



Under the Christmas Tree

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Category: Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: What if the only present you want this year is a person?

Katie's position as an obstetrics doctor has her busy on Christmas Day yet again. Her mother isn't happy about it—she wants Katie moving home and settling down with someone, but Katie never has time for home or for anyone.

Almost anyone.

Maggie is the one person Katie has time for. The two have been best friends for years, but Maggie's feelings have long since shifted into something more.

The Christmas season brings friends pushing them to be together and family pulling them in directions they don't want to go, showing up unexpectedly, and interrupting all of their carefully planned time together, as well as the slow realization that they might both be feeling something more than friendship. Will they get their Christmas wish, or will fate conspire against them and leave them feeling lonely this Christmas?

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:38 am

Chapter One

“I don’t know what to tell you, Mom, I have to work,” Katie said, not for the first time, as she made her way into the hospital.

“It’s Christmas, Katie. You have to be there. It’s getting ridiculous. Everyone’s going to start thinking you hate your own family,” her mom replied, half scandalized.

Katie laughed, ignoring the familiar pang in her chest. “I visit more than enough for them to know that’s not true.”

“Christmas is different. And everyone knows it.” Her mom sniffed pointedly. “I just don’t see why you always have to be working. I’m sure everyone will be fine for one day.”

“Yeah, that’s how bodies work, Mom. People just choose not to have babies so medical staff can take a day off.”

“It’s Christmas! Who’s having a baby on Christmas Day?”

Katie paused, still two feet away from the elevator. She wondered whether her mom would figure it out without her. “I think you might have forgotten what Christmas is supposed to be about...”

Her mom huffed. “Oh, sure. If you think you’re delivering the next Jesus Christ, be my guest and miss yet another Christmas with your family. Somehow, though, I think you might not be.”

“Good to know you’d have liked me better if three wise men showed up after my birth,” Katie laughed, pushing the elevator call button.

“I like you just fine. That’s why I want you at Christmas.”

Katie sighed, stepping into the elevator and half hoping the connection would cut and they’d be disconnected.

She knew it was hard on her mom. When she’d been growing up, family Christmases were a big deal. They still were, but Katie wasn’t a kid anymore. She had a job and it needed her, even on the days most other people got off.

And it wasn’t like she didn’t miss her family or those Christmases, but she loved her job, it was important, and she wasn’t going to work every Christmas Day for the rest of time. But this was not the year.

“I’m off the 27th. I’ll be there then.”

“Everyone else will have gone. And it’s not the same,” her mom said and Katie rallied against the tone in her voice.

“Don’t worry, I know where they all live. I know how to go see them too.”

Her mom sighed. “Nobody warned me when I was bragging about my daughter going off to be a doctor that it meant I wouldn’t get to see her for Christmas.”

“You will again,” Katie said, giving up on trying to convince her that the days around Christmas still counted. “But, this year, I have to work. I’m sorry.”

She stepped out of the elevator and onto the obstetrics floor. You couldn’t predict when a baby was going to come, so it wasn’t like they kept regular hours, but the

hospital in general was a little quieter at this hour, and the maternity ward seemed to be following suit.

Rea smiled at her from behind the desk. Katie grimaced back at her, gesturing to her phone.

“Mom again?” Rea mouthed.

Katie nodded, appreciating the sympathetic wince Rea gave in response. The two of them had been friends and colleagues long enough now for Rea to know the drill. Christmas rolled around, Katie was on the schedule, and Irene Smith was on the phone at least once a week, lamenting, begging, and bargaining.

Katie shrugged exaggeratedly before making her way to the break room to dump her stuff before her shift. She had a scheduled c-section coming up and needed to get updated on who was in and what was going on. She didn’t really have time to have this conversation again. Although, she wasn’t sure she’d had time for the previous fifty either.

As her mom listed everyone who was going to be there—as if Katie didn’t know her own family—and how much they all wanted to see Katie, she pushed the staff only door open.

“Hey, Doc,” Malik said from over by the coffee station.

As Katie greeted him in return, her mom paused.

“Are you even listening to me?” she demanded.

Katie took a slow breath. “Yes, Mom. I’m listening to just how much six-month-old Jaden is looking forward to seeing me.”

Malik laughed, holding up a mug in offer of pouring Katie one too.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:38 am

She looked at him like he was an angel on Earth, nodding gratefully.

“You don’t have to say it like that,” her mom replied. “Babies remember lots of things. They have lots of feelings.”

Katie looked down at herself as if her mom could see her. “Yes, thank you, Mom. I happen to know a decent amount about them.”

“Not enough, clearly.”

“I’ll see Jaden beforeandafter Christmas Day. I’m certain he won’t know the difference.”

“You’re really not going to even try?”

Katie was out of ways to have this conversation. Sometimes, years of practice made you an expert at something. In others, it was just running out of ways to make your mother realize hospitals didn’t run on the whims of mothers who wanted to see their adult children on days they had to work. “There’s literally nothing I can do. I have to be here in case the next coming of the Lord happens.”

“Katie Smith,” her mom replied, as though scolding a child. She wasn’t even religious, so Katie wasn’t sure why she was so upset about the flippant comment.

“Yes, Mom?”

“You’re getting coal for Christmas,” her mom said, seemingly giving up.

Katie laughed. “Well, at least I won’t be too distracted by my luxurious gifts to tend to my patients.”

“Hmm.”

She knew her mom was still disappointed and hurt that Katie wasn’t going to be there for yet another Christmas, but, deep down, she knew why. For Katie’s whole life, her mom had sung the praises of the medical staff who had delivered her children. They both knew she didn’t really want Katie doing anything that would leave the hospital short-staffed and the patients suffering.

She just also wanted Katie home for Christmas. It was a complicated mix of emotions.

Even more so when you factored in her recent determination to get Katie married off to someone back home, make her move back, and turn her into a sort of mini-me.

“I have to go now,” Katie said, hoping it wouldn’t distress her mom further.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” her mom promised, and Katie sent up a wish that it wouldn’t be to discuss her work schedule. “Have a good shift, darling.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Katie said, deflating as she hung up the call.

Malik approached her as she dropped into a chair, holding out her coffee. “Family fun?”

Katie laughed once, reaching up to take the mug. “Just my mom—and a six-month-old, apparently—stressing about me missing another Christmas day.”

“It’s a good thing she doesn’t know who does scheduling.” He paused, his cup

hovering before his lips. “Or how much you like your job, apparently.”

Katie raised her eyebrows. “How’d you mean?”

Malik shrugged. “It’s not like you ever seem that sad to be working the holidays.”

“Oh.” Katie thought it through.

She really wasn’t, if truth be told. Sure, it would be nice to be at her family’s Christmas celebrations, and she looked forward to joining them again in the future, but she did love her job. She’d known what she was signing up for when she became a doctor, and, honestly, there was always something extra special about births on holidays. Some magic in the air that Katie always wished she could bottle.

When it was Christmas—Katie’s favorite holiday—and everyone was feeling extra special cheer, she couldn’t help but appreciate it. There was something about being around that kind of love and happiness that made missing her own family hurt a little less. And, working in a hospital, often missing family events, you kind of banded together, and made bonds that felt like family.

Maybe things would be different if she had a partner or children of her own, but, as it was, she knew what she’d signed up for and she didn’t have either. Much to her mother’s disappointment.

“Yeah,” she told Malik eventually. “I guess it never occurred to me to be upset about it because we all know what we’re getting into doing this job, you know?”

He laughed. “I’m sure there are plenty of people who knew what they were getting into but still get a little annoyed at missing holidays. You’re just a workaholic. You’ll change your mind one day.”

She laughed. “I doubt it.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:38 am

Her whole life, she'd heard she was a workaholic. It hadn't gone anywhere. She liked to think she had a good balance in her life, but she didn't mind picking up extra shifts or working when others preferred not to. It wasn't like she often had stuff going on outside of work that she couldn't rearrange. If her working meant someone else got to see their kid at Christmas, she couldn't feel bad about that.

"We'll see," Malik said, shooting her a loaded look.

She narrowed her eyes, watching him as she sipped her coffee. It wasn't good, but it was exactly what she needed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know, when you finally pull yourself together and start dating and stuff."

She snorted. Not him too. "I have to date to have it all together?"

"No. But you're soft. You might hide it well under working too much, but you want it. The whole thing. Hearts, flowers, love. We all know it."

Her heart picked up slightly, embarrassment coursing through her. She did a good job of not engaging in that. Partly because she didn't have time for dating, partly because her schedule wasn't fair to potential partners, and partly because it was something her mom wanted so much for her that Katie felt like she couldn't even think about it for fear of losing who she was to who her family thought she should be.

She rolled her eyes at Malik. "No idea what you're talking about, dude."

"Sure you don't. Like we don't see the way you melt when you see a supportive,

loving birthing partner.”

Katie held her free hand up in indignation. “Uh, we all do that, thank you very much.”

“Nah. We don’t. We love to see it, but not the way you do.”

She scowled at him. “Well, either way, it’s irrelevant. As you and my mother keep pointing out, I work a lot. I don’t have time for a relationship.”

“Everyone who wants one has time for a relationship. You just have to care enough to make time for it.”

She rolled her eyes, downing the rest of her coffee. “No such luck. Plus, unless I’m looking to pick up a pregnant patient—which I’m definitely not—I don’t think that’s going to be a problem anytime soon.”

Malik hummed into his mug in a way Katie didn’t like. It was like he knew something she didn’t. And there wasn’t anything to know.

He finished his drink and headed for the door. “Relatedly, you might be interested to know Maggie’s here.”

Katie looked up, a smile taking over her face. “She is?”

Malik smirked. “Birth in three.”

Maggie was Katie’s best friend. She was a photographer who did a lot of births. They’d met years ago on a birth, hit it off, and been friends ever since.

She was around a lot, but rarely on births Katie was on. Most of it was a deeply

unlucky coincidence, but, in fairness, Katie was more likely to be called in on a birth requiring intervention and, in those situations, people were less likely to want a photographer documenting every second of the experience. But, Katie still loved the days they got to work together, and was secretly hoping to be on a birth together soon. It had been too long.

She was a little jealous of all the nurses who got to work with Maggie more frequently. She was an incredible presence in the room. Unintrusive—almost invisible—when required, and supportive, encouraging, and comforting when that was required instead.

There was just something warm and friendly about her that made her so beautifully suited to documenting births, to being witness to those vulnerable, life-changing moments.

Plus, she had an incredible eye for detail. Katie would often look through her social media posts in awe at the magic in those photos. Katie's job was to make every birth as smooth as possible, going through standard protocols to prevent anything unusual from happening, and falling back on familiar routines if it did. Maggie's job was to capture just how different every single birth was. It didn't matter if two people had the exact same birth plans because, the truth was, no two people were the same. No two babies or families were the same. So no two births were really the same. Through Maggie's lens, Katie, and the world, got to witness every birth like a completely new experience, like it was the only birth to ever exist.

It was a good day when she was around the ward, even if she liked to avoid mentioning it to Katie in hopes of sneaking up on her and surprising her. This time, though, Malik had given Katie the upper hand. Maggie had enjoyed more than enough moments of seeing the gleeful surprise on Katie's face. It was Katie's turn to watch that million-dollar smile appear on Maggie's face.

Chapter Two

Maggie moved very slightly to the side, focusing on the tangle of fingers. One hand in absolute agony, grasping on for dear life, strong and brave. The other, white with force, panicked and startled.

Maggie had seen this time and time again. That moment when it dawned on the support partner just how much the person giving birth was going through, just how much they were tearing themselves apart to bring this new life into the world. It looked slightly different for every person, but, unless it was a couple who'd both given birth before, it was always there. Even those who were old hands at the process now still had that moment where the reality of the memory came flooding back alongside their new reality.

Maggie loved every part of it.

She snapped the hands, the expressions, the moment of eye contact between the two, the aching, tense muscles, and the patch on the back of a maternity bra where the color deepened from the exertion of birth.

"You're doing so well," the labor nurse, Cara, murmured to Angelica, Maggie's client.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:38 am

Maggie took a shot over Cara's shoulder, capturing the moment forever—Angelica tensing through another contraction, Cara monitoring her closely, and her wife holding on for dear life. It was their first. They'd talked a lot about this moment, both to Maggie and away from her. They'd been as prepared as they could be.

But nobody was ever really ready for this.

"I need Mariah," Angelica screamed.

Her wife, Tori, looked up at Maggie desperately. There was no way she was letting go of Angelica, they both knew that.

Maggie breathed a laugh, nodding quickly and making her way over to the phone they had connected to a portable speaker. "On it."

This had been one of Maggie's suggestions. Sure, she was there as the photographer, but she'd played DJ for enough births that she knew it was better to offer it up early on in the process, take something off their plate. Once things picked up, it was often hard for the support people to step away, to do anything other than be completely present in that moment. Maggie was there for all the little extras.

She scrolled to the incredibly festive playlist Angelica had set up. As far as Maggie could tell, from the minute she'd known she was having a December baby, she'd been committed to having them born to a playlist of Mariah Carey, Wham!, and Brenda Lee—no matter how early in December they came.

Maggie was so here for it.

Mariah picked up around them, Angelica letting out a noise somewhere between despair and delight, and Maggie snapped pictures of the phone, the speaker, and the Christmas travel mugs the pair had arrived with.

The bells kicked in and everything felt like it was moving in slow, crystal-clear motion. Cara spoke clear, familiar words that told Maggie it was time—she'd photographed enough births with Cara to know how things worked—and Angelica gave even Mariah Carey a vocal run for her money.

Maggie fell into the familiar rhythm with Cara, knowing where she needed to be and when. She moved around, clicking picture after picture, capturing every moment she could of this tiny baby's entry into the world, surrounded by love, pain, and Christmas songs. Maggie wasn't sure she could think of a better combination to be born to, honestly. Maybe less pain, but she'd seen enough births both with and without them to know that, without an epidural, Angelica wasn't getting through this pain-free. Angelica knew it too. But that didn't mean she wasn't allowed to scream the place down.

It didn't take long for the baby to arrive, and Maggie followed his first journey up into his mom's desperate, waiting arms. She caught the tears, the joy, the piercing baby screams, and, most of all, the love and relief. That incredible moment at the end of nine long months when a family expanded and their life would never be the same again.

The first birth Maggie had shot had been a favor for a friend. She'd been an established photographer, but she'd never done a birth. When Mariana, her college roommate, had approached her, asking whether she might be willing, Maggie had barely had to think twice. She'd seen other photographers shooting those moments, seen the intimacy and trust, the beauty of being present and documenting those moments, and she was only too happy to be that for her oldest friend. And, after the first, she'd been only too happy to make it part of her regular work.

Now, births made up a good chunk of her work. Sure, sometimes it made life a little complicated—babies were unpredictable, and due dates were seldom hit exactly—and she'd missed more than one planned event, or had to dash out in the middle of something to make a birth, but she wouldn't change it for the world.

When she got to document this magic every day, who would she be to complain?

The newborn calmed as his mothers soothed him, and the two shared a look, one Maggie wasn't going to miss. It was a look that spoke of how much they loved each other, how much they couldn't believe this tiny little thing was theirs, and how much admiration and awe they had for all that Angelica had done. Maggie knew the exhaustion would hit soon, but, for now, she got to ride high on the endorphins of having done it.

“Well, he'd better love Christmas,” Tori said, gesturing to the phone and speaker.

“Of course he will,” Angelica cooed, rocking her son slightly. “It's in his blood.”

“When the first thing you hear earthside is Mariah Carey, how could it not be?” Cara murmured with a smile.

Maggie liked her. She was good at her job, efficient, clear, and friendly. All things Maggie had come to understand were vital when someone was having a baby. She'd shot a couple where the staff were not in tune with what the birthing person needed and she hadn't been impressed.

When someone was in the worst pain of their life and probably more vulnerable than they'd ever been, the last thing they needed was staff who didn't get it, who couldn't communicate with or help them, or who seemed to want to be anywhere else but there.

Cara wasn't like that, and, given the number of births Maggie attended at Saint Giles Memorial Hospital, she was glad of it.

Of course, Cara wasn't even close to Maggie's favorite member of staff at Saint Giles, but not everyone could be Katie.

Katie who, Maggie was pretty sure, would be on duty now.

She hadn't been in on rounds, so Maggie still wondered whether she might be able to catch her by surprise. Perhaps it was odd, but, running high on the emotions of another wonderful birth, she always loved catching Katie off-guard with her presence. There was something about that moment of Katie seeing her, not expecting it—even though, at this point, she probably should—and the smile that took over her face.

Maybe Maggie just liked seeing her friends smile. Maybe it was just Katie. She wasn't really sure.

As things calmed and quieted in the room, Maggie took pictures of the happy little family, basking in the beauty of the moment. And, eventually, it was time for her to pack up and leave the three of them to it.

She congratulated them again, greeted their new son, and promised to be in touch with the pictures soon. Since time was about to become entirely irrelevant to them through a cycle of sleeping, feeding, and diapers while being more sleep-deprived than they'd ever been in their lives, she wasn't sure soon really meant anything to them, but she, at least, would have a good handle on time.

With one last glance at them, she slipped out of the room door and into the hospital corridor.

There were holiday decorations up out here, more than in most wards given that this was, in many ways, a gentler, more family-friendly space. She watched them twinkling in the light as she made her way to the nurses' station.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:38 am

Rea grinned up at her. “How are you doing?”

“Good. A little one born to Mariah Carey. What a great way to kick off December,” Maggie said, leaning on the counter with her elbows. She nodded back towards the staffroom. “Is Katie in?”

“Maybe,” Rea said, her brow creased.

Maggie laughed. “Okay... You haven’t seen her or—”

“Hi,” Katie said, popping up from behind Maggie and making her jump.

“Jesus, Katie,” Maggie gasped, gripping at her chest.

Katie laughed and, even through the adrenaline suddenly coursing through her system, Maggie couldn’t help but notice the gleam in her eyes. It suited her.

“Warn a woman next time,” Maggie said, sucking in a careful breath.

“What, like how you always warn me?” she asked, giving Maggie a pointed look.

“I don’t jump out and scream at you.”

“I didn’t scream,” Katie insisted, laughing. “You’d know about it if I did.”

Maggie’s nostrils flared and her cheeks heated up. She’d normally brush it off as her hearing what she wanted to hear—or what she wished she could hear—but Rea heard

it this time, too, and she was looking between the pair of them with intrigued, probing eyes.

Katie did that sometimes—said something that could be flirty. Or something that could be completely innocent, but her voice would drop a little deeper, become unintentionally seductive, and, every time, Maggie would be unwittingly seduced. She was sure Katie wasn't doing it on purpose, but that only made it worse. Especially when other people picked up on it.

Sure, they were friends, and they were both bisexual, and they both enjoyed each other's company, but that didn't mean anything. Sure, Katie made those inadvertent comments sometimes, but, as she'd never done anything on purpose, or addressed it directly, Maggie had resigned herself to having a secret, teeny, tiny, little crush on her best friend.

Which was fine.

Unless someone was watching. Like Rea was doing. Too intently.

She leaned forward, grinning at the pair of them as Maggie silently begged her cheeks to return to their normal color. "Say, Katie, has your mom ever met Maggie?"

Maggie shot her a look of betrayal, one designed to stop what she was doing, but Rea just looked up at Katie with a faux innocent smile.

Katie blew out a breath. "No. You heard just a snippet of her on the phone earlier. If they met, do you think she'd ever stop asking when I'm bringing her over again?" Katie looked at Maggie with a soft smile. "She'd never let you escape."

They'd had that conversation many times. Maggie couldn't count the number of times she'd thought about Katie saying she wished she could bring Maggie to some

family dinner or other, that she didn't get much time off and she wanted to hang out with Maggie but also see her family, and how much easier it would just be if they could exist in the same space. Katie had no idea how much the idea messed with Maggie's brain.

But, Maggie had overheard enough calls between Katie and Irene to know her assertion wasn't wrong. If Katie brought Maggie home, the questions would be endless, and the demands to bring her around again would never stop, and they might never get another minute alone ever again. Every time they were hanging out, there would be no excuse not to go over there. They weren't a couple, what would they need alone time for?

Maggie knew her answer. She wasn't sure what Katie's was, and she was perpetually afraid of asking, but, whatever the reason, Katie valued their alone time almost as much as Maggie did, and Maggie wasn't going to question that, or offer it up as time with the whole Smith family instead.

Rea's eyes gleamed. "Oh, I'm sure Maggie would fit right in with your family. She's a natural around people, always photographing families. Plus, you two just... oh, I don't know. Fit. Together."

Maggie wanted the floor to open up and swallow her.

Up until that moment, she'd always liked Rea. What Maggie could possibly have done to deserve such a betrayal, she wasn't sure, but she was going to have to have words with Rea.

Just not when Katie was in earshot.

"She's my best friend," Katie said, smiling at Maggie in a way that turned her stomach soft. "Of course she would fit in with them. I just don't want to share."

“Do you not, indeed?” Rea said, leaning closer still as she shot Maggie a loaded, pointed look.

Maggie felt her face burning so brightly she felt like she might be giving the Christmas lights a run for their money. She felt like she might be sick.

She really needed to know how she’d hurt Rea because this could not be anything but revenge.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:38 am

Up until that moment, she hadn't even known Rea was aware of her crush on Katie. She'd tried so hard to keep it quiet.

