WANT TO KNOW WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE THE FIRE?

PASSION
A FALLEN NOVEL

LAUREN KATE

Find out in this special bonus chapter – only available on Amazon
Luce had an oil smear across her cheek and a gloppy brown stain near the hem of her T-shirt. Her white tennis shoes had turned a scuffed, scummy shade of gray. But she didn’t care; she hardly noticed. Getting up close and personal with a 1967 Alfa Romeo was a huge perk of her after-school job. Luce was in the zone.

She got a kind of Christmas-morning feeling when one of the few old cars in town rolled into the shop. The snug little Fiat convertible or the sputtering boatlike Chevy Impala. So much cooler than the pristine late-
model Mustangs and 4Runners. Those were the jobs Luce dreaded: The ones whose insides looked more like computers than cars. The ones most likely to be brought in by one of the rich prep school kids enrolled with her at Dover.

And that sucked.

The boys from her precalc class ogled her in her grease-stained cut-offs, their expressions making her feel even dirtier than she already was. The girls who had the row of lockers across from hers all came into the shop together, looking so pristine and made-up with their lip gloss and mascara. They’d drop off their BMWs, then trot over to Jake’s for cigarettes while they waited. They didn’t stare at Luce the way the boys did. They didn’t see her at all.

But it was a small price to pay to get her hands on a couple of classic cars. Like the one she was working on today. Sure, the Alfa was a little rough around the edges. Its transmission had already been replaced twice and looked like it would need to be again. The air filter was on a fast track to corroded. Windows didn’t roll up.

But it was forty-plus years old. It must have been places and seen things Luce couldn’t even imagine. It had history and dignity, stories that could outshine anything the fancy new cars her classmates drove around would probably ever experience.

Feeling a crick in her elbow and a deep sense of satisfaction, Luce tightened the drain plug on the Alfa’s
cruddy oil pan, then wheeled herself out from under the car.

“You’re here late.”

The voice surprised her, though she didn’t know why it should. Mr. Pisani, Luce’s boss, practically lived in his shop. Actually, he did live upstairs, with his wife and three sons, in the apartment above the shop, but in the three years Luce had been working for him, trying to make some extra cash for spending money at Dover, she’d never even seen him go up there.

“I was just finishing,” Luce said, propping herself up on her elbows on the creeper.

Mr. Pisani extended his hand to help her up. His grip was strong, his forearm tan and burly. Even when his hands were freshly scrubbed, they still had grime in the creases. “Gonna miss your mug around here this summer. The boys. Me too.”

Luce felt the corners of her mouth pull up. For Mr. P., this was a lot of emotion. “I’ll be back in the fall,” she said, grabbing the least-dirty rag on the sawhorse table to wipe her hands. “If it were up to me, I’d stick around here all summer. But my parents want me back home. They miss me during the year.”

A series of thuds, followed by a few Italian expletives, sounded from the other side of the shop. Through the interior windows, Luce could see Mr. Pisani’s three sons wrestling each other in the lobby.

“Imagine that,” Mr. Pisani said, eyeing the window;
his sons had disappeared from sight. He grimaced when he heard a loud, metallic crash. “Maybe your parents want a few more to miss during the year. Take these briccones down to Georgia with you this summer.”

Luce laughed. As the only child of two hard-to-rile-up parents, she found it tough to imagine the Pisani sons wrestling in her tranquil living room. Her parents had never had to deal with a horde of rambunctious boys. They had to deal with Luce, and the quieter, darker things that came with raising her.

Mr. Pisani patted her back and headed toward the lobby. “Don’t leave before saying goodbye, you hear? I’ll be in the office. Got receipts up to my ears.”

“Okay.” Luce gathered her few things from her cubby, pulling her sweatshirt out of her bag and tugging it on. Her phone was in the front middle pocket. It was blinking. A text from Callie with directions to Rachel Allison’s end-of-the-year party down by the lake.

Luce didn’t want to go. She’d never been to one of Rachel’s parties, but she imagined they were even more unbearable than the Monday-morning rumors always made them sound:

Rachel and Trevor broke up mid-hors d’oeuvres.

Rachel and Trevor were caught making up in the bedroom of her father’s sailboat.

