



The Ties that Bind

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Category: Erotic, Romance

Description: A sexy law student and a dissatisfied professor. A talented pianist and a brooding rockstar. A driven nurse and a carefree florist. Three spring flings led three sorority students to the men of their dreams. Fate has touched them and given them the happiness they deserve. Can Maggie even hope to ask for one last blessing? Less than a month remains before Maggie's and Marty's perfect June wedding approaches. Can everyone come together to make this last miracle happen? Will their futures always honor the ties that bind them?

Total Pages (Source): 16

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Chapter One

Maggie

Hands on my hips, I stared critically at the wall. Three pairs of eyes stared back at me.

A second pair of hands joined mine, twining about my fingers and holding me steady. “It looks perfect there.” Marty rested his chin on my shoulder, and I felt his lips smile against my cheek as we both looked at the painting of three black kittens.

“You think? It might be better over the dresser in the bedroom.” Some distant relation of mine had painted these kittens and given them to my mother. In turn, knowing how much I loved animals and missed my cat while I was attending Tulane University, she had given them to me. But, no matter how much I liked their sleek painted fur and big round eyes, I wasn’t sure if the kittens should be right in the entryway to stare down anyone who opened the door.

“I don’t think. I know.” Arms circled my waist, and I leaned into them, picking out Marty’s heartbeat against my back. “We won’t be here for too much longer.”

“I know. I just want it to look a little less...meh.”

Before I had moved into this temporary apartment housing with Marty for patients who needed to stay close to the Tulane University Cancer Center, I had lived in a sorority house with my two best friends, Zoe Etienne, and Abigail O’Connor. My bed there and the room I shared with my friends had been decorated with little things I

had collected over the years and brought from home; pictures of family and other items that made the little space more...me. Having things that reminded me of everything I cared about and the woman I had become was important to me.

So, when I had packed up my belongings and moved here to be with Marty, I had immediately set upon a quest to personalize the bland, light gray walls and nondescript furnishings. I knew Marty didn't really understand my need to add little pops of color and hide sections of wall, but he had helped me anyway because it made me happy.

“What’s wrong?”

I loosened a grip on his hand that I hadn't realized I had tightened. I turned around and drank in his brown eyes that always looked a little tired from the rounds of chemo treatments. His shaven jaw and his baseball cap hid slightly thinner-than-usual hair.

To me, Marty was just as handsome as ever and as strong, too. Fate had brought my high school sweetheart and me back together, and now our love would keep us that way.

“Just thinking about how lucky I am. And how happy I am.”

Marty didn't have to answer. He just had to pull me into a hug that told me he agreed with all his heart. “I love you,” he murmured into my hair.

“I love you too.” We lingered there, sharing a long, thankful moment before I gently disentangled myself. “Alright, alright. I’ve got to finish this before I go to Zoe’s.”

Marty sat down to watch me contemplate a small box of family pictures. “Is Abigail still in town?”

“Yeah, she’s staying at Zoe and Aiden’s house until she goes back to Florida.” I placed a recent picture of my mother and grandmother dressed up for Mardi Gras on a shelf of a cabinet.

“I still haven’t met Al.”

“He’s...interesting. I still can’t believe Abigail got herself a rock star.”

“Jealous?” I turned in time to see Marty’s eyes crinkle.

“Not at all. I have a flower star.” I grinned widely and put a picture of my father next to my mother and grandma, so close it almost looked like they could be together in the same photo. A few more of my favorite pictures followed, then I stepped back to admire my handiwork. “Well, it looks less like a hotel suite now. I’ll do some more tomorrow. I don’t have time to finish now if I want to go to the gym.”

Marty glanced at my butt and opened his mouth, and I shushed him and let some of my bossiness slip through. “I’m going to find the perfect wedding dress, and I’m going to look great in it. There’ll still be plenty there for you to grab ahold of.” I dodged his hands, giggling, and ran into the bedroom to find some yoga pants and a comfortable T-shirt.

Forty-five minutes later, I stepped off the treadmill, huffing and puffing. I glanced over the statistics of my exercise as I wiped down the handles of the machine. Not great, nothing like the other girl who had been running since she got here and was still lightly trotting away on her treadmill, but not bad. I still walked a lot more than I jogged, but I could feel improvement slowly creeping into my lungs.

My lungs weren’t the only part of me showing improvement. A quick visit to the scales in the women’s bathroom put a small, proud smile on my face. It felt so good to know that even though I had gained a bit of weight during the course of nursing

school, I could lose it again if I worked at it.

And I wasn't afraid of a little work. I never would have gotten through nursing school otherwise.

Marty was in the bedroom when I pushed open the door to take a shower. Pillows propped him upright, and he held a book but didn't look all that comfortable. As subtly as I could, I asked in a roundabout way if he was feeling alright and if he needed anything.

"I'm just tired. I'll read for a while and then have a nap. Go get ready." He shoosed me into the bathroom.

I went without argument, for once. My running had made me...well, run late. Thirty minutes was what I had promised myself, but I had been feeling surprisingly good and pushed it to forty-five. Zoe and Abigail won't care, I realized as I dropped the bottle of liquid soap in my rush to get ready. Both girls knew that I had been hitting the gym and were very supportive of my efforts.

The steaming water washed away the thin sheen of workout sweat. I stepped further into the stream, letting the calming jets soak my slightly frizzy hair and press it flat. Hopefully, some conditioner would help keep those adventurous ends down.

Now that I had realized there was no need to hurry to be perfectly on time to a casual sleepover with friends, I took my time with hair products. I emerged from the shower, wrapped in a towel, to find Marty in the same position as before. His eyes followed me around the room to the dresser, and I made sure to add a little extra swaying to my hips when I dropped my towel to put my clothes back on.

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“Do you have to leave?” Marty’s eyes gazed imploringly at me over the top of the book.

“Yup,” I said, turning to look for my shoes before those eyes got to me. “I’ve been planning this for days. You knew that.”

“Yeah, but...you could come help me relax first.” The eyes intensified and blinked.

I started to laugh, then realized what he meant and turned it into a playfully exasperated snort. “Marty, I love you, and I would love to stay in bed with you and watch TV shows and do all kinds of other, naughtier things...” I watched the hope dawn in those puppy eyes. “Any day after our wedding,” I added smoothly, giggling as his face fell. “I really have to go. Do you need anything first?”

“No, I’m good.” Marty gave up the act and straightened up so he could give me a big hug. “Have fun, okay?”

“With Zoe and Abigail? Always.” I grabbed the bag I had packed earlier, checked that I had my phone, charger, wallet and keys in my purse, and headed out the door.

My music app brought the speakers to life as I turned the key in the ignition, and I immediately began to sing along. I hadn’t seen Abigail and Zoe since the engagement party Marty’s parents had thrown for us. That had only been about five days ago, but I had become so accustomed to seeing my friends every day around the sorority house we had lived in.

We’re all moving on to new chapters in our lives. I knew this, and I was so, so proud

of myself and all my friends, but it felt very strange to know that after the wedding in June, I would be the only one of us three who still lived in New Orleans.

By the time I knocked on the front door of Aiden's beautiful Greek Revival home in the Garden District, nostalgia and the tiniest bit of worry about the future prompted me to gather my two friends into a hug.

"What's up?" Zoe asked, blue eyes worried amidst a frame of black hair.

"Just thinking about how you guys are both moving away soon."

Abigail grabbed my hand and tugged me inside. "But not today! Come on. Zoe and I went to the store earlier and got snacks and wine."

"I thought we were making dinner?" I asked as I stepped into the house.

"Oh, we are. But we'll need snacks for all the movies we're watching tonight."

I gave a mental shrug as I followed my friends to the kitchen. I would just be careful not to let the chips bait me into curling up on the sofa with an entire bag.

But there were no chip bags. Zoe giggled at my face. "Did you really think we'd get a bunch of Doritos and popcorn and stuff like that after you've been working so hard? There's hummus in the fridge to go with the veggies, and we've got some mixed nuts and deviled eggs."

"You guys are actually the best." I popped a walnut half into my mouth.

"Of course. Although we were getting worried for a while there that you weren't coming," Abigail told me as she began pulling various ingredients for gumbo out of the fridge.

“I was just running a little late,” I said. Bent down to grab a pot from a cabinet under the counter, Zoe nibbled her lip and wiggled her eyebrows. “Stop that! I was just on the treadmill.”

“Mhm. And you and Marty didn’t want to, uh, do anything before you left for a whole night?”

I shook my head at Zoe, but the pink flush in my cheeks told the truth. “Okay, I mean, maybe he wanted something. But I didn’t have time. There probably won’t be much time until after the wedding.”

“Oh please,” Abigail dismissed. “You can always make time for a little fun.”

I saw my chance to divert the conversation from my own sexual pursuits and seized it. “Uh huh? So what about you and Al? I bet Mr. Rock Star is more than a little fun.”

Abigail grinned mischievously. “More than a little... A lot more than a little... Even big, I would say.”

Zoe’s and my mouths formed O shapes as we picked up on her meaning, and we glanced at each other, eyes filled with fun and nosiness. “Damn, girl,” Zoe said. “But does he know how to use it?”

Abigail took a long, slow sip of her glass of wine before answering, “Oh yeah. Let’s just say he’s had practice. And he likes to keep practicing on me.”

“Whoo!” I looked at Zoe, fanning myself, to see that my friend was doing the same. “Well don’t stop there! We need details.”

“Well...” Abigail began.

A throat cleared, and we all looked toward the living room. Aiden was standing there, slightly red and obviously trying not to laugh. “Hello, ladies. I just wanted to let Zoe know that I’m leaving.” He turned to his woman and held out his arms, and she flew into them like he was a magnet. “I’ll be back late, okay? Y’all have fun.”

“We will.” After the previous topic of conversation, the kiss Aiden and Zoe shared made Abigail, and I swap suggestive glances. When Aiden disappeared through the front door, Zoe said, “He has a sort of going away party with some of his faculty friends at Tulane tonight.”

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“Sort of?” Abigail asked.

“Sort of as in we aren’t really leaving for like a month, so he’ll probably see most of them again.”

“Oh.”

The next hour was a blur of gumbo prep, constant giggling and sexual details that would have made any one of our beloveds turn red. And this was no boring, minimal-ingredient gumbo we were creating. This was a recipe from my grandma, a woman of Creole and French roots - and it showed in her cooking. This was a proper New Orleans Creole seafood gumbo, and although it took about an hour to prep and another two to cook, every bite would be worth it.

When the gumbo was almost finished, Abigail downed the last sip of her current glass of wine and went down the hall to use the restroom.

I saw my chance to do something I had carefully thought through and planned out for a while. I grabbed Zoe’s hand and tugged her into the living room, still holding a stirring spoon. “Zoe. We’ve known each other for...gosh, I don’t know, forever? You’re an amazing, wonderful friend. I couldn’t even count the number of times you’ve had me over to your house. I’ve thought about it a lot, and I would love it if you would be my maid-of-honor at my wedding.” Choosing just one of my two wonderful friends to be my maid-of-honor hadn’t been easy, but I had known Zoe longest. We had spent hours and hours with each other. There was no other way to put it: we were sisters.