"Doctor Smith?" someone called from behind them, pulling Katie away from the counter and the conversation.

When she was out of earshot, Maggie rounded on Rea. "What on earth have I done to hurt you?" she practically hissed.

Rea laughed. "Nothing. I'm trying to help you."

"You're not helping anything," Maggie insisted.

Rea rolled her eyes. "Come on, Maggie. You and I both know that woman is a genius in many ways, but she is somehow, inexplicably, ignorant of the relationship between you two. I'm just pointing her in the right direction. Consider it a Christmas gift."

"We're just friends," Maggie insisted emphatically. "She doesn't need pointing anywhere."

"Sure you are. Do you think the rest of us can't see the way you look at her? Or the way she looks at you?" She shook her head. "How she hasn't figured it out yet is beyond me. Is her head just so full of medical facts she can't see what's right in front of her?"

"Oh my god. Rea. Please. I'm begging you, stop."

Rea laughed again and raised her hands in surrender. “Fine. I’m not saying anything. But this is your year, Maggie. Whatever it is that’s going on between you, it’s been long enough. Give yourself the gift you really want this year.”

“You to stop trying to betray me to my best friend?”

“Nah. Katie. In your bed.”

“Oh my god.” Maggie felt the color drain from her face right as Katie came back towards them. She supposed it was better than bright red, at least.

It didn’t matter that she did want that. It mattered that she spent all of her time pretending she didn’t so the two could be friends. It mattered that Katie didn’t know. And it mattered that, if she ever did find out, she didn’t do so because Rea was offering her up in Maggie’s bed, wrapped in a Christmas bow.

Chapter Three

Two hours after her supposed clocking-off time, Katie was finally done with births and rounds for the day. She didn’t mind working overtime. She did it more often than she didn’t. Perhaps Malik had a point about her being a bit of a workaholic... Two hours barely even felt like overtime.

She made her way to the staff room, more than ready to relax on her couch with a pizza and some trashy TV until she fell asleep. Though she probably should have been, she wasn’t expecting to find Maggie there waiting for her. It had been a long shift and Maggie’s birth had been done hours ago. She’d have been well within her rights—and sense—to have left long ago.

But, when Katie pushed the door open and stepped out of the ward and into the little piece of privacy, she found it empty besides the blonde-haired woman tucked up into

the corner of the room.

The waiting-room-style seating Maggie was pretzeled up into wasn't the comfiest, but Maggie could sleep anywhere. Katie had learned that very quickly about her. She claimed it came with the territory of being a photographer and not always being in the most luxurious quarters in search of the perfect shot—but Katie just thought it was a Maggie thing.

She'd obviously been working when she fell asleep. Her laptop and camera were laid out on the table next to her. Maggie also always said she could make an office anywhere, and she wasn't wrong about that. Photographer's duty, she said. As if she hadn't known more than one photographer who was slightly more selective about where they worked on images. But, for Maggie, give her a laptop and a corner to tuck herself into, and she was good to go. Or to fall asleep.

Katie smiled to herself. Pizza and falling asleep on the couch were always better with Maggie.

She moved quietly to her locker, collected her belongings, and pulled on her hat and coat against the chill outside the hospital. Just because she was going to wake Maggie in a moment didn't mean she wanted to startle her or wake her prematurely. It was the least she could do for her best friend who'd waited over half a day for her.

Once she was ready to head out the door, Katie moved softly over to Maggie, noticing how very peaceful she looked, despite the awkward sleeping position. She reached a hand out and ran it over Maggie's scalp. Maggie had the softest hair. It shimmered in the light as Katie's fingers brushed through it.

Maggie shifted. Her eyes blinking open, she looked up at Katie sleepily.

"Hey, sleepyhead," Katie whispered, moving to perch on the edge of the seat, close to

her.

Maggie breathed a laugh, stretching around Katie. “I hope I haven’t been out too long.”

“No idea. I just got back. But it wouldn’t matter either way. You know we all get it.”

Maggie laughed a little louder. “That’s what makes it worse. I’m here to photograph one birth and then I’m falling asleep in the break room? Bad form in front of hospital staff I know have been on duty for hours, doing who knows what.”

“Hey, you might not have been delivering medical care, but you’ve been here longer than I have, and you’ve been working. You’re allowed to be sleepy.”

“I guess...”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:38 am

Katie grinned, standing up and holding out a hand for Maggie, pulling her upright when she took it.

She'd misjudged the distance between them and, once Maggie was standing, Katie found herself basically pressed against Maggie. As she watched Maggie's eyes widen and her nostrils flare, Katie felt herself blushing without really knowing why. They were friends. They were often in close proximity. Maybe it was a little different when they were face-to-face with barely an inch between them, but it wasn't that much different than a hug. And they did that all the time.

Katie cleared her throat and stepped back. They were both tired. And hungry. It was probably just that. "Did you eat?" she asked as Maggie busied herself putting her gear away.

"Uh... just some stuff from the machine a few hours ago." She waved a hand in the direction of the two vending machines on the opposite side of the room, still not looking at Katie.

"Well, you must be as ravenous as I am then," Katie said, walking backwards to the door once Maggie was ready. "Pizza and Netflix back at mine?"

Maggie finally looked at her, something a little flustered and wary about her expression that Katie didn't understand, but she smiled, and Katie was glad to see it. "Sounds great. I could murder a pizza right now. But I warn you, I might not have the energy to leave."

Katie laughed. "As if I want you to. You know full well that you could move yourself

in and I'd never ask you to leave."

"Right."

They walked towards the elevators, Maggie looking down at the floor, and Katie couldn't help but wonder what was bothering her tonight.

"Katie! Maggie!" Malik called as they passed the nurses' station. "O'Sullivan's. You two game?"

O'Sullivan's was a bar near the hospital that a lot of the staff frequented after their shifts. The owners knew their clientele well. They served food every hour they were open, and they kept a stock of the regulars' favorite drinks—alcoholic and not—at all times.

Ordinarily, Katie would accept the invitation, even though she only ever went for a quick drink and some food before running out for more work or a few hours of sleep before more work, but, tonight, she just wanted casual clothes, blankets, and time on her couch with Maggie. Maybe she'd even get six solid hours. She always slept better when Maggie was there.

She grinned at Malik. "Sorry. Maybe tomorrow. I'm beat."

Maggie smiled at him too. "Same. Thanks for the invite, though."

He leaned on the counter, watching them for just a second too long.

When Katie started narrowing her eyes at him, he laughed quickly. "No worries. You two have a good night."

There was something in his voice. Katie knew what it was, but she hoped Maggie

missed it.

She chanced a glance at Maggie. Her face was aflame. Ah.

Katie was going to have to have a word with him tomorrow. There was no excuse for making salacious comments that made Maggie feel uncomfortable.

Besides, they were going to eat pizza, stare at a TV screen, and fall asleep. There was nothing about it that was salacious. She didn't know what Malik was getting at. It was much more slumber party than salacious.

They entered the elevator and Maggie waited until the doors closed on just the two of them before she looked at Katie. "So, your mom was on you about Christmas again earlier?"

The fact that, even sleepy, hungry, and hours later, Maggie had picked up on that and remembered it made something in Katie's chest feel warm. Nobody, not even her mom who was always monitoring something in her life, ever paid attention to her like Maggie did. Nobody in the world knew or cared the way Maggie did. Katie had never had a friendship like it. Hell, she'd had relationships that were less attentive. And, every time it happened, she felt soft and warm, like the edges of the world were blurring into something nicer than reality.

She leaned back against the rail, watching as the floors flicked closer to one. "Yeah. You know how she is."

"Annoyed you're missing another Christmas?"

Katie shrugged as if it didn't matter, but she knew Maggie would see through it. "She just doesn't get it, you know? And I see her point. She wants her kids around her for Christmas. It's not like it's something egregious she's asking for."

Maggie stepped closer to her, pulling Katie's gaze to her face. "You can understand her point and still be upset by her continued pushing. And of how upset she gets about it. Her feelings can be valid and she can be sharing them in the wrong place. Both things can be true."

Katie sighed, wishing the whole world saw her the way Maggie did. "I'm the one letting her down. She sees the culprit as the natural one to complain to."

Maggie breathed a sympathetic laugh. "Culpritis a strong word for it."

"Not if you ask my mother, it's not."

"Well, parents can be wrong too sometimes."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:38 am

Katie laughed. “Shh. Don’t let them hear you say that upstairs.”

Maggie grinned that wide, happy smile Katie loved. The one where her eyes lit up and crinkled. “It’s a little different when they’re giving birth than when they’re harassing their adult children over having to work the holidays. Especially because their job is being a doctor.”

“Yeah. My mom didn’t get the memo that births still happen at Christmas.”

Maggie laughed. “What does she think Mary was keeping in that manger?”

“God knows.” Katie paused. “Whomp, whomp.”

“Very funny,” Maggie said flatly, as if she wasn’t laughing. Nobody laughed at Katie’s bad jokes the way Maggie did.

The doors of the elevator opened and Maggie reached out to take Katie’s hand like it was the most natural thing in the world. It was when it was the two of them.

“Come on,” she said, pulling Katie out into the lobby. “I’ll buy you that pizza.”

“I invited you over, so I think it’s on me to pay,” Katie said, going with her willingly, and enjoying the feeling of her soft skin, grounding after a long day.

“Actually, I think you invited me to move in. The least I can do is buy you a pizza.”

“That argument might fly if you actually were moving in... As it happens, I don’t

think you're giving up your place just yet."

Maggie hummed thoughtfully, slowing as they walked towards the doorway out onto the street. "Maybe not just yet. But I am stealing that dark green hoodie tonight, so maybe call it payment for that."

Katie laughed. "Okay, but I warn you now that I slept in it last night, so it's going to stink like me."

As they reached the door, Maggie slipped her hand from Katie's under the guise of pulling her own hat on.

In the wave of frigid cold that hit them, the loss of her touch felt particularly painful. She always had the warmest, softest hands—perhaps because Katie tended to have the stereotypically cool physician's hands. Or maybe it was just that Katie was feeling particularly sentimental. Some days were like that, and Maggie always made them better.

Katie was glad Maggie had still been there when she finished her shift.

"Pizza," Maggie said, nodding in the direction of their favorite pizzeria. "And no worries about the hoodie. I like it better when they smell like you."

She said it so quietly that Katie wasn't even sure she'd really heard it, but, logically, she couldn't deny that she had. And she couldn't deny the way she suddenly felt like her insides were on fire, even in spite of the freezing night around them.

Chapter Four

"Ooh, yikes," Mariana muttered as Maggie dropped into the seat opposite her. She'd obviously been there for a while, given the spread of her belongings around the tiny

café table, and the half-empty coffee.

“What’s up?” Maggie asked, pulling her scarf off and looking around at the busy café.

“You’ve got that look.”

Maggie frowned. “Which look?”

“That one.” Mariana sipped her coffee, wincing upon realizing it had gone cold, and shooting Maggie a loaded look.

“The... one where it’s cold out?” her nose and cheeks felt chapped from the biting cold, so she wouldn’t have been surprised if she looked something like a circus performer.

“It’s like a whole new level of denial,” Mariana said, obviously despairing.

Maggie watched her for a minute, but, when nothing else was forthcoming, she nodded to herself. “Okay, well, while you... think about that, I’m going to grab a drink.” She gestured to the half-empty cup. “Do you want another one?”

“Mm. Yes, please. Get me one of those disgustingly sweet Christmas drinks.”

“Which one?”

Mariana laughed. “Whichever one you think would make even Santa sick with its sweetness.”

“You got it,” Maggie promised, heading for the counter.

They had one that came topped with whipped cream, cinnamon sugar, and tiny gingerbread men, so Maggie knew what she was getting for Mariana without question. It took her longer to decide for herself.

She’d had coffee before leaving Katie’s—or, perhaps more accurately, she’d made Katie coffee before work but Katie hadn’t even had time to finish her full cup. So Maggie had finished it. Stuff like that had been part of their friendship for so long that Maggie knew it wasn’t supposed to feel weird. It hadn’t always been weird. But then Maggie had developed some very awkward feelings for her best friend and, well, then everything became a little awkward. She was still more comfortable around Katie than anyone else in the world—Katie was the one person she always wanted to be around.

But, the problem was that Katie was the one person she always wanted to be around. And not in a platonic way. So, when it came to sharing a cup of coffee right as Maggie was sending Katie out the door for work, her bag packed with more food than she’d eaten yesterday, it wasn’t hard to feel like it was something more than friendship. And that just set off a longing Maggie didn’t know how to fix.

Because, no matter what they did, no matter how many cups of coffee they shared over morning farewells, they weren’t a couple. And Maggie—and apparently Rea, and possibly Malik—knew she wanted to be.

She wasn’t getting coffee. Not even the sickly sweet one she was getting Mariana.

She stepped up to the counter and ordered a large caramel hot chocolate. She might not have Katie, but she could have sweetness up to her eyeballs.

“Seems about right,” Mariana commented once Maggie rejoined her at their table.

“Well, I did tell you I was going to get drinks. I’m not really sure what you expected me to return with.”

“See, now I know you understand what I’m getting at. You only get snarky like that when you’re defensive.”

“Also when I’m confused.” Maggie gestured to her. “But, if you want to illuminate me on what’s bothering you, I’d be happy to respond.”

Mariana watched her as she took a sip of her coffee, delighting in the sickly sweet flavor of it. “Where were you last night?” she asked eventually.

Maggie’s stomach dropped slightly. She finally got it. How she hadn’t up until that point, she wasn’t really sure, but, well, maybe that was the problem. Maybe she’d been running high and low on the emotions of having gone home with Katie last night, sharing a pizza, snuggling on the sofa under one blanket even though Katie had a million of them—mostly for Maggie, if she was honest—and waking up together, sending Katie off to work, sharing a coffee... It really was a problem. And apparently, the whole world knew.

Except Katie.

“Oh. Uh.” Maggie chewed her lip briefly. “Just, you know, at Katie’s. I had a job at the hospital and she happened to be on shift.”

“How long after you were done did you wait for her?”

Maggie loved Mariana. They'd been roommates in college and friends ever since. She owed her current career to Mariana.

Back when they'd first met, Mariana had arrived from Colombia knowing nobody else in the city, and Maggie had been the product of a family who cared well enough if you were close by, but the minute you moved away, it felt very much like being out of sight and out of mind. They'd both needed someone to hold onto and, thankfully, they'd found that person in their own room. Maggie barely kept in touch with anyone else from college, and she was certain Mariana didn't, but the two of them were with each other through thick and thin. They were family.

But Mariana was the kind of family who saw through all your bullshit and didn't let you get away with it. Maggie often thought her godsons' teenage years were going to be a trip with Mariana seeing through every bit of teenage nonsense they were undoubtedly going to try.

As if they hadn't been the same when they were teens.

Maggie sighed. "A couple of hours."

"Hm. So, her whole shift, plus extra, I'm guessing."

How did she do that?

"I was working for a lot of it," Maggie insisted.

"Sure you were." She tilted her head. "So, did you tell her yet?"

Maggie choked on her drink. "I didn't even knowyouknew. Why would I tell Katie?"

"¡Qué oso!" Mariana rolled her eyes.

“Hey!” Maggie protested. “She’s my best friend. I’m not trying to destroy everything.”

Mariana sighed heavily. “Look. You’re family, Maggie, but you’re letting the side down. This has been going on long enough, and, for someone who just might be the smartest person I’ve ever met when it comes to medicine, your girlfriend is a complete fool when it comes to understanding relationships.”

“That’s not true. She’s great with people, her patients, the staff. She has tons of friends.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:38 am

“Oh my god. You’re so far gone. It’s actually sad at this point.”

Maggie stared at her. There was something especially brutal about hearing that from your oldest friend.

Mariana reached across the table to put her hand on top of Maggie's. “I love you, but this is getting ridiculous. Katie is wonderful and friendly and whatever other compliments you need me to give her. But you’ve been in love with her for ages now and the woman doesn’t have a clue. I’m pretty sure she’s in love with you too, but she’s a damn fool and doesn’t realize it. So. It’s Christmas. And you don’t need to spend another one mooning over her, being sad. Do yourself a favor and tell her. And we’ll all be absolutely delighted to attend the wedding and give extensive speeches about how we’re all glad the oblivious pining is finally over.”

“Please don’t do that at my wedding.”

Mariana hummed through a sip of her coffee. “No can do. Maid of honor privileges. I support you through this tragic, painful part of your life, and I get to say whatever I want at your wedding.”

“Mariana...”

She laughed. “Relax. I’m kidding. I would never embarrass you on the world stage like that. You’ve seen me pushing humans from my body. You think I’m jeopardizing that?”

Maggie smiled softly. Mariana was blunt, perhaps, but she was a really great friend.

“I’m just saying, it’s time,” Mariana watched her seriously.

Maggie thought it through, not for the first time.

It wasn’t like she didn’t want to, but it was Katie. Even Mariana didn’t get her the way Katie did, and Maggie loved Mariana with her whole heart. But Katie was... different.

Sure, if Maggie told her and it went badly, Katie would probably be lovely and polite about it, but it would still have happened, and there would be no taking it back. No matter how they tried, or how they promised it wouldn’t change things, they’d never be able to go back to the minute before Maggie said anything. And everything would always be different. She didn’t want that.

Not to mention Katie’s longtime insistence that she didn’t want, nor did she have time for, a relationship. Maggie didn’t need to meet Irene Smith to know she was hugely invested in trying to get her daughter a partner. And Katie didn’t need to say it out loud for Maggie to know Katie needed her independence in this matter. She needed not to just do the thing her mom had always been telling her she needed. Maggie wasn’t going to be the person to ruin that for her.

She frowned. “Have you been talking to Rea?”

Mariana looked at her in confusion. “Katie’s friend? No? Why would I be? How would I be?”

Maggie gulped. It had felt right when she asked. Now, she wished she hadn’t said anything. “She just... uh, she... well, she said something similar yesterday.”

Mariana’s eyes lit up. “Did she now? How very interesting.”

Maggie felt her whole face and her ears burning, and she was certain it had nothing to do with having come in from the cold this time. This was the kind of burning that only came from shame. The kind of shame that came from realizing that basically every person in her life knew she was in love with Katie, except the most relevant person. “Um. Yeah.”

Mariana waved a hand, gesturing for her to continue talking. “What’d she say?”

Maggie winced. She really wished she hadn’t brought this up.

Couldn’t she just go back to Katie’s oversized couch, seven soft blankets, and a shared cup of coffee? She’d liked life better back then.

She cleared her throat, avoiding Mariana’s gaze as she attempted to return her face to its normal color. “Just something about, um, Katie being my... Christmas present this year. And well, a lot of the same things you said about Katie being weirdly oblivious for someone so smart. But, it’s not that. She’s got a lot of important things in her head. Life-saving information and things to do. And she’s busy, you know?”

“None of that stops her from being oblivious, so I’m not really sure what your point is.”

Maggie sighed. “I guess... I don’t really have one except that it’s not Katie’s fault.”

“Right, and, despite the fact that the rest of us clearly know what’s going on, and she’s been unconscionably oblivious not seeing it, we can all forgive that so long as she figures it out when you tell her.”

“I’m not telling her anything.”

“Oh, you definitely are, because you can’t spend your life like this. And I know you

don't want to." She drained her mug before looking directly at Maggie. "I've known you long enough to remember you, nineteen and drunk on life in the city, all that freedom and adventure. And I remember you telling me that you wanted the kind of relationship that felt like being in love with your best friend."

"I... didn't know you remembered that." Maggie shifted in her seat, struggling to hold Mariana's gaze.

"Of course I do. That was you. No filters, no worries, nothing. Just you. And I swore to myself back then, that if you ever had that and something was in the way, I'd do everything in my power to help you keep it." She shrugged slightly. "Admittedly, I didn't think it was going to go down quite like this, but, if what you want is a workaholic doctor, who can't see how blatantly in love you are, then that's what you shall have."

"She does important work and she takes it seriously. I doubt you'd have wanted the team delivering Joaquín or Andrés to be distracted and unserious."

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:38 am

“Of course not. I’d have fired them and delivered the kids myself. But that’s not the point.”

Maggie laughed. She could imagine Mariana doing exactly that. She did not suffer fools gladly.

Perhaps it was a wonder she hadn’t tried to have this conversation with Maggie sooner.

“The point is, we’re not heading into another year where you’re pining over the best friend that’s clearly in love with you too.” She pursed her lips. “Admittedly, I wasn’t expecting you to be quite so reluctant, but that’s fine. If I need to convince you first, to give you the confidence to go for it, I can do that. What’s a few more days compared to the rest of your life?”

Maggie stifled a laugh. She’d need more than a couple of days to believe Katie would ever want her declaring her feelings, but she had to applaud Mariana’s confidence in herself.

Mariana began pulling her coat on. “Plus, it sounds like Rea gets it too, so now I have an accomplice.”

Maggie felt the color drain from her face. “Weren’t you just complaining about how you don’t even have a way to contact her?” She heard the quiver in her voice but she really hoped Mariana wouldn’t.

“Yes, because you and Katie haven’t had a gathering lately. But it’s not like she’s

hard to find. She works at Saint Giles. It's not like they limit who can and cannot walk into a hospital."

