

**NOELLE SEE**

*Dreams of Forever*

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*First edition*

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## One

# *Swipe Right to Destiny*



I never thought I'd end up on a dating app, but here I am. Everyone on here seems to be looking for the exact opposite of what I want. Speaking of, I'm looking for true love. Yes, I'm one of *those* girls. I want someone who shares my personality—a book nerd and artsy nature lover who adores animals.

But so far, all I've had are pointless conversations that lead nowhere. At least, that's how it feels until I come across *his* profile. He's handsome, a musician, and looks like he might be here for the right reasons. Would I even stand a chance with someone like him? I swipe right, thinking, *What's the worst that could happen?*

After swiping, I toss my phone aside. Honestly, talking to these guys is exhausting—they all seem to want the same thing: sex. That's the *one* thing I absolutely don't want. When I was younger, I was raped by a family friend, and ever since, the idea of sex has been terrifying. I'm not sure if I'll ever want it.

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Almost as soon as I set my phone down, it buzzes. Curious, I pick it up. We matched. *That's crazy*, I think. *I just swiped on him*. I've never matched with someone so quickly before. My heart races as I consider what to say. Is a simple "Hey" good enough? Or should I go with "Hey, how are you?" Would that be too much? Finally, I settle on just "Hey."

He responds immediately. "Hey."

I type back, "How are you?"

"I'm fine," he replies. "How are you?"

"I'm doing fine," I answer, even though my nerves from the other guys' comments are still nagging at me. Just as I start to type my next message, another one from him pops up.

"You're very beautiful. You should let me take you on a date sometime."

I pause, reading his message over again. *Maybe this wouldn't be so bad*. I reply, "Sure, just let me know when and where, and I'll be there."

His response is quick and confident. "No, I think I'll pick you up. Tomorrow night at 8. Be ready. What's your address, darling?"

I stare at the screen, stunned. I've been on my fair share of dates, but no one's ever offered to pick me up before. After a moment of hesitation, I type back, "100 Woodshire Dr."

"Wear something nice," he replies. "I'm taking you somewhere special."

*Special?* The idea surprises me. All my previous dates have been casual—T-shirts and jeans were the norm. But this? This feels different. I decide to put my phone down for the rest of the night. I'll need time to pick out an outfit and wind down before work tomorrow.

The next morning, my alarm goes off at 5:30. Just enough

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time to shower, get ready, eat something, and head to the coffee shop where I work. I arrive just in time to open and prepare for the day.

All day, my mind is on the date. I keep replaying our messages, imagining all the ways it could go right—or terribly wrong. Last night, I chose my outfit: a short, red spaghetti-strap dress that's a little sexier than my usual style. I'm both excited and anxious as the hours drag on.

By the time my shift ends at 5, I'm exhausted but determined. I head home, take my dog on a short walk, and start getting ready. My earlier excitement has morphed into nerves. My mind keeps spiraling: *What if this is a mistake?*

Still, I push through. I apply makeup that perfectly complements my dress and style my hair in a half-up, half-down look. By 7:30, I'm ready, with nothing left to do but wait. I decide to distract myself with a book, managing to get through ten chapters before my phone buzzes.

"I'm here," the message reads.

My heart skips. I grab my purse, take a deep breath, and head to the door.

## Two

### *The Perfect First Date*



The crisp evening air greets me as I step outside, clutching my purse tightly. My heels click softly against the pavement as I approach his car—a sleek black sedan that gleams under the streetlights. He steps out as I near, and for a moment, I can't help but take him in. He's even more handsome in person, with dark hair that falls just above his eyes and a confident, easy smile that makes my knees feel weak.

"Clarabelle?" he asks, his voice smooth and warm, like a favorite song.

"That's me," I reply with a small smile.

"You look stunning," he says, his eyes sweeping over my dress appreciatively but respectfully.

"Thank you," I manage to say, my cheeks warming.

He opens the car door for me—something no one has ever done before. I slide into the passenger seat, the leather interior cool against my skin. As he rounds the car and settles into the



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driver's seat, I realize my nerves are starting to fade, replaced by something lighter, almost giddy.

"So," I say, buckling my seatbelt, "where are we going?"

"That's a surprise," he replies with a wink, pulling out onto the road.

