I've been keeping on every kind or soft thought that dared to bubble up about him, *and there have been plenty*, and now I'm thinking them out loud at my friends. *Why was I keeping this in?*

I confess how attracted I was to him the first moment I saw him, that by the time I found out who he was, I'd already pictured him fucking me in three different positions. Sadie chokes on her drink at that little detail. I point out that he changed his order from coffee to Americano after I made him an Americano *once*. He's a good tipper. He holds the door open for everyone. He has a skill for showing up in the parking lot exactly when I'm carrying something heavy and always carries it for me.

The floodgates are open now, and I gush about him and Betty, showing Devon and Sadie all the many, many photos I've snuck of Betty on my phone when Luke wasn't looking. "He's good to his dog, like *sooo* good to her. She adores him."

"Dogs are supposed to be good judges of character," Sadie says, nodding along with me.

"Ezzackly! It's so weird. How can she be the sweetest, best cared-for dog I've *ever* met, and he's a jackass? It doesn't make sense!" The people in the spot next to us look over at me. *Maybe I yelled that last part.*

"Maybe he isn't a jackass," Sadie shrugs.

"Shit," I grumble, "If he's not, that means I am."

"You're not a jackass," Devon says, adjusting the umbrella above us for maximum shade, "but it's time to move on. Hating Luke isn't a great look on you."

"You have a really irritating habit of being right all the time. You know that?" I ask, moving from laying on my back to sitting up on my lounge, pulling my legs into a crisscross. I'm dizzy for a moment as my vision takes a second too long to catch up.

"I do," she says, with a self-satisfied smirk.

She was right about me taking a few days off, too. I needed this. Time outside with my friends, relaxing, laughing, and spilling secrets. Having a good drink. *Or five or six good drinks. Whoops.*

Devon passes me a glass of water. "Drink this, babe." *Where did that come from?* I don't remember her getting up. I

down it in a few gulps, and she immediately passes me another.

“Should I apologize for being so harsh?” I ask, and I can hear my words slur. *Shit.*

“Of course,” Sadie says.

At the same time, Devon replies, “Absolutely not.”

~

I wake up on the couch in our living room, my vision fuzzy and a sharp headache pressing into my skull. My eyes focus on the clock on the wall, and it reads seven-eleven. *Ooh, now I want a Slurpee.* I lost count of how many drinks I had by the pool, but apparently it was enough to warrant a hangover that timed up with the sunset. There’s a full glass of water and two Advil on the coffee table that I’m sure Sadie set there for me. She’s on the other side of the powder-blue tufted sectional, wearing an oversized cotton t-shirt, and tucked under a cream-colored knit blanket, scrolling on her phone.

Sitting up, I down half the glass of water in one go, followed by both Advil. I tap the rim of the glass. “Thank you for this.”

“Of course.” She smiles broadly.

Part of our conversation from this morning comes back to me, and I realize this is likely my last chance to chat with her before she leaves. “Sade?” I ask. “Are you really okay about Jared?”

She plops her phone down in her lap and rubs her hands together nervously. “Yeah, he’s a good guy. Sometimes I just need a break. Being here with you and Devon has been so nice. It’s like an escape.”

An escape from your boyfriend? I resist the urge to push her further about that. “We’ll have an office for Devon soon enough, so our third bedroom will be empty if you ever want it,” I offer.

“Yeah, right,” Sadie laughs without mirth, “I could never.”

“Could never what?” Devon asks, coming down the hallway. She’s fresh from a shower, smelling like clean laundry and peppermint soap. Her face glows from doing the kind of nighttime skincare routine that I’ve never mastered. *Is she not hungover? How the fuck?*

“I was telling Sadie she should move in with us.”

“Yes, you should. Dump that loser boyfriend, and get yourself out to the desert,” Devon agrees, cutting through the bullshit, yet again.

My phone buzzes, and I’m confused by the name on the screen.

Luke: Feeling okay?

I’m Day Drunk Hangover Barbie, to use one of Bea’s phrases, but I’m not about to tell him that. *Why is he texting me?*

My eyes focus on the rest of our text conversation, which should be details about dripping faucets and burnt-out lightbulbs. But it’s not.

Me: Luke.

Me: Lucas

Me: Im sorry im mean...

Me: I lov you

Me: you dog

Me: i love you’re dogg

And then an hour later

Me: dont hate me plss

My heart plummets to my stomach. The sounds of Devon and Sadie’s voices fade to nothing. *Holy fuck.* I look on in horror. I drunk-texted him from the pool today. *And now he’s checking on me.* I am beyond mortified.

“Oh, my fuck.” My words come out in a breath.

Devon's face snaps to mine. "What happened?"

"I drunk texted Luke."

"Noooo." Sadie drags the single-syllable word out into a long gasp.

"Oh, yes." I hand my phone over to Sadie so she and Devon can read through the texts.

"Allie." Sadie's voice is a shocked whisper. "You told him you love him."

I bury my hands in my face. The leftover smell of the rum on my breath fills my nose as I mumble through my fingers, "I know."

"And you used the wrong form of your." Devon adds, and I roll my eyes. She's *such* a Virgo.

"It's a good thing I have to move *Turbine* because I can never face that man again," I groan.

"What are you going to say to him now?" Sadie asks, handing my phone back.

Devon answers for me, "Absolutely nothing. She is going to walk into work tomorrow, tits up, chin held high, and act like nothing ever happened." She turns to face me, holding both of my hands in hers. "You are a queen who doesn't drunk-text your irritating work neighbor, no matter how hot he is. It never happened."

I like that plan. I look back at my phone and review the short conversation again, wincing at every word. *Yeah, Devon's plan is my only option.* There's absolutely nothing I can say to make this better.

CHAPTER 12

Luke

“If you keep pointing the flashlight at everything but the lug nuts, we’ll never get this spare on.”-*Grandad Ernie, teaching seven-year-old Luke how to change a tire on the shoulder of the PCH.*

By the time I finish working on my last bike of the day, the building is quiet. The curtains are still drawn at *Turbine*, so I’m not sure when the last people left, but the light stopped coming in at the edges hours ago. I spend a few minutes scrubbing my hands with pumice soap to get the day’s grease off before I grab my helmet and lock up for the night.

The parking lot out back is empty except for my Honda CB and Allie’s silver Toyota Corolla. *What’s her car doing here so late?* She wasn’t at work today and hasn’t been since she essentially told me to fuck off after I caught her when she fell off that table last week. Those adorable drunk texts yesterday are all I’ve heard from her since.

Her headlights come on, illuminating the cinderblock wall on Allie’s side of the parking lot, but instead of driving away, she gets out and walks toward the hood. The lights and shadows of the parking lot display her silhouette, soft shoulders narrow to her waist, then flare into thick hips and thicker thighs. *Goddamn.*

She reaches to lift the hood of her car, and my feet move immediately. I’m not leaving her alone in a parking lot with a car that’s not working.

“Oh!” She makes a startled little scream and presses her hand to her chest. “You scared me.”

“Didn’t mean to.” Closer now, I can take in the full sight of her. Hair damp around her forehead. Little beads of sweat sitting on her collarbones above the neckline of her shirt. A

cropped white shirt stops a few inches above the waistband of her tight black leggings. She's coming from a workout. *Shit, that's sexy.* Seeing her slightly disheveled and sweaty sends a shock of awareness through me.

She looks up at me, wide eyed, with a look on her face I can't decipher. After a few moments of silence she speaks, her voice coming out weak. "My car is being mean."

"Mean?" I step closer, holding up a flashlight over her shoulder at the engine bay, and catch the faint scent of her sweat. It makes me want to smell every inch of her.

"Oh!" she yelps in surprise again, her back brushing against my chest when she turns to look up at me. "Where did that flashlight come from?"

I hold open my hand to show her the light is on my key ring.

"Oh," she replies, voice quieter than usual. "That's handy."

I nod in agreement. "What's the problem?"

"Won't start." She shifts her weight from one foot to the other, running her fingers through the tips of her hair. *Is she nervous about her car?*

"Is it turning over?" I ask.

She looks at the engine bay, confused, then back to me, "I don't think so?"

"Let me have your keys," I say, holding my hand out.

A flash of defiant irritation crosses the round features of her face, but then she motions towards the cab. "Still in it."

I hand my motorcycle helmet to her and push back the driver's seat to make room for my legs.

"What are you doing?" she asks, looking between me and the helmet in her arms, lips pursing in confusion.

"Figuring out what's wrong." I press my foot to the brake and turn the key over in the ignition. "It's most likely your starter."

“How do you know?” she asks, and I’m glad to hear some of her usual fire return to her voice.

“You realize I’m a mechanic, right, sweetheart?”

She moves to put her hands on her hips but ends up propping my helmet on her curvy waist instead. “Don’t you work on motorcycles?”

“An engine’s an engine. I’ll show you.” I wave at her to come closer, which she ignores, and turn the key in the ignition again. “You hear that clicking?” I ask, and she nods. “That means it’s not turning over. I have to get something out of my shop, so I can confirm. Come with me?”

She tilts her head to the side, making her precious attempt at a glare. “Why?”

“So you’re not alone in a dark parking lot.”

Surprisingly, she follows without argument. We get a screwdriver and a second helmet from my shop, which she eyes warily but doesn’t say anything about when we set them on the asphalt by my bike.

I hand the flashlight to Allie when we reach her car’s open hood. “Will you point it right here?” I ask, tapping the starter with the screwdriver. She holds it up and presses in closer to me in order to see what I’m doing. *Closer than necessary*. The thought settles nicely into my mind. “If you’re ever doing this by yourself, make sure you use something with a plastic or rubber handle like this one. Otherwise, it’s a good way to get electrocuted.”

She looks up at me with intent teal-green eyes, bringing our faces only inches apart and swinging the flashlight off its target. I hold her gaze, reaching across her to wrap my palm around her delicate hand, and direct the flashlight back to the starter. “Keep that there.” Her cheeks flush pinker. Memories of Grandad scolding me for not holding the flashlight correctly remind me to soften my tone, adding, “Please.”

She blinks a few times before she turns away and holds the flashlight steady. I use the rod of the screwdriver to connect

the positive and negative posts on the starter. The same clicks sound, as I thought they would.

“Is that good or bad?” she asks.

“Pretty good. Means it’s not your ignition, which would be a pain in the ass to fix. Starters are a lot easier.” I make sure her hands are clear and shut the hood. “The part’s not hard to get. I can take care of it in the morning.”

“What?” She sounds bewildered and steps back, looking up at me. “No, you don’t have to fix this. I’ll get it figured out.”

“I don’t have to, but I’m going to.”

“It’s fine. I can handle it.” She looks around, like a different solution is going to materialize in one of the empty parking spaces.

“Hiring a mechanic is handling it, Allie.” I don’t have any intention of accepting her money, but she doesn’t need to know that right now.

She purses her lips and props her hands on her hips in a familiar stance, the look on her face flashing from irritation, to concentration, to deep thought, and back to irritation before taking a deep, exaggerated breath. “Okay, thank you.”

“Come on. I’ll give you a ride home.” I take a step toward my bike, but she doesn’t follow.

“Where’s your truck?”

“At home. I dropped Betty off a few hours ago and came back on my motorcycle.”

She plants her feet firmly on the ground, hands going to her hips. The strong stance makes me grin. “There’s no way I’m getting on that thing.”

“Why not?”

Her mouth drops open, like the answer should be obvious. “Because motorcycles are dangerous.”

“You have nothing to worry about. I’ll keep you safe.”

“Safe? *Safe?*” She juts her chin forward, voice incredulous. “Have you ever had, like, even one conversation with an ER nurse? That is a sexy death machine.”

“Sexy death machine? I like that.”

“You are impossible.” She throws her hands up, but the act is more teasing than frustrated. “It wasn’t meant as a compliment.”

“You don’t have to ride the bike if you don’t want to. I’ll go home and get my truck, but you have to promise to wait for me inside.”

She steps closer to me. “You can’t go home for your truck. That’s ridiculous.”

“Allie, you’re afraid to ride the motorcycle. I’m not going to force you onto it. I’ll be back in fifteen minutes.”

That does it. “I am not afraid,” she says, indignantly enunciating each syllable.

“You’re not?”

She crosses her arms over her stomach, pushing her rounded breasts up. *Fuck.* “No, I am absolutely not afraid.”

“In that case, let’s go.” I hold a helmet out to her.

She shifts back and forth on her feet, staring at the helmet like it may bite her. Her emotions have ranged from nervous, to irritated, to curious, to irritated, and back to nervous in the last ten minutes. Her raw expression is one of my favorite things about her.

“Have you ever been on a motorcycle?” I ask, arm still extended with the helmet.

“No,” she says quietly.

“You’ll probably love it. There’s a reason people ride them.”

She waits a few seconds, and then slowly unfolds her arms, curiosity winning out, and takes the helmet from me.

CHAPTER 13

Allie

It's in your nature to make the most out of new situations. Get outside and try something different today. -*Allie's horoscope, March 26th*

Dammit. Of course, he's here when my car breaks down and I need help. I should have gotten it fixed last month when I first noticed it having trouble.

Devon's advice of *tits up, pretend nothing happened* regarding drunk-texting your work rival is harder than it sounds. I may have even taken an extra day off of work in order to postpone facing him. *Why isn't he saying anything?* It has to be fresh in his mind. It was yesterday.

And he's being nice. And helpful. And protective, *which I don't hate for some reason.* And standing close to me, smelling like steel and something soapy and citrusy. Between all of that and trying to shut off the *lov you, you dog, i love you're dogg* cringe-loop in my brain, I'm too distracted to come up with a solid reason why I shouldn't be getting on the back of a motorcycle.

"I'll take it easy," Luke says. "You can trust me." I *have* to trust him, whether I like it or not. I committed to this, so there's no way I'm backing out.

"This is yours," he says, tapping the padded seat in the back of the bike. Then he reaches over and pulls down two pegs towards the back of it. "These are for your feet."

The pegs are a couple of feet off the ground, which makes me uneasy. "They're way up there."

He looks at them, like he's never considered their height before, then looks back at me. "Won't matter. You'll be holding on to me, anyway." *Oh fuck.* He's right. I'm going to need to press my entire body against his for this to work,

which both horrifies and excites me. I'm suddenly very aware of how sweaty I am from my workout. *Why didn't I think of this earlier?*

"Ready?" he asks, exuding warmth and kindness. Cocky smirk nowhere in sight.

"Sure," I say, infusing my voice with all the confidence I don't feel.

He nods toward the helmet in my hands. "Safety first."

I pull my hair down out of its ponytail and fluff the roots. Not that it matters, because the helmet's soft fabric padding smooshes snugly against my head. Luke lifts the visor of my helmet up, then reaches under my chin and tightens the strap. It's a warm night, but his hands are warmer when they graze against my neck. "Is that snug enough? It should be good and tight," he asks, his voice slightly muffled by the helmet.

"Yes, I'm tight," I say, grateful for the helmet hiding my blush when I realize what I've said. "I mean, it's good and tight." *Shit. That's not much better.* "I'm ready for you." *Jesus Christ.* Adding this exchange to the cringe-loop immediately. I look up at Luke right as a cocky smirk takes over his mouth.

He grasps the bottom of my helmet and tries to wiggle it, making sure it won't budge. "You're all set," he says and then drops a playful tap onto the top of my helmet. *Did this man just bonk me?* He slides his leather jacket off, revealing a black t-shirt and those fucking ridiculously muscular forearms, then holds it out for me.

"No, no. I am very wet." His usually stern brows raise into a surprised arch. *Oh. My. Fuck.* Can I say anything that isn't an innuendo right now? Everything was so much easier when I was focused on hating him. "Sweaty. I am very sweaty."

He shakes the jacket, indicating I should slide my arm in. "Don't care."

"I'm not getting my sweat all over the inside of your jacket."

"You were worried about safety, right?" he asks, being so fucking patient with me. I nod. "You're safer with the jacket"

than you are with bare arms.” He steps close to me and brushes his unoccupied hand against my ribs where my cropped tank meets the skin on my back, sending a chill up my spine and a drop in my stomach. I remember my sports bra is soaked underneath, and I cringe. The look on his face suggests he’s not grossed out by it at all, though. He tugs on the hem of my shirt. “Plus, as soon as we get going, this little tank top will fly right up your back.”

Then he walks around behind me and eases me into his jacket before I manage to respond. It’s warm from his body heat, the structured sleeves hang all the way past my fingertips and then some. Even from inside my helmet, it smells like leather and *him*.

“Now you look like you’re ready for me to take you for a ride.” *Did he have to phrase it like that?* He must be fucking with me. Luke puts his helmet on and tightens the chin strap before he settles smoothly onto the motorcycle. He looks over at me. “Well?”

With my bravest face on, I set my left foot on the peg. *Now what?* I look at Luke and try to figure out a way to do this without grabbing him all over.

“You have to touch me if this is going to work.” Luke reaches over and puts my left hand on his stomach, flexing his abs underneath my touch. *Show off.* I take one deep breath and then place my right hand on his shoulder and hold on to him as I swing myself onto the bike. My body naturally slides flush against his, and my hands settle on his hips.

“A couple more things before we go.” He turns in his seat, speaking to me over his shoulder. “Where do you live?” I laugh as I realize a phone GPS is not going to suffice in this situation. After I give him brief verbal directions, he says, “I’ve got it, but you can point in front of me to show me where to go if you need to. Tap my right shoulder to turn right, my left to turn left.”

“Okay.”

“When I told you to hold on, I wasn’t kidding.” Luke takes my hands off of his hips and pulls them together against his

stomach, causing my chest to press tighter against his back. “It’s safer for both of us if you stay connected to me. Follow my lead, like a dance. If I lean into a turn, you need to lean into it, too. Do you understand?” he asks.

“Yes. You lean. I lean. Got it.”

“For some people, the first time the bike dips into a turn, it scares them, and they jerk up. You can’t do that. It’s dangerous. Trust me. Trust the bike. I won’t drop you on a turn, okay?” His voice is serious, and I’ve rarely experienced this stern version of him before, but it’s working. I do feel safe.

“Okay.” I nod, and my helmet knocks into his.

Luke smiles, and his abs flex under my fingertips again as he laughs. “You’re going to love this, sweetheart.” His usual teasing tone returns. He flashes me his cocky half smile one more time before he slides my visor down. Luke fires up the engine, and the entire bike vibrates underneath me.

All the nervousness fluttering around inside me shifts into excitement the moment Luke pulls forward. He doesn’t leave the parking lot immediately. Instead, he snakes around the spaces, turning left, then right, then left again, teaching me how to lean with him. *He was right*. It feels like the bike is going way lower than it should, but I follow his instructions even when my instinct is to pull up.

When he accelerates onto the street, the evening desert air blows against us, his body blocking the brunt of it. *Are his arms cold?* He shouldn’t have given me his jacket.

Luke reaches back and squeezes my knee as we pull up to a stoplight. “You’re doing so good, sweetheart,” he says, a thrill ringing through my body at his touch.

The light turns green, and the bike gets up to speed immediately. The wind blows against us harder, feeling like we’re going eighty-five miles per hour. I look over his shoulder at the speedometer, and it reads only forty. I tap his right shoulder to remind him to turn. The speed limit on this road is higher, and again, we get up to speed in an instant. I

can't help but giggle as we ride down the road. *Shit. He was right. I fucking love this.*

The motorcycle continues to rumble underneath us, and holy hell, between that and the brawny man wrapped in my arms, I am turned the fuck on. *How does no one ever talk about how very stimulating riding a motorcycle is?*

Luke reaches back and squeezes my leg just above my knee again, offering reassurance I no longer need, but the touch still sends butterflies into my stomach. I've finally given myself permission to stop hating him, and without that lens, I'm afraid I'm falling quickly in the opposite direction.

Standing in that parking lot was the most I'd ever heard him speak. He's usually clipped sentences, smirks, and what I assumed was quiet judgment. *But is he just observant?* He oozes confidence and self-assuredness. I try to ignore the very real possibility that he barely talks to me most of the time because it's been my habit to shut him down.

Luke turns into my neighborhood, and when he pulls up in front of my house, I'm disappointed the ride is over so quickly. He turns toward me and slides up his visor before doing the same to mine. His cocky smirk is gone, replaced with a broad, full-mouthed smile that makes him look like a kid on Christmas morning. "I was right," he says.

"About what?"

"You loved it."

My smile is giving me away, but I still try to pull it down. "Maybe."

"Bullshit. I could feel you giggling."

"I didn't hate it." That's the only admission I'll give.

"You loved it. It's a good thing, too." He tugs at my chinstrap. "It'd be a damn shame for you to look so cute in that helmet if you weren't going to wear it again."

"What makes you think I'll be wearing it again?"

"We parked a while ago, and you're still on the bike. Either you like riding it, or you like holding onto me."

Releasing my hold on him, I scramble off as quickly as possible, pressing myself fully against him once more.

He laughs, getting off the motorcycle effortlessly and taking off his helmet to set it on the seat. With one shake of his head side to side, his hair falls back into its perfectly imperfect style, dark tendrils draping across his forehead.

I pull up on my helmet, forgetting it's still strapped on, and end up yanking hard on my chin. Luke laughs, saying something under his breath that sounds suspiciously like, "Adorable," and reaches under to loosen the buckle before sliding it off my head. My hair must look completely ridiculous between the sweat, the helmet, and the wind. I rush to smooth and tousle it into shape. *How does his hair look so good immediately?*

I thank him for the ride, and he follows when I move toward my front door. "You're really on that gentleman shit tonight, aren't you?"

He shrugs as he tucks his hands into his front pockets and chuckles. "What time should I be here in the morning?"

"For what?"

"To give you a ride to work."

My eyes flash to the motorcycle behind him, bringing a blush to my cheeks that I try to hide by messing with my hair. "No, you don't need to do that," my words rush out. "You've done enough. Thank you. But Devon has a barre class across the street in the morning, so I'll catch a ride with her."

"Alright, sweetheart. You know how to reach me if you change your mind." He dips his chin at me in a movement that echoes a cowboy in an old western, tipping his hat to a lady, then walks down the driveway. I close the front door and collapse back against it, listening to the sound of his motorcycle disappearing. *What just happened?*

~

“I would’ve come to pick you up,” Devon says, as she pulls out of our driveway onto the street the next morning. “I wasn’t even asleep yet.”

“I know, but he was just *there* being so helpful and—insistent. And *muscular* and—I don’t know. I couldn’t think straight.”

“Mmhmm.” She smiles, infusing the two hummed syllables with pages of unspoken observations.

Pulling my purse into my lap, I dig around for my red lip liner, lipstick, and cherry gloss. “You can say it. Go ahead.”

“Do I need to?” she asks, flipping on her turn signal.

“No. You don’t. I’m fucked. I know I’m fucked. And he’s going to fix my car, even though I really don’t want him to. So I’m going to *owe* him.” I find the gloss in the little zipper pocket and tuck it into my palm.

“You won’t owe him anything but money, which you have,” she says, firmly.

“I know, but it’s a huge favor anyway, which sucks.” I hold the lipstick next to the gloss as I continue searching.

“It’s okay to ask for help,” Devon says, insistently, for the probably the millionth time in our friendship.

“I know,” I drag out the word in a way that I’m sure makes me sound like a petulant child. “Ah!” I exclaim when I locate the lip liner. I flip down the passenger-side visor and apply a bright red lip. “I’m going to make him teach me,” I say, admiring my cherry-scented crimson smile. “That way, I’ll never have to ask anyone to help me with a starter on my car ever again.”

“And the lipstick is for...?” Devon asks, glancing over at me when she stops for a stop sign.

“It’s part of my *I’m a pin-up girl fixing a car* look, duh,” I say waving my hands over my denim romper, fitted navy t-shirt, and white low-top Converse. I don’t dare pull out the red bandana for her to judge me.

“Oh yeah, very necessary for fixing a car,” Devon smirks.

CHAPTER 14

Luke

“As soon as you get it running, I’ll teach you how to drive it.” -*Grandad Ernie, to twelve-year-old Luke, after handing him the keys to a rusted-out Oldsmobile*

“Morning, Luke! Morning, Betty!” Allie calls from behind the counter when Betty and I walk into *Turbine*. Usually it’s only Betty she greets. *Interesting*. She slides an Americano across the counter to me. This is the first time she’s had my drink ready before I ordered. *Very interesting*.

She stops me when I reach for my wallet to pay. “Nope, free coffee. You’re fixing my car.”

I drop cash in the tip jar instead. “Can I get your keys?”

“You’re fixing it right now?”

“Yeah, I picked up the parts on the way here. Want to get it done before it’s too hot out.”

“Oh, sure,” Allie says, cheerily, before leading me back to her office, giving me a view of short denim overalls that barely cover her ass cheeks. I’ve been watching them since Allie pulled the curtains back open this morning, mercifully restoring my view into her life.

Sitting down at her desk, she pulls her purse into her lap and digs around for her keys. Her hands pause, and she speaks into her bag, instead of looking up at me. “Would it be alright if I helped you today? I’ll probably slow you down. And I know it’s actually extra work to have someone help who doesn’t know what they’re doing, but I’d—”

I cut her off, “Of course, I’ll teach you.”

She smiles, cheeks blushing, as she thanks me.

Grandad taught me about fixing motorcycles and cars as soon as I could grasp a wrench. I complained once when my little sister said she wanted to help too, thinking it would take too long, and he told me he was teaching Skye no matter what, because *'only assholes hoard knowledge.'*

After locating her keys and holding them out to me, Allie pulls out a red bandana, rolls it into a two-inch strip, and ties it up into her chestnut brown hair, using a mirror on her desk to get it adjusted correctly.

"I figured I should try to *Rosie the Riveter* it up today. I wish I had those blue coverall things, too. This was the best I could do on short notice." She waves her hands in front of her overalls, and the tight, low-cut shirt she has on underneath. She even has on bright red lipstick, which is something I've never seen on her before. *Fuck, she looks good.*

Allie has a simple wardrobe like jeans, t-shirts, and cotton dresses, but the way she wears them makes her stand out. She uses clothes to show off her body instead of using her body to show off clothes. "It's working."

Allie's different today. She's as strong and gorgeous as always, but instead of being bristly and argumentative, she's being sweet and considerate. I'm finally getting the version of her she gives everyone else.

~

"Lie down on the creeper and roll under there."

"I'm sorry?" Allie puts her hands on her hips, scoffing a laugh. "Lie down on the what?"

"It's called a creeper." I point at the flat, four-wheeled dolly by her feet.

"The fuck it is."

"Why would I make that up? Lie down and roll under there."

Eyeing me skeptically, she lies down carefully and glides underneath the car. My biceps rubs against her, from hip to shoulder, as I roll into the tight space next to her. We got started early, but the desert sun is closing in on us fast.

Allie rolls her head to face me, bringing her nose within inches of mine and the scent of coconut, lemon, and cherry with her, cutting the drab smell of asphalt and road dirt.

She listens intently as I talk her through the steps of removing the old starter. Nodding emphatically to show her understanding when I finish, she knocks her forehead solidly into the underside of her car and immediately bursts into laughter. “Ow! Fuck!” She presses her hand to her forehead. “I bet you’ve never done that.”

“It’s more common than you think.” I ease her hand off her forehead. “Let me see. Close your eyes so I can check with the flashlight.” I roll my chest against her side, careful to keep my weight off of her. With her eyes closed, the light lets me view every detail of her face close up. Her defined brows, a few shades darker than her hair, are arched and serene at the same time. Dark, thick eyelashes cast long shadows over her round, freckled cheeks.

Plush, pouty, reddened lips part, asking me, “Can I open them now?”

Shit. I’m supposed to be checking her head. “Almost.” Carefully smoothing my thumb across her hairline, I find she has a bump forming on her forehead already. *I’m an asshole.* I should have warned her how tight it is under here. I should never have let her get hurt. I should have had ice on this already instead of getting lost in her eyelashes. I swing the flashlight off her face. “Alright, sweetheart. It’s not bleeding, but you’ve got a decent-sized bump already.”

She opens her eyes and lifts her hand back up to touch her forehead, wincing.

“Are you dizzy?”

“Nope,” she shakes her head side to side to emphasize her point.

“Vision blurred?”

“Also nope.”

“That’s good. Now we need to get you some ice.”

“No, no. Don’t worry about me. I can ice it after we’re done. I want to learn how to do this.”

No sense of self-preservation in this one. “You can learn how to do this after we get ice on that.” I roll out from under the car, but she doesn’t follow. “Come on, Allie.” I say, tapping her foot where it sticks out under the hood.

“I’m fine!”

Stepping around, so I’m standing between her legs where they’re extended out from under the car, I wrap my hands around her ankles. “You can do it after your head is taken care of.” Sliding my hands over her calves, I pull her forward until she’s no longer underneath the car, and my hands are hooked behind her knees, holding her legs on either side of mine.

She squeals, and her words come out in between delicious bursts of laughter. “Lucas Pine! Put me down!”

Fuck, she looks good like this. It takes control I didn’t realize I had to give up the view and lower her feet to the ground. “Can you sit up?”

She accepts my offered hand but scoffs, swinging herself upright. “Yes, I can sit up.”

“Wait here for me.” I head into *Turbine*, and by the time I return with a bag of ice, she’s back under the damn car. Rolling in next to her again, I say, “You were supposed to wait,” as I plunk the bag of ice on her forehead.

“Shit, that is cold!” she protests, but leaves the ice in place while she continues to work on removing the starter.

She sings along to music that plays from her phone, tucked into the front pocket of her overalls. I don’t recognize the artist, but it’s something poppy with female vocals, and she knows every word.

Enjoying the show, I don't intervene unless she asks for help. She remembers my explanations from earlier and tries things out a couple of different ways, getting the old starter off without any physical help from me.

Beaming, she holds the starter out to me. "We did it!"

Turning it over in my hand, I say, "You did it."

Her smile grows wider. "Little fingers. Makes it easier," she says, wiggling them for emphasis.

"You were serious about wanting to be able to do this on your own, weren't you?"

"Oh very." She nods again, the ice pack sliding from her forehead into her eyes, stopping her movement just in time to avoid hitting her head again. "This is very inconvenient," she says between giggles.

Removing the plastic bag of ice from her nose, I find that it's melted, anyway. "We'll get you a new one when we're done."

"I think it's almost ready," she says as she immediately goes back to work.

Reaching one arm across her body to brace on the dolly she's lying on, I lean in to confirm her progress, reveling in the feel of her body pressed against mine. "You almost have it, should only be a few more minutes. You're picking this up really quickly."

"Mm, thanks," she mumbles, focusing back on her task. Once it's finished, she helps me remove the jack stands and pack up my tools. The morning heat has grown intense, and we're both relieved to move into the cool air of my shop.

"How much do I owe you?" she asks over her shoulder, as she washes the grime from her hands in the shop sink. Smudges of grease and engine dust remain on her cheek, collarbone, the front of her overalls, and her white tennis shoes, making her the picture of adorable disarray.

"Nothing. You did all the work."

“Stop it. You bought the parts, and you spent your morning teaching me.” Wild pieces of her hair curl out behind her bandana as she shakes her head.

“And you gave me a free drink. We’re square.”

“We are absolutely not square.” Allie’s posture straightens, and if she weren’t vigorously scrubbing her hands, I’m sure she’d have them planted on her hips. “I’m going to pay you.”

Taking money from her isn’t right. Taking *anything* from her isn’t right. But if I don’t let her pay me, it’ll insult her independence. “You can pay me for the part.”

She turns to face me, drying her hands on a blue garage towel. “I’m paying for everything, including your time.” Her voice is stern.

