



Seaside Hideaway

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Description: When Hollywood A-lister Piper Emerson inherits her beloved grandmother's beach house, she sees it as more than just a property. It's her chance to escape the relentless spotlight and honor a cherished memory.

At 30, Piper's determined to renovate the house into her personal hideaway, a place she can go and get away from the craziness of her life in Los Angeles. But her plans are immediately complicated by Audrey Sutton, her captivating 49-year-old neighbor and landscaper who's been faithfully tending the property's garden since her grandmother passed away.

Despite their age gap and different worlds, the attraction between Piper and Audrey is immediate and undeniable. Too bad Audrey has no idea she's falling for one of Hollywood's hottest stars – and Piper wants to keep it that way.

But when steamy nights lead to vulnerable mornings, both women must decide what they're willing to risk for love. Can Piper blend her high-profile life with Audrey's down-to-earth world? And can Audrey open her heart to a woman who's just passing through?

With nearly two decades between them and worlds apart, Piper and Audrey must decide if they can turn this summer renovation into a love built to last.

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Piper Emerson leaned back in her plush leather seat as the wheels of her private jet touched down on the sun-baked tarmac of LAX, a gentle bump signaling their arrival. As the aircraft decelerated, the late afternoon sunlight poured through her window, bathing the cabin in a rich, amber glow.

“Welcome back to Los Angeles, Ms. Emerson,” the pilot’s voice crackled over the intercom.

Piper glanced at Natalie, who sat across from her, already tapping away on her phone. “Glad to be home?”

Natalie looked up, a small smile playing on her lips. “So glad.”

As the jet taxied to its private hangar, Piper felt a mix of relief and anticipation wash over her. The past few months had been a whirlwind of filming on location and traveling across Europe for promotional appearances. She loved her work, but the constant travel and pressure had started to wear on her. She always tried to catch herself before she could complain, even to Natalie, because it wasn’t that long ago that she was dreaming of having a schedule as insane as the last few months had been.

The plane came to a stop, and James, one of her security team members, was already on his feet. Piper gathered her things, slipping on her oversized sunglasses - a habit born from years of dodging paparazzi.

“Ready?” Natalie asked, standing and smoothing out her blazer.

Piper nodded, following her friend and chief of security towards the exit. The blast of hot July air hit her as soon as the door opened. As she descended the steps with Ryan, the third member of her security detail, ahead of her, Piper could already feel herself beginning to relax. If the traffic wasn’t awful, she’d be home in no time, where she could focus on something other than her next scene or interview.

Inside the private terminal, Piper was greeted by the familiar faces of the VIP staff. The air conditioning washed over her, a welcome respite from the sweltering heat outside.

“Welcome back, Ms. Emerson,” said a cheerful blonde woman behind the counter. “How was your flight?”

Piper smiled, genuinely pleased to see her. “Thanks, Melissa. It was smooth sailing all the way. How’ve you been?”

As Melissa chatted about her recent vacation, Piper could see Ryan looking fidgety out of the corner of her eye. Piper knew her security team would prefer to whisk her in and out of places, but she never wanted to be above talking to staff or fans, and she tried her best to remember as many names as possible.

“Your car is ready whenever you are, Ms. Emerson,” another staff member informed her, handing over some paperwork.

Piper nodded, signing where indicated. “Thanks, Tom. It’s good to be back.”

As she made her way towards the exit, Natalie fell into step beside her. “Ready for the gauntlet?”

Piper took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders. “As I’ll ever be.”

The moment the doors slid open, a barrage of flashes erupted. A group of paparazzi had somehow gotten wind of her arrival. Their rapid-fire clicks filled the air as Piper stepped out into the fading sunlight.

“Piper! Over here!”

“How was Europe, Piper?”

“Any comments on the rumors about your affair with Evelyn Coleman?”

The questions were always the same, and Piper lifted her hand in a brief wave to the fans she saw amongst the photographers, her practiced smile firmly in place. She was so tempted to stop and give that lost photographer a piece of her mind, but she kept going, knowing that if she denied those rumors, she’d only be adding fuel to the fire. It was best just to ignore it.

Piper could feel James and Ryan flanking her, their presence a comforting barrier between her and the cameras as they kept moving.

Natalie’s voice was low and steady beside her. “Car’s right there. Ten steps.”

Piper kept her pace measured, neither rushing nor dawdling. She’d learned long ago that sprinting to the car only made for more dramatic photos. Instead, she maintained her composure, focusing on the sleek black SUV ahead.

As they reached the vehicle, James smoothly opened the door. Piper slid inside, the tinted windows instantly muffling the shouts and camera clicks. She let out a long breath as Natalie settled in beside her.

Piper watched through the tinted windows as James and Ryan loaded the bags into the trunk. Piper noticed how they seamlessly blended their tasks, keeping a watchful eye on their surroundings while handling the luggage. It was a dance they'd perfected over the years, and Piper felt a surge of gratitude for their dedication.

As the last of their luggage was added to the trunk, Piper caught sight of a photographer trying to sneak closer for a better shot. Before she could even tense up, Ryan smoothly intercepted, his body blocking the camera's view.

Piper never took for granted how lucky she was to have the three of them. They were some of the best in the business, but she could also relax with them over a few beers, and even though she was technically their boss, Piper considered the three of them friends.

Natalie glanced at her as James and Ryan hopped in the SUV. "You okay?"

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Piper managed a small smile. “Yeah, just ready to get out of here.”

As the SUV pulled away, Piper leaned her head against the cool glass of the window. The flashes of cameras faded into the distance.

“God, it feels good to be back,” Piper sighed, sinking deeper into the leather seat.

Natalie looked up from her phone, a small smile playing on her lips. “I bet. You’ve been running non-stop for more than four months now.”

“Feels like four years,” Piper said. “Don’t get me wrong. Filming in England and Wales was incredible. Those castle locations were straight out of a fairy tale, but I’m glad to be back home.”

“Remember that tiny pub in Cardiff?” Natalie’s eyes glistened with amusement. “I thought James was going to hit his head on every beam.”

Piper laughed softly as she gazed out the window.

“The press tour was something else, though,” Piper said. “Paris, Rome, Berlin... It all started to blur together after a while.”

Natalie nodded, her expression softening. “You handled it like a pro, Piper, but I could tell it was wearing on you towards the end.”

Piper turned to her friend, gratitude welling up inside her. “I couldn’t have done it without you, Nat. I think it all the time, but I don’t say it enough. It’s not just about

the security. You know I trust you when it comes to that, but I'd be lost with your friendship. You know that, right?"

"Don't go getting sappy on me now," Natalie teased, but Piper could see the affection in her eyes.

"I mean it," Piper insisted.

Natalie reached over and gave Piper's hand a squeeze. "Well, the feeling's mutual. Now, what's the game plan for your well-deserved break?"

"Absolutely nothing for the next week, and that means an equally well-deserved break for you guys. But for the first time in I don't know how long, my schedule is blissfully empty. No scripts to read, no photoshoots, no interviews. Just me, some takeout, and maybe a Netflix binge or two."

"Sounds perfect," Natalie grinned. "And then we'll head to Morro Bay next week?"

Piper's gaze drifted back to the window, her mind wandering to her grandmother's beach house. She should have felt a surge of excitement at the prospect of finally tackling the renovation, but instead, a heavy weight settled in her chest.

"You know," she said, "I keep telling myself I should be thrilled about getting started on it. But every time I think about it, I just feel... guilty."

Natalie turned to her, concern etched on her face. "Guilty? Why?"

Piper sighed, running a hand through her hair. "It's been two years since she passed away. Two years, and I'm only just now getting around to fixing up her home. And before that? I barely visited her in the last couple of years of her life. I was always too busy."

“I know the renovation needs to happen,” she continued. “If I leave it much longer, it’ll probably need even more work. And I’ve started daydreaming about having it as a nice getaway from LA. But it feels... I don’t know, selfish somehow.”

Natalie reached out, giving Piper’s arm a gentle squeeze. “Your grandmother would want you to enjoy that house, Piper. You know that, right? That’s exactly why she left it to you and not your parents. She wanted you to have it.”

Piper nodded, but the guilt still gnawed at her. “I know. It’s just... I can’t help thinking about all the times I should have been there. All the memories we could have made if I hadn’t been so caught up in the constant need to further my career.”

She turned back to the window, watching the familiar streets of Los Angeles go by.

“I guess I’m just worried about facing all of that when I get there,” Piper admitted. “It’s not just about picking out new paint colors or updating the kitchen. It’s about confronting everything I let slip away.”

The SUV pulled up to the gated entrance of Piper’s Hollywood Hills home. As the gates swung open, she felt a wave of relief wash over her. The winding driveway, lined with perfectly manicured hedges and palm trees, led to the sprawling modern mansion she called home.

As Piper stepped out of the car, the hot evening air carried the faint scent of flowers from her garden.

Inside, Piper kicked off her shoes, the marble floor cool beneath her feet. The open-plan living area stretched out before her, and she couldn’t wait to wake up in the morning in her own home.

Piper made her way to the kitchen, her fingers trailing along the smooth quartz

countertop. She opened the fridge, pleasantly surprised to find it stocked with her favorite foods and beverages. She'd have to call her manager and thank her for thinking ahead. She returned to the foyer just as James and Ryan entered, carrying her luggage.

“Where would you like these, Ms. Emerson?” James asked.

“Just leave them here for now,” Piper replied, stifling a yawn. “I’ll deal with them tomorrow.”

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Natalie appeared in the doorway, her eyes scanning the room out of habit. “Everything looks as secure as we left it.”

“Good.” Piper nodded, a genuine smile spreading across her face. “Thank you all for everything. Go and enjoy your break. I’ll see you next week.”

James and Ryan showed themselves out while Natalie pulled her into a hug.

“Call me if you want to do anything during the week,” Natalie said as she met her eyes. “But I’d completely understand if you’re sick of me by now.”

“Never,” Piper said with a smile. “Give me two or three days to recover and unwind? What about dinner Thursday night? I’ve been craving my grandmother’s eggplant parmesan.”

“I’d love to. Just send me a message to confirm, and I’ll be here.”

Piper walked Natalie out and watched her slide into the passenger seat. The SUV pulled away, and for the first time in months, Piper was truly alone.

Piper decided to leave the unpacking for later. She was tired, but not quite ready for sleep yet. Stepping outside, she made her way to the edge of the pool, gazing out at the sprawling view of Los Angeles before her.

The city lights twinkled in the distance, and Piper took a deep breath. It felt good to be back home, and it wasn’t until she’d stepped off her plane that she realized just how exhausted she was, both mentally and physically.

She stared out at the skyline, and Piper couldn't help but reflect on how far she had come. Nine years ago, when she had left her grandmother's house in Morro Bay to pursue her acting dreams in Los Angeles, she never could have imagined the path her life would take.

Back then, she had been a wide-eyed 21-year-old, full of ambition and determination, but also full of uncertainty. The decision to leave the safety and comfort of her grandmother's home had been a daunting one, but Piper had known in her heart that she needed to take a chance.

And she had achieved so much, far beyond what she had ever dreamed possible. But the part that Piper was most proud of was the fact that she had done it all while being true to herself.

Not once had Piper hidden who she was. From the moment she had arrived in Los Angeles, she had been an out and proud lesbian. It hadn't always been easy, and she was certain that she'd missed out on roles because of that decision, but it wasn't long before she proved that her acting skills were far more interesting than her sexuality.

Piper's thoughts drifted to her grandmother and a pang of grief tugged at her heart. It was her unwavering support and acceptance that had given Piper the courage to embrace her true self, even in the face of her parents' rejection. If it weren't for Lily, Piper knew she might not have had the strength to pursue her dreams and become the woman she was today.

A single tear slid down Piper's cheek as she wished, not for the first time, that she could have had just one more day with her grandmother. Piper wished she could tell her how much she loved her, how much she had shaped her life for the better. Two years later, Piper still couldn't shake the regret of not spending more time with her, and she was starting to wonder if she ever would.

As the cool breeze ruffled her hair, Piper made a silent vow to honor her grandmother's memory by pouring her heart and soul into the renovation of the Morro Bay beach house. It would be a chance to reconnect with her roots, to find the peace and solace she had always felt in that special place. And perhaps, in the process, she could finally find the closure she had been searching for.

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Audrey pushed open the door of Haven Café, a welcome blast of cool air washing over her sun-warmed skin. The familiar chime of the bell above the door announced her arrival, and she breathed in the comforting scent of freshly brewed coffee and cinnamon rolls.

"Audrey! Your usual?" Lisa called from behind the counter.

"Yes, please," Audrey answered, making her way to her favorite corner booth. She sank into the cushioned seat with a sigh, feeling the ache in her muscles from the hours of landscaping work she'd already put in this morning.

Lisa appeared at the table, setting down a tall glass of iced coffee. "Rough morning?"

"Just hot," Audrey said, wrapping her hands around the cool glass. "Mrs. Johnson's new garden is coming along nicely, but I swear that woman changes her mind every five minutes."

"Sounds like you've earned your lunch break," Lisa laughed. "I'll be back with your turkey club in two minutes."

As Lisa walked away, Audrey took a long sip of her coffee, savoring the taste and willing the caffeine to get her through the second half of her day. She leaned back, letting her eyes drift closed for a moment. The quiet hum of conversation and the

clink of dishes surrounded her as she thought about her next job. Thankfully, it was only a ten-minute drive away, and the owner of that house was much more laidback than Mrs. Johnson.

Opening her eyes, Audrey caught sight of her reflection in the window. Her black hair was pulled back in a messy ponytail, a few wayward strands clinging to her neck, damp with perspiration from the morning's labor. She looked tired, the faint lines around her green eyes more pronounced than usual, but there was a spark of satisfaction there too. Despite the challenges, she loved her work. The ache in her muscles and the dirt under her nails were signs of another job done. Her landscaping business was thriving, and with each garden she transformed, she felt more rooted in this coastal community she now called home.