The city lights blur past as we drive, the radio softly playing a playlist of indie rock and acoustic love songs. We chat easily, falling into a rhythm that feels surprisingly natural. He asks about my favorite books, and I light up, talking about the worlds I've escaped into and the characters I've fallen in love with. He listens intently, occasionally glancing over at me with a small, thoughtful smile.

Before I know it, we've arrived. He parks the car and hurries around to open my door.

"We're here," he says, offering me his hand.

I take it, stepping out to find myself in front of a cozy Italian bistro tucked into a quiet corner of the city. Warm light spills from the windows, and the scent of fresh herbs and garlic wafts through the air.

"I hope you like Italian," he says, his hand still resting lightly on mine.

"I love it," I reply, genuinely touched by the thoughtfulness of his choice.

Inside, the restaurant is intimate and inviting. Soft candlelight dances on the tables, and a violinist plays a romantic melody in the corner. He pulls out my chair, and I sink into the plush cushion, feeling like I've stepped into a dream.

The meal is exquisite—freshly baked bread, creamy pasta, and a decadent tiramisu that we share at the end, laughing as he playfully swipes a bit of whipped cream onto my nose.

Conversation flows effortlessly. He tells me about his music,

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the bands he's played with, and his dream of composing soundtracks for films. I share my love for writing and how it feels to pour my heart into words on a page. For the first time in a long time, I feel truly seen.

After dinner, he suggests a walk, and I eagerly agree. We stroll down a quiet path by the water, the moon casting a silver glow over the rippling surface. He pauses, looking at me with a soft, almost shy expression.

"I have to admit," he says, "this is the best date I've ever been on."

My breath catches, and for a moment, all I can do is stare at him. "Me too," I whisper.

He takes my hand again, and we walk in comfortable silence, the cool breeze brushing against our faces.

When he finally drives me home, he insists on walking me to my door. I turn to thank him, but the words catch in my throat as his eyes meet mine.

"Goodnight, Clarabelle," he says softly.

"Goodnight, Max," I reply, my voice barely above a whisper.

He hesitates, then leans in, his lips brushing my cheek—a sweet, lingering kiss that sends a flutter through my chest.

As I step inside and close the door behind me, I can't stop the smile spreading across my face. For the first time in what feels like forever, I feel hope.

## Three

### *Spend the Day Texting*



Saturday mornings were my favorite—slow, quiet, and filled with the possibility of doing absolutely nothing. I woke up later than usual, sunlight spilling through the curtains and warming my face. Reaching for my phone, I noticed a new notification.

**Max:** *Good morning, beautiful. Did you sleep well?*

A smile tugged at my lips as I stretched and typed back.

**Me:** *Good morning! I did, thank you. How about you?*

His reply came almost instantly.

**Max:** *It was okay. My cat decided my stomach was the perfect trampoline at 6 a.m., so I've been up for a while.*

I laughed, imagining the scene, and our conversation flowed easily from there. He sent me a picture of his cat, a fluffy orange tabby with a mischievous glint in its eyes, sprawled on his lap.

**Me:** *He's adorable! What's his name?*

**Max:** *Benny. He's kind of a menace, but I love him.*

As the morning unfolded, our texts grew longer, diving

deeper into who we were beyond the surface.

**Max:** *So, tell me about your family. Are you close?*

I hesitated for a moment, unsure how to describe something so complicated.

**Me:** *I guess you could say we're close, but it's... messy. My mom and I have always been tight—she's my rock—but my dad left when I was ten. That threw everything off for a long time. What about you?*

His reply took a little longer, and I wondered if I'd said too much too soon.

**Max:** *My family's complicated too. My parents are still together, but they're not exactly happy. They argue all the time. My little sister, Emma, keeps me sane. She's only 14, but she's smarter than me half the time.*

**Me:** *Emma sounds amazing. Siblings can be a lifesaver, huh?*

**Max:** *Definitely. She's why I'm working so hard right now. I'm trying to save up enough to help her go to the art school she dreams about.*

My heart softened at his words. There was something so earnest about the way he talked about his sister, and it only made me like him more.

We texted through breakfast, then lunch. As I sipped coffee and lounged on the couch, my phone lit up with his messages, and I felt a connection growing between us, piece by piece.

