



Stand By Me: A Sweet Lesbian Romance

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Category: Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: Finding love is easy. Keeping it is something else entirely.

For Evie Lane, running her father's bookstore is her life. From the aged building to the used books themselves, her world revolves around her father's hard work and the memories he left behind. But when someone drops off a box of old journals in the middle of the night, she's torn between respecting the author's privacy and caving under her sister's curiosity.

The journals could've belonged to anyone, but out of all the people Evie expected to find in her bookstore, the infamous Cassidy Blake wasn't among them.

Singer, songwriter, and Evie's first crush, Cassidy's life isn't as glamorous as she'd like her fans to believe. Between an overly protective manager and the loss of her mother, what Cassidy really needs is a friend, a friend she easily finds in Evie.

Falling for Cassidy wasn't part of the plan, but when the fire burns at both ends, it's only a matter of time until someone gets hurt.

With Cassidy's tour right around the corner and their words so far apart, can these two women find a way to close the distance between them? Or is Evie destined to stand on the sidelines forever?

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Chapter One

Between the Pages has been in my family for over forty years. Built from the ground up, my father put his heart and soul into the used bookstore that now sits between a perfume outlet and a very small thrift store. It had lasted the test of time while he was alive but was slowly starting to sink to the ground. The store was where I spent most of my life and the one thing my sister and I always argued about.

Today was no different.

“You could install one of those reading stations,” my sister suggested.

“If people want to read a book without buying it, they can go to the library,” I said, cradling the phone against my ear so I could unpack a box of books someone had dropped off the night before.

“You own a used bookstore, Evie. It needs an upgrade.”

“Ebooks aren’t used,” I reminded her, placing a stack of dark books on the counter in front of me. “You can’t trade them in.”

“But you can share them,” she quipped, bringing up the same point she always did. Ebooks could do everything physical books could do, but better.

I didn’t agree. Used books have always had a magical aura about them. You never know what you’ll find. It’s the thrill of the hunt and finding that one book you could never do without that keeps me going. I could never upgrade the shop. If I did, it’d

lose all its charm.

“Don’t you want this place to do well?” I asked, already knowing the answer. Bridget gave up on the shop years ago, shortly after our folks passed away.

“Of course, I do,” she said without a bit of hesitation. “I know you don’t trust the new tech, but if you just added a few of them—”

“No,” I said, cutting her off. “If I do that, they’ll want me to add a cafe. You know how delicate these books are.” The last thing I needed was for someone to walk in and run their sticky fingers over all the books. “And I’m not a daycare center, either,” I added, referring to the handful of parents that used to drop by just so their kids could run all over the place.

“You know, as much as you claim to love the shop, you aren’t much of a people person,” my sister said with a touch of amusement in her voice.

“I’m not the problem,” I said, releasing a long breath.

“It’s everyone else, I know.” Her voice was softer now, almost on the verge of tears. “I have memories too, of the shop and Dad, but there comes a time when you have to decide between paying the electric bill and keeping yourself fed.”

“I’m fine,” I said, opening one of the books that had been dropped off to see what the title was. Odd. “Looks like someone accidentally dropped off a bunch of journals,” I said to Bridget as well as myself.

Flipping the book over, I frowned. The stamp from the manufacturer I hoped to find wasn’t there. The book lacked identifying marks of any kind, which meant it was either custom made or the journal was so old that the mark simply wore off over time.

“Are they any good?” Bridget asked in a hopeful voice. No doubt she expected me to read someone else’s personal thoughts.

“No,” I scoffed, turning the book over again once I realized it wasn’t something I could sell. I’d have to try and locate the owner later. The journals clearly weren’t meant to be packed away with the used books, of which there were three. “Why does it matter to you anyway?” I asked when she huffed on the other side of the line. “You just want me to sell the shop so you can buy another car.”

She did the same thing with her last inheritance.

Meanwhile, I put whatever I could into the shop to make it more presentable. The beautiful golden lettering on the front

window had cost a large chunk of what I spent, followed by the new carpeting and the sofas I’d added in the lounge up front. I poured everything I had into the place, and no one seemed to notice.

“Like I said,” my sister began, using the firmest voice she could, “upgrading will breathe new life into it. That’s all. I want the shop to do well, Evie, I really do.”

“But?” I urged, knowing she wasn’t about to drop the subject.

“I just want you to be realistic. Ebooks are here to stay.”

“They aren’t physical,” I said, repeating the same thing I’d told her a million times before. “Physical books still have a place.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, “in a library.”

Rolling my eyes, I set the box of books to the side, then went to see if anything else

had been left behind. If I could find the owner, then I could return the journals. Throwing them away wasn't an option. The thought of putting something so personal in the trash made me sick to the stomach.

"I can tell you're busy, so I'm gonna go," my sister said, her voice sounding terribly far away. "Just think about it, okay?"

Sure, I'd think about it, just like I'd thought about it the last time she brought it up. It was one subject we'd never see eye-to-eye. Even before ebooks were a thing, she insisted on adding a cafe to the front of the shop or bringing in some other, unrelated merchandise. I'd seen enough stores fall victim to the same exact thing. My shop was still around, but just barely.

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“I’ll call you later,” I said, an uncomfortable silence lingering between us. “Love you.”

“You too.” She disconnected the call before I could say anything else, leaving me alone in an empty shop with all of my books.

Up front, sunlight streamed in through the window, illuminating the pair of sofas just inside the front doors. They

were tucked in a cozy corner off to the right, straight across from the registers. They were also easy to see from the sidewalk outside, but folks rarely stopped in.

Maybe my sister was right. Maybe I really was holding on to an impossible dream.

Those who dropped by my shop did so because they needed directions, they were hiding away from the cold, or because they wanted to browse. As much as my sister insisted on selling ebooks, I honestly couldn’t understand why folks walked into the shop to browse when they could do the same thing at home.

Those weren’t my customers. I wanted the people who enjoyed leafing through the pages and remembered when books were the best thing around. I was after the customers who walked into a bookstore as though it was a portal to another world, thousands of worlds. Those were my customers.

The customers looking for a place to read the paper with their morning coffee weren’t for me. I also wasn’t interested in folks who only wan

ted to read a handful of pages before walking out again. No. I was after the dreamers, the believers, and time travelers. People like me.

Less than a third of the people who happened to stop by left with something they didn't have when they first walked in.

The amount of savings I'd put into the shop just to stay open was unimaginable, but it wasn't something I cared to tell my sister.

Times were tough, for sure, but I wasn't about to give up on my dream or the one my father had worked so hard to keep while he was still alive.

With my sister's daily phone call out of the way and the guilt weighing heavily on my shoulders, I went back to the front of the shop to unload the books I could actually place in the store. Hopefully, by the end of the afternoon, someone would realize their mistake and come back for the journals. If not, I'd have to come up with something else.

All morning, those journals clung to the edge of my thoughts. I loved new books. I loved to open them, read the first chapter, and escape my life for a few minutes at a time.

But those journals weren't just any books. They were personal, private, and not for my eyes.

That said, I couldn't leave them on the front counter, either.

I'd already checked the inside of the covers, but whoever they belonged to never put their name where I could easily find it.

There was a date on each one, however, spanning over the course of three years. The

journals were more than fifteen years old.

Whatever happened to the author after the fact was a mystery. Perhaps the rest of their journals were in another box somewhere, one that hadn't mistakingly been dropped off the night before.

No one would've kept those journals around unless they meant something.

"They do look pretty, though," I mused aloud, reading over the beautiful writing on the inside of the cover. Whoever owned those journals had wonderful penmanship. It wasn't something I saw very often. In a world of technology, no one wrote by hand anymore.

"Who are you," I asked, stroking the journal's spine. Who did it belong to? More importantly, why did I have this overwhelming need to find out?

The few times I'd tried to keep a journal, I filled half the pages before giving up. So for someone to keep writing day after day for years on end... well, it was something I admired.

Had they done some sort of research and placed their findings inside those books? Did they fall on troubled times and simply needed a place to record their thoughts?

Maybe they were love letters that never reached their recipient.

No matter what was inside those books, I didn't have the heart to throw them away.

So there they sat, outside my peripheral vision but still close enough for me to see if I turned my head the right way.

Customers came and went, but no one asked about the journals or seemed remotely

interested in buying a book. By the end of the night, I'd spent more time trying not to look at the journals than doing my job. Aside from tidying up the place and making a handful of sales, the day had been a complete waste. Unless you include whatever my mind came up with about those journals, of course.

They could've belonged to just about anyone. A surgeon, a researcher, an artist, an author... it had to be someone special.

Someone with a lot of passion. Someone who had the dedication to continue their writing for several years.

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Considering the flow of the letters on the inside of the covers, I had a feeling they belonged to a woman as well, but it was honestly just a hunch.

With no one to claim the journals and no safe place for me to keep them, I locked up the shop, then packed up the journals and took them home. They'd be safe for now, but I also knew I couldn't cart them around forever.

One more day. Two at most.

I'd give it a week. If the owner didn't show by then, I'd have no choice but to break them down. I just hope it doesn't come to that.

Chapter Two

"Let me get this straight. You brought them home, but you haven't read them yet?"

My sister would've been the type of person to read well past the front cover, so I wasn't surprised when she wanted to know more about them.

"It isn't any of my business," I told her as I settled down for dinner. And it isn't any of yours, either. I kept the last bit to myself as it wouldn't have made a bit of difference.

"But you brought them home," she reminded me, drawing the words out. "You wouldn't do that unless you wanted to look at them yourself."

"Or I'm trying to keep them safe."

“From what?” she laughed. “Dust? Come on, you know you want to look.”

“You’re getting us mixed up again,” I said, only half-listening as I worked on dinner, making sure to keep the journals far out of reach as to not damage them.

“You are one of the strangest people I’ve ever known.”

“And that’s what makes me special. Look, even if I don’t know the author, that doesn’t mean I’d feel good reading their personal thoughts. Because they are personal, Bridget. It wouldn’t be right.”

“But lugging them around in your car is okay?” She didn’t sound convinced, and to be honest, neither was I.

I insisted it was so I could keep them safe, but temptation is a cruel mistress and not something I can hold out against for very long. “There are only two used bookstores in town,” I said matter-of-factly. “Someone has to come by for them soon, I just know it.”

“And you’re afraid of upsetting what? A future customer?”

I imagined Bridget shaking her head at me. “If they dumped

off a bunch of books after closing, then I’m pretty sure physical books aren’t their thing.”

“Or they just work late.” I’d probably have to wait until the weekend to know for sure.

“And what happens if no one picks them up in a few weeks? Will you keep them then?”

Of course not. “I’m just trying to do the right thing.”

“Doing the right thing is boring. Have a little fun. Just because you read them, that doesn’t mean the owner has to know.”

“That’s like saying it’s okay to take a twenty out of the register and put it back later.”

“Dad was fine with it,” she bit back, “and that was almost twelve years ago.”

“After you told him it was to get something for Mom,” I reminded her. “Which totally wasn’t what you planned to do.”

No, the twenty was so she could treat her new secret boyfriend to a dinner she couldn’t afford. Even after all these years, she still acted like a sixteen-year-old.

“Good night, Evie.” It was the same thing my sister said when she didn’t want to talk. Usually, I egged her on and got her to open up, but I wasn’t in the mood.

Once we hung up and I sat down for dinner, I looked back on the day’s events. Aside from a handful of sales and the journals, the day had been pretty lackluster. Of course, going from a shop that’s almost in debt to an apartment that’s only big enough from one person wasn’t any better.

“This is no way to live,” I said with a sigh, repeating something my sister had said a million times before.

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She was right, of course, but I couldn't let the store go. It was too important, too personal, and the only thing I had left.

When the house sold, I unloaded everything, putting funds aside for future repairs the shop might need.

That money went into a few renovations when a storm knocked down one of the trees in town, busting the front

window. I used the rest of the money to repaint the front of the shop and add the golden lettering my father had always wanted but could never afford.

Bridget begged me not to do it, but my pride got in the way and now I was just getting by because of it.

"Something has to give," I mumbled under my breath.

Like it or not, it'd probably be me.

I checked outside the shop the next morning, hoping to

find another box that might lead me to their owner. The one I found was smaller, had no journals to speak of, and no clues as to where the books originally came from. The books probably didn't even come from the same house, but I'd thought someone might've left a note about them or something.

Perhaps they hadn't realized the mistake, or maybe the person who wrote those

journals hadn't dropped them off at all.

Maybe a family member dropped them off without looking inside the box. It did have Books written on the side of it, so there was probably no reason for anyone to check the contents unless they belonged to the author themselves. All through the night, I resisted the urge to look past the front covers. I wanted to, god did I want to, but my conscience got the better of me.

My sister was a bad influence, but somehow I held out. She was right, though. I couldn't keep dragging the journals home with me forever. A part of me wondered why I was so interested in them. Folks dropped stuff off by accident all the time. Then again, they usually called me soon after the fact.

The journals, however, were unspoken for.

There was no note waiting for me outside the front door and nothing taped to the one in the back. Whoever wrote those journals had no idea they were missing.

Not wanting to repeat the day before, I set the journals behind the front counter and busied myself by updating the wall of books up front. A series of books sat on the light gray wall, their covers clearly visible to anyone walking by.

They were my top picks. Heavily discounted, they were the books I wanted to sell most of all because of the worlds that

existed inside of them.

Customers rarely looked at the wall, which was a real shame. We all need an escape sometimes.

The rest of the shop was much like any other. Books were cataloged based on genre

and age group with a smaller sitting area in the children's section. It was a beautiful, warm shop with more memories than I could count.

And if you went all the way to the back, there was an old spiral staircase leading up to yet another beautiful lounge no one ever cared to use. It was my happy place and where I went to collect my thoughts whenever I got the chance.

Bridget insisted I hire some help, but considering the lack of business and how high the bills had become, I managed on my own. It may have been exhausting, but it wasn't like I could just walk away. Even if my family didn't own the shop, even if I had somewhere else to go, I'd stay.

As one of two bookstores in town, Between the Pages was the only escape from the real world that I had.

I could open up a book whenever I wanted, jumping into faraway lands where I rode on the backs of dragons, talked to ogres, and took part in huge space battles. What more could a bookworm possibly need?

Granted, the time I got to spend reading was far less than it used to be when I was a kid. Even without the foot traffic we used to get, there was still plenty to do.

I had to tidy the shelves, keep the books dusted and clean, sweep the floors, vacuum, fix up each lounge when necessary, and update the wall of my favorite books when something new caught my eye.

Needless to say, I was in the middle of stocking the shelves with new books when a harried woman walked in. Bundled up and shivering from the cold, I had a feeling she came in to escape the elements more than anything else. It wasn't until I returned to the front desk when she walked up to me, her red tresses a stark contrast to her pale complexion.

A handful of tendrils had escaped her hat and scarf which she gingerly pulled away from her lips.

“I’m sorry, this is going to sound really dumb,” she began, averting her gaze as she dug at something under her nail.

I smiled at her and said, “Any books you’re looking for, I either have or I can get them for you. There’s no reason to feel embarrassed. I’ve seen all types. What are you looking for?”

I’d seen a number of potential customers come in with someone else, mumble something about a book they wanted, only to walk out again because they were too afraid to ask.

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With the BDSM craze still hanging around, I had a feeling I knew exactly what was going on.

“It isn’t that,” she said, keeping her voice low as her cheeks filled with color. “I already checked the other shop in town and... did you get a box of books yesterday?” She looked at me expectantly, her hazel eyes boring into mine. That’s when I knew. The woman in front of me was the same one who’d written those journals.

“I did,” I said cautiously, “but you’ll have to be more specific. Folks drop things off by accident all the time. If you have the title—”

“It isn’t anything like that,” she cut in, already starting to turn away. “I’m sorry to have wasted your time.”

“Journals, right?” I asked, raising my eyebrows at her when she looked at me again.

“Yes. How did you—”

“I can tell when someone’s passionate about something. I just wanted to make sure the books you were looking for were the same journals I’ve been holding on to in hopes of getting them back to their rightful owner.”

She passed me a small smile and shuffled her weight from one foot to the other. “That isn’t possible,” she said, not looking at me. “Their author passed away years ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I just thought—”

“It’s okay. I’m just glad they’re still here.” She released a sigh of relief when I placed the journals on the counter between us. She hesitated then, reaching for the books without taking them. “Did you read them?”

Thank god I’d kept to my word, or I wouldn’t have been able to tell her the truth. Whatever was inside those journals was personal, possibly more personal than I could comprehend. “No. The only thing I did was look inside the front covers for a name. I wanted to return them as soon as I unpacked the box, but without a name...”

“You couldn’t reach me,” she said with a nod. “Thank you for holding on to them. My mother must’ve packed them up while I was away. I didn’t realize it until I went looking for them after the fact. Have you ever tried to clean out an old house?” she asked with an exasperated sigh. “A lot can get lost in the shuffle.”

“I completely understand.” Handling the sale of my folks’

house had been a nightmare. Even after Bridget and I divvied up all of the china and useless knickknacks, there’d been a ton of stuff to do. “I’m glad someone came by to claim them. I was at a loss of what to do, but I knew I couldn’t throw them away. Whoever wrote those journals must’ve been an amazing person. The writing inside the cover is lovely, and the fact they wrote over so many years...” I shook my head. I was getting ahead of myself. “They were very dedicated.”

The woman laughed a small tired laugh, but one all the same. When she looked at me again, there was a shine to her eyes. “She really was. Anyway, thank you for taking care of them for me. I really appreciate it.”

“It’s my pleasure.” Reaching under the counter, I took out my card and handed it to her. “That’s just in case something gets dropped off again.” If she was cleaning out someone’s house the way Bridget and I had done for our parents, then she probably had a lot more to unload than a box full of books.

“Thanks, Evie,” she said, reading over the card. She looked as though she wanted to say something else but thought better of it. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Enjoy your day,” I said, waving at her when she turned for the door. “And drop by any time.”

She waved her thanks, then she was gone, walking down the sidewalk and out of my line of sight soon after. Strange. It was probably my imagination, but I could’ve sworn I’d seen her before. It wasn’t so much her looks, most of which were hidden behind layers of clothing, but her voice. Light and musical, her voice was familiar but also one I couldn’t place.

Not that it mattered. As soon as she got what she came for, she left just as quickly.

Like I said, folks rarely came into the shop to buy new books, which was a real shame. To be honest, I would’ve loved to have gotten to know her a little better. She obviously needed someone to talk to, which was why I gave her my card in the first place. I’d happily talk over a box full of books any day.

Glad I didn’t read the journals, it made it easier for me to talk to her in person. She might not have been the one behind the journals, but she knew their author very well. That much was painfully obvious given the way she held herself along with the tightness in her voice.

Perhaps they belonged to her mother or an old friend.

It doesn’t matter. The likelihood of me seeing the redhead again was rather slim, mostly because she walked out of the shop without a single book.

Chapter Three

“You should’ve asked her out,” my sister spoke on the other side of the line.

“She was a customer,” I said, working through the books that came in earlier this morning so I could get them out on the shelves.

“Who didn’t buy anything,” Bridget pointed out. “I’m just saying it’d been nice to hear about your dating life for a change.”

I laughed at that. The way my sister picked up guys, it was a wonder she could remember their names at all. I, on the other hand, didn’t have the time. Unless they were willing to hang around the shop with me, dating wasn’t really an option.

As though she could read my thoughts, Bridget said,

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“When’s the last time you went out on a date?”

I considered her question a moment. Nothing came to mind.

“The last person I remember was the one from that bar you took me to.”

“That was two years ago, Ev, and that wasn’t a date. It was a hookup. They’re completely different.”

Yeah, and hookups totally weren’t my thing, either. “I don’t have time for that kind of commitment right now.”

“That’s what you said after Dad passed away. You used the same excuse after we sold the house. When will you stop trying to live out Dad’s life and start living your own?” She was frustrated with me, as always, but this time I couldn’t blame her.

Once our Dad passed away, I latched on to the shop as hard as I could. Bridget suggested selling it right after we sold the house because of how painful it was for me to work there, and yet, I didn’t let it go. I worked through the teary haze, pushed away the depression, and changed just enough of the shop to make it my own.

Still, everywhere I looked, I could almost see my Da

d there.

He sat in the lounge with the morning paper, he helped unpack boxes of books in the back, and he even joined me when I had lunch upstairs. He was nowhere and

everywhere all at the same time.

That was probably why I kept the shop in the first place. It was so I could be closer to him, or at least my memories of him.

“Are you even listening to me?” my sister groaned on the other side of the line, likely having gone on a tangent I didn’t hear.

“I’m sorry. What did you say?” I asked, stopping in the middle of sorting through the books behind the counter once I realized I had a box cutter in one hand and a fantasy novel in the other.

“I said you should’ve exchanged names. Did you get her name at all? Maybe we can look her up online.”

“No, and no. Absolutely not. I don’t do hookups.”

“But you are thinking about her,” my sister said, her voice sounding more confident than I’d like.

“I was thinking of Dad, actually.” But what else was new? I thought about him all the time. When my mother passed away, he took it hard. Somehow, he kept the shop going, which was exactly what I wanted to do for him.

“Spending that much time in the shop isn’t good for you.

You need to get out. Preferably somewhere nice.”

“And eat with what money?” I asked, wanting to pull the words back as soon as they left my mouth.

“What’s that supposed to mean? I thought you said you were okay.”

“I am.” I was. “I’ll be fine.”

“Mom was right. You’re a terrible liar. I can hear it in your voice. How far behind are you?”

“I’m not.” At least that much was true. As for how much longer I could keep it that way, it was hard to say.

“Look, I’m getting paid on Friday. I can—”

“No,” I said, stopping her before she said something we’d both regret. “I’m not taking your money. I’ll be fine, really. It’s just a bad time of year.” More like a bad year. She didn’t have to know that. She was the baby of the family and my kid sister.

I was supposed to take care of her, not the other way around.

I may have hated how she blazed through her inheritance, but I refused to share my burden with her. She wasn’t the one who decided to keep Dad’s shop. I got myself into this mess and I’d be the one to fix. She’d made a life for herself, albeit a chaotic one, but at least she was happy. In the end, that’s all that mattered.

“I was going to invite you out for drinks,” my sister said, clearly changing her plan to save me from myself. “We need to catch up. You almost never come by anymore.”

“You could always drop by the shop,” I offered, already knowing how uncomfortable it made her. “I’m sorry. I know you don’t like it. I’m trying here, Bridget, I really am.”

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“But you’re living his life. I’m just saying you should start thinking about your own.” Her voice softened, and when she spoke again, there were tears in her voice as well. “I miss him too, but I also want my sister back. I want to talk to the woman who laughed over lunch and stayed out until almost dawn. I want that sister back, not whoever I’m talking to now. I miss you, Evie.”

I miss me too. “I know, and I’m sorry. It’s just—”

“You need to look after the shop, I know. Just think about it, okay? Love you.”

“Love you too,” I said, unable to keep the tears out of my voice.

“They need me back at work, but I’ll call you tonight. Talk to you then.”

“Until then.”

She disconnected the call before she could hear what I’d said, but then that was Bridget, always on the fast lane while I sat on the road to nowhere.

“Things will get better,” I said, looking around the shop.

It’s the same thing I’d said for the last two years, and day after day, things only seemed to get worse.

“You’ll see,” I said to no one in particular. “This time next year, everything will be fine.”

Chapter Four

After not hearing from the redhead for close to a week, I was pretty sure I'd never hear from her again. That is until she called me right before dinner. Thinking it was Bridget, I picked it up on the second ring and spoke without looking at the caller ID.

"Let me guess, he was a total pushover," I said with a laugh, stirring the pasta so it wouldn't boil over.

"I'm sorry, I think I have the wrong number." The voice was familiar somehow. I'd heard it somewhere, but I couldn't remember where.

"No, it's me who should apologize. I picked up the phone without checking the ID."

"Is this Evie?" the woman asked with a touch of uncertainty in her voice.

"It is," I said, cradling the phone between my ear and shoulder so I could drain the pasta. "Who is this?"

"Cass." She laughed, then said, "I don't think I actually gave you my name. I'm the one who came in for the journals."

And that's when it clicked. "Oh! Hi!" Wow, I sounded like a complete dork. "Sorry for the mix-up from before. Sisters, you know?" I released a nervous laugh that hopefully didn't sound as stupid as I felt.

She giggled. "Can't say that I do. I'm an only child."

"Lucky."

"Anyway, I was calling to see if you had room for another box of books. They're

pretty heavy and look kind of old.