“No.” I have to draw the line on that point. “I didn’t do any work.”

“You are impossible, Lucas Pine.” Allie huffs. “How much for the starter, and how much for your time?” I give her a dollar amount that’s a quarter of what I paid for the starter and half my hourly rate. I hate charging her, but I’ll find a way to discount her rent or something to make up for it. Luckily, she doesn’t know the price of car parts, and pays me without protest and goes back to work on her side.

For the rest of the day, her smile is even more electric than usual, red lips adding to the effect. And a couple of times, she’s already looking back at me when I find her through the window. I try not to count the days that I have left of this and enjoy her presence while I can. I’ll have to let her go in a few months, because the only way to keep her would be scrapping the idea of Grandad’s bar, which I can’t do.

CHAPTER 15

Allie

No one is better suited to handle today's challenges than you are. Your natural creativity and resilience will have opportunities to shine. -*Allie's horoscope, April 4th*

"This neighborhood has a wave of darling little restaurants popping up," Hector says as I pull into the parking lot of the building we're touring. It was a smoothie place for a few years but has been vacant for five or six months now. It's in a funky foodie location about twenty minutes from Station 19.

The two major downsides are that it's only available for rent, and a lot of locals who walk to *Turbine*, including Hector and Brian, wouldn't be able to come as often. So far, I haven't considered something so far away, but it's time to broaden my search.

I nod excitedly. "Devon and I tried that Indian place on the corner last week, and I haven't stopped daydreaming about the samosas since."

Taking a few solid days off of work has renewed my perspective on my situation with *Turbine* and my search for a new location. I was gone long enough to miss the café, but I didn't miss the building. I missed gossiping with Hector, hearing stories about Marisol's kids, and seeing Daisy's latest drawings. None of these people will go away completely when we move, so the heart of what matters will still be there.

Ideally, I want to find a place that has character, a unique aesthetic—maybe some vintage appeal—but that's also in the same part of the city we're in now, doesn't cost too much, and is available for sale. *So—Station 19*. I've rejected every place that hasn't met those criteria, but I'm slowly accepting that I don't have to find the *ideal* solution. If I find *a* solution that works well enough, the people will make up the difference.

The property manager has to step outside to take a call shortly after he lets us in the building, so Hector and I are left to wander around on our own. The floors are a drab linoleum, and every wall that isn't covered in lime-green tile is in need of a good coat of paint. But it *is* a corner unit with lots of windows and natural light.

“Honestly, this is the best place I've toured.”

“It *is*? You cannot be serious.” Hector makes no attempt to mask his shock.

“Yes,” I laugh, “It really is.” Leaning against the wall, I dig in my purse to find my phone so I can take a few pictures. “Everything's in good shape. It's not too expensive. The floors and walls can be changed. It's not *our* neighborhood, but it's a good one.”

Hector moves around the space, one hand propped under his chin, considering. “Maybe I was being a touch too judgmental.” He paces quietly for a couple of minutes, trying to see its potential. “Our chairs would look okay right here in the corner, and you could put tables along that wall, but it would be a tight squeeze.”

Moving behind the counter, I join him in imagining the space. “The espresso machine could go here. This place is bigger behind the counter than what I currently have, which would be really nice.” We spend the next twenty minutes taking pictures and visualizing how to make it work.

“You don't love it, do you?” Hector asks, concern rimming his chocolate brown eyes.

“No, not yet.” I scan the empty dining room again, trying to imagine the smell of freshly brewed coffee and the sound of friendly conversations. “But I could if I had to—”

“If you *had* to? Yuck.”

I wish he loved it. Maybe then, I could love it. I'm running out of time. “So, you don't think this place could work?” I wave at the windows, which are its best feature.

“I want to hate it because it's far away, but you could make something special out of this space if you *had* to,” Hector

begrudgingly admits, as he inspects one corner of tacky tiled wall.

“I may *have* to make the most of something. If not this place, then something like it. Nothing will beat Station 19, but,” I spin around in a circle, taking in all 360 degrees of the old smoothie shop, “honestly, I’m starting to see it. This could be really good.” The weight on my chest lifts a little. For the first time, I found something that *could* work. “It’s big enough, not too expensive, has lots of outdoor space, and the rest I can work around.”

The property manager comes back in right as I’m ready to tell him I’m interested in the building. “Oh, good! You’re back,” I say, smiling widely at him.

“Hey, guys,” he says in a slow, cautious voice. He closes his eyes, wincing, and I know what’s coming before he says it. “So, my business partner just leased this unit this morning. I’m so sorry to waste your time. I didn’t realize.”

Of course. I’m flooded with warring feelings of disappointment and relief. I wanted this to be it so I could be done trying to solve my problem. But at the same time, I’m holding out hope that something better will come.

“Perfect!” Hector claps his hands together. “Now you can’t settle. Let’s celebrate with samosas.”

For him, the matter is closed, but my mind can’t shift to lunch. “Hector, what if I can’t do this?” I ask him, as we step outside the latest building that will not be housing *Turbine*.

Hearing the tone in my voice, he swivels and pulls me into a warm hug. The smell of his cologne, woody and bright, brings me comfort.

“Alice Walker,” he uses my full name, one of the few people who knows what Allie is short for, “you have already done this. *Turbine* exists. Right now. Because you made it.”

“But what if I fail this time around?” Emotion rises in my throat, the loss of this building that I only wanted for forty-five seconds, and not even that badly, the final straw that makes me break.

“Nothing about this could make you a failure. You could close *Turbine*’s doors forever, which I *know* you will not have to do, and you would not be a failure. Who are you really worried about failing?”

My family, *who I barely speak to*, my friends, *who couldn’t consider me a failure even if I never earned another dollar in my life*. Me. *No caveat there*. I’m worried about failing me. I can’t say it. “Maybe I am ready for samosas.”

Hector’s lips widen into the whitest toothed smile of anyone I know. “Alright, let’s get lunch, and in a few days we can go check out that place on Avenida de los Arboles and Third.” He pronounces the first street name in his Mexican accent the same way he always does when he pronounces the Spanish street names around here, and it makes me smile.

“Hector, that place is twice my budget,” I laugh.

“You know Brian and I would help if—”

“Absolutely not,” I cut him off.

“Fine,” he sighs. “Had to at least try.”

~~433 Sierra Vista~~

Too late :(

~

A group of women who are in town for a bachelorette weekend have populated the row of white pedestal tables that line the glass wall, shamelessly watching the dark-haired, broad-shouldered, muscle-armed, motorcycle mechanic show next door.

“Good lord. I didn’t know we were getting coffee and a view,” a woman with red hair and a pink *I’m with the bride* tank top says.

“It didn’t say anything about a viewing window into blue-collar sexiness when I looked this place up online,” the maid of honor, marked by her matching white-lettered, pink tank top and air of *I’m-the-planner* authority, replies.

“*Voyeur Motors*, indeed,” a third woman drinking out of a flask I pretend I can’t see adds.

I’m tempted to draw the curtains and cut off their view, but when we had them closed before, customers complained. They missed seeing Betty. *And probably also Luke*. Plus, ever since he fixed my car, it doesn’t feel right to shut him out.

“Who has forearms like that? I can see the definition from here,” a bridesmaid adds, leaning forward on the table to get a better look.

Luke has parts and pieces of something metal and mechanical laid out on a towel on his workbench, forearms flexing as he picks up each piece to polish them, or maybe file them? All I know is nothing on that table is a starter for a Corolla.

“Excuse me?” The maid of honor waves me over from where I stand behind the counter. “Would you take a photo of us?”

“I’d love to.” Sending tourists home with a memory that isn’t off center and blurry is such a special little joy. She hands me her phone and then arranges her group into a pose, making sure the bride is prominently featured in the middle.

“I can pull that curtain if you want,” I say. “It’ll make for a nicer photo background.”

“Oh no, we want him in the background,” the redhead says, pointing at Luke, and the rest of the group giggles in agreement. *Has he noticed them fawning over him yet?*

My height won’t allow for a good photo angle, so I climb up on a sea-foam green Eames chair to get a better shot. After I take a dozen photos with slight variations—making sure Luke is in the background—one woman smacks the window to get his attention, like she’s a child, and he’s a gorilla at the zoo.

The sound gets his attention, and he looks up from his work, brows narrowed, and lips flattened in irritation. I wonder if he’d be offended by a *Please don’t tap the glass*. *It disturbs the mechanic* sign? I’m smiling to myself about the

idea when his eyes catch mine. His face is stony, and he points to my feet, where I'm standing on the chair.

Some of the women try to get his attention, but his eyes stay on me. I hold up four fingers, trying to express that the chair has four legs, not just one like the table I fell off of, so I'm safe. He cocks his head slightly, probably confused, and continues to glare.

I hold my hands flat in front of my chest, palms parallel to the ground, and swing them out straight to the sides, making the *safe* motion from baseball. It's not supposed to be funny, but immediately, his brows soften, and his lips curve into a smirking grin.

The same woman from before bangs on the glass again, gaining Luke's attention for the briefest moment before he looks back to me. I shrug apologetically and pantomime that they want him in a photo, pointing at the phone, then at the bachelorette party, and then at him. He smiles at me, then disappears below the workbench and reappears, holding all sixty pounds of Betty as if she weighs no more than a grocery bag.

The bachelorette party makes a collective, "Aww," and if I'm honest, I join in. Betty is too adorable for words. Luke settles her on to an empty space on the workbench, and she sits proudly at attention next to him. His gaze fixes back on me, even though there are ten other women staring at him through the window.

We take another round of pictures, this time with Luke and Betty proudly in the background. Again, a little like a zoo. His eyes stay locked on me the entire time, and I can't fight the blush that spreads to my cheeks at his attention. I twinkle my fingers at him to let him know we're done, but he keeps watching me until I've climbed safely off of the chair.

The redhead who first pointed Luke out leans on the glass wall next to me, tilting her head in Luke's direction. "So, what's his story? Is he single?"

The question catches me off guard. The only person I've seen next door who isn't a customer is Cameron, and they're

definitely not dating. That doesn't mean he isn't dating *someone* long-distance from wherever he moved from, though. The thought twists my stomach in a knot. *Why do I care?* He's only the distressingly good-looking man who works next door, and I've just barely forgiven him for taking Station 19. After my lease is up at the end of July, he'll be out of my life.

"I honestly don't know," I tell her as she watches me with hungry eyes.

"Oh, I thought maybe you two were..." she says waving her hand between me and Luke, raising her eyebrows suggestively.

Where did she get that idea? I look through the window at Luke. As if he can feel my eyes on him, he immediately looks up from his workbench and smirks at me. My ears burn with embarrassment, and I turn back to redhead and glass-tapper.

"Nope. We just work next door to each other. I barely know him."

"Oh, good! Can I get his number?" she asks.

"Um—I, um," I stumble over my words. *What the fuck? Why are they asking me?*

"Oh my god, Aspen. You're so rude," another bridesmaid chides. "She can't give us his number." She grabs the redhead by the hand and pulls her out the front door of *Turbine*. A second later, they're inside *Voyeur Motors*.

Good, now they can talk to him, and I won't have to be involved. They can get his number and meet up with him later tonight or something. That wouldn't be an issue for me. *Not at all*. I move back behind the register and wipe down the already clean counter. It doesn't matter what they're talking about. It's not my business. *I don't care. I don't care. I don't care.*

I look through the window, but only to check if they're being nice to Betty. I can't see her, of course. There is a three-foot wall at the base of the windows, and she's not that tall. But it looks like Luke is scratching her ears, based on the movement of his arms. He's leaning back against his leather

couch, and the two women are both giving him their best flirtatious looks. What are they saying? *Why can't I read lips?*

Their conversation only lasts a couple of minutes, and as the women turn to leave, he faces me and waves. *Dammit. How did he know I was watching?*

~

Luke's locking the back door to his shop when I step out into the parking lot to leave for the day.

"You're heading out early," he says.

"Happy hour." I nod in confirmation as I walk over to pet Betty. "You're leaving early, too. Crashing a bachelorette party?"

He doesn't respond, so I look up from petting Betty to find him staring down at me. He holds eye contact for a few seconds before asking, "Would it bother you if I was?"

"No, of course not," I respond too quickly. "Why would it bother me? You can spend time with anyone you want. It's not my business." *Why am I still talking?*

"I'm not meeting up with them."

"They were attractive."

"Were they?" he asks, dryly.

"What do you mean?" I stand up from petting Betty, and she leans against my leg. "Of course, they were attractive. You saw them."

"Didn't notice."

"Sure you didn't." I roll my eyes.

"I noticed the attractive brunette who was taking my picture."

Did he just call me attractive? Blush floods from my cheeks down my neck. Hopefully the sun's too bright in his eyes for him to notice.

I talk to Betty, since apparently, she's the only sane one in this parking lot. "Good night, sweet girl. Love you," I say, waving at her as I practically sprint to my car.

"She knows, sweetheart. I did read her your text," Luke calls out right as I shut my door.

CHAPTER 16

Luke

“Are you listening? We’ve got a legacy here, kid. Someday this bar will be yours. Pay attention.” -*Grandad Ernie, teaching eight-year-old Luke how to run an industrial dishwasher.*

Allie has on a dress today. Most days, she wears shorts and tank tops, clothes that are only made special by the privilege of displaying her curvy body. This dress is different. I’ve watched its butter-yellow fabric shift against her thighs all morning as she floats around *Turbine*, chatting up customers and wiping down tables.

Standing on her toes, she does a little hop to get onto a barstool, causing the dress to ride up much higher on her legs.

A throat clears behind me, and I turn around to find Brian standing by my front counter. “Hey, kid,” he says, smiling knowingly.

“Perfect timing,” I say, redirecting his focus from my obvious attention on the girl next door to his bike. “I’ve spent the whole morning with this beauty and got it running.” I pat the single headlight of his 1959 BMW R60. Turns out his dad had incredible taste. “You ready to take this bad boy out for a quick ride?”

Brian laughs quietly. “I’ve never actually ridden one myself.” He puts his coffee and a white paper bag on my front counter before crossing over to check out his motorcycle. “I kept it after my dad passed because it felt like keeping a piece of him, but I didn’t know what to do with it after. Guess that’s how it ended up sitting in the garage for decades.”

“I’ve got my grandad’s old BMW, too. I don’t ride it much anymore but seeing it in my garage always makes me feel closer to him.” I grab his key from the lockbox. “Even if you

never ride yours, you've at least got to hear this motor. It's fucking beautiful."

"I'd love to."

Getting on the bike, I twist the gas, flip the kick starter out, and give it a few solid kicks. The R60 rumbles to life underneath me. *Braaap*. The sound reverberates off the walls and rumbles around the shop, waking Betty. She lifts her head from where she's lying on the cool concrete floor, yawns, and settles back into her nap.

I give it a few more good revs, *braaap braaap braaap*, watching Brian's smile widen with each one.

He shakes his head slowly from side to side as I cut the engine and move off the bike. "That's something I haven't heard in years," he says as he stares wistfully at the bike. "Many, many years. Sounds just the same as it did when I was a kid. This is incredible, Luke. You have no idea what you've given me just by making it run again," he finishes, reaching out to shake my hand.

We discuss the details of the remaining work on the R60, and he takes all of my suggestions on the aesthetics, teeing me up for a dream project.

"What about you? How have you been?" Brian shifts the conversation to me, adjusting the sleeves of his white oxford shirt.

"Been real busy with the shop, haven't had time for much else," I respond, leaning back against my workbench. "No complaints, though."

"Any updates on the bar?"

"Currently, it's boring paperwork and prep."

"Do you mind if I ask," Brian looks through the glass wall, then back to me, "Why a bar? The motorcycle thing I get." He holds an open hand out, gesturing between me and my shop. "It suits you, but what's the motivation behind the bar?"

Brian's presence makes my venture in Palm Springs less isolating. I met most of the people I know here through

Turbine, and they're understandably apprehensive about trusting the guy who's unseating a local favorite. A lot of the regulars have warmed up to me, but my bar is still a taboo subject. Brian's the first one to show any interest.

"My grandad—the one who left me the BMW—ran a biker bar, and I spent a lot of time there with him as a kid." I leave out the details of why I was always at a bar as a small child. Grandad was the closest thing to a dad I've ever known, and Mom left him to do most of my parenting. I can't blame her. No one should have to raise kids alone, but it doesn't always reflect well on her when I share those details. "He always told me that everything worth knowing can be learned behind a bar."

"Never would have thought of that, but he had a point," Brian laughs.

"I'd perfected pouring beer with the right amount of head before I could reach the taps on my own." My hands mimic the proper form, holding an imaginary glass at a forty-five-degree angle, showing the pouring motion I've repeated thousands of times.

"Did he hold you up to show you how to pour?"

"When I was real little, he did." I point to a battered wooden stool against the far wall. "Eventually, we made that stool over there for me to stand on."

Brian walks over and inspects the decades old piece of homemade furniture. "Solid construction." He taps a wooden leg, smoothed with age and use. "He taught you well. Impressive that you still have it."

"I kept the pieces of him I could. That's the answer to your question about the bar, too, by the way." I run all ten fingers through my hair before sliding them into my front pockets, shifting my weight against the workbench. "He died when I was fifteen. It made sense to me at the time that opening a bar was the best way to keep him close and learn the lessons he never got to teach me. I did a lot of dumb shit as a teenager, but that kid had at least one good idea."

“Sounds like it,” Brian agrees, nodding as he moves to leave. “I’m looking forward to seeing how it comes out.” He pauses by the front door. “I’ll let you get back to work.”

“Don’t forget,” I tell him, pointing toward the coffee and white paper bag he left on the counter.

“Those are for you.” He smiles.

“Thanks, Brian. You didn’t have to do that.”

“I didn’t,” he says, pointing over my shoulder.

“Allie?” I ask.

He smiles and nods with knowing amusement before turning around and walking out the front door of my shop.

Watching Allie, who’s having an animated conversation with Hector, I take a sip of the coffee. It’s an Americano, of course. The paper bag holds a turkey sandwich on rye and a bag of BBQ chips, my usual order. Her memory is perfect, like the rest of her.

It never made sense to me why the guy I bought Station 19 from wouldn’t sell to her. I finally had the opportunity to ask him last week when he came by to see how things were going. Evidently, he didn’t believe she was serious when she brought it up because the dollar amounts she talked about were too low.

He got cagey and changed the subject when I asked why he told me no one would care to see *Turbine* go, making it obvious he was afraid I’d rescind my offer if I found out how upset the community would be at losing Allie and *Turbine*. It doesn’t sit right with me. This town deserves better. *Allie* deserved better.

My eyes lock on the movement of her yellow dress as she walks behind the counter. I scan the curve of her body from the short hem of the dress, over her ample hips and soft belly, up to her electric smile, and land on giant teal eyes that stare right back at me.

Holding up my drink, I mouth *thank you*.

She waves her hand in the air dismissively, cheeks flushing, before turning back to Hector, chestnut ponytail bouncing along with her animated hand motions.

The temptation to extend her lease and surrender the idea of opening a bar in Grandad's memory comes to the forefront of my thoughts. *It's been coming up with a disturbing regularity lately.* But asking Allie to stay would mean giving up on Grandad, and I can't do that. He raised me, and there are too many things I never got to learn from him. Working behind a bar is the most connected I feel to him, and it's the reason I bought Station 19 in the first place.

My phone buzzes, lighting up with Allie's name.

Allie: Eat! It's 1:30 already!

Me: You didn't have to do this.

Allie: You can't go all day without eating. I won't allow it.

Allie: 1:36 now. Eat!!

Me: I'm not a man who takes well to being bossed around.

Grabbing the lunch she sent me, I move over to the couch to take a break. Betty comes to lie on my feet, hoping I drop something.

A teenager sitting by herself at one of the white round tables by the glass wall asks Allie a question, and my daily visual companion moves over to take the seat across from her. From my angle, I can see her profile, filling with a warm smile as she talks with the younger girl. After a brief conversation, Allie brings her something from the bakery case, and by the girl's response, I can tell it's a gift.

Allie's a natural host, making each person at *Turbine* right at home. I've seen her take countless photos, spend twenty minutes building a full itinerary for lost tourists, and remember the names of people who only come to Palm Springs twice a year.

Allie returns to the counter, and my phone buzzes again.

Allie: I can see you eating the sandwich. You're taking it just fine.

Me: This sandwich is the tits. I made an exception.

It takes her a few minutes before she's able to look at her phone again, but when she does, her shoulders shake with laughter.

CHAPTER 17

Allie & Luke

April 7th

Luke: What did you do different with my coffee today?

Allie: It's the literal same thing I always make you. Is something wrong with it?

Luke: Nothing wrong. It's better today.

Allie: No it is not.

Luke: Agree to disagree?

Allie: Never.

April 10th

Luke: Honestly surprised you're a Sex Pistols fan

Allie: WHAT

Allie: LUKE

Allie: You can hear my music???

Luke: Clearly

Allie: WAIT. Always??

Luke: Always.

Allie: Why didn't you ever say anything? Fuck I can turn it down.

Luke: Don't. I like it.

April 11th

Luke: How's the car running sweetheart?

Allie: Starts every time. No new sounds. So good?

Luke: Good. You'll tell me next time something comes up?

Luke: Right?

Allie: Ugh.

Luke: Why do all of your customers today look like they're ready for a photoshoot?

Allie: Coachella this weekend. They are.

April 13th

Luke: Are you in the back?

Allie: Yeah why?

Luke: There's a dog out here you'll want to see.

Allie: WHAT

Luke: It has floppy ears.

Allie: I'm coming right now!! Don't let them leave!

April 15th

Allie: That's the prettiest motorcycle you've had. I like the sparkles.

Luke: Sparkles won't last. I'm sanding and repainting it.

Allie: Boo. Sounds lame.

Luke: It'll be prettier when I'm done. Promise.

Allie: Doubtful.

April 17th

Luke: Your friend scares me.

Allie: Devon?

Luke: Is she the blonde glaring at me from the bar?

Allie: Oh yeah. She's terrifying.

Luke: Did you leave already?

Allie: Yeah?

Luke: You shouldn't be alone in the parking lot at night. Tell me next time?

Allie: Not necessary.

Luke: Allie. It's not safe.

Allie: I walked to the parking lot by myself for years before you showed up.

Luke: Good thing I got here when I did. You never have to again.

April 18th

Allie: Is that a new shirt? I like it.

Luke: I have 9 of this exact shirt. They come in packs of 3. I wore one yesterday.

Allie: Whatever.

Allie: The correct response is Thank You.

Luke: Looking for a comment on your new shirt?

Allie: Of course not.

Luke: Looks perfect on you.

Luke: 10/10

Allie: I hate you.

Luke: The correct response is Thank You.

April 21st

Luke: Is that a new dress? That color looks incredible on you.

Allie: You don't have to comment on everything I wear.

Allie: But thank you :)

April 22nd

Allie: Are you actually taking a day off for once?

Luke: Why? miss me?

Allie: People are asking about Betty.

Luke: Sure they are.

Luke: Be there this afternoon. Went to Ventura last night for my mom's bday. Heading back soon.

April 24th

Luke: What do you think of this bike?

Allie: Ooh, shiny. Very sleek.

Luke: Maybe even pretty?

Allie: More than pretty. Beautiful.

Luke: So I was right. It does look better without the sparkles. Noted.

Allie: Dammit.

April 25th

Allie: Are you even working today?

Luke: You're looking right at me.

Allie: You've been sitting on that couch for hours.

Luke: You've been watching me for hours?

Allie: That's not what I said.

Luke: Sure it is.

Allie: Whatever.

Luke: Doing emails and bullshit today. Don't worry. The motorcycle show will be back tomorrow.

April 26th

Allie: That lady by the window practically fell out of her chair when you rev'd that motorcycle.

Luke: Shit. Sorry.

Allie: It was fucking hilarious.

Allie: It was like Grrr rrrr RRRR and she yelped.

Luke: Is grrr supposed to be the motor?

Allie: Yeah cause it's growling.

Luke: You're adorable.

Luke: But just so you know. if you're ever texting anyone else about motorcycles we use braaap instead of grr.

Luke: I changed my mind. Never text anyone else about motorcycles.

April 27th

Luke: Coffee is extra good again today. What are you doing to it?

Allie: Nothing. You're ridiculous.

Luke: You're ridiculous if you think I believe that.

Allie: I haven't changed anything.

April 28th

Allie: You left your step stool over here.

Luke: No I didn't.

Allie: It's right here.

Luke: It's yours. Try it out. You'll love it. Furniture designed for standing on.

Allie: Let me pay you for it.

Luke: No. It's not even new. I've had it forever.

Allie: Free coffee all week then.

Luke: I'll accept it if you tell me what you're doing to make it better.

Allie: It's not different!

April 29th

Luke: Looks like you were slammed this morning.

Allie: Holy fuck, yes. That was brutal.

Luke: Want to come test drive this Ducati with me when you're ready for a break? Got to make sure it'll handle with two.

Allie: Be there in 30 seconds.

Luke: Leaving soon?

Allie: Yeah, in like 10.

Luke: On my way to walk you out.

April 30th

Allie: Hector and Brian are over here talking about you.

Luke: What are they saying?

Allie: I'm no snitch.

Luke: You just snitched.

Allie: I told you they're talking about you. Not what they're saying.

Allie: It's barely a half snitch.

Luke: Remind me never to tell you any of my secrets.

Allie: You have secrets??

Luke: Of course.

May 1st

Luke: It's an extra shot, isn't it?

Luke: That's why my drink is better?

Luke: Allie.

Luke: I'm right, aren't I?

Allie: I don't know what you're talking about.

Luke: You're so cute.

Luke: Okay, this song I don't like.

Luke: Did you just turn it up?

Allie: That motorcycle is the actual prettiest one.

Luke: You should tell Brian that. It's his. '59 BMW R60. Might be the prettiest bike I've ever worked on.

Allie: Since when does BMW make motorcycles?

Luke: Since before they made cars.

Allie: Sharing a glass wall with you is very educational.

May 2nd

Luke: It's nice on the patio.

Allie: It's 90 degrees out.

Luke: 80 in the shade.

Allie: Practically winter.

Luke: Come sit with me. You need a break.

Allie: Fine, but you have to split the BBQ chips with me. You got the last bag.

Luke: They're all yours.

May 3rd

Allie: You should start charging for these bachelorette party photos.

Luke: I don't mind. I like the photographer.

Luke: I didn't give these ones my number either, in case you're wondering.

Allie: Wasn't. You can give your number to every single girl in Palm Springs if you want.

Luke: I'll pass.

Allie: Leaving in 5!

Luke: Be right there.

May 4th

Allie: When's your birthday?

Luke: January 11th, 1994. 6:10am

Allie: I didn't need all that.

Luke: Sure you didn't.

Luke: When's yours?

Allie: August 11th

Luke: Leo. Should have guessed.

Allie: Who taught you this??

Luke: My mom, don't worry sweetheart.

Allie: I wasn't worried.

Luke: Sure.

Allie: A triple Capricorn?? What??

Luke: Mom calls me her little goat.

Allie: She sounds awesome.

May 5th

Luke: What's my horoscope say today?

Allie: How would I know?

Luke: Come on.

Allie: "Luck is on your side today. Big risks will have big rewards."

Luke: I like that one.

Allie: Let me know what you decide to risk.

Luke: I'll try my turkey sandwich on sourdough.

Allie: So risky.

Allie: Does that blue bike need to be tested for two top?

Luke: Two-up.

Allie: What?

Luke: It's called two-up when there's two people on one bike.

Allie: I like two top better.

Luke: Works for me.

Luke: The blue one isn't ready, but the green one is. You want a ride?

Allie: I don't want a ride. I just want to help if you need to test it for two top.

Luke: I need to.

Allie: Good thing I asked.

May 6th

Allie: Do you ever take a day off?

Luke: And miss the view through this window? Not a chance.

May 7th

Luke: What's my horoscope today?

Allie: You could look it up yourself.

Luke: I could.

Allie: "You are on the right path. Keep pushing forward, but don't ignore the thorns that snag you on your way."

Luke: Mm. Lots to consider.

Allie: Did you get Betty BOOTIES??

Luke: It's getting too hot for her feet. I'd rather not carry her everywhere until fall.

Allie: They're so fucking cute.

Luke: You should've seen the first time I put them on her.

Allie: Tell me there's a video.

Luke: There is.

Allie: Send it!!

Luke: Come over here. I want to see your reaction.

Allie: Coming right now.

Luke: You ready to walk out?

Allie: Yup!

Luke: Be right over.

May 8th

Allie: You got a haircut, didn't you?

Luke: I did.

Allie: You look good.

Luke: Thanks for noticing. Got a horoscope for me?

Allie: Ooh, be careful today. "Small changes can cause big feelings. Think before you act."

Luke: Are you having big feelings about my haircut?

Allie: I think it means your feelings.

Luke: Doesn't answer my question.

May 9th

Luke: Are you alright?

Luke: Allie?

Luke: It's 7:30 and Turbine is still locked.

Luke: Is someone supposed to be here? Don't you usually get here first on Thursdays?

Luke: I'm worried about you.

Luke: Are you okay?

CHAPTER 18

Allie

Some surprises are better than others. Be prepared for all kinds today. -*Allie's*
Horoscope, May 9th

Knock! Knock!

What the fuck? My body hurts. All I want to do is sleep.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Who knocks on a door anymore? *Rude.*

Knock! Knock!

“Allie, are you okay?” A booming voice calls, barely muffled by the distance between my bed and the front door. It sounds familiar. A little too familiar. *Why is he here?*

The awful noise continues as I force myself out of bed and painfully move toward the front door. My cramps are so intense, I’m practically limping.

Looking through the peephole confirms what I suspected. Luke is the motherfucker who forced me out of bed. Betty whines and wags her tail, probably smelling that I’m close.

“Allie?” he yells again, not catching Betty’s cues.

Reaching for the brass doorknob, I catch my reflection in the entryway’s full-length mirror. My hair is loose around my shoulders, kinked from yesterday’s ponytail. The gigantic t-shirt I’m wearing that reads *Death Before Decaf* is barely long enough to cover the biggest, comfiest granny panties I own. *No notes.*

Luke’s broad chest rises and falls with a full body sigh of relief when his wild eyes land on me. Then his jaw clenches under a freshly trimmed beard and he tenses up again. “You don’t keep your door locked?”

“Can you fucking not?” I roll my eyes at him, exasperated already. “What are you doing here? The last thing I need right now is to be dragged out of bed. For fuck’s sake, you have my number. Text me if you need something. This is the most—”

He cuts me off, running a hand through mussed black hair. “You’re not answering your phone, sweetheart. I texted, and I called.”

“So what? Calm your tits. Jesus. I don’t have to answer my phone. You don’t have to come banging on my door at,” I reach for my phone to check the time, but realize I left it in bed, “whatever the fuck time it is.”

“Allie, I was worried,” Luke says, the tension around his eyes corroborating his assertion.

“Just come in. It’s hot out there.”

As I’m shutting the door behind him and Betty, another wave of angry cramps tightens around my uterus. I can’t suppress the pained whimper that passes through my lips as I collapse at the waist, pressing a hand against my stomach.

“What the fuck, Allie?” Luke crosses to me in an instant, wrapping an arm around my waist and supporting my weight as I lean bodily against him. “What is going on?” he asks, angling his face, so his concerned espresso-colored eyes meet mine.

“It’s literally just cramps.”

“Just cramps? This isn’t *just* anything. You need to lie down. Let me help you.”

“I was lying down before *someone* came banging on my door for no reason.”