Cheerful, carefree Zoe's eyes welled up with tears, and that was how I knew how much Zoe cared about me. "Maggie, I would be absolutely honored to be your maid-of-honor. You're my best friends too, and nothing would make me prouder or happier."

We hugged until we both had to let go just to breathe. Down the hall, we heard the toilet flush. Zoe wiped her eyes, smiled widely, and said, "Now, let's go eat your grandma's gumbo."

Chapter Two

Zoe

When I opened my eyes the next morning, the first thing that I noticed was, thankfully, I did not have a hangover. We drank a lot of wine last night... A LOT of wine.

I groaned a little when I remembered the mess we had made of the kitchen. Usually, I had a habit of cleaning as I cooked. While something boiled, why not wipe down a section of the counter? Five minutes for a pot to simmer was ten dishes I could wash. But last night we had been having too much fun to think about cleanup.

Before I rolled out of bed, I leaned over to kiss the bare shoulder next to me. Aiden let out a little muffled groan from his position, his face half buried in his pillow. I might not have had a hangover, but my boyfriend most definitely did.

Keeping that in mind, I didn't pull back the heavy velvet curtains or turn on the bedroom lights as I normally did in the morning. Tiptoeing took me around the room to find clothes appropriate for the day's mission: procuring a wedding dress for Maggie and dresses for me, Abigail and Maggie's mom, Delphine.

I might not have been a perfect student when it came to law school. I might not have been able to come up with the perfect vision for wedding decorations. But this... Shopping was my expertise, and I intended to find the perfect dresses for everyone today.

I collected some of my products from the master bathroom to take to the hall bathroom so I wouldn't disturb Aiden, snuck in a quick peck on his cheek and crept out of the room. I wonder if Maggie and Abigail are up yet. Abigail had slept in one of the guest rooms and Maggie had opted to sleep on the couch - even though there were more than enough guest rooms for her too. I didn't blame her. That couch was comfy and awesome and Aiden and I had spent more time cuddling on it than anywhere else.

With my bag of hair care and makeup products, I walked down the stairs into the living room. When I saw Maggie, my smile slid off my face, and I ran to my friend, who was sitting with her phone in her hands and unhushed tears in her eyes. "Oh my gosh, Maggie, what's wrong?"

"Nothing bad," she said immediately, looking briefly horrified as she realized that with Marty still fighting cancer, I must have jumped to conclusions. "It's my grandma. She's been saving money for years, a little at a time, to help me with college or for some rainy day. I got a scholarship to Tulane and we never needed the money...so she just called me and told me to use it on a dress."

"But Maggie, that's incredible! She loves you like we all do and she wants this to be the best day of your life." I sat beside Maggie.

"I know, but-"

"No buts," I said firmly. "You're a nurse now. You can take care of your mom and grandma. There won't be a rainy day, and your grandma wants you to take that money and buy a beautiful, perfect dress. And that's exactly what you're going to do

today.”

“Okay.” Maggie smiled, her eyes warm. “You’re right. Let’s go drag Abigail out of bed and get ready to go.”

We devised a system for getting ready. One of us would go into the large hall bathroom to shower, dress and avail herself of the plentiful makeup options, and the other two would work in the kitchen on cleanup duty. We could have used the other bathroom as well, but cleaning up alone was no fun. Anyway, we weren’t in a hurry. Maggie’s mom had to drive all the way down from Lafayette to meet us at the wedding salon I had chosen, so we had plenty of time.

The cleanup was done by the time Abigail, the second one of us to shower, finished up, so Maggie went to get ready while Abigail and I cooked breakfast. When I say cooked breakfast, I mean that we washed some strawberries and tossed some pancake batter in a pan, dirtying as few dishes as possible.

“Ready?” Maggie asked as she dried and put away the pan and bowl we had used.

“I think so.” I sent a glance around the house, approvingly nodding at the level of cleanliness. “Let’s go!”

We all piled into Maggie’s car, Abigail riding shotgun while I decided to take the back seat. Surprisingly, it was a beautiful day. Spring in New Orleans never lasted long before the pleasant weather gave way to the sizzling summer heat, but today, a nice breeze kept the temperature down. I hoped that this weather would keep up for just a little longer, or maybe come back in time for Maggie’s wedding.

After all, fate had brought Maggie and Marty back together, hadn’t it? What’s to say fate wouldn’t give them a wedding gift of perfect weather?

“Is this the place?” Maggie asked. There was a large sign on the side of the building that said For Her Bridal Salon, so I wasn't sure why Maggie needed to ask - then I realized that she looked nervous.

“Yes! For Her is the best bridal salon in New Orleans. They'll treat you like a princess here, and you're going to let them, okay? It's their job, and you're their customer. Basic business ethics,” I said matter-of-factly.

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“I know, I know,” Maggie placated me. “Oh, there’s my mom!” She pulled into a spot next to a smiling, waving woman. Mrs. Delphine looked so similar to her daughter. They shared long, wavy, dark hair, blue Creole eyes, and a smile that crinkled their eyes and cheeks. Only their skin tone was a little different; in Maggie’s mother, you could see a hint of Maggie’s grandma. “Is Grandma not coming, Momma?” Maggie embraced her mother.

“She says she’s too old for long drives and she wants to save her old bones for your wedding,” Mrs. Delphine laughed. “Really, she’s just on the last couple chapters of a book and couldn’t tear herself away.”

“That’s fine. Grandma has a dress for every occasion,” Maggie laughed.

“Exactly.”

Maggie isn’t the only one who’s nervous, I realized as I watched the mother and daughter. This had to be a little stressful for them both, just because of the closeness of the wedding date. Most brides liked to shop for a dress several months in advance and get one made for them personally - a one-of-a-kind dress that would transform them into the vision of the bride they had always dreamed they would be. Maggie wouldn’t have time to order one specially made for her, so she would have to find one that she loved as-is and upon which the bridal salon could perform minor alterations.

I knew we would find the right dress, though. Maybe not at this specific salon, but that was just fine - I had another two lined up. Somewhere, somehow, we would find the right gown.

We walked in, signed in at the front desk and were immediately asked to go ahead and follow a saleswoman who introduced herself as Janet, even though we were about ten minutes early. She shook all of our hands and smiled through the introductions, appearing genuinely excited for the whole group.

“Have you been dress shopping before, Maggie?” she asked the bride-to-be.

“No, actually,” Maggie told her.

“That’s perfect! I absolutely love so many of the designer dresses we have here, and I can’t wait to tell you all about them. I already have a few in mind for you to try on.”

The saleswoman could clearly tell that Maggie was nervous, because she kept up a conversation mostly with herself, talking about bodices and skirts and exuding confidence in her job and the prospect of finding Maggie a dress. She knew how soon Maggie needed the gown and quickly took charge in the spacious, comfortable dressing room. “I could go on about gowns all day, but I think we should just cut right to the chase and try one on. Let me take a few quick measurements and we’ll get started!”

Abigail and I chatted with Maggie’s mother while Janet gradually drew Maggie into the conversation, asking questions about the groom and wedding. Then, it was time for Maggie to try on her first dress. Janet brought it in, and we all had to stifle gasps. Suddenly, imagining Maggie wearing this beautiful designer gown made the wedding feel so much closer.

Maggie changed inside a smaller, curtained dressing area in one corner, and when she stepped out...

“You look incredible,” I breathed, breaking the silence before Maggie could look any more like she might bolt back into the safety of the curtains. It was so odd, the

usually bold and direct Maggie nervous about something as simple as trying on a dress, but now I realized that she was only nervous because of how much this day meant to her. She was getting married! Of course, she would feel nervous.

“Really?” Maggie asked, regaining a little of her confidence as Abigail and Mrs. Delphine both nodded and offered their own opinions about the dress.

Janet stepped forward and adjusted the sleeves and bodice a little, then gave a nod of agreement. “I have to say, I expected this one to look fantastic on you which is why I wanted you to try it on first, but it compliments your body type even better than I hoped! How does it feel? Do you like the style?”

“Actually, I love the style.” Maggie gave a little swirl of her skirt, watching it sway in the two large mirrors in the corner. “And it feels...good. Amazing.”

“The skirt is just a hint too long. It would need to be taken up a little. And I know when you made your appointment, you said you would prefer to have shoulder straps, and these sit a little wider for a wider neckline. How do you feel about that?”

“I...like it, actually. I was afraid the dress might not feel like it would stay up, but it does and I feel supported,” Maggie decided.

“I like to say that you should wear the dress, and the dress should wear you.” Janet smiled. “Okay. How about we start two racks, the ‘maybe’ rack and the ‘um, no’ rack, and try to put a couple dresses on each one?”

“Sounds perfect!” There it was, that enthusiasm and unquenchable happiness that I’d gotten used to hearing from Maggie since she had become reunited with Marty. She had been out of her element, but now she had tried on something and had an idea of what she wanted - a place to start, something to go off of.

Abigail, Mrs. Delphine, and I sat and watched as Maggie modeled dress after dress. Each time she asked us for our opinions, we each gave a quick opinion based on what we knew about Maggie and her style and our own thoughts, but mostly, we let Maggie form her own ideas and consult Janet, who dealt with brides all the time and clearly knew what she was talking about.

Then, Maggie decided that was enough - she had tried on a lot of dresses she liked, as she told us and Janet, and she wanted to let us start picking out our dresses while she did some thinking.

So, it was our turn to be doted on and regaled with flattering compliments, matter-of-fact comments, and ideas for the perfect bridesmaid dresses. More than once, Janet commented on how beautiful Abigail's hair and my hair both were - bright red and shining black - and also how she loved the challenge of finding a single dress that would compliment both of us at once.

Since we already had colors and themes for the wedding, Janet wasted no time in leafing through a notebook of photos featuring all the hues the dresses came in that would compliment us both. Soon, we had a few on the "maybe" and "uh, no" racks along with Maggie's potential wedding gowns. Even Maggie's mom, who turned out to be quite particular, found a couple of dresses she thought would suit the mother of the bride.

Then, it was time for decisions. We could decide on dresses for all of us, dresses for some of us or no dresses at all, in which case we would head to the next bridal salon tomorrow and give their selection a try.

I had been sneaking glances at Maggie while we tried on all the gowns. She had spent whole minutes lingering on each dress, no doubt imagining herself walking down the aisle in each of them. But there was one that I had caught her staring at more than any of the others.

“Do brides usually pick the first dress they try on?” Maggie asked Janet as she touched the soft material of that very dress.

“Actually, they often do,” she said encouragingly. “I picked that one out for you to try based on your style preference, body type, wedding plans and everything else you told me or provided through the appointment booking. This dress was the one I thought would be the best fit for you out of all the gowns we have in stock. All the others are ones I thought you would love too, but this was the very first one I picked.”

“Then...I love it. I think I want it.”

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“Are you sure? I think it looked the best on you of all these ones we have here, but we can always try any of them on again and take a second look. I want you to be completely sure and love your decision.”