“They’re historical romance, I think?” She didn’t sound so sure of herself. “They were my mom’s but I wanted to make sure you had room for them instead of leaving them there to get thrown out.”

My heart dipped at that. I never got rid of any of the books I found outside my door. Sure, I may have dropped them off at

the thrift store if I already had a copy or two, but I never threw them out.

“I think I have the room,” I said once I realized she was waiting for an answer. “If not, I’ll make some. The historical section could use a little love.”

She laughed at that. “Right, because they’re historical romances. Would tomorrow be okay? I know it’s last minute but...”

“It’s no problem at all. I’ll be there from eight until five, so drop by whenever you have time.”

“Great. I guess I’ll see you then.”

I guess you will. “Have a good one.”

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She hung up soon after that. To be honest, I didn't open until nine, but if she'd dropped off the journals during the evening hours, then that probably meant she worked a nine-to-five job. I told myself I gave her an earlier time to make things easier, but if I were truly honest with myself, I'd say it had more to do with my wanting to see her again than anything else.

With my mind worlds away, I finished dinner without tasting a bite. My thoughts were on the lovely woman who walked into my shop a week before and the journals she'd kept over the years. She spoke fondly of the one behind the journals, and yet, there was a great sadness there as well, one of which I couldn't ignore.

Maybe it was because I was still working through my own loss, but a big part of me wanted to help her navigate the turbulent waters of whatever she was going through. Seeing as she was cleaning out her mother's things, I had a feeling her loss was a recent one. If I couldn't find a good place for her books, the least I could do was be there as a friend.

Opening up at eight in the morning was a lot harder than I remembered. With the sky being as heavy and overcast as it was, getting out of bed was a challenge. Still, with the promise of seeing Cass again, I managed to make myself somewhat presentable before heading into the shop. Granted, I probably

should've grabbed something to eat on the way in because by ten o' clock, I was starved.

Between Cass' visit and my growling stomach, focusing on work was close to impossible. After updating the inventory and pricing some new books that had come

in, I was still lagging behind. I should've been done with unpacking the new shipments by now, but each time I looked at them, all I could think about

was Cass and her journals.

I'm not usually one to obsess over things, especially ones I don't understand, but for whatever reason, my mind refused to let it go. My sister would've laughed in my face, and to be honest, I was doing the same exact thing. Work came first.

There was no getting around it. If I didn't make the shop as presentable as possible, it could mean losing a sale. So, after a hard self-talk, I busied myself with things that didn't need my attention like washing the front window.

I'd washed it the other day. There was no dust on the windowsill and no fingerprints on the glass. I cleaned it anyway, using it as an excuse to look up and down the street for anyone with red hair. Very few people walked the streets, and none of them came inside the shop.

My heart dropped. The harder I fought to keep the shop up and running, the harder things became. In the winter, I excused the slow business because of the cold. In the spring, I blamed it on the rain. When summer came around, I insisted it was because folks had gone on vacation and were out of town.

But now, with the cold season being as bitter as the last...

"Maybe it's me," I said, turning away from the front window once I was through.

My sister would never say it to my face but she'd probably agree. I was fighting to hold on to an idea from a previous lifetime. Like it or not, I'd eventually have to upgrade and move on with everyone else, but as I looked around the shop at all of the physical copies on the shelves that no one else had the desire to open, I knew I

couldn't give up. Not yet.

There were other people out there like me who loved the smell of a good book and the feeling of paper and ink under their fingertips, I just hadn't found them yet.

"Hello?"

Nestled in the children's section, I was almost finished putting a new selection of books out on one of the tables when the same voice I'd heard on the phone the night before reached my ears. At first, I thought I was imagining things, but as soon as she rounded the corner, I knew the voice belonged to her.

Unlike her last visit, her face was clearly visible, her scarf pulled away from her lips so it hung loosely around her neck.

With no hat to speak of, her hair went all the way down to the middle of her back, the long red tresses full of waves and curls.

"I can't believe it," I said, getting to my feet. "You're Cassidy Blake." Writer. Singer. She'd done it all. I knew she sounded familiar, but I never thought I'd have a celebrity inside my shop let alone one who clearly used to live in the area. "I didn't know you were from Bakerdale."

She passed me a small smile, then ran a hand through her hair, pushing it away from her eyes. "It's been a long time,"

she admitted, her voice tighter than usual.

"I'm sorry," I apologized, composing myself before my fangirling got the better of me. "It just came as a surprise."

According to what I'd read about her, she rarely went out in public. If she did, she went incognito, which was exactly what she'd done the week before.

"I prefer to be treated like a human being whenever possible. Folks aren't themselves around me unless I'm in hiding." She lowered her voice even though we were the only ones inside my shop. "It also gives me a break from my manager, which I desperately need."

"Well, thank goodness for that. We all need a break sometimes."

She nodded in agreement, but her smile from before was no longer there. "I left the box of books on the front counter. I

hope that's okay."

"It's no trouble at all," I said, taking one last look at my handiwork before walking toward the front of the shop again.

"I like to rotate books whenever I can. The bears had been on display long enough."

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She laughed at that, then ran a hand through her long hair.

“Man, this place hasn’t changed a bit.”

I looked at her with surprise. “You’ve been here before?” I did my best to remember my customers whenever I could, but I couldn’t place her anywhere in the shop. Considering who she was, it wasn’t something I’d easily forget.

“It’s been a while,” she said, averting her gaze but not before I noticed the color on her cheeks. “My mom used to bring me here every weekend when I was a kid. I was allowed to get a new book so long as I kept my grades up.”

“Funny, you’d think she would’ve wanted you to read anyway,” I mused aloud, stepping behind the counter so I could open the box she’d brought with her.

“She did,” Cassidy said with a nod, “but at least with the good grades, I got to pick the book. Mom was more interested in long prologues and such like that. I was all about the fantasy.”

“Me too,” I said without a bit of hesitation. “It’s way more fun traveling to another world.” And now I sounded like a complete nerd.

If she noticed, she didn’t say anything. “Anyway, when I went off to school, the world got busy and...” She shrugged.

“I ran in and out of here so fast the other day, I didn’t give it a proper look.”

“It happens to the best of us. Let’s see,” I said, going through the contents of the box. “These are quite old.”

There was a worried expression on her face. “Does that mean you can’t sell them?”

“No, I can, but I want to make sure they aren’t something you’d like to keep.”

“If they were by Piers Anthony or R. A. Salvatore maybe, but I’m not really into that.” She wrinkled her nose, then turned on her heels to look around the store. “That wall over there is new,” she said, walking over to my top picks for the month.

“Those are some of my favorites,” I said, leaving the historical romances where they were so I could join her. “This one here was really good. It’s actually the fourth in a series but has a critical turning point. The rest of the series is really good. I read most of them in under a week.”

She took the book off the shelf and turned it over so she could read the back, talking as she did. “I always wanted a gig like this when I was a teen. I can’t tell you how many times I left my resume at some of the big chains. I never got a call back, though.” She put the book back and faced me again.

“It isn’t as amazing as you’d think,” I said, dropping my gaze before busying myself with a book that was fine right where it was. “I don’t get to read until I’m home for the night.

Working behind the scenes is a lot different than what we see as a kid. I still love it, but it’s also tough.” Really tough.

“How did you get the job?” she asked, offering me a small smile when I finally met her eyes. “I tried to get one here before college, but back then it was a family business. Is that not the case now?”

“It is,” I told her. “I was the owner’s daughter. One of them, anyway.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I just thought that they retired.”

“He tried,” I said with a laugh, “but when you’re as passionate about your work as my dad, retirement means taking a few weeks off before going at it again. I finally got him to stay in the back when he got ill, but he never stopped coming to work, not even when the doctors told him to rest.”

“He lived by doing that he loved,” she said, her voice dipping at the end. “If only we could be so lucky.”

“What? To come into work in your pajamas and snore loud enough for the customers to hear?” I asked, smiling as I did.

She laughed. It was a full belly laugh and music to my ears.

“Man, the image you put in my head is just...” She shook her head, waving me away when I went to say something else that might send her over the edge again. “I remember this one time when we came in around Halloween. He put black paper over all the windows so it was super dark. He scared the crap out of me and my mom by coming up behind us with a wolf mask on.”

“Oh god, I remember that thing! It got quite scraggly over the years, but he still insisted on wearing it.”

“I haven’t laughed like this in... well, I don’t know how long. It feels nice. Thank you.”

“After my dad died, it took me months to feel like I could really laugh again. My sister begged me to close the shop and take a few days off, but I just kept coming,

same as him.”

“That must be hard, working here I mean.”

“It has its good days. My sister wanted me to sell it, but I can’t let it go.”

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“That’s how I am with the journals you set aside for me. My mom thought it was silly to keep them for so long, but...” She blew out a breath. “I’m sorry, I don’t usually talk like this.”

“It isn’t something you can put in a song,” I said, offering her a reassuring smile. “Not in the way you need,” I added when she didn’t say anything. “I don’t open up very often. It drives my sister crazy. She has to beg me to say anything, so I get it.”

She nodded, then took a seat on one of the sofas in the lounge up front, staring at the ceiling as she spoke. “The journals weren’t mine, but they were given to me when a good friend passed away. Leukemia,” she said once she looked at me again. “I guess I thought reading them over and over again would keep her alive.”

“You remember her,” I said, sitting on the sofa across from her even though I really wanted to touch her hand, to let her know it was okay. “That’s the important part.”

She nodded in agreement but got quiet after that. She might not have said as much, but I could tell she was trying to find a way to get up and leave without being rude. As much as it thrilled me to have the Cassidy Blake inside my shop, I completely understood why she’d want to go into hiding again.

Aside from the lyrics in her music and whatever information reporters could easily look up on the internet, she was a very private person. She never did interviews or speaking arrangements, which explained why she dropped off the books after closing. It wasn’t that she worked late, it was because she didn’t want to be seen.

The possibility of losing those journals was probably what brought her to my shop i

n the first place, and now, she was looking for an escape.

“You know, I was going to close up for lunch,” I said, meeting her gaze.

“Oh,” she said with a hint of disappointment in her voice.

“I’ll just...” Her voice trailed off when I reached for her hand.

“I was going to ask if you’d like to join me,” I said, my cheeks burning hot under her intense eyes. “It wouldn’t be anything too crazy and you can bundle yourself up same as before, but you really look like you could use someone to talk to. I’m a great listener, and there’s this great spot on the corner. It’ll be my treat.”

Cassidy looked away from me and wrung her hands in her lap. Was she actually considering it? She dealt with people every single day, but that was usually in a large crowd. Would she have preferred going someplace else?

“I’m sorry, that was stupid of me,” I said, getting to my feet so I could see her out.

“No,” she said, the word clipped at the end. “It sounds nice.

Normal,” she added when I looked at her again. “Besides, if you’re talking about Maggie’s, she has some of the best comfort food around.”

“Finally, someone after my own heart,” I said, touching her shoulder before letting my hand fall to my side. “My sister hates it, but I can never get enough. Just let me lock up and then we can go.”

Chapter Five

Maggie’s was a short five-minute walk from my shop, which was great on days when

I couldn't leave things for very long. Today, however, wasn't one of those days, and I planned to make the most of it. I'd spent far too much time at the store and rarely let myself sit down for more than a few minutes at a time. It was one of the reasons why Bridget invited me out for drinks and why she constantly pestered me about my lack of a social life. If only she could see me now, walking side by side with Cassidy Blake.

"My mom and I used to come here all the time," Cassidy said without looking at me as she paused to get the door.

"They have the best pancakes."

I couldn't help but smile. "The short stack, right?" Three delicious, buttery pancakes made completely from scratch with real Maple syrup. My mouth watered.

"Their waffles aren't too shabby, either, but you can never go wrong with the pancakes."

I nodded in agreement and checked the time. "We still have thirty minutes until the lunch rush, so maybe they'll still serve us breakfast."

"All I need is a good cup of coffee and I'm good to go,"

Cassidy said, following the hostess back to a booth by the side window after the hostess gave her a suspicious look. Like before, Cassidy had bundled herself up and hid her face well.

That said, I wasn't sure how she planned to eat with the scarf in front of her mouth and her hat practically covering her eyes.

"Should we place an order to go?" I asked, pausing outside the booth.

She shook her head, her hazel eyes meeting mine. Normal, I reminded myself, slowly lowering into the booth across from her. She wanted something normal, and coming to Maggie's on a cold day was as normal as anyone could get.

Already knowing what I wanted to eat no thanks to her, I set my menu down on the table between us. "I'm getting pancakes, and it's all your fault," I said, using the sternest voice I could. My smile gave me away.

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She giggled. “Right, like you weren’t planning on it, anyway.”

“Actually, I was going to get one of the orange cranberry muffins but the pancakes sound way too good now.” I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had breakfast out. Most times when I stopped at Maggie’s, it was for a burger or a wrap. Not breakfast, and certainly not sticky pancakes.

The books will be fine, I assured myself, looking at my clean hands as I contemplated my earlier decision.

I’d never messed up a single page inside any of my books and I wasn’t about to start now.

“Why not get both?” Cassidy asked, returning to what I’d said before. “Eat the short stack here and take the muffin for later.”

I sat back when the hostess dropped off our coffee. “I like the way you think.”

Once we placed our order, we fell into easy conversation with one another. Most of it had to do with the store, when my father passed, and why I was the only one working there. In all honesty, it wasn’t any of her business, but just as she needed someone to talk to, I was much of the same. So I talked, possibly more than I had in months, especially to my sister.

“The bills pile up,” I said, adding some cream and sugar to my coffee. “But it isn’t something I can walk away from.”

“That’s how I felt about my mother’s house,” she said, adding milk to her own drink, “but just walking in that front door was too much. I was essentially covering the bills so it could sit there as someone else’s over-sized lawn ornament.

Once I realized how much of a waste it was...” She shrugged.

“I threw a ton of stuff into storage and am just starting to go through it now.”

“How long has it been?” I asked, hoping I didn’t overstep.

“My mother passed away in the summer.”

“But weren’t you—”

“On tour?” She forced a smile, then looked into her own coffee. “Yes. We had to cancel a few shows due to my getting sick, but even when we were here to handle her things...”

“It was still work,” I finished for her.

“My manager insisted on keeping to my old routine. He said it was healthy, but in the short time I was home, I didn’t get to grieve. I was a machine, going through the motions and feeling nothing at all.”

“I think that happens to a lot of us,” I said, looking back on my own loss. “I didn’t cry at my Dad’s funeral. I know people expect you to, but to be honest, I was still expecting him to pop up in the shop somewhere. It’s childish, but I just didn’t feel like he was gone.”

“When did it hit you? The loss?” she asked, looking right at me while balancing her spoon between her hand and the edge of her cup.

“Not until months later. I was trying to unpack a box that refused to open. I got frustrated and, well, that’s when everything hit.”

“So then this is normal,” she said, her voice being one I couldn’t read. “I keep thinking if I just get rid of one more box, maybe it’ll help, but it seems like the more I throw out, the more stuff piles up.”

“It’s a lifetime of things you’re trying to replace. The best way to handle it is one brick at a time.”

“And how’s that wall coming along for you?”

I considered her question along with the collection of items I had tucked away in my apartment. “Very slowly.” Slower than I’d like. Granted, with me running the shop, it wasn’t like I’d ever get rid of it all. Anything not store-related, however, had gone to Goodwill or a local thrift store, one piece at a time.

“I didn’t realize he died,” she said, oblivious to my thoughts. “Your dad. I try to pay attention to the paper when I can, but—”

“We didn’t publish anything,” I said, staring into my coffee.

My voice was hoarse and felt terribly small in such a large space. “Only the immediate family knew, and because I’d already started to work the front of the store, the locals didn’t notice.”

“I would’ve,” she said, offering me a small smile from across the table. “It might not have belonged to me, but that shop gave me a lot of wonderful memories. My mom and I always came there whenever she had off from work, which was rare. She worked two shifts just so we could get by.

I told her I could skip school and get a job to help her out but she wouldn't hear any of it. Her long hours and absence at home were what put me through college. But on the weekends? I got to spend as much time with her as I liked, which included a trip to your dad's shop. Your shop," she corrected herself.

"It's still his," I said. "Even if he isn't the one paying the bills, I'll always think of it as my dad's store a

nd not my own.”

Our food came just then, giving us both a small reprieve from the memories that haunted us every single day. The way she spoke about her mother was how I felt about my dad. He’d been gone for years, and not a day went by when I didn’t think of him or my mom. It got easier, of course, but they never left my thoughts for very long.

The sound of cutlery filled the space between us as we both dug into our food. The buttery pancakes I’d anticipated ever since we walked through the front door barely registered on my tongue. Maybe I remembered them wrong. Maybe they weren’t as good as when I was a kid. Whatever the reason, it seemed as though Cassidy wasn’t doing any better. She took one bite, grimaced, then pushed her plate to the side, calling the waitress over so she could get a refill on her coffee.

“Aren’t you hungry?” she asked me, tilting her head to one side.

“I am,” I admitted, staring at my pancakes while pushing another bite around the plate with my fork. The river of syrup I poured for them didn’t help. In fact, it made them worse.

With my pancakes ruined, I shoved my plate alongside hers, focusing on Cassidy’s slender hands and pink fingernails.

Embarrassed by my naked nails and their chipped edges, I placed my hands in my lap and turned my attention to the people walking outside.

When I didn't say anything, Cassidy cleared her throat and smiled. "People watching?" she asked with a playful lilt in her voice.

"I feel like it's all I do these days," I told her, wincing when my words came out a lot harder than I'd wanted them to. "I'm sorry. That was out of line."

"How come?" she asked with a laugh. "You're frustrated, and you have every right to be. It must be hard working in a shop that is struggling to keep up with the rest of the world."

Her words were nothing but kind, her eyes full of concern.

"How bad is it if you don't mind my asking?"

I blew out a long breath and offered her a partial shrug.

"Not good." I wasn't about to dump a sap story on the table between us.

This was supposed to be my break away from everything I had waiting for me back at the shop. It was supposed to be fun, but with our food getting cold and my appetite gone, all it was turning into was a bad experience. Except for the company, of course. That was a welcomed change from me being in my own head all the time or eating alone.

"Folks just need to remember how things were a few years ago," she said, oblivious to my thoughts. "We all have memories of going into a bookstore as a kid and picking out that one book we always wanted. I have dozens of them." Her small laugh made me smile.

"In fact," she went on, getting my full attention in the process, "there's one memory that stands out most of all. It was on the weekend and my mom had brought me into

the

store, same as always. You guys were having a reading circle back in the children's section so my mom dropped me off and went to get something from the other side of the store. Your dad served juice boxes and cookies, but my juice box exploded all over my dress as soon as I put the straw inside the hole."

Wait a second...

"I remember this," I said as the scene played out in the back of my mind. "Your mom was pissed."

She laughed and nodded in agreement. "And then your mom came out of the back of the store with some spare clothes she'd kept for you."

"God, I'd forgotten about that. So much happened in the shop when I was a kid, I didn't even realize we used to play together." It wasn't just that one weekend, either. After her mom dropped off the spare clothes, we hung out every weekend. That is until she stopped coming. "Hey, what made you stop coming? Did your mom get slammed with work?"

"No, we actually ended up moving away. Mom regretted it and moved back into the area years later. That's why I wanted to bring the books here, because I knew your family cared about books as much as I did. Man, I was so jealous of you when I was a kid. That bookstore was my version of a castle."

"It was," I agreed, unable to wipe the grin off my face. "It even has a tower. Or, well, sort of. That's what I call the second floor, anyway."

"I've never been up there, actually. My mom always kept to the lower part of the shop since that's what we liked to read. I might have to drop by again sometime to

check it out.”

“I’d like that,” I said, chewing my bottom lip as heat filled my cheeks. “I mean...” I released a frustrated sigh. I had no idea what I meant, but just as she remembered me as a kid, I was starting to remember the weekends I spent with her.

It took some time to recognize her since so many kids came into the shop all the time, but once I did, I looked forward to her visits. I was heartbroken when she stopped coming and always thought it was because of something I’d said.

“It’d be nice to catch up,” she said, practically reading my thoughts. When I looked at her, there was a warm smile on her face. “I need to get back to cleaning out that storage, but how does next weekend sound?”

“Next weekend would be great.”

She gave me a curt nod, then ordered a muffin to go. In the end, we spent another hour talking about how we used to sit in the back of the store away from all of the noise to read books and how, even if we didn’t talk, we always knew the other one was there, stuck in her own world of fantasy and magic.

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Living in a world where everyone knew her name, it was easy to see she wanted somewhere to sit and be normal, and my shop was just the place.

Chapter Six

If I thought I'd obsessed about Cass visiting the store before, I was a complete wreck now. Finally, I had someone to share the shop with. Not that she'd come to work with me or anything, but to actually have someone in the shop, someone who actually wanted to be there and had the same memories I did? It was amazing. My sister thought I was out of my mind, but then she didn't know who Cassidy was. I decided to keep her full identity a secret as it really wasn't my place.

Besides, it wasn't like I saw our old acquaintance going much further than that. It was nice to talk books with someone who actually got it instead of rambling things off to my sister while she only half-listened to whatever it was I'd said.

Bridget used to love books as much as I did, but when our dad passed away, she gave up on them as well.

To be honest, I probably would've done the same thing if books hadn't always been my escape from the real world.

They were the closest thing I had to a therapist because whenever I was inside a book, I was able to take a break from my own head. Needless to say, I read as often as I could, which was never as much as I liked.

Between working at the shop, going over bills, and planning how long I could stretch

things out, there was very little time left for books. Somehow, I made time every single day, forfeiting a full night's sleep for a handful of chapters, chapters that turned into the entire book if it happened to be one of the really good ones.

Until last night. Until I had something else to look forward to.

As soon as she walked into the shop with a bag in one hand and a tray of coffees in the other, I couldn't help but smile.

"I hope you don't mind, but I decided to get us breakfast."

She stepped up to the counter and deposited the items, removing a pair of muffins from the bag before throwing it

away. "I can't get anything done on an empty stomach and felt rude just getting something for myself."

I smiled my thanks and put the inventory I'd been working on to the side. The cranberry orange muffin was a welcomed surprise, one of which I devoured without giving it a second thought.

"I'm not too early, am I?" she asked, giving the stack of books a worried glance.

I followed her line of sight, then quickly waved her concerns away. "Not at all. They can wait until later. I tend to get around to the inventory whenever I get the chance."

She nodded, then looked around the room, pausing to admire the wall of books she'd noticed the last time she was in along with the front window. "This room used to get so much light," she said in a warm voice, pressing her back into the counter as she slowly took apart her own muffin, one bite at a time.

Much like before, she was covered in layers, turning away from the front window whenever someone happened to walk by the shop.

“Do you ever get tired of it?” I asked, walking over to join her on the other side of the counter.

“Do I ever get tired of what?” She tilted her head to the side, the hint of a smile teasing her pink lips.

“Hiding?” I wasn’t exactly sure what to call it, but it was painfully clear she didn’t want to be bombarded by her fans.

She released a breath, then reached behind her to grab one of the coffees. “Sometimes,” she admitted, taking a sip before closing the lid again. “While I love my fans, there are times I wish I could just go outside without sunglasses or wearing a million layers, you know?”

“I might not be able to relate but I do understand. Finding your normal, new or otherwise, is usually what keeps us sane.

It’s my routine that actually gets me through the day most of the time.”

“Yeah, but at least you can walk down the street without getting pulled aside every now and then. I used to love walking all through town, but what once took me all of two hours can take three or more depending on how much someone wants to talk. And if the vendor I go to doesn’t understand the way you and the folks at Maggie’s do, that time ends up being even longer.”

“I can’t stand when someone recognizes me in the grocery store and insists on talking for fifteen minutes, especially when that someone only knew me from band practice in high school.”

She laughed at that. “Band practice, huh?” She looked at me a moment, tapping her chin as she did. “I guess I could see that.”

“I didn’t last long,” I admitted with a shrug. “It wasn’t for me.”

“But I bet creativ

e writing was.”

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God yes. “English was one of the only classes I ever looked forward to. What about you? Were you always into music?”

Thinking back to the time we spent inside the shop when we were kids, I couldn’t remember if she talked much about it or not.

“I sang to music I liked just like anyone else, but then I sort of fell into it in college. I honestly didn’t expect things to go very far, but my friend, the one who had leukemia, always told me to pursue my dreams.” Her breath hitched at the end, but as quickly as it came, it was gone. “We went to prom together,”

she said with a smile. “Her mother begged us not to. She thought it would make her even worse. Her dad took us instead, hanging around in the parking lot so he could bring us home after one dance. That’s all she ever wanted, to wear a beautiful dress and have one dance.”