Audrey sipped her coffee and let her mind wander. She thought about the garden she'd just left behind, envisioning how it would look once the roses bloomed. There was something deeply satisfying about coaxing life from the earth, about creating beauty where there was once only bare soil.

Her phone buzzed, taking her away from her thoughts. It was a text from her newest client, confirming their appointment for the following week. Audrey quickly typed out a response, grateful for the steady stream of work that had allowed her to rebuild her life here in Morro Bay.

Lisa appeared at her table, setting down a plate piled high with a turkey club sandwich and a side of crisp, golden fries. "Here you go."

"Thanks," Audrey said, her stomach rumbling as soon as she caught the scent of the toasted bread and fries.

A waitress took Audrey's plate, and Lisa slid into the booth across from Audrey, a warm smile on her face. "Sorry. We just got busy after you came in."

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Audrey finished her ice coffee before she shook her head. “I never expect to get a chance to talk to you when I come in here.”

“And that’s why I was thinking that we should try this new restaurant that just opened up. I thought maybe we could check it out together, grab some dinner. What do you say?”

“Today?”

Lisa nodded.

Audrey hesitated, her mind already jumping ahead to her evening plans. “I’d love to, but I’ve been meaning to work on my neighbor’s garden. It’s been neglected for a while now. I haven’t been over there in almost two weeks, and it’s starting to get messy.”

Lisa’s expression softened. “You’re still looking after Lily’s garden?”

Audrey nodded, a sad smile tugging at her lips. “I can’t just let it get overgrown. Lily loved that garden.”

“Do you think the house will ever be sold?”

Audrey shrugged, her gaze drifting out the window of Lisa’s cozy café. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen anyone come around, not even to check on the property. Lily never really talked about her family. I never asked what happened. But they must know about the house, or maybe they just don’t care,” she finished with a sigh.

Lisa reached across the table, giving Audrey's hand a comforting squeeze. "I'm sure whoever they are, they'd appreciate what you're doing."

Audrey met Lisa's gaze, a grateful smile on her face. "Thanks, Lisa. I just... I feel like I owe it to her, you know? After everything she did for me when I first moved here."

Lisa nodded, understanding in her eyes. "Of course. But don't forget to take care of yourself too, okay? The offer for dinner still stands, whenever you're free."

"Thanks. Maybe next week?"

"If it's next week, I'll be persuading you to do dinner and a movie."

"Another Jake Griffen action thriller, whatever," Audrey said with a flick of her wrist.

"It's a tradition at this point."

"Thankfully, there's always a woman to distract me from Jake Griffen's sweaty, chiseled body."

"And that's why you keep coming with me. Good luck with your afternoon project."

"Thanks."

Audrey watched Lisa walk away. She was so lucky to have a friend like Lisa. Audrey had spent a lot of time with Lily too, but it was always gardening or going for a walk on the beach. With Lisa, she got out of her comfort zone. Lisa always wanted to try new restaurants or go away for the weekend. Lisa even came to gay bars with Audrey when she was feeling particularly adventurous, back when she'd first moved to Morro Bay.

That was only four or five years ago, but it felt like a lifetime ago. Audrey couldn't even imagine going to Los Angeles or San Francisco for the weekend like they used to. She'd almost accepted that she wasn't going to be in a serious relationship again. Yes, the divorce had left her feeling bitter, but even as the years went by, and she found a new place to call home, she hadn't felt that need to put herself out there again and try to meet someone new. She didn't need to. She was happy just the way things were. Every once in a while, Lisa tried to set her up with a friend of a friend, but even Lisa might be ready to give up on her.

Audrey sighed, her thoughts drifting back to her neighbor's garden. She couldn't help but feel a pang of sadness as she thought about Lily. The older woman had been such a comforting presence in her life, always ready with a wise word or happy to just sit together on the deck and watch the sun set. Lily had been the first person to make Audrey feel truly welcome in Morro Bay, and even though it had been two years since she'd died, Audrey was missing her more with each passing month.

Audrey paid and got another iced coffee to bring with her to her next job. As she pushed open the door of the café, the warm California sun embraced her once again. She squinted against the brightness, her hand automatically reaching up to shield her eyes. The walk back to her truck was short, but Audrey found herself taking her time, her mind still lost in thought.

She climbed into the driver's seat, the hot leather sticking to the back of her thighs. The engine roared to life, and Audrey reached for her shades, sliding them on, ready to get back to work.

Piper picked Natalie up in the afternoon, more than ready to get on the road after having one of the most relaxing weeks in recent memory. As much as she enjoyed that alone time, she was ready to jump into this project. It had been taking up space in

her head for more than a year, and it was time to finally get started on it.

Even now, Piper still couldn't believe that her grandmother had bypassed her son and left Piper the house. Piper never doubted how much her grandmother had loved her, but if she had, the fact that her grandmother had taken her in when her own parents had thrown her out, would have told her everything she needed to know.

But still. It was a big deal for her grandmother to have changed her will, and Piper didn't have to speak to her father to know that he would have been pissed to have been completely left out of it.

And now, Piper had every intention of honoring that decision. She had plans to keep a lot of the house the same, to keep the things that reminded her of her grandmother the most, but with a fresh coat of paint and some updates, the beach house could be Piper's little hideaway when she needed to escape the madness of her life in the spotlight.

As Los Angeles faded in her rearview mirror, she merged onto US-101, the freeway carrying her inland through the San Fernando Valley, enjoying the freedom of driving without worrying about paparazzi spotting her in traffic which was a rare thing.

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The open road stretched before her, and Piper rolled down her window, letting the warm breeze tousle her hair. About halfway through the journey, Piper decided to take a detour, craving the scenic coastal route for the final stretch.

She turned to Natalie. “Can you call James and tell him I’m taking the scenic route?”

“Sure.”

As she wound her way west, the landscape transformed dramatically. Grassy hillsides yielded to rugged cliffs, and suddenly the vast expanse of the Pacific stretched out beside her, glistening in the sun. Natalie put on her favorite playlist for the rest the journey, and once again, it got Piper thinking how lucky she was to have Natalie. Piper felt so safe having her with her, but it was never in a stifling, overprotective way, and the fact that they’d developed an easy friendship that had strengthened over the years was an added bonus.

Piper wasn’t even sure that she needed to bring her whole security team, but Natalie pointed out that she’d more than likely need people helping her whether it was painting or bringing in new furniture or getting new floors. And anytime anyone from outside their well-insulated world needed to be involved, it was a risk, so Natalie convinced her that they might as well do the work, and while they were there, they could install a security system that would allow Piper to go on her own in the future.

It wasn’t until Piper approached Morro Bay, that a real wave of emotions washed over her. The quaint coastal town held so many memories, both cherished and painful. She hadn’t even made it back for her grandmother’s funeral, and the guilt of that alone still gnawed at her, nevermind all of the time they could have spent

together if Piper had made the effort to come out here, but she'd allowed the demands of her career to keep her away.

The beach house came into view, its weathered cedar shingles and wraparound porch the same as Piper remembered it.

Piper parked the car and sat for a moment, her hands gripping the steering wheel, while Natalie got out. A part of her longed to walk through that door and find Lily waiting, ready with a warm hug and a mug of chamomile tea. She could almost picture it, and the thought of it was enough to cause her eyes to water.

Taking a deep breath, Piper stepped out of the car. The salt-tinged breeze whipped through her hair as she made her way up the path flanked with flowers, a vibrant mix of pinks, purples, and yellows.

Ryan and James pulled up behind Piper's car, and Natalie was directing them as soon as they got out. "Full search of the house has to be done."

"Nat, it's fine," Piper said, sliding her hand into her pocket to pull out the key to the front door. "No one's going to have been here."

Natalie opened her mouth and closed it again. "Okay, we'll start out here and figure out where to put the security cameras."

"Thanks," Piper said.

Piper slid the key into the lock, her hands shaking a little as she turned it. The door swung open, and the familiar scent of her grandmother's home, a mix of lavender, old books, and the faint saltiness of the ocean breeze surrounded her.

She stepped inside, her footsteps echoing on the hardwood floors. The living room

was just as she remembered it: cozy and inviting, with plush couches and bookshelves filled with well-loved novels. Memories of countless afternoons spent curled up with a book, listening to her grandmother's stories, filled her mind, and they were so real, that Piper almost couldn't believe that her grandmother really wasn't here.

But the stillness served as a stark reminder of her loss.

Piper made her way through the house, pausing in the doorway of her grandmother's bedroom, a lump forming in her throat. The room still held Lily's essence, from the soft pastel colors to the vintage furniture she had lovingly collected over the years.

Piper found herself drawn to the kitchen. The large windows overlooking the garden allowed sunlight to stream in, casting a warm glow on the white cabinets. As she approached the window, something caught her eye.

At first, Piper thought she was seeing things, but as she blinked and looked again, there was no mistaking it. A dark-haired woman was working in the garden, her back turned to the house as she tended to the flowers.

Piper's brow furrowed in confusion. Who could be in her grandmother's garden?

Curiosity getting the better of her, Piper made her way to the back door and stepped outside.

As Piper approached the woman, she called out, "Excuse me, what are you doing here?"

The woman stood up from her crouched position, brushing dirt from her hands onto her jeans. As she turned, Piper was immediately taken aback.

The woman had striking green eyes that seemed to sparkle in the sunlight, contrasting beautifully with her wavy black hair that fell just below her shoulders. Piper found herself momentarily speechless as she took in the sight of this gorgeous stranger standing in her grandmother's garden.

The woman offered a warm smile, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "I'm Audrey. I live next door."

Piper blinked, trying to regain her composure, and then a hint of a smile came to her lips. Usually, when people met her, they were starstruck, but this woman showed no signs of recognizing who Piper was. She couldn't even remember the last time that had happened.

But now, Piper was the one in danger of making a fool of herself if she didn't stop staring and start speaking.

Before Piper could find her words, Natalie appeared at her side, placing a protective hand on the small of Piper's back. "Everything okay out here?" Natalie asked, her eyes darting between Piper and the stranger.

Piper nodded, finally finding her voice. "Yeah, everything's fine. This is Audrey. She lives next door."

Piper fully took in the garden now, and she remembered the flowers lining the path on the way in, but she hadn't put two and two together. Of course, someone had to be doing all this. The place should have been completely overgrown after two years of neglect.

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“Hi,” Audrey offered.

“Hi,” Natalie answered, but her attention was back on Piper. “Ryan and James are somehow under the impression that there’s going to be things for them to smash. Walls to knock?” Natalie shook her head. “I’m just going to go back in and make sure they don’t do anything stupid before you give the go-ahead. I had no idea they would be this eager, or I wouldn’t have suggested bringing them.”

Piper smiled. “I’ll be there in a minute.” When her eyes landed on Audrey, Piper couldn’t quite decipher the expression on her face. It was almost a look of disappointment or disapproval. “Thank you,” Piper said. “For doing this. I had no idea.”

Audrey’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly as she held her gaze. “I couldn’t not do it, if you know what I mean. I couldn’t watch this garden waste away.” She ran a hand through her hair. “I didn’t catch your name.”

Piper felt a flush of embarrassment as she realized she hadn’t even introduced herself. It was so rare these days that she actually had to tell someone her name. Usually, people recognized her instantly, their eyes widening with a mix of awe and excitement. But Audrey was looking at her expectantly, waiting for a response.

“I’m Piper,” she said, extending her hand.

Audrey’s hand was warm as she shook Piper’s. “It’s nice to meet you, Piper.”

Piper found herself lingering, not wanting to end the conversation just yet. But she

could hear voices coming from inside the house, reminding her that she needed to get back and start making some decisions about what needed to be done.

“I should probably head inside,” Piper said reluctantly. “But it was really nice meeting you, Audrey.”

“Likewise,” Audrey said.

As Piper went back into the house, her mind lingered on Audrey. It had been a long time since Piper had felt drawn to someone so effortlessly. In her world, people were often more enamored with her celebrity status than with who she was as a person. But Audrey’s gaze had held no trace of recognition or awe, just a genuine warmth and a hint of something else Piper couldn’t quite decipher.

Maybe it was the way Audrey had looked at her, like she was just another person and not a famous actress, that had allowed Piper to let her guard down, even if only for a moment. It was refreshing to be seen as herself, without the weight of her public persona.

Piper shook her head, trying to refocus on the task at hand. With a deep breath, she pushed aside the distracting thoughts of Audrey’s captivating smile and set her mind on the countless choices that lay ahead.

4

Audrey woke up to the loud sound of hammering and shouting coming from next door. This was the third day in a row that she’d woken up like this. It was the weekend, and any thoughts she’d had of sleeping in were gone as the beeping of a truck reversing grew more persistent the closer it got.

Glancing at the clock, she reluctantly got out of bed and after freshening up, went to

the kitchen in desperate need of a coffee to wake her up. The coffee maker sputtered as she poured herself a cup, the rich aroma doing little to ease her rising frustration. Leaning against the counter, she took a sip of coffee as she stared out at her garden, normally so quiet, now disrupted by the noise next door.

She sat down at the dining room table and opened her laptop, intent on managing her landscaping business today, but every time she tried to focus on sending invoices or responding to clients, another sharp crack or the clattering of equipment made her lose her train of thought. She took another sip of coffee before setting it down and running a hand through her hair.

Her mind drifted back to the other day, when she'd nearly fallen into the dirt at the sound of a voice behind her. A woman in her late-twenties was standing there, staring at her like she was thinking about calling the cops, and then another woman had appeared, more than likely her girlfriend, with a protective hand on her back, looking between the two of them. It had been such a strange interaction. Audrey hadn't expected anyone to ever be there. No sales signs had been put out in the last two years. No relatives had ever come by to look through Lily's things.

The only conclusion that Audrey could draw was that Piper and the other three people over there were flipping that house. It felt like they were working every hour of the day, probably working on a tight schedule, maybe needing the money for their next project. Lisa loved those house-flipping shows, and Audrey had seen a few episodes over the years. But that's what it looked like, even if Audrey had no idea how they'd bought the house. Maybe they knew a realtor in the area who could bring the deals directly to them. She didn't know, but she couldn't shake the image of Lily's cozy beach house being transformed into some empty, modern home, stripped of all its charm and put together solely for a quick profit.