“I’m sure,” Maggie declared as she gave the dress another look. “I love this dress and I want to be married in it.”

Janet looked absolutely thrilled. “And how do you feel about the bridesmaid gowns?”

Maggie, Abigail and I easily made up our mind - this place wasn’t known as the best bridal salon in New Orleans for no reason - and Mrs. Delphine picked her favorite of the two she liked best. My parents had offered to buy my dress for me, Al was footing the bill for Abigail’s and Maggie would be using her grandma’s savings, so we all had the funds to cover our gowns. Abigail and I had sneakily told Maggie to tell her mom that her grandma’s money would cover both of their dresses, and if that wasn’t true, we would chip in for the last bit of money needed. After all, this would be an incredibly special day for Mrs. Delphine, too. She had three children, but Maggie’s two older brothers were in the military and had yet to marry. She had to be the proudest mom ever, and she needed her perfect dress too.

We walked out of the salon and back into the fresh New Orleans air. Each of us took a deep breath, glancing around at everyone else.

“We did it,” Maggie said happily. “They said the alterations would be simple, and it’ll be done in time for-”

A big, celebratory group hug squeezed the last few words out of her, and I noticed

Mrs. Delphine wiping away tears of joy.

Chapter Three

Marty

There were so many reasons that a June wedding was perfect for Maggie and me. It would be hot, but not too hot to have the reception outside, which we had both agreed we wanted. Maggie's two best friends would both still be in New Orleans in June before they went off to play piano for a band and go to law school respectively. My cancer was in remission - meaning that, I was almost finished with the chemo treatments. My bones still ached sometimes, and I still felt tired. Mostly though, I was fine right now. But the best part was when the oncologist reassured me I could have children. That was so important to Maggie and me.

To an outsider, someone who didn't know us, our marriage might seem sudden. But we had known each other for years. We had been high school sweethearts, and we had thought about each other every day we had lived our lives apart. Sudden? We had been waiting to join our hands longer than we had realized.

And even though the past month had been the scariest of my life, I was happy. I was so, so happy. The kind of happiness that filled your lungs instead of air and made your chest swell each and every day - especially when spending time with that special someone.

Today, I would get to spend time with a different special woman in my life - my mother. After hearing Maggie's success in finding the perfect wedding dress a few days ago, she had planned to drive from Lafayette and pick me up so we could scout for locations for the new flower shop. We had a couple places in mind, and we intended to head to those first and take some notes, but we would also keep our eyes open for any other possibilities.

I couldn't wait. I'd gotten used to working closely with my mother, and I admired her self-starting attitude, strong business sense, and love for her family. It might have seemed silly, but I was definitely that little kid in school who wrote "my mom" on the blank next to the prompt: "role model." I loved my fiancée and New Orleans, but I missed handling the day-to-day with my mother.

I missed working at all, actually. The sooner I got my strength back, the sooner I could get back to being a part of the family business.

A knock sounded on the apartment door. I slipped my phone, wallet and keys into my pockets, made my way past the stares of Maggie's three black kittens and gave my mom a big hug.

"I'm so glad Maggie is taking care of you," she said approvingly when she glanced around me and spotted the kittens as well as the other homey touches Maggie had added.

"Yeah, yeah. Don't make me change my mind about missing you," I joked. Together, we headed down to the parking lot. "You drove my pickup?" I asked in surprise, affectionately patting my beloved truck. Momma usually preferred to drive automatics, especially when dealing with city traffic.

"Well, we need to see how it looks in the parking lots of potential locations," my mom said, smiling as I eagerly accepted the keys like a child with a new toy.

My hands hadn't lost the calluses built up from countless workout sessions in our garage, and I wrapped them around the leather steering wheel of my truck and felt more like myself than ever. I had checked with the oncologist and the nurse who visited me occasionally in the medical center housing, and both had told me that driving was totally fine.

Sometimes, on Maggie's days off, I found myself borrowing her car to go to the store for things we didn't really need. She never asked to come with me. Somehow, with her own brand of loving-fiancée ESP, she knew without me mentioning a word that since this was one of the few things I could do by myself, I wanted to do it alone.

"Maggie's amazing," I told my mom as we pulled out of the parking lot, needing to share with someone how incredible this woman I would get to spend my life with was.

"I know she is. You both are." My mom had the brightest smile of anyone I knew, and nothing was easier than smiling back. "But hold on, stop here for a second. Let me map this place I thought was really promising."

While she used her phone to put in the address, I took a quick picture of the wheel and dashboard of my truck and sent it to Maggie. "Back in the saddle!"

"Flower cowboy," came the teasing response.

I sent her a winking face with the tongue sticking out. She sent me one rolling its eyes.

Ten minutes later, we reached the first possible location for a new LaFleur's Flowers. Before it had gone out of business, this place had been a metaphysical shop that sold things like crystals, candles and incense. A hint of its past lingered in the shop, detectable only through sense of smell, and not at all unpleasant.

"Metaphysical Melodies," Maggie texted me when I sent her a picture of the shop. "I've been there with Abigail and Zoe before. Melody, the owner, moved away last month."

I opened a door to another room that had probably been an employees-only area,

hoping Metaphysical Melody hadn't left any unpleasant or bad vibes for future owners of the place to deal with. I didn't have time to communicate that thought with Maggie, though, because my mother had pulled out her notebook, written down the address of the building and started a list of notes on the place.

"It's the right size," I commented.

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“Well, every place we visit should be the right size. I wouldn’t waste our time with anything too big or too small.”

“Of course not, Momma. I meant that the main shop and the back room are the right size.” I opened the other door, the one at the rear right side of the shop. A large green dumpster stood on one side of the outdoor space, and an old wooden fence with a small gate separated it from the road.

“Yeah, I looked back there. There’s not nearly as much space as we have at the Lafayette store, but if we get rid of the dumpster and knock down the fence, there’s room to back a truck up to the door with a little bit to spare.”

“Definitely,” I agreed enthusiastically. Maggie had told me she had chosen the very first dress she had tried on and that she had been nervous she was only choosing it for that reason. I was having a similar kind of “problem” now. This was a pleasant little building with plenty of bright windows, a nice, welcoming appearance from the front and lots of room for creativity. The pottery could go on that wall over there, a large, hanging display could go over here, the window displays would have specific kinds of flower arrangements in them...

I mentioned some of my vision to my mother, and we both stood there looking ridiculous together as we gestured, waved and counted on our fingers to compare notes. “I think we’ve seen enough,” my mother said. “Let’s move on to the next location.”

The next location was in the city of New Orleans proper. I disliked it almost immediately - probably because I was a country boy at heart, and I didn’t like the

idea of working in a corner of a strip mall squished between the ground and a skyscraper. The old metaphysical store might have been a little smaller than this place, but it was its own building. I wouldn't have to fight traffic for the space to unload a truck there.

My mom also wasn't impressed, but I had a feeling that was more to do with the cost of opening a shop here than anything else. She still had me take pictures, but I doubted we would be following up on this place.

The next location was also in a strip mall but it was the corner shop and on the outskirts of the big city buildings. Here, LaFleur flowers should get plenty of business but also benefit from lesser costs and more outdoor space.

I sent Maggie a picture of the strip mall. When I zoomed in a little, I noticed something in the bottom corner - a small purple wildflower, nestled in a bed of tall, lush grass. It gave me an idea.

"What do you think of this for flower arrangements for the wedding?" I asked Maggie after sending her a picture of that little flower. "Purple, pink and white flowers with some buds to celebrate spring and new beginnings, and a bed of long grass or fern fronds?"

"I love you."

"Not the answer I was expecting, but I love you too."

"That's a wonderful idea. Can some of the flowers be lilies?"

"Of course. Some of the Peruvian lilies in the nursery already have bulbs, and they'll bloom in time for the wedding."

Just being out of the apartment and breathing fresh air stirred my creativity, and I had lots more ideas for arrangements as I scouted the city with my mother. Each time something new came to mind, I texted Maggie. She loved every single one I mentioned to her, and, in typical Maggie fashion, had a little advice or comment of her own to add.

That was just another thing I loved about Maggie. She didn't just listen and let me make all the decisions or give me a clearly uninterested "oh, that's nice." This was my passion and my livelihood. She knew both of these things. She encouraged my passion while also unabashedly offering her opinions, even though she knew I had been putting together arrangements for years.

She wasn't bad at it. If she ever decided to hang up her nursing scrubs, this job might suit her.

"Alright." My mother and I sat down in a booth of a sandwich shop, the notebooks of notes on the table between us. "I say we think while we eat, finish our sandwiches, then say our most preferred location on the count of three."

"Sure," I agreed, although I didn't have much thinking to do. I already knew which location I preferred - although I doubted it would agree with my mother's choice.

When the last bites of sandwich had been washed down with long sips of tea, my mother began the countdown. "Three, two, one - strip mall."

"Metaphysical shop," I said at the same time. Just as I expected.

"Okay." My mother leaned forward on her elbows. "Why?"

I had already prepared my own list of pros and cons for this question, and I laid all my cards on the table while she listened closely.

“Okay,” she said again. “The metaphysical shop it is. I’ll have the inspector out as soon as possible to get the place checked out.”

“Really?” I cocked my head, feeling one eyebrow inch up my forehead. “You don’t have anything else to say about it?”

“No, I don’t. Marty, this is your store. You’ll be running it. If you believe the metaphysical shop is the best location - and you gave some good reasons - then I trust you.”

My mom leaned forward over the table and gripped my shoulder with the strength years of shoveling and hauling had given her. “This is a family business. You, your brother, your father, me - we share the decisions. Your brother picked the location for the store he owns, and he did a fantastic job. You will too because you’re both the best sons in the world.”

“Gosh, Momma, you can’t get all sentimental on me like that,” I teased lightly because tearing up wasn’t a manly thing to do.

We talked about the new shop for a few minutes, drawing designs on napkins and sharing ideas, then my mom hopped up to refill her tea glass from the dispenser. I took a picture of the paper with the layout and address we had chosen and sent it to Maggie. “Found a place! Just got to have the inspector check it out.”

“First place you visited?” was her reply. “Coincidence?”

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“Fate, I think. But there were some other good choices. This was just the best one.”

“I could say the same about wedding gowns.”

Every time Maggie mentioned gowns, my imagination pulled itself away from whatever else I had on my mind to imagine her as my bride, walking down the aisle.

“I can’t wait to see you in it.”

“Too bad you do have to wait to see me in it. We’ve got to find a place to actually have the wedding, too.”

“If I can find a place for the newest LaFleur Flowers, and you can find the perfect dress first try...do you really think we’ll have trouble finding the perfect venue?”

“Of course not.”

Chapter Four

Maggie

“Somewhere on the shore of Lake Pontchartrain?” I suggested, twisting a mouthful of pasta around my fork, grabbing my bowl as it tried to escape over the edge of the table. It had been a few days since Marty found a place for his new shop. Now, we were sitting together and trying to think of a place for the wedding over a home-cooked lunch in the apartment.