**Max:** *Can I ask you something?*

**Me:** *Of course.*

**Max:** *What made you join Tinder? Like, what are you hoping to find?*

I stared at the screen, biting my lip. It was a fair question, and one I'd been asking myself ever since I downloaded the app.

**Me:** *Honestly? I want something real. I'm tired of meaningless*

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*connections. I want to feel like I matter to someone, you know?*

His reply was quick and reassuring.

**Max:** *I get that. Same here. My last relationship felt like I was just... convenient. Like I wasn't enough.*

**Me:** *That's awful. I'm sorry you went through that.*

**Max:** *Thanks. What about you? What's your past relationship history like?*

I hesitated again, feeling the weight of vulnerability pressing down on me. But something about Max felt safe, like I could tell him the truth without judgment.

**Me:** *I've had a few relationships, but none of them lasted. The last one ended because he wanted things I wasn't ready for. It's hard to explain, but... I've got a complicated relationship with intimacy.*

**Max:** *You don't have to explain if you're not ready, but thank you for sharing that with me. I respect your boundaries, Clarabelle.*

Tears pricked at my eyes. His words were simple, but they carried a kindness I wasn't used to.

**Me:** *Thank you for saying that. It means a lot.*

The conversation shifted after that, growing lighter again as we talked about our lives and the struggles we were facing.

**Max:** *Being a musician is amazing, but it's tough, too. Gigs aren't always consistent, and money's tight. I'm working part-time at a music store to make ends meet, but it's not enough sometimes. What about you?*

**Me:** *I get that. I work at a coffee shop, and while I love the people I meet, it's not exactly a dream job. Plus, I'm trying to save up for school, which feels impossible most days.*

**Max:** *What do you want to study?*

**Me:** *Creative writing. I want to be an author someday, but it feels like a pipe dream.*

**Max:** *That's not a pipe dream. You're clearly passionate about it,*

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*and I bet you're amazing at it. What's stopping you?*

**Me:** *Money, mostly. And fear, if I'm being honest. What if I'm not good enough?*

**Max:** *Fear's a liar, Clarabelle. If writing makes you happy, then you owe it to yourself to try. I'll be your first reader when you're ready.*

His encouragement lit a small flame inside me, one I hadn't felt in a long time.

The hours slipped by as we shared pieces of ourselves—our favorite childhood memories, the songs that made us cry, and the moments that shaped who we were. Max's honesty was like a balm, soothing the parts of me that had felt unseen for so long.

By the time the sun began to set, our conversation had shifted to dreams for the future.

**Max:** *I want to compose music for movies one day. It feels impossible sometimes, but I'm holding onto it. What about you?*

**Me:** *I want to write a romance novel. Something raw and real, about people who find love despite all the odds.*

**Max:** *Sounds like a bestseller to me.*

**Me:** *You're biased.*

**Max:** *Maybe, but I mean it.*

As the day faded into night, I realized how much I'd opened up to him in just a few hours. He'd done the same, and the vulnerability between us felt like something rare and precious.

**Max:** *I've never spent an entire day texting someone before. You're something special, Clarabelle.*

**Me:** *Right back at you, Max.*

For the first time in a long time, I felt a glimmer of hope. Maybe, just maybe, I'd found someone who truly saw me—and wanted to stay.

## Four

### *A Month of Us*



A month had passed since that first date, and things between Max and I had slowly evolved into something deeper, something more real. It felt like we were building something solid, even though we were still just getting to know each other. Every conversation we shared, every text exchange, every time we hung out—it felt like another layer of us had been peeled back, revealing a connection that was undeniable.

At first, it was the little things that drew us closer. I found myself looking forward to every message, every phone call, like they were pieces of a puzzle I didn't even know I was trying to solve. We didn't rush into anything—there was no pressure to label us, no rush to define what we were. It just felt natural, like something that was meant to happen.

Max had this way of making me feel seen, of listening to me with an intensity that was rare. He'd ask about my childhood, my favorite books, my dreams—things I usually kept to myself.

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And I, in return, learned more about him than I could've imagined. I learned about his love for music—how he could get lost for hours writing songs, or how he'd pick up his guitar and just strum until the words came. I learned about his family, his past relationships, his fears, and his hopes for the future. The more I learned, the more I found myself drawn to him, captivated by his vulnerability and strength.