Maggie stared at her, almost certain her entire stomach had dropped out of her body. "Mariana, please don't... I—Oh, god. Please don't."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't be silly. I have two kids, a partner, and a job."

Maggie relaxed a tiny amount. If Katie saw Mariana running around the hospital, having secret meetings with Rea, she wouldn't be too oblivious to notice. Or ask. And then what would happen?

"I'll just call."

Maggie's stomach coiled tighter again. That wasn't much better. Sure, Katie didn't often answer the phone, but that didn't mean she couldn't. And, what if it wasn't Rea who answered the phone, and people ran around looking for her, announcing it was Mariana on the phone, and Katie heard that way?

Maggie was screwed.

Noticing that Maggie wasn't moving to join her in leaving, Mariana paused. "Don't worry. I won't tell them who's calling until I know it's Rea." She breathed a laugh. "You really have got it bad."

Maggie nodded mechanically. It was probably the best she was getting. Or, perhaps she could... What? Secretly change the hospital phone number? That seemed unlikely. Hang around the hospital intercepting calls from Mariana? She could do that, but it might start getting suspicious pretty quickly. Still, it would be better than Katie finding out.

Or, she could realize it was the holiday season, and life was busy for everyone, but especially those with kids. Mariana had a million things going on, they'd even struggled to schedule their meet-up. The likelihood that she'd have time to sit around, calling the hospital in hopes of catching Rea seemed very slim.

Maggie took a deep breath, soothing herself, before she stood back up, preparing herself for the outside world.

Mariana grinned like she was winning. Maggie didn't mention her revelation, she just prayed it would hold true.

"Good," Mariana said, leading her from the café. "And now, I have two kids and a partner to shop for—one who wants something for gaming and something for crocheting. You're going to have to help me make sure I get the right stuff."

"Joaquín's crocheting already? That's quite the skill for a two-year-old."

Mariana shot her a look. "Snarky fool again." She shook her head. "No, William wants that. And they'll be sad if I get them the wrong thing. So, you can help."

"What makes you think I know anything about crocheting or gaming?"

"You're creative," she said, as if that answered any and all questions.

Maggie laughed. Maybe it really was that simple in Mariana's world. Maybe Maggie's life would be easier if she operated in the same way. As far as she could tell, it didn't even occur to Mariana that telling Katie might not go well, that Katie didn't have the time for a relationship, or the inclination to deal with that pressure. In her head, Maggie and Katie were going to be together, and they just needed to say it to make it true.

Maggie shuddered in the cold and sighed. Part of her really did wish it felt that simple for her too.

“Come on,” Mariana said, looping her arm through Maggie’s and leading them forward. “I’ll help you choose something for Katie, and I won’t even make any comments if you buy her what is essentially an engagement ring and try to pass it off as a friendship ring.”

Maggie laughed. “She doesn’t wear a lot of rings, you know, surgery, births...”

“And that’s the only reason you’re not doing that,” she replied flatly.

“I’m not that bad.”

“Sure you’re not.” She laughed. “Don’t worry. I still love you, though.”

Maggie laughed. No matter what happened with Katie, at least Maggie would always have that.

Chapter Five

Katie hadn’t seen Maggie in three days. It was getting annoying. She had also barely stopped working, and was feeling exhausted, emotional, and achy ahead of her period, so there was a distinct possibility she was feeling it slightly more than she should, but texting just wasn’t cutting it. She wanted time in the same room with her best friend. She wanted to feel safe and relaxed. She wanted to switch off for a minute.

It wasn’t as though work had been bad. They’d had some emergency situations, but they’d all been rectified with relative ease. It had just been constant and there was something inherently emotional about the work. Of course, like every other medical professional, Katie had long since needed to learn not to bring her work home wherever possible, but she wasn’t a robot, and, when she was already feeling emotional, it was harder than she wished it would be.

She barely spoke to the others as she gathered up her things, desperately in need of a shower so she could wash the ick of the last few days off her and, hopefully, just relax. She had a day off tomorrow and, while she’d already resigned herself to spending it with stomach cramps, she was really hoping she could drown out the irritated filter in her brain that every one of her thoughts and interactions was currently passing through. It wasn’t anyone else’s fault. They weren’t doing anything

wrong. But knowing that didn't stop it. PMS was no fun.

She bid the others a quick farewell and headed towards the elevators.

As if she wasn't already perfectly aware of the emotional mess she was, her eye caught on one of the nurses entertaining three small children, who were likely waiting for relatives giving birth, by talking to them about the Kwanzaa decorations they had up on the ward. From the way one of them was watching and adding her own comments in, Katie knew she hadn't gotten nearly enough opportunities to talk about her holiday like this.

Katie smiled, feeling herself tearing up as she dropped her head and called the elevator. She really needed a shower, some food, and rest.

The elevator arrived and three other people were already in it. She stepped in alongside them, pulling out her phone to type out a message to Maggie.

For one moment, she hesitated, wondering how honest she was supposed to be, given that she was feeling both sappy and miserable. But, as the elevator stopped to let someone off on another floor, she remembered this was Maggie. She didn't want to keep things from Maggie. She was feeling fragile and she needed her best friend. If she couldn't be honest with Maggie, who could she be honest with?

She fired off her text as she walked across the lobby, shoving her phone back into her pocket as she scrambled to get her gloves on before heading outside. Without even stepping out, she could tell it was freezing. And not just because it was always freezing these days.

The growing layer of frost across the windows was glistening in the light from the hospital, and the people coming and going held themselves in a braced position against the weather. It wasn't that late, but it was already pitch black outside.

Katie took a breath and ventured outside.

The preparation wasn't enough.

The cold hit her in every part of her body, even though she was wearing numerous layers. She blamed her period. Everything was far too sensitive and reactive, and it was all her period's fault.

She headed off in the direction of the metro. She didn't live too many stops away, and, on a nice day, she sometimes walked, but today wasn't a nice day. Nor was she feeling nice.

She joined the crowd at the stop, grateful she only had a few minutes to wait, and, even through her irritation, she could feel the holiday spirit around her. People loaded with bags from shopping—some having a great time, others who clearly didn't love holiday shopping—and those who were likely headed to holiday gatherings, sparkling in a way that only came with this time of year. Katie looked forward to being one of those people again the second she got the next few days out of the way.

And once she got to see Maggie again. Not seeing her best friend for three days should be illegal.

She squeezed onto the packed train and didn't even have the space to pull her phone out to check if Maggie had texted back yet. She hated that, but she also felt like the people around her were holding her up. As though, without them, she'd have just collapsed to the ground and ridden the train back and forth all night.

Katie always hated days that made her feel like that. Even when she was working every shift sent her way, she'd become tired, but she didn't feel defeated like this. And, of course, she understood the cause, but that didn't make it better. It just meant she'd gotten used to giving herself grace on the days she wanted to be the one

everyone was looking after, rather than the one doing the caring.

She briefly wondered whether she'd be able to convince Maggie to come over tonight. Although, they already had plans for tomorrow, and she really didn't want to drag Maggie out in this cold.

The train pulled into Katie's stop and she dragged herself through the throngs of people feeling like she was climbing through Jell-O. She was dead on her feet. If she hadn't always been absolutely routine about taking a shower once she got off work, she'd have been heading through her door and straight to her bed, where she might have stayed until she had to leave for her next shift.

As it was, the biting cold cut through her lethargy and spurred her home. The warm lobby of her building was a relief, and she felt herself switching off the closer she got to her floor.

Get in the door. Dump your stuff. Take a shower. Grab leftovers. Go to bed.

Katie chanted her tasks over and over, just to have something to keep her alert and get her through them.

She wrestled her keys from her bag and let herself in, more than ready to collapse under the exhaustion of the day.

But, when she pushed the door open, the apartment wasn't how she'd expected to find it.

The lights were on low, a cheesy Christmas romance playing on the TV, the smell of fresh-baked cookies filling the room, and, best of all, Maggie.

Katie dropped her stuff beside the door, barely remembering to close it as she stood

staring in awe at Maggie.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:38 am

She was moving around Katie's kitchen like she belonged there, making cookies, moving a lasagna she'd made out of the way, and, then, when Katie thought she might sob, looking up and giving Katie the warmest, best smile she'd ever seen.

"You're here," Katie said, hearing how her voice wavered as her eyes filled with tears.

Maggie's smile faltered and she tilted her head, moving to take the festive red apron with ruffled trim off. "Oh, you look exhausted."

Katie nodded. She knew she was being silly, but it felt like the whole world was bearing down on her, and all she'd really needed was Maggie. And Maggie was, inexplicably, here.

It wasn't the first time Katie had come home to find Maggie here, but, at that moment, it felt like it was. Like nothing had ever been so wonderful, or made so much sense, as walking in the front door, defeated and premenstrual, and finding the one person in the world who made everything okay.

Maggie came towards her, enveloping her in a hug, and, even if Katie felt like she was the walking dead, everything felt right in the world.

"Are you okay?" Maggie asked after a moment. She made no move to pull away from Katie, which Katie appreciated. She needed just another minute longer.

"I'm fine," she said, even though it sounded like she was crying. "My period's due tomorrow, so it's..."

“Taking you for a ride?”

“Mm,” Katie agreed, nodding into Maggie’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry.” She held Katie a little bit tighter and Katie no longer needed the wall-to-wall crowd of the train to hold her up, she had Maggie, and that was all she was ever going to need.

“I’m so glad you’re here.” She nuzzled Maggie’s shoulder, breathing in her scent and letting it fill her mind.

She’d always liked the way Maggie smelled—soft and warm and comforting. With the way she was feeling, she wanted to wrap herself in that smell and live in it forever—wrap herself up in Maggie and live there forever.

Maggie’s hand ran over her hair, and Katie felt the tears even though her eyes were pressed shut. Maybe she’d be embarrassed in a couple of days when this was behind her, but she couldn’t find it in herself to be anything but completely overwhelmed and grateful that Maggie was here and that she’d shown up to look after Katie before Katie had even hinted at asking. She was the best person Katie had ever known.

She squeezed Maggie tighter. She was the only thing keeping Katie grounded and Katie didn’t want to step away and lose that.

“It’s been a rough few days, huh?” Maggie asked softly.

“Not really,” Katie admitted, knowing as she did that she should be embarrassed by how she was acting. There had been bad days. Maggie had seen them. They both knew what bad days looked like when you were a doctor. But this wasn’t that. This was just hormones, exhaustion, and missing her best friend. “Just a lot of work, no sleep, and PMS. Plus, I missed you.”

Maggie sucked in a breath. “I missed you too.”

Katie hummed. Maybe it was okay that she was falling apart if Maggie had missed her too. Was it weird to be glad somebody had missed you? Either way, Katie was glad.

“We can do something else tomorrow, if you want?” Maggie offered, rubbing Katie’s back gently. “Going to pick out a tree seems like it might not be what you need right now.”

“No, no. I’ll be good. I just need some decent sleep, probably some food, and I’ll be fine once my period kicks in and I take some painkillers.”

It was true. The lead-up was often worse than the thing itself for Katie. Of course, if she had debilitating cramps, she’d have been in the right line of work to get someone to look at it. As it was, there wasn’t anything she could really do for being hormonal and a little overworked.

Besides, every year, they went to pick out trees together. And every year, they decorated them together. And, every year, Maggie liked doing Katie’s more because she had more space in her apartment than Maggie did, so they got to pick a bigger tree—and Maggie loved Christmas trees. Katie wasn’t letting an annoying little period get in the way of that.

Maggie breathed a laugh that tickled down Katie’s neck and made them both shudder.

“Well, the good news is that I made dinner,” she said, “and loads of cookies. And I can make you a hot water bottle and a warm drink while you take your shower?”

Katie nodded. She couldn’t imagine anything better. “You’re the best ever, you know that?”

Maggie giggled. “You’re just saying that because I made you cookies and I’m about to serve you dinner on the couch.”

“You’d be the best either way, but that definitely doesn’t hurt.”

She took a breath, drinking in the scent of Maggie one more time before she finally stepped back. Maggie had always been one of those people who waited for the other person to end the hug. It was a quiet kind of gift, one people didn’t really think to do—didn’t really think of in the first place. But, when you knew the person you were hugging would stay there as long as you needed, never getting bored or frustrated, it felt like a tiny piece of your soul was clicking back into place after being lost for too long.

Maggie smiled at her and, not for the first time, Katie thought about how coming home to her really was the best thing ever. She didn’t mind living alone. She liked her space, even. But being around Maggie was something better than being in her own company, and there weren’t many people Katie could say that for every second of every day, no matter how she was feeling.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:38 am

“Go take your shower,” Maggie said, nodding her head towards the bathroom. “I’ll make you some tea. We can have hot cocoa with the cookies later.”

“You’re a literal angel, Maggie.” Katie smiled in a way she hoped looked more cheeky, and less sentimental and broken than she felt.

“Well, I guess we know what you’re putting on top of your tree tomorrow, then,” she said lightly, but there was a blush over her cheeks that told Katie she wasn’t quite so nonchalant about the comment.

Katie should compliment her more. She liked it when Maggie blushed. It was adorable.

She turned to walk towards the bathroom. “Absolutely. And then you’ll have to stay here. Angels don’t just go back home every night. They’re here for the season.”

“I’m here whenever you want me. You only have to ask,” Maggie called from the other room in reply.

Katie was certain she wouldn’t have said it quite like that if they’d still been standing together, but they both knew it was true. She had specifically not asked Maggie to come over earlier because she knew Maggie would and she didn’t want the cold to punish her. Of course, Maggie was so wonderful that she’d somehow known exactly what Katie needed, and been here already. But, in general, if Katie asked, Maggie would be there. And if Maggie asked, Katie would be there. That was just how they worked.

And she wouldn't want it any other way. Ever.

Chapter Six

Maggie had spent enough time around Katie to know how long it would take her to shower, especially when she was so clearly exhausted, and she timed it perfectly. When Katie reappeared with damp hair and sleepy eyes, Maggie had dinner plated up, tea ready, the kitchen cleaned, and a large plate of cookies ready for dessert.

Katie smiled at her like she really did think Maggie was an angel, and Maggie found herself blushing again.

It was hard having a best friend she was basically in love with who complimented and looked at her like that. At least, it was when she was trying hard not to be discovered.

"Come on, sleepyhead," she said to Katie, ducking her head to hide her blush. "Let's get you a seat before you keel over on me."

Katie laughed and Maggie was glad to see the weight she'd been carrying when she arrived home seemed to be a little less heavy now.

"I'm sure you'd catch me if I did," Katie said, but she walked over to the couch and dropped down onto it gratefully.

Maggie hummed, feeling her face redden further. Clearly, they both knew she would, but she couldn't help wondering whether Katie had any idea of the lengths Maggie would go to for her.

Since her conversations with Rea and Mariana, she couldn't help but feel like everyone in the world knew how she felt about Katie, and, if they all knew, how

could Katie not? But here they were. Still the same as always, without even a hint of Katie knowing. Maggie was grateful again that, despite being so ridiculously smart, Katie was at least oblivious in this one area.

She carried their plates over to the couch and sat down beside Katie. They'd done this so many times that she basically had a spot, a place she usually gravitated to on the couch, just like Katie had one. It was becoming increasingly difficult not to see all of the ways a life together might work. Even if things were a little more complicated than that. Life wasn't all sitting together on a couch and watching TV. Katie's life, at least, was basically non-stop working, and Maggie didn't want to ruin that for her.

But still...

Katie took her plate looking content as she snuggled into the corner of the sofa, glancing up at the TV to see what was playing. Maggie had made sure it was a film they'd seen before, so Katie didn't have to put too much energy into paying attention, but she'd timed it to start right as Katie came back and they settled in for dinner. And all of it was just so very nice.

Maggie's heart ached.

"Have you booked your flight to your parents for Christmas?" Katie asked as she set about eating.

Maggie felt like she'd bumped back down to Earth. "Not yet."

Katie frowned. "Why not? Haven't they asked you to?"

Maggie shrugged. "They have. My mom sent me a text telling me to let her know when I get in."

Sensing that something was off, Katie examined her, a little pucker in her brow as she chewed carefully. “You’re thinking about not going?”

“No, no, I wouldn’t do that...” She sighed. Maybe she would. Not this year, but maybe some year. Her family probably wouldn’t get it, but she wanted to spend Christmas at home—her real, actual home—and around the people she loved.

Her whole life was here. She felt like a stranger when she went back ‘home’. Her family felt like strangers. They basically were. Sure, they shared some DNA, but they barely spoke to each other for most of the year. And not in the way Maggie had with some of her friends where not speaking for a few months meant nothing once you were reunited. This was more like... outgrowing something, nobody putting any effort into keeping it alive, and still being expected to spend her favorite time of year there, away from everything that made herher.

Out of sight, out of mind. Right up until social convention dictated you all convened in your childhood home.

Katie didn’t push her. She simply waited for Maggie to continue, quietly eating her lasagna, and being open and attentive and patient—all of the things Maggie wanted in the relationships in her life.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:38 am

“I think I’m going to fly in on Christmas Eve and fly out on the 26th. In the evening.”

A million fragments of expressions crossed Katie’s face, and Maggie knew she was working hard to rein them in.

Eventually, she settled on an impressed smile. She knew all about Maggie’s dynamic with her family, of course. “How do you think they’re going to feel about that?”

Maggie huffed. “No idea. Not good, I imagine, but what difference does it really make? They do presents in the evening of the 25th, after dinner. I’d be there for all of that. They wouldn’t...”

She trailed off, feeling guilty for even thinking it. Sure, they wouldn’t really do anything for her being back, and she didn’t need them to, especially at such a busy time of year, but they’d barely even pay attention to her. She’d be stuck in shallow conversation after shallow conversation with people who didn’t really care how she was doing, told her they’d missed her when they really hadn’t, and promised to be in touch, or even come visit her over the next year, when that never happened. She heard from people in her immediate family via text every few months at most, and nothing from anyone else except when she attended Christmas. It just wasn’t what she wanted every year for the rest of her life.

She shook her head. “Besides, I have a birth booked that’s supposed to happen on the 29th. It’s her first, and she’s absolutely certain the baby isn’t coming until next year, but I can’t afford to be out of town too long.”

“Ah, maybe I’ll see you in the hospital for the first birth of the new year,” Katie

laughed.

Maggie smiled at her. She was pretty sure Katie wasn't scheduled for the midnight slot on New Year's Eve, but when had that ever stopped her? "Never say never." She looked down at her plate, chewing her lip, and moving her food around. She wished she didn't feel so conflicted.

Katie reached over to take one of her hands. "For what it's worth, I think you're making the right decision."

"You do?" Maggie looked up at her, searching her face for any sign of a lie. She hadn't realized how much she needed someone else to tell her this was the right thing to do—how much she'd needed Katie to tell her that. Katie knew her better than anyone. Katie was her family, and, if Maggie was going to start officially distancing herself from her biological family, she needed to know her actual family believed in her.

Katie smiled and nodded. "I do. I mean, I support you not going at all. You can come hang out with me at the hospital all day—though I wouldn't do that to you. You deserve a happy, relaxed Christmas day. And, in the absence of that, you deserve to make the decision that feels right for you on how long you go back there for."

"I wouldn't mind spending it at the hospital with you," Maggie said, a little shy.

Katie laughed, dropping her hand and returning to her dinner. "Yeah, I'm sure you're just itching to spend Christmas in the hospital."

"Well, it sounds a little more threatening when you say it like that..."

"Oh my god. I don't mean like that. And you know it." She threw a cushion at Maggie, carefully avoiding her plate.

Maggie laughed, batting the cushion away, but she couldn't deny the burn in her stomach at the conversation. She really would rather spend Christmas at the hospital if it meant she got to see Katie. Katie felt like home. Katie felt like love and understanding.

Maybe that was a sign that she really shouldn't be going back home to her family at all. It was definitely a sign that her crush was getting out of hand. But that didn't matter. She wasn't actually going to pitch up at the hospital on Christmas Day. She'd take the flight, go home for two days, put up with the comments about her brief visit with insinuations of work keeping her booked, and she'd be back in the city, with Katie, before she knew it.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, watching the movie and enjoying their food, but, when Katie was done and had slipped her plate onto the coffee table, she sat up, looking intently at Maggie.

Maggie swallowed, her whole body coming awake at the intensity of the look.

She pushed her plate onto the table too, working hard to clear her throat without choking. "Yes?"

"I'm proud of you," she said, her voice sincere and a little deeper than usual.

Maggie's heart pounded. "Thank you." She hesitated. "For the food, or...?"

Katie rolled her eyes. Her mood had definitely shifted, but she still looked exhausted. "No. For doing what you want for Christmas, for once."

"Oh." Maggie looked down, chewing her lip. She wasn't really sure what to do with that.

Katie took her hand again. She was always even more tactile than usual when she was tired. “I know it’s not easy, but you’re doing it, and I’m proud of you. I know you want Christmas in the city. I know you want to be here, to see it snow over the city on Christmas evening, and to choose what you do with your day.”

Maggie’s face burned. “How do you know that?”

Maggie didn’t know she’d told anyone about that. It was one of those seemingly impossible wishes that she held in her heart and never let out. How was it possible that Katie knew?

