

## CHAPTER 1



Phone in one hand, I unfold the newspaper page in the other.

### **DON'T WANNA BE HOMELESS**

**May 24<sup>th</sup>-September 2<sup>nd</sup> Gillamour Island**

**Hey.**

**Looking 4 housing on island.**

**Alls I need: ceiling & walls. No joke—I'll live in ur closet. Can't pay more than \$500/month, but I share my snacks. Contact Bodie ManinaStetson@lifeworks.com (917) 555-3216**

Memorial Day weekend until Labor Day. For three short months, putting up with a roommate is doable. The bar is so swamped over the summer, I'm hardly ever home anyway. And if I'm lucky, this "man in a Stetson" will agree to walk Hugo when I can't get home to do it myself. If nothing else, I owe it to the old dog's bladder.

*Hi Bodie. Caught your ad in the Waterfront Gazette. I have a room for rent on the island.*

I run my fingers through my shaggy, sun-bleached hair, suck in a deep breath to strengthen my resolve, and finish the text.

*Slightly bigger than a closet, and it's got a ceiling and walls. LOL.*

I refrain from adding a winky-face emoji but *go me* for injecting humor. After pressing send, I rub the goosebumps from my arms. I am so not a people person.

*Cool.*

The reply pops up before I have a chance to stick my phone on the arm of the chair.

I gawk at the four-letter word. Cool? That's all this Bodie guy has to say in response to such a supremely generous offer? Because anything less than \$1000/month is a steal for a rental with a private bedroom so close to the beach in summer season. As I shake my head, cursing silently, he adds to his original, extremely inadequate reply.

*Size ain't everything, am I right?*

The potential for a measly five hundred bucks a month doesn't make responding to his one-liner worth the effort. And in my experience, the only men who make size jokes are ones who have issues with being small. Anyway, it's a damned good thing I'm not looking to get rich. I'm merely saving for a car—something bright and beachy and distracting—and so I require a temporary influx of cash. If I can deal with a stranger—a small-statured cowboy, no less—invading my precious private space for a couple of months, I'll have enough for the required "good faith" down payment to the Bank of Dad.

*My name's Oliver. I live downtown. Across the street from Pendle Beach. My cottage is a shoebox, but I've got a spare bedroom w/a twin bed & an empty bureau. Only 1 bathroom, so we'll have to share. Living room, sunny porch w/an outdoor shower. I take another stab at humor.*

*And a tiny kitchen where you can keep your snacks.*

*Gonna call you Ollie.*

My humor has again fallen flat. And... this guy seems pretty much out to lunch.

*I should also let you know that I have a dog. A yellow lab. Name's Hugo.* Maybe Bodie hates dogs. Or is allergic to them. I catch myself smiling. The Hugo-factor will probably kill the deal and I'll have to find another less irritating way to raise the down payment. But what do I have left to sell other than my body? Men seem to appreciate it—they call me “sleek” and “lanky.” Women are into me too, but with *them* I wouldn't prove to be as much fun between the sheets. In any case, sex work isn't a realistic option for me. Not being a people person and all.

*Cool.*

Bodie's probably just a man of few words. That's “cool” when you're sharing a tiny cottage and you're a serious introvert.

My phone vibrates again.

*Parking a prob? Got a bike.*

A bike? He must mean a motorcycle.

*There's plenty—on and off street.* I flip my phone in my hand to study the image of the car my heart is set on parking in the tiny spot beside my cozy cottage. Last week in my routine internet search for the perfect used car, I fell madly in love, printed the picture, and taped it to the back of my phone. Very middle school, I get that. And I haven't been able to concentrate on much else since. But it got my mind off Jack.

The vehicle's owner—an Abby Turner who lives across Pinella Bridge on the mainland—promised to hold the car for me until September fifth. She likes the idea of one last summer season with her “baby.” So I'll only be hoofing it and taking the beach shuttle for three more months. Then the little yellow bug will be *my* baby.