Letting me lean on him, Luke guides me over to the blue sectional and holds my hand, steadying me while I lie down. He grabs two patterned throw pillows from the other end of the couch and tucks one under my knees and the other behind my head. Betty sits on the ground next to me, settling her sweet face onto the cushion next to my head.

“Shit, Allie.” Sitting on the walnut coffee table next to me, Luke leans forward, bracing his forearms on his knees. “I’m sorry. There’s no one at *Turbine*. It was an hour and a half after you were supposed to open.” Squeezing his eyes together, he runs his fingers through his messier than usual hair. He continues, voice quieter than before, “You weren’t there. *Turbine*’s never closed in the morning. I was afraid something had happened to you.”

“My uterus happened to me.”

The tension falls out of his jaw, and his eyebrows furrow. “I can see that now.”

If I wasn’t preoccupied with hating one of my reproductive organs, I might be touched by his concern. “Marisol couldn’t make it in to cover for me until nine. Sorry, I should have told you.”

“Don’t apologize to me.” He shakes his head. “That’s not the point. I just, I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Okay.” I blink at him, unsure what’s supposed to happen next.

“What can I get for you? What do you need?” He leans back and looks around the room. “Where’s your heating pad?”

Normally, I loathe needing help, but right now, I don’t give a shit. I’m just grateful he’s here to take care of me. “My room is the one down the hall with the door open. Will you get my yellow blanket, please? And the bottle of painkillers next to the bed? The heating pad is in there too.”

“I made you get out of bed.” He runs his fingers through the dark tendrils of his hair yet again, forearms flexing. “Shit. I really am sorry, Allie. Do you want to move back there?”

“No, no I’m good.” He’d probably carry me to my bed if I asked him to, which would sound appealing under *any* other circumstances, but now that I’m settled into the couch, I’m not moving for anything.

Luke skeptically narrows his eyes but turns and disappears down the hallway. Betty stands up, wagging her

tail, and whines at me. She nuzzles her head into my palm, so I pat the couch by my legs to encourage her to jump up.

“She’s not supposed to be on the furniture,” Luke says, emerging from the hall.

“She seems different today. She’s nuzzling me more and whining. Is she okay?”

Luke drapes my cozy yellow blanket across my legs. “She’s worried about you. She can tell you don’t feel well.” He reaches down and scratches her behind the ears. “Isn’t that right, babe? You’re worried about Allie, too?”

“Dogs can tell that?”

“I don’t know about all dogs, but Betty knows.”

“Are you sure she isn’t allowed up here?” I push my lower lip out in an exaggerated pout and make a show of batting my eyelashes. My face may not be good for intimidation, but it’s perfect for getting exactly what I want.

“How could I say no to that?” he asks, his familiar smirk tugging the edge of his mouth. Luke tells Betty, “Okay,” and gestures to a spot on the couch that she immediately jumps onto. When I reach to pet her, she scoots closer and cuddles up close to me, resting her blocky gray head with the thick white stripe down the middle on my hip, and curling into the space behind my hooked legs.

“She’s an excellent snuggler,” Luke says. The mental image of Betty curled up in his arms feels ridiculous and endearing at the same time. “Figured you’d want this, too,” he says, handing me my phone. He sets me up with the heating pad, painkillers, a glass of water, and even pulls the tray of remotes across the coffee table, so they’re within my reach. Taking his spot across from me again on the edge of the coffee table, he asks, “Is there anything else you need? You want? Snacks?”

“No snacks,” I groan.

“Have you eaten anything?”

“No, but food sounds awful right now.”

“Okay.” Luke’s voice is damn near sweet. He’s fully in caretaker mode, and it makes me wonder how many other women have seen this side of him.

The idea of Luke draping a blanket across another woman’s legs and letting her cuddle Betty makes me irrationally jealous. I look down at Betty, who’s snoring not so quietly against me. She probably knows all his secrets. *Fuck*, I bet Luke’s the kind of guy who brings soup when you have a cold—or he comes over and *makes* soup.

“I’ve never had a dog before,” I say, trying to distract myself from the direction my thoughts are headed.

“No? You’re so good with Betty.”

“I don’t know about that. I think she’s just good with me.”

Luke’s smirk turns to a full smile as I watch his eyes pass from me to Betty and back again. “What else do you need?”

“Will you grab me an edible? They’re in the cabinet above the fridge.” Lying down has taken some of the pressure off, but I’m still in a lot of pain. All I want to do is sleep until the worst of the cramps have passed.

When Luke returns with the pink package of gummies, he’s also carrying a bowl of cashews, some crackers, and an apple. Setting them on the coffee table, next to where he sits, he says, “Hopefully you’re hungry soon.”

“Why are you so good at this?”

“At what?” he asks.

“Knowing how to take care of me.”

“My little sister gets bad cramps, too.” His tone is matter of fact, like any big brother would take care of their little sister in the same situation.

“I didn’t know you had a sister.” *How have I missed something this basic?*

He laughs, “Skye is finishing her last year at UC Davis. She’s coming to visit next week.” His voice carries clear

affection for his sister. “You’ll meet her then. I bet she’ll like you more than she likes me.”

“I doubt that, but I’d love to meet her.” After how awful I was to him for so long, I’d be shocked if she liked me at all.

“You’ll see soon enough.” He reaches across me and pats Betty’s head before standing up. “Alright, sweetheart. I’m heading out, so you can rest.” I try not to let my disappointment show. It felt good to have him here, and I’m convinced Betty’s cuddles have some kind of magical healing properties. “Is there anything else you need before I go? I’ll be back to check on you this afternoon.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I have to come back for Betty, don’t I?”

“Would you really leave her with me?” I ask.

“Of course. Doubt she’d be willing to come with me right now, anyway.”

“Thank you for coming to check on me,” I say. “It was totally unnecessary, but sweet.”

Luke scoffs, walking toward the door. “It was necessary.” He opens the front door and looks back at me over his shoulder. “Text me if you need anything, okay?”

“Okay.” The response is a reflex. I have no intention of asking for more help. He’s done far too much for me already this morning.

I’m not sure how long it takes after Luke leaves before I fall asleep, but when I wake up, it feels like it’s been hours. The pain medication has started to wear off, but the edible has definitely kicked in. Betty’s still cuddled tightly against me, but I wake her up, let her outside, and fill up a bowl of water by the back door.

Fifteen minutes later, we’re cuddled up together on the couch again, and I’m halfway through the snacks Luke left out for me. I take a picture of Betty curled up against me and send it off to Luke, who replies immediately.

Luke: She taking good care of you?

Me: The best.

Luke: You hungry yet?

Me: Nope.

I'm really hungry. But he's already done enough.

Luke: That's not true. I'm bringing you food. Any requests?

Me: I have food here.

Luke: See you soon.

I must have fallen asleep again, because the sound of Luke rapping lightly on the door startles me awake.

"Coming!" I call. Betty groans when I push against her to get up. Catching my reflection in the mirror again, I realize I'm still not wearing pants. Probably should have done something about that before he came back. *Oh well.* Pulling on the door to open it, I realize he locked it on his way out.

"You don't check to see who it is?" Luke asks.

I roll my eyes. "Come in."

"Was she good for you?" Luke asks. Betty wags her tail and goes over to greet him, while I settle back into my cozy spot on the couch under the yellow blanket.

"She was a dream."

Luke unloads a paper bag onto the coffee table, pulling out a bag of chocolate-covered pretzels and then handing me a tub of mac 'n' cheese from the deli down the street. *He made two stops.*

"Fuck me. This looks incredible," I say, popping off the top of the macaroni. "Thank you so much for doing this. I'm sorry you had to go out of your way."

He chuckles at my response. "I like helping you."

My cheeks heat at his statement. "Seems like I've been needing a lot more of it since I met you."

He smirks, taking a seat next to me on the couch and pulling out his own tub of mac 'n' cheese. "No, you're just more likely to accept it from me." *Dammit. He's right.* I keep

finding myself in situations where Luke is helping me, and rather than fighting it, I'm leaning into it.

Luke sitting on my couch, eating takeout in the middle of the day, shines a light on how segmented my knowledge of him is. How does he know about the deli down the street? Is it close to his house, too? Where does he even live? We don't sell mac 'n' cheese at *Turbine*, so I didn't know he eats it with a fork instead of a spoon.

I know how he treats strangers. But what about his family? He's so good with Betty, but how did he get her in the first place? I know the hours he keeps at work, but what time does he go to bed? I know what he looks like, polishing stuff and twisting tools around. *I should really learn more about his actual work.* But what does he look like laid back after a long day, drinking a beer? *He has to be a beer guy, right?* Does he like to grill?

Looking up at him, I see that he's watching me, with a grin on his face, not a smirk, nothing cocky about it, just genuine pleasure. "Something on your mind?" he asks.

Well, shit. I'm just staring at him. How creepy of me. I land on the least invasive of my questions. "How did you end up with Betty?"

"She found me. Four years ago, she was sleeping in the shade under my truck when I was leaving my friend Rick's house. She was underfed and a little skittish," He reaches down and wraps a thick arm around her neck, kissing her on top of the head, "but already such a sweet girl. Instead of running away, she wagged her tail and whined. I stood and waited, and after a few minutes she came and leaned up against my legs. I checked for a tag or a microchip and asked around to the neighbors, but I already knew she was mine."

He pulls out his phone, and I lean in close as he shows me pictures from their first few days together. She's thinner, scarily so, but the same dog with the little 'socks' of white fur on her front feet and already looking at him with adoration in her eyes.

"Maybe someday a dog will find me, too," I say.

“Would you like that?” he asks, setting his phone on the coffee table, but not leaning away from me.

“Hopefully, someday. I’m so busy with *Turbine*, it wouldn’t be fair to one now. They’d be home alone all day.”

“You’d be great with a dog. Too bad you can’t tell the FDA to eat shit and get one, anyway.”

Or, it could hang out at Luke’s with Betty all day. The idea crumbles as soon as it materializes. In three months, Luke and Betty will both be out of my life.

CHAPTER 19

Luke

“Pay attention to this idiot in the hat, and you’ll learn what not to do to keep a lady interested.” -*Grandad Ernie, pointing out a guy crashing and burning on a first date at the bar.*

“Dude. I can’t believe you made me get out of bed this early,” Skye complains. “And without coffee. You’re a monster.”

“It’s ten o’clock,” I say, holding open the passenger side door of my truck for her, “and we’re going for coffee right now.”

“It better be as good as you said.”

“It will be.”

As I’m pulling onto the road, she asks, “Are we gonna talk about mom?”

“If you want.”

“She’s doing better than you think.”

“I know how she’s doing. Just saw her a few weeks ago.” I reach across the truck cab to point the vents so the A/C hits her, but she bats my hands away.

“I can adjust my own vents. Did she tell you she made friends with the new neighbors? And she adores the handyman you hired to work on her bathroom? I know she’s always trying to guilt you into coming home. She even asked me to help convince you. I told her to get the fuck over it, by the way. She’s not being fair to you.”

“I’ve always been the one who takes care of her.”

“Do you hear how fucked that sounds? She’s your mother. She should have been the one to take care of you.”

“And she was, in every way she could manage.”

“I call bullshit. She saw how much easier it was to let you manage the house, raise me, finish raising yourself and just coasted.”

“Be careful how you speak about Mom.” Each time we have this conversation, Skye pushes harder toward my mom being in the wrong, but she was so young when it all started. She wasn’t old enough to comprehend how much it fucked with mom when Skye’s dad left or when Grandad died. I was. She was a wreck. Maybe it wasn’t right for me to be the one to help her, but there was no one else to do it.

“You know what’s not fair? Staying up late to help your little sister with her homework and then getting up at five the next morning to work a job before school while your mom gets to go to bed early and sleep in.”

Pulling up to a stoplight, I briefly look her in the eyes. “It wasn’t fair that both of our dads skipped. It wasn’t fair that Grandad died so young. But that doesn’t mean it wasn’t reality.”

“You’re enabling her.”

“Did you take a psych class this year or something?”

“Two, actually,” she says, flipping her dark, curly hair behind her shoulder with the back of her hand. “You know, you’re allowed to put yourself first. You’re not doing anything wrong, living out here, doing things you love.”

“Never said I was.”

“Grandad would have been proud of you.”

“He’s the one who told me to take care of her.” Grandad taught me almost everything I know about fixing and building while he was fixing and building things for Mom. He always said he wouldn’t be around forever, and I’d have to pick up where he left off, eventually. After he died, I did exactly that.

“I’m sure he didn’t mean for you to do it at the expense of living your own life.”

“Is there a point to this?”

Skye pokes me in the arm. “The point is you shouldn’t feel guilty.”

“I don’t.”

“You’re impossible,” she huffs, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Common opinion these days.”

“Who else says that?”

My silence answers her question.

“It’s Allie, isn’t it? I cannot wait to meet her. Do you think she’ll be there today? Do you think I’ll like her? Do you think she’ll like me?”

“She will. And you will. And she will.”

My prediction about the two of them is proven correct within seconds of entering *Turbine*.

“Is this your sister?” Allie squeals, coming around the counter. “It has to be. You have the same eyes.”

“Yes! And you’re Allie, right?” Skye reaches out, pulling Allie into a hug. Her eyes flash with surprise, probably at my sister knowing who she is already, but she returns the hug with enthusiasm. They look like old friends, not two people meeting for the first time. Allie fawns over Skye’s curly hair, and Skye asks where Allie got her silver necklace with a lock and key pendant, because she has to have one too.

“I am dying for coffee. He’s deprived me all morning,” Skye says, glaring at me over her shoulder.

“He didn’t let you have coffee at home?” Allie asks, voice incredulous.

“She wasn’t awake to drink it.”

“You should have woken her up with it,” Allie scolds, leading us over to the register. “Coffee is the only acceptable reason to wake someone up.”

“Noted.”

The two of them have a lengthy conversation about flavored syrups and seasonal specials, with Allie helping Skye pick the ‘perfect Palm Springs vacation’ coffee before Allie trades off her duty at the register with Marisol and joins us with a drink of her own at a round table by the glass wall.

“So, how has my brother been as a work neighbor?” Skye asks, dimples showing in her mischievous smile.

I expect Allie to explain how she finds me infuriating, but she doesn’t. “I wish I could tell you he’s an impossible jackass, but he’s not.”

“It’s irritating how calm he is, isn’t it?” my sister asks, glaring at me accusingly.

“It’s like he’s totally unruffled,” Allie agrees.

Leaning back in my chair, I sip my coffee and watch them volley excited conversation back and forth.

“What’s with the windows?” Skye asks. “He said it’s cause it’s an old gas station?”

“He would say that.” Allie rolls her eyes at me. “The real story is sweet and adorable and includes people falling in love.”

That’s my cue to leave. I push back my chair. “I’ve got some work to do, so I’m going to head next door before she starts on this fairytale.”

“It’s a real story,” Allie insists, sitting up straighter in her chair, a slight rosy blush coming to her round, freckled cheeks.

I don’t bother arguing. The story makes her happy, and the last thing I want to do is take away any more of her happiness.

~

Allie: Today’s horoscope says little goats make very good big brothers.

Me: Is that so?

Allie: "Those around you look up to you, even if they don't realize it. Or you don't deserve it." So pretty much?

Me: I'll take it.

My eyes meet hers through our glass wall. Her cheeks flush, as they often do when I pay attention to her, but she holds my gaze and shines her electric smile at me instead of looking away like she used to.

She and Skye talked for an hour before Skye borrowed my truck to go shopping at the places Allie recommended. It only took my feisty brunette neighbor two minutes to text me after my sister left.

Me: Thank you for keeping Skye company.

Allie: I'm obsessed with her. She's like a funnier, cooler version of you.

Me: So you're obsessed with me?

Allie: That's not at all what I said.

Me: It's basically what you said.

Allie: You're impossible. Can you see me glaring at you?

Looking through the window, I see her round cheeks, bright eyes, and plush lips trying to suppress a smile. She may be trying to intimidate me, but I'm only reveling in her focus.

Me: I see you.

Opening my laptop on the workbench, I settle in for a few hours of working on plans for the bar. I've been connecting with beer vendors, working on the cocktail menu, looking for staff, and I applied for the liquor license weeks ago. But when it comes to the actual physical design for the space, I get stuck.

Looking up from my laptop, I see Allie's chestnut ponytail bob in time with her laughter, reminding me why. She belongs over there. Every time I try to imagine changing out countertops, adding in beer taps, or revamping the kitchen, all I can picture is her standing there, disappointed.

She's wearing a dress again today, mint green with thick straps and a short skirt. I don't know if it's the extra heat of

late spring in the desert, but she's been wearing them more often than not. Probably inconvenient for her work, but I'm not complaining.

Me: That dress looks perfect on you by the way.

When she sees my text, she spins in a circle, showing off the dress, its hem ruffling just barely below her ass.

Allie: It's nothing special.

Me: You make it special.

Allie: Jesus, sometimes I think you're trying to make me blush.

Me: I am.

CHAPTER 20

Allie

You can't make old friends, but don't let that stop you from making new ones. -*Allie's horoscope, May 17th*

"It looks good right there to me," I say to Devon, who's been moving the same chenille pouf around her new office for ten minutes, uncharacteristically indecisive.

"Love you, but you're wrong," she replies, picking it up and walking back to the window she first set it under. She and Bea have been working out of this space for the past month, but all the furniture and decor have to be placed to perfection for their grand opening party tomorrow night.

My design skills are sorely lacking, so I've been helping by providing coffee and an extra set of hands. "What's next, boss?"

"The guys from the showroom should have been here an hour ago with the sofa and the rest of the furniture. There isn't much else today." Devon twist her almost-white blonde hair together into a clip, before she holds up her wrist, checking her black athletic watch. Most days, she wears a cream-colored leather one, but today she changed it to match her outfit, essentially dressed for a workout in white Adidas, black wide-leg sweatpants, and a fitted brown crop-top that shows off her flat stomach. "Yeah, they said between one and two. It's quarter after three, I'm calling again."

While Devon is on the phone, Bea pushes open the front door, balancing a cardboard box on her hip. She's wearing loose-fitting olive-green pants, tan Nikes, and what I'm assuming is a t-shirt of a band I've never heard of. Seeing her outside of barre class and workout gear still surprises me sometimes. Her vibe is much less Workout Barbie, as she calls it, and much more Cool Girl Barbie.

“Hello, angel!” she greets me in her low, sing-song voice.

“Hi, gorgeous! Let me help you.” I take the box from her.

Bea slides off her rectangular orange sunglasses. “You’re perfect. Thank you,” she says, moving to style a bookshelf that holds exactly six books and a bunch of other *stuff*.

“I still can’t believe I took your classes for years and never knew you were a designer.”

“I’m a woman of many mysteries,” she says, moving a bronze vase down two shelves. “But my degree isn’t one of them. I just like to keep this part of my life separate from the gym.”

Devon walks back into the room. “I am very stressed,” she says instead of greeting Bea.

“You don’t look stressed,” Bea responds. “You’re playing it off beautifully.” And she’s right. Devon’s moods are often hard to read. She has an enviable poker face.

“Thank you for that,” Devon says. “I just got off the phone with the showroom who sold me the sofa and the rest of the rugs and furniture we need. They over-committed their delivery schedule, and they can’t deliver until Monday.”

“Do you need all that for your grand opening?” I ask.

“Not technically,” Devon says, and I can tell she’s frustrated by the tiniest change in the shape of her mouth.

“We need them,” Bea disagrees. “It’s the grand opening of *Friday West Interior*’s first office. It matters. We’ll figure it out,” she finishes, with the comforting authority of someone who knows how to pull a solution out of thin air.

“The showroom closes at five, and they’re not open tomorrow. I’ve got an hour and a half to figure out a way to get it picked up,” Devon says.

“*We’ve* got an hour and a half,” Bea corrects, pulling out her phone.

“How do I not know anyone with a truck?” Devon asks.

“Oddly enough, neither do I,” Bea says, “but rentals exist. I’ll start calling around.”

“I kind of know someone with a truck,” I volunteer.

“Who?” Devon asks. It’s a fair question. We have all the same friends.

“Luke.”

Neither of them looks surprised. Maybe I’m not playing things as close to the chest with him as I thought, but I haven’t said a word to either of them about him since the day he helped fix my car. I don’t fully understand what’s happening between us. He’s sweet to me, keeps *fucking* taking care of me, and I don’t even blame him for taking the building anymore. So, I guess that makes us friends? But he flirts with me. A lot. And I might flirt back. But nothing could ever happen between us. *Right? Right.* I’m moving *Turbine* in a few months. Although I’m still not sure where, which is another—

“Al,” Devon interrupts my thought spiral, “are you going to ask him?”

“Of course.” It makes me extremely uncomfortable to ask anyone for a favor, especially him, but I would do anything for Devon.

Me: How would you feel about me owing you a big favor?

Luke responds immediately.

Luke: You could never owe me anything. What do you need, sweetheart?

Me: I feel so bad asking this.

Luke: Ask.

Me: You’re my only friend with a truck.

Luke: What do you need me to move?

“Are you texting him?” Devon asks. “Can you not just call him?”

“We aren’t on phone call terms yet.”

“Well, I’m about to be,” Devon says, voice steady and firm, not losing her cool.

“Give me three minutes.” I walk to the other side of the room as Luke and I finish the conversation over text with him agreeing to pick everything up immediately.

“He’s on his way to the showroom.” I tell Devon.

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

Devon’s façade cracks for the first time, her shoulders slumping in relief. She walks across the room and wraps me in a tight hug. “Thank you, Al. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Literally, all I did was text a man.”

“A man who you’re frenemies with,” Devon says.

“At this point, he’s pretty much all friend, and no enemy,” I say.

“Interesting,” is all Devon says, but I know her analytical mind is already thinking about what that means.

We work together to unpack every item Bea brought from the house. The space is practically unrecognizable from the bland white walls they started with a month ago. They’ve added paint, wallpaper, and new curtains. There’s even a little kitchenette that now has tile and freshly painted cabinets with new door hardware and, of course, a killer coffee set up. The place feels like Devon. She got to implement design ideas I’ve heard her daydream about for years.

An hour and a half later, Luke’s truck rumbles up. I check my reflection in Devon’s leather-framed “statement” mirror. White Converse, black bike shorts, black cropped t-shirt, and my usual ponytail. Nothing he hasn’t seen me in before. *Not that I care*. I finger comb my wispy hairs into place as I follow Devon and Bea outside to meet him.

He opens the passenger side door, and Betty bounds out, then runs up to me in her little blue pavement shoes, wagging her tail, and wearing that broad open doggy-smile of hers.

“It’s pretty definitive that she likes me better than you now,” I tell Luke as I squat down low to the ground to hug Betty. He only laughs in response.

“Thank you for doing this,” Devon says. “How can I repay you? Actually, can I pay you?”

“Absolutely not.” His answer is immediate and firm.

“Ooh, bossy,” Bea says, walking past him on her way to check out the furniture in the truck bed.

“It is hot as fuck out here,” I announce, standing up from my place on the ground with Betty. “Let’s get this unloaded.”

Luke’s truck is loaded down with enough furniture and boxes to fill a small apartment. “Holy shit, Luke. I had no idea how much I was asking you to move,” I say to him and then shoot Devon a glare. She rolls her eyes, raising her hands in a *sorry, not sorry* shrug.

Luke takes a step closer to me and slides a hand around my bare waist as he leans down to speak into my ear. “It’s alright, sweetheart. I like doing things for you.”

I turn my face to hide my blush and catch eyes with Devon, who’s analyzing us. “Well, thanks,” I stutter out awkwardly to Luke before reaching for a box in the truck bed.

The heat makes the task of unloading the truck twice as daunting, but between the four of us, it goes decently fast. Luke takes the lead, and much to my surprise, Devon lets him. After his truck is unloaded, he hangs around to help get everything placed, genuinely happy to help.

“Luke, you saved me today,” Devon says to him as we’re heading to our cars. “Truly, thank you.”

“No point in having a truck if I’m not willing to use it,” he says.

“Are you free tomorrow night?” Bea asks, shooting me a conspiratorial grin. “We’re having a grand opening party. You should come.”

My eyes grow wide, but I try to hide the surprise on my face. It’s the right thing to do, inviting him. *Didn’t we just*

decide he's my friend? Why am I so nervous? I see him every damn day.

Luke slides his hands into his front pockets, and his familiar cocky half smile appears across his face. "I'd love to come."

CHAPTER 21

Luke

“Same as most things, kid. Don’t rush. This works better if you take it slow.” -Grandad Ernie to twelve-year-old Luke after he cut himself while learning to shave.

Hector and Brian find me the moment I walk in the door of Devon’s party, Hector wrapping me in an unexpected, but appreciated, hug before I have a chance to look for Allie.

“Well, doesn’t Mr. Motorcycle clean up nice?” Hector says half to me half to Brian, who nods in agreement behind him.

“Is that my nickname?”

“No, I just tried it out for the first time and I don’t like it. It’s officially retired. You deserve better,” Hector says, making all three of us laugh. “I’ll come up with something in time. Or not. Luke suits you. Anyway, I’m thrilled the girls invited you.”

“It’s good to see you outside of Station 19,” Brian adds.

“Love the name of your shop, by the way. Don’t think I ever told you,” Hector adds. “*Voyeur Motors*. Very sexy.”

Brian moves past Hector’s comment. “I’m sorry I haven’t picked up my dad’s motorcycle yet. I’m afraid it’ll just go back into the garage for another thirty years.”

“It’s a gorgeous machine. I don’t mind keeping it around,” I say, scanning the room behind him for a chestnut ponytail. “I could help you sell it if that’s what you decide you want to do. It’s worth quite a bit.”

“Oof,” Brian says, putting a hand to his chest, “It’s probably the best idea, but it hurts to consider.”

“You don’t have to part with it. There’re motorcycle shows you could submit it to.”

Hector interjects, waving a hand between our faces. “This is a party. Let me show you the bar.” He squeezes my shoulder once before leading the way across the room.

Following Hector through the packed crowd, we pass a couple of people I recognize from *Turbine*, but still no Allie. *She must be here somewhere.*

“The line for the bartender is right here,” Hector says. “We’ll see you in a bit.” Brian taps my shoulder and points to the far corner of the room before he and Hector walk away in the opposite direction. Following the line of where he pointed, I finally lock eyes on Allie.

Her body is turned, showcasing her profile. Chestnut hair styled in loose curls falls around her face. No ponytail tonight. She throws her head back in a laugh that I can hear all the way across the room, hair sliding away to reveal bare shoulders. The crowd between us blocks my view of what must be a strapless dress.

“Sir?” The bartender’s voice grabs my attention. “What would you like?” His tone implies this isn’t the first time he’s asked me this. After apologizing, I order both of the event’s specialty cocktails. Drinks in hand, I find an empty space against the wall with a view of Allie talking with some people I don’t know, her laughter repeatedly echoing throughout the room.

She looks over her shoulder toward the door, trying to be discreet, but obviously waiting for someone to arrive, which I take as my cue.

Once I’ve cut through the crowd, the full sight of her from head to toe nearly steals my breath. Her strapless pink dress has a straight neckline that sits low on her chest. The bottom of the dress lands just above her knees, which would make it seem modest if it weren’t for the slit that runs up the front of one leg. It’s much tighter than her usual clothes and shows off every one of the lush curves that I’m dying to run my hands over.

Steep, tan high heeled shoes lengthen her exposed legs, and a gold necklace lands in the divot between her

collarbones. Most days, Allie strikes an adorable balance between casual and put together. Tonight, she's all sex and power.

She looks over her shoulder, checking the door again, and I step closer, so I'm standing beside her when she turns back.

"Waiting on someone?" I ask.

"Luke," she gasps, face lighting up with a smile when she sees me, eyes growing wide. The warm blush I crave fills her cheeks.

"Hey, gorgeous."

Her cheeks blush brighter. "I'm so happy you're here. Is one of those for me?" she asks, indicating the drinks with a pale, freshly manicured hand.

"Or both. Whatever makes you happy."

She giggles, reaching for the rosemary whiskey sour, leaving me with the greyhound. "I like this one better." And then she wraps her free arm around my waist, pulling me tightly against her for a hug, barely avoiding spilling both of our drinks. Her high heels bring her head up just above my shoulder and the familiar scent of coconut and lemon with it.

When she pulls back, I let my hand linger on her waist for a few extra breaths. "You look incredible."

She giggles again. "Thank you. You look," she pauses for a moment, looking me up and down, taking in my combed-back hair, freshly trimmed beard and fitted dark-gray suit. "You look incredible, too." She cocks her head to the side, unabashedly staring at me.

"Hello, darlings." Bea's voice comes from my left, and I reluctantly give up eye contact with Allie to greet her. They squeal over each other's outfits while I sip my drink.

When another friend of theirs joins, they include me in the conversation by sharing how I moved furniture yesterday. The story paints me in a better light than I deserve. Allie asked me for help, and I know how hard that is for her. There's no way

I'd pass up the opportunity to come through for her, to be someone she can count on.

The rest of the evening plays out similarly, Allie shining brightly while she and her friends exchange stories and make each other laugh. She's more relaxed than she is at Station 19. Without the weight of being in charge, she's letting loose.

"Don't think just because you helped out last night, I'll go easy on you with my girl." Devon speaks quietly enough from her position next to me that only I can hear.

Suppressing a smile of admiration for Devon's fierce protection of her friend, I invite her critique. "Tell me what you're worried about."

Devon narrows her eyes at me skeptically. "I don't know you. She doesn't either, really. But she likes you, and she trusts you." Her words come out like an accusation. "To be clear—I do not like you, and I do not trust you." She pauses, staring at me with searching blue eyes that are level with mine with her heels on, while she considers her next words. "You will be careful with her."

Her words are firm and deliberate, but not practiced. Still, I wonder if Devon has ever had this talk with another man. Or men. The thought stirs a level of jealousy in me deeper than I knew I was capable of.

"I am careful with her, and I will continue to be," I respond, keeping my voice respectful and not defensive.

Devon persists, either not satisfied with my answer or her own warnings. "She gives a lot more than she takes. Do not take advantage of her."

"I would never take anything from her."

"You've already taken the one thing her entire future was hanging on."

"That's fair." We both know what she's talking about, and I don't bother defending myself. The idea of Allie moving *Turbine* is more distasteful to me every day. Watching her struggle to find a new space keeps me up at night.

I glance down at Allie, where she stands to my other side, and she flashes a brilliant smile up at me before returning to her conversation. I'm amazed that she's allowing me into her life despite the trouble I've caused her.

When I look back at Devon, she glares at me and sighs in frustration. I half expect her to ask me my intentions next, but she says, "She likes peonies. The season is short, so don't miss it."

My eyebrows rise in surprise. "Thank you for that."

Devon's eyes narrow at me again, judging. "Don't fuck this up."

I nod in affirmation before returning my attention to Allie. Leaning down, I whisper, "You want to grab another drink and get some air with me?"

She squeezes my wrist and whispers back, "Yes, please."

We get two fresh cocktails and find a quiet spot with a bench in the courtyard outside. It's May in the desert, so the days have been blazing, but the nights are warm with a slight breeze occasionally blowing through.

Settling my arm across the bench behind Allie, I consider her little pink dress and all the skin it exposes. "Are you cold?"

"No, it's perfect outside." Still, she inches a little closer to me. "Warm desert nights like this are my favorite," she says, smiling up at the sky.

"This will be my first desert summer," I look down at green eyes framed by thick black lashes that beam back at me, "but I can already tell I'm going to love it."

"I bet you will," she responds, watching the stars above as we lapse into an easy silence.