Normally, a Catholic wedding would be held in a church, but we had agreed a while

ago not to have a traditional Catholic wedding for a number of reasons. Our guest list was small, just close family and friends, and the massive St. Louis Cathedral would feel so empty. And if we had it there, I would feel obligated to invite some of my close but not so close friends who attended Mass there. Together, Marty and I had decided we would have the chaplain from Tulane University, a well-known, well-respected man, marry us in a more personal setting.

“Hm... There’ll probably be a lot of bugs this time of year,” Marty mused.

“Big scary bugs?” I teased.

“No, small annoying ones.” Marty flicked a piece of lettuce at me. “The bugs don’t really bother me. I’ve worked outside a lot, remember? I’m just thinking of our guests.”

“We’ll find the perfect wedding venue,” I promised. “You found a new shop, and I found a wedding dress. Everything will work out.”

“I know.” We scooted closer and shared a kiss over the table. “Are we still going to Zoe and Aiden’s?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m still not sure what it’s about, though. All she said was to bring you and to come over to Aiden’s house when she gets home from her mom’s at 5:30.”

“Huh. She’s your maid-of-honor, right?”

“Right. Maybe it’s about that. Maybe something went wrong with her dress.” What if they couldn’t get the alterations done in time? Or somehow they ran out of that color dress in the right size?

“Definitely not.” Marty’s confidence restored my own. “If there was a problem, Zoe would tell you right away. This is something good. A surprise, probably.”

I hopped up and gathered our dishes, afire with curiosity. “I guess we’ll find out.”

Before we could do that, though, Marty and I had some errands to run. We needed to pick up groceries and one or two things we still needed around our apartment.

Our apartment. Keys in hand, I glanced around the place before following Marty out the door. This wasn’t really our apartment, and despite all my best efforts, it still didn’t quite feel like home.

I wouldn’t be sorry to leave this place behind, not at all. Marty and I hadn’t done any house-hunting yet. Well, maybe apartment hunting was more accurate now with all the wedding plans to handle. As soon as we found someplace, I would be able to really make it ours. And find a better spot to put the three black kittens.

“Oh my gosh!” I exclaimed loudly.

Marty actually jumped. “What is it?”

“Sorry,” I apologized. “I just realized...we’ll be moving into our own place soon.”

“Of course. Together. And?” He paused quizzically, a hand on the door handle of my car as he got in.

“We can get a cat!” My toes bounced me up and down in the seat.

Marty stared, then laughed a deeper, richer laugh than he had in a while. “Definitely. Maybe two cats? A brother and sister, from the same litter?”

“Yes!” I had to calm down a little to get the key in the ignition, and shared another kiss with Marty before pulling out of the parking lot.

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We had consulted and agreed to allow about an hour to run all our errands. This wonderful, late spring day blessed us with short lines and quick shopping, so we finished up in about fifty minutes instead. “We’ll be kinda early,” I decided, glancing at the time on my phone. “Zoe won’t mind, though. If she’s not home yet we can always chill in the living room and talk to Aiden.”

“Sounds good.” Marty settled back in the passenger seat, along for the ride.

To get to Aiden’s house, I had to drive past a very, very familiar place. I couldn’t resist pulling up in front of the building and sitting by the curb just for a moment to look at the columns and large Greek Kappa Omega Epsilon letters.

“Do you miss it?” Marty asked.

“No, not really. I loved the sense of community and family and all the girls I met there, but all I feel is happiness when I think about my experiences here. No regrets whatsoever.”

“You’re almost making me wish I had gone to college,” Marty joked.

“It wasn’t all good. Late nights, insane amounts of homework, tons of reading, stress-”

“Okay, I get it. I don’t wish I’d gone to college.”

We went for yet another kiss and continued on to Zoe’s. As expected, we got there a little early, but still...no big deal. Just a little waiting, if anything.

I knocked on the door, Marty standing beside me with an arm around my waist. No answer. I blinked at him and knocked again. This time I thought I heard something, like the loud thump of a door shutting or something falling. “I think someone’s home?” I ventured.

Just as I was about to peek in through the glass panes to the side of the large wooden door, a lock turned on the inside, and it creaked open. Zoe stood there, tugging at the door handle with one hand while hastily fiddling with her blouse with the other.

“What are you...” I stopped when I realized she was doing up buttons. “I thought you were leaving your mom’s house at 5:30?”

“Uh... I thought I would be home and showered by 5:30, but Daddy showed up early for dinner.” I didn’t miss the mischief in her eyes.

The floor creaked behind her, and I glanced past to see Aiden crossing the hallway, shirtless, his hair tousled in a manner very unlike the professor’s usual look. He shot us a shameless grin and disappeared up the stairs.

“Showering, huh?” The suggestiveness in my voice finally wrung a blush out of Zoe.

“Hush, you. Just come in. Aiden will be down in a moment, and then we have something we want to talk to you about.” Zoe started to lead the way inside, then wheeled back around. “Wait a minute! You were supposed to be here at 5:45. You’re early. This is your fault,” she insisted teasingly.

I adopted a look of pure innocence. “What’s my fault? That we interrupted your ‘shower’?”

“Okay, okay. Sit down. I’ll be back in just a sec’.” Zoe took the stairs two at a time and followed Aiden.

I turned to see Marty staring at me, wiggling his eyebrows as if to say...They're doing it, so maybe when we get home.."No!" I insisted. "After the wedding. You have to help your mom out with the new shop. I have wedding planning to do - there's so much to get done. After, okay? After," I insisted one more time.

Marty sighed. "Fine. We still need to find somewhere to actually have the wedding, too."

"Actually, we were thinking we might be able to help with that," Zoe said as she came down the stairs with Aiden, both of them properly dressed and groomed. They sat down across from us, each taking a chair.

"Really?" I perked up. I valued Zoe's suggestions, whether they involved fashion or locations.

Zoe looked at Aiden, who clasped his hands together and spoke up. "We were talking, and Zoe told me some of what you were looking for ... the perfect wedding venue. She mentioned, outside space, a large indoor space in case it ends up being too hot... And oh, yes, character... the place has to have character." He turned to Zoe and smiled. "We were thinking, We know a place that has all of that. This house... my house right here."

We turned our heads as if they were on puppet strings when Marty and I suddenly saw the house in a whole new light.

"I think - we think - that it would be perfect. The backyard is large and fenced in for privacy. The house is big enough for any number of people you want to invite, and I'm sure the private school down the street will allow your guests to use their parking lot for the wedding since its on a Saturday." Aiden glanced at Zoe, probably trying to think if he had left anything out.

“And it’s got character, and connection to us,” Zoe pointed out. “It’s like a little slice of New Orleans history, and all of us and our families are from Louisiana.”

I glanced over at Marty, hoping he could see my feelings in my eyes. He did, and he said to me as he took my hands, “See? Everything works out. Aiden, I haven’t had as much time to get to know you as I would like, but it’s incredibly generous of you to offer your house for the wedding, and I think I speak for us both-” I smiled as Marty shot me a glance, using the motion to hide a sudden well of tears that had no place in this wonderful moment. “-when I say that we would be absolutely thrilled to have our wedding here.” The two men shook hands, and I felt a friendship formed in their firm handshake.

“It’ll be perfect,” I told all three of them happily. “We plan to keep the guest list to close friends and family, so everyone will fit just perfectly here. And I’ve seen the backyard. There’ll be plenty of room for the seating and for the band. Oh, and the gazebo... you have a beautiful gazebo! Thank you both so much.” I also shook Aiden’s hand, then threw myself into Zoe’s arms, unable to contain my excitement any longer.

“Sit back down,” she ordered me, laughing. “We aren’t done with you yet.”

“What?” I shared a look with Marty, but he only shrugged.

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“This is the house I grew up in,” Aiden said, sending a sweeping look around the beautiful home. “My foster parents loved this place and they left it to me. It has a lot of memories. Some of them are good and some of them aren’t, but I wouldn’t lose any of them for the world.” He took a moment to polish his glasses that had become suspiciously moist. “I want to move to California, I really, really do. It’s a wonderful opportunity and a chance for a fresh start with the woman I love. But I love this house, too, and I really couldn’t bear the idea of just putting it up on the market and selling it to strangers...”

Marty’s eyes went wide. Clearly, he understood where Aiden was going with this. I still had no clue.

“I want to give you the opportunity to lease it... and then maybe a lease purchase if you decide you want to live here permanently. Both of you, Maggie and Marty, are people who will take care of the old place. And I know you two care about your Louisiana roots, too, and will appreciate the history of the home... even before my parents bought it. I don’t want my family’s home to fall into the hands of strangers.” Zoe had to hop out of her chair and perch on the edge of Aiden’s so she could hug away a rush of emotion. He gave a quick cough for show.

“Oh my gosh, Aiden,” I finally managed, completely blindsided and staggered. “Are you sure? You really... Would you really like for us to live here?”

Aiden smiled a wide smile. “Definitely. I’ve thought about it a great deal, and it’s silly - but I’ve kind of already decided you’ll live here, in my mind, anyway. I know you haven’t said yes yet, and you might already have somewhere else lined up for all I know.”

“No, no,” I hastened to assure him, floored by the sudden nervousness on his face when he realized we might not accept. Aiden really, truly wanted us to have his home. “We would absolutely love to live here. It’s so close to my work and Marty’s new shop, and it’s- it’s- just incredible,” I finished, at a loss to express how much this meant to me.

Aiden smiled. “It means a lot to me, it really does. As you know, Zoe and I will be moving out in late June, so we can work out the details before then. Plus, you have way too much on your plate with the wedding already.”

Marty shook Aiden’s hand again. I hugged Zoe and also Aiden this time, then both of them at once. “You guys...” I choked on emotions.

Zoe and Aiden took a moment to look into each other’s eyes. “Yeah, us too.”

Marty and I left together. I wasn’t sure what we had just agreed on, but it felt right and good, and one more thing had fallen into place for us, thanks to our incredible friends.

Chapter Five

Abigail

The last time I had made the trip from New Orleans to Miami, I’d spent the whole flight with my face pressed against the window staring down at the scenery with melancholy. Even though I was only leaving for a few weeks; I had said goodbye to everyone I knew in New Orleans. A few weeks ago, that trip had felt so final.

Now, it was a few days after the sleepover with Maggie and Zoe, and I was boarding a plane to make the same trip. But this time it was different. No goodbyes were necessary because I would be right back in a week or so for Maggie’s wedding - no

need to think about our final goodbyes until after the ceremony. So, I was looking forward to spending time with my own boyfriend again before our big summer tour started and focusing on practicing with the band.

And Vaporized had a lot to do. Not just for the tour, although I wanted to meet the new drummer, and we all needed to start practicing together regularly in preparation to play on stages across the States. And, of course, the band had agreed to do the music for the wedding, too. That meant we needed to put our heads together and plan out which existing pieces to use. And decide whether we should come up with anything more appropriate since a lot of Vaporized's music was anything but. In that regard, at least, the new album was finished and had quite a softer sound to it than any of the previous ones.