Some days, we'd spend hours texting, talking about everything and nothing. Other days, we'd meet up for coffee or a walk in the park, letting the world drift away around us while we shared the simplest of moments. There was no rush, no agenda. We were just... together.

I remember one Sunday afternoon, we decided to go for a hike in the woods near the city. The weather was perfect—crisp air, the leaves a burst of red and orange in the sunlight. We walked in comfortable silence for a while, until Max broke it.

"You know, I've never met anyone quite like you," he said, his voice soft but sincere.

I looked at him, trying to gauge if he was joking or being serious. He wasn't looking at me—his eyes were focused on the trail ahead.

"I don't know if that's a good thing," I teased, nudging him lightly.

He laughed, and it was one of those laughs that made me feel warm inside, like the kind you can't help but share when you're with someone who just gets you.

"I think it is," he said. "You're... different. You don't just talk to talk. You listen. You actually care about what people say, even the little things."

I smiled, feeling my heart flutter. "I think that's one of the best compliments I've ever gotten."



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We kept walking, the forest around us still and peaceful, like the world had paused for us. After a few minutes, Max reached for my hand, and the gesture felt so simple, so natural. I didn't pull away. Instead, I let him take my hand in his, the warmth of his fingers calming me in a way I didn't know I needed.

As the weeks went on, we continued to spend time together. I began to look forward to our late-night talks—those moments when everything felt real, and the world seemed smaller. He opened up to me about his past, about Sophie, about what had happened between them. And I did the same, sharing stories of my childhood, my family, the experiences that had shaped me.

I'll admit, there were moments of hesitation. There were days when the shadow of his ex seemed to loom over us, even though he assured me she was in the past. It wasn't that I didn't trust him, but the fear that I wasn't enough, that I could never live up to someone from his past, crept in at the edges of my mind.

But every time I had a doubt, Max would say something to put my fears to rest. He was patient with me, understanding my insecurities without ever making me feel weak. He never pushed me for more than I could give, and that made me trust him more than I thought possible.

There were days when we would spend hours on the phone, talking about everything from books to politics, from our favorite childhood cartoons to our biggest dreams. It wasn't about trying to impress each other—it was just two people finding comfort in each other's company.

One Friday night, we went to a small, cozy restaurant for dinner. It was one of those places with soft lighting, white tablecloths, and a menu that felt like it was meant to be read slowly, savored. We ordered our food and then spent the rest of the evening talking about the future, about the possibility of

us.

“So,” I said, glancing at him over the rim of my wine glass, “where do you see yourself in five years?”

Max thought for a moment before answering. “I think... I think I’d still be playing music. Maybe not on a stage, but somewhere. I don’t know. I just want to feel like I’m doing something that makes a difference, you know?”

I nodded, feeling a wave of admiration for him. “I get that. I feel the same way about writing.”

“Yeah?” he said, raising an eyebrow. “What do you want to write about?”

“Anything,” I said with a shrug. “Romance, mystery, maybe something that combines the two. I want to create worlds where people can lose themselves for a little while, you know?”

He smiled, his eyes soft and kind. “I think you’ll do it.”

And that was it—there was no need for more explanation, no need for grand promises. We both understood that we were on the same page, even if we weren’t entirely sure what the next chapter of our lives would look like.

That weekend, we went to a concert together, a local band Max was friends with. The music was loud, the crowd was buzzing with energy, but all I could focus on was Max beside me. Every glance, every touch, felt like it was part of the same beautiful story we were writing together.

As the month went on, I could feel the connection between us growing stronger. Max had become more than just someone I was dating; he was becoming someone I could picture in my life long-term. But even as I felt that pull toward him, I couldn’t shake the worry—what if this wasn’t enough? What if, in the end, he chose Sophie, or someone else entirely?

And then, after a month of laughter, long conversations, and

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stolen glances, Max said something that made my heart stop.

“I think I’m falling for you, Clarabelle.”

I blinked, my heart skipping a beat. “What?”

“I think I’m falling for you,” he repeated, his voice steady but full of meaning. “I know we’re still figuring things out, but... I feel it.”