Devon's words repeat in my head. *You've already taken the one thing her entire future was hanging on.* If I hate the idea of taking anything away from Allie, how do I justify letting her lease run out? What am I offering her if I'm the source of her biggest problem? I see her strength, keeping a

brave face for everyone around her, but she's being brave about losing something that I've taken away from her.

Allie points the toes on her right foot, admiring her strappy tan shoe. "You have a nice talk with Devon?" she asks, the laughter in her voice showing she knows it was anything but.

"Nice isn't the word I'd use," I answer.

Allie laughs, setting her cocktail down on the bench beside her. "She really loves me."

"She really does," I agree. "You want to know what we said?"

"Nope. Doesn't matter. I trust you. She likes you." Allie squeezes her hands on the edge of the bench on either side of her partially exposed legs. Now that she's sitting, the top of the slit reaches nearly to the fold of her hip.

"That's not the message I got."

"You must be confused, silly."

Moving my arm off the bench to rest across her shoulders, I ask, "Agree to disagree?"

"Have I ever?" Allie crosses her legs toward me, leaning into my hold. She's so close now and she smells *so damn good*. Warm and sweet. "Agreeing to disagree would be admitting I'm wrong. Which I never am."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Good, don't forget it." Tapping her fingers lightly against my chest, she adds, "For the record, I'm happy Bea invited you tonight."

"So am I, sweetheart. You shine so brightly when you're with your friends. I've never seen you laugh so much."

She tries to bury her face in my shoulder to hide her blush, but I catch her chin between my fingers, drawing her eye to eye with me. "Why do you do that?" I ask, smoothing my thumb across the silken skin of her jaw before releasing her face.

"Do what?" she asks as she blinks up at me.

“Hide from me when you blush.”

“Didn’t know it was obvious.”

“Hard not to notice.”

“Blushing is so embarrassing. When I was in high school, kids used to make fun of me for it, and then my cheeks would turn even redder, so I started hiding my face. I guess I never stopped.”

“I hate that they did that to you.” The thought of anyone making her feel bad for one of her most adorable, and vulnerable, traits makes my own cheeks red, but for a different reason. “You’re not looking for revenge, are you? I could help.”

“No, but you’re very cute,” she laughs, the sound sugary and full.

I brush a loose curl behind her ear. “Try not to hide from me when I say this next part, okay?”

Turning on the bench so she’s facing me directly, she brings her legs all the way across my lap, resting her feet on the other side of my thighs. “Okay,” she nods emphatically, sending her hair out of place again. “I’m ready for whatever you’ve got.”

I resist the urge to explore further as I run my fingertips up the length of her thigh, so I can make my point. “Your blush is beautiful. It’s beautiful that you wear every emotion raw on your face. When you’re happy, your smile is electric. You radiate joy. When you’re laughing, your ponytail bobs, and your whole body dances. And when you’re mad at me, and you try to glare—”

“Ugh, damn Bambi eyes and round cheeks,” she interjects.

“Allie Walker, I never want to hear you curse your perfect features again.” Clearly, I haven’t gotten through to her yet. “It’s fucking adorable when you do your little glare thing. I know you’re mad. You get your point across, but you’re too good inside for it to overtake your face. Bambi eyes and round cheeks are exactly what you should have. They suit you. Your

remarkably kind heart. You are so thoroughly good from the inside out.”

Allie blinks up at me, cheeks brighter than I’ve ever seen them, but she makes no move to hide. I can tell her mind is whirling behind her teal eyes, so I continue tracing a path up and down her leg and wait for her to speak. “That was—I’m not—I don’t even—,” taking a deep breath, she clasps her hands together across the top of her knees and tries again. “You make me feel seen. And not just right now. Always. Every day at our building.”

The sound of ‘our building’ on her lips cuts me to my core. She’s forgiven me for taking Station 19, but I haven’t forgiven myself. Devon was right. She gives magnitudes more than she takes, and I refuse to be someone who takes from her. I want to be the man who gives her everything, no matter what I have to give up.

“You’re impossible to miss, Allie.” I tap her chest above her heart to emphasize my point before tracing her bare collarbone with my fingertip. “Did I tell you how much I love this tiny pink dress?”

“You didn’t.”

“Shame on me. You look delicious.”

She blushes, giggling, as she reaches across me. She picks up the cocktail I took two sips of before abandoning in favor of having my hands all over the chestnut-haired goddess in my lap. “Can I have this?”

“It’s all yours. You’re not driving, are you?”

“Oh, fuck no. Devon’s taking me home. She never drinks at work stuff.” Through the windows of Devon’s office, the party is winding down, meaning my time with Allie is almost up.

“How would you feel about playing hooky with me tomorrow?” I ask, continuing to run my fingers up and down her lush thigh.

“Hooky?” She leans her head onto my shoulder, giggling more.

“Yeah, blow off work. Spend the day with me.”

“Would I get to sleep in?” she asks, but her playful tone suggests I’ve already got her.

“I want the whole day. I’d pick you up at seven.”

Allie reaches across my body and wraps her right hand around my left wrist, pulling it up so she can read my watch. “That’s almost nine whole hours away. Plenty of time for a good night’s rest.”

“So, that’s a yes?” I ask.

“It is.” She smiles. “Are you going to tell me what we’re doing?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

CHAPTER 22

Allie

“You can be the life of every party, but it’s okay to take a step back and give someone else a chance to shine occasionally.” -*Allie’s horoscope, May 19th*

Luke: You make me coffee every day, but I don’t know how you take yours. That’s not right.

Me: I’m indecisive. Different every day.

Luke: What would you like today?

Me: Lucas Pine, are you bringing me coffee?

Luke: That’s the idea.

Me: Cold brew with a splash of sweet cream please.

Luke: Perfect. See you in 30.

Me: How am I supposed to know what to wear if you won’t tell me where we’re going?

Luke: We’ll be outside. Maybe wear a hat. And lots of SPF.

Me: A hat?? And sunscreen. Not exactly a complete outfit.

Luke: It’s casual. Anything you wear will be perfect.

Me: You continue to be infuriating.

Luke holds my hand as I jump down from his truck onto the gravel parking lot. He’s enjoying keeping today’s itinerary a surprise, so I didn’t push the subject during our hour and a half drive. The smells of hot asphalt, burnt rubber, and engines revving are my first clues. “Is this some kind of car show?”

Reaching into his truck bed, he opens a cooler and tosses me an ice-cold bottle of water. “Stay hydrated, today. Okay?”

“Wait, did I guess right?”

“Let me have my fun, sweetheart. You’ll find out soon enough,” he says, leading me toward the sounds of revving engines. Luke walks with even more confidence than usual. Muscular chest proud, steps sure, and a permanent grin on his bearded face.

My stomach has been filled with butterflies ever since Luke asked me to spend the day with him, my mind wandering with the possibilities of what it could mean.

Luke’s been teasing and flirtatious with me since we first met, but I wrote it off as something he must do with everyone. The way he’s treating me lately feels different, more intentional. Affectionate even.

“Did I tell you how fucking cute you look in this?” Luke asks, tugging playfully on the bill of my hat. After his entirely unhelpful wardrobe suggestions this morning, I landed on cutoff denim shorts, cropped white tank top, white low top Converse that are still scuffed from the day we worked on my car, and a black baseball cap, silver anklet, and a little black backpack filled with Devon’s good sunscreen and oversized sunnies for accessories. *Trying to look like I’m not trying. Not sure if I succeeded.* For his part, he’s dressed the same as always, navy t-shirt and worn jeans.

“Yes, Lucas, it was the first thing you said when I opened the door this morning,” I say, his attention making me giggle.

“Good, I don’t want you to forget it.” He slows his steps, leaning closer to me. “Stick with me today, alright?”

“Who else would I be with?” I ask him, confused.

“I’m serious.”

“Me too.”

Luke shakes his head and laughs, picking his pace up again. “They’re going to love you. Maybe too much.”

Before long, a rainbow of canopy style tents, like the ones at a BBQ or the beach, comes into view. There are trucks and trailers everywhere, a lot like a tailgate party, except this one has motorcycles peppered throughout. Underneath the tents,

people are sitting on lawn chairs and drinking beers out of koozies.

“Fucking Luke!” a boisterous voice coming from somewhere in between the tents yells. “Bringing a girl to race day?” The owner of the voice appears, and I recognize him immediately as Luke’s friend Cameron. He’s hard to miss. Excessively tall with wild red hair that fades into a washed out green, and colorful tattoos covering almost every inch of exposed skin other than his face.

Cameron rushes us, like he’s about to scoop Luke up in a hug. I step back to give them room, but at the last second he turns toward me instead, wraps his arms around my waist, and picks me up all the way off the ground to spin me around in circles.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Luke says to Cameron after the second spin. “She probably doesn’t remember you, Jesus.”

“I remember Cameron,” I say, laughing as he sets me back down on the ground. Luke moves next to me, wrapping his heavy, muscular arm around my shoulder in an undeniably possessive move.

“See? She loves me,” Cameron says.

“Actually, I said I remember you,” I correct, causing Luke to smile.

“One and the same, love. One and the same,” Cameron says, every word out of his mouth bordering on laughter. “But will you call me Cam, please? Or Hack?”

“Hack?” I ask him.

“Cameron Hacker,” Cam says and then lowers into an exaggerated bow in front of me. “My mother calls me Cameron. My friends call me Cam, and my race friends call me Hack.”

“I’ll go with Cam.”

“After today, we’ll be race friends. Is this your first time racing a motorcycle?” Cam asks me.

“Wait, hold the fuck on.” I hold my palms up flat in front of me and try to step backwards away from them, but I only land more solidly in Luke’s hold. “Nope, nope, nope.”

“Quit being an ass,” Luke scolds Cam before squeezing my shoulder reassuringly and looking down at me. “He’s fucking with you. We’re only here to *watch* races.”

“He’s right. I’m sorry,” Cam says, with a gigantic smile and not a stitch of remorse in his voice. “Although this shit is addictive. I’ll bet you ten bucks and a warm beer that you’ll want to try it yourself by the end of the day.”

“Those are low stakes,” I say.

“Exactly. That’s how I get people to play along with me. Did it work?” Cam asks.

“Sure didn’t,” I deadpan, causing Cam and Luke to both laugh louder than the joke deserved as we head toward the tents.

“Are you racing today, too?” I ask Luke.

“Our boy gave up racing years ago,” Cam answers for him. “He had to, otherwise no one else would ever win.”

“Lies.” Luke shakes his head. “I was not that good.”

“He was that good.”

“I haven’t raced since juniors. Switched from racing to fixing bikes pretty quick,” Luke explains.

The scene around us becomes more chaotic as we reach Cam’s tent. People are rushing between the enclosures, yelling things about missing parts and how little time they have left. The revving engines become more frequent, which Luke informs me is people testing their bikes before the races.

Everything in Cam’s area is black and yellow, like an oversized bumblebee. His canopy tent is bright yellow with black metal legs. He’s backed his truck, which is also bright yellow with black stripes along the sides, up under the edge of it next to a big black box trailer with yellow decals on the side, including one that says, “*Race Naked.*” Luke slides two

camping style folding chairs out of the bed of the truck and sets them up for us next to Cam's chair.

"What'll it be?" Cam asks, holding up two different beers, one in each hand.

"It's not even nine o' clock," I answer.

"Are you going to sit there and tell us you're against day drinking?" Luke asks, mistaking my pleasant surprise for judgment. He settles back into his bumblebee-colored folding chair like it's a throne, with his chest broad and chin held high, smiling wide. The cocky half-smile I've grown used to hasn't made a single appearance yet this morning.

"This is hardly day drinking," I say. "It's *morning* drinking. It's different. Arguably better." I'm all-in on whatever Luke has planned for the day, so I pick a beer, and Cam gives the other option to Luke.

"It's all coffee and water for me until I'm done racing, but you should enjoy," Cam says, handing us each a warm breakfast burrito wrapped in foil before disappearing from the tent.

Luke raises his can in cheers. "Thanks for being up for this."

"Of course!" I tap my can against his. "I can already tell I'm going to love it."

"And we haven't gotten to the good part yet."

"No?"

"The races are the real fun." He smiles broadly again, carrying himself with the kind of happiness I've never seen on him before.

"Even though you don't race anymore?" I ask him.

"Absolutely. I prefer it that way."

"You really like to watch, don't you?"

"You have no idea," Luke responds. I turn away and take a sip of my beer to hide the blush I can't quite explain.

“LP!” a young voice yells from behind us. A girl and two boys, probably pre-teens, walk into Cam’s tent. They all have on leather coveralls that are unzipped and hanging from the waist over the top of their regular clothes. It’s got to be eighty-five degrees out already. They must be sweltering.

Luke hugs each of the kids and introduces them to me. The girl with two long dark-brown braids and rich bronze skin is named Addison. The boys, Joshua and Dylan, look so similar with their shaggy long hair and sandy sun-tanned skin that I’m sure they’re brothers.

“Where have you been this year? I almost won last weekend, and you missed it!” The taller of the two boys, Dylan, asks Luke.

“Fourth place isn’t almost winning,” Addison teases him.

“I got passed twice in the last turn. Wasn’t fair,” he argues. “Still better than you placed.”

“One time. You’ve placed higher than me once this whole year,” Addison scoffs at the boy and moves a few steps away from him. *Are these children racing motorcycles? Is that safe?*

“You’re gonna watch today, right?” the shorter boy asks Luke.

“Of course. We both are,” Luke says, sitting back down in his chair next to me and waving a hand between us. “Why else would we be here?”

“Are you his girlfriend?” The shorter boy asks me.

My cheeks flame red, and I choke on my beer. *Very smooth.* Luke responds before I have to, “Allie is my friend.” I have no right to feel the twinge of hurt in my chest that rises at his quick denial, but I feel it just the same.

“That’s dumb. LP never has a girl,” Dylan, the taller and likely older boy, replies. *Never has a girl? How is that possible?*

“Do *you* have a girlfriend?” Luke asks him, playful accusation in his voice.

The boy shakes his head no. “Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Luke says. “Worry about yourself.” The other two kids laugh, and I do my best to stifle my own.

“Does my dad know you’re here today?” Addison asks.

“I gave him a heads up,” Luke replies, turning back to me. “Addy’s dad is Rick Weaver. He’s one of the best guys out here, on and off the track.” Addison’s posture grows proud at Luke’s description of her dad. “I was his lead race mechanic for years.” I nod along like I know what a lead race mechanic is.

“Yeah, and then he ditched us to move to the middle of the nowhere and open a bar,” Dylan adds.

“Oh, I was there for that part,” I say, taking another sip of my beer.

“Now, get out of here.” Luke waves them away. “You’re going to be late for your qualifier.”

“Oh, shit!” The taller boy exclaims. He yells over his shoulder at us as the kids hurry away from the tent, “I’m number 383! Look for me, I’ll be the one out front!”

“It seems like they really like you,” I say to Luke after they’ve cleared the tent.

“Fuck if I know why.” Luke shakes his head.

“They’re racing motorcycles?” I ask, nodding in the direction the kids went. “They’re so young.”

“They’re probably twelve or thirteen,” Luke explains, like that’s a perfectly normal age to be racing anything. “Cam and I were that age when we started.”

“We were what age when we started what?” Cam asks, reappearing and sitting on his truck’s tailgate.

“We were the same age as Bill’s boys and Addy are now when we started racing,” Luke says.

“Oh, shit yeah. Probably younger. Fifteen, twenty years ago now,” Cam agrees. Picturing Luke and Cam at that age, hanging out around racetracks and visiting the adults they

liked, just like those kids were, brings a smile to my face. I bet they were adorable. “Of course, our parents didn’t have money like their parents do. Luke and I were always coming up with new money-making schemes to support our motorcycle habit.” Cam laughs. “Some things never change.”

Luke reaches over and places a light squeeze on my thigh just above my knee, the same way he does when we’re riding two top. “Did I tell you Allie’s a great mechanic?” he asks Cam, pride clear in his voice.

“I am not!” Leaning forward in my chair, I clarify for Cam. “Luke replaced my starter, and I helped a little.”

“She did the whole damn thing herself. I barely touched the car,” Luke says.

“Bull. Shit,” I say with exaggerated emphasis on both syllables.

“I dunno, Allie. Luke’s the best mechanic I know. If he says you’re good, I’m with him,” Cam says, jumping down off his tailgate. Well, stepping down is more like it. *He’s so fucking tall.* “I’m going for a walk to clear my head before qualifiers. See you two cuties later.” He pulls cordless headphones out of his pocket and pops one in each ear before disappearing from the tent again.

“He never sits still, does he?” I ask Luke.

“No, never.” He chuckles and smiles warmly in the direction of his best friend. “Never has. Cam’s all energy. Gotta get it out somehow. Today’s a big race for him. He’s lined up to get a couple of big new sponsors, and he’ll be able to move up to a higher racing league for next season depending on how this one plays out. His last two races didn’t go as well as he wanted, so he’s got to pull it out today.”

Luke speaks about Cam with genuine care and affection. The way he knows so much about him, his struggles, the specific details of his life, reminds me of how close I am with Devon. For the first time, I’m realizing how much he’s had to do by himself in Palm Springs. I’ve always thought he was

kind of a solitary guy, but maybe that's not it at all. Maybe his community is somewhere else.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out to see a new group text.

Devon: Your location is showing as the middle of nowhere. Do I need to come out there?

Sadie: I wanna see where you are! Share with me too!

Bea: You'd better write back soon. Dev's losing her shit over here.

Me: Sorry!! forgot to check in. I'm safe. We're watching motorcycle races.

Sadie: Thank you for sharing!

Sadie: Wow, that really is nowhere.

Me: I'm being rude. Got to go.

Sadie: Have so much fun, Al! Call me tomorrow, so I can hear all about it!! Eeeee, I'm so excited for your motorcycle date!

Me: I don't think it's a date.

Bea: It's a date.

Devon and Sadie both like Bea's last text, and I shove my phone away.

Luke gets stopped multiple times while we're on the way over to the track. Evidently, every single person here is thrilled he's back and they all say racing isn't the same without him. Dylan wasn't joking when he said, 'LP never has a girl,' either, because each person expresses shock to see me with him or does a terrible job of trying to hide their surprise. Luke makes a point to include me in conversations and occasionally drapes a mildly possessive arm over my shoulders.

His warning to stay close to him makes a lot more sense now. There are not many women here, and a lot of single guys. More than a few of them start to check me out and then turn away when they notice Luke. The introduction of me as his 'friend,' stinging a little more each time.

The juniors' qualifier is first, and Addison places higher than both of the boys, filling me with a little girlie pride. After juniors, we get to the "good" races, and Cam places third in his qualifier.

I'm stunned at how much fun the races are to watch, far more exciting than I'd expected. Kind of like riding on one with Luke was so much better than I'd imagined it could be. His passion for motorcycles is making more and more sense to me.

On our walk back to Cam's tent, we run into Rick, the man who Luke used to be a mechanic for. He wraps Luke in a huge hug, just like everyone else has. I never would have guessed a race day would include so much hugging. *But maybe that's Luke's way?*

When we reach Rick's trailer, Luke introduces me to Rick's wife, Kiara, who's almost a twin image of her daughter, with the same rich-bronze toned skin, long dark brown hair, and welcoming smile. When Luke leads me to 'go see what kind of mess the new guy had made of Rick's bikes,' she stops him.

"I'm sure she's seen enough motorcycles today to last her a lifetime." Stepping in between us, as if the matter is already settled, she says, "Come on. Let's sit and talk instead."

Luke checks with me briefly, making sure I'm okay staying with Kiara before walking away with Rick. It's the first time he's left my side all day, and even though he's leaving me with a married woman who seems perfectly nice, he's still protective.

Kiara gets us both giant cups of iced tea, and we settle into chairs in the shade of a canopy. "This is the first season I can remember that Luke hasn't been at the track every weekend. He always talked about opening his own shop or opening a bar like his grandpa's. When we heard he found a way to do both, we were so proud. As much as we wanted to, we couldn't hold it against him that he was leaving our team."

Skye mentioned their grandpa being Luke's motivation for opening a bar the day she visited, and now Kiara's bringing it

up, too. This woman knowing him so much better than I do leaves me jealous. *What was his relationship with his grandpa like? What was so significant about this bar?* I was awful to him for so long about Station 19, it's no wonder that he's never mentioned it.

"Luke worked on Rick's bikes for years. He used to take care of Addy when she was really little so I could watch the races, he'd even babysit occasionally so we could do date nights," she says, giving me a knowing smile when I'm way too obvious about adjusting in my seat to get a view of the subject of our conversation.

"I got to meet your daughter earlier. She was with a couple of boys who race juniors, too."

Kiara sips her iced tea, smiling. "They all admire him, grew up with him. He has such a big heart, that man, but I'm sure that's old news to you."

My cheeks heat. It would have been old news to me if I'd been seeing him clearly from the beginning, but I was blinded by my anger about Station 19.

When it's clear I'm not going to pipe in with recent anecdotes about Luke's big heart, Kiara continues, "We miss him terribly. We all knew it was coming, but it's hard to imagine him being happier doing something other than working on bikes at the track."

Kiara tells me stories about Luke fixing bikes in record time and getting into trouble with Cam when they were younger. He was even at her and Rick's house the night he found Betty. I learn more about his history in this one conversation than I've learned from him in the last few months. Her family has a significant role in his life, and I'd never heard of them until a couple of hours ago. The realization stings that Luke had this whole life before Palm Springs that I know nothing about. *Because of course he did.*

"We're all planning on coming out for his grand opening at the bar. Does he have a date set for that yet?"

Holy fuck. The question is like a punch to the gut, but not because he's opening a bar where *Turbine* currently is, but because he hasn't even mentioned it to me. Of course, he's planning on doing a big grand opening, and of course his friends know about it. *Of course, of course, of course.* I've been disappointed every time he introduced me as his friend today, but am I even that? "Um, well," I stumble over my words, trying to mask my flush of embarrassment with literally any information. "My lease is up July thirty-first, so a month or two after that?"

"Oh." A flicker of understanding passes over her face, and her tone softens. "You own the coffee shop. That's how you two know each other."

I nod in affirmation.

"You weren't planning on leaving until he came along, were you?" I shake my head no. Kiara nods and then says the last thing I'd expected. "I bet that's just killing him."

Killing him? No. That can't be true. "I don't think so. He's never said anything like that, anyway."

She scoffs then leans in close to me, her kind face bordering on stern. "I'm going to fill you in on some things, Allie." *Doesn't she realize how much she already has?* "Luke is one of the best men I know. I guarantee he's one of the best men you know. He brought you out here today for a reason." I wonder again what that reason might be. "You're the first woman he's ever introduced to us, and we've known him a long, long time." She looks over her shoulder at him and Rick walking toward us and then back to me. "He will do anything for the people he cares about, especially the women. You are on that list now." With another quick glance to make sure he's not close enough to hear, she finishes. "Do not waste it."

He has done a lot for me, but that doesn't mean he cares. It's in his nature to be nice. He brought me the ladder when I was trying to hang curtains, curtains that he knew I was only hanging to block him from my sight. *Curtains that only got used for one weekend, but that's beside the point.* He took care of me when I had cramps. He walks me out at night. He

moved all that fucking furniture for Devon. That's normal stuff to do for someone you don't care about. *Right?*

CHAPTER 23

Luke

“Some things you don’t want your Grandad’s advice about.” - *Grandad Ernie, after twelve-year-old Luke discovered a stack of Playboys.*

“Join me for dinner, sweetheart?”

“Of course,” Allie replies with a scoffing laugh, as if having dinner together is something we do every night.

“Where should we go?”

“I have that handled.”

“Handled? Like you made reservations?”

“Handled.” We aren’t going to a restaurant. I’ve spent the whole day introducing her to people, catching up with friends, and trying to keep every guy at the track from ogling her. Tonight, it’s only the two of us. I’m not sharing her with anyone, and she is getting my full attention.

“When you picked me up, I figured we’d be going to brunch or something. This was so unexpected.”

“In a good way?”

She beams up at me from her spot on the other side of the bench seat in my truck. “In the absolute best way. I think I might be totally obsessed with motorcycle racing now. Actually, I know am. I’m totally obsessed with it. The energy at the track is electric.” I chuckle at her use of electric, the word that always comes to mind when she smiles. Every time I looked at her today, it lit up her entire face. “When can we go again?”

“Whenever you’d like.” My plan in inviting Allie today was to let her experience my world. I hoped she would like it, feel the excitement of it, and her response was better than I imagined. “They have races every weekend during the season,

always at different tracks. I can check the schedule, but I think the next time they're out here is in July."

"Count me in," she says, pulling her left leg up onto the bench seat between us and turning to face me. It's a struggle to keep my eyes on the road when I can feel the full weight of her attention on me.

Reaching across, I squeeze her knee. She doesn't shy away from my touch, and I realize she never has. Well, not since that first time I threw her over my shoulder and carried her out of my shop. I can't blame her for that one. She could have walked out without getting hurt; I was just being a dick. And I wanted to hold her. "I liked having you by my side today."

Watching Allie at the track revealed a new side of her, the side that fits into my world. Seeing her on the backdrop of asphalt and motorcycles that I've defined my life by, felt like snapping the final piece of a puzzle into place.

A sense of pride filled me more and more with each new person who was captivated by her presence. Cam's been sold on the idea of her for months already, telling me he's never met someone more perfect for me and asking when I'm going to get my shit together and make it happen.

Even Kiara, who can be tough to impress, liked Allie. Kiara's protective, like a big sister, after watching me grow up at the track. I wouldn't be surprised if their conversation was a mirror of the talk Devon gave me last night. Although, it couldn't have gone too badly. Before we left, she told me, "She's got it bad." It's tempting to believe her.

"I liked being there with you," Allie says, tempting me further. She's still turned sideways on the seat, watching me, but when I turn on a dirt road, she pulls back and swivels around. "Where the fuck are we?" She laughs. "What happened to dinner?"

"We're on our way to dinner."

"You know I'm not going to be fishing for my dinner or some shit, right?"

"You won't have to kill your dinner. We're almost there."

“I didn’t expect you to be so big on the surprises, Pine, but I’m into it.” She moves on from the subject of dinner immediately, settling back into her seat and recounting the details of Cam’s race for me, the way someone would recount the highlights of a movie when they’re walking out of a theater. “I thought there was no way he’d make it, but then he finally passed that guy on the blue bike.” She covers her pouty pink mouth with her hand, interrupting herself. “Don’t tell him I said that. I always believed he’d win. But anyway, it didn’t look like there was space for him to fit his bike past the other guy, but he fucking did it!”

The amazement in her voice when she talks about my best friend shows yet another reason she fit in so perfectly today. She knew nothing about racing, but jumped right in. “He’s notorious for going for the tightest gap, pulling off passes no one else would dare to try.”

“That doesn’t surprise me one bit. He’s really...” Her voice trails off as I park the truck. Dozens of massive wind turbines come into view, each tower topped with three long propeller-like blades. The setting sun casts a yellow light against the white behemoths, creating an impressive view. She points up through the windshield toward one that’s casting a shadow across the truck cab where we sit, only its tower visible. “You know these are the reason I named my coffee shop *Turbine*? I’m obsessed with them. I even have a tattoo of one.”

I had a good idea that’s how she picked her coffee shop’s name, but the tattoo is a surprise. “Oh? I’ve never seen it.”

She raises her eyebrows suggestively and bites her lower lip in a way that tempts me to peel off every piece of clothing she’s wearing until I discover where she’s got that tattoo hidden.

“I fell in love with them the first time Devon and I drove down here from Oregon. I’d seen some before, but out here there are so many, and they’re lined up so perfectly, like gigantic protectors of the desert.” Allie’s speaking picks up speed in the adorable way it always does when she’s excited about something. She unbuckles her seatbelt and slides closer

to me on the bench seat, waving her hands to emphasize every other word. “Did you know they’re like twenty-something stories tall? I looked it up once. And the tips of the blades are moving way the fuck faster than the center part that’s connected to the tower. Like, 200 miles per hour, I think. I bet you can’t even get that fast on a motorcycle.”

She can’t really think that. “Of course, I can.”

“Bullshit!” she exclaims, mouth dropping open incredulously.

“What’s your guess at my top speed, then? Since 200 is out of the question.”

In a move that’s rare for Allie, she takes a breath and considers my question for quite a while before answering. Finally, she says, “135.”

I don’t bother stifling my laugh. “I’ve done that in a car. Motorcycles are light. They have a higher horsepower to weight ratio than anything else you can drive. There’s nothing to stop you from getting over 200.”

“Except maybe sanity. Or a will to live.” Allie lengthens the last word in each sentence. “Self-preservation...”

“You worried about me, sweetheart?”

“No.” She answers too quickly for me to believe her, “But I am worried about your concept of a restaurant. Aren’t we supposed to be having dinner? As amazing as these bad boys are,” she gestures up toward the turbine’s blades again, “they can’t feed us.”

“I told you there’d be dinner. Never said anything about a restaurant.” I get out of the truck and walk around the hood to open her door, but she’s already getting out by the time I make it around.

“You could let me open your door.”

“Oh, didn’t realize that’s what you were doing,” she says, accepting my hand as I help her down. Immediately, she has her phone out, and she’s snapping pictures of the turbines and the increasingly vibrant sunset.

Leaving her to enjoy, I lay out pillows and blankets in the truck bed, pull a full spread of meats, cheeses, fruits, and crackers from my cooler, and put on a band I know she likes on a Bluetooth speaker. Then I sit on the tailgate and lean forward to enjoy my favorite view— Allie Walker. She snakes through the field of precisely lined wind machines, their shadows growing longer with each minute as the sun settles closer to the horizon.

When I moved to Palm Springs, romance was the last thing on my mind. I've been saving and prepping for fifteen years, getting ready for my shop and my bar, so as soon as that inheritance kicked in I'd be ready.

Station 19 is an ideal situation, one I never expected to find. I chose it because I wouldn't have to sacrifice my passion for bikes in order to fulfill my dream of opening a bar and becoming the kind of man Grandad wanted me to be.

But Allie is a wrench in that plan in the worst and best way. Her joy is more important to me with every moment she's in my life. How can I take anything away from this woman? What kind of man would I be if I took away the thing she wants most? Grandad wouldn't have been proud of that, and neither would I.

We're the only ones around for miles, and Allie's wandered far enough into the desert that I could cover her from view with the tip of my thumb. Turning around, she calls something out to me and jogs in my direction. Her loud, bubbly laugh carries all the way to me.

Allie reaches the truck, still laughing, and braces her hands on her knees to catch her breath. "Sorry about that. Didn't realize I'd gotten so far away."

"Don't be sorry. You're adorable," I say, getting down off the truck bed to greet her and tugging on the bill of her baseball cap. *She looks so fucking cute today.*

She blushes at my words, and instead of turning away, beams a smile at me. "Is there food?"

“Sure is.” Wrapping my hands around her soft waist, I lift her onto the tailgate before getting back up to join her.

She squeals in surprise at my touch before scanning the meal I’ve laid out. “Did you make me a truck-bed-charcuterie dinner?”

My intention was to cook Allie a proper meal for dinner tonight, but my little sister talked me out of it. Skye’s *I miss my stupid big brother* call came through while I was in the produce section at *Ralph’s* on my way home from Devon’s party. She told me taking Allie back to my place was very presumptuous, even if my intention was only to cook for her, and insisted I do something ‘casual and cute’ instead. She then spent ten minutes on a video call directing me to which cheeses, jams, and tiny pickles I needed.

“Skye said it counts as a proper meal.”