Audrey returned her attention to her laptop, but the noise was relentless. Did they even take breaks? The constant sound of hammering or drilling made it nearly

impossible to concentrate. Every time she managed to focus on a task, a particularly loud crash or the whine of a power tool would jolt her out of her workflow.

She closed her laptop, knowing she'd have to get out of here and go to Lisa's café if she wanted to get any work done. Then another thought popped into her head. What kind of neighbors would she have? Audrey loved the retired couple on her left, and Lily had become such a good friend these last few years. If there was ever a problem, either of them would have come to Audrey for help and vice versa. But now? Audrey had no idea what to expect.

Audrey sighed, pushing back her chair and gathering her things, sliding her laptop into her bag. She made her way to her bedroom, rifling through her closet for something comfortable yet presentable. She settled on a pair of denim shorts that hit just above her knee and a light, flowy top in a soft shade of green that complemented her eyes.

Standing in front of the mirror, Audrey applied a light touch of makeup - just enough to feel put together but not overdone. A bit of mascara to accentuate her lashes, a swipe of tinted lip balm, and a dab of concealer to cover the slight shadows under her eyes from the early wake-up call.

As she slipped on her favorite pair of sandals, Audrey's stomach growled, reminding her that she hadn't eaten yet. Lisa's homemade cinnamon rolls were always tempting, but maybe she'd opt for something a bit healthier today. A veggie-packed omelet might be the better choice.

Grabbing her keys and sunglasses, Audrey headed out the door with her bag on her shoulder, looking forward to the peace and quiet of the café and the promise of a satisfying breakfast to start her day.

Audrey made her way to her truck, but then she spotted Piper in the front yard of the

beach house. Piper was balanced on a ladder, reaching up to clear debris from the gutters. Her tank top rode up slightly, revealing a sliver of tanned skin at her waist as she stretched to reach a particularly stubborn clump of leaves. Audrey found herself unable to look away, mesmerized by the fluid movements and the obvious strength in Piper's arms as she worked. Piper's brow was furrowed in concentration, completely absorbed in her task. Wisps of hair had escaped from her messy ponytail, framing her face in a way that made her look even more striking.

Audrey felt a flutter of attraction and quickly chastised herself. What was she doing? Yes, Piper was undeniably attractive, but she was clearly with someone.

Audrey tore her gaze away from Piper, a confusing mix of attraction and embarrassment flooding her senses. Her cheeks felt warm, and she quickly ducked into her truck, the leather seats cool against her flushed skin. Her fingers fumbled with the keys before she finally managed to start the engine.

As she pulled out of her driveway, Audrey caught a final glimpse of Piper in her rearview mirror. Her eyes lingered on the way her tank top clung to her body, before she forcibly wrenched her attention back to the road.

It had been months, maybe even years, since she'd caught herself looking at another woman like that. She felt a flush of embarrassment creep up her neck. What was she thinking? Piper was easily two decades younger than her.

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As she drove to the café, Audrey couldn't shake the unsettling feeling. Was this some sort of midlife crisis? The one thing she was sure of was, she would not be telling Lisa about this.

5

The sun dipped low on the horizon, painting the sky in a breathtaking array of oranges, pinks, and purples as Piper and Natalie sat on the new deck chairs, enjoying a glass of wine. The gentle breeze carried the distant crash of waves, a soothing rhythm that could almost lull Piper to sleep. She stretched her arms overhead, feeling the satisfying pull of tired muscles, a reminder of the week's hard work.

"I can't believe how much we got done," Piper said, turning her head to glance at Natalie. "The kitchen looks incredible with those new cabinets and all the appliances. Every room, no matter how little or how much we changed, turned out better than I'd imagined. I couldn't have done it without you and the guys."

Natalie smiled. "Your grandmother would be proud."

"I don't know," Piper said before taking another drink.

"She left you the house for a reason, and I doubt it was to turn it into a museum to honor her memory. It's yours now, and you've made it yours, while still keeping plenty of reminders of her. I honestly didn't think it'd work out as well as it has."

Piper's eyes drifted back to the sunset. "I wasn't sure either. I kept second-guessing every decision, worried I was erasing too much of her." She paused, taking another

sip of wine. “But you’re right. It feels like a perfect blend of her and me now.”

“And how are you feeling about staying here on your own?”

Piper could hear the concern in her friend’s voice. She turned to face Natalie fully, offering a reassuring smile. “I feel safe here, Nat. Really. The security system is top-notch, and no one knows I’m here. It’s just what I need right now.”

Natalie’s brow furrowed slightly, her protective instincts clearly at war with her desire to respect Piper’s wishes. “I know, it’s just... I’ve seen a lot of crazy things over the years with this job.”

“I appreciate that, more than you know. But this isn’t L.A. No one’s looking for me here. I’ll be fine.”

Natalie’s expression softened, though a hint of concern lingered in her eyes. “You’ll call if anything feels off? Even if it’s just a hunch?”

“Yes,” Piper said before a mischievous grin spread across her face. “Although the scariest thing I’ve encountered so far is that spider in the attic. Remember how James screamed?”

Natalie burst out laughing. “Oh god, I thought we were under attack! I’ve never seen him move so fast.”

The conversation flowed easily between them, punctuated by laughter and shared memories of the week’s renovation adventures. Ryan had kept the whole project moving because he was the only one with actual construction experience from helping his older brother build his house when he was a teenager. They’d had plenty of near misses and mistakes along the way, but Piper had never taken it too seriously.

As the last rays of sunlight dipped below the horizon, a comfortable silence fell between them.

Piper took a deep breath, savoring the peace that settled over her. For the first time in years, she felt truly at ease. The weight of constant scrutiny, the pressure of her public image – it all seemed to melt away here, replaced by the gentle lapping of waves hitting the shore.

“You know,” Piper said softly, her eyes still fixed on the darkening sky, “I think this is exactly what I needed. A place to just... be.”

Natalie hummed in agreement. “It suits you. I haven’t seen you this relaxed in a very long time.”

Piper nodded, a small smile playing at her lips. “I’m so glad we came up here.”

6

The sudden silence from next door was deafening. Audrey stood in the kitchen, her fingers hovering over the start button of the dishwasher. The clamor of hammers and drills that had filled the air for the past week was conspicuously absent. She had grown accustomed to the constant hum of activity from Lily’s old house, the sound of laughter drifting through the open windows as they worked.

Now, with the renovations seemingly complete, Audrey couldn’t help but feel a twinge of disappointment at the thought of not seeing Piper again. With a sigh, she pressed the button, and the dishwasher hummed to life. As she turned to wipe down the counters, a knock at the door took her away from her thoughts. She frowned, tossing the cloth aside as she made her way to the front door. It couldn’t be Lisa. She always texted before coming over in case Audrey was still out working.

Audrey opened the door, only to find Piper standing on her porch, a bottle of wine in hand and a hesitant smile on her face. The sight of her sent a flutter through Audrey's chest, a reaction she couldn't quite suppress.

Piper was dressed for the warm summer evening in a pair of denim shorts that showcased her tanned, toned legs. Her tank top, a soft shade of blue that perfectly complemented her eyes, hugged her curves in a way that made Audrey's mouth go dry. Today, Audrey noticed details she'd missed that day in the garden, the streaks of honey and caramel in her brown wavy hair and the delicate curve of Piper's collarbone.

"Hi," Piper said, her voice soft and almost apologetic. "I hope I'm not intruding. I just wanted to apologize for all the noise and disruption this last week."

Audrey blinked, momentarily caught off guard by Piper's unexpected appearance. She quickly composed herself, offering a warm smile. "Oh, no, not at all. Please, come in."

She stepped aside, gesturing for Piper to enter. As Piper passed by, Audrey caught a whiff of her subtle perfume, a light, floral scent that seemed to linger in the air.

"I brought this as a peace offering," Piper said, handing her the bottle of wine as they went into the kitchen.

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“Thank you. You didn’t have to” she replied, trying to keep her voice steady. “Why don’t we sit out on the deck and share it? It’s such a beautiful evening.”

“Sure. That sounds great.”

They made their way outside, Audrey acutely aware of Piper’s presence behind her. On the deck, Audrey busied herself with opening the wine and fetching glasses, grateful for the distraction.

As they settled into the comfortable chairs, the sun was just beginning to set. The sky was a stunning mix of orange and pink. Audrey poured the wine, the rich burgundy liquid splashing softly into the glasses. She handed one to Piper, their fingers brushing briefly in the exchange. The contact, however fleeting, sent a small jolt through Audrey’s system.

Audrey took a sip of wine, letting its smooth, rich flavor coat her tongue. She couldn’t help but be impressed. “This is delicious,” she said, nodding appreciatively. “You have excellent taste.”

Piper’s smiled as she brought her glass to her lips and took a sip. “It’s one of my favorites,” she said, her voice warm. “I’m glad you like it. I didn’t know what you’d prefer, but I figured you can’t go wrong with a good Cabernet.”

“Well, your instincts were spot on,” she replied, raising her glass in a small toast. “To good taste.”

Piper smiled, clinking her glass against Audrey’s. “To good taste,” she echoed, her

eyes meeting Audrey's over the rim of her glass.

Piper leaned back in her chair, her gaze drifting towards the setting sun. "It's so quiet now," she said softly. "I didn't realize how much I'd gotten used to all the noise."

Audrey nodded, watching Piper's profile in the fading light. "It does feel a bit strange," she admitted. "I kept expecting to hear hammering or sawing today."

Piper's gaze shifted from the sunset to Audrey, a hint of vulnerability in her eyes. "It's almost too quiet now," she admitted, her voice soft. "I found myself missing the company, actually. That's partly why I came over. I hope that's okay?"

The confession caught Audrey off guard. She took a sip of wine to hide her reaction, savoring the rich flavor as she gathered her thoughts. "Of course it's okay," she finally said, offering Piper a warm smile. "I'm glad you did."

"I wasn't sure if I'd be intruding," she confessed. "But after all the noise we put you through, I figured the least I could do was bring over some decent wine."

Audrey chuckled, raising her glass in a small salute. "Well, mission accomplished on that front." She took another drink. "So," she began, aiming for a casual tone, "Now that the renovations are done, what's next? Are you heading back to...?"

Piper took a thoughtful sip of her wine before answering. "Actually, I'm planning on staying for a few weeks," she said, her blue eyes meeting Audrey's. "In the long term, I want to use this place as a vacation home, but right now, I just need some time away from... Everything."

Audrey nodded, processing this information. Her mind raced with questions she wasn't quite bold enough to ask. What about Natalie, the woman who had been here during the renovations? Why had she left? Were they not together?

“That sounds nice,” Audrey said instead, keeping her tone light. “It’s a beautiful place to get away from it all.” It was exactly how Audrey had felt when she’d come here looking for a place to buy. It had felt so different from San Diego, and it was somewhere that she could see herself starting over.

Piper nodded, her expression softening. “It really is. I’m looking forward to just... Being here. No distractions, no obligations. The last week has been intense. Physically, but mentally too. It was a challenge trying to find the right balance with the renovations. I wanted to honor my grandmother’s memory, but also make the place my own.”

Audrey’s heart skipped a beat, her wine glass frozen midway to her lips. “I’m sorry, did you say your grandmother?” The words tumbled out before she could stop them, her mind reeling with the implications.

A warm flush crept up her neck as the pieces clicked into place. The resemblance was there, now that she looked closer. They had the same kind eyes, that infectious smile and warmth about them.

Her stomach twisted with a mixture of embarrassment and something else she couldn’t quite name. She’d been assuming Piper was just here to flip the property. But Lily’s granddaughter?

“I... I didn’t realize,” Audrey managed, her voice barely above a whisper.

“She left me the house when she passed away,” Piper said softly. “I’ve been meaning to come out here sooner. And well...” Piper took a drink. “I’ve been meaning to visit for a few years now. I’d always assumed that she’d be here.”

Audrey felt a sudden pang in her chest as she caught the subtle tremor in Piper’s voice. The sadness in those words was unmistakable, raw and vulnerable. She

watched as Piper's gaze drifted towards the horizon, her fingers absently tracing the rim of her wine glass.

Audrey set her glass down, her mind reeling. "I miss her too." She swallowed down the lump in her throat. "But I had no idea that's who you were."

"Sorry, I just assumed you knew. If you were close enough to her to keep taking care of her garden."

Audrey shook her head. "No. We talked about a lot of things over the years, but family? That was always a topic she seemed to avoid."

A shadow passed over Piper's face, a mixture of sadness and understanding. "That doesn't surprise me," she said softly. "Things got complicated with our family." Piper's eyes met Audrey's, a wistful smile playing on her lips. "I've been lucky to have friends that are just as good as family," she said, her voice warm with affection. "I don't know what I would have done without them this past week."

Audrey felt a sudden shift in her perspective, like puzzle pieces falling into place. The easy camaraderie she'd observed between Piper and Natalie when Audrey was coming home for a shower between jobs or when she'd finished her day and drove by Lily's house, the shared laughter and casual touches – it wasn't romantic intimacy. They were just friends. She took a sip of wine to hide the rush of emotions that threatened to show on her face.

"You are lucky," Audrey said, her voice slightly hoarse. She cleared her throat, trying to regain her composure. "It's important to have people like that in your life."

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“I should probably head back,” Piper said as she finished her wine a few moments later. “Thanks. That was a nice way to end the day. And the week, really.”

Audrey nodded. “It must have been tough. Being back here.”

“Hm,” Piper said as she stood up. “It was. It was hard, but I think I got some closure too. I don’t think I fully accepted that she was gone until I stepped into the house and felt how empty it was.”

Audrey stood up, her heart aching for Piper’s loss. Without thinking, she reached out and placed a gentle hand on Piper’s arm. “I’m so sorry,” she said softly. “I still forget sometimes,” she added with a bit of a smile. “I think I’ll bring over some cut flowers and... I don’t know how I can still forget.”

