


The
WAINSWORTH
ROYALS
next year

Radical

ROYAL

DANIELLE KEIL

Radical
ROYAL



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Radical Royal

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THE AINSWORTH ROYALS: THE NEXT GEN

Radical Royal

*To everyone who dreamed about being a princess when they were younger...
but now have grown up and realized it's still a job.*

It's okay to still want the tiara, though.

AUTHORS NOTE

*This novel is written in British English.
All spelling and grammar are reflected in this
and may differ from what you are used to reading.*

CONTENTS

[Also By Danielle Keil](#)

[Authors Note](#)

1. [Maggie](#)
2. [Maggie](#)
3. [Maggie](#)
4. [Ollie](#)
5. [Maggie](#)
6. [Ollie](#)
7. [Maggie](#)
8. [Ollie](#)
9. [Maggie](#)
10. [Ollie](#)
11. [Maggie](#)
12. [Ollie](#)
13. [Maggie](#)
14. [Maggie](#)
15. [Ollie](#)
16. [Maggie](#)
17. [Ollie](#)
18. [Maggie](#)

19. [Ollie](#)
20. [Ollie](#)
21. [Maggie](#)
22. [Ollie](#)
23. [Maggie](#)
24. [Ollie](#)
25. [Maggie](#)
26. [Ollie](#)
27. [Ollie](#)
28. [Maggie](#)
29. [Ollie](#)
30. [Ollie](#)
31. [Ollie](#)
32. [Maggie](#)
33. [Ollie](#)
34. [Maggie](#)
35. [Ollie](#)
36. [Maggie](#)
37. [Maggie](#)
38. [Ollie](#)
39. [Epilogue: Maggie](#)

[Also By Danielle Keil](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About The Author](#)



CHAPTER ONE

Maggie

Having the King for a father was the worst.

“You’re so *infuriating!*” I didn’t mean to raise my voice at him, but the way he was treating me left me with only one option—to throw a teenage temper tantrum. I was well beyond the need for one, but if it was the only way my father would *listen* to me, then so be it.

Stomping around my room and chucking throw pillows didn’t help the growing anger inside of me. Why my father couldn’t understand the fact that I was *not* working yet angered me. He kept telling my assistant to add more to my plate when I already had enough with schoolwork, charity work, and my music.

“I’m infuriating? Margaret, you need to grow up. You have a duty to your kingdom!”

Throwing around words like “duty” and “kingdom” didn’t help him, and he still didn’t see it.

“I grew up the second Grandmum announced her cancer and you took

over. Six years ago, Dad. Which, if you ask me, was a heck of a lot sooner than you did!” It was a low blow, but I needed the gut punch right now. He wouldn’t listen any other way. He hadn’t been listening for years.

Dad opened his mouth as if to rebut. Wisely, he closed it before a word came out. The daggers coming from my eyes might have been a good clue that he shouldn’t be talking.

“We agreed *years* ago that I would not be working until after I turned twenty-one. Unless *I* specifically wished to do so before then. School, charity, and my own interests were to take precedence. I have four more years, Dad!”

He ran his hand over his salt-and-peppered hair, streaked with grey he blamed on me and my siblings. “Yes, we did agree, but—”

“There’s no but’s, Dad!” My voice unintentionally raised again. Sucking in a breath, I lifted my head to the ceiling, trying to hold back my frustration.

Javeen, one of my newer assistants, scurried from the adjoining room and into the main hallway, getting away from the blows. The fights between my father and I had become legendary; everyone knew about them and smartly stayed far away.

It wasn’t that I didn’t love him. I did, more so than many. And it wasn’t because I didn’t understand the stress and pressure he had with his job. Obviously I, more than almost anyone, would be the most understanding.

First in line to the throne was a stressful enough job. Actually sitting on the throne, so to say, was worse.

I had seen my father decline over the past six years, since Grandmum handed him the job. She gave him a test-run first, having him take over duties while she battled through cancer treatment.

Even when she was in remission, she was still scared it would return. It scared all of us. Wanting to live her life to the fullest without all the stress and worry, she renounced her title as Queen and handed the crown to my father.

He was only forty-seven years old at his coronation. I was twelve when I officially jumped to first in line, even though he had been acting as King for almost a year before then. Which was old enough to understand what was going on and what was expected of me, but young enough to want to live a somewhat normal life.

“You two are at it *again*?” Mum asked from the doorway with her arms crossed over her chest. She was the only one who could break up an argument between Dad and me, mainly because she would drag Dad away and let me fume.

“Margaret needs—” One expertly raised eyebrow from Mum had him silent in an instant. After almost twenty years of marriage, he learned his place.

He may be King, but Mum ruled the home.

“Even Sir Biscuit is hiding this time. How long have you been in a spat?” My Corgi was indeed stuffed under the ottoman, only his stumpy back legs sticking out.

Dad glanced at me, trying to get out of answering. I replied with the same raised eyebrow as Mum. Dad always said I was her replica, except for our matching pair of bright blue eyes. His shoulders sagged, defeated.

“Dad has a stick up his arse. Again,” I mumbled, flopping into the chair and resting my feet on the ottoman. Sir Biscuit wiggled his fluffy butt out and jumped into my lap.

The corner of Mum’s lips quirked, like she was holding back a laugh. She took my side recently, knowing Dad came down on me too hard. With only a few years before I became a full-time working royal, Dad felt I should start inching my way in now.

“I just think—” Dad started. Mum cut him off again by placing her hands on his shoulders and turning him toward the door.

“Don’t think. Just walk. Dear. My love.” She batted her eyelashes at him and pushed him through the doorway.

Dad huffed out an angry breath and followed orders. I waggled my fingers at his retreating form in a sassy goodbye, thinking they would both leave and I could stew in private.

I was wrong. Mum came strolling back in a second later, the eyebrow raised once again.

“Ugh,” I sighed, flailing my limbs over the sides of the chair in an overly dramatic fashion. Even though Mum and I may look alike, I had Dad’s personality through and through—a flair for the dramatic, even if the situation didn’t call for it.

“Maggie... about the charity...” Mum started, positioning herself on the edge of my chair and stroking Sir Biscuit’s soft fur. He wedged himself between her and the chair, not giving me a second glance while he lapped up the attention.

My heart dropped. I hadn’t realised Dad overheard me speaking with Xavier about his charity work. At almost thirteen, he had to choose a charity to work with. He wanted to take the easy route, and go with Dad’s sports charity, which was about to hit its twenty-year anniversary.

I warned him away though, citing Dad’s aforementioned stick up the arse as a reason to steer clear. Really, Xavier needed to branch out and not be lazy. Of course, that’s not the part Dad overheard.

“I didn’t—” Mum held up a hand to stop me, just like she did Dad. My mouth clamped shut in the same manner.

“I know you didn’t say something to hurt your father’s feelings on purpose, dear. However... be more mindful of when and how you speak, hmm? The walls have ears...”

It was a saying she had been telling all four of us kids since we moved into the palace. There were no secrets around here, no matter how hard we tried.

I closed my eyes, rubbing my forehead like I’d seen her do on many an occasion. “Understood, Mum.”

She patted my leg, gave Sir Biscuit one more scratch behind the ears, and

left without another word. At least she understood the need for silence after a row with my father. There was a lot I needed to mentally unpack, including how to make him realise I wasn't going to be at his beck and call.

Not yet, anyway.

What I needed was to talk to someone who *understood*. Someone who had been there, done that, and got a shirt at the palace gift shop.

Someone who knew my father better than almost anyone. Who knew how he ticked, because she was quite literally made from the same cloth.

Pulling out my mobile, I speed-dialled my aunt. Surely my dad's own twin could shed some light on his behaviour and how to switch his mindset.

After I explained the situation, Auntie Ellie sat silent for a moment, thinking over the incredible task I asked of her.

Get Dad to lay off.

"Sweetheart, that's not something I can do," she responded softly. I rolled my eyes so hard it almost hurt. "Your father is under an enormous amount of pressure every day..."

Like I didn't know that.

"Auntie Ellie... he's just—" I cut myself off this time, having been trained well enough not to throw a temper tantrum with other family members.

"Oh, Maggie," she sighed, using the family nickname. No one outside the palace walls except her used that name. Even my Auntie Charlotte still called me Margaret. To the rest of the world, it was Her Royal Highness, Princess Margaret.

"You need to make amends with him, dear. He's trying his best in a situation he never thought he would be in at this stage in life. He planned on being around as just your father for a while and to take the title once you were all grown. He thought you and he would work through this stage together, navigating life as working royals in unison."

"Then why is he so insistent on me taking over responsibilities when we had an agreement?" The groan that escaped was accidental. Ellie's sigh made

the guilt creep in. I was acting like a whiny teenager because that's what I was. A teenager. Who occasionally whined. And sometimes still threw temper tantrums.

“I can't play both sides here, sweetheart. I love you to the moon and back, and your father is my twin brother. I have loyalties on all sides, and I cannot choose one over the other. I understand what you're saying, but it's a problem between you and James, I'm afraid.”

I stayed quiet, not having any comment after that. She was right. I knew she was right. *She* knew she was right. The whole world knew she was right, yet that didn't mean I wanted to accept it. I wanted someone to commiserate with me, to whine about ridiculous things with me, and tell me I was right and Dad was wrong.

It wasn't a privilege I was given, having lived in the palace for the past six years. I wasn't afforded the right to best friends and sleepovers and late-night gossip. My corner of the world was Mum, Auntie Ellie, and—

“Maybe call Grandmum? She gives good advice,” Auntie Ellie mentioned. Grandmum completed my little circle of women role models.

“Thanks, Auntie Ell,” I said before hanging up.

I wasn't sure how many times I could dramatically sigh in one night without it being overkill, but I tried one more for good measure.

Sometimes being a royal sucked.



CHAPTER TWO

Maggie

What is it about the C chord that my fingers don't like?

I had been struggling with these particular notes for a week now. Not even my teacher knew how to fix my ridiculous fingers. Practicing only made it worse, creating cramps on top of strain.

After plugging the guitar into my amp so I could hear the sound better, I heaved it over my shoulder and adjusted the strap.

Knowing Mum took the twins shopping and Xavier was in his lessons on the opposite side of the palace filled me with the desire to kick the amp up to the highest setting. No one was around, so who would I bother?

Even Dad was out. Like always.

We hadn't spoken since our tiff last week, and honestly, it was the most peaceful week in the recent past. Not having him berate me day after day gave both of us some time to cool off. Another hours-long talk with Mum helped shed some light on the leniency I should be giving Dad. I was just like him—stubborn and hard-headed.

I would apologise, but not until he apologised first. We had a deal, and he was trying to break it. I should have made him pinky-promise. Or found the solicitor and made an official contract.

Strumming a few easy chords, I thought about that. Maybe Xavier should get something in writing so he doesn't have to go through with all of this when he gets to be my age. At thirteen, he was just now entering the world of a semi-working royal, and needed to be protected at all costs. I didn't want the stress of being a prince to weigh him down. He deserved to live his life as he wanted until he came of working age.

Diving in before he was ready would lead to massive burn out, tension, and hatred for all things royal.

Not unlike what was happening to me.

I knew my place. Even though I was only seventeen, I understood what it meant to be first in line. The title of crown princess was not lost on me; however, a normal, teenage life was still attainable, to a degree. It was that specific degree Dad and I disagreed on.

The twins, at only eight years old, had more time before they were swept up into the chaos and strict lifestyle that I was held in. Hopefully by the time they were of age, I would be able to make some changes in order to protect them.

Flipping my hair over my shoulder, I plucked a few strings, focusing on my finger spacing. I still couldn't get the chord.

It didn't matter anyway, because a moment later, the door burst open, almost slamming into the wall behind it.

"What the hell, Margaret?" Dad seethed. "Where were you?"

I didn't bother acknowledging him; he would continue his tirade whether I participated or not. Instead, I replaced my fingers on the fretboard, stretching them into a rather unnatural and quite uncomfortable state. I bit my lip, my brows scrunched together.

"Margaret! Are you even listening to me?" Dad shouted. His voice broke

on the last word and it took everything I had not to burst out laughing. I couldn't take him seriously when his face looked like a tomato.

"Sprout a new grey hair there, Pops?" I asked, lifting the guitar strap over my head and placing the instrument on the holder in the corner. I kicked off the amp with my foot and flung myself on my bed. It didn't matter where in my room I was, Dad would keep going anyway.

"The event, Margaret! Why were you not at the event? The Prime Minister and other foreign—"

I held up my hand to stop him, which seemed to be the only thing that worked, since it was Mum's signature move. She could get the Prime Minister to stop talking with that hand.

He stopped. The rage behind his eyes flashed.

"Esme said it wasn't an official event. That you put it on the agenda because you thought it would be a good publicity stunt. She said it was fine if I *didn't* go, because it wasn't sponsored in any way and therefore not an official working engagement. And without it being official, that means..." I raised an eyebrow, daring Dad to defy me. He probably would, but I would repeat our deal until I was blue in the face.

"Well... Esme shouldn't have... she..."

I rolled my eyes and flipped onto my stomach, picking up the nearest magazine I had lying about. My legs lifted, kicking back and forth in a manner I knew was obnoxious, but dealing with Dad was even more so.

"And when I see an *official* event, placed on my calendar by the *palace staff*, then I will attend. After I finish university or turn twenty-one, I will go to all your *unofficial* gigs. Until then..."

My eyes darted to my guitar in the corner, Dad's gaze following me.

"Is that it? Your ridiculous guitar taking up all your extra time? You can't possibly attend the events on your schedule like an *adult* because of that *guitar*? I have half a mind to just—"

My heart screeched to a stop, my life flashing before my eyes as Dad

stomped over to my precious baby, lifting it by the neck and crushing the strings. I sat up straight, holding out my hands and silently begging him not to hurt it.

“*This!* This is the issue? Well, good thing it’s an easy issue to take care of, Margaret! You can have it back when you decide to grow up and take responsibility for your actions.” Dad’s voice carried now, echoing around my bedroom and the tall ceilings.

“You will put that instrument back down right this moment, James Phillip Edward,” a stern voice demanded from my doorway. “And you will do so slowly and carefully. If it is harmed in any way, you will be fully responsible. Tame that temper, *dear.*”

The second Dad lowered my guitar, oxygen returned to my lungs. And with it, rage. It flooded my body like nothing I ever felt before.

Had Dad gone so crazy that he would take the guitar? What was he planning on doing with it—smashing it? Stealing it? Selling it?

It didn’t matter. Because the moment he laid hands on it, I was done. Dad and I were *done*.

“*What* has gotten into you, love?” Mum asked, reaching out for Dad’s hand. “The stress is really getting to you.”

Mum ushered him out of the room, mumbling something to him quietly. Watching him being escorted out of my room was a scene I had become rather used to.

The times Mum wasn’t around while Dad and I had a row usually ended in Dad’s assistant coming to my rescue, telling him there was urgent business to attend to.

Someone always had to come rescue me.

No more. It was time for this princess to rescue herself.



Mum—I love you. Always. But I cannot handle another spat with Dad. The

two of us need our space before we begin a household civil war.

Tell the kids I love them.

I'll be in touch. Don't worry about me. I promise I'm fine.

-M

I left the note where Mum wouldn't find it for another few hours at least. By that time, I would be at Auntie Ellie's house already. Which was far enough away that I couldn't just turn around and come home straightaway. If Mum wanted, she could come get me in the morning.

I only hoped and prayed she wouldn't.

Jonathan, my driver, didn't question me when I threw three large duffel bags and my guitar case into the trunk and told him to drive. He barely blinked when I told him the location, even though it was an almost four-hour drive.

The only thing he did was ask about my security team. I lied through my teeth and told him they were following behind, and another team was already at Ellie's. He had to know I was lying, and I saw him make a discreet phone call thirty minutes into our trip.

But if Auntie Ellie could get away with vanishing in the middle of the night twenty years ago, I could do it now.

"Why the bloody hell did they have to move all the way out here, Jonathan?" I mumbled an hour after my arse went numb.

He chuckled, but didn't respond. Considering he technically worked for my father, and the kingdom, he attempted to stay out of our personal affairs.

When we were little, he would sneak us extra sweets when Mum or Dad weren't looking. I highly doubt he stopped that practice with Henry and Louisa. The same way Xavier and I always kept our lips closed.

"Your Highness, I do not wish to inform you of bad news, but it looks as if the family may have turned in for the night," Jonathan said a bit later as we

pulled up in front of Auntie Ellie's house.

All the lights were off except the glow from a lantern outside the front door. I glanced at my watch, seeing as the time was almost eleven at night. I knew my cousins would still be awake, even if Ellie and Sean were asleep.

If I could get in, and Christian saw me to a room, then by morning, Auntie Ellie would have to let me stay. For a while at least.

Maybe.

"That's alright, Jonathan. I'll take it from here. Please, find a hotel for the night before driving back," I mentioned, opening my door before he made his way around. I was on my own now; I didn't need a driver taking care of me.

"But Princess—"

I whipped my head around so fast my long, dark hair slapped me in the face. "Shh!" I hushed frantically. I couldn't risk any neighbors overhearing.

We were far enough away from London that I hoped to be able to lay low without anyone recognizing me. Considering how many engagements I stayed away from in the past few years, and the elaborate gowns I wore when I did go out, there was a possibility that I could get away with being anonymous while dressed down.

And the sweatpants, oversized t-shirt, and fake glasses I had on were as dressed down as I could get.

"Margaret," Jonathan corrected himself, a bead of sweat appearing on his brow. I hated putting him in this position, but I had no other choice. "Your father..."

He had been with our family long enough to realise not to deal directly with my father if you had news that was anything less than stellar. Mum was the more lenient of the two, and took bad news better.

"You could always just slip back and not tell anyone?" I suggested, knowing it wouldn't work.

He shook his head, the black-framed glasses slipping down his bumpy nose. A past life playing professional rugby left him with more than one

broken nose over the years and it showed.

“You know as well as I that would never work, Your Highness.” He stood up straight and buttoned his jacket, resuming his role and brushing off the worry. “At the very least, I’ll blame it all on you. Hope that’s alright, *Margaret.*” He adjusted his words as I glared at him for the use of a title.

It only took him a moment to heave my bags out of the boot and place them on the pavement, as if in hopes to place them, and me, back in the car in a hurry.

I gave an exaggerated huff and grabbed a duffel. With the racket we were making, I couldn’t believe Ellie or Sean would be asleep much longer. And if Jonathan wanted to blame me, well, then that was fine. Dad would only add it to the long list of my faults as soon as he found out anyway.

“Perfectly splendid, Jonathan. Now, I thank you for your service and will bid you adieu. *Hope that’s alright.*” I threw his words back at him in jest. Tipping the brim of his cap, he shut the boot and returned to the driver’s seat.

Knowing him, he would situate himself around the corner until I entered the home and the door was shut and locked behind me. There was no way he would leave the first in line to the royal throne in danger. The call he made earlier probably had some sort of elaborate set up, with communication between him, my security team, and Ellie’s team too. Though she chose to abdicate and live with her family in the country, she was still part of our family, and therefore had protection when necessary.

Shuffling around my bags, I tapped my knuckles on the front door, sending a silent prayer that Christian answered instead of the adults.

Being only a year older than me, he was bound to be more understanding than Ellie or Sean. Christian was taking a gap year before figuring out what he wanted to do for a career.

Uncle Sean would love for him to join him at the tattoo shop, but Christian was more rigid than that. He had Ellie’s stiff upbringing type of personality, without the “let-loose” she had developed since renouncing the throne.

Christian and I were never super close, but in this moment, I whispered every prayer I knew that he would answer first.

The door swung open, and I found myself face-to-face with my aunt instead.

Shit.

“Margaret? What in the heavens are you doing on my doorstep in the middle of the night?”

“Hi, Auntie Ellie...” I started, not quite sure how to begin this conversation.

She glanced behind me, seeing my massive bags. Her eyes grew wide and all the colour drained from her face.

“Oh no. You’ve become me.”



CHAPTER THREE

Maggie

Ellie led me into the front room, shouting for Sean to grab my bags off the path.

He walked by with a smirk on his face, like he was holding back laughter. His easy-going personality made it fun to visit with him; he made me forget about the stiffness of royal life.

Which was one reason I chose this particular home to come to.

The second the door closed behind me, Auntie Ellie sent Mum a text. They must have been on the same wavelength, because Mum found my note mere moments before Ellie's message.

Two separate phone calls and a video chat later, Mum was satisfied that I hadn't been kidnapped or held against my will, and I still had all my limbs. She allowed me to stay for the night and said we would speak about the situation in the morning.

The best part of the call was when she also promised not to tell Dad I left until after our conversation tomorrow. She wasn't happy about the note, or

the lack of security, but being the level-headed woman she was, understood my need for some space. Mum ended the video call telling me how much she loved me and that everything would get figured out. She promised me she would do all she could to have an outcome I was happy with.

The second call was strictly for the adults, and lasted much longer than mine.

Christian and I talked for a moment while Ellie, Sean, and Mum were on the phone. He voiced his distaste with my decision and how, if he were in my position, he would never “run away” from the palace. The thought of being a royal thrilled him. He confided in me that he never understood how his mother could give it all up for a lazy, country lifestyle.

If he had his way, he would be in the palace with a title, second in line after his older brother.

He seemed rather snooty about the whole thing, turning his nose up at me when I explained how I wanted to get away and lie low for a little while. He scoffed when I told him the quarrels I had with my dad, saying my problems were miniscule compared to the rest of the country. As if being a princess didn't allow me the same feelings and thoughts as anyone else.

There was so much he didn't know, however, and so much I wouldn't tell him. I would let his little fantasy stay intact. No one could ever understand how demanding, how overwhelming, how stifling my life could be.

“Now that we got that settled, mind telling me the real reason you're here?” Ellie asked, lounging on the sofa with her feet tucked under her and her hands wrapped around a warm mug of tea. The streaks of pink popped from the underside of her dark hair. Sean sat next to her, leaving me in the armchair in the corner and Christian leaning against the wall opposite me.

I sighed before answering Auntie Ellie's question. “No offense, but...” I picked at a cuticle in desperate need of a manicure. I only got them before an engagement; nails didn't last long with my guitar.

“James,” Ellie finished for me.

I nodded, hoping she understood. Being Dad's twin sister, she had to realise what he was like these days. The stress from his job had only made him worse over the past few years. I understood, really, I did, but it wasn't fair for him to put all the pressure on me either.

When he was younger, Ellie was first-in-line. He was the spare to the heir, and ran with that. During his teenage years and into his twenties, he was a party boy through and through. It wasn't until he met Mum that he settled down and changed things up.

So why was he putting the weight of the world on my shoulders when I was only seventeen?

Ellie sighed and put her empty mug on a coaster before leaning into Sean, looking lovingly in his eyes. Their love story was one of my favourites. Especially now.

When Ellie ran away from the palace, she dyed her hair, came up with a new name, and eventually met Sean. They fell in love, she renounced her place in line, and they started a family out here in the country.

It sounded like a dream to me.

"You know, Maggie," Ellie began, using my nickname when no one else in the home dared to, "when I left the palace all those years ago, I was miserable. I couldn't fathom another day in such a prison."

My back straightened, and a smile found its way on my face for the first time in the past few hours. "So you get it!" I exclaimed, my hands clutching each other in order to not launch myself at my aunt and tackle her in a bear hug.

She shook her head, though, smashing my hopes. "No, Maggie, I don't. The reason I left was completely different from yours. Just because you and your father argue, doesn't mean you should run away..."

"It's not that, and you *know* it's not. It's not *one* argument, Auntie Ellie. It's one argument per hour at this point. Nothing I do makes him happy. Not unless I was the perfect princess, stuck by his side on display all hours of the

day.”

Ellie tucked her lips in and closed her eyes, grimacing. Sean wrapped an arm around her shoulders, his thumb rubbing small circles on her bicep.

My lip quivered, tears pricking at the corner of my eyes. “I understand if you don’t want me to stay. I just thought... if anyone would get it, it would be you...”

“Margaret Victoria Alice, you are not going anywhere,” Ellie stated, her eyes flying open with a look of determination I knew so well took over her face. It matched the one on my father’s face often.

“I’m not?”

“No.” A small smile spread across her lips as she glanced at her husband. “School starts soon...”

“Wait, what?” Christian asked from his perch, his hands shoved into his trouser pockets and his glasses slipping down his nose as he stumbled away from the wall and stood to his full height.

“You need distance from your father. I understand that. James can be... hard to handle. Your mother and I spoke, and *if*, and that’s a big *if*, I can get you into Waversmore College before the term starts, then you can go. At least for the first term.”

My head spun. My goal was to separate from my father for a few days, a week max. Never did I think I could attend a boarding school more than four hours away from home. How would that even work? There were engagements to attend, official trips planned, and my entire life back at the palace. When I said I wanted space, I didn’t imagine this.

But Auntie Ellie said Mum agreed. Which meant she would have to deal with my father. And the press.

I couldn’t think about that at the moment, though. The only thing going through my mind was that I could stay. I could attend Waversmore College, a boarding school mere minutes away from here. The one Christian and his older brother, Edward, had attended.

An actual school. Not a tutor. A place where I would go to classes, where I would live in a house, eat in a dining hall, and—

“How?” I blurted out. Waversmore College meant other students. Students who could identify me moments after entering the building.

“It so happens that your aunt is rather good at disguise,” Sean piped in. He twirled a finger around a lock of Ellie’s hair. She kept the underneath with streaks of pink, dying it other colours for holidays and special occasions, but always returning to the pink.

A massive grin grew, stretching my cheeks to their limits.

“Your appearance would need some modifications. How do you feel about purple?” Ellie asked, a mischievous glint in her eye.



“So, as you can understand, we need to leave here with absolute certainty that not only will Margaret, I mean Maggie, be cared for, but also protected at all costs,” Ellie said. She spoke in what I called the “Royal Voice”. It was the most serious of tones, one that conveyed harsh penalties if objected.

Headmistress Tavers nodded, her dark, tightly wound curls bouncing around her head. She, too, spoke in a grave tone, as if having me at her school was a personal threat on her life.

Which, if things went wrong, it could potentially be, considering how upset my father already was.

I pushed my dark rimmed, cat-eye shaped glasses up my nose. They were hurting my face, but as part of my disguise, they had to stay.

“I can personally guarantee that Princess Margaret’s safety will be my top priority for however long she resides on this campus. All security personnel are on the highest alert. If you deem necessary, we can provide extra guards for her house, or personal escorts around campus.”

Sean shook his head. “None of that. Having Edward and Christian go through Waversmore already, we are more than pleased with the measures

you have in place currently.”

“We will need this disclosure signed by yourself and any administration that is told of Margaret’s true identity.” Ellie slid a pack of papers across the desk at the headmaster, who didn’t blink upon receiving them. Something told me it wasn’t her first bout with confidentiality agreements, which made me slightly more at ease with the transition.

“No escorts. And please remember it’s Maggie... do you really think I should keep my name?” I questioned, twirling a lock of purple hair between my fingers. It came out better than I could have hoped. Auntie Ellie’s stylist was a master of colour and got my dark locks looking lively and shiny. He left the roots my normal dark brown, giving it an ombre definition. He also cut it to my shoulders.

With that, and the glasses with fake lenses, even I didn’t recognise myself. I tried to convince Ellie for a nose piercing, but she refused, stating that if she sent me home “full of holes”, my father would have her exiled.

Considering he had the power to do that, I let her win that battle.

Sean offered a tattoo, but the look of sheer horror on Ellie’s face shot that idea down just as fast.

“Maggie should be fine. You’re only Maggie to me and your family; no one has ever called you that outside palace walls. Her Royal Highness, Princess Margaret Victoria Alice, doesn’t exist here. Now you’re just plain old Maggie Davies from Blackpool. You’re Sean’s niece, no relation to me or my family. With the name, the slight back story, and your new look, we should be able to pull it off,” Ellie replied, leaning over to straighten my uniform blazer.

Headmistress Tavers agreed. “To be frank, Your Highness, the moment you walked in here, I didn’t know who you were. The fact that you came with Mrs Davies gave me pause because of who she is, but I had no indication as to your parentage. Though, looking at you side by side, I see the family resemblance in the eyes. However, your aunt won’t be here with you at

school, so no one should piece things together like I am now.”

The butterflies in my stomach calmed a bit, but still flew around like maniacs. This was the riskiest thing I had ever done in my life. If I got caught, it would be a scandal and slander against my family name. I could become the laughingstock of the country and the palace would have to work overtime to get my name cleared.

All I wanted was a little space from my dad. If this went awry, I would be in way deeper than I had been before.

Thinking about how outraged he would be with me if I came home with my head hung made my stomach churn. Dad was already upset with me for missing an engagement he thought necessary. And for not taking control over my life the way *he* planned it out. If I took this risk and screwed it up, he may never forgive me.

Four days ago, I ran away with not a single clue what I was going to do besides camp out at Ellie’s for a while, until Dad got the stick out of his arse.

Now I was enrolling in Waversmore College, as an upper sixth form. It was my first time attending a school in person since I was eleven years old. Once I turned twelve, Grandmum renounced the throne, Dad took over, and my life as the first-in-line took precedence. That meant tutors in just about every subject, including world politics, geography, royal history, international etiquette, and more. The classwork alone was more than twice what a normal student would get, and that was on top of the events and engagements on the official calendar I had to attend.

It was what I so desperately wanted Dad to understand, and what he could not wrap his head around. While I wasn’t considered a working royal yet, I had more on my plate than he ever could imagine.

“Well, honey, what do you think? Are you excited? You can still pull out now. Or at any time. You just ring us, no matter what.” Ellie wrapped me in a hug at the entrance to Carriageton House, my new home for the term. Headmistress Tavers personally showed us the way, getting a few glances

from other students moving in.

“This is good,” I responded, trying to convince myself of the fact.

A tall boy strolled by just then, his long blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail, two drumsticks in his hands. He beat an invisible drum as he walked, whistling to himself. The uniform blue blazer hugged his shoulders, the sleeves wrapping around his biceps like they would burst with a single deep breath.

Before he got out of sight, he turned, walked backwards, and locked eyes with me. One wink was all I got before he crossed the courtyard and vanished.

“Well... keep out of trouble. Head down, don’t cause a scene. No joining any sports or clubs that put you in the public eye—we can’t have your name out there in any way. Someone could eventually make the connection. The more you keep to yourself, the better,” Ellie said, pulling me in for another hug.

Sean patted my shoulder. “Make friends and have fun. Don’t be a hermit.”

I grinned, glad he piped in. “Make friends, but don’t stick out. Pretty sure I learned how to do that years ago.”

Ellie shook her head, sadness pulling her face down. I knew what she was thinking.

Living the life of a princess wasn’t as glamorous as others made it seem. It included a lot of time being alone, having to plaster on a fake smile no matter what, and people telling you what to do.

“Be good, sweetheart,” Ellie said. “Please call your parents and let them know you’re safe. And call them often. And me. Don’t forget to check in with me. I promise to leave you alone unless I don’t hear from you.”

I gave Ellie a thumbs up and waved as they walked toward their car and disappeared out of sight.

I was on my own now.

For the first time in years, I didn’t feel lonely.



CHAPTER FOUR

Olivia

I stopped outside the entrance of the main building, taking in a deep breath.

It was the last first day I'd ever have, and I wanted to savour the moment. The first day of the last year at Waversmore, which had been my home since I was five.

Starting at Waversmore Junior, and now Waversmore College, it was one of the few places I liked to call home. School was more of a home than the house I resided in during the summer holiday, anyway.

"Watch it, you big oaf," someone yelled to my left. I spun around, my long blonde hair whipping me in my face. I would have to pull it back before my teachers yelled at me. I stole a ton of hair ties from a friend at home over the summer. It was ridiculous how fast I lost those little buggers.

"Shit, mate, can't you let me have a moment?" I shot back with a smile, throwing an arm around my best friend's shoulders. Travis' hair was in a worse state than mine, although not long enough to be tied up. It had that messy style he swore drove the ladies crazy, whereas mine was getting to man-bun length if I didn't cut it soon.

And I wouldn't. I quite enjoyed running my fingers through it and giving it a good tousle.

"It's our last first day, Travis boy. You know what that means?" I asked, staring up at the Waversmore name etched into the stone above the door. The building was almost as old as the school itself, dating back to the seventeen hundreds.

Travis crumpled his nose as if he smelled something foul. "We have a whole year of schoolwork to do before freedom?"

I laughed, but didn't let go of his shoulders. "No, mate, it means less than a year left of stability, of knowing what to expect, of routine. It's our last first day for the rest of our lives." I attempted to put on my most serious tone.

"You're off your rocker," he answered, shrugging my arm off him and reaching for the door handle.

A group of students pushed past us, not even bothering to recognise the occasion. A swarm of blue blazers over grey pants pulled Travis in with them, leaving me once again alone on the front step.

This was a moment I both anticipated and dreaded at the same time. Next year, life would be completely different. And that terrified me.

"Oi, Ollie, move on!" Travis called from inside.

I grinned and pushed past the door. Nothing changed as I walked into the building. I didn't feel any different, the school looked the same, and Travis punched me in the shoulder.

"Ow," he complained, shaking out his hand as if my bicep hurt his knuckles. "I need to take up drumming."

I flexed, being careful not to rip my shirt sleeves. My blazer had a bit of spare room, as I ordered a size up, but the button down was tight around my biceps, threatening to come apart at the seams if I stretched too far.

Drummer problems.

A few of our friends strolled in behind me, slapping my shoulder as I greeted them. I knew almost everyone at Waversmore. I was what we called a

“lifer”—someone who went from start to finish with the school. Waversmore was my home, through and through, and I loved it.

Travis and I took off down the hallway, taking in everything around us. He wasn't one to make idle chit-chat, which I appreciated. I wanted to soak it in, bask in the—

“Ollie! Oh, Ollie, dear!” a too-sweet, sing-songy voice echoed from down the hall. I glimpsed at Travis, my eyes wide with fear. Instead of helping me out, he smirked, laughed, and pivoted on his heel, taking off in the opposite direction as fast as he could.

The click-clack of heels and a cloud of vanilla perfume announced Kenzie before I even saw her. Her hand slid around my arm, her pink claws resting on my bicep.

My jaw tightened at her arrival.

“Oh, Ollie, how are you darling? I've missed you so.” She stood a bit more on her tip toes, as much as possible in her stilettos, and attempted to kiss my cheek.

I turned away, avoiding her lipstick at all costs. The last thing I needed on the first day was to walk around branded by Kenzie Settleman.

“What do you want, Kenzie?” I hissed, looking to see if anyone was around to save me. The second someone caught my eye, they ducked their head and shuffled off. The only person who stayed was Camille, Kenzie's best friend, who leaned against the stone wall next to a classroom watching the two of us. She waggled her fingers, taunting me.

Kenzie rambled on about her summer and how excited she was to return to school, but I was over it.

“Kenzie,” I deadpanned, not wanting to deal with her nonsense any longer than I had to. My one goal for my last year at Waversmore was to enjoy the ride, live it up, and forget the drama. And drama was Kenzie's middle name. I had enough of it last year, and I vowed to have this year be different.

“You realise we are not together anymore, right?” I let her hand stay,

knowing that if I tried to remove it, she would put it right back, as if she had some sort of claim over me.

She thought she did. She was wrong.

We broke things off at the end of last term, spending the summer break with absolutely zero communication. It was exactly what I needed, yet somehow she found her way back to me today. She was a leech I couldn't get rid of.

Besides her boobs and her arse, there wasn't much else I liked about her. The only reason we dated for those three months was because one of my mates forced her onto me. He started dating Camille, and they wanted to double date.

I agreed, not realising I had entered a contract of sorts, where Kenzie assumed the one double date meant I was her new boyfriend. She assumed I would act like a puppy dog, following her around and acting like a fool.

I went along with it, letting Kenzie pretend we were happy.

But we weren't. At least, I wasn't.

At the time, other things going on in my life sidetracked me, and my "relationship" took a back seat. I used Kenzie as a distraction, not realising she was using me too, until it was too late.

Summer holidays seemed like the perfect excuse to break things off. I hoped the lack of communication would drive the nail into the coffin of our relationship.

With her on my arm right now, it was obvious she didn't get it. Even Camille and her boyfriend broke it off, but that didn't seem to affect Kenzie's thought process at all.

"Oh, Ollie. You're so silly. We all know summer holidays are for having fun, but now that we're back at Waversmore, things return to how they were." She batted her long, fake eyelashes and fluffed her perfectly curled honey brown hair. I shuddered.

"Nope," I started, sliding my arm away from hers. Before she could reach

out to grab my arm again, I jumped to the side, letting a stampede of students between us. Today was my last first day, and I wasn't going to let Kenzie ruin it. Or ruin the rest of the year, either.

It was time to take back my life after the mess of last year, and make it the best I could with what I had left. The future still held a lot of unknowns for me, so I had to live in the here and now.

Kenzie's green eyes flared. If there was one thing Kenzie Settleman was famous for, it was her wrath and her flair for the dramatic.

Her tone turned vicious, the sugary-sweet attitude falling away to her true colours underneath. "Pardon me, but no. We're Kenzie and Ollie! The couple of Waversmore!" She reached for me again, but I flattened my back against the wall, just out of her reach.

"No, Kenzie. 'Kenzie and Ollie' doesn't exist anymore. That ended last term. We're not together. There is no us."

She sucked in a breath, holding it for a beat. She was about to explode, and I didn't want to deal with the aftershock.

As her mouth opened, a hand grabbed my arm from the door behind me and pulled me in. I stumbled, almost falling over.

By instinct, my hand wrapped around to my backside, pulling out my drumsticks before I crashed to the floor. Thankfully I only stumbled before steadying myself on my feet again. No drumsticks or tailbones broken today.

I twirled a stick between my fingers as my heart slowed back to a normal speed.

"Thanks, man," I said, finding Charlie at my side. He was a year younger and the keyboardist in our band. As the resident genius, he took all advanced classes, including the one we were currently in—Geography.

Charlie shrugged and slid into the chair closest to the door. I sat across the aisle from him.

"I saw Kenzie, I saw you, then I noticed her stomping around like a T-Rex, so I figured some saving was in order," Charlie said, turning in his chair. I

laughed at his statement; he didn't know how perfect his analogy was.

Combing my hands through my hair, I tugged out a few knots and wrapped it up in a holder before responding. If Mr Edwards saw my hair down, it would be an automatic demerit.

“Yeah, man, she was about to blow.”

“Didn't you two break up?”

A snort escaped. “We did. Or at least I thought we did. Seems like Kenzie thinks otherwise. We are never, ever getting back together.”

He stayed silent, nodding his approval instead. The bell was about to ring and a few students straggled in before they were marked tardy.

Mr Edwards slammed the door shut the second the bell finished. We were in for a treat this year with him. He was one of the strictest teachers in the school and taught one of my least favourite topics. Geography hit right behind history on my scale of most hated subjects.

I tucked my sticks into my backpack, switching them out for a pen. I made everything into drumsticks. My brain worked in beats, having to constantly be moving in order for me to focus. It drove some teachers insane, but it was who I was.

Mr Edwards dropped the textbook on his desk with a thud, garnering the attention of anyone who already wasn't awake. Before he could speak, he was interrupted by the door opening again.

Ready to shout out whoever dared enter his class, he turned with his eyes narrowed, creating deep wrinkles on his forehead. Once again, he stopped before he got a word out.

It was an interesting thing to watch, though not as interesting as who came through the door.

Headmistress Tavers entered first, her back straight and her chin up as always. Behind her was the girl from yesterday. The one I saw in front of Carriageton. A new girl, being dropped off by her parents. I had thought I recognised the mother, but brushed it off, not recognising the girl.

This girl. This downright gorgeous woman.

She glanced over toward me and a shock raced down my spine. From her hair, faded from dark brown on top to bright purple at the bottom, to her solid black glasses, everything about her was captivating.

Her eyes were what gave me pause. Blue eyes so sharp they sucked me in, capturing me and not letting go.



CHAPTER FIVE

Maggie

When I was told to report to the headmistress's office again this morning, I thought I was in trouble. I had never been sent to the office before, even when I was younger. There was a first for everything.

"Princess —my apologies. Maggie," Headmistress Tavers corrected herself before continuing. It sent my heart racing, remembering how quickly this entire plan could go downhill.

"Maggie, I fear there's been a mistake in your schedule. I wanted to catch you before you headed to your first class today. Did everything go alright last night in Carriageton House?"

Lifting my chin, I leaned forward, handed over my schedule, and nodded. "Yes, everything was perfectly pleasant, thank you."

The headmistress looked me over top to bottom, peering over her reading spectacles. "If I may suggest something, your—Maggie?"

That was twice now that she had to correct herself. She needed to nip that

habit quickly. I assumed a few other staff were told of my arrival for security reasons. But all it took was one person to slip up one time, and my entire identity could be exposed.

“Yes, please do,” I agreed, crossing my ankles and tilting my legs to the side. Princesses didn’t cross their legs or bounce them, no matter how many nerves they were working through.

“Your wardrobe... and posture. Mannerisms and the such,” she started, waving my schedule at me for show. “The students at Waversmore are more... creative.”

My brow furrowed, not sure what she meant. We all wore the same uniform; I saw so this morning at breakfast. Well, the quick breakfast I took from the dining hall and ate in a courtyard not too far from the main school building.

Everyone wore a blue blazer and white button-up shirt, the men wearing ties, and the ladies a jumper instead of a blazer if they wished. Ladies could wear a navy skirt or grey pants to their choosing. Today I chose the skirt, tucking in my fully buttoned shirt and making sure I pressed the blazer last night.

I left my hair down, not quite sure what to do with it in the state it was in. With the hair dye, it was harder to wash it as often as I liked, but it held a curl longer that way, too.

“Yes, yes, dear, everyone wears the uniform. However, maybe... not buttoned all the way to the neck? And the blazers are usually left open, especially on a warm day like this. Accessories aren’t forbidden either...” she trailed off, her cheeks flush as she grabbed another paper from her desk.

My face also reddened as I looked down at my clothing. Quickly unbuttoning the top two buttons of my shirt and opening the blazer, I rolled down my socks, making a mental note to look at the shoes of other students. They were the only part of the uniform we could choose on our own.

“What a beautiful necklace,” Headmistress Tavers mentioned, handing a

new piece of paper over the desk. My hand flew to my neck, reaching for the necklace I never took off. My Grandmum gave it to me the morning of my father's coronation. It was a simple chain with three charms—one diamond, one tiara, and one cursive M. "Delicate, but powerful," Grandmum said then, "just like you." It's been on my neck ever since that day.

I glanced over my new schedule, not finding too many changes from what I saw last night. The first class of the day was different—advanced Geography instead of English history. I huffed at the small change, knowing very well my knowledge of geography would outmatch almost everyone. It was one topic drilled into my head with a tutor for the past six years.

"Let me show you to your first class," the headmistress stated, getting up from behind her desk and rounding toward the door. I lifted my satchel over my shoulder, letting it fall neatly against my side, and making sure my blazer still sat perfectly. Old habits would be hard to break.

As we approached the class, butterflies filled my stomach. It was one thing to be new on the first day; it was another to have the headmistress herself introduce you. There was nothing worse than having a giant, blinking sign over your head when all you wanted was to hide.

"Mr Edwards, students, excuse the interruption," Headmistress Tavers stated after clearing her throat to gain attention. Not that it was necessary; all eyes were already on us, and the teacher looked downright maddened that we dared enter his class.

"This is Maggie. She is a new upper sixth form this year. Please extend your most welcome greetings and help her with anything she may need." The class gave polite smiles all around. No one seemed overly interested in my presence, which helped calm the nerves slightly.

That was, until I locked eyes with one person in particular. Green specks in his hazel eyes, his cheekbones highlighting a rugged jawline, and the blonde hair... it was the same blonde hair I saw yesterday; the drummer who winked as he turned the corner.

My heart flip-flopped for a moment before I broke eye contact. The headmistress nodded to me, apologised to Mr Edwards once more, and left.

I stood awkwardly in front of the class for a beat before Mr Edwards cleared his throat and gestured toward the seats.

Red faced, I ducked my head and started toward an empty seat in the back. Before I could get there, a hand reached out into the aisle, stopping me.

The drummer glared at the guy sitting in the seat next to him, then jutted his chin. The boy scrambled out of his chair and hightailed it to the one in the back, vacating the spot for me.

My fluttering butterflies grew into anxious, buzzing bees as I sat silently. I gave the guy a timid smile in appreciation, which he returned with the same wink from yesterday.

Geography was as boring as I expected it to be. I was far ahead of the rest of the class and Mr Edwards' voice was rather monotonous. I could only hope after today he would loosen up, or else I would have a hard time staying awake each morning.

I was glad I was up to speed in this class, because the rest of my schedule would be a toss-up. My education had been broad, covering subjects from world politics to conversational arts but also dabbling in maths and sciences when necessary. The future of the British monarchy was in my hands, and I had to be as well rounded as possible.

As soon as the bell rang, chairs scraped against the floor, the shuffling of bags and feet mixing with the chatter of the students. Mr Edwards barely had time to give out the homework to anyone who was listening.

I listened. And I wrote it down too. I couldn't afford to stick out by being the student who didn't do the work correctly or on time. I needed to blend in as much as possible.

The blonde guy was waiting for me as soon as I passed through the doorway. Leaning against the wall, his hands shoved in his pockets, he pushed off and began walking backwards in front of me. Without being able

to see behind him, he almost ran into a few people, but they jumped out of his way at the last second.

“I’m Ollie,” he said, sticking out one hand. I shook it without hesitation, hoping he couldn’t sense the slight tremor in my hand. I was more nervous today than I was at most royal engagements.

“Maggie,” I replied. As word left my mouth, I cringed. Of course he knew my name; the headmistress introduced me to the entire class.

“Where are you off to next?” Ollie asked. He turned around, walking at my side in the bright hallway. For a building over two hundred years old, a lot of sunlight filtered in.

“Honestly, I have no idea,” I muttered, my cheeks becoming pink. “Headmistress Tavers changed my schedule at the last minute this morning. I tried to memorise it yesterday, but I haven’t had a chance to go over the changes.”

The dazzling smile he gave me made my heart beat in a way I had never experienced. Before I could show him my schedule, a group of boys in matching blue blazers surrounded him, swallowing him in the crowd.

Being the tallest of the pack, with the longest hair and biggest shoulders, Ollie stood out. They all slapped each other on the back and talked animatedly, speaking over each other and laughing.

I took that as a cue and headed toward the staircase. I wasn’t exactly sure where my next class was, but assumed it would be on the level above this one. Having studied the layout of the main building extensively last night, I only hoped I would make it there on time and not have another show upon arrival.

“Excuse you,” a snotty voice said as I accidentally brushed up against a girl. The satchel strap over her shoulder fell into the crook of her elbow. Her vivid pink lips curled into a sneer.

I gasped, my hand flying to my chest. “I am so sorry! I—”

She didn’t let me finish, however, before she flipped her bouncy, light

brown hair over her shoulder and walked away. Not even five seconds later, her heels clacking on the floor, she raised her hand in the air and shouted, “Oh, Ollie! There you are. We need to finish our conversation from earlier...”

Ollie was still laughing with his mates and didn’t respond. Either he didn’t hear her, or he ignored her.

If I were him, I would have done the latter too. She didn’t exactly give off the friendliest vibes.

Shaking my head, I turned back to my schedule and map, flattening myself against the wall so I didn’t run into anyone else. Something told me that girl wasn’t about to offer to help me find my next class.

Consulting my papers, I kept an ear open for the conversation now being held between Ollie and the brunette girl. Her voice was like a diamond cutting glass—high pitched and screechy. Especially since whatever they were talking about didn’t seem to be going in her favour.

“You’re insane!” she squealed. I looked up at her shout, finding Ollie’s face marred with frustration. I frowned, wondering if he needed rescuing, when his gaze locked onto mine.

It was as if a light bulb went off in his head. His eyes widened, a smile slowly spreading across his cheeks. He nodded toward the girl, patted her on the shoulder, and muttered something just before dashing in my direction.

The fire that came from the girl’s eyes was enough to melt anyone on the spot. I held my breath, sure she was going to come charging after him, or even *me*. But she swallowed down her words, let out a huff, and expertly spun on the toe of her platform heels.