Allie’s ear-to-ear smile tells me it’s a good thing I listened to my sister. She kicks off her shoes and says, “She was totally right.” Getting on all fours, she makes her way deeper into the bed of the truck toward the blankets and food, and I swear she points her ass directly at my face to fuck with me.

We each get comfortable in makeshift cushioned seats, using the truck bed’s walls and the back of the cab for support. I resist the urge to draw her into my lap and feed her every bite myself, so we end up sitting across from each other, snack-meal spread out between us.

Allie comments on how *yummy* or *tasty* each bite is, never eating the same combination twice. Every few minutes, she declares a new favorite and makes one for me to try. The appeal of this slow, interactive way to share a meal becomes clearer each time she holds out a new tiny sandwich offering.

“Why did you invite me today?” Allie asks as she hands me a gorgonzola, salami, and spicy mustard on a poppy-seed cracker combo.

For months, Allie and I’ve been living parallel lives through our shared glass wall. Even when we don’t talk, she’s a constant presence in my day, making drinks for regulars

before they even walk in her door, while I'm on my side of our building turning wrenches and polishing chrome.

I've memorized her wardrobe to the point that I know every time she wears something new, which is often. She notices when I get a haircut. I know when she has a new favorite album, because she plays it on repeat over the speakers at *Turbine* for days on end.

We've spent so much of our time together while we're both working that I meant what I said last night when I asked her to play hooky. I needed to get her out of Station 19. All day there's been an undercurrent of energy like we're getting away with something. Like we've put away all our responsibilities, so we can play.

"I wanted more of you." It sounds greedy, but that's where I'm at with Allie, greedy for more.

"You always say things that make me blush."

"It's intentional."

Allie's blush turns even pinker now and she turns away to examine herself in the reflection of the cab's window. She takes off her hat, makes a sound of disapproval, and fingers through her hair before securing it up in a big claw clip. Her blush returns when she looks back at me and realizes I'm watching her.

"I know you thought the hat was adorable, but I was over it. Sun's down now, anyway."

"I like this too. I can see you better."

"You see me every day."

"Trust me, I know it's a privilege that I can look through that window and see you whenever I want." I scan her face for any sign of apprehension at my words, but she only smiles and leans toward me. "But today was even better. You're usually so busy taking care of everyone else that you don't get a chance to slow down and enjoy things for yourself. I've never seen you so at ease with yourself."

Allie doesn't respond immediately, instead reaching for a sleeve of crackers and returning it to its box. Following her lead, I open the cooler and start putting away the meats and cheeses. *Is she ready to leave, already?* I watch her twist the lid back onto a jar of jam. Her motions are easy, body language loose. She doesn't look upset, but it's unusual for her to stay quiet for this long.

"What do you mean when you say, 'at ease with myself?' Do I not normally seem like that?" Her voice is curious, timid, like the concept of ease isn't something she's considered before this conversation and she's worried about what I meant by it.

I take in the now empty space between us after packing up our dinner, four feet of blanketed truck bed. *Too far.* Moving closer, so we're side to side instead of facing each other, I lean against the cab of the truck. She adjusts in her spot, making room for me and resting her knees against mine, the casual closeness like a gift.

When I press a comforting squeeze onto the bare warm skin of her thigh, just above her knee, she visibly softens. "You're in your element at *Turbine*, but you're always *on*. I only get to experience one side of you." Her brows draw together in concern, or maybe confusion. I give her leg another squeeze, leaving my hand to rest on her knee.

"It's a good side. You make people feel seen, and that's really something. You're always thinking about what you can do for someone else. You're in control when you're at work, so everyone else can relax and have a good time."

Allie nods her head slowly, agreeing with each point I make.

"Today, I got to see what you're like when you're along for the ride and relaxed. You let me run the show." She let me take care of her today and didn't fight me for a second.

A timid smile, one that's new to me, spreads across Allie's lips. "You were different today, too."

"Oh?" I raise my eyebrows in question.

She giggles. *And fuck, it's adorable.* “You were more relaxed than usual. Those people are really *your* people, aren't they?”

“They are.”

“You were bolder with me than usual today, too,” Allie says, quickly enough to show her nervousness at the words.

“Yeah?”

She cocks her head exaggeratedly to the side, nervousness gone as soon as it appeared. “Yeah,” She leans in toward me, “and a little possessive.” Leaning in to match her brings me close enough that her scent fills my nose.

Most days she carries with her the stoic scent of ground espresso beans, filled out by lemon and coconut. Today, the espresso is missing. The light smell of her sweat from being in the sun all day comes through, combined with the lemon and coconut, making her smell like summertime and spontaneity. It's impossibly sexy.

I lean in another inch, soaking up as much of her as I can. Her eyes register my closeness, and she sucks in a quick breath.

“Do you like that?” I lean closer still and ease one hand underneath her bent knees, the other behind her back. She makes a surprised squealing sound and smiles up at me. I'm close enough to catch her pupils dilating when I pull her legs across my lap. “When I'm possessive?”

She laughs quietly, her breath skating across my jaw as she leans her head back further to look me in the eye. “I usually hate that shit, but I like it with you.”

Pulling Allie closer until she's sitting sideways across my lap, the warmth of her skin tempts me. I indulge myself in it, running my nose all the way down the column of her neck, starting behind her ear and ending at her collarbone. She hums in pleasure as I do.

The press of my hand against the small of her back causes her to arch deliciously into my hold. Inhaling a deep breath against her chest, I cannot resist tasting her for another

moment. Opening my mouth against her smooth skin, I trace the lines of her collarbone with my lips. She hums a satisfied sound and presses more firmly against me. *Fuck*. I make another pass, this time letting my tongue taste the salty sweetness of her skin.

Her whimpers get louder as I taste up her neck with light kisses. She swirls her hips, the heat of her center pressing against my leg.

“Luke.” Her voice is a needy whisper that runs straight to my cock.

I ghost my lips back and forth along the column of her neck. “Yes, Allie? Is there something you’d like?” She whimpers again and presses herself harder against me. When I draw her earlobe between my teeth, she twists her fingers into the hair at the base of my skull and says my name again, this time an all-out whine.

Pulling my face up so it’s level with hers reveals wild eyes and cheeks that I’m sure are flushed with a delicious blush that’s only hidden by the evening’s fading light. I run the back of one knuckle down her cheek and across her jaw. “Fuck, you’re incredible like this.”

Allie leans into my hold, her desire palpable. “Like what?”

“Undone.” I lean in as if to kiss her, and she closes her eyes in anticipation. I place a soft kiss just to the side of her mouth instead.

Long lashes part, and her eyes fly open, giving me the closest thing to a glare she’s ever managed. “Tease.”

“Needy,” I say, before I place a kiss on the other side of her mouth.

“Luke.” She whimpers my name, dragging it into three syllables.

Resting my forehead against hers, I speak against her lips. “Absolutely incredible.” My cock is straining hard against my jeans, and Allie’s whimpering and writhing in my arms. *I’ve teased us both enough.*

She whimpers one more time, loudly, and I capture her mouth with mine, swallowing the sound with the kiss we've both been aching for.

CHAPTER 24

Allie

“Don’t ignore the person who’s right in front of you. Great love is within your grasp.” - *Luke’s horoscope, May 19th, that Allie conveniently forgot to share with him.*

Finally. Luke presses his lips against mine with such tantalizing intent. He kisses me slowly, deliberately, reveling in each second just as much as I am.

There’s always a special thrill the first time my lips meet someone new. But this is different. This isn’t the rush of gaining the attention of the hottest guy at a party, or a chaste kiss on my doorstep after a first date.

This is powerful. There is deeper meaning behind this kiss than any kiss I’ve had before. *And the feel of it.* His lips are firm and soft, teasing and insistent. He’s rocked me to my core, and I haven’t even gotten any tongue yet.

While Luke is slow and tender with his lips, he’s buzzing with desire for more at every other point in which our bodies meet. For more of me. The muscled arms I’ve admired time and time again through our glass wall are wrapped firmly around me, crushing me against his body as his thundering heart beats against my ribcage.

He places one soft, teasing kiss against my lips after another. Each time I think he’ll deepen it, he pulls away briefly, then picks it up again with another sweet, closed-mouth caress. *It’s infuriating, and I love it.* Luke’s lips moving against mine feel like a new beginning and a perfect ending at the same time.

From the first moment I saw him, I’ve been drawn to him, captivated by him, impossibly turned on by his stern face and all the muscle that’s currently wrapped around me. When I found out who he was—what he’d done to me—my desire was

overshadowed with a mix of hatred and jealousy, though I never stopped imagining all the things our bodies could do together. With each second his lips are pressed against mine, I melt a bit more. *How did I ever hate this man?*

I'm growing needier and more impatient. He holds me up, one hand behind my head, the other at the small of my back, but from my position sitting sideways across his lap, I can't get the contact I want.

He stops our kiss and draws back from me, his cocky grin sexier than ever only inches from my face. He raises a thick brow at me. "Is there something you want, sweetheart?" He leans down to kiss me, but instead of my lips, he goes back to the tender spot behind my ear. I moan, loudly. "Mm," he hums, grazing his lips along the curve of my jaw. "I want to learn everything you like. Give you everything you want."

I open my eyes wide. "Is it not clear? I want you to kiss me."

He drops a light kiss into the dip between my lips and chin. *So close.* "Am I not kissing you?"

"I was just thinking about how you've made it impossible for me to hate you anymore. But you're no less infuriating than you were three months ago, Lucas Pine."

He rubs a slow, grazing circle on my back with his fingertips. "I love it when you say my name like that."

"Are you even listening to me?"

He grazes his lips across my jaw on the opposite side. "I am." A light kiss behind my other ear. "I promise."

"Then why aren't you—"

He kisses my lips again, cutting me off. His tongue teasing against mine for just a second before he pulls away again. "I know what you want. You want me to kiss you." He presses his lips against mine in another agonizingly short kiss. "Properly."

"Then why did you—"

He cuts me off with a kiss again and then speaks against my mouth. Our lips touching with every syllable. “You like it when I’m in control?”

He places another quick kiss to my lips before I can speak, so I only hum an agreeing, “Mmm,” in answer.

“Then let me be in control, Allie.” Another kiss. “You can’t make me rush this. I’ve been dying to have you pliant in my arms since the moment I first saw you. I *will* savor you.” He kisses me again, properly this time, open-mouthed, allowing our tongues to ease against each other. *Fucking finally.*

The feel of his tongue inside my mouth, of him inside of me, ratchets up my desire even further. The tentative, teasing kiss of moments ago is gone, and it’s replaced with a kiss of visceral desire. I am melting beneath his arms further and further with each second he holds me pressed against his lips.

“Is that better?” he asks.

“Mmhmm.” I nod. He holds me there for long moments, stern brows suddenly not so stern, jaw still chiseled, but without its usual tension. The sound of music cuts through the tension of our locked gazes. *How long has that been on?* “I love this song.”

“That’s why it’s playing.”

“I never told you that.”

He places a tender kiss to my forehead. “You’ve played it every morning for three weeks.”

“Before you get there, though.”

Luke chuckles, his breath ghosting against my lips. “Allie, I’m always there in the morning. I work by your lights and don’t turn mine on.”

“Stop it. You’re lying.”

He smirks. “You knew.”

I suspected. When I do more dancing in the mornings, I get a lot more texts during the day. *Okay, I knew.*

“Will you dance with me, Allie?” His question surprises me.

“Right now?”

“Right now, sweetheart.”

“Okay.” I never liked it when he called me sweetheart until this moment. Now, I feel the sweetness in it. The tenderness. Like I’m dear to him.

He removes me from his lap with control and gentleness before helping me to my feet and pulling me close to his chest. Wrapping one arm tightly around my waist, he holds my hand up in the air near our shoulders with the other and rocks me gently with the beat of my current favorite song. We’re dancing in the bed of his truck, right underneath one of my favorite local landmarks, which I never told him about, but he guessed; listening to my favorite song, which I also didn’t tell him about; and we had my favorite dinner, which I never told him about either. *He’s far more observant than I gave him credit for.*

“What’s on your mind, sweetheart?” he asks, placing a kiss on my temple.

“How come you introduced me to everyone as your friend all day?”

“It felt presumptuous to introduce you as anything else.”

What a perfectly reasonable answer. Ugh. Luke releases my waist and spins me around before pulling me flush to his chest again and bending forward so our foreheads press together.

His voice is low and measured when he speaks again. “Would you have preferred I told everyone that you’re the woman who’s occupied every moment of my thoughts since I first saw her? That I work early and stay late every day, so I don’t miss a glimpse of your electric smile or your ponytail bobbing when you laugh? That I want you as close to me as possible? That your presence in my life has turned every plan I’ve ever made upside down? That watching you exist is the greatest joy I’ve known?”

He patiently awaits my response, guiding me in a slow, easy dance as I roll his words over in my mind, trying to commit each of his confessions to memory. *The greatest joy he's known* beats the hell out of *my friend Allie*. "That would have been preferable, yes."

He chuckles, not expecting that response. "I'll keep that in mind for next time, but for right now," his smile skips right on over cocky, flirtatious, and teasing and lands firmly on predatory, "I want to find that tattoo."

In an instant, he's picked me up and wrapped my legs around his waist. He's kissing me again, tongue insistent between my lips as he walks me backward and sets my ass down on top of the truck's cab, still warm after baking in the sun all day.

My legs fall to the sides of his hips as his hands waste no time peeling my shirt up from the hem. When he releases our kiss so he can pull the shirt over my head, I laugh, telling him, "It's not under there."

He places a finger to my lips. "Let me have my fun."

"In that case, you should probably check under here, too," I

say, hooking my thumbs under the straps of my butter-yellow lace bra and dropping them down my shoulders.

The light of the nearly full moon reflects in his chocolate brown eyes as he takes me in, running his warm, calloused hands over every inch of my exposed skin in a slow perusal from my waist and tummy, over my back and shoulders, then smoothing over the pillowed tops of my breasts, before finally coming to rest around my ribs, thumbs teasing against my lace covered nipples. "You are exquisite."

He leans in close, pretending to search for a tattoo he knows isn't there, dropping kisses on each place he's inspected. "I want to kiss every inch of this lush body," he says before removing my bra and drawing one of the soft mounds into his mouth while massaging the other.

A wave of tingling warmth spreads through my body. I want to tell him—*Fuck, I can't remember what I wanted to tell him.* Every word I try to say dissolves on my tongue and all I manage to get out is a moan as he trails kisses across my sternum and sucks my other breast into his mouth.

“No tattoos there,” he says with a satisfied smirk as he comes up for air.

“You’re never going to find it if you keep checking with your mouth,” I laugh.

“Are you complaining about my methods?” He cups his hand against the front of my shorts, rubbing against my clit with the heel of his hand. “I was planning to try the same thing here, but if you’d rather I didn’t, I can stop.”

“Please don’t stop,” I plead, thrusting against his palm for more friction.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” he whispers against my lips as he pulls off my shorts, revealing the thong-half of my matching set. *Did I put these on today, just in case I wasn’t alone when I got undressed later? Of course not.*

After inspecting my right leg from ankle to hip and finding no tattoo, he kneels down and kisses all the way up, “Just to be sure.”

“You know tattoos don’t taste like anything, right?”

He looks up at me from between my thighs, “If I didn’t know better,” he kisses higher up, at the soft junction where my leg meets my core, “I’d think you don’t want my lips all over your delectable body,” he says, before his warm mouth meets the center of my soaked panties, and my hips instinctively rock against his face.

“Goddamn, you’re delicious.” He licks my glistening arousal from his lips while splaying the fingers of his broad hand across my stomach, pushing me flat on my back against the roof of his truck.

Standing over me, he hooks his fingers into the sides of my panties and draws them slowly down and away from my body. I wish I could bottle up the look in his eyes as he takes in my

fully naked body for the first time. With his pupils blown, he stares at me in awe. “Allie,” he utters my name in a long, slow whisper. Running a reverent hand from my jaw all the way down my body, he dips his fingers between my thighs and weaves teasing lines through the wetness there, causing my eyes to flutter in pleasure.

I’m laid out bare before him, while he stays above me, his cock cutting an impressive outline against his jeans. I’m aching to feel it moving against me, moving in me, but when I reach for it, he stills my hands.

“Not yet, sweetheart. Let me take care of you.”

He draws a finger up to my clit, now slick with my wetness, making slow, rhythmic movements that drive me wild.

“Okay,” I gasp, tugging at the hem of his shirt, “but this has to go at least.”

Without a word, breaking eye contact or slowing the hand at my clit, he uses his other hand to rip his shirt over his head, tousling his already mussed hair further. *Good fucking fuck. Is he serious with this body? Like, I knew something incredible was under there, but sweet fucking hell.* He’s a tree trunk of a man. Imposing, thick, and muscular. I’m going to lick every inch of him as soon as he lets me.

His cock strains hard against his waistband as he continues his movements on my sensitive bud, not entirely unphased by me practically drooling over his chiseled torso. *Good.* He keeps up the motion at my clit, unrelenting, while I move my hips to match his rhythm.

Usually, shortly after someone has me naked, they’re covering my body with theirs, pressed against me, and getting inside as fast as possible. But Luke is leaving me exposed in the warm desert air, eyes bouncing over my moonlit body with heated adoration, unable to choose one place to focus.

“Fuck.” Luke runs his unoccupied hand through his hair. “I could watch you like this forever.” His gaze focuses on the hard peaks of my breasts. “Touch your nipples for me, baby.”

Baby? That's new. His command sends a jolt to my already throbbing sex. I obey immediately and enthusiastically, rolling each of my nipples between my thumb and forefingers as tantalizingly as I can.

“You’re such a good girl.”

Good girl? Fuck, I am so into that. A gush of wetness swells in my sex at his words. His movements at my clit pick up speed, building heat. *He better not move his fingers away from this exact spot.* “Yes, just like that, please,” I beg him, continuing to roll my nipples between my fingertips.

Luke listens, keeping the same movement, pressure, and speed. *What a concept.* Using a finger from his other hand to dip inside me, he moves both hands in tandem, working me close to my peak faster than I thought possible. His eyes are trained on mine now, watching for my reaction to every one of his movements.

He curls the finger that’s deep inside me, drawing a cry from my lips. My own hands still, no longer able to focus enough to toy with my nipples.

“You make the most delicious sounds for me.” He adds another finger inside my wet heat, massaging the extra sensitive tissue there. “I knew you would.”

He lowers to his knees, unrelenting in his attentions, and presses harder with his fingers, working me even closer to orgasm. His name escapes my lips in a cry this time. Luke kisses along my hip bone all the way down to where his fingers move against me. “You smell delicious.” He inhales against my sex, and then his tongue replaces his finger on my clit, expertly maintaining the same rhythm and pressure without missing a beat.

The added moisture and texture of his tongue is exactly what I need. He keeps the fingers inside me curved, hitting my g-spot over and over in time with his tongue on my clit. “Oh, yes! Right there. That’s it.” Words of praise spill from my mouth. “Oh, fuck, Luke. Don’t stop. Please. Yes!”

I twist my fingers into his hair, pressing into his lips as my orgasm burns through me like a wildfire, starting at my center and running in a frenzy all the way to my toes. He keeps working me through every wave, and doesn't stop until he feels me relax again.

Gathering me in his arms, he pulls me off the roof and sits down in the bed of the truck, nestling me across his lap, his hard cock pressing against my ass. He makes a show of licking the wetness of my orgasm from his lips as he presses me tight against his chest.

"Never did find that tattoo," he says, running his hand up my left leg.

Turning in his lap, I point my bare hip and its turbine tattoo up at him.

"Well, that's the cutest fucking thing I've ever seen," he says, caressing it softly.

Eagerly, I graze my fingers across his hard length. "Your turn?"

Luke's hand stops my movements again. "Believe me, I cannot wait to have you wrapped around my cock in every way imaginable, but tonight is about you." He kisses me, and the taste of my orgasm on his lips makes me even more wild for him. "Plus, if I leave you wanting more, I know you won't turn me down for a second date."

CHAPTER 25

Luke

“Hate to break it to you, kid, but sometimes your mother does know what she’s talking about.” -Grandad Ernie, to thirteen-year-old Luke, after his mom’s advice about a girl in his class turned out to be right.

Me: Morning gorgeous.

Allie: Morning handsome! Interested in today’s horoscope?

Me: Interested in anything you have to say.

Allie: “Trust your intuition Little Goat.”

Me: It did not say little goat. Where are you getting these?

Allie: Don’t question my methods.

Me: When do I get to see you today?

Allie: I’ll be in at 10.

Me: I’ll be waiting.

Fixing bikes is not only my work, but also my meditation. Working with my hands calms my mind and helps me focus.

Well, it does on every day but today. I’ve been looking at the same four cylinders all morning, barely making any progress because all I can focus on is the time crawling by until I get to see Allie again.

Betty whines by my feet, looking through the window for the woman who occupies my mind. I scratch her behind the ears. “I know, babe. Our girl will be here soon.”

It hasn’t even been twelve hours yet. Apparently, now that we’ve crossed the line from friends who pretend they don’t flirt with each other over to people who are honest about wanting each other, I’ve lost my ability to wait patiently.

I thought I was fucked before, mind constantly occupied with Allie, but now that I know how she looks laid out before me, playing with her perfect nipples and responding so thoroughly to every touch of my hands? I'll never be able to think of anything else again. Nothing could be better than Allie, vulnerable in my arms and trusting me to take care of her.

The moment I first saw her through our shared glass wall, I knew she was gorgeous. Then I spoke to her, and she spit fire at me, and I knew she was special. The idea of fate always seemed like a copout for people who don't want to take responsibility for their own choices. That was until I heard Allie call me a jackass, and instead of pissing me off, it made me want to hear every word she'd deign to share with me. The feeling in my gut that she's meant to be in my life started building right then.

My mom would say it's intuition. She's always insisted that she has feelings about people, and I've always dismissed it. She believes when she meets someone, she can sense what their purpose in her life will be, what their 'story together' will be.

She claims the intuition extends to me and Skye, too. The first day she met Cam, she told me he was going to be the brother I never had. Even at thirteen, I told her that was a load of woo-woo bullshit. She couldn't possibly know that about this kid after spending three minutes with him. But, as often happens with my mother, she was right.

I wrote it off as one of many lucky guesses. For every time my mom's intuition is right about something, it's wrong about another. After Skye's recent foray into psych classes, she told my mom she didn't have intuition—she had confirmation bias. It did not go over well.

Still, I've avoided mentioning Allie to her, half because she might confirm that Allie is destined to be in my life, half because she might contradict it.

Unmistakable movement from the other side of the glass wall catches my eye. *Allie*. The swing of her hips is just

exaggerated enough that I know it's intentional, making her walk look like a dance.

The sight of her brings me immediate relief. She laughs at something a customer says, throwing her head back and revealing the delectable neck I now know the taste of. I take a step closer to the window, watching her as she tucks some wild hairs behind her ear and twists her fingers around an earring that hoops around her soft earlobe. I know the taste of that earlobe now, too. Every inch of her is salty and sweet.

She's wearing a cut-off band t-shirt and a yellow skirt. It has to be her favorite color. She wears it so often and so well. After seeing her wrapped in that soft yellow lace last night, it's mine, too.

She laughs, her chestnut ponytail moving expectedly along with her shaking shoulders, and then her eyes catch mine. She blushes but doesn't look away. I could watch Allie all day, *and most days I do*, but this time I need to be closer.

A minute later, Betty and I are standing at the register, up close with the girl of my dreams. When she comes around, squatting down low to greet Betty, she looks up at me, beaming her electric smile.

"Morning, Lucas Pine."

"Morning, Allie Walker. You look perfect today."

She looks down at herself, as if she forgot what clothes she had on and laughs. "I slept in this shirt last night."

"Pity I missed that."

"Lucas Pine!" she says my full name again, this time with a little censure and a big smile.

"Alright, Betty," I call my dog back to me. "It's my turn."

Allie laughs, standing up, "Your turn for what? You want me to pet you?"

Closing the two-foot distance between us, I draw both of her hands around my neck. "Yes, please." Then I pull her close with one arm around her waist and the other cradling her head.

She melts into my touch, rising up on her toes to meet me for a kiss.

I didn't think it was possible, but her lips are even more plush today than they were last night. I release the kiss reluctantly.

"That was yummy," she giggles, squeezing my hand before turning and moving to the espresso grinder. "Someone left peonies on my desk," she tells me over her shoulder.

"Did they?"

"How'd you know they're my favorite?"

Sitting on the closest barstool, I reach down and scratch Betty behind the ear as Allie gets back to work. "Devon, wants you to be happy more than she doesn't like me."

"I told you she likes you," Allie tsks.

"She doesn't."

Allie throws a loose coffee cup sleeve at me with accuracy that would have hit me in the forehead if I wasn't quick enough to catch it. "She does."

"Agree to disagree?" I hedge.

"Have I ever?"

"Not yet, but I'm not giving up." She's too much fun to tease.

She tries to glare at me, sparking laughter in both of us.

"How was your morning, sweetheart?"

Allie grumbles under her breath before pasting a smile on and saying, "It was great."

"Bullshit."

"What? It was. I got to sleep in."

I soften my voice. "Tell me what happened."

She sighs, setting the black handle into the espresso machine much harder than usual. "Can we not?"

“Sure.” I lean forward on the counter. “If that’s what you need. But it seems like it’s not what you need.”

“You’re so annoying,” she huffs and doesn’t say anything more until she sets an Americano on the counter for me. I spin the cardboard cup between my fingers, seeing the turbine in the *Turbine Café* logo in a new light. *It’s the same one she has tattooed on her hip.* She speaks up again before I can comment on it. “I toured a building this morning, and it was fine.” Her voice is all wrong. Tight and quiet. “Just like every other building I’ve toured. Nothing is special like,” she lifts a hand up, waving it around to indicate that nothing is like Station 19.

Makes sense she was trying not to say anything to me about it. She loves this building. She belongs here, but I’m the one who gets to keep it. *It’s not right.* “Sounds shitty. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t feel bad. I’m figuring it out.”

“Do you have any other places lined up?”

She hesitates, unsure. Yet again, I want to scrap my bar and make this all go away for her. “I’m going to check out a place in Joshua Tree next month that seems promising,” she finally says, quietly enough for only me to hear.

“Isn’t that an hour away?”

“Forty-five,” she hedges, “—ish. But the building looks incredible, and I could buy it, not just rent.”

Moving *Turbine* an hour away? To another city? Is she going to live there too? *No. That can’t happen.* “I’ll go with you to see it.”

“Would you really come?”

“Of course.” I may loathe the idea of her moving that far away, but I’m not making her continue this search without help.

She rounds the counter, squeezing her arms around me in a tight hug, and speaks into my chest, “This helps a lot. Thank you.”

~

Me: I love watching you through the glass.

Allie checks to make sure no one else has eyes on her and then shimmies her perky tits at me.

Allie: Really? I hadn't noticed.

Me: You mean it had nothing to do with your skirts getting shorter over the last few months?

Allie: Don't flatter yourself. It's the heat.

But she tugs up the waist of her yellow skirt, making it that much shorter. I haven't accomplished anything today; all I can think about is her taste on my lips. How wet and hot she was, pulsing around my fingers as she came. I've been half-hard all day.

Me: Want to get out of here?

Allie: I wish. But I already told my new barista he could leave early. Gotta close.

Me: Can I have you after?

Allie's talking to a vacationing family, probably making up a detailed itinerary of the right things to do, like stop by the visitor's center to see the architecture, and the ones to avoid like afternoon hikes, because it's way too hot for that, before checking her phone. The wait is worth it. Her eyes go wide, cheeks flushing, as she looks for me.

Allie: Goddamn I hope you mean what I think you mean.

Me: I do.

Allie: Should have never let the new guy leave.

Me: We'll make do.

Allie starts rushing through the familiar motions of her closing routine a half hour early. I try to focus on stripping the engine I'm rebuilding this week, but her flirtatious green, doe eyes and teasing little skirt won't let me.

Me: Can I make a song request?

Allie: That sounds fun.

Me: Killing in the name

Allie: You think playing Rage will clear customers out? You're underestimating how much people love punk.

Me: It was the first song I saw you dance to.

Allie stares at her phone in confusion, blinking slowly, before realization dawns.

Allie: YOU WERE HERE THAT DAY?? YOU SAW ME???

Me: I was. I did.

Me: You were perfect.

Allie: I cannot believe you. That is so embarrassing. I'm not putting it on.

Me: Missed an opportunity to say fuck you I won't do what you tell me

Allie: Motherfucker

She holds up her middle finger, blows me a kiss with it and turns away fast enough that her skirt flutters up, revealing more than a hint of ass cheek. *Fuck. How much longer until those cheeks are in my hands?* She only has one customer left, sitting in Brian's chair by the front window. He stays there, scrolling on his phone for the next half hour, and still hasn't moved five minutes after the official closing time.

Me: Want me to make that fucker leave?

Allie: Lucas Pine. He is a nice guy. He's probably just not paying attention.

Me: A nice guy would pay attention to the closing time.

Allie walks around, pulling the dark shades for every outside window. When she has to reach across the guy to get the last shade, he finally gets the picture and leaves. She locks the door behind him.

My girl is within my reach now, the glass wall between us a feature, not a flaw. Leaning back on my workbench, I watch.

I've been watching Allie since February, but this is the first time I've had her to myself like this in our building.

Allie: You just gonna watch me work?

Me: Hoping to watch you do more than that.

Allie looks at me, opening her mouth wide to feign a scandalized response, before running a teasing finger back and forth across her waistband.

Allie: You're on.

She turns up the music enough for me to hear it very clearly, right as it switches to a Miguel song. Her hips move in tune with the beat, teasing me with the occasional body roll, as she finishes up her final closing tasks.

Her laugh comes through the window, carrying over the loud R&B music. *Goddamn, she's perfect.* Allie's all confidence, joy, and soft curves. She's thriving, putting on a show for me. No woman could ever be more perfect.

Me: You are incredible. so sexy.

Allie: I know, right?

Allie flips a switch, so only dim overhead lighting remains.

Allie: I'm all done, I'll come to your side.

Me: Stay. I need to watch you before I get to touch you again.

She walks over to me, stopping just on the other side of the row of tables that line the glass wall, close enough to show me the pink blush of her cheeks, lust-filled doe eyes, her full chest rising and falling with anticipation. Untying the apron at her waist, she drops it to the floor as she takes a step closer.

Allie: Tell me what you want to see.

Me: Take your hair down for me.

She releases her hair, letting it fall around her shoulders in sensual chestnut waves. I imagine the smell of fresh coconut shampoo as she shakes it out, using her fingers to comb it into place. Closing her eyes, she drags her fingertips down, starting

at her temples, combing through her hair to graze the column of her neck, cupping around her breasts, sliding past her hips, and coming to rest on the sides of her thighs.

A pleased smirk crosses her lips when she clocks me running my hands through my own hair, keeping them occupied until I can touch her.

Allie: How was that?

Me: It was perfect. you're perfect.

Allie: What's next?

Me: Take your shirt off for me.

Allie plants her hands on the table in front of her, one of the damn pedestal tables, like the one she fell off months ago.

“Stop! You’ll get hurt!” I yell through the window.

She laughs as she pulls herself up onto the circular tabletop that wobbles briefly before settling, placing herself directly in the center, so it’ll hold steady beneath her.

Me: Fuck. that was dangerous.

Allie: Calm down. You wanted my shirt off. yes?

Me: God Yes. but do you have to do it up there?

Allie: It's the best view. Promise.