“It sounds like you gave her that and so much more.”

She offered me a curt nod, then sipped from her coffee again. “Anyway, she was the only one who knew I could sing until years after she passed away. I was in college and decided

to join the choir we had on campus just for fun. That’s how it all started. I haven’t looked back since.”

“I remember the first single you put out,” I said, trying not to gush over her even though I really wanted to. It was strange, being able to talk to her like this without

even realizing who she was. Maybe it was because I still remembered the little girl I used to play with, the one I read books with, or maybe it was because I didn't just see her as a singer or an artist but as someone who needed a break, same as me.

"It's still one of my best," she said with a hint of sadness in her eyes. "That one's about her, actually."

"Get Me Through?" I asked, continuing when she nodded a response. "I always thought it was about your mom," I said, going over the lyrics in the back of my head.

"It wasn't supposed to be a love song," she said, lowering her gaze so I couldn't see her eyes. "I wanted to write something completely different because one dance wasn't enough. It was all we could afford, though. I also didn't want to write a song I wouldn't be able to sing on tour without constantly thinking about her so... I changed a lot of it."

My heart went out to her. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It was a very long time ago."

Ten years ago wasn't a long time, not when it came to losing someone and having to let them go. "I'm still sorry," I said, placing my hand on hers, "but if you're anything like me, you probably want to drop the subject, right?"

She looked at me then with a kind smile and relief in her eyes. "Please."

"Consider it dropped," I said, happy to change the subject so long as it was what she wanted. Talking about the past is hard, but sometimes it's what we need most. In that moment, I could see Cassidy needed something else, an escape from her real life. "Oh, if you ever want to avoid being jumped outside, you can always come in through the back. Just give me a call beforehand and I can unlock the door for you."

Her eyes lit up. “God, that would be a huge help. Just being in here with all of these books...” She released a contented sigh. “I don’t know how I’m ever going to leave.”

“Wait until you see the tower,” I teased, taking my own coffee from the counter before heading back in its general direction. “The stairs are a bit narrow, but there’s a railing there if you need it.”

Knowing she was right behind me, I reached the second floor in record time, stepping aside so she could get the full experience once she reached the last step. Her face brightened as soon as she did. Pausing at the top of the steps, she held on to the railing with her free hand, taking a moment to look around the room.

Unlike the lower level of the bookstore, this one wasn’t crammed full of books and had no carpeting to speak of.

Instead, books from my own collection sat behind a pair of glass cases, each one standing on either side of the room. On the far side of the room, across from the stairs, sat a set of beige sofas, each one covered in pillows and blankets.

Like I said, no one ever went up to the tower, so it was mostly meant for my sister if she ever decided to drop by as well as myself.

Once she had her fill, Cass effortlessly glided toward one of the sofas, sitting down on the one closest to the window. The window wasn’t big and didn’t offer much of a view, but it still got some of the best sun in the afternoon.

“I can’t believe I never came up here,” she said, sitting back with her coffee. “It’s like a dream.”

“It really is,” I agreed, joining her on the sofa with a cushion of space between us. “I try to come up here at least once a day during lunch. It’s my happy place.”

“I used to have one of those,” she thought aloud, tilting her head back before closing her eyes. “It was the crawlspace. My mom hated whenever I went in there because the ceiling was only four feet off the ground and it wasn’t carpeted. Still, it was my place to hide out and just enjoy the quiet, you know?”

“I do. I had a place like it, actually, but I usually ran out as soon as I saw a spider.”

She fell into a fit of giggles, coughing once she was through. “The spiders never bothered me, but I stopped using the crawlspace once my dad installed a bunch of rat traps. I never saw any of those, either, but getting my finger snapped by one of the traps was more than enough reason for me.”

I winced at that. “Where is your dad now?”

“He bailed when I was nine.” She shrugged and left it at that. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be saying any of this as we only just met.”

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“I don’t see anything wrong with it,” I said, smiling at her as I spoke. “We’re just sharing war stories, and it isn’t like I’m planning to go to the press or anything. I’m a very private person, so I get it. Besides, it’s nice having someone to talk to.”

“I thought you had a sister.”

“I do, but our interests don’t match.” Boy, was that the understatement of the year! “She’s into guys and flashy cars and I’m just... me.”

“Books, books, and more books?”

“Pretty much, though I do enjoy listening to music from time to time.” I gave her a pointed look and laughed when she did the same.

“Thank you for this,” she said, gesturing at the room.

“For what?” Was she referring to the tower, my words, or the company?

“For being normal. It sounds like such a simple thing, but most people act differently around me.”

“And you don’t think I am?” I asked.

“No,” she said without a bit of hesitation. “All this time, you could’ve asked me about my friend, my mom, or work.

Instead, you dropped the subject as soon as it got uncomfortable and happily talked

about something else. Being

in my line of work, you learn to read people and their intentions. You're a good person, Evie, and I'm really glad I ran into you."

"Well, anytime you need to get away from the world, you can always come here."

"I might have to take you up on that." She paused and checked the time on her phone. Her bright smile faded a second later. "Unfortunately, I need to run. Can't keep the manager waiting. Thank you again. You have no idea how much this meant to me."

"I have a pretty good idea," I said, placing a hand on her shoulder as we neared the stairs. "And you're welcome here anytime."

Once I saw her out, I did everything I could to relieve the butterflies in my stomach. I'd just spent the last hour with Cassidy Blake, the Cassidy Blake, and as much as I wanted to gush over her, I knew I made the right choice. She was just a person, same as everybody else, so if she needed a place to hide, I promised to do whatever I could to give her that.

Even if it means giving up the tower for a little while.

Chapter Seven

"So, how did your date go?" my sister asked once I finally bothered to answer one of her

calls.

Oh my god... "For the last time, it wasn't a date." And I really wished she'd stop calling it that.

“Uh huh.” She wasn’t convinced. “Are you going to see her again?”

“Yes. I thank so. I...” I honestly wasn’t sure. That was completely up to Cassidy and whatever time she had left before going back on tour. She said she’d be back on tour in a few weeks so...

“But you’d like to see her again,” my sister said with a smile in her voice. “First dates are always tough,” she added, likely looking back on personal experience. “You need to feel her out, you know?”

I rolled my eyes even though she couldn’t see me. “Like I said, it wasn’t a date. We hung out in the shop and talked books, that’s it.” That wasn’t entirely true, but if I wanted to keep Cassidy’s identity a secret, a few white lies couldn’t hurt.

“For you, that’s a date. You used to spend hours with...

what was her name?” Bridget released a long breath, then continued. “You spent hours in the bookstore down the way going cover to cover just to see if they had something we didn’t.”

“I wasn’t that bad, was I?” I knew I liked to go with my ex to the other bookstores, but we met over books as well. She never said anything, so I figured it was fine.

“If someone likes you enough, they’ll listen to you ramble over stories and far-off worlds just to enjoy your company.”

“You’re starting to sound like Mom.” It was exactly something she would’ve said if she were still alive.

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“So what can you tell me about her?” Bridget asked, going back to our original conversation. “Is she cute?”

“Bridget!” I groaned, thankful when she couldn’t see the color on my cheeks. “If you must know, yes, she’s cute.” Very cute. I smiled then, looking around the shop at where we sat a few days ago. If I looked hard enough, I could almost see her sitting on the sofa beside the front window with a book in her lap.

“And when are you supposed to see her again?” She didn’t ask about my next date this time but it was implied.

“I...” I paused, chewing my bottom lip as I did. “I don’t know. She’s really busy with work right now and I don’t know when it’s going to get any better.”

Not to mention her going back on tour meant she wasn’t girlfriend material. Not for me, anyway. I never cared for the long distance thing, and believe me, I tried. College was a bad time to start a new relationship, especially when that girlfriend decided to go to school several states away.

But with Cassidy, she’d be gone more often and for longer periods of time. The timezones alone would make talking to her extremely difficult.

Not that we were dating, of course, but she was nice to talk to.

“You guys didn’t set up another date?” my sister asked, surprised.

“Sort of?” I’d offered Cassidy a place to go when she needed to unwind, but that

didn't really count, did it? My sister would know for sure, but not without me sharing every single detail with her. If there was one thing I knew about Cassidy Blake it was her need for privacy, privacy I was happy to give any way I could.

"So it wasn't a date," Bridget said with an exasperated sigh.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you. We're just friends." More like acquaintances, really, but it wasn't like I'd know the difference.

The friends I had growing up were the ones I read about inside one of my books. Mom and Dad tried to get me to hang out with a girl down the street, but I couldn't be bothered.

It's really hard to date when you're as awkward as me.

"Is there anything you can tell me about her?" This was usually when Bridget would give up and find a reason to hang up the phone. Instead, she wanted to keep talking, drawing as much information out of me as she could.

It wasn't that I didn't want to talk about it, but after seeing the lengths Cassidy went to just to have a semi-normal day out, it didn't feel right. So I shared as little as possible, which wasn't nearly as much as my sister would've liked.

"She used to come into the shop," I said, focusing on when we were kids. "I didn't realize it was her because of how long it's been."

"And she still lives in the area?"

Of that, I wasn't sure. "She's taking care of a few family things."

"Like you did after Dad passed away."

“Yeah. That’s how the journals ended up at the shop. She was cleaning out the house. Anyway, I don’t know if I’ll see her again because I don’t know how long she’s supposed to be in town. I think she just wants to take care of things here and move on, you know?”

“I do, but that also explains why you’re drawn to her. And don’t tell me you’re not. I can tell you’re holding something back, which probably has more to do with you protecting her rather than yourself. You always were a giver, Evie. Because you handled things after Dad passed away, it makes sense for you to take a liking to someone facing the same thing.”

“And she likes books,” I pointed out with a small smile.

“Don’t forget that.”

“Well of course she does,” Bridget said, laughing as she did.

“I’m glad you’ve found someone, Evie, even if it’s only for a short while.”

“Me too.” More than I realized, actually.

“And if it turns out she really isn’t living here anymore, at least you know what to write on your dating profile.”

“Bridget!” I almost screamed, covering my mouth when someone walking on the sidewalk paused to look inside the shop.

“What? It’s true. Smart, down to earth blonde seeks other bookworms. It’s perfect!”

I shook my head but couldn’t help the smile on my face.

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“I’m hanging up now.”

“Love you!” she said in her sweetest voice, drawing out the words before finally hanging up.

Alone in the shop, silence quickly fell down around me.

Aside from the very light music I had playing on the overhead speakers, all was quiet. There were no kids in the children’s section giggling over brightly colored books, no adults taking them through the shop to pick out one of their favorites, and no one sitting up front with their morning paper.

The life that once existed inside the shop was no more, replaced with full shelves, silence, and empty chairs. As quickly as my sister had lifted my spirits, that warm feeling disappeared, traded for a cold shop and no one to share it with.

Cassidy finally reached out to me the following week. I’d just finished putting a new shipment of books on the shelves when I got a text, soon followed by rapid tapping on the back door. Before I could get the door open the entire way, she slipped inside, sounding terribly out of breath as she spoke.

“Thanks. My manager’s been hounding me all morning, and I could really use the quiet,” she said, her words running together. “He seriously wants me to do this interview on channel eight and... you’d think after working with me for years he’d know I don’t do that.” When she finally ran out of breath, she sucked in a lungful of air, then offered me an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry. You don’t want to hear about this. It’s just I don’t really have anyone else to talk to since my mom’s gone and

Joel's got his own life to tend to."

"Who's Joel?" I asked, stepping aside before gesturing toward the front of the shop where it got the most sunlight.

"Oh, he's my best friend. We used to live down the street from one another, but he's got his own things going on so I don't want to weigh him down." Realizing what she'd said, she looked at me and corrected herself. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that I want to trouble you, either, it's just... god, talking's hard this early in the morning."

I giggled, then gently placed a hand on her shoulder. "I've been there, so I totally get it." I stepped behind the front counter and removed the red coffee maker from underneath of it, plugging it in before putting in some fresh beans and filtered water I always kept alongside it. "It might not be as good as the stuff they sell at Maggie's, but it should help," I said, referring to the coffee as it started to brew.

"After my dad died, my sister didn't want to talk about it.

Aside from the funeral, she acted as though it didn't exist. In her mind, our dad had gone on a much-needed vacation. It wasn't until later when she finally faced it, but by then, she was too stuck in her own head to share her feelings with me."

"She sounds young," Cassidy said, leaning against the front counter and smiling her thanks when I handed her a fresh cup of coffee. "You're a lifesaver. Truly. And this isn't nearly as bad as you make it sound," she said, holding up the mug so she could study it. "I like it."

"It isn't too plain for your accomplished palette?" I teased, hiding my smile behind my own mug when she looked at me again.

"Please. I don't really do all the fancy stuff. People would like to think so, but I've

had times when I came close to living on the streets, so I tend to hold on to whatever funds I get.”

“I’m the same way. Aside from the shop, I don’t spend much at all. Anyway, my sister is only a few years younger than me, but she had a hard time dealing with things when Dad passed away, so I didn’t press her. I wanted to talk about it and sort things out, but she didn’t.”

“So you did it all yourself?” Cassidy asked, her brow furrowing above her eyes.

I offered her a partial shrug, then walked over to one of the sofas in the front lounge so we could sit down. “For a little bit.

She helped with the house when she could. There were a lot of things she wanted to keep that belonged to our mom. I’d sooner get rid of everything but the shop because everything else doesn’t come close to the significance of where we are now. Anyway, I’m rambling. Like I said before, I get it.

Talking to someone, anyone, can really help. I once rambled off to one of the waitresses at Maggie’s. It was later in the day and they had a lull, but I still felt bad for holding her up.”

“They must’ve known him, though,” Cassidy said, sitting cross-legged on the sofa across from mine.

“They did, so I guess that made it a little easier, but we all can

’t be so lucky. “I gave her a pointed look, leaning back as I did. “So why is your manager pressuring you to get in the public’s eye?”

She blew out a long breath, causing a tendril of hair to flutter in front of her face. She

tucked it behind her ear, then spoke. “Probably because my last song was written three years ago. It isn’t like I’m not trying, but after my mom got sick, I just didn’t see the point. I couldn’t put my energy toward it.”

“But you still went on tour?”

“I did,” she said, choking around the words. “I thought I was doing it for the fans, but I was honestly afraid of what I’d have to face once I came home. Does that make me a terrible person?”

I quickly shook my head, then got to my feet so I could join her on the other side of the lounge. “It means you’re human.

It’s normal to want to run from the pain. That’s what Bridget did and what I would’ve done if I had someone else around to handle all of the stress. However, seeing as I’m the oldest...”

“You took it upon yourself to carry the full weight so your sister could cope,” she finished for me, smiling as she did.

“My manager was understanding at first, but he gets impatient.

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Sales are down, apparently, which is usually when he throws one of his fits.”

“So he thinks you going on this interview or whatever will increase sales?”

“That’s his hope.”

“And what about you?” I asked, sitting on the sofa so I was looking right at her.

She stared into her coffee, shaking her head as she spoke.

“My needs—”

“Are just as important as anyone else. You aren’t a machine, Cassidy. We all need time for ourselves, even if it means talking to someone you barely know just to get things off your chest.”

She laughed at that. It was a tight, uncomfortable laugh, but was still enough to make her smile. “Has anyone ever told you you would’ve made a great therapist?”

“I’m only talking from experience. I wouldn’t be much help otherwise. But you’re avoiding the question. You don’t need to answer me but think about it for yourself. What is it you want?

Why do you want to avoid the public eye so much?” I had a feeling I knew the answer, but I left it at that. If she wanted to answer me, she could. If not, that was fine too.

In the end, she placed her mug in her lap and leaned her head back on the sofa, closing her eyes as she spoke. “I know as soon as I get on that stage, I’ll have to explain my absence.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to anyone.”

“But even if they don’t ask, I know it’ll be at the backs of their minds, and I’m just not ready to talk about it, you know?”

I smiled gently. “I do.”

“But then I’m talking to you and...”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, placing my hand on hers without a bit of hesitation.

“Like I said, we all need someone to talk to, even if it’s someone we barely know.”

There was a slight shine to her eyes, and when she spoke again, there were tears in her voice as well. “And if I want to

get to know her even better?”

“Then I guess we’ll just have to take things one day at a time,” I said, swallowing around the lump that had formed in the back of my throat.

“I’d like that.”

“Me too.”

Even if she was only in town for a little while.

Chapter Eight

We spent most of the morning sharing all the funny things our folks did around the holidays and anything else we could think of to keep the mood light and completely off whatever it was her manager wanted her to do. By lunch, we ordered some burgers and fries from Maggie's, closed up the shop, then went back upstairs.

It was strange having lunch in the tower with someone else.

No one ever came up here, and the few times Bridget actually joined me, I'd begged her to do so. Not Cassidy. As soon as I turned the shop sign from open to closed, she flew up those steps, breathing a sigh a relief once she reached the top.

Her manager had been calling all morning, grating on her nerves as the day went on. When he texted her before lunch, I took the phone from her and turned it off. Granted, I could see she wanted to check her messages as she kept touching the phone which she'd hidden in her pocket.

"He'll find you if it's an emergency," I told her as we sat down to enjoy our lunch.

"He doesn't know I'm here," she said between bites. "No one does."

"Hiding out," I said with a nod of approval. "I like it."

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“Me too,” she admitted with a laugh, covering her mouth when her bite of pickle tried to slip off her lip. “Man, this is so good. I forgot how much I loved going to Maggie’s.”

“Breakfast, lunch, dinner... they do it all. I could eat there all the time if I didn’t have respect for my waistline.”

That got a laugh out of her. “You’re funny.”

“I try to be.” I got quiet a moment, thinking back to something she’d said earlier. “So you really haven’t written anything new in years?”

She looked at me as though I’d just slapped her. Her face paled and she looked at everything inside the room except me.

“Sorry, you don’t need to answer. I’m just trying to make conversation.” One of which didn’t go as planned.

“No, it’s okay,” she said, wiping her mouth with a napkin before finishing up her fries and drink. “I’ve written a few of them, but there’s a big difference between writing a song and wanting to sing it for someone else.”

“So they’re private,” I said, “which is totally fine, by the way.”

“My manager would beg to differ. If he knew I was withholding new material...” She shook her head, then dropped the subject altogether.

“It isn’t any of his business,” I told her, “and you should be able to sing whatever and however you want. In fact, if you need a place to sing just for yourself, you can come up here.

Folks rarely come into the shop, so you could treat it like your own personal studio.”

“Really?” she asked with disbelief, her eyes going wide when she looked at me again.

I shrugged, then said, “It isn’t like anyone else is using the space. Besides, the shop could use a pick-me-up.”

“Singing to cheer up a shop,” she said with a laugh. “I like it, and I’d be honored to sing in this room. Besides, it would mean hanging out with you some more before I have to go back on tour, so in that sense, it’s a win-win.”

There was that smile again. The same exact smile that made my entire stomach swirl with nerves.

“Then I’ll leave you to it,” I said, getting up from my spot so I finish what was left of my lunch before opening the shop downstairs.

“I’ll just be a few more minutes, then I’ll grab my gear from the car.”

“Take your time,” I said, stopping at the top of the steps and hoping I didn’t look as silly as I felt. My smile was starting to make my cheeks hurt, and as I hovered with my hand on the

railing, I knew I’d lingered longer than I should. “I’ll be downstairs if you need me.”

I didn’t wait for an answer, forcing my legs to move before I said something I might regret. Something like how pretty she was, or happy I was to have her around, and

how badly I wanted to take the day off just to hang out with her. Those were things something would say to her girlfriend, not someone she just met.

It's just because I haven't dated in a while, I decided, excusing my childish feelings of lust as nothing more than that. It was lust, plain and simple. Once she was around for a while, things would calm down.

I was almost sure of it.

As promised, the afternoon inside the shop was slow and quiet. I still managed to find something to do, but in reality, it was just to keep my mind off of Cassidy. Things like rotating the books on the front wall yet again even though I'd just done it, or cleaning the fr

ont window and putting some books on the windowsill to try and bring in more business.

There was a time when putting new books inside the window meant a rush of foot traffic, but not anymore. Folks were so glued to their phones that even when they went out for a walk, their heads were down and their minds completely oblivious to the world around them.

Okay, so not everyone was like that, but it certainly felt that way. At least I'm not alone, I thought with a smile, turning back toward the inside of the shop once I arranged the books inside the window.

Cassidy hadn't said more than a few words between her trips to the car and back. I wasn't exactly sure what she planned to do up in the tower, but it didn't involve singing.

She didn't take up her guitar case which I'm sure she kept with her at all times. As far

as I could tell, she didn't sing, either.

Perhaps the offer of having a place to unwind was enough.

She could've just as easily gone up there to read whatever

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books she'd put away for safekeeping. A part of me wanted to go up and check on her, but in the end, I focused on my work instead.

When she quietly slipped downstairs an hour later, she almost gave me a heart attack.

"I'm going out for some coffee. Would you like some?" she asked, causing me to hit my head on the front counter as I'd been looking for a few books I'd stored away earlier. "Oh god, I'm sorry." She rushed over to my side of the counter and helped me up, her hand warm on my arm.

With my heart racing and my head throbbing the slightest bit, I managed to get to my feet with her help, then braced my hands on the counter to keep my balance. Man, that hurt. I winced when I tried to look at the overhead lights, dropping my gaze moments later.

"We should call someone," Cassidy said, her voice full of concern. She already had out her phone but hesitated when I placed my hand over the screen. "You could have a concussion," she said.

I waved her concerns away, holding my eyes tight until the throbbing in my head quieted to a dull roar. "I'd know if I did.

I've had one before," I said, meeting her eyes again. "It isn't the first time that's happened, "I told her, hoping it would put her mind at ease. "I used to hide under there as a kid. It drove my mom crazy because I was always in the way." The cubbie under the counter was a wonderful place to read a book instead of doing my homework, so long as there was room, anyway.

She didn't look convinced, crossing her arms in front of her chest as I shifted my weight from one foot to the other. "I still think you should have it looked at."

"It's fine," I assured her, forcing a smile. "What was it you asked me again?" I didn't exactly hear all of it no thanks to the loud crack my head made when it connected with the counter.

"Coffee," she said, not moving from where she was, "but we could always make some here," she added, gesturing to the little pot I had behind the register.

She didn't want to leave, that much was clear in the way she spoke and how she hovered in front of me, her eyes never leaving mine. Worry lines marred her beautiful face, her lips pinched in a tight line as she contemplated what to do.

"Go," I said with an uneasy laugh. "Get something from Maggie's. I'll be here when you get back."

"Are you sure? Because I could—"

"It's okay," I assured her, thankful when the pain in my head finally passed.

She hesitated a moment more, then put her phone back in her pocket and bundled up before going back out onto the sidewalk. If anyone knew who she was with all her layers, they didn't say a word. She easily stepped in front of a small crowd and kept walking, walking out of my line of sight soon after.

Knowing she'd be back, I finished what I'd been doing earlier, then opened the front door when I saw her walking up to the shop. She smiled her thanks, then handed one of the coffees she'd bought to me along with another muffin I didn't need.

"Just in case," she told me when I tried to give it back. "You don't need to eat it right

now, but if you get hungry, it's there,"

she added with a smile, placing her coffee on the counter so she could unravel the scarf around her neck and face before shoving it along with a fuzzy hat inside her coat pockets.

"Doesn't that get exhausting?" I asked, immediately wishing I hadn't.

She paused, looking at me as though I'd spoken a completely different language. "It does," she admitted, rolling her shoulders before fixing the sleeves of her shirt, "but it's better than hiding away all the time or getting interrupted during a meal."

I nodded my understanding, then took a sip of the coffee she'd brought for me. Surprisingly, it was just the way I liked it.

"I saw how you fixed your cup before," she told me, likely sensing my confusion. "I'm observant like that. My mom always told me it was a strange habit, but I just call it common courtesy. You treated me, so now I'm treating you." With that, she walked over to one of the sofas and plopped down, leaning back into the cushions once she did.

"You didn't have to, but thanks," I said, glancing outside at the empty sidewalk before joining her again.

"You'll know if anyone comes in," she said, looking from me to the glass doors that were to the left and behind her.

"And if you sit over there, then you'll see them as well."

I sat across from her and smiled. "I know. I just never liked going into a shop where the employees were sitting down or leaning against the furniture and talking to one

another.”