“You look lost,” Ollie said, sliding an arm around my shoulders. “Where was that class you were headed to? I didn’t get a chance to hear your answer...”

I studied him for a moment, my head tilted, my eyes narrowed. Tall, built, gorgeous eyes, strong jawbone, long blonde hair—he was the full package.

He seemed to know everyone here, by the way his mates surrounded him and everyone greeted him. The interaction with the rude girl rubbed me the wrong way, though. And the fact that he was now using me as an excuse to get away from her didn't sit well either.

"Third floor. Statistics in room three twelve," I muttered, allowing him to guide me up the stairwell.

A real smile shot across his face as he dropped his arm. He unwound the band from his hair, letting it fall over his ears as he shook it out, tousling it with his fingers.

"Fabulous. You'll be with my best friend, Travis," he said. The ability to retie a ponytail while walking up stairs was a feat I assumed only women could do. He was more talented than I thought. "Travis plays bass in our band."

I paused, causing Ollie to put on his brakes before he ran into me. "You have a band?"

He nodded, jogging up the last three steps and opening the door for me. "Sure do. I'm the drummer. Travis is bass, Charlie plays the keyboard, and Henry rounds out on a not-so-good, but decent enough guitar. Do you play?"

I shook my head. "Um, no. No, I'm doing art this term." The fumble over my words made me cringe. I needed to relax. No one else walked or talked as proper as I had been so far today.

We had to choose my co-curricular when making my schedule yesterday. Both Auntie Ellie and the headmistress decided art would be the better choice. Going with music and guitar meant I would have to perform with the Waversmore band during the bi-annual Waversmore Week. And they performed for the public.

It seemed easy enough to hide at a boarding school, away from most prying eyes, as long as I didn't go out of my way to perform out in the open. It was the one concession I made for Auntie Ellie—stay away from the village and public eye.

I didn't totally give up my guitar though; I was allowed to take private lessons with a teacher once or twice a week. It wasn't exactly what I wanted, but there had to be a compromise somewhere.

Ollie's face dropped for a second, his hopes obviously dashed by my admittance. "Well, art is cool, too. Some of the girls here are really talented. I can't wait to see what you create."

We came to the room labelled three twelve. Ollie jammed his hands in his pockets again, rocking back on his heels. "Tell Travis I say hey. He'll look out for you. I'll see you at lunch?"

I furrowed my brows, unsure how he knew we would have lunch together.

Walking backwards again, he chuckled at my confusion. "All upper sixth forms have lunch at the same time. Each grade has their own time slot. See you then."

He grabbed something out of his back pocket before spinning around.

Drumsticks.

Tapping a beat on an invisible drum set, he took off around the corner and out of sight.

I shook my head again, opening the door to the classroom and pleased to find it still half empty.

Drummers always went to a different beat. And Ollie seemed like no one I've ever met before.



Just like Ollie had said, his friend Travis helped me out. When Statistics was over, I found a tall, handsome boy staring at me. His hair looked like he just rolled out of bed, hanging to his ears in dark messy waves.

After introducing ourselves, he asked where I was off to next. I answered, then told him about meeting Ollie in Geography earlier this morning.

He rolled his eyes and guided me toward the staircase in the same gentlemanly manner Ollie had earlier. "Oh, that oaf. Did he try to charm you

to pieces? Make you think he was the world's perfect gentleman? Or did he already try to get into your pants? Drummers are like that, you know. Girls either swoon at their feet the moment a drumstick comes out, or they can't look past the arms..."

The casual shake of his head said he was joking, but he wasn't far off. Drummers were a different breed. They were hot, could keep a beat, and those arm and shoulder muscles...

"Yep, he's charmed you for sure. How do you feel about guitarists?" Travis asked, giving me pause.

"Guitarists are the best," I answered, not revealing my own playing skills. No one could find out I played.

Travis shouted in glee at my answer, punching a fist in the air, causing a few students turning their heads.

When we reached Chemistry, I thanked him, and squared myself up for yet another round of staring.

After stepping only a few feet through the door, I paused, checking out the seating and determining where I wanted to sit this time.

Stopping became hazardous, however, when a body slammed into me from behind.

"Whoa, there, didn't expect you to throw the brakes!" Travis said, his arms wrapping around my waist to steady us both.

Someone called him from the back of the room. Travis attempted to guide me with him, but I shrugged him off politely. It was the first day of term for everyone else as well, meaning they wanted to catch up with friends they hadn't seen all summer. I didn't want to get in the way or be the odd man out while they talked about things I had no clue about.

I felt out of the loop enough last night in the lounge of Carriageton House, when everyone talked about their summers. I couldn't add anything about mine, as it was nowhere near the same as theirs. And when the conversation turned to popular music, clothing, and celebrities... I was just as helpless.

“Thanks for the help.” I smiled at Travis before parting. He said something about meeting after class to walk to lunch together, which I appreciated.

Travis wandered off to the back to sit with a boy who looked like the epitome of English boarding school. He was so well groomed that he could have been on the front cover of every brochure.

Thinking about it, he may *have* been on the cover of the brochure Ellie showed me the other day while waiting outside the headmistress’ office.

Shaking it off and trying to set my sights on blending in again, I sat in another seat in the middle, praying that the teacher wouldn’t call on me to introduce myself. The fewer lies I made up, the easier it would be to keep them under control.

The second class ended, everyone bolted from their seats, knowing lunch was next. I waited for an extra beat, not wanting to get lost in the stampede. I remembered where the dining hall was from here, as I mapped everything out last night.

It would be nice to walk with Travis; he seemed rather genuine and kind. But when I looked up, his head was ducked as he walked with a gorgeous, dark-haired girl I recognised from my house. I didn’t remember her name either, as I hadn’t taken the time to use my mnemonic devices like I do at some of the more important royal events.

I sighed, resigning to the fact that I would walk alone to the dining hall. Having Ollie and Travis as escorts made the walks so far today more enjoyable and less lonely. As much as Auntie Ellie wanted me to keep to myself and not draw attention, Uncle Sean told me to make friends and enjoy myself.

It was only the first day. I had all term to make friends and have some fun. Hopefully after the first week, all these nerves would disappear and allow me to relax. I was jumpy and on edge, thinking at any moment that someone would recognise me.



CHAPTER SIX

Ollie

I must have driven Ms Terry absolutely insane during my third class.

The constant tapping of my pen on my notebook already got me glares from most of the students nearby. I couldn't break the habit. Not that I ever tried. I drummed every moment of the day, whether or not other people enjoyed it.

The more preoccupied my mind, the more my fingers, pens, sticks, toes, or whatever I could move, would tap out a beat. It distracted me, allowing my brain time to figure things out.

The bigger the problem, the bigger the item I needed to smash. Huge issues required face time with an actual drum set. This wasn't one of those times, yet.

Maggie. The new girl. With the purple hair and black glasses that magnified her brilliant blue eyes. She was captivating.

And I left her in the greedy little claws of my best friend for two classes.

Thankfully, we all had lunch next.

Travis messaged me earlier, telling me all about Maggie and how they got

along famously. They not only had Statistics together, but also their third lesson—Chemistry. He had to rub in how he escorted her there, talking all along the way.

Turns out, she loved guitarists. He even told me how much she hated drummers, saying they were “too dramatic” and “whiny” most of the time.

It was all a load of bullshit. I had no doubt he added all that in on his own, trying to keep her for himself.

And now, the only thing that stood in the way of me and Maggie was five minutes and Kenzie Settleman.

Vanilla perfume wafted across the classroom the second she entered. Because of how we left things earlier, I knew she was going to be in a mood the rest of the day. I could feel her eyes boring holes into my skin all class.

If I didn’t cut her off now, I would have to deal with her more than just today. She was like a dog with a bone- she didn’t stop until she got what she wanted. And if she didn’t get it, well, no one else did either.

Considering that asking Maggie on a date had been on my mind for the past two hours, I wasn’t going to let anything stand in my way—especially not Kenzie.

As soon as class ended, I jumped from my seat and tried to flee for the door. The students in front of me took their time retrieving their satchels from the floor and getting out of their chairs, blocking my way.

Which was enough time for Kenzie to saunter over, Camille smirking from across the room as she watched. They were *always* together, no matter what.

“You owe me an apology. A *public* apology,” Kenzie said in a harsh whisper.

I shook my head. “No, I don’t. Because you need to move on. As I explicitly stated this morning, there is no more us. Realise that, figure it out, and leave me alone.”

Being nice to Kenzie was only for when you wanted something. I didn’t want to be mean on purpose; she just had to understand that I meant what I

was saying. I couldn't spell it out any clearer for her.

The sad eyes she put on were a cue that she started her dramatics once again. Turning on the waterworks usually got Kenzie what she wanted, but it wouldn't work on me.

Planting one hand on her shoulder, I tipped her chin up with my other, so we were looking eye to eye. "No. I'm done."

The lip quiver stopped as soon as it began, being replaced by a sneer so ugly, I had to turn away.

"You don't know what you've done. Your loss, Oliver Hastings!" she spat out, tossing her long brown hair over her shoulder and strolling away, adding a little wiggle with her arse just for me. She probably hoped I would reconsider, but the only thing I did was suppress a laugh instead.

Kenzie tried too hard, plain and simple. She was a gossip. She loved to start rumours. Drama was her specialty, and I already decided this year was going to be a drama-free year.

Between her and the torture from Christian, I had enough harassment last year to last a lifetime. The last thing I needed was a repeat of all of that. I almost didn't come back this term because of the two of them.

At least Christian graduated last year, so I was free of him now. His relentless torment made life a disaster.

Christian bullied me for personal reasons. It was revenge for the sake of revenge. When I got the drum solo in the first month of school last year, he took it personally. I did nothing to him, yet he felt the need to hurt me every chance he had. As if tormenting me would make him a better drummer.

He found out about my home life, turned it against me, then used his clout to his advantage. All of it mixed together left me miserable. So miserable, I almost didn't return to Waversmore.

He kept my torture low key, just getting under my skin, but not shouting it off the rooftops. Travis didn't even know until the year was almost over.

Poking my head out of the classroom and glancing down the hallway, I

made sure the coast was clear before leaving the room. I didn't put it past Kenzie to ambush me to make a bigger public display.

Gathering speed, I jogged down the stairs and out into the courtyard. The bright sun welcomed me with its warmth; it wouldn't last, so I soaked it in while I could.

Checking my mobile, I looked for a message from Travis confirming they were on their way to lunch, but I didn't find any. I shot him one instead, telling him I'd grab our usual table.

I, however, didn't make it in time. In fact, I almost didn't make it at all.

Because what I saw next floored me and angered me at the same time.

Maggie. With fucking Henry Mathison. The male equivalent of Kenzie. Stuck up, richer than rich, and got everything he wanted. We tolerated him because he played guitar in our band. He was a decent lad, but the thoughts that flew through my mind at the moment made me forget that.

Sending a rather explicit message to Travis about the sight, I ducked behind a tree and watched Maggie be escorted across the lawn toward the dining hall building.

It looked like Henry was trying to get Maggie to be his next conquest. If she only knew what he put girls through when he ditched them after shagging them. Henry liked new, shiny things. When he grew tired of something, or *someone*, he ghosted them. Everyone knew his tactics by now and any girl who decided to get with him went in knowing they were there for a good time, not a commitment.

But Maggie didn't. Maggie was new. She had no idea who Henry was or his issues. I wanted to warn her, but they were too far for me to call out to.

I couldn't hear their conversation, which angered me. What annoyed me more was watching Henry's hand resting on her lower back, sliding centimetre by centimetre until it hovered right over her perfectly shaped arse.

The navy skirt she chose today showcased that arse and sent messages straight to an area of my body that didn't have a brain to act on.

Why Maggie didn't push him away baffled me. She may have been trying to be polite, allowing him to escort her to the dining hall on her first day. Her politeness could end up with harassment if she wasn't careful.

Shit.

I crept through the doors after them, sliding through and heading straight to the table I told Travis I would be at. I didn't want to stand in line and watch them potentially make out on the spot. At least that would be the scenario if Henry had his way.

No, I would wait patiently right here. He would bring her right to me. Maggie already knew me, which meant I could skip the pleasantries and go straight to directing her attention away from Henry.

It was like stealing candy from a baby.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Maggie

“Hey, princess,” a voice called from behind me. I froze, my worst fear happening right as I thought of it.

I didn't breathe as I allowed him to get closer, which I couldn't determine if it was wise or stupid.

A hand grazed the centre of my back, shooting tingles down my spine. And not the good ones. Not the same ones when Ollie grabbed my hand. These sent immediate negative vibes.

The hand slid from the middle of my back down, until it was resting dangerously above my arse. I spun, my hair flying around me, ready to tell off whoever thought they could get so cheeky with me without consent.

Instead of throwing some of my well-known snark, I clamped my mouth shut. The blonde, preppy boy grinned back at me, his mouth full of sparkling white teeth all in a neat row. His uniform button up had all except the top button done, his blazer pressed neatly, and not a single piece of lint showing.

He carried a briefcase instead of a bag or satchel, with the letters HRM

engraved in gold lettering on the top by the handle.

“Henry Richard Mathison,” he stated, catching my glance. “And you must be Maggie. I’ve heard loads about you, love. On your way to the dining hall all alone, are you? We can’t be having that. Did Travis ditch you already?”

He rambled on, more about him than me. I smiled and nodded, instantly categorising him on a different scale than Travis and Ollie.

“Dining hall, yes,” was all I could answer, as he didn’t allow any time for me to say anything longer.

On the short walk, I learned a lot about Henry. I found out where he went to primary, when he transferred to Waversmore College, his parent’s occupations, and his thoughts on the snack shop on the lower level of the main building.

I also learned how handsy and bold he was.

“Henry,” I interrupted as we came to the door of the dining hall. The stone arch above had the name Gilbert engraved into it. It was the name of the original family that lived in the home hundreds of years ago. Once the school took it over, they renovated it into a dining hall on the lower floor, adding the industrial kitchen, all in an open floor plan. The two floors above were staff housing, including the dining hall manager, Miss Duphrey.

It took another try before Henry finally closed his lips.

“Thank you so much for the escort. I believe I have it from here.” I gave him the sweetest smile I could muster, even though I was cringing on the inside.

Henry cocked his head, not a single strand of hair moving. It was as if his hair was held together by concrete. Compared to Travis and Ollie, it was quite comical. Henry was the definition of “trying too hard”, yet he didn’t seem to realise it.

“No, love, there is no way I’m leaving my princess stranded here at the door! What kind of gentleman would I be if I didn’t help you in and give you the insiders tips on the best items to order and how to charm Miss Duphrey to

do anything you wish?" He winked, and I swallowed back the gag in my throat.

Using princess for a second time had my heart pounding so loud I was sure he could hear it. Then again, he wouldn't over his incessant talking.

The only upside to this situation was the fact that I would have someone to sit with. Henry was friends with Travis, who was best mates with Ollie. Suffering through a few more moments with Henry could be worth it to sit with them.

Although, I should be making friends with girls in my house. Maybe the girl Travis walked over with would be nice.

Anyone would be better than the cruel brunette from before.

I didn't have time to contemplate longer before Henry whisked me inside and forced me into the short line, still babbling in my ear. I tuned him out enough to not have to pay attention, but would hear any polite breaks he took.

It was a skill my mother perfected over the years, whether listening to us kids ramble on about nothing or having to deal with foreign dignitaries who loved to hear themselves talk.

Sometimes, being a royal came in handy. Now was one of those times.

My assumptions were correct. Henry beelined to the table Ollie occupied. Of course, he made sure I stayed within eyesight. Something told me that if he was able to carry his briefcase, his lunch tray, and my tray at the same time, he would have.

He knew every aspect they taught at charm school. However, being a perfect gentleman went past the outward gestures. It was important to make a woman feel comfortable in your presence, and with Henry, I did not. I was great at reading people, understanding their motives, and figuring out their personalities in a split second.

Lord knows I spent enough time around all types of people to have picked up a thing or two. Most of the people I associated with either were genuine or not. I could tell when someone was putting on a facade in front of my family.

Sometimes people were nervous, and that was easy enough to tell as well. Those that held ill will toward my family, yet plastered a smile on their faces when in person, were easy to spot.

Henry wasn't quite like those people, but he wasn't in the genuine group either. Ollie and Travis were genuine. They were kind and helpful, without a hidden agenda. Henry seemed like someone who was only nice to you if he wanted something.

What he wanted from me, I wasn't sure. Whatever it was, I wasn't giving it to him.

“Oliver, my lad, meet Waversmore's newest student, Maggie—”

“We've met,” Ollie replied, not bothering to look at Henry. He kept his eyes glued on me, sending another pleasant shiver down my spine. As soon as we connected, his lips turned up in a small grin.

“Not eating today?” I asked, sliding my tray onto the table opposite him and Henry. Making sure my satchel was out of the path behind me, I sat in the chair, crossing my legs at the ankle and unwrapping my napkin to place on my lap.

Ollie tilted his head and continued to stare at me. He scanned me from top to bottom, as much as he could while we were sitting. I held my breath as he lingered over my hair, then swept toward my lips. I fought back the urge to lick them, not wanting to give off the wrong impression.

“I sure am glad I got lunch for two today, mate. Looks like you had a hell of a time keeping this table away from the vultures. Except, you let one in...” Travis' voice echoed behind me, a girlish giggle joining after him.

I straightened my back and turned my head, finding Travis and the dark-haired girl he left class with earlier. He was right—his tray was loaded with food, well more than one person could eat.

“Miss Duphrey noticed you slipped in and didn't take a tray, so she sent me over with food for you. I'd say you owe me, but you just owe her,” he said, settling the tray in front of Ollie and sliding into the seat next to him.

It left me the odd person out. The three boys sat on one side while I sat alone on the other. The girl didn't hesitate, and plopped herself gracefully to my right, across from Travis. Now Henry was the odd one out, alone, with no one across from him.

"Did you just insinuate I was a vulture?" Henry questioned, leaning back in his chair to look behind Ollie at Travis. I tracked their conversation, my gaze bouncing from person to person. Whereas I didn't want to intrude in Chemistry, they quite entertained me with this one. They went back and forth, tossing light-hearted insults in jest.

"Don't listen to these imps. All they do is laugh at each other. They're friends, but you'd have to understand the nature of their relationship to understand how they work. It's quite embarrassing most of the time." The girl next to me leaned in close and whispered into my ear. I giggled, covering my mouth with my hand.

"I'm Lily, by the way. We're together at Carriageton House. We'll have our house meeting tonight."

I sighed, glad that she introduced herself first. It was more than the girl in the too-tight blazer had done earlier. No one else except the boys sitting across from me had introduced themselves, either. Being the new girl made me an outsider, and when no one even said more than a hello, it felt worse.

"It's nice to meet you, Lily. I'm Maggie."

"Are you getting along alright? Sorry you had to put up with that one there," she said, jutting her chin towards Henry. "Most of the time he means well, he just doesn't know how to interact with the opposite sex properly. He's a teenage boy with one thing on his mind, and since you have the right parts, he's going to try to get to them as quick as possible. Steer clear of him if you're not interested." Lily added a light giggle after her statement, which made me go red in the face.

I looked over at Henry, now done with his argument with Travis and trying to flatten his hair down once more. How it could have moved with the

amount of product he had in it, I wasn't sure, but Travis seemed to get him flustered enough that it had.

“Ollie and Travis are the good ones, though. They'll be on your side as long as you let them. Isn't that right, boys?” Lily asked, now loud enough for them to hear.

Travis nodded, keeping his eyes on Lily with a hint of admiration in them. There had to be something going on with them, I just wasn't sure what. It wasn't my business to ask either, though I did think they would make an adorable couple.

Ollie smirked, also nodding slowly. “Maybe not the good guys, but we're decent lads, I expect,” he replied, still staring at me while munching on a biscuit. The tray settled between the two of them, each stealing something off it.

Lily and Travis took over the conversation for a few minutes, talking about their classes so far. Travis mentioned having two with me, and Ollie in my first, making Lily quite jealous. A fleeting moment of happiness travelled through me, knowing that someone already cared enough to be upset she didn't have a class with me.

The feeling of being wanted, for reasons other than my title, was something I never felt before. Lily genuinely wished to be my friend, even though she knew nothing about me.

Lily had just asked to see my schedule, to determine if she had any afternoon classes with me, when her phone buzzed. Looking down, she whispered a small swear and shoved it back into her satchel.

“Sorry, friends. I forgot about my lesson with Mrs Bradley.”

Ollie frowned, little lines appearing between his eyes. “Lesson? Co-curricular isn't until tomorrow afternoon.”

Lily shook her head and stood. “I have a private lesson twice a week now. If I'm going to have a chance to play in the same symphony as Rose, I have to up my game.”

I didn't ask what she played, or who Rose was, before she dashed out of the dining hall, Travis close on her heels.

"Are they dating?" I asked innocently. Henry let out a guffaw, causing other students to look our way. I rounded my shoulders, trying to hide from the attention, when Ollie answered.

"No, but they should be. They've been playing this back-and-forth game since last year. Neither wants to commit, yet they still spend all their free time together. Travis is like a puppy dog with her—he'll follow her around and do anything she asks. It's cute," he paused, thinking, "and also annoying."

I pursed my lips, holding back a laugh. The drama surrounding other teenagers wasn't something I was used to, but was quite enjoying.

"You never answered her question. What's the rest of your schedule? I can take you to your next class, if you'd like."

I knew exactly where it was, but I handed him the piece of paper anyway, letting him scan it. We had three more classes this afternoon, the last one being an elective. I chose, or rather Ellie chose, Business. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, we had our co-curricular which replaced the elective.

It was a complicated system. One I memorised late last night, not wanting to be the lost new girl during the first week.

Henry reached across the table, dumping the leftover rubbish from my tray onto his, then stacked them and headed to the bin.

"Looks like we have Business together later. Too bad you're not in music though, or else we'd have that as well tomorrow."

I stood, lifting my satchel over my head and resting it cross-body on my shoulder. Grabbing a fistful of hair from under the strap, I sighed.

"I appreciate the assistance from you boys. It's refreshing to have someone offer to help without having to ask," I said, watching as he stood to his full height. He was so tall, my forehead only came to his chin. He could have wrapped me in a hug and used my head as a resting spot.

“It’s my pleasure, Maggie—um, er... yeah. Maggie.” Ollie cleared his throat just as Henry returned.

“Is everything alright?” I questioned, reaching to take my schedule back from him. His face had dropped, a frown and wrinkles between his eyes appearing.

“Yes, sure. Actually, I have to go somewhere before next class. Henry here will take you, won’t you, chap?” Henry stood behind his chair, about to grab his briefcase. Ollie slapped him on the back, causing Henry to launch forward, gripping the edge of the seat in front of me and coughing.

As soon as he settled, his eyes lit up, and he extended an elbow toward me. “Absolutely. My pleasure indeed. Princess, this way, if you please?”

Ollie flinched as Henry called me princess. I flinched too, but tried to brush it off.

Ollie stared at the floor, waiting for Henry to make his way around the table toward me. I stayed quiet, not wanting to be a nuisance, but there was a nagging feeling in my mind. Something about Ollie flipped. Whereas he spent all of lunch staring at me, smiling, and being joyful, he now hunched over, his hands in his pockets, his face drawn.

The last thing I wanted to do was slide my arm through Henry’s, but I also didn’t want to be rude. I took what Lily told me to heart, convincing myself that I wouldn’t let him get that far. I would make my intentions with Henry crystal clear as soon as we left this dining hall.

Before I could take a step, Ollie rushed off, almost as fast as Lily had.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Olivia

I needed to get to the music hall and slip behind a set of drums before I exploded. Sitting through the last three classes of the day had been the worst kind of torture. The only thing that could calm my racing mind were my drums, and having to wait just made everything worse.

Especially when my last class was with Maggie.

Seeing what I saw on her schedule flipped everything about her upside down. I spent the last three hours trying to make sense of it, yet I still couldn't. I couldn't do any good thinking without my drums.

Tingles danced through my arms and legs as I got closer, the anticipation of pounding out my frustrations making me downright giddy.

Luckily, the main entrance was open. I crossed my fingers and hoped I could find an unlocked percussion classroom as well.

After checking a handful of rooms down the “drum corridor”, I found one. Slipping inside and closing the door after me, I sucked in a deep breath, breathing in the scent of maple and glue.

Gathering my hair back and securing it with a twisty motion as I walked

toward the drums, my heart pounded out a beat, the rapid *thumpthumpthump* wailing in my ears. A million thoughts raced through my mind, and it took all my concentration to focus on the set in front of me.

I grabbed my drumsticks out of my back pocket and gave them a few test twirls, the familiar feeling of them filling me with confidence.

After raising the stool to accommodate my long legs, I settled in, orientating myself with the instruments. I had a ritual of sorts, having to touch each drum and cymbal both with my eyes open and closed before I could play.

I never needed to look while I played, especially if I was just jamming. My body took over, muscle memory jumping in and doing its thing. Once I learned a song, the music flowed through me like electricity.

I smashed my first few notes, going harder than I normally do.

Christian Davies. Maggie Davies.

They had to be related. It would have been too much of a coincidence. And now that I made the connection, the lady who dropped off Maggie the afternoon before classes began looked a lot like the former princess herself, Eleanor Davies.

The princess who gave up the throne to live a “normal” life. The one who Christian resented, saying what a mistake it was, and how he should have been a prince.

The small fact he flaunted in everyone’s face whenever he got a chance.

My breathing sped up to keep in line with how fast I was moving my arms around the kit. I had no direction. I was just hitting for the sake of hitting something.

Were they siblings? Christian had an older brother who had gone through Waversmore. I didn’t know him, but I had heard of him. I never heard of there being a sister.

A cousin maybe? I racked my brain as I tapped out a beat, trying to remember the little I knew about the royal family. It wasn’t a topic that

interested me much, so my knowledge was extremely limited.

If Christian Davies was related to Maggie Davies, then where did that land me? Would I be the subject of her torment this year? Would the drama from last year repeat all over again?

The crash of the cymbal didn't satisfy me. I kept pounding on the drums, hoping to feel the sense of release I searched for.

Christian Davies was the reason I almost didn't come back to Waversmore. If he had been here, I would not be. If I knew Maggie would be here in his place, I may have made a different decision as well.

This year was my redemption from last year. All the drama was supposed to be gone. It was my final shot at a normal life before the tragic downfall that awaited me after graduation.

I had decisions to make before then, and none were looking in my favour. My pops held all the cards, and they weren't anything close to what would make me happy.

Audible gasps left my lips as breathing became difficult. Sweat dripped down my face, dropping to the floor almost on beat.

She just had to be a Davies. Why were the hot ones always trouble?

My arms strained to let negative energy out, on fire from the rapid movements that had yet to satiate me.

I couldn't turn off the thoughts, unable to get the images out of my head. How Christian would walk by me, whispering "Little Orphan Ollie" out the side of his mouth, just loud enough for me to hear.

How he would ask how my holiday was, when he knew full well I spent it at school.

How he would scoff at the state of my satchel, the patched-up holes and broken clasp, because I didn't have the money to use on a new one like he did.

Not to mention House Wars, when Christian purposefully targeted me in competitions, laughing when I failed. Making sure everyone picked me last.

And turning my own team against me when I ultimately screwed up, because Christian sabotaged it to make it look like it was my fault.

And while we played in the band... the glares he would give me, the times he would make a noise to startle me, causing me to slip up. Anything he could do to make it look like he was the superior drummer. Even though *I* had been chosen for the solo he so desperately wanted. It was the basis to all his torment.

Images of breaking down in the shower, letting the sobs wreck through me as the water pounded over my body, flashed through my mind.

I slammed down on the snare, going full force with both arms and legs, giving every ounce of energy I had into making noise. Sucking in a deep breath, I tried to erase the pictures out of my mind.

He graduated. He was gone. This was a new year, a new chance.

Christian Davies couldn't break me again.

And now that I found the truth about who Maggie Davies was, I could be prepared. I would be one step ahead of her at all times, not letting her get under my skin like I had Christian. With him, I was wholly naïve, allowing him to ruin my mental state because I was too afraid to fight back.

But not now. Not this year.

This year, I was taking back my life. I wouldn't let anyone take me down. Maggie Davies could be trouble, but not for me.

I would break her before she had the chance to break me.

My eyes flew open, worried I broke the drums because of my anger. I put the sticks in my lap for a moment and stared at the ground, trying to catch my breath. Sweat rolled down my face. I wiped it away, along with a rogue tear or two.

Gulping back my emotions, I started again with a softer beat as I worked through my problems.

As I focused on my breathing, I allowed my muscle memory to take over, picking up a bit of speed. My arms flew over the drums, my legs keeping

tempo to whatever it was I wanted to play.

Eventually, the beat turned into a song more familiar to me than my own name.

My mother's song.

Somehow, my body unconsciously played the same song my mother perfected while she was pregnant with me whenever I was feeling overly emotional. The song she said I used to kick to while in the womb. The song she named for me.

Ollie's Song.

She never taught it to me, though. I found the original sheet music in a box of things in the garage two summers ago while helping Pop clear it out before he moved.

My body moved in tune, repeating the song over and over as my mind ran wild. I thought about Mum, the lasting picture I had of her ingrained in my brain. The picture that hung in my room at King's Cottage, the one of her dancing in a field of sunflowers, her straw-blond hair hanging to her waist and floating in the mid-summer sun. The smile on her face radiating pure happiness and joy.

A moment of purity.

A moment I never saw.

A moment I'll never see.

I worked out the anger and frustrations with the hard hits, and now a tidal wave of sadness washed over me. Exhaustion set in from the emotions I put my body through in the last thirty minutes or so. Everything I had pent up finally fell quiet.

I wiped the sweat off my face with my shirt, grateful I had the foresight to take off the button down and drum in my undershirt.

"Hell of a workout," a voice called from the corner of the room.

My head jerked up, scanning the once silent space until catching eyes with my best mate.

“How’d you find me?” I asked, stretching as I stood from the stool. My back ached from the positioning, my arms on fire.

Travis crinkled his brow as if I insulted him. “Seriously? You weren’t in our room or the snack shop. It was too early for dinner, so where the hell else would you be?”

I smirked and shrugged, as he was right. There weren’t many other places on campus I frequented besides Gasby’s Pub, and that was only when I was being paid.

Travis chucked a water bottle and a small towel at me, followed by a new undershirt. “Dinner’s soon. Didn’t think you’d have time to clean up.”

He was always one step ahead of me, which is why we made such a great pair. That, and his bass skills helped our band.

After ripping off my sweaty shirt, I drenched the towel in some water, and wiped myself down from head to waist. A shower would have to wait until after dinner, unfortunately, as we had strict hours for the dining hall.

Travis sat silent as I changed and buttoned up my shirt, swiping my blazer from the chair next to him. I chugged the rest of the water and crumpled the bottle before tossing it in the trash.

“Why are you here?” I asked, plopping down in the chair and pulling the elastic from my now-limp bun. I wanted to shake the hair loose, but didn’t want to cover him with sweat droplets. I usually had a sweat band for sessions like this, but considering it was an impromptu rage fest, I was out of luck.

Travis leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands together. The shaggy brown hair he never once touched with a comb the entire time I’ve known him hung over his face like a curtain, shielding him from my view.

The hesitation freaked me out. Travis, while outgoing and fun, also had a serious side not many people knew about. When he dove into that mode, he chose his words carefully, never wanting to say the wrong thing in the wrong

way.

This seemed to be one of those times.

“Lay it on me, man,” I whispered, sitting up straight and holding my breath. One of the last times we had a conversation like this was when my grandmother died, leaving me all alone. Even though my pops could not care less what happened to me, Gran loved me. When Mum passed away when I was only four, Gran was all I had left. Pops sent me to Waversmore Junior the year after. Every time I came home from school for the summer, Pops found a reason to not be home—business trips, vacations, off to visit friends. You name it, he did it. Anything to not have to see his son again.

The reminder of what he lost.

The physical embodiment of his sadness.

Gran was always there for me, though. At least, until two years ago.

“Now, if you don’t mind.” I needed Travis to drop whatever he was holding back. My heart and lungs wouldn’t make it much longer. Nothing he could say could be as bad as what I thought of while I played. The thoughts that crowded my head threatened to drown me had I not been able to clear them.

He tilted his head toward me, just enough to see past his hair and stare straight into my eyes. A chill ran down my spine, my heart already plummeting toward the floor.

“I know who she is.”

All the blood drained out of my face. My body knew whatever he meant wasn’t good, even though the lightbulb didn’t come on right away. Once it did, everything clicked, making my thoughts go from bad to worse all over again.

“What?”

Travis straightened up, pulling one ankle over his other knee, almost without breaking eye contact. I broke it first, staring at my hands still wringing the towel.

“Maggie.”

Oh. Her. I’d successfully drummed her out of my mind. I left no thought unturned, no emotion disregarded.

Maggie Davies was officially off my radar.

“How did you find out?” I asked a moment later. If I hadn’t seen her schedule in person, I highly doubted I would have found out for a few days at least. And even then, I was so oblivious to life at times I probably wouldn’t have connected things for quite some time after that.

Seeing it typed out in black and white made it clearer for me. I snapped two and two together faster than my algebra teacher back in year eleven.

Travis ran his hands through his hair, a trait we shared when we didn’t know what else to do. “I overheard her introduce herself to a teacher this afternoon. We have Psychology together. Why didn’t *you* tell me?”

I huffed a short laugh through my nose, my breathing returning to a normal rate now that I knew no one was dead or anything. “Mate, let me tell you the shit that’s been going through my head since *lunch*.”

All I had to do was gesture to the drum set across the room. He saw the workout I put myself through on it, the sweat and tears that poured out with my soul.

“I bet that’s not what you were expecting to see on the first day of term. I would ask how you’re handling it, but I can tell.”

“What if she’s just like him?” I asked, not able to stare at him. I couldn’t sit anymore, either. Tossing the towel onto the chair, I paced from the door back to Travis, and over again.

Travis stared at me with an inquiring eye, making me feel so uneasy I had to sit down. Bouncing my knee subconsciously, I couldn’t get my heart rate to lower. My breathing became shallower by the second, my brain running wild, the room spinning.

This was why I had come here in the first place. I’d worked out the issues, and now Travis brought them back.

“Breathe,” Travis said, placing a hand on my shoulder to steady me. I closed my eyes, resting my elbows on my knees, and jammed my fingers into my hair.

I scratched at my scalp, desperate to feel something other than the tightening in my chest. Any sort of pain besides that would help.

“I can’t... I can’t go through what happened last year again. I just can’t,” I whispered, more so to myself than Travis.

“You won’t. I won’t let you.”

“Lot of good that did last year,” I retorted, immediately regretting it. He was used to my stupid remarks and wouldn’t take it personally. God knew he wouldn’t still be my friend if he did, considering the shit I said to him last year without meaning it. My anxiety had no filter, something I tried hard to work on, but usually failed.

He sighed, mimicking my position. “True. I was a sack of shit last year when it came down to it. However,” he paused, and I knew exactly what he was going to say next, “it was partially your fault for not cluing me in until it was too late and everything blew up. You know damn well I could have helped earlier on, tampered down the rumours, even knocked some sense into Christian.”

The thought of Travis using his fist to solve a problem made me laugh. The boy was an enigma. Spontaneous, fun, and wild most of the time, but also one of the best listeners and advice givers. And not once had I ever seen him use violence for anything.

I snorted at that. “Yeah, because beating the shit out of the King’s nephew would go over *real* well with Headmistress Tavers.”

He tousled his hair away from his face as he sat up, a smirk on his lips. “Never know.”

I shook my head, astonished he even thought about it. By the time I sat up myself, my breathing returned to normal and my heart rate settled.

“Thanks, man,” I said, not needing to elaborate further.

I jerked my head toward the door, remembering it was almost time for dinner. We stood and headed out, ready for the walk to Gilbert Dining Hall.

“For the record, I don’t think she knows anything. She may be related to Christian Davies, but I’ll state it now—I think she’s different,” Travis said as we walked in silence.

I cocked my head. “Different?” Lifting an eyebrow, I questioned him. “Have you seen her? Of course she’s different. So different, I thought she was hot. Now... now she’s just a threat. And I won’t have anyone or anything threatening to ruin another year of my life. Especially not my last year here. Understood?”

Travis nodded, adjusting his satchel over his shoulder. “Understood. Operation: avoid Maggie Davies is in effect starting now. No threats to my best mate.”

“If it runs in the family... the snark, the holier-than-thou attitude, the drama? It’s a no drama year. My last chance at normality. No Christian, no Kenzie, no catastrophes.” Confidence surged through me the more I said it all out loud.

Travis slung his arm around my shoulder as we approached the dining hall, the line of students extending out the door as they had just opened for dinner.

“No way, mate. I’m not letting you go through that again. We avoid Maggie Davies as much as possible. Easy as that.”

“She’s hot though.” It pained me to admit it, but it was true.

Travis snorted. “That she is, no doubt about that. Hot doesn’t mean what’s on the inside is good. Ignore her, that’s my advice. She can have her chance to prove herself, but right now, she’s not your problem.”

Solid advice, as that was my plan already.

Christian thought he was untouchable and used that to his advantage. If Maggie thought she was going to use that against me, she was wrong.

This was *my* year, and I wasn’t going to let her take it from me.

I wouldn’t be the victim any longer.



CHAPTER NINE

Maggie

“Tonight is about meeting your new housemates, the girls you will spend most of your time with,” our Housemistress stated. “This house will act like a big family. These are your sisters. Most of you know each other already and have formed unbreakable bonds.”

Most of the girls surrounding me in the lounge smiled or hugged each other. Mere moments into the brief meeting last night about emergencies, I realised I was the only newcomer in this group; the rest had been together at least a year or more, being a “family” in Forthman House the previous years.

“We have someone new joining us. Introduce yourself, Maggie Davies.” Housemistress Thompson, who told us last night that we were never to address her as anything else, no matter how casual some of the other housemistresses were, was strict. She spoke in demands, never asking or putting polite remarks on a statement.

Her look matched her personality—the dark hair streaked with white wound into a tight bun at the nape of her neck, the pointed nose, and the

permanently narrowed eyes that always seemed to glare at people.

She reminded me of one of my first tutors. She was so strict she made me cry at least once a week until Mum politely dismissed her after two months.

I sucked in a breath and stood, smoothing my navy skirt as I did so. Clasping my hands behind my back and squaring my shoulders, I attempted to make eye contact with a few other girls around me. No one looked my way. It was a move my personal assistant Esme taught me early on; make yourself seem taller and command attention, so people will assume you are a person of interest and have power. Even if you felt like you wanted to run and hide.

Clearing my throat, I lifted my chin and stared just above the heads of the other girls, including the brunette who brushed me off earlier. I now knew her as Kenzie, who sat next to her best friend Camille. Lily sat next to me with a comforting smile on her face.

“Hello. My name is Maggie Davies. It’s a pleasure to meet you all. Thank you for the warm welcome, Housemistress Thompson, as this is the first boarding school I’ve been to. I look forward to getting to know each of you.” I let my smile travel around the room before sitting back down, tucking my skirt under me and crossing my legs at my ankles.

“And?” Housemistress Thompson snapped. I blinked in her direction, lost at what else she wanted me to explain. I didn’t want to go into much detail, as the more lies I spread, the harder it was to keep up.

“Your family, where you’re from, your hobbies?” Her eyes narrowed even more than they already were, which made me pop back to my feet.

“My apologies. Yes, um, I am from, well, I have, um, two brothers and a sister. Some Corgi’s. And, well, hobbies, yes...” My stutter was unusual, but I was so thrown off, I wasn’t sure where to start or what to say. I hadn’t prepared to make a personal speech tonight. I was dying up here. One thought popped into my head, and I ran with it. “I love to paint. I’ve been painting since I was little, and find it rather relaxing and enjoyable.”

I practically fell back onto the couch next to Lily, panting, as if I had just run a marathon. The spike in my heart rate was akin to a shot of adrenaline. I started my introduction so well, with a passage I could recite to anyone at any time. Housemistress Thompson threw me for a loop I was not prepared for, and I floundered.

Housemistress Thompson nodded her head once, apparently satisfied with my answer. The air whooshed out of my lungs, my shoulders sagging into the cushions.

“She’s something else, isn’t she?” Lily whispered into my ear. I nodded, not daring to speak out of fear of the housemistress hearing.

“We will each go around and introduce ourselves in similar manner, for Maggie to learn a bit about you, as well as I.” The housemistress grabbed a small notebook and pen, poised to take notes.

Lily patted my knee and winked at me before standing. “Thank you, Housemistress Thompson. I, for one, am very glad to be here in Carriageton this term, and look forward to a wonderful relationship with not only you, but all the girls here.”

She gave a dazzling smile. She was good at this. I whole heartedly believed her too, yet also knew she was putting on an act in order to save me.

“My name is Lily Taylor. This is my third year here at Waversmore, and I love it here. My deepest passion is my violin, something I share with my older sister, Rose, who graduated from Waversmore College and now resides in London, playing for the London Symphony Orchestra. My greatest wish is to join her on that stage.”

With that lovely speech, she sat back down, once again patting my knee in comfort. Housemistress Thompson’s hand flew over her page, writing the tidbits Lily threw out with speed.

“Next!”

One by one, each girl stood up and spoke a little about herself. The first two girls after Lily seemed nice enough, but nothing about them jumped out

at me.

After that, it was Camille's turn. I already met her a few times, briefly, as we shared a bathroom between our rooms.

"Name's Camille St. John. Family's from London. Second year here, and thankfully the last. I dance." Her curt, brief sentences raised a lot of eyebrows, but Camille didn't care. Even the housemistress didn't think it was wise to confront her to speak more.

I took mental notes on her, making sure not to ask her for advice or bother her with anything unnecessary. Not only did she not seem the friendliest, but also because of who she sat next to. She and Kenzie had to be best friends.

After the way Kenzie treated me earlier for a slight mishap, I figured she wouldn't be the most welcoming of the bunch, either. She confirmed my thoughts as she glared at me from across the room.

"Kenzie Settleman's the name. I've been at Waversmore since after primary, and it's just my favourite place ever." The sticky-sweet tone made me cringe, but I held it inside. "The people are my favourite, including my wonderful best friend." She turned to Camille and squeezed her hand. I glanced at Lily and raised an eyebrow. She bit her lip in response, the both of us able to see right through Kenzie's charade. "And the boys, they're my favourite too! I love the teachers, the staff, just everyone. I can't wait to get to know all of you better, if we haven't had the pleasure of hanging out before!"

A few girls clapped. I stayed still. Mainly because Kenzie's gaze was directly on me with the last line. However, opposite of her super sweet words, the scowl coming from her held heat. The second she sat, gaze still on me, her smile dropped, her eyes becoming hooded with rage.

I had a feeling it had to do something with Ollie. The way he brushed her off after Geography, only to catch up to me, led me to believe Kenzie wasn't my biggest fan. Not that I had anything to do with it, but she looked like someone who thrived off drama.

It didn't matter, though. The way Ollie rushed off and left me with Henry

at the end of lunch confused me. And even though we had a class together in the afternoon, he ignored me.

Maybe it was because I stood out like a sore thumb. Only a small handful of other students had their hair dyed, and not an all over colour like mine. For as much as I wanted to blend in and hide, the hair had been the outlier. Blonde would have been a better choice.

Or maybe it had to do with Kenzie. Maybe she threatened him somehow, telling him if he looked in my direction, she would do something. She seemed like the person who would make good on a threat.

I turned away from Kenzie's glare, trying to focus on the last two girls introducing themselves. Once they finished, Housemistress Thompson finished her notes while I set my mnemonics for the room. Some would be easy to remember, like Lily, Camille, and Kenzie.

Sandra had sandy blonde hair, Emily had glasses with only the top frame, which looked like a sideways E, and Justina... I just couldn't remember what Justina said about herself. She would be a hard one to remember, along with a few others. Usually my assistant, Esme, was the one drilling names and important facts about people into my head, sometimes moments before an event. We had quite the tradition of doing a run through while hustling from one end of the palace to the other.

If I showed up at an official event and called someone the wrong name, or, heavens forbid, got their spouse's name wrong... the King would hear about it. Which meant extra tutoring sessions for me the next day.

"So, that's the girls. What do you think about Waversmore so far?" Lily asked once we were all dismissed. I didn't rise right away, allowing the rest of the house to leave first. Lily must have taken that as a sign, as she lifted her leg onto the sofa and turned toward me, her elbow resting on the back pillow and supporting her head.

"Oh, um, well, everyone seems great. I've never lived with other girls before, so it'll be a bit of a change. And sharing a bathroom," I added in at

the end for laughs. It was true though; from Clarence House to the palace, I had not once ever shared a bathroom with anyone. I always had my own, as well as a sitting area and handmaids. All that, plus Esme.

Getting used to school was an adjustment, but the house would be even more so. Carriageton was one of the oldest and smallest houses at Waversmore, and exclusively for upper sixth form girls. It looked like a small stone castle with a few turrets. It was the only house on campus that had individual rooms, so no girls shared. That was mainly because the rooms were small, only holding a bed, a desk, and a dresser. The closet consisted of a rod around a drawn curtain in a corner. We all shared bathrooms, whether between two rooms like mine and Camille's, or down the hall and assigned to two students.

Lily grinned, a smile so big it stretched her cheeks and showed all her teeth. "You'll get used to it. The housemistress is right, the girls really do become your family. We're around each other all the time here in the house. We go on excursions together, have parties, and such. We're sisters, especially this year, our last year. It's special to everyone, and Waversmore makes it so we have a great time. My sister is still best friends with some girls from Carriageton her last year, even being a bridesmaid in a few weddings."

Talking to Lily was the easiest conversation I had all day. Ollie had been nice at first, and seemed like he could be a great friend. The hot and cold thing he had going on rubbed me the wrong way, though.

Then there was Travis. I didn't quite feel ready to ask Lily about him yet. It was hard to get a good read on him. The boys were genuine, but then turned on me, and I couldn't figure out why.

Henry, on the other hand, was kind. And also unsettling. He was too handsy for me, and made me feel a bit slimy after our conversations. Everything he talked about was all about him, without taking a breath to have someone else speak.

No one else had introduced themselves. I hoped I would make more friends soon, but I wasn't counting on anyone throwing themselves at me. Hopefully there would be more like-minded people in the art studios tomorrow.

"It sounds great. I think I'm going to go up to bed now, though. First day wore me out." I gave Lily a genuine smile, and she nodded in return. Exchanging good night's, I wound my way up the small stone staircase toward the bedrooms, glad Auntie Ellie remembered to pack me a pair of house shoes. The floors here were old and cold all year round.

Sleep was far from my mind, even though I was exhausted, mentally and physically.

A million thoughts raced through my brain as I laid in bed in the dark. I wondered how my parents were doing. Did they miss me? Were they upset with me?

What about Xavier and the twins? It hurt me to think about them. I hoped they didn't think I had abandoned them, as that was as far from the truth as possible. I loved them dearly and missed them so much it made my heart hurt.

Then my mind travelled to London, the kingdom, and work. Esme had been in touch only once so far. I didn't know if Mum told her to keep her distance, but not receiving her daily, sometimes multiple times a day, updates felt weird. She was one of my best friends, by proxy alone, and not having her here also hurt.

Before I closed my eyes for good, the boys from today popped through my thoughts once more. How fast Ollie and Travis ditched me, even though they were so friendly at first. And how quickly Henry attempted to lay his claim, even after I clearly portrayed my disinterest.

Being around people my own age for as long as I had been today was a new concept for me. Multiple times I felt out of the loop, not knowing the most popular bands, songs, movies, or shows. I knew I had been living a

sheltered life, but never realised just how out of touch I was.

Every time we had an engagement, advisors gave me a list of acceptable topics to discuss with everyone in the room. Rarely did it include social media or popular entertainment, unless we were at a movie premiere of some sort. Even then, the topic stuck to the movie itself, or the other works of the director and lead actors.

I had to brush up, just like Headmistress Tavers said. Even the way I wore my clothes was out of date, all stuffy and buttoned up.

Tomorrow was a new day. A new opportunity to start out on the right foot.

Tomorrow was also art day. A chance to paint again.

I couldn't wait.



CHAPTER TEN

Ollie

The sounds that accompanied breakfast did not make the pounding in my head any better. Part of me wished I was hungover, so I would have something to blame it on. It was only me and my stupid inability to sleep last night.