And in that moment, everything shifted. I knew, deep down, that he meant it. That this wasn’t just something fleeting, something temporary. It felt real.

“I think I’m falling for you too, Max,” I whispered, the words feeling too good to be true.

We didn’t say anything more after that. There was no need. We simply sat there, in the quiet of the evening, knowing that what we had was something worth fighting for.

## Five

### *The Test*



## *The Test*

*Sunday morning arrives with an unsettling weight in my chest. I wake up to a new text from Max, and although it starts like any other, there's a tension that seems to linger between his words.*

**Max:** *Morning, beautiful. I need to talk to you about something.*

Those words—I need to talk to you about something—are never a good sign. My stomach twists as I sit up in bed, clutching my phone.

**Me:** *Good morning. Is everything okay?*

**Max:** *Can we meet up later? It's something I'd rather say in person.*

I hesitate, my mind running through every possible scenario. Did I say something wrong yesterday? Did I overshare?

**Me:** *Of course. What time?*

**Max:** *How about 2 p.m.? I'll pick you up.*

The hours between his text and the time he arrives feel like an eternity. My thoughts spiral, bouncing between optimism and dread. When his car finally pulls up, I take a deep breath and head outside.

He doesn't smile like he usually does when he sees me. Instead, his expression is serious, almost guarded. My chest tightens as I climb into the car.

"Hey," I say softly.

"Hey," he replies, keeping his eyes on the road as he pulls away from the curb.

We drive in silence for a while, the tension thick enough to cut with a knife. Finally, he pulls into a quiet park and turns off the engine.

"Clarabelle," he begins, turning to face me, "I really like you. I need you to know that before I say anything else."

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I nod, unsure of where this is going.

"But something came up last night," he continues. "My ex called me."

My stomach drops. "Your ex?"

"Yeah. Sophie." He sighs, running a hand through his hair. "We dated for two years, and when we broke up, it wasn't because we stopped caring about each other. It was just... timing. She moved to another state for a job, and we decided to let it go."

I swallow hard, trying to keep my voice steady. "Why is she calling you now?"

"She's back in town," he says, his eyes searching mine. "She wants to meet up and talk. She said she made a mistake leaving and that she wants to try again."

His words hit me like a freight train. The idea of him with someone else, especially someone he clearly still has history with, makes my chest ache.

"What... what do you want to do?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

"That's the thing," he says, his voice cracking slightly. "I don't know. I wasn't expecting this. I wasn't looking for her to come back into my life, and then I met you." He pauses, his gaze steady. "And you've been incredible, Clarabelle. You make me feel things I haven't felt in a long time. But I need to figure out what I'm feeling, and I didn't want to keep this from you."

I look down at my hands, twisting them in my lap. Part of me wants to tell him to forget about Sophie, to choose me. But another part of me knows that's not fair.

"Do you still have feelings for her?" I ask, bracing myself for the answer.

"I don't know," he admits, his voice heavy with frustration.

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"It's not like I'm in love with her, but she was a huge part of my life. And now you are, too. This is tearing me apart, Clarabelle."

The honesty in his voice cuts through my anger and fear, and for a moment, all I feel is sadness.

"What does she want?" I ask.

"She wants me to give her a chance to prove she's serious about us," he says. "But I don't want to hurt you in the process. That's why I need to figure this out now, before it goes any further with either of you."

I blink back tears, my heart pounding in my chest. This is too much, too soon. But even through the pain, I know he's trying to be honest, to do the right thing.

"Max," I say, my voice trembling, "I can't compete with someone you've loved for two years. If she's what you want, I'm not going to fight you on it. But if you choose her, you need to let me go completely. I can't be second place."

"You're not second place," he says quickly, his hand reaching for mine. "You're not. I just need time to figure this out. Will you give me that?"

I hesitate, my mind spinning. Everything in me wants to say yes, to hold on to him and hope he'll choose me. But I also know how much it will hurt if he doesn't.

"How much time?" I ask finally.

"A week," he says. "Just one week. I'll talk to Sophie, figure out where I stand, and then I'll know. But Clarabelle, I need you to know something. No matter what happens, meeting you has changed me. You've shown me what it feels like to really connect with someone again."

Tears spill over, and I look away, trying to collect myself. "Okay," I say after a long moment. "You have a week. But Max, don't string me along. If you want her, just tell me."