What it comes down to is, I've learned not to put my faith in human beings. To be blunt, I need another boyfriend like I need a hole in the head. Not that I've had many, but my relationships *always* end badly, leaving me unbearably lonely. Which is strange considering I don't mind being alone. Then there's my family. Mom and Dad live separately, but nearby. I do my best to keep a safe distance between them and me, as our bond tends to be complicated. Complicated—a PC way of saying they seriously stress me out.

And I already have a dog.

I'm just so stuck in a rut; a new-to-me car is the obvious solution. But between school loans and a mortgage, I'm in debt. Buying a car will create even more debt. It's a financial risk I'm willing to take, as I'm hoping it will liven things up and get me out of the depressing habit of basking in my self-created misery.

*When do you want to come by and check out the place, Bodie? No need. I'll take it. \$500/month, yeah?* I thought I was impulsive to sell my sacred privacy for the price of a less-than-practical car. But this guy is reckless. He's moving into a house, sight unseen, with a total stranger. I could be a serial killer. But then, so could he. I shrug and type.

*That works.*

*Gotta move in on Friday, Ollie.*

Ollie? So not me, but Bodie doesn't know that. Yet.  
*It'll have to be early in the day. I work at four.*

*Same.*

Great. Bodie has a job. I probably should have thought to ask. And what about references? I really ought to request those too. But it's only for the summer. How much harm can one guy do to my tightly guarded life in three short months?

*Do you need help bringing in your stuff? Nah. Don't have much shit.*

And now it's my turn to type that four-letter word.

*Cool.*

All I have left to do is the formal meet and greet and then fork over a key.

*Yeah.*

I grit my teeth and seal my fate.

*My address is 17 Pendle Lane. White cottage w/yellow shutters & front door.*

*Yellow.* He repeats. *Yellow shutters. Yellow door. Yellow pup. Yellow's cool.*

Don't I know it? I'm risking my very sanity for a 2017 Sandstorm Yellow Volkswagen Beetle Dune. But it's a convertible and I'm a sucker for wind in my hair.

*What time should I expect you? See ya Friday, dude.*

So much for timing.

*Friday, it is.*



"HEY, TOP DOG." Sam insists on calling me this, although I'm his coworker, not his boss. And I've never been a top, though he has no way of knowing this.

"Sam, you're late." I press the ice-crush button to drown out his excuse, which he most certainly considers a valid reason. But since I'm not going to do anything about his tardiness, there's no use hearing it.

The blender stops too soon; Sam is still babbling. "So anyway, thanks to Mom's nails not being dry, she didn't get home to watch LeeLee on time. And I missed the three o'clock shuttle."

*Again.* But Sam's a single dad to the cutest little girl on the island, so of course I cut him some more slack. Maybe my frozen loner heart is mottled with soft spots—for LeeLee, Hugo, Dad—at least lately—and maybe even a little one for Sam because he's been trying so damn hard to make sure LeeLee is emotionally stable since his nasty divorce last summer. Jack *almost* melted the ice encasing my heart but ended up sending me back into romantic deep-freeze. Probably never to emerge. And speaking of icy things, it's time for the drink's special ingredients. I toss a handful of sugar-coated, frozen strawberries into the blender and pour in Surf's Up's custom daiquiri mix. The one I created. Then finally a generous stream of Tito's. "Table ten is waiting for a bucket of Buds."

"On it." Sam heads to the ice bin. He grabs a clean orange pail from one of the overhead hooks but stops and says, "It's gonna be out of control in here tonight seeing as it's the first warm day of the season."

"The guests will sure be thirsty," I chime in. Small talk takes effort, and I do my best. I tend to stray toward work-related topics. "Um, you need to pull your hair back, right?"

"Oh, yeah. Right." He captures his long dreads in a loose ponytail. "Did Jack hire a new bouncer yet?"

Sam sinks the bucket into the ice bin. "Not your worry." I have to raise my voice to be heard over the roar of the blender. And I so very much hate to shout—don't care for too much attention.

"Um...it kinda *is* my problem. Last night I had to break up a brawl over there, by the jukebox. The dude, as well as the lady, was twice my size." He glances past the bar to the antique jukebox in the corner, and his eyes fill with clouds. Rainclouds, not the puffy, white sunny-day kind.