I wasn't known for any sort of insomnia, so when the clock hit one in the morning, and my eyes had yet to even feel heavy, I worried.

The drum session, and vent session with Travis, earlier in the evening felt great. I assumed I got all my frustrations out and my mind was back to normal.

Obviously, that wasn't the case. And the text from Pops after dinner didn't help either.

POP: Don't forget your card has a spending limit. I got the school fees list from the headmistress' office yesterday. I'm monitoring the charges carefully.

That was it. Nothing else. Not "hope you had a great first day", "how are

things going?”, or any of the other pleasantries that usually accompanied a message from a loving parent.

Not that anyone considered Pops a loving parent.

What kept me up all night was the sadness. It was how much symbolism I put into walking through the front doors, the weight I put on having the best last first day ever, only for it to crumble.

The more pressure you put on symbolism, the worse you felt when things went south.

Putting so much thought into one day, only to have it turn on me, made me wonder if it wasn't an omen for the rest of the year.

In one day, I found out the new girl was related to the person I hated the most. Then a phone call with Pops reminded me that the only person who wanted me to enjoy my last year at school was me.

The only good news about his text was the fact that it still seemed he didn't know about my job. My rather part-time, probably illegal, job. Not many people here at Waversmore knew about it, either.

I was a backup drummer for Gasby's Pub a few blocks away and worked on an "as needed" basis. They paid strictly in cash. It was good money, especially because it was usually last-minute work. The house band always threw me a few extra quid each, grateful that I could hurry my arse up and get there in record time. If it was another band, they paid even better, as I had to quickly learn the back beats of their sounds. If they were doing covers I knew, I played them, but learning entirely new songs in mere minutes was out of the question.

However, I was damn good at what I did, and could jump into a song and play the beats without learning prior. The house band played mostly covers or songs I already taught myself in order to keep up. If I hadn't had a gig that week, Gene let me wait tables for cash, too.

Graduation was coming up faster than I liked, and I had to save up all the money I could before then. Once Waversmore became nothing but a memory,

I had to rely solely on myself. The change had to start now. Which was another reason I couldn't let Maggie Davies get in my way.

"Are you going to eat that, or just stare at it?" Henry asked, giving my tray a shove. I blinked, refocusing my gaze on the food in front of me.

Miss Duphrey loaded me up today, probably noticing the bags under my eyes and my dragging feet. She added an extra scoop of scrambled eggs, an extra slice of bacon, and an extra helping of beans as well.

"Quiet down, would you?" I said in a harsh whisper. Henry's voice grated on both my nerves and my brain today. The pain medicine I took this morning barely touched the ache yet, and Henry's voice went straight into the epicentre.

"Someone wake up on the wrong side of the bed?" he responded, shovelling eggs into his mouth. He chewed with his mouth open, showing everyone exactly what was going on in there.

For someone so prim and proper, so uptight and exact, he could be disgusting around us boys sometimes. The second a girl came along, he straightened up and put on a show, like he had with Maggie the other day.

It didn't go unnoticed by anyone at the table except her. Maybe I would get lucky and she would become interested in Henry, and we could ignore the both of them.

That was fine with me too.

"What's fine with you, darling?" Kenzie's voice hurt almost more than Henry's. I closed my eyes and rubbed my fingers against my temple, not having the patience to deal with her again today.

I also knew she wouldn't back down without a fight. Kenzie Settleman cared about appearances and appearances only. She would go tooth-to-nail with me, even if it meant pretending we were all fine and dating, but not talking to each other behind closed doors.

Sort of how our "relationship" had been last year. I doubted she knew about the issues I had with Christian. Not many people did besides Travis,

Henry, and Charlie, and that was only because of the massive amount of time I spent behind my drum set. I didn't know any other way to work out my frustrations and anger besides beating the shit out of a drum.

As long as I was on Kenzie's arm each morning, and attended the activities with her at night, she couldn't care less about me as a person, or about my problems. I had to sit with her and let her literally cry on my shoulder the day she found out her cat died. We did so publically, in the gardens, where people could come and pay their respects and she could be the centre of attention.

"None of your business, Kenzie," Travis shot back, taking the reins from me. He had never been on team Kenzie in the first place, so her pulling a stunt now would set him off. I needed to jump in before he got heated about it all, but my head was still pounding and the rest of me was dragging.

Taking a massive gulp of black coffee, I stood and faced my ex. Every single hair was in place, her makeup impeccable, and her uniform barely passing standard.

"Kenzie, please, leave. Find someone else to torment, I'm begging you." Short and to the point. I didn't have enough energy, or caffeine, to deal with her in any other manner, and the more words I used, the more Kenzie would twist and manipulate them.

She opened her mouth to speak, but it wasn't her voice that came next.

Cue the third voice I would never want to hear when I was feeling as bad as I was today.

"Oliver, how are you this morning?" Headmistress Tavers asked, strolling through the dining hall. My standing up must have got her attention. I silently cursed Kenzie for making that happen before putting as big of a smile on my face as I could.

As the headmistress got closer, I realised my tie was undone and my hair hadn't been pulled back. The dining hall didn't have as strict regulations as the classrooms, but seeing the headmistress while not put together was never a good sign. She only came to the dining hall for random breakfasts and

dinners during the first week of terms or special occasions, and of course, this just had to be one of those times.

“Good morning, Headmistress. It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?”

She smirked as my hand rose to my tie, attempting to knot it without her noticing. Obviously, it was a complete failure, but she seemed to enjoy watching me try.

Once I finished, ignoring the hair situation as that would be rather rude to do in front of her and in the dining area, her gaze tracked the room, her brows furrowing. “Where might our new student, Maggie, be? Is everything going well with her?”

Shit. Of course she would ask about Maggie. And of course I had yet to see her this morning. I swivelled my head, searching the same places the headmistress just did, hoping to find a different answer.

By the grace of some unknown deity, the purple haired girl strolled through the doors at that exact second. My eyes shot open, wide awake now, as I dashed toward her.

Throwing my arm around her, I guided her back to Headmistress Tavers, whispering under my breath, “Go along with it.”

Her brilliant blue eyes widened under her black-framed glasses. Thankfully she didn’t say a word.

“Well, look who finally showed up! I was just about to head to Carriageton to make sure she knew her way, but this one here is a quick learner. I bet I won’t even have to help her find her classes today, Headmistress. Maggie here is quite independent. A marvellous thing for a woman to be in this world, don’t you agree?”

I hadn’t dropped my arm from around Maggie’s shoulders. Pins and needles pricked my skin every second it stayed there, and my lip quivered at the attempt to sneer in her direction instead of keeping the grin on my face.

Last night I couldn’t decide if I felt bad about already hating her based on what her relative did and not giving her a chance to prove herself, and feeling

confident in my decision to completely avoid her.

The confidence won the battle in the end, purely because of past experiences of being burned. I put my desire to survive this year unscathed above everything now.

Headmistress Tavers narrowed her eyes, surveying me, trying to sniff out my lies. I kept the smile plastered on, not wavering in the slightest.

“Very well. Please make sure she knows where her co-curricular is this afternoon. Maggie, I believe you chose art as your specialty?”

Maggie nodded, but didn’t speak. That was for the best. The less she said, the better.

“Have a great day then, Oliver. Maggie.” With a nod, the headmistress left, greeting a few students as she walked out of the dining hall.

I waited until the doors shut behind her before sliding my arm off Maggie’s shoulders.

“What the hell, Oliver?” Kenzie hissed. My entire body cringed, knowing I just threw myself into the lion’s den.

The lasers coming from Kenzie’s eyes were enough to scare anyone off, but I stood my ground. “Kenzie. Just don’t.”

Maggie’s head whipped between me and Kenzie. As much as I wanted to hate her, she didn’t need to be subjected to Kenzie’s torture too. Once Kenzie got it in her head she didn’t like someone, it was game over for them.

And with Maggie living in the same house as her, well, it wouldn’t be me Maggie would have to worry about.

I had bigger problems than worrying about her. Kenzie would be harder to shake off now that she saw that stupid display of chivalry. The only reason I dragged Maggie over and pretended to be best friends with her was because of the headmistress.

For all Tavers had done for me in the past, I couldn’t let her think I was actively avoiding Maggie. I had never let her down before, just like she never let me down.

I was a “lifer”, and so was the headmistress. A year after I came to Waversmore College, she did as well, transferring from Waversmore Junior. I grew up with her as my headmistress, a mother figure of sorts, especially when she knew my own mother had died before primary school. She looked after me, never letting me fall behind or slack off.

I couldn't deal with that now. The tension was so high, it felt like the dining hall was about to explode, as well as my head.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Maggie

“Kenzie. Just stop,” Ollie stated, dragging his hands over his face. The bags under his eyes proved a difficult night for him, but it couldn’t have been any worse than mine.

It was well into the night before my brain finally shut off enough to get a few hours of sleep, and the alarm came early this morning.

Early enough to need a high dose of caffeine, whether it be Miss Duphrey’s tea or even a cup of coffee. It was also too early for the intense glare coming from Kenzie.

The tension between our trio was so thick, I should have asked Miss Duphrey for a knife.

“Pardon? What is going on?” I asked tentatively, not wanting to jump into the middle of this dispute. Whatever Kenzie and Ollie had was between them. Though, from my outsider’s perspective, it didn’t seem like they were on the same page.

“What’s happening, *new girl*, is the fact that Ollie seems to forget where

his loyalties lie. This little... *display* is nothing short of a ridiculous act.” Kenzie accentuated her words by waving her hand in my face, the obnoxious fake pink nails matching her lipstick.

Ollie’s head snapped toward her again, his eyes blazing. “Kenzie-”

She waved a hand at him, shushing him just like my mother did to my father. Except Kenzie did it with malicious intent, not as a power move. And Ollie’s lips clamped shut out of annoyance, not respect.

Reading body language was an art form I had perfected over the years of attending royal events. Here, it was clear to anyone in the vicinity that Ollie had had enough of Kenzie, yet Kenzie stood here, staking her claim as if she had the right.

I didn’t need to know the backstory of their relationship. Ollie was one of the popular guys, and Kenzie, the Queen Bee, therefore she assumed they belonged together. Whatever they had, Kenzie banked on using it to her advantage in her last year of school, only to be shot down by Ollie. And it had to be recent, with as frustrated as Ollie seemed.

My lips wanted to curl into a smirk, but I tucked them in, pressing tight so I didn’t give any emotion away.

“Why don’t you go find someone else to obsess over, new girl? Ollie is off limits.” Kenzie folded her arms over her chest, her blouse straining to stay buttoned beneath her tight blazer.

I narrowed my eyes. The last thing I wanted to do on my second day of term was create enemies, but Kenzie seemed to have decided on that already.

Straightening my shoulders, I raised one eyebrow and let the smirk loose. If she wanted to battle, I could battle.

“I introduced myself last night. In case you forgot, it’s Maggie. Maggie Davies. And I think I can figure out who’s off limits myself, thanks. By the looks of it, Ollie wants to run as far away from you as possible, so maybe you should rethink your own relationships instead of worrying about my potential ones, alright?”

Her eyes grew, the fury turning apoplectic. I cast a side glance at Ollie, finding his hands dropped to his side and his mouth hanging open. After a moment, he took a step forward, his eyebrows furrowing and creating a little wrinkle between them.

“Kenzie, darling, Sandra needs to borrow your curler. Better make it quick so we don’t miss first class!” Another girl came out of nowhere, looping her arm through Kenzie’s and dragging her out of the dining hall.

My stomach rumbled, reminding me the reason I came here in the first place. With all the hubbub of the last few minutes, I had yet to grab food. Or tea.

But I needed to know one thing before I left this spot. I was on fire now, feeling sassier than usual. Placing a hand on my hip, I cocked my head and looked directly into Ollie’s eyes.

“What the hell was that?”

The cold shoulder from Ollie was clear. What I did or said yesterday to earn that, I didn’t know. Ollie wanted nothing to do with me. And that was fine by me; I didn’t need a babysitter.

The outrageous stunt he just pulled annoyed the crap out of me, though.

Ollie stared, his hazel eyes pulled down by the frown on his face. His mind was working overtime, yet no words escaped his lips. A flurry of emotions crossed his face in the span of a few seconds.

Anger seemed to be the predominant winner, but a sudden mischievous grin pulling at his lips surprised me.

“Are you finding your way?” he asked, smoothing his blazer and straightening the haphazardly tied tie. The grin sat on an otherwise blank face, becoming quite unsettling.

I blinked, trying to catch up. Between the ache behind my eyes and the growling stomach, I desperately needed food and tea.

“Am I... am I finding my way?” My brows furrowed, absolute confusion crossing my features. After that display, he now suddenly cared if I made it to

my classes? He put the little act on for the headmistress, not out of concern for me.

I racked my brain, unable to come up with any other motive behind his question. Sucking in a breath and straightening my glasses, I answered. I squared my shoulders and lifted my chin just slightly. “Yes, I’m fine.”

He nodded and turned back toward his table of friends. I glanced that way, finding Travis staring, but not at his friend—at me.

A chill ran through my body. Yet another person who was friendly and kind to me yesterday, only to turn a cold shoulder.

Auntie Ellie assured me my alias was rock solid. No one would be able to pin Maggie Davies to anywhere—she didn’t exist on social media, wouldn’t have anything in an internet search, and Christian’s friends all graduated with him last year. Some students may remember him, but him not mentioning a distant cousin wouldn’t be too far-fetched.

“Good,” Ollie replied from a few steps away. I turned my attention back on him, watching as his blazer stretched over his massive shoulders. “If you need something, well, find someone else.”

I quirked a brow and crossed my arms. There it was. He wanted to toss out an insult, to assert his dominance over the situation. A power move he thought would seal his win, but he didn’t know who he was messing with.

He pulled *me* into his mess, leaving me alone to dig out of it. He wasn’t going to get away with his little temper tantrum.

“Someone else? Like Headmistress Tavers, perhaps?” The sneer I put on my lips matched the evil laugh I suppressed inside.

My words stopped Ollie cold. Travis shifted in his seat, ready to get up and protect his friend. Ollie waved him off, which turned my sneer into a smile.

A smile that vanished the moment he faced me again. His eyes darkened, hooded by his narrowing lids. This wasn’t a playing around type of glare—this was full on hatred.

My heart dropped. I said it in jest, but to Ollie, it was an attack.

Sometimes my sass went overboard without me realising it. This seemed to be one of those times. I hit a nerve with Ollie. He and the headmistress must have a good relationship, with him being a “lifer” and all. The thought of disappointing her ran deep. Threatening to expose our situation was not only a joke, but a strike against him personally.

I took a few strides back, to get out of Ollie’s personal space and start my exit. I no longer felt the desire to stay and eat my breakfast, so it would be on the go now.

But... the desperate need to get the final word nagged at me. I went along with his little show for the headmistress. Now it was my time to retaliate.

“Whatever. I’ll find the art building myself later. I never asked for a tour guide, anyway.”

I slid into the line to grab some food and tea, not looking back. Just because Ollie spoiled my morning didn’t mean I had to go hungry.

Before dashing out the door, I glanced at Ollie, finding him staring at me with such intensity, my entire body ran cold.

Not wanting to lose this battle, I wagged my fingers and blew him a kiss.

“See you in Geography. I’ll save you a seat.” I threw him a wink reminiscent of his own, and pushed through the doors.

It had only taken a day, but the meek, lost, nervous girl of yesterday was gone. Strong Maggie Davies took over, the perfect blend of power and confidence.

To this world, I may be an outsider. But I could still conquer.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Ollie

I managed to keep my cool for most of the day, even in Geography. Since we had our co-curriculars today, I didn't have to see Maggie in Business, which left the end of the day on a high note.

Travis and Henry kept me busy during lunch, with Henry finally picking up on the vibe and not talking about her. No matter how hot he thought she was.

Dating at Waversmore was difficult. One bad breakup, and life was immensely harder than it had to be. We lived within walking distance of the girls' houses, attended classes in the same building, and had inter-mixed co-curriculars. There was no escaping anyone. As evidenced by Kenzie Settleman.

The gossip mill was just as bad. Rumours flew through campus. I knew who started most of them in the past few years, and it was unfortunately someone I associated myself with more than I wish I had.

Every school had the mean girl group, and with how distracted I was last year, I somehow found myself smack in the middle of them.

Kenzie didn't know anything about my issues with Christian Davies, and part of me wishes she had. Maybe if she realised just how much her words could affect people, she would back down a bit.

Probably not. Kenzie and her friends thrived on power, on knowing others were afraid of them, too scared to stand up for themselves and fight back.

I pushed open the doors to the snack shop in the basement of the main building. The line for the register wound around the aisles, as classes had just let out for the afternoon. Everyone's favourite thing to do before heading to the specials buildings was grab a snack, myself included.

We had half an hour to do whatever we needed before getting to our designated spot, which would leave enough time to buy something and eat it in the courtyard between the school building and the music hall.

"Did you see the boobs on her? Man, one handful—" a guy whispered to another in front of me as I got in line with my choice.

"Forget the boobs. Did you see her arse? Mmm, thank you uniform skirts!"

My lip curled into a sneer. No matter how hot a girl was, she didn't deserve to be spoken about like an object. I was about to voice my opinion when the next comment from another guy in their group stopped me in my tracks.

Who said it didn't surprise me. William Van Der Mullins was one of the most disgusting boys I had ever met. Dumb as bricks, but filthy rich, he thought he was God's gift to mankind.

"I'd fuck her every day of the week and twice on Sundays. Maggie Davies would be screaming my name so much she'd go horse. Either from that or taking this in her mouth." He reached down and grabbed his junk through his trousers. His minions, Louis and Alexander, laughed as if it was the funniest thing they ever heard.

I gagged, almost dropping my food. The fact that guys talked this way made me want to puke. And it just had to be about the one person I was trying to get *away* from, didn't it?

She was hot, that much I agreed with. The instant attraction to her when the headmistress walked her into class was there.

The snark and sass in her voice from this morning at breakfast was also sexy as hell. How she transformed into a badass who wasn't afraid to call me out on my shit was way hotter than anything Kenzie had ever done.

Maggie didn't take my crap. She went along with the act for the headmistress, but when she left, it was game on. Maggie wasn't a pawn to be moved around or the lost girl she portrayed yesterday. She was strong and independent, and could fight her own battles.

Plus, Kenzie had it coming. It was about time someone finally talked back to her.

On the other hand... knowing what I knew about who Maggie was... the sass also confirmed everything.

Maggie Davies was trouble. And I needed to stay far away.

"You'd have to get in line. I'm going to ask her out this weekend first. To shag, that is," Louis said, pulling me out of my thoughts and remembering exactly what they were talking about.

"Not if I beat you to it. Trust me, mate, by the end of the week, Maggie Davies will be old news for you. She'll be too busy being under me," Alexander replied, shoving William's shoulder and sending him careening toward the shelf while cackling.

I had enough. I shoved my bag of snacks on the closest shelf and barged my way through them.

"Grow the fuck up, you tossers," I said through gritted teeth as I pushed past them. I didn't care about them or their food, and when they dropped their items, I actually smiled.

If there wasn't a risk of suspension, I would have punched them all in their mouths for talking about someone that way. Even if it was Maggie Davies.

Ignoring their calls and shouts, I pressed my way through the door empty handed, my stomach grumbling. I would just have to suffer until dinner. The

suffering was preferable to standing there and listening to those prats anyway.

“Oi, Ollie! Nice of you to show up,” Henry cat-called as I stomped across the expansive, meticulously maintained courtyard. As big as a half a football pitch, the grounds were always trimmed and lined with massive rose bushes, creating walking pathways that looked straight out of a palace garden.

It was the biggest of the courtyards, and the only one original to the beginning of Waversmore. The first year the school opened, the headmaster commissioned the gardens as a place for the boys to court the young women of the town. The school was originally for boys only, and most would go on to find their future wives from the village women.

Hence the name “courtyard”. Or, at least, that’s what the legends said. There were so many different rumours about the founding and what went along with it, no one knew the true meaning of things anymore.

I chucked my satchel in the direction of Henry, currently lying on his side, his head resting in his hand. He made sure not to have his fingers near his hair, however, to maintain the updo he spent so much time on in the morning.

The bag didn’t touch him, yet he still flinched. Travis snorted.

“So close, mate. You almost had him that time.”

I rolled my eyes and lowered myself to the ground next to them. Eying Travis’ array of food, I snatched a bag of crisps and ripped them open between my teeth.

“Absolutely, please, help yourself. I wasn’t planning on eating any of this,” Travis muttered sarcastically.

“Couldn’t grab a snack at the shop,” I explained, leaving out the encounter with the boys objectifying Maggie Davies.

“Well, eat up, we have business to discuss.” Henry sat up and took a small notepad out of his briefcase, the one monogrammed with his initials. It was new this year, as it was every year, even though his old one wasn’t worn down in the slightest. Like himself, Henry kept his belongings in perfect

condition.

“First up, band name. We cannot go another year without a proper name, lads. It’s utterly ludicrous.”

Travis and I glanced at each other, matching small smiles appearing. Henry noticed and began his usual whine.

“What have I missed now? Honestly, being in a band with you two is the worst.”

“Who’s the worst?” Charlie asked, appearing out of nowhere as he plopped onto the grass next to Travis. “Oh, snacks. Thanks. The line at the snack shop was almost out the door by the time I got there. And these boys standing outside, saying such rude things about—”

“Untitled,” I blurted out, not wanting Charlie to continue his sentence.

“What’s untitled? And who’s the worst? Why am I always late to these things and feel absolutely clueless by the time I arrive? Can we push back the time—”

Henry held up his hand to get Charlie to hush up. “Untitled what? Please tell me that’s not your genius idea for a band name.”

I grinned, feeling some laughter bubble in my chest. “It most certainly is.” I leaned back onto my hands, stretching out my long legs and tipping my face to the peeks of sun shining through the clouds. “We’ve been unnamed for over a year now, and I feel like it’s stuck. Ask anyone on campus and they’ll tell you.”

Henry narrowed his eyes, a vein in his neck pulsing. He wouldn’t come outright and voice his disgust, as his upbringing forbade such bad manners. He would just figure out how to prove that his point of contention was better.

I lived for this game. Debate was one of my favorite subjects and, with a little intuition, I could take down just about anyone. If I cared to, that was.

“Oi, you, stop for a moment,” Henry called, scrambling to his feet and dusting off his trousers. A girl who looked younger than us stopped in her tracks, her eyes wide with fear.

“Do you know the band on campus? The one with this oaf as the drummer?” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder at me. I waggled my fingers in her direction, giving her my most charming smile. I wanted to let my hair down and have it sweep over my forehead, but that would be overkill. The girl looked frightened enough of Henry; I didn’t need her fainting at my beauty.

“Pardon? A band?” she asked, biting her bottom lip.

“Calliope, please ignore this prat here,” Charlie retorted, pushing Henry aside and taking the girl’s hand. She relaxed under his touch, confirming the notion that Henry was a sleezy jerk. We put up with him purely for his somewhat decent guitar skills.

“What he’s asking is, do you know the name of our band?” Charlie looked directly into her eyes as if he was trying to tell her telepathically.

Calliope bunched her face in thought. “I’ve only seen it labelled unnamed or untitled on any flyer’s I’ve seen. I’m not sure if that’s your name or if you haven’t chosen one yet.”

Charlie thanked her and sent her on her way with his apologies once again for Henry’s outburst.

“There you have it, friends. Untitled it is. No one would recognise us if we had a name now.”

Travis nodded and crunched some of his crisps. I followed suit, a slight smirk on my face directed toward Henry, who sat pouting and muttering to himself while writing something in his notebook.

“Fine. Onto our songs, then.”

We spent the next ten minutes going over a playlist, even though we had nowhere to play at the moment. It never hurt to be prepared.

“Ollie, do you think you can ask?”

I jerked out of my own thoughts, unsure what Charlie was asking of me.

“The pub. Do you think you can ask the manager if we can play this term?”

Biting my lip, I thought this over. Only these three knew I even worked there part time, and had that pull.

We played there twice last year, as a favour from the manager for my good deeds. Neither time I actually came out and asked; both times were because of last-minute cancellations and slots needing to be filled.

However, I had been working there, whether on the drums or waiting tables, for two years now. The extra spending money came in handy when Pops refused to send any.

“I suppose I could ask next time I’m there,” I answered slowly. It made me nervous, but there wasn’t much I could lose. I doubted he would fire me for asking, and if anything, I could just ask to be put on the list for cancellations again instead of requesting an actual slot.

“Atta boy!” Henry exclaimed, slapping me on the shoulder.

The bell tower struck, alerting everyone to the need to get to their specials.

The four of us headed towards Fairfield Hall, the music building, where we then separated into our instrumental classes.

There was nothing I looked forward to more in my day than getting to beat some drums. It was when I was at my happiest and nothing could bring me down.

That was, not until class ended and I saw the voicemail on my mobile from Pops.



CHAPTER 13

Maggie

I finally found my groove here at Waversmore after the first month.

There were a few girls I became friendly with, and a handful of boys I had to teach a lesson to with some sharp words. Mostly, people just left me alone.

The bad part about starting a new school in the last year was the fact that everyone had their circle of friends and were set on their relationships.

The good part about starting as a last year when trying to hide was the same. Since everyone already had their group of friends, I was most often left to do my own thing. That meant sitting alone in the dining hall a lot, and doing class projects by myself when everyone else huddled together to work.

I didn't mind; I liked to people watch and my best work came when I could do it on my own.

Lily had taken me under her wing, becoming the closest person I could call a friend. She sat with me at lunch when she wasn't at the music hall practicing. She was on track to audition at the same symphony her sister

played at and allowed extra practice time.

The other thing I was able to hide was my guitar playing. I hadn't told anyone yet, lest I become even more of an outcast. I hid it under my bed and sneaked out when it was time for my lessons. So far, no one suspected anything, and that was how I liked it.

After my lesson this evening, I ran to drop my guitar off in my room, knowing there wouldn't be anyone at the house. I was already late for dinner, and didn't want to make my own in the Carriageton House kitchen. Housemistress Thompson watched us like a hawk, never offering to help, just making sure we didn't take more than necessary. The kitchen was open for the girls to use how they wished, but she made it seem as if we were on rations.

I got in and out of the house relatively unscathed, waving a quick hello and goodbye to the housemistress as I bolted through the lounge. She called after me to slow down, that proper ladies did not run. I didn't stop to listen. I was too hungry and almost wasn't going to make it to dinner in time.

Besides, I knew exactly what proper ladies were supposed to do. The number of times my siblings and I got yelled at for running up and down the palace hallways was too high to count. We did it anyway.

Flying out the front door, I dashed down the path to the right, checking my watch to see how much time I had before Miss Duphrey closed the doors. It wasn't long, and I could make it if I hurr—

“Ahh!” I squealed after colliding with an immovable force. My hands flew into the air, circling to keep my balance, but it was impossible.

The backwards swan dive to the ground seemed as if it was in slow motion. I braced myself for the fall, gritting my teeth at the expectation of how much it was going to hurt when my butt collided with the concrete path.

It never came. Instead, a muscular arm wrapped around my waist, hoisting me back onto my feet. I crashed into a warm body, my arms automatically winding around his torso to keep myself steady.

“Oh goodness, I am so sorry! I was in such a rush, I didn’t—” This time I cut myself off. As I apologised, I looked into the face of my rescuer and finding the tightly drawn brows and massive frown of Oliver Hastings.

I jerked my arms back as fast as I could, but his arm was still around my waist, holding me to him. Squirming, I wiggled my way out after placing my hands on his chest and pushing hard.

He didn’t say a word. His chest rose and fell with each heavy breath he took as he stared me down.

I brushed off my skirt and straightened my blazer while staring at the ground instead of at him.

“I’m sorry,” I said again. “I didn’t mean to run into you.”

Ollie had ignored me since the first day of school. We had yet to speak much at all, even though we had two classes together.

“What did you hear?” he snapped. I swiped a rogue lock of hair that flew into my face when I slammed into him.

After untangling it, I answered, “Hear? I didn’t hear anything.”

I lifted my gaze, locking eyes with him. His narrowed, hazel pair were steely and full of pain.

“Don’t lie, princess,” he muttered softly, though his jaw hardened. His whole face tensed, from his forehead through his neck, the muscles straining.

“Princess? Excuse me?” I shot back, propping my hands on my hips. When Henry used that nickname the first time I met him, I had been a wreck inside. I had been here a month now, and barely anyone blinked in my direction, so I had started to relax. Until now. Was Ollie using it like Henry had? Or had he found something out?

Ollie’s lip curled with a mischievous sneer. “Seems fitting for the girl who thinks she’s better than everyone.”

My head tilted as I looked around me. Was I missing something? When did I think I was better than *anyone*?

“What did you hear?” Ollie demanded again, taking a step closer and

looking down at me.

I held up my hands in defence and took a step backwards, out of his space. “Honestly, I didn’t hear a thing. What’s got you so worked up?”

Ollie let out a large breath and ran a hand through his hair while shoving his mobile into his back pocket next to the ever-present pair of drumsticks.

They were a safety net of sorts, like my necklace was for me.

He shook his head and looked away. “My pops.”

I didn’t mean to, but I laughed. My mouth clamped shut, though, when he whirled back around, staring at me as if I personally attacked him.

“Sorry. Again. I mean...” Fumbling over my words seemed to be a new thing for me while here. “I mean, is everything alright?”

Not breaking eye contact, Ollie shook his head slowly, his hair brushing his ears as he did. “Whatever. I’m late for dinner.”

He turned and walked away. I reached out, skimming his arm with my hand. He froze, but didn’t turn around.

“I have issues with my dad, too. It’s kind of why I’m here,” I admitted. It felt like the right thing to say.

Except, instead of sympathy or acknowledgement, he let out a laugh like the one I just had.

“Oh really? The pretty princess has issues at home too, huh? Trust me, whatever ‘issues’ you think you have, they’re nothing compared to mine.”

I let him get exactly six steps down the path before calling out. “You know, real men don’t run away from their problems. The least you could do is face me if you want to fight.”

Once again, my need for the final word was going to get me in trouble. The last time I spoke this way to Ollie, he was too stunned to respond, and I left the dining hall before he could get a word in.

This time, he was right here, pivoting on his heel, turning around to face me again.

He tucked his hair behind his ears and looked at the ground as he retraced

the six steps toward me. I lifted my chin, ready to look him dead in the eye and find out what the hell I had done to make him hate me so much.

He may not have spoken to me since the day in the dining hall with the headmistress, but the glares, the stares, and the cold shoulder he showed any time he was close to me spoke volumes.

“Real men, huh? You don’t think I’m a ‘real man’?” With his hands in his pockets, he rocked back on his heels, waiting for my answer.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Nope. Fight your battles. You have issues with me, then let’s hear them.”

Ollie took a long breath, stalling. He scanned me from head to toe and back again. I stayed silent, waiting for him to drop whatever bombshell revelation he thought he had.

I had done nothing to him. There was no reason for the hostility.

“Let me tell you, princess. I’m here to finish my last year in peace. I don’t need your drama, your trouble, or your sass. Your little smart mouth that you may think is so clever won’t make you any friends.”

“Don’t call me princess,” I spat out, the anger inside of me rising. I fought the urge to stomp my foot in protest.

The sinister smile on Ollie’s face sent a shiver down my spine. Staring at me from under his lashes, he reached up and brushed his thumb over his lips. “I’ll call you whatever I believe fits.”

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from retorting. That seemed to be what he wanted me to do. I would throw out a witty line and he would jump back with a rebuttal.

We were dancing around each other, tossing insults and insolence in a sort of verbal tango.

“Go back to your palace. Waversmore doesn’t need another spoiled, two-faced bitch on campus.”

As my jaw dropped, he spun around and walked away, whistling a tune I didn’t recognise.

“Waversmore doesn’t need one, or *you* don’t?” I yelled after him.

Cocking his head from left to right, his neck cracking, he spun in a circle to face me while replying, “they’re one and the same, as far as you’re concerned, princess.”

My blood boiled as I clenched my fists hard enough to make half-moon indentations on my palm.

Never in my life had I had someone speak to me in such a manner. No one ever dared; at least, not to my face.

But I wasn’t a princess here. I was a nobody. A nobody who had made an enemy out of Ollie Hastings, without a single clue as to why.



CHAPTER 14

Maggie

My stomach rumbled, starving after I ended up missing dinner last night due to Ollie Hastings and his infuriating antics. Once I realised I was out of luck, I sulked back to the Carriageton kitchen and made a small snack, all under the watchful eye of Housemistress Thompson. Not wanting to take too long, I scarfed it down and ran to my room.

This morning, I slid into the dining hall early and relatively unnoticed, just like every other day.

“Why hello dear, you’re a bit earlier than normal, aren’t you?” Miss Duphrey’s soothing voice greeted me as I grabbed a tray and joined the small line.

She was a face I could always count on for a comforting smile. She was one of the few people that talked to me over the past few weeks.

I shrugged and returned her smile with one of my own. “Things to do, people to see. I’m a busy woman, Miss Duphrey.”

She chuckled, a deep laugh originating in her belly. Miss Duphrey was sunshine on a rainy day, always there to brighten things up. It didn't matter how bad of a day I was having, I knew I would get the best from her.

“Aren't you all. I'm just glad I work here, so I can see your lovely faces at least three times a day.”

I loaded up with some scrambled eggs, Miss Duphrey's famous bacon, and some sausages. “Four, if I come for tea.”

Her smile warmed my heart. “Don't think I didn't notice you skipped tea recently, love. Don't be a stranger now. I'd love to have a good chat about how your first month here at Waversmore is going.”

For any other staff member, that would seem to be an odd comment, wanting to have tea with a student and talk about school. But for Miss Duphrey, it was a kind gesture, one I would most likely take her up on.

“It would be a pleasure, Miss Duphrey. I'll swing by on Monday. How about that?”

She agreed, and I continued my way through the line, grabbing some breakfast tea at the end. Exiting the hall, I looked around the dining area.

I wasn't sure what I expected, as it would be the same as every other morning. Groups of students sat together, sometimes leaving empty seats at their tables, sometimes not. The noise in the room highlighted the fact that they were there for a good time with their friends while eating.

Once again, I would dine alone, as Lily ran to the music building to record a piece before classes.

Pulling out a chair to a table in the back, I slid my tray down and set my bag on the floor, but I couldn't find the motivation to eat. I was both physically and mentally exhausted. What I needed was my mum. Being away from her and my siblings was taking a larger toll on me than I realised.

I called her last night, but it wasn't the same. I was missing out on an entire world out there, my world, my life. They were moving on as if I didn't exist, even though I knew that wasn't true.

“And I heard she set fire to her old school, and that’s why she got kicked out.” Chairs screeched on the floor as a group of girls I was all too familiar with took residence at the table behind me. They spoke louder than necessary.

Kenzie and her circle of mean girls had arrived. I successfully avoided them for the most part after telling Kenzie off last month. Camille and I shared a bathroom. We seemed to have worked out an unwritten schedule of sorts, never overlapping or even really seeing each other.

“Really? That’s not what Greyson said. He told me that his cousin went to school with her and she got kicked out for drugs.”

My brow furrowed, wondering who they could be talking about. Obviously they wanted me to hear, with the volume they were using. Arson and drugs were not something to joke about.

“Well, that’s probably why she dyed her hair purple. So no one would recognise her. Why she would keep the same name when it’s easily searchable is beyond me. I mean, Maggie isn’t that uncommon,” Kenzie’s high-pitched tone entered the chat.

Me. They were talking about me.

I froze, but didn’t turn around to face them. I wanted to hear what other ridiculous things they could come up with before interrupting. There was no way they didn’t see me sitting right behind them. They were trying to get to me, and it wouldn’t work.

Years of being in the public spotlight and having tabloids and media slander me gave me thicker skin than most people would assume.

They didn’t know that.

They probably assumed I was ready to cry at whatever abuse they threw at me. In their small brains, they believed they could toss out a few ill-advised rumours and it would alienate me.

What they also didn’t know was the fact that I sort of *wanted* to be alienated. Making friends was important, but I was in hiding. Plus, I didn’t

want to join that particular circle of girls anyway, so all their rumour starting was for naught.

“Drugs, you say? Wow, that seems rather... outrageous,” I said, slowly turning around to face the group.

A sneer appeared on Kenzie’s perfectly made-up face, her pale pink lips upturned, creating a small wrinkle between her lip and nose.

I wanted to point it out, but that would be petty.

“Oh goodness me, I didn’t see you sitting there!” She batted her fake eyelashes, her voice dripping with pseudo-sincerity.

“Gosh, Maggie, care to set the record straight? I mean, there are so many rumours flying around, surely *one* of them has to be right?” Camille stated, looking bored as she picked at her cuticle. I had yet to see another look on her face. It was as if she were permanently uninterested in the world around her.

I rolled my eyes, not wanting to play into their game. It didn’t matter what people said about me. They could say whatever they wanted; only I knew the truth, and that was enough for me.

“Oh goodness, you may have to clue me in! There’s just so many that you’ve started —er, I mean, that have been floating around,” I corrected myself, even though it was no accident.

Kenzie opened her mouth as if to respond, but I jumped back in. “Would you look at that? I have to get to class. Please, continue. Maybe one day you guys will come up with one that’s remotely close to the truth.” I pushed back my chair, adjusting my satchel and fluffing my hair for added show.

Half of the dining hall fell silent, watching our antics with bated breath.

That included the table only three away, with Travis, Ollie, and Henry. They all stared, waiting for my next move. Ollie’s eyes darkened, his lips in a thin line and jaw tight, as if his entire day was now ruined based on my actions.

“Besides,” I injected, as Kenzie was about to speak again, “if you ever do get it right, you’ll just about *die*.”

I left them with a wink, laughing softly to myself.
If they only knew.



What the girls said rang through my head as I made my way to Geography. It was now a class I looked forward to, not only because of my extensive knowledge of the subject, but somehow Mr Edwards made it enjoyable. Though he was strict, and hated interruptions of any kind, his lesson planning was spot on in engagement.

No one dared to speak out of turn, but when offered a question, most students raised their hands to answer. One of his favourite activities was to throw a dart at a map and learn about that country for a day or two. Students got to take turns doing the throwing, which usually ended up with the class in hysterics when they missed or it bounced off the board instead.

So far, we had only worked on the world map. Today, the first thing I noticed was a zoomed in map of Europe. My specialty. I could name all the countries in alphabetical order, list their capitals in record time, and even tell you the year of their founding, as well as any that had royal families.

I took my seat and focused on getting my notebook out of my satchel before hanging it on the back of the chair. Keeping my gaze on the map, I tried not to notice when Ollie walked in and sat down next to me.

Mr Edwards assigned the seating chart on the first day, didn't allow any changes after that. It helped him learn names, made it easier to pass graded papers, and kept everyone in line.

"Good morning, students," he said as he walked into the room, closing the door behind him. If you were late, you might as well go to the office and sign up for a demerit yourself; Mr Edwards would not open it again.

"Good morning, Mr Edwards," we all replied in unison.

I took that moment to sneak a glance at Ollie, finding him in quite a state. His hair hung haphazardly in a ponytail, his tie crooked, and his blazer

unbuttoned. It was like he had either got dressed in a hurry, or didn't care enough to make himself look presentable.

The corners of his lips were so down turned, it pulled the rest of his face with them, creating a little set of wrinkles between his eyes.

After another beat, I realised what was really out of place—he wasn't drumming. The incessant need to use anything as a drumstick, all the time, usually drove me crazy. Try as I might to tune him out, the *tap tap tap* every morning made me irritable.

Except today, he was silent. He didn't have a pen, a pencil, a stick, or even his fingers making a beat on the desk.

Mr Edwards drew my attention away from Ollie before I could continue speculating.

“Today we're going to pair up for our main project. It'll be part of your final grade at the end of the year, so get comfortable with the information. You will work on it in class only once per week, and the rest will have to be on your own time.”

Everyone's eyes grew wide, mine included. I didn't know anyone else well enough to pick my own partner. Part of me hoped Mr Edwards would assign partners, but that scenario scared me too. What if he paired me with someone I didn't get along with? Or someone who was lazy, and I ended up having to do all the work?

We all held our breath as he looked at the sheet in his hands. Scratching his chin, he then shook his head and put it on the desk in front of him, face down.

“I was going to go with alphabetical order, but I'll be a little lenient this year.” A sigh rose through the class, even though we weren't sure what “lenient” meant in his terms.

“You can partner with the person next to you. These two rows, these, and these,” he said, gesturing to the pairs as he walked across the classroom.

My face dropped. Everyone around me chatted, but not me. And not my partner.

Because I was now paired with Ollie Hastings for the rest of the year.

Maybe if I didn't move, I could pretend it was all a crazy nightmare. That I was still in bed, and the rumour mill from breakfast and this pairing had not really happened.

Squeezing my eyes shut for a moment, I also pinched myself on my thigh under the desk.

"Having some issues, princess?"

I turned my head slowly, not wanting to look at his reaction. If it was like mine, he would be just as upset.

Sucking in a breath, I held it for a moment before letting it out nice and slow. I couldn't think of anything to say. Since last night, I figured ignoring the princess comments was the best route.

Tapping my pen on my notebook, I tried to figure out how this scenario would work out, but I came up with nothing.

"Well, here we are."

Ollie nodded, chewing on the inside of his cheek. "Yup."

"Students, pick a representative of your pairing to come up and toss your dart. Wherever it lands will be your country to learn about. This packet tells you everything you need to research, the paper that that is due at the end of the year, and the presentations you will give during the course of term, with a broken-down time table."

I lifted an eyebrow at Ollie, silently asking if he wanted to do the honours, but he shook his head, a rogue lock of hair falling out of his too-loose ponytail.

Sighing, I stood and took my spot in line. I didn't want to embarrass myself, so I threw the dart with as much precision as I could so it didn't bounce off the map.

"Ah, well, seems like you got off rather easy, Miss Davies. Discovering our lovely country through your eyes will be rather interesting," Mr Edwards exclaimed as he saw where my dart landed. The group of students behind me

groaned as my cheeks grew red.

Ducking my chin, I headed back to my seat with two copies of the packet from Mr Edwards.

“Seriously?” Ollie asked, his face a sheet of bewilderment. The furrows between his brows deepened as he stared at me.

“Sorry,” I muttered, my heart racing fast. I figured landing on England would be a good thing, but it seemed nothing I did could make Ollie happy.

“Sorry? That had to be the best throw you could possibly have done. We’ll barely have to do any extra work. We can get the whole project done in class and not have to meet after hours.” Ollie sighed and relaxed, leaning back in his seat and flipping through the packet.

Then he laughed. *Laughed*. Usually when he looked at me, it was with a scowl or rolled eyes. I knew my pick of country was good, but for him to think that we wouldn’t have to put in the work infuriated me.

My pulse quickened again instead of lowering. Landing on England was a double-edged sword —on one hand, we knew a lot about it, obviously. I could recite almost everything about this country in my sleep.

On the other hand... it meant we had to dig into the history of the monarchy for part of the project. *My family*.

Would Ollie connect the dots and figure out who I was? Maybe it was better that we got England. I could try to conceal some information I didn’t want him researching, including anything related to me. Mum and Dad did their best to keep me and my siblings out of the media as much as possible, choosing to release their own pictures throughout the years, and forbidding any photographs or videos taken of us during certain events.

However, there would be a lot of explaining to do if Ollie looked too far into my family, particularly me.

I had to do my best to hide once more.

“I guess getting England is a good thing. I would hate to inconvenience you,” I stated, tossing some cheekiness behind my words. If he thought I was

going to do the entire assignment by myself, he was wrong.

“This class is already an inconvenience. The project is ludicrous and troublesome.” He held my gaze, going head-to-head with me.

“Troublesome? Might I ask what you are planning on doing with the rest of your life if this is considered troublesome?”

Ollie rolled his eyes, making me even more angry than I already was. “It’s not the *project* that I’m finding troublesome. Trust me, if I could change partners, I would. But I’m not too keen on asking Mr Edwards for any sort of special favours. Unless you want to...”

He left that hanging, knowing full well I would never.

Shifting in my seat, I gathered up my supplies, ready to head out now that Mr Edwards dismissed us with the assumption we would go to the library and begin research. That didn’t seem to be what Ollie was planning, though.

“I’ll meet you in the library,” I stated, not wanting to give the idea that I would even walk down the hallway with him. Not like we did that first day, before he had such an issue with me.

He huffed out a laugh and rolled his eyes. “Let’s just split this and call it a day, shall we?”

My turn to furrow my brows. “No, we’re not supposed to do that. Mr Edwards said so.”

Ollie grimaced.

“Is working with me going to be a problem?”

“No problem, *princess*.”

My heart leapt into my throat as he said that. I know he didn’t already figure it out, but—

“You liked it when Henry called you that, didn’t you?” Ollie continued, a sly smile crossing his face.

I wanted to vomit. So that’s where he got it from. After Ollie and Travis both decided to ignore me, Henry followed suit. And it was he who called me that the first day of school.

Scrunching my nose, I responded, “Henry is nice, but foul. I try my best to avoid him.”

“Bet you don’t have any problem letting him call you that, though,” Ollie snorted. He slid the elastic out of his hair and shook his fingers through the blonde strands. I tried not to stare, but when his hair hung down, it accentuated his jawline. The stubble that accompanied the jawline wasn’t quite to dress code; not that it bothered me.

“What does that mean?” I asked, realising what he said.

Ollie tilted his head and looked at me, his green speckled brown eyes practically glowing with mischief. “You are related to Christian Davies, are you not?”

I felt as if someone slapped me in the face. Auntie Ellie told me that Christian kept to himself, he didn’t have many close friends, and most of the younger years probably wouldn’t think twice if they recognised my new, albeit fake, last name.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. I figured that out on the first day of school when I saw it on your schedule. He had no problem reminding everyone who he was and his relation to the King. I bet you secretly love it when someone calls you a princess.”

My eyes grew wide. Christian was spouting his relation to us for *clout*?

Suddenly, Christian’s comments at Auntie Ellie’s house made sense. How angry he got at me for “giving it all up” and not “appreciating what I had”. He wanted what I had and wasn’t afraid to be vocal about it.

However, I doubted he ever said a word to his mother about it. She would put him in his place in an instant. Palace life isn’t what everyone thought it would be. It wasn’t glamorous, it was work. Being a princess was a job title, not a celebration.

To hear that he used my family to further himself enraged me. I didn’t want to let Ollie get away with just dropping that bomb though, and not expect me to defend myself.

“Christian is my cousin. His dad is my mum’s brother. He, nor I, have claims to any titles. The King is his uncle, but that’s about it. I’ve never met him.” I lied through my teeth, praying that Ollie bought it. This conversation needed to move away from my family, and quickly.

The way Ollie nodded his head told me he not only didn’t believe me, but he also didn’t care. What he said next confirmed it.

“You’re just like him. Well, go on with your bad self, princess. Tell me exactly how we have to do this project.”

I was just like him? “Why are you so incredibly rude? I haven’t done anything to you!” Steam was about to come out of my ears, I was so angry.

Who did he think he was, treating me this way based on my cousin’s actions? I barely knew Christian that well; growing up hours apart meant we only saw each other on holidays. Auntie Ellie came down alone more often than not.

“It means I know exactly who you are and what you’re like, and I’m not falling for it. We’ll do this project together, but don’t think it’ll make us friends. You take the first part and I’ll take the second. We’ll go over our work next time we have a chance in class.”

Before I could argue, the bell rang. Ollie leapt out of his seat, hitting my desk and sending my notebook careening to the floor as he flew toward the door.



CHAPTER 15

Ollie

“**W**hat am I supposed to do? I’m paired with her for the rest of the *year*, Travis. The only good thing about this is that she has decent aim and got us England. At least that means we don’t have to do much work outside the classroom.”

I laid on my bed, my hands behind my head, as I listened to Travis practice a song on his bass. He liked to keep his instrument in the room instead of in the music hall, like most others. Sometimes I wished I could keep a drum set here, but between the two of us, it would never fit.

“You’re supposed to do the project and get out in one piece. Don’t push her buttons, Ol. If she’s anything like Christian, she’ll poke back. We already know she can, based on her interactions with Kenzie and crew.”

He was right. Both times Kenzie provoked her, she stood up for herself. The attitude she threw at Kenzie was sexy as hell, and more than any other girl ever did.