Piper’s eyes met Audrey’s, a mix of gratitude and vulnerability in her gaze. For a moment, they stood there, connected by the shared memory of a woman who had meant so much to them.

“Anyway,” Audrey continued. “Thank you for the wine and for coming over.” She led Piper back inside and towards the front door, pulling it open.

As Piper turned to leave, she paused and looked back at Audrey. “Goodnight, Audrey.”

“Goodnight.”

As Piper walked down the path towards Lily’s house, Audrey leaned against the

doorframe, watching her go. The evening had taken an unexpected turn, leaving her with more questions than answers, and Audrey tried to recall Lily telling her about her granddaughter, but Audrey was certain she would've remembered if she had.

7

Piper's arms trembled, her muscles burning as she struggled to hold the ceiling fan above her head. Sweat trickled down her spine, making her tank top cling uncomfortably to her skin. The ladder wobbled beneath her feet, each tiny movement sending a jolt of panic through her body.

"Come on," she hissed through clenched teeth, blowing a strand of hair out of her eyes. The wires tangled around her fingers, seeming to mock her efforts. Her heart pounded, a mixture of frustration and anxiety making her chest tight.

She should have done this while Ryan was here. He would have had this fan up in minutes, his experience making quick work of the installation, but she'd completely forgotten about it.

The creak of the door opening startled her, nearly causing her to lose her grip on the fan. Piper's stomach lurched as she teetered on the ladder. She glanced over her shoulder, her breath catching in her throat as she saw Audrey standing in the doorway, a bouquet of vibrant flowers in her hand.

"Need a hand?" Audrey asked.

Piper swallowed hard, her throat suddenly dry. "Yeah, actually, I could use some help," she admitted, trying to keep her voice steady despite the flutter in her chest.

"Sorry to just let myself in like that, but I saw you through the window."

“It’s okay,” she said with a smile. “This probably wasn’t my best idea.”

Piper’s mind flashed back to the previous evening, when she and Audrey had shared a bottle of wine on the deck. In the soft glow of the sunset, Audrey had looked breathtaking, her wavy black hair catching in the fading light.

A wave of self-consciousness washed over her as she became acutely aware of her sweaty, disheveled state. She watched, transfixed, as Audrey set the flowers down and made her way over to the ladder.

As Audrey climbed up the opposite side of the ladder, Piper’s senses went into overdrive. She could smell the faint scent of Audrey’s shampoo, feel the heat radiating from her body in the small space between them.

“Hold the fan steady while I connect these wires,” Audrey instructed.

Their hands touched as they both gripped the fan, and the connection sent a shiver down Piper’s spine. She glanced up at Audrey, their faces only inches apart. The proximity made Piper’s heart race, her breath coming in short bursts.

Audrey’s voice was steady, but her eyes betrayed a flicker of something deeper as she got to work.

“We’re almost there,” Audrey said. “Just a few more seconds.”

As Audrey connected the final wire, her fingers grazed Piper’s hand again, lingering a moment longer than necessary. Piper’s pulse quickened, and she could see a similar tension reflected in Audrey’s eyes. Once the fan was secure, they both lifted their heads at the same moment, their faces close enough that Piper could see every fleck of gold in Audrey’s green eyes, every subtle line etched by time and laughter. The air between them felt charged, and for the first time, Piper wondered if she wasn’t the

only one feeling something here.

“Thanks,” Piper managed to say, her voice a bit breathless.

“Anytime,” Audrey replied softly, her gaze holding Piper’s for a beat longer than necessary.

They carefully descended the ladder, but the tension lingered. “That wasn’t your first time.”

Audrey smiled. “No, it wasn’t. Growing up, I helped my dad a lot around the house.”

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“You brought flowers,” Piper said as her feet touched the ground. “Like you used to for my grandmother,” she added, a sudden wave of self-consciousness washing over her. Maybe she was imagining things. Maybe Audrey was straight, and what Piper thought she saw in her eyes was nothing more than the start of a new friendship.

Audrey nodded, a soft smile playing on her lips. “I did. Lily always loved fresh flowers in the house. I thought... Well, I thought you might appreciate them too.”

Piper’s heart fluttered at the thoughtful gesture. “Thank you.” She pushed a piece of hair behind her ear, wishing she wasn’t such a mess, because she wanted to offer Audrey a glass of wine.

Audrey’s eyes moved around the room, taking in the details, and her expression shifted to one of surprise. “You know,” she began, her tone thoughtful, “Before I knew you were Lily’s granddaughter, I’d assumed you’d be tearing this place apart and making it all modern. But this...” she gestured to the room, “This is not at all what I thought it would be like.”

Piper felt a mix of pride and nervousness at Audrey’s words. She’d put so much thought into preserving the essence of her grandmother’s home while still making it her own. “Really?” she asked, unable to keep the hint of eagerness from her voice. “What do you think?”

Audrey’s gaze softened as she continued to look around. “It’s beautiful,” she said sincerely. “You’ve managed to keep so much of Lily’s spirit here, but it’s different. More of you, I imagine.”

“Thank you,” she said softly. “I didn’t even touch her art studio. But every other room got some kind of a refresh.” Their eyes met again, and Piper felt that same electric charge from earlier. She took a deep breath, gathering her courage. “Do you want the tour?”

“I’d love to, but I’m meeting a friend of mine, and I’m already running late.”

Piper’s heart sank a little at Audrey’s words, but she quickly masked her disappointment with a smile. “Oh, of course. Sorry for keeping you,” she said, trying to keep her tone light. “But thanks again for your help with the fan. I don’t know how long I would’ve been up there struggling if you hadn’t come by.”

Audrey waved off the apology with a warm smile. “No need to apologize. I’m glad I could help.” She paused for a moment, her eyes meeting Piper’s once more. “I better get going.”

“Enjoy your evening,” Piper said as she walked with Audrey to the door.

“Thanks. You too.”

Piper watched as Audrey walked down the path. This was not good. Piper knew exactly what was going on here. Yes, Audrey was beautiful and thoughtful and exactly Piper’s type, but the fact that Audrey had no idea who she was, unless she was a talented actress in her own right, made her even more attractive than she already was.

Piper had always dated women in the business, because she couldn’t imagine being in a relationship with someone who’s friend might be a fan or who might unknowingly give away their location by posting something on social media. She’d always known that there were too many obstacles to overcome. Plus, she’d never met anyone outside of her own social circle who had caught her eye.

But Audrey was different. There was something about her that drew Piper in, a warmth and sincerity that she found utterly captivating. The way Audrey had looked at her, with those expressive green eyes, only made Piper want to spend more time with her. And the casual intimacy of their interactions, the way their hands had brushed, the tension that had crackled between them. It was intoxicating.

And Audrey had always treated her like a normal person. There hadn't been even a second where Audrey had looked at her with any kind of knowing, and Piper couldn't remember the last time that had happened. Even when she was traveling through Europe, she was recognized by hotel staff, by people on the street, and by locals who thought they'd find out what it's like to be a member of the paparazzi.

Closing the door, Piper turned to face the room, her gaze landing on the bouquet of flowers Audrey had brought. A soft smile played on her lips as she walked over and picked them up, inhaling their sweet scent.

As she arranged the flowers in a vase, Piper's mind drifted back to the moment on the ladder. The way Audrey's hands had brushed against hers. She couldn't shake the feeling that there was something more there. Not that it mattered. Piper wasn't staying long enough to even think about dating someone, and she already knew all of the reasons why it would never work with someone who wasn't as famous as she was or who at least had some experience with dating someone in the spotlight.

It wasn't going to happen, but that didn't mean Piper couldn't enjoy the feeling of falling for her new neighbor.

8

The dim lighting of the bar cast a warm glow over Audrey and Lisa as they settled into their seats, drinks in hand. The hum of conversation and the clink of glasses filled the air, but Audrey's mind was far from the present moment. She stared into her

glass, swirling the amber liquid absently.

“You’ve been quiet since we left the theater. What’s on your mind?”

Audrey looked up, meeting Lisa’s concerned gaze. She took a sip of her drink, the smooth burn of the whiskey grounding her. “What was the name of that actress?”

“Piper Emerson,” Lisa replied, her brow furrowing slightly. “I’m surprised you don’t know her. She’s one of the few women I can think of who’s been out since she started her career.”

Piper Emerson. The woman who had dominated her scenes, running through the jungle, her toned abdomen and arms still clear in Audrey’s mind. The same woman who had been occupying her thoughts for entirely different reasons.

Audrey’s grip tightened on her glass. How could she not have recognized Piper? And what must Piper think of her? That she lived under a rock?

“I... I had no idea,” Audrey managed, her voice barely above a whisper. “I don’t really keep up with celebrities.” Her mind raced, replaying every interaction she’d had with Piper. It all took on a new light now that she knew who Piper really was.

Lisa’s eyes widened in surprise. “Really? You didn’t recognize her? She’s huge, Audrey. Like, A-list huge.”

Audrey shook her head, a self-deprecating smile tugging at her lips. “I told you, I don’t really follow that stuff. You know I’m more of a book person.”

Lisa smiled, taking a sip of her own drink. “I know, but why the sudden interest?”

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Audrey hesitated, her fingers tracing the rim of her glass. She wasn't sure how much she wanted to reveal, even to Lisa, so she said nothing. If Piper really was that famous, Audrey imagined that Piper wouldn't appreciate her telling anyone else about her being in Morro Bay. "No interest. Just curious."

Lisa leaned back in her chair, her eyes twinkling with amusement. "Curious? You sure you're not just smitten? I saw the way you were looking at her."

Audrey knew she was blushing, but there wasn't much she could do about it. She took another sip of her drink instead. "She's a great actress. That's all."

Lisa laughed softly. "Sure, okay. But seriously, Piper Emerson is gorgeous. You can't deny that."

Audrey thought back to the moment on the ladder, the intensity in Piper's blue eyes. Gorgeous didn't even begin to cover it. "No, I can't deny that," she admitted.

Lisa's expression turned thoughtful. "I know someone that kind of reminds me of her almost. An older version of course."

"No." Audrey cut Lisa off before she could even say it. "No setups. Please. I'm not interested."

Audrey's tone was firm, but Lisa's expression remained undeterred. "Come on, Audrey. You can't avoid dating forever. It's been years since your divorce. Don't you think it's time to put yourself out there again?"

Audrey sighed, running a hand through her wavy black hair. “It’s not about avoiding dating, Lisa. I just don’t want to be set up. I want... I want something organic. Something real.” Her mind flashed back to Piper, to the way their hands had brushed, to the electric charge that had passed between them. That had felt real. But now, knowing who Piper was, she wasn’t sure what to think.

Lisa reached out, placing a comforting hand on Audrey’s arm. “I get it. I do. But sometimes, a little nudge in the right direction can lead to something organic. Something real.” She paused, her eyes searching Audrey’s face. “You deserve happiness, Audrey. You deserve love.”

Audrey felt a lump form in her throat at Lisa’s words. She did want love. She wanted what she had once thought she had, before her marriage crumbled and left her picking up the pieces. But she was also terrified of opening herself up again, of risking that kind of pain.

“I know,” Audrey finally said, her voice soft. “And I appreciate what you’re trying to do, Lisa. Really, I do. But I need to do this at my own pace. I need to be ready.”

Lisa nodded, understanding in her eyes. “Okay. I won’t push. But promise me something?”

Audrey raised an eyebrow, a small smile playing on her lips. “What’s that?”

“Promise me that when you are ready, you’ll give someone a chance.”

Audrey took a deep breath, considering Lisa’s words. It was a fair request, and she knew Lisa only had her best interests at heart. “I promise,” she said, her voice steady.

Lisa smiled, raising her glass. “To new beginnings, then. Whenever you’re ready for them.”

Audrey clinked her glass against Lisa's. "To new beginnings," she echoed, although her mind was still swirling with thoughts of Piper and the revelation of her true identity.

As Audrey and Lisa clinked glasses, a rumble of thunder echoed in the distance signaling the arrival of a storm that had been forecasted since yesterday morning. The bar's atmosphere shifted subtly, the hum of conversation picking up as patrons watched a flash of lightning brighten the night sky.

Lisa glanced out the window. "That storm is coming in faster than they predicted. We should probably get going."

Audrey nodded, finishing the last of her drink. "You're right. You okay to drive?"

"Yeah. I feel fine."

They settled the tab and quickly made their way outside. The air was thick with humidity, and the first heavy drops of rain began to fall as they hurried to Lisa's car. By the time they got in, the rain was coming down in sheets, the sound of it pounding against the roof filling the silence.

Lisa started the car, the windshield wipers working furiously to clear the glass. "At least we don't have far to go," she said, leaning forward to peer through the downpour.

9

Chapter 9

The glow of a single lamp illuminated Piper's corner of the living room as she sat curled up on the couch, an old diary of her grandmother's open on her lap. She'd

found it tucked at the bottom of a box during the renovations, the leather cover worn and soft with age. Unable to resist, she had settled in with a glass of wine, her phone left upstairs to charge while she lost herself in Lily's words from decades past.

Outside, the summer storm that had been threatening all day finally rolled in. Rain pelted the windows in heavy sheets, and the occasional rumble of thunder echoed through the house. Piper barely noticed, too absorbed in the glimpse into her grandmother's life.

Suddenly, an enormous clap of thunder shook the house, the accompanying lightning bolt so bright it flooded the room with a bright, white light for a split second. And then, darkness.

The power had gone out, plunging Piper into pitch black. Startled, she set the diary down, blinking as her eyes tried to adjust to the abrupt shift. She remembered seeing a flashlight in one of the drawers while sorting through Lily's things and carefully made her way over, hands outstretched. But when she found it and clicked the switch, nothing happened. Dead batteries.

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She rummaged through drawers and cabinets, trying to recall where she'd last seen a candle. The storm outside seemed to intensify, the thunder growing louder and more frequent, setting Piper further on edge. When she finally located a jar candle, she had a new problem. There were no matches.