Despite the fact that Vaporized mostly had everything we needed - with mild modifications - to play at the wedding, one more thing still worried me. I was a bridesmaid, so I wouldn't be able to play the actual wedding march itself. That didn't bother me at all. I would a million times over rather be at Maggie's side as she said her vows than behind a piano. But, later during the reception, I would be playing with the band. We had no way of knowing exactly how long the reception would be since it was a fairly informal setting with a tight-knit guest list - not a venue rented for a specific amount of time.

That meant Vaporized might need more music than we had that would be appropriate to play at a wedding. It might also mean that the band, as the sole form of entertainment and background music, might be expected to play throughout the reception, with me, one of Maggie's best friends, stuck at the piano the whole time.

I doubted Maggie wanted that. In fact, I knew she didn't, but this little hitch probably hadn't even crossed her mind. She was so busy planning everything out... Hm. I would have to think about this problem and find a way to work it out. I really didn't want to bother Maggie with it, not on top of everything else.

I was still mulling over the issue when Al's car swung around the curve to pick me up at the airport. Briefly forgetting my worries, I could hardly wait for him to get out before I flung myself into his heavily inked and muscled arms. "I love you," I murmured into his chest, letting his familiar strength and scent envelop me.

"I love you too, and I missed you." His breath stirred my hair, and that voice from all my favorite songs reminded me that somehow, I had found Al and he had found me - and we were meant for each other. "And I missed you, too."

"A week is too long," I agreed, finally extricating myself so we could get my luggage in the car and stop holding up the right lane of traffic. "But you're going back with me next time!"

"Of course." Al glanced over at me as we simultaneously sat in the car. "I can't handle another week with just the boys. And I'm not letting you leave me again so soon."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm a grown woman, Al. Perfectly capable of flying between New Orleans and Miami on my own."

"Sure you are. But you would have more fun if you were with me."

A cocky statement, but it was a true one. I just acknowledged it with a little resigned shake of my head. Al's mention of the band brought back my concerns about Vaporized playing at the wedding, though, so I lost the little smile his words had put on my face rather quickly. "Hey, you know how we're supposed to play at the wedding?"

"Yeah?" Al's eyes met mine in the rearview mirror. "It should be great. We can play our new, softer music."

“Yeah, the music isn’t what worries me. Not exactly. The reception will be over an hour at least, probably more like two or more.”

“Oh.” Al’s fingers tapped the steering wheel. “I get what you mean. I’m sure the band will be able to take breaks. Play on and off.”

“Maybe.” Unconvinced, I resisted the urge to succumb to restlessness as well. “It’ll be kind of hard to scatter and start conversations, then get everyone back together every few minutes. And usually, receptions have constant background music playing.”

“That is a hard one. The only thing I’ve got is maybe half the band can play at once? I can do a couple acoustics, then take a break, and you and the others can play something a little more orchestral. That sort of thing.”

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I considered. Actually, that was a pretty good idea. We still had the problem with coordinating that, though. And that would mean Al and I would probably be with the band and socializing at opposite times.

This was Maggie's wedding, and she and Marty came before anyone else, of course, but I was still looking forward to spending time with Al during the reception. "It could work," I conceded unwillingly. "Let's give it some more thought, though. I'd rather figure something else out."

"Sure. Maybe some of the boys will have ideas. And you still need to meet Jonah."

The new drummer had flown into Miami a few days ago to become better acquainted with the band and practice with them. I hadn't had a chance to meet him yet, but Al had talked about him often when we stayed up late into the night, talking about this and that and how much we missed each other. Jonah was fitting in well with the group, and he appreciated and enjoyed both our old and new music, unlike the old drummer who had abandoned the band when the other members agreed to try a new sound for the new album.

"Right now?" I asked, realizing that we were headed in the direction of Al's massive mansion, which also served as a sort of headquarters for the band.

"I figured it would be best for us to stay in the house since we'll be practicing and working on the wedding music so much." Al stopped at a stop sign and swung his head to the side to give me a full-effect wink. "Not that we can't go to the condo if we need a little more privacy for any reason... Any reason at all."

“In case we want to...” I let Al hang on my words for a moment. “Work on songs by ourselves?”

“Not exactly what I was thinking. I was thinking something a little more...curvy. Sexy,” he mused, rubbing his chin as though looking for the right word and waiting for me to supply it.

“Hm. I’m not sure if those lyrics would work well in songs for the wedding. You might want to write them down and put them on the back burner.” I grinned fiercely, relishing my triumph as Al finally gave up and dropped his suggestive attitude and turned his eyes back to the road. “We’ve got to think about Marty and Maggie right now. And I need to figure out this music problem.”

“I know. But why can’t we have a little fun in between figuring things out and practicing? We could have sex... make love... anything and anywhere you want...”

Impossible. Insatiable. I could only shake my head. Luckily, we had just turned into the driveway so I could hop out of the car while Al had to stay behind and finish unloading the trunk. I grabbed a bag, left the other one for Al and headed inside.

The next few minutes were filled with “hi”s and greetings as the band members welcomed back their new pianist. I spotted a new face behind the guys I knew and introduced myself. “I’m Abigail,” I said, shaking his hand. He had a very, very firm grip, but I shouldn’t have been surprised to feel that from a drummer.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Jonah. I’ve heard a lot about you.... Can’t wait to see if you’re as good as this big guy’s been telling everyone.” Jonah clapped Al on the shoulder just as he walked in.

“Lies. All of it lies,” Al said promptly. But he winked at me when Jonah turned away, and warmth spread through my heart to know that Al would give me such high praise

without ever expecting I would hear it.

I chatted some more with the guys in the band, but my phone rang not ten minutes after walking into the house. “Hold on,” I told Jonah, stepping outside. The number was unknown, but it had a New Orleans area code. “Hello?”

“Hi, Abigail? This is Lily Etienne, Zoe’s mother?”

“Oh, hi, Mrs. Etienne! Sorry, I didn’t recognize your voice!” I hadn’t seen Zoe’s mother in quite a while. I had been to Zoe’s house a few times, but the last couple of semesters at Tulane had just been so busy for us all.

“Don’t worry about it! I had an idea for Maggie’s wedding, and I wanted to talk to you about it.”

“What is it?” I asked, wondering what on Earth it could possibly be that Mrs. Etienne would need to call me.

“Zoe was telling me that Vaporized is playing at the wedding and reception... Congratulations, by the way. Playing in a famous rock band is something most people only dream about.”

“Yes, ma’am, it is really a dream come true... in a kind of a weird way.”

“I was worried, though, that the band might have to play so much that you wouldn’t be able to enjoy the reception. And you are a bridesmaid.”

“Really, you read my mind. I was wondering how to work that out too... with Al and the band.”

“I think I have the answer, Abigail... I was thinking, what if I hired a jazz ensemble

to play as well? Vaporized could take the stage as much as you wanted, and the jazz ensemble could play whatever time you feel like taking breaks or spending time with the wedding guests.”

I stood there in the warm Miami sun, a little stunned. Here I had been thinking about this problem all day, and Zoe’s mom had already thought of it and found a solution. “Wow, Mrs. Etienne, that would be amazing! I really was worried about that,” I admitted. “I want to play, but I also want to spend time with Maggie and Zoe. Having a jazz band there would be the perfect solution!”

“That’s great, Dear,” Mrs. Etienne said enthusiastically. “I’ll make the arrangements asap. I’m so glad I could do something to help out. It feels like everyone else is so busy, and I wanted to do my part.”

“Thank you so much!” My heart bubbled over, and I couldn’t wait to tell Al.

“It really is nothing at all. I want to do this for Maggie. I think it’s best we don’t tell her right away. If I know that girl, she’ll tell me not to hire the ensemble just to save money.” We laughed about the truth of that for a moment, then Mrs. Etienne hung up.

I stood there, my phone still raised a couple inches from my ear until Al came out of the house. “Is everything okay?” he asked.

“That was Zoe’s mom. She’s going to hire a jazz ensemble to play some of the time so Vaporized can enjoy the party.” I hadn’t sent up a single prayer, but they had been answered anyway.

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“That’s amazing!” The passion and suddenness of our kiss sent a pair of birds flying into the blue sky.

“Yep.” I went back in for another.

“So...” Al began when we broke apart, mischief in his eyes. “We can have sex now?”

I slapped his firm chest and whirled away, his laughter following me into the house.

Al

Abby and I sat on the bed together the day after she had come back to Miami, looking down at a sheet of music we had just finished composing. “Should we play it now?” I asked. I knew the answer already - the answer was yes. But this particular piece of music meant a lot to Abby. She should be the one to decide if the notes were all in place and ready to hear how it sounded.

“Well, not yet.” Abby set the sheet down carefully, eyeing all the other music that littered the bed. “We should finish selecting the music we want to play at the reception first. Playing this song can wait.”

I nodded. It was true, but I knew how excited she was to play this song. Her grandmother had given it to her in a dream, and it was all about following your dreams, working hard and taking pride in knowing yourself and that other people were proud of you too. In a way, this song told the story of Abby’s journey to join

Vaporized - how she had wanted so badly to be a concert pianist and even believed it was her fate, but after failing her audition she had found the band.

We hadn't chosen all the music for the wedding yet. That was what we were doing now. But we both knew that at the very least, this song would be one of the ones we played. Soon, the rest of the band would come over to the house, and we would all practice - and one of the songs we played would be the one Abby's grandmother had given her.

Ever since Abby had figured out the melody and accompanying instruments, I had been fascinated with the song. It would be beautiful when we all sat down and played the first notes, and I found myself just as excited as Abby.

For another hour or so, we shared ideas and edited pieces, garnering a collection of music, old and new, that would sound incredible at a wedding. I had to admit; when Abby first suggested that Vaporized play at her best friend's wedding, I had been a little hesitant. Plenty of fans would kill to have Vaporized play at their weddings, but Maggie? Maggie didn't listen to rock and would never have heard of Vaporized if Abby hadn't managed to snag the group's vocalist - me.

But we're not a proper rock band, not anymore, I reminded myself again. We had introduced the piano and a lot of songs with a softer sound than before. We could still play our old songs, and we would in concerts, of course - just not at Maggie's wedding. And I had to admit, the more I sat here, chatting and working with Abby, the more enthusiastic I felt at the idea of playing at a wedding. With a little work, we had lots of songs that would be just fine.

And then it was time to practice our new sound. The rest of the band showed up around 3 PM, as we had planned. Abby and I brought out the sheets we had worked at busily, and the band looked them over together, suggesting minor changes and giving their instruments a few strums or taps to test various sections of notes. "Looks

good,” Cory said, giving his bass a pluck. “Let’s try out some of them. What do you want to start with?”

I looked at Abby, and she looked back at me. We smiled together, and I left it to her to pick out her grandmother’s song from amidst the sheets. “This one.” It took her two minutes to visit the copier to make sheet music for each member of the band, then she came back and passed them out, her face showing her pride.