Katie scooted a little closer to her, smiling. “You told me last year. When we celebrated before you flew back to see your family. You were mostly asleep—and had possibly had a little too much champagne—and you told me all about how much you wanted to stay here, see the snow, see the city, see... me.”

Maggie thought she might throw up. “And you never thought to say anything?”

“I’m saying something now.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:38 am

“What else did I say?” She stared at the TV, not really seeing it, just needing anything else to look at than Katie.

She breathed a laugh. “Just that you liked it here, which I already knew.”

“Okay.” Maggie took a steadying breath. She couldn’t remember a word of that conversation. She was going to need to be a million times more careful being sleepy and talkative around Katie going forward.

She supposed she was glad her former, sleepy self had at least had the wherewithal not to blurt out exactly why she liked it here, or all of the reasons she wanted to see Katie for Christmas.

“Okay,” she said again. “Well, yeah, that’s true. This is my home, you know? I want to spend important holidays here, with the people I love.”

“Right. And, if this is the first step towards that, I’m always going to support you. I’m really glad you’re doing what you want instead of what some random relatives want from you.” She laughed. “And, hey, if you want to stay slightly closer by and attend a family Christmas, you can go see my family. My mom would never leave you alone again, but she’d be delighted to have you. She’ll think you’re the daughter she never had.”

“She has you.”

“Not when I’m missing Christmas she doesn’t.” She laughed, shaking her head.

Maggie was overwhelmed. She knew Katie was joking. Her family was pushy, but they didn't disown her for missing Christmas. But, the idea of meeting Katie's family at Christmas was too much. As much as Katie attempted to maintain their privacy by not throwing Maggie into all that, they both knew it was going to happen at some point. Even so, meeting the family of the best friend you were secretly in love with at Christmas felt... a little too much, even just as an idea.

Katie laughed again, pulling Maggie backwards into the cushions. "Don't worry, you know they're going to love you when they finally meet you, but I'm not just going to abandon you there for Christmas."

"Good to know," Maggie said, her heart and her head both still feeling fuzzy and confused.

She couldn't help relaxing into Katie's side, though. It was the most confusing of things. Being close to her was both something that Maggie craved and something she always worried made her creepy, given her feelings. But, despite all of that, it was still Katie, Maggie's best friend, and it just felt natural to relax with her, to melt into her embrace. There was no fighting it, even though Maggie worried about the day she finally found out and whether she'd feel differently about it then.

Katie pulled her closer, into a hug. "Whatever happens, I'm proud of you, I'm here for you, and I love you."

"I love you too," Maggie replied, trying desperately to mean it only platonically, and failing miserably. Maybe she was supposed to say something, to warn Katie so she didn't do things like this without understanding how much Maggie meant them.

"And we'll always have our Christmas celebration. Just me, you, and nobody else. None of that confusing mess."

“Yeah.” Maggie smiled through the whirlwind of emotions. She always loved her Christmas celebration with Katie. No matter how busy they were, what other work or travel plans they had going on, they always found time to have their own, private Christmas together. It was Maggie’s favorite part of a whole season she loved.

“And I’ll be at the airport to meet you after your flight to pick you up. You can complain all you need. I’ll look after you.”

Maggie’s heart pounded, longing. “You have work. You’ll be tired.”

“I’m never too tired for you.” She squeezed Maggie tightly and pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

Maggie was pretty sure Katie was starting to lose the battle against sleep. She, however, was wide awake, and, no matter what, she didn’t think she was ever getting over Katie or moments like this.

Chapter Seven

An hour and a half after waking up, Katie’s painkillers had kicked in and she was feeling fine. She snuck around the kitchen making buttermilk pancakes, trying not to wake Maggie. After everything Maggie had done for her yesterday, Katie more than wanted to return the favor by spoiling her a little too—because Maggie really had been spoiling her all night with being here, dinner, the cookies and hot cocoa, and then snuggling up to watch movies until Katie physically couldn’t stay awake any longer.

While she might not have managed to stay up all night, even on her days off, she was an early waker. And she was determined to have breakfast on the table before Maggie woke up.

She blasted Christmas music through her headphones as she moved around the kitchen, whipping cream and flipping pancakes. She loved her job and she wouldn't give it up for anything, but she did wish more mornings were like this—maybe minus the period, but other than that, it might have been her perfect morning.

When everything was ready, she piled two plates high with pancakes, whipped cream, and copious amounts of red and green sprinkles she'd bought on an impulse because she knew Maggie would love them.

If she really thought about it, half the things in her apartment were bought because she knew Maggie would like them, but Katie liked it that way. She wanted Maggie to feel happy there.

She quickly made coffee and, once the breakfast bar looked perfect and ready to go, she crept back into the bedroom, kneeling on the edge of the bed as Maggie slept on, blissfully unaware.

She smiled and traced a finger lightly over Maggie's hand. "Maggie," she whispered. "Wakey, wakey."

Maggie let out a deep sigh, shifting slightly.

"Maggie... I made breakfast."

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:38 am

Maggie groaned, stretched, and cracked her eyes open. “Hi,” she said, her voice slightly croaky. “Is everything okay?”

Katie grinned. “Absolutely. I made breakfast.”

Maggie paused, her brain seeming to take a moment to process and make sense of Katie’s words. “You did what? I’m supposed to be looking after you!”

“Yeah, well, too bad. You spoiled me enough last night. Let me spoil you for once.”

“You spoil me all the time.” She sat up, shaking her head. “I was really going to make breakfast and look after you, you know?”

“I know. But I promise I’m fine. Couple of painkillers and I’m good to go.” She grinned, watching Maggie get up.

Maggie stood at the side of the bed, leaning against it lightly as she looked Katie over. “So, you’re feeling better than last night?”

“Much. Sorry for being so—”

“You’re allowed to be emotional and sleepy and in need of cuddles.”

Katie laughed. They knew each other so well. “Well, then I guess I’m not sorry. And I’m not sorry I made pancakes, either.”

Maggie paused. “You made pancakes?”

“I did indeed.”

“Oh my god.” Her face lit up like a kid on Christmas morning, and Katie loved seeing it.

Maggie wasn't hard to spoil, honestly. Give her a camera, something to photograph, or some pancakes, and the woman was putty in your hands.

She bounded around the bed, grabbed Katie's hand, and led them back out to the living room. Katie went willingly, loving the moment when Maggie spotted the ridiculous piles of pancake sweetness.

“You bought Christmas sprinkles?” she asked, looking at Katie with a wide-eyed wonder that solidified for Katie just how much she really would love every morning to be just like this.

She breathed a laugh. “I did. I thought you'd like them.”

“Oh my god, Ilovethem.”

Katie led her to the breakfast bar, set the music playing through the speakers, and settled in for her first truly festive day of the year. She was glad it was with Maggie.

???

“What about this one?” Katie asked, pointing to one of the Christmas trees as they walked through snow-dusted rows of them on the sprawling Christmas tree farm about an hour outside the city.

After the best morning she'd had in some time, an hour of driving with an excited Maggie, and Christmas songs playing all the way, Katie couldn't deny she was well

and truly in the Christmas mood.

Maggie stood back, examining it from every angle. She looked adorable bundled up in her winter coat, hat, and mittens, casually carrying their saw like she was born to do it.

She yanked one of her mittens off and pulled the tape measure from her pocket. “Help me out?” she asked, shooting Katie a grin.

“Always.” Katie reached out to take the other end of the tape measure.

Katie was actually the one who had started this tradition, but she’d never imagined the way Maggie would adopt it and take it so seriously. Maggie had grown up with artificial trees, owing to her dad’s hatred of cleaning up shed needles, and she’d never been to a Christmas tree farm until the first time Katie had asked for her company. Maggie had jumped at the chance, and, after seeing how much she enjoyed it, Katie had sworn to do this with her every year. They hadn’t missed one since.

Maggie had been adorably hilarious that first year, losing all sense of reasonable proportions once they were out amongst the trees and heading straight for the biggest ones in the field. Katie had laughed and pointed out that photographers were supposed to have a good sense of proportions. Maggie hadn’t fully understood her point until they’d compromised on a tree Maggie thought was too small and Katie knew was slightly too big. It had fit in her apartment, but her TV had been half-obscured for the entirety of Christmas.

Katie still loved the memory of the look on Maggie’s face when they released the branches and the tree suddenly made her living room shrink by several square meters.

“Oh,” she’d said, her eyes wide. “But it looked so small at the farm.”

Katie had laughed and thrown an arm around her shoulders. “Yeah, in a field, next to a bunch of other trees. It’s a little different when you start bringing them indoors.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

Maggie had winced and apologized profusely, but Katie had brushed her off, insisting that she loved it. And she had. They'd needed to go out to buy more decorations to fill it, but Katie had loved every second of it. She still had a picture of a puzzled and slightly embarrassed Maggie standing next to it stuck to her refrigerator.

But she hadn't minded when, the very next year, Maggie had shown up with a tape measure and a notebook to ensure they picked a tree with the correct dimensions.

And so their Christmas tree tradition had begun. Never quite getting over that first tree, Maggie measured the space before they left every year, and, when they found one they liked, they measured it from every angle, and they made it through the Christmas season without having to squeeze around the tree, or missing half the TV screen.

Maggie examined the tape measure in front of her, stretched out between the two of them. "Not bad. Looks like it'll fit."

"Great," Katie replied, grinning. She'd known it would. She'd grown up with her mom training her to have an uncanny eye for the size of the tree they needed, and it was a skill that had never seemed to leave her. But she didn't want to ruin her tradition with Maggie.

"Does it look a little uneven to you?" Maggie asked, circling it slowly.

Katie watched her, Maggie's words bouncing around in her head. She looked at the tree the same way she looked at the things she photographed. There, in her eyes, was that incredible, assessing thing she did. The one where she lined everything up

perfectly, saw the very best way to capture every little thing. And there was that magical twinkle Katie had never seen in anyone else—assessing but in awe. Maggie saw the beauty in everything. She captured the beauty in everything.

Katie was fairly certain it didn't matter whether she thought the tree looked uneven or not. Maggie wasn't asking as a reason to reject the tree, she was considering it, seeing every little thing about it. Katie knew how to assess someone medically, knew how to factor in every contingency she needed to best help someone, but she seldom got to see the world the way Maggie did. Maybe that was part of why she loved Maggie's photographs so much—why Maggie's photographs were so beautiful. They captured how she saw the world, and it was wonderful.

As Katie watched her, her eyes catching on the pink in Maggie's cheeks, the tip of her nose, red with cold, and that glimmer in her eyes, she felt for the first time like she was seeing it in real life. Like she'd finally learned how to look at the world and see it the way Maggie did. It was a million times more beautiful than Katie could ever have imagined.

Maggie finished circling the tree, and looked up at Katie, still waiting for her answer.

Katie looked directly at her, unable to take her eyes off that mesmerizing exhilaration she saw in them. "It looks perfect," she said, her voice a little rougher than she'd expected.

Maggie's breath caught, her eyes widening, her pupils dilating. She stared back at Katie with something loaded between them.

Katie didn't understand it, but, as her stomach somersaulted and her heart pounded, she was certain she'd never felt anything like it, and she couldn't get enough.

Part of her suddenly wasn't so sure she'd been talking about the tree.

Maggie sucked in an audible breath, her lips parting, and Katie couldn't help but follow the movement.

She knew it wasn't the first time she'd looked at Maggie's lips, but she was cognizant enough to know it was different this time.

"You think?" Maggie breathed, and Katie was aware of how close together they were suddenly standing, even though she couldn't recall either of them moving.

She nodded, her ribs battling her as she attempted to get enough air into her lungs. "I really do," she whispered back.

Maggie nodded, leaning somehow even closer.

Katie's eyes flickered to her lips again. Soft, pink, perfect.

"Nice tree you ladies got there," called a voice, shattering the moment and prompting the pair of them to jump apart from each other.

Katie looked down, clearing her throat and putting on her best bedside manner. She had no idea what had just happened—and almost happened—but she did know how to put her feelings away to be what someone else needed her to be. "Thank you. We're pretty happy with it."

The man in question—a guy easily in his seventies, with a fisherman sweater, and his own saw—nodded and grinned, apparently satisfied that they were taking the tree in question, and it wasn't available for him to select.

Katie was certain that, even if they hadn't already been set on it, she'd have been insisting it was the one after... whatever that loaded moment was.

She was wise enough to know what it felt like, but she couldn't understand at all. She and Maggie spent so much time together and it had never been so electric before, never had they so clearly been about to... kiss. Already, her brain was telling her she'd misunderstood the situation, that it was her and Maggie and they couldn't possibly have been about to kiss, but what else could it have been? Sure, nothing had ever felt quite like that before, but she'd kissed more than enough people to know what looks like that led to.

As the guy wandered off, joining back up with his party on their quest for the perfect tree, Katie chanced a glance at Maggie.

Her face was aflame, and Katie was certain it couldn't just be the cold making her so red.

Obviously feeling Katie watching her, and looking for any way out of the moment, Maggie cleared her throat. "So, this one?" She gestured to the tree with her saw.

Katie nodded. "This one. It's perfect."

Maggie made a tiny, tortured noise, but cleared her throat again in an attempt to cover it up. She scrambled to the floor, setting about taking it home with them. And Katie stood, watching her, her brain filled with everything and nothing at the same time. The only clear thoughts in her head were the question of whether she'd wanted Maggie to kiss her, and what it meant if the answer was yes.

Chapter Eight

Maggie smiled as she watched her newest potential customers walk around her studio space. It was one of Maggie's favorite places in the world—an unapologetic space to be exactly who she was and display the things that mattered to her. She heard over and over again from customers who came in that they loved the photos displayed on the walls away from the shooting space. She'd waited all of her life for this, and she treasured every new person she brought into it.

But this time, something was missing.

Of course, she knew what it was. Things had been just a little bit off between her and Katie since their trip to the Christmas tree farm. They were both trying to act like they weren't, but Maggie was certain they were, and she knew Katie felt the same way.

The clients—a polyamorous family of three—seemed happy, they commented on the pictures to each other, smiled, laughed, and looked relaxed. And all of it felt secondary to the storm that had taken up residence in Maggie's chest over the last few days.

She wished she could take that one moment back. She didn't even know how it had happened. Everything had been fine, normal. It had been her, Katie, and a bunch of Christmas trees. It was their favorite time of year. And, all of a sudden, things were loaded and different and tender and intense, and Katie was looking at her in that way Maggie had always wanted her to, and nothing in the world had made sense except that it was her and Katie and that was all the sense she'd ever needed.

And then the moment had burst. In its wake, confusion, embarrassment, shame, and loss had snuck in, accompanied only by the intense need to pretend that everything was fine. They'd finished picking trees, driven home, stopped for dinner, put the trees up, and even decorated them together, all like normal. Except nothing was normal because Maggie knew they'd almost kissed.

And, oh, how she'd wanted to.

No matter how much she tried not to think it, she couldn't help tormenting herself with the question of why Katie had wanted to too. Because Maggie was certain she had. For one, sparkling moment, Maggie had been absolutely certain of the fact. But, their relationship in the aftermath had been so awkward that Maggie wasn't sure whether it had only been something she wanted for one moment, or whether it was something she wanted every moment.

She glanced out of the window. The sky looked cold and heavy with snow. Maggie wanted the snow so badly. She needed the city to be a canvas of white, to be fresh and new with the first snow of the season, even if it would be just another reminder of the Christmas tree farm. She wanted to hear that crunch under her boots again. Maybe it would give her the courage to ask Katie about their almost kiss.

"This one's gorgeous," someone called to her, shaking her out of her reverie.

She shifted her focus, forcing her usual smile onto her face and registering who was speaking to her.

Her stomach lurched as she walked over to where the three had gathered. Of course it was that one. Of all the pieces displayed around the space, it was the one that got the most compliments. It was the one that was Maggie's favorite. And it was the hardest one to look at.

Maggie was confident enough to know she was good at her job. She worked to catch the perfect moments, the little and large interactions between people, to capture the love in the world. And she did it well. But, even she had to admit that, when the photographer was in love with the subject, the resulting picture was something more than a little spectacular.

She stood beside the three as they leaned into each other, looking at the photo. With some effort, she looked up at it too.

Katie. Perfect, radiant Katie, laughing and looking at someone off-camera. The lighting, while not studio-perfect, was perfect to Maggie. They'd been at an event with some friends and the edges of the photo, closeup as it was, glowed with the pink and purple blur of neon lights. Katie's face, perfectly captured by the camera, was cast in that same pinkish hue. The sight of it anywhere took Maggie back to that moment in time, that picture. Almost like she could feel the warm air of the room and the icy blast whenever someone opened the door. Like she could hear Katie's laugh, see Katie's smile. Like she wanted to live in that moment forever.

It was the best photo Maggie had ever taken, and she knew exactly why.

The other three looked at her.

"Partner?" one asked.

Maggie's breath caught like a lump in her throat. Yes. The answer was there, so readily, in her mind, her heart aching to say it, to make it true.

For so long, she'd done a good job of pretending, even to herself, that she wasn't in love with Katie, and, now, one moment by a Christmas tree was going to ruin it all.

"Um..." She hesitated.

The others laughed and one of them—a white person with a blond undercut—moved to Maggie’s other side.

“Don’t worry,” they said. “We’ve all been there. You have no idea how long it took for Danelis, Austin, and I to get together. It’ll happen.”

Maggie took a step back. “No, no, it’s not like that. We’re just friends.”

“Of course you are.”

“We are. She’s my best friend. That’s all.” Maggie’s heart raced. That wasn’t all. Not for her, and maybe not for Katie. And that made everything a million times more complicated. The statement had felt like a lie before, but a manageable one. A fairly accurate one. Because, no matter Maggie’s feelings, they had been just friends.

Now, it just felt like a lie. And it was an unmanageable one because she wasn’t so sure why she was still telling it, but she couldn’t not. If she said the truth out loud, would it ruin everything?

“Sweetie,” the blond said, patting her shoulder, “I feel like we just reached inside your soul and pulled this photo out. You’re incredible at your job, and all the photos are amazing, but this one? There’s no lying about it.”

“I...” Maggie didn’t know what she was trying to say, other than that she never should have put that picture on display.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

Every single time she'd looked at it, it had felt exactly like that. Like her lens had somehow captured her soul and put it on display for the rest of the world. But Katie had been here. She'd seen the photo, and she'd said nothing.

Well, not nothing, but nothing of relevance to whether or not a photo could be a declaration of love, which it seemed to be.

The three of them allowed her a minute to simply stare at the picture. They didn't say anything—but what was there to say? Rea knew, Mariana knew, three complete strangers knew. The whole world knew. And what was left for Maggie to do but accept it?

She needed to talk to Mariana.

She shook her head and turned to the three people still watching her with amused curiosity.

“You should bring her to our commitment ceremony,” one said, smiling warmly. She was a Black woman, and the only one of the three wearing a pin stating that her pronouns were ‘she/her’.

Maggie's head spun in a way that made her feel like she might fall over. The idea of bringing Katie as—what? Her date?—to an event they'd described as “like a wedding, but not. Something for us,” was impossible to wrap her head around.

The other two grinned at Maggie, and it took a moment for the penny to drop.

“Wait,” Maggie said when it finally did, staring at the woman. “Does that mean—?”

“Yes! I’m Danelis and we’d like to hire you as our photographer.” She grinned so widely that Maggie couldn’t help but smile back. “And you really can bring her to the ceremony.”

Maggie felt herself blushing and refused to look back up at the photo. “Oh, she’s a doctor and she works a lot, so she’s almost never free...”

Austin, the final member of the group, laughed and inclined their head at the photo. “Looks like she was free for whatever this event was.”

Maggie attempted to look at them, but her eyes couldn’t hold their gaze. She caught on tanned skin and long, black hair, a patterned shirt that looked like a ‘90s carpet. Anything but their eyes.

She cleared her throat. “It was... a... lucky one-off.”

It was almost true. Sure, she’d spent more than enough time with Katie outside of work, but on that particular night, she’d been certain Katie had to work. Katie had told her she had to work. It had all been a ploy to surprise Maggie, and it had worked incredibly well. Perhaps that was why this photo, more than any other, screamed of the way Maggie felt about her. There had been no time to prepare herself, to put her messy, complicated feelings away into their careful, tidy boxes. All Maggie had experienced was love, surprise, and more excitement than she’d have been able to explain.

“I’m sure it was,” Danelis said. “But, still, we’re holding an event celebrating our love and commitment to one another. You’re our photographer. You should come with your love.”

Maggie laughed, the sound more than a little awkward. “You do know photographers don’t usually get a plus one, right?”

She laughed. “You do know people typically claim weddings should have only two people getting married? This is us, doing things our way, and if we want to give our photographer a plus one, we will. So sue us.”

“I really don’t think that would be in my best interest.”

“Too right,” Austin said, giggling.

Maggie really wasn’t sure how she’d ended up here again. Well, she guessed she was, at least in this case, but she couldn’t help but wonder how long her feelings had been perfectly obvious to everyone around her but Katie, and why the world had taken it upon itself to suddenly push her, with maximum force, into confessing.

Did it really think she kept quiet because she thought it would go well?

“Does she know how you feel?” the blond with an undercut asked, leaning closer to the photo again. Something about the movement made Maggie want to pull them away. The picture was so full of Katie that it felt like she was in the room with them. As though, if they leaned too close, she’d hear the entire conversation.