Sam's got a point; he's way too small to break up brawls. There's plenty of cause for concern. It's the week before Memorial Day. Folks tend to let their hair down when vacation is in sight, even if it's just a long weekend. Surf's Up needed a new bouncer like yesterday. It's a crying shame our last doorman thought it was a good idea to proposition the girls waiting in line to get inside. And to very vocally rate how hot they are on a scale of one to ten.

I nod and reach to the high shelf for some thick-stemmed glasses. Rod "The Angel Slayer" Bernardi definitely had to go. And Jack made *me* do the dirty deed. I'm no angel, but the look in Rod's eyes when I sacked him told me I was next in line to be slayed.

"I'll keep an eye out for trouble tonight."

"Like you don't have enough to do, Top Dog. Running the bar, even with Mika's help, is more than a fulltime job." Sam grins. "And, not that you're interested, but *my* prediction is you're gonna be a total waste product by the end of the summer if you're serious about buying the chick car you told me about."

"Since when do cars have gender assignments?"

He takes his time arranging the bottles in the bucket. "Whatever. Just watch my back tonight. LeeLee graduates from preschool tomorrow morning, and I can't show up with a black eye."

It's been damned rowdy in here since Jack made me can Rod. Still, there's no way I'm about to admit this to another employee. I don't have plans to throw Jack under the bus, even if he threw *me* under a Mack Truck. It'll be a miracle if I get home to Hugo at a decent hour, though. My dog is the only truly positive living being in my life—he deserves to be treated as such.

"Look, Jack swears the new bouncer, some guy named Nicholas Bowden, will be here on Friday. I can keep things under control until then." It's just two nights.

I pull my hair into a messy bun on top of my head. Don't need any distractions tonight.

## CHAPTER 2



I got home very late last night. *Okay, okay, maybe it was very early this morning.* Hugo was waiting for me at

the door. He looked pretty needy, which cast me into a major dog-owner guilt fest. I need to shake off the dog-guilt because, God knows, I treat Hugo like the best friend he is and has always been. But the shame always manages to find me. It's a personality flaw.

"I swear I'll make it up to you, boy." I'd rubbed his head before he scurried out the kitchen door to relieve himself. "You're gonna *so* love riding in the bug with the top down, your ears flapping in the wind. I swear, the passenger seat has your name on it."

I let him sleep in the bed with me. *He* liked that.

We slept half the day away. *I* liked that.

After caffeinating myself thoroughly and feeding Hugo a heaping I'm-so-sorry-about-last-night bowl of kibble, I snatch his leash off a hook in the entryway. He knows what time it is and darts for the door as quickly as an eleven-year-old, slightly overweight lab can. As always, Hugo tilts his head and glances up at me when I attach the leash to his collar, and then he smiles. Some dogs actually *can* do this, as is evidenced on YouTube. And when Hugo smiles, it melts my heart in a way Jack never could.

I'm not sure which of us appreciates his walks more. I crave physical activity, but Hugo is extremely social. With a sniff and a tail wag, he says hello to everyone who passes by on Main Street—human, canine, feline, and squirrel—so I don't have to. Generally, at our journey's midpoint, usually somewhere near the Gillamour Island Town Library, he selects and commits to a certain well-shaped, overlong stick, which he lugs back to the cottage. It's the cutest thing, if not a labor of love. And, of course, every now and then, Hugo leaves a sign that he's been there.

While Hugo achieves *his* goals, I focus on mine. I pick up some of my needed daily steps while following Hugo, occasionally picking up what he leaves behind on the sidewalk. I smile in the general vicinity of the passing tourists and villagers but avoid direct eye contact. And while I walk, I think.

About how the yellow convertible is *not* a chick car. About my impending loan from the Bank of Dad.

About my soon-to-be tenant—Bodie, the man in a Stetson.

About how much Jack does not deserve my foolish loyalty.

And about how I hope the new bouncer Jack hired can tame Surf's Up's wildest patrons.

Today, Hugo's stick of choice is really more of a long branch, nearly as wide as the sidewalk itself. Once the stick is in his mouth, there's no redirecting him to a more reasonable selection. The walk home should be interesting, like last night was at the bar.