We started to play. The song began softly, gently, then rose and swelled, gaining confidence, power, and beauty. It told a story of believing in yourself, sticking with what you love and who you love and second chances, and it was the most beautiful song I had ever heard.

Jonah went to print copies of the next song, and I let my guitar hang at my side from its strap so I could wrap an arm around her. “That was amazing, Abby,” I told her, the nickname she had finally let me use sliding off my tongue easily.

“Wasn’t it?” she agreed happily. “I love it. It’s perfect. Just like your guitar solo,” she complimented me, with a wide smile.

I opened my mouth, one corner twitching and one eyebrow rising, knowing how my guitar solos often turned her on. But instead of getting a heated kiss, Abby gave me a shove back toward my spot. “What? Ouch.” I rubbed at the firm and totally fine planes of my chest where her hands had pushed me, drawing my brows together with the utmost innocence.

“We are still. Not. Having. Sex,” she spelled out plainly, reading my face like a book. “Not, yet! We’re not done practicing!”

Every single member of the band in the room heard and roared with laughter. Jonah stepped back into the practice room a second later, holding some papers aloft, only to

find most of us doubled over with tears running down our faces. He asked after a moment, “Uh...what did I miss?”

Chapter Six

Maggie

So many things had fallen into place. I had found the dress of my dreams, and it would be ready for a June wedding despite all the odds. Marty had found that perfect location for his New Orleans store, and his mom and he were in the process of opening that shop so it could supply the flowers for our wedding. Zoe and Aiden had come through with an incredible, wonderful surprise - they had offered their house for the wedding and soon after for us to live in permanently when they moved to Los Angeles together.

Now, we had only five days until that big day, and a few things still hadn't been resolved....and I could feel nervousness creeping into my heart. My mom had called my brothers and my dad, and my brothers were both able to fly in for the wedding, but we still hadn't heard from my father. And I had convinced myself to wait two more days before I let myself ask the question. What do I do if Daddy can't come? At the moment, I was just doing my best not to think about it at all.

Besides that, there was still so much to do to get ready for our big day. Unfortunately, today those preparations had taken Marty and me to different parts of New Orleans. He would spend the day with his mother, helping her decorate Aiden's house and yard and overseeing the remodel at the shop. And me...

Well, I also had a mother-daughter date today. My mom had agreed to drive down from Lafayette again to help me with two more important decisions: catering and wedding cakes.

When I had asked about it, Momma had stayed silent on the phone for a moment. “Are you sure, Honey? Usually the bride and groom shop for the cake together, not the bride and the bride’s mother, no matter how much the mother loves her beautiful daughter.”

I had smiled at the endearment she worked in, trying to shove down a bout of nervousness. Zoe’s father knew a bakery that had been able to get a small wedding cake for a friend of his done within a week. I was hoping the place would be able to do the same for me, with a couple fewer days, but nothing was guaranteed.

“We’ve talked about it a lot, and we know that...” I waited until my mother must have been hanging on my next words. “We both understand that we have no idea what we want. All we have decided on is that we want some sort of floral pattern, and possibly a bride and groom under an arbor on the top, but...neither of us could really think of something perfect. Marty will be busy with his mom at the shop, and he trusts me to make a good choice.”

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“Then I’d love to come cake shopping with you and help you make that perfect choice,” my mom promised. “See you then.”

So now, here we were one day later, parking my mom’s car in a lot near a well-known French Quarter bakery that specialized in wedding cakes and had been thoroughly vetted by Zoe’s dad.

“Hello and welcome! Do you need help finding anything?” the cheerful woman behind the counter asked as we walked inside, breathing in the scent of fresh bread.

“Actually, can we talk to a...cake designer? Artist? A pastry chef? I want to order a wedding cake,” I explained. “What do you call someone who made cakes?”

“Either of those is fine, but we tend to call them cake designers here. And I think Arturo would love to hear what you have in mind. Come back here, please.” She waited for us to circumvent the counter and brought us to a sort of office. “He’ll be with you in a second. Please, take a seat!”

Not two minutes later, a short, thin man walked in, pulling stained pink gloves off as he did and threw them in the trash can. “Hello,” he said, beaming as he shook each of our hands. “I’m Arturo. I heard you want a wedding cake. What did you have in mind?”

“Well...” After walking past the beautifully designed cakes in the shop, saying I wanted things like flowers and arbors sounded so minimalistic and uninteresting. “I, I’m not exactly sure. But I know I want the cake to represent things we do and things we love. We were together, then parted, then got back together, so I’d like the cake to

show reconnection somewhere, too.” I shook my head, realizing I was spewing a bunch of intangible ideas to a man who needed to combine physical things into a cake. “Sorry. I’m not sure how to describe it.”

“No, no, don’t worry,” he insisted. “Let’s try this. What do you do, and what does he do?”

“I’m a nurse, and he’s a florist. I know I’d like some kind of flower pattern on the cake, and maybe an arbor over the top,” I said, finally adding those things.

Arturo didn’t seem put out by the unoriginality. “Hm. Let me think a moment.” Arturo took out a sketchbook and began drawing.

My phone vibrated, and I glanced at it to see a picture message from Marty. In the picture, he sat in the shaded gazebo in Aiden’s backyard, holding a glass of tea in his hand. The caption was “Time for a break.” A massive, ancient oak tree stood behind the gazebo.

“Oh!” I exclaimed. “Marty and I met in Lafayette, and there’s this big old oak tree in a park there. We both carved our initials in it when we dated four years ago, then we found those initials again a couple months ago. What if we have a tree on top of the cake, with a bride and groom underneath it?”

“Fantastic!” Arturo matched my excitement and scribbled furiously. “Perhaps a golden, white, or green wire for the tree. And we can look at some flower patterns to see what you’d like.”

My eyes sparkled, and my mom laughed when I actually bounced up and down in my seat. “And maybe daffodils around the base? Flowers for Marty, specifically daffodils that symbolize healing and hope because I’m a nurse?”

“Absolutely!”

“Oh, that’s so perfect! Thank you, Arturo!”

“But of course, it’s my job.” Still, he shook my hand, looking very pleased with himself. “Now, what date do you need this cake? And how many guests? And I’ll need you to fill out an order form.”

“Well, actually...” I swallowed. This was the moment where everything could go wrong. “The wedding is in five days. It was a bit sudden. There will be about thirty people there,” I added hastily as his face fell. The guest list, at least, we had sorted out.

Worry changed to relief, and Arturo nodded. “We can make that work. If you wanted a cake for a hundred-and-fifty people, it wouldn’t be possible, but a two-level cake to feed thirty is doable. Go ahead and fill out the form, Miss. Your cake will be ready in time for your wedding.”

I had to request a new form part-way through filling it out because utter relief shook my hands and turned all the letters and numbers in Aiden’s address into jagged markings. Thank goodness we had decided to keep the guest list small and personal!

About twenty minutes later, my mom and I walked out of the bakery, absolutely thrilled. Well, I was thrilled, and my mom was thrilled for me. “Gosh, Honey, I’m so jealous! Your wedding is coming along so nicely, and it’s going to be wonderful... beautiful. When your dad and I got married, well...let’s just say there were a few hitches.”

“You’ll have to tell me sometime, Momma, but not today! Don’t jinx it. Everything is going so well.” Just one more thing to think about. Come on, Daddy. Please, please, please...I didn’t know if I was begging my father or praying, or both.

“I can’t jinx what is meant to be! Nothing I can do would put a single hitch in this wedding.” My mother’s conviction strengthened my own.

“You’re right. That means finding a good caterer should be a breeze!” I said optimistically, reminding myself that I had sworn I would wait a little longer before panicking over my dad’s silence.

We visited a few likely places but always ended up turning them down for one reason or another. Sometimes, we didn’t love the food. Other places couldn’t accommodate the wedding date. Finally, late in the afternoon after our feet hurt from walking around the French Quarter all day, we walked into one last restaurant.

Both Marty and I wanted real New Orleans cuisine at our wedding. We had figured the French Quarter was just the place to find it, and we hadn’t been wrong.

“This menu looks scrumptious,” I said slowly, hardly able to believe we may have found the perfect restaurant. “This is food you cook all the time - like Grandma’s recipes.”

“I agree. I think we found the place. Let’s see if they’ll let us try a couple of the dishes on the menu...to see how it tastes for the wedding guests, of course. Not because your Momma is hungry after walking around all day or anything.” A bowl of gumbo caught her eyes as we went to ask about samples, and I chuckled, feeling a hollowness in my own tummy.

Every dish we tried tasted incredible and authentic, as though I had forked it out of a tupperware or casserole dish at a family reunion. Whoever owned this restaurant understood this city, its roots and its classic dishes.

In fact, we loved the food so much that not only did we hire the place to cater, we also decided to stay and eat dinner there as well. Every time my mom and I went out

to eat together, we ordered two separate things and shared them. We did the same today. Why try one food when you could order two entrees and have some of each?

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My mom dropped me off at the apartment, gave me her usual loving goodbye hug and started the drive back home. I sat down with a book and a glass of iced tea to wait for Marty. Really, I had expected he would beat me back here, but I figured his work at the shop or at Aiden's was causing him to run late. Or maybe he had gone out to eat with his mom too.

Three chapters into the book, my phone lit up with a call. Savoring a few moments to relax, my eyes refused to leave the page until I finished the sentence I had started. So by the time I picked up the phone, it had already vibrated a few times. Hastily, I answered. "Hello?" The word turned into a question when I realized I hadn't seen the caller's name on the screen.

"Hi, Honey."

"Daddy!" Low, loving and so familiar - only one man could possibly have that voice. I had to blink a few times to hold back a sudden pressure behind my eyes that would turn into tears if I let it.

"Maggie." I could picture that wide, toothy smile my dad always had, combined with the pride in his eyes that he felt for all his children. "Your mom called and told me you were getting married! And to Marty! Damn, I'm so happy for you both. I always liked that man, and I won't have to meet someone for the first time when I fly back home for the wedding."

"When you-" I lost my voice for a moment, scarcely able to believe yet another thing that meant the world to me had fallen into place. "When you fly in for the wedding?"

“Did you think I would miss my only daughter’s special day? Your brothers are both focused on being bigwig military types, not finding women to settle down with,” he joked. “When will I have another chance to be at one of my children’s weddings? Your mom called me nearly two weeks ago, but it took until today for me to be sure I could get that special leave I asked for. I’ll be home in a couple days.”

“Daddy, I’m so, so happy you’ll be here!” I had never told Marty how much it meant to me for my father to give me away, and I had been waiting, holding my breath to hear if he could make it to our set date at the end of June. If he couldn’t... I didn’t know what I would have done. Despite my love for Marty and all our plans, I might have brought up the possibility of moving the date.

“Your mother thought it was best you hear it from me. It’ll be all of us together, just like at Christmas.”

My skin tingled all over, and my heart skipped and skidded. Was this real? Would the whole, complete Fontenot family really be able to come together for my impromptu June wedding? “I have to call Scott and Nick,” I murmured, mostly to myself. My mom had handled calling everyone, including my brothers and father, and I had just been so busy lately... Why hadn’t I called them immediately, right after Marty proposed?