She brings herself up to kneeling on the table, making us eye level. Running her hands up from her thighs, she squeezes and touches all the way until her fingers catch the bottom of her cropped shirt on both sides. She’s slow about it, pulling first one side, then the other, lifting it just high enough to show me the light blue lace bra she has on before dropping it and running her hands down and up her body again.

She continues teasing me, taking half a song to tantalizingly peel her shirt off over her head, before throwing it across the room. The dim light shines like a halo over her increasingly exposed body.

Arching a brow in question, I point to her hand and draw an invisible line up her body to the pink nipples that are visible

through the sheer material of her bra.

Allie bites her bottom lip, worrying it between her teeth as her painted fingertips pull her bra straps down around her shoulders. She traces all along the detailing on the top of the cups before circling each hard nipple with her index fingers over the taunting blue fabric.

Sinking down on to her heels, Allie spreads her knees wide, barely avoiding exposing her sex to me. She writhes on the table as she draws the lace down, exposing her perky breasts.

“You’re incredible,” I say aloud, even though I doubt she can read my lips.

But she mouths back, “I know,” as she begins to play with the rosy tips of her nipples. *She knows exactly what she’s doing to me.*

Me: Are you wet for me sweetheart?

She notices the vibration from the phone on the table next to her, but holds up a finger, as if to say, “Give me a minute.”

I watch with rapt attention as she plays with her body, her hips continuing to grind in the air above the table as she twists, rolls, and pinches her nipples. She removes the bra and tosses it to the floor next to her apron and shirt before picking up her phone again.

Allie: Of course.

Me: Show me.

Allie’s face has been flushed pink since she dimmed the lights, but that text is the thing that makes her ears flame red. Still, she doesn’t shy away. She clearly loves sex, loves touching, loves her body, and she’s discovering in real time how much she loves an audience of one.

She runs her right hand down her body, in the now familiar teasing trace along her curves, before using it to pull her skirt up, aching slowly. When she reveals herself to me, I stand, taking a step closer to the glass.

Her skirt is folded up over her waist, knees still spread wide on the table, exposing light blue underwear that matches the bra she just tossed across the room. *Does she wear exclusively coordinating underwear? Fuck.* Allie draws her bottom lip between her teeth, swiveling her hips impatiently.

Holding up two fingers, I point to the junction of her thighs, then turn my hand, making a curling motion in a mimic of the movement I want to watch her recreate.

She does as I asked with no teasing preamble, as turned on as I am. She slides two fingers underneath her panties, moaning at the contact. Drawing them out, she holds up her fingers for me, glistening with her wet arousal in the low overhead light.

I run my hands through my hair as I take a step closer. I'm dying to touch her, but I've imagined this scenario with Allie dozens of times, and I'm not done with her yet. I lift my two fingers to my mouth, and Allie's lips curve into a wicked smile before I've even finished the motion. She sinks both of her fingers between the pouty lips of her mouth, turning so I have a full view of how deep she's pushing them down her throat.

I clench my fists at my sides. *Not yet.*

Allie: Hurry the fuck up and get over here. I want you inside of me.

Fucking hell. I can't wait to get that filthy mouth wrapped around my cock.

Me: One more thing I want before filling you with my cock.

Allie: Goddammit you're hot.

Me: Show me how you make yourself come with those sweet little fingers, baby.

Allie wastes no time, pulling her panties to the side, revealing herself to me fully. I step all the way to the windowed wall now, my hands grasping against the glass. She starts playing with her clit, first with slow circles, gradually building up speed.

Allie moans, loud enough that I hear it through the window, then dips the two fingers she's been teasing herself with into her glistening lower lips. She pumps them in and out, in time with the fingers that work her clit.

She's mesmerizing. An angel. A vixen. A goddess. I don't deserve her. Don't deserve to watch her. Care for her. Salivate over her exposed body.

But somehow she believes I do because she is showing me everything. No shyness. No inhibition. She's in ecstasy, holding eye contact with me while she pleasures herself so deliciously, moaning as her hips move, riding her fingers.

I press against the glass as both of her hands move faster and she comes apart, never taking her eyes off of me. The second she pulls her hands away, I'm moving for the back door.

CHAPTER 26

Allie

“You can accomplish anything you put your mind to, but you may find it more satisfying if you allow someone else to help you along the way.” -*Allie's horoscope, May 20th*

I'm on my knees, bra pulled down, panties to the side, skirt folded up at my waist, coming down from the best orgasm I've ever given myself when Luke comes in the back door of *Turbine*.

He watched me with hungry eyes while I touched myself, devoured every movement of my impromptu striptease. *Well, impromptu for me at least.* He was ready for it.

It has not escaped my notice that Luke likes to watch. At first, I thought maybe he hated me just like I hated him, so he watched to catch me fucking something up. Every time I felt myself starting to crack under the pressure of losing Station 19, I knew I couldn't let it show, because he would see.

But as time went on, I recognized the way his features would soften when he watched me. Jaw less tense. Brows less stern. He wasn't watching because he hated me. It was the opposite. Eventually, when the stress got to me, I'd find him through the glass wall, and our eyes meeting would bring me comfort. I started wearing dresses because I knew he would be watching. I even bought a couple of new ones. *Okay, more than a couple.* And he commented on every single one.

And of course, he's been flirting with me since day one. So, *show me how you make yourself come* shouldn't have been a surprise. I'd never masturbated in front of anyone before, but I loved touching myself for him.

Now, I'm left craving his touch so badly, I can barely stand it. I watch as he takes determined steps toward me, seconds

feeling like minutes. The hard cock that's been taunting me all night strains against his pants. *Fuck, he looks powerful.*

He's always in control, almost stoic.

Doesn't raise his voice. Doesn't lose his cool.

I've tried to get a rise out of him in every way imaginable, starting with towing his truck on that first day. Turns out, all it took was giving in to this attraction for him to come unraveled.

When I start to turn away from the window toward him, my table wobbles a little, but he's there in an instant, balancing it and stopping me from moving. In one motion, he picks me up and presses his lips to mine.

It's only been a matter of hours since he kissed me last, but I've craved his lips on mine every second since. He kisses me deeply, and I sink into it, only letting go when he sets me down on a nearby chair.

"You have to get rid of these tables." Luke shakes his head.

"Why? I love them."

"They're dangerous, Allie," he says, dropping to his knees in front of me.

"I've never gotten hurt."

"Only because I keep saving you." He pulls me so far forward on the chair that I have to balance on him to keep from falling off as he draws one of my nipples between his lips, sucking, kissing, massaging with his tongue. When I run my fingers through his hair, he moans, sending vibrations into the sensitive tissue of my breast. Once he's satisfied with the treatment on that side, he looks up to me. "Although, I would like to keep that one." He points over his shoulder at the table I was kneeling on moments ago, the same one that has a chip out of the finish on the edge because I fell off it and knocked it over. "For memories."

"I think I'll keep them all," I say, trying to be light-hearted and flirtatious, but his attentions have my voice coming out

breathy instead.

Still on his knees before me, Luke nips at the tight bud between his lips before pulling back, rubbing his thumbs back and forth across my thoroughly ravaged nipples. “I’ll take you shopping. I’ll buy you new ones. I’ll *make* you new tables if you’d like, but I won’t allow you to get hurt.”

“You’re impossible,” I murmur.

“So are you,” he laughs, rising up to kiss me. Holding me steady, he feels around my skirt until he finds the zipper and pulls it down before immediately peeling off it and my ice blue thong. “You wear the sexiest things under your clothes, sweetheart. Do you always match like this?” he asks, stretching them across the fingers of one hand, fascinated, before tucking them into his back pocket.

“Hey! Those are part of a set. Give them back.” *Part of a set that I bought weeks ago in case he took my clothes off one day. But still.*

“Your matching lacy sets are sexy and adorable, just like you.” Where has this man, with the praise pouring from his mouth, been all this time? *I’m obsessed.* “And I’ll get you as many as you want. A replacement for this pair, even. But I will be keeping these.”

“Lucas Pi—” My protest is cut off by his face, diving between my legs. The coarse hairs of his beard tickle roughly as he kisses up the tender skin inside my thighs, over my mound, and sucks my clit between his lips.

He squeezes my thighs in approval as I cry out. The man obviously loves the sounds I make when he touches me, and my body has never responded to anyone else the way it does to Lucas Pine. He looks up briefly, saying, “You are delectable,” before bringing his mouth back to my clit. My fingers twine into his hair, and he moans again. *He really likes that. Good to know.*

He draws one broad hand away from its spot at my hip and slides two fingers into my wet heat. My second orgasm builds quickly, still sensitive from the first.

His tongue makes rhythmic swipes across my clit, in time with the fingers he's curling into my g-spot. *Goddamn, he's good at that.* He's on his knees before me, broad shoulders flexing as he draws me closer to another orgasm.

"A little harder," I whimper, and he immediately increases the force of his movements inside me. When I feel myself pulse around his fingers, I moan, pulling hard on his hair, and he responds with a growl of his own. I break apart, legs shaking, as my climax vibrates through every inch of my body.

Luke pulls back, kissing along the insides of my thighs before rocking back on his heels and standing to his full height. Most of the time when he stands over me like this, I feel intimidated. *But not now. Right now, I feel safe.*

"Am I finally going to get to touch you?" I ask, breathless.

He pulls his shirt over his head with one hand, dropping it to the ground behind him and revealing abs I want to run my tongue over. *Holy shit. I bet I could.* Reaching out, I pull him closer to me by his belt loops and lean forward. I run my tongue against his torso, starting with one defined ab muscle, before moving on to the next, making a point to rub my bare breasts against the hard rod of his cock through his jeans.

"Fuck, Allie," he breathes out, twining his fingers in my hair in the same way I had mine in his a moment ago.

I continue licking across his muscled body while my hands join in my exploration, running across his low back and around his hips, before coming around to his belt. I look up at him, wanting to lick something else. "You going to let me touch you tonight?"

"Fuck yes, I am. Any way you want to, sweetheart."

"Then lose the pants, Pine."

He kicks off his work boots, then pants, leaving him standing before me in nothing but boxers.

"Those too." I pull at his waistband, and he drags them off, revealing a cock that is frankly, beautiful. *Like, this cock is art.* I want to learn how to paint so I can make a portrait of it and put it on my nightstand to admire before bed. He's long, thick,

and hard with a bead of pre-cum on his rounded tip that I cannot resist licking off.

I get on my knees before him, drawing his length between my lips and swirling my tongue around the head. The hard concrete floor bites at my knees, but I'll take the bruises if it means I get to indulge myself with Luke's glorious body.

"Fuck, Allie. That is so good. Have I mentioned how perfect you are?" he asks, breathless.

"You have, but I can't hear it enough."

He tucks a stray lock of hair behind my ear. "You are flawless."

Bringing both of my hands to his base, I take him deeper into my mouth, working his entire cock. Luke has been my fantasy for longer than I'm willing to admit. But finally being with him, touching him, getting to do everything I've imagined doing, has me turned on beyond reason. My sex is throbbing after two orgasms, and I still want more.

Luke groans, moving his hips in time with my mouth, holding my hair a little tighter. I suction my lips and hollow out my cheeks as I move faster on his cock.

"Sweetheart," his voice is strained. "You're going to make me come if you keep doing that, and I need your sweet cunt wrapped around my cock before that can happen."

The moment I release him, he picks me up and wraps my legs around his waist. He squeezes one of my ass cheeks. "You've been flashing this juicy ass at me all day. I've been dying to get my hands on it." Sliding the hand lower, he continues. "And these thighs. Damn, every inch of you is a temptation."

Adjusting me in his grip, he slides his cock against me. "Still so wet for me. You have a third one in you, gorgeous?"

"Mmhmm," I nod and moan, making no effort to mask my enthusiasm. *I want him inside me. Now.*

"I've been tested recently. I'm good. You want me to wear a condom?" He nods over his shoulder to where his jeans are

discarded on the floor.

Writhing myself against him, I answer in rushed, breathless words, “No STDs. On birth control. Fuck me, please.”

He chuckles low but wastes no time walking me back and pressing me against the windowed wall. The cold glass is a pleasant shock compared to the heat radiating between our naked bodies. Lifting me, he lines himself up with my entrance and brings his lips to mine, searing me with a kiss as he pushes his ludicrously immaculate cock into me.

I moan against his mouth, feeling myself stretch around him. He pulls back, then pushes in a little further, repeating the motion over and over, going a touch deeper each time. When I bite his lower lip, his hips jolt, and his thrust finally brings him fully seated inside of me.

“You are perfection,” he whispers against my lips as he continues to pump in and out in slow, deliberate strokes. “You’re taking my cock so well. I’ve been thinking about this tight little cunt,” he punctuates the word cunt with a punishing thrust, “since you were squeezing around my fingers last night.” He continues, shifting his hips, and hitting me deep and hard with every stroke. “You’re so good at being mine.”

At being his? I like the sound of that. Before I have a chance to analyze it further, he captures my lips in a fierce kiss, and I’m lost in the feel of him, pulsing, throbbing, aching, the tension in my body building up with every hard thrust.

With one hand planted on the glass above my head, and one wrapped firmly around my waist, he looks down at where we’re joined. My eyes follow his, and we watch his cock slide in and out of me. “Look at you, Allie. So gorgeous when you take me.”

“I want to come on your cock,” I whimper against his lips.

“You’d better,” he says, bringing me down onto his length in a brutal thrust.

Pleasure buzzes in my body from my center out to my limbs every time he hits my g-spot. I lose track of the sounds escaping my lips. Whimpering, moaning, crying out. He's relentless.

"That's it, sweetheart. Such a good girl for me."

The praise is what pushes me over the edge, and I'm an explosion of electricity, pulsing around the cock he continues to slam into me as I cry out his name with my climax. He pulls me closer, holding me against his chest as he groans, finding his own release.

His arms loosen their grip, letting me lean back against the glass, but he stays inside me, looking down again at where we're joined.

"Holy fuck. You are good at that," I tell him on a breathless laugh.

He tucks another rogue strand of hair behind my ear. "You are unbelievable. You're everything."

CHAPTER 27

Luke

“Told ya, should’ve had Luke do it. He’s a damn good mechanic, better than the hacks over at Joe’s shop.” - *Grandad Ernie, about fourteen-year-old Luke, to a bar patron whose motorcycle broke down two hours after getting it fixed.*

Me: Morning gorgeous. When do I get to see you today?

Allie: Morning handsome! Got here early to clean up or else I would have gotten the worst kind of “Who closed last night” text from Marisol.

Me: Be there in ten.

There she is. The sight of Allie brings me immediate relief. She stands in the middle of her shop with her head thrown back in laughter that I can’t hear through the window but that’s also now familiar enough to echo through my mind.

My eyes shift to the table she kneeled on when she touched herself for me, the chair she sat in while I tasted her, and the part of the window she was pressed against when I got to have my cock inside her for the first time. Not a single smudge or fingerprint.

Me: Did you climb on that goddamn table to clean the window?

Allie: Someone gave me a wooden stool to use instead.

Me: Did you use it?

Voyeur Motors’ back door opens, and Allie walks in. “I brought you breakfast,” she calls, her bright voice bouncing around my shop as she walks over and places two coffees and a white paper pastry bag next to the disassembled Honda engine I’m working on.

Bouncing up on her toes, she twines her fingers into my hair as she comes up for a kiss. *Fuck, that is good.* Framing her waist with my hands, I lift her and set her on the tall wooden workbench next to the Honda's cylinders. "Allie Walker. No more crawling on wobbly tables."

"You're no fun." She pushes out her lip in an exaggerated pout, but she's only able to hold the look for a couple of seconds before she breaks into laughter. "Okay, fine! If you insist. I'll use the stool you gave me."

"Look at that. You will do what I tell you," I say, kissing her forehead.

Her protest gets caught in her throat, laughing. "For fuck's sake."

"You're a very good girl." My voice is teasing, but her eyes still light up at my praise as if I've unlocked the code that makes this feisty doe-eyed brunette melt for me.

Crossing her legs underneath her, she pulls a bacon and egg breakfast burrito from the bag and holds it out for me to take a bite. The smell must reach Betty because she emerges from my office a moment later. "Ooh, there she is," Allie squeals when Betty comes over, wagging her tail.

"No human food for Betty." I make my voice and my glare as stern as possible, but I know she'll toss the dog a piece as soon as I turn my back.

Watching Allie yesterday had me too distracted to accomplish much on this engine. Her comforting presence allows my mind to focus on the task at hand. She giggles and talks to Betty, giving her half of my gifted breakfast while I work on reassembling the engine.

"I have a question for you, Mr. Pine."

"I'm interested."

"I guess it's not a question," she hesitates, "Kiara mentioned that you're having a grand opening party for the bar."

My hands still. The grand opening is the last thing on my mind. I've avoided focusing on the bar lately, outside of the bare minimum I need to do to make it happen. The liquor license will be ready in time, and I've met with a few of the reps and vendors I'll need, but that's all. I know opening this bar means Allie losing *Turbine*, and me losing the literal window into her life that let me fall for her.

"Skye suggested it, and I told her to run with it."

Allie nods silently, encouraging me to continue.

Moving closer, I rest my hand on her knee. "This is the first I've thought of it since then, but if Kiara knows, Skye must be making progress."

"I'll just text Skye and ask her how I can help," Allie smiles. The heart on this woman. I'm taking away her building, tearing apart her business, and she's going to help me celebrate it.

"You don't have to. I know this has to be hard for you." I run my fingers back through my hair. "If it helps any, I feel like shit about it."

She rubs her hands up and down my arms. "It does not help. I don't want you to feel bad." She pauses when I avert my gaze. "Hey, look at me. Of course, you love this building. It's incredible. Any idiot would want it. How could you have known?" she asks as she grabs my face to bring me back to her. "No more of this, okay?"

"I don't like you comforting me because I did something that hurt you. I'm the last person who should be hurting you."

"Get over yourself, Pine." Holding up one arm horizontally in front of her chest, she says, "This is the bridge," then pushes her other hand underneath the *bridge*, saying, "Water under it. Let's move on, okay?"

Fuck, she's adorable. I won't really move on until I've found a solution for her, but I drop it for the moment. "Wait, you have Skye's number?"

"Obviously."

“Do you talk much?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” She pushes on my shoulder. “Now, get back to work. I know you didn’t get anything done yesterday.” Smiling, she takes a long sip of her iced drink and stays sitting on my workbench, keeping me company long after it’s gone.

~

The front door to *Voyeur Motors* dings as I finish scrubbing my hands before lunch.

“Hey there,” Brian calls.

“Come to visit your bike?” I ask, pointing toward the rear corner where his restored BMW shines under the overhead lights.

“Something like that. Figure it’s about time I make a decision about it.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“I can’t bring myself to sell it.” He adjusts his black glasses on his nose. “Doesn’t feel right, but I can’t leave it to rot in my garage again, either.”

“Any other ideas?” I take a seat on the leather couch and wave for him to sit in the chair across from me.

“You’ve done a beautiful job with it.” He smiles broadly, crinkling the skin around his eyes. “Even better than it looked brand new.”

“That’s high praise.”

“I mean it. People stare through the glass at it every day.”

“They do,” I agree. “Could be my favorite project ever, Brian.”

He leans forward, looking back and forth from the bike to me a few times. “What if I leave it here for good? You could use it as a showpiece, couldn’t you?”

I'd thought this exact thing myself, but it was too selfish to ask. "You don't have to do that."

"I know," he says, firming his posture. "I'm offering because I appreciate you, and I want the bike to have another life. It's right for you to watch over it."

"That's amazing." I take a breath, gathering my thoughts as I run my fingers back through my hair. "It's already helped me sell a few projects and would help show off what I can do."

"Exactly, and I can still see it whenever I want."

"Come with me." I stand up. "Let's figure out how we should display it. I could build a stage or a table, even put it on the wall."

Glancing through the window, I see Allie leaning across *Turbine's* counter, talking with Hector and smiling over at me.

CHAPTER 28

Allie

“Don’t be surprised when things start going your way. Eventually, your hard work will pay off.” -*Allie’s horoscope, June 12th*

Luke: You need to wear pants.

Me: PANTS?! It’s already 90 out.

Luke: You know I love you in a skirt but if you want a ride to Joshua tree on my bike you’ll wear pants.

Me: You’re infuriating. I hate you.

Luke: I’m not. No you don’t.

Luke: Bring a backpack with a change of clothes.

Me: You could have said that in the first place.

The ride out to Joshua Tree is the longest I’ve been on a motorcycle, even with all the time I’ve spent two-topping them with Luke. My ass is a little numb, and it’s a long time to go without getting to talk to each other, but it’s mesmerizing too. It’s amazing how much of the desert I miss when I make this drive in my car—with a roof.

Luke reaches back and squeezes my knee, melting me with his touch. I squeeze tighter around his torso in response, like I always do. We’ve fallen comfortably into step with each other. Being together is the most natural thing in the world. Decisions like how much time to spend together, what to eat, where to go, all come to us easily.

Four months ago, sharing a glass wall with the unfairly hot man who stole my dreams felt like a curse. Now it’s a blessing. He’s still unfairly hot, but he shares his body with me, so no more complaints on that front. And I know he didn’t steal my building. He pursued his own dreams, and I can’t fault him for that.

We're in a happiness bubble of watching each other all day while we work, sending naughty texts through the window, and sitting together at lunch, but it has an expiration date. Two more months of this bliss, and then I'll be somewhere else, maybe as far as Joshua Tree, and he'll be running a bar in my old place.

I'm trying to find the balance between reveling in the present and figuring out the future. *So far, I'm terrible at it.* But it helps a lot that's he's coming with me today.

Luke leans heavily into the turn as we pull off the highway onto a side street. *I swear, he's exaggerating the turns just so I have to hold on tighter. I don't hate it.*

We pull up to the building I've been stalking on Google Maps street view for weeks, the corner unit of a strip mall featuring sand colored stucco walls and a red tile roof with a covered patio that wraps around the front and side.

I've been harping on about character during this search and rejecting places in Palm Springs for their lack of it. While strip mall doesn't exude unique character—Joshua Tree does. There's something magical and undeniably vibey about this corner of the Coachella Valley. Being a part of this community could be a great consolation prize.

“Do you want to change?” Luke asks me.

“Feels a little odd to ask if I can use their bathroom and come out in a totally different outfit, doesn't it?”

Luke shrugs.

“I'll survive in pants, but thanks.” Truth is, I don't have a change of clothes in the backpack. Figured I could surprise him with a backpack-desert-floor-picnic-lunch since he surprised me with truck-bed-charcuterie-dinner.

He handles the backpack and the helmets, so my hands are free to take notes and pictures and explore the building. The real estate agent gives a small pitch and hangs back to let me explore on my own. Luke doesn't say a word, letting me come to my own conclusions while he inspects structural things I'm not particularly interested in.

This unit was once a coffee shop, then a taco shop, and has been empty for a few months now. The interior is plain. Cream walls, concrete floors, and big windows on the corner walls that line the patio. My spot in Station 19 is an odd triangular-ish shape that Devon described as a design nightmare. This one's a normal rectangle. A blank slate.

Tables here, here, and there. I walk around, imagining the setup. *Couch here, more tables by the back wall, big plants on the east-facing window, and Hector and Brian's comfy chairs could go by the front like they are now.* A twinge of sadness tightens in my gut. Hector and Brian would come out here once to congratulate me, but who's going to drive forty-five minutes to hang out at a coffee shop all day? Not even those two. Not that I'd blame them.

Moving *Turbine* out here would be starting over in just about every way. Devon said it could be good for me. Maybe even force me to have a better work-life balance. Work a real schedule.

I could tweak the menu and finally drop the damn Cookie Explosion blended drink that I added on a whim years back without realizing what a pain in the ass it would be to make. Cookies, peanut butter cups, chocolate-covered espresso beans, dates, caramel drizzle, and sprinkles on top of the whipped cream. It's a monstrosity, and people love it. I took it off the menu once, and people continued to order it, due in large part to the "Quirky Things to Try in Palm Springs" article that's been making the rounds for ages. I even kicked up the price of every size. It's the most expensive thing on the menu, but people still order it.

The idea of burying the Cookie Explosion once and for all is appealing, but it's still nothing compared to losing Hector and Brian. *Not to mention Daisy. Or Marisol. Or any of my other staff. And there's no barre studio across the street for—*

"It's a little bigger than what you've got now, right?" Luke asks into my ear, his arms wrapping around me from behind, calming my racing heart. *How did he know I was about to spiral? Am I that obvious?*

“It is,” I say, with forced cheer in my voice, leaning into his hold. His biceps press in around my arms, the hard planes of his chest firm against my shoulders. Arching my back, I rub my ass against him. “Maybe we should get out of here and trash this whole idea.”

“Sweetheart, I cannot wait to have you again,” he whispers into my ear, dark and low. “But we’re here for a reason. Tell me more about what you see.”

He’s right. *I hate how often that happens.* “I love the windows and the patio outside.”

“Where do you think you’d put the register?” He kisses my temple, letting go of my waist, so I can walk over and show him. Once my feet are planted, hands up in the air to show I’m in the spot, he says, “Oh, I see it. You look good there.”

“You think I look good everywhere.”

“You do, but that spot is particularly good. You could make this work, sweetheart. Here, watch,” he says, going out the front door and out of sight before walking back in fifteen seconds later. There’s a little bell tied to the door that rings when he walks in. Seeing him there in his worn jeans and gray t-shirt from my spot behind the *register* I’m suddenly able to picture what it would be like to move *Turbine* here. From this spot, I could keep an eye on the whole place, but it’s far enough from the door that I wouldn’t get a wash of heat every time someone came in. I have a view of the mountains in the distance and cars going by on the highway.

There would be new faces. New regulars, lots of out-of-towners—which I love. Luke stands a few feet inside the door, hands in his pockets, sly smirk on his face, and it clicks that one of my regulars *would* still come here. *Luke*. No one else is coming forty-five minutes for coffee, but I bet he would. Could get here in thirty on one of his motorcycles, I bet.

We spend another half hour investigating the place, pondering the possibilities and taking pictures. Luke only speaks up to ask a few questions about safety and security, and when we leave I am truly, honestly encouraged and excited about moving *Turbine Café* for the first time ever.



Tapping on Luke's shoulder to signal he needs to turn right at the next street, I rush to get my hands back around his waist. He cocks his head to the side, in a silent, "Really?" but makes the turn, anyway.

I told him I knew where we should go for lunch, but it was easier if I gave him directions on the way. I'm sure he was confused when we drove away from town, but that's the beauty of being on a motorcycle. He can't ask questions. Much easier to keep my little surprise a secret this way. I guide him further into the desert for twenty more minutes, onto side roads and up to a hiking trail.

"We hiking in jeans today, sweetheart?" he asks once our helmets are off.

"Fuck no. There's a shady spot behind those rocks over there." The hiking trails within the actual national park are incredible. Stunning. And often crowded. Where we are now is just as beautiful, *according to me*, and much more private. Luke follows me for the three-minute walk to the shade. It's 105 out, not a cloud in sight, so that's all it takes to have both of us breathing heavily with the heat.

Pulling out the cooler bag that's in my backpack, I toss him a cold water to drink while I lay out the blanket, but he helps me set up our picnic instead. We have turkeys on rye, BBQ chips, and potato salad from the deli with the good mac 'n' cheese.

"This is adorable," he says, settling down onto the blanket and finally taking a big swig of the water.

"You seem to have a thing for surprise picnics. Felt like it was my turn."

His laugh is rich and full. "I have a thing for *you*."

CHAPTER 29

Luke

“If you don’t ask for what you want, someone else will get it.” -*Grandad Ernie, encouraging seven-year-old Luke to speak up at a family dinner when the mashed potatoes were almost gone.*

“It’s too hot. I can’t take it anymore,” Allie says, fanning herself with the leather notebook she uses for notes about new buildings.

“Alright, sweetheart. I’ll get you home.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We’ve barely been here three minutes. I’m just taking off my pants.”

Raising my eyebrows, I scan the area for other people. No other cars in the parking lot. No one on the trail.

“Don’t worry about it. I picked a secluded place on purpose.” Waving a hand towards my lap, she says, “You’ve got to be burning up. Takes yours off, too, and we can talk about the building.”

“You want me to take my pants off so we can talk?”

“I want you to take your pants off, so you don’t overheat,” she laughs.

But I’m not thinking about taking off my own clothes. My eyes are locked on her, leaning back on the blanket, unbuttoning her jeans, working them off her hips and shimmying them down her legs, revealing smooth thighs and curved calves.

“Ahh,” Allie sighs, “that is so much better.” She sets the jeans aside, leaving herself sitting on the blanket, wearing pink and orange striped panties that probably have a matching bra under her pink cropped t-shirt. She pulls her hair back into a

messy bun, pats around it with her hands, decides she doesn't like it, takes it down and ties it up again.

She goes about unpacking her backpack, like this is a normal occurrence. This fiery woman—who can't be bothered to wear pants—has me mesmerized with every swivel of her hips and shake of her hands.

“Lucas,” she waves her hand in front of my eyes, “did you hear me?”

“You look like that, and you expect me to hear you?”

“Yes, I do. Get it together,” she waves her hand towards my lap again, “and take off your pants.”

“So we can talk. Right. Got it.” Removing my pants reveals the evidence of her effect on me, hard and trying to escape my boxers. I'm pleased to see her staring, too.

“We're never going to have this conversation, are we?” she asks, inching closer to me on the blanket.

“It'll go better if we're not distracted. Maybe you'll be able to focus after an orgasm or two,” I say, pulling her close to me and slotting my lips against hers.

She straddles me, swinging her legs around my hips and setting her striped panty clad ass in my lap, without breaking our kiss. She's warm, soft skin and tempting curves in my arms that I still can't believe are familiar to me.

“I've been aching to feel you all day,” she says, breaking the kiss only long enough to speak. She tugs at my boxers, releasing my cock then moves her hips, sliding her hot sex against my hard length repeatedly. *Fuck, she's magnificent.*

Pulling her panties to the side, my fingers find her soaked. Lubricated with her arousal, I move my thumb over her clit as she continues rocking against me. “You're so wet for me already, sweetheart,” I say against her ear, biting the lobe, and showering kisses down her neck, kneading one of her perfect breasts through the fabric of her shirt while I keep up my movements against her clit with my other hand.

“Faster,” she whimpers.

“You sound so pretty, telling me what you need.” I increase the speed against her sensitive bud, watching her face, feeling her legs tighten around my hips, focusing on the rocking of hers that slicks her lower lips against my cock.

When I increase the pressure with my thumb, her entire body twitches, and she moans, gasping, “Yes, please,” and writhing on my cock.

“Are you going to come for me, sweetheart?”

“I want to come around your cock,” she practically screams, and it echoes in the surrounding valley.

“You can have whatever you want.”

“Lay back and watch,” she says, pushing on my chest.

Leaning back, I slide the fingers soaked with her delicious arousal into my mouth and watch as she lines herself up to take me in. The wetness of her entrance welcomes me as she lowers herself down. Her perfect, tight cunt squeezes around my cock, and I watch her lift herself up and lower back down again, riding along my length, using me for her pleasure.

Once she finds her rhythm, my thumb returns to her clit, and she shudders around me, stuttering in her pace for a moment before moving again.

“Show me your nipples, gorgeous?”

Hands flying to her shirt, she throws it down to the blanket, revealing a pink and orange bra that matches the panties she’s pulled to the side, half framing the view of my cock sliding in and out of her. She pushes the cups of the bra low, showing me her hard rose-colored nipples.

Bracing herself on my chest with one hand, she uses the other to play with her nipples as her rounded breasts bounce in time with her movements.