“Especially when you need their help,” Cassidy said, holding up her coffee as she did.

“I can’t imagine anyone not stopping to help you,” I said, apologizing soon after. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I try not to get someone else’s attention,” she admitted,

“mostly because it means taking several minutes out of my already busy schedule to talk. I love my fans, I really, so it’s just... I like to be normal sometimes. I want to walk into a clothing store and gather my things without an employee rushing over to see if I’ll be wearing it on my upcoming tour.

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It's kind of nice going to a smaller town than this one where hardly anyone knows the name Cassidy Blake."

"I can imagine, but if you're so against the extra attention, why do it at all?" The words slipped from my mouth before I could pull them back.

To my surprise, Cassidy didn't miss a beat. "I liked it in the beginning. Getting recognized for something I'd worked so hard on was great, but over the years, it's become rather intrusive." She released a long breath and looked down in her lap. "I wanted to give my mother the funeral she deserved, but I couldn't because I knew the entire town would show up."

"That wouldn't have been so bad." At least I didn't think so.

"No, but then you get the reporters and someone taking a shot of a private moment. I just couldn't face that after she passed away. It would've made the day about something else besides her and tarnish her memory, so I had to do something private instead." She choked back a sob, then waved me away when I rushed over to give her a handful of tissues. "I can't even visit her grave because someone might be there."

"You think people hang out at her grave waiting for you?" I asked, lowering onto the sofa beside her.

She shook her head, her hair shielding her eyes from view.

"I don't know what to think, but it's the fear that keeps me from visiting."

“I haven’t gone to see my dad in a while,” I said, grimacing when guilt tightened in my chest. “I went a few times, but it only feels cold and lonely when I do, so I just stay here.”

“It must be hard but also sounds kind of nice having a place you shared with him.”

“It is,” I agreed, smiling when she looked at me again.

There were tears in her eyes, and when I reached out to caress her cheek, she didn’t stop me, leaning into my touch instead.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized, pulling back before I did something we’d both regret.

“Don’t be. You’re the first person who’s truly treated me like an actual person since my mom passed away. My manager thinks I’m a superhero and can’t be bothered by feelings, and I haven’t told anyone else. They just think I’m on break. Well, aside from Joel, that is. He knows, but he’s so busy with work that I haven’t been able to keep up with him.”

“Your friend, right?” When she nodded, I smiled. “At least you can still talk to him.”

“I can, but our conversations are usually rushed. He did promise to visit me when I go back on tour, so there’s that.”

She cleared her throat, blew her nose, then put the tissue in her pocket. “Look at me being a blubbering mess when I haven’t even asked you how you’re doing. Are you feeling any better?”

The way she looked at me then with strands of hair stuck to her cheeks, I couldn’t help but smile.

“I am, actually. The coffee helps.” And I was pretty sure the muffin would as well.

She got quiet then, and at first I thought it was something I’d said, but then she asked me something I never thought I’d ever hear. “If I went to visit my mom...” She shook her head.

“Nevermind.”

I reached over and placed my hand on hers. “Would you like me to go with you?” I knew what it was like having to visit the cemetery after losing someone. It was nerve-wracking and always left an uneasy feeling in my stomach.

The fact Cassidy never got to go and the way she asked then, I could tell she needed the company.

“You don’ think it’d be weird?” she asked, looking at me with disbelief. “I mean, we know each other, but I’m sure you’d rather stay here.”

“Maybe,” I said, “but if I do, would you actually go on your own?” When she didn’t say anything, I continued. “You should at least see her before you go back on tour,” I told her matter-of-factly. “When you do, I’d be happy to join you.”

I couldn’t

??t believe what I’d just said. Cemeteries gave me the creeps even before my folks passed away. I wasn’t one of those kids who walked around in the cemetery taking pictures and hated when my folks took us there to visit some of our other relatives.

Still, if it would put Cassidy’s mind at ease, then there was no way I couldn’t help.

She doesn’t have anyone else. She’d said so herself, and aside from her old friend

who was who-knows-where, I was the best thing she had.

“Think of it as a support group,” I said after giving it some thought.

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“You mean like one of those grief counselors?” she asked, tilting her head to the side so her eyes caught the afternoon

sunlight just right.

“Sort of, only our meeting will be in the cemetery. You can talk to your mom, to me, or not at all.” To be honest, it sounded kind of nice, just being able to sit with someone and be present with my own thoughts. It wasn’t something I did very often as most of the time those thoughts involved the shop and my pile of bills.

“You really don’t mind?”

I offered her a partial shrug. “It’s been nice having someone else around,” I said, averting my gaze as heat brushed my cheeks.

“Especially when she understands what you’re going through?” she urged, placing a hand on my knee.

“Exactly.”

“Could we go tomorrow during lunch?” she asked, her voice wavering a bit.

“Only if you’re ready,” I told her, placing my hand on hers.

“You have plenty of time.”

“Time goes by fast in this business,” she said with a nervous laugh.

“It does,” I agreed, “but the offer still stands no matter if you want to go tomorrow or months from now.”

“Thank you,” she said, leaning her head on my shoulder a moment later.

Smiling, I let myself be present with her, taking in the sweet scent of her shampoo and the warmth of her body next to mine. Even if our meeting one another didn’t amount to anything, it was still the happiest I’d been in months. If I could give her the same in return, I would.

Chapter Nine

Weeks passed since Cassidy last spoke about her mother, and even though she visited the store on a regular basis to hide out in the tower, it felt as though a wedge had forced its way between us. She still had the same smile, the same soft voice, and always brought me a coffee from Maggie’s in the morning, but something was still off.

When she spoke, there was an edge to her words, and whenever she managed to meet my gaze, she looked away soon after. It wasn’t in that shy, I like you kind of way, either.

No. It was almost as though she was guarding herself, slowly pushing away from me to avoid discomfort later on. I used to do the same thing, so I honestly couldn’t blame her.

Even so, it hurt seeing her with her eyes down and very few words shared between us.

“I finally did it,” she said one morning after handing me my coffee. “The storage from my mom’s house is empty.”

I looked at her, unsure of what to say. Was she pleased to have the weight off her shoulders? Or was she like me and regretted getting rid of some of her mother's things in the first place?

"It's surreal," she said, oblivious to my thoughts. "I knew it would take time, but I sort of pushed it from my mind and simply went through the motions. I can't remember where I dropped half the stuff off, but it's empty." Her voice was tight and hard to read.

Definitely not a happy occasion. "I'm sure her things went to those who needed them most," I assured her. "I remember sorting through everything before giving them away. I don't remember all that much aside from how hard it was to sort through someone else's life."

She offered me a curt nod. "It's strange. In the end, all our lives come down to are an assortment of boxes, packaging tape, and bubble wrap."

"And those who are still around to remember us," I added, forcing a smile.

"I'm sorry if I've been distant," she apologized, her brows furrowing the slightest bit. "I was stuck in my own head."

"It's okay. I figured it was something like that and I didn't want to bother you in case it was something you had to do it on your own."

"Thank you for that. Thing is, I still can't bring myself to visit her by myself. It shouldn't be that hard but..." She blew out a frustrated breath. "It's not that I need to go, but—"

"You don't have to explain," I told her, walking around to her side of the counter so I could take her hand in mine. It was something I'd done before, only this time, instead

of easing her mind, it only seemed to make matters worse.

Her body tensed, and after gently pulling her hand away from mine, she played with the top of her coffee cup. It was easy to see she didn't want me to notice, but I knew what it felt like when someone blew me off, which was exactly what she was doing.

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“My offer from before still stands,” I told her, forcing back the tension in my throat as I turned away, tidying up behind the counter once I did. “Everyone can use a friend,” I told her when she didn’t say anything. “And even though I might not be the friend you’d like to take with you, I’m not about to let you go on your own when you could use the company. Heck, I could just drive you over there and sit in the car until you’re done, whatever you like.”

“Could we go during lunch?” she asked hopefully, passing me a small smile as she continued to fidget with the tab on the top of her coffee lid.

I glanced outside and checked the time. With less than an hour to go until lunch, closing up early wouldn’t hurt. “We can go right now,” I told her, walking over to the door so I could lock up.

“Oh no, you don’t have... okay, maybe you do.”

“Getting up the courage to see my dad took me a lot longer than I anticipated,” I told her, turning off the store lights before gathering my things. “If I put it off longer than I did, I probably never would’ve gone.”

“Rip it off like a bandage.”

“Pretty much,” I said, walking with her to the back of the store. I paused just inside the doorway, turning to her before speaking again. “It gets easier,” I promised. “Maybe not today or tomorrow, but it does get easier.”

“Are you trying to convince me or yourself?” she asked, her smile from before fading

under her worried gaze.

“A little bit of both I guess. I might not visit him that often, but thinking about my dad now is easier than it was before.

Just take it one day at a time. Think of it like those boxes you unpacked. You go through one box at a time, sort through all of the memories, then keep the ones you want most.”

“Like your dad’s shop.”

“It’s full of memories,” I admitted, waving my hand at the space around us, “and while my sister still doesn’t like me keeping it around, those memories are what comfort me the most.”

Cassidy took a steadying breath, then faced the door, steeling herself for whatever was to come. “Let’s go.”

The Belview Cemetery was on the far side of town and one of the only ones around. It’d been ages since I’d gone and I couldn’t imagine how long it had been for my sister. We honestly didn’t talk about it so I never thought to ask.

Looking at Cassidy with her hands held tightly in her lap, I had a feeling she’d be much of the same. Then again, she was probably nervous for a completely different reason.

“It should be quiet seeing as it’s the middle of the week,” I said, resisting the urge to tap my fingers on the steering wheel to release some of the nerves that had managed to bunch in my stomach.

She nodded and watched out her window, her reflection a mix of confusion and

concern. Her eyes were focused on something I couldn't see, and when she took a deep breath, I couldn't help doing the same.

"It'll be fine," I assured her. "And if you want, we can do a slow drive-by. Whatever makes you happy." It was probably silly for two adults to be so unsettled

led in a cemetery, but I never believed in visiting a resting place in order to be closer to the ones I lost. Even so, if she wanted to stay and needed the company, I'd stay for as long as she needed me to.

She looked at me and chewed her bottom lip, digging under her fingernail when she couldn't come up with something to say.

"Do you know where it is?" I hedged, slowing the car as we pulled into the driveway leading all around the cemetery.

She cleared her throat, then pointed down the way. "It should be all the way at the end. I wasn't picky so long as they buried her under the shade of a tree."

I smiled at that and kept driving, gripping the steering wheel when we passed by the row my father was in. I really wasn't a fan of cemeteries and it wasn't because of their purpose, either. They'd always unsettled me even as a kid. My sister, on the other hand, loved them in her teens because that's about the only thing she ever took pictures of. Beautiful black and white pictures.

"There," Cassidy said, pulling me from my thoughts. "Oh, it's rather small." She frowned at the short tree the groundskeepers planted next to it.

"It'll grow," I offered, parking the car off to the side of the row before cutting the engine.

She made a sound of approval, removed her seatbelt, and then... nothing. She simply sat there and stared at her mother's gravestone. It was a lovely red granite with a rose engraved above her name. The details were ones I'd expect. Loving mother and friend. That's all it said, and in the end, it didn't need more than that.

"I can go with you," I said, reaching to unbuckle my seatbelt.

"No," she said, placing her hand on mine which was a lot colder than her own. "I can see her from here."

Glancing around the cemetery, there wasn't a soul in sight.

So if she really wanted to get out, she could do so without anyone recognizing her.

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“Are you sure?” I asked, turning my hand palm-side up before taking her hand in mine. “No one’s around, so—”

“I’m fine.” Her face flushed, and when she averted her gaze, I knew the words were because of her nerves instead of me. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. Take all the time you need.”

Starting the car, I put the music on low in case she needed something to calm her mind. It worked. Her hand eased under my touch, her shoulders relaxing once she released a long breath, one of which she’d probably been holding back since we first arrived.

“Is this okay?” I asked, referring to the song I’d turned on.

It was mostly instrumental with a handful of vocals, but nothing too sad or crazy.

“Yes, thank you.”

“So, this is going to sound strange, but I have to ask... does being a songwriter and singer make you appreciate other music more or less?”

She looked at me and laughed. “Just because I sing, that doesn’t mean I’ve lost the enjoyment from listening to someone else. To be honest, I get tired of listening to my own music, but I kind of have to in order to find any issues with the track before it gets shipped.”

“I can understand that. I mean, we all get tired of listening to the same song over and over again eventually, so I can only imagine what it must be like when that music is your own.”

“My big issue is that I can always improve, you know? I eventually have to settle on my music being just good enough,

but there’s always something I could nitpick if I really wanted to.”

“You’re a perfectionist and good at your craft. I’d expect no less. I’m glad you get to enjoy other music, though.”

“It inspires me,” she said, looking past me at her mother’s gravestone. “New lyrics pop into my head all the time when I’m listening to someone else. They almost never make sense and don’t really go well together, but I write them down anyway just in case I can use a few of the words in a future piece.”

“I know we all listen to music to get an emotional high, to relax, or let go, but how does it feel to sing?”

She released a contented sigh and leaned back in the passenger seat. The look she got on her face just then was almost angelic. “Truthfully? If humans could fly, it’d probably feel a lot like that. When I hit those high notes and really push it out, nothing comes close to the way it feels. There’s a sadness there, of course, especially with a few of my older songs, but it’s usually a good feeling.”

“And if it isn’t?” If the song had the reverse effect while she was on tour, what did she do?

“If the song’s too overwhelming or if I can’t get out of my own head, I thank the crowd, get a drink of water, then take a short break. By the time I get back on stage,

the gunk in my head's no longer there." She offered me a partial shrug, then undid her seatbelt. "The best thing I can do when it gets really bad is to push through it because, like it or not, the feeling is always temporary. Just like right now."

With that, she opened her door and walked to my side of the car.

"Would you like some company?" I asked once I rolled down my window.

"I'd love some."

Chapter Ten

Cass' spirit improved the moment we walked into the shop.

Mine, on the other hand, was a different matter entirely. My stomach churned and my heart ached at the thought of her going on tour again. I'd known about it from the very start, and yet, I'd grown attached. As much as I didn't want to admit it, her almost-daily visits had become a part of my routine, one of which I looked forward to every single day.

The entire time my sister's told me to get laid, all I needed was a friend. I needed someone to talk to, someone who'd always have my back if I ever needed the support. Someone like Cassidy.

It wasn't just our loss that made her easy to talk to. She was understanding, kind, and seemed as interested in my life as I was in hers. She didn't act like a big-name celeb at all, not that I ever met any of them, but she didn't fit the image. Sure, she concealed herself the best she could whenever we went out to eat, but once we were back in the shop or up in the tower, she was just like everyone else.

She had dreams, aspirations, and a great deal of stress pressing down on her. She

didn't talk about it, but I could tell the upcoming tour worried her, especially considering how her manager treated her. Instead of being her friend or working for her like I'd imagined, he was demanding, impatient, and rude.

Some of the texts he'd sent her while we were out to see her mom were above and beyond the worst I'd ever seen. He sounded like an angry ex-boyfriend instead of the manager he was supposed to be.

"I should probably go," Cassidy said as we neared the front of the shop. She had her phone in front of her, her fingers tightly gripping the device.

"If you ever decided to change managers, would it interrupt your touring schedule?" I asked, curious as to why she kept him around.

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“It might cause a small hiccup, but it wouldn’t interrupt the shows. Those are already scheduled and completely planned out. But anything having to do with the promotion and such like that... that might not be as effective as it is now.”

“With a manager who treats you like a child more than anything else?” I asked, gesturing at her phone. “I get it. He discovered you when you were young, but you’re a grown woman now and—”

“Don’t,” she said, her voice clipped at the end. “Please.

Let’s just enjoy the rest of the day. I know you aren’t fond of him, and sure, he gets on my case sometimes, but he isn’t the villain you make him out to be.”

“I never said—”

“You didn’t have to.” She released a shaky breath and shoved the phone back in her pocket. Once she did, she took my hands in hers and held them between us. “I love that you’re looking out for me, I truly do, but right now what I really want is a friend to sit and be with me, even in silence.”

I squeezed her hands tight and smiled when she squeezed back. “That’s something I can definitely do. Just let me get things situated down here, then I’ll come up.”

She looked from me, my hands, at the front doors, then back at me again. “You really need to get back to work.” She didn’t sound convinced, but then neither was I.

I didn’t move. “I’ll put a note on the door and—”

“Turning customers away?” She tilted her head to the side and gave me a half-smile. “That doesn’t sound like the Evie I know.”

It wasn’t. It wasn’t like me at all. “Today’s different.”

“And tomorrow will be better,” she promised, referring to everything she’d faced today. “We can have lunch in the tower tomorrow, but you really should open the store.”

She was right, of course, and as much as I wanted to hide out in the tower with her, I let her go, unlocking the front doors as she headed toward the back of the shop.

Tomorrow couldn’t come soon enough.

As promised, Cassidy dropped by first thing in the morning.

She’d been visiting the shop so much, it was almost like a second home for her. Most days, she’d park out back, let herself in, then slowly gather her things upstairs. Today, however, was different. Today, not only did she bring me a muffin from Maggie’s, but she’d ditched all of her extra layers as well.

There was no hat, no scarf, and nothing to hide her face.

She’d walked into the shop as the Cassidy I’d grown to know and love, the one who spent lunch with me in the afternoons and simply let herself go. The same one I wished more than anything could stay in town a little while longer. The one I considered my friend.

“What?” she asked with a shy smile, tilting her head to the side.

“You. Your hair...” I released a breath. “It’s beautiful.”

Without all of her extra layers to hold it back, her red tresses cascaded down to the middle of her back. It wasn't frizzy or windswept at all. It was... perfect.

"You helped me realize something yesterday," she said, taking off her coat before draping it over one arm. "My mother never would've approved of me walking around the way I've been, hiding myself like I'm ashamed."

"You have

your reasons," I said, walking around the counter to join her. It wasn't quite lunchtime so I couldn't close the shop, but that didn't mean I couldn't listen.

"Not any good ones," she admitted, chewing her bottom lip a moment later. "She never understood why I went into this business if I couldn't be myself. That includes acting the way I've been."

"Everyone needs time to mourn," I told her, gesturing over to the sofas in the lounge so we could sit down. "That's nothing to be ashamed of."

"And yet I'm hiding it from my fans. They don't want to hear about this. They just expect me to sing."

I was shaking my head before she could finish. "I don't see you like that. You're human. Having the support of your fans is just as important as anything else."

"My manager doesn't think so," she said, refusing to look at me. "He convinced me to keep things quiet. He knows how much I need my time alone but—"

"You don't think he's playing on that a bit?" Not letting her fans see her like this was ridiculous. "No one's a superhero."

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We all have feelings. We all fall on hard times.”

“Yeah, because being a celebrity is so hard,” she said, the venom in her voice catching me off guard.

“Money isn’t everything,” I told her, taking her hand in mine. “If it was, I would’ve given up on this place a long time ago.”

“But you’re different. You’re holding on to precious memories and the kind of magic I’d do anything to give with my music.”

“You can,” I told her, “but only if you get out of your own way. I’ve heard you play your guitar and listened to the excitement in your voice whenever you talk about your craft.

That passion is still there and will always be there, but if you keep holding back like this, then that magic you mentioned will stay just out of reach. You need to be honest with yourself and stop letting your manager say what is or isn’t good for your public image. Don’t think about the upcoming tour or having to explain your time away. What do you want?”

“I...” She wet her lips and averted her gaze.

“You’ve never asked yourself that, have you?” When she shook her head, I continued. “There’s a reason you became a musician.”

“I’m good at it,” she said, her voice so low I barely heard her.

“And I’m sure you’re good at a bunch of other things, so why sing?” I took her hands in mine and gave them a squeeze, releasing a sigh of relief when she finally met my eyes.

“Because when you’re on stage, you can fly.” It was

something she’d said back at the cemetery. “Music runs through you. Sure, the fans are another side of it, but you need to trust them. Trust that they won’t turn their backs on you just because you show a bit of emotion. Music’s all about emotion, anyway. Let them in. Share your sense of loss with them.

Relate to them.”

“Like I did with you?” she asked with a small smile.

“Maybe not on a personal level, but yeah. You told me you started singing before your friend passed away. That’s your origin story and one I never would’ve known if you hadn’t accidentally dropped off her journals with me.”

“I don’t know...”

“You don’t need to tell them what happened,” I assured her,

“but if you open up a tiny bit and share where you came from, I’m sure the fans would love you for it.”

“I actually have something I’ve been working on,” she said, her voice shaking at the end. “It’s sad and rough around the edges, but... do you think I could test it on you? My manager will never get it, and I’ll probably never play it for anyone else, but, well...” She exhaled hard, then tried again. “I’d love for you to hear it.”

“I’d be honored.”

Cassidy’s music slowly made its way through the store, the new melody reminding me of some of her earlier work. With lunch still an hour away, my heart ached to join her, to hold her hand and be there for her. Instead, I dove into my work, fully focused on finishing up the inventory on time.

Her words, or at least the sound of them, reached straight down to my soul. The haunting yet beautiful melody gave me the same emotional outlet her music had offered so many times before. Diving into a good book didn’t come close to listening to her earlier work.

Now was no different.

Standing in front of the computer, I did my best to get the store in order, forcing back the tears that happened to burn at my eyes. The black text on the monitor blurred, the words

distorted as Cassidy’s music gently took me in its arms, embracing me. It was then I wondered how long it took for her to write the song about the friend she lost. How long did it take for her to sing it without missing a note?

I could only imagine how hard it must’ve been to play the song in front of a crowd while letting down her guard long enough to do so.

She swore the fans would never accept her new story, but she was wrong. Her earlier work was what made her famous.

It was also full of emotion and some of the most cathartic music I’d ever listened to.

If Bridget were around, she would’ve agreed.

The more time I spent around Cass, the more I wanted to let Bridget in on our secret. It's not my place. Until Cassidy said otherwise, her identity along with her whereabouts were stuck with me.

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Reaching for a tissue under the front counter, I dabbed at my eyes so I could continue my work. It wasn't until I got down to the last page of the new inventory when I realized Cassidy's music had stopped. Worried the lyrics had overwhelmed her, I turned for the middle of the store, making my way toward the tower.

Cassidy met me at the foot of the stairs. "I was wondering where you were," she said, her face flushed and her voice lighter than I expected. "It's almost one."

Really? Surprised, I turned around to check the clock behind the front counter. "Huh, so it is. I'm sorry. I got wrapped up in my own head again while doing the inventory.

It's a bunch of numbers and brainless stuff, so I tend to zone out when I do it." Aside from listening to her music, of course.

She crossed her arms over her chest and passed me a knowing smile. "Your eyes are red."

I released a small laugh and waved her look of concern away. "Music does that to me sometimes. It's as beautiful on your tapes as it is in person."

She blushed at that, averting her gaze in the most adorable way. "Thanks," she managed, her voice squeaking at the end.

The way she stood in front of me then with her head tilted to one side, I couldn't tell if she was trying to hide herself or if it was another part of her charm. Her hair shielded her eyes from view, but when she spoke again, her words were just as endearing as before.

“Does this mean you need to skip lunch?” she asked, offering me a sly grin once she looked at me again.

“It’s just one more page, which I can easily finish after we eat.”

Had I realized what time it was, I would’ve stopped as soon as I was able. Instead, I let my mind drift, completely neglecting the task at hand in exchange for Cassidy’s music and the emotions I’d kept bottled up inside for far too long.

“You want a burger this time?” Cassidy asked, reaching behind the front counter to grab her coat.

I considered her question a moment, then smiled. “A burger sounds great.” I’d already had three salads this week. A little comfort food wouldn’t hurt.

“Be back in five.”

She waved back at me, not waiting for an answer. Stunned, I watched her walk out the front door as the Cassidy I’d come to know instead of the one who’d hid under a million layers.

My stomach bunched with nerves as she walked out of view, a smile playing on my lips as my chest filled with warmth.

“She did it. “She really did it.

Alone in the front lounge, my fingers itched to touch her, my feet begging me to run after her just in case she needed a

human shield. I should’ve gone with her, but then maybe that’s why she left as quickly as she did. Soon, her life would revolve around the interactions she had with

her fans, on stage that is. She rarely took interviews and thinking back on what she'd said, she almost never went out until she had a hat and sunglasses to hide her face.

My breath hung in the back of my throat, never leaving my lips as I anticipated her return.

She didn't take long, and as soon as I spotted her up the street, I opened the front door in case she needed to make a hasty retreat.