No full-fledged brawls erupted last night at Surf's Up. Thankfully. Not that the evening sailed by without a hitch. A middle-aged lady threw up in one of the potted palm trees by the dance floor. I helped her to the restroom and made her friends promise to get her home safely. When I cut off the flow of beer to three belligerent college-age guys, they expressed their dissatisfaction quite vocally. Ultimately, they needed to be escorted to the door, and this was admittedly challenging as I'm tall, but not even slightly rugged. Or intimidating. Somehow, I got the job done, incurring only minor bruising in the process. And to top the night off, an elderly, gay couple indulged in a verbal knock-down/drag-out because of a random flirtation. I talked them off the ledge, and they kissed and made up.

On the bright side, Surf's Up attracts a diverse crowd.

All in all, it could have been much worse. Bonus: Sam will celebrate LeeLee's graduation shiner-free.

I only have to get through one more night as bartender/bouncer. Tomorrow night Nicholas Bowden will arrive to save the day. And my ass.

I sigh. *My soon-to-be hero.*



THE SEAS ARE ROUGH TONIGHT. In other words, the smooth sailing at Surf's Up is a thing of the past. The ruffians have come out in hordes to lube up for the holiday weekend. Managing the bar *and* being the stand-in bouncer is turning out to be more than I can handle.

"Time to go, buddy." Honestly, the slobbering drunk I'm holding upright by the scruff of his neck never should have even gotten in. But a bar without a doorman is basically a free-for-all.

"I'm not goin' nowhere," he slurs. So I size him up: He's a few inches shorter than me but has spent serious time in the gym. Not running on a treadmill—pumping iron in the weight room. *He's too drunk to throw a decent punch...*I sincerely hope. "Not goin' nowhere 'til you bring me a nice, tall beer, sweetie. And I like plenty of head."

I'm sincerely unsure whether he's coming on to me or just likes foam. But I stand my ground. "Sorry, sir. No brew for you!" An inopportune smile lifts the corner of my mouth—I sound like Seinfeld's Soup Nazi.

"What's so funny, pretty boy?"

I'm yanking him toward the door when Mika shrieks. "Get your paws off me, asshole!"

Her timing couldn't be worse, not that she had the luxury of choosing it. My attention is drawn away long enough for the stocky drunk guy to take a swing and clip my jaw. I can't respond to this sucker punch because Mika's safety comes first. I have a little soft spot for her too.

I stomp across the bar to where she's trying valiantly to dole out drinks from her teetering tray. The guy whose hands are cupping her ass is old enough to be her grandfather, which is really not relevant to his bad behavior. I'm far from an ageist.

"Hands off the server, sir!" The deep and raspy bark in no way resembles my usual bored tenor.

He drops his hands and Mika scoots away, shooting him, and then me, a dirty look. "Make that creeper leave, Oliver. Like *now!*"

To complicate a situation that is already pretty damned convoluted, my poor jaw feels like it's dangling from the side of my face, entirely prepared to separate from my body and drop to the floor. To make matters worse—if that's even possible—the asshole who delivered the blow is now seated at the bar, waiting impatiently for me to return and take his order. *As if that's gonna happen.* "Fuck me."

The old man who molested Mika finishes off his glass of bourbon in a single swallow. He checks her out lewdly and grumbles, "I'm leaving, I'm leaving. Don't get your knickers in a knot, little girl." As he heads for the door, he's so intent on making eyes at Mika that he barrels directly into me, knocking me ass first into a crowded table. I land gracelessly on some girl's lap. She isn't very happy about it. Neither is her hulking boyfriend who grabs me by the neck of my T-shirt, drags me back, and heaves. Next thing I know, I'm looking up at Mika from hands and knees on the floor.

Just before the angry boyfriend's work boot makes contact with my ass, I bellow, "Get Jack!" And then I'm sent sprawling into the rungs of a bar stool.

"Like *ouch*, Oliver." Mika bends to help untangle me from the stool, which is a sweet gesture, but not what I need most.

"Seriously, Mika," I mutter, shaking off her hands and dragging myself upright with the assistance of the same stool that ambushed me. "Get Jack. I need him at the bar."