A few minutes must have passed as Piper stood in the darkness, debating her options, wondering if she'd stumble her way up the stairs to get her phone.

Between the rumbles of thunder, Piper could have sworn she heard a knock at the door. She made her way to the window, her hand gliding over the couch as she tried not to trip over anything.

Piper opened the door just a crack to see who it was. "Audrey?" Piper fully opened the door. "What are you doing here?"

Audrey stood on the porch, a flashlight in one hand and a pack of candles in the other along with some matches. "I thought you might not be prepared for a storm."

"Not in the slightest." Piper stepped back to let her in. "No working flashlight and no matches for the candles I found." She went to grab the candles now that the beam of Audrey's flashlight illuminated the space. Piper glanced back towards Audrey who had closed the door behind her but hadn't moved any further inside.

Piper spread the candles out on the coffee table and put some in the kitchen. Audrey handed her the matches, and Piper went around to each of them. "Thank you. That's twice you've come to my rescue now," she added with a smile as she blew out a match.

Audrey returned the smile, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. She avoided Piper's gaze as she set the flashlight down. "It's no problem."

Piper studied Audrey's face in the candlelight, wondering if she storms like this made her jumpy, because there was definitely something off about her tonight. "Can I pour you a glass of wine? As a thank you?"

There was a beat of hesitation before Audrey nodded. "Sure."

Piper busied herself pouring the wine, but she couldn't shake the feeling that something was different. When she came back and handed Audrey her glass, their fingers brushed, and Audrey nearly flinched.

"Is everything okay?" Piper asked, concern furrowing her brow. Had she misread this? Had she made it too obvious how much she was drawn to Audrey?

Audrey took a quick sip of wine without meeting Piper's eyes. "Yeah, everything's fine," she answered a little too quickly.

But Piper wasn't convinced. As they settled onto the couch, the storm was raging outside, and Piper tried to steer the conversation to something safe like Audrey's job. Piper had seen her truck, with her landscaping business logo on the side, but Audrey's responses were uncharacteristically short, like she was distracted by something.

A particularly loud thunderclap made them both jump, Audrey nearly sloshing wine onto her shirt. In the flickering candlelight, Piper caught a glimpse of something in Audrey's eyes before she could look away.

Their gazes met and held for a second before Audrey once again averted her eyes.

“You seem...different tonight,” Piper said softly, almost a question.

She took a shaky breath, as if steeling herself. “Piper, I...”

But whatever she’d been about to say was lost as another boom of thunder rattled the windows, and the moment was gone. She drained the last of her wine and set the glass down with a definitive clink on the coffee table.

“I should go,” Audrey said, standing abruptly.

Piper got up too, not wanting Audrey to leave like this. She had to know what was going on. “You don’t have to leave,” she said, hating the note of pleading that crept into her voice.

Audrey shook her head, already moving towards the door. “I just...I can’t...” She seemed to struggle with the words, her hand fumbling for the doorknob.

Piper reached out to put her hand on her arm. She felt Audrey tense under her touch. “Audrey, what’s going on? Did I do something to upset you?”

“No,” Audrey said softly, her grip on the doorknob tightening as she grappled with her thoughts. She turned to face Piper, her eyes reflecting the flickering candlelight. “It’s not you, Piper. Okay? I’m trying to process some stuff. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

Piper’s hand was still resting gently on Audrey’s arm. “What do you mean?”

Audrey took a deep breath, her eyes searching Piper’s face. “I just... I realized something today,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Audrey, I don’t understand. I thought...” Piper’s voice trailed off. She wasn’t

prepared to put herself out there. Not like this anyway. Not with Audrey ready to run out her door. “I thought we were getting to know one another and that maybe, I don’t know, we might end up being friends,” she finished.

Audrey hesitated, her gaze flickering away before meeting Piper’s again. “I know, but I realized that I... That I’m developing feelings for you, Piper,” she confessed, her voice tinged with vulnerability. “And I can’t be around you like this, drinking wine, watching sunsets together. It’s just not a good idea.”

Piper’s heart sped up. So, she hadn’t been imagining things. There was something in the way Audrey had looked at her, something real and tangible. Her hand trembled slightly as she reached up, cupping Audrey’s cheek.

“Audrey,” she whispered, her voice barely audible over the pounding of her own heart. Her thumb brushed gently against Audrey’s skin, savoring the softness. She searched Audrey’s eyes, trying to read the swirl of emotions there. “Would it help if I told you I felt the same way?”

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For a moment, hope flared in Piper's chest as Audrey leaned into her touch. But when Audrey's eyes opened again, they were filled with an uncertainty that made Piper's stomach clench.

"No. That makes it worse."

"Why?" Piper asked, her heart racing as she tried to understand Audrey's reluctance. "You're not seeing anyone, are you?" The words tumbled out, tinged with a hint of jealousy that had come out of nowhere.

"No. I'm single." Audrey visibly swallowed, and Piper felt a flicker of hope, but it didn't last long. "There's plenty of other reasons why this isn't something I even want to let myself think about, never mind act on."

"Like what?" she pressed, dreading the answer but needing to know.

"Our age difference?" Audrey offered, her hand covering Piper's, gently lowering it away from her face as she took a step back.

"Is that really such a big deal?" she asked, figuring this wasn't the best time to tell Audrey that she actually had a thing for older women.

Audrey sighed, running a hand through her hair. The candlelight cast shadows across her face, making it harder for Piper to read her expression. "It's not just the age gap, Piper. It's... Everything."

Realization dawned on Piper as the room lit up with another flash of lightning, her

eyes widening as the pieces fell into place. Audrey's strange behavior, her sudden distance, the way she couldn't quite meet Piper's eyes. It all made sense now.

"You know who I am," Piper said softly, more a statement than a question. She took a step back, feeling like such an idiot for not figuring this out as soon as Audrey had showed up tonight. "That's what changed. You figured it out."

Audrey's silence was confirmation enough. She looked away, her jaw tight. "I went to the movies with my friend earlier," she admitted quietly. "I don't know how I didn't realize it before."

Piper swallowed down the disappointment and the frustration. But what surprised her was the sense of loss. She'd been enjoying the anonymity, the chance to just be herself without the weight of her celebrity status. And now, that fragile bubble had burst.

"So that's it then?" she asked, hating the way her voice wavered. "You're just going to walk away because of who I am?"

Audrey finally met her gaze. "It's not that simple, Piper," Audrey said her own voice rough. "Your life is so different from mine. The fame, the spotlight, the paparazzi."

Piper felt a surge of frustration. She stepped forward, closing the distance between them. "But that's not all I am, Audrey. If you hadn't seen that movie, you wouldn't have known."

Audrey sighed, her shoulders sagging. "But I do know now. And I can't pretend I don't. I've been down this road before, Piper. Falling for someone who lives in a different world. It never ends well."

Piper's heart ached at the pain in Audrey's voice, but it didn't stop her from saying

exactly what she was thinking. “When was the last time you did something without thinking about it?”

Audrey’s expression was impossible to read in the flickering candlelight. “What?”

Piper held her gaze. “When was the last time you just... Let yourself feel something, without overthinking it or worrying about the consequences?”

Audrey opened her mouth to respond, then closed it again, and Piper stepped closer, her heart pounding. Another rattle of thunder filled the air, but Piper barely noticed. She reached out, her fingers ghosting along Audrey’s arm on her way down to her wrist.

“Because right now,” Piper continued, her voice low and intense, “I’m not thinking about how different our lives are. I’m just thinking about how much I want to kiss you.”

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Audrey stood frozen, her heart pounding in her chest as Piper’s fingers grazed her skin. The air around them crackled with an electric energy that was both exhilarating and terrifying. She could feel the heat emanating from Piper’s body, and it was all she could do not to lean into it.

“Audrey,” Piper whispered, her voice hoarse with desire.

Audrey’s breath hitched in her throat as she looked into Piper’s eyes. She saw the same vulnerability and longing that she felt mirrored back at her. For a moment, she thought about the consequences of giving in to this attraction, of all the ways it could go wrong. But then she remembered the feeling of Piper’s fingers on her skin, the way her heart raced when they were together.

Slowly, she reached up and cupped Piper's face, feeling the softness of her skin beneath her fingers. As their eyes locked, Audrey leaned forward, her lips brushing against Piper's in a gentle, tentative kiss.

Audrey closed her eyes and let herself get lost in the kiss. The urge to deepen the kiss pulsed through Audrey's body, a throb of want that made her ache in places she almost forgot could ache like that. Audrey's heart thumped in her chest as she brushed her lips over Piper's, almost forgetting what this felt like.

The kiss had started out slow, but quickly deepened as Piper responded eagerly, parting her lips to allow Audrey to explore her mouth.

Their breathing became heavier, and Audrey arched her back, pressing her body flush against Piper's as desire coiled hot and tight in her belly. She slid her hands under Piper's shirt, brushing over the smooth expanse of her back, feeling the ridges of her spine. Piper made a low sound deep in her throat, her own hands roaming up Audrey's thighs until they reached her white shorts and the curve of her ass.

Without breaking the kiss, Piper backed Audrey up against the door, pinning her there with the weight of her body. Audrey gasped as Piper slid a thigh between her legs, rubbing against the heat gathering at the apex of Audrey's thighs. Audrey ground down against her, chasing friction as need built to a fevered pitch. Piper made a sound deep in her throat and Audrey swallowed it greedily, letting her tongue delve deeper, stroking over Piper's own.

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Consumed by lust, Audrey tore her mouth away to trail her lips down Piper's jaw and throat, nipping and sucking at the delicate skin. "Audrey," Piper moaned breathlessly, her hands roaming hungrily over Audrey's body. Audrey could barely respond, consumed by the heat of Piper's mouth crashing back against her lips.

As Piper's strong thigh pressed more insistently against Audrey's core, Audrey let out a choked gasp, breaking the kiss. She rocked her hips, chasing the delicious friction. Audrey's hands slid under Piper's shirt again, palms skimming over soft, warm skin.

"God," Audrey gasped out, as desperation and desire took over. Her hands roamed over Piper's side, up along her ribs, while Piper's thigh pressed relentlessly against Audrey's core. Audrey's head fell back against the door with a soft thud as a drawn out moan spilled from her lips. Piper's hands skated over Audrey's sides, gripping the hem of Audrey's shirt and tugging upward.

"Audrey," Piper breathed against Audrey's neck in between pressed open-mouthed kisses. "I want you."

Audrey panted, running her hands down Piper's back. Piper pulled back just enough to help Audrey take off her shirt, tossing it aside. Audrey's chest heaved as Piper's hands skimmed over her bare skin.

"You're beautiful," Piper said, her tone full of reverence as she took a step back, her eyes traveling over Audrey's body.

Audrey immediately missed the heat of Piper and the pressure of her thigh against her

clit. She reached for Piper's shirt and tugged her back in for a hungry kiss, their mouths colliding with a desperate urgency. Audrey knew she was losing control, but she didn't care. The heat between them was unbearable, and their mouths met again, their lips parting and their tongues swirling in a dance of pure desire.

Piper broke the kiss, stepping back for a moment, but she reached for Audrey's hand and led her over to the couch. Audrey's heart pounded in her chest as she felt Piper's weight on her, the heat of her body pressing against her own. Piper climbed on top of her, lifting her own top over her head, and Audrey's hands slid over her skin, moving to Piper's back to unhook her bra, easing the straps down her shoulders.

As the fabric fell away, Audrey's eyes drank in the sight of Piper's bare breasts. Audrey reached up to trace the curve of her breast, her thumb brushing over the hardened peak, eliciting a low moan from Piper. As their lips met again, Audrey palmed her other breast, the kiss deepening, and Audrey slid her other hand down Piper's back until she was groping the swell of her ass through her jeans shorts.

Piper dipped her head as she moaned again, her hips rocking forward while her lips trailed a path from Audrey's jawline down to the hollow of her throat. Audrey's back arched off the couch, pressing herself more firmly into Piper's touch. The sensation of Piper's mouth on her skin was electric, and Audrey had no idea how desperate for Piper she'd actually been.

Audrey guided their lips back together, moaning into the kiss. Audrey let her other hand tangle in the silky strands of Piper's hair, pulling her closer, deeper. She could feel the urgency in Piper's kiss, the hunger that matched her own.

Eventually, Piper broke the kiss, and both of them breathing heavily. Piper's gaze lowered to her chest, and she seductively trailed her fingertip along the edge of Audrey's white bra. "I'd love to take this off," Piper said, her eyes lifting to meet Audrey's.

Audrey silently leaned forward to give Piper enough room to slip her hands behind Audrey's back and unhook her bra. The instant Piper's fingers brushed the back clasp, Audrey shuddered. She was hyper-aware of every touch, every breath, every shift of Piper's body against hers.

Piper's hands slid around to the front, taking the fabric with her, and then she was cupping Audrey's breasts. Audrey let out a shuddering moan as Piper's thumbs brushed over her nipples, teasing them to aching stiffness.

"Beautiful," Piper breathed, her voice full of desire as she gazed down at Audrey's bared breasts.

Unable to resist any longer, Audrey tugged Piper down for a searing kiss, her fingers tangling in Piper's silky hair. Piper kissed her back just as fiercely, her hips rocking against Audrey's and sending delicious shocks to Audrey's clit.

Audrey's hands slid down Piper's bare back to cup her ass, pulling her impossibly closer as a rattle of thunder cut through the splatters of rain hitting the windows and their breathy moans. A flash of lightning illuminated the room, but Audrey barely registered it, lost in the slide of Piper's skin against hers and the heat building between her thighs.

"This is crazy," Audrey gasped out, even as her hands slid down Piper's back to grip the swell of her ass, pulling their hips flush together.

Piper made a sound that was half moan, half laugh, burying her face against the crook of Audrey's neck. "In the best possible way," she agreed, her lips curving into a smile as she trailed kisses along Audrey's throat. "This is not at all how I thought I'd be spending my night."

Audrey shuddered, her head falling back against the cushions as Piper's tongue

teased her pulse point. Desire, hot and urgent, coiled tight in her belly, winding tighter with each press of Piper's lips.