To her credit, she stopped to sign someone's paper, talking as she did, before finally returning to the shop.

Once she was back inside with the doors locked, I spoke.

"You know they'll come looking for you," I told her, making sure everything was saved on the computer before shutting it down. "They saw you come in here."

She shrugged, then placed our bag of food on the front counter so she could take off her coat. "That's okay, right?"

Because I thought it would be nice to have some foot traffic inside the shop again. You know, like old times."

Like when we were kids. She hadn't said as much but it was implied. She was trying to help the shop. She'd gone out there without any cover... for me.

She went on when I didn't say anything, grabbing our food as she did. "I've seen how hard you work and how much you've struggled. It takes everything you have just to keep the lights on."

"It's been easier," I admitted, "but I don't think folks coming into the shop looking

for you is going to be much help.” If anything, it would just mean more potential customers leaving without a single book.

“Trust me,” she said with a hint of excitement in her voice, quickly making her way toward the spiral staircase. “I have a plan.”

Chapter Eleven

Sitting across from me on the floor with her legs crossed, Cassidy slowly picked through her lunch, talking as she did.

“If you could change one thing about the store, what would it be?” she asked, gesturing at the space between us.

Why? I wondered. What’s wrong with the shop?

Before I could form a response, she continued. “If I could go back to when I first got into music, I think I’d change how I interacted with my fans. It was fun and a total blast that first year, but then I sort of got overwhelmed. It makes it hard to go back to that.”

“Then why leave the shop the way you did today?” If the idea of being that open with her fans made her uncomfortable, why do it in the first place?

“Because you’re right. Music’s all about opening up and sharing the story behind it. I’ve let folks speculate the meaning behind my music for years, never correcting them because...

well, because Laura was my secret. In the beginning, I didn’t want to talk about her because it was too hard. It still is if I’m being completely honest with myself. But she’s my reason for getting into music in the first place. If it wasn’t for her—”

“You’d still sing,” I said, taking her hand in mine. “Maybe not on stage or in front of

a crowd, but you'd still have your guitar and you'd still sing."

"You sound so sure of yourself."

"That's because I am. Books are my thing. I might not write them, but I can't imagine living my life without them. For you, I bet music's the same way. The thing you need to remember is your why. What were you striving for in the beginning? Who did you sing for?"

"No one," she said, dropping her gaze. "I sang for myself and for someone who couldn't hear the words." She shook her head at that. "I guess I sang because it made me feel closer to

her. When someone heard me for the first time and expressed their interest in it, I thought it would keep her memory alive."

"And now?" I hedged, scooting over next to her when her words clipped at the end.

"I've played it so often, it's lost all meaning."

"Which is why you need to share it with them," I explained, repeating what I'd said earlier. "It might not make that much of a difference for them, but it will for you. Somewhere down the line, you lost your identity. You might not see it, but after spending these last few weeks with you, it's plain as day.

When you play in the tower, you're free to be yourself. But when you're out there..." I released a long breath and shook my head. "I don't know because I've never seen you on tour, but seeing the way you talk about it, you don't sound as happy about that as you've been up here."

She nodded as I spoke. "It's partially true. I don't want to admit it but coming home

to take care of my mom's stuff was sort of a blessing. I love performing and will do almost anything for the fans, but I also needed a break."

"Burn out," I said, offering her a partial shrug. "Everyone goes through it."

"Yeah, but a part of me feels like I'm not allowed to take time off, you know?"

"Are you kidding? Look at some the other singers out there.

Some of them haven't had a new album in over a decade.

Their fans are still willing to wait for it. Your true fans will always be there, even if you need to step away for a little while."

"Don't tell my manager that," she said with a nervous laugh. "He'd throw a fit."

I didn't doubt it. "It's one thing to want to keep everyone else happy and something else entirely when you lose your love of music."

"I still love it," she argued, her shoulders bunching up as she did.

"But it could be better."

That time, she didn't say anything. As silence fell between us, I worried I'd done something wrong. It wouldn't have been the first time I'd overstepped, but even as I considered what to say, Cass leaned her head on my shoulder and spoke.

"I'm not sure how to bring it up with him."

"So don't." When she lifted her head to meet my gaze, I continued. "Let it be a surprise for everyone. When you get up on stage to play her song, tell your fans

there's something you need to say, something important. Once you do, go from there.

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The fans won't mind. In fact, I bet it will make them enjoy the song that much more."

"And my manager?"

"You can't put a genie back in its bottle once you let it out,"

I said matter-of-factly. "If he's against it, so what? The fans will know, and you'll gain some relief by sharing it."

"You know, if this shop doesn't work out, you'd make a wonderful therapist," she teased, leaning into me.

I forced a smile. "I blame it on all the books I read. It's just like the hero's journey. You started on this quest, made a few friends along the way, and now you've reached that pivotal moment where a big decision has to be made."

"So you're the wise man I come across in the desert?"

"Pretty much, but it isn't like I'm telling you something you don't already know. That's the beauty of the hero's journey.

I'm simply agreeing with you."

"Is there a fortune teller I can talk to first?" She bumped shoulders with me and laughed. "Thank you."

"What for?"

“For being my wise man and...” She blew out a long breath and looked right at me. There was a light shine to her eyes, and when she pressed her forehead to mine, my heart skipped a beat. “For being a friend.”

For a brief moment, I thought she might turn away. I thought she’d take the words back, pull away, then run out the door. She didn’t move, and as we hovered on the very thin edge between friends and something more, I did the one thing I’d been wanting to do ever since she first walked through my door.

I kissed her. It was light and barely there, and I hoped I hadn’t read her wrong. She pushed her lunch to the side, her body stiff against mine. Seconds passed, a minute, possibly more. All the while, I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t take a single breath, fearing it’d push her away.

The feel of her fingertips on the nape of my neck reached my subconscious first, soon followed by a small puff of air as it escaped her parted lips, warm against mine. My heart faltered and stopped, starting up again as she leaned in, a short breath away.

Fire surged under my skin as nerves bunched in my stomach. Wrapping my arms around her, I left enough room for her to get away. I knew how I felt about her, but I had no idea how she felt about me. No one knew or had ever seen her in a relationship, so if this was wrong, if I was wrong, then—

Her lips touched mine, silencing my thoughts. In one fleeting moment, I leaned in, delighting in the feel of her fingers in my hair.

The air rushed from my lungs, my heart hammering in my chest as the room swirled around us in wide circles. She was kissing me. Cassidy Blake was kissing me. Not the singer or songwriter, but the woman I’d spent my days with, reminisced with, and shared books with. The kind of woman I could see spending the rest of my life with.

My heart skipped at that, but even as I tried to push the thought back, it continued to bombard my mind.

But she's going on tour soon, a small voice in the back of my head murmured.

I didn't care, and as time slowly jumped back into motion, I lost myself under her touch and the sweet taste of her lips.

When we finally separated, we were both breathless, and Cassidy's hair was frizzier than before.

I touched my fingers to my lips, the warm skin still tingling where her lips had been. "That was—"

"Something I've wanted to do for a very long time," she finished for me, her cheeks darkening with color.

"But won't it complicate things?" I asked, unable to hold the words back even if I'd tried.

"No more complicated than it's already been," she said, her words just as sweet and kind as before.

"But your tour," I argued, not sure what to say.

"Isn't happening for a few more weeks." That time her smile didn't reach her eyes.

"Don't ruin this," she begged, taking my hands in hers. "Let's just be p

resent for a little while longer."

Nodding, I met her in a kiss that was just as hungry and aggressive as before. As our

meals turned cold, we lay in the tower, losing ourselves in each other's company and the time we had left together.

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“How come you didn’t tell me you had Cassidy Blake in your store?”

I’d barely walked through my apartment door when the phone rang. Man, news gets around fast. As promised, the moment I opened the shop after lunch, a line was waiting for us. Or, more specifically, for Cassidy. The entire afternoon was a complete blur, starting with that kiss and finally stopping once I locked the front door.

No doubt someone put out an alert online as soon as they saw Cassidy in my store. As much as I appreciated the added foot traffic, those who walked into my shop were there because of her instead of me. I assured myself it was okay, that having her fans in the shop would be fine until she went on tour, but to be honest, I was kind of jealous.

Maybe it was that kiss, or maybe it was how the afternoon started. Regardless of the reason, everyone who walked

through those doors took minutes away from me being with her. It was a stupid way to look at it and made me sound like a complete twelve-year-old, but I couldn’t help it. I’d lost myself in Cassidy’s arms, I’d tasted her lips, and I wanted more.

So much more. More than time was willing to give.

“Are you even listening to me?” my sister wailed on the other side of the line. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because it wasn’t my place,” I replied, setting my purse on the kitchen counter.

“How long have you known she was in town?”

“Since the journals.”

“The journals?” And that’s when it clicked. “She’s the mystery woman?” Bridget practically screamed in my ear.

“That’s okay, I didn’t need that eardrum anyway,” I said, holding the phone away from my ear a second too late.

“Oh, come on. I wasn’t that loud.”

I laughed. “You kind of were.”

“Soooo... what’s she like?” She didn’t ask in that fangirl sort of way. She asked as though she already knew Cassidy and I were together.

Are we together? I honestly wasn’t sure. My heart certainly thought we were, but it was just a kiss. A bunch of them. Not to mention the hour or so we spent laying together, running our hands through each other’s hair as I stared into her eyes.

But that didn’t mean we were together, right?

Cassidy had asked me to enjoy the moment, so I did, and I’d continued to do so until she either went on tour or I couldn’t stand the secrecy any longer.

I’d kept her identity and whereabouts a secret this long.

Throwing a relationship into the mix wouldn’t make one bit of difference.

Realizing my sister was still waiting for an answer, I said,

“She’s human? I don’t know what you’re asking.”

“Come on, Evie, I’m not dumb. You’ve been sneaking around with her, haven’t you?”

My heart skipped at the accusation. “No. Not really.”

Maybe.

“Uh huh.” She wasn’t convinced. “Is she as amazing in person?”

“She’s...” I released a long breath and stared at the ceiling.

“Just like the rest of us.” She was flesh and bone, same as me.

She’s also sweet, kind, gentle—

“Okay, okay, I don’t need a grocery list,” my sister said, laughing once I realized I’d said those things aloud. “So when did it happen? When did you finally kiss?”

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Damn, she was good. “That’s not any of your business.”

“Let’s see... Extra defensive, nervous... it must’ve been recent. Very recent.”

“I hate how you do that.” She was the same exact way with my ex. In fact, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say Bridget was a fortune teller. Maybe Cassidy should’ve talked to her.

“I can’t believe you kept this from me,” she whined.

“I’m sorry, I just—”

“No, I mean I can’t believe it. You suck at keeping secrets.

You remember that one time we went out to get Dad a gift?

His birthday wasn’t for another three weeks and you almost burst at the seams just so you could tell him once we got home. So how did you manage this? You must’ve done something. Oh, were you sworn to secrecy? Maybe you had to sign one of those non-disclosure agreements.”

“No, and I don’t honestly think that’s how it works,” I said with a laugh, walking into the living room so I could sit down.

“I don’t know. I just saw how much she tried to hide herself that I didn’t risk saying much of anything at all.”

“Because you like her.”

There was no point denying it. My sister knew me better than I did most of the time.

“I really do.”

“Have you told her?”

What kind of question was that? “She knows.”

Bridget blew out a frustrated breath. “Evie...” I could almost imagine her rubbing her forehead. “Just because a woman knows you like her, that doesn’t mean she wouldn’t like to hear it. Ask me how I know.”

She did have the better track record when it came to dating.

Sure, her relationships may have been shorter than mine, but she definitely had the experience.

“How do you even tell someone that?” I was so used to showing my affection and only getting to the I love you stage after my date did. “Besides, she’ll be going on tour soon, and

—”

“Long distance relationships are a thing,” my sister cut in.

“You need to tell her, Evie. Sooner rather than later.”

“But we only just—”

“Don’t care. If you were willing to keep her a secret from me, then I know you like

her. You like-like her.” She laughed.

“You can’t see me, but I’m winking.”

“I figured,” I said, smiling as I did. “I’ll tell her the next time I see her.” It probably wouldn’t be tomorrow. Once her manager got wind of this, he’d probably lock her inside that tour bus of theirs.

“Be sure that you do. Stuff like this doesn’t come around that often, especially for you.” There was the sister I knew and loved.

“Ha ha, very funny.”

“I’m serious. Don’t let her go halfway across the country without telling her first. A girl can get lonely on tour. So—”

“La-la-la. I’m not listening.” I pretended to cover my ears.

“I’m just saying, if she has someone waiting for her back home, it’ll give her something to look forward to once she gets back. That’s all.”

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If she even wants someone waiting for her back home. The way Cassidy spoke earlier, it was hard to tell.

“Trust me,” Bridget said, pulling me from my thoughts. “I know what I’m talking about. You have a small window before she runs off to her fans. Make sure she has a reason to come back.”

Nodding, I finished up my talk with Bridget, then hung up the phone and tossed it on the table beside the couch. My sister was right, of course, but as much as I wanted to tell Cassidy the way I felt, I feared how her manager might react once he realized she’d been hiding out in my shop this entire time.

Not wanting to get her into any trouble, I sent her a text that hopefully looked like it came from a friend more than anything else.

“Making sure you got home okay. Call me when you’re ready.”

I hit send before I could second-guess myself. Once I did, I went back into the kitchen to make something to eat even though the only thing I wanted right then was her. I wanted to hear her voice, her laughter, and to feel her lips on mine. I wanted her hands in my hair and our bodies pressed close together.

Most of all, I wanted to know if she was okay. Did she regret what happened today? Would she come back?

Heart in my throat, I busied myself and did everything I could not to think of her.

It didn't work, and as I turned down the covers for the night, I checked my phone one last time before finally getting into bed.

Cassidy never answered.

Chapter Twelve

Cassidy was waiting for me when I arrived the next morning. Tucked away in her car, she barely noticed me as I walked up the stretch of pavement between her car and the back door. To say I didn't expect to see her until later on was a huge understatement. I figured she'd get stuck somewhere with her manager as he read over her rights as a performer, where to go, and when to pick up his calls.

Needless to say, I was happy to see her. Thrilled, actually.

Her manager must've heard about her time in my shop by now, which meant one of two things. She was here to say goodbye, or she'd talked her manager into some strange contract, possibly with a curfew.

Granted, I didn't know the guy, but the way Cassidy went on about him...

"Morning," I said, gently tapping on her window.

"Listening to anything good?" The beat thrumming inside her car was low but still audible once she turned it down.

"Just an old mixtape I like to take out from time to time,"

she said, turning off the car before finally joining me in the parking lot. "Laura made

it for me. I had the tracks put on a CD and always have it on me in case of emergencies.” She released a small laugh. “It gets me hyped up before a show, among other things.”

“Power music,” I said with an approving nod, holding the back door open for her so we could get out of the cold. “I have a few playlists like that. They change whenever the mood strikes.”

“Not this one. This one has been my go-to since forever.”

“Did it help? The music this morning, I mean.”

She paused once we reached the front registers, leaning with her elbows on the counter while I booted up the computer. “A little, but not as much as I’d hoped.” She deflated in front of me. “I think I may have jumped the shark yesterday.”

“Getting ahead of yourself?” I asked, double-checking the cash before putting it in the drawer.

She offered me a partial shrug, then turned so her back was pressed into the edge of the counter. She took in a deep breath, admiring the wall of books on the opposite side of the store.

“It was a good idea at the time.”

Her voice dropped at the end, and when she refused to look at me, I knew yesterday was something she regretted. Cassidy tensed, practically jumping out of her skin when I closed up the register.

“Anything you want to talk about?” I asked, keeping my voice level as to not startle

her.

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She took another breath, exhaling hard before finally facing me again. Her cheeks were red, but not because of the cold air outside. “I may have said something stupid,” she began, digging under her fingernails. “My manager, he... let’s just say he wasn’t thrilled. That is until I told him it was all part of my plan before going back on the road.”

Uh oh. That didn’t sound good. “And he believed it?”

“Hardly,” she scoffed, shaking her head a second later.

“Apparently, warming up, as he calls it, should take place in a coffee shop or other musical platform. Not a bookstore.”

I had to agree with him there. Maybe at one of the big chains, but here? I didn’t even sell CDs. “How did you get him to agree?” He obviously bought it, or she wouldn’t have been waiting for me as soon as I pulled up. Unless...

“Relax,” she said, her voice lighter than before. “I managed to calm the beast once I told him how many people showed up.

Truth be told, I think he’s relieved. The way I’ve been acting lately, distancing myself and all of that, he probably wondered if I wanted to go back on tour at all. So while he might not like my choice in venues, it’s still a positive sign for the near future.”

My heart didn’t agree. There she was, standing right in front of me but still out of reach. “It also wasn’t planned,” I said, my tone harder than I intended. Did that mean

she'd have to perform inside the shop again? What about her manager?

Would he be around as well?

I don't mind having folks in my shop, but if yesterday was any indication, I wouldn't get much out of it. I got to hang around Cassidy, sure, but who paid the overhead fees? Who covered the time it took for me to clean up the shop once everyone else had gone?

"I know it isn't what you wanted," she said, pulling me from my thoughts, "but at least this way we get to see one another."

I released a frustrated sigh and left it at that. I knew better than to get close to her, but I did it anyway. Good going, Evie.

Cassidy came around to my side of the counter and hooked her thumbs in my belt loops, giving them a tug until we were an inch apart. "This also means we get more us time when no one else is around."

"Oh?" I asked, swallowing back my nerves.

"Mmm-hmm." She leaned in close, pressing her body to mine with our lips no more than a breath apart. "Times like right now," she went on, her eyes lidded as she met me in a feverish kiss.

Running her hand through my hair, she kept the other one on the small of my back, holding me close as she deepened our kiss. My back arched, my body seeking out her warmth as the smell of peaches and coconut filled the air.

I tried to argue, I tried to pull away, but my heart broke at the thought of putting any amount of space between us. So there I stayed, her lips pressed to mine as my mind

drifted a million miles away.

No longer in the shop, we sailed toward the horizon.

Cerulean blue waves graced my fingertips as she leaned me back over the edge of the boat, my hair drifting on the water's surface. Stranded in the ocean, the world was ours. No one

could touch us. There were no distractions, no responsibilities, and no land. Just a big wide ocean for us to explore together.

"What're you thinking?" Her voice was faint under the sound of waves lapping at the side of the boat. I almost didn't hear her, and if not for the fact her lips were right against my ear, I wouldn't have.

"Nothing," I lied, refusing to open my eyes so I could stay with her a while longer.

"Then why don't you open your eyes?" she asked with a playful lilt in her voice.

I imagined her tilting her head to the side in that cute sort of way and smiled. "Because as soon as I do, this ends."

"What ends?" She didn't step away. She never let me go, remaining present with me as I admired her beauty and closeness from afar.

"This," I said, holding on to the collar of her blouse when she went to pull away.

"Nothing's ending," she said, her voice light and comforting as I leaned into her embrace. "In fact, I'd say it's more of a beginning."

My heart jumped at that, stopping completely when I opened my eyes. She looked

right at me, her smile just as warm and encouraging as before. “But your music—”

“Might complicate things for a little while, yes, but I realized something last night.” She gestured at the sofas in the lounge where we could sit down.

Checking the clock and knowing we had a few extra minutes to kill, I joined her without hesitation. Once I did, she continued.

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“My manager was waiting for me when I got back to where I’m staying,” she said, clasping her hands between her knees.

“I can’t say he was thrilled, but the entire time he argued with me, all I could think about was never getting to come here again. Never getting to play in the tower. Never getting to

come here after Maggie’s, and this,” she said, taking my hand in hers.

“I could lose all of those things, but not this. I know it’s silly for me to get involved so close to my tour, and I tried to fight my way out of it, but I can’t help it. You’re the first person since Laura that’s ever accepted me as I am. Not because of fame or my music, but because of me. It’s unexpected, and honestly? It’s a breath of fresh air.”

She got quiet then, tensing when I arched my thumb over the back of her hand. “I’ve never told anyone this,” she said with a nervous laugh, “not even my own mother. I’m sure she had her suspicions, but that was the thing about my mom that I loved most. She never pushed, not unless she knew it was in my best interest. She pushed hard after Laura passed away.

Once she realized I had a heart for music and what drove me to my passion, she used it to fuel me, even if, at the time, I didn’t want to.”

Looking at our hands with our fingers locked together, I smiled. “I’m sure she knew.” As far as celebs were concerned, Cassidy wasn’t terribly open about her relationships. However, sitting in my shop, I could already see what she was struggling to say. “Have you ever—”

“Never,” she said, cutting me off. “I’ve never been with anyone. Not serious, anyway. I’ve... experimented?” She frowned, then shook her head. “I don’t mean it like that. I guess explored would sound better. God, I sound like a total ass right now.”

I smiled and kissed the back of her hand. “You sound nervous,” I told her, “which is totally normal. To be honest, I haven’t done much in way of dating, either. Not recently, anyway. I’ve tried, but things always seem to just—”

“Fall apart?” she offered, giving me a knowing smile. “I can relate. Being on tour, I’ve never been able to hold on to anything for very long.”

“But you’re okay with this?” With us? I kept the last bit to myself, my throat closing in on itself.

“This feels different,” she said, leaning against the back of the sofa before meeting me in a lazy kiss. She caressed my face and pushed the hair from in front of my eyes, smiling as she did. “You remind me of her. She had such a fiery spirit. I envied her. Even after her diagnosis and all of the tests, she never stopped smiling. I knew she did it for me, but she was my first crush. I never... I didn’t realize she felt the same way until her mom gave me those journals.”

My heart dipped into the pit of my stomach.

“She wrote everything down,” Cassidy explained, her eyes growing distant. “What I was wearing on any given day, what song I sang for her, the way we danced at prom even though she was almost too sick to stand. It’s all inside those journals.”

“Which is why you wanted to keep

them,” I said with a nod.

“But then why were they with your mom?”

“Being on tour as much as I am, things tend to get misplaced. If I ever lost them, if I ever lost the last part of her I have, I don’t think I’d ever sing again. I turn to those entries when things are hard. I have them photocopied and saved on my laptop, but nothing can ever offer me the same comfort as those originals.”

My heart went out to her. Not only because of the good friend she’d lost but also because of the secret she’d been carrying with her for so long.

“Does your manager know?” I asked, immediately wishing I hadn’t.

Cassidy’s face paled, and when she looked at me again, she looked right through me. Past me. “There are some things that need to remain private around him. I trust him as a business partner, nothing more.”

I nodded my understanding. “Then how do you want this to work?” Meaning us. If she was on tour as often as she claimed and her manager didn’t know about us, how much time would I get with her once she was home? If she comes home.

She only came back to take care of her mother’s things. If not for that, would she have stopped in town at all?

“Carefully,” Cassidy said after giving it some thought. “I’ll tell him just... not yet. He’s been trying to get me on someone’s arm for years. He claims it would be great for publicity, among other things.”

Yeah, like live interviews. I wrinkled my nose at that, already sensing Cassidy’s disgust.

“I don’t mean to put you in such an awkward position,” she said, leaning into me.

“But you kind of have.” Not only for me but for the shop as well.

“I know, and I’m sorry. Just give me a few weeks to play things by ear.”

“By then you’ll be on tour.” That time there was no escaping the hurt in my voice. I cared for her, I really did. I could see where she was coming from, but unlike me, she could leave once things got out of hand. I, on the other hand, had nowhere else to go.

The shop was my life, and now with Cassidy in it, I’d always be able to relive my memories of her. The last thing I wanted was for those memories to be full of anger and regret.

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Anger at her for stringing me along and hatred toward myself for ever letting things get as far as they did.

But no matter how much I tried to warn myself, no matter how much I wanted to keep up my guard, those walls came crashing down as soon as she took me in her arms. I wasn't one to take risks. I hated them, actually, but if keeping things quiet meant I get to spend a few more weeks with her, then I'd do exactly that.

"Okay," I finally said, wincing when my voice cracked. "I won't say anything, but my sister might've already guessed."

"Just so long as we aren't talking about newspapers and reporters, we should be fine."

"She isn't into either of those things and knows when to keep things quiet." I was the one with the big mouth, not her.

Cassidy took a deep breath and snuggled against me, eyeing the clock before holding me close again. "Stay with me a while longer."

She didn't have to ask twice, and as patrons gathered on the sidewalk, I let them wait a few more minutes just so I could be alone with her.