All of the fight drained from Maggie and she felt lost. What was the use in pretending if everyone saw through her ruse anyway? She’d gone through the same thing with Mariana. Part of her had hoped it was simply because Mariana had known her so well, for so long. But, with these three, any such hopes had flown straight out the window.

She sagged, leaning against the wall beside the photo, unable to look at it. “I don’t know. A week ago, I’d have said no, but who knows now?” She shook her head,

straightening up. She could have this conversation with Mariana later, not with her new clients—no matter how much they seemed to want to have it. “But, that’s completely irrelevant. Let’s get set up at the desk and we can go through exactly what you’re looking for.”

The three of them shared looks and Maggie knew exactly what they were thinking. If nothing else, those looks alone told her just how badly she needed to tell Katie what was going on.

Maybe it would go badly, but at least she’d know. At least she’d be able to move on. And she’d just have to hope that their friendship was strong enough to weather the storm, because she couldn’t keep doing this. Living in the whirlwind of wondering whether Katie knew, whether they were going to end up in a moment together again, wondering whether Katie felt the same way, and wondering whether every single person who so much as passed her in the street knew how she felt was exhausting. And that was going to ruin their friendship more than simply coming clean if the last few days were anything to go by.

She didn’t want a life without Katie in it and, as far as Maggie could see, that was the way she was heading. If coming clean prevented that, it would be worth it no matter the outcome. Even if Katie needed some time and the awkwardness took some serious work to get through, at least they’d both be working for the same thing, rather than keeping each other at a painful, impossible distance, with no idea what the other was thinking.

Chapter Nine

Katie stepped out of the elevator, ready to go home, curl up in bed, and curse every bad decision she’d ever made in her life. But, before she could do anything more than register the hospital lobby, two arms looped through her own and began marching her towards the door.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

Her muscles stiffened in surprise, not easing up even as her head whipped from one side to the other and she registered Rea on her right and Malik on her left. They both looked tired from their long shifts, but alive, alert, and more than a little amused at Katie's reaction.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, still tense, but walking with them without much fight.

"We're taking you to O'Sullivans," Rea said, grinning.

"Oh, I don't really feel up to it. I'm tired, it was a long shift—"

"Sounds like a ton of excuses to me," Malik said, shooting Katie a knowing look.

"As if you're not tired?" She shot him a bewildered look in response.

He laughed. "When are any of us not tired? Welcome to adulthood. But that's not what I mean, and you know it."

"Yeah," Rea agreed easily as they all huddled closer together against the bitterly cold evening. "You've hardly been there all week."

The streetlights glistened in the layer of frost that was already building up on them. Katie could only imagine how much of an ice rink the city was going to be in a few hours. Luckily, the gritters were already out and the area around the hospital was well covered. The last thing anyone needed was someone coming to the hospital only to sustain extra injuries on their way in, slipping on ice.

“I’ve been there every day,” Katie protested indignantly.

Rea rolled her eyes. “Not physically. Of course you’ve been there physically. But there’s something off. And, since you haven’t found a moment to talk about it, we’re helping create just that moment.”

“You really don’t have to...”

“We know that. Just like you don’t have to tell us what’s going on. You can come to O’Sullivans, eat jalapeno poppers, and go home with your secrets intact. But, we all know that whatever’s been bothering you will keep eating you up, and your approach is, as usual, to try working yourself into oblivion.” Rea looked at her like a principal scolding a schoolchild. “But, as your friends, we’re going to do everything in our power not to let you destroy yourself like that.”

“Oh, but there are other ways you’ll let slide?” Katie smirked, shooting for nonchalant and unbothered.

“No,” Malik said quickly. “But they’re not even close to being a thing right now, so we’re worrying about what you’re actually doing.”

“I’m not doing anything.”

“Sure you’re not.”

“What did you have for dinner last night?” Rea asked, too much weight in her tone for the question to be casual.

Katie winced. “Chips and dip.”

They both shot her identical looks. The kinds of looks that said they’d already known

the answer, were worried about her, and that they were right all at the same time.

Katie sighed, looking up at the glowing green sign outside O'Sullivan's as it came into view. "Okay, fine. Maybe I've been a little off my game."

"Only personally, thankfully," Rea pointed out. None of them needed to think about the consequences if they were off their game at work.

Neither of them seemed interested in pushing Katie too hard while they were still out in the cold, and, while Katie thought it might actually be nice to talk about what was going on, she wasn't ready to volunteer it either, so they walked the last few feet in silence, huddling in their coats and ready to be out of the cold.

Katie wasn't even sure exactly how to explain it. Her closest friends at work noticed she was off, they'd known she was overworking and under caring for herself. And it wasn't even over anything worthy. If something objectively bad had happened, maybe that would be excusable, but, in Katie's case, she was just being a coward and worrying about having ruined her friendship with Maggie. She knew it shouldn't be bothering her so much—it was her and Maggie. They were going to be fine. But still, she couldn't help it. Maggie was the best thing in her life. Katie didn't want to risk that for anything.

Plus, there was the whole...feelingsthing that the Christmas tree farm had uncovered.

They'd been to that farm before. They'd done the tree picking, they'd done the drive, and the decorating, they'd exchanged gifts, hung out, and done everything best friends did. And then they'd almost kissed and everything seemed different. Everything seemed like it was in technicolor, like Katie had been watching the world in black and white for years without realizing.

How had she not realized?

She'd been so caught up in work, and what she thought her life was supposed to be, and repressing her feelings so hard even she didn't know they were there. So, when they hit, they hithard.

But, the more she'd thought about it, the more apparent it had become. She liked Maggie, way more than she liked her friends. Way more than just a best friend. Leaning in to kiss her had felt like the most natural thing in the world.

The three of them ordered hot drinks and food at the counter and settled themselves into a table. The place wasn't empty, but it wasn't too busy. Given how early it got dark, and how busy everyone was at this time of year, stopping into O'Sullivan's in the early evening wasn't on everyone's to-do list, Katie supposed.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

Rea pulled her coat off, shuddering as the warm air hit her. She shot Katie a serious look. “So, do you want to spill?”

Katie chewed her lip as she took her own coat off and hung it deliberately over her chair. “I’m... not sure.”

That wasn’t exactly right. She did want to, it was more than she didn’t know how.

They both knew her well enough to understand her, though.

Malik tilted his head, wiping his fogged-up glasses on his shirt. “It’s about Maggie, obviously.”

Katie spluttered. “Whyobviously?”

He laughed. “Because you never get nearly this worked up about anything else.”

“That’s not true.” Katie wanted it to be untrue, but even she knew it was. She’d been doing a lot of soul-searching since almost kissing Maggie and she’d learned a lot.

“It definitely is,” Rea said, shaking her head. “So, what happened?”

“You two went on your annual Christmas tree thing, right?” Malik replaced his glasses and leaned across the table towards Katie.

She nodded. “Yeah. It was great until...”

For several moments, they waited patiently while Katie's brain and stomach felt like they were being flushed down a toilet. Nothing good was going to come from that sensation.

Eventually, Rea ran out of patience. "Until?"

"I almost kissed her." Katie grabbed the menu placed behind the condiments at their table, needing something other than their faces to look at.

Still, she could feel their eyes on her.

"Almost?" Malik said after a beat too long. "As in, didn't actually do it?"

"Yep."

"Why not?"

Katie sighed. "Well, honestly, I suppose, because we were interrupted. Tree farms are public places. There were other people there."

"Okay. Coached. Explain."

Katie's face burned in a way that had nothing to do with the changes in temperature between the hospital, the outdoors, and O'Sullivans. "It's not like it would be a good idea, is it?"

Rea snorted. "Why not?"

Katie scowled at her. "Because we're best friends and that's not something we do, and clearly the universe was sending a sign that it was a terrible decision and I needed to make better ones."

Rea rolled her eyes in exasperation. “You’re in love with her. She’s in love with you. The only potential issue I see is that you’ve been building up to it for so long that you might have lost all sense of time and place and gotten caught having sex.”

“Hell of a thing to find under your Christmas tree,” Malik said, barely holding his laughter in.

Rea laughed freely while Katie looked between them, dismayed.

“How are you not taking this more seriously?” she asked them.

Malik reached out to pat her hand. “Because Rea’s right. You two are so painfully in love with each other that kissing can only ever be a good thing, and now you’re overthinking it, overworking yourself to try hiding from it—and Maggie, too, I’m guessing—and you’re only perpetuating the problem.”

Katie’s heart throbbed painfully again. She’d tried to ignore it when Rea said they loved each other, but now Malik was saying it too. And neither sounded like they were simply exaggerating.

It wasn’t great that they both felt that way, but it was worse that they were speaking what Katie had been trying not to all week.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

She had been working to avoid Maggie in some ways, because things between them were weird right now. They were stuck in some odd, liminal space that was neither sustainable nor enjoyable. But, mostly, she'd been working to avoid herself and the undeniable feeling that she was in love with Maggie, had been for some time, and probably always would be. She wasn't sure a friendship could go back to the way it was once you realized that. Nor did she want it to. She just... didn't know what to do with that.

She was too afraid to say anything, to ask, to tell Maggie how she felt for fear of being rejected, for fear of ruining what they had.

And, honestly, for fear of turning into everything her mother had been trying to force her to be for years.

"What if we ruin everything?" Katie whispered, just loud enough for Rea and Malik to hear.

"Isn't it already ruined?" Rea asked, blunt but careful.

The air rushed from Katie's lungs. It was brutal, but she was right. From the minute she'd leaned in to kiss Maggie and pulled away with no explanation or discussion, their dynamic had been ruined. They were balancing, terribly, on a knife's edge. Sooner or later, they'd have to fall one way or the other.

"If you don't talk about it," Malik said, practically reading Katie's mind, "you're both going to continue avoiding each other, drifting apart, and you're never going to be able to get back to where you were because there will always be this giant thing

between you that you don't talk about. It happened. It's not going anywhere."

"And if we talk about it?" Katie had thought through every option this week. She already knew the answers. She just needed to hear them from other people, people who were at least somewhat removed from the situation.

"You'll at least have addressed it." He shrugged. "I don't think it's likely, but if you don't want to give it a go—"

"Why would you not, though?" Rea interrupted. "You're both completely in love with each other and both being annoyingly foolish not just talking about it."

Before Katie could say anything, Malik cleared his throat and continued, gentler than Rea. "If you don't, at least you're on the same page. It might be awkward for a while, but you'll both heal and move on, together. Because it won't be an unknown. It won't be something you don't talk about and have to tiptoe around."

Katie nodded. She knew it made sense. And, even with how much getting called out stung, she knew Rea was right—at least about her. She was completely in love with Maggie, and she was being an annoying fool.

"And," Malik said, grinning now, "the most likely outcome is that you talk about it, get together, and live your happy life forever and ever together."

"What if it ends?" Katie's eyes stung painfully as she asked. That was what it came down to, really. The ending. She didn't want it to. She wanted Maggie in her life forever.

But they were right. She was already ending it by doing nothing, and that was infinitely worse.

Rea softened. “I really don’t think it’s going to. You two are made for each other. But, either way, you can’t live your life worrying about a terrible ending to the best thing in your life. If it does end, it’s you two. You’ll navigate it with grace and love, and everything will be okay in the end.”

Katie chewed her lip again. Maybe Rea was right. She couldn’t imagine a single reason she’d never want to be with Maggie, but, if Maggie didn’t want to be with her, or if they one day outgrew each other, she’d still want to be friends. She’d want to move forward with love and friendship.

It didn’t mean thinking about it didn’t hurt, but it did soothe the fear slightly.

She laughed, the sound a little more stuffy than she’d have liked. “I’ve spent all this time talking about how my job is my life and I don’t have time for romance.” She winced. “All this time telling my mom I didn’t have time for it.”

They both laughed and shared a look before Rea said, pointedly, “You always find the time for Maggie.”

And that was true too, wasn’t it? Katie had little time for anything in her life outside of work. She saw her work friends, her family sometimes, and she often had to cancel or miss holidays and events. But she never canceled on Maggie. She was never too busy for Maggie. And Maggie was never too busy for her.

Maybe she should have known all along.

She let out a long, nervous breath. “So, I guess I have to figure out a way to tell her now...”

Rea laughed. “Naked and under her Christmas tree.”

“I don’t think so.”

Malik laughed too. “Hell of a thing to find there.”

Even through the vaguely sick feeling in her stomach and the fluttering in her chest, Katie found it in herself to laugh with them. She wasn’t going to do it that way, but she was going to do it.

Falling in love with the one person who truly saw and understood her wasn’t the same as dating one of her mom’s friends’ kids. It didn’t mean she had to give up everything that was important to her. It was more that she’d found the one thing she didn’t want to give up, no matter what else was happening in her life. And that was both terrifying and exhilarating.

Chapter Ten

Maggie kept Mariana’s words in her head as she walked to Katie’s apartment. She clung to them desperately. Mariana’s utter confidence that Katie would take Maggie’s feelings well, and her promise that, on the bizarre off chance that Katie didn’t feel the same way, they’d be okay as friends.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

Maggie wasn't nearly as confident that Katie was interested in her as Mariana was, but the confidence was comforting nonetheless.

The world around her glowed magically with decorations. At this time of year, even the lights from buildings around the city felt like holiday decorations to Maggie. They glowed warm and bright in the inky evening sky, and, in any other circumstance, Maggie would be glowing with them. She loved this time of year. She loved the twinkling lights. And she loved how much happiness they brought Katie.

But, faced with the suddenly long walk to Katie's apartment, her legs feeling like they were being weighed down, she was struggling to muster her usual joy.

Katie was the one who'd invited her over. Their conversations had been more careful and vaguely awkward than usual lately, they both knew it, but Katie wanted Maggie to come over for a late dinner and Maggie knew she needed to pull the Band-Aid off.

She'd rehearsed what she wanted to say with Mariana—all while at Mariana's home, with her partner and kids whirling around them in a storm of Christmas excitement. Seeing Mariana had helped, but being with the kids and catching the magic of Christmas—writing letters to Santa and visiting his grotto—had really helped put things in perspective too. Life was so big. Maggie remembered when she'd been an excited kid, desperate for Santa to come. She knew the magic, the impatience. And she knew how quickly all of that could pass you by. Life was too long to live without the things that felt like magic in them.

Christmas didn't always feel the same these days as it had when she was a kid, but she hadn't forgotten that magic, and she knew what felt like that in her life. She knew

she wasn't willing to let it go just because things had become a little awkward.

So, there she was. On her way to Katie's, her fingers playing with the written-out speech in her pocket, and her heart filled with terror and hope.

It was a little like the time she'd woken up as a child to sounds from the living room downstairs. She hadn't been able to tell exactly what the sound was, but she'd known it was Christmas Eve, and she'd known without a doubt that it was Santa and his elves at work downstairs.

She'd also known she wasn't supposed to wake up. Santa came while you were sleeping.

She'd pressed her eyes together so tightly they hurt, buried her head under the covers, and breathed fast as her heart pounded in her chest, a mix of excitement at knowing Santa was there and terror that she'd ruined everything by waking up.

Even in the time since she'd learned exactly what was going on that night—and the fact that she hadn't ruined anything, but her father had ruined an expensive crystal vase—it had never occurred to her that anything in her adult life would make her feel that exact same way again.

She turned onto Katie's street—so familiar and so strange all at the same time—and wondered whether it was because so few things in adulthood felt like you wanted to believe in them the same way you did with Santa as a kid.

Mariana was the friend who still believed with her whole heart, who had lists of reasons he had to be real. Maggie was the kid who couldn't quite believe but wanted to so badly. The only difference was that, this time, they were believing in Katie, not Santa.

And Maggie did believe in her, in almost everything in life. Katie was the one thing Maggie would never not believe in. But, when you thought that highly of someone, when you loved them so much, how were you supposed to believe they loved you back? How were you supposed to believe you were enough for them to give up their carefully crafted life for? How were you supposed to believe you were anything other than the kid waking up and ruining Christmas for everyone?

She rang the buzzer for Katie's apartment, shivering as she watched her breath swirl in the air around her.

It took longer than it usually did for Katie to answer. Although, to be fair, it had been some time since Maggie had even bothered ringing to be buzzed in. She had a key. She just let herself in.

She hung her head. She was here to try making things better and she was already making them weird before she'd even gotten into the building.

"Maggie?" Katie's voice eventually said through the speaker.

"The one and only," she replied, attempting to sound bold, brave, and, frankly, just as normal as she could. She knew she was doing a terrible job of it, but just the sound of Katie's voice had her heart pounding painfully.

"Uh, yeah. Come up."

The door buzzed and unlatched. Maggie walked through it but she couldn't stand the nervous humming in her skull. Something wasn't right. And it wasn't just in her head. She could hear it in Katie's voice.

When she'd invited Maggie over, she'd called. They'd spoken on the phone and she'd sounded absolutely fine. A little nervous, perhaps, but nothing like she did now.

Maggie knew it wasn't just distortion over the intercom either. Something was genuinely wrong.

She stared at the white lights wrapped around the topiary in the lobby as she waited for the elevator. There was no telling what was waiting for her upstairs, but she really hoped Katie was okay.

The elevator had never felt so slow in her life. Sometimes, they felt too quick when she was with Katie, when she was attempting to cling to the time they had together. Now, it seemed to crawl down to her and crawl back up like it didn't even want to take her to Katie's apartment.

She hoped it wasn't a bad sign.

Eventually, she made it. She held her hand in front of the door. She could let herself in. It would be the normal thing to do. But, ridiculously, she'd set a precedent for tonight by buzzing from downstairs.

She took a deep breath and knocked.

The door whipped open too swiftly, startling Maggie and sending her reeling backwards a few steps.

She looked at an unfamiliar face with wide eyes. "Uh. Hello?"

The guy on the other side of the door grinned and the smile was familiar. It was warm and amused and so very, very Katie. "Hey. Maggie, right? Welcome to the party."

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

Maggie walked into the apartment automatically as he threw his arm out in a wide, welcoming gesture. “Thanks. I did, um... I didn’t realize it was a party I was attending.”

He laughed. “Nothing’s a party until it is.”

She woodenly removed her coat and hat. Katie’s apartment, with the ten or fifteen people in it that Maggie hadn’t expected, was especially warm, particularly in contrast to the outside world.

She’d thought the walk and the place only felt strange because of the weight of what she was going to do and say. Now, though, nothing about it seemed familiar. It was like she was on a set she recognized, but it was so full of people she’d never seen before that she was certain she was in the wrong place.

And the guy who smiled like Katie was still looking at her. Even though there was no sign of Katie herself.

“Indeed,” Maggie agreed, unsure of what else she could say in the situation.

He laughed. “You look just like she did when we showed up.”

“Huh.”

Maggie’s brain worked hard to put the pieces together. If Katie looked the same way Maggie felt, she hadn’t known all of these people were coming. She hadn’t invited Maggie to some odd party she hadn’t mentioned she was planning.

Maggie looked around the room again, searching for the familiar pieces of the space. She spent almost as much time here as she did at her own apartment, it shouldn't have been difficult.

Her eyes landed on the table and there was the first sign that this evening had not been a planned party.

It was set for two people. Beautifully so. Gold charger plates Maggie was certain were new and red napkins with little white snowflakes on. Water glasses, wine glasses, and... champagne flutes.

She and Katie had drunk champagne together before but not at a table that looked exactly like a romantic date in Katie's apartment.

And definitely not with a dozen other people randomly around.

The noise of the people gathered there was loud, but it hushed slightly as the guy who'd let Maggie in laughed and called towards the kitchen, "Specks, your friend's here."

Maggie followed his line of sight and, as the crowd parted, she finally caught sight of Katie, and everything started falling into place. This was Katie's family. Here. In her apartment. Unexpectedly.

They usually didn't even visit her individually, let alone as a huge group. Katie was the one who'd moved away and into a busy city they complained about. She was the one who went back to see them.

But they were definitely all here now.

Katie met Maggie's gaze, looking at her like she was the lifeline Katie desperately

needed. It did nothing good for Maggie's aching, pounding heart. There was no way she'd be able to come clean tonight. Not with all these people here.

Though, at least Katie was looking at her relatively normally again. As normally as one could after their apartment had been invaded, at least.

Maggie set off towards her, shimmying through the sea of people. Katie's apartment was a decent size, but it wasn't set up for a crowd, especially not with the Christmas tree up.

"Nice to meet you, Maggie," the guy behind her called, sounding more than a little amused.

Maggie glanced briefly in his direction, waving in agreement. She wasn't sure she did agree, but it was the polite thing to do. She wasn't even sure that constituted a meeting. She just felt like she was missing something massive and he knew exactly what it was.

She made it to Katie who was standing over a pot on the stove. Now abandoned to the side was a little tray with their Christmas mugs on. They'd bought them a couple of years ago. Matching, magical Christmas mugs. One set for Katie's house and one set for Maggie's. They used the ones at Katie's far more frequently.

The tray was beautifully set with little bowls of add-ons for hot cocoa. Had Katie been making them a mini hot cocoa bar? On top of the ridiculously intimate and festive dinner table she'd set up? Maggie's heart ached painfully.

Whatever Katie's plans had been, they'd been thoroughly scuppered now.

The rest of her mugs had been taken out and were lined up haphazardly along the countertop.