"Do you know how badly I want you right now?" Piper asked, her voice a low rasp against Audrey's skin.

"Yes," Audrey breathed, because she'd never wanted anyone as much as she wanted Piper in this moment.

Piper's hands slid up Audrey's sides, grazing the sides of her breasts before skimming lower to the waistband of her white shorts. She dipped her fingers just beneath the fabric.

Audrey sucked in a sharp breath, her hips canting up into Piper's touch. "Please," she begged.

"You have no idea what you do to me," Piper murmured, her fingers slipping lower still, brushing through the coarse hair. Piper circled Audrey's clit with a feather-light touch, sending sparks shooting through Audrey's body. "You're so wet." She rubbed her fingers along Audrey's slit, feeling the evidence of her arousal.

Audrey's hips bucked at the touch, a gasp escaping her lips. "Piper," she moaned, her hands clutching at Piper's shoulders, anchoring herself as waves of pleasure threatened to overwhelm her. Piper's fingers were gentle yet insistent, exploring Audrey's folds with a teasing touch that left her craving more.

Piper looked up at her, eyes dark with desire, lips swollen from their kisses. She leaned down to claim Audrey's lips in a deep, passionate kiss while her fingers slid lower, slowly pushing inside. Audrey gasped into the kiss, her body arching off the couch as Piper entered her with a long, smooth stroke.

Piper started to move her fingers, thrusting in and out in a rhythm that had Audrey seeing stars. Her thumb found Audrey's clit, circling it in time with her thrusts. Audrey's moans filled the room, her hips moving in sync with Piper's hand.

Piper trailed kisses down Audrey's neck, her free hand cupping Audrey's breast, teasing her nipple with skilled fingers. Audrey could feel the tension building inside her, the pressure of her impending orgasm coiling tighter and tighter.

"Piper," she gasped, her fingers digging into Piper's back. "I'm close."

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Piper looked up at her, their eyes locking. She increased the pace of her thrusts, her thumb pressing harder against her clit. “Come for me, Audrey,” Piper whispered, her voice laced with raw desire.

That was all it took.

Audrey’s body convulsed, waves of pleasure crashing over her as she cried out Piper’s name, riding out an orgasm that left her breathless and shaking.

Piper slowed her movements, gently bringing Audrey down from her high. She pressed soft kisses to Audrey’s chest, working her way up Audrey’s neck to her jaw.

Audrey reached up, tucking a strand of hair behind Piper’s ear, her fingers lingering on her cheek. “That was incredible.”

Audrey’s voice was barely a whisper, still breathless from the intensity of her climax. She looked into Piper’s eyes, seeing the desire still burning there, and felt her own need stirring again. She wanted to give Piper the same pleasure, to feel her body respond to her touch.

Sliding her hand down Piper’s body, Audrey found the button of her shorts and flicked it open. Piper’s breath hitched, and she stood up to allow Audrey to ease the fabric down her thighs, taking her underwear with her. Piper stepped out of them before climbing back onto Audrey’s lap.

Audrey’s hand trailed down Piper’s back as she leaned in to find Piper’s lips, kissing her hungrily while her hand moved down her side and over her stomach. Piper

moaned into the kiss as Audrey continued to explore her body, her palm gliding along her thigh. Piper's hips gently rocked as Audrey took her time getting to the heat between Piper's legs. Audrey's fingers brushed lightly against Piper's folds, feeling the slick wetness there, causing both of them to moan.

Piper gasped, her hips rolling, pressing herself more firmly into Audrey's touch. "Please," she begged, her voice barely recognizable.

Audrey looked up, meeting Piper's gaze as she slowly slid her fingers inside. Piper's mouth opened in a silent cry, her eyes fluttering shut as Audrey slowly entered her, the heat and wetness almost overwhelming. She began to move her fingers, setting a slow but steady rhythm that had Piper's hips rocking in time with her thrusts. With her thumb, she found Piper's clit, circling it gently.

Piper's moans filled the room, her body writhing on top of Audrey as she chased her orgasm. Her hands gripped Audrey's shoulders, holding on tight.

"Don't stop," Piper panted, her voice ragged with desire. "Please, don't stop."

Audrey had no intention of stopping. She increased the pace of her thrusts, her thumb pressing harder against Piper's clit. She could feel her own arousal building again, the sight and sound of Piper's pleasure pushing her closer to the edge.

Piper's body started to shake, her moans growing louder and more insistent. Audrey could tell she was close, her body teetering on the brink of release. She leaned forward, capturing one of Piper's nipples in her mouth, sucking hard as she continued to thrust her fingers deep inside her.

And then Piper came undone, her body tensing as she clung to Audrey, holding on, her breath hot against Audrey's ear.

Audrey wrapped her arms around Piper, holding her close as she rode out the aftershocks of her orgasm. She could feel Piper's heart pounding in her chest, the rapid beat matching her own. They stayed like that for a while, the rain steadily hitting the window as they caught their breath.

Eventually, Piper lifted her head, looking down at Audrey with a soft smile. "That was..." she started, but Audrey silenced her with a gentle kiss.

"I know," Audrey whispered against her lips. "I know."

"I'm not sure that I can stand up just yet," Piper said with a hint of a smile, "But I'd love to take this upstairs." She lowered her head to kiss Audrey's shoulder, then her neck. "I can't believe you still have your shorts on," she murmured against Audrey's skin.

Audrey smiled as she leaned her head back against the cushions. "I can't either. And yes, as hot as that was, I'd love to continue this upstairs." She slid her hand into Piper's hair. "But I need a minute too." She tilted her head, pulling Piper down into a slow, seductive kiss.

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Piper's heart pounded with anticipation as she led Audrey up the stairs, the jar candle she was carrying casting flickering shadows on the walls. She couldn't believe how quickly things had escalated between them, but it somehow felt right.

As they reached the bedroom, Piper set the candle on her dresser, the soft glow spreading a warm, inviting light around the room. She turned to face Audrey, taking in the sight of her almost naked form, and Piper couldn't wait to see all of her.

Piper stepped closer, her hand reaching out to cup Audrey's face. She leaned in,

pressing her lips to Audrey's in a slow, deep kiss. Audrey responded eagerly, her tongue swirling against Piper's, sending shivers of pleasure down her spine.

Without breaking the kiss, Piper guided Audrey backwards towards the bed, her hands sliding down to the waistband of Audrey's shorts. She fumbled with the button for a second before popping it open. Audrey pushed the fabric down her legs, blindly stepping out of them as they continued to kiss.

Piper's hands moved to explore her hips, her thighs, the curve of her ass. Audrey's skin was warm and smooth beneath her touch, and Piper couldn't get enough. She wanted to feel every inch of her.

Piper gently pushed Audrey back onto the bed, breaking their kiss just long enough to look into her eyes. She saw her own desire reflected back at her, and it sent a thrill coursing through her veins. She climbed onto the bed, straddling Audrey's hips, and leaned down to capture her lips once more.

The kiss deepened, their tongues dancing together as Piper's hands roamed freely over Audrey's body. She cupped her breasts, her thumbs brushing over her nipples, drawing out a low moan from deep within Audrey. Piper loved the sounds she made, the way her body responded to her touch. It was intoxicating.

Piper trailed her lips down Audrey's jaw, her neck, her collarbone, until she reached her breasts. Piper lingered there before taking one taut nipple into her mouth. She swirled her tongue around it, drawing out another moan from Audrey, who arched her back, pressing herself further into Piper's touch. Piper took her time, moving from one breast to the other, her hands continuing their exploration of Audrey's body.

Audrey's fingers tangled in Piper's hair, holding her close, her breath coming in quick gasps. Piper's hands trailed down to the lace edge of Audrey's underwear, her fingers hooking into the fabric. She pulled back slightly, her eyes meeting Audrey's

in a silent question. Audrey nodded, her lips parted, her eyes dark with desire. Piper slipped the underwear down, tossing it aside. She began to trail kisses down Audrey's stomach, her hands caressing her thighs, spreading them gently. She could feel Audrey's tension, and Piper couldn't wait to taste her, to feel her come undone beneath her touch.

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Piper settled between Audrey's legs, gently kissing her inner thighs. She looked up, catching Audrey's gaze, holding it as she leaned in. She pressed a soft kiss to her center, feeling Audrey tremble beneath her. Then she found her clit, teasing her, tasting her, exploring her.

Audrey's moans filled the room, her hips bucking against Piper's mouth. Piper gripped her hips, holding her steady as she continued to circle her clit. Audrey's breath hitched as Piper slid two fingers inside her, curling them slightly, finding the spot that made Audrey moan even louder as her breathing grew ragged.

Piper increased the pressure with her tongue, her fingers moving in a steady rhythm. Audrey's hands clutched at the sheets, her head thrown back, her breath coming in short gasps. Piper could feel her getting close.

"Piper," Audrey breathed out, her voice barely a whisper, yet filled with urgency. Hearing her name on Audrey's lips spurred Piper on, her tongue and fingers moving in sync, pushing Audrey closer to the edge.

Audrey's body arched off the bed, a low, guttural moan escaping her lips as she found her release. Piper stayed with her, riding out the waves of her orgasm, softly kissing her thighs, her stomach, her hips, as Audrey slowly came down.

Piper moved up Audrey's body, capturing her lips in a soft, slow kiss. Audrey wrapped her arms around her, pulling her close, their bodies pressed together. They lay there for a moment, both of them catching their breath.

Piper brushed a strand of hair away from Audrey's face, her fingertips gently tracing

the line of her jaw. “You’re beautiful,” Piper whispered.

Audrey smiled, a soft, genuine smile that reached her eyes. “So are you,” she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. She pulled Piper closer, their lips meeting in a tender kiss.

Audrey shifted beneath Piper, gently rolling them over so that she was now on top. She looked down at Piper, her eyes reflecting the warm glow of the candle, a mix of desire and tenderness in her gaze. Piper’s breath caught as Audrey began to trail kisses down her neck, her collarbone, mimicking the path Piper had taken on her body. She found Piper’s hands, lacing their fingers together before pinning them above her head, and Piper’s breath hitched as Audrey took control.

Audrey held Piper’s hands in place with one of hers, her free hand beginning a slow, tantalizing exploration of Piper’s body. She traced the curve of her breasts, her fingertips circling her nipples until they hardened under her touch. Piper arched her back, pressing herself into Audrey’s palm, craving more contact.

Audrey smiled, her eyes locked on Piper’s as she continued her descent over her stomach until her hand slid between Piper’s legs. Audrey’s fingers brushed against Piper’s inner thighs, making her shiver with anticipation.

Piper’s heart pounded in her chest as Audrey’s fingers trailed back up her thighs, her thumbs brushing against her sensitive folds. She let out a moan, her hips lifting off the bed, seeking more of Audrey’s touch. Audrey leaned down, capturing Piper’s lips in a searing kiss as her fingers began to explore her.

Piper’s hands gripped Audrey’s shoulders, her nails digging into her skin as Audrey’s fingers slipped inside her. She gasped into the kiss, her body arching against Audrey’s.

Piper could feel the pressure building inside her, and she had to break the kiss, her head falling back against the pillow as she panted for breath. Audrey's lips moved to her neck, her teeth grazing her skin as her fingers continued to work their magic.

"Audrey," Piper moaned, her voice barely recognizable. She could feel her orgasm building, her body trembling with the effort to hold it back. She wanted to ride this wave for as long as possible, to draw out this feeling of being completely consumed by Audrey.

Audrey's mouth moved back to Piper's, swallowing her gasps as her fingers moved deeper, curling to hit that sweet spot that made Piper's breath hitch. Piper's hips rose to meet each stroke, and her grip on Audrey's shoulders tightened, her fingers digging into the soft skin.

"Don't stop," Piper whispered, her voice ragged and desperate. Audrey's lips curved into a smile against Piper's neck, her breath hot against her skin as she increased the pace, her fingers moving faster.

Piper's body tensed, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps. Audrey lifted her head, her eyes locking onto Piper's, holding her gaze as she pushed her over the edge. Piper's orgasm hit her hard as she slammed her eyes shut. Audrey stayed with her, her fingers moving slower, gentler, riding out the waves of Piper's climax until she was left panting and lifeless on the bed.

Audrey gently withdrew her fingers, leaning in for a soft kiss, and Piper wrapped her arms around Audrey as she recovered.

As amazing as that was, Audrey's words still lingered in her mind, and Piper had to know what she'd meant. Piper turned her head to meet Audrey's eyes. "Can I ask you something?"

“Hm,” Audrey said, her eyes fluttering open.

“What you said earlier... About being down this road before? About falling for someone who lives in a different world? What did you mean?”

Audrey threw her arm above her head as she looked up at the ceiling, the shadows from the candle dancing across the walls. “I was married to a relatively famous jazz singer. She wouldn’t get recognized everywhere she went, but I always felt like an outsider looking in. Her friends, her social life. It was like nothing I’d ever experienced before, and she spent more time on the road than at home. And I guess, when I found out who you were, that was my first thought. Not again.”

Piper swallowed down the lump in her throat. “And that’s why you wanted to go.”

“Yes.” Audrey turned to look at her. “I knew what kind of life I’d have if I got involved with her. She was already a well-established name. None of it should have come as a surprise.”

“I can’t promise you anything.” Piper tried to keep her voice steady, and it should have scared her how much she wanted Audrey to give her a chance. “And I hope you don’t end up regretting tonight, but from the moment I saw you outside in the garden, I found myself being drawn to you, in a way that made no sense.” A smile came to her lips. “I was trying to be bothered by the fact that a stranger was standing on my property, but I just wanted to stay talking to you.”

“I was trying to be mad at you for all the noise you were making over here and for wrecking Lily’s house, but I ended up making extra trips to my truck and going for walks just to catch another glimpse of you.”

“What?” Piper asked, half sitting up.

“One day you were up on the ladder cleaning the gutters, and I just couldn’t stop staring.”

Piper fell back against the sheets, covering her face with her hands. “And you kept seeing me all sweaty with my hair a mess.”