Chapter Thirteen

Ever since I opened the shop earlier this morning, it'd been a swirl of activity. From Cassidy playing in front of a crowd in the lounge to a handful of new customers happily browsing the children's section, I had my hands full just trying to keep up

with everything. The excitement, however, only lasted so long.

Cassidy remained positive, on the outside that is. Deep down, I knew her mind was focused on the road ahead, her upcoming tour, and where we went after the fact. She didn't say as much, but whenever she risked a glance my way, she immediately averted her gaze, concentrating on her music instead.

Perhaps it was because she didn't want to get caught.

Perhaps it was because she didn't want her fans to come to the same conclusion Bridget had. My stomach churned, the twinge of anxiety causing my heart to skip. I should've been happy, thrilled that she shared my feelings. To be honest, it scared me.

I wasn't exactly the type of person to run away from commitment, but when it came to Cassidy and her line of work, I wasn't so sure.

Scanning one of the books for a customer as Cassidy's voice rang out in the background, auto-pilot set in. I went through the motions and I heard her words, but my mind was far away. It drifted back to our time in the tower, with the afternoon sun shining on her face. Her eyes filled with hope as she met my gaze from across the room.

It was hard to believe how we got here. She could've dropped those books off at the other used bookstore, but she came here. She came here because it's where her mother brought her when she was young. It was where our story started. We might not have realized it at the time, but sharing stories in the children's section was how this all started, just like how her relationship with Laura was the story behind why she started to sing in the first place.

It was all connected, and as much as I hated the thought of her not being around for

months on end, a part of me wanted to see where we'd end up a few weeks from now. A couple of months. A year.

Where would she be once we shared our first I love yous?

Would she be home with me or about to go on stage in the middle of her tour?

I shook my head, pushing the thought from my mind. I was letting my hopes get the better of me. In another lifetime, we probably would've been best friends. In fact, that's where I thought we were headed before I kissed her, surprised when she kissed me back.

Things are moving too fast, I fretted, finishing up with my customer before opening up the inventory on my screen. The words blurred as I considered my options. It wasn't like I was against us being together, but a candle that burns quick has a tendency to burn out before its time. With the wick burning at both ends, there was only so much time left before we knew where we'd be after her tour.

I never should've gotten involved. But I did. After that first day in the shop, the day when she dropped by for the journals, I should've sent her away instead of giving her my card in case she needed to unload anything else. If I knew then what I knew now—

Who am I kidding? I thought with a sigh. I wouldn't have changed a thing, not how she ended up in my shop or any of the events that had happened since. More than anything else, I wanted to see this through, to see where our days would take us, including now.

A deep baritone voice thrust me from my thoughts, an older gentleman standing on the other side of the counter. "You own this establishment?" he asked, sounding somewhat annoyed, probably because he had to repeat himself.

“I do,” I said, looking from him to Cassidy who had an uncomfortable expression on her face. “What can I do for you?”

I didn’t have to ask to know the man standing in front of me was her manager. His shirt alone probably cost more than my entire wardrobe combined. Unlike Cassidy who dressed down, this guy made sure to flaunt his ego wherever he went.

“I wanted to thank you for giving her a space,” he said, his tone far from cheerful, “and to give a warning.”

Seriously? The nerve of this guy! “A warning for what?” I asked with a nervous laugh.

“She doesn’t get involved,” he said, his brows pinched above his eyes. “I’ve seen women like you come and go. She might not realize it, but I’ve known for a good long while.

Don’t let this make you think otherwise. As soon as we go on tour, you’ll be a spec in her rearview mirror, just like all the others.”

“And who are you supposed to be? Her dad?”

“Her manager.”

I shrugged him off. “You’re treating her like a child, so it’s pretty much the same thing.”

“Look, I was only giving you a heads up.”

“And trying to scare me away.” No doubt he was more concerned about her public image than anything else.

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“I’ve looked into this place and I’ve done my research on you,” he said, lowering his voice so no one would overhear.

“You’re barely making ends meet, but if you agree to cut things off and let her down gently, then I might be able to help.”

I scoffed at that. “No thanks. I can manage just fine without you and your handouts.” And I’ll never hurt Cassidy like that.

She’d already been through so much. If her manager knew the pain she was in, then maybe... No. He probably wouldn’t care at all. Her manager was more interested in his bottom line. Cassidy was an asset to him, that’s all.

I figured that was the case before, but now that I’d met the guy, I hated him even more.

He opened up his wallet and put his card on the counter. “In case you change your mind.”

I picked up the card and immediately tossed it in the trash.

“I won’t.”

His face darkened, but whatever came to mind he kept to himself. Annoyed, he turned on his heels and left, practically knocking over my sister who’d walked in as we were arguing.

“What was that all about?” my sister asked, gesturing back the way Cassidy’s manager had gone.

“A bad deal,” I said, watching him go as Cassidy continued to fill the front of the shop with music. “What are you doing here?” I asked, looking back at my sister once she joined me behind the counter. “You never visit the shop.”

“Same reason as everyone else, I suppose,” she said with a shrug, removing her coat before folding it behind the counter.

“Man, this place hasn’t changed.”

“The front window and lounge have changed a tiny bit.”

Which was something she’d know if she ever cared to visit. I fought back my temper, taking a deep breath before speaking again. “It’s something Dad had always wanted—the gold lettering.”

Bridget smiled at that, then turned her attention to Cassidy who’d moved on to another song. “You remember that one time we planned to see her on tour?”

How could I forget? “This is almost as good,” I said, fondly thinking back to when my sister and I used to hang out all the time.

She nodded in agreement, leaning her head on my shoulder as we both swayed back and forth to the music. “We should take her out to dinner.”

“We?” I almost choked on my own spit.

Bridget stopped swaying and looked right at me. “Sure. I saw how short her manager got with you. You could barely get in a word. Now, I have no idea what that was about, but you know I’m great at reading people.”

“And?” Not usually one for my sister’s input, I had to admit I was curious.

“He’s clearly worried about her image or how she’s perceived, but if the three of us go out together...” She trailed off, smiling as she did.

“It would make her time in the shop less suspicious,” I finished for her.

“And it’s not like I wouldn’t benefit from it. It isn’t every day you get to hang out with Cassidy Blake. Well, most of us, anyway.” She passed me a sly smile before mouthing the words to the song.

“I’ll see what she says once everyone else has gone,” I promised, bobbing my head to the music as I finished reading over the updated inventory.

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“Be sure that you do. The way that guy seemed to talk has me a little nervous. Something like this might cool his jets for a little while.”

“It certainly couldn’t hurt. Cassidy hanging out with me alone could be seen as an intimate relationship, but if she went out with me and my sister, it would come across as three friends catching up. That was something I could do, at least for a little while. It wasn’t something I’d accept forever, but if it meant getting her manager off her case for the time being, then it was worth a shot.

Chapter Fourteen

Ferdinand’s was on the other side of town and a lot fancier than Maggie’s tiny cafe. The place had an actual dress code, so after searching my closet for a nice gown I could wear, I took a deep breath and faced the mirror. It’d been ages since I dressed up and longer still since I’d worn the yellow gown.

Bridget had convinced me to keep the dress just in case, and for once, I was glad she did. I honestly never expected to wear it after our father passed away. It was something he bought for me back when the shop was busy and we had a small party on the first Fridays of the month. It was the only time we allowed food and drink in the shop. It was also a time when the books were deeply discounted depending on how many you bought.

Folks loved it, but after he died, I couldn’t bring myself to celebrate the way he did. Turning those first customers away was hard, and eventually, they stopped coming.

I exhaled hard, pressing my palms into the top of my dresser. That’s when it all

started to go downhill, all because I'd stopped one silly tradition.

Looking at myself now, I couldn't believe I ever forgot. I'd pushed those memories to the back of my mind, just as I'd done with the gown in my closet. Now that I had it on, all of those memories came rushing back.

"I can't do this," I said, my voice wavering a bit as I refused to meet my own gaze.

I never should've agreed to one of my sister's schemes. She meant well, but if I'd realized where we were going... if I knew taking out the gown would bring back so much pain...

You still would've done it, a small voice said in the back of my mind.

I still would've agreed, and I still would've put on the gown. I also couldn't stand the thought of letting Cassidy down, so after a handful of steadying breaths, I smoothed the delicate fabric, got my things, then headed for the restaurant.

Cassidy agreed to meet us there, and once I spotted her car, I pulled in right next to her. My sister arrived a few minutes later.

Dressed to the nines in a pale blue gown with only a shawl to keep warm, Cassidy looked at me from under her long lashes and smiled.

"You look lovely," she said, throwing her arms around me as the three of us gathered outside the restaurant doors. "And look at you!" she said, gesturing to my sister's black cocktail dress.

"It's no biggie," Bridget said, turning a circle and being as dramatic as ever. "I had it lying around."

“Don’t listen to her. She wears that thing whenever she gets the chance,” I said with a laugh. “Blind dates, second dates, you name it.”

“That doesn’t change the fact I look amazing in it,” Bridget said with a huge smile on her face. “I told you that dress would come in handy someday.”

I wet my lips, smoothing the wrinkles out of the fabric and hoping the bottom of my gown wouldn’t drag on the floor.

“You did,” I said, my voice not nearly as confident as I would’ve liked.

When Cassidy looked at me with concern, Bridget stepped between us and hooked her arms with ours. I knew she did it to keep Cassidy from asking about it, and as much as I would’ve loved to tell Cassidy all about the gown my father gave me, my heart seized whenever I thought about bringing it up.

Nerves that, once we stepped inside, got worse.

A soft melody played on the overhead speakers, the sound of a violin grating on my nerves more than it ever should.

“Just three tonight?” the hostess asked, focused on the menus behind the counter. “Oh my gosh, you’re Cassidy Blake.”

So much for a quiet evening. She practically screamed Cassidy’s name, and as we stood in the doorway, some of the patrons looked our way.

Heat burned my cheeks, but Cassidy took it in stride, smiling when the hostess walked us back to our table.

“So, how long have you two been together?” the hostess asked once we sat down.

The three of us laughed, me and Cassidy because of nerves, and my sister because she was way better at acting than I ever was.

“Just friends,” I said, silently thanking her for my coffee as I stared into the dark liquid.

“We’ve actually known each other since we were kids,”

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Cassidy added, pouring some milk into her own coffee. “The three of us used to hang out in that bookshop all the time.”

The hostess smiled and nodded her understanding. “My apologies. It’s just that the two of you look so cute together.”

And that’s when my sister really laughed, wrapping an arm around both of us before bringing the three of us together. “We really do!”

With the hostess’ face as red as it could go and the three of us stuck in a fit of giggles, the hostess returned to the front of the house to help the next group of customers.

“We should bring her around more often,” Cassidy said, catching her breath. “She’s hilarious.”

“She really is,” I agreed, leaning my head on Bridget’s shoulder once our laughter had died down. “Going out tonight was a great idea.”

“Not just to get David off my back, either.” Meaning her manager, I realized.

“Aww, you guys are going to make me blush,” Bridget said, hiding her head in her hands.

“You deserve it,” Cassidy said, bumping shoulders with her.

“Thank you for this.”

“Anytime.”

“So, any ideas on what you want to order?” I asked, looking over the large menu and not really feeling like much of anything. My stomach had been in knots all afternoon. I expected Cassidy to say no, but once I brought up the crap about her manager, she agreed.

Now that we were here, the anxiety I saw in her eyes was no more. As for me, my mind was still set on what would happen once we went home. Cassidy didn’t share much about her manager, but considering how he spoke to me and how many times he’d texted her days prior, I had a feeling I knew exactly the type of person he was.

I didn’t trust him. Not only because of his stupid bribe earlier today but because of how he acted in general. He hovered over Cassidy all morning, staying close even though she obviously had things under control.

A handful of reporters had even dropped by, but with a wave of his hand, they left, much to my relief.

While Cassidy may have offered to play some songs in my shop, I could see she wasn’t ready to take things further than that. New patrons or her

fans were welcome to walk through those doors, but anyone with a camera crew was asked to leave.

Of course, there was no stopping the videos folks decided to post online, but that was way better than seeing my store on the evening news.

I shuddered at that, waving Cassidy’s look of concern away before taking a sip of my coffee.

“Are you cold?” Cassidy asked, already removing her shawl so she could pass it to me. “Here. I have another one in the car.”

I grabbed her wrist before she could leave, silently begging her to sit back down. She hesitated, but only for a moment, taking her seat before I could say anything else.

“I’m fine,” I assured her, keeping my voice low so no one would overhear. Having the hostess ask about our relationship

status was bad enough, but if the other patrons were as observant as she was, there’d be yet another video floating around on the internet, and it wouldn’t involve my shop. “Just nervous is all,” I went on, putting my hand in my lap. “It’s been... actually, I don’t think we’ve ever been in a place like this, have we?” I looked to my sister who was more than happy to hide behind her menu, glancing my way whenever she thought I wasn’t paying attention.

“Maybe not you, but a guy brought me here once,” she said from behind her menu. “The steak’s to die for. I was stupid and bought a salad, then I ended up eating half of his meal instead.” She laughed at that, a tight nervous laugh that made me feel a lot less alone.

“Steak sounds too heavy at the moment,” I admitted, giving the menu a final read. “The fish sounds nice, though. What about you, Cass?”

“I might just stick with the salad.” She shrugged, and bless her, she kept a straight face until the very end. “Truthfully, I could go for a steak. I haven’t really treated myself since I got back.”

“Stuck eating ramen just like the rest of us, huh?” my sister teased, hiding her smile behind her menu.

“Mac n’ cheese, actually. Comfort food.”

“I hope you eat better when you’re on tour,” I said, cringing at how much I sounded like our mom. “Sorry.”

“No, you’re right, and I do. It’s just, being back here and with Maggie’s so close, I can’t not eat there on a regular basis.

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When I used to come home, I'd stop by my mom's place, but..." She trailed off, shielding her eyes with her hand. "I'm sorry. Tonight's supposed to be a lovely evening, and here I am, losing it all over again."

Bridget was the first to respond, placing her hand on Cassidy's the way I'd done so many times before. "It's hard,"

she agreed, offering Cassidy a partial smile when she met her gaze. "I'd say it gets easier but look at this one. She's still a mess."

Cassidy choked back a tiny laugh, then gave me an apologetic smile.

"It gets easier," I said, smiling the slightest bit, "but some days are worse than others." I paused a moment, wondering if I should bring up Laura again and if Cassidy losing her mother felt the same way. In the end, I decided against it. It wasn't my place to ask, and with Bridget around, I didn't want to make Cassidy more uncomfortable than she already was.

Cassidy took a deep breath, wiping her eyes with a tissue once the hostess returned to take our order. After she'd gone, the three of us fell into silence, my sister playing with the corner of a napkin and Cassidy's mind miles away. I've never liked awkward silences, so after coughing to move the air from my lungs, I spoke.

"Do they allow pets on the bus?" I asked Cassidy, resulting in a confused look from both her and my sister. "You never mentioned if you have any pets or not, so I was wondering if it's because you can't have them or if it's just because life's too busy."

She passed me a warm smile, clearly thankful for the new topic. “I thought about getting a dog once, but it wouldn’t have been fair to either one of us. We’re always moving around.

Most of the time, the world outside the van is crowded and uncomfortably loud. I wouldn’t have a yard for it to play in, and I honestly don’t want to have to worry about it whenever I’m on stage. That isn’t to say it wouldn’t be nice to get one someday, but not until after I’ve bought a place of my own and can be there on a regular basis.”

I nodded at that. “That makes sense.”

“What about a cat?” my sister asked. “They aren’t as sensitive and you wouldn’t have to worry about leaving it alone as much.”

“I’m allergic.” Cassidy wrinkled her nose. “We used to have one when I was a kid, but then I broke out in a rash and, well, the rest of the story is what you’d expect. Some cats are worse than others. Coby was terrible. He’d wrapped his paws around me when I picked him up, then rub his face all over my neck

and cheeks, causing me to break out in hives. It’s a real shame because I really liked him. He was the most affectionate cat I’ve ever known.”

“A fish, then,” my sister decided, continuing down her list of possible animals.

“She’s going to keep going until you cave in,” I warned.

“She did the same thing with my parents when she wanted to get a pet.”

Cassidy’s eyes lit up. “What did you guys end up with?”

“A turtle,” Bridget said with disgust. “Dad found it on the sidewalk. He brought it in and asked us to take care of it. The thing smelled horrible.”

“That’s because it was a turtle and you can’t give them a bath like you would with a dog,” I pointed out, laughing when she stuck her tongue out at me.

Our food arrived then, stopping my sister from saying anything else. As the three of us dug into our food, I couldn’t help smiling at how well the three of us got along with one another. Bridget was more of a people-person than I’d ever been, but it was usually forced.

Not with Cassidy. Even as Cassidy talked about her upcoming tour and schedule, Bridget treated her more like a friend than the fangirl she truly was. No doubt I’d get a call from her before bed, just so she could gush over Cassidy.

It was nice, not only to have a night out but to spend time with my sister. She was right. It’d been way too long since we’d had a night out together, and while Cassidy may have been our reason for doing so, I knew then it’d be something we’d have to continue. If not for me, then for her.

“I was thinking we could walk around town after dinner,”

Cassidy said between bites, taking a sip of water once she’d finished.

“I actually need to head back home soon and check on a guy I’ve been talking to,” Bridget said, keeping her head down so I couldn’t see her face. “But Evie’s free. Aren’t you, Evie?”

Here we go. I knew it wouldn’t take long for my sister to try and hook us up again.

I blew out a breath and hoped the heat on my cheeks wasn’t as noticeable to them as

it was for me. “I could go for a walk,”

I said, wincing when my voice wavered at the end. “Are you sure you don’t need to get back?” The last thing I wanted was for her manager to get on my case again, or worse. I could only imagine how charming he must’ve been to Cassidy once she got back.

“Not until tomorrow morning.” She flashed me a wicked grin, causing me to choke on my food enough for my sister to laugh at my expense.

Sipping my water, I took a handful of uneasy breaths, waiting for my heart rate return to this side of normal before saying anything else. “I’d be more than happy to join you.”

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With Bridget excusing herself from our tiny group, the walk gave me the time I needed to clear my head as well as to clear things up with Cassidy. After everything her manager had said to me this morning, I honestly wasn't sure where we stood. If he made her as uncomfortable as he'd done for me, then I wanted to know ahead of time instead of getting let down the moment she left.

Chapter Fifteen

Bridget bailed as soon as we paid for our meals, giving us both a hug before getting in her car to leave. No doubt she'd call me later to check on how things went, but I honestly

wasn't sure what she expected to happen. My mind was too full of worry for me to think of anything else.

So as Cassidy and I walked side by side, I tried to resist the urge to take her hand, hugging my arms around myself instead.

The air outside the restaurant was cold, but not too cold to keep me from walking. The cool air helped, keeping me present in the here and now instead of my thoughts running rampant like they'd done so many times before. Cassidy, on the other hand, was a world away, playing with the end of her shawl as we walked in silence.

"About David," she said, not looking at me, "you have to understand he's seen me go through a lot. He doesn't want me to get hurt."

I wasn't so sure about that. "He mentioned how you've been sneaking around and

that you just use other women until you're bored, then you walk away."

Her footsteps faltered, her heels clicking on the sidewalk once she picked up the pace again. "It isn't like that. He's just

—"

"Looking out for you. I know." I took a breath to ease the building tension in my back, clenching my jaw before I said something I might regret. "But what happens when you eventually find someone you really like? Will you keep them at arm's length as well?"

That wasn't what she'd done with me, but that was before her manager stuck his nose where it didn't belong. Cassidy's love life was her own. I could understand if she threatened to quit her tour, but she'd said no such thing. And so what if she did? It was her life, not his. He was simply riding on her

coattails and would do it to someone else if Cassidy ever decided to step down.

Cassidy looked at me then, the color draining from her face.

"I'm not trying to push you aside."

"I know you aren't, but you and I both know this won't last.

If the distance and time apart don't break us, his influence on you will." I was letting my temper get the better of me, but it couldn't be helped.

"I'll talk to him," she said, focusing on the sidewalk in front of us. "He means well, but I guess with me losing my mom, he thinks I'm more vulnerable than usual."

“Which would totally be understandable if you were hooking up with a random person, but look at who you’re talking to here. We’ve been hanging out for weeks and I’ve never pressured you into something you didn’t want to do.”

“I know, and I thank you for that. It’s just... I need you to be patient with me a little while longer.”

Be patient? “I’m not asking you to do anything,” I said, stopping when we reached an intersection. “I just don’t want to get blindsided. That’s all.”

“And you know I’ve been hurt enough to know what it would feel like to go through that pain in return.” She turned to me and held our hands between us. “I would never, ever do that to you. As soon as I feel something’s off, I’ll let you know.”

“But now?” I hedged, not sure if I wanted to know the answer.

“I like you, Evie. I really like you, and if you’ll have me, I’d like to give this a try. I know it won’t be easy. It’ll be damn-near impossible at times, but you’ve made me laugh more in the last few weeks than I have in years. It isn’t just because of my mom or Laura, either. I used to smile all the time, and while I do it on stage, real life isn’t that simple.”

“Trust me, I know.” I took a long breath and held her hand in mine as we crossed to the other side of the street. “And I’m willing to give this a try so long as you are. I won’t say I’m

thrilled with the idea of you being on tour and so far away, but I know we’ll talk whenever we can, and I can see you whenever I want so long as I look up your recent videos online.”

“But that isn’t me,” she said, her words strained at the end.

“I know it isn’t, but it’s still a part of you, one I’ll gladly accept until your next break.” I paused then, standing outside my shop once I realized how far we’d gone. “Do you always come home during break?”

“Pretty much. When I’m on tour, I tend to get my sight-seeing out of the way a few days after I arrive. The rest of my time is spent in hotel rooms or on the bus. It can suck and be exciting all at the same time. To be honest, sight-seeing isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, especially not as a celebrity. I’d love to see the world through someone else’s eyes, not getting interrupted when I’m looking at the Eiffel Tower or admiring the displays inside the Louvre Museum.”

I smiled at that. “It’s funny. So many of us would die to have a life like yours, but you just want to live one that’s close to normal.”

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“Music and being on tour is my normal. It can be exciting and suck all at the same time, but I honestly can’t imagine doing anything else.”

“Well, you could always come and work with me,” I said with a laugh, gesturing at the store.

“I’ll hold you to it,” she said with a smile, turning back the way we came. “Should we head back?”

“Yes, please,” I said, shivering for warmth. “It’s freaking cold out here.”

She laughed, then leaned her head on my shoulder. “We could always stay in your shop,” she teased, forcing butterflies into my stomach.

“Tempting,” I said, my voice shaking the slightest bit, “but I left the sleeping bags at home.”

“Shame. It would’ve been fun to camp out in the tower.”

“I’ll be sure to remember that.”

Spending the evening with Cassidy had been a blast, and if camping out in the tower meant I got to spend in even more time with her, it was definitely something I’d have to do before she went on tour. It would certainly be a fun way to see her off.

Pushing my fears aside from the time being, I walked with her, enjoying the cold evening air regardless of the goosebumps prickling all over my skin. Most of them

weren't because of the cold, anyway, my mind completely focused on the tower and how I could make it more magical than it already was.

And that's when I had an idea.

"What are you doing Friday night?" It was still a few days away but would give me just enough time to finish what I had in mind.

Cassidy gave my question some thought and shrugged.

"Probably working on my music, why?"

"You don't have a date with David?"

She wrinkled her nose and batted a hand at me. "He wishes.

No, it would just be me. Why?" She gave me a suspicious glance, a shy smile tugging at her lips. "What are you planning to do?"

"You'll see. You won't be allowed to see me all afternoon, but if you want to drop by around six, I should be ready."

She frowned, but after giving it some thought, she agreed.

"Six o' clock it is. Anything you need me to bring?"

"Just an overnight bag and possibly some chips."

Her grin widened. "Chips are something I can definitely do.

Now I want it to be the end of the week. Are you sure you can't do it tomorrow? I'm

free,” she added in a sing-song voice.

I shook my head, laughing at her when she gave me the most adorable look. “Friday,” I told her again, “and no sooner than that.”

She released a huff, then hugged her arms around mine.

“You can’t blame a girl for trying.”

“I promise it’ll be worth the wait.”

“It’d better be.”

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll have to come up with something better, and I suck at surprises.”

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“Giving them or receiving them?”

“A little bit of both, but I’m terrible at planning stuff like that.”