Collin and Eli had a puking contest in the lake.

“But it’s the last night of the year,” Callie had pleaded from the shower stall next to Luce’s in the dorm
bathroom that morning. “We gotta have a little fun.”

Rubbing the shampoo from her eyes, Luce had sputtered, “Precisely why we should not go to some lame prep school party.”

“Oh, come on. You-know-who will be there,” Callie sang. “Starts with a TR- and ends with your-obsession-for-ever!”

Trevor Beckman. He had not been her obsession forever. Just the five hundred and forty days she’d been at this school. She couldn’t help it. Didn’t try to. Really tall and muscular, with that amazing sandy-colored hair, Trevor was by far the hottest thing at Dover.

For the first few months of class—when Luce still had the drag of going to see Dr. Sanford, her shrink at Shady Hollows, three and sometimes four times a week after school—it would totally brighten her day just to see Trevor’s smile in the hallway. Not even smiling at her. That had only happened a handful of times, and usually made her more nervous than anything else.

No, she liked just seeing him smile from across the room, the way his eyes really seemed to twinkle. Like a dark thought had never crossed his gorgeous face.

Alone in the garage, Luce slipped her phone back into her bag, and Callie’s text to the back of her mind. She could barely ask Trevor to pass the scalpel during biology. Like she was going to be able to talk to him in the middle of his girlfriend’s party.

She was comfortable here, in the shop, with the

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Pisanis. Which was funny, because before she’d moved to New Hampshire to go to this school (to go to this therapist, really), Luce’d had less than no interest in cars. Sure, she’d hoped for one when she turned sixteen, but that was just to get away—any old thing would have done. Before she started working here, an oil change meant washing her hair for the first time in a few days. But now, sometimes this grimy garage felt more like home than anyplace else Luce knew.

She missed her parents, of course, but things were hard with them. Their whole home seemed to sag under the weight of Luce’s “struggles.” Their phrase, not hers. A phrase so vague Luce took it to mean her parents really didn’t want to know any of the details.

Maybe that wasn’t the case. Maybe they cared. Okay, she knew they cared. But it was care wrapped up so tightly with worry that it was impossible to talk about anything with her folks without Luce feeling like she was crazy. Sometimes it seemed like the only thing salvaging their relationship was the fact that she was away at boarding school for most of the year. When she was home, it was painfully obvious how much her parents worried about her.

And she didn’t have to deal with things like that at Mr. P.’s.

Just the three boys: Dominick, the shy youngest son who treated her like a princess; Frankie, the middle, always-in-and-out-of-love-with-an-older-woman son,
who used Luce as his personal diary; and Joe, the oldest, who was as protective of her as the kid sister he’d never had. Luce loved them, all of them. She’d always wanted brothers. She loved Mr. Pisani, too, though he was nothing like her dad. Gruff and salty, but always teasing, Mr. Pisani and his sons made her feel comfortable. Normal, even. Luce didn’t like to think it was just because they hadn’t seen a certain side of her.

She shut off the lights in the garage and walked through the empty lobby to Mr. Pisani’s office. Time to say goodbye. She felt weird and sad, a little bit lonely, and something else she couldn’t quite name. All day the feeling had been nagging at her. She’d been extra-conscious of the shadows in the shop, but so far, nothing out of the ordinary. Probably just nerves about leaving.

Leaving.

Why hadn’t she realized it? Luce was all the way to the door of Mr. Pisani’s office when she remembered: the ritualistic summer send-off gift. The Pisanis did it every year. She groaned—but it was the kind of groan—but it was the kind of groan people made when they felt flattered, like a guy at a karaoke parlor who obliges all his friends begging him to sing one more song. Luce was smiling when she knocked on the door.

Sure enough, Mr. Pisani and his sons were all waiting for her in the office. No receipts up to anyone’s ears. Just Frankie, popping out from behind the door with a greasy rag to use as a blindfold.
“You guys.” Luce laughed. “You do not have to do this every year. I’ll be back in three months. I’ll—”

“Shhh,” all of them scolded her at once. Giggling and arguing among themselves in Italian, like they did every year, they tied the makeshift blindfold over her eyes—like they did every year—and led her to the back room for her annual surprise. When Luce said she’d know her way around Pisani’s shop blindfolded, she wasn’t kidding.