She’s a vision. Stray strands of hair escape her messy bun every time she brings herself down on me. Her cheeks flush with a mix of heat and arousal, freckles standing out against the pink of her cheeks. Teal-green doe eyes focus as she watches me watching her.

“You love being watched as much as I love watching you.” It’s a statement as much as a question. I want to hear her say it.

“I fucking love when you watch me,” she says around gasping breaths.

“I could never look away.”

Her eyes roll back when I find the rhythm and pressure with my thumb that I know will bring her over the edge. A touch faster than before, not too hard, tight circles. She continues to ride me until she breaks, crying out and pulsing around my cock. Holding her steady, I take over, thrusting up into her until I’ve found my own climax, and she collapses against my chest.

I run my fingertips up and down the length of her spine, never wanting Allie any farther away from me than she is with me still inside her. *This is where she belongs. Where I belong. We fit together perfectly, and she is mine.* “You were incredible. You look so beautiful when you make yourself come on my cock.”

She giggles into my chest. “Not sure beautiful is the right word.”

“It is.”

She lasts for about thirty seconds after we’re cleaned up and at least partially re-clothed before she starts the conversation back up. “What did you think of the building?” So business-minded when she wants to be.

“Your thoughts first. You’ve got to process it without my interference.”

She details everything she likes about the place: size, windows, patio, view, charm of Joshua Tree, relative affordability compared to real estate in Palm Springs. I try to understand her points, to be the support she needs, to consider this as a serious option, like I have all morning.

But my mind keeps returning to Allie, *my Allie*, out here. So far away from me. How am I supposed to keep her from climbing on wobbly tables if she’s an hour away? *What if someone tried to rob her? Or what if she gets cramps halfway*

to work and has to drive in pain like that? What if she's lonely? She doesn't belong out here. She belongs at Station 19.

It's up to me if she gets to stay or not. I can make all of this go away for her, and I'm the jackass she used to say I was if I don't. Yes, Grandad told me I could learn anything behind a bar, but he also taught me being good to the people I care about is what matters most. He never told me I had to spend my inheritance creating a bar in his honor. Fifteen-year-old Luke decided that and never looked back. *Until Allie.*

I bartended for a decade and learned countless lessons. It wouldn't be rejecting his plan for me if I chose not to open the bar. And even if it were, it's time to let *my* plan matter. Wasn't that the whole point of moving to Palm Springs, to stop doing what everyone else wants and start doing what I want? I want Allie in my life. I want to be the man she deserves. And she should be with someone who wouldn't put her second to anything.

"I don't want you in Joshua Tree."

"Oh, I don't want me in Joshua Tree either," she laughs. "And it's not like I'd move, just have a drag of a commute. Believe me when I tell you I have scoured Palm Springs for a better solution." The tightness of her smile causes an echoing tightening in my chest. "This is the best option I have, and I will love it."

Drawing both of her hands into mine, I hold her gaze. "You do have a better option. Stay. Keep *Turbine* where it is. You belong there. Station 19 would be nothing without you. It's not right for me to take it away. I need you more than I'll ever need to open that bar."

Saying this to her lifts the weight from my chest I've been carrying around for months. It's the right thing to do. Allie gets to keep her spot, and the idea of her being close to me, indefinitely on the other side of our glass wall, washes over me in a wave of relief.

"Oh, you're so sweet. But I'm not staying," she laughs.

“What?” *Did I hear that right?* “Why not?”

She kisses me on the forehead like she’s placating a two-year-old and explains, “Because I’m figuring this out on my own. I’m not taking anything away from you. Are you kidding? You’ve told me about your Grandad and the bar. It’s a beautiful idea, and it’s important to you. There’s no reason for you to give it up.”

“You’re the reason to give it up, Allie. No bar could be more important than you are.”

“Of course not. I never thought it was.”

I’m at a loss for words, stunned. *Shit.*

“You don’t get to be the hero this time, Pine. I found a solution. I found Joshua Tree. Everything’s going to be okay. I get to keep *Turbine*, and you get to have the bar.” Crawling into my lap, she kisses me soundly. “Don’t worry. This is a good thing.”

“When did you decide you were doing Joshua Tree? I thought it was only an option?”

“It makes the most sense—” she starts to explain but hears my phone ring and waves at me to answer. It’s a number I don’t recognize.

“This is Luke.”

“Lucas Pine?”

“Yes.”

“Darlene Pine’s son?”

“Yes.”

“She has you listed as her emergency contact.”

CHAPTER 30

Allie

“There’s a reason people stay loyal to you, Leo. Allow yourself time today to do something extra for someone you love.” -

Allie’s horoscope, June 15th

“You’re just alone in his house? He left you?” Sadie asks through the phone.

“I’m alone at his *mom’s* house. He’s at the hospital with her. It’s not like he’s blowing me off.”

“Hmm,” she considers, “I guess that’s fair. At least you have lots of time to snoop. Are you snooping?”

“No. I’m sitting on the deck.” Pulling my knees into my chest, I rock slowly on the porch swing on the overhanging roof. Betty is curled up in a tight, snoring, ball a few feet away, and the sun is about to set. The scene is almost idyllic, just missing Luke. “You can smell the ocean air from here. It’s delightful.”

“I can’t believe you’re not snooping. Don’t you want to know more about him?”

“Of course, but I don’t need to snoop. He showed me around the house, his old room, childhood photos.”

“I snoop through Jared’s stuff all the time, and we live together.” Sadie says this casually, like everyone should be doing it.

“Sadie, what the fuck. Can’t you just ask him things?”

“He hates emotional conversations, you know?” Defensiveness edges her usually bubbly voice. “If I don’t snoop, I have no clue what’s going on with him.”

Fucking Jared. Maybe if he wasn’t an asshole, she wouldn’t have to snoop. Fuck that guy.

Betty's head lifts when seagulls honk as they fly overhead, bringing her close enough that I can reach down and scratch behind her ears. "Listen, I want to be in your corner so badly. You have a right to be with who you want to, but for fuck's sake, Sade. What are you even getting out of this relationship at this point?"

Sadie laughs uncomfortably, and I feel bad. *But also, no I don't.* Someone has to have this conversation with her. "Allie, I don't know how to be without him. We've been together for nine years. *Nine.* We were in high school when we met. I've never been an adult without him helping me."

"In what way is refusing to talk to you, refusing to share his *life* with you, helping you?"

Luke's truck turns onto the street, and I watch it rumble toward me and pull into the driveway as I wait for Sadie's response.

When it comes, it's quiet. "I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"Neither do I. I never want to have this conversation again. I want you to be free. You're capable of so much, Sade. Give yourself a chance. Devon and I are not joking about you living with us."

"Allie, please. Let it go."

"Fine, I'll drop it. But please know, I hate him."

Luke hears my last statement as he walks up the weathered wooden front steps. Pointing at his chest and raising his eyebrows playfully, he mouths, "Me?"

Rolling my eyes and shaking my head, I scoot over to make room on the swing. He sits, squeezing me tightly to him and kissing me on the temple.

"I kind of hate him, too," Sadie admits, before making up an excuse about being busy, even though she called me to talk just twenty minutes ago, and we end the call.

"Who do we hate?" Luke asks.

“Fucking Jared, my friend Sadie’s boyfriend. He’s the fucking worst, and she is a beautiful ray of sunshine who won’t leave him. It’s heart-breaking.”

“She’s lucky to have you.”

“A lot of good it does if she won’t listen,” I pout, and Luke pulls me closer, squeezing my knee reassuringly, a move he does on and off the bike now. *He’s comforting me after spending all day at the hospital with his mom. Shit.* “Enough about me. Tell me about your day.”

“Let me grab a couple of beers from the fridge. We can take a walk on the beach while I fill you in.”

The evening is cool enough that I get to wear a hoodie for the first time in months. It’s Luke’s, so it hangs past my wrists and hits my upper thighs, cozy as fuck. *He’s never getting it back.*

“How was she today?” I ask as we reach the beach. Betty wags her tail, shifting her feet back and forth impatiently as we slide off our shoes, leaving them in the sand to be picked up on the way back.

“My mom’s a little tough,” Luke says, reaching for my hand as we start towards the water’s edge.

“Isn’t that a good thing in this situation? Fighting to heal?”

“Not quite what I meant, but she is healing quickly. Pretty banged up from the car accident and exhausted from everything, but she should be out of there in a few days.” I squeeze his hand, encouraging him to continue. When he does, his voice is tight. “She’s a tough person to get along with. For me.”

He’s only brought up his mom casually before, mentioned she’s into astrology, that Skye looks exactly like her—*which must mean she’s a curly-haired knockout*, she lives in Ventura, and he occasionally drives out here to visit and fix things. The only other hint I’ve gotten about their relationship is that she hasn’t come to visit.

I stay quiet, letting him process as we continue walking in the wet sand, the edge of the water rippling over the tops of

our feet when the waves roll in, occasionally splashing onto the bottoms of our rolled-up jeans. Betty walks alongside us, happy as can be.

“I never want to say anything negative about my mom.” Luke breaks the silence. “She’s tough in the good ways, like you said, and she got dealt a shit hand with my dad and Skye’s dad. They both left when we were still babies. My Grandad, the one who used to own a bar, was her dad. He did everything for her, fixing her car, keeping the house from falling apart, babysitting me at the bar almost constantly.”

“Sounds like he was pretty incredible.”

Luke’s smile is warm and proud. “He was incredible,” his smile fades, “and it was awful losing him. After he died when I was fifteen, mom didn’t have any help. So I stepped up. It needed to be done.”

The picture of fifteen-year-old Luke fixing cars and mending broken furniture slots perfectly into my understanding of him. Babysitting his little sister, who was probably four or five at the time, suits him perfectly too. It all informs his intense need to fix, care for, and meet my needs before I know they’re my needs.

“I never stopped taking care of Mom, and she’s angry that I moved away. She’s acted like,” he takes a deep breath, choosing his words carefully, “like I did it to hurt her. I should have done a better job of prepping her before I left. It probably felt sudden to her. She’s been lonely.”

“She doesn’t have friends?”

“She does. Lots of them. But none who know how to repair a broken floorboard or replace her brake pads. For fifteen years, she’s called and I’ve answered. Her problems were fixed. Now I’m two to five hours away, depending on traffic, and she feels abandoned.”

Does this woman not know how to google a handyman? Never heard of paying a mechanic? My cheeks heat, reflecting my rising frustration on his behalf.

“Mom went through a lot to make sure Skye and I were happy and healthy. She worked really hard to make sure we didn’t grow up and turn into jackasses.” He pinches my ass cheek then, teasing and lightening the mood a bit. “And now she’s hurt, physically, and it took me three hours to get here.”

Considering we were freshly post-coital on a hiking trail in Joshua Tree when he got the call, I thought three hours was impressive.

“At the hospital, she was trying to guilt me into moving back.”

He doesn’t want to say anything negative about his mom, but I sure do.

“That’s part of why I haven’t brought you there. And I just told her about you today,” he rushes to explain, “because I wasn’t ready to share. Wasn’t ready for her opinions.”

Balancing on my toes, I give him a sweet, soft kiss. “I’m not offended, promise.”

Dropping Betty’s leash and tucking his beer bottle into the sand, he cups both broad calloused hands around my face, holding my eyes locked with his. “You sure?”

“I’m sure.” I nod.

He kisses me again, and *goddamn* I love this man’s lips, the scruff of his close-trimmed beard, his hands on me. I can’t believe I spent all that time hating him when I could have had this instead. A cool breeze blowing off the ocean makes me shiver, and Luke blocks my body with his until it passes, even though I already stole his hoodie and he’s only wearing a long-sleeved baseball tee.

We turn around and head back down the beach, quietly watching the sun dip below the horizon line of the water as we hold hands and sip on our beers. He doesn’t speak up again until we reach our shoes. “It’s a financial thing too, with my mom.” He steadies me while I knock the sand off of my feet. “She needs help sometimes. Another thing I took over from Grandad. I know she won’t be able to handle the medical bills, a new car, any of it without help.”

“Hmm.” There are so many things I want to say right now, but I doubt, ‘*Doesn’t she have a fucking job?*’ would be helpful. “Sounds like a lot for you. How do you feel about it?”

“It’s fine. How it’s always been. I got my inheritance from Grandad on my thirtieth earlier this year, been saving for the bar for ages. It’ll be fine.”

“None of that was how you feel,” I say as we step back onto the street toward his mom’s house.

“You perceptive little thing,” he teases, tugging lightly on my ponytail. “I’m not sure how I feel about it yet.”

“That’s fair.” Squeezing his hand, I add, “I’m in your corner, whatever you need.”

~

“I’m ready for a shower. Got to get all the hospital and beach off of me,” Luke says after we’ve fed Betty and scarfed down a dinner of cheap pizza and cheaper beer. He’s exhausted, his beard looking scruffier than usual, his posture a bit lax, chocolate-colored eyes starting to show dark circles beneath. *The man needs a break.*

“Alright, I’ll shower after you. I’m all beachy, too.”

“Sweetheart,” Luke picks me up off the couch, and I squeal as he throws me over his shoulder with energy I didn’t realize he had, “that was an invitation.”

“Not sure how I missed that,” I say into his shoulder, giggling as he carries me up the stairs, down the hall, and all the way to the bathroom. Our clothes come off in a flurry of laughter and teasing. The shadows under his eyes persist, but his broad, effortless smile is present in full force. He needs a distraction, and I’m happy to oblige.

We laugh and play, probably making a mess of the whole bathroom while we wash each other, each of us stopping the other if we get too handsy because, “We have to get clean.”

“Let me wash your hair,” I say, scanning the bath products.

“That sounds incredible,” he says, lifting me by the waist and setting me on top of a teak stool in the shower. “Be careful up here.”

“I promise. Now turn around.” I spin my finger in a spiral over his head, he follows, then leans his head back and closes his eyes. The beach sunset was beautiful, but it had nothing on the bird’s eye view of water sluicing down Lucas Pine’s brawny naked body.

“Mmm,” I hum in admiration.

“Like what you see?” he asks, smirking.

“Obviously. You’re a babe.” I select a blue bottle from the shower’s shelf. “Now keep your eyes closed, unless you want shampoo in them.”

He groans the second my fingertips begin to lather the shampoo into his hair, scratching my nails back and forth over his scalp.

“You really love this, don’t you?”

“Mmhmm,” he moans in response, a soothed smile ticking up the edges of his mouth for the entirety of me washing and conditioning his hair.

When I reach across him to adjust the water temperature, he turns into my chest, kissing across my collarbones and down the soft mounds of my breasts. *Fuck, that’s nice.* The hard rod of his erection rubs against my leg, taunting me. “You’re not taking care of me tonight, Pine.”

“What do you mean?” He looks up at me, pushing his lower lip out in a pout that’s comically at odds with his stern brows, angled jaw, and coarse beard.

“I mean, tonight I’m taking care of you. That’s it.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Isn’t it? You’ve had a tough week. You need to relax.”

He growls, narrowing his eyes. “I don’t like to be selfish.”

“You’re not being selfish, *Jesus.*” Luke stops me when I try to get down from the bench and lifts me off while being

pointedly careful not to touch me anywhere fun.

He's in the middle of scolding me for being *reckless* with my safety when I drop to my knees in front of him. "Allie, you don't have to."

Water runs over his head, past his shoulders, across every ridge of his pecks and abs, in an obscene river. A few lucky streams pass across his glorious cock before I draw the tip between my lips. His hands go immediately to my hair, tangling his fingers between the wet strands. "I'm never going to forgive myself if you don't come."

"I never said I wasn't going to come," I scoff and swallow him down whole, or as whole as I can as the tip of his cock brushing deep in the back of my throat for just an instant before releasing him and finishing my thought, "just that you weren't allowed to help."

"Goddamn, Allie." He shakes his head, voice tight. "And I get to watch?"

I nod, arching my low back as I take him back into my mouth, giving him a view of water sliding over my rounded ass cheeks as well as me bobbing my mouth over his cock. His eyes lock on me, watching me with intense desire as I swallow him down. I alternate between closing my eyes and looking up to gaze at him when the position allows it.

My own arousal builds, adding slickness to my lower lips. Touching Luke, pleasing him, taking care of him, and watching him lose control turns me on enough to make my clit throb without a single touch.

Over and over, I slide my lips down and back up, massaging with my tongue as I go, the taste of pre-cum disappearing into the wetness of my mouth. With one hand, I toy gently with his balls while the other works the base of his shaft where my lips don't reach. His broad shoulders block most of the water until it pools around his feet and runs past my kneeling legs. Each time I come forward on his cock, my breasts brush against his thighs, the rough hair teasing my hardening nipples.

Luke groans, removing one hand from my hair to brace it on the tile wall behind me, and I know he's getting close. Dropping my hand from his balls, I make a show of running my fingers down my throat, across my chest, plucking at my nipples before settling between my legs onto my clit.

Luke tracks every inch of the movement, offering encouragements and naughty praises as I go, adjusting his stance to get a full view of my hand on my sex. "You look perfect when you touch yourself for me, sweetheart. Do you know how many times I imagined what you would look like, pleasuring yourself? I got off to picturing you teasing that delicious cunt while thinking of my cock countless times before you ever stopped calling me jackass."

The fingers at my clit pick up speed, moving in time with the slide of my mouth over his cock. His words add to the tension in my throbbing sex, bringing me closer to the edge.

"When was the first time you thought about me, gorgeous?"

I look up at him, unable to respond with a mouth full of his divine cock, deciding I need to shut him up, too. My mouth, the hand on his shaft, and the hand on my clit all ratchet up in speed. I take him deeper, hitting the back of my throat on each forward thrust. The look in his eyes grows wild, muscles tensing across his thick neck, broad shoulders, sculpted arms, and unfair abs.

I lose myself in the motions, focused on getting both of us there. My core clenches around nothing, and I ache to be filled. I'm sure he'd take over in a second if I asked, but this time I'm determined to take care of him. My fingers slide down my seam and inside myself, even hotter and wetter than the steaming shower around us.

My hips rock, riding my fingers as I work his shaft with my throat, lips, and hand. "Fuck, baby," he breathes, hips stuttering as his cum spurts down my throat. Tasting him, feeling him come apart at my mercy, sends me over the edge, and an orgasm quickly ripples through me before I release him from my mouth.

Luke drops to his knees in front of me, water spraying over both of our heads, curls of steam twining past our shoulders. He pulls my lips to his, kissing me fervently, holding my mouth to his with sensuous pressure. “You are perfect, in every single way.” Then he takes the fingers I was just riding and sucks them into his mouth, licking and tasting every drop the shower hasn’t already washed away. “Every. single. one,” he says, placing a kiss to a different fingertip after each word.

“The first day I met you,” I say.

“Hmm?” he asks, leaning his forehead against mine.

“The first day I met you was the first time I came with your name on my lips.”

CHAPTER 31

Luke

“Your mother has a soft heart. After I’m gone, sometimes the hard things will fall to you.” -*Grandad Ernie to fifteen-year-old Luke during one of their last conversations.*

Careful not to make extra noise, I close the blue painted cabinet door. Allie is upstairs sleeping, and I’d like her to stay that way until I have her coffee ready.

She insisted on taking care of me last night, including playing with my hair as I fell asleep with my head on her chest. I’m about as good at accepting help as she is, but she knows exactly how to make me take what I need.

Grandad charged me with taking care of mom half my life ago. Which, admittedly, was a sort of fucked up thing to do to a fifteen-year-old. But I can’t blame him. *How else was he supposed to make sure his daughter was okay with him gone?*

Being here this week and spending countless hours at the hospital with mom, then coming home to Allie has my perspective shifting. I can honor Grandad and make sure Mom’s okay without having to do it the same way he did. Mom’s young, barely in her fifties. She doesn’t *need* me here all the time. She’s rarely kept a job for more than six months, but that doesn’t mean she can’t try again.

I can still have Station 19, *Voyeur Motors*, all of it. The bar is happening in a couple of months, though I like the idea less and less as the days with Allie next door at *Turbine* race by. I don’t have to sacrifice myself to make sure Mom’s okay. The trick will be getting her to see it that way, too.

“Are you making me coffee, Lucas Pine?” Allie asks, emerging from the hallway at the top of the stairs. Morning light beams in, shining golden on her sweet face and mussed chestnut hair. One of my faded black racing tees hangs off one

smooth shoulder and rides up just enough to show some cheek as she comes down to the kitchen.

“I am. Was planning to bring it to you in bed. Heard that’s the only acceptable reason to wake you up.” I retrieve the creamer from the fridge to add to her coffee. “But it’s tough to wake up earlier than you.”

She climbs onto a stool at the kitchen island and says, “I do love coffee in bed.” Her voice still sleepy.

“Then I’ll keep trying.” I place the warm cup of coffee in Allie’s waiting hands and a kiss to her temple. “I’d like you to come see Mom today. How would you feel about that?”

“Sure,” her response is immediate and enthusiastic, the first sip of coffee already lending her energy. “I’ve been wanting to meet her. Will she be okay with me being there?”

“Oh, yeah. After I told her about you yesterday, she scolded me for not bringing you by sooner.”

She squeezes my hand across the island. “Then we’ll definitely go together.” Bringing Allie to the hospital with me today will make the entire ordeal with mom feel less daunting. Her presence this week has already brought me peace where I normally wouldn’t have had any.

While she’s upstairs getting ready, I search the house for things Mom might need help with. Cam did a good job of putting in the hydraulic slow-close mechanism for the screen door to the front porch. The stair railing the handyman repaired feels sturdy. None of the plumbing is leaking. The gardener’s doing a good job, better than I ever did. Things are not in the kind of shape that I expected, which is a relief. And also a bit irritating, since Mom is always saying how much she needs me to do.

I grab the last few days’ worth of mail on my way back into the house. While I’m sorting the junk out, I come across an official-looking pink envelope. *Shit.*

~

“So, my little goat tells me you’re a Leo,” Mom says, ten seconds after being introduced to Allie. “But he didn’t know your rising or moon. Men can be so useless.”

Allie doesn’t join in with Mom’s laughter. “Some men can be, but Luke isn’t.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean anything by that,” Mom says, waving it away like it’s nothing. And her comment *was* nothing to me. I would have forgotten it immediately, but Allie’s refusal to agree with insulting me? *That was something.*

Leaning against a bland, gray cabinet along the far wall, I let them fall into easy conversation. Allie’s warm and inviting as she listens to Mom with genuine interest. I’ve seen her win over hundreds of customers in an instant, but this is different, more raw. She’s letting Mom in deeper than that.

For her part, Mom warms up to Allie immediately, smiling at me knowingly after *every* sentence out of my girl’s mouth.

I try to listen, wanting to know what they’re connecting about, but my mind keeps going back to that pink envelope. After looking through Mom’s desk, I found that it was one of many. *She knows.* She knows exactly what she stands to lose. Was she not going to ask me for money? Or is that why she keeps asking me to come home, so she could ask me in person?

We’ve spent hours upon hours together in this hospital room this week, and she never said a word about financial problems. Mom has never hesitated to ask me for help before. *What’s different this time?*

“How long will you be in town for Luke’s bar’s opening?” Allie’s question draws me back to their conversation. “I want to show you around. I can plan the perfect trip for you. There’s an aura photographer who comes through sometimes.”

Mom’s face lights up as Allie describes all the different things they should do together. I hadn’t realized Mom was committed to coming out to visit, but I’ve also buried my head in the sand about the bar. Skye’s been working hard to make sure things come together, and she’s forced me to make

decisions. The menu is set. We picked the name *Ernie's*, after Grandad. But it doesn't feel right. None of it is worth what it's costing Allie.

She told me *no* when I asked her to stay, but it's hard to believe that's what she wants. *How could her opinion have changed so drastically since that first day she found out I'd bought her building?*

After a long conversation with Mom, Allie squeezes my hand and balances on her toes to kiss me on the cheek on the way out of the room to find us some food.

"She's a very special woman," Mom says, not waiting for her to be out of earshot.

"She is," I say, moving forward to take the seat Allie just vacated.

"You know she's all in, right? She's yours?"

"I know that." I nod.

"Forever. Have you figured that part out yet? You get to keep her. She's your person. I could feel it the second she walked in this room." I knew all of this, but it's fun to watch Mom figure it out, too. "You know I have intuition about people."

"I know, Mom. I love her. I'm keeping her."

"I always knew you'd end up with someone magical and free." She squeezes my hand tightly.

Mom gushes about Allie, repeating the conversation they just had while adding in her observations about Allie's fiery spirit, powerful energy, and even calls her smile electric.

Running my fingers back through my hair, I interrupt her. "I wish we could talk about Allie all day, but I've got something else I have to ask you about."

"What is it, little goat?" Mom tilts her head to the side, her dark brown ringlets even wilder than usual from days in a hospital bed. Her comforting smile, marred by a cut on her chin, her perceptive eyes, same as Skye's and mine, edged

with yellowing bruises. The car accident really fucked her up, but nothing could stop her spirit from shining through.

“The property tax on the house, Mom. How long do you have?”

Some people might be angry about me going through their mail, sticking my nose in their business, but not Mom. We’ve been a team for a long, long time. Her business is my business. “Until the end of the month.”

“That’s all they give you? That’s bullshit.”

“No, I’ve known for a long, long time, honey.”

Anger clenches my jaw, my hands flexing in and out of fists. I take a few deep breaths before asking, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

She looks at me, for a long moment before she says, “You may not believe this, but I never liked taking money from you.” She takes three deep breaths, which she does when she needs to steady herself, before continuing. “I hated that my son was the only man who stayed. Hated myself for not being able to handle everything on my own, not being able to get out of bed some days. While at the same time, being grateful you were such a capable and hard-working young man.” Her voice cracks with the weight of long-held emotion. “I don’t know how we would’ve gotten through those years without you carrying us.”

We’ve never put a name to mom’s *issues*. Neighbors called her flighty and irresponsible. Grandad called her troubled. Skye has a whole list of diagnoses she thinks it could be, and has been pushing for her to get help, but to me, she’s Mom. That’s enough information. She’s strong in every way she can be, and I’m strong in all the others. It’s how it’s always worked. Or at least, I thought it was working until I moved away, and she’s had so much trouble with the change. *And then I found those pink envelopes.*

“You work so hard,” she continues, squeezing my hand again. “I kept trying to figure it out myself, the money for the taxes, but I just couldn’t come up with it. I’ve been working

for Gabriel, doing service writing at his shop for a few weeks now. You remember him, right?”

I nod. Gabriel’s a good guy, a local who’s been around for decades. He was a regular at Grandad’s bar. If mom can hang on to that gig, she’ll be in good hands.

“But that’s the best thing I’ve had in years. There just isn’t enough money.” She pauses, tilting her head to the side. “I know this building, your motorcycle shop, the bar, they mean a lot to you,” her voice trails off, almost dismissively.

“Yeah, they do, Mom. But if you would have told me this in the first place, I would never have bought that building. I would never have left.” Saying it out loud turns my stomach sour. *If I’d never gone to Palm Springs, I wouldn’t have Allie.*

“People are complicated, Lucas, your mother included. I kept thinking I’d figure it out on my own. I really thought I could, but I knew if I didn’t, you’d handle it. And by the time I figured out I needed you to step in, you were already making plans to leave. If I talked you into staying here, it wouldn’t be such a big deal for you to give up the money,” she says, matter-of-factly. “Maybe if I could make you think you never wanted to leave,” she trails off. “I don’t know. I’ve always counted on you. With you gone, I didn’t know what to do. I’m caught between being a good mom and losing my house. What am I supposed to do?” The question is rhetorical, and also an admission that she doesn’t have a plan other than *wait for Luke to fix it.*

I run my fingers through my hair, one hand after the other. “I’ll figure it out, Mom. You’re not losing the damn house.”

“I knew you’d come through for me,” she says, warm affection in her tone. “But even if you decided not to, I wouldn’t hold it against you.”

I narrow my eyes at her in response.

She tilts her head. “I hate that you left me, but I don’t begrudge you spending Dad’s money on things you want. Even if those things are in the middle of nowhere, far enough

away from your mom that she can't pop over for dinner anymore."

"That's not why I picked Palm Springs."

She laughs, shaking her head. "Of course not. You picked it because you were meant to. Your soulmate is there." Mom's right. She is a complicated person. She resents that I left her. She expects me to come back and fix her problems. But she also believes I was meant to leave... Meant to find Allie. To her, none of these things are contradictory.

I arch a brow at her. "I don't believe in soulmates."

"Doesn't mean you don't have one."

"I didn't know she was there when I moved there."

"Doesn't matter. She's the reason you were drawn there. Things happen for a reason. Your Grandad probably didn't realize when he stopped for gas in Palm Springs seventy years ago that it would lead to his grandson's destiny, but it still happened."

CHAPTER 32

Allie

“Don’t let your ego block your happiness. In some situations, they are mutually exclusive.” -*Allie’s Horoscope June 18th*

“Joshua Tree?” Hector asks incredulously. “You can’t be serious. Brian!” he yells over his shoulder from his spot at the counter to his husband who’s sitting by the front window.

“I heard,” Brian says at a normal volume, not looking up from his paper. “Not worried about it.”

“Not worried? Are we supposed to carpool with Daisy now?”

Daisy looks up, smiles, and goes back to her drawing.

“Why am I the only person who’s concerned about this?” Hector throws his hands up. “What did Devon say?”

“Devon doesn’t *love* it,” I admit. “Although, she thinks it may force me to have healthier boundaries with work. But you know better than anyone how hard it was to find a place in Palm Springs.”

“I didn’t realize we’d given up,” Hector says, arching a judgmental black brow at me.

“We didn’t give up.” I set a consolation iced coffee on the counter for him. “This is a really good option for me.”

“I hate it. *Loathe* it. Detest it.” He takes a long sip of his coffee. “I am vehemently opposed to the idea of *Turbine Café* moving to Joshua Tree.”

I lean forward on the counter. “The building isn’t going anywhere. We can meet here for happy hour at *Ernie’s* instead.”

“The fuck is *Ernie’s*?” Hector asks, lip snarling in offense.

“Ernie was Luke’s Grandad’s name,” I explain. “It’s what he’s calling the bar.”

“What’s the point of sleeping with your landlord if he’s going to kick you out, anyway?” Hector asks, still incredulous.

I point through the window at my landlord-boyfriend. He’s lifting something metal, maybe a motorcycle engine. The details of his broad muscular shoulders show through his grease-smudged t-shirt and tendrils of black hair fall across his forehead. “I promise, it’s worth it, even without the building.”

“Okay, fine,” Hector admits, begrudgingly. “I can see the appeal.”

Truth is, I’m still heartbroken about leaving Station 19. But knowing that leaving helps Luke, makes it okay. I only have a month and a half left here, and I’m spending every second reveling in it while I still can.

Luke: Any chance you’ll bring me a turkey on rye?

Me: Sure thing, Pine. Be right over.

I say goodbye to a cranky Hector and head over to have lunch with my sexy motorcycle mechanic boyfriend. Betty greets me when I come in the back door, wagging her tail excitedly as I sneak her extra pieces of turkey while we wait for Luke to finish scrubbing the grease from his hands.

When we sit down on his leather couch together, his body language is stiffer than usual. *Not angry, but maybe nervous?* He’s been a bit on edge since we left the hospital a couple of days ago. He’s never short with me, but it’s evident he has a lot on his mind.

“I want to talk to you about something,” he says.

“Anything.”

Luke runs his fingers through thoroughly mussed black hair, one hand after the other. “Before we talk about this, I need you to know two things.” I nod, encouraging him to continue. “One: I heard you when you said you don’t want to extend your lease. I know you’re excited about Joshua Tree

and owning a building, and I'm not trying to guilt you into changing your mind."