"You sure do. There are like ten people waiting on drinks." And somehow, *she* manages to sound bored.

Telling it like it is—and too bluntly—is certainly a talent of Mika's. Nonetheless, I love working with the petite, red-haired server. She gets things done. I smile for a second, remembering how Mika was hired on her twenty-first birthday, the same week Jack hired Sam and I, about two years ago. Surf's Up staff has a tendency to turn over in waves—workers can only take so much of Jack's antics and bail out in groups. But Mika was thrilled to land a job at the island's most popular bar.

Back to reality. My head pounds, my jaw aches, my ass throbs, and when I reach down to touch my knees, I find them sticky with blood and/or beer. Which I probably deserve for wearing shorts. "Just fuck me," I mutter again, straightening up.

"I will, if you insist. But you've been playing hard to get lately." Jack leers at me. Just what I need.

"You've got to work the bar, Jack."

"Isn't that *your* job, Oliver?"

"In case you didn't notice, we're severely understaffed tonight." My voice is hostile. Way more so than I'd intended. Something about my ex brings out the petulant teenager in me.

Jack tosses back his head and cackles. His perfectly whitened teeth gleam in the dim light as if they're fluorescent. "Relax, babe. You've got this under control."

I shake my head in frustration until a commotion in the hall near the restrooms steals my attention. "I'll take care of the brawl in the hallway. *You're* on the bar until further notice."

He runs his palm over his light brown waves, cut and styled to Kennedy-like casualness. And he opens his mouth to speak, likely to inform me that I'm not his boss. Which is true. But the sound of breaking glass in the hallway puts a quick end to this debate.

"Unless *you* want to break up the brawl..." After a perturbed huff, Jack spins on his boat shoe and heads to the bar. "I didn't think so," I utter beneath my sigh and head down the narrow walkway that leads to the restrooms.

When I reach the scene of the crime, I survey the damage I'm too late to prevent. Naturally, those responsible are long gone. A framed print of Jimmy Buffet standing beside a palm tree on a white sandy beach is marinating on the slippery floor, shattered glass around it.

"Damn shame, it is."

I glance up—and I mean way far up—from the scattered glass to peer at the hulking customer who spoke in a deeper bass than my put-on tough guy one. His gaze seems to be fixed on the floor. A black cowboy hat is pulled so low I can't see his eyes. "What?"

“The signature, man—it’s all smudged.”

“On the Buffet print?” I’d never noticed it was signed. I guess I’m not tuned in to those types of details.

He bends and picks up the print. When he stands and holds it to his nose, I catch a glimpse of his eyes. I’m not sure if they’re plain brown or deep bronze—the lights are low— but whatever the color, I’m captivated by the heat in them. The way he looks at me is...not to be dramatic...smoldering.

“Yep. Just like I figured. It smells like a brew—Sam Adams, I’d say.” *Did the guy with the smoking hot eyes just sniff the picture? And identify the brand of beer based on the scent of a drenched photograph?* If it wasn’t so odd, it would be impressive. “Hate to tell ya, but your Jimmy Buffet pic, here. It’s history.”

I’m absolutely certain this night can’t get any weirder. Nonetheless, I have a job to do, so I clear my throat and issue a stern warning. “Please don’t touch anything else, sir. You could cut yourself on the glass.”

A chuckle comes from low in his belly. “*Sir...I like that.*”

My cheeks warm to what I’m certain is a humiliating tomato red. Fortunately, the darkness provides cover. “Can you do me a favor and make sure nobody steps on the glass while I go grab a broom?”

“Thought you were the bartender, not the janitor.” The stranger doesn’t sneer on the word janitor as if it is a lowly job. He just nods at the bar where Jack is working the blender, and then slips the hat from his head and presses it against chiseled abs, barely hidden beneath a once white, tissue-thin Henley. *I am* tuned in to *certain* details. “Or the bouncer.” He places his thumb lightly on the tender bruise blossoming low on my jaw.

His touch barely lasts a second, but I shiver as if the gesture was of intimacy rather than mild concern. “I... uh, I multi-task around here. You know, I do what’s necessary.”