Well, I knew the answer to that as far as my father was concerned. He worked offshore on oil rigs where he had limited cell service, so he could be pretty hard to get ahold of sometimes.

“They’d like that. Scott and Nicholas remember Marty too, and, in the words of Scott when I talked to him yesterday, ‘Wow, my not-so-little sister is getting married? Cool beans’.”

“Cool beans,” I repeated, forgetting to be emotional and snorting loudly. “Scott’s just

as big a goofball as before he joined the army.”

“Not even a drill sergeant could stomp that out of him,” my dad agreed solemnly.

“Let me let you go so I can go call him and tell him that,” I requested, my heart full and content. “I have so much to tell you, Daddy, but I’ll wait until you get home!” I hung up only to immediately dial another number.

“Little sis!” Scott answered, sounding thrilled to hear from me.

“Cool beans? Really?”

Marty

I sat down on the antique living room couch, letting the air conditioning waft across the layer of sweat I had accumulated throughout the day and admiring the handiwork of all the incredible people who had turned out to help decorate Aiden’s house. White lace trailed down the staircase railings like the veil of a runaway bride, interspersed periodically by ties that would also hold flowers on the day of the wedding. There would be flowers everywhere, actually - in the tall white stands from my mother’s Lafayette shop and the smaller vases adorning tables and the mantelpiece, wrapping around the elegant columns outside on the front porch and in the center of every table that would be set up outside.

And they had done so much more than prepare for the flowers. Colored lanterns hung all around the ground floor of the house. The curtains had been changed out to reflect the colors and themes chosen for the wedding. I touched the cover that had been laid over the couch I sat on, knowing it hid the unweddinglike paisley pattern. Everything on the whole ground floor of the house sported solids and patterns of whites, pinks

and soft purples.

It looked incredible, and it had only taken about half a day to do all this. The idea of waiting until the day before the wedding to decorate the backyard had made me a little nervous, but after seeing how smoothly everything had gone today, I knew it would be just fine.

Any group effort needed a team leader, and the leader of the move to clean and decorate the house walked out of the kitchen just as that moment, holding a glass of iced tea and brushing back a few strands of hair that had escaped her messy bun. “Momma, the house looks incredible,” I told her as she sat on one of the covered chairs with a sigh of relaxation. “We couldn’t have done it without you.” She had been everywhere at once, directing everyone as they carried things in from the LaFleur Flowers truck and returned from shopping trips for other things needed to complete the decor, putting up several of those decorations herself, and delegating tasks.

“Doesn’t it?” she said, pleased. “It’s all thanks to you, Zoe, Aiden and everyone else who helped.”

“No, it’s definitely not,” I argued. “Someone had to keep us all in line so we’d get things done. And all of this-” I gestured expansively to encompass the room. “-was your idea.”

“It still took all of us to get this done,” she insisted. “And your help in particular by going to check up on the progress at the shop.”

I thought back to all the pictures I had taken of completed shelving and hanging installments for the flowers, pots and other little things we would sell at the new shop. “It’s coming along nicely, isn’t it? Should be ready to open the day after tomorrow.” My brother Joshua was coming down to NO for a few days to oversee the

running of the store and start training the new hire I hadn't met yet since my mother and I would both be busy.

"We'll have to order another LaFleur Flowers truck, but you'll be able to make do with your pickup for now." The fondness that crossed my face when my mom mentioned my pickup didn't escape her. "Yes, of course, you can bring your truck here. Your father's old pickup will be enough for hauling things at the nursery."

This was the first time I had seen my mother just sit down and relax in days. I could swear she was more stressed than Maggie and me, but I knew that was because she loved me and wanted everything to be pristine and perfect for us both. "It'll be fine, Momma. Everything will be ready in time. We've got this."

She relaxed even further, sinking into the couch. "I know. It's just so much so fast! I guess all weddings are a little stressful, though."

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Stressful? I smiled at her, but I didn't agree with what she said. Everything was coming together, and I had faith that everything that hadn't quite done that yet would fall into place in time. In the meantime, I was just...happy. Just so happy to have everyone I loved around me, helping me prepare to marry the woman of my dreams.

Chapter Seven

Aiden

Finally, after a few days of living in a house adorned with wedding decorations, the day had arrived. Today, wedding guests would walk up the sidewalk to see flowers and balloons out front marking my home as the spot for the ceremony. Later, they would behold the most beautiful sight of all... Maggie walking down the white runner laid across the soft green grass between the rows of chairs on either side.

The groom, best man and the other men would stay downstairs where we could help with last-minute chores and take turns getting ready in the guest bedroom. Marty was already here, and he had strict orders to stay in the guest room and keep the door closed so he wouldn't see Maggie or her wedding dress when she arrived.

"Are you ready?" Zoe asked. I turned around to see her leaning against the master bedroom doorway, wearing jean shorts and a tank top for now. But that would change very, very soon. We had decided it was best for the bride and bridesmaids to come up here to change into their gowns. The attached master bathroom was the largest in the house and the perfect place to do their hair and makeup.

"Am I ready?" I opened my arms and sat on the bed. Zoe pushed away from the

doorway, flopped on our king-sized bed and laid her head in my lap, gazing up at me with her riveting blue eyes-black hair splayed across my legs. “You should ask the bride and groom that question.”

Zoe’s smile slipped a little, and she turned her head to gaze out the window. “I’m not ready.”

“What?” My heart dropped. Had she and Maggie had a falling out or something? “Baby, what’s wrong?”

“It’s just... Today, we’ll be so close, and then tomorrow everything will be different. Everyone will eventually be going their separate ways.” Her deep sigh shook her shoulders.

“Not forever,” I pointed out, stroking her hair. “We all have to live our own lives, but we can keep our ties to each other. We can come back and visit, and we can invite them to visit us in LA. You can call anytime you want... paths can separate, but they can also join again.” She met me halfway as I stooped down to place a kiss on her lips. “Many, many times. No goodbyes are permanent unless we want them to be.”

“You look like a wise college professor right now,” Zoe told me, wrinkling her nose and smiling at the same time.

“Not a professor any more, thank goodness. Wise? It’s just the glasses.” I adopted a supercilious look and gave them a little tap to push them up my nose.

The doorbell rang, and we went to answer it, still chuckling. Maggie’s mom smiled at us, the expression a bit brief and harried. “Maggie’s on her way over from the hotel. Is upstairs ready?” She didn’t wait for a confirmation before pushing past us and heading upstairs with the bridesmaid dresses held high in her hands.

Zoe and I glanced at each other and tried not to snicker. “When’s Abigail going to get here?” I asked, glancing out the still-open door to see if anyone else was coming toward the house.

About ten minutes later, I was on the back porch when a voice that definitely didn’t belong to Zoe said, “Hey, Aiden.”

I turned to see a heavily tattooed man sporting a beard with brown, sideswept hair, wearing ripped jeans and a leather jacket walking onto the porch. “You must be Al?” I guessed. This guy was the definition of a rockstar.

“Yup,” he confirmed, stepping forward and holding out a tanned hand for a shake. “I was looking for you, Zoe asked me to let you know Maggie and the dress are upstairs. She said you would tell Marty the coast was clear.” He clapped me on the back. “And I needed to meet you, anyway.”

“Agreed. I don’t really know how we didn’t manage to meet before, considering how close the ladies are.” His grip matched my own, and I decided right on the spot that I liked this man.

“Well, Vaporized has been busy arranging proper wedding music. The rest of the boys aren’t here quite yet. All they need is thirty minutes or so before the other guests arrive to get set up. We’ve learned the meaning of the word ‘organized’. It’s a necessity in our business.” Al’s gaze swept across the chairs, runner and bedecked gazebo where the ceremony would take place. “I expect the grand piano to be delivered any minute now. I got a text from the rental house. The truck is on its way.” He pointed toward the gazebo. “It’s supposed to go right there, right?”

I nodded, “That’s my understanding.”

“Al!” Abigail popped her head out of the door. “What are you doing? Get your

tattooed butt back in here and help!”

I raised an eyebrow as Al grinned widely and winked. “She’s not wrong...about either of those things. Let’s go help.”

Shaking my head and chuckling, I followed the only rockstar I had ever met back into the house.

All three girls, Al, Maggie’s parents and my parents had come in within the last thirty minutes. But we still had two hours before guests would be arriving, and another half hour after that before the ceremony would start. The ladies had estimated that it would take them an hour and a half to get ready, so they would disappear in thirty minutes to be on the safe side.

Before then, though, there had been a few last-minute things that required the bride’s attention. So, I played doorman ensuring Marty was inside the guest room with the door closed when Maggie was downstairs.

I walked into the kitchen to find not Marty’s mother standing at the position of authority in the midst of everyone, but Maggie. I waited at the kitchen counter to be noticed, watching with amusement as Maggie listened to Mrs. Ellen expressing some sort of concern, looking nervous and holding a hand to her head. Maggie just calmly spoke to her for a moment, then turned away to tell her grandma not to put a certain bouquet of flowers in the wrong vase.

“Sorry,” she said when she had a moment to talk to me. “Everyone is kind of acting a little crazy right now.”

“But not you,” I observed. Maggie positively glowed.

“Not me,” she agreed. “Everything I wanted has come true, and I got to spend the

whole day yesterday with my brothers and father. I'm honestly just having so much fun right now, and I'm so happy. All the odds were against us having this wedding in June... so soon... but everything is falling into place. We are so blessed... I don't need to worry about anything. All I need to do is keep supporting and loving Marty, working my best and hardest and living life like it's my wedding every day."

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I couldn't say or do anything except reach out and squeeze Maggie's hand in understanding, because that was exactly the way I felt about Zoe and my life with her. Professors were supposed to have a way with words, but I never would have thought to put it like that.

"Alright, ladies, time for us to disappear back upstairs," Maggie decided, finding Abigail and Zoe amongst the milling people. Giggling, the three girls ran up the stairs after one last glance at Al and me.

I smiled and made a shooing motion with my hand, then mouthed "I love you" to Zoe. It surprised me that Maggie's eyes lingered for a moment on her mother struggling to straighten the floral garlands around the stair railings, but didn't stop to say anything. She really was happy and intent upon just having a wonderful time, whether every single flower was perfectly put into place or not.

Marty's mother took charge in the bride's absence, but she seemed to have taken a leaf out of Maggie's book and relaxed considerably. Smoothly, we all helped to make sure the last of the flowers from the truck in the driveway were unloaded and put into place, the tables were set aside out of sight but ready to be moved into the backyard when we rearranged the chairs for the reception.

Delphine asked if I had heard from the bakery and the caterer? When I told her, "They both called me this morning to double check the time and let me know everything's ready," she breathed a sigh of relief.

Then I felt a tap on my shoulder, and I looked behind me to see Al. "I think we've done about all we can, and we're just about the only ones not dressed yet. Let's go

get ready.”

