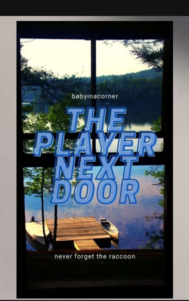

39 | I'm a Work in Progress

Thank you @Aloha568 for the beautiful poster <3

Chapter 39: I'm a Work in Progress

"Would you care for anything other than water?" the waiter asked, staring at us from under his disapproving nose.

It's been an hour since I arrived at my own birthday dinner. I drank three glasses of water while I waited for no one to show up. And just when I thought no one would, the last person I ever expected to walk through the door... did.

Luke Dawson sat in front of me, his strong arms folded on the white tablecloth. His chiseled features spellbound me.

"Do you want to eat something?" I asked him, since the waiter was waiting for our response.

Luke looked at me in a way I hadn't really seen before, like he was trying to memorize me in this moment.

He sat back and shook his head. He said, "Let's go to our spot."

We have a spot?

He handed the waiter a cash tip and got my jacket for me. I was confused.

"What's our spot, Luke?"

"You'll see."

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Luke picked my bike and put it in the back of his jeep.

"You need a better car or a bigger bike," he said, swiping the pink ribbons that fluttered against his face from the bike's handlebars, "This is a kid's tricycle."

I nodded wordlessly, buckling myself up. I wasn't embarrassed of my bike anymore. We've gone beyond the point of embarrassment now - he's seen me in way too many awkward situations.

Luke didn't say much as he got in beside me and started the journey to 'our spot.' I didn't realize we had a spot and he wouldn't tell me where it was. In fact, he didn't do much talking. I think he was still processing what had happened – how no one showed up to my birthday.

The realization that I was entirely alone.

"This is a lot of pressure," he finally said.

"What is?"

"To show you a good time on your birthday. I want this to be special."

I glanced at him as he pulled into an empty parking spot. The engine shut o and we were le in a calming silence.

"You don't have to..."

"I want to," he said and his lips broke into a charismatic smile, "You can ask for a refund later."

I smiled. This was already more than anyone had ever done for me on my birthday. And it was from the last person I ever expected.

That's the thing about expectations. They're never right. And when you stop expecting, that's when you start to see people for who they really are - for better or for worse.

We got out of the car and I found myself in the middle of green pastures, with no tall buildings in site. We were thirty minutes outside of town. I saw a green sign over a country farmhouse in front of us.

"What is this place?" I asked.

"My family used to come here when we were little, before dad married his job and mom stopped leaving the house."

He said it so casually, though it clearly meant a lot to him. I could hear the hurt in his voice and I didn't ask him anymore questions. He took my hand and guided me towards the door.

The restaurant was on a farm. It was all home-made, organic, farm-to-table food. The atmosphere was cheerful and cozy. There weren't many tables, but they were all full of families. We asked for a table by a window.

"Can you not tell them it's my birthday?" I asked, still a bit scarred by all that happened before.

My birthday was never a good day for me.

"Your secret's safe with me," he said.

I believed him.

We settled into our seats and they brought an old-fashioned lantern to light up our wooden table. It cast an ethereal glow over his captivating face.

It was starting to get dark outside and, as I peered out the window, I saw a pony trot close to our window. I gasped as it pressed its nose against the window, leaving a wet mark. I smiled and pointed to show Luke but he was already looking at me. I gulped. He smiled back.

This really was a farmhouse.

"I didn't think those pink invitations were your style by the way," he said casually, taking a piece of bread from the bread basket.

He ripped it and put a piece in his mouth.

"You rejected it anyway," I reminded him.

He swallowed, "But I made it in the end, and that's what counts."

True. Though I was still in disbelief that he did.

"MILLIE! LUKE!"

We heard a little boy's voice scream our names and turned around.

Dupree was sitting two tables down. Dupree: our Apple Cabin camper-turned-fisherman.

He was with his parents and he shimmied out of his chair, crawled under the table, squeezed through his parents' legs and ran towards us. We were shocked to see him, but he was ecstatic.

We hugged.

"You're here! I knew I'd see you again! I started school and it's so boring!" he launched into his full life update, "My teacher doesn't give me any gold stars. I want to come back to camp so we can start the fishing club. Alicia said she'd join. I told all my friends about our camping trip and the lake-"

His mother came to collect him, and she apologized for intruding on our meal. I saw the iPad she held in her hand and glanced back at her husband on the phone.

"Sorry for that," she took her son's arm, and tugged him away, "Dupree is far too energetic. We try to calm him down but it's di icult when we're so tired ourselves."

Luke gave me a look. That's not how we remembered Dupree at all. He had been glued to his iPad at the beginning of summer and very slowly came out of his shell... maybe that's how his parents liked it. Dupree struggled against his mother's pull.

"Here, honey, can you play on this for a little?" she handed him the iPad and he whined.

"But I want to-"

"No sweetie, you can't interrupt people's dinner like that."