We both heard the rumours about her. Rumours no doubt started by Kenzie and her friends. Maggie was here for reasons unknown. When a person came

to boarding school for the first time for their last year, there was a reason behind it. Yet somehow, no one knew Maggie's backstory.

She was hiding something. Probably something big. I was sure Kenzie was trying to chip away at it, but I didn't pay attention. I had to spend enough time with her doing our project; I didn't care to hear about whatever rumours Kenzie wanted to start.

However... if I came across anything interesting...

My lip twitched as the thought bounced back and forth in my mind. If I did find something juicy on Maggie, would I tell Kenzie? Would I spread it myself? Images of Christian popped into my head then. He used everything he found out to hurt me; wouldn't I be just like him if I did the same to Maggie?

Sighing, I knew there was no winning this internal argument.

"She's so infuriating, Travis. It's like she enjoys getting under my skin."

"Aren't you doing the same to her?" he asked, not bothering to look at me. I didn't even understand how he could see his guitar under all that hair, but he was still playing somehow.

I rolled my eyes, feeling the need to defend myself and my actions. Instead, I chucked a pillow at him and sighed. He was right, but that didn't mean I had to admit it.

Before I could make a smart-arse remark, my phone buzzed.

Maggie: I have a free hour. Can we work on our project in the library? It's my only free time this week.

I sighed again and rolled off the bed. Travis stopped playing, flipped his hair back, and looked at me questioningly.

"Maggie. Needs to work on the damn project. It's her only free hour this week she says." I gathered my satchel and made for the door. "Like she's the only one who's busy. Like I should work around her schedule and do whatever she says, whenever she says it."

Travis raised his eyebrows and huffed out a small laugh, as if he was trying

to hold back.

“What?”

“Seriously? You’re whining about having to go meet her *now*?”

“Yeah, what’s it to you?”

Another snort came from him. “What the fuck were we doing? A whole lot of nothing, that’s what. You’ve been sitting in this room for almost an hour staring at the ceiling. You can’t complain about her timing, mate. If anything, it’s perfect. But... when did she get your number?”

I paused, staring at him. How *did* she get my number?

We locked eyes for another moment before bursting out with the same word at the same time.

“Lily.”

Rolling my eyes, I left. Screw Travis. I didn’t need him to be the reasonable one right now. I needed him on my side, no matter what.

Ignoring the laughs that followed me down the hall, I headed toward the library, my mood turning more and more sour by the step.



Considering she didn’t specify *where* in the library she wanted to meet, it took me a minute to find her.

The colorful head of hair was a dead giveaway. I saw her across the room, her head bent over a stack of books.

“How’d you get my number?” I asked as I slid into a chair opposite from her.

Her head snapped up, her glasses sliding down her nose a bit. She blinked and her blue eyes locked onto mine.

I frowned. Without the glasses in place, there was something rather... familiar about her. It was on the edge of my mind. She looked like someone I knew, but I didn’t know who.

“Lily,” she finally replied, regaining her composure and straightening her

blouse.

Sitting taller and folding her hands on the table, she continued. “I took the liberty of finding a few books for the topic we’re supposed to work on this week.”

“I could have found them too.” I didn’t need her thinking I was incapable of my part of this assignment or that I wouldn’t pull my weight. The last thing I needed was her doing all the work and holding it over my head all term.

No, she didn’t need to have a leg up on me in any circumstance. I would do my part, split equally, and not a bit more.

“I’m aware. Considering I’ve been in this library for half an hour already, I figured it would be a good use of my time to get ahead. I do hope that’s alright with you.” She threw on the saccharine, batting her eyes to go along with the charade.

I huffed out a breath, my annoyance levels rising. “Fine. We need to work on the—”

“First three rulers and how they shaped the country.” She cut me off again, sliding both a book and a pamphlet toward me.

“No, it’s the monarchy—”

She rolled her eyes and gestured to the other stack of books in front of her. “Obviously, I understand the assignment. You take the first three, and I’ll take the last three. Since we need to compare the shaping of the country from the initial rulers to the most current ones, that should at least get us started. If you take the first and I take the current, we can compare notes and come up with what has changed.”

My teeth ground together as my jaw ticked. She thought she was so smart, already breaking up the assignment into a way that worked well for *her*.

Again, I wasn’t having it. “How about this,” I stated, pushing the book away and reaching across the table for the ones by her. “I’ll take the current and you take the first. History is boring. Current events are more my thing.”

She gasped and reached out to smack my hand away from her pile. I retracted it immediately, shocked by her sudden movement.

We both paused, staring at each other. Her face paled, her eyes blinking, but otherwise not moving.

“Is there a problem?” I asked, unsure what just happened.

“No. I, um, I already started taking notes on the current rulers, so it’s better if you start on the first,” she said, rushing her words. She broke eye contact and began fidgeting with the papers in front of her, stacking them and straightening them multiple times.

As soon as she finished shuffling, one hand reached up and rubbed a charm on her necklace. I knew that necklace; she wore it every day.

“Whatever. Let’s just get it done. I don’t have all night,” I finally replied, annoyed by her mere presence. If she wanted to take charge, I would let her.

Because in the end, the faster we got the project done, the less time we had to spend together.



CHAPTER 16

Maggie

After the ridiculous debate with Ollie last night, I was ready to blow off some steam. He was so infuriating, it was exhausting. From his know-it-all attitude to his unwillingness to go with anything I planned, it was like dealing with a child.

There was one thing I would not give up on, and that was my insistence on doing the research on my family. When he reached over last night to take my section instead of the one I offered him, I almost passed out. He could choose whatever he wanted for the rest of the project, but there was no way I could allow him to handle that.

We were civil to each other during class this morning when we had to present a recap of what we were working on to Mr Edwards. Now, all I wanted to do was take out my guitar and zone out.

I kept my guitar in my room, carefully taking it to my lessons when I had to. Sometimes, if there were too many people around, I borrowed one from the music hall instead. I was proud of myself for being able to keep it a secret

still. Either nobody cared to ask, or no one had seen me yet.

I threw my strap over my shoulder and fiddled with the tuning when Lily's voice floated down the hallway.

It sounded like she was on the phone with a relative, most likely her mother. Quietly putting my guitar back in its case and sliding it under my bed, I popped my head out the door just as she hung up.

"Hey! I didn't know you were here," she said with a smile. "Want to come hang out while I change?"

I shrugged and headed down the hall to her room. She changed in her adjacent bathroom while I sat on her bed.

"Why are you changing?" I asked, genuinely curious. Most of us stayed in our uniforms through dinner, only changing when we were ready to stay in the house for the night. Considering it was a Friday night, there was a chance she had other things going on. I never did, so I stayed in uniform until it was time for pyjamas.

"Travis has a gig tonight. Oh!" She popped her head out the bathroom door, her eyes wide with glee. "You should come!"

"Come where?"

She disappeared once more. The muffled sounds of her rummaging through her belongings came from the bathroom as she changed. "To the gig!" she shouted from behind the closed door, even though I could hear her just fine.

My shoulders drooped. A gig for Travis meant a gig with Ollie.

"Did I tell you?" I asked as Lily made her way to the bedroom, brushing her dark hair that fell halfway down her back.

"Tell me what?"

I flopped onto her bed, crossing my ankles and resting my hands on my stomach. "Ollie and I got stuck doing a Geography project together for Mr Edwards. One that lasts the *entire year*."

Lily grimaced and sucked in a sharp breath through her teeth. "Yikes."

By now, I assumed everyone knew of the tension between Ollie and me. At the very least, Lily would, being friends with him and Travis.

Getting under his skin was one of my new favourite activities, but his hatred toward me was more personal. And now we were stuck together.

“Yeah. So, sorry, but I get enough of him during the day. I’d rather not spend the evening with him too.”

Lily pouted. “No, you have to come!”

I shook my head. “No, I really don’t. Besides, hanging out with the rest of the student body squished together in the concert hall doesn’t sound like much fun to me either.”

“It’s not at the concert hall! And no one knows about it, so no one but us will be there.”

That news got me sitting up, leaning on my elbow. I pushed my glasses up my nose. “Not at the concert hall? Then where is it?”

Lily’s cheeks turned pink as she bit her lip. “Well... Ollie kind of has this job at the pub in the village. It’s a secret, sort of, except the band knows—”

“And you, via Travis,” I finished for her.

She nodded. “Yeah. Anyway, he plays backup drums for their house band when needed, and sometimes is a waiter. The manager loves him, as he’s reliable and responsible...” The way she enunciated those words made me laugh. It was as if she were trying to sell me on Ollie’s good qualities.

I knew he had some. He just didn’t like to show them to me. The way he acted on the first day of school showed real potential for a nice guy under there somewhere.

I wish I could have seen more of it before he turned the cold shoulder, just because of my name. My *fake* name.

“Please! Come with me! We’ll be the only students, I swear. It’ll mainly be locals. We can sit in the back and no one will know we’re there. They’re only an opener tonight, as a favour from the manager when the other band cancelled. The gig is fifteen minutes, tops.”

It was the stuck out bottom lip that did me in.

Rolling off the bed and heading for my room, I shouted, “Fine! Come help me find something to wear!”

Her squeal of excitement made me laugh. It would be the first time I went out since starting at Waversmore. Usually I spent my nights alone, or hanging out with Lily. Sometimes I video called my siblings, listening to everything that happened to them that week.

Tonight would be different. I would dress up, go out, and act like a normal teenager.

Wild.



The place was more crowded than Lily said it would be. We slipped into the back relatively unnoticed.

The boys were on stage, tuning their instruments and completing their set list.

“See? I told you no other students would be here. There’s too many... adults.” We both looked at the locals crowding the room and the bar on the far wall. She was right; there was no one under the age of forty here except us.

“There’s a few other pubs scattered throughout the village that are more popular, which is why Ollie chose this one to work at,” Lily chattered on. I tuned her out, not caring much about Ollie’s backstory.

The lights were dim everywhere except shining on the small stage. Ollie seemed to be well known here, as a few people hollered out his name and he waved.

His hair was down tonight, just like Travis’, and they were all dressed casually. It was crazy how different someone could look when you were used to seeing them only in one type of clothing.

The t-shirt stretched tight across his arms, rising over his biceps as he

moved around, touching all the drums and cymbals. The dark wash jeans hugged his hips, but were loose enough to let his legs do their thing.

“Doesn’t he look great?” Lily asked, moving to stand in front of me as she was shorter by about three inches. More people crowded the floor. I pressed my back against the wall, making sure Lily stayed in within earshot.

“Yeah... he does,” I whispered.

Lily turned to me. “Wait, you’re not interested in... do you like Travis?” Her dark eyes narrowed in confusion.

I did a double take between her and the boys, not sure what just happened. “What? No? Huh? What are we talking about?”

A knowing smirk crossed her lips. “Right. Never mind.”

Just then, Charlie started the first few notes on his keyboard, letting the crowd know they were ready to play.

It didn’t take long to realise one thing—Henry could *not* play guitar. It was painful for my well-trained ears. The rest of the crowd was into it. It was only me that cringed at the wreck Henry added to the sound.

Lily looked back at me, bobbing along to the beat. I mouthed Henry’s name to her with a grimace, and she laughed.

“Yeah, he’s the best they could get.”

A flood of jealousy washed through me. If only I could tell them I played, I could be on that stage with them jamming. Not that I could do that, but it was a nice daydream for a moment.

Tuning out Henry’s horrific playing, I focused on one thing —Ollie. As much as I didn’t want to watch, he was captivating. Travis was great on the bass, but Ollie was in another world. His arms moved in perfect rhythm, even with his eyes closed. He was mesmerising, capturing everything I loved about music.

His drummer muscles shone in the spotlight, the sweat dripping down the sides of his face, his jawline tense with concentration. I couldn’t tear my eyes away, watching as he flew over the drums, hitting every beat with perfection

and grace.

He was in his element, no matter what else was happening. He owned that stage, and the crowd knew it. They whooped and hollered, calling out Ollie's name as he smashed his way through a rock song I had never heard before.

Ten minutes later, Ollie grabbed Travis' mic and announced they had one song left. I didn't think he saw us in the back, but I ducked my head just in case.

"The last one we'll play tonight is special. It's called *Ollie's Song*. And before any of you fuckers make fun of it, my dead mother wrote it for me as a baby, alright?" He winked, showing his not so serious side.

The crowd roared for Ollie, and I couldn't hide my smile. Knowing his mother had passed made me sad, but the soft beat of the drums fixed that quickly.

And Henry ruined it once again. They were playing with too quick of a tempo. My fingers moved against my jeans, plucking imaginary guitar strings to a better beat.

It was a great song. Travis' vocals did amazing with what he was given time wise. But it was all wrong.

The vibe of the crowd shifted as the song came to a close. People reallocated, heading back to the bar for refills or huddling with their group of friends. The sheer number of people in the building hit hard once I focused on it. That, and the fact that some of them had cameras out, videotaping the set.

My heart pounded louder than Ollie's drums. I tapped Lily, taking her attention away from Travis, and jerked a thumb over my shoulder. Gesturing to the crowd around us, I put a weary smile on my face.

She nodded, understanding what I meant.

"Let's go before they see us," Lily whispered as soon as the song ended.

"You don't want to see Travis?" I answered, following her along the back wall toward the exit.

“I sort of promised him I wouldn’t come tonight...” she answered, keeping her gaze on the pavement. It wasn’t often that she left her hair down, and now it became a curtain around her face.

“Oh really? Is that so...” I teased her, bumping her shoulder with mine. “What is the deal between you two, anyway?”

She didn’t answer right away, just shrugged.

It was only a ten-minute walk to campus and Carriageton House. The cool air turned brisk after the sun set, causing the two of us to wrap our jumpers tighter.

When we got back to the house, she went to change, as did I. Thinking our night of fun was over, I took out my guitar once again and strummed the song I last heard.

Everyone told me I had an ear for music. I could hear a piece once and attempt to replicate it to the best of my ability. Something about Ollie’s Song stuck with me more than others. Maybe it was the need to fix it, to make it the right tempo, to put the words to a better timing.

Maybe it was because it was Ollie’s.

Either way, I worked through the chorus before a knock came on my door. Lily cracked it open before I could hide the guitar under the bed again.

“Hey, Maggie! I just wanted to—” she paused, glancing from me to the instrument and back before her eyes lit up.

She came all the way into the room, shutting the door behind her. I placed my guitar on the floor gently right before she leapt onto the bed, tossing me around.

I stayed still, holding my breath and staring at her, unsure what was going to happen next.

“Oh my gosh, Maggie, is that yours? Do you play?” Lily asked excitedly. She held her hands in her lap to keep them from flailing around like she normally did when she was excited.

I bit my lip, debating how much I wanted to tell her. She already saw the

instrument, so there was no hiding that. The next question out of her mouth would be why I wasn't taking music as my co-curricular.

I decided on honesty. Not the whole truth, but enough to placate her and make her understand why I was keeping it a secret. The little I knew about Lily was sufficient to have hope that she wouldn't tell anyone.

"Yes, it's mine. I do play. But," I paused, looking at her with my most serious expression, "no one here knows. I didn't want to join the band, so the headmistress allowed me to use art as my main co-curricular, and not music. I take private lessons though."

Lily nodded like a bobblehead, her dark hair still loose from her usual bun. "Is this all a secret? Can I ask why?"

Briefly closing my eyes, I sighed. "Yes and no. It is a secret. I just... playing is very personal to me. I do it for me. I love it. It makes me happy and helps me when I'm stressed or feeling down or—"

Lily held up her hand, stopping me. "I know exactly what you mean. You don't have to explain it. My violin is like that. It's been a part of me for most of my life."

I grinned. "Same as my mother. Her violin was an extension of her, like an extra limb or something."

Glee filled Lily's eyes. "Your mother played?"

"She did. Does, still. I actually learned violin first, before the guitar. Guitar just stuck with me longer. I taught my mum to play, as she taught me violin."

Lily laid a hand on her heart, swooning. "A musical family. My absolute favourite. I knew I was destined to be friends with you. Where did your mum play?"

I shrugged, unable to disclose that fact. There was only so much I could say that wouldn't give away who my mother really was. "With different orchestras when she was younger. Once she had me and my siblings, she only played for herself."

Lily's whole face fell with sadness. "Oh, that's horrible. I mean, not that

you were born, but the playing... I feel like that would be my sister, though. She went all the way through Waversmore, top of her class, got selected for the Queen's music program, then the London Symphony Orchestra. She's destined to be a mum, though. The moment she meets someone, it'll be all over for her."

My heart jumped when she mentioned Mum's program. She started it after she had us, still wanting music in her life.

A board of musicians hand-picked students from around the country to be part of a two-week program. It only ran twice a year, and there were no applications. They found you, ran your work by Mum, and she had the last say in acceptance. Not a single person turned down the offer, ever. It was one of the highest, most accredited programs in the country.

"That's... well, if that's what she wants," I replied, wanting to steer away from this conversation. The choice to leave what you love doing just to have a family sounded splendid.

It was a choice I would never have.

"What were you playing?" Lily asked, thankfully catching on to my cues of not wanting to talk about family anymore.

However... telling her what I was doing was also not something I had in mind.

"Just a little something," I muttered.

Lily pushed herself off the bed and gave me one of her knowing smiles. "Well, it sounded great from the little I heard. Keep it up. And I promise, I won't tell anybody about your guitar. Your secret is safe with me." She walked backwards toward the door, miming zipping her lips and throwing out a key.

She left without another word, closing the door behind her with a soft click.

I had no worries she would keep her promise. Lily was trustworthy and not someone who would spill secrets.

There was one problem —I believed she wouldn't tell anyone about my guitar. But would she be able to hold back and not tell Travis or Ollie about me playing his song?



CHAPTER 17

Ollie

I spent the past two days holed up in my room. I almost didn't let Travis in, but after Mr Todd threatened to break down the door, I relented.

He understood my need to be alone, and only stayed to sleep, sticking to lounging around downstairs or elsewhere on campus. I wasn't mad at him, and he knew it.

The only person who deserved the blame and the rage was me. Letting the band play Ollie's Song was the biggest mistake of my fucking life. I thought we were ready. I thought I could handle it.

Playing live, in front of an audience, was horrendous. Travis and I tried to hold it down, but Henry wailed it into the next village. He played too slow at the beginning, screwing up the tempo. Charlie attempted to jam down on his keyboard, alerting Henry to the beat, and he still didn't fucking listen.

Travis stood right next to Henry and attempt to get him back on track, but then Henry went too *fast*.

Again, it was my fault. Internally, I had no idea how I wanted the song played. The rock part of me wanted it fast and upbeat. It was written slower,

but it didn't feel right either. And since I never heard it played by the person who wrote it, there was no one to answer my question about how to do it right.

Trial and error ended in a massive catastrophe. And it was our closing song. The one everyone would go home and remember.

That was how I was going to be remembered. I was almost too ashamed to show my face in the pub again this week. I wouldn't blame Gene if he fired me for that shit show. Why would any other band want me to play with them after that?

At least no one from school was there to witness it. That was the only upside; if any students saw that nonsense, I would never live it down. The teasing and bullying would become relentless, worse than last year. It would come from everyone, not just from Christian being salty for losing the drum solo.

The potential that it would fall all on Henry was high, though, not that it mattered. I didn't want to think about that either. He was dumb as bricks, but still my friend and bandmate.

"Rise and shine, sunshine. Get off your arse and ready for class," Travis said, throwing a tie at me. I caught it before it hit my face. "Hey that rhymed. Do you think I could turn that in for my literature homework?"

I didn't laugh. Instead, I groaned and looped the tie around my neck. It felt like a noose.

"How is it Monday already? Can't I call in and say I'm ill?"

"Not a chance now that I hear you up and about." Mr Todd yelled from the hallway as he walked by. "You seem perfectly fine to me!"

Growling, I rolled out of bed and went to brush my teeth. Even though I felt like shit on the inside, I needed to look presentable for class. Another demerit on my account for appearance wouldn't help anything.

"Breakfast, or no?" Travis asked as we walked down the hallway. He shoved his hands in his pockets, keeping his distance from me. I didn't smell,

so it had to be out of respect and maybe a little fear. I hadn't been the most hospitable person over the weekend.

"You go ahead. I'll catch you at lunch," I mumbled, turning right out of the front door of King's Cottage while he went left to the dining hall.

I detoured to the snack shop in the basement of the main building to grab a cup of black coffee. It was the only thing that got me through the mornings, though I preferred Miss Duphrey's coffee more than this. But I didn't want to get stuck in a conversation with her, which would include why I skipped all meals this weekend.

She had sent Travis back with food for me so I didn't starve. I would have been fine without it, using my self-pity to get me through. We didn't deserve someone like Miss Duphrey. She put all her love and energy into us students, and I could only hope she understood how much we honestly loved her.

Taking a big gulp, I pushed open the doors to the courtyard, wanting some fresh air before heading to class. I would be early, which was fine. More time to wallow.

"Get a grip, Hastings," I whispered to myself as I let the sun shine over my face for a minute before hiding back beneath a cloud. Kind of like my mind—a moment of clarity, before I started bashing myself again.

I made it to Geography, assuming I'd be the first one there, as there was still ten minutes before class started.

I was wrong. Only one other chair was occupied, and in it sat a purple-haired girl.

Just my luck. When I wanted to be alone, she was right there waiting for me, waiting for another round of our daily battles. At least arguing with her over petty things would take my mind off of the gig for a second. Actually, I kind of looked forward to our debate today. I had a lot of pent-up emotions I could get out.

"Morning," she said, nodding in my direction. I grunted a reply, dropping my bag on the ground between our desks and falling into my seat with a thud.

“Nothing good about it,” I finally replied, after taking another few sips of coffee.

She frowned. “Didn’t say it was. Only said ‘morning’.”

That got a snort from me. She was always sassy, but her snark was about to get turned up.

“Bad weekend?” I asked. I didn’t know why I asked. Keeping some sort of small talk seemed to be better than going back inside my head to the negative thoughts.

Maggie faced me, resting her elbows on the desk. Her navy uniform was perfectly pressed, her charm necklace settled between the buttons of her shirt. Besides the hair, she looked like every other student here, but she wasn’t. Not by a long shot.

Maggie Davies was different. Having to deal with her every day, multiple times a day sometimes, drove me crazy. Because of the project in this class, I couldn’t escape her. Later, in Business, I sat on the opposite side of the room from her, so I didn’t have to interact.

She was friends with Lily, though. Who had a thing with Travis. Meaning every now and then, we were all together in the same place.

“You’re upset,” Maggie said in the softest tone I had ever heard come from her mouth. My brows slammed down, confused. I hadn’t had enough coffee to deal with a nice Maggie today.

I wanted sarcastic Maggie. The usual Maggie. I need her to be the same Maggie she always was, so I didn’t have to overthink. My brain couldn’t handle any more.

“I’m fine,” I snapped back.

She continued to stare, her blue eyes piercing into me.

“Whatever you say,” she replied, gathering her hair and making some sort of plait from the top of her head and behind her ear. Her fingers flew through the strands, the dark on top blending in perfectly with the purple towards the bottom. She made it seem effortless, but the end result looked more

complicated than I could figure out.

“I could do your hair next, if you want?”

I snapped out of it, having zoned out as if her plaiting her hair hypnotised me. “What?”

She gestured to my hair, still hanging loose by my ears. “Your hair. I can plait it to match mine. We can be twins for the day.”

The smirk on her face made me burst out laughing. “Yeah, real twins we are. Despite the height difference, the eyes, the—”

“Sounds reasonable to me. Fraternal twins happen. My brother and sister are twins.”

I glanced over at her, realising she just released a bit of personal information. I never heard her say anything about herself before.

“They are?”

Her face fell. The glimmer of joy that was behind her eyes a moment ago left, her lips turning down into a frown. A steel mask covered her now; she shut down at the mere mention of her family.

“There you go again,” I snapped.

“Pardon me?”

I rolled my eyes and went back to drinking my coffee, stretching my legs out in front of me. “Nothing, forget it.”

“Just because you had a bad weekend doesn’t mean you need to take the attitude out on me.”

“It has nothing to do with my weekend.”

“Oh, so it really is just me?” she asked. I narrowed my eyes at her. She tilted her head, nibbling on the corner of her pen. The sun from the window glinted off the diamond on her necklace. She wore no other jewellery other than that necklace. Not even earrings.

No rings, either, and her nails were always kept short. She was in the art program, so maybe it had something to do with painting. The only other girls I knew that kept their nails that short were the string instrument players,

mainly guitarists.

“Starting my day by seeing you every morning puts me in this type of mood, yes,” I replied with a smirk.

“And here I thought I was the ray of sunshine on your otherwise dull day.”

“Well, it’s England. Sunshine is rare, and if it does come out, it’s not going to be because of you, princess.”

She scoffed at the use of the nickname I tortured her with daily. It always got a reaction out of her, so I continued using it.

Students filed into the class now, with Mr Edwards close behind them. Right after the bell rang, he announced, “Today will be devoted to your projects. You may either stay in class or head to the library to work. Your choice. We’ll pick up again on the change of Egyptian leadership and Cleopatra tomorrow.”

Without another word, the entire class packed up and scampered out of the room. Most of them would head toward the library, but I had no doubt some would just ditch and go elsewhere, using it as a free period.

That sounded like an excellent idea. I could use more moping time. Maybe I could sneak into the music building and sit behind a drum set in an attempt to figure out what the hell went wrong this weekend.

Chugging down the rest of my coffee, I leaned over and grabbed my bag, hoisting it over my shoulder and heading to the front. I could feel Maggie’s gaze tracking me, but if she didn’t want to come, then that was on her. We were most likely more ahead on our project than other students anyway; Maggie was some sort of geography and history wizard, especially about our country.

“Mr Hastings, the hair,” Mr Edwards warned as I reached the door. Maggie snickered behind me.

“I offered to plait it for him, like mine, but he declined,” she said as she approached us. Mr Edwards looked over the top of his rimless glasses, giving us both a stare that clearly stated just how much he didn’t care about our

interactions.

“Your England project is coming along quite well. I assume you are headed to the library to continue the work?” It wasn’t an actual question, so we both nodded our reply and left.

“Where are you going?” Maggie asked as I turned toward the stairway down instead of up. The library was one floor above, but the exit was below.

“Doesn’t matter,” I mumbled. I didn’t want to deal with her. I was given an escape, and I was taking it.

To my surprise, footsteps followed me down the stairs.

“Ollie?” The tone in her voice made me pause on the landing. I gulped down my regrets and turned. “Are you alright?”

Ice travelled through my veins from head to toe. The look on her face was one of concern, of genuine caring. Shaking my head, I continued on my way. The last thing I needed was the person I wanted nothing to do with to pity me.

I already hated myself enough at this moment; I didn’t need it from anyone else.

“I’m fine,” was my automatic answer as I reached the bottom. “Bad weekend, like you said.” I didn’t turn around again to face her until she tapped me on the shoulder.

She stood on the second step, eye to eye with me now. The closeness was unnerving; my pulse picked up pace and my hands began to sweat.

Every negative thought I had about myself over the weekend flew out of my mind at that moment. Staring at her stunning blue eyes behind those dark-framed glasses left me in a world I didn’t know existed.

The last person I ever thought would have cared about me, cared enough to ask, would be Maggie Davies.

Yet here she stood, closer to me than ever before, her eyes not leaving mine as she tried to peer into my soul. Her gaze was intense but soft, as if she was trying to listen to my thoughts.

“You don’t have to lie, Ollie, especially not to yourself. It’s okay to admit when you’re hurting. If something’s wrong... you can put your trust in others for help. Just know that.”

She didn’t waver. I didn’t respond. I was like a statue, frozen out of both awe and fear.

My last phone call with Pops ran through my head. How completely opposite that conversation was to this one. How he treated me as if I were a thorn in his side, ordering me not to bother him for anything that wasn’t an emergency. He didn’t care if I was hurting. He didn’t care if something was wrong. He expected Waversmore to raise me, and that’s why he paid for it.

And here was Maggie, the one person I thought cared the least about me in this whole school, telling me the opposite. Telling me to trust people.

“What others?” I spat out. She jerked, her face falling the second the words left my mouth.

Regaining her confidence, she straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin, even though we were at the same height. She wasn’t backing down; she was setting up for a battle, like I had seen her do so many times.

Except right now I didn’t feel like arguing. My guard was down and I needed to stay level-headed. Now wasn’t the time for one of our daily debacles.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered, running my hand through the hair I had yet to put up, even after Mr Edwards warned me. Scratching at my scalp, I debated just turning and leaving versus looking back up and seeing a look of sorrow on Maggie’s face.

As much as I wanted to get away from her, I was also drawn to stay. The internal tug-of-war toiled with my mind, the push and pull straining on my already limited thought capability.

Curiosity got the best of me, and I finally locked eyes on her again. The look wasn’t sadness. It was apprehension and understanding.

She broke away first, staring down at her blazer.

“I know what it’s like to feel like you don’t belong. What it’s like to have a bad day, but not be able to tell anyone about it in fear that they won’t understand or tell you that your problems aren’t valid because there’s worse out there.”

She took a breath, as if she were about to start a rant, but stopped herself and looked away.

Scuffing her shoe on the stair, she gulped and continued.

“Anyway... it’s okay to have bad days. That’s all I wanted to say. I’ll hit the library before next class. You go find some chocolate or a drum or something. As my mum says —tomorrow’s a new day for a new chance.”

My chest heaved as she finished. She glanced up once and gave me a small smile before turning around and hurrying up the stairs.

The sound of her footsteps grew softer and softer as she climbed, but her words didn’t leave my head.

I couldn’t admit it to her, but in that instant, my view of Maggie Davies changed. This entire term, months now, I had been searching for her sass, her snark, her posh attitude to compare it to her cousin. There were days I ignored signs of her real personality in order to overplay the negative parts.

In the past month or so, the rumours had been dying and the hubbub surrounding Maggie Davis had become old news. Yet every day I went to class knowing I wanted to get under her skin as a sort of payback for Christian.

A payback she never deserved.

And now... it didn’t have the appeal anymore. Not after what she just said to me. Not after she took the time to tell me she cared.

I jammed my hands back into my hair as I dropped to sit on the stair under me. Everything was upside down and backwards.

Previous conversations with her ran through my mind. The time she caught me talking to Pops on the phone. How she said her dad was just as overbearing as mine. I brushed it off as if it was nothing, in no way thinking

that hers could be worse than mine.

The way her face looked when Kenzie and the girls talked about the rumours they made up at breakfast.

My breathing grew shallow as I thought about all the times I was mean to her, that I took part in the rumours, that I made her life miserable just because I could.

Maybe Maggie Davies wasn't who I thought she was. And that notion changed everything.



CHAPTER 18

Maggie

If I tilted my head at just the right angle and squinted, I might have actually considered my painting decent.

“Oh, stop that. Your work is amazing. Enough with the self-doubt,” Auntie Ellie said, wrapping her arm around my shoulder. Her famously pink hair was subdued today, only a few strands showing from the simple plait that fell down her back.

I had spent the last two weeks finalising this painting, but I would never consider it done. The second week of December had finally arrived, and with it, our deadline. I could have easily used another three, even four weeks, to get it as close to perfect as possible.

My tilted head snuggled in close and leaned on Auntie Ellie’s shoulder. “Maybe. I’m not overly happy with it, though. Wish I had more time to get it just right.”

Auntie Ellie stifled a small laugh. “You’re just like your father, you know that? The perfectionists. And stubborn. Always stubborn about being

perfectionists.”

The smile didn't quite reach my eyes and also hurt my heart. I hadn't spoken to Dad since the day before I left the palace. Mum and I spoke often, a few times a week at least, but so far, Dad and I kept our distance.

It was what I originally wanted, yet now... now it just hurt.

“Well, you and I both know I would have rather been doing something else at Waversmore Week...” I trailed off, thinking of my guitar and the songs I practised alone in my room and with my private tutor.

Auntie Ellie gave me a sad smile. Taking her arm off my shoulders, she turned me around and looked me in the eye for a beat.

“Maggie... dear, if you aren't happy here, you are welcome home at any time, you know that, right?”

I sighed. Looking around the room, excited parents stood with their children everywhere. Most people were mingling, saying hello to friends and family members who came out for the showing.

A streak of blonde hair across the room grabbed my eye, but when I looked further, no one was there.

Unsatisfied, and becoming more annoyed with my painting by the second, I took Auntie Ellie's arm in mine and started our stroll around the makeshift gallery to view other pieces. I judged and compared, imposter syndrome settling in quite nicely next to my self-doubt.

About twenty minutes later, we ended up back at my spot. The two of us didn't talk until we had done an entire lap of the place, stopping to ponder over some pieces of work, but mostly walking by.

“Your use of colour is really something, Maggie,” Auntie Ellie said for the second time. My Uncle Sean was the most artistic person in our family, outside of music. He owned a tattoo shop and already told me he and I could work together for my first piece. It didn't go over well with Mum, but once I turned eighteen, I could do what I wanted.

I stared at the painting once more, glad to not have to work on it anymore,

even though I didn't think it was fully finished.

"Seems like art was an excellent choice for co-curricular, Maggie." Headmistress Tavers joined us, crossing her arms over her chest and staring at my canvas.

"Thank you. I'd love your opinion," I answered. I was genuinely curious. The headmistress had an art background herself and often popped into the studios while we worked to give some pointers and just oversee progress.

"The colours are extraordinary. The normal thought for a heart would be pinks, reds, or lighter hues. However, your use of light and dark, the shadows... it speaks volumes." She tilted her head and squinted the same way I had just a bit ago when I saw it for the first time hanging on the wall.

I opened my mouth to reply, but she continued. "I think it says to protect your heart. To hold it dear, and also to let it go. The yin and yang, the push and pull, all tell the viewer it's a complex emotion."

I frowned. "A complex emotion?"

Headmistress Tavers tore her eyes from the canvas and looked back at me. "Love, dear. Love is a complex emotion and I believe you captured it beautifully in this piece. Well done."

With a pat on my shoulder and a smile to Auntie Ellie, she left, heading to another student's piece to critique it.

Love. I hadn't even thought about love when painting it. I focused more on the techniques, the colouring, the details. Love hadn't been on my mind at all.

Sucking in a big breath, I let it go and leaned my head on Auntie Ellie again. Having a familiar face here in person brought back a whole slew of emotions I hadn't realised I had missed. Spending every day with strangers who turned into friends, and friends who were becoming family since we spent all our time together, was a different feeling than having *actual* family here.

And I hadn't seen my real family in months. Auntie Ellie was the closest I had. I bit my lip, holding back a few tears when Auntie Ellie spoke, bringing

up a subject I knew she would at some point today.

“How are you doing here, Maggie? We’ve talked a few times about it. Are you sure you want to stay? Your mum says you are welcome to make your own decision. I don’t want to influence you, but how are you feeling? Is the risk worth the reward still?”

Pulling my mouth to the side, I contemplated her words. When I first came, it was under the guise that it would be for one term. Once term started and I got settled, Mum said it would be fine if I stayed for the year, as long as I spent the Christmas holiday at Auntie Ellie’s. Being seen with my family at Christmas and then disappearing again would cause a media uproar, not to mention allow more people to connect the dots.

The hair would be the dead giveaway for sure.

However... if I left Waversmore, I could head straight home. I could spend Christmas with my family, have things go back to normal.

“Honestly, I’m not sure Auntie El. I enjoy it here, most of the time. The girls can be catty and cruel, but there are upsides. I’ve made some friends. My subjects keep me interested. And I still get to play, even if it’s not exactly the way I wanted. As for the risk... well, it’s on my mind every day. Every time I talk to Esme, I freak out after, wondering if it’s worth it.”

She rubbed my shoulders as we continued to stare at the heart in front of us.

“But... maybe I should go home. I miss Mum. And Dad.” Auntie Ellie smiled at me. She most likely knew I hadn’t spoken to Dad in months. “And the kids. And the thought of being away for the holiday’s hurts. I also miss music with Mum. And on my own, where I don’t have to hide it. Knowing Waversmore was a music school, I hoped I would be able to play, and not just alone... So many things, Auntie Ellie, now that I think of it...”

Tears prickled at the corner of my eyes. Listing everything I missed about home made it more real. It was different being here at Waversmore; we were in our own little bubble, where reality stayed on the outside and our only

problems were what was happening here at school.

I turned my head away from Auntie Ellie, discreetly wiping the tears before they could let down. Taking a deep breath, I steadied myself, squaring my shoulders and lifting my chin.

“Yes, I think I want to go home at the end of the term, Auntie Ellie—”

An arm slung over my shoulders, and it wasn’t from my aunt. The muscular arm belonging to a tall, blonde-haired boy sat like a weight on me, heavy and full of dread.

“Did I hear you say Auntie? Is this the famous Mrs Davies?” Ollie said, with more delight in his voice than I had ever heard before. “I can’t believe I’m finally meeting you! Oliver Hastings, but please, call me Ollie.”

He stuck his right hand out, not letting the left one off my shoulder, and shook hands with Auntie Ellie. She glanced at me, puzzled. The surprised look on my face gave her nothing.

“Pleasure to meet you, Ollie. Are you and Maggie friends?”

Ollie’s hand flew to his heart, his lips circling in a round ‘O’ in mock shock. “You mean Maggie hasn’t mentioned me before? I’m hurt!”

He turned and faced me, giving me a pouty lip that just confused me more. I figured enough to realise he wanted me to go along with whatever crazy stunt he was pulling, but I was so utterly lost, I didn’t even know where to start.

“Maggie and I are partners on a Geography project this year. Thanks to her *excellent* aim, she got us stuck with England. Between the two of us, she’s most definitely the smarter one. She took over; her knowledge is astounding. I’m just lucky she’s on my team.” He put on his most charming smile for Auntie Ellie, who smirked in response. She raised three boys already; she was immune to the charm, but let Ollie continue anyway.

“So, what’s this I hear about wanting to go home? Only for the holidays, I assume?” Finally, he dropped his arm from my shoulder, spinning me to look him in the eye.

The charming smile and gleeful glint disappeared. Concern and confusion replaced his features.

“I... I...” I stuttered, unable to come up with a reply. Thankfully, Ellie took over.

“She has a decision to make. I’m leaving it up to her, but yes, if she wants to return home after this term, she is more than welcome to do so.” Her serious tone told both Ollie and me that no matter what he said, the decision would be up to me.

“If I can put my opinion in...” Ollie said, still looking down at me. “I can’t imagine you not being here, Maggie. Not only would Geography be boring, but who would put up with Henry? Who would put him in his place when he’s being an arsehole? You can’t leave now! There’s so much fun stuff coming up next term.”

He wasn’t joking around. It wasn’t an act. Ollie Hastings was standing in front of me, begging me to stay. Sure, his words were jovial. His reasonings were juvenile. The look on his face is what gave me pause.

Something in Ollie had changed lately. No longer was he overly rude or obnoxious to me in class. We still had our banter, as was typical for us, but it was more with humour and less with sass. Wit replaced spite.

And now? Now he stood here, before my family, saying he wanted me to stay.

Saying it in front of the mother of the one person he hated the most.

He wasn’t outing Christian to Auntie Ellie. He didn’t give pause when speaking with her. It was as if he was talking to a random person on the street, not the mother of his worst enemy and an actual former princess.

My breath hitched as I tried to figure out what it meant. If Ollie knew Ellie was once a princess, would he connect the dots? I already told him I was Sean’s niece, not Ellie’s, but with his love of calling me princess...

I didn’t take any more time to think it over before I answered. I needed him away from Auntie Ellie as fast as possible.

“I’ll take that into consideration...” I finally replied. He burst out in another grin and turned to Auntie Ellie again.

“Nice to meet you again, Mrs Davies. I’ll see you guys around.” He started to walk away, but stopped after only a few feet. “Oh, and Maggie?”

I looked at him, expectant.

“The painting is beautiful. The colours are extraordinary. Kind of like you.” He added one of his signature winks, the same one he gave me the day Ellie dropped me off at Carriageton the first night.

One I hadn’t seen since the first day of school, when he decided to hate me.

I didn’t know what sort of upside-down world I had just entered, but I was about to find out.



CHAPTER 19

Ollie

What the hell was that? Did I really just go up to Maggie Davies, the girl who caused me more frustration and confusion than anyone else, and practically beg her to stay at school?

I had officially gone insane.

Pushing through the gallery doors, I shoved my woolly hat over my hair and pulled my mobile out of my back pocket. Instinctively, a drum stick came out with it.

I twirled the stick in one hand while I punched in Travis' number in the other. We finished the group band concert for Waversmore Week thirty minutes ago. He left to go watch Lily's solo performance while, for some insane reason, I decided to check out the art student's gallery.

Maggie was the first person I noticed when I entered. Her purple hair stood out in a crowd of people, drawing me toward her. Once I saw she was with her aunt, I backed off. Getting close to more members of the Davies family wasn't on the top of my to-do list.

When they returned, I may have eavesdropped. Maggie's voice turned

sorrowful when she talked about playing. I didn't understand what she meant, so I kept listening, hoping she would explain.

Hearing to Mrs Davies talk about having Maggie leave Waversmore after term hit me in a way I also couldn't explain. Having our daily debates had become a fun part of my day.

The day Maggie gave me her speech in the stairwell changed my viewpoint on her. She was sassy and obnoxious and sometimes rude, but deep down, she was kind of refreshing.

Our little spats kept me on my toes, and her need to control parts of our project was more helpful than not. I was seeing her in a different light, but I didn't want her to know that.

Until now, apparently.

And what did she mean by risk? What risk was there staying here?

“Ollie! Ollie, wait!”

I stopped and turned back toward the building I just left, lowering the phone as Maggie ran down the front steps. The purple scarf that flew behind her matched her hair. She left her black coat unbuttoned, like mine, and parted in the brisk wind.

She came to a halt right in front of me, closer than normal. With her hands propped on her hips, she narrowed her eyes and glared at me, tiny puffs of air escaping from her lips in the cold.

It was not quite the same reaction I was having after our last conversation.

“What the hell was that?” she asked. I choked back a small laugh, as I had wondered the same thing moments ago.

“I think you mean, thank you Ollie, for saving my arse,” I shot with a smirk. My mobile chimed with a call from Travis, but I ignored it. I hung up the phone before he answered, so he more than likely was ready to bitch me out for it.

Her brows furrowed behind her glasses, confusion sweeping over her face. “Thank you? Whatever would I be thanking you for? You embarrassed me in

front of my aunt!”

I licked my lips, preparing for another battle. A slight shiver ran through my body. Whether it was from the cold or from Maggie, I wasn't sure.

“Your aunt. She's hot. Would have made a good queen, you know. I see where you get the hair inspo from, by the way.” I reached forward with my drum stick, lifting a purple lock and twirling it before dropping it.

Maggie gasped, but didn't say a word until I started spinning the stick in my fingers again.

“That's... disgusting. She's my *aunt*, Ollie. Like, your mother's age.”

What happened next shocked me. I dropped my drum stick. We both stood silently, watching as it clattered on the pavement below, rolling down the slight decline. I never dropped my sticks. Ever.

I couldn't even chase after it, as I was rooted to the spot in disbelief. After a moment, Maggie came jogged after it, bending down and grabbing it before it rolled into the grass.

“Are you alright?” she asked as she handed it back to me.

“I don't have a mother,” I blurted out before I could even catch myself. Maggie froze, her hand still outreached with my drumstick. She blinked as I froze, not wanting to answer questions that no doubt would come next.

“Ollie... I'm so sorry.”

I turned away from her. The look of compassion on her face was exactly what I wanted to avoid. I flinched when something touched my back pocket; Maggie slid the stick next to the other one.

Gathering my confidence again, I thought back to what I overheard.

“What did you mean in there, a risk? What's the risk of you staying here?” I asked, finally looking at her. Turning the conversation away from the negative parts of my life and exploring her own seemed like a great idea.

She stopped and looked around. “What in the world? Weren't we just discussing your mother? Ollie, I-”

“You said the risk was on your mind all the time.”

Slowly, Maggie shook her head, her gaze on the ground now. I stepped forward and lifted her chin. As much as I didn't want to discuss my issues, I wanted to know all of hers.

"You were listening?" she whispered, her features a mixture of scared and concerned.

"Not on purpose. I was coming to talk to you about your piece, but you were so deep in conversation that..."

"That you decided to butt in and give everyone your opinion? When you nobody asked you?"

Staring into her eyes, I looked for some hint of appreciation. Something that said she didn't mean what she was saying.

Because I meant every word of what I said to her in that gallery. It may have come out of nowhere, but it was all true.

"Are you really leaving?" I muttered, my thumb brushing across her pink lips. "Because I don't want you to."

Maggie's chest heaved, her breaths coming in waves matching that of my pounding heart.

"You don't?"

I shook my head, keeping my eyes on her. A fleeting moment of sincerity passed through me again, as if she was pulling it out of me with her vulnerability.

"Why? You don't even like me. Why did you stand up for me back there?"

It took a minute to contemplate a reasonable answer. Because I didn't have one. The conflicting emotions she brought out in me every day were just that—conflicting.

I made assumptions. I grouped her with someone I despised, thinking they were one and the same.

The Maggie Davies I saw over the past month or so wasn't like that. As much as I wanted to be wrong and still dislike her, I couldn't.

"You've never said anything nice about me before today." She ripped

herself out of my grasp, taking a step backwards and glaring at me. “Was it all an act? To get on my aunt’s good side and let her think I have friends here? To make her think that I’m not lonely as hell and that someone cares what happens to me? Is that what all this is, one big act?”

She spread her arms out wide, hyping herself up. I stood in place, my brows furrowed as she got all worked up.

One thing stuck out in the whole speech she just gave. “You’re lonely?” I whispered, my face dropping at her admission.

Before recently, I never gave a second thought about how Maggie would feel being the new kid at school, especially coming in when she did, after we all had been together for so long. I was so hyper focused on making sure *I* had a great year, that I ignored everything else.

“I have one friend, Ollie. One. Everyone else either ignores me, is on Team Kenzie, or Team Ollie. The two of you are the most popular in the year, so why would anyone side with me? Especially after the rumours?”

A solitary tear rolled down her cheek. I wanted to wipe it away, but I froze in place.

Racking my brain, I tried to think of any time I saw Maggie outside of class or the dining hall. Any single time where she was surrounded by other students, or having fun with a group. In Business, she sat next to some girls from Carriageton, but had I ever seen them chatting? I thought hard about any instance where Maggie was with other students besides Lily.

I failed.

My hand itched to reach into my back pocket and grab a stick to twirl, but I couldn’t. They were marred now, stained with the fact that I let one fall.

Loneliness was a feeling I knew all too well from last year. When Christian got to me so bad that I lived inside my own head, berating myself for the things he said to me. I pulled away from everyone, putting on a show and a façade when in public. No one knew about the inner turmoil until it got to my breaking point, and by then, the year was almost over.

My chest heaved as my mind tumbled with thoughts. Maggie stood in front of me, her hands shoved into the pockets of her coat now to keep warm.

“It wasn’t an act.”

She gasped, her breathing coming more shallow now. “Then what was it, Ollie? Because until right now you’ve never touched me. You’ve never put your arm around me like we were... were... *friends!* You’ve never done anything but scowl in my direction.”

I couldn’t answer her. I couldn’t explain how sad I would be if she left. Because I had no idea *why*. I just knew that I had started looking forward to our morning quarrels in Geography. That I searched for her vibrant head of hair in the dining hall, even if I didn’t go talk to her.

I couldn’t tell her that instead of hating her, I may actually be starting to like her.

The epic battle in my head erupted day after day, the culmination happening right this instance.

Maggie Davies was trouble. That was what I told myself all term so far. Stay away from Maggie Davies, and I’d have a drama-free year.

Except it hadn’t work. Instead, we were pushed together, forced to interact on multiple levels all the time.

I couldn’t take it anymore. The answers I had in my head wouldn’t be the ones she wanted, the ones she expected to hear. They weren’t satisfying to me either, because all they led to were more questions.

Throwing my hands out to the side just like she did, I exploded.

“I don’t know, Maggie, alright? You can do what you want, don’t let what I said influence your decision. Go home, stay here, whatever. It doesn’t matter to me.”

Her frown pulled her face down, her eyes glazed over with a mixture of sadness and confusion. “I don’t understand you, Ollie. I really don’t.”