“It was actually quite sexy.”

Piper uncovered her face, turning to look at Audrey. “Why didn’t you say anything? You could have just come over.”

Audrey chuckled softly, her eyes reflecting the flickering candlelight. “I thought about it,” Audrey admitted, tracing patterns on Piper’s shoulder with her fingertips. “But I thought you were with that woman.”

“Natalie?”

Audrey nodded.

“She’s my head of security and my best friend.”

“Well, when I thought you were flipping the house as a couple or as a team, I don’t know. You two seemed close.”

Piper exhaled slowly. “I can see how it might look like that. The tabloids have run more than one story about us actually now that I think about it.” Piper couldn’t miss Audrey’s sharp inhale, and she wished she hadn’t reminded Audrey about any of that. “I’m going to be here for a few weeks, more maybe. I don’t have any projects lined up.” She waited for Audrey to meet her eyes. “What do you think about enjoying whatever this is? No pressure? Just see where it takes us?”

Audrey’s eyes held Piper’s gaze for a long moment before she reached out, tucking a stray lock of hair behind Piper’s ear. “I’d like that.”

The bell above the door chimed as Audrey entered Haven Café. She made her way to the counter where Lisa greeted her with a bright smile.

“Morning.” Lisa gave her a smile. “Did you lose power?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Yes, but thankfully it came back before I was up this morning. Do you want your coffee to go?”

Audrey nodded, stifling a yawn. “Yes, please.”

As Lisa prepared her coffee, she gave Audrey an appraising look. “Are you using a different foundation?”

Audrey pressed her lips together. “No. Same one I always use. Why?”

Lisa shrugged. “You look good. You’re almost glowing or something, and I’m here trying to cover up the bags under my eyes. I couldn’t sleep with all that thunder.”

“Uh, thanks. Yeah, I didn’t sleep well, either, really.” Heat crept up Audrey’s neck, and she hoped her makeup would hide her blush. She definitely hadn’t slept more than four hours, and she should have felt completely exhausted, but her body hummed with an energy that a full night’s sleep could never provide. Memories of last night flooded her mind, and she cleared her throat, trying to focus on the present.

Audrey paid, and Lisa handed her the coffee. “Thanks, Lisa. I better get going.”

“Enjoy,” Lisa said with a wave before turning her attention to her next customer.

Audrey stepped out onto the sidewalk, taking a sip of her coffee as she walked to her truck. She spent the thirty-minute drive to her first job thinking about last night. She still couldn't believe that any of it had happened.

She'd only meant to drop over the candles and a flashlight in case Piper didn't have any, and then leave. She never could have imagined how the night would have gone. When she'd been sitting beside Piper, trying to act normal, trying to act like she hadn't just seen Piper on the big screen at her local movie theater, Audrey had realized that she already felt way too much for her. She'd finished her wine, ready to leave, to stop torturing herself, but Audrey never would have guessed that Piper felt the same way about her.

"This is madness," Audrey muttered to herself as she parked in front of the two-story home, ready to pick up where she left off last week. But it hadn't felt that crazy last night. It had felt surprisingly easy. Nothing like her first time with anyone else had been.

But the situation was madness. Even this morning with Lisa, Audrey couldn't tell her about Piper even if she wanted to. She trusted Lisa not to tell the whole world that Piper was here, but it was too big of a risk to take. This was an even worse situation than she'd found herself in when she met Morgan all those years ago. She should be running from this.

Instead, she was thinking about tonight, wondering if she should invite Piper over for dinner.

The sand was warm beneath Piper's bare feet as she strolled along the shoreline with Audrey. It was a beautiful, sunny afternoon with just a gentle breeze blowing through their hair.

A hint of a smile tugged at Piper's lips, something that had become increasingly common over the past week. The days had blended together in a blissful haze, and they'd fallen into an easy routine, spending just about every evening together since the night of the storm. Even on an evening when Audrey had plans with her friend, Lisa, they still spent the night together.

Piper had expected Audrey to want some space, to either process what had happened or to try and maintain some distance between them, but nothing like that had happened. Audrey was the one knocking on her door after she got home from work, inviting her over for dinner.

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Piper glanced at Audrey, admiring the way the sunlight danced across her features. She had to believe that Audrey was intentionally not asking Piper to go out in public with her, and Piper wasn't sure what to make of that. It was thoughtful, but Piper hated that she couldn't just go and bring her to a restaurant in town. Well, she could, but Piper nearly shuddered at the thought. More than once, she thought she could get away with doing normal things, but it rarely worked out. Somehow, there was always a photographer lurking.

At least, this beach was quiet more often than not, and Piper felt safe going for a walk most days. It was something she'd been thinking about a lot this week though. How she could make this easier for Audrey.

"You okay?" Audrey asked, reaching for Piper's hand as they walked, their fingers intertwining.

"Yeah. I just got a message this morning from my manager. I have a speaking thing I completely forgot about. If it wasn't for an event I cared about, I'd skip it, but it's a panel to discuss progress and challenges of LGBTQ+ representation in the film industry."

"Oh, when is it?"

"This weekend. But it's just in L.A., so I'll drive back Thursday night and be back here Monday sometime." Piper glanced at Audrey, waiting for her reaction. Even though acting was her life, Piper had barely mentioned anything about her work in the last week, knowing that it wouldn't help her chances of this being more than a vacation fling. And she tried to just be happy with something casual, but when she

woke up with Audrey's arm wrapped around her waist this morning, Piper knew it would never be enough. Not with Audrey. Piper wanted this to become something. "I wish it wasn't this weekend, but I already committed to being on the panel."

"No, it's fine. It sounds like an important event."

"It is." Piper took a deep breath. "Any interest in coming with me?"

Audrey's steps slowed. "You'd be okay to be... Seen with me?"

"Yes?" Piper stopped walking. The sound of the waves hitting the shore seemed louder now, or maybe it was just her pulse swishing in her ears. "What do you mean? Why wouldn't I?"

"I don't know. Because this is probably only temporary? Because I'm so much older than you? Look, it doesn't matter. I'd like to go, but I have a full schedule. I can't get away for that many days, so forget I said anything."

"Okay, first of all, I'd be more than happy to be seen with you. You have no idea. But this isn't the first time you've brought up your age. You can find out in two seconds how old I am, but you still won't tell me how old you are. I don't care, Audrey. It doesn't matter."

Audrey's hand slid out of hers. She ran it through her hair, sweeping it away from her eyes. "I'm going to be fifty in November."

If Piper had to guess, she would've said that Audrey was around forty-five, so it wasn't exactly shocking news, but now she understood what the big deal was. "And I'll be thirty-one in December."

"You can't tell me nineteen years doesn't matter," Audrey said with an exasperated

sigh.

“I don’t think it does. Has it mattered to you this week?”

“This week? No. But it’s one week.”

Piper pursed her lips. “I’m just going to say this as clearly as I can. I don’t care how old you are. I think we’re great together.”

She thought she saw Audrey roll her eyes, a ghost of a smile on her lips as they started walking again, and Piper had to count that as a win.

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Audrey poured the last of the wine into their glasses, the rich red liquid catching the fading light. This time of year, Audrey felt like she spent more time out on her deck than inside the house.

“Thank you,” Lisa said as she brought the glass to her lips. Her phone chimed on the table beside them, and she picked it up, checking her notifications.

Even though both of them were busy with work, they always made time for at least one night out a week or night in, like they were having tonight. Piper had left yesterday, and Audrey knew she needed these few days to herself. She was getting too wrapped up in all things Piper, and Audrey knew it was a bad idea, but it was hard not to keep spending time with her when she lived just a few feet away.

Lisa’s voice took her away from her thoughts. “Audrey, I don’t know why you insist on keeping your phone free of social media. You’re missing out on all the good content.”

Audrey smiled, taking a sip of her wine. “There’s nothing that important that I need to see.”

“Yeah, but you’re missing out on all this good content. See?” She showed her a photo of none other than Jake Griffen in a very fitted black dress shirt. He looked like he was on a red carpet. “Don’t worry,” Lisa said, swiping her finger over the screen. “I have something for you.” Lisa turned the phone back towards her, and Audrey was looking at a photo of Evelyn Coleman and Piper posing for the cameras. Evelyn Coleman wore a stunning blue dress, while Piper looked effortlessly chic in a black blazer with a white dress shirt underneath, the top few buttons casually undone. The blazer was tailored perfectly to her body, and her hair fell across her shoulder in loose waves.

“Hm,” Audrey murmured, her gaze lingering on Piper.

“There’s a gay cinema event in Los Angeles this weekend, but Jake Griffen is there as an ally. He’s playing a gay man in his next movie, which I absolutely need to see.”

Audrey nodded absently, her mind still on the photo. Evelyn Coleman was someone so famous and so talented. This was Piper’s life—red carpets, photo shoots, and high-profile events. Audrey’s life was quiet dinners on the deck and long days working in the garden. The thought of trying to bridge that gap felt overwhelming.

Lisa kept talking, her enthusiasm undeterred. “There’s always rumors about Evelyn Coleman and Piper Emerson, but last I heard, Evelyn Coleman met an Irish woman, and she moved to Ireland to be with her. I don’t know why there’s always rumors about co-stars.”

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Audrey forced a smile, trying to push her doubts aside. “It’s just the nature of the industry, I guess. People love a good story.”

Hours later, when Lisa had fallen asleep in the guest room, Audrey was still up, unable to resist the urge to turn on the TV and find one of those entertainment news channels. It didn’t take long for images from the event to appear, and Audrey found herself glued to the screen, watching Piper navigate the red carpet with ease. The sight of her in that tailored black blazer was even more striking on screen. Audrey couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride mixed with apprehension as she watched Piper interact with other celebrities, poised and confident.

As the camera panned out, showing the bustling crowd and flashing lights, Audrey tried to imagine herself in that world. She thought about the peace she found in her garden, the simple joy of a well-brewed cup of coffee in the morning, and the comfort of her routines. How could she ever fit into Piper’s world?

The news segment shifted to a live interview with Piper, her bright smile lighting up the screen. The reporter asked about her current projects and her thoughts on the future of LGBTQ+ representation in film. Piper spoke with passion and clarity, her answers thoughtful and measured, and it all felt a little surreal. This was the woman Audrey had spent every night with for the past week. This amazing, talented, gorgeous woman.

When the interview concluded, the camera shifted back to the red carpet, where more celebrities were arriving. Audrey turned off the TV, suddenly feeling exhausted.

Audrey knew she needed to be honest with herself and Piper. This wasn’t just about

their age difference. It was about their worlds colliding in a way that felt almost insurmountable.

15

The reception hall buzzed with conversation and laughter as Piper weaved her way through the crowd, a glass of white wine in hand. She'd been looking forward to this moment all day—a chance to catch up with Evelyn Coleman, her close friend, and former co-star, without the pressures of the red carpet or the intensity of the panel discussion.

She spotted Evelyn near the far wall, chatting with another actress. As if sensing Piper's gaze, Evelyn looked up, her face breaking into a wide grin. She excused herself and made her way over to Piper.

"There you are!" Evelyn said, pulling Piper into a quick hug. "I thought we'd never get a moment to ourselves."

Piper laughed, returning the embrace. "I know."

"Come on, let's find a quiet corner where we can catch up."

They settled into a secluded alcove, the chatter of the reception fading into a pleasant background hum. Piper took a sip of her wine, savoring the crisp, refreshing taste.

"So, how's Claire?" Piper asked. She'd met Evelyn's partner in England just a few months ago. She was over visiting Evelyn for the weekend.

Evelyn's smile reached her eyes. "She's great. Actually, I have some news. I proposed last month, and she said yes."

Piper's eyes widened. "Evelyn, that's amazing! Congrats!"

Evelyn beamed, her happiness contagious. "Thank you. We're keeping it quiet for now, but I wanted you to know."

"I'm so happy for you both."

"Keep the end of May open next year," Evelyn said with a wink. "You'll be getting an invite."

Piper grinned. "I wouldn't miss it."

"What's new with you?"

Piper told her about the beach house and the renovations. But then she took a deep breath. "I wanted to ask you for some advice."

"Sure. What is it?"

"I think met someone."

Evelyn's face lit up with a smile. "You think?"

Piper laughed softly. "I like her. A lot. But she has reservations. We're actually neighbors. That's how we met. When I got to the beach house, she was working in the garden. She was taking care of my grandmother's garden since she passed."

Evelyn studied Piper. "What's her name?"

"Audrey." Piper sighed. "She's older than me, and it bothers her, even though it doesn't matter to me. And she's not in the industry, which means bringing her into

this crazy world of ours...”

Evelyn grinned as she shook her head. “This is sounding an awful lot like myself and Claire.” Evelyn was quiet for a moment, considering Piper’s words. “Piper, if she makes you happy, that’s what matters. The age thing? It’s just a number. And as for the publicity side of things, it’s all about being honest and setting boundaries. Talk to her. Work together to find a balance that works for both of you. Sometimes, Claire comes to events like this with me. Sometimes she doesn’t. We both made sacrifices to make it work.”

“You moved to another country for her.”

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“And I’d do it again,” Evelyn said before she took a drink. “I would never have asked her to leave Ireland for me. Just talk to Audrey. It’s still crazy to me to think how close I was to not being with Claire. I let a movie take me away from her, and it took a long time to get back to her. But when I did? It was so clear that we had to make it work. We were too good together.”

Piper pulled her into a hug. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Hey, if you want to get away for a while, you’re always welcome to stay with us. The scenery is so much more incredible in person.”

“I’ve only ever been to Dublin, so I’d love to,” Piper said. “And the same for you too. If you want to spend some time in California, the beach house is there. Natalie insisted on the best security cameras, but anyway, it’s secure, and it’s been so quiet there. I haven’t had any issues with photographers or anything. I can just walk out onto the beach.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. That sounds amazing. Claire still hasn’t been, if you can believe it. We’ve only ever been to New York together.”

“Then you should.”

“We should do a better job of keeping in touch,” Evelyn said as she finished her drink.