Dressing for men was usually easier and faster than it was for women, and today was no exception. It didn’t take us long to change into our tuxes and gel our hair into a presentable form. It took longer than it needed to, though, because we chatted the whole time, talking about many things - especially our women. I hadn’t talked to Al before today, and I had only met Marty briefly, but the three of us hit it off immediately.’

“It’s because our girls are best friends,” Al joked as he came out of the bathroom, adjusting his bowtie.

“Wow, you clean up nice for a rough and tough rocker,” Marty joked. Only the tattoos on Al’s hands peeked out from under the tux jacket, and he had tamed his hair into a style more acceptable to the older generations that would be in attendance.

“Of course I do,” Al responded, raising his eyebrows high, standing up straight, and jokingly brushing an invisible hair back into place. “Mustn’t offend the moms and grandmas.”

Yeah,I decided again,I like Al. A bit direct, or even crass but polite when he needs to be.

Marty glanced at his watch. “We need to get out there,” he announced, nervously rubbing the back of his neck.

“You already got the girl, man,” Al told him nudging Marty with his elbow. “All you’ve got to do now is get out there, kiss her and seal the deal.”

Chapter Eight

Maggie

What's wrong?" Zoe leaped forward, steadying me in my heels at the top of the stairs. The house was finally quiet, and I knew why - everyone was outside waiting for me to appear.

I corrected my near overbalance with her help, feeling a little silly. "Nothing," I told her, letting Abigail take my other hand. "I'm not dizzy or overheated or anything. I just..." I giggled and held a hand to my mouth. "I'm so excited my legs are kinda shaky."

My two friends relaxed when they realized I was alright and fussed over me, finding some little things that were "wrong" with my satin train and waist length veil. They fixed these imaginary issues while I calmed my racing heart and settled my shaking legs.

I was doing it. I was getting married. After so much preparation, the time had finally come, and I could hardly believe it was happening. "This is really happening. Marty and I are getting married," I murmured, wondering if the words would become more real if I spoke them aloud.

"Yes, itishappening," Abigail agreed. "And it's happening because you're a beautiful, wonderful woman who found the man of her dreams."

I glanced back and forth at my two best friends in the world and grinned. "You two are absolutely stunning." The pale pink silky charmeuse fabric of their bridesmaid dresses clung to their curves elegantly. "Everything's going to change after today, isn't it? But for the better."

Zoe nodded her head slowly, her black curls bouncing against her shoulders. "Aiden said something to me this morning. He said that paths can separate, but they can also

join again.”

“We can split and go across the country to live our lives, but we can always come back together again,” I translated.

“Exactly. Now come on, you got this! Let us go out first, your dad is waiting in the dining room. Then you just take his arm and walk out the back door, looking like the beautiful bride you are, and tell that guy waiting at the end how much you love him.” Zoe gave me a careful hug and Abigail did the same, then they headed down the stairs and straightened out my train before leaving.

Everything is ready. Everyone is ready. I had written my vows, but I hadn’t needed to memorize them. They were written in my heart, and I could never forget something that meant so much to me.

The house is so quiet, I realized. I couldn’t hear a murmur of voices outside, the chirp of birds in the trees or gusts of wind playing with the old shutters. Everything held its breath along with me, waiting for the sound of the grand piano that had been placed in the backyard, near the gazebo. I shifted my bouquet in my hands, and the leaves and petals rubbed against each other and whispered tiny encouragements.

“Are you ready, Maggie?” My dad stepped up to me, offering me his arm with sparkling eyes.

“Oh, Daddy, I’m so, so ready. And I’m so glad you’re here!” I carefully through my arms around him in a spontaneous hug before I took his arm. “And you look so handsome, and Momma looks so beautiful.” I kept putting so in front of everything like I could somehow use the word to explain the vastness of the wealth of happiness in my heart.

“And you look the best of all of us, Honey. You make your whole dress glow,” he

said gently, giving my sleeve a little tug to straighten it from the hug.

Then deep, shimmering tones came from the backyard. “Is - is that it? Is Abigail at the piano?” I asked, suddenly unsure.

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 10:18 am

“Yes. She’s playing. It’s time! Come on, my beautiful daughter.”

Together, we walked to the back door. My dad took the handle in his free right hand and opened it wide, letting the soaring notes of the wedding march reach out and carry us into our first steps down the petal-covered white linen runner.

The weather was glorious; warm and sunny with just a few clouds, but not too hot. Just right!

To the right and left, a wave ran through my family and friends as they stood and turned to face me. Everywhere I looked, I could see smiles, joy and love. I knew every face. My mother, my two brothers, my grandma, Zoe’s parents, Abigail’s parents, her two sisters, the Vaporized band members, Al, Aiden, Marty’s parents and his brother... Everyone was here. Everyone had found the time to come together and be here for Marty and me.

Marty. Of course, Marty was here too... I hadn’t seen him at first because every part of me felt him there, waiting for me at the end of the aisle. I didn’t need to look for him. I knew he would always be there.

Now that I had found his gaze, though, I couldn’t look away. Every note of the wedding march beautifully played by Abigail brought me closer to him and my new life. I had to watch my feet, measure every step because if I didn’t, I would pick up my skirt, run to him in my wedding gown and kiss him before it was time.

Finally, we reached the end of the runner and stepped up into the gazebo with Marty on my right and the chaplain from Tulane University in front of me facing the

audience. The music faded away, and Abigail stood gracefully. Arranging her skirt, she stepped across the grass to stand beside Zoe inside the gazebo.

The chaplain gestured to Marty, and he stepped forward to stand on the other side of Daddy. Then the chaplain began to speak. He spoke of the beauty of the bride and the groom, the beauty of this place upon our green Earth and the reverence and integrity with which all in attendance should look upon our union that God had brought together. His strong voice carried to every man and woman in attendance. I listened to him and felt the truth of his words in my heart.

“Please be seated,” he ended, and a rustling of fabric met my ears as everyone did so. “Pray with me.”

The prayer was short and said without a single hitch in the chaplain’s words - maybe he didn’t even breathe. But its brevity didn’t lessen the beauty of the prayer, nor its heartfelt delivery. And then, suddenly, it was time. Holding open his pastoral book, the chaplain turned to my father, and asked, “Who gives this woman to be married to this man?”

“Her mother and me,” Daddy’s voice quivered a bit before he stepped back, removing himself from the space between Marty and me and letting my hand slip from his arm to my beloved’s. I gave his arm one last squeeze before he stepped away to be seated next to Momma.

From his book, the chaplain shared a brief passage of Scripture that spoke of love. I had read it before, but unlike many, many passages, I had never connected spiritually with this one.

I did now. It applied to us all, whether we all realized it or not.

Then, finally, the chaplain spoke directly to Marty. He asked those questions, the ones about loving me, wanting to be with me and sharing his life with me. He asked

if Marty would do those things, as long as we both should live.

Abigail took my bouquet before Marty began slipping the beautiful wedding ring that matched my engagement ring on my finger, answering, “I do.” From the lips of the man I loved came those two words, so simple, yet so filled with meaning.

Then it was my turn and Zoe handed me Marty’s gold wedding ring. I listened to the same questions and I had to stop myself from nodding my head. Of course, I would do all these things. That was what love meant, and I loved Marty with everything I had. “I do.” My eyes misted over, just a hint of happy tears, but I blinked them away. Now it was time to recite the personal vows we had created for each other.

I raised my voice so everyone could hear, my lungs strong and sure, not a quiver in my voice. I told Marty how I had felt when I met him. How he had stood above any other man. I recounted the sadness I had felt when I moved away and the joy that had replaced that sadness when we reconnected. I told him everything I loved about him, and then I had to pause to collect myself, so I could tell him how strong he was and how brave he had been in the face of cancer.

I could see quelled tears in his eyes, and it was his turn. I had to fight even harder to keep mine down as he told me how much I meant to him and how others in his past had led him to struggle with believing in love. I had reawakened that belief in him and he loved me all the more for bringing him back on the right path. Then, finally, in a deep voice as strong as the man himself, Marty spoke about fate. Fate had brought us together in high school, separated us to learn lessons of life, and then God had pulled us back together when the time was right.

I was actually crying now, but not any normal kind of crying. Tears ran down my cheeks but I beamed like I never had before, and my eyes were as bright as the sunny day. I could see everything so clearly. The life ahead of me, Marty’s love for me, and my love for him...

The chaplain cleared his throat gently, closed his book and announced, “I now pronounce you husband and wife! You may kiss the bride.”

Marty lifted my veil then caressed my face gently in his hands as I closed the remaining inches between us, and we brought our lips together in the most important kiss of our lives.

Clapping broke out from the approving, loving hands of our family and friends. We both knew it was time for Marty to offer me his arm and take me back down the aisle created by the runner between the chairs as a married couple, but we shared one more, then two more kisses, lost in each other, our hearts thundering above the applause.

Music rose above the dozens of hands as we finally broke our kiss. The members of Vaporized had jumped up quickly and headed to their instruments set up to one side of the yard, where the grass was greenest, flattest and perfect for dancing. The guests all stood up. “My beautiful, wonderful wife.” Marty kissed my hand, opting to cut the cake later. “May I have this first dance?”

“Of course.” I resisted the urge to kiss him again. There would be more than enough time for that later. For now, Abigail had gone to join her band and Al had taken the mic and hoisted his guitar, and we needed to go kick off a wonderful evening of dancing and fun.

The guests circled around the soft green of the natural dance floor to watch and munch on the food. The song took Marty and me, pulling us along and keeping us perfectly in step, and when it ended, everyone clapped again. In twos and threes, others joined us under the lanterns strung over the grass.

The next song, of course, I danced with my father. I spotted Marty and my mother dancing on the other side of Zoe and Aiden, and my heart fluttered to see two people I loved more than anything celebrating together.

Then the song ended and another began, but I stepped off the dance floor. I smiled widely as Marty's brother asked one of Abigail's sisters to dance, leading her into the midst of the other dancers.

"They would make a cute couple," I commented to Abigail.

"Maybe, but she's kind of a tease. Hasn't found anyone she wants to keep more than a couple of months." Zoe, Abigail and I giggled at Abigail's words. Of course, we were all spoken for now.

"Maggie, we have to do this again," Zoe said suddenly. "I don't mean this exact occasion... Although, I hope that will happen for both of us too, of course. I just mean us three. Together. Having a good time."

"Then let's do this every year," I decided suddenly. The light from the lanterns glimmered in the faces of my two best friends. "Let's have a reunion every year, in June, right here in this house. We weren't just fated to find Marty, Al and Aiden. We were also fated to be best friends."

"We can celebrate the ties that bind us every year in New Orleans," Abigail agreed, and we all joined hands.

"Sorry to interrupt, but might I steal my beautiful wife for another dance?" Marty asked, coming up to us. The jazz band was playing now, and Al stood next to Marty, extending a hand to Abigail as well.

I let Marty take my hand. He held it high, leading me to the dance floor with an impromptu spin. My eyes met Zoe's and Abigail's, and we smiled secret, best-friend smiles, knowing that we might lead different lives and move to new places, but we would never forget our ties here in New Orleans, Louisiana.