I didn’t understand myself either. Maggie brought out something in me I don’t think I would ever understand. Years from now, I would look back on

this year and nothing would make sense. Not how I acted, how I treated her, how I let her get treated by others without stepping in, or how I felt about her.

“Go home for break, Maggie. Be grateful you have somewhere to go. We aren’t all that lucky.” Walking backwards, I stared straight at her, hoping to get something across. What, I wasn’t sure. “I’ll still be here when you come back. *If you come back,*” I corrected.

Her lips parted. The number of times she changed emotions in the past few minutes was astronomical. And it was all because of me.

“You... you don’t go home for break?” she whispered. I barely heard her as I shuffled down the path.

Was she going to look at me with pity all over her face every time now? Now that she knew my mother was dead, I rarely went home, and that I, too, had bad days? Ever since that moment in the stairwell, she treated me differently. It was subtle differences at first, but I understood them now.

Maggie Davies never hated me. She pitied me. And that was worse.

“I haven’t gone ‘home’ for anything except summer break since I was ten,” I replied, air quoting around the word home. I used the term loosely because it wasn’t *my* home. It was Pops’. I just visited, and usually when he wasn’t there.

Her face crumpled, and that’s where I left her, standing on the path, her arms hanging at her side, defeated.

She could take the break to think things over. If she wanted to come back, I would be here waiting.

If she didn’t... well, then it had been an interesting term.



CHAPTER 20

Ollie

Christmas holiday was even lonelier this year. I was the only student from King's Cottage to stay, and one of six people total in the whole school.

Even Headmistress Tavers left for the first week, coming back the day after Christmas.

Since no one else was in King's Cottage, they put me into a temporary room in Galesmore House with three other guys, all younger than me. I didn't even have Mr Todd on my side.

The two girls who stayed were also put up temporarily in a house, with Housemistress Thompson at the helm.

Miss Duphrey stuck around, too; she didn't have any family to visit this year, and wanted to be here for "her kids", as she called us. She made an excellent Christmas Eve dinner, a full ham with all the trimmings. It was one of the best meals I had in a long time, and we praised her up, down, and sideways for it.

Every day I went to have tea with her. We talked about everything and

nothing, never bringing up any serious topics. She was used to me sticking around for breaks, and we picked up our old habits like nothing had changed.

The headmistress even gave me special allowance to use one of the music rooms in drum hall to practise. She didn't always allow students access to buildings without staff present, but for me, she made the exception.

Which is what led me here, alone in a drum room, my kit silent in front of me as I contemplated what to play.

Nothing felt quite right. Tapping out a random beat didn't give me the satisfaction it usually did. The song we played in the band for Waversmore Week wasn't even fun enough, though it was the most complex solo I ever had to perform.

I didn't want complex though; I wanted familiarity. I wanted something that would soothe my soul, bring clarity to my foggy mind, and solve all my problems. Not that that was possible, but it was an attempt.

A nagging thought wanted me to practise Ollie's Song. I hadn't played it once since that regretful night in the pub. I couldn't bring myself to even attempt it without trying to fix it in my head first.

And nothing I could think of made it seem right. If I switched the tempo, then the lyrics wouldn't match. Or I could change the drum section, but the guitar would be off. Every time I thought about it, I grew more and more frustrated.

Maybe today was the day, though. Maybe being alone, having nothing else to worry about would let me concentrate and really suss it out.

I stared at my kit. Stared and stared and stared. I tried squinting, tilting my head, and even standing for a different point of view.

Nothing helped. Not a single idea of how to fix the song came into me. The hamster up top stopped spinning the wheel. I was completely out of solutions.

Sighing, I dropped my sticks onto the music stand with a clatter and crossed the room to where I left my mobile. If I kept it too close, there was a risk I would scroll through endless drum videos instead of playing, so I put it

as far away as possible.

Right as I reached it, a message came through. My manager at Gasby's needed some extra help, like now. Not drumming, though, just an extra hand.

I had two. And the mental capability to spare, since I hadn't been able to think of anything worthwhile lately, anyway.

Considering it was break, I was already in casual clothes, which Gene allowed for work. It was a pub; there was no dress code.

Making sure I fully shut the entrance to the music building, I took off toward Gasby's at a slight jog, wanting to get there as soon as possible. It would be a good distraction from the whole lot of nothing else going on.

"Oi, Ollie, thanks for coming in so quickly," Gene stated as soon as the bell above the door jingled with my entrance. "Think you can help clean up after that party that just left in the back corner?"

"Right away, boss," I teased, knowing he hated when I said that. He whipped a dish towel in my direction, but I caught it and slung it over my shoulder instead.

I was right. Three hours of constant work, never stopping, and my day was already better. I missed tea time with Miss Duphrey, but at least I wasn't sitting around and wallowing in my own self-pity.

"Take a breather, son. You've been going non-stop."

I leaned over the bar counter on my elbows, scratching at my forehead. I tied my hair back, as was policy, even though I desperately wanted to get a good all over scratch. Nothing felt better after physical labour than a head scratch.

"What's on your mind?" Gene said, flinging a rag over his shoulder and grabbing a glass. He used the sprayer to fill it with a lemonade and slid it across the counter to me.

The pub had emptied with the lull between the lunch and dinner rushes. Only the usual occupants stayed, the ones that basically lived here, anyway.

"Just bored with break. Never thought I would say it, but I almost wish

school would start.”

Gene grunted. For a man twice my size in width, he looked all more of a giant behind the bar. His impressive work of facial hair also helped, his beard reaching a good six inches from his chin.

“What?” I asked, taking a sip of my drink. It was refreshing and hit the spot better than tea would have in this moment.

“I’ve never heard you say that before. Here I thought you were down because of a girl.”

Lemonade went down the wrong pipe as he said that. I sputtered, coughing up liquid into a napkin. “Pardon?”

“You’re telling me there’s not a girl back at that school of yours that has you all in a twist?”

“No, absolutely not.”

“Sure. I’ve seen enough young lads come through here with the same look on their faces. It’s always a girl.”

I shook my head so hard my hair tie came loose, my long hair falling around my face. Reaching up to fix it, I replied, “No, I swear. There’s no girl.”

The smirk on Gene’s face told me he didn’t believe me in the slightest.

“Well, thanks for the help today. Nathaniel will be here for the dinner shift, so you can stay and grab some food or head out for the day. I’ll add an extra hour to your clock for the quick response.” He walked away before I could argue.

The fact that he paid me in cash when I wasn’t sure it was entirely legal made him even better. I didn’t have to admit to my father that I had a job, no one had to know, and I could use the money for whatever I needed during school.

He told me as soon as I turned eighteen, I would have to get onto payroll. I had hopes I wouldn’t be in this situation by then. I could dream, at least.

Declining the food, I took the long way back, deciding to walk through the

town instead.

Waversmore was situated on the edge of a small village, which looked like it was stuck in the seventeen-hundreds, when the school was founded. The population was sparse, but it attracted a few tourists here and there.

Jamming my hands in my coat pockets, I kept my eyes trained low, not wanting to run into anyone I might recognise from the pub. I was in no mood to make any sort of small talk; I just needed to hang out in my own head.

Why would Gene say anything about a girl? The only girls I had much contact with this year were Kenzie, Lily, and...

Maggie.

The purple-haired girl flashed through my mind, making me shake my head. The last time I saw her was outside the art building, after our little tiff about my ridiculous actions.

The last thing I said to her was that I hoped she returned after the holidays. She hadn't replied. I told her how I hadn't gone home since I was ten, and the way her face crumpled after that fact made my heart shatter.

I wasn't looking for her pity. I wasn't looking for anything from her. Everything I did, everything I said in front of her aunt was payment for what she said to me in the stairwell last month. At least, that's what I had been trying to convince myself.

She would never know how her words affected me. It took quite some time for me to admit it to myself, and even longer to admit it to Travis, but what she had said mattered.

Knowing that someone I treated so badly could turn around and say things with such care was hard to digest. It was like she didn't even consider the anguish I put her through over the previous months before she shot out her speech, looking me dead in the eye and staring into my soul.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I kicked a rock down the path and finally looked up, staring at Carriageton House. I was back on campus without even realising it, ending right in front of Maggie's house.

She wasn't there, of course, but instinct was instinct.

Maybe when she returned, I could be a different person. Maybe *if* she returned, I would change, treat her nicely.

After all she had done for me so far, she deserved that.

But again, that was all dependent on *if* she came back.



CHAPTER 21

Maggie

“Pardon. Please repeat what you just said?” I whispered into my mobile.

Esme took a deep breath. Repeating herself was not something she particularly enjoyed doing, but I needed to hear this again. It couldn't be true.

“Where's Margaret' is trending. More than last time. It's blowing up social media outlets everywhere, across the entire United Kingdom.”

The entire kingdom. Not only London, where it had been trickling for the past few months, but the *entire kingdom*. Which meant it wasn't long until students here at Waversmore were talking about it.

We lived in a little bubble on campus, but not enough to ignore major issues.

“Your Highness, you didn't return for the holidays. That was a misstep on all of our parts, one we cannot justify to the public with any reasonable excuse. So, they've gone rogue and started making up their own reasons. We

will not drop to their level, of course, as private matters are indeed private within the family. However, you must be made aware of this and have a slight heightened sense of surrounding. Eleanor is on alert, and we have put evacuation protocols into place for you to leave at a moment's notice.”

I blinked, unable to process what she was telling me. Raising a hand to cover my eyes, I fell backward on my bed, hitting a pile of clothing I had yet to put away after returning from holiday break.

After tossing and turning the entire night of the gallery showing, I made my decision to return to Waversmore. To stay as long as I could, to get the most out of one more term.

To try to figure out what was happening between Ollie and me.

Once my decision had been made, the option to go home was out of the question. Getting rid of the hair dye would prove difficult, and any photos of me were just one more way someone could notice me. Especially since the world was apparently waiting for a sighting.

Staying out of the spotlight at all costs had been the best plan. Until it wasn't.

“What do I do now?” I whispered into the phone. I hadn't spoken in a louder voice during the entire conversation. My body and mind went into shock; I wasn't sure what steps to take next.

Esme already planned for evacuation. My guess was she planned it the second she got the call that I was attending Waversmore. She wasn't one to slack on details of any sort, but this was the first time she told me about it. She never released details I didn't need to know or didn't need to concern myself with. When I was ready, I knew, and not a moment before. There were a lot of aspects of her job I was completely clueless about, and happy for it, too.

“You stay the course. Keep on as if nothing has changed, because it hasn't. It's not the first time the press has run rampant with a story about you. They'll make things up if they can't find anything, which they won't,” she

added. It did little to slow my racing heart. “They’ll dig into unreliable sources to do so. It’ll fizzle out after a while once they realise they have nothing to go on. As long as nothing comes out of Waversmore, you will be fine.”

I clutched my necklace in my hand, my thumb tracing over the “M” in the centre. Biting my lip, I considered my options.

Returning to the palace was at the top of the list. After some statements about my absence, of which I would never reveal my spot at Waversmore, the press would quiet down. Life would return to the normal it was before I left, and everyone would be able to breathe again.

Or I could stay and pretend nothing happened. I could act like every other kid here who recently returned from the holidays with their families. Since many people saw Auntie Ellie at Waversmore Week, they knew I was related to her in some form. So, telling them I spent my break at her house wouldn’t even have to be a lie.

Sighing, I agreed with Esme, and we said our goodbyes.

Unable to sit still, I decided to grab some crisps from the snack shop. There was food in our house kitchen, but I had no mental power to make something for myself at the moment.

Sliding my phone into my trousers pocket, I took off. The courtyard was relatively quiet due to the cold. We had a random free afternoon, a gift of sorts. Some hung out at their houses, some went into the town to shop and walk around, but most lounged around campus or headed to their specials buildings for practise.

The project I was now working on in the painting studio sat as a blank canvas. I needed more inspiration, and with this news, it may be a while before I came up with any.

After paying for a handful of snacks, I took to outside, wanting to find one of my favourite benches in the courtyard. The winter gloom had taken over campus, but an enticing sliver of sunshine poked through the grey clouds.

It was the only silver lining I saw in this moment.

Before I got past the hedges that lead from the exterior door to the snack shop, a group of boys surrounded me on all sides, blocking all exits.

My eyes grew as the rest of me froze. The wicked grins on their faces meant they were up to no good, but there on a mission; they wanted something.

I recognised one as Kenzie's new boyfriend. His name was William, and he was almost a replica of Henry—prim, proper, and dull. His father was a Duke. The only reason I knew that was my extensive knowledge of the duchy, as embedded into my brain by my previous tutor. It would come in handy when I became Queen.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" I asked with an air of what I hoped was confidence. My heart raced, panic setting in. This was exactly what scared me once Esme told me about the press ramping up their agenda. I just didn't think it would be as quick as this.

"Oh, you can help me alright. I have a problem only you can solve," Louis, another boy my age, said. He scanned me from head to toe, giving me the chills.

William slid up next to me and put his arm around my shoulder. I tried to shrug him off, but he kept a tight grip.

"We heard you wanted to leave Waversmore at the end of last term. Is that true?" William twisted his face into a mock pout, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

"If it meant getting away from the lot of you, I should have done it," I replied through gritted teeth. William's cologne overpowered my nose, making me need to sneeze and gag at the same time.

Louis circled me twice, keeping his gaze directly on my chest and, I assumed, my arse. "You can't leave now," he said. "We're just getting to know you. No one here has really had a chance to... *know* you."

It didn't take a genius to understand the innuendo he was portraying, which

caused the rest of the group to snicker.

“Besides, I heard a rumour yesterday...” Alexander, the third boy in the pack, spoke. “A little birdie told me the media is looking for Princess Margaret. And with your name being Maggie... who’s to say you’re not the missing princess?”

My heart fell to the floor with a thud. My lungs restricted, squeezing every ounce of air out, and not just because of William’s odour.

Evacuation plans would have to be put in place immediately. The stupid part of me had hoped I could get away for another few weeks at least, but now... it was all over.

“No, she can’t be the lost princess. She’s way hotter than Princess Margaret. I mean, look at her boobs. And this bone structure.” William took the hand on my shoulder and used it to grip my chin, turning my face from side to side.

My head spun, air not reaching my lungs or my brain, leaving me unable to fight back. I wasn’t prepared for this. No one ever prepared me for being physically assaulted. I had bodyguards by the dozen accompanying me to every event outside the palace, and the security detail inside was stronger than any fortress.

“Well, that’s too bad. I’d love to say I found Princess Margaret. Of course, that would be after I had my way with her. How many people can say they shagged a *princess*?”

The laughter that rose from all three boys made me gag. My knees buckled, but William shifted his arms quickly, supporting me under my shoulders as his hands grazed my chest. I swallowed the bile creeping up in my throat and blinked back the tears trying to escape.

Was there no one else on this campus watching? Did no one see what the boys were doing? It went against every moral code here at Waversmore, but the boys weren’t known to always play by the rules.

“Get in line, mate,” William said, lifting me to my feet and planting

himself directly in front of me. “Finder’s keepers.”

A few drops of rain fell on my face then. Within minutes, the skies would open up. The weather was unpredictable, and in this circumstance, I was grateful for it. Once the boys felt it raining, maybe they would leave me alone.

William brushed away a drop from his cheek, and leaned in like he was going to kiss me, cupping his hands around my jaw to keep me steady. I lost all will to fight. My mind dismissed the idea entirely. I had never been put in this position before in my life; I didn’t even know what to do. If I fought, would they hurt me more?

Louis and Alexander both took a step forward, blocking William and me from others watching. To anyone else, it would look like an intimate moment the boys were trying to keep private. Public affection was frowned upon by the staff and they broke couples apart any time they saw.

As expected, the clouds let loose, the rain coming down harder, yet it didn’t deter William. He planted one foot between mine and held my jaw even tighter. The stench of whatever he had for lunch was still on his breath, but I couldn’t move to avoid it.

Lowering a hand to my breast, he squeezed and smiled before pursing his lips, mere centimetres away from my face now. I pulled backwards, but his hand flew up to my head again, holding me in place.

I closed my eyes, praying for him to just get it over with before I vomited. Rain mixed with tears streaming down my cheeks.

“Oi! What’s going on over there?”

Between the shock of a shout and me jerking my head, William’s hand slipped, the band of his watch scraping across my cheek. He didn’t completely release me, though, his long, cold fingers wrapping around my neck as if to tell me to stay still and quiet.

“Let her go!” Ollie yelled.

Ollie. It was Ollie. I never thought I would be excited to hear his voice, but

in this instance, I would take it over anything.

“This isn’t over, *princess*,” William whispered. He shoved me aside, Louis and Alexander following suit, knocking me to the ground before they started running in the opposite direction of Ollie. Their shoes slapped against the wet pavement, sending water into the air in splashes as they went.

I hit the ground hard, my hands splashing in a small puddle that had already formed. I wasn’t down for long. Ollie’s strong arms lifted me back to my feet, his bright hazel eyes staring into mine.

“Are you alright? What did those prats do to you?”

Rain plastered his hair to his head, tiny beads of water gathering on his long eyelashes. I looked at him, blinking to clear my own eyes, my mind completely blank.

He didn’t look away, not even giving the boys a second thought. His eyes were trained on me.

I went through an emotional roller coaster, careening through worry to frustration, anger to fear. Everything in the last few minutes flashed through my mind, like a big-screen movie and a blur at the same time.

“Why do you care?” is what I eventually spat out. I didn’t mean it. It was the overwhelming number of feelings coursing through me. I couldn’t control what I was saying because I couldn’t control what was happening.

I closed my eyes, trying to focus on my breathing and regain my sense of self. The only thing grounding me in this moment was Ollie’s hands on my arms, holding me steady and not letting go.

The rain pelted down on both of us now, slipping down my neck and back, soaking through my coat and uniform trousers.

After counting to ten in my head, I stood up straight, allowing Ollie to back away. Opening my eyes, I found him with a look of pure fear on his face.

The sting on my palms when I brushed off my hands made me suck in a breath.

Ollie's gaze followed as I looked down. He grabbed my palms, electrical shocks jumping as his skin met mine. He traced a finger around the scrapes, brushing away small pieces of dirt and cement with the slightest touch.

“Shit. We need to get you to the school nurse.”

The tender way he cradled my hands, moving his fingers ever so gently over my scrapes, both confused me and warmed my heart.

The longer I stared at him, the more emotions I saw cross his face. I didn't know what was going through his head, but it wasn't anything good, based on the number of times he ground his teeth and set his jaw. In all that flurry, he had yet to let go of me.

And I didn't want him to.

What just happened, and what almost happened, shook me to my core. I was certain I would have to call Esme and begin the evacuation protocol immediately. As I replayed their comments in my head, it became clear that they were looking for something to distract me with, not really believing I was Princess Margaret. They used the same name as a reason to corner me, but that was probably as far as their thick skulls could go.

They chose to frighten me just because they could. The way they looked at me as if I was theirs for the taking. The way William grabbed my face, like he wanted to not only kiss me, but take me alone and do other things as well. He wouldn't stop with a kiss, that was certain. I shuddered, thinking of what he would have done had Ollie not come along.

Would I have let him? Would I have been able to fight back? I turned, noticing that they cornered me in the perfect spot—tall bushes lined the path to my left, creating a little maze of a pathway out of the snack shop entrance. He could have dragged me past the door and done whatever he wanted, with Louis and Alexander keeping guard.

A small sob escaped my lips, a gasp following it. Ollie must have noticed, as he lowered our hands. But he didn't let go.

Tilting my head back and lifting my chin toward him, I whispered the one

thought that was constantly on my mind, and now seemed confirmed.

“You know, I’m used to people always liking me. Wherever I go, people have been kind, and helpful, and genuine. Well, at least before I started here. But I’ve never been sure if it’s *real*, or if they’re putting on an act because of who I am.” I stopped, realising what I said. It wouldn’t make sense to Ollie, and surely he would start asking questions. I sucked in a deep breath before finishing. “Now I know. It’s not real. It never was, and it never will be.”

Ollie stayed silent, his gaze shifting between my bleeding hands and the ground. My bottom lip trembled. My entire body shook on the inside, the stress and shock settling and mixing with the cold.

Tears and rain fell down my face like a waterfall, the two blending to the point no one could tell them apart.

Ollie cleared his throat before lifting his head. We locked eyes, but it wasn’t for long. The anger that flared in his gaze disappeared in an instant as he searched me. His jaw dropped.

“Maggie... your cheek...” Ollie dropped my hands and lifted his, reaching toward me. I beat him to it. I couldn’t have him touch me, not now. Not after William...

Bringing my fingers to my cheek, a twinge of red mixed with the rain in my palm. William’s watch must have scratched me harder than I thought. I only hoped that it wasn’t deep enough to scar.

Sliding my hand down, I brushed along my collarbone.

And my heart dropped once more.

My necklace was gone.

I gasped and looked wildly around me, searching the ground below for any sign of it. It had to be here, it just had to. It was a present from my Grandmum, the one piece of jewellery I never, ever took off.

“What’s wrong?” Ollie asked, also looking at the ground.

“My necklace. It’s not here.” I gave up the search after a moment, realising William must have taken it when his hands were around my neck. I was so

scared then, and feeling the initial sting of the scratch on my face, I didn't realise he pulled it off.

"They took your necklace?" Ollie's eyes were full of fire and rage, his lips settling into a thin line as he cocked his head back and forth. He looked ready for murder.

He pushed his soaking wet hair off his face with both hands, taking a step back, his jaw tightening.

My knees buckled, and I fell to the ground in a heap just as Ollie took out his mobile. Holding it to his ear, he lowered himself next to me.

"House. Five minutes," he muttered into the phone before clicking it off and returning it to his pocket.

I didn't know who he was talking to or what it was about. My sight was muddled with more tears rolling down my cheeks, stinging when they reached the scratches.

"I'm going to kill them," Ollie whispered as he pulled me into his chest, resting a calloused hand on the side of my head. "They'll never touch you again, I promise you. No one will."

I couldn't process what he was saying, though.

They could blow my cover any second.

They took my necklace.

My entire world was in pieces, and the only thing holding it together was the man who hated me.



CHAPTER 22

Ollie

“**M**aggie! Wait!”

After a few minutes on the ground, holding her to my chest as she sobbed, she suddenly jumped to her feet and dashed away. I called out, but she didn't stop. I was stuck watching her retreat, her purple hair falling down her shoulders in wet waves.

Seeing Maggie about to make out with William outside the snack shop disgusted me at first. Not only because Maggie could do so much better, but I thought we hit a turning point in our odd relationship.

Then I became outraged when I realised what William was doing. As I got closer, I caught the fear in Maggie's eyes. The way William had her clasped between his hands, unable to move. How he was leaning toward her, Louis and Alexander covering for him.

Rage boiled inside when I called out.

The terror coming from Maggie was palpable. The second William let go, her body began shaking, a slight tremor at first, then turning into an all-out shiver. I don't think she even realised.

And now she vanished. I couldn't protect her anymore.

Sliding my hands through my wet hair, I pulled at the strands, frustrated about this whole situation, upset for Maggie, and madder than hell about the boys.

Part of me wanted to run straight to Headmistress Tavers office and report all three of them. She knew me long enough now to take me for my word, and she would expel them immediately. She was a no-nonsense woman who didn't tolerate anything of that sort. Harassment was a one-way ticket out of Waversmore. So was bullying.

That was, when she was aware of it.

But there was something I had to do first.

My pacing between the courtyard and the main building was getting out of hand. The rain soaked me head to toe, and was only now lightening up. My scalp stung from the tugging, causing me to lower my hands and grab my drumsticks instead. I didn't stop walking, just started drumming on my thighs. Creating a beat helped me think better, anyway.

Going to the headmistress wasn't the right first step. No, I had to take matters into my own hands. Literally. Remembering I called Travis with the S.O.S., I took off.

Jogging back to King's Cottage, I burst through the front door so hard it hit the wall behind it.

"Everything alright, Mr Hastings?" Mr Todd asked, peering up from over his newspaper. I didn't know anyone who still read the paper except him. He read a section at a time, lasting him almost the whole day.

I didn't stop as I dashed to the staircase. "It will be."

He raised an eyebrow at me, but stayed silent. I could feel his gaze follow me as I ran up the stairs two at a time. I was getting the entire place wet. I didn't care; I had bigger worries.

Rounding the corner, I prayed he would be inside. Because if he couldn't calm me down before I found the three idiots, I would end up being the one

expelled.

The soft beats of his bass filled the room as I pushed the door open. He lifted his head to look at me, his hair falling over his forehead.

Instead of explaining myself, I stood in the frame, my arms crossed over my torso, and my jaw set, dripping wet. I didn't take my eyes off of my best friend.

Travis jumped off the bed, laid his bass on the floor, grabbed a towel, and strolled over. After tossing me the towel, he cracked his neck and tucked his hair behind his ears.

“I'll get the shovel.”

The corner of my lips quirked. Rubbing my head dry, I nodded and jerked my chin down the hall. Travis narrowed his eyes.

“Which one?”

Sucking in a big breath, I waited until I let it out on a count of five before answering. “William.”

Travis sneered, his nose scrunching as if he smelled something foul. He opened his mouth to speak again, but I beat him to it.

“And Louis.”

He growled. Travis' dislike for that whole group was well known, ever since they cut the strings on his bass in his first year here. No one could prove it, but we knew who it was.

“And Alexander,” I added at the end, to really get him pumped up. The veins in his neck strained, his chest growing with every deep breath.

He took one step toward me to exit the hall. I placed a hand on his shoulder, stopping him.

“Who else?” he asked, running his hands through his hair to make it even messier than it already was. He was just like me; when we didn't know what to do, we either played with our hair or played an air instrument.

“Maggie.”

That got him to back up a few steps, his face screwed up in confusion. He

flipped his hair over and cocked his head.

“Davies? What’s she have to do with this?”

“They hurt her,” I muttered through gritted teeth. It took everything I had to hold back my anger. My knuckles were white from clenching my fists so tight.

He chewed on the inside of his cheek as I pushed my way into the room and grabbed a dry shirt. I gave him the quick rundown on what I saw, what she said, and how she fled, as I changed. With each sentence, his eyes flared in anger.

“Those bastards! They’ll be expelled for this, they will. Want me to go with you to the Headmistress’ office? Hell, I’ll tell her I saw the whole thing if you need me to.”

I shook my head gently and walked over to sit on my bed, my elbows resting on my knees and my head in my hands.

“We can’t.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“They have something of hers. I need to get it back.”

“Mate, I ask this in the nicest way possible—why the hell do you care about getting something of Maggie’s back? I’m all for beating the shit out of them for even laying an unwanted hand on a woman, but it is Maggie Davies...”

The air whooshed out of my lungs. “You didn’t see her, Travis. William scratched her face so hard she was bleeding. Her hands... scraped up. And her eyes... she wasn’t just scared, mate, she was downright terrified.” My heart raced as I thought about how she looked again. Under those black glasses laid a woman in distress, one I wholeheartedly believed could stand up for herself in any other circumstance. But being cornered, pinned between a group of guys who were taller and bigger, being held against her will...

Her confidence faltered in that moment, leaving her exposed and vulnerable. The look in her eyes would haunt me forever.

“They took her necklace,” I whispered. The waver in my voice must have conveyed more than I could say. Travis’ face went blank at first before going soft.

“So, we get it back,” he answered. My involvement in all of this confused him, but I didn’t care. That necklace belonged to Maggie. She wore it every single day. No one wore something every day without it being the most sentimental item they owned.

Nodding, I stood up, took my drumsticks out of my pocket and dropped them onto the bed. Cracking his knuckles, Travis joined me as we made our way down the hall toward William’s room.

He was stupid enough to return to the house after running away from me. The boy had fewer brain cells than a goldfish, which was probably the reason Kenzie went for him. He was easy to train and mould into her perfect boyfriend.

We didn’t bother to knock. The door was already slightly ajar, voices from all three boys coming from inside.

I pounded my fist into the door, sending it flying. Everyone stopped talking at once, their faces frozen in terror.

Which was exactly what I wanted.

“Who the *fuck* do you think you are?” I growled. Travis slid out from behind me to my side, puffing up his chest and snarling.

William jumped to his feet, tilting his chin up in dominance. The three of them already dried off and changed, as if they weren’t out in the rain at all.

I remained motionless, as did Travis. Together, we were a brick wall, impenetrable and pissed the fuck off.

“Get out of here, Ollie. None of this concerns you.”

That’s when I saw it. The small glint of shine coming from the sun in the window sparkling off a silver object on William’s desk.

The necklace.

I took three steps into William’s room just as Louis and Alexander rose to

their feet. Their perfectly coiffed hair and freshly ironed blazers held no match against my fury.

It took one swift punch to the face to take down William. Travis shoved the other two down with a single push of each hand, sending them tumbling back onto the bed.

“You arse! Look what you did!” William screeched. It was loud enough to attract attention, so I had to act fast.

Swiping the necklace off the desk while no one was looking, I slipped it into my pocket, making sure everyone’s eyes were still on my face instead.

“Maggie Davies is off limits,” I declared.

Travis whipped his head around in surprise, but I didn’t back down from my statement. Crossing my arms over my chest, I surveyed the damage. William had a bloody nose, Louis flipped over the side of the bed and landed on the floor, and Alexander was scrambling to the far wall, fixing his hair.

William wiped his face with the back of his hand, a sneer on his lips. “Oh sorry. Did I move in on little orphan Ollie’s territory? Does the big bad drummer have a crush on the purple haired *freak*?”

My hand twitched, ready to swing at him again. “You’re lucky I didn’t go straight to the headmistress with what I saw, William.”

He huffed and shrugged. “Wouldn’t make a difference. With as much money as my family gives this place, there’s nothing she could do to me.”

It wasn’t true; the headmistress did not play favourites and pushed the board to make sure they didn’t either. It was why they gave her the job.

A nasty smile pulled at my cheeks. “We all know that’s a lie. But know who else values my opinion over yours?”

Alexander coughed in the corner as Travis started toward him. Normally, Travis was not threatening in any manner. But now, when it was against people he hated who hurt an innocent person, he looked downright deadly.

“Let’s see. No one?” William taunted. He backed up a step, showing his uncertainty. He may be as dumb as rocks, but he could recognise a threat.

I rubbed my hands down my face, the stubble of a beard breaking through in the late afternoon. “Kenzie sure hangs onto every word I say still. Even though she claimed your scrawny arse. I think she would love to hear what you were doing with Maggie Davies. And you bet I’ll twist it to make sure she knows it was all on you.”

William paled as he wiped away more blood trickling down his face.

We all jolted as footsteps sounded in the hallway.

Travis glanced at me and I nodded. We had to leave, fast. They were lucky they got away with only one bloody nose and nothing else.

We fled just before Mr Todd rounded the corner. We hid out of sight until he entered William’s room to see what the commotion was about. Then we sprinted down the hall and the stairs, and out the front door.

Even if William tattled and said it was me who gave him the bloody nose, he would have to explain why I did it. And I highly doubted he would want to give that story.

Being a lifer at Waversmore allowed me certain allowances, and having the staff know me well was one of those. There was no way Mr Todd would believe William if he tried to attest that I hit him unprovoked.

William would have to lie.

But I wouldn’t.

Reaching for my mobile in my back pocket, I brought up Kenzie’s number and opened a new text.

Me: Check on your boyfriend. He’s a bit... messy at the moment. Could probably use some comforting. And while you’re at it, ask him what he and his friends were doing outside the snack shop entrance an hour ago. Getting handsy...

I didn’t wait to see if she was going to reply or not. More than likely, she would demand more answers as she marched her way over the King’s Cottage to see for herself. My best guess was William would refuse to come out until he cleaned himself up. Then he would lie and lie again.

Kenzie was smart, however, and resourceful in getting what she wanted. If she wanted information, she would find out. When she realised William had chosen Maggie as the one to be kissing...

Well, World War Three wouldn't be ruled out as possible options for her.

Travis and I walked in unison and silence until we were far enough away from King's Cottage, the tension between us heavy.

"He knew," Travis whispered with a sigh as he shook his hair out of his eyes. I ran my hands over my head a few times, front and back, scratching at my scalp before I could come up with a thought.

I didn't need clarification; I caught the subtle reference William slipped in. How William knew the nickname Christian Davies used in torment last year astounded me. I didn't think anyone truly knew what was happening back then. The torture was for me and me alone, a personal vendetta.

Hopefully, Travis and I scared William enough that he wouldn't think about retaliating or coming after us. He was a total tosser, but had to have enough sense that we could get him expelled. With Maggie as a witness, it would be a clear-cut case for the headmistress.

But that was up to her. Not us.

Travis nudged me with his elbow, drawing me out of my thoughts. "You got it?" he asked.

I nodded, sliding my hand into my trousers pocket. I dangled the sliver necklace between my fingers, watching it sparkle in the peek of sun.

A small diamond hung in the middle, alongside a tiara charm and a cursive letter M. I couldn't remember the necklace *not* being around her neck. It had to mean something, and I was glad I got it back for her.

"It's broken," Travis said. When William ripped it off, he must have broken the clasp that held it together. I hoped no other charms were missing.

Returning it would be at the top of my to-do list. Maggie had to be freaking out without it, and I wanted to make sure I returned it to her safely.

I couldn't take away her pain, mental or physical, but maybe this one thing

would make her happy again.



CHAPTER 23

Maggie

“Maggie?” Lily’s voice travelled through the door after a soft knock.

I didn’t answer right away. From my position in the corner of my room, I doubt she would have heard me even if I did respond. I huddled with my knees pulled to my chest, my arms wrapped around them, and my non-scratched cheek resting on my legs, being still and silent.

“Maggie, I know you’re in there. At least, I’m pretty sure you’re in there. Please, answer the door.”

A sniffle was all that escaped. I stopped crying a while ago. Without my phone next to me, I lost all concept of time, and even though it felt like hours, I knew it probably had only been a little while. The only thing I had done was changed clothes. My wet hair formed damp spots on the shoulders of my once dry shirt.

“There you are,” Lily said, her voice no longer muffled by the door anymore.

I lifted my head, finding her crouched in front of me, her long, dark locks falling loose as she bent to look at me.

“Your face,” she gasped, reaching out to cradle my cheek. I turned my head at the last second, not wanting anyone to touch me.

Instead of my face, she reached for my hands and pulled me to my feet before I even knew what was happening. She led me to the bathroom and sat me on the closed toilet seat. I just stared, unable to comprehend what she was doing or why.

“Travis sent me a text. Rather vague, but it made me concerned,” she said in her hurried, “let me take over the conversation” type voice. She always knew when it was the right time for her to talk and make me feel like I didn’t have to. It was the perfect balance of comforting and reassuring.

“A text?” I let my hair fall over my face so she couldn’t see the scratches anymore. I still hadn’t cleaned them out or put any sort of aid to them. The mere thought of looking at myself in the mirror made me ill.

Lily reached into the cabinet and took down a first-aid kit. She waved her hand as she opened the pouch and rummaged around.

“Oh, it was vague. He just said for me to check on you and report back. I had no idea what he meant, and he refused to elaborate. Sometimes those boys have their little secret code and don’t bother to tell anybody, you know what I mean?” She rambled on until she got out all the supplies she wanted, then focused her attention on me.

“So, my beautiful friend, may I attend to your cheek?” She didn’t take a single step closer to me, standing frozen with plasters in one hand and cream in the other. She stared at me with a soft gaze, waiting for my approval.

I had no doubt that if I voiced my opposition, she would put down all the items and not move any further.

But I didn’t. I nodded and tucked my hair behind my ears, turning my injured cheek toward her.

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Would it be alright if I let the boys know I

found you? After I attend to you, of course.”

I caught her gaze as it flicked from my cheek to my hands, which rested on top of my scraped up knees. I discovered those when I changed out of my soaking wet trousers.

As Lily was already working on my face, I murmured my approval once more.

If Travis knew, that meant that Ollie told him. And if they were waiting for a word back from Lily, it meant they were concerned. My heart ached thinking about them being concerned for me.

I had left Ollie outside the snack shop, calling after me as I ran to Carriageton in the rain. I felt horrible, but I had to get out of there.

“Would you like to talk about it?” Lily asked softly as she finished up with my cheek and moved to putting the plasters on my hands and knees.

My lip quivered, and the tears came back, falling down my cheeks one by one.

After she finished, she took my hands and led me to the bed, pulling back the covers and helping me inside. Once I nestled under, she climbed in after me, covering both of us in the quilt and wrapping me in her arms just like Ollie had earlier.

“They attacked me.” It came out of me unexpectedly; I wasn’t sure I wanted to tell anyone. Once I started, I couldn’t stop.

By the time I finished telling her about William and the attack, the sun had set. We missed dinner, but Lily just shook her head when I mentioned it.

“I have extra snacks in my room, and Housemistress Thompson stocked the kitchens yesterday. We’ll be okay.” She squeezed me in a hug.

“Thank you for telling me, Maggie. I’m honoured that you trust me enough to share that with me and I’m so horribly sorry that it happened to you.” Brushing my hair from my face, she tilted my head down onto her shoulder. The motion was soothing, lulling me into a sort of trance I didn’t want to escape.

We sat there for a few minutes in silence, just thinking.

“Lily?” I whispered. She murmured in response. “I haven’t been fully honest with you.”

Instead of becoming upset with me, she shifted so we were eye to eye again. The look of confusion on her face wasn’t threatening or angry, but gentle and welcoming.

Telling her what I wanted would break everything Auntie Ellie, Mum, and Esme drove into me over the past few months.

I was tired. It was exhausting holding this in day after day, constantly worrying about someone finding out, thinking all my steps through to make sure I wasn’t giving anything away that could expose me. By each evening, my mind was fatigued, only to have to do it again.

“Are you alright, Maggie?” Lily prompted, reminding me of my statement.

I shook my head and pulled out of her arms, situating myself on the bed a foot or so away. Crossing my legs, I laid my hands in my lap, unsure of what to do with them.

“That’s just it. My name isn’t Maggie.”

Lily’s eyes grew, but she stayed silent.

“At least, it isn’t to most people. My immediate family calls me Maggie. Everyone else calls me Princess Margaret.”

I couldn’t look at her. I couldn’t handle seeing the disappointment on her face, or the look of shock. If I were her, I would travel through shock, confusion, anger, and upset. In the end, I expected her to be hurt by my betrayal and lying.

“*Princess Margaret?*” she whispered.

I nodded and took off my glasses, staring at her with my face on full display. Except now it had fresh cuts adorning my cheek to add to the disguise.

Lily’s brows furrowed as she tilted her head. “Wow. I guess I could see it. The hair really throws me off, though. But with a tiara... and a gorgeous

gown she's always known for... well, *you're* always known for, I suppose... wow."

She wasn't upset. She looked at me in amazement instead, her eyes growing wider, glistening with excitement by the second.

"You're... you're not mad at me for lying this whole time?" I asked, my thumbs fiddling with the hem of my trousers.

Her jaw dropped. "Are you kidding? Of course I'm not mad. I'm astonished you've kept it a secret! Wait!" She held up a finger like she had an idea. "Your guitar! That's why you had to hide it and not play with the band. So no one would notice you!"

My crestfallen face slowly turned into a small grin, Lily's enthusiasm becoming contagious.

"Yes, exactly. That's why I had to make sure you wouldn't tell anyone. And since you did so well with that... can I ask you hold in one more secret? One the entire monarchy is relying on you to keep?"

I didn't mean to sound as ominous as I did, but it was true. If Lily leaked the info about who I really was before I left Waversmore at the end of term, then things would become rather unsettling. I had to get her word that she wouldn't tell a soul.

She put her hand to her chest, her dark brown eyes still wide. "I solemnly swear on the life of my violin." The serious look made me smile.

"Thanks," I whispered, resuming my spot next to her at the top of the bed.

"Can I ask one thing?"

"Sure."

"Have you met any hot princes?" Her signature lithe giggle lifted my heart and spirit, pushing all thoughts of the boys and the attack out of my mind while we chatted and gossiped.



CHAPTER 24

Ollie

“Are you *sure* Housemistress Thompson is out?” I whispered to Lily, taking a glance around the corner once more. She laughed and dragged me out into the open.

“Positive. She left for town ten minutes ago. Which means she’s just about there. At a minimum, you have fifteen minutes. Think you can get the job done in that time, soldier?”

I liked Lily. She was not only a good friend, but I really liked her with Travis. And even though they claimed to not be more than friends, everyone knew there was more there. Half of us thought they had a secret thing going on, though Travis wouldn’t hide that from me. The unknown of life after graduation was too scary for them to form something solid, even though they enjoyed each other’s company.

“And you’re positive she’s—”

Lily sighed and pushed me through the front door she unlocked. “Yes, I’m sure she’s in her room! Up the stairs, to the right, it’s the last room at the end of the hall on the left. You literally can’t miss it. Get in, give it to her, and get

out fast. I'm getting out of here, so I'm not seen as an accomplice to your actions."

Her wide smile told me she was joking, but deep down, I was glad she was leaving. I didn't want to get anyone else in trouble for my wrongdoings.

But Maggie Davies had been hard to track down. She skipped classes on Friday, to which Lily stated she was "sick", and hadn't left the house all weekend. I had no other option than bringing the necklace to her instead of waiting for her to find me.

She didn't know I had it. Only Travis did. I brought it to the pub Thursday night, and before my shift, Gene and I fixed the clasp with tools he had in the back storeroom. Well, fixed it enough so it would stay on, but she would need a new one, eventually.

"In and out, alright?" Lily said as I walked through the door. "Don't get caught."

Getting caught in the other gender's dorm resulted in immediate detentions, usually a week's worth. It didn't stop people from doing it. You just had to be smart. And since Housemistress Thompson was the strictest of every house master, barely any guys risked it.

"Up the stairs, to the right, last door on the left," I whispered to myself, following Lily's directions exactly. I had never been past the lounge of Carriageton. Upstairs felt like a forbidden area.

Keeping quiet and tip-toeing through the hall, I stopped dead in my tracks when a familiar sound hit my ears.

Ollie's Song.

I recognised the notes instantly. Someone was strumming a softened version of *my* song on a guitar. It struck me right in the heart.

It became louder the closer to Maggie's room I went. My heart dropped to the floor when I heard where the sound came from. I couldn't move. I could barely breathe.

At first, I assumed it was an audio file. I was wrong. So wrong.

Maggie Davies not only played guitar, and extremely well, but she could also sing. She sang in a soft, whispery, angelic voice. The sound was subdued, as if she were trying to keep others from hearing her, but strong in conviction.

It was absolute perfection.

And exactly how the song *should* be played. She hit every note beautifully. It was undeniably the answer I had been searching for ever since that fateful night at Gasby's when we butchered it.

The number of hours I spent in the drum room, going over the song in my head, and attempting to correct it, was astounding. And here was Maggie Davies, doing it with grace, excellence, and magnificence.

It was brilliant.

I shook my head, my pulse pounding in my ears. How the hell did I not know she played the guitar? Or sang? Was I the only one who didn't know all of this? My mind swam with thoughts, both positive and negative.

Why did she hide this? How did she hide this? Her co-curricular was in art, specifically painting. Hell, I pulled her away from her aunt while looking at one of her paintings. Yet, I had never seen her in the music building. There's no way that if she was this good, she wouldn't be taking classes. Lots of people took multiple co-curriculars. The headmistress encouraged it actually, making sure there was enough time in student's schedules to accommodate multiple specialties.

I pushed aside all those thoughts as Maggie reached the chorus of the song. Of my song.

One time. We performed it one time. But Maggie wasn't there. No students were. We didn't advertise it at all, especially because it was last minute. So where did she hear it?

Had she been in the music hall while I contemplated working on it? Did she overhear me working out my frustrations on it? Was she spying on me?

My hands tapped out the corresponding drum beat on my thighs. Her

voice, her ability, her talent all drew in me in. I could stand there all day and listen to her play.

My phone buzzed, drawing me out of my trance.

Lily: What's the hold up?

I jerked my head back toward Maggie's room, my fingers slipping into my pocket and cradling the now fixed necklace. I rubbed my thumb over the charms, tracing the M over and over.

Going in now would ruin everything. For some insane reason, I didn't want her knowing I heard her. Not yet. Not until I could wrap my brain around what I heard.

Another message buzzed, probably from Lily, but I didn't check it. I had to leave, and quick. Maggie's voice transfixed me to this spot, the spin she put on my song captivating me, putting me in some sort of reverie.

One more buzz and that was it. I sprinted down the hallway, not caring if I made any noise. By the time someone came to investigate, I would be long gone from Carriageton.

Flying out the front door, I took a right and headed back towards King's Cottage. A figure jumped out at me about half-way there, scaring me.

"Hell, Lily, don't do that!" I shrieked, stopping in my tracks and placing a hand over my rapidly beating heart.

Whether it was pounding hard because of Lily's jump-scare or because of Maggie, I didn't know. There were too many thoughts jumbled in my head. Nothing made sense.

"What took you so long! I thought you just needed to give her the necklace back?" Lily asked, cocking her hands onto her hip and raising an eyebrow. Though small, she had spunk.

My face dropped. I looked at her hard, wondering if she knew.

"Maggie plays guitar." I said it as a full statement on purpose. If I posed it as a question, she could lie. Saying it straight out forced her to either come back with complete shock or utter confusion.

“Yes, and? Did you give her the necklace or not?”

My mind blanked. “You knew? Did everyone know except me?”

As the lightbulb went off in her head, she tucked her lips in and stared at the ground. The sheepish look that overtook Lily’s cheeks told me I stumbled upon a secret.

“Well... no. Quite the contrary, actually. I believe I may be one of the only people that knows. How did *you* find out? Was she playing? That would make sense. She only does if no one is around.” She paused, her eyes now panicked. “Ollie, you can’t tell anyone. If she finds out I told you, I’ll be in trouble because she trusted me and she’s my friend—” Lily rambled on, but I cut her off.

“Understood. It’s a secret. But...” I trailed off, not sure if I wanted to tell her what Maggie was playing. Reaching up, I shook a hand through my hair, getting caught in the knots I didn’t brush out this morning. My sole focus today was returning the necklace and making sure Maggie was okay. Nobody had seen her in person since she ran from me. All we had to go on was the vague text Lily sent Travis.

“But what?” she asked, slipping her arm through mine and continuing our walk. Lily was someone that made you comfortable no matter the situation. Walking arm in arm with her settled my jumping mind a bit.

“She was playing something I didn’t think anyone knew. We only played it live once.”

She cocked her head, subconsciously rubbing my forearm with her thumb. “What song is that? I’ve been to almost all of your shows.”

I nodded, spotting King’s Cottage up ahead. “My mother wrote for me when she was pregnant. It’s called Ollie’s Song. We played it at the pub earlier this year. Henry butchered it.”

Lily threw her head back and laughed. “Oh, that. I remember that. Sorry, it was a bit cringey.”

“Exactly. And Maggie was playing it. Well, a softer version of it. On her

guitar... and singing.” I paused, thinking about what she just said. “Wait. What do you mean you remember that?”

Lily pulled away a few inches to look me in the eye while cringing. “I sort of was there? And Maggie was with me. Travis told me about it in passing and I wanted to be there for support. I didn’t want him to find out because he said it wasn’t public. Then I told Maggie and I asked her to come with me and well...”

I stopped all together and let go of her arm. “Pardon? No, I would have remembered if she was there.”

Lily shook her head, her long dark hair brushing over her white button down. Even though it was Sunday, she still wore clothing close to uniform.

“We got there late, because it took forever for me to convince her. We were in the back beneath the loft. It was hard to see you guys, but the sound was great. We left the second your set ended. I sort of told Travis I wouldn’t go. Maggie also wanted to leave. She seemed quite overwhelmed being among a crowd.”

Something still didn’t make any sense. “Alright, even if she was there... how would she know Ollie’s Song? She only heard it once, and that was months ago.”

Lily gave a slight laugh and shrugged her shoulders, urging me back along toward my house. “I take it you don’t know Maggie Davies very well. That girl is a genius, especially when it comes to art and music. She takes private lessons instead of group classes, and from what she’s told me, her instructor is head over heels for her. You didn’t hear that from me,” she added in a rush, her eyes wide. She let slip more than she should, but I wouldn’t tell anyone. I respected her honesty.

Plus, I had just been given a Maggie Davies secret. Something she tried to keep hidden. But why? If she was such a talented guitarist and singer, why wouldn’t she be with the rest of us in band? Why would she be taking private tutoring sessions instead?