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He nods, his expression pained. "I won't. I promise."

The ride home is silent, the weight of our conversation hanging between us. When he pulls up in front of my house, I hesitate before getting out.

"Thank you for being honest," I say quietly.

"Thank you for understanding," he replies, his voice filled with emotion.

I shut the car door and watch as he drives away, my heart heavy with uncertainty.



## Six

### *Waiting*



The week crawled forward, each day slower than the last. Every morning, I woke up with a pit in my stomach, wondering if Max had made his decision yet. But the silence from him was deafening. His texts were infrequent, short, and lacked the warmth I'd grown to adore. I couldn't help but feel like I was losing him, and the thought gnawed at me constantly.

Monday morning started as most did. I woke up to my alarm blaring at 5:30 a.m., a sound I hated with a passion, and dragged myself out of bed. My dog, Lila, wagged her tail enthusiastically, already ready for her morning walk.

"Come on, girl," I said groggily, clipping on her leash. The cold air outside was sharp and bracing, waking me up more effectively than coffee ever could. As Lila sniffed every blade of grass, my mind wandered back to Max. Had he already made up his mind? Was he talking to Sophie right now?

The questions were endless, and by the time I got home, I felt

more drained than when I woke up.

Work was no better. The coffee shop was busier than usual, a steady stream of customers who barely looked up from their phones as they placed their orders. I plastered on a smile, but inside, my emotions churned.

“You okay, Clarabelle?” my coworker, Tanya, asked during a rare lull.

“Yeah,” I lied. “Just tired.”

She didn’t look convinced but didn’t press further, which I was grateful for. How could I even begin to explain the situation without sounding like I was living in a soap opera?

By the time my shift ended, I was exhausted in every way possible. I walked home, Lila greeting me excitedly at the door as if I’d been gone for days. Her unconditional love was a comfort I desperately needed.

That night, I tried to distract myself with a book, but every few pages, my eyes drifted to my phone. When a notification finally came through, my heart leapt—until I realized it was just an email.

I sighed, setting the book down and staring at the ceiling. *Why did I agree to wait a whole week?*

Tuesday wasn’t much better.

The routine was the same: wake up early, walk Lila, work a hectic shift, and come home to an empty apartment. The only difference was that Max did text me once that afternoon.

**Max:** *Hope your day’s going okay. Thinking of you.*

I read the message about a dozen times, searching for hidden meaning. Was he reassuring me? Trying to keep me at arm’s length? I debated how to reply before settling on something simple.

**Me:** *Thanks. Thinking of you too.*

## *Waiting*

The exchange was brief, and I couldn't help but feel the growing distance between us.

By Wednesday, I was in full-on survival mode. I buried myself in work, volunteering to take on extra tasks just to keep my mind occupied. Tanya noticed.

"Okay, spill it," she said as we cleaned the counters after closing.

"Spill what?" I asked, feigning ignorance.

"You've been a zombie all week. Is it a guy?"

I hesitated before nodding. "It's complicated."

"Isn't it always?" she said with a laugh. "Do you want to talk about it?"

I did, desperately, but the words felt too heavy to share. "Not really," I admitted.

Tanya nodded, respecting my boundaries, but her kindness made me feel a little less alone.

That night, I stayed up late scrolling through old messages from Max, reminding myself of how things used to feel. The jokes, the compliments, the way he made me feel like I was the only girl in the world—it all felt so far away now.

Thursday brought no relief. The days blurred together, my emotions swinging between hope and despair. I tried to focus on Lila, taking her on longer walks and spoiling her with treats, but even her happy energy couldn't fully pull me out of my funk.

Max sent another text that evening.

**Max:** *How's your week going?*

It felt like a placeholder, like he was checking a box rather than genuinely wanting to talk. Still, I replied.

**Me:** *Busy. You?*

**Max:** *The same. Can't wait for the weekend.*

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The weekend. His decision. The thought made my stomach churn, and I didn't reply again.

By Friday, I was emotionally drained. Every interaction felt like walking through quicksand, and even Lila seemed to sense my mood. She curled up beside me on the couch, resting her head on my lap as I mindlessly watched a show I wasn't even following.