“Hey,” Maggie said, more than a little cautious. “Are you okay?”

Katie shot her a look that was just for the two of them. Without a word, she told Maggie the answer to every question Maggie had about the situation—Katie had no idea everyone was coming tonight. This wasn’t what she’d had planned. And she wasn’t happy about it.

“My mom decided to bring family Christmas to me,” she said. Her voice was light and unbothered on the surface—she was well-practiced in schooling her tone—but Maggie knew her better than most. She heard the cracks underneath.

“Ah. Quite the surprise.” Maggie looked around with a forced smile on.

“Indeed.” She stirred the pot that Maggie now realized contained a large quantity of thick, rich hot cocoa. Hot cocoa that had probably started as a much smaller batch, just for the two of them, and that she was now being forced to make for a much larger group. “As you know, I skipped going home this week because I had to work and, well, apparently, seeing me after Christmas wasn’t good enough. So here they all are.”

“Here they all are.”

Maggie looked them over, thinking about how she had known that. Even with how awkward the edges of their conversations had been, they’d still been texting regularly, and Katie had told her how unhappy Irene had been about Katie having to work instead of making the trip back.

Neither of them had expected this, though.

Maggie couldn’t decide whether she was supposed to think it was nice or not. She knew some people loved big gestures at Christmas. She knew Katie’s mom, and her whole family, missed her and wanted to see her, and that they were simply lost in the festive spirit and wanting to do exciting things. She knew they must all think it was wonderful. Maybe it was.

But maybe it was also a houseful of people nobody had been expecting. It was people invading a space they hadn’t actually been invited to. And it was people interrupting a plan.

Maggie sighed. She knew her own view on it was just as skewed as Katie's mom's was, just in the opposite direction. And they had both kept Maggie and Katie's family separate. That meant she didn't have any real clue what was normal for them. Katie was always Katie, but everyone was a little bit different around different people. Maybe this was okay and welcome in their family.

She looked back at Katie who was frowning into the hot cocoa. Maybe not.

Katie looked up at her, holding her gaze for more than a second or two for the first time in days. "I'm really sorry," she whispered. "This wasn't at all what I had planned for tonight."

Maggie did her best to muster a smile, knowing Katie would see through it. "It's okay. We can do that another night. And I'm sure it's nice to see your family?"

Katie's face twitched before she smoothed it over quickly. "It would have been nicer with some warning, or some say in the matter."

Maggie nodded, understanding a million things Katie couldn't say with her family swarming around them. She loved them. She loved people. But her home was her space, her privacy. She didn't like people invading it. It was the one place she got away from the hecticness of life. The only one she enjoyed finding there unexpectedly was, well, Maggie.

Maggie breathed against the well of emotion surging through her. She needed to be strong and supportive for Katie. She needed to be happy so Katie could be happy too. She needed to be there for all of the complicated emotions Katie was currently feeling. And she wanted to be. She wanted to be that person for her. No matter what had happened to their plans.

She stepped closer to Katie, pressing into her side and taking her free hand, squeezing

it reassuringly.

Katie smiled gratefully down at her, and Maggie knew she understood. They were going to get through this together. They would get their evening alone later, but everything was okay with them for now.

Maggie's chest ached with how much she'd missed that since the Christmas tree farm. It was so subtle and so important all at the same time.

She lay her head on Katie's shoulder, feeling like she was home at last, even in the midst of the chaos around them. "That smells amazing, by the way. Do you want me to take over?"

Katie scoffed. "No. I was making you hot cocoa, and the addition of thirteen other people to our night isn't changing that. Let me make you the best hot cocoa you've ever had."

"Any hot cocoa with you is the best one I've ever had."

Before either of them could relax, a woman gripped Maggie's shoulders and spun her on the spot. "You must be Maggie. At last!"

Katie sighed, somewhere between exasperation and amusement. "Maggie, my mom. Mom, Maggie."

Chapter Eleven

It was an odd experience to be filled with softness and terror at the same time, but that had been Katie's experience for most of the night. As she watched her mother continue to completely monopolize Maggie's attention where they sat together on the couch, Katie doubted it was going anywhere anytime soon.

She'd had such plans for tonight. Terrifying, tantalizing plans—made all the more tantalizing by the way Maggie had scooped up beside her and rested her head on Katie's shoulder earlier. Maggie was never shy with physical affection towards Katie, even in company, but, given the slight awkwardness between them lately, and the fact that Katie's whole family had descended on their night, she hadn't been expecting it. Or, perhaps that was a product of how nervous she'd been for the evening.

This was Maggie, her best friend, the one person she loved more than anyone else. Maybe that should have been a sign long ago, but Katie had been busy being a fool. So convinced that they were just friends, that she didn't have time for a relationship, and that she wasn't willing to get into one just because everyone in her life thought she should. She'd been ignorant of the fact that she'd basically already been in one, with Maggie.

Rea and Malik were right. She made time for Maggie and it didn't feel like it took any effort at all. Every day she didn't see Maggie was a day that felt longer and darker than the rest. When she'd been asked to make time for dates, it always felt like it was getting in the way of her job and time she could be seeing Maggie.

Now, she realized it only felt like a chore because it was dating that was being almost forced upon her. She'd been happier when she'd placed a ban on dating because she got to spend her time with the one person it felt natural to be around, and wasn't that what relationships were supposed to feel like? She didn't have time for relationships that felt draining and uncomfortable, but she did have time for Maggie. All the time in the world, no matter how much she worked.

It hadn't been much of a leap from that realization into realizing that she'd been in love with Maggie for some time now. And she'd been so close to finally telling her.

Then, she'd opened the door and basically been rushed by her family. Her mom had relocated the food she'd made for Maggie into the refrigerator for another time, set

out the food she'd apparently brought with her, and, upon discovering the thick, rich hot cocoa Katie had been making, set her in front of the stove to make enough for everyone.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

She hadn't even let Katie grab her phone to tell Maggie what was happening first. Not that it would have made a huge amount of difference since Maggie didn't arrive too long after they did, but Katie would still have preferred to warn her. However, when her mom was in control of a crowdmode, there was no getting away from her orders.

It had long irritated Katie—someone who often had to take control of situations at work and didn't love being controlled in her personal life—but it was just who her mom was. Even if being controlled in her own home was a deeply unpleasant experience.

She watched as her mom moved infinitesimally closer to Maggie. The two were clearly getting along as they laughed and chatted. It was everything Katie had known it would be. Now, she was more aware of why she'd been so reluctant to let it happen, but she couldn't help but be torn between the pang in her heart at seeing Maggie and her mom laugh together, and the twist in her gut that her mom might attempt to recruit Maggie on her quest to find Katie a partner.

Katie was moments away from telling Maggie how she felt about her, the last thing she needed was her mom further ruining that by failing to see that Maggie was what Katie wanted, and looking for Maggie's assistance pitching the latest prospect she'd selected from amongst her friends' children...

She was really going to have to have a conversation with her mom about boundaries. She knew she'd disappointed her family by working this week instead of going home, but couldn't they have called before they showed up? What were they planning to do if she'd been at work?

The thought hadn't occurred to Katie until that moment, but, now that it had, she couldn't wrap her head around what a dozen people were going to do in a strange city with platters of food.

Show up at the hospital, probably.

She shuddered just imagining that, but she knew it would have happened. They knew where she worked and they weren't great at taking no for an answer.

Katie sighed. Families were complicated.

"What's got your goat?" Adam asked, nudging her as he showed up at Katie's side. "Jealous Mom's stolen your girlfriend?"

Katie side-eyed her brother. "Excuse me?"

He laughed, shaking his head at her. "Please. Mom might have missed the clues, but I haven't. And that includes all of the ones before tonight."

Katie turned reluctantly away from Maggie to stare at him. "What are you talking about?" She wondered if her tone might have been more impactful if she hadn't started blushing at his accusations.

Adam smirked. "Nine times out of ten, if we manage to catch you outside of work, you're with Maggie."

"She's my best friend."

"Yeah, and Daveed is mine, but you don't see me practically living in his pocket."

"I live here, thank you very much."

He laughed. “You only get evasive when you’re hiding things.” He nodded over to the couch where their mother was being pressed further into Maggie by the others squeezing onto the couch with them. “She might be too hung up on the idea that you’re going to marry someone back home, move back, and live the whole suburban life, but I know you better than that, Specks.”

Katie shook her head at the nickname—one neither of them remembered the origins of, but which had stuck around for years. “I’m not moving anywhere. I like it here.”

He hummed. “I can tell. Quite a cozy little night you had set up for two...”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, you mean before you lot burst in unannounced?”

In his favor, he looked chagrined. “Yeah, sorry about that. It sounded like a good idea when Mom pitched it to us all.”

“And you didn’t think to ask first?”

He winced. “You know what it’s like when she gets these ideas and whisks everyone away with the magic of it all. You missed your visit, we won’t see you for Christmas, we’ve never been out here to see you... I don’t know, it just sounded like a magical, Christmas thing to do.”

Katie sighed. “Yeah, I get it. And it’s not like I don’t appreciate the gesture, just—”

“Call next time?”

“Yeah.” She scoffed. “Or, you know, ask whether I’m working or have plans or whatever. Like, what would you have done if I’d been stuck at the hospital all night?”

He laughed, relaxing as he saw some of the fight drop out of her. “I’m more

concerned about what we might have walked in on here if we'd been a little later."

"Dinner," she deadpanned, ignoring the way Adam wiggled his eyebrows at her. "You'd have interrupted the very nice dinner I was in the middle of making when you all burst in."

"Right. Date night dinner."

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

“It wasn’t date night. Maggie and I aren’t dating.”

“Yeah right.” He looked at her like she’d never told a bigger lie in her life.

She scrubbed a hand over her face, suddenly too tired to deal with all of this. “I’m serious, Adam. Maggie and I aren’t dating.”

He studied her for several moments before looking across the room at Maggie, still caught up in conversation with their mom.

Katie wasn’t sure whether it was just a conversation or whether, at this point, Maggie was being held hostage by the woman. She’d always known her mom would love Maggie, but she hadn’t quite been expecting this.

“You can’t be serious,” Adam said eventually, looking back at Katie. “You’re literally always with her.”

“I thought I was literally always at work?” she pointed out, reciting her family’s most frequent complaint about her life.

“You do work too much. But, really. You and Maggie. When are you not together when you’re not at work?”

“Plenty of the time,” Katie insisted, knowing that she was lying. They did spend some time apart, but, given her working hours, it did rather seem like they spent most of her non-working hours together.

Seriously, how had she not realized earlier?

Adam frowned. “You’re really not dating?”

“We’re really not,” Katie said, and she couldn’t help but hear the sadness and longing in her voice. She refused to look at Adam in case he could hear it too.

“But, tonight?”

“What about it?”

He gestured around them as if every plan she’d had for the night hadn’t been thoroughly trampled all over. “The table was laid for a romantic dinner, you were cooking and it smelled great, honestly, and you had your whole cute little tray set up for hot cocoa and everything.”

Katie scowled at him. “Why are you saying that like it’s a move I use on people?”

He laughed, the sound a little startled. “That’s definitely you saying that, not me, Specks. I don’t think you’ve got a single move. You never date. Where would you have picked them up from?”

She swatted at him like they were kids again. “Rude.”

“I know.” He grinned at her. “I’m just saying, everything about tonight screams romantic date night and, not ten minutes later, Maggie comes through the door. Seems pretty cut and dry if you ask me.”

“Oh, yeah, my apartment being invaded by my whole family absolutely screams date night. How silly of me.”

“Before we arrived.” He shot her a look.

Katie’s heart hammered in her chest. What did he want from her? Did he want to know? Did he want her to spill her guts for everyone to see? Did he want her to say things she’d never be able to take back, and before she knew whether they would go well?

He watched her with a studying, sympathetic look.

That was exactly what he wanted, and it barely mattered whether she said it out loud. The look on his face told her he already knew, he just wanted confirmation.

She huffed. “Fine. We’re not dating, but, tonight, I was going to...” It was harder to say than she’d realized. She’d started the sentence with so much bravado, but it drained fast. “I was going to... to...”

“Tell her,” he finished. Katie thought it should have been a question, but they both knew it wasn’t.

She nodded, feeling like she might throw up. “Yeah.”

He frowned, looking back at Maggie. “Why haven’t you done it before?”

“I was busy.”

“Too busy to date?” He laughed before she could answer. “I guess that has been your whole thing.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

“Yeah...” It didn’t feel like quite the suit of armor it once had. “I was so busy working and trying to fend off everyone Mom wanted to send my way that I put out a blanket no-dating policy. I didn’t have the time or the inclination for it.”

“And, in doing so, you failed to realize you’d already found the person you wanted to date.”

Katie looked down. “Essentially.”

“So tonight was—”

“A pretty big deal, actually, yeah.”

“Shit.” He cringed, looking around at the crowd, his eyes lingering on the now abandoned tablescape. “Sorry, Katie.”

“Ugh. Don’t use my real name. You’ll make me think I’m actually as tragic as it feels I am.”

He laughed softly, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “It’s not tragic, kid. It’s just love. Welcome. We’re all a little bit tragic in it, but only in the best ways.”

“Still waiting on the best parts and the less tragic parts.”

He tilted to look her in the eyes without letting go of her. “I’ll talk to Mom for you.”

She sniffed. “Thanks, but I think I need to do it. Set some clearer boundaries on

what's going on in my life and what's okay to bring into it."

"Do you think she'll take it well?"

Katie shrugged. "The fact that I'm never coming back home and I'm not marrying the kid of one of her friends? Probably not. The fact that I found someone I actually do want to be with? Probably." She nodded towards her mom and Maggie. "She seems to like her well enough."

Adam laughed. "Hasn't left the poor woman alone all night. You might want to be worried about Mom muscling in on your girl."

Katie shuddered. "Not thinking about that, thanks."

Adam squeezed her shoulders tighter. "Do you want to do it tonight?"

"Ha. No. I should have been clearer with Mom about what is and isn't acceptable long ago, but, in this case, I think I want to tell Maggie how I feel first, you know, before I start broadcasting it to everyone. Just like I'd planned to do before you all burst in here tonight." She glared up at him.

He winced again but still seemed a little amused. "Yeah, sorry, Specks. Regardless of how it goes, I'll make sure we call next time."

"Next time, he says. As if this is a regular thing you do."

"Hey, we've been here now, seen your luxury pad. We might be here all the time."

"I'm changing the locks and refusing to let you in."

He laughed and Katie joined in. It felt good to tell him. She really did like her family,

but she had boundaries, and that was okay. He'd listened and understood, and that was the way it was supposed to be. Boundaries weren't incompatible with love and family, no matter how long she'd allowed her mom to dance over hers. And, if she really was engaging in the next phase of her life—hopefully with Maggie—boundaries were going to be of paramount importance. She had zero interest in her family showing up at the door unannounced when she and Maggie were... indisposed.

Chapter Twelve

Maggie felt like she'd been on edge for days. She'd been on edge heading to Katie's apartment, on edge finding her whole family there, on edge as Irene chatted to her all night, and on edge at the fact that they still hadn't left.

She was beginning to wonder whether they were planning on simply staying until after Christmas. Some of Katie's extended family had left, but her mom, siblings, and their families were sticking around. Irene seemed to have barely left Katie's side if the messages Maggie had been getting were anything to go by. She let Katie go to work, but she was sleeping at Katie's apartment—in Katie's bed—and spending every second she could with Katie.

Maggie got it. Irene missed her daughter. Katie's schedule was packed and didn't allow a lot of time for anything but work. Of course her mom was doing what she could to see her, but Maggie could sense the growing frustration in Katie's messages. They both knew she had to talk to her mom, but Katie had obviously been hoping to wait until after the holidays in order to avoid upsetting Irene during them.

And, selfishly, Maggie missed her. They were supposed to be wandering Christmas markets and shopping for gifts together, drinking hot cocoa, and baking cookies together. Maggie knew she wasn't owed that, and she was certain Katie's family took priority over her, but she missed her best friend and their traditions. She was booked

on a flight to her family tomorrow. They were running out of time to even see each other.

She also missed what might have been if Katie's family hadn't arrived unexpectedly.

She'd wondered over the last few days whether it was odd to miss something you'd never had and didn't even know the reality of, but she'd been ready to put her heart on the line, Katie had gone to a lot of effort for the night, and she couldn't help but hope and wonder. The further they got from it, the more her longing heart hoped that Katie had been planning to tell her she'd wanted them to kiss too.

She stared out of her window, missing the window seat and large, latticed window at Katie's apartment, the one that let you look out on the city like it was a magical place in a movie.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

When her phone vibrated, she jumped, too lost in her own thoughts to have expected it.

“Hello?” she asked, hopeful and nervous when she saw that it was Katie.

“Hi.” Katie’s voice was barely more than a breath—a soft, warm, wishful thing. She sounded like she hadn’t spoken to Maggie in days.

Maggie felt like she hadn’t.

“Is everything okay?” she asked cautiously, wondering about the quiet voice.

“Yeah. I was just wondering where you are right now?”

Maggie’s brow furrowed in confusion. “I’m just at home...”

“Great.” If she hadn’t sounded so genuinely delighted, Maggie would have worried.

“Can you get to the hospital in the next half an hour?”

And Maggie was worried again. “Yeah, of course,” she said, leaping up. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I just have a break coming up and I want to see you.”

“Oh.” Maggie froze, her whole body feeling like it was melting over a deliciously warm heat. “I... want to see you too.”

“Yeah, sorry.” Katie’s tone implied she was wincing. “We haven’t had much time lately...”

“It’s okay. I get it. Your mom needed to see you.”

She sighed and Maggie could hear the complicated swirl of emotions she was pretty sure Katie had been dealing with since the moment her family showed up. “Yeah.”

“But, I’ll be there in half an hour and then I get to see you,” Maggie said, desperate to cheer Katie up again.

She laughed. “I can’t wait.” She cleared her throat. “But, for now, I should get back to this paperwork.”

Maggie winced. She’d been so happy to hear from Katie that she hadn’t fully pieced together that she was working. “See you soon.”

“Not soon enough,” Katie called before hanging the call up.

Maggie felt herself blushing as she rushed to get ready. Part of her was sure Katie was just being funny and friendly. The other part of her couldn’t help but wonder...

She pushed the thought out of her head and got ready in record time, basically racing to the hospital. It was embarrassing how much she needed to see Katie. And to see her without Irene being around. Maggie liked Irene well enough, but she liked Katie infinitely more, and, if she went the rest of her life without having to have another conversation with Irene about what Katie’s type was, and when she might be ready to move out of the city, it wouldn’t be long enough.

“Right on time,” Katie’s familiar, happy voice called as Maggie practically ran at the hospital doors.

She stumbled to a halt, looking towards the voice, searching for the one person in the world she wanted to see.

There, leaning against one of the columns, was Katie. Exhausted, happy, bundled up Katie.

Maggie knew just from a glance that it wasn't work that was exhausting her right now. She was emotionally exhausted. Katie was incredibly good at looking after herself emotionally when it came to everyone but her family and Maggie could see the toll it was taking on her.

She wasn't even all that bad at it with her family, she just worried about upsetting them, so she kept things bottled up inside sometimes, she danced around the truth looking for a softer way to say things. Maggie was hardly one to judge. She was hours away from a flight she didn't want to take, all because she couldn't tell her family she didn't want to spend Christmas with them, that it didn't make sense to spend Christmas with them anymore.

She idealized a world where everything was simpler, and everyone said what they were feeling, but that wasn't reality. Reality was wishing you could and knowing that doing so would unleash emotions you had no way to control, ones that would be turned back around on you. And it was the turning back against you part Maggie struggled with most. It was the part she was certain Katie struggled with the most. It was probably the part most people struggled with. Upsetting or disappointing people was hard, made harder by a history of knowing what those people did with that disappointment.

But she wasn't disappointed now.

She grinned wide and giddy at Katie. Even exhausted she was perfect—the most perfect person Maggie had ever known. Perfection, on a person, wasn't about not

having flaws or never making mistakes, it was having them and still being the best thing in the world to someone. At least that was how Maggie felt with Katie, and she wasn't about to reassess that view for anyone.

As she got closer, Katie reached out a hand, gripping the cuff of Maggie's coat, and pulling her in for a tight, lingering hug.

Maggie went willingly. Her arms encircled Katie, holding her close, breathing her in. She'd missed everything about Katie—her warmth, her laughter, her scent, the stories she told, that twinkle in her eye. Everything. So, while Katie was willing to hold her like that, Maggie simply relaxed into it and enjoyed every second of it. She didn't even care if someone saw them, or if they made sarcastic comments—she could only imagine the field day Rea would have if she saw them.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

“I missed you,” she whispered into Katie’s collar.

Katie breathed an emotional laugh. “You have no idea how much I missed you.”

“Oh, I think I do.”

“No chance.”

Maggie laughed. “How long do you have?”

“Ugh.” Katie finally pulled back, the freezing air rushing in between them, and Maggie regretted asking. “Just long enough to buy you a hot cocoa.”

Maggie laughed as Katie grabbed her hand and dragged her towards the tiny Christmas market that had sprung up in the plaza opposite the hospital. Even through both of their thick winter mittens, it still thrilled Maggie when Katie held her hand.