We reached King's Cottage before I asked any more questions. Travis came out the moment we arrived.

“Lily! What are you doing here? And on the arm of this oaf? Is there something I need to know?” he asked with a twinkle in his eye.

Lily giggled. “It's top-secret information, and you, love, do not have the classification. So sorry.”

She grinned as Travis walked over and slung his arm around her shoulder. She smiled and waved goodbye as he took her away. Travis didn't even bother to look back; he just flipped me off and continued walking.

The puzzle that was Maggie Davies had got increasingly more complex in the last hour. All the moving parts were confusing and I had no idea how to put them together.

One thing was certain—I still had to give her the necklace back.



CHAPTER 25

Maggie

My face hadn't healed. Lily helped me try to cover as much as I could with makeup. I thought it would work since the scratches were small, but now that they scabbed over, it just looked crusty and gross. In the end, we tried a new hairstyle, flipping the part and trying to hide the side of my face.

I avoided everyone over the weekend, even claiming to be sick on Friday to get out of classes. Housemistress Thompson must have taken a little pity on me. When she came to my room to confirm illness, she saw my face, frowned, and signed the form to send to the main building to excuse my absence.

I had to go today. There was no other excuse I could use, as I really wasn't sick.

Not physically, anyway. The thought of seeing William or the other boys sent me into a downward spiral.

The only person I shared the story of what happened was Lily. I didn't

deserve her. She spent a good amount of time trying to convince me to go to the headmistress's office, but I refused. It would create a fuss, there would be an investigation, and it would put everything at risk. I couldn't afford to put myself in that position. Not if I wanted to stay at Waversmore.

With all the lies I'd told and the hiding I've done, it weighed on me heavily. Even though we spent the night talking and swapping stories, it didn't matter. Guilt still ravaged through me, thinking about how I lied all year.

And not only to Lily.

"Chin up, buttercup. It's a new day, the sun is out again, and you are a badass warrior," Lily whispered into my ear as we walked through the front doors of the main building.

I tried to heed her advice, even though I didn't feel like any of those things. I wasn't a meek little princess, but I also wanted nothing to do with William and the boys. How would I feel when I saw them? Would I go into a rage and attack? Would I break down sobbing and run out of the room? Both things seemed like good options in my head, depending on the hour.

The only thing that brought me peace this weekend was my guitar. I spent hours and hours mindlessly strumming it, trying out new songs and chords. I even perfected a song I had been working on for months. Mrs Bradley would be so excited to hear it when we had our session later this week.

"Are you sure you're going to be alright? I could try to ask the teacher to stay with you..." Lily offered, knowing it wouldn't work. The gesture was sweet, and I appreciated it.

I squeezed her hand and attempted to put on my most reassuring look. "I'm sure. I'm a big girl and I have to deal with big girl problems."

The look on her face told me I wasn't as convincing as I hoped to be. "Well... if you need anything, find Travis. I know you all aren't really friends, but he's my best friend, and if you tell him I sent you, he'll help you, no questions. It's one of his better qualities. Plus, he's Ollie's best friend..."

When we talked on Friday, I told her how Ollie was the reason that the boys left me alone, how concerned he was for me. And how I ran away from him, leaving him in the rain, yelling after me.

What I didn't tell her was the all-out rage that flashed behind his eyes when he first approached me. How it seemed like he wanted to run after William and beat the crap out of him. Or how tenderly he held my hands, how he reached for my face when he found the scratches. Or the small conversation we had. Or what I told him about people liking me.

He was another person I didn't want to see today. Having him find me in such a place of vulnerability sent my heart straight into an overwhelming anxious spiral. I would try to do what I had been doing a lot of this year and ignore him, but something told me it wouldn't work.

"Find me at lunch, alright? I'm skipping my tutor session and hanging out with everyone today." She held up her hand to stop me from protesting. "My choice. Don't bother arguing. I'll see you then, okay?" She leaned in to give me a hug and hurried off to her first class before the bell.

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself through the door, though it wasn't chin up like Lily requested. Instead, I kept my head down, letting my hair cover my face and shield me.

The only saving grace was the fact that I wouldn't have to see William until next class. And Travis would be there if I needed. If Lily told him to watch out for me, I had no doubts he would.

I slipped into my chair unnoticed. Ollie wasn't there yet, which saved me from the pity look and worry. It didn't last long, though.

"Hey." His voice rang through my ears as if he spoke through a bullhorn, even though he was whispering. He slid into his desk, and leaned across the aisle toward me, his elbows resting on his knees, his fists clenched under his chin.

"Hi," I replied, to be nice. Running away from Ollie after he had helped me wasn't the best thing to do. But losing my necklace had pushed me over

the edge. Seeing the look on his face after he scared the boys away was one thing. Adding kindness to it made everything hurt even more.

“I tried to find you this weekend...” he whispered, glancing around to make sure no one was watching. My heart leapt into my throat.

“What?”

He closed his eyes, as if it pained him to say what he was about to. “Are you alright? You didn’t show to class Friday, and this weekend... well... I came to give you this.”

The next second, my life flashed before my eyes. He opened his fist, a silver strand looped over his finger, with three charms tumbling down until they bounced at the end.

My necklace. He had my necklace.

I wanted to grab it, to put it back where it belonged, but confusion paralysed me. *How* did he have it? *Why* did he have it?

I reached for it, but he snatched it away at the last second.

“What the hell? Give it back.”

Gathering the necklace into his fist, he shoved his other hand through his long hair, giving it a little shag.

“I found it in William’s room, fixed the clasp, and had Lily sneak me into Carriageton to return it in person. You weren’t in class or at meals, so...” he rushed the last sentence, as if to excuse his behaviour. That wasn’t what I focused on.

“You... why were you in William’s room?” Deep down I knew the answer, but didn’t want it to be violence. There had been enough hatred and anger earlier that afternoon, and if Ollie had got caught...

His eyes searched mine, the answer hanging between us. He skipped it entirely, and went for the distraction instead.

“This is important to you.”

He sought my necklace from William. And fixed it.

A lone tear ran down my cheek, over the scabbed scratches. I didn’t bother

to wipe it away, knowing another would take its place.

Ollie noticed. Before I knew what was happening, he inched forward in his chair and reached up. After gently moving my hair, his thumb brushed another tear away, his fingers grazing over my scratches. I stared at him, his green hazel raging, his lip twitching.

Taking a breath, he cut his gaze to me, our eyes locking.

“I heard you in your room,” he whispered, even softer than before. My outstretched hand remained in place. It was as if someone dumped ice over my entire body. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t move.

“Your guitar. And you singing. You’re talented. Honestly, really amazing.”

I inhaled sharply, the touch of his skin on mine sending jolts down my back. Ollie jerked, and the trance around us broke.

Mr Edwards would be here any second. And Ollie still had my necklace.

“Can I have it back?” I snapped, a bit more harshly than I meant to. I wiped my face and covered my cheek with my hair once more.

“One condition.”

I scrunched my brows and tilted my head. “Excuse me? It’s my necklace.”

“Meet me in the music hall at six. With the guitar.”

Glancing around, the rest of the class seemed to be oblivious to the mental breakdown Ollie clearly was having. Not only would he not give me my necklace back, but now he was requesting I join him in the music hall? It was bad enough he knew a secret I was keeping from the rest of the school, but to make demands? My father could have him exiled for less.

“My necklace,” I demanded once again, holding out my hand.

His eyes connected with mine and neither of us spoke as we stared. For the first time, it was like I was seeing the real Ollie. Not the one who put on a show for the other students, the popular boy everyone liked, or the jokester. This Ollie... this was the Ollie who got upset when he saw me injured.

The one who begged me to stay that afternoon in the art gallery.

The one who was scared I overheard his conversation with his father.

This Ollie didn't hate me. This Ollie was misunderstood, just like me.

"Alright," I whispered. "Six o'clock." Not taking his eyes off mine, he dropped the necklace into my palm, closing my fingers over it.

Every time he touched me, it was like a bolt of lightning coursed through my body. For someone I assumed hated me for so long, I couldn't quite understand why I reacted to him in this manner.

But I wanted to find out.

I cradled my necklace, wanting to thank him for a gift I could never repay him for. This necklace was one of the most sentimental items I owned; he would never know how much it meant to me that he not only rescued it, but fixed it.

"You're welcome," Ollie whispered. I know for a fact that I hadn't accidentally spoken out loud. I glanced at him, confused.

He reached over again, just as Mr Edwards entered the room, and wiped one more tear off my cheek. "I took care of them. You're safe now."



CHAPTER 26

Ollie

She wasn't going to show. Why would she? Just because I did one nice deed? Honestly, I wouldn't have shown up either.

Who did I think I was, holding her necklace hostage unless she agreed to meet me here? I probably spooked her by telling her I spied on her in the hallway of her own house. What kind of creeper said that—admitted they were standing outside someone's room without their knowledge, listening to them do something so deeply personal?

Tapping a soft beat on the snare in front of me, I waited. She was ten minutes late, but I wouldn't leave until it was clear she wasn't coming.

I kept my limbs moving, working out the nervous energy. I spent all day trying to figure out why I even asked her here. Listening to her play last week... I needed more. No one else here played like she did, especially not any of the girls. She blew me away.

That, and the fact that she played my song. She heard it *once*, months ago, yet not only did she memorise it, but she put a little spin on it. One I wasn't even mad about. I had got so irked at my own band for butchering it that one

night. And Maggie nailed it. She figured out the feeling and emotion the song required and did it more justice than I ever could.

Twenty minutes. She was now twenty minutes late, and I would soon have to admit that she wasn't coming. The only reason she agreed to get her necklace back; she didn't mean it.

"Ollie?" her voice called from the hallway. I jumped at the noise, crashed my elbow into a cymbal, and stumbled off my stool all at the same time.

Rubbing my elbow, I made my way toward the door, but it opened before I got there.

"There you are. You know you just said 'meet me at the music hall', and never told me *where*? I've been wandering around for nearly twenty minutes struggling to find you." She raised an eyebrow and cocked a hand on her hip, a guitar bag strapped to her back.

I stopped and scanned her up and down, realising what I did. "My apologies."

She narrowed her azure eyes behind those dark glasses. An overwhelming desire to take them off and see what she looked like without them came over me. I was in no position to ask, however, so I kept my mouth shut.

"Thank you. Now that I'm here, what on earth did you want with me?" We locked eyes, a shiver going through my body.

I gulped, suddenly wanting to answer that question with something other than music. She had her hair tucked back and secured in two tiny pigtails at the nape of her neck, showing off her collarbone. I never knew a collarbone could drive me crazy, but it did today. Instead, I kept myself in check, and responded with a dose of snark, like we were used to doing around each other.

"Why were you playing that song?"

"What song?"

I took a step forward, getting heated for no reason. We fell into our normal beat, sparring back and forth. "The one you were playing the other day."

“Why did you think it was okay to eavesdrop on me, anyway?” she shot back. She was great at the art of misdirection, but not this time. Waiting expectantly, her eyes bored holes into my head.

I licked my lips and tucked them in, biting on the lower one and deliberating if I should tell her the truth or not. If I wanted to hear her play, I had to be honest. I wasn’t sure how much I could trust her, but with this... my gut told me she wouldn’t back down.

“Lily helped me sneak into the house so I could give you the necklace. I made it to your hallway when the sounds of your guitar hit me. You would have stopped too, if you were me. How do you know that song?” I took another step toward her as I spoke, getting within her personal bubble.

She lifted her chin to meet my eyes again. She wasn’t short, but I still had quite a few inches on her.

“I heard it somewhere. It stuck in my head ever since and sometimes I play it. It’s not perfect, so I’ve been working on it by myself.”

She was purposefully withholding the truth. But why?

Another step closer to her. “Where did you hear it?”

She scrunched her brows. “Why does it matter?”

I held my ground, not answering until she did.

She sighed and rolled her eyes. “Fine. It was from the *one* show I went to with your band at that pub. Last term. Lily took me.”

We were so close now, I could reach out, put my hand on her waist, and pull her into me if I wanted.

Instead, I pushed the subject. “So, you heard a song once, months ago, and suddenly you can play and sing it perfectly?”

She tilted her chin even more, our faces almost touching. My breath hitched, but I gulped it down out of nervousness.

“It got stuck in my head. I don’t even know if I’m playing it right, I’m just messing—”

“It’s right.”

Maggie blinked, her long, dark lashes sweeping the lens of her glasses.

“It is?”

I nodded, my gaze searching her face, finding a look of confusion mixed with a bit of happiness and pride.

“What are you, some sort of musical prodigy? I thought you chose art as your specials.” I was being ruder than I wished, but I wanted some sort of logical explanation. “Or did you record the song and play it until you learned it?”

The confusion turned into anger in a flash. I hit a sore spot and immediately regretted what I said.

“I have a good ear. And no, I’m not a prodigy. I enjoy a challenge.”

“What else do you play?”

She did a double take. My interrogation was frustrating her, but I needed to know.

“Nothing as much as guitar anymore. Violin, a bit.”

“Two string instruments. Interesting.”

A smirk appeared on her lips, sending a shiver straight through me. “Try *all* string instruments at one point or another. I come from a musical family. Mum was quite the violinist.”

My brows shot up at her admission. *All* string instruments? Musical prodigy was an understatement.

“What’s with the interrogation, anyway? You asked me here. Plus, I thought you hated me.”

My head turned as if she had slapped me. What she said wasn’t untrue, but hearing it said out loud, from her lips, stung.

“I never said that.”

“You act like you do.”

I hesitated, unsure where to take this conversation. I wanted to take it back to the guitar, to the music, but Maggie Davies wasn’t someone to back down.

One small step closer, and there was now no room between us. She didn’t

even blink at the lack of space, but held my gaze, a fire burning within.

“I hated your cousin. I figured you were just like him, so I stayed as far away from you as possible. I didn’t need you ruining my year like he did last year.”

“Just like him? How so?” she challenged.

“The rich girl, related to the King, acting like you’re better than everyone else because of your pedigree. Making everyone you deemed beneath you feel small and worthless.”

Her face dropped, looking much the same as I had a moment ago—as if I slapped her. Her chest heaved with emotion, and I could tell the gears were running rampant in her brain.

“What did he do to you?”

I jolted back a few inches, staring at her. Did she really not know? Did she not know this entire time? There was no way...

“The rumours... your disinterest... your attitude was just like him. I assumed...”

She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out at first. Finally, she found her words. “So, your assumptions led you to hate me this entire year? You never cared to get to know *me*, only shut me out on day one because of my last name?”

The little quiver in her voice told me more than her words did, but I let it slide. My mind was still preoccupied with only one detail.

Reaching my hand toward her, I tipped her chin up to look at me. Her face was so close I felt the warm breaths on my cheek, her eyes blinking rapidly as she held my gaze.

“That song...”

“Why are you so obsessed with that one song?” she said, throwing her hands in the air, exasperated.

I hesitated, still not sure if I should admit the truth. It was a personal part of me, and it could give her the fuel to use against me like Christian did.

But Maggie *wasn't* Christian. She had proved that time and time again, right until this very moment.

Without realising what I was doing, I cupped my hands around Maggie's cheeks, my thumb brushing over her healing scabs. She gasped and froze under my touch.

"Because it's my song. My mother wrote it for me as a baby. And you played it better than ever before."

Her mouth fell open, her face dropping. "What?" she whispered against my hands.

I nodded, unable to look away from those full lips.

"I have never heard it done with such emotion, feeling, and confidence. It's been tearing me apart for months to even get *close* to how you nailed it. Do it again?"

She pulled away from me and lifted her bag over her shoulder. My arms dropped to my side, tingling with loss.

As she plugged in her guitar, I slipped behind my drums. I didn't know how she was going to play the song, but I would tap out a beat to whatever she did. How I played it was a direct determination of my mood, and right now... it wanted soft. It wanted gentle, like a lullaby.

I started a quiet roll, waiting for her to tune in. She glanced my way, locking eyes with me in a question of permission. I nodded, letting her take the lead and show me what she had.

She didn't look at me once while she played, staring into the distance or looking at her guitar instead. I never took my eyes off her. She *felt* the song down in her soul, pulling the sadness out from a place deep inside of her, lifting her lips in a soft smile during the happier chorus. The range she had, not only on guitar, but in her singing, did the song more justice than I ever thought possible. *This* was the way I wanted it played at the pub.

I understood now; Ollie's Song was meant as a ballad, with a quiet, soul-crushing undertone, instead of the rock spin I had been trying to put on it.

As the final note held, Maggie looked at me, a worried glance.

Neither of us spoke. The song spoke for us. It connected the two of us in a way I never thought would happen. I spent so long stuck in my assumptions of her, thinking she hated me, but now... now everything changed.



CHAPTER 27

Ollie

Keeping a secret from Travis was harder than I thought. We had been friends for so long that I couldn't remember the last time I *didn't* tell him something.

He had to know something was up, though. It had been two weeks since I returned Maggie's necklace and met her in the music hall.

Two weeks since my entire perspective had shifted. Watching her play was not only a kick to the gut about making assumptions, but the shift I needed to feel okay with the thoughts running through my head.

The ones that kept thinking about her. The ones I originally tried to push down, to tamper out, to flip the narrative in a negative way.

"If you keep zoning out, can I stack things on your head and see how tall it gets until you notice?"

I blinked, reprocessed Travis' words, and punched him in the shoulder. "No, you prat."

His laughter rang through the dining hall, attracting the attention of a few students nearby. We were waiting for Charlie and Henry to discuss another

band meeting. We hadn't met in almost a month, and I was getting antsy. Working with Maggie sporadically in the past two weeks was great, but I couldn't put off a band practice any longer.

They weren't who I wanted to play with, though. Maggie's abilities blew Henry out of the water. Not that it was hard to do, considering his lackluster skills.

"You're keeping a secret." Travis nudged my shoulder, causing me to spill the tea Miss Duphrey made.

"Watch out!" I hissed, getting more annoyed by Travis by the second. Was this how it was going to be? Having to keep my sessions with Maggie, and her talent, a secret, meant driving a wedge between me and my best friend?

We weren't even dating. I could see a girl coming between us potentially, but not just because we were playing music together...

I sighed and put the cup on the table, careful not to let it tip. "No secrets. Just jumpy today."

Truth was, I was looking for Maggie. We had yet to tell anyone we were working together, and somehow came to the silent agreement that we wouldn't act any different in public.

Which meant I had to convince everyone that Maggie Davies was still on my no-fly list.

Travis knew something had switched after her attack, after the trouble we went through to get her necklace back, but even he didn't know the extent of it. He assumed I did it because it was the right thing to do, and it was, but really... that moment changed everything.

It was the start of a new Ollie and Maggie era, one that wasn't filled with hatred and assumptions. One where the two of us could get to know each other based on civil, light hearted conversation instead of feisty arguments.

As much as I used to look forward to our debates in Geography, I now looked forward to our time together in the music hall.

"Yeah, sure, alright mate. Jumpy. Well, when you're ready to spill, tell me.

Otherwise, I'm out of here. The boys aren't showing up and Lily has some extra time before her tutoring. See you later."

And with that, he left, leaving me to the peace I once wanted. It didn't totally surprise me that the boys didn't show. Ever since the disastrous gig back in the autumn, I hadn't been demanding about meetings or gigs. I had been too busy trying to salvage my song and other co-curricular music duties than to worry about the band.

Travis and I still played together when we had the free time, but the band as a whole was almost dismembered.

Though, with the revelation of Maggie now... it could change a lot.



I didn't see Travis again until last night for bed, and we still didn't talk about what I was hiding. He was respectful. The jerk that I was, I would have prodded him day and night to get an answer out of him.

Breakfast this morning was like every other day. Due to our unspoken rule, Maggie and I continued to avoid each other in public places, but I still sought her out everywhere I went.

Sitting at our table, I kept my eyes peeled until I saw her flash of purple come through the door and enter the line, Lily behind her.

"How's that project coming with Maggie?" Travis asked. I flinched and whipped my head around toward him, my cheeks flushing.

"Um, it's fine. Almost done with it. Maggie split most of the work up early on, so we've been able to, um, work on it without much fighting." I stuttered my way through the admission, even though it was all true.

The project was due in its entirety in about a month. We presented each individual component to the class every other week. Now it had to be bundled up and turned in, along with the final essay.

Which meant more library time alone with Maggie.

I kept my head tilted down, my gaze tracking her across the dining hall and

to the table she shared with Lily and some other girls from Carriageton. They sat only a few tables down from ours. It was enough distance where I couldn't overhear what they were saying, but I desperately wanted to.

Travis and the boys chatted throughout breakfast. I kept my attention elsewhere, letting my mind drift away.

Maggie was in class before I got there, so I slid into my chair and grunted out a hello. Watching the corner of her lip raise told me she heard me.

Mr Edwards let us go, telling us to start wrapping it up and be ready for our final presentation next week. I stayed seated as everyone else left the room, as did Maggie. No matter where she was, she always let people leave first.

“Library?” she asked as she lifted her satchel over her head.

I shook my head and jerked my thumb over my shoulder. “I have a better idea.”

“Make sure you're prepared, Mr Hastings and Ms Davies. You've been doing an excellent job thus far, but thirty per cent of your grade comes from the accumulation and final report...” Mr Edwards called after us as Maggie and I hurried out of the classroom.

I bit my lip to stifle a laugh and Maggie let out a little chuckle as we passed through the doorway.

“Where are we going?” she asked. “We really do need to finalise a few things, Ollie.”

“I know,” I started, turning a corner. “Who wants to be stuck inside the stuffy library when we could be...” I waited a beat as we entered another room.

Her brow furrowed as she looked around. “In some other stuffy room?”

“Bingo,” I said, bopping her on the nose. The look on her face didn't change—she didn't seem particularly happy to be here.

I threw up my hands. “Fine, whatever. It's just a classroom that's not being used, but more importantly, it's *private*.” I emphasised the word, hoping she

would finally catch on.

It took an extra moment, but she did. “Oh. I see.” The tone of voice wasn’t what I was hoping for.

I thought she would want to be alone. Each time we met in the drum room over the past few weeks, she relaxed more and more. Shockingly, last time we even *laughed* together about something a younger student had done.

It was hard to get her to relax at all when she was so on edge and aware of her surroundings. I figured she would be grateful to be alone, out of the eye of other students.

I was wrong.

“Is this... not alright?” I whispered, stepping closer to her. She looked up at me, her brilliant blue eyes full of fear and confusion.

“No... it’s fine... I just...”

“Just what?”

“It’s a little weird?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “What’s weird?”

She sighed. “I don’t know, all of this? I mean, we spent all year basically hating each other, tossing insults or berating one another, and now... now you’re looking for a private place for us to talk? It’s just... different.”

My shoulders dropped. It *was* weird, but to me, it felt right. Finally learning who Maggie was, what she was capable of, and how alike we really were, put a new spin on everything. Including how much I wanted to be around her.

The change *was* rather sudden. To me, it was a culmination of a lot of things, resulting in one final explosion that changed our relationship.

“I don’t think it’s weird. People change. Viewpoints change.”

She sighed and rolled her eyes. “I know that. And to you, it may not feel weird. But I’m already as much of an outcast that I could be here, Ollie. It almost felt better when we ignored each other. It made everything make sense —”

I took another step closer to her, wanting to feel the energy she radiated.

“And now nothing makes sense. My world has been flipped upside down by you multiple times since we’ve met. And you are one of the most talented musicians I’ve ever met. Every day I learn something new about you that astounds me. Makes me angry I ever was rude to you before.”

She shook her head. “Don’t do that. I’m not *that* good.”

“Don’t do *that*,” I responded, getting closer still. We were toe-to-toe as I stared down at her.

“Don’t put yourself down, especially not in front of me. You want me to be mad at you again? Fine. I’ll yell at you every day for keeping your talent a secret. For taking *my* song,” I tipped her chin up so she could see just how *angry* I was, “and not telling me you made it better. I can still be upset with you, *princess*, if it’ll make things ‘not weird’.”

I ended my pretend tirade with a signature wink. It was a natural move for me, but before, with her, it wasn’t something I even considered. Bringing it back felt nice.

Maggie gritted her teeth and narrowed her eyes, ready for another round, but I stopped her. I didn’t want a dispute. I just wanted to hang out with her once, outside of playing music, and pretend we were not enemies.

Reaching up, I tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, letting my hand drift down the side of her neck and lift her necklace, the charms falling into my palm.

“Did you get it fixed?” I asked. I had only reworked the clasp so much; it needed an entirely new one, so it didn’t break when she wasn’t expecting it.

I drew away my gaze from her collarbone and to her mouth as she bit her lip and shook her head.

“Not yet,” she breathed.

I hummed my disapproval. “You should soon. I wouldn’t want you losing it again...”

Dropping my hand, I turned around, my back to her, and tugged out my

hair tie, letting my hair fall over my ears and face.

“If you really want to go to the library, we can,” I muttered, accepting defeat.

“No, it’s alright,” Maggie replied in a rush. Spinning around, I caught her just as the flush on her cheeks spread. “We can work from here.”

A smile stretched across my face. I was hoping she would say that.

I led us to a table and pulled out a chair for her before I put my bag down and sat. “Let’s get to work, then.”

It was rather difficult to focus on what we needed to accomplish with her sitting across from me, but we pushed through.

“I think we’re in a great spot. If you finish the conclusion, I can package everything together after that. Wow. We’re actually done, Ollie. Finally.” Maggie took her glasses off and rubbed the bridge of her nose.

It was the first time I got a glimpse of her without them on. She was beautiful. Not that she wasn’t with the glasses. There was just something so familiar about her, I couldn’t put my finger on it.

Returning the black frames to her face, she looked at me expectantly. I blinked and sucked in a large breath.

“Right. Yes, we’re finished. I think we’re all set then,” I answered, standing and heading toward the door.

I held it open for her, but she stopped before she got all the way through. Leaning over the top of her, I stuck my head out the doorway to see what the hold-up was.

It didn’t take long for me to figure it out.

Kenzie and William, walking hand in hand down the hallway, coming toward us.

Maggie gasped. I pulled her back into the classroom, flattening my back against the wall.

She stumbled backward. I wrapped her up and held her tight, her back against my chest. She trembled, a slight shiver travelling up her body and

ending with a relieved exhale.

“Do you think they saw me?” she whispered, her voice wavering a bit.

My arm snaked around her waist, holding her steady. “I’m not sure.”

If Kenzie had seen her, or us, we would know before we even got to our next classes. She would spread it around school with some sort of rumour attached. Everyone would know Maggie and I were seen coming out of an empty classroom together. It wouldn’t matter our reasoning, because expectations were everywhere.

Maggie’s breathing became shallow as she tried to hide her quick gasps. The whole William attack was still fresh on both of our minds.

Leaning against the wall, I kept one hand on Maggie’s hip and put the other on her shoulder, spinning her to face me.

I pulled her against me, cradling her head against my chest. The steady, loud beating of my heart provided the only noise in the room.

“I got you. Don’t you worry.”



CHAPTER 28

Maggie

For a while, Ollie and I managed not to kill each other. We also managed more sessions in the music hall unnoticed. I wasn't sure how he secured the room at a time no one else would be around, but I didn't question his process.

The only thing that put a snag in our secret plans was Kenzie. Turned out, she had seen us leave the classroom. And even though William never said a word, Kenzie was sure to do so.

Lily warned me that if Kenzie learned William had gone after me, there was a chance of her twisting the story until it made me the villain. It never happened, though, making me wonder if someone convinced her otherwise. And if that someone was my new music partner.

Even though the rumours Kenzie started fizzled quickly, it meant Ollie and I still had to keep up our charade of annoyance between the two of us. Ollie made it abundantly clear to everyone that we were working on our Geography project, something the other students in our class backed up. And

since Ollie and I kept up the appearance of enemies, they could attest to that, too.

It didn't matter, though. The damage was done. Kenzie was a master at spreading lies and getting what she wanted, and she wanted Ollie far away from me.

Which, to what she could see, was what she got. But it wasn't quite reality. With our music sessions ramping up to almost four nights a week, we were getting closer than ever. The Ollie I was getting to know was more on point with the guy I met the very first day of school, before assumptions were made and lines were drawn.

Sneaking away after dinner on weeknights, with my guitar strapped to my back, was no easy feat. There were many times when I had to duck and hide in order to stay out of sight.

It was worth it.

I couldn't remember a time I felt so... free while playing. The last time I played like this at the palace, Dad threatened to take it away and force me to attend engagements with him.

This space was our own little bubble, a world where somehow Ollie and I agreed and worked well together, song after song.

Anything outside that bubble was reality. Where we had to pretend we didn't get along and stuck to our own separate lives.

But in here, it was a dream. Having Ollie back me up on drums to almost any song I could imagine set my soul on fire. He was as talented as I was, and we went head-to-head multiple times in music battles. We would go so long, neither of us could remember who started, and therefore no one won.

He left almost every session a sweaty mess, his undershirt soaked through and his hair wet. I didn't exactly work as hard as he did, so I didn't look as horrible. Seeing him so passionate, throwing himself into his drums with every song he played... it filled me.

The first time he stripped off his shirt and used it to wipe his face made my

jaw drop. I recovered before he saw, but his abs... they matched the rippling muscles through his shoulders and arms. It was something I never thought of, under all the pieces of his uniform he wore every day. I sure was glad I caught it.

It only added to the many reasons I was excited to get to play with him.

Ollie Hastings was the musical partner I never knew I needed.

Everything was different after our first couple of weeks. The sun shone brighter, I smiled more, classes didn't seem as dull. As cliché as it was, I felt happier. I spent so long thinking I was an outcast at this school, that having Ollie pull me out of my shell opened me up so much more.

But... his hatred of me, his assumptions of me, were hard to shake off. We spent the first few minutes of every session arguing about something or another. Having to keep up charades didn't help the feeling. Every time we bickered, it brought back the thoughts of when he ignored me on purpose, when he didn't step in and stop Kenzie and her rumours, or insulted me.

I was hoping today would be the first day we *didn't* argue. I got to the room early, plugged in my guitar, and started to play before he arrived. If I was already mid-song, he wouldn't have time to start a quarrel, would he?

Wrong. So wrong.

"What the hell, Maggie? Someone could have seen you if you got here too early. And if someone saw you..."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "If someone saw me, what? Would you walk the other way? Are you ashamed to be seen with me, Oliver Hastings?"

He ran the hand not holding drumsticks through his hair, tousling it back as he went. He always drummed with it in a ponytail, but I loved seeing it down.

"Jesus, Maggie, you know that's not it..." He sucked in a sharp breath, letting it out nice and slow.

I strummed a chord. "Isn't it, though? That's our whole thing, right? In here, we're a duo, an unbeatable duo. Out there," I gestured toward the window with the neck of the guitar, "we're mortal enemies."

Ollie walked straight up to me, planting himself toe to toe, and gripped my chin, forcing me to look directly at him. “That’s not true.”

I huffed. “It’s okay. I don’t need the extra attention, anyway.”

Ollie’s chest heaved as he sucked in another deep breath. Ripping his eyes away from me, he turned to his drums. I stayed still for a moment, letting the tingles travel through me before hitting another chord out of nerves.

Every time he was that close to me, my toes tickled, sending little shock waves through my body. Part of me hated him for making such asinine assumptions about me all year, but the other part... well, this Ollie was radically different from the other Ollie.

“I’m changing things up tonight,” he said, settling in on his stool. Tapping out a random beat, I tried to match him, but he shook his head. “Nope, not tonight.”

Before I could question him, he glanced toward the door. As if on cue, it opened and three guys entered, each with a hopeful and sheepish look on his face.

Travis. Henry. Charlie.

I paled, unsure if I wanted to stuff my guitar in my bag and run, or yell at Ollie for inviting people to invade our sacred space.

I did neither. Instead, I stayed rooted to my spot, unable to move or speak, almost unable to breathe. The three boys walked across the room and stood next to Ollie, who was staring hard at me.

My eyes darted from the three of them as they all looked at each other nervously. Henry had his usual cocky grin plastered on. Travis’ dark, shaggy hair hid his eyes. And Charlie held his hands behind his back, shuffling his feet.

“What the hell is happening?” I finally muttered.

Ollie took that as his cue. He stood, waving his arm over to his friends. “Meet the band,” he said, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

The shake of my head started out slow, a little tremor of sorts. I kept

blinking, sure this was a dream. No one was supposed to know about my guitar. I didn't want it to be known that I was taking private lessons while everyone else had to be in the main band or orchestra.

I didn't want to be labelled any more different from I already was.

Here stood three boys I already knew, not super well, but enough to know that the potential for my secret to end up all over the school was high, especially with Henry. The boy didn't know what it meant to keep something to himself.

After another moment of silence filling the room, I shook my head harder, purple hair whipping me in the face. "No."

Ollie's face dropped. Did he really think I would be excited to be introduced to the band? This was our personal space. It took way too much courage for me to come meet him the first time, and I only had as repayment for fixing my necklace.

My hand reached to my neck and rubbed against the charms, filling me with a sense of familiarity in a sea of unknown.

"Wait, what? No, Maggie, I apologise. I should have asked."

I didn't give him a chance to explain his actions.

"You said this was private. You said no one would know I came here with you. You said..." I trailed off, my chest becoming tight, my throat closing up.

"You said no one would know," I whispered, my lip quivering. I wanted to stay strong, stand my ground, but the panic set in.

Ollie rushed over. I took a step back.

"No, Ollie. You lied."

His shoulders dropped, but he stayed standing where he was. "I have good reason."

I scrunched my nose in disgust. "There is never good reason for lying. For... for... trapping me like this."

"That wasn't my intention."

"I should certainly hope not!" The anger overtook the panic, my

confidence becoming stronger. Having Ollie closer to me filled my body with conviction, allowing me to stand up for myself more.

He took a step toward me at the same time I started at him. The tension was high, our tempers flaring, battling for dominance.

“You are one of the greatest guitarists I’ve ever played with. One of the best I’ve ever seen in person. People should hear you, Maggie. You’re magnificent.”

The studio around us disappeared as I stared into his hazel eyes. The only time he spoke to me like this was in this room; outside of here, he barely said anything to me at all.

He was serious, though. Ollie wasn’t one to waste his words, to dole out praise where praise wasn’t due.

I gulped, not breaking eye contact. “That doesn’t mean you can invite people here without my permission.”

He nodded, recognising his wrongdoing. “It doesn’t. But they aren’t just anyone. They’re my band. An extension of me.” He took another step closer, my body right up against his. His hand brushed my cheek, something he had been doing ever since William scratched me.

His thumb grazed over the healing skin, the scabs long gone, the pink scars fading. My breath hitched, his hand warm on my cheek.

“Let them hear you. Just once. Please,” he said softly.

Closing my eyes briefly and breathing him in, I shook my head. “No.”

A grin stretched his cheeks at first, then fell when he realised what I said. He dropped his hand and blinked, taking a step back to turn toward the guys I had all but forgotten about in the past few minutes.

I glanced over at them, their jaws hanging open, looking rather shell shocked.

“I’m sorry, but... no.” I didn’t give any of them a chance to speak before I took off. Fleeing was my go-to move anyway, as if I were an animated princess in the movies, running away from all my problems and flinging

myself onto the nearest immovable object.

Except there was no such object, and I didn't fling. I did burst through the main doors of the music hall without checking to see if anyone was around first. It was a good thing I didn't have my—

My guitar. In my hurry, I left my guitar back in the studio.

Coming to a dead halt on the stairs, I turned around to dash back, but instead bumped into a large, somewhat firm chest.

"Oof. We have to stop meeting like this, love," Travis' soft voice said on the step above me. It was reminiscent of our first day of school when he ran into my back as I stopped halfway into the classroom.

"What are you doing?"

"Finding you, of course."

I put my hands on my hips, hoping to look more self-assured than I felt.

The band meant a lot to Ollie. The fact that he hadn't told them about me, or us playing together, must have been difficult, especially with Travis being his best friend.

It still didn't give him the right to surprise me with them, to tell them about me without my consent. It was a violation of *my* privacy, something I worked so hard all year to keep quiet.

"And what do you want with me?" I countered.

Travis didn't blink before responding, "Whatever makes Ollie happy."

That was the last thing I expected to hear out of his mouth. My arms dropped. Did he think *I* made Ollie happy? Just because we played together didn't mean that I was ready to be put in that category.

"And to ask a... favour," he said. "There's a gig. A pretty good one. At the pub. We're getting our own time slot and everything. With you playing with us... it would be huge. For Ollie," Travis explained, searching my face for some sort of help.

"No." There was absolutely no way I could play with them, not inside, and not in public. It was bad enough he, Henry, and Charlie now knew my secret;

performing in public was completely off the table.

“Maggie.” The way he said my name with the utmost respect made me pause again. Travis and I had never been much of friends, but we were always cordial to one another. Having Lily as our connection helped things, as neither one of us wanted to disappoint her by being rude.

“Ollie has a dream and it one hundred per cent will not come true without this gig. Sure, we can use Henry. It would be fine. But we don’t want *fine*. Ollie can’t risk it being *fine*. With you... with the talent Ollie says you have... it could change his life. I don’t mean to sound dramatic, but it’s true.”

My face scrunched with concern as I considered what he was saying. It was still a hard no, as playing in public was at the top of the “do not attempt” list set by Auntie Ellie, Uncle Sean, Esme, and Mum.

I also didn’t want to be the reason Ollie’s dreams got crushed. I saw Henry play; there would be nothing *fine* about it. It would be another train wreck to anyone who had a musical background.

“What’s his dream?” I asked, taking a seat on the steps and waiting for Travis to join me. None of the other boys followed me out of the building — more than likely Travis told them to stay, but why?

“He wants to open his own concert hall. For newcomer musicians, those that have been turned away from other gigs, that kind. And he needs to get a scholarship into some sort of performing arts university to even consider that. Without it... well, that’s his story to tell.”

Travis shook out his hair and pushed it back with one hand, just like Ollie did. Travis’ wasn’t quite long enough for a ponytail, so it hung to the side, opening his face to me.

He loved Ollie. He took his job as best friend seriously and would do anything for him. I had no doubt Ollie would do the same for him.

“I...” I sighed, trying to think of the right words. “It’s complicated.”

Travis shrugged. “No worries, love. Life is complicated. Maybe we could head back in there, and you can consider while we all play? I’d love to hear

you. If that's alright with you."

I shot him a look as a thought crossed through my mind. "When did Ollie tell you about me?"

Travis jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Right now, in there. When he called you the greatest guitarist he ever played with."

My jaw dropped. "Pardon?"

A wicked smile crossed Travis' face. "Yeah. All he told us earlier was to meet him in that room. We figured it was a band practice, but when we walked in... what a surprise we got."

"He really didn't say anything?"

"Nope."

Ollie didn't break my trust. Yes, he invited the boys without permission, but he hadn't said a word otherwise. Not even to his best friend.

"I suppose we could go back in."

Travis popped to his feet and reached down to help me up. His hand in mine was as warm as the smile on his face.

"Give Ollie a chance to fix this, yeah? His heart was in the right place."



Ollie bumped Travis in the shoulder when we got back, a whole conversation passing between their eyes.

"Maggie, care to play with me?" Travis asked, looking at me for my permission. I nodded, and went back to my guitar, feeling Ollie's gaze on me the entire time.

He returned to his drums as Travis strapped on his bass and Charlie went to the keyboard. Henry took a seat in a chair near the door, crossing one ankle over his knee and folding his arms over his chest, a smug grin on his face. He didn't seem too bothered that he wasn't playing, so I didn't give him another thought.

"Um, er, right. A song," I muttered, not sure which to pick.

Travis named something rather easy, which caused Ollie to snort. “Something harder, you oaf. Girl has skills. Test her.”

Henry cleared his throat and Charlie kept his eyes on his shoes.

“Know what, Maggie, why don’t you just play. Wow them with your talent.”

Travis looked bewildered, his gaze pin balling between me and his best friend. Shoving his hair away from his face, he nodded and waited for a cue.

I put the guitar over my shoulder and jutted my chin towards Ollie. The strum of a chord from me told him which song I wanted to do. It was one we had worked on a few times, and though it was far from perfect, it was still amazing to play.

Both Travis and Charlie kept up with me rather well, to my surprise.

I kept my eyes trained on Ollie and his drums, as to not freak out knowing people were watching me. I didn’t want to know their reactions until the very end, when I had a chance to flee if it was bad.

Once I hit my last note, and Ollie let the crash of the cymbal vibrate through the silence. No one spoke. No one moved. It was as if life stood still right here in the studio.

“Shit, mate. You’ve been hiding her all this time?” Travis finally blurted out, his eyes wide and a smile travelling up his cheeks.

Ollie exhaled a breath of relief. “Nah, just a few weeks.”

“So, I assume this means I’m out of the band?” Henry asked, picking invisible lint off his trousers. He didn’t look all that upset about his statement, but my heart dropped anyway.

Before I could protest, Travis jumped in. “You suck at guitar, lad. Sorry to break it to you. Be glad your other co-curricular is in sculpting. It’s a better suit for you.” He patted Henry on the shoulder.

Surprisingly, Henry broke into a matching grin. “About time. I’ve been waiting for you lot to find a new guitarist for ages. I only stayed because I felt sorry for you all. And for the groupies. Mainly for the groupies.” He sent an

exaggerated wink across the room toward me, but I just huffed out a laugh. I had got used to Henry over the year, knowing that most of his antics were all talk, no follow through.

I scrunched my brows. “What is the big deal about this gig? You’ve played at the pub before.”

Ollie and Travis exchanged a look, then both shook their heads, their matching long locks swishing around.

“This one has music school scouts attending. It could open doors for Ollie, where doors otherwise will not exist. If this goes wrong... he’ll be out on his own, not knowing where to turn after graduation. His father... he’s all but cut Ol’ off at this point. If he doesn’t apply to uni to be a solicitor, Pops isn’t keeping him.”

“Not that I want anything to do with him anyway, but Travis is right,” Ollie chimed in.

This was serious. It wasn’t just my call to make anymore. Henry could play with them like they used to, and everything could be fine. On the other hand, I didn’t want to let Ollie down.

The internal debate was strong. On one hand, it shouldn’t be just up to me for this to be a make it or break it situation. The band was a unit, and together they could work it out. They were laying on the pressure to join them, and I was in no place to tell them exactly why I couldn’t.

Then again... Ollie got my necklace back. He stopped William and the others from further assault. Since that night, he’s done nothing wrong, protecting me when I needed protecting, going to bat for me when I couldn’t myself.

“One show?” I blurted out before I kept overthinking, the panic building inside my chest again.

While I had my mental debates, Ollie had walked over. He tipped my chin up to look directly at me. “One show. A small show, I promise. It’s not being advertised, just being put on for the scouts. No students.”

The fear inside wanted to take me down, but I pushed against it. Sucking in a big breath, I agreed.

“One show. And no one finds out about me until then, understood?” I stared at the three of them intensely, making my viewpoint clear. They all nodded, even Charlie in the corner.

“Thank you, Maggie. You’ll never understand what it means to me.”
And he would never understand the risk I was taking to help him.



CHAPTER 29

Ollie

Lily was never wrong. How she always knew everything was beyond me. I could have asked her the square root of three hundred and seventy-five and she would have the answer as easily as if I asked her what was for lunch today.

At least this information was useful to me. I needed to find Maggie was in the arts building, and Lily came through once again.

The door was ajar when I came up to it, so I rapped my knuckles on it lightly, not wanting to scare Maggie and potentially mess up her work. Lily said she was working on her new painting this afternoon, which is why she pushed back our practice session until later.

It seemed as if the band had taken over our lives. We still had to remember we had other classes and co-curriculars to worry about as well. Seeing as the end of the year was approaching faster than any of us realised, we had to prioritise.

That didn't mean I couldn't sneak away and visit her outside of practices. Since we foolishly decided to keep up this enemies' act, I had to stay away

from her during the day. And at night, the boys were in the rehearsal studio with us, which didn't leave any alone time.

I missed our private sessions. When I got to see Maggie as her real, relaxed self. Where we laughed and played until our arms ached. Where we chatted and argued and didn't have to pretend.

Losing that tore a hole in my heart, one that grew wider every time I saw her outside the music building, yet couldn't talk to her.

After another round of knocking went unanswered, I cracked the door and poked my head in. The back of Maggie was almost as gorgeous as the front. Headphones stuck out of her ears, connected to her mobile tucked into the waistband of her skirt. Her shoulder-length hair swished across her back as she swayed in front of a canvas only half painted. She had a way to go on the project.

Guilt travelled through me for a moment, thinking of all the spare time I had been taking from her, time she could have spent perfecting her project here. She wasn't happy with the one she had done for Waversmore Week last term, citing the imperfections she had wished she could have changed.

Was I taking too much of her time? Was I asking for more than she had? Surely she would say something if she was unable to keep all her commitments.

I sulked into the classroom, making sure the door was closed behind me. We didn't need someone walking by and seeing us together. It had taken a lot of effort to call Kenzie off after the last time they caught us, and even then, she didn't give up easily.

Maggie was still in her own world, bopping along to whatever she was listening to. I had to be careful not to scare her too much, as her brush swept over the canvas, working on minute details of...

... a sunflower field? My breath hitched as I saw the outline drawn before her, half of the flower stems already painted, the rest waiting for the golden yellow and orange heads.

My brain went into over drive, but I shook it off, remembering why I came—for alone time. To talk to Maggie, to just be with her outside of the music hall.

Seeing her in class didn't cut it. I needed more of her like I needed my next breath. Ever since that moment in the stairwell, where she looked deep into my eyes and showed me how much she cared, even though she had no reason to do so...

Creeping up behind her, I waited until she lowered the brush away from the canvas before slipping my arm around her waist and setting my chin on her shoulder. It was closer than we usually got, but something about the sunflowers triggered a bit of an emotional response in me.

Just as I thought she would, she jumped, almost spilling the paint she was dipping her brush in. A little yelp escaped her lips, making me smile.

I pulled away, reaching up to take the headphones out of her ears.

"Bloody hell, Ollie, you scared me!" she gasped, placing the paint and brush down on the countertop to her right. "What are you doing here?"

Her eyes darted for the door, a wave of relief washing over her when she saw it was closed.

I took a seat on the stool to her left and nodded at the canvas. "What's up with that?"

Her brow furrowed as she glanced between me and the painting multiple times. "The sunflower field? How can you not figure that one out?"

Propping her hands on her hips, she cocked her head. The paint smears on her smock clashed with her neatly pressed uniform, creating a sort of chaotic look to her.

I smirked. "Oh, *I* figured it out. Just want to know what you think of it."

"Obviously it's from the line in Ollie's Song," she answered as she leaned her back against the counter next to me. It was like magnets drew us together; now that we weren't fighting all the time, whenever we were in a room, we had to be close.

Nodding, I reached out for her hand. My thumb stroked her knuckles. “Remember that day in the stairwell? After Mr Edwards told us to go to the library?”

She hummed a sort of agreement.

“That was after I spent all weekend beating myself up for having the band play Ollie’s Song at the pub.”

Her cheeks grew pink at the realisation.

“I holed up in my room, torturing myself over and over about how horribly it went, the disgrace we did to that song and my mother...”

Maggie opened her mouth as if to say something, but I cut her off. “No, it’s fine. It was my fault, though. I should never have played it knowing Henry’s skills. Hell, even if he could play, it still was all wrong. But you... you fixed it. You brought it to life.”

The pink cheeks deepened. I let go of her hand and reached into my back pocket, bypassing the ever-present drumsticks and pulling out my mobile.

Swiping through my camera roll, I found the one I was looking for. It was a picture of a picture; the one that sat on my bedside table back in King’s Cottage.

Turning the phone so Maggie could see, I explained. “That’s my mom. In the sunflower field.”

Maggie gasped and took the mobile from my hands. “She’s beautiful. You look just like her,” she said in awe.

That was the biggest compliment someone could give, and also the most heart breaking.

“She loved sunflowers. Had them everywhere—the décor, pictures, fake ones, real ones, if she found them. Well, in the old house, anyway,” I said, reaching to take the mobile from her and slip it back in my pocket.

Maggie took a step toward me. My arm twitched, wanting to wrap it around her waist, to pull her into me. To do that and not have the closeness be because she was hurt or scared, like each time before.

The only times she pressed up against me had been after the attack from William and the time Kenzie saw us coming out of the classroom.