“Then leave it up to me. In the meantime, go home, get warm, and get some rest. We can talk more tomorrow.”

“I’ll text you when I get in,” she said, stopping just outside her car so she could kiss me on the lips. If she was worried about public shows of affection before, it wasn’t a concern right now.

Breathing her in, I arched my back, losing myself under her kiss. By the time we separated, I was out of breath and had completely forgotten whatever it was I’d wanted to say.

She kissed me one last time, then passed me a knowing smile. “I’ll text you later,” she said again, showing me her phone, “and I’ll drop by the shop tomorrow.”

I stood on the sidewalk outside of Ferdinand’s and watched her go, touching my lips where hers had been. With the streets clear and all of the commotion happening inside the restaurant instead of out on the sidewalk with me, I took one last look at the night sky before getting in my car to go home.

The entire way there, one thing made its way to the front of my mind. Cassidy kissed me. In public.

And on Friday night, she’d spend the entire night with me.

I could hardly wait.

Thankfully, when I asked my sister for the silly dragon decorations she'd used last Halloween, she didn't ask me what

they were for. Why she still had them on hand was anyone's guess, but it was way better than buying them online or trying to make them on my own. If there was one thing my sister was good at, it was using her hands.

She was amazing when it came to crafts. I always felt she'd be better off working in one of those art stores, but she said they bored her to tears. She made stuff all the time, usually for people who didn't deserve that level of thought or dedication.

And when it came to Halloween? No one did it better.

"You want the party hats as well?" she asked once she'd stopped by to drop off a box of decorations.

"Party hats?" As kind tiaras and crowns?

"You know, like one of those princess hats."

"Oh! Oh..." I checked inside the box, smiling at the felt dragon and its bright orange scales. "No. I think this should be okay."

"What is it for, anyway? Are you throwing a wizard party?"

I choked back a laugh, then nodded, deciding it was as good of an excuse as any. "Yeah. We're supposed to do a reading, but the book isn't really that exciting to look at."

“Well, Charlie here should help.”

“

Charlie? You named the dragon?” Why was I not surprised?

“Duh. I name all of my decorations.” She followed me over to the counter, then turned back for the rest of the store. “Are you sure you don’t need anything else? I could stop by and—”

“No,” I almost yelled. “No. Everything’s fine.”

“Uh huh.” She crossed her arms over her chest and gave me a suspicious look. “So what’s really going on?”

For the next several minutes, I told Bridget how I planned to decorate the tower. All the while, the smirk on her face got bigger and bigger.

“You know what you really need?” she asked, her smile as wide as it could go and her voice giddy as hell.

“No. What?”

“A servant.”

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I batted her away but couldn't help laughing when she did the same. "Get out of here."

"Oh, if you plan to use candles, keep them away from Charlie's tail. He might be able to breathe fire but he isn't fire-resistant."

"Charlie will be fine," I said with an exasperated sigh. "And thanks. You've been a huge help."

"Have fun," she threw back over her shoulder, reaching for the front doors as she did. "Don't do anything I would do."

I shook my head again and watched her go, doing my best to ignore the butterflies in my stomach and the very small window of time I had left to finish up for tonight.

One hour down, seven hours to go.

So long as I didn't get bombarded with new customers or folks looking for Cassidy, I'd be able to finish before she walked in the back of the shop.

Time to have some fun.

Chapter Sixteen

Charlie, as my sister liked to call him, was the absolute pinnacle of decorations. Getting him to fit just right on the ceiling took a ton of thumbtacks and more time than I'd care to count. But it was done, and as he looked down on me with his big

golden eyes, I shivered with anticipation. Some folks liked to sleep under the stars, but tonight? Tonight, Cassidy and I would sleep under the mouth of a dragon.

It was silly and lame all at the same time and exactly the kind of thing I would've loved if she'd done it for me. I only hoped she'd feel the same way. Of course, if Charlie did freak her out, there were plenty of other places we could hide inside the store, including the front lounge once I closed up for the night.

There were other decorations as well, from the lights woven along the edge of the stairs to the dozen candles I'd strategically placed on each of the shelves inside the tower.

Not knowing what she was planning to bring, I'd made sure to pack an extra set of blankets on my ride in this morning.

Standing in the doorway, I took a moment to admire my handiwork. I truly loved this room, and considering how much time Cassidy spent in the tower, she did as well. And after tonight, there will be one more happy memory inside this shop.

It'd been a long time since I'd had something to look forward to, not including Cassidy's almost-daily visits.

When the butterflies in my stomach grew too large for me to stand, I took a deep breath, then returned to my place in the lower level of the store. Fortunately, it'd been a rather slow day. Bad for the business, but fortunate because it gave me some time to clear my head.

The nerves, however, never stopped. From the moment I drove in this morning to the second I locked the front door, my stomach churned with nerves. I honestly wasn't sure what I was expecting, but just the thought of spending more time with Cassidy had my stomach doing somersaults around my ankles.

As always, Cassidy arrived just in time, her tiny knock on the back door sending my heart rate into overdrive as I finished counting out the register for the day.

“Did ya miss me?” she asked in a cheerful voice, throwing her arms around me once she dropped her overnight bag inside the door.

“Always.” I kissed her on the cheek and sunk in her embrace.

This was what I needed. This was what I’d been waiting for all day—not her staying over for the night, not cuddling in the tower, but this—her arms around me and her chest pressed close to mine. I could almost feel her heart beat next to mine, its rhythmic beat just as erratic as my own.

“So, I was thinking we could order in,” Cassidy said, kissing me on the lips before drawing us apart to meet my gaze. “Unless you’ve already got something planned, that is.”

“No plans,” I told her, taking her hand in mine before she could take her things up to the tower. “You can just leave those there for now.”

“Still not letting me go up there, huh?” She cocked an eyebrow at me and smiled the same mouthwatering smile she’d given me the day she walked inside my shop.

“It’s for later,” I said, taking a breath when she finally turned away from the stairs. “You wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise, would you?”

“I can’t imagine what you’d have up there that I haven’t seen already.”

“And you’ll get no more hints from me.”

She crossed her arms over her chest with a huff but her straight face only lasted so

long. In the next moment, she leaned into me and kissed the sensitive spot behind my ear, smiling when it sent a shiver down my spine.

“What if I persuaded you?” she asked, her voice low.

I swallowed. Hard. “Not until after dinner,” I said again, clenching my jaw to keep my teeth from chattering.

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“Then I guess we should place that order, shouldn’t we?”

There was that smile again, and hell if it didn’t make me weak in the knees. “I’m thinking Maggie’s.”

“Not Ferdinand’s?” I teased, already knowing why she picked it.

“Maggie’s is closer and way more acceptable for a night in.

I wouldn’t feel right eating anything from Ferdinand’s in here.”

I nodded at that. Eating a nice steak off of a paper plate really didn’t sound that attractive. Besides, the meal didn’t matter. It was what happened after our meal that did.

“I want to stay up all night,” I said, grabbing a menu from behind the register even though we both already knew what we wanted to order. “I want us to do what old girlfriends would.”

“Spreading rumors about the popular girl at school?”

Cassidy said, tilting her head to the side.

“That, but also just staying up, telling stories, laughing...

you know, the light stuff.” And the kind of stuff I would’ve enjoyed if I heard it from her. There was so much about Cassidy I didn’t know, so many things I’d love to hear

if she gave me the chance.

“Breakfast for dinner sound okay to you?” She took out her cell, pulling up Maggie’s number a moment later.

“That would be amazing.”

Eating in the lower level of the shop felt weird at first, and as much as I wanted to introduce Cassidy to Charlie and the new and improved tower, I managed just fine. Cassidy, on the other hand, kept checking her phone, releasing a sigh of relief whenever she realized David hadn’t called.

“You should talk to him,” I said once our meal was through.

“If he’s causing you this much anxiety just for having a night out, you need to tell him.”

She forced a smile and set her phone to the side, glancing at it when she thought I wasn’t looking. “Old habits die hard.”

“Just let it go for one night,” I said, leaning in to kiss her on the lips.

The sweet taste of maple syrup danced across my tongue as she deepened our kiss, her arms tight around me. Knowing her manager would always be at the back of her mind, I set work aside and lost myself in that one kiss. In the way she held me with one hand at the nape of my neck and the other on my hip.

At how she breathed, her exhale of breath as shaky as my own.

And how, every time her tongue swept over mine, it sent a spark all the way down my spine.

I would've stayed there all night if I could, but as with most things, our kiss came to an end much too soon, leaving us bo

th breathless as I fell into her arms.

"Why don't we move this upstairs?" she asked, her voice barely audible over the pounding of my own heart.

I smiled, joined her in a lazy kiss, then took her hand in mine so we could head into the tower. Once she grabbed her overnight bag, I stood with her at the base of the stairs, smiling when her eyes lit up at what she saw.

The tiny white lights I usually used out front around the holidays were the perfect way to guide our path. As soon as we reached the top of the steps, Cassidy's voice caught, her hand tensing in mine.

"Evie, this is... it's beautiful." She looked back at me with a huge smile on her face.

"I would've lit the candles before we came up, but..." I shrugged and left it at that, letting our hands drop to our sides as we walked single file into the room. "The dragon's name is Charlie. You can thank my sister for that."

"She made him?" She looked at me with disbelief.

"I might tease her when it comes to her choice in boyfriends, but she's amazing with her hands. Very crafty."

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“Remind me to commission her the next time I need something for one of my sets.”

As Cassidy slowly made her way around the room, running her fingertips over the warm blankets I’d left on the sofa, I lit every single one of the candles. As expected, they offered just enough light and the perfect atmosphere for the evening. Once they were in place, I turned off the light and joined her on the sofa.

For a long unnerving moment, neither one of us spoke. My mind was going a mile a minute, hyper-aware of her fingers on my skin and the warmth of her kiss when she touched her lips to the inside of my wrist.

Looking at me from under her lashes, Cassidy smiled, gently kissing up my arm until my sleeves got in the way. But she didn’t stop. Instead, she jumped to the bare skin of my neck, giving extra attention to the sensitive spot behind my ear until finally meeting me in a kiss, one that was far more aggressive than before.

My stomach clenched, my heart pounding in my chest as she lay me on the floor with her arm under my neck. As the room spun around us, I let go. I stopped worrying about the shop, the bills, the lack of customers and Cassidy’s upcoming tour. I stopped worrying about her manager, her cell phone which was still on and probably loud enough for both of us to hear if anyone happened to call.

I pushed all of those things to the back of my mind until all that was left was her. The sweet taste of her lips, the coconut shampoo in her hair, her touch, and the fire building in my stomach.

It was freeing and sad all at the same time. I’d spent most of my life looking for

someone like her, and now that she was here, she had to leave. It wasn't fair. I'd finally found the kind of love they show in the movies, but in the end, there'd be no race to the airport. I wouldn't chase her down or stop her from going through that terminal.

She'd board the plane and go on tour just like she always planned. As much as I wanted her to stay here with me, I also knew I couldn't stop her from doing what she loved.

So I forced the worry and fear to the back of my mind and ran my hands through her hair, holding her close and breathing in as much of her as I could. It was her fingers that touched my skin, her lips that kissed mine, and her heart beating against my breast. Cassidy. Just Cassidy.

A lifetime had passed since we entered the tower, and yet when she pulled back to check on me, it felt much too soon.

"Are you okay?" she asked, brushing the hair from in front of my eyes before pressing her forehead to mine.

"Yup," I managed, wincing when my voice didn't sound as convincing as I would've liked.

She frowned, then lay on her back, taking me with her. As I lay my head on her chest, she spoke, absently stroking my hair as she did. "I think this is the first time I'm not looking forward to going on tour," she said, resting her hand on the nape of my neck. "I mean, I never fully looked forward to it.

It's always nerve-wracking until I get out there, you know?

But this time feels different." She shifted her weight, sitting up so she could look me

in the eyes. “This time feels like I’m actually leaving something behind.”

My cheeks burned at her admission, at the fact she’d miss me just as much as I knew I’d miss her. “I can’t even begin to imagine how hard it is,” I said, sitting on the floor beside her.

“I love it once I’m out there, but getting to that point takes a lot of effort on my part and even more when it comes to my manager.”

I couldn’t help noticing the tightness in her voice. “How is he when you’re out there?” I asked. “I mean, is he as aggressive as he is now?”

“He gets impatient,” she said with a half-smile. “Then again, we all do. When the bus starts to feel too crowded, I like to get out and take a walk. Of course, that means he isn’t far behind me, which only adds to the stress instead of removing some of it like I’d hoped.”

“And you can’t find a new one? A manager, I mean.”

She released a long breath and shook her head. “I’ve considered it, but he’s been with me since the beginning.”

“You don’t owe him anything,” I told her, taking her hand in mine. “If a manager makes you this uncomfortable that you have to hide away in a bookshop, he isn’t right for you.” It’s something I’d said before. “Maybe in the beginning, but I’m sure there are others out there who would love to have you.”

“But he knows me.”

“And he ends up being the topic of most of our conversations aside from your mom or books,” I added. “I’m just saying, if it doesn’t feel fun anymore, then maybe

there's something you need to change.”

“And what about the shop?” she bit back, looking away from me as soon as she did.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“The shop is...” I waved my hand in front of me, searching for the right words.

“Difficult. Bridget keeps telling me to upgrade and add these ereader stations or whatever they’re called, but that isn’t what my father had in mind.”

“He also came before the new wave of technology, so how can you know he’d keep it this way?” Cassidy dipped her head, gently pressing her forehead to mine.

I didn’t. “I don’t know. It just doesn’t feel right.”

“So while I’m remaining loyal to a manager who has his moments, you’re holding on to an idea that’s no longer your own.”

I opened my mouth to say something but thought better of it. She had a point. As much as I hated to admit it, holding on to an idea from the past wasn’t doing me any favors, but the thought of moving forward didn’t make me feel any better.

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“Tell me something. If this was your shop from the very start, what would you have done differently?”

I leaned my head on her shoulder and lay my arm across her chest, thinking back to when I was a kid. “I used to pretend I was a shopkeeper when I was little. I always envisioned the

way the lounge is now along with the wall, but I also wanted a place in the back to hold things like poetry readings or music.

The store’s too small, though. Without moving things around, they’d never fit.”

“What about the tower?” she asked, gesturing at the ceiling above us. “It might not be the most spacious room in the store, but it could offer something different.”

But this is our tower. I kept the thought to myself. It wasn’t ours, hers, or mine. It just was.

As though she could read my thoughts, she said, “I know how important it is to you, but if you really want to make the shop your own without adding in more tech, then something has to give.” She was starting to sound like my sister.

She was also right.

“I could do that, or I could move some of the smaller reading sections upstairs. Maybe the magazines and newspapers. It’s quieter up here, so folks can enjoy their morning paper in peace.”

She was shaking my head before I could finish. “No, the tower deserves better than that. Having a room for quiet readers isn’t going to bring in the traffic this place deserves.

However, if you hold something like a poetry reading and give something like a 10% off coupon for those who participate, it could mean more people in the door along with more sales.”

“Because of the coupon they receive.” I couldn’t believe it.

Not only was it a great idea, but I could honestly see it working out.

“Exactly,” she said with a nod, sitting up with her back pressed against the sofa. “If folks aren’t coming through that door, give them a reason to do so.” She paused a moment, then said something I never thought I’d hear. “In fact, why don’t we do this. You open up the tower for events once I get back, and I’ll book your first one.”

I looked at her with disbelief. “You’d do that?” She’d already played inside the shop, but to actually organize something like that? Here?

“This place has reignited a spark inside of me I feared was long gone,” she said, kissing the top of my head. “If I can give something back, I will. And because I know you won’t take donations...” She gave me a pointed look and left it at that.

“I’ll think about it,” I said, not wanting to force her into something she’d regret. “But no promises.”

“That’s all I ask.”

With our concerns out of the way, we both sat in silence, enjoying one another’s company. As the night went on, Cassidy got even quieter. A part of me worried it was

because of something I'd said. In the end, it was simply because she was tired.

According to her, packing up to go on tour was as exhausting as it was trying to get back home. She'd been on her feet all day, occupying her time between last minute bookings and seeing that the rest of the crew's needs were met.

She didn't talk about them much, but there was the guy behind the equipment they set up, a few girls who sat outside with merchandise, the driver of the bus, and of course, her manager.

Knowing she had a few friends she could lean on made me feel a little better, even if it meant only getting to see her over the phone for a while.

As the candles slowly burned out, night finally descended on my little shop. A part of me wished I could go with her, not right away but sometime in the future. Granted, taking time away from the shop wasn't realistic, but maybe if I begged Bridget, she'd

fill in until I got back.

I could only hope.

Chapter Seventeen

The days flew by after that, but Cassidy still found the time to drop by every day after lunch. Her visits were short, a small tease of what had been but still a lot more than one person probably deserved. I could see she was worried and that her upcoming tour stressed her out, but she never said a word.

Knowing she wanted to enjoy what little time we had left, I kept my concerns to myself, more than happy to push them aside for just one more hour with her.

But when she drew away from me instead of sinking in my embrace like she usually did, I knew something was wrong.

“What?” I asked, lifting her chin so I could see her eyes, eyes that were glazed over with tears. “What is it?”

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Her lip trembled and she quickly turned away, the tears in her voice hard to ignore. “It’s stupid.” She walked away before I could place a hand on her shoulder, standing just out of reach. When she looked at me again, her expression was hard to read. “I feel like a kid by saying this but I don’t want to go.”

She stomped her foot and managed a small smile.

“So you’re going to throw a temper tantrum in my store?” I couldn’t help but laugh, and when she joined in, I breathed a sigh of relief. Taking her hands in mine, I said, “Look, things will be weird for a little while, but we’ll make it work, okay?”

I raised my brows at her, tucking a tendril of hair behind her ear as she leaned into my caress. “Anything worth having isn’t easy.”

She nodded at that. “I have an entire career to prove it.

Sure, I may have accidentally stepped into it, but keeping things going is...” She blew out a breath and left it at that. “I can’t believe how calm you are about all of this. Why aren’t you freaking out?”

“Oh, trust me, I am. There’s tons of chaos happening up in here,” I said, pointing to my head. “To be honest, I’m trying not to lose my mind. I also have the butterflies to prove it.”

“Then you have a better poker face than I do.”

Nodding, I guided her to the front lounge so we could sit on the sofa. For a

Wednesday afternoon, the store was really quiet, and for once, I was thankful for the silence. Still, there was no quieting the fears constantly crashing into the back of my mind. I had no idea what her schedule was like once she went on tour, and considering how nervous she'd been the last few days, I didn't have the heart to ask.

"Are we crazy for doing this?" she asked, her soft voice booming in the otherwise quiet room.

"For trying to make a long distance relationship work, or falling in love at thirty-five?" My cheeks burned under her intense gaze, forcing me to look away a moment later.

Her soft hand on my cheek forced whatever tears I'd been holding back to fall. When she spoke again, her voice was a mere whisper. I had to strain my ears just to hear her.

"A little bit of both," she said, passing me a small smile when I looked at her again. "I was starting to think I'd never find lo... someone like you."

Her close admission caused the butterflies in my stomach to grow. "You and me both. Bridget used to say I was married to my work. If I reached fifty without getting married, I was going to get the papers drawn up and everything."

"Then I guess I got to you just in time," she teased, pressing her forehead to mine as she held my face in her hand.

"You had some time," I said, my voice shaking as I met her in a tentative kiss. "But I'm glad you came now. I honestly wasn't sure what I'd do in another five years."

"Mid-life crisis?" She offered, the lift of her eyebrows causing my smile to grow. "Can't say I've had one of those just yet, but I've been close."

“You don’t think us being together is—”

“No,” she said, cutting me off. “This isn’t a crisis, and we aren’t a mistake. I dropped those journals off for a reason, and that reason is right here.” She caressed my cheek, catching one of my tears with her thumb. “All these years, I’ve been searching for a reason behind my music and fame. I thought

she might be out there waiting to see me perform. Who knew I’d find her right in my hometown, and in a bookstore no less.”

“It’s always in the last place you expect,” I said, taking her in my arms as we both reclined on the couch. “So, you really think we can make this work?”

“With someone like you?” she asked, brushing my hair from in front of my eyes. “I know we can.”

Cassidy packed up her things and boarded their bus two days later. In that short time, she spent as much of her day with me as she could, which wasn’t much. Between all of the preparations she had to do and her manager breathing down her neck, we were lucky to get an hour to ourselves without something interrupting us.

In the end, I gave up when it came to having a silent moment to ourselves and settled for just being present with her, holding her hand in mine as she sorted through the next few months of her life. Their first stop was two states over, not far but still far enough away for us to test our strength.

I’d offered to go with her and be with her until she went to her second destination, but she asked me to stay behind and watch the shop instead. She explained that by going with her, I’d make it that much harder for either one of us to leave. She wasn’t wrong. Even before I offered to join her, I knew it’d be impossible for me to walk away once everything was said and done.

If not for the fact the store was practically bleeding money, I probably wouldn't have come back at all. And now, with her gone, the shop needed my attention more than ever.

My heart jumped whenever someone walked through the front doors. Cassidy hadn't used them in weeks, always parking out back, but I looked anyway. I looked because, against all reason, I hoped she'd come home for good.

It was a selfish thought and one that would likely pass in the coming weeks, but right then, days after her departure, her absence was the only thing I could think about. There was no

music coming from her place in the tower, no one standing at my side as I finished up the inventory for the day, and no hand in mine as I locked up for the night.

Cassidy was gone, and no matter how hard I tried to reassure myself, my eyes burned with tears that refused to fall.

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I missed her. I missed her laugh, her sweet smile, the warmth of her touch, and everything in between. My chest ached whenever I thought about her, and my throat threatened to close whenever I happened to look at my phone.

One of the last things we did was take a picture together, a picture I'd set to the login on my phone, that way I got to see her every single day, even when things got rough. She was always there, in my mind, my heart, and just a short phone call away.

But I didn't call, deciding it was best if I waited to hear from her instead.

Bridget kept tabs on where she was and all of her performances as I honestly couldn't bring myself to watch them on my own. I knew she was well and that she was still out there doing shows as they made their way across the country. I could've flown out to surprise her if I wanted, but a part of me knew I'd end up in the same place I'd already been.

Here. In my shop. Thousands of miles away from her and feeling terribly alone.

"Get a grip," I chided myself, opening and closing the register as I stared at a blank computer screen. "You're acting like a lovesick teenager. You're an adult. Act like it."

Taking a breath, I calmed my nerves enough to walk into the back to get a new shipment of books I could stock. The box wasn't anything like the one Cassidy dropped off so many weeks ago, but it made me think of her anyway.

Man, I'd heard of instant love before, but this was ridiculous. I was surrounded by her

memory, of where she'd been and things she'd touched, making it all the more difficult to concentrate on my work. I was used to the memories I

carried had because of my dad, but seeing Cassidy around every corner was surreal.

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I could imagine her in the lounge with a book in her lap, walking through the front door with a coffee from up the street, and even hear her soft voice as it made its way down from the tower. She was gone but still around all at the same time, my memories of her playing out in vivid detail.

I couldn't not think about her, and as I stocked the shelves, I smiled when my fingertips brushed the spine of one of the books she'd been reading before she left.

I'd actually restocked it on the shelf the day before, but for whatever reason, I decided to pull it out and open up to where she'd left off. I'm not sure why I didn't see it before, but there, stuffed in between the pages of the book, was a folded up note meant just for me.

Smiling, I set the box of books off to the side and sat down, happily losing myself between the fantasy and sci-fi sections of the store.

Reading is your escape, just as music is mine. Promise me you won't escape for too long, though, because we're about to go on an epic journey together.

That's it. That's all she wrote, and yet I had the biggest grin on my face.

Hugging the piece of paper to my chest, I fought back the tears that burned my eyes, then tucked the piece of paper in my pocket for safekeeping.

It was then I knew with absolute certainty that we'd get through this.

Together.

Chapter Eighteen

"Any word from Cassidy?"

My sister called as soon as I walked in the door, her voice sounding just as hopeful as I'd been earlier.

Leaving my bag at the door, I made my way into the living room and collapsed on the sofa. "Briefly. She called around noon, but not two minutes later, she had to go. I think her manager kicked her off or something."

"At least you know she got in safe. They probably have a lot of work to do before tonight."

My heart seized at that. Tonight was her first show, and again I wished I'd gone with her to see it. "I guess. It still sucks, though. If her calls are going to be like that—"

"Evie, it's only been a few days. You need to chill and let her do her job. You're starting to sound like you're the young sister instead of me." Her playful jab hurt more than it usually would.