She tried to protest when Katie really did buy both of their drinks, but Katie insisted and Maggie knew too well she wasn’t giving in when she was that set on something, so, instead, she blushed, thanked Katie, and spun in a small circle, taking in the magical scene.

The little wooden cabins were all bedecked in decorations, Christmas music played from a speaker somewhere, and people moved from stall to stall, investigating what each one had to offer. It was a tiny taste of their usual traditions but Maggie loved it just as much, perhaps even more for the effort Katie had gone to just to ensure they had this moment.

Maggie sipped her hot cocoa. “Mm. It’s good. Not as good as the one you made the other night, of course.”

Katie laughed, looking away, a little shy. The sight made Maggie’s stomach drop delightedly. “That was nothing special.” She laughed once. “And, even if it had been, it was rather ruined by the arrival of a bunch of other people.”

“Yeah.” Maggie looked her over, noticing the troubled pucker between her brows. “How’s that going?”

Katie sighed, stepping closer to Maggie. “I know I’m going to have to talk to her. I half think she believes that, if she refuses to leave, I won’t go to work on Christmas Day, but it doesn’t work like that. And she knows it.”

“I mean, I’d show up at your apartment and refuse to leave if I were missing you too.”

Katie half laughed. “That’s different. I want you there.” She sighed. “I love my mom, a lot, but I’m not a kid anymore, you know? Once you’ve moved out and formed your own life, it’s hard being around your family all the time again. It’s hard living with them and having your mom constantly tell you what you’re supposed to be doing, controlling all of your time.”

Maggie nodded, nursing her hot cocoa. She knew exactly what Katie meant. Nobody wanted to hurt anyone, nobody meant to be mean, but, past a certain point, when you’d built your own life, there wasn’t space to be controlled like a child again. Nor should there be, really, but she knew it must be hard for people to let go of that.

Katie shot a nervous glance Maggie’s way. “And, you know, I guess the whole thing isn’t helped by...” She chewed her lip for a moment before carrying on. “Well, by the fact that I had important plans the night they showed up.”

Maggie's legs felt like Jell-O. "Right. Does she know that?"

Katie huffed. "She knows I had plans, but... I don't know, it's that whole thing of her apparently thinking I'm still five and couldn't possibly have actually important plans. She ate half of the meal I made you for lunch the next day. Didn't even ask if it was okay." She looked up at the sky, searching. "Is that a mom thing, or is that amy momthing?"

"I'm honestly not sure. I don't spend enough time around my mom to really know, but I'd guess it's not every mom."

"Yeah... I don't think I'd have cared if she'd eaten literally anything else, but that was... for you, you know?"

Maggie's face burned as she looked at Katie. They both knew this conversation was about something more than Irene. This conversation was about the one they hadn't gotten to have yet. And it didn't seem to matter to either of them that it was happening in a busy plaza, opposite a hospital, because they just needed it to happen. They'd both been sitting on it for too long now. Over dinner would have been nice, but this was the time they had, and that was good enough.

Sometimes, it wasn't about the perfect place and the perfect time. Sometimes, it was about the time and the place you had, and it was something else that made it perfect. Something you couldn't plan for.

Katie took a deep, tense breath. "I'd wanted to tell you something. Something important."

"Me too," Maggie whispered, facing Katie.

Silent Nightplayed on the speakers around them. Shoppers split to walk around them.

The chilly air bit at their exposed noses. The lights glowed against the fading daylight. And Maggie's breath came fast and shallow. Katie was looking at her almost the exact same way she had at the Christmas tree farm.

The only thing in the world that mattered was Katie. Katie, who was staring back at her, searching for words for feelings too complicated to be contained by them, and every other person faded into the background. Right up until someone yelled both of their names.

Chapter Thirteen

The sheer irony of Silent Night to be playing when Katie felt like she wasn't getting another one of those for the rest of her life.

I like you had been bubbling up, itching to break free of her. I love you was more accurate, but she didn't want to scare Maggie—although, with the way Maggie had been looking at her, she was beginning to wonder if she even needed to worry about that.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

Now, though, Maggie looked broken.

“I’m so sorry,” Katie said, feeling worse than she could ever describe.

“Yoo-hoo! Katie, Maggie, over here,” came that frustratingly familiar voice again.

Katie turned on her heel, her stomach suddenly swirling in a much less pleasant way.

She loved her mom, she really did, but this couldn’t go on. Katie had specifically called Maggie to meet her on her short break because her mom hadn’t given her a second alone since she’d arrived. How was it possible that she was here too?

“There you are,” her mom said as she stopped in front of them, beaming and entirely missing the suddenly sour air. “Fancy running into you two here.”

Katie narrowed her eyes. Those two statements didn’t belong together. “Mom, what are you doing here?”

“I came for a hot cocoa.” She gestured airily to the cups Katie and Maggie were holding and over to the stall they’d gotten them from.

“Why here? There are loads of places to get them from.”

Her mom laughed. “Well, you work right here, so I thought I might be lucky enough to catch you.”

Katie couldn’t do this. Something painful twisted in her stomach.

She knew her mom had this vision of the family together for Christmas, but Katie visited when she could. She had a job and a life. She wasn't a little kid who needed coddling, and this whole thing was starting to feel like she was being stalked by her mom. How had she known almost exactly when Katie would take her break? Katie hadn't even known that when she left her apartment.

Maggie sighed heavily, turning slightly. It was the best attempt she had at giving them any privacy. She smiled a heartbroken smile at Katie. "Maybe we're not meant to have this conversation." She shrugged sadly. "Maybe we can try again next year."

Katie's heart pounded, the sound bouncing painfully around her head. Maggie looked defeated. Katie couldn't blame her. Three interruptions. Two of them from her mom. Katie's break almost over, and no privacy in sight.

"Do you want..." Maggie trailed off, but Katie knew she was asking whether to stay for the conversation Katie now had to have.

She shook her head sadly. "I'll text you later. I only have a couple of minutes anyway."

Maggie held her gaze for a minute too long before she looked away and nodded. "I'm here for whatever you need." She turned to look at Katie's mom. "Merry Christmas, Irene."

It was probably the worst holiday greeting Katie had ever heard Maggie give, and it brought reality crashing down around her. Maggie was heartbroken that they kept getting interrupted. The thing she wanted to tell Katie had to be good. Katie couldn't have been imagining it.

And now, she thought the universe was sending them a sign they shouldn't talk about it. Katie was hit with a wave of nausea as it occurred to her that Maggie might be

taking it as a sign that they weren't meant to be together after all...

No. They'd been through so much. Katie loved her so much, and if Maggie felt even a fraction of the same thing, she wasn't going to give up, right?

It was worse than getting coal for Christmas. This was almost getting everything you'd ever wanted in life, only to have it whipped away at the last second, left hanging in the balance as to whether you'd ever get the chance again.

Katie looked back at her mom as Maggie walked away.

She clasped her gloved hands together in front of her chest, smiling almost conspiratorially at her daughter. "Ah, well, now I get you all to myself for a bit."

Katie took a deep breath, fighting against the wave of emotion pushing her to chase after Maggie. She'd messed up by letting her mom invade their time. She'd messed up by not having clearer boundaries with her mom. She'd messed up by not refusing to spend every second she had out of work with her mom, and by not taking the time she needed to go see Maggie. She'd messed up. She had to make it right if she wanted the life she needed, the one where she might get to love Maggie with everything she had.

"Mom," she said, her voice serious and measured.

"Yes, darling?" She turned towards the hot cocoa stall. "Let's walk and talk."

"No," Katie said, surprising herself a little. She was so good at being firm when she needed to at work, but this was how her mom won. She could refuse to go home because she had to work, but then she'd just go along with things when they were together. And that needed to stop. "Mom, I need you to go home."

She stared at Katie, clearly shocked. “What?”

“I’m sorry, I really am, but I need you to go home. I need you to go back to your life and let me live mine.” Katie hated every second of it. She felt guilty and ungrateful. But she also knew they had to do things like this.

“You don’t want to see your own mother for Christmas?”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

Katie winced. “Mom, we’ve had this conversation a million times. It’s not that. It’s that I have a job and a life. I feel like I can’t breathe at the minute. I work long hours, I come home, and you want to be with me every second.”

“Christmas is a time for families, Katie,” she said, her voice stern, much like she was scolding a child.

“For some people, sure. But I have work. I had plans when you burst in. I had plans for the last few days.”

“Plans that are more important than your own mother?”

Katie’s insides boiled. She didn’t want to do this. She hated when people played that card. “I’m not saying you’re not important. I’m saying I’m not a child. I’m saying I’m an adult with obligations. I’m saying I’m too old to be sharing a bed with my mom and not getting enough rest before long shifts where people’s lives depend on me being alert.”

“You could have slept on the couch if it was bothering you that much,” she replied petulantly.

Katie sighed. “It’s my bed, Mom. I shouldn’t have to sleep on the couch.”

“Well, look at me being a terrible person just because I want to see my own child for the holidays.”

Katie pursed her lips, considering. She didn’t have the time or the inclination for this.

She knew her mom was hurting. They'd get past this at some point, but this wasn't the time. "I have to get back to work."

"You're always working, Katie. When am I supposed to see you if I don't come here myself?"

"Mom, I visit all the time."

"No, you don't. All the time would be moving back and—"

"I'm not moving back. My life is here and I love it."

"More than—"

"I'm not having this conversation right now," Katie said clearly, knowing exactly what the end of that sentence was. "I should have done this better, and that's on me. I apologize for springing it on you, but I'm not going to be guilted into giving up my whole life, Mom. I love you, but you have to let me live the life I built myself, not the one you wish I would live."

She shot her mom a look before turning to head back to the hospital. She called Adam as she went.

"What's up?" he asked when he answered.

Katie huffed, putting all of her emotions away as best she could before she made it back to the ward. "I think I just broke Mom's heart."

"Ah. You had the conversation." He sounded knowing and sympathetic.

"Yeah. I didn't do a great job. She caught me and Maggie on my break and..."

interrupted again. I was worried I messed it up with Maggie, frustrated at how she even knew I was there, frustrated at not having slept properly in days, and having no time to myself, and I... just told her to go home.”

“She needed to hear it, Specks.”

“I could have been gentler with it.”

He laughed. “Look—enjoy this because I’m not going to say it again—you’re gentle with her all the time. She’s spent your entire adult life trying to persuade you out of the decisions you’ve made for yourself, trying to lure you back home with people on sticks like carrots. And you’ve just let her do it. I’m not saying it’s your fault, at all, but you’ve put up with enough. Everyone has a breaking point, Specks. Guess we finally found yours.” He laughed again. “Should have known it would be a woman.”

“I don’t even want to know what that means.” Katie bypassed the elevator, heading for the stairs—something she only did when things were really weighing her down. “I thought I was taking a cute girl for a hot cocoa and, instead, I wrecked that and my relationship with Mom. Hell of a lunch break.”

“Did you even eat?”

“Nope.”

He snorted. “Of course not. Don’t worry, though. I saw the way Maggie was looking at you the other night. She’s not going anywhere.”

“I really hope so.” An intense fear clenched at Katie’s heart. She’d been such a fool for not realizing how she felt sooner, but, now that she did know, she couldn’t bear the thought of losing Maggie.

“And Mom’s going to be fine too,” he added. “I’ll go meet her and book her into the hotel with us.”

“I don’t think that’s going to work...”

“I’ll talk to her, help her see reason.”

“Do you think that’s going to help?”

“Hey, it’s not like I haven’t tried before. But you know what she’s like. Told me you’d have said something if you didn’t know you were coming back home, if you didn’t know that was where you belonged.”

“Oh, god...”

Adam laughed. “Well, now you’ve said something.”

Katie groaned. She was supposed to be happy right now. She was supposed to have told Maggie how she felt. She was supposed to...

Well, she was supposed to have done a lot of things differently. Starting with the fact that a half-hour break really wasn’t the best time to tell your best friend you were in love with her, but it was what it was.

Perhaps she should have been thanking her mom. If she could work up the courage to try again after seeing that resigned look on Maggie’s face, she’d get another chance at doing it right. Another chance at spoiling Maggie the way she deserved, at showing her exactly how much care and effort she deserved to receive.

Weren’t things supposed to go right at Christmas? Weren’t they supposed to be magical? Who had she angered this year to end up in this situation?

“Don’t worry, Specks. It’s going to be fine,” Adam said, sounding far more confident than Katie felt. “I’ll talk to her, get her a room here, and we can go from there.”

Katie sighed heavily, opening the door to her floor. “Thanks, Adam. I really appreciate it.”

As they hung up, she rounded a corner and practically collided with Rea, who was stepping out of the elevator.

She gave Katie a look. “Who peed in your coffee?”

Katie deflated, groaning again. She wasn’t even doing a good job of putting on a show. How had one break gone so very awry?

Rea paused, gripping Katie’s arm. “Oh, shit, someone really did.” She wrapped her arm around Katie’s shoulders and started walking them both forwards. “Come on. I’ll buy you anything you want from the vending machine and you can tell me all about it.”

Katie laughed, the sound grateful and desperate in equal measure. “You really know how to sweep a girl off her feet.”

Rea laughed freely. “Don’t let your girlfriend hear you saying that.”

Katie’s stomach clenched. An hour ago, that’s exactly what she’d been hoping for when she came back from lunch—the possibility of calling Maggie her girlfriend. Now, that felt further away than it ever had.

Rea raised an eyebrow. “I knew it was about her. Spill.”

Katie felt herself blushing, but she really did want salty snacks and to tell her friend.

Maybe if everyone else was still referring to Maggie as her girlfriend there was still hope.

Chapter Fourteen

Maggie stared at her suitcase waiting by the door. She'd packed it in the aftermath of running into Irene yesterday so she had no idea if she genuinely had everything she needed. Though, she was only going for a couple of days and she knew she had all of the gifts she'd bought. Everything else she'd just have to figure out if she forgot it.

The problem wasn't that she was worried about her packing, it was that she didn't want to go.

In her disappointment over Irene's interruption, she'd made a flippant comment about whether it was a sign she and Katie shouldn't be having a conversation about their relationship—for she knew that was what they were doing, and she was finally certain they were on the same page. But then, Irene. Again. And she couldn't stop herself from worrying that it just might be a sign they weren't supposed to be together.

She didn't believe that, though. She'd just felt defeated by the lack of time and privacy they'd had. And by how she was leaving today, and they'd had to meet while Katie was on her break, and, for ridiculous, illogical reasons, Christmas felt like a deadline they had to have the conversation before. Like, if they didn't say it before Christmas, maybe it wouldn't be real anymore.

Maggie was certain she was just being foolish and overly attached to the fact that it was at the Christmas tree farm they'd almost kissed, and how she'd wanted this for so long, but maybe nothing would be the same once the Christmas magic was gone. And, now, it was Christmas Eve and they still hadn't had that conversation.

Logically, she knew feelings didn't work like that. They were far too complicated to have deadlines or to simply be the product of festive spirit, so she knew things would be fine. Emotionally, though, she felt like she was dragging herself out the door, away from any possibility of being together, and away from Katie, who needed her because things with her mom were so tense right now.

They hadn't talked about their almost conversation, but they had talked about Irene, about the things Katie had said to her, and about how much Katie both regretted them and needed to say them. Needing to say them didn't stop Katie being upset at hurting her mom, or being upset at Irene's responses. Shutting her feelings down to head straight back to work hadn't helped either.

Maggie was doing her best to be there for her, from afar, and to find the balance of what Katie needed from her. She needed a space to name her regrets. She also needed a space to hear she wasn't in the wrong for being upset at Irene's attempts at emotional manipulation—and she needed a space to have them named as such.

Maggie wanted, so badly, to run to her place and hold her, to tell her everything was going to be okay. They both hoped it would be. Katie didn't want to lose that relationship. She wanted to fix it and she was willing to put the effort in. She just needed Irene to be on the same page, and some time for healing.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

According to Adam, Irene was getting there, but none of them were willing to put Katie in a situation where she became an emotional punching bag for her mom. Irene needed to work out her feelings away from Katie so they could have a productive conversation together.

And still, Maggie was supposed to be getting on that flight.

Her phone buzzed to let her know her ride was downstairs.

She sighed, picked up her camera bag, grabbed her suitcase, and left her apartment with her limbs feeling like lead.

When she was in the car, she texted Katie to let her know, and shared her location, just in case.

Everything was going to be okay when she got back, right? Christmas was just another day. It wasn't a deadline after which a person's feelings changed. They'd both been circling back around to them, they'd do the same thing after Christmas too, right?

As if she could hear Maggie's thoughts, Katie texted her. Have a safe journey! Everything will still be here when you get back. Me included.

Maggie's heart pounded and it took every inch of her strength not to ask the driver to take her to Katie's place instead.

It had to be a sign. It had to be Katie telling her there was still a chance for them, that

she wasn't giving up, that the interruptions weren't a sign they couldn't be together.

She scrubbed a hand through her hair. How was she supposed to get on a plane away from Katie when all she wanted was her?

Her knees bounced as they drove closer and closer to the airport. She couldn't just miss her flight. She couldn't just turn around. She couldn't add more pressure on Katie when she was already going through so much.

When she was wondering whether they were far enough into the airport for Katie's phone to reach her as there, Maggie's phone buzzed.

She yanked it out of her pocket, foolishly hoping it was Katie telling her not to go.

It wasn't Katie. She attempted to regulate her disappointment as she answered. "Hello?"

"Hey, Maggie? It's Timia," said a slightly tense voice on the other end of the call.

"Timia? Are you okay?" There was only one reason her clients usually called her unexpectedly and from unknown numbers...

"Yeah." She cut off, clearly gritting her teeth through a wave of pain. "The baby's coming early."

Maggie breathed a laugh. It felt like a lifeline she desperately wanted. "Are you at the hospital?"

"On the way." Timia took a steadying breath, speaking much more smoothly when she started again, without the contraction. "I'm so sorry. I don't even know if you're in town or you went away for the holidays..."

“I’m still here. I’m on the way. I’ll meet you there.”

“Oh my god.” Timia sounded like she might burst into grateful tears. “You’re the best.”

Maggie laughed. “You just look after yourself and I’ll be there soon.”

Timia hung up and Maggie, ridiculously gleeful, asked her driver to take her to Saint Giles, apologizing profusely for the change of plans as she turned off location sharing on her phone. If Katie saw her heading to the hospital, she’d be convinced something terrible had happened.

She’d figure out what to do about her flight and Christmas and her family later, but, for now, all Maggie could think was that she was getting another shot. She had an important job to do, but, after that, she was telling Katie. Come hell or high water, she was telling her. And she didn’t care if the entirety of both their families showed up, they’d just have to watch the show.

If Maggie was going to believe in signs, she was sure as hell going to believe in this one.

It didn’t take long to make it back to the hospital, even though Maggie’s flood of emotions made every second feel like a lifetime, and, before she knew it, she was practically throwing herself and her belongings out of the car, and power-walking towards the hospital doors.

She bounced on the balls of her feet as she jammed the elevator button, barely taking in her surroundings. When the doors dinged open, she leaped inside, attempting to speed it up simply through force of will.

It stopped on three different floors on the way up and, through her irrational

frustration, Maggie knew she needed to calm down. Birth was rarely a quick process. She was unlikely to have missed it, and, while she was eager to get to Katie, she wasn't going to be impatient during a client's birth. She wasn't going to ruin it for them.

Finally, the doors opened on the correct floor, and she rushed out, charging towards the nurses' station. She was overjoyed to find Rea there.

She frowned at Maggie. "What you are doing here? Aren't you supposed to be on a flight right now? God knows Katie hasn't stopped complaining about it."

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

Maggie laughed, a little hysterical. “Technically, it’s not for another two hours.”

Rea leaned on the counter, shooting a knowing look at her. “Then, technically, shouldn’t you be checking in at the airport, not the hospital?” She nodded at Maggie’s case. “We don’t really provide that service here.”

Maggie shook her head. “A client called me. She’s gone into labor early. I was still in town, so here I am.”

Rea sighed. “Jesus, you and Katie are made for one another. If you’re basically at the airport, you’re allowed to say you’re not in town.”

“I am in town, though. And now I’m here.”

“Mrs. and Mrs. Workaholic, or what,” she muttered to herself, rolling her eyes. “I’m sure you’re going to be absolutely overjoyed together. You, Katie, and your jobs.”

Maggie’s insides tingled, but she had something else she had to attend to first. “My client,” she said, shooting Rea a pointed look. “Timia. Which room?”

Rea tapped at the computer, a speculating, plotting expression taking over her face. “Seven. Leave your case, I’ll take it.”

“Thanks so much,” Maggie said, sliding the suitcase towards Rea before she turned to rush to Timia’s room. “I owe you one.”

“Maybe two,” Rea said, amused as Maggie left her standing there. “She’s early so I’ll

be sure to send the doctor in quickly.”

“Thank you,” Maggie called over her shoulder as she reached Timia’s door.

Timia managed a smile through gritted teeth as the tail end of another contraction passed when Maggie entered the room. “You made it.”

“Nowhere else I’d rather be,” Maggie said truthfully as she took Timia’s hand in greeting.

The baby was early, but not dangerously so, and Timia seemed relaxed about it. This was her third time around, so she knew how these things worked, and Maggie’s second time shooting a birth for her. Maggie loved her first time working with a family, but there was something extra special about shooting multiple births for the same family. You knew each other better, you all knew what to expect and how things were going to go. It was shooting friends, instead of just clients.