Both times raised my blood pressure, and both times left me craving more. Most of the time when we were close together, we were arguing. Now, I wanted her next to me, in my arms, without the fear or the battles.

“The old house?” she questioned, her eyes doing that thing where she stared so hard, it was like she was looking into my soul.

I glanced at the tile floor below, not wanting to look at her. “Pops moved a few years ago. That’s when I found the outline for Ollie’s Song. We were packing up the garage, and it was in a box of random things, tossed aside like it didn’t matter. Once I saw the lyrics, I instantly knew the song. It had been so long since I heard it, though, I thought I had imagined it until that day.”

“You only had an outline?”

I nodded. “Yeah, there was no sheet music with it. And my memory of her singing it was so fuzzy, I couldn’t figure it out. Not to mention she sang it in different tempos all the time, depending on what we were doing or the mood she was in, I think.”

“So, your father moved houses, and you still don’t go home for breaks? Did he move further away from Waversmore?”

She was the master of the misdirect, wanting to dive deeper into my family trauma, ignoring the part about Ollie’s Song. I wanted to sing her praises, to compliment her on finally making the song the way it should have been, had Mum written the music to it.

How hearing her sing it the first time drew back memories I didn’t realise I had. That listening to her was as close as I could get to my mother again.

But no, she wanted to talk about my Pops.

I sighed, giving in. “No, he moved closer, actually. Which makes everything even more laughable. Pops isn’t the biggest fan of me. especially because I look exactly like my mum, like you said.”

A sad smile crossed her face. “I look like my mum too, but I have my

father's eyes. And my Grandmum's."

I matched her smile and took her hand again. "My gran was the only person who still loved me for me. She died a few years back. That's when I stopped going home completely, except for summer holiday. When Gran was around, I would at least go home for Christmas as well, but..."

"She was your last connection to your mum, I take it?"

How Maggie could pick up on the small details without me having to say it astounded me. She was always one step ahead of my thought process.

"She was. Somehow, my pops put up with her more than he did me. He said I reminded him too much of Mum, and that was enough of an excuse for him."

"How old were you when your mum passed?" Maggie asked, taking another step further. I couldn't stop it this time; my hand snaked around her waist, pulling her to me. She rested her hands on my shoulder, waiting for me to continue.

"I was almost five. She and Pops decided to send me to Waversmore Junior as a day student. Once she died, Pops changed me to a boarder the first chance he got. Once Mum died... I don't know, he just stopped caring that I even existed."

"He still pays for you to come here, right? That's something, at least?"

I knew she was trying to be comforting and helpful, but she didn't understand the extent of it. I shook my head. "No, the opposite. He sends me so he doesn't have to deal with me. Even when I go home for summer holiday, he ignores me. He finds somewhere to go, business trips that need to be taken. He's also why I have the job at Gasby's—he refuses to pay for anything except the bare minimum for school. Everything else is on me. Not that he knows about the job..."

I was baring my soul and my secrets to Maggie, trusting her more than I trusted almost anyone. Only Travis knew this much about my life. And, to some extent, Christian, though not by choice.

“And this gig will help you so you don’t have to rely on him for university,” she whispered, wrapping an arm around my shoulder.

We were in opposite positions than usual; with me sitting on the stool, my head came up to her shoulder. I was the taller one. We were unbalanced, and it made me somewhat uncomfortable.

“I want to avoid anything to do with him after this term. What are you doing after graduation? I don’t think we’ve ever talked about it...” I desperately wanted to get off the subject of my pops.

Maggie jerked, snatching her arm away from my shoulders. I kept my arm tight around her waist, not letting her run like she normally did. Why she had such a reaction to a simple question confused me.

“I’m... I’m not quite sure. Maybe taking a gap year to figure things out. You said Waversmore has been your home since you were five?”

I narrowed my eyes, but didn’t push it. If she was as confused about life after graduation as I was, then I understood the desire to not talk about it completely.

“Yeah. That’s what made the decision I had to make last summer even more difficult. Sure, I could have gone to another boarding school. But it wouldn’t be Waversmore. It wouldn’t have Travis, my band, my friends. This place, and Junior, have been more of my home than my actual one since I was five.”

Maggie paused. “What decision?”

I stared at her. It still astounded me that she had no idea what Christian did, or what he knew. How incredibly wrong I had been about her all year.

“Because of Christian.”

Her eyes grew wide. This time, I let her pull away from me a step.

“Because of... because... Ollie. What did he do to you?” she whispered. Her face went pale, the concern in her eyes increasing.

Why *I* felt like apologising, I wasn’t sure. “I’m so sorry, Maggie. I thought you knew everything. I thought he told you, that you were sent here knowing

and thinking of me the way he did. I thought—”

“Waversmore was a last-minute decision for me. Very last-minute. I almost didn’t get in. My Auntie Ellie had some pull because of Edward and Christian attending for years. I talked with Christian the night before I came here. He didn’t mention a damn thing. And Ellie said he kept to himself, and that not many people here would have been friends with him.”

My heart dropped to the floor. “I’m an arse. I made assumptions—”

“We’ve been down that road already,” Maggie said with a wave of her hand.

I hung my head, staring at my shoes. “Last year was hard. He never left me alone. Every chance he had to hurt me, he took.”

Maggie’s jaw fell open, but I was just getting started. “Toward the middle of first term, I got a drum solo that he wanted. He told everyone that he was going to get it, and then I did.”

“That’s it? All because of a solo?”

I shook my head, my hair swishing across my forehead. “Sort of. He wanted the solo so it would increase his chances of getting into the Queen’s music program.”

A choking noise came from Maggie’s throat. She cleared it and said, “My mu—I mean, I didn’t know Christian wanted a spot in the program. The Queen is his aunt. Wouldn’t she just give it to him?”

My brain started to short circuit, thinking of the memories about Christian. They replayed like a bad movie in my head.

“That’s what we all thought. The fact that the Queen herself told him he would have to go through the process like everyone else rather upset him.”

“She doesn’t even deal with applicants. She only makes the final approval by the recommendations of the board and advisors,” Maggie said.

I stared at her, wondering how she knew so much about the program. Because I respected her privacy, and because I already broke her trust by inviting the boys to see her play, I never asked about her guitar or what she

did with it. Maybe she knew about it because of her music background. She did say she played every string instrument at one time or another.

“Right,” I continued. “As you can imagine, that didn’t go down well with him. He thought by having the solo, he would be a shoo-in for a spot. And by not getting it...”

“He took it out on you instead,” Maggie finished.

I nodded. “Yeah. I assume he thought if he tortured me enough, I would give up the solo and it would be his.”

She didn’t speak again after that, and I was more than happy to drop the subject entirely. “Sorry if I disturbed you. I know band practice has taken up a lot of your time, and you probably don’t get enough time to work here...”

Maggie pulled a double take between me and the canvas, opening and closing her mouth as if trying to figure out something to say.

I wanted her to keep talking. I didn’t want to leave this room.

“Thank you for telling me about your mum.”

I swallowed the emotions building in my throat again. “You know...” I started as I stood and took a step toward her, “besides mentioning you have twin siblings, I don’t know a whole lot about your family.”

Her breathing increased as a fearful look crossed her eyes. My brows creased, uncertain why she was holding back information. Not everyone liked to talk about themselves or their personal things, but every time I mentioned something, or she let a tidbit slip, she shut down.

When she didn’t say anything, I moved on. I wasn’t here to make her uncomfortable or afraid; I just wanted to spend time with her.

“Anyway, I should let you finish. I can’t wait to see the painting when it’s done,” I said, just as the sound of voices in the hallway carried into the room.

The fearful look in her eyes intensified. I stood in front of her and tipped her chin up toward me. “Thanks for letting me vent.”

She softened beneath my touch and wrapped her arms around my torso. I did the same, pulling her head onto my chest.

“Any time. Thanks for sharing.”

Pulling away, she looked up at me as I stared into her brilliant blue eyes. My chest heaved, craving her closeness again, but in a different way.

I leaned down toward her, closing the distance between us.

Just then, a loud rapping came from the door, which opened ajar. Scared, I stepped out of Maggie’s arms and pushed her down, below the height of the countertop and under the large island full of cabinets and draws, out of the line of sight.

“Pardon? Who are you?” the art teacher, Miss Kelley, stated.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was looking for, um, George. Had the wrong room, and was just looking around. I didn’t touch anything, I promise!”

The teacher scanned the room, her eyes lingering on the cup of paint and the recently used brush sitting next to it.

“I’ll be on my way then,” I said, picking up my bag and showing it to her, as if that would be convincing.

She nodded and left, keeping the door propped open a few inches.

As soon as she was gone, I extended a hand down for Maggie and pulled her to her feet. I didn’t replace her where she was against my body a moment ago.

Her face was on fire, matching the twinge of red in my own cheeks. I rubbed my face with my hands, the stubble prickly against my fingers.

“I should go. I’ll see you tonight for practice? Unless you want to stay and keep working on your project. Please don’t feel obligated to attend practice if you have things that need to get done. I know we’ve taken up a lot of your—”

Maggie smiled and cut me off. “I’ll see you tonight.”

I nodded and walked out of the room without another word. My heart was racing and I couldn’t get my mind under control.

The last thing I needed was more distraction before this gig. And kissing Maggie Davies would be the ultimate distraction.



CHAPTER 30

Ollie

Adding Maggie to the band was the push everyone needed to do better, play better, be on another level.

She not only brought the best out of us music wise but also stepped in with excellent advice regarding the set list, order, and transitions. The way we played before was good. Now we were *great*.

I had no doubt the scouts would take notice. We all tried to keep up with Maggie's talent as much as possible, but she definitely shone above the rest of us. There was no comparison when it came to the sound she produced; she was in another league and we were just happy to play alongside her.

The boys never asked why she wasn't playing with the school band. They respected her privacy and her space, never pushing past what was common courtesy unless Maggie freely spoke. And, as far as I knew, none of them said a word to anyone else.

The only person who knew outside of the five of us was Lily. Considering she was already aware about Maggie playing, and also about our band... it didn't make much of a difference. Her lips were sealed tight as well.

The day before the gig, my heart was pounding out of my chest in panic. Panic over the gig itself, over the songs we chose, the level of difficulty, the set list, just everything.

“What stick forced itself up your arse, mate?” Travis said, stopping in the middle of a song. We were all tired and a bit sick of seeing each other so much. We had been practising two hours a day every day in the past week alone, by special permission from the music hall director and the headmaster.

This gig needed to be done and over with so we could all return to some sort of normalcy.

Though... adding Maggie to our band required a new definition of normalcy. By default, we hadn't been giving her any more attention than we had in the past. We didn't want anyone to know of our new member, lest they found out about the gig. The one promise we made to Maggie was that it would be small, intimate, and not open to the public. It was the only way she would play with us, and something we had to remind her of every day.

No one asked her why she was so frightened of playing in front of people. I remembered Lily saying the last time she went to the pub to hear us play, she left after being overwhelmed by the crowd. It made sense to me, not liking being around too many people at once, so playing in front of a lot of them would be even worse.

I crashed a stick into the cymbal, letting out some of the pent-up frustrations boiling inside of me.

“We have to be perfect, Trav. *Perfect*. There is literally no room for error.”

Everyone remained quiet as I stewed. They knew the pressure this gig was putting on me. If this didn't go well, if I didn't get some sort of scholarship out of it, then the day after graduation I would be not only homeless and broke. I had some money saved up from working at the pub, but not nearly enough for a place to stay, pay bills, food, and everything.

It was either this, or succumb to my dad's every wish and follow in his footsteps. And be miserable doing so.

“Ollie,” Maggie’s soft voice called from the opposite side of the room. “If you put too much pressure on yourself for this gig, you won’t play your best.”

I rolled my eyes at her. “You don’t think I know that?” I snapped.

Instead of her face falling, it tightened up. She tilted her chin and squared her shoulders, just like I had seen her do the first day of school. Except she didn’t push back. Her voice lowered, her face determined.

“Imagine today is the first time you ever played drums. Why did you pick up the sticks, Ollie?”

I stared at her long and hard, trying to figure out her game plan. “They looked fun. My mum said I could make lots of loud noise.”

The corner of her lip quirked. “And was it fun? That first time?”

A soft smile crossed my face, remembering Mum and me crashing and bashing and laughing until we fell to the floor in hysterics. I had only been four, so making noise was at the top of my list of exciting things. “Yeah.”

“Show me how you played that day.”

I shot her a confused look as I pushed my sweatband back up my forehead. Maggie just stared at me, not backing down, and not continuing with any further expression.

Having nothing to lose, I twirled my sticks before crashing them into the drum set in the loudest racket I could make. The tingling in my fingers brought another grin to my face. I closed my eyes, picturing Mum in her old purple t-shirt and blue jeans, her blonde hair hanging to her waist, watching me with a look of pure joy on her face.

My eyes snapped open as the distinct sound of Travis’ bass joined in on the fun. He didn’t place his fingers over any strings, just started plucking at random. Same with Maggie a moment later- she went crazy, shredding her guitar in wild abandon.

The laughter started low, but as soon as Charlie joined, banging away in complete chaos on his keyboard, we couldn’t hold it in. The attempts to keep

playing while we doubled over in hysterics.

Travis wiped away tears streaming down his face as we stopped a few moments later. “That... was amazing. Who knew we could play so well? I definitely think we should start with that song tomorrow.”

Maggie snorted, and we all laughed again. “Maybe it should be our closer instead. Leave them wanting more.”

I banged my forehead on my cymbal after clutching my stomach and leaning over. “I’m not sure what the hell that was, but it felt good. Better than good. That was the best drumming I’ve ever done in my *life*.”

The smile on Maggie’s face went straight to my heart. She was amazing. The way she cared about helping people, with no concern for anything in return, was gracious and giving. She genuinely wanted others to succeed and did what she could to assist in that. Her actions were positively royal, which made me rethink how I called her princess to get under her skin.

Once again, the assuming made an arse out of me. The only thing to do now was move forward, and try to make up for the missed time getting to know her.

And damn, did I want to know her more. Outside the music studio.

“Let’s call it on that good note, everyone. Tomorrow will be a long day.” Headmistress Tavers excused us from our co-curriculars for the afternoon, but we needed to head out if we were going to make it to dinner.

Lily had been covering for Maggie more often lately. Headmistress Thompson excused her from her art sessions, and every time Maggie came to the studio, it was with Lily or leaving with Lily. If anyone asked, she was there to listen to Lily play, to support her, or hang out with her.

Charlie stood, dusted off his trousers, and bid everyone a good night. He never spoke much now that Maggie was around; that was just Charlie being Charlie.

Travis put his bass away, choosing to keep it in the music hall this week instead of carting it around campus. Maggie had done the same with her

guitar, since we were in here so much.

All I had to do was tuck my drumsticks into my back pocket and slip on my shirt.

I let my hair loose, being careful to shake it away from Travis or Maggie so they didn't get sweat droplets showering them.

Maggie turned to leave, but I called her back. Glancing at Travis, I jutted my chin toward the door, telling him to leave the two of us alone.

After a waggle of his eyebrows, he did.

Maggie turned to me, questioning.

"I just wanted to thank you," I said, looking at my feet as they shuffled. "And apologise."

"Apologise for what?" she asked, cocking her head to the side. Her glasses slipped down her nose ever so slightly. She didn't reach to fix them, but I did.

Gently laying my fingers on either side of her frames, my first instinct was to take them off, to see who she was under the glasses. Her hands on mine stopped me. We both paused, the sounds of our breathing the only noise in the room. Her hands were soft, but the touch was electrical.

I slipped my hands down, cradling her cheeks gently, and skimming my thumb over her now healed scars. I breathed her in, every part of her. She closed her eyes, giving me complete control as her hands gripped my wrists like she was hanging onto me for support.

Leaning my forehead against hers, I took in a deep breath, taking in all that I could of Maggie Davies. Of *this* Maggie Davies.

The real Maggie.

Not the one I assumed her to be all these months. This right here, the witty, sassy, amazingly talented, purple haired rock star, was the real Maggie.

Her sass was her weapon, her vulnerability was her shield.

She tipped her chin up, rising onto her tiptoes. It took all the self-control I had not to devour her in that instant. Every fibre of my being itched for her, wanting to feel her against me, her mouth on mine. I wanted to lift her up,

wrap her legs around my waist, dig my hands into her hair, grabbing her by the back of her neck and driving her lips against me.

The realistic part of my brain took over. It shoved my feelings down deep, burying them. I groaned, in physical pain as I pulled away from her slowly, my hands lowering hers to the side of her torso, leaving her mouth gaped and her intense blue eyes wide.

Her lip trembled. I wanted to reach out and touch it, to still it, but I couldn't. We had a gig to play. Anything that happened between us before then could ruin everything.

"I... I should go," she stammered, her cheeks reddening by the second. She grabbed her satchel and left the room before I could even call out for her.

I hung my head, jamming my fingers into my hair and pulling on the strands until I couldn't feel the pain anymore.

Something deep inside of me craved Maggie Davies, yet I pushed it aside again and again.

I didn't deserve her. I didn't deserve for her to forgive me for being so rude, so outlandish, so unwelcoming. There was nothing I had that I could offer her; all I would do was hold her back in life. Between Pops and Christian, I learned my place in this world, and it was at the bottom.

And I wouldn't drag her down with me.

Feeding the monster would only get me in trouble. And I didn't have any time or resources to spare.



CHAPTER 31

Ollie

My hands trembled at my side, banging into my legs every other second.

I couldn't stop it. I couldn't control them if I wanted.

Nothing should have felt different about playing tonight. I'd played drums on this stage dozens of times over the past two years.

Yet... the pressure riding on our set was monumental. I let it get inside my head, psyching myself out all night and all day today.

The picture of Maggie fleeing the studio yesterday didn't help either. I replayed that moment over and over, barely getting any sleep. I tried to analyse what I should have done differently, and wondered if it would affect our playing tonight.

As usual, she ignored me most of the school day, not letting on to anyone what happened. I didn't even tell Travis, even though he asked me when I got back to our room last night. He knew how close Maggie and I were getting, but had enough respect to let me tell him in my own time.

"Deep breaths, mate. You won't be able to drum if you can't stop the

hands,” Travis whispered into my ear. The sound from the pub was deafening; I could barely hear Travis, though he was right next to me.

Three bands were playing tonight, and we were the last to go on. Travis had his bass strapped onto him already, and Charlie saw that they safely brought his keyboard over from the music hall this morning. Another drummer was using the drum set from the house band, the one I usually played.

The only missing piece was Maggie.

“Where is she?” I asked for the tenth time in two minutes.

“She’ll be here. She wouldn’t miss it,” Travis tried to assure me, but it went over my head.

My foot tapped nervously on the sticky backstage floor, matching whatever beat my hands were moving to. My whole body became a drum set, unable to stay still.

I also felt like I was going to vomit. My stomach flipped, and I started toward the bathroom just as she walked in.

Guitar strapped to her back, her purple hair in two buns on top of her head with some strands hanging down, the cat-eye glasses prominently featured on her face, she looked ready to rock. I had never seen her out of her school uniform; at least, not in something like this.

She wore a tight, black crop top, exposing an inch or so of her abs, with the name Sunset Swerve on it, a band I didn’t recognise. That, paired with ripped skinny jeans and sparkly gold flats that matched the gold lettering on the shirt, she looked... stunning. Absolutely incredible.

All the breath escaped my lungs as she made her way over to us. My stomach churned for a different reason.

For the first time, Maggie Davies made me nervous.

“Hey,” she mouthed when she got to us. Or, at least, I thought she mouthed it. It was so loud, she may have shouted, but I couldn’t hear her either way.

Travis scanned her from head to toe and back again, eyes wide as he

pushed his ridiculous hair out of his face. “Hot damn.”

Maggie smirked and hip checked him, shaking her head.

“You are looking hot as sin, Maggie Davies,” he said, smirking and giving her another once over. I had done multiple since she walked through the door on a less obvious level.

Cocking one hand on her hip, she stared at him, her brilliant blue eyes narrowing. “Oh, now that I’m not in uniform, you notice me? Never realised I could look like this without the skirt and blazer? How sexist of you, Travis.”

The small smile on her face clued us in to her sarcasm. Travis pursed his lips and nodded. “Busted. I was never allowed to look before, anyway.” He gave her a wink and flickered his eyes at me.

My mouth went dry as she turned, following his gaze. We hadn’t spoken since last night, since she left me. Since I pulled away from her.

One quick glance to Travis, and he directed Charlie away, giving Maggie and me space once more.

“You came,” I whispered, leaning in to speak into her ear so she could hear me.

“Of course I came. I’m sorry I’m late. Lily had to help me get out of the house unnoticed, especially looking like this. I had to put my uniform on over it. She’s holding it all in a bag out in the audience. Is that... okay?” The worried quiver in her voice sent my heart into panic.

I crossed my arms, sticking my shaking hands under my armpits to stop them from moving. It didn’t stop the foot, but it was a start. “Of course. She’s your friend. Maybe it’ll help you.”

An eyebrow raised. “Help me?”

I cringed. Looking around, I needed to find a quieter space to talk with her. If anything, to quiet my own nerves. I would drop sticks left and right if I didn’t get my hands to stop moving. Checking my watch, we had about ten minutes before our set started. The current band would finish in five, and then

the stage hands had to put up our gear before we went on.

Maggie let out a small yelp as I grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the side exit. Alone in the alley, I began pacing, trying to expel some of the pent-up energy.

“Are you alright?” she asked quietly, leaning against the brick building. Grabbing my sticks out of my back pocket, I twirled them, giving my hands something else to do besides shake.

“Nervous,” I replied, still not looking at her. I brought her out here to talk about last night, yet I couldn’t string a full sentence together. My heart was in my throat, my stomach turning inside out, and my head filling with air.

Maggie sighed and pushed off the wall. Putting both hands on my shoulders, she stopped me, looking me dead in the eye. My whole body froze like she threw a bucket of ice water over me.

“Stop. You’re going to be fine. We’re going to be fine. Better than fine. It’ll be amazing out there. Nothing to worry about.”

I believed her. No matter how many times Travis already told me we were going to rock it tonight, my brain didn’t want to listen. Not until the words came out of her mouth.

“Easy for you to say. You don’t have anything riding on this like I do.” Not exactly what I wanted to say, but it was on my mind.

She shook her head, the little tendrils hanging over her face swishing back and forth. “It’s true, I don’t. I am risking a lot to be here for you tonight, whether you know it or not. So, yeah, I get it.”

My brows slammed together. What was she risking? What was she hiding? Was she holding something back, or hiding from someone else?

I gulped and tried to get air into my lungs, but it was no use. My airway was closing as the panic built. Breaths came in shallow spurts and my vision started getting hazy.

“Ollie?” Maggie questioned, her hands sliding up my shoulders to my cheek. “Ollie, look at me. Breathe with me. Big breath in, slowly let it out.

One, two, three, keep going, four, five. Good. And again.”

She led me through two more rounds of that breathing, and it worked. My whole body was shaking on the inside still, but at least I had oxygen in my lungs and my vision was clearing.

Her hands were calm on my cheeks, causing all the restraint I had last night flew away.

Shoving my sticks back in my pocket, I grabbed her hands and ripped them off my face. I only caught a glimpse of her stunned look before I wound one arm around her waist and the other behind her neck, yanking her toward me.

Her lips tasted sweet, the smell of flowers filling my nose as I breathed her in. I pressed her tight against me, wanting to feel every inch of her body against mine.

I devoured her lips, exploring them with my tongue, begging for her permission to open. As soon as they parted, both my hands raced toward her face, holding her chin in my palms, and taking what she was giving me.

My head spun, but not from a lack of air this time.

It felt like hours and seconds, then suddenly, Maggie pulled away, her lips leaving mine, her arms falling from around my shoulders.

“Umm...” she stuttered, biting her bottom lip. A few strands of hair fell out during our kiss, making her look more dishevelled than before. She looked hotter, sexier, than I could ever imagine.

I stared at her, still unable to put together a coherent sentence. Before I could remember what words were, the back door flung open, Travis sticking his head out.

“There you are! We’re on in two minutes! What were you doing—” A slow smile crept on his face as he figured out what was going on. “Bravo, mate. Bravo. Now get your arses in here! We’re on!”

Maggie disappeared inside, leaving me to follow past Travis with my lips tucked in and my head hung. He clapped me on the back, laughing to himself.

“Never thought I’d see this day come, but there’s a first time for

everything I suppose.”

We joined Charlie and Maggie, both glancing around nervously. I bounced on my toes, warming up my body. I took survey of what was going inside, finding the rapid firing of nerves had stopped, the shaking subsided.

That kiss soothed more than my soul. It set me on fire.

After they announced us, we rushed out onto the stage to thunderous applause. The place was packed with adults. Only Lily was recognisable in the corner, screaming her head off in support. I pointed a drum stick in her direction, and she pretended to swoon.

I was on. It was my time to shine.



“That was the greatest moment of my *life*,” Maggie breathed as she ran off stage. Travis wrapped his arms around her and swung her in circles. She threw her head back, one of her buns now lopsided from the intensity she put into playing.

The set was epic. We had never played better. The four of us were in such sync the entire time, every note hit, every song utter perfection.

Ending with Ollie’s Song was the best choice possible. We rocked out for ten minutes straight, getting the energy up, and then it fell, right on cue. The adrenaline pumped through the crowd, so the beginning notes of Ollie’s Song threw them for a loop, causing a rippling hush to pass through the pub.

Their attention was rapt. The drum solo Maggie insisted on starting with drew their gaze my way while the spotlight lit me up from above.

Then Travis joined in, a few notes at a time, until Maggie and Charlie blended the whole song together. By the end, the entire crowd was swaying to the beat, tears glistening in their eyes.

I couldn’t have imagined a more perfect ending.

“I could just *kiss* you right now! You musical genius, you!” Travis said, putting Maggie down on her feet. A low hum escaped my lips, almost growl

like, at that comment.

My fist balled around my drum stick at my side as Maggie reached up and squished Travis' cheeks together, as if she was really going to kiss him.

"Not in a million years, stud," she said, laughing. Lily joined us backstage then, her cheeks wet from the tears streaming down her face.

"You guys! That was momentous. That was massive. That was... epic in every way. But Maggie, we have to get back before Housemistress Thompson does her check-in. You didn't get an excuse card like these guys did, remember?"

I stared at her in shock. *How* did she not get an excuse card? This gig could have easily gone another hour if people didn't show up on time, there were equipment malfunctions, or any random reason.

Was that what she meant by risking it for me? If she got caught out of the house after check-in, she would have a demerit on her record, or face suspension.

"Care to walk me back?" she asked, staring straight at me. Lily handed her the uniform she had stuffed in the bag, and Maggie put it on over her clothes.

I nodded, shoving my way toward her. Lily stepped aside, allowing me to grab Maggie's hand and practically drag her out of the building.

It was a short walk to campus and neither of us said a word. As soon as we left the pub, I figured she would pull her hand away, but it remained cradled in my palm, sending tingles through my body.

Before we rounded the last corner where Carriageton would be in sight, I stopped and turned her to face me.

"Thank you," I breathed. If I had gone on stage the bundle of nerves I was, we would have flopped. I wasn't sure how one kiss could change my entire being, but it did.

That one kiss also happened to be with someone I spent most of the year hating.

Maggie grinned at me and reached up to take out her buns.

“No thanks necessary. It was a great set. I hope it helps you,” she replied, combing her fingers through her purple strands.

I shook my head. “No, not for the gig. I mean, yes, for playing with us. Thank you for that. Like Lily said, it was epic, truly. But... before...” Words escaped me yet again.

She lifted her lip slightly, giving me a grin I used to consider her version of an “I’m better than you” type of smirk. I knew better now.

“That... I don’t even know what to say about that.” The confused look on her face threw me.

“Are you upset about it?”

Her head shook slowly. “No, not upset...”

“Mad? Angry? Shocked? Irritated with me?”

She huffed out a small laugh. “No, none of those things.”

I slipped my hand out of hers and crossed my arms over my chest. “Then? I’m sort of confus—”

Before I could finish, she lifted onto her tiptoes, grabbed my face in the same manner she did to Travis earlier, and kissed me with every ounce of passion as she had before.

Except this one was better. It wasn’t marred by nervous energy or out of timely desperation. It was pure desire, want, and need. From both of us.

My arms slid around her waist, palming her arse and lifting her onto my torso, just like I imagined doing yesterday. She wrapped her legs around me, sliding her hands back and tangling her fingers in my hair, pulling on the strands.

I groaned on her lips, and she smiled beneath my mouth. Leaving one hand resting on her backside, I reached up and cupped the back of her head, keeping her as close as possible.

“Is this...” The question eluded me, but she knew what I meant once again.

Biting her lip, she nodded and dove back toward my face once more, her shoulders rising, her hands on my cheeks. She was as light as air, yet sent

shock waves through me.

I turned and walked her backward until I pressed her back against the brick wall. Lowering her to her feet without breaking our kiss, I steadied myself by placing both hands on the wall, caging her in front of me.

Maggie intertwined a foot behind mine and curled her thumbs in my belt loops, pulling me into her.

She was greedy, desperate for the same thing I was.

I've only had a sample of her, yet I needed more. She needed more.

And I would give her it all, if it meant one more taste.

My tongue dove between her lips, exploring the sweetness of her mouth as her hands yanked at my shirt, ripping it away from my jeans and lifting up.

Before I could take it off, her mobile chimed. She ignored it, running her fingers over my chest, everywhere she touched on high alert. She sent my body into overdrive, the buzzing coursing through my veins.

I lowered a hand, tracing along her jawline, my lips following my fingers. I kissed the outside of her lips, the corner of her mouth, and dotted across her cheek. I brushed against her barely there scars and headed toward her ear.

Reaching down, I lifted one of her legs and wrapped it around me again, bursting to be closer in any way possible. She drove me wild with every touch, with every scratch of her nails down my back.

I held her steady with one arm while nudging her hair out of my way with my nose, laying soft kisses along her neck and behind her ear.

Her phone chimed again, but she didn't move a muscle. A sultry moan escaped her lips, sending me over the cliff. I was so hard by this point, there was no way she couldn't feel it through my jeans.

"You are *astounding*, Maggie Davies," I breathed into her ear, outlining it with kisses over and over. Her low, sexy hum hit me straight in the chest. I wanted nothing more than to toss her over my shoulder and find the nearest private spot. It wasn't possible, but damn if I didn't want to try.

Leaving her leg where it was, I cupped her face, my thumbs running over

her cheeks as I returned to her lips once more. When we connected, my pinky hooked onto her necklace, and I threaded my fingers through it gently, memories of the item flashing through my head.

How I wanted to beat the crap out of William and the boys for what they did to her, for hurting her, for making her cry.

How I went to return the necklace, finding her playing my song, the emotion put behind it sending a dagger straight to my heart.

How it felt wiping the tear off her cheek when she realised I fixed it for her.

Three chimes came from her phone then. Finally, she dug her hand into the back pocket of her jeans, under her skirt, and checked the screen.

“No! Oh no, I have to go!” she exclaimed, pushing me and lunging away from the wall.

My brain didn’t make any connections at that point. Everything was a blur as I stood in a haze, still reeling from what just happened.

Maggie took off, just like she had last night. Except this time, after she had only got a few paces away, she stopped and turned, looking back at me.

Lifting her hand, she gave me a small wave and a slight smile. I returned the gesture with my own, my heart pounding loudly in my rib cage.

Walking backwards a few steps, she kept her eyes locked on mine before spinning around once more and taking off.

And just like that... I fell for the amazingly talented, sassy, wickedly beautiful, purple haired Maggie Davies.



CHAPTER 32

Maggie

I wasn't sure what to expect this morning, but it wasn't this.

When I woke up, it felt as if nothing and everything had changed. No one besides Lily knew about the gig last night, so in part, life would return to normal. My alarm went off, Camille was still in the bathroom after I got dressed, and I rushed down to the dining hall for breakfast before they closed the line.

Just like every other day.

Miss Duphrey greeted me and made some small talk while I gathered my tray and loaded on some food. It was a highlight to my day, no matter what, and today was no different.

Lily waved to me as I got out of line, like most other mornings. I wove my way through the crowd, stepping over bags and satchels, squeezing between chairs, and lifting my tray over the heads of seated students, careful not to tip it even an inch.

Finally reaching her, I slid my tray onto the table and sighed in relief. "Is it

more crowded today than usual, or am I not as late as I normally am? Camille seemed to take forever in the bathroom, but maybe my sense of time is off?”

Shovelling the first forkful of eggs into my mouth, I cast a glance at my friend, sitting with a goofy little grin on her face. Following her line of sight, I looked over at a table a few away from ours.

Ollie’s table. The frown and the little wrinkle between his eyes hit me hard. He looked upset, and I didn’t know why. He locked his eyes on me, the frown deepening.

My heart dropped to the floor. I was up way past my normal bedtime, tossing and turning, replaying the entire night over in my head. From the second I walked into the pub to the moment I got Lily’s urgent text messages.

Did he not do the same? Did he regret what happened? He said the first kiss calmed him, enough to get out on stage and kill it. But after... before I went back to Carriageton... did I imagine how into it he was? It certainly didn’t *feel* like he wasn’t into it.

My mind ran so fast that I didn’t realise Lily was calling my name.

“Maggie Davies, where are you?” she asked with a laugh.

I snapped to, locking eyes with her. “Huh?”

She grinned widely. “You’re out of it. I wonder why...” The raised brows and knowing glint in her eye had me worried. Did she know what happened with me and Ollie last night? Did Ollie tell Travis who told Lily? How many people knew now? Was that why the room was more crowded than—

“Hey.”

I blinked, certain Ollie’s voice spoke behind me. But that was impossible. Ollie never acknowledged me in public, not unless it had to do with our school project.

“Can we sit here?” he whispered into my ear, a lock of his hair brushing against my face. Lily’s smile grew even bigger as she nodded, gesturing to the empty seats around us.

As soon as she did, chaos erupted. Chairs screeched on the floor, trays

slammed on the old wooden tables, and previous conversations resumed.

I couldn't take my eyes off Lily. If I looked, they would all disappear. The noise level in took a turn for quiet, most likely because everyone was looking at us. At the popular boy sitting with the rebel, problematic, weirdo girl. The purple haired freak.

It took a while, but I came to terms with what people thought of me. The more they thought I was the introvert who didn't like to hang out, the better. It let me hide and stay low. I had my little circle of trust, and that was all I needed, besides the entire experience of being out in the world.

At times, I even forgot about being a princess. In moments of light heartedness and fun, the pressures of my title were let go, a faraway problem. Maggie Davies existed in a different realm than Princess Margaret.

After a moment, I finally turned to my left, indeed finding Ollie, Travis, and Henry had joined our table.

Leaning forward across the table, I whispered to my friend, "What's happening?"

She patted my hand and let out another signature giggle. "Our friends are joining us for breakfast."

My heart was beating as if I just ran a marathon. All eyes were on us right now, and it made me itchy.

"Rough night?" Ollie asked, sliding me a crispy piece of bacon. I never said no to the crispiest bacon, and Miss Duphrey made some of the best. She put the chef at the palace to shame with it.

I shot him a questioning glance, and he just shrugged.

"Everyone likes Miss Duphrey's extra hot, extra crispy bacon."

I took a bite off the end, crunching it in my mouth, when the unthinkable happened. It was like a nightmare, one thing after another, playing right in front of me like a movie.

"Pardon me, but when did we start sitting near the trash?" Kenzie's whiny, nasally voice cried.

Henry was the first to speak. “Many apologies, Kenzie dear. We seem to have changed alliances overnight. I am most grateful, in fact.”

I suppressed a laugh, but inside I was reeling. The shell-shocked expression on Kenzie’s face compared to the dull, bored one Henry was giving her was utter perfection.

“Yeah, old table looks to be free. Have at it, love,” Travis added, breaking apart his biscuit, not even bothering to look up at Kenzie and Camille.

Lily let a snort out from under her hand, her cheeks growing pink as she tried to keep it in.

The rage building in Kenzie seemed near catastrophic level. No one at the table wanted to deal with it.

“Darling, what’s the matter. Why aren’t we finding a place to sit—oh.”

William’s voice rang in my ears. There was the trifecta. First Ollie sitting here, then Kenzie showing up, and now him.

Before I could even glance up, Ollie was out of his chair, his shoulders squared, his hands in fists at his side. The entire dining hall fell quiet as they watched what was about to happen.

William took a step back, one hand holding his tray and the other up in front of his chest in surrender. Travis leapt up the second Ollie had and took a death grip on one of Ollie’s wrists.

“A table is free over there. Let’s go,” William said, grabbing Kenzie’s hand and guiding her across the room.

My stomach churned, and I lost my appetite. I had successfully avoided William as much as possible since the encounter. My cheek healed, I got my necklace back, and I just wanted to move on. No one knew what happened except Lily, Travis, and Ollie. I hadn’t breathed a word to Auntie Ellie, Esme, Mum, or anyone else. And that was the way it was going to stay.

Once everyone was sitting again, the tension thickened. We continued to eat, but no one spoke.

I sat, embarrassed, ready to pull my usual stunt and high tail it out of the

dining hall as fast as possible. If I wasn't there, I couldn't hear what people were saying about me.

I didn't leave because, out of nowhere, Ollie's warm, slightly calloused palm encircled mine under the table and squeezed.

The squeeze went right from my hand to my heart. It instantly erased the frown and look of worry from earlier, and I found myself with a small smile on my face.

"Oh, look at this!" Lily exclaimed. Everyone stopped and stared as she lit up with glee while she looked at her mobile. "You guys have a video up!"

Travis reached over the table and took the phone from her, turning the screen so Ollie and I could see as well. Henry seemed interested, but not enough to come watch.

"Whoa, that's amazing quality!" Ollie gasped.

My face dropped, going pale as all the blood drained from it. My head spun as I watched myself on the screen. I looked amazing, the grin electric and joyful, my playing on another level. The sound quality was great, as Ollie said, every instrument easily identifiable, no one overplaying another.

That wasn't the problem, however.

"Holy crap, would you look at that!" Travis shouted, loud enough for the rest of the hall to hear.

"That's what I was trying to say!" Lily squealed. "You guys are going *viral!*"

Phones started dinging all over the dining hall.

The trifecta just became an instantaneous nightmare.

My pulse pounded in my ears as I let Ollie's hand slip from mine. I spun around, watching as people looked back at me, whispering amongst themselves.

I didn't know how I had the energy to get up, but I did so quickly, leaving my tray and grabbing my bag before racing toward the door. I was half way across the hall before shouts of my name exploded behind me.

In a matter of seconds, my entire world flipped upside down. Nothing would be the same again.



CHAPTER 33

Ollie

I didn't start to worry until Maggie didn't show for lunch.

She ran out of the dining hall so fast this morning, none of us had a chance to catch her. By the time Travis, Lily, and I made it outside, she was nowhere to be seen.

Lily and I texted her as much as we could between classes. She wasn't in Geography, making Mr Edwards rather upset about her missing during a day we were to finish our projects. The whole report and package were due next week.

Travis said she wasn't at her next two classes, and now lunch. Lily ran back to Carriageton, but she wasn't there either.

I sent younger students every which way I could think of to look for her. All I wanted was to understand why she left in such a hurry.

The video of our gig not was not only incredible with great sound quality and camera work, but it indeed went viral. Hundreds of thousands of views by breakfast, and now at lunch it was at—

“Three point two million,” Travis breathed, checking his phone for the

fifteenth time since he first saw it. “Three *million*, Oliver. Do you know what this means?”

I didn’t answer him. Only one thing worried me, and it wasn’t that. They set the entire gig up for scouts and music execs to watch, so the views didn’t matter to me. If the scouts liked it, they would call. They wouldn’t bother themselves with checking how many people watched a video.

“Where is she?” I asked again, raking my hands through my hair. Robert, a younger student, jogged up to me, shaking his head, telling me he also had not found Maggie.

Whipping out my mobile, I dialled her number and was sent straight to her voicemail. Her voice came through, asking me to leave a message. I didn’t. I hung up, having already left five messages, on top of the ones Lily and Travis left as well.

It seemed redundant to text her; none of those had been answered either.

“Maybe she got spooked. Wants to lie low until the video blows over?” Travis suggested, taking a bite of his sandwich. “She was never one for crowds.”

He was right. The only reason Maggie agreed to play the set with us was under the assumption that only scouts would be there; the place would be closed to the public, including students.

“But, where?” That was my main concern. If she wanted to hide for a bit, that was fine. Understandable, even. When she didn’t answer, and no one could find her... it worried me. It was like she vanished without a trace.

I turned to my own lunch, unable to eat while my mind wandered. Miss Duphrey cut herself off after I didn’t respond to her first two questions while in line, but loaded my plate with an extra dessert instead.

My fingers drummed on the table, my chin resting in my propped-up hand. I was out of ideas. The last place I could think of going to ask was the headmistress’s office, but that would be a stretch. If Maggie was just lying low, like Travis said, then involving the headmistress would make things

worse.

When she wasn't in Geography, my mind went to the worst—what if William or the boys had got a hold of her again? What if they saw the video and decided she was an open target now? I had been lucky once, to catch them in the act and get her free, but what if no one saw this time? How far would they take it?

“I can't handle this,” I exclaimed, pushing my tray away from me. I wanted to vomit. At this point, I didn't even care if she didn't answer me personally. If she just contacted Lily or Travis or *anyone* else in this entire school, I would be at rest.

“I'm going to take a walk. Maybe hit the music hall or the arts building and check again,” I muttered, pushing my chair away from the table with a screech. Travis' mouth pulled to the side, like he wanted to talk me out of it, but knew better. He didn't get up, leaving me to my own personal torture.

I hadn't made it half way across the room before the whispers started. I usually ignored them, not caring about the latest gossip or rumours that travelled the school. Kenzie made most of them up, anyway; dating her for those three months showed me how easy it was for one tiny nugget of information to be twisted around and ruin someone's day.

However, when people began whispering Maggie's name, I put the brakes on. Tucking my hair behind my ear, I listened hard to figure out who said it, and in what context.

That's when the chaos erupted.

Squeals spread across the dining hall from girls on all sides. Gasps of shock filled the air, chairs knocked over backwards as students stood up too fast, pushing their phones in front of their friends' faces.

I looked over at Travis and his face told me everything I needed to know.

They found Maggie. And something was wrong.

As if in slow motion, he jumped up, his eyes trained on me. The rest of the dining hall went crazy, but none of it registered as I watched Travis.

He swiped his satchel off the back of his chair and hurried over, keeping his head down as if he was trying to conceal his departure.

Considering the number of shouts with our names coming from different people in the hall, I took it as a good assumption.

When he reached me, Travis spun me around and pushed me in front of him, shoving me toward the exit as fast as he could.

“Head down. We need to get to the headmistress’ office immediately.”

As soon as we were outside, I put a stop to the nonsense, spinning around to face my best friend. I didn’t get a word out before Lily came sprinting down the path, her hair coming undone from her bun and her satchel banging against her legs. She had a look of absolute devastation on her face.

I choked back a gag, my stomach revolting against anxious feelings churning inside. I couldn’t handle hearing whatever they were going to say. Mentally, there was no way for me to prepare either. I had been tossed around on a wild roller coaster ride since the day I met Maggie Davies.

Seeing Maggie get hurt. Hearing her sing. Finding out she wasn’t who I assumed she was this whole time. Torturing myself because of my regret and guilt.

Playing with her.

Kissing her.

Falling for her.

And now...

“Ollie...” Lily started, grabbing my hand. I ripped it away from her, not wanting to be touched. I jammed my fists into my eyes, willing the tears to stay away. I was stronger than this.

But if I closed out the world, nothing bad could happen.

“Maggie is...” Travis paused. Lowering my hands, I stared at my best friend in desperation.

“Go on, tell me. Get it over with.”

He sucked in a breath and shot a look at Lily before starting over.

“The reason Maggie left after seeing the video is because the video went viral.”

I threw my hands in the air. “No shit! We’ve figured that one out already. Now tell me—is she hurt? Is she... is she...” I couldn’t finish the statement, my mind assuming the worst.

Travis’ brows shot up his forehead, his eyes growing wide. He pushed his hair aside. “No! Bloody hell, Ollie, no nothing like that.”

My knees gave out. I sunk into the grass as a group of students left the dining hall. They didn’t notice us at first, but once they did, they stopped.

Some of them looked as if they wanted to come over to us. An arm pulled them away, steering them toward another building.

It was Charlie; he glanced over and gave me a small smile with a nod. The kid didn’t say much, but he always had our backs.

A hand appeared in my face and Travis lifted me to my feet. “We really have to get to the headmistress’ office though, Ollie. And fast, by the looks of it.”

More students charged out of the dining hall, and there weren’t enough Charlie’s to deter them. Why they were coming at us, I wasn’t quite sure. The video travelled around the student body all morning already; no one seemed to care about it much, besides the occasional compliment.

Without question, we turned and jogged toward the main building. As soon as we passed through the doors, I stopped them again.

“She’s not hurt?”

Lily shook her head. “At least, I don’t think so.”

“So what gives?”

Travis put both hands on my shoulders, looking me square in the eye. “Mate, I don’t even know how to process this right now, so I’m not sure how you will either. I’m just going to say it exactly how we saw it.”

The seriousness of his tone forced my mouth shut.

“Maggie Davies isn’t who she said she is. Well, if the media is right, that

is.”

My heart felt like it split in two. All breathing ceased for a moment and my mind went blank. I spent all day looking for her, and now they’re telling me she wasn’t who she said she was? What did that even mean?

I already figured out she wasn’t who she was months ago. All the beliefs I put on her just because of her name, all the ideas I conjured in my head to keep me from thinking she could be a good person.

It was all flipped upside down. I knew who Maggie Davies was now. And she was amazing.

Travis breathed deep and glanced at Lily. Another tear rolled down her face, but she nodded, wrapping her arms around his waist. He dropped one arm from my shoulder and put it around her, the three of us huddled together.

“If the rumours are true, which they do make a compelling argument, then Maggie Davies... is really Princess Margaret.”

It was like a firework exploded under my skull. Travis was right; I didn’t know how to process this.

So I did it the way I normally did—I laughed.

I laughed so hard, tears rolled down my face.

“Maggie? The *princess*?” I gasped, clutching my stomach and trying not to double over. Travis and Lily didn’t join in, looking at each other in confusion instead.

“Are you joking? That was just Henry’s stupid little nickname. One I used to annoy the crap out of her. Is this a prank? Maggie isn’t the princess. That’s ludicrous! Absolute insanity!”

Travis cleared his throat. “It makes sense, actually. Eleanor’s niece? Well, that’s true, just not on Sean’s side. The purple hair and glasses? Most likely some sort of disguise.”

Lily chimed in, her voice soft and small. “She did everything she could to hide.”

Stumbling backward, I leaned against the wall, placing my hands on my

knees and letting my hair fall in front of my face.

“A disguise? I mean, come on, lots of people don’t like crowds, there’s a whole phobia—” I stopped short, replaying what Lily said in my head.

Pushing my hair out of my way, I looked up at her. She seemed distraught, not surprised. Just like she did the night I tried to return Maggie’s necklace.

“You knew. This whole time. Just like you knew about her guitar. This whole time you knew?” I stood to my full height, towering over Lily. Travis pushed her behind his back, going chest-to-chest with me, but I looked around him.

“Oliver? Travis? Lily? Please come with me,” Headmistress Tavers’ voice echoed through the empty hall. Her heels click-clacked on the wood floors as she turned sharply and headed toward her office.

I gulped. Travis puffed up his cheeks and exhaled harshly as he grabbed Lily’s hand. He kept her on the opposite side of me, as though he was worried I would do something to her.

We walked behind the headmistress in silence, the click of the door closing echoing throughout the room.

“The three of you are close to Maggie Davies, correct?” she asked, folding her hands together and placing them on her desk. We sat in front of her, nodding.

“She lied. About everything,” I whispered, more so to myself than my friends. I didn’t want to believe it, but seeing Headmistress Tavers’ grave face left me with no other choice.

“Then it is to say, she will no longer be attending Waversmore College. I’m sure you’ve heard the rumours floating around by now. Lord knows my window won’t open today because of all the chatter.”

One by one, our faces dropped in realisation. Lily, that her friend had disappeared without a word. Travis, out of worry for Lily and I. And me, for being duped, pulled into her scheme, spat out, and once again, left behind.