"Sorry. You're right. I'm just not used to this whole long distance thing."

"You mean the whole dating thing," Bridget corrected me.

"It's been ages since you've been with someone more than a millisecond, but trust me when I say that newness and need to be with her all the time will pass."

I wasn't so sure about that.

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“Distance makes the heart grow fonder,” she said, likely batting her eyes in the process.

“Or more lovesick.”

She released a breath loud enough for me to hear. “Okay, that’s enough. We need to go out, like right now.”

“Now?” I whined, glancing at the clock to check the time.

“It’s almost eight. I don’t feel like it.” Not to mention there was no reason for me to go out in the first place.

“You’re feeling sorry for yourself. Cassidy made me promise not to let you get like this.”

“She did? When?” I didn’t hear her say that.

“She called. Yeah. I gave her my number that night at Ferdinand’s. It was actually so she could call me once those keychains came in, but...” She trailed off. Bridget always did like her flashy merchandise. Granted, I never thought they’d talk to each other on their own. “She knows you’re going to worry,” my sister said when I didn’t speak up. “And as your baby sister, it’s my job to look after you.”

I laughed at that. “I honestly don’t think I’ll make the best company,” I warned her, “but I am getting hungry. If you feel like dropping by, I’ll order us a pizza.”

“Give me fifteen and you’ve got yourself a deal.”

Going into work the following morning was a lot harder than I expected. Between my sister keeping me up until the dead of night and Cassidy not texting me until after I’d gone to bed, my stomach was a twist of nerves and anxiety. I knew it was because it was her first show since she went on break, one of which that sold out months in advance, but I had to wonder if this was going to be our new normal. Would our calls happen in tiny bursts, or would there come a time when she could actually sit down and talk for more than a few minutes at a time?

It shouldn’t have worried me as much as it did, but in the end, I couldn’t help it.

Opening up the shop, I went right for the front of the store, completely ignoring the staircase leading up to the tower. If I could avoid it, then maybe it would make my day go by a little faster.

That was the hope, anyway.

As soon as I unlocked the front doors and glanced at the wall of books, my heart sank. One book was missing from the wall, the same book I’d found tucked away on a shelf the day before. The same book Cassidy had been reading before she left.

I really should’ve put it back where it belonged. I honestly have no idea why I put it in the fantasy section when it clearly had a spot up front. Maybe it was because I wanted to keep it in the shop a while longer, not that anyone would look at the wall of books anyway.

Still, having it tucked away on a random shelf instead of on display meant it was less likely to get picked up.

Smiling, I rummaged in my pocket for the small note Cassidy had left for me. This

was our journey, our heroes'

quest, and just like any other journey, it'd have its ups and downs. This was just a small dip in the road before things could improve. I was almost sure of it.

Feeling a little better than when I first walked in, I sorted through the bit of inventory I had yet to put away, then went back to check on any books that may have been dropped off the night before. A small box of books sat outside the back door, unnoticeable to even me when I first came in.

Studying the box, I frowned at the torn flap and the damp cardboard along the bottom edge. Thankfully, the books inside were unharmed, but whoever dropped them off clearly didn't care about what happened to them at all. The books weren't dropped off by mistake, and as I took the book in my arms, I thought back to the box Cassidy had left so many weeks ago.

It was hard to believe how far we'd come since then, moving from acquaintances to friends, and finally to something more. Something I couldn't put into words.

My nights were restless when she wasn't around, my heart sick with worry as I wondered where she was and if she missed me as much as I missed her. Granted, she had a lot of things to distract her, things that needed her attention way more than I did. Things like her audience, interacting with the fans, and tiptoeing around her manager.

I cringed at that. His first and only visit to the store left a bad taste in my mouth. I understood why Cassidy kept him around, but deep down, I didn't trust him. I knew as soon as he opened his mouth that he didn't approve of what she did, but if it didn't bother her, then why did he care?

I wasn't a danger to her. In fact, if anyone was the danger, it was him.

“Stop,” I scolded myself, gritting my teeth before my temper got the better of me.

God, I hated this. Her short phone calls, quick texts, and not seeing her warm smile. I would’ve done anything to see her beautiful face again, one not thrown around inside a video. No doubt a video had already gone up from the night before, and as much as I wanted to hear her sing and see she was okay, I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

So I dove into my work, stocking what I didn’t need to stock and rotating the books on the front wall even though I hadn’t read a good one in months.

Once I was through, I finally headed up into the tower, stopping just inside the door when my foot grazed the side of a box.

“Strange. That wasn’t here before.”

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Kneeling down, I opened the flaps and caught myself before I could fall off balance. There, inside the box, were the journals Cassidy had asked me to keep. I'd completely forgotten about them. Between our night in the tower and her going on tour, I'd forgotten my promise to keep the journals safe.

She couldn't take them on tour, and with her mother's house cleaned out, there was nowhere for them to go.

"She must've left them here the other day," I mused aloud, picking up the box before walking it over to one of the sofas and sitting down.

She'd gone up into the tower one last time before she left, but I always thought it was because of something she forgot, not because of something she wanted to leave behind.

Looking at the journals now and knowing who they were from, my fingers ached to touch their spines, to open up to the front cover and trace the words, words I was never supposed to read.

"It wouldn't be right," I told myself, but not even my heart agreed.

The journals were just one more connection to her, a way to ease my mind during Cassidy's absence. But she didn't write them. It didn't matter. She was the subject of most of the entries. She'd said so herself.

So why was I hesitating?

Taking a breath, I fisted my hands to keep them from shaking. This isn't right, a small voice said in the back of my head.

I should've been downstairs doing my job. Instead, I was in the tower, balancing on the edge of respecting a dead woman's privacy and breaking all the rules just to read more about her.

About Cassidy.

"She left those journals," I texted Bridget, bouncing my knee as I waited for her response.

"The ones from before?"

"Yeah. I kind of agreed to look after them while she's gone."

"But you want to read them."

"Yeah..." I winced at the admission.

"You respected her privacy before, so why not do the same thing now?"

"That was before I knew who they belonged to." Before I knew they were hers.

"I'm going to go against what I said before. Leave them alone. Put them somewhere safe and

then forget about them.

Besides, we have a bigger problem. Look.”

A second later, she sent me another text, one linking to a big news site. Knowing I’d regret it, I clicked on the link anyway, my heart dropping into my stomach once I did.

CASSIDY BLAKE, SINGER, SONGWRITER, AND...

DATING?

I picked up the phone and called my sister as I read over the first paragraph, my eyes fixed on a photo of Cassidy and a man I didn’t know.

“It isn’t true,” I said, my voice wavering a bit.

“I know that, but what about everyone else? We need to get ahead of this.”

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“And do what?” I asked with a tight laugh. “Go up on stage and profess my love for her?” She’d never forgive me.

“Something like that. Yeah.”

I didn’t agree. Knowing how much Cassidy hated public appearances, I had a feeling the article was as much a surprise to me as it was to her.

“What are you going to do?” my sister asked, pulling me from my thoughts, my vision blurring with fresh tears.

“I don’t know, but I’ll think of something.”

Chapter Nineteen

“Are you dating HIM now?”

Okay, so maybe texting her with a copy of the photo wasn’t the best of ideas, but when she didn’t pick up my calls, it was the only thing I could do. It isn’t her, I reassured myself.

Cassidy wouldn’t do something like that. Not to me or anyone else.

As the minutes passed, the nerves in my stomach wound even tighter. Maybe it was an accident. Maybe it was a one-time thing.

I shook my head, dismissing both possibilities altogether when my cell phone rang.

“Cassidy?” I asked, coughing to move the air from my lungs. “Oh, thank god. I was starting to worry.”

“I’m working through this mess,” she said, her words short and quick. “How about you? Are you okay? I was hoping you wouldn’t see this and... well, do what you did.”

“Freak out?” How could I not? “What’s going on? Who is he?”

“Those stupid reporters spun the story they wanted to tell.

It’s as simple as that. And before you get upset over the fact that he’s holding my hand, that’s Joel.”

Joel... Joel. I frowned, thinking back to where I’d heard his name before. “Your best friend?” No wonder the two of them looked close!

“The one and only,” she said with relief. “David convinced me to get a shot with him before we did the show last night.

After what you told me about being more open with my fans, I figured it couldn’t hurt.”

“Until the media got to it.” I hadn’t read past the first paragraph, but if it was the kind of article I thought it was, then someone must’ve spoken to them directly. “But they can’t make up a story out of the blue.”

“No, they can’t,” she agreed. This time when she spoke, there was no mistaking the pain in her voice. “You were right about him. Everything you said, it all makes sense. He’s never done anything like this before, but when I told him I wanted to be more open, he suggested the photo. So much for an old dog changing his ways, right?”

“So what are we supposed to do now?” I understood it was her public image that was in jeopardy, but I still wanted her to know she wasn’t alone.

“You know how you said you’d come and see me on tour?

Any chance we could move up the date a tiny bit?”

My stomach churned, a big smile spreading across my face.

“I can come this afternoon. Just let me get Brid—”

“She’s coming too,” Cassidy cut in, almost laughing.

“She’d kill you if you asked her to stay behind.”

“True. Okay. Give me a few hours to wrap things up, then we’ll get on the next flight.”

“I’ll have the tickets waiting for you.”

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Halfway down the steps, I hesitated. “Cassidy, I—”

“Consider it our first anniversary gift.”

“Our first?” I asked, placing my hand on the railing so I wouldn’t fall. “But we’ve only—”

“Been dating a few weeks. I know. But we’ve been friends for longer, so let’s celebrate that.”

Breathing a little easier now, I gave her a nod before realizing she couldn’t see me. “Okay, but I get to pay the next time we go out to dinner.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal.”

After a nerve-wracking flight with my sister rambling the entire way, we finally reached Cassidy’s hotel. Large white pillars stood before us, making the hotel look like a museum more than anything else. The front doors opened once we got close, the hotel opening up with a tall ceiling and a pair of spiral staircases positioned to either side of the reception desk.

“Man. How much do you think it costs per night to stay here,” Bridget asked, her eyes fixed on the beautiful chandelier hanging several floors above our heads.

“More than I make in a month, probably.” Reaching the desk, I was about to ask the receptionist to announce our arrival when a familiar face caught my eye.

“Evie?” His voice wasn’t nearly as deep as I’d expected from his photo, but Joel’s smile was more than enough reassurance for me to step away from the desk.

“Joel,” I said with a smile, joining him along with my sister on the far side of the lobby. “I recognize you from the photo.”

My voice wasn’t as cheerful as I’d hoped.

“Nice to see I’m not the only one who’s upset with this mess. My boyfriend’s been an absolute wreck! Cassidy too.

You can’t begin to understand what this is doing to her. She was up first thing this morning and has been working nonstop trying to fix it.”

“Let me guess, they won’t take back what they said because of the whole freedom of speech,” Bridget said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Pretty much. The way Cassidy sees it is this. In order to rectify the damage the media has done, you’ll need to go up on stage with her.”

“Me?” I asked, the word barely leaving my lips. “But she

—”

“Doesn’t want something like this to happen ever again.

Come on. She’s waiting for you both upstairs.”

My excitement to see Cassidy only lasted a few minutes. As soon as she mentioned having me onstage, my heart dropped into the pit of my stomach. Her lips continued to move but hell if I heard any of it. It felt as though I’d gone far enough into the

mountains for my ears to pop, only I hadn't done it yet.

Taking a breath, I concentrated on whatever she was or wasn't saying, releasing a sigh of relief once I finally heard her voice.

"It'll be fine," she said, placing her hands on my shoulders.

"I'll be with you the entire time."

"It's not the audience I'm worried about," I squeaked, taking a shaky breath when she tilted her head to the side.

The announcement she wanted to make was one I didn't expect to happen for months, or possibly years from now.

It wasn't a proposal, but considering our options, it was pretty close.

"David," she said with a nod, offering me a small smile before walking me over to one of the sofas. "This isn't his decision."

"Are you talking about the announcement or about us?"

Because right then, it sounded like a little bit of both.

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She shrugged. “Both. He’s been my cornerstone and my confidant for years, but I’m slowly starting to realize I need more than one person on my team.” She looked at me and my sister. “I need all of you.”

“We’re a three-legged table,” Joel said with a laugh, causing me to do the same. “I know you’ve threatened to throw me into the back of your van, but surely I’m more important than a piece of furniture.”

“Very important,” Cassidy agreed. She brushed my hair from in front of my eyes and caressed my cheek. “I know I’m asking a lot, but I can’t do this without you.”

“What about me?” Bridget asked, standing beside me. “If you need an extra bouncer, just say the word.”

I laughed at the thought of my sister kicking folks out of the audience. “That’ll be the day.”

Cassidy smiled, then said, “I want you close by for support.

For Evie. She’ll need you while I sing.”

“I’ll be there,” Bridget promised, giving my shoulder a squeeze.

“We both will,” Joel agreed, standing between them. “And if anyone gives you the side-eye, they’ll get a nice shot of my

bum.”

“Now I see why Cassidy likes you,” I said with a smile.

“You have such a way with words.”

“I try.”

“You okay?” Cassidy asked once Joel and Bridget stepped away to give us some privacy. “If I’m asking too much—”

“No, it’s okay. It’s just unexpected.”

“I know, and if not for that article, we would’ve had months to prepare for something like this. You need to know I never want to push you into anything. I hate what they wrote about me and Joel, but I can handle it if you’re too uncomfortable to go up there with me. If this causes us to move things along too soon, just say the word and I’ll back off.”

She was giving me an out, one I’d gladly take if not for our current circumstances. Taking her hands in mine, I managed a smile, then lay my head on her shoulder.

“I’m ready.”

The thought of getting in front of thousands of people was unnerving at best. Standing backstage with Joel at my side, I had a feeling he was just as nervous as I was.

He hadn’t said more than a handful of words since we left the hotel room, and each time he did, it was just so he could check and see how I was doing. No doubt he had the same fears running through his mind, ones involving the rumors that had already spread and what Cassidy planned to do in order to fix them.

One shot of him and Cassidy was all it took to turn our worlds upside down. Out of all the years I'd wanted to go backstage with a celebrity, this wasn't what I had in mind.

The floorboards under my feet shook from the vibrations of Cassidy's opening act. The cheers and applause outside made me half-sick, and the fact Cassidy's manager was stalking somewhere nearby only made matters worse.

Cassidy managed to put him to the back of her mind, but she wasn't the one standing backstage, just outside his

peripheral vision.

"Forget about him," Joel said, placing a kind hand on my shoulder. "He has no say in this."

I managed a small laugh. "You should've seen how he acted in my store." I shook my head at that, dismissing the topic altogether when I heard Cassidy mention Joel's name. Any minute now, she'd call me out on stage to... what? I honestly wasn't sure, but a public show of affection probably wasn't it.

Bridget would've died if it was, but I had a feeling Cassidy would give her announcement, maybe take my hand, then go on with her show. That's what I hoped she'd do, anyway. I honestly couldn't stomach more than that. Not with so many people watching us.

It wasn't that I was ashamed. It was the complete opposite, but I'd never done well in front of a large group. My hands shook at the thought. I shoved them in my pockets and hoped no one noticed.

"You're probably wondering about the article that's been going around this

morning,” Cassidy’s voice radiated from the stage, pulling me from my thoughts. “I want you all to know it isn’t true. The man in that photo is a very good friend of mine, but I also know it’s hard to believe me when there are rumors spreading all over the place. Because of this, I’m putting my girlfriend in a very uncomfortable situation, so you’d better thank her for it. Evie, come on out, hon.”

My cheeks burned at the mention of my name, my heart pounding in my chest as I slowly looked around the curtain. A thousand eyes were looked onstage, some of them spotting me before I had a chance to move from my hiding place.

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“I can go with you,” Joel offered, placing a comforting hand on my back. He forced a smile when I looked at him, his ears as pink as my cheeks probably were.

“It’s okay. Only one of us should suffer through this.

Besides, you already got yours,” I said, referring to the photo.

“Yeah, but that was a quick snapshot. This is, well...” He blew out a breath and shook his head. “I don’t know why I’m

arguing with you. You go on ahead.”

His tight laugh made me smile, and after giving him a quick hug, I managed to make my way toward the front of the stage.

The audience erupted with applause as soon as I walked on stage, the gown I’d brought with me feeling terribly small in the large room. It was the same gown I’d worn to Ferdinand’s and one I hoped would be acceptable for something like this.

Of course, as soon as I glanced at the front seats, every single one of them full, it felt as though I wasn’t wearing anything at all.

Their eyes burned right through my dress, seeing the nervous, small-town girl I truly was.

Cassidy reached for my hand before my nerves got the better of me, taking me in her arms a moment later to shield me from the cameras that were pointed in our direction.

“You look lovely,” she said, the warmth of her voice sending a shiver down my spine.

“But you’ve already seen this,” I said, nervously fixing the edge of my gown.

“That doesn’t mean I don’t like it,” she said, kissing me on the cheek before finally facing the crowd. “You ready for this?” she asked, her question directed at me.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” I said, squinting at the bright spotlight when I happened to look in its direction.

Taking the microphone from its stand, Cassidy held it in one hand while taking my hand in the other. “I want to introduce you to Evie. Now, our story isn’t the usual girl meets girl, girl likes girl, girl goes out with girl. No. Our story is a slow burn, one that’s just beginning.”

“It actually started in a bookstore,” I said with a laugh, surprised when my voice actually worked.

“And me dropping off a box of books by accident,” Cassidy added. “If you’ve ever lost a loved one, then you probably know how hard it is to sort through the bits and pieces they leave behind. I didn’t realize how difficult it was until a month

or so ago. It’s as gut-wrenching as it sounds, and sometimes we make mistakes.”

“Happy mistakes.”

Cassidy nodded in agreement. “I used to live in a small town, and in that town, there have always been two used bookstores. Exhausted from cleaning out my mother’s stuff, I simply took a box labeled books without looking into it first, then dropped it off at Evie’s place. It wasn’t until I got back to my hotel room when I realized the

mistake I'd made. I'd dropped off a lot of things that day, so I couldn't remember where I left the box of books."

"But I knew they were important," I joined in. "So I set them aside in case the owner returned."

"And I did, one day later and completely out of my mind."

She blew out a long breath, then brushed the hair from in front of her face. "These last several weeks have been nothing but chaos. I was stressed, angry for not having enough time to sort through everything, and anxious to get back here in front of you."

I don't usually talk about my feelings because I figure that isn't why you're here, but Evie convinced me that being more open about my work would make it more enjoyable for each of you. After what happened with that article, well... I'm probably being more open than I probably should."

The audience awwed and cheered, some of them calling out her name with things like 'you rock' or 'we're here for you, Cassidy.'

The audience's support made me smile, and when she took me in her arms again, her words were strained with tears.

"Thank you," she said, burying her head in my hair. "I know how hard this must be."

"It was," I admitted, holding her close, "but it's also kind of fun. That doesn't mean I want to do it again tomorrow night, but..." I shrugged and left it at that, kissing her on the cheek before finally letting her go. "I'll be backstage if you need me."

"Don't go far," she called after me, her voice carrying over the speakers.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Getting to see Cassidy live? Yes, please!

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As Cassidy basked in the spotlight, I couldn't help but smile. This was where she belonged, where she'd always belong regardless of what happened between us. She was in her element, and as she slowly played a handful of cords from one of my favorite songs, I found myself looking back on the journals and the long history behind them.

Cassidy never mentioned Laura or how she was Cassidy's inspiration to sing in the first place. Instead, she simply played her music and let the audience think whatever they wanted, her form swaying back and forth to the melody.

Seeing her with her silhouette highlighted in a white glow, my heart filled with warmth. She wasn't kidding when she said she could fly. As I watched her sing and dance across the stage, there was no mistaking just how happy she truly was.

And that makes two of us.

Epilogue

Once David's contract was up, things got infinitely better.

They were so good, in fact, that months later, we divided our time between her visiting the shop and me joining her on tour.

It was a strange routine, but it was ours, and with Bridget's help, I was able to leave the store for weeks at a time.

In the end, I added the ereaders along with a cafe to the lower level of the store. It

wasn't something I'd wanted but if it meant keeping the store alive, then it was way better than the alternative. Cassidy offered to help, but I couldn't stand the thought of her working two jobs just because I refused to change.

So I did, and once we made the shop our own, Bridget was more than happy to share it with me.

Walking into the shop one Friday afternoon, I just about had a heart attack when I walked right into Charlie, the bright orange dragon. My sister must've set him up the night before, clearly getting a kick out of my tiny scare as she chuckled from her spot up front.

"Can I ask why he's here?" I called up toward the front

of the store, removing my coat before draping it over one arm.

"You could've killed me."

"Which would've been a real shame considering who's here."

Someone's here? We weren't supposed to open for another half an hour.

Fighting back my nerves, I hurried toward the front, my smile as wide as it could go. "You're early," I said with surprise, throwing my arms around Cassidy as soon as I was within range. "I thought your flight wasn't due for a few hours."

"That's what we wanted you to think," Bridget said with a huge grin on her face. "That was a later flight, but not the one we picked."

We? "Do either one of you want to tell me what's going on?" Not only was Charlie hanging right inside the back door but there were streamers hanging all over the front

of the store as well. “Please tell me you two aren’t trying to do one of those grand re-openings.”

Bridget loved a good party, but all I could think about was the rush of people and the half-empty coffee cups they left behind. I’d be stuck in the shop for hours trying to clean up after the fact. Considering the fact Cassidy was in town after weeks of being away, I had better things to do with my time.

“Oh, we should really do that,” Bridget said, her smile never leaving her face.

“But this isn’t it?” I asked nervously, looking right at Cassidy who wore the same grin my sister did. “What have you done, and why is no one telling me about it?”

“Do you know what today is?” Cassidy asked, taking my coat before handing it off to my sister.

“Friday?” With so much going on, I wasn’t sure what she expected me to say.

“Ten months ago, I walked through those doors,” Cassidy said, gently kissing me on the lips. “I was an absolute mess and a complete stranger to you.”

“Ten months?” Had it really been that long?

Cassidy offered me a nod, then continued. “I could’ve gone to the other shop, but I came here. Then you gave me your card. I’ve been in this store countless times since I was a kid, but coming here because of those journals is one of the happiest mistakes I’ve ever made.”

Oh god. She wasn’t going to...

Cassidy took my hand in hers and rummaged in her pocket for a small black box.

Oh my god, she is!

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“Your shop, the one you carried for your father for so long, lead me to you. And that, love, is the greatest gift of all.

Evelyn Samantha Lane, will you marry me?”

“Yes!” my sister cried out, covering her mouth with both hands when I glared in her direction. “Sorry,” she whispered, her face as red as it could go.

“I know I have her blessing,” Cassidy said with a laugh,

“but what do you say?” She held a beautiful band between us, one made of white gold with Celtic designs carved into it. “If I’m moving too fast, just—”

I throw my arms around her and kissed her on the lips.

Hard.

With my heart pounding in my chest and the entire room turning sideways, I somehow managed to catch my breath enough to say the one thing she needed to hear from me most of all.

“Yes,” I squeaked as tears slowly ran down my cheeks. “Of course, I’ll marry you!”

She slipped the band on my finger, then took me in her arms, kissing me back as the store went in and out of focus.

“Of all the memories I have in this shop,” she said, wiping the tears from her eyes,

“this one is the greatest one of all. I love you, Evie.”

“I love you too, and if you’ll have me, I’ll stand by you forever.”

“That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“Okay,” my sister said from the sidelines, walking up to us with a box of tissues she had to use. “If we’re all done crying, I think it’s about time we opened the store.”

Looking to Cassidy, I took her hand in mine and said,

“Should we retreat to the tower?”

Cassidy smiled, then looked at my sister.

Reminding me of our mother, Bridget threw her arms in the air and sighed. “Go. You’ll be of no use to me down here. I also don’t need to see all that mushy stuff.”

“Admit it, you like it,” I said, batting my eyes at her.

“No, I like it when you’re happy,” she corrected me, throwing her arms around both of us before going to unlock the front door. “Just keep it down up there, will ya? I don’t want our customers to get any ideas.”

“We’ll lock the door,” I promised, taking Cassidy’s hand in mine before hurrying to the back of the store.

“And we’ll be quiet as a dormouse,” Cassidy called back over her shoulder.

“You’d better, because if I hear one peep out—”

“Peep.”

“Peep.”

My sister released a loud groan, then went about her work, opening the shop as Cassidy and I retreated into the tower.

Together.