Experience had taught her not to expect too much. As sweet as the Pisani men were, they weren’t exactly skilled in the art of gift giving.

Her freshman year, they’d given her the world’s gaudiest pair of clip-on earrings—lifted no doubt from Mrs. Pisani’s trunk of costume jewelry: purple silk flowers the size of golf balls, with a cluster of dull jewels hanging by a silver thread. She’d considered pawning them off—there was a really tacky consignment shop down the street from her parents’ house—but when she got close to doing it, she found she couldn’t part with the unsightly things.

Her sophomore year, the Pisanis gave her an oversize mauve scarf knit by Grandma Pisani herself. Luce had actually worn it a few times, once it got cold again, until Collin Marks told her in biology that the scarf was the same color as the fetal pig they were dissecting. Since Collin was friends with Trevor, and Trevor had laughed (just a little, under his breath), that was all it took to
banish the scarf to the nether regions of her closet.

“Drumroll, please,” Dominick said in his soft accent now. They’d steered Luce to the doorway of the back room. Dutifully, she beat her palms against her thighs.

“Well, what do you think?” Mr. Pisani asked before they’d even fully untied the blindfold.

To most people, the sight before them would have looked like a heap of junk. Rusted metal, peeling paint, an exhaust pipe lying severed on the ground. But Luce saw the beauty in its potential.

This was a black 1989 Honda Triumph, beat to hell, but she’d seen Joe resurrect worse from the junkyard. She’d been drooling all year over the latest bike he’d fixed up.

“No. Way,” she gasped, falling on her knees before the old bike. “No way no way no way!”

“Way,” the Pisanis all said together, sounding pleased.

“You like it?” Dominick asked, showing white teeth behind his engine-grease-stained face. “I mean, it needs a little work—”

“A little?” Mr. Pisani snorted.

“Pop,” Dominick said. “I told you I’m gonna fix it up this summer while she’s gone.”

“Put a little hair on his chest,” Mr. P muttered to Luce.

Luce looked at Dominick, who dropped his head just a second too late to avoid being caught blushing.

“I can’t accept this,” she said, immediately wishing
she’d resisted her annoying tendency to be polite and just shouted “Yes!”

“You can,” Mr. Pisani said softly. “You will. Come September, she’ll be so beautiful you won’t be able to resist.”

Luce ran her hand over the bike’s faded black seat. Rain and time had split it down the center, and the foam core was busting out a little. But it gave the whole bike a cool, weathered look that Luce adored immediately and completely.

“It’s perfect,” she said, hopping on. “I couldn’t love anything more.”

“A girl like you needs a fast pair of wheels to fend off all those boys, eh?” Mr. Pisani grunted. “Are you staying for dinner or what? I smell Bolognese upstairs.”

“I can’t, I—”

“She’s a beautiful young girl, Pop,” Joe said. “What would she wanna hang around here all night for?” He turned to Luce, who actually would have loved to stay. But she’d already accepted too much from the Pisanis.

“Come on,” Joe said. “I’ll walk you out.”

She hugged the rest of them and promised to call, and then Joe was following her out the front door. It was dusk and getting chilly. Luce was about to stick her hands in her pockets for warmth when Joe slipped a key into her palm.

“What’s this?” she asked.

But she knew. His bike. His golden 1986 Honda Shadow.
“I heard there’s some party tonight.” Joe smiled. “Don’t you need a ride out to the lake?” Then he tousled her hair and disappeared inside the shop before she could respond.

Her cell phone was buzzing again. Probably more persuasion from Callie about the party. Luce was alone in the quiet summer night, the key growing warm inside her fist. There was the feeling again. A strange tremor inside her, anxiety shifting slowly into something else.

She knew then that she was going to this party. She knew something was about to happen. Something big and important and unavoidable. Something hard to parse. She just didn’t know whether that something was going to be good or bad.

She headed toward the bike, jingling the keys in her hand. For a brief second before gunning the engine, she thought about finding Trevor at the party and asking him to go for a ride.