"It's fine," I told her, "He can join-"

"No, we're about to leave anyway. I wanted to come over and thank you. You both saved my son's life. He told me about his accident on the lake. I am very grateful for you two."

"He didn't need saving," Luke said, not wanting to be labeled a hero.

His mother thanked us again and dragged Dupree away. We waved at him and I wondered when we would see him again. It's strange to think we spent the summer together, looking a er this boy every day and then he was gone. Back to his life. Back to ours.

I looked at Luke again. I was grateful Luke didn't walk out of my life a er summer ended. Everyone else had.

"Do you know what you want?" Luke asked me, staring down at the menu.

I skimmed the options. My eyes landed on the dessert. And one in particular.

Minnie's Pie.

"Luke," I got his attention, my heartbeat accelerating, "You said you used to come here all the time as a kid. Was this always on the menu?"

He saw what I was looking at. The name of the dessert... was it a coincidence?

He smiled, "Minnie's Pie. That's always been my favorite dessert. I don't have a sweet tooth, but this is the only one I ever craved. You see Minnie, this was our place before you ever knew it was."

"I thought you called me Minnie because you couldn't remember my name," I said quietly, "But did you connect me to this memory?"

"It means something to me. I had a sense you would too," he replied and then changed tone, shaking himself out of this romantic sentiment, "I mean, it's either this or Minnie Mouse. A er all, you were wearing a red shirt with white polka dots on the first day I met you."

"Was I?" I couldn't believe he remembered.

"Yeah. Trust me, you made an impression," he said.

I don't think he realized the impact his statement had, because he was already calling a waiter over while I was silently hyperventilating. Before the waiter came, he casually added, "I wasn't going to forget you, Minnie."

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We shared a hearty dinner together and ended it with a slice of Minnie's Pie. Luke wasn't kidding. It was a delicious warm apple and caramel baked pie with vanilla ice cream. I wasn't surprised that Luke's favorite dessert would have something healthy in it.

We were the last ones in the restaurant. We saw them dim the lanterns and sweep the floor before we got the hint to leave. The waiter came over a er we asked to pay.

"You don't need to. The lady on that table paid for your meal," he pointed at the now empty table where Dupree's family had been, "She said you saved her son's life."

I hadn't expected that. It touched me in a way I never anticipated. I may be ignored by most people around me, but knowing that I have touched the life of one person out there is enough for me. It's worth it.

"Happy birthday," Luke whispered.

This feeling is a gi - a real birthday gi .

Luke and I walked back to his car. It was now fully dark outside, and the gravel crunched beneath our shoes. I struggled with how I felt about him. The last time I had seen Luke, we were yelling at each other on the basketball court.

"I'm still annoyed at you," I told him. I had to be honest. It's hard to forget the past.

"I figured you would be," he said, holding the door to his car open for me.

"What you did at the courts wasn't right."

Do I just forgive it now?

"I know it wasn't," he said, standing by the car door while I sat in the passenger seat. His hand held onto the door frame. "I got your point a er the eighteenth time you rejected my call."

I stared down at my lap. How could I stay mad at him a er he came here tonight? The only one here for me tonight.

I didn't feel like I could look at him, or else my entire determination would dissolve in his eyes.

"You set me straight, Minnie. I'm a work in progress and I know that. I'm an assh*le to deal with but you deal with me. I want you to know that I respect you," he said. "Honesty can hurt but I need it. I wish you didn't leave a er you said your piece."

I remembered how his basketball coach had practically thrown me out. "Everyone wanted me to leave," I said.

"I didn't."

Um... what? I was lost for words. He seemed to understand that. He leaned against the door frame. His angular jaw locked as he thought about what he would say next.

His voice was rough but sincere. "I don't know how we ended up in that cabin together Millie, but there's no quitting us now. I'm in. I'm in for all your crazy antics, for your co ee mornings and for how you are somehow the only person who gets me. So, you can't just say something like that and walk away."

There's no walking away from us.

I stared at him. The tears were back for the second time tonight. And this time, I couldn't control them. They leaked out of my eyes and he watched them fall. I could tell he felt uncomfortable. But he behaved like he wasn't. He gently rested his hand on my knee and, slowly, his grip tightened.

He leaned forward, and I breathed in his cologne. His lips felt gentle on my skin. He kissed the tear on my cheek. He moved his head and kissed a tear near my nose. His hand moved up my leg, slowly. I lowered my hand to cover his. His other hand let go of the car door and took hold of the back of my neck.

He looked at me, "I'm here for you, Millie. I may not be what you want, but I'll protect you until you don't need me."

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A/N: Be still my heart. Is Luke turning so ??

More Luke+Minnie and fewer cli hangers on my Instagram (@NatalieInACorner). I'll be posting much more behind-the-scenes and real life inspiration for these moments

If only the raccoon could've made an appearance at her birthday. There's nothing like saving someone's life that brings two souls together....