“Cool.” I glance up from the hat to see unruly, auburn curls falling softly around the face of a cowboy. A few days’ growth blankets his cheeks and chin. And his crooked smile is more naughty than nice. “I’ll keep this area clear. I’m at your service...uh?”

He wants something from me—must be my name. “Oliver. My name’s Oliver Tunstead.” I realize I’m staring at him but can’t seem to stop. “And you are?”

The cowboy tilts his head and smiles, exposing even, white teeth. This man, I decide, was made to smile. I strongly suspect he isn’t the giddy, gleeful type, though. I’m the recipient of a rare gift.

In fact, his smile melts my heart more than when Hugo does it. My shoulders loosen. My jaw relaxes. I pull in a lazy breath. “What’s *your* name?”

His lips quirk. “Just call *me* sir.”

And once again, I’m on edge. Prickles of heat crawl my spine, so I force my gaze from his satisfied smirk that lifts just the left side of his face. I look south, to his shoulders, which can only be described as strapping. My attention is next drawn to a sculpted chest and a narrow waist. And then to long, leanly muscled legs, clad in faded jeans. And finally, to worn brown harness boots. By the end of this perusal, I’m sweating.

“I’ll be right back, *sir.*” According to most everyone in my life, Oliver Tunstead has perfected the frosty art of sarcasm. I try to employ it judiciously, but I use it now. Out of pure necessity. I’m in desperate need of the ice bucket challenge, but I’ll settle for this less satisfying attitudinal cool down. And I don’t insist on learning his name. I’ll never see his perfect buckaroo face again after tonight, so it doesn’t really matter.





NATURALLY, the broom isn't in the closet where it's supposed to be. I end up tracking it down in the employee lounge, if you can call it that. It's really just a dusty back room with a bunch of folding chairs circling an antique, wooden trunk. And a couch with a history I'd gladly give my eyeteeth to forget.

I rush back to the hallway near the restrooms and my mouth falls open. The cowboy has somehow herded all of the desperate bathroom-goers into a single file line pressed against the wall, totally avoiding the glass on their sandaled feet. None of them are complaining or pushing the person in front of them. They're all staring at him open-mouthed. As am I.

"I want y'all butt to belly, folks. 'Til I give the word."

*Fucking amazing.* Especially for this time of night when most everybody is three sheets to the wind. *And* he's corralled the glass into a neat pile near the opposite wall, probably with one of his sexy boots.

"Hey...um," I greet him. "Yeah, well, thanks for watching this area for me."

"No problem." He's returned the cowboy hat to his head. His flashing eyes are shadowed beneath the brim, but he still wears that ridiculously hot smirk. The Marlboro man is clearly amused by my chagrin.

I reach out to shake his hand and notice that he's stuffed it deep into his pocket. When he pulls it out, I can't miss that blood stains his fingertips. Instead of thinking "lawsuit," I'm genuinely concerned. "You weren't supposed to touch the glass. That's why I was getting the goddamned broom."

Instead of shaking it, I grab his hand to inspect the damage. He snatches it back. His gaze on my face now feels more sullen than sultry. As if he doesn't trust me to hold his hand.

"I was just checking to see if you're okay," I whine, unreasonably insulted by this minor rejection.

"I'm fine."

Dad once told me that when these two words are used in conjunction, they *always* amount to a lie. "Have it your way, then."

He watches in silence as I sweep up the pile of glass. As soon as it's in the pan, he redirects the line of people to the middle of the hallway with a mere point of a bloody finger and a muttered, "Get moving." Crowd control is so fucking easy for him.

"Enjoy your night, *sir*," I say in my bored voice, resisting the urge to thank him again.

The cowboy tips his hat. "Got a feeling it's gonna go downhill from here." I try to ignore the way his tongue slides across his top lip. This proves to be a challenge. And without my consent, that pesky heat slithers down the length of my chest, settling below my belt.

*Just perfect.*

I have no idea what he meant with his cryptic statement. Nor do I care. I turn my back to "sir," the nameless cowboy and make my way through the crowd to the bar. Time to relieve Jack so he can go back to the pressing duty of playing Candy Crush on his cell phone in the office.