“We really should.”

Audrey stepped out of her truck and walked towards the cozy seaside restaurant where she was meeting Lisa for dinner. The sun cast a warm, golden glow over Morro Bay, and as she approached the restaurant, she could see Lisa through the window, already seated at a table by the window, her face animated as she chatted with the waiter. Audrey took a deep breath, steeling herself for the evening ahead. She had agreed to this dinner days ago, before Piper had returned, before the whirlwind of emotions that had swept through her these last few days. She knew Lisa would notice her distraction, would ask questions, would push her to talk, and that's because Lisa was a great friend, but Audrey couldn't tell her about Piper. It was too much of a risk.

She pushed open the door, the delicious smells of garlic and tomatoes hitting her as soon as she entered the cozy Italian restaurant. Lisa looked up and smiled when she spotted her. Audrey made her way to the table, dodging a waiter with a tray of steaming pasta, and slid into the chair across from Lisa.

"Hey," Audrey said, reaching for the glass of water that had already been poured for her.

"You look tired," Lisa said, her brow furrowing as she studied Audrey's face.

Audrey managed a small smile. "Thanks a lot."

Lisa rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean. Long day?"

Audrey nodded, grateful for the out. "Yeah, I had a job a couple of hours away, and I didn't sleep well last night."

Lisa hummed sympathetically and pushed a glass of wine towards Audrey. "Here,

this will help.”

Audrey took a sip, the cool liquid sliding down her throat, and set the glass down, her fingers tracing the stem. She looked out the window, watching as the sun dipped lower, the sky a gorgeous mix of oranges and pinks. She could feel Lisa’s eyes on her. She braced herself, knowing what was coming. Lisa was like a dog with a bone when she sensed something was up. And Audrey knew she hadn’t been herself lately. There was no way that Lisa wouldn’t pick up on her distraction, her restlessness.

Lisa opened her mouth to speak, but Audrey cut her off, gesturing to the menu. “What’s good here again?”

Lisa raised an eyebrow, a clear sign that she knew Audrey was dodging, but she played along. “The seafood linguine is amazing. And the garlic knots are to die for.”

Audrey nodded, scanning the menu. She took another sip of wine, her eyes drifting back to the window. Piper got back from Los Angeles yesterday, but Audrey had a job that was two hours away and by the time she got back, the lights were off at Piper’s house. Today she’d gone home for a quick shower after work and then met Lisa here for dinner. Audrey knew she couldn’t avoid seeing Piper forever, but she’d already made up her mind that if this was never going to work, then she should just end it. Before she lost herself completely.

But she knew that was easier said than done.

Because as much as she tried to deny it, she knew that once Piper was standing in front of her, once she looked into those blue eyes, once she felt the warmth of her touch, her resolve would crumble.

Three days had passed since Piper had returned from Los Angeles, and in those three days, she hadn't seen Audrey. Not properly, anyway. She'd caught glimpses of Audrey's truck coming and going, so she knew she was okay, but Piper couldn't understand how they kept missing each other. Unless, Audrey was avoiding her purposely.

Last night, Piper had gone next door, her heart pounding in her chest as she knocked on Audrey's door, but no one had answered.

Now Piper was restless, and she couldn't stand this uncertainty anymore. She needed to see Audrey, to talk to her, to understand why she was avoiding her, if that was what was happening. She could see the faint glow of lights from the windows, and Piper grabbed her keys, locking her door behind her.

She made the short walk over to Audrey's and knocked on her door for the second night in a row. This time though, the door opened, and there she was. Audrey stood in the doorway, her black hair falling in soft waves around her shoulders, her green eyes meeting Piper's gaze. But there was something different about her. She looked tired, the lines around her eyes more pronounced than Piper remembered. And her smile, though warm, didn't reach her eyes.

"Piper," Audrey said, her voice soft. "Come in."

Piper hesitated for a moment, sensing the subtle shift in Audrey's demeanor. Something was definitely off, but what could have happened in the few days she was gone? She stepped inside, following Audrey through the house and out onto the deck which was bathed in the soft glow of string lights. The gentle sounds of the ocean rolling in filled the silence that had fallen between them.

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Audrey gestured to one of the chairs, and Piper sat down, her eyes never leaving Audrey's face. She wanted to reach out, to take Audrey's hand, to pull her into a hug, but Audrey's body language was closed off, her arms crossed over her chest, her shoulders tense.

"Is everything okay?" Piper asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Audrey took a deep breath, her gaze fixed on the horizon. "Piper, we need to talk."

Piper's heart sank. Those were not the words she wanted to hear. She braced herself, her hands gripping the arms of the chair tightly. "What is it?"

"These past few days, while you were gone, I had a lot of time to think," she began. "About us, about what we're doing, about where this is going."

Piper listened, her heart pounding in her chest. She wanted to interrupt, to tell Audrey that she knew what she wanted, that she wanted her. But she bit her tongue, letting Audrey continue.

"I realized how unrealistic it was to think that we could actually work," Audrey said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Our lives are so different, Piper. I was here with Lisa, having dinner, and she showed me photos from the event, and I just couldn't put the two together. The version of you that I know and the version of you who was standing beside Evelyn Coleman on the red carpet, and it just brought me right back. I can't make the same mistake twice."

Piper's stomach churned. She really didn't want to be compared to Audrey's ex-wife,

but she didn't have much of an argument. Yes, she was standing beside Evelyn Coleman, posing for photos on the red carpet before they'd spoken on a panel together. That was her life.

"I'm sorry, Piper," Audrey said, and it looked like she was blinking back tears. "I don't regret what happened between us, but I shouldn't have let it happen. I can't forget about my past, as much as I want to."

Piper shook her head. How was this happening? This was the exact opposite of the conversation she wanted to have with Audrey. She opened her mouth, wanting to defend herself, to defend them, but she exhaled instead. That's what happened the night of the storm. Piper could have listened to Audrey, tried to understand her fears, but instead, she'd given into the attraction, into the desire, and now she was here, getting her heart broken.

"I don't really think there's much I can say," Piper started, running her hand through her hair before she pushed herself off the chair. "At least, I know that you've put a lot of thought into this."

"I have." Audrey pressed her lips together as she looked up at her, her eyes glistening in the moonlight. "And it wasn't an easy decision to make."

Piper bit the inside of her cheek, willing herself not to let any tears fall. "I guess, I should show myself out." She inhaled a deep breath, not knowing what to do with herself. She wanted to hug Audrey, to say goodbye properly, but she couldn't. She'd definitely start crying then. "Goodnight, Audrey."

She made her way down the deck steps without looking back, sliding her feet out of her sandals when she hit the cool sand. She walked in a bit of a daze, following the shoreline, not wanting to go home just yet.

The beach stretched out before her lit up by the nearly full moon. Piper kept walking, her footsteps leaving a trail in the sand. At some point, she stopped and looked out at the ocean. She thought of Evelyn and the advice she'd given her, and she remembered how they'd spent months and months apart before they finally figured out a way to make it work.

But Piper wanted to respect Audrey's decision, and that meant walking away, even if it was the last thing she wanted to do.

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An hour after Audrey had watched Piper walk away, she was still sitting on her deck. She'd gotten up to pour herself a glass of wine, needing something to distract her, but as she stepped back outside, she saw Piper coming back towards her house. At first, Audrey assumed Piper would turn towards her own deck, but she climbed the steps to Audrey's instead.

Audrey met Piper in the middle of the deck. "I can't leave things like this," Piper said. "Not without saying what I came here to say."

Audrey cradled her glass of wine, her fingers trembling slightly. "It was a pretty one-sided conversation."

"The funny thing is, I knocked on your door tonight to talk to you. I'd been thinking too, except I came to the opposite conclusion."

Audrey swallowed, her heart pounding as she waited to hear what Piper was going to say. She looked so beautiful with her hair tied back in a messy bun, her face free of makeup.

"I wanted to talk to you about how we could make this work, about how our lives

could fit together even when they're so different. I have nothing on my schedule for the rest of this year. I'd planned on taking some time away from work anyway, and what better way to spend that time than here, with you, seeing where this could go." Piper wiped a hand across her face, pacing nearly as she tried to put her thoughts into words. "I was going to say that I'd never ask you to leave here, that if I was working in Los Angeles, I'd find a way to spend time out here with you. That even when I'm away filming, I won't ever be away for too long. I wanted to ask you if you were willing to give this a try. I know that these next few weeks wouldn't be a true reflection of what it'd be like to be together. I won't always be able to be here full-time. But by then, we'd know if this was something worth fighting for. I know, you have reservations. I'm just..." Piper exhaled, her voice filled with longing. "I don't know. I couldn't leave without saying that."

Audrey's eyes widened, her heart skipping a beat. "You're leaving?"

Piper nodded. "I can't be this close to you, seeing you all the time, and not be with you. Not after the week we spent together. I'd drive myself crazy."

Audrey started to doubt her decision. "You know where I'm coming from though, right?"

"Yes. And does it change anything to know that I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make this work? I got the impression that your ex wouldn't."

Audrey shook her head, a wry smile on her lips. "No. She definitely didn't. But that's what drove me to make the decision. I don't want you to have to change your life for me. An amazing life by the looks of things."

Piper's eyes softened, her voice gentle. "I don't have to. I want to. And it has its moments, but I've been in the game long enough to know that it's not everything people think it is. I love acting. I'm not going to give that up. But I also don't need to

take on every single job that comes my way. I can pick and choose. Maybe you can come with me if you have enough notice to work it into your schedule. I don't know." Piper held up her hands. "That was all I wanted to say, and I thought I'd be saying it to someone who wanted the same things as I do. Anyway, on that note, I'm going to go.",

"Piper, wait." Audrey put her glass down on the table and reached for her arm. "I didn't mean for things to get this dramatic. I just wanted to keep myself from getting too lost in this, but I think it's somehow already too late for that. This whole thing with you has been crazy. This is not what my life is like. I'm boring. I have a best friend who I spend all my time with and other than chatting with my clients while I'm working, I don't have the best social life. I haven't dated in years. I don't fall like this. This fast, this hard. I'm just trying to protect myself."

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“I know.” Piper’s voice was soft, filled with understanding and hope. “I know. And I’m scared too.”

“You are?” Audrey’s hand drifted lower, sliding over her wrist until she held Piper’s hand.

“Hm. Scared of losing this chance.”

Audrey’s eyes fluttered shut. “This is why I’ve been avoiding you. I knew if I saw you, I’d change my mind.” She finally opened her eyes, but Piper was blurry, her eyes full of tears again.

“I told Evelyn about you.”

“You told Evelyn Coleman about me?” Audrey asked with a smile.

“Yes. Well, I asked her for advice. You know about her and Claire?”

Audrey nodded. “I’m not oblivious to all celebrity news.”

“Just me then?”

Audrey shook her head, heat flaming her cheeks. “Lisa is going to have a field day with this. Assuming I tell her.”

“Your friend? Of course, you can tell her. You’ll have to. Unless we never leave the house. Better yet, we could never leave the bedroom.”

Audrey playfully tugged her closer. “What were you saying about Evelyn Coleman?”

“Just that she met Claire and that Evelyn nearly let her go. I don’t want to make that same mistake.” Piper searched her eyes. “If you really want to end this now, I would completely understand. It’s the last thing I want. But I’ll walk away. Really, this time. I won’t come back again an hour later,” she finished with a smile.

“Piper, I’ve spent the last hour being absolutely miserable, and I think that was long enough.”

Piper’s smile widened. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“Yes.” Audrey lifted her hand to Piper’s cheek. “I’m sorry for making this so difficult.”

“Shh,” Piper whispered, already leaning in, and Audrey met her halfway, parting her lips against Piper’s. Audrey slid her hand from Piper’s cheek to the back of her neck, pulling her closer, and deepening the kiss.

EPILOGUE

Piper and Audrey swayed gently to the rhythm of a slow, romantic melody, their bodies pressed close together, lost in their own world amidst the crowd of wedding guests. The castle’s grand ballroom was illuminated by the soft glow of chandeliers, creating a warm and inviting ambiance.

The laughter and chatter of Evelyn and Claire’s friends and family filled the air, but to Piper, it all felt like a distant hum. All that mattered was the woman holding her close.

“You look beautiful,” Audrey whispered, her voice a low, velvety murmur that sent a shiver down Piper’s spine.

Piper smiled, her heart fluttering. “You look absolutely stunning.”

Audrey chuckled softly, her eyes crinkling at the corners in a way that Piper had grown to love. “I never thought I’d be dancing with you in a castle in Ireland.”

Piper’s smile widened, her eyes sparkling with happiness. “Neither did I.”

When the song ended, Piper and Audrey remained in each other’s arms, their eyes locked in a silent promise. Around them, the reception continued as the band moved into the next song.

“I love you,” Piper whispered, her voice barely audible above the hum of the crowd.

Audrey’s eyes softened, and she leaned in to press a gentle kiss to Piper’s lips. “I love you too.”

Hand in hand, they left the dance floor as other couples took their place. They headed towards Evelyn and Claire who were at the bar. Evelyn looked stunning in a simple, yet elegant white satin dress, her hair in an up-do while Claire wore a white halter top and tailored white pants, her black hair tumbling over her shoulders in loose curls.

Evelyn smiled when she saw them heading their way. “You two look radiant,” Evelyn said. “I’m so glad you could be here to share this day with us.”

Claire wrapped her arm around Evelyn’s waist. “Thank you for coming. It means the world to us to have you both here,” she said in a melodic Irish accent.

“It was a beautiful ceremony,” Audrey said as Evelyn passed them all glasses of champagne.

“What’ll we toast to?” Piper asked, lifting her glass. “The happy couple?”

Evelyn met Piper's eyes. "We can do better than that. I think we need to toast serendipity," she said with a smile tugging at her lips. "Where would we be without it?"

Piper met Audrey's eyes before turning back to Evelyn and Claire. "To serendipity," she said, lightly clinking their glasses together, still not quite believing how lucky she'd been to find Audrey living next door to her grandmother's beach house.