Maggie set her stuff up in the corner, whipping her camera out, and immediately whirling to start shooting. They weren’t too close to the baby’s arrival yet, but she loved capturing those moments before birth, too. The moments where everything was on the precipice of changing in the blink of an eye. The moments where people prepared, where their laughter gave way to grimacing strength, where people walked and danced and did whatever they could to make the process easier, where they talked to their baby through a stomach for the last time.

Birthing suites were a universe in and of themselves. Tiny places where whole worlds changed. And Maggie loved them all.

As she snapped a picture of Timia’s mom pressing her forehead to Timia’s in support, their hands clasped tight in prayer over the birth and the baby, the door opened, and it was Maggie’s world that felt like it was changing.

Katie, in scrubs and her white coat, stepped into the room. She smiled at Timia before spotting Maggie staring at her over the top of a camera.

She laughed, clearly confused and overwhelmed, before switching back to doctor mode—Maggie had always known how good she was at that. They both really did know how to put everything else aside to be there for their work.

“And how are we doing here?” she asked Timia.

“Pretty good, Doc.”

“Contractions five minutes apart,” Timia’s mom said, looking ridiculously proud of her daughter, and not needing the labor nurse to relay that information to Katie. Maggie had only met her once before, after the birth of Timia’s last child, but, given the early arrival of this one, Maggie wasn’t surprised plans had changed and she was here for the birth this time.

“A baby for Christmas, huh?” Katie asked with a gentle laugh.

Timia laughed through another contraction as Katie moved around her, examining her. “Yeah, this one just couldn’t wait for next year, apparently.”

Katie shot a quick look at Maggie which Maggie’s stomach swoop. “I know the feeling.”

Maggie hid her face behind her camera, taking picture after picture. She knew Timia wanted pictures of the staff helping her through labor, but they were ridiculously easy to take when it was Katie she was shooting. She captured the careful, confident movements of her skilled hands. She captured moments between Katie and Timia. She caught every little moment she could memorialize on film, and, whenever Katie was in the room, she thrilled at the loaded, magical glances they exchanged with one

another.

She'd wished to shoot another birth Katie was working on, but she hadn't imagined it would be like this. She knew she'd have to send Rea a massive box of chocolates. She'd put Katie on Timia's birth on purpose, Maggie was sure of it.

Before they knew it, the baby was coming, and Timia was strong and beautiful. Concentrated, consumed, and celebrated as she brought her third child into the world, her mom holding her up as she squatted.

Maggie and Katie were both completely absorbed in their own jobs, but Maggie knew she was taking in every minute of the experience, cataloging the incredible doctor Katie was, and every emotion coursing through the room. Something told her Katie was feeling similarly aware of her, a thought confirmed once the baby was delivered and Maggie finally looked up from the camera to see Katie watching her with the warmest, most loving look Maggie had ever been on the receiving end of.

She gestured to Maggie with her head towards the door.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

Maggie smiled and nodded, quickly telling Timia she'd be right back as she snapped another photo of Timia, her mom, and her brand-new baby.

Katie followed her out, just a little too close. Maggie felt like she was on fire.

They stopped by the vending machines in the hallway.

"I can't believe you're here," Katie breathed, her eyes roaming over Maggie's face. "Your flight..."

Maggie smiled blissfully. "I had a client in labor. I couldn't leave her."

Katie looked like she melted. "You could have, but you never would."

Maggie felt herself blushing. She'd ached for Katie to look at her that way for so long, and here it was. "Are you doing okay? I know everything's been... a lot lately."

Katie huffed a laugh, but there was real pain behind her eyes. "Changing the subject, I see."

"Not at all. Just checking you're okay. Yesterday feels like a lifetime ago."

Katie nodded and Maggie was glad to see she knew exactly what Maggie meant. "Yeah. It's a mess, but, you know, it really gave me some... clarity, I guess?"

"Oh, yeah?"

She nodded. “So... are you staying here for Christmas, then?”

Maggie glanced at the clock on the wall. It was late now, almost Christmas Day. The sight of it flooded her already emotional system with a wave of feeling. “Pretty sure I missed my flight.”

“You don’t seem all that sad about it.”

“Yeah. I, um, spent the whole journey to the airport feeling like I was doing the wrong thing, like I was meant to be somewhere else.”

Katie sucked in a breath. “Where did you feel like you were meant to be?”

She was so perfect. Her brown hair tied back, her eyes so warm and alive, her teeth pressing into her lower lip in that way she did when she was nervous. Maggie had loved her for so long. Looking at her now, she didn’t know how she hadn’t burst with that fact a million times over.

“Here,” she whispered, taking a step closer to Katie. “I know we’ve been interrupted every time we’ve tried to have this conversation, and when we—well, I’m sure you remember.”

Katie laughed, blushing hard as she looked down. “Right.”

Maggie twisted her fingers together behind her back. “And I know everything with your family right now is complicated and I feel like it’s my fault—”

“It is not your fault,” Katie said firmly. “There’s a lot of things that needed sorting there, but it’s not your fault. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I spent too long in love with my best friend without saying anything. And, if I’d said

something, maybe things would have gone differently.”

Katie looked at her like the whole world had just been handed to her.

For several moments, they simply looked at each other. Maggie felt like she was living every beautiful moment they’d ever had together all at the same time.

Eventually, Katie laughed. “You knew before we almost kissed?”

Maggie couldn’t help but laugh at the outrage in Katie’s tone. “You didn’t?”

“No!” She shook her head, looking embarrassed by herself. “I was too busy living in... I don’t know, denial, I guess. But it must have been torture for you, all that time, all... we... everything...”

“There was nowhere else I’d rather have been. If all I ever got was to be your best friend, that was enough. But I couldn’t stop loving you.”

Katie slowly reached out a hand, running it down Maggie’s arm, and tugging her hand around to her front again. “I wish I’d figured it out sooner. I’m sorry.”

Maggie’s heart leaped as she laced their fingers together. “I’m not. Loving you is always beautiful, whether you know it or not. And we’re here now.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

“We are.” She brushed a stray hair from Maggie’s face with her free hand. The feeling shot through Maggie and made her feel dizzy. If Katie’s expression was anything to go by, she was feeling the exact same way.

“Now kiss,” Rea’s voice called from down the hallway.

Katie collapsed into Maggie as they both turned to see Rea—in a Santa hat—and Malik watching them, both looking like their Christmas wishes were coming true too.

“I’m done letting interruptions ruin things,” Katie told them in a warning tone, “so I’m going to kiss her whether you’re there or not.”

“Uh, after the amount of pining we’ve watched you two doing, we’re absolutely watching,” Malik said, laughing.

Maggie groaned. At least she wasn’t the only one they thought had been pining, she supposed.

Katie shook her head and turned back to Maggie. Her eyes ran over Maggie’s face, drinking in every inch of her like she’d never really seen her before. “I love you so much,” she said, and they both ignored the cheers from Rea and Malik.

“I love you too,” Maggie said, feeling the words with her whole soul.

She leaned in, pressing her lips to Katie’s, and it was even more perfect than she ever could have imagined. She’d never felt anything like it—being in love with her best friend. Being loved by her best friend.

As they pulled back minutely to look at each other, she felt the tears in her eyes. Tears at how much she loved Katie, how much it had taken to get to this moment, and how much her life seemed beautiful, open, and promising now that she'd finally admitted she was in love with Katie and always would be.

"Yeah, I guess that was cuter than the naked under the Christmas tree thing," Rea said with a laugh.

"Ignore them," Katie said quickly.

Maggie laughed. "I can't wait to hear that story later."

"Never," Katie said, laughing. They both knew she'd tell Maggie anything she wanted to know.

"Always," Maggie said, her heart thudding happily when a smiling, overjoyed Katie leaned in to kiss her again.

Epilogue

Katie looked up from where she was stirring a pot of hot cocoa to watch Maggie, just drinking her in. She'd barely been home over the past week, and, even then, only to pick up more of her belongings to bring over to Katie's. Without saying anything, they both knew she wouldn't renew her lease when the time came. She'd only ever been living there half of the time anyway. Another thing that absolutely should have been a sign that they were already a couple.

Katie shook her head at her own foolish ignorance. But they were here now.

Maggie was sitting in the window seat, looking out over the city that was bustling with New Year's Eve excitement as she chatted away to Mariana on the phone. Katie

had always liked Mariana, but she'd especially enjoyed hearing just how relieved Mariana was that Maggie and Katie were finally together. With how much Malik and Rea had embarrassed Katie with tales of her pining, Katie was glad Mariana was stocked up on similar stories about Maggie. She was already preparing for how much the three of them were going to complain about her and Maggie when they all got dinner tomorrow night.

Katie wasn't even a little worried about that dinner. She and Maggie had been such huge parts of each other's lives for so long, that their worlds had already been slotting together. Being officially together was just the final locking of the pieces into place—into where they should have been all along.

Tonight, however, Katie was worried.

Her week with Maggie had been so perfect and blissful. So beautifully, wonderfully magical, even with both of them working. They'd come home to each other, just like they always had, but now, it was so much more. There was no overthinking every lingering look or touch. Katie came home to Maggie and held her so tightly. They laughed together, they kissed, they fell into bed together, and, the next day, when it was time for work again, they kissed each other, declared their love, and promised to be home for dinner—whatever time dinner happened to be at thanks to their slightly unconventional schedules.

Katie had never seen Maggie so happy. Even her family hadn't kicked up a fuss about her missing Christmas. They'd made her promise to visit soon, but it seemed they, at least, understood that babies came when they were ready, with little care for anyone else's plans. Neither of them was sure what the future of Maggie's relationship with her family looked like, or whether they really did want her to visit soon, but they were going to figure it out together.

And Katie herself had never been so happy. Except for the one spot of lingering

tension.

Adam had managed to get their mom to stay at the same hotel he was staying at. It hadn't been easy to do, but, once she was there, the distraction of her children and grandchildren seemed to have cheered her up. All except Katie, of course.

Their communications had been non-existent for a couple of days. Katie had relied heavily on Adam for updates on what was happening. But, when December 27th rolled around—Katie's day off when she had been planning to go visit her family—her mom had reached out.

Maggie had sat by Katie's side, holding her hand tightly while tracing feather-light patterns into her skin, and Katie had managed to have the conversation she'd wanted with her mom. She'd apologized for blowing up and demanding Irene go home. She'd tried harder to explain her position in a way that was reasonable and genuine. She'd talked about how she felt ignored in favor of the dream daughter her mom wanted. The one who stayed at home, got married, had a couple of kids, and dropped in every day. She talked about why that could never be her life.

And, for the most part, her mom had listened. It hadn't been completely smooth sailing, but she talked about how rejected she'd felt by Katie's words, about how she'd had a dream for her daughter's life and their relationship from long before Katie was born, and how she was struggling with reality looking different. She'd wanted something she'd had with her own mother. She'd also never wanted to emotionally manipulate her children. She'd been genuinely apologetic about that.

They both listened, apologized, and acknowledged they still weren't on the same page with some things. That some of them were going to take longer to adjust to than others. It hadn't all been fixed, but Katie had gotten off the phone and felt relief from the pressure in her brain that had been throwing her off since their conversation outside the hospital.

She hadn't been sure whether her family was going to stick around after that. Part of her figured they'd go back home, and Katie wouldn't be welcome for a while before things would slip back into the status quo and they'd all move past this without acknowledging it. So, when Adam had messaged her to confirm they were going to stay until the New Year, as they'd originally planned, Katie had known what she needed to do.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

Her mom wanted holidays with her whole family. It was what she'd always had, and, sure, Katie sometimes felt smothered and unseen in that, but they weren't going to get through this without trying to see each other's sides. And she could see her mom's side. Her mom's family had always stayed near home. Everyone always gathered together for the holidays. When she'd had kids and become the host for Christmas, it had become a huge part of her year, her identity. While Katie couldn't give up her life to do exactly what her mom wanted every year, she could at least show it wasn't because she hated her mom and didn't want to spend time with her.

So, after many long conversations with Maggie about it, they'd decided to host a New Year's Eve dinner with all of her family who were still in town.

Maggie had gone all out helping her prepare. They'd made all of the foods Katie had grown up eating for New Year, they'd set up a wonderful tablescape for the evening, and Katie was making a large vat of hot cocoa. Sometimes, it was an olive branch, but other times, it was hot cocoa and the understanding that both parties were working together to move forward.

But that didn't stop her from worrying.

She still hadn't actually seen her mom since their argument. Over a phone call, you couldn't see someone's reactions, you couldn't see the emotions they didn't want you to. In person, everything was laid bare. Katie wasn't sure how she felt about that for either side.

Maggie laughed as her conversation with Mariana wrapped up, promises to see her tomorrow ending the call as she turned back to Katie.

When she caught Katie watching her, she tilted her head, smiling in that way that crinkled her eyes and made Katie's heart ache with how much she loved her.

She walked into the kitchen, wrapping her arms around Katie's middle and leaning her head against Katie's back. "You're worried."

Katie breathed a laugh, still stirring the mixture in the pan. "And I thought I was doing such a good job of hiding it."

Maggie nuzzled her softly. "You were. I just know you well."

Katie hummed, pressing back into Maggie a little more. It wasn't new, Maggie had always known her, but there was something so special about being so truly known, about the person she loved more than anything else in the world understanding her so completely. She'd been so busy ignoring her feelings for Maggie that she'd always thought it impossible to achieve such a thing with a partner. She'd heard about it in songs, books, movies, and from people she knew, but she'd always known nobody would ever know her like Maggie did.

It just so happened that she hadn't realized nobody would ever love her like Maggie did either.

She'd been so busy holding everyone else at a distance because they couldn't measure up to her yardstick that she'd missed the fact that her yardstick was Maggie, and she was right there.

"It's just complicated, you know?" she murmured, embarrassed that she didn't quite know how to put her feelings into words.

"I understand. Missing my family Christmas turned out to be easy. That's nice in some ways, but it also means nobody is working on those relationships. We're

probably better off without each other, we're all fine with that, and we're just going to keep going through the motions when we have to. That's fine. But, this? This is being vulnerable and open with each other, with no real idea how the other person is going to take it, and all you have to cling onto is the knowledge that you want a relationship. That you want to have your mom and your family in your life while also respecting the life you need for yourself, and the obligations you have in it."

"Yeah, everything was easier before."

Maggie breathed a laugh, her breath hot through Katie's shirt in a way that made her shudder. "Was it?"

"Yes," Katie said, knowing she sounded a little petulant.

Maggie laughed louder. "So, we're just ignoring all those calls where Irene pretended not to know how doctors' schedules work? Or all the messages demanding you drop everything and move home? Or the way she just moved herself into your bed with no plan on leaving for two weeks?"

"Yes."

"Well, at least you're consistent."

Katie sighed, putting the spoon down before she spun in Maggie's arms to hold her close. "Okay, fine. That wasn't better and was probably always leading to a fight, but... what if it never gets better? What if I ruined everything?"

"People make mistakes, love. They say things they don't mean, or things they do but in the wrong way, most especially when they've been keeping them bottled up for too long. The only thing you ruined was a version of you that never existed. Now, you and your mom get to know and love each other for who you really are. That's

infinitely better than before.”

The buzzer sounded and Katie clutched Maggie closer for just a second. “I sure hope you’re right.”

Maggie smiled, pressed a quick kiss to Katie’s lips, and said, “You stir. I’ll get the door.”

Katie could do that. Stirring was useful. It gave her something to do other than standing in painful discomfort.

Maggie buzzed them in, and Katie was impossibly glad that her siblings and niblings came in being their loud, regular selves—maybe a little bit extra loud, just to smooth things over. She turned, smiling and waving, to greet them, her heart clenching painfully as her eyes found her mom automatically in the crowd.

Irene took a deep breath as she handed Maggie a bottle of wine and took her coat off.

Adam made a big show of talking about how it felt like snow outside, and how he was certain a blizzard was going to hit before midnight.

Maggie laughed from across the room. “Big talk with only a few hours to go.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

“Oh, I can make it bigger than that. Fifty bucks says snow before midnight.”

“Adam,” his wife, Lora, said, shaking her head and laughing.

“Okay. You’re on,” Maggie agreed easily.

“What will I do with my winnings?” Adam mused aloud, much to everyone’s amusement.

Even through the rod of tension holding her prisoner, Katie laughed too. Adam was funny, but mostly, she was just happy with how easily Maggie fit in with her family. How it felt like she had always belonged there. Katie had worked so hard to keep Maggie and her mom apart for fear of what would happen, that she hadn’t realized how good it could be to have Maggie with them.

Maybe Maggie was right. Maybe this was hard, but maybe it hadn’t been better before.

Someone walked slowly up to her side and, without looking, Katie knew it was her mom.

“You made the hot cocoa,” she said, more formal than the last time she’d told Katie to make it.

“Yeah. I know it’s not what we used to have for New Year’s Eve, but, since you liked it so much...”

“It was a good choice.”

Katie’s heart pounded. She was used to flippant comments and deflections around her mom. She was used to being told things she didn’t want to hear, but she wasn’t used to this. She had no idea what to do with it. She had no idea how to have a conversation with her mom when it wasn’t simply a case of her mom telling her what to do.

She liked the sound of a relationship that didn’t work like that though.

“Have you had a nice week?” Katie asked after several moments of them both staring into the hot cocoa.

“Yes, it’s been... illuminating.” She nodded, mostly to herself. “How has work been? I hear people still have babies this time of year.”

And just like that, Katie knew they’d be okay. That little callback, her mom’s slightly sarcastic tone, and the promise that, while this part was going to take some navigating, things were going to be okay.

She let out a laugh, relieved and overwhelmed. “They do indeed. Maggie missed her flight because one showed up early. Babies just... do their own thing.”

Her mom looked her over, really looking at Katie for what felt like the first time in years. “They do,” she said quietly, as if only just realizing it. “I guess we spend so much time trying to get babies to do things on our schedules that we sometimes forget there comes a time when it's not on us to tell them what to do anymore.”

Katie smiled softly. “You did a good job, Mom.”

She pursed her lips, her eyes shimmering with tears. “Thank you.” For a moment, she

clearly warred between being sentimental or letting the moment go. When baby Jaden squealed delightedly at something, the moment broke and Irene grinned. “You were an absolute nightmare, so it took some work.”

Katie laughed genuinely. “Worse than Adam? I don’t think so.”

“What’s worse than me?” Adam asked, coming up behind them and dropping an arm on each of their shoulders.

“Mom’s trying to make out that I was harder work as a kid than you were,” Katie said, looking up at him in sheer gratitude for his help in getting them all to this moment.

“You were,” he insisted. “I had it good before you came along, then it was all tea party this, climbing a tree that. You never did anything on anyone else’s schedule. Probably why you’re a doctor.”

She frowned. “Explain.”

“No, thanks.” He nodded to the pan. “You serving this or just staring at it all night?”

“Oh my god,” Maggie cried before Katie could answer.

The three of them spun to see what was going on.

Katie’s eyes met Maggie’s. She was laughing and shaking her head. “It’s snowing.”

Adam barked a laugh. “Told you so.”

Katie looked at her mom as she pointed at Adam. “I was worse than this guy?”

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

“Yep. And now your girlfriend owes me fifty bucks,” he said smugly before walking off towards Maggie.

“Your girlfriend?” Irene said, looking between Katie and Maggie.

“Ah, yeah. I was planning to tell you tonight. Not like this. Sorry.”

She thought it over for a moment, continuing to look between them both. “I should have known. I guess I really haven’t been paying attention.”

Katie hated the pain and regret in her tone. She wanted to make it better. She wondered whether that was too close to what she’d always been doing with her mom, but hey, baby steps.

She patted her mom’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. I didn’t realize it until the beginning of this month either. And I really should have been paying attention. Maybe it runs in the family.”

She smiled gratefully at Katie. “She’s a lovely woman, and I’m truly happy for you both.”

“Thanks, Mom. It means a lot.”

She cleared her throat. “Any chance she’s got any interest in living outside of the city?”

Katie narrowed her eyes, “Mom...”

She raised her hands in surrender. “Just kidding.”

Katie hummed as she began tipping hot cocoa into mugs. She was pretty sure it was mostly a joke. For the rest of it, she’d just have to keep toeing the line that she and Maggie were both happy where they were.

She handed out the mugs and snuggled into Maggie’s side feeling more relaxed than she had all month. Everything with Maggie was wonderful, but seeing a path forward with her family was such a weight off her shoulders.

“Having fun?” Maggie whispered, just for Katie as they watched the snow picking up.

“Yeah. This was a good idea.” She pressed a kiss to Maggie’s temple, breathing in the scent of shampoo on her soft, blonde hair. “Although, my mom did just ask if you have any interest in moving to the suburbs.”

Maggie pulled back to stare at Katie. “She did not.”

Katie laughed. “It was mostly a joke.”

“Hm. Well, at any rate, I do not. Snow, the city, and my love. How could I ever give any of this up?”

Katie stared down at her, knowing deep in every part of her that this was it. This was the love everyone talked about. This was the feeling when you really did just know. Sure, she’d taken a while to figure it out—falling in love with your best friend was complicated, after all—but, now that she did, she was never letting it go.

She kissed Maggie quickly. “I have no idea.”