That is not the caveat I was expecting.

"Two: More than anything, I want you to stay. I would give anything I have to make you happy." *Fuck. Why did I tell him No again?* He got the call about his mom while we were in the middle of that conversation, and we never got to finish it. I open my mouth to make an excuse, but he silences me with a calloused finger to my lips. "You don't have to say anything yet." He takes a deep breath. "Mom's about to lose her house."

"Oh, fuck," I whisper.

"Yeah, fuck. House is paid off, but she hasn't paid her property taxes in years. I found out while we were out there."

I know he takes care of a lot for his mom, but this is a weight he shouldn't have to carry. I bite my tongue, wanting to let him talk this out without my opinions influencing him.

"It's a lot of money, and I have it, but..." his voice trails off, looking through the window at *Turbine*.

"It's the money for *Ernie's*?"

"Yeah." He nods.

I wait for him to continue, but when it's still silent after a few moments, I ask, "You know, you don't have to take care of this for her, right?"

"I know that."

"But you *are* going to take care of it, aren't you?"

Luke cocks his head, a knowing smile spreading his lips. "Ernie was her dad, and it's his money. It's the only way for him to take care of her anymore."

"It's your money now, so if you do this, it's you taking care of her."

He furrows his brows. "I guess."

"You've spent a lot of money on her over the years, yes?"

He nods.

“So, maybe if you hadn’t, you wouldn’t have needed your Grandad’s money to do all this?” I wave both hands in the air, indicating *Voyeur Motors* and Station 19.

He nods again.

“You’re a very good man, Luke. It’s admirable how much you love your mom.” He grunts, uncomfortable with the praise. “What does all this have to do with me?”

He reaches down to where Betty lies on the ground by his feet, scratching absently behind her ears. “*Ernie’s* isn’t happening.”

Fuck, I hate that. It’s not fair. It’s not right. “So you need someone to rent that side?” I ask, my heart fluttering with a mix of excitement about maybe staying and a twinge of anxiety that he’s losing his dream.

“I had another idea, actually.” He stands up. “Wait here. I have something for you.”

He walks back to his office and returns with a thick stack of paperwork. He hands it over, and I flip through, seeing my name, his name, Station 19, and lots of legal jargon. “What am I looking at?”

He returns to his spot next to me. “I’ve been working with the bank to split the deed for Station 19. I want to sell you your half. Then you can own your space, like you always should have.”

Why would he give that up? I never imagined. Overwhelmed, tears well in my eyes. I push the paperwork back towards him. “Luke, I—” I stop and start, struggling to find words. “It’s just so—I... Luke, I can’t do this to you.”

“You’re not doing anything to me. You’d be helping me. I need the money to help Mom.” He sets the paperwork down on the nearby coffee table and squeezes both of my hands in his. “But that’s nothing compared to how much I need you.” He pulls me closer to him until my folded legs are leaning against his, his hands cradling my face. “Allie, I love you. I need you close to me always. I don’t want to look through that

glass wall and see anything but Allie Walker or *Turbine Café*. Do you understand?”

He loves me? He loves me. Holy shit, he loves me.

“Luke, I—” Struggling with words again, I opt for kissing him. My hands go to frame his face, and he pulls me across his lap until I’m straddling him. Our lips crash together in a searing kiss that rocks me to my core. The kiss of a man who *loves me*. Who wants me more than anything. *Who I love*. And who I want more than anything. Breaking the kiss, I stay curled in his arms on his lap, but pull back far enough that we can see each other clearly. “Luke, this could actually work.”

He runs his hands up and down the sides of my waist, chuckling. “I know, sweetheart.”

An idea materializes immediately, one I can’t believe I never thought of before. “But I need you to know two things before I accept.”

He nods, a smirk curving his lips.

“One: I love you too.”

His smirk turns into a full, broad smile.

“Two: I will not let you give up the bar.”

His smile falters. “Allie. No. You’re not giving up *Turbine*.”

“Have you ever noticed that *Turbine*’s only open during the day?”

“Of course,” he laughs, “I hate working late because I don’t get to see you.”

“What if it was *Turbine* during the day, and *Ernie’s* at night?” I smile, giddy with excitement at the prospect.

He squeezes my knee, a broad smile taking over his mouth. “I like that idea, but it has a couple of flaws.”

I tilt my head to the side, pretending to rethink my proposition. “Pretty sure it’s flawless, actually.”

“Calling it *Ernie’s* isn’t right anymore. The bar will be ours, not his.”

“Ours?”

“Oh, yeah. We’re about to be business partners, sweetheart. I’m not running a bar in your space without your help. We’d be opening a bar together.”

Oh, fuck. He’s right. That is better. I squeal in excitement, tapping a hand on his sculpted shoulder. “Okay, so not *Ernie’s*. I’m good with that. What’s the other imaginary flaw?”

“Those fucking pedestal tables.” He points through the window, and I collapse against his chest, laughing. “I refuse to run a business with those hazards. They’re out. All of them.”

“All of them?”

“Well, the *one* will be at my place. The others can go to a landfill for all I care.”

“Hmm,” I take my time, pretending to consider even though we both know my mind is solidly made up. “Alright. You have a deal, Lucas Pine.”

CHAPTER 33

Luke

*“Proud of you, kid.” -A note from Grandad Ernie that thirty-year-old Luke found tucked into a copy of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* at his mom’s house that was intended for him as a sixteenth birthday present.*

“Today is your day, Capricorn. You will find success in love, business, and family. Step outside, and don’t waste the opportunity to revel in your luck.” -Luke’s horoscope, that he now reads in bed next to Allie every morning, August 1st.

Opening the door to my bedroom, two coffees in hand, I find Allie still sleeping. *Finally.* I’ve been trying for months to wake up early enough to do this. Stepping quietly into the room, I set the coffees on the nightstand and slide back under the covers next to her.

She’s perfect, as always. Morning light shining across the smooth skin of her naked body. Chest rising and falling with the steady breaths of sleep. It’s tempting to keep watching her, but the draw of kissing her sweet face is stronger. I kiss along her jaw, down the column of her neck, tracing my hand up and down the side of her soft waist, easing her awake.

“Mmm.” Her sleepy voice comes as I’m kissing back up the other side of her neck. “Morning.”

“Morning, sweetheart,” my hand at her waist traces lower, over the slope of her hip, smoothing down the curve of her round ass cheek. “I know you’ve said the only thing worth being woken up for is coffee—”

“That’s because it is,” she giggles quietly, eyes still closed.

“I’d like to test that theory.” I kiss down her sternum, stopping to suck and nibble on each round breast on my way lower. “I have something you may want to add to that list.” My fingertips travel across the top of her thigh, dipping between her legs.

She gasps my name at the contact, rolling her hips eagerly to meet my touch. “You may be on to something.” Her voice comes out breathily. I rub a finger in circles around her slicking entrance, loving the way my touch affects her. “But I won’t know for sure until you show me.”

“Of course, sweetheart. You should have all the information.” I dip the finger inside her, only a knuckle deep, sliding back and forth, as I kiss lower on her body, tasting the curves of her soft stomach.

“Fuck, Luke, you’re going to make me lose control like that.”

“That’s the idea.” I dip the finger further on my next pass, still not giving her quite what she needs. “By the way, there is coffee on your nightstand. If you’d like to enjoy that, too.”

She looks over, smiling, “I thought I smelled coffee. Better not, though. Wouldn’t want to spill.”

I slide my finger free. “I could wait.”

“You better fucking not,” she scolds, grabbing my wrist and pulling it close to her again.

This time I fill her with my finger like I have something to prove. My lips leave their final kiss on her belly and drop down to her clit. She cries out the moment my mouth is on her.

“So responsive,” I mumble against her sex before my lips are on her again, sucking lightly as my tongue starts to swirl her sensitive bud.

Her hips rock on my finger, slick with her arousal now, so I add a second.

“Yes, please,” she cries.

The feel of her, hot and wet, soaking my fingers and lips is intoxicating, her pleasure the most delicious thing.

Looking up, I watch her, head thrown back as she moans in ecstasy. Curling my fingers, I pump harder, and her moans reach a peak at the top of each thrust.

I increase the sensation at her clit, more insistent with my tongue, lips sucking harder.

“Yes, that. That. *Yes.*” She hits her fist against the bed, punctuating each word. “Fuck, don’t you dare stop.”

She starts to pulse around my fingers, squeezing me tightly, and I keep up the motions exactly as she asked. She keens, making the most delicious sounds as she encourages me to continue. I could live and die between her legs, but it only takes another minute before she’s coming apart.

Once I’m sure she’s fully satisfied, I pull back, sitting up to take in her blissful face, flushed from the exertion of her orgasm.

“Well?” I ask.

“Hmm?” she asks, dazed.

“Is that an acceptable reason to wake you up?”

“Oh, fuck yes.”

~

Our place is buzzing with people by the time Allie and I arrive. As of today—the soft opening of the bar—Allie is closing *Turbine* at two rather than five, so we have a couple of hours of downtime to switch gears until the bar opens at four.

“This showed up this morning,” Devon says, handing me a wide, flat cardboard box. “It needs to be hooked up and hung in the front window, please.”

“Please? That’s new. Are you finally willing to admit you like me, Devon?” I give her my best smirk, even knowing it won’t have any effect.

She scoffs, “I like exactly four people. Allie, Sadie, Bea, and my massage therapist, Sam, who allows me an hour of

blissful silence each week.”

“She likes me too, but won’t admit it,” Rhett, a carpenter we hired for the remodel, interjects, brushing against her as he passes by with a case of pint glasses. He’s friends with our lead bartender and is helping out as extra staff tonight.

Devon glares at him in a way that would have most people cowering, but he only laughs and continues on his way.

“What is this, anyway?” I ask, taking the unmarked cardboard box from her.

“Your neon sign,” she says, annoyed. “What else goes in the front window?”

“I didn’t know there was a neon sign.”

Devon breathes out, annoyed, her perfect posture slipping for just a second. “He should have told you already. It’s a gift from Cam. Try to act surprised.”

“Alright,” I say, carrying the box with me to the back, where I hear Cam’s voice. He’s been in town for a few days, helping get things ready. Mainly running errands for Allie before she has a chance to freak out about things not being ready in time.

“Ooh, what you got there, boss?” he asks.

“I’m told it’s a gift from you.”

“Oh, fuck yes!” Cam grabs the box and leads me toward the front of the restaurant. Betty, who’s been following him around since he got here—which Cam assures me has nothing to do with him sneaking her human food—follows along too. “Took you guys so long to pick a name. It barely got here in time.”

We rolled around name ideas for the bar for weeks, and ultimately, the one we chose was Hector’s idea. A combination of Turbine Café and Voyeur Motors. Maybe not the most conventional name, but it does have a full kitchen. And most importantly, my Allie loved the idea.

Cam unpacks the sign carefully before plugging it in to show me the details. The neon buzzes to life. It’s custom with

two different names. We can switch it on in the morning to read *Turbine Café*, and at night, when the bar opens, it'll read *Voyeur Café*.

"This is awesome." I pat him on the shoulder. "Really great of you to do this for us."

"Tried to order it for you months ago, but you wouldn't give me a damn name. Guess it was never meant to be only yours, huh?" Cam asks, pushing fire engine red hair out of his eyes.

I shake my head. "No, never was."

Betty gets up from her place on the ground and meets Allie as she comes over, *ooing* and *aahing* over the sign before wrapping Cam in a big hug that he has to practically bend in half to participate in. "It's really happening!" she squeals, bouncing on her toes as he lets her go.

"It really is, sweetheart."

"Okay," she claps her hands loudly in front of her chest, holding them together as she doles out orders. "We have exactly one hour and forty-five minutes before we open, and there is still a big heap of goodies in the truck out back that needs to be unloaded, please."

"We're on it," I say, gathering up the cardboard trash.

"You got it, boss!" Cam agrees, wide mouth drawing into an exaggerated smile.

"Thank you!" She rises to her toes to kiss me and bounds away to take care of the next thing on her list. Watching Allie lock into her planning brain these past weeks has been amazing. She's loud, giggly, and happy, but she's not scattered. Everything has a place and a time. I had a plan for *Ernie's*, but it would have been nothing compared to what Allie and I have been able to pull off together.

"You did good, Cam. Thank you." I pat him on the back as we walk out to the truck.

"*You* did good, boss," Cam scoffs.

"Me? We're not even open yet."

He dismissively waves his hand. “Oh, that’ll be great. I’m not worried about that. I mean, Allie. It was touch and go there for a while, wasn’t sure if you were going to pull it off.”

“You told me you had a sixth sense that she was into me the first time you met her.” I follow him through the back door.

Cam’s laugh echoes around the back parking lot. “Oh, I made that shit up to encourage you. I could see it in your eyes that you were fucked up about her. Had to make sure you took a run at it.”

“She was already into me then, for the record.”

“Sure, she was,” Cam laughs, passing me a box down from the truck.

“Luke!” Allie calls out the back door of *Turbine*. Well—of *Voyeur Café*, now.

“Yes?” I ask, around the box I’m holding.

“Get in here. I want you to meet someone.” The door closes behind her before I have a chance to respond.

“I’ll finish this up,” Cam says, taking the box back from me. “You heard the lady. Get in there.”

I find her in Brian’s chair by the front window, Betty laying by her feet, and an older couple sitting in the two seats across from her. Lots of retirees in Palm Springs, but I don’t know these two.

“There you are,” Allie chimes. “This is Nora and Lou!”

Nora and Lou. The names sound familiar, and I realize there’s an old photograph of this woman in my desk drawer that I can finally return to its owners. I’d recognize that mischievous glint in her eyes anywhere. “Hi, son,” Lou says, extending a hand to me. “We’re the ones who used to own the place. I ran the diner here, and Nora had the bookstore on that side.”

“You knew that.” Allie bats at me playfully in the chest before indicating we should share the leather armchair. She

gets up just long enough for me to sit before leaning back into my lap.

“We heard there were big changes, and I told Lou we had to come see for ourselves,” Nora says, waving a hand toward the counter.

There have been big changes. Devon and Bea worked non-stop getting the place ready for our opening. The wall behind the bar, that used to be painted a crisp white, now boasts sunflower-yellow two-by-six tiles stacked in crisp lines up to the ceiling, brass sconces, and a set of taps. The counter itself is still white quartz, which was a battle I lost against Devon. I would have preferred concrete to match the floors, but she said that was, “Industrial, unnecessary, and incongruent with the mid-century modern flair of this space.”

There’s a second register at the bar, framed black and white photos of vintage bikes, including a blown-up version of the picture of Grandad that lives in my toolbox, and the fucking white pedestal tables are finally gone, replaced by sensible black ones with four legs. More hanging plants have been added around the glass wall and the windows to the outside. The sputnik lights and the massive starburst clock remain, but the black barstools have been replaced with walnut ones with back support.

The kitchen in the back also received a hefty facelift, now boasting a full chef’s set up.

“I tell people your story all the time,” Allie beams.

“That she does,” I nod. I found the original blueprints for the building while I was working on splitting the deed. They confirmed there was always a window, so people could see the work being done on their cars. But I tucked them away. The story brings Allie so much joy. No harm in her believing it. Still, I wonder why this couple lied.

“He’s so silly. He doesn’t believe it.” Allie squeezes my hand.

“Allie, can I borrow you for a minute,” Devon calls from behind the bar, voice firm in a statement, not a question.

“I’m sorry,” Allie apologizes to Nora and Lou. “I have to see what she needs, but I’ll be back.” Betty lifts her head and watches as Allie hurries away.

“Don’t worry, sweetie,” Nora says. “It’s a big day. Take care of what you need to.” Looking at Lou, she says, “I’m going to visit the little girl’s room,” and follows Allie toward the back of the restaurant.

As soon as they’re both out of earshot, I lean forward, bracing my forearms on my knees. “Lou, I have to ask,” he smiles, knowingly, before I have the question fully out. “Why the story about the window?”

“Nora and I didn’t always get along. She hated me for a long time.” He shakes his head, laughing to himself. “I came in one day, and she’d boarded up the windows from her side, still won’t tell me how she pulled it off by herself. She’s tall, but not that tall. Couldn’t have done it without a ladder, and I know she didn’t have one of those. The boards she used were nasty and splintered. Took me hours to get them all down.”

“How’d you get her to let you take them down?”

“Oh, she didn’t let me.” He smiles warmly, reminiscing.

“I broke in after she left that night. And the night after that, while I was gone, she put them up again. The next night, I threw the boards away a few streets over. She found new ones. Went back and forth like that for an entire week.”

I glance over to the curtains that Allie put up months ago, still hanging next to the glass wall, that she only used for a weekend. Mild in comparison.

“The final night I went in to take them down was New Year’s Eve, and I had a party to get to. Nora was waiting for me, and we had it out. She yelled and told me how I was a selfish prick, and I told her why she was a spoiled princess.” A sly grin tugs at the edge of his mouth briefly. “Well, we worked it out. I didn’t make it to the party. She didn’t make it to whatever plans she had. The boards never went back up, and she’s been mine ever since. I told her she could build an

entire wall to block the windows, and I'd just put in new ones."

"Well, that explains it," I chuckle, and I can't help but smile.

Lou nods. "That's where it comes from. The windows were already there, but if they weren't, I would have had them put in the moment I laid eyes on that woman. I was never going to miss a second of Nora."

CHAPTER 34

Allie

“Celebrate today. Big things, little things. You know how to throw a party better than anyone. Take advantage of that fiery center-of-attention energy.” -*Allie’s horoscope, August 1st*

“Heels may have been a poor choice,” I say, brushing my hands over the ruffled hem of my short dress and assessing my look in my office mirror. I look hot as fuck in tan, chunky heels and a fitted yellow cocktail dress with a sweetheart neckline, but I’m about to be on my feet behind a bar for eight to ten hours.

Luke stands behind me, hands coming around my waist. “I do like how easy it is to kiss you when you’re up here,” he says, dropping a soft kiss on my lips. “But I put a pair of your Vans in the truck, in case you change your mind.”

“I knew I liked you,” I smile up at him. He’s dressed up too, in his own way. His hair is combed back, beard freshly trimmed, and he has on dark wash jeans, and a dark gray button up shirt. He still smells like steel and soap, though—just the way I like him.

Devon opens the office door, statuesque in a navy column dress, nude matte lip, and platinum hair smoothed back into a low bun. Her brows are defined in their usual dark espresso color, as if to say, *Yeah, I bleach my hair. Mind your business.* “You two planning to make an appearance?”

“We still have three minutes,” Luke says. “You can trust me to get her out there on time.”

“Huh.” Devon’s blue eyes turn thoughtful for a flash of a second as she tilts her head to the side. “I do trust you. Didn’t see that coming.” And then her face is back to its usual mix of

RBF and otherworldly beauty, and she's on her way back out my office door.

"You know, Lucas Pine, I'm really happy you came to Palm Springs and stole my dream, because now I'm living a new one with you, and it's better than I could have imagined."

"I love you," he whispers in my ear.

"I love you too," I whisper back.

Then he pinches my ass cheek. "But I can't let you be late. Let's get out there."

He follows me, and we take up a place behind the bar, the place already filling with friends and family.

Marisol is here with all three of her kids. I promoted her to *Turbine's* GM. First, because she deserved it, and second, because Luke insisted I loosen the reins a bit saying, "No one needs Allie Walker working twenty hours a day, every day." *Whatever.* We even hired two more baristas, so I don't have to open anymore. Although, I'll miss my not-so-solo morning dance parties.

Daisy is in her usual spot, wearing a dress the exact shade of her pink hair, and she has a handsome older gentleman on her arm she's never brought in before. We share a conspiratorial smile.

Bea's sitting at the bar, wearing an orange striped dress that has to be vintage, more jewelry than I could pull off, and sipping on a honey whiskey cocktail from Luke's custom menu. Turns out, he knows what the fuck he's doing behind a bar, and those flexing forearms look just as good with a drink shaker as they do with a wrench.

Bea, Devon, and Skye have been here every day this week after hustling to pull the design together to turn *Turbine's* space into *Voyeur Café* in record time. Devon even let me pay her for once, saying that Luke doesn't get the best friend discount. *Yet.*

Hector and Brian sit on the barstools closest to Luke and me, both looking extra dapper for the occasion.

“Can I get a Cookie Explosion?” Hector asks, teasingly ordering the coffee drink I hate and will never escape.

“Absolutely not.” My hands go to my hips, emphasizing my authority. “The blenders are busy making margaritas. Would you like one of those?”

Brian holds up the cocktail menu, adjusting his black-framed glasses as he studies each drink intensely.

“He’s picking out the only thing he’ll ever order here, so don’t rush him.” Hector pats Brian on the shoulder.

“I appreciate a man who knows what he likes,” Luke says.

I roll my eyes. “One of these days, I’ll get you away from black coffee.”

“I drink Americanos now. It’s an entirely different experience,” He scoffs.

Cam drapes himself casually into the seat next to Hector, spinning the stool around backwards so he can rest his arm and chest on the backrest. “I want one of those Cookie Explosion things, too. That sounded good.”

Luke puts a draught beer down in front of him. “You’ll drink this.”

“Sure, but I’m having a Cookie Explosion for breakfast.”

“Fine by me. I won’t be here,” I laugh, shifting my weight between my feet.

“You want me to get your Vans?” Luke whispers in my ear.

“Not yet.” I smile up at him.

Cam pauses the swiveling of his barstool, staring slack-jawed at the front door. “Which one of your friends has pink hair?”

“Huh?” Looking up to see who he’s talking about, I find Sadie standing in the doorway. Her hair is indeed pink, at least at the ends and it’s a good eight inches shorter than it was last time I saw her.

“Holy shit!” I yell when I see the giant roller bags in her hands. I push out from behind the bar and run to her at the door, unconcerned with the bar full of people whose attention I’m gathering. Pulling her in for a tight hug, I ask, “Is that a fucking break-up haircut, Sadie Winslow? Did you finally leave that motherfucker?”

She laughs against my hair because I still haven’t released her from the hug. “Yeah. I left that motherfucker.”

I squeal, picking her up and spinning her around. “Are you moving in with us, too?”

“I am. Worked it out with Devon, but we thought it’d be fun to surprise you.” She’s smiling brighter than I’ve seen in years. “Plus, I heard you may be moving in with the bartender over there who won’t stop looking at your ass.”

Turning around confirms that Luke is standing behind the bar, staring at my ass. I blush and blow him a kiss. Sadie and I start making our way back to my office with her suitcases, but Cam intercepts us. “I got these. You two grab a drink. I heard the Cookie Explosion is top-notch.”

“Cam, don’t you fucking dare,” I try to scold him, but he’s gone with the suitcases before I finish my sentence.

I get Sadie settled in on a barstool right next to Bea.

When I cross back behind the bar to get back to work, I hear Bea saying to Sadie, “Look at these angels. Aren’t you glad you they worked it out?”

“I like to think I helped. If I hadn’t encouraged her to text him while we were at the pool that day—”

“Sadie!” I gasp. “You remember that part? I thought we were both blacked out.”

“Oh no, just you,” she laughs, brightly. “I thought you should apologize, and Devon didn’t, so I waited until she went to bathroom and brought it up again.”

Luke places a tiki drink, that’s definitely not on the menu, in front of Sadie. “She told me these were what caused it. Now I know I have you to thank.”

Putting my hands on my hips, my mouth drops open in offense, “You pretended you hadn’t seen the texts when I showed you!”

“Oh, I didn’t realize what you’d actually written,” Sadie laughs.

“What did she write?” Bea asks, hazel eyes sparking with excitement.

Luke scrolls immediately to a screenshot of the text conversation that only recently stopped making my stomach clench with embarrassment and passes his phone to Bea.

I can’t help the exasperated expression I give Luke. “You just have a screenshot ready to go?”

“It was the first time you told me you loved me. Of course, I saved it.”

“I said I loved Betty.”

“Sure, sure.” He pats me patronizingly on top of the head.

“Well, those were magnificent,” Bea says, passing Luke’s phone back to him. “I sent myself the photo, so we can blow it up. There’s a spot on the wall right over—”

“You wouldn’t dare,” I laugh, unable to tell if she’s serious, since it would actually be hilarious.

Before I’m able to find out, another familiar voice calls my name. Skye and her mom are standing by the front door, spitting images of brown-eyed, dark-ringed beauty.

Darlene’s eyes are wide, scanning every inch of the bar with an awed smile on her face. She’s completely recovered from the accident, not a bruise or scar in sight. I wave at Luke to grab his attention and we weave our way over to his family.

“Lucas,” his mom’s voice comes out in an impressed breath. “Honey, this is amazing.”

“Thanks, Mom. It’s really Allie’s doing.”

“No, it’s not.” I draw his mom into a tight hug. “He’s done so much.”

“It’s the two of you together,” she says, moving to wrap her son in a maternal hug.

“Yeah, Luke wouldn’t have pulled this off alone,” Skye laughs.

“Dad is so proud of you,” Darlene says.

“Communing with the dead now, Mom?” Luke laughs.

“Oh, hush.” She waves a hand in Luke’s face. “He wanted you to run a bar, take care of me, take care of Skye, but more than that, he wanted you to have love.” She steps back, looking between Luke and me. “And just look at you two.”

Walking around our new bar, she gushes over him, over me, and over the building. This is the first time she’s been here, and I can practically feel the pride rolling off his chest at his mother’s approval. He takes her for a long tour, showing her every inch of the building, including the *Voyeur Motors* side.

After their tour, Luke finds me, and we move back behind the bar and work side by side as the minutes disappear into hours. Our favorite people filter in and out, sampling every item on the menu we’ve lovingly pulled together. The music gradually gets louder along with the laughter and conversations, and before long my cheeks are sore from smiling.

Luke reaches around me far more often than necessary, and I rub my ass against his dick every chance I get. “If you keep doing that, you’re going to miss the rest of your party, Ms. Walker,” he whispers, squeezing my ass cheek.

“I’ve worked with couples before,” Rhett says, reaching for the top-shelf whiskey, “but you two are next level.”

“That’s because she’s not just my girlfriend,” Luke says, pulling my back flush against his chest and wrapping his arm tight around my waist. “This is the woman who’s occupied every moment of my thoughts since I first saw her.”

My cheeks heat as I recognize the words, realizing he’s going to repeat the entire speech he gave me in the bed of his truck after the races.

“I work early every morning and stay late every night, just so I don’t miss a glimpse of her electric smile or her ponytail bobbing when she laughs. I want her as close to me as possible. Her presence in my life has turned every plan I’ve ever made upside down. Watching her exist is the greatest joy I’ve known.”

Rhett passes us each a shot of whiskey and raises one of his own high in a toast. “May we all be so lucky.”



“I heard an interesting rumor tonight,” I say to Luke, as he holds open the back door of *Voyeur Café* for me. It’s two-thirty in the morning, and our bartenders just kicked us out, saying it’s easier to close down if your boss isn’t up your ass.

“You did?” Luke asks.

“Yeah, apparently, we’re moving in together. Have you heard that one?”

“I may have been the one who started it,” he says, the overhead lights of the parking lot highlighting his growing smirk.

“Were you planning to ask me about it?”

“Eventually.” He squeezes my hand.

We reach his truck, and a rustling noise sounds from the nearby bushes.

“Do you hear that?” I whisper.

“Hear what?” he whispers back.

I wave him over, inching closer, waiting for the sounds to happen again. When it does, it’s accompanied by a few quiet yips. I look over at Luke, raising my brows in question. He nods to confirm he heard it, too.

The rustling gets louder, and the yipping picks up, and a little pink nose emerges from the bushes, followed by a tangle of brown fur. *It’s a puppy.* I suppress a squeal and sit down on

the warm asphalt, forgetting the dress I bought especially for today's occasion.

“Sweetheart,” Luke whispers at me, “Be careful.”

Be careful? Of what? The puppy? Silly man. I sit very still but try speaking sweetly to the tiny dog. “Hi, little one. Are you scared? You're safe now. You found us.”

The puppy inches closer to me, then freezes in place again. I look up at Luke making a silent, ‘*Look how fucking cute this sweet baby angel is*’ face.

Luke kneels next to me, dropping a handful of treats in my lap. *Where did those come from? Whatever, I don't care.* I hold one out, flat-handed to the puppy. “You're okay. You can eat this. I'll take care of you.”

The brown fur-baby inches closer, finally getting the courage to eat the treat out of my hand, its little tongue lapping up all the crumbs. “Poor baby. Are you hungry?” It comes closer, then scrambles into my lap and starts nosing at the pile of treats there. “Oh, you are.” I wrap a protective arm around the little baby, scratching behind its ears, just like Betty likes.

“Hey, Luke?” I ask him quietly.

“Yeah, sweetheart?” His warm hand rubs soothingly across my back.

“Did you hear the rumor that me and my new dog are both moving in with you?”

~

The End

EPILOGUE

One Year Later

Gravel crunches under my truck tires as I turn on to what Allie now calls ‘our road.’ Both dogs pop up to standing in the back seat, shifting their weight around in anticipation of being released to run free.

My girl snuggles into my side from her spot in the middle of the bench seat. “Tonight’s sunset is going to be so good,” she giggles. “Thank you for agreeing to an impromptu picnic.”

Pulling her tighter against me with the arm I have draped across her shoulders, I kiss her temple. “Of course. We were overdue for a night off.” The thing about falling in love and then starting a business with another person who never takes time off of work is that if I don’t take time off, neither will she. Mixing drinks back-to-back with my girlfriend—my partner—is a unique joy I would have never predicted, but it can’t replace actual rest.

An excited whine comes from the back seat.

“She knows it’s her ‘gotcha’ day,” Allie says swiveling her head to look back, “Don’t you, sweet girl? My pasta girl.”

WHATS NEXT?

You've just finished *Voyeur Café*, book one in *Heartbeats in the Heat*, a series of interconnected standalone spicy romantic comedies. Book two will revolve around Devon and Rhett, and it will be releasing in late Spring 2024.

The best way to make sure you have all the details for the next release is to sign up for my newsletter at JasmineGraceAuthor.com. I'll send out the title, cover, blurb, release date, and all of the other details as they become available.

Thank you for reading book one! I hope to see you again for book two!

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

S

Thank *you* for reading my debut novel. You've changed my life by giving me a chance, and I am so grateful you did.

Thank you to every single person I sent the first two chapters of *Voyeur Café* to in the summer of '23. Your thoughts, critiques, and encouragements helped shape this story into what you now hold in your hands.

Gary, I'm already crying and all I've written is your name. I know you keep saying I could have done this without you, and you're right. I can do anything, but any love story I would have written without you by my side would have been a shadow of what we've accomplished together. Thank you for cooking me hundreds of dinners, bringing me mini charcuterie snacks when I was up late writing, drawing my beautiful cover, creating our Station 19 floorplan, reading every word of *Voyeur Café* multiple times over, being my motorcycle mechanic expert, learning InDesign with me and helping me figure out how to send a newsletter. I never once doubted I'd get to the finish line, because I knew you were supporting me.

The rest of these are listed in alphabetical order, because ranking them any other way feels icky.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jasmine Grace



Jasmine Grace writes sweet and spicy escapist love stories filled with all her favorite things and none of her pet-peeves. You will find Forced Proximity and He Falls First tropes in most of her stories, and you will not find a third act break-up or a miscommunication trope in any of them.

She lives in Denver, Colorado with her husband, Gary, stepdaughter Sophia, and their two dogs, Banjo and Shadow.

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