In seconds, my entire year blew up in front of my face.

At the start of term, I avoided Maggie Davies because I assumed she was trouble. I figured staying away from her would let me have a drama-free year, unlike last year. I came back to Waversmore this year wanting to enjoy it, to enjoy my freedom while I had it, tossed around like a rag doll.

And I failed. Again.

“I will not be addressing the rumours, however. I implore the three of you to do the same. And pass along the message to anyone else Maggie may have been close to. Waversmore does not deal with the press in any matter outside of official school doings, and we will not be speaking on this. Do I make myself clear?” She looked over the top of her glasses, staring us down, giving us the threat without actually saying it.

“Yes, Headmistress,” Lily replied. We knew better than to ask questions at that point. She wouldn’t answer them, anyway.

Silently, we left, our heads hung.

“What now?” Travis asked.

The three of us stood on the front steps to the main building, more lost than we ever felt before.



CHAPTER 34

Maggie

As soon as I left the dining hall, my head began to spin. I didn't even know who to contact first. Did I call Mum? Auntie Ellie? Esme?

There was an evacuation plan in place, but did I need it yet? Just because the video was posted publicly didn't necessarily mean they would connect the dots, right?

Besides, with my hair and glasses and outfit, I could have been anyone. Doppelgangers existed all over the world.

I hurried back to Carriageton to wait out the storm and figure out a game plan. Even if students didn't put the pieces together, knowing the video was being seen by so many people freaked me out. No one knew I played guitar before this morning; now they all saw.

My mobile chirped a new text from Ollie. And Lily. And Travis.

I didn't answer any of them.

Flinging myself onto my bed, I buried my head in my arms, tossing my

fake glasses aside. I didn't know what to do, and I didn't know who to ask for help.

Mum would listen, but what could she do from London? And if she told Dad, he would just give me the "I told you so" speech, and demand I come home immediately.

Auntie Ellie would emphasise, then most likely advise I come home too, just in case. She didn't like the aspect of scandals and tried to avoid them as much as she could since she was the centre of one once.

Esme... she would be the most realistic. If she thought the video would be a problem, she would say so. But she wouldn't say until she had all the facts gathered and was one hundred per cent certain of her decision.

Lifting my head, I glanced at the clock—I should have been in Geography right now. I wondered if Ollie even knew I was missing. The fact that he sat and had breakfast with Lily and me this morning spoke volumes.

When he held my hand secretly under the table, it lifted my spirits and comforted me in a way I never thought possible.

It was all my fault, though. I became too comfortable. Too trusting. I let my guard down and made a bad decision. Auntie Ellie warned me I couldn't do things in public, yet I went off and performed in front of a crowd, in a pub, off campus.

Anything that happened as a result was directly blamed on me. And I would take the retribution, no matter what. I could only hope that nothing happened to my friends.

The guilt wrecked me. All the lies, all the cover up, the hiding, the vagueness. My friends didn't deserve that. Ollie didn't deserve it.

If he ever found out the truth...

A sob escaped me as I thought about how Ollie would feel. He would think I swindled him, that I led him on.

Would he hate me for being exactly who he originally thought I was? When he saw my relation to Christian, he predicted I would be just like him

—a stuck up royal wannabe.

Except I wasn't a wannabe. Being a princess was my life.

And after graduation, what did I think would happen? There was no other choice but to return to the palace and resume a normal life. Royal life.

Anything I started with Ollie wouldn't work outside of Waversmore.

It was a miracle I made it this long. Mum's promise was for one term at first. When she saw how I was doing in my classes, my art, my music... she agreed to the second term as well.

Ollie had played a part in that, too. How he convinced Auntie Ellie that I had to stay, that I was loved and had friends, made all the difference. As to his intentions back then, even though they weren't quite honourable, I appreciated them.

And, knowing what I did now, I saw exactly why he did it. Because of who he was at his core. A protector. Loyal. Caring. Observant.

Whatever Christian did to him last year broke him, but he rose back up like a phoenix out of the ashes. Would this break him again? Not only finding out who I really was, having to deal with the fact that I lied since day one, but me leaving as well?

If I were him, I would hate me too.

I jumped as my mobile rang under my hand. Swiping it without looking to see who was calling, I raised it to my ear.

"Hello?"

A sigh greeted me on the other end. "Oh, thank goodness you answered. Maggie, Esme called." Auntie Ellie rushed through her words, winded, as if she were running.

"Auntie Ellie? What do you mean Esme called? She didn't call me?" My pulse picked up, my heart jumping into my throat. If Ellie was calling me now, if Esme called her already, this meant... it meant...

"They found me."

"I'm afraid so, dear. Or at least, enough for the media to make their

assumptions and their way down to Waversmore. The evacuation is already in progress. A car is coming to get you. I'll meet you in Sheffield in two hours."

My head spun, literally and figuratively. I looked at all the things in my room—my guitar, my canvas, my books, school supplies, clothing, everything. There was no way I could pack it all up in time.

"Take nothing. People will be by shortly to pack up your belongings."

Breathing had turned into a chore, coming in short spurts and not giving my brain enough oxygen to make rational decisions.

The phone beeped in my ear. I turned it, seeing Esme's name flashing on the screen.

"Ellie, Esme is calling."

A car door shut. "Answer it. I'm on my way to Sheffield now. Be safe, honey. And don't worry."

She clicked off, allowing Esme's call to be put through.

"Your Highness, the plan for extraction is underway. What is your location?" Her crisp, no-nonsense tone hit me right in the chest.

"My room," I answered in a small voice, like a tiny child in trouble.

"Please proceed down to the furthest exit. The side door off the kitchens, next to the bushes." I had no doubt Esme was currently looking at a full blueprint of Carriageton. "You'll find a man by the name of Ames waiting. Take nothing."

"My guitar—"

"Do I ever repeat myself, Princess Margaret?" she snapped, though her tone was still steady. How she was remaining so calm in a moment of crisis like this was unbelievable.

"No. I'm heading downstairs right now."

Leaving my guitar made me want to cry. I could only hope the palace's people could get to it before anyone else in the house. By now, I was sure they made Housemistress Thompson aware of the situation, and closing the

house to anyone except occupants would be strictly enforced as soon as possible.

But I didn't trust Camille or Kenzie not to swipe it and sell it.

"Ames is in position. The car is waiting. You will go straight to Sheffield to meet your Auntie Ellie. Then, the transfer will take place and you both will be sent to an undisclosed location, where you will remain for three days. Your hair will need to return to its normal colour, and a stylist will be available upon arrival. A trunk of your clothing and needs are already en route. All your belongings at school will be packaged up and sent straight to the palace. Are there any questions?"

I dashed through the kitchen, one hand on the knob to the back door. "Can I let my friends—"

Esme cut me off. "Absolutely not. The palace will not be acknowledging any rumours or media questions about your whereabouts. The Headmistress has assured me that Waversmore also does not comply with the media on subject matter outside official school doings. She will be speaking with your friends to ensure they are on the same page. I will assume that many of the students will eventually speak out, but the conflicting comments will lead many to assume no one knows anything. You are underage, and therefore off limits, and we do not have to explain your absence to anyone."

I turned the knob, finding a large man in a black suit and matching sunglasses staring intensely at me. "If I can just send one text—"

"Princess, for your own good, and protection, Ames will take your mobile now. It will need to be kept with palace security for the time being, to make sure there are no threats that come with your sudden exposure or departure."

Esme hung up before I could argue. Within seconds, Ames held his hand out, gesturing for me to put the phone in his palm. Reluctantly, I did so, swallowing another sob as he slid it into his pocket and grabbed my hand.

Swivelling his head all around, he deemed it safe to leave the doorway and make a dash to the unmarked sedan waiting at the edge of the street. A driver

in a matching suit got out of the front, opened the back door, and waited for me to get in.

Ames didn't follow. The driver closed the door after me and slid back into the presence, pulling away from the house sharply. Ames crossed his arms in front of him, watching us as we drove down the street.

I turned around, watching the world I had just started to enjoy disappear.



CHAPTER 35

Ollie

“A freaking *princess*,” I muttered, swiping through my mobile. “How the hell did we not see it, Trav?”

It had been three days since Maggie’s departure. The last time any of us saw her was when she left the dining hall. There hadn’t been a single word since then.

Lily kept trying, sending at least one a day, to no avail.

I gave up.

If she wanted to leave, to desert those that she called friends, then that was fine.

“Honestly, mate, I’m not sure. I feel dumb for not realising it. Did you even know Princess Margaret played guitar?”

“Queen Zara was an accomplished violinist before she married the King. Remember her music program? It makes sense.” I spent hours scouring the internet, trying to learn everything I could about the royal family in an attempt to put the puzzle together and figure out how she fooled all of us.

“You didn’t know that before, though.”

I sighed, dropping my phone onto the bed and rubbing my face. “I should have. Maggie, fuck, I mean Princess Margaret,” it felt odd calling her either name right now, “told me she played almost every string instrument at some point or another. And that her mum played violin. She dropped all these clues over the months, yet we didn’t pick up on any of them. How dense are we? Tavers should withhold our diplomas for our idiocy.”

Rolling onto my back, I picked up my phone again, but instead of turning to an article about the princess, I opened the video of our gig.

“Give it a rest, mate. You’ve watched that video a million times. I bet you’re the one racking up all the views at this point.” Travis threw a dirty shirt at me. I blocked it before it hit my face.

“Did you notice how—” Another shirt came wailing at my head, but I didn’t see it before it landed directly on my nose.

“I noticed. You noticed. Everyone has noticed. And if you *haven’t* noticed, the entire school hasn’t shut up about the princess. Half the students have done interviews to get their fifteen minutes of fame. So, if you please, can we *not* discuss this in here? I’m a bit sick of it now.”

My jaw dropped open. “Fine. Be like that.”

Travis sat up, staring at me from behind his massive amount of hair. “You’re giving me attitude? Let’s see—when is the last time you tried to contact her?”

I snarled in his direction. “She never answered.”

The blank face he gave me did nothing to make me want to continue my explanation.

“Right. So just give up. The logical answer. You were falling head over heels for that girl, and you know it. Never, in the however many years I’ve known you, have I seen you like that. Whatever magical spell she put on you in that alley before the gig *worked*, mate. Whatever she did calmed you enough to kill it on that stage. Don’t think I didn’t see how you were looking at her during the set. And the day she left? It was obvious to everyone. Why

do you think Kenzie had her knickers in a bunch?” He laughed, more so to himself than anything.

The pit in my stomach grew bigger. It was nothing new. We had been having this conversation in multiple ways for the past three days.

“She’s a *princess*, Travis.”

“And?”

I gestured toward myself. “And I’m... well... me. If I don’t hear from one of those scouts, I’ll be broke. And homeless. I’m a nobody.”

“You’ll hear back. Especially now. If anything, having Maggie outed from that video will probably help you in this scenario.”

I took a deep breath, considering the weight of his words. Everything she did at that gig, and since then, had been at a risk for her. She said so herself. I just never realised what a risk it was.

What if the video went viral and we didn’t see it for some time? If we hadn’t been at breakfast, had we been in classes, we wouldn’t have been checking our mobiles as often. What if the media found her here before she could get away safely?

I was angry at her. I was mad beyond belief that she lied and deserted all of us without a word. I was also glad she returned home without incident. Considering the amount of media that camped out just outside campus, it could have been ugly for her.

By now, she was at the palace. Nothing was confirmed, but the rumours stated she went somewhere else for a few days before going back in the cloak of darkness.

Her return to royal life meant peasants like us were left in the dust.

“Well, one thing is nice,” I said nonchalantly. “At least my gut instinct was right.”

Travis scrunched his face, swiping his deodorant off the counter in the adjoining bathroom and spraying it on. “What’s that?”

“Remember how I said she was just like Christian? Acting as if she was

better than all of us because she was related to royalty?”

He snorted at my comment. “Man, you really are thick, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m a genius. I had her pegged the moment she walked through the doors.” Reading up on her and her family the past few days only made my confidence in this matter grow.

I based my initial impression of Maggie Davies on an assumption. Now it all made sense. She wasn’t smug because she was *related* to royalty; she used her snark and sass as a weapon *because* she was royalty.

She didn’t act like she was above everyone else like Christian did, because all he had was clout. She acted the way she did because she *knew* she was better. She not only had a title to her name and a tiara on her head, but an entire kingdom in her future.

The only thing my future held was uncertainty.

While sliding a button-down over his head, Travis paused before answering. “No, mate, what you’re doing is looking for excuses.”

I glanced at the time. It was a debate we already had multiple times. Now, we had mere minutes to make it to the dining hall.

“Excuses for what?” I finally asked, buttoning my own shirt and looping my tie around my neck.

“To hate Maggie.”

“I have plenty of reasons to hate her already. I could write you an entire book of reasons.”

“And they’d all be utter bullshit.”

I blinked at him, completely lost. “No, they are genuine. Every last one of them. Starting with—”

“Starting with, you’re actually in love with her, but hating her is an easier way to cope with how she hurt you. That you really miss her so much, your heart has shattered and you can’t deal with the pain. Creating these false fantasies of yours is a distraction. But guess what, asshole? You can’t fool me. My job as best friend is to knock you on your thick skull when you’re

being a prat.”

I stopped, one hand on the doorknob to the bathroom, the other jammed into my hair, holding it in place so I could grab an elastic from the counter top.

“My skull isn’t thick—”

“We need to make a plan,” Travis interrupted, holding the door to our room open. We had to hurry to make it before Miss Duphrey closed the dining hall doors.

“A plan for *what*, exactly?”

A wicked grin crossed Travis’ face. “To get her back, of course.”

I dropped both hands and cocked my head. “Are you insane? We’re not talking about a random girl from Carriageton House anymore. We’re talking about the princess of the entire British empire, Travis. The first in line to the throne. One that lives in a *palace*. And you called me thick, honestly.”

I pushed past him and continued down the hall, pretending he hadn’t said anything. It ran through my head the rest of the day.

It would be near impossible. But near impossible was never a zero probability.

After the year we had together, after the miniscule amount of time we had together... didn’t we deserve the chance?



CHAPTER 36

Maggie

The quiet killed me.

I got accustomed to the dull murmur that seemed to be around every corner at Waversmore. No matter where I was, there were always people.

It was the same here at the palace, just on a different scale. Staffers adorned the rooms like decor, yet not a single person my age was present. The staff here shut up the moment I walked in, and at Waversmore, I was almost invisible. No one stopped talking because of me.

Most of all... the palace didn't have my friends.

It didn't have Ollie.

I had only been home a few days, after staying at the undisclosed location for three days, per Esme's instructions. I came back late at night, in a car with Mum, the windows tinted. Had someone been waiting, which there were a few media outlets camped outside the palace gates, they would have assumed it was Mum's car, with only Mum inside.

That was the plan, at least.

Esme stopped telling me the news the day after I arrived. She saw how upset it was making me to listen to the gossip and rumours swirling around, and the students who decided they needed their side of the story heard.

By then, word got out that I left the school, so naturally, everyone wanted their fifteen minutes of fame at my expense. Especially Kenzie and Camille. They were the first to speak up. To no one's surprise, they pretended we were best friends. All the media outlets wanted exclusive interviews with them. Camille used the fact that we shared a bathroom to her advantage, while Kenzie spouted lie after lie about how "close" the two of us were.

After her second interview, I stopped listening.

While with Auntie Ellie, my hair was stripped and dyed my natural dark colour, my glasses taken away, and they brought my vast array of skirts and pantsuits over from home. It was a change from my daily uniform, but one I didn't want.

Looking in the mirror for the past few days gave me a fright; I got so used to my purple locks and cat-eye glasses that I almost didn't recognise myself. Mum and my siblings never knew me when I looked like that, so they thought nothing was amiss.

Seeing them was the only bright spot to my sudden return home. Getting hugs from the twins felt like pieces of my soul coming back together. Even the side hug I got from Xavier made me smile.

The only person I had yet to have a lengthy conversation with was Dad. He was out of the country on a state visit when everything went down. He was in touch with Mum via phone, but hadn't asked to talk to me yet. He was supposed to return today. I'd rather take another Statistics exam than sit and talk with him.

Falling back onto my bed, I stole a look at the clock. It was mid-day, and I was as bored as I could possibly be. At school, I would have been headed toward lunch right now, with Lily by my side, waiting for Travis and Ollie to

join our table.

Or maybe they wouldn't. Maybe breakfast that last day was a fluke. Maybe it was all a fluke.

So many thoughts ran through my head over the last few days that I couldn't tell what was real and what wasn't anymore. Did Ollie just use me for my guitar playing skills? The gig meant a lot to him; he really needed those scouts to notice him.

It wasn't the most likely scenario, but one I had spent a lot of time perfecting in my head.

Before I could dive back down into the negative thought territory, someone knocked on my door. I had Mum order all staff out of my wing, so it was up to me to open it.

I knew who it was before I even had my hand on the knob.

"Hi, Dad," I said meekly, poking my head out into the hall.

Dad turned and faced me, his matching set of blue eyes locking onto mine. He had a few more wrinkles around his eyes than I remembered, and a small silver streak atop his head.

But he was still my dad. The person I went to for every scraped knee growing up. The one I spent countless nights in the kitchens eating strawberry shortcake with and discussing the political wrongdoings he dealt with daily.

"Oh, Maggie. I've missed you," he said, wrapping me up in his arms. My heart shattered into a million pieces when I didn't even think I had any pieces left to shatter.

With his arm still around my shoulder, he guided me back into my room, closing the door behind us.

I wanted him to yell at me. I wanted to hear him explode, tell me how reckless I was, what a radical move it was to run off like that. How attending Waversmore wasn't the life he planned for me.

I needed someone besides myself to tell me I was wrong and that

everything was my fault.

I got none of it. Instead, the sombre look on his face made me burst into tears. I cried on his shoulder for what seemed like hours, his arms holding me as I let out all the frustration and negativity of the past week.

Dad sighed and tipped my chin up to face him. He went to wipe away my tears, but I turned my head and pulled out of his reach. He didn't know, or need to know, that gesture reminded me too much of Ollie and the way he brushed over my scar, wiping away my tears.

The scar faded enough to be covered by my makeup. In another few months, it wouldn't be there at all. Maybe then I would tell my parents what happened. But maybe not.

"Sweetheart..." Dad started. I hiccupped, holding back another sob. The tone in his voice was so different from the last time we spoke, from the argument that forced me out of this home, running away to my aunt's house.

When I left, I never expected to be gone long. I wanted a little space, some clarity, to shine a light on my situation.

What I got instead was an entire experience, friendship, loyalty... and love.

Tears sat on my eyelids, threatening to spill over once more. Dad shook his head, staring at his shoes.

"You came back," he whispered, his hands turning over and over in his lap now.

My brows furrowed. "Of course I came back. Didn't you hear what happened?"

He looked at me, the sadness in his eyes evident. "I did. But that's not what I mean."

"You thought... you... no. Dad, you didn't think..." I was flabbergasted. There was no way Dad thought I wouldn't be coming *home*.

Straightening his back and his tie, he nodded. "When your mum said you were at Ellie's, my mind automatically turned to what she did all those years

ago. How unhappy she was, how I never really saw it until it was too late. I thought you went to her because... well, because I pushed you too hard, too soon. I figured you left because you wanted to follow her footsteps, not mine.”

I gasped, my hands flying to my chest, my fingers grabbing at my necklace. “Dad, no! I would never! Renouncing my place in line to the throne was never a thought. I can’t believe you... Dad, I’m so sorry.” The dam burst, tears spilling down my cheeks once more.

A lone tear rolled down Dad’s cheek too. “No, princess, I’m sorry. I am so sorry I couldn’t see what I was doing hurt you. That I pushed you too fast, too soon. I’m sorry I constantly broke our agreement. I’m sorry you felt threatened by me. and I’m so sorry I was horrible enough that you needed to leave. My heart burst when I found out, each day you were gone chipping away at it. I’m so glad you are home now, and safe here again.”

I wrapped my arms around his torso and hugged him tight. “I missed you too, Dad.”

“Tell me about school. The good parts,” he whispered, resting his chin on top of my head like I was a little girl again. “Mum tells me you dyed your hair purple? That *had* to be Ellie’s doing.”

I let out a giggle, the feeling unfamiliar in my chest. “I did. And it was. Dad, I rocked it. It looked so cool...”

For the next hour, Dad and I talked. I told him everything from the first day, Headmistress Tavers, my room, my house, the art building. I even told him about Miss Duphrey, who he said reminded him of a cook he had growing up in the palace. We swapped stories when they matched, but mostly... he *listened*.

I hadn’t been able to have a real conversation with him, one where we didn’t argue, in a long time. Longer than I could remember at this point.

We were both laughing over the time I spilled an entire can of paint while working on my part of a mural, and how Jennifer had accidentally walked

through it, leaving blue footprints down the hall. Miss Kelley left it, calling it symbolic art.

A deep sigh followed by a small snuffle broke our attention. There, in the doorway, was Mum. I missed her something fierce while I was away, but seeing her in person now only made me realise just how much.

“Well, isn’t this a lovely picture,” she whispered, dabbing a tissue at the corner of her eye. “I can’t remember the last time I came to this room and didn’t have to break the two of you up.”

Dad rose and went to stand by her, slipping an arm around her waist and pulling her in tight. They were quite the couple. I stared at them a moment, taking a mental snapshot, and remembering their love story. How they were forced together for publicity at first, and how they ended up falling for each other.

To this day, Dad never looked elsewhere while Mum was in the room. He only had eyes for her and let everyone know it. Dad deferred to her in many situations, taking her advice almost more than his actual advisors.

He would burn down the world to protect Mum. Or myself or my siblings. There was nothing more important to Dad than the five of us.

“Are you alright, sweetheart?” Dad asked. I blinked, the two of them staring back at me questioningly.

Tucking my lips in, I nodded and looked down at the floor.

Seeing them together made my heart hurt so badly I wanted to rip it out of my chest.

I had a fleeting moment with that feeling of love. The overwhelming desire to be close to someone, to be touching them in some way, just so you stay rooted to the ground. Because otherwise, the feeling inside was so great, it felt as if you could be lifted straight to the heavens.

Mum gave Dad a kiss on the cheek, and ushered him out of the room, closing the door behind him.

“I know that look. There’s a boy, isn’t there?” she asked, sitting next to

me. If I opened my mouth to answer, the floodgates would burst again. I didn't think I had any tears left to cry at this point.

Gulping down a sob, I squeaked out, "Yes. There is. Was."

"The drummer?"

My head whipped up to look at her. How did she know? Her soft smile brought warmth to my breaking heart.

"Have you seen the video?" she asked softly, resting her hand on my knee. I laid mine over it and shook my head.

"No. I... I can't."

"Where's your laptop?" she asked. I hesitated, not wanting to see what she was clearly going to show me. Standing and crossing the room, I slid my computer out of the drawer of my desk. I hadn't much need for it since I got home, but was glad they gave it back to me. They hadn't given me my phone back, though. Princesses didn't have a need for their own mobile.

And I almost didn't want it back. There was no need for it here. If I wanted to call someone, Esme would patch it through. And considering the way I left school, no one was calling me.

Everything was up in the air; I only had my assumptions about what they thought about me now.

"I want you to watch the whole thing first. Just watch," Mum said, pressing play once she got it lined up.

I held my breath, forcing myself to keep my eyes glued to the screen. As soon as it was over, I tore away, dabbing at the tears in the corners of my eyes.

"Again, Margaret. But this time, don't watch yourself. Watch the drummer."

Confusion took over my face. What did she mean, watch the drummer?

She didn't give me a moment to ask before pressing play again. I did as she wanted, keeping my eyes trained on Ollie in the background.

Mum didn't know, but this was mere minutes after our first kiss. The way

he came at me as if I was oxygen he so desperately needed.

The pain in my chest was excruciating as I locked my eyes on Ollie. My jaw dropped a moment later as I watched.

His playing was flawless, but that wasn't what kept my attention. What made me gasp was the fact that he rarely took his eyes off *me* during the whole performance. He tracked me across the stage as I played, smiling in my direction between songs, as if he held a secret.

The way he looked at me for the entire video was as if I were on a pedestal.

"Why did you show me this?" I croaked out after it finished. If I hurt before, this made it worse. It took me days to stop crying over Ollie after I left Waversmore so suddenly. Not being able to explain or say goodbye, straight up crushed me.

"No one who looks at someone like that can just forget them, Maggie. You say 'was', but I disagree. That sort of look doesn't come with feelings that disappear overnight."

I slid the laptop down the bed and snuggled under my covers. My mood dampened. I just wanted to be left alone. All the happiness I had laughing with Dad disappeared now, replaced with the sad thoughts overwhelming my mind.

"All I'm saying, Maggie, is to give it a chance. We'll figure it out, alright?" She patted my leg over the covers and stood.

Before reaching the door, she turned again. "Also, anything you want to do for your birthday coming up?"

I shook my head. "You plan it."

She gave a small smile and left the room, leaving me alone with my tears once more.



CHAPTER 37

Maggie

The eighteenth birthday of the crown princess should have been a monumental day, one full of parties, dignitaries, and maybe even fireworks.

I didn't feel any different when I woke up this morning. The birds tweeted their happy songs, and the sun streamed through my window. I felt just the same as I had yesterday—lonely, sad, and nervous.

Today was going to be the first time I appeared at an official event in almost a year. Esme assured me there would be no media. The palace photographers would take the photos for today, but no journalists would be allowed in. They classified it as a private family affair, as all other birthday parties were.

Usually the crown princesses' eighteenth birthday would be a public event, a coming-of-age type thing. But after the past year, my parents left it private, only inviting our closest family members. Grandmum and Grandpop would be there, Auntie Charlotte and her family, and, of course, Auntie Ellie and her

family, too.

I didn't want to see Auntie Ellie. The disappointment on her face when we met in Sheffield was enough to last me a lifetime. The lectures I had for the next three days as we laid low rivalled those from Dad. They were twins, and apparently that extended to their guilt trip style as well.

It was all my fault. I accepted the blame and knew everything that came after directly resulted from my actions. Sean and Ellie specifically said no public events. They told me to hide out and not make a spectacle of myself in any manner.

Then I went and joined a band, and performed at a pub in the middle of a village next to campus. Even though the gig was private, the school did not sanction it, meaning I had no protection whatsoever.

It didn't take long for the world to connect the dots after the video came out. It still surprised me that no one at school made the connection. I must have done something right to fool them for so long.

It was all about first impressions—no one was “looking” for me at the time, therefore no one had to be suspicious. Even when I said Ellie was my aunt, once I told them I was from Sean's side, they had no reason to suspect me.

Plus, what princess had purple hair, wore solid black cat-eye glasses, and attended boarding school hours away from downtown London? None. I hadn't even been seen in a real school in almost seven years by that point.

Guests would start arriving in less than an hour. Mum was outside in the gardens with Grandmum setting up. She said she wanted it to be a surprise, so I wasn't allowed out. Mum chose an early sunset garden party, a blend of formal and informal.

Which was fine by me. I didn't really want a party, anyway.

My idea was to greet the guests, cut the cake, circulate for a few minutes, and get out of there. I wasn't feeling very social, and the dreaded small talk made me cringe. I was refined in the art of conversation, knowing how to

mingle politely. I could hold a debate in three languages, and my memory recall of names and faces could beat the best of them.

But today... I didn't want to use any of those skills. I wanted to stay in my room, read a book, take a bath, or just watch the party from a window.

Not even my guitar brought me joy these days. I used to love to sit and strum for hours on end, allowing whatever came to me to be played. I had barely cracked open the case since it arrived with the rest of my stuff from Waversmore.

Mum had taken care of all my school items when they came. My uniforms, books, school work, and anything related to Waversmore were put into boxes and stored. She only brought my personal items back to my bedroom—which included my guitar and art supplies. Neither of which I wanted.

“Princess Margaret? Are you about ready?” Esme knocked on the door.

I turned, taking one last glance in the mirror, and sighed. The dress I wore was beautiful—the lightest shade of lilac, strapless, with an overlay of lace from the bodice all the way down through the full skirt that puddled on the floor. Even with my stilettos, it still draped around me.

My excellent pick of evening gowns for formal events had become my signature of sorts. I took pride in my relationships with designers from all across the kingdom and was honoured when they chose me to wear their amazing creations.

They were beautiful dresses, and I always felt stunning in them. Tonight, though, it didn't match my mood, and therefore fell flat.

The other thing out of place was the small tiara on my head. It nestled into my half-updo, sparkling on top of my head. It wasn't anything extravagant, but it had been so long so I wore one, I almost forgot what it looked like.

The image of my buns from the gig flashed through my mind. The before and after, then and now. How quickly life changed from one thing to another.

Maggie Davies didn't exist anymore. Princess Margaret was back.

Straightening the tiara, I gave up on staring at the stranger in the mirror.

This was my life. Getting a tiny glimpse at being a normal teenager was fun. Now it was time to head back to reality.

“Coming!” I shouted as I headed toward the door. Esme opened it before I could and ushered me out and down the hallway.

Like every other event, she caught me up to speed as we power walked down the hallways, as fast as I could in my heels, anyway.

As we got to the doors leading outside, I stopped, knowing the guards would need to announce my arrival. Even if it was just family and close friends, I was still the birthday girl, and traditions were traditions.

Pausing behind the doors, I sucked in a deep breath, filling my lungs, and held it a moment. Esme rested a comforting hand on my shoulder as I let the air out slowly through pursed lips.

Nodding at each guard, I clasped my hands behind my back, squared my shoulders, and lifted my chin, ready to be announced formally to all the guests waiting on the other side.

As soon as the doors opened, I plastered on my best smile, ready to convince everyone that everything was normal and nothing had changed.

The smile fell after taking only three steps onto the garden patio.

I whipped around to look for Esme, but she disappeared. The doors behind me closed with a soft click.

No one was outside. Not Dad, Mum, my siblings, anyone.

Petals lined the path leading from the patio, through the hedges, and to the main gardens, as if they were leading me somewhere.

The moment I began my walk, music started playing. It was far enough away that I couldn't make out the song, but seemed to come from the gazebo in the middle of the garden.

Looking around wildly, the curtains in the door fluttered as my gaze passed over them. Someone was watching, but who? And why?

The music got louder as I made my way through the hedge maze, my heart beating fast, my eyes wide open now. I had no idea what was going on or

where everyone was.

Did Mum make it a surprise party? It wouldn't be much of a surprise, since I knew about it and knew who was coming. Was there a present out there they wanted me to be surprised with?

The hedges lowered as I got closer to the middle, almost to the gazebo I spent so much time at as a kid.

My mind jumped to my twelfth birthday, the one where we simultaneously found out Grandmum's cancer was in remission and she was renouncing the throne in favour of my father.

I fled to this gazebo then, thinking she had ruined my party, taking all the spotlight off of me. In reality, it was the best news possible; Grandmum had been healthy ever since, and Dad has been a wonderful King.

This birthday couldn't be more different. I'd wanted all eyes on me at that party. In this one, I'd rather hide.

Taking it one step at a time now, I gulped back my nerves and stopped completely when my mind registered what was playing.

This had to be a prank. My hands flew to my face, covering my mouth and holding back a sob.

Whoever was doing this was horrible. This was a terrible prank to play on me.

The opening chords, *my* opening guitar chords, to Ollie's Song spread through the gardens. My lips quivered as tears sprung up. Lifting my head to the sky, I fanned my face with my hands. I couldn't mess up all of my makeup, not when the palace photographer had to get photos of me to prove my return home.

My pulse pounded in my ears, almost louder than the music itself.

I wanted to run. I wanted to head straight back to my room and refuse to come out, birthday party be damned.

But I couldn't move. I was frozen to this spot, listening to the song that made me feel more for someone than I ever felt before.

I closed my eyes, letting the music take over me, letting the emotions run their course.

The vocals came next. I braced myself to hear my voice singing the words that I hummed in my head almost every day.

They didn't come.

Not with *my* voice, anyway.

I gasped, my eyes opening wide. Lifting my skirt, I didn't walk the rest of the way to the gazebo—I ran.



CHAPTER 38

Ollie

My palms were so sweaty, my drumsticks almost slipped out of my hands multiple times.

We were playing to a soundtrack, but the audio was only Maggie's part. Travis, Charlie, and I were playing live. And hopefully loud enough for her to hear.

I had no idea where she was. Her mother, the freaking *Queen*, told me to start playing when the guard to our left gave the signal. Lyrics were coming up any second, and my throat was almost closed up in fear.

What if she heard us and ran away? What if she didn't want to see us? Or, more specifically, me?

Travis shot me a glance and a nod. He couldn't hold off, especially since we were playing with a track.

When the two of us decided on this plan, we knew there was no way we could leave out Maggie's guitar. It made the song what it was. Without it, it didn't hold the emotion, the feeling, the depth.

We added one change—we took out Maggie's voice.

And replaced it with mine—live.

I had never sung in public before. I barely sang alone in the studio. This may be my one and only time being on vocals, but it was worth it. She was worth it.

Travis nodded again, a look of desperation on his face. We were in front of the entire royal family; it wasn't the time to screw around.

So, I sang. My voice cracked at first, but I kept going.

One line down.

Two.

I finished the first verse and Maggie still hadn't appeared.

We pushed through, Charlie pale at the keyboard. He didn't look anywhere except for the keys, not that I blamed him.

I held the last note of my part an extra beat as Travis sent us to a short interlude of him and Maggie playing. I used that time to wipe my hands on my dress pants as quickly as I could.

Lifting my sticks back into the air to come in on the downbeat, I froze.

The music kept going around me, without my drums, but I didn't hear it.

All I saw was her.

She was beautiful.

She was a princess.

Breathing became a conscious decision as I stared. The lights from the gazebo lit her face.

This wasn't the Maggie Davies I knew. This was Princess Margaret.

And she was gorgeous.

The purple hair and glasses were gone. A long, flowing evening gown replaced the skirt and blazer uniform combo.

I scanned her up and down multiple times, not wanting to forget a single detail.

There was a tiara on her head. A real, true tiara nestled into her chocolate brown hair, which hung half up and half in gentle waves to her shoulders.

Jewels adorned her ears, sparkling in the lights.

I stood, my eyes locked on hers, tears rolling down her cheeks as she clutched her necklace. Travis moved out of my way as he and Charlie finished up the song as best they could without drums or vocals.

I didn't notice them. I didn't notice anything outside of the girl in front of me.

Standing toe to toe with her, her head now almost matching mine due to her heels, I exhaled a breath I had been holding since the moment she left the dining hall.

She was here. Right in front of me. And I had no idea what to say.

"You're a princess," I whispered.

Her glassy eyes shone with a mixture of happiness and sadness as she shook her head softly.

"No. I'm a person. Just a girl. The same Maggie-"

"My Maggie," I breathed, slipping my hands around her cheeks and lifting her chin.

I brushed away the tears as they fell, never taking my eyes off hers.

"My Maggie," I repeated. She bit her lip and nodded her head so slightly, I almost didn't catch it.

"Yours."

That's all it took before I crashed my mouth onto hers, capturing what I had lost. She tasted as sweet as I remembered, but this time was different.

This kiss lit fireworks in my head, sending tingles from my fingers to my toes.

Maggie wound her arms around my back, pressing herself against me. I couldn't let go. I wouldn't let go. Not again.

I felt as if we were raised to the heavens. There was no place I'd rather be than in Maggie's arms right now.

A throat cleared behind us after what felt like only seconds. We broke apart, jumping back a foot from each other.

“Dad!” Maggie whispered, exasperated.

All the blood drained from my body as I died right there on the spot. Reality came crashing down, hard.

The girl in front of me was no longer *just* Maggie Davies.

She was Crown Princess Margaret, the eldest daughter of the King of England.

Who now stood right behind me.

“Your majesty,” I said in a low voice, turning around, taking a step back, and deepening into a bow. I held it for an extra second, not really wanting to face him.

“Dad...” Maggie said again, this time in a more of a warning tone. Was she scolding the *King*?

“I believe we hired this young man as entertainment for the party. Not *your* personal entertainment, Margaret,” the King stated in a stern voice that would have sent most people running.

I stood up straighter than I ever had before. My hand instinctively went for my tie, making sure it was knotted and straight.

Before looking at the King, I took one last helpless glance at Maggie. At Princess Margaret. At my Maggie.

My lips quirked as I found her rolling her eyes and sighing.

“Tell the guests I’ll be back in a few moments, would you?” she asked, grabbing my hand in hers, and using her other to lift her skirt.

Before her father could reply, she dragged me down another path, away from the gazebo and the party, away from the King.

“Thank you,” I whispered, pulling her hand into my arm and helping her walk down the path.

She beamed at me, the biggest smile I had yet to see on her face.

And I put it there.

“You’ll get used to him,” she said. “He’s really nothing to worry about unless he’s super stressed. And since I’ve been home, he’s been somewhat

calm. I'm hoping it stays this way."

I raised a brow as we came across a bench in front of more beautiful flowers.

"I'll get used to him?"

Maggie turned as we sat. "I mean... oh." Her face dropped.

Lifting her chin to face me, I smiled. The frown on her face broke my heart, so I fixed it the only way I thought would work.

"Maggie Davies. Princess Margaret. Your Highness. Whatever name you wish for me to call you, it doesn't change anything. The moment you left, my heart shattered into a thousand pieces, a type of pain I never knew even existed." She wrung her hands, but I stopped them with one of mine.

"Finding out who you truly are sent me into a frenzy. All the lies, the secrets, the hiding? The knife not only went through my heart, but it stabbed repeatedly every time I thought of you. And that was a lot."

A tear rolled down her cheek. I captured it with a gentle kiss.

"If you taught me one thing, it's not to judge anyone before I knew their story. Before I get to know them as a person. Because I made that mistake once, Maggie, and I won't do it again."

I took in a deep breath before continuing. "So, I'm here. I'm here to learn everything there is about Princess Margaret. About *you*. Because I had just started to get to know Maggie Davies, and she was the most amazing girl I had ever met. And I didn't have enough time with her. So please... don't run away this time. Give me the chance to know the real you. Give me the chance to love Princess Margaret just as much as I do Maggie Davies."

Tears were not only streaming down her face, but also down mine.

She let out a giggle, surprising me.

"We're one and the same, Oliver Hastings. And both Maggie Davies and Princess Margaret love all of you too." She grinned, grabbing both my hands in hers and bringing them up to her chest.

Reaching up and removing the tiara, she showed it to me. "And this? It's

just an accessory. It doesn't define who I am. *You* taught me that."

I brushed my lips against hers like a soft breeze. She leaned in for more, but I pulled away, teasing her.

"And you taught me what it's like to be loved. To have someone care about me for who I am. To care so much, they risk their own safety, their own life, to help me accomplish a dream. Which, by the way, was incredibly stupid of you," I added, lifting an eyebrow and chastising her.

She let out a huff and smirked. "It was my decision, though. You deserved it more than anyone. I would do it again in a heartbeat."

I laughed, shaking my head and capturing her face in my hands. Pressing my forehead to hers, I whispered, "Look at us, arguing over dumb things, just like always. But know this—I'll never put you in that kind of position again. I didn't know what I was asking of you then, but now that I do, making sure you're safe and happy is all I care about."

"And I'm so sorry about the lying, the secrets, about leaving. There's so much that happened—"

I cut her off with a wave of my hand. None of that mattered now. "There's only one thing I'm concerned about, and that's the here and now. Maggie..." I paused, not sure how to say what had been weighing heavily on my heart since the moment I saw her again. "You're a princess. You live in a palace. I'm a nobody. I don't deserve you and... you can't be with me."

The raised eyebrow returned, and I knew what was coming next. "Pardon me? I think *I* get to decide who I can and can't be with. If I recall, didn't I tell Kenzie I could figure out who I wanted to be in a relationship with, all the way back in the first week of school?"

I nodded, swallowing my fears. The sass was back. My Maggie was back.

She pressed a kiss to the top of my nose. "I'm glad you think that, because..."

I pulled away, confused. "Because why?"

She smiled, the corner of her lips spreading wide, her eyes twinkling with

glee. “Well, my mum’s music program happens to have an opening this summer. And I may have done some sleuthing and know you got at least one music scholarship starting in the autumn. So... if you want... Well, let me ask you one thing. Have you ever stayed in a palace before, Oliver Hastings?”

The air left my lungs then as I fell back onto the bench. Stay at the palace? Work with the Queen’s music program? It was one of the highest positions a musician could have; they never even took auditions. The summer term started in two days—

“I’ll take that as a yes, then?” Maggie asked, leaning her head on my shoulder and snuggling in close.

It was all so surreal. We were sitting in the gardens of the palace she called home, in the heart of London. My hopefully now girlfriend was a princess, one day to become Queen.

I couldn’t think of anything to say, so instead I nodded again.

“Let’s go meet the rest of the family then,” Maggie whispered, standing and holding her hand out to me.

Meeting the royal family was the scariest thing many people would ever have to do. But I already lived through scary times. Everything with my father, with school, with losing Maggie. If I could survive that, then meeting the family would be easy in comparison.

“Let’s go,” I added, winding my fingers through hers and pulling her to me.

I gave her one last kiss before departing toward the gazebo, one last show of my love before our dreams became reality.



EPILOGUE

Maggie

I couldn't stay away from my own party any longer. Ollie and I had to make our way back soon, even though I'd rather spend the entire night on this bench, in his arms.

The old saying was true—you didn't realize how much you missed someone until they were gone. Spending all those hours together in the music room, hanging out secretly when we could, and playing together... it all brought me more joy than I realised at the time.

"Do we have to?" Ollie groaned when I stood and extended my hand down to him. I nodded and shrugged.

"Unfortunately, yes. My mum will be besides herself if we don't show up. It is my party, after all," I answered as he slipped his hand into mine.

"Your mum," he repeated, brushing off invisible lint from his suit jacket. I had never seen him dressed up before, and I definitely was not disappointed with it.

Uniform Ollie was hot. Tuxedo Ollie was on fire. With his hair pulled

back, a slight hint of stubble on his chin, and his shoulders defining the suit jacket...

Well, I may have taken a moment to reconsider joining the party. There were plenty of places to hide in a palace, places no one would find us for a good while.

“Your mum is the *Queen*. Your dad is the *King*,” Ollie repeated to himself, as if he was trying to convince himself that it was all real.

“And my brothers are princes, and my sister a princess. I’m so glad you’re catching on quickly.”

Ollie shook his head and threw an arm around my shoulder. “Hysterical. Obviously it’s nothing to you, but to a peasant like me... this is insane. Absolutely bloody insanity.”

We took three steps down the path before Ollie dropped his arm and turned back. Reaching down, he grabbed my tiara from the bench. I dipped my head, allowing him to return it to its nest in my hair.

“I miss the purple,” he whispered as he settled it in place.

“Me too. Think I can bring it back?” I asked, looping my arm through his as we returned to our walk.

“Please and thank you,” he replied. “But... can princesses have purple hair?” His brow furrowed as he thought.

I laughed at his response. “Princesses can do whatever they want. Well, not whatever. But... I think purple hair may be alright. I’d have to check with Esme.”

“Who’s Esme?”

I sighed. There was so much for him to learn. Life at the palace was another world entirely. Sort of like learning to live at Waversmore without knowing anything about boarding schools prior. Ollie would need an education in palace living before he settled in. I got him up to speed with a lightning round of facts.

“And why am I living at the palace anyway? Students don’t usually stay at

the palace, do they?” Ollie asked just before we returned to the party. The music definitely came from a soundtrack now, not a live band. Which made me wonder where Travis and Charlie had gone to.

I bit my lip before responding. It was an idea Mum and I came up with, one we hoped to bring up to Ollie when he was sent his official music program invitation.

“Well... I figured you may not have another place?” I whispered. His dad’s house would be too far away to commute every day, and if his dad cut him off anyway...

Ollie nodded. “That’s true. I appreciate the thought. But... won’t your mum and dad have a problem with it? I mean, your dad is—”

“King James,” dad announced, coming from around the hedge and scaring us both half to death. “But you can call me Your Highness.” He extended his hand to a shell-shocked Ollie, who had dropped my arm from his and was standing slack jawed.

Ollie’s gaze pinballed between me and dad, unable to figure out what to do.

I sighed. “Dad, stop it. You’re freaking him out.”

The serious look on Dad’s face lifted as he broke into a smile. The same smile he had on every day since I returned home. The same one he used when I joined him for late night strawberry shortcake in the kitchens, just like we used to do when I was younger.

Ollie cleared his throat after regaining his confidence. “Your Highness, sir. King James, sir. A pleasure to meet you.” I let him bow, as per custom, but pulled him back to standing when Dad started chuckling.

“I wish I could say I’ve heard a lot about you, young man, but my daughter here seems to be quite tight lipped.” Dad’s glare turned toward me, but I just shrugged. While Ollie had been on my mind, he hadn’t been something I wanted to talk about. It hurt too much.

“Well I’ve known all about you since the moment Maggie returned home.

That video of your band was absolutely amazing,” Mum piped in, coming to stand by Dad’s side.

Just when I didn’t think Ollie’s eyes could be wider, they did. They looked like they were going to pop out of his head.

“Thank you, Your Highness. Queen Zara. Um…”

“And I think that’s enough for now. Dad, Mum, please excuse us,” I said, grabbing Ollie’s hand.

“It was a pleasure to meet you. And please don’t let my husband scare you. We are just Margaret, *Maggie’s*, parents to you, Oliver dear,” Mum said before we left. I spied a food table off to the side—if there was anything to make us both feel better, it would be finger foods.

Ollie managed to nod as I pulled him away. Once we were out of earshot of my parents, I whispered to him, “you can breathe now.”

A huge woosh of air left his lungs as he bent over and placed his hands on his knees. “Maggie, how do you do that every day?”

I raised an eyebrow, humored by his nervousness. “What, deal with my parents? It’s a tough job. Almost one a princess should have.” I pointed to my tiara and let out a giggle.

“I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to knowing you’re an actual princess. And your parents are the King and Queen.”

I looked at him, my head tilted. “You literally called me princess for almost a year.”

Ollie smacked himself on the forehead. “That ridiculous nickname. I have to hand it to Henry though. He nailed it from the start. I used it because I saw it bothered you.” He glanced at me, his jaw dropped momentarily. “And now I know *why* it bothered you. Bloody hell, Maggie, you thought we sussed you out from the first day, didn’t you?”

I piled small finger foods onto a little plate and handed it to Ollie. “Yes, I was quite unnerved. But when I realised what you were doing, it was fine.”

“Not fine. None of what I did to you was fine. But I plan on making it up

to you now that I'm here. And going to stay here." Ollie almost dropped his food at that realisation. "I'm staying in a palace. A *palace*. I need to find Travis."

Motion by the doors caught my attention. I turned, finding Christian hanging out by himself, away from the rest of the crowd to his left. His eyes bore holes into the back of Ollie, causing my anger to flare up.

Instead of telling Ollie about it, I spun around, looking for his best friend.

"Over there. He's with Charlie talking to my other cousins, Mary Kate and Jane. They're my Auntie Charlotte's girls."

He started toward them, but I grabbed his arm, holding him back a moment. "Oh, and Ollie?" I said, taking his plate and putting it on the table for a second.

I stole a quick look back at Christian, making sure he was watching before I continued. Resting my hands on Ollie's cheeks, I pulled him into a kiss.

After I broke away, and his confused, but happy eyes returned, I raised my voice loud enough for Christian to hear.

"I'm so incredibly proud of you for making it into Mum's music programme. You are going to do wonderful things there and it'll be the jumpstart to your career, I just know it."

I gave him another long kiss, turning our bodies slightly so we were more than visible to my cousin. After that, I sent Ollie on his way toward Travis, making sure he didn't turn around to see Christian.

There was nothing else to say. By the level of disgust and rage flashing over Christian's face, he got my message loud and clear.

Nobody messes with the Princess.



Want more Maggie & Ollie? Sign up for my newsletter to receive a bonus scene.

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Danielle Keil grew up in the Chicagoland area. A recent transplant, she is enjoying the Mississippi life, especially the pool in her backyard.

Danielle has been happily married for over 10 years, and has two young children, a daughter and a son, who are exact replicas of her and her husband.

She also is a fur mom to their Corgi, Cozmo, who loves barking, mud, and peanut butter.

Danielle's love language is gifts, her Enneagram is a 9w1, and she loves everything purple.

The way to her heart is through coffee, chocolate and tacos (extra guac).

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