I debated texting Max, asking if he'd made up his mind, but I stopped myself. I'd promised to give him the space he needed, no matter how much it hurt.

Tanya called that evening, surprising me.

"Hey," she said. "I was thinking we should grab drinks after work tomorrow. You need a break."

"I don't know," I said hesitantly.

"No excuses, Clarabelle," she insisted. "You're coming. I'll see you at eight."

I hung up, grateful for her persistence. Maybe a night out would distract me from the endless waiting.

Saturday morning arrived, and with it, a flood of nerves. This was it—the day Max said he'd make his decision. I couldn't bring myself to text him first, so I waited.

And waited.

The hours ticked by, each one heavier than the last. By the time 8 p.m. rolled around, I still hadn't heard from him. I grabbed my purse and headed out to meet Tanya, determined not to let the silence ruin my entire night.

As I stepped into the bustling bar, I forced myself to focus on Tanya's cheerful smile and the lively atmosphere. But even as we laughed and chatted, my mind kept drifting back to Max.

By the time I got home that night, I was exhausted, my emotions frayed. I collapsed onto the couch, Lila hopping up

## *Waiting*

beside me. My phone buzzed just as I was about to set it down.

It was Max.

**Max:** *Can we talk tomorrow?*

The pit in my stomach deepened. Tomorrow would bring answers, but for now, all I could do was wait—and hope that whatever he had to say wouldn't break me.

## Seven

### *The Decision*



The days leading up to that weekend felt like an eternity. I woke up every morning, my heart heavy with uncertainty, wondering what Max's decision would be. The messages from him had slowed down over the past week, his responses more distant, more clipped. I told myself I wasn't going to overthink it. But I couldn't help myself. I had tried to push my worries aside, focusing on work, on Lila, on everything except what loomed ahead.

Sunday arrived, and the moment I opened my eyes, I knew today would be the day. My phone lay beside me on the nightstand, and even though I didn't want to check it right away, I couldn't resist. I reached over, half-expecting to see a message from Max. But it was quiet. No text, no missed call.

I exhaled slowly, pushing my phone back down. *He hasn't made up his mind yet.* That was the only thought running through my head. Maybe he was still thinking. Maybe he was

## *The Decision*

still weighing things.

I tried to distract myself by walking Lila, making a cup of coffee, anything to avoid the inevitable. But as the day went on, it became clear that I couldn't put it off any longer. The thought of seeing Max, hearing his voice, was the only thing that occupied my mind.

By late afternoon, my phone buzzed, and I froze. My heart raced as I grabbed it from the table. It was a text from Max.

**Max:** *Hey, can we talk?*

I stared at the message for what felt like an eternity before I typed my reply.

**Me:** *Of course. When and where?*

His reply came a few minutes later, and I could tell by his brevity that he was serious.

**Max:** *I'll come by in about an hour. Can we talk at your place?*

I quickly typed a simple reply: *Sure.*

I spent the next hour pacing around my apartment, cleaning up, tidying everything up like it was some sort of subconscious way to prepare myself. I couldn't sit still. The anticipation was killing me.

When the doorbell rang, I jumped. My hands were clammy as I opened the door to see Max standing there. He looked different—his face was slightly flushed, his hair messy from the wind. He smiled at me, but there was something behind his eyes, something heavy that made my stomach twist.

"Hey," he said softly.

"Hey," I replied, trying to steady my breathing. "Come in."

He stepped inside, and for a moment, we just stood there, neither of us knowing exactly what to say. Finally, Max broke the silence.

"I've been thinking a lot," he began, his voice low. "About

everything—about Sophie, about us, about what I want.”

I swallowed hard, my throat dry. My heart was beating so fast I thought it might explode.

He took a deep breath. “And I’ve realized something, Clara-belle,” he said, looking directly at me. “I’ve been holding onto the past for too long, and it’s not fair to either of us.”

I stared at him, my pulse racing. My thoughts were a whirlwind—what was he saying?

“I want to be with you,” he continued. “I don’t know what the future holds, but I know I don’t want to walk away from this. From you.”

Relief flooded through me, so overwhelming that my knees felt weak. I felt as though the world had just shifted, the weight on my shoulders lifting. Max was choosing me. He was choosing us.

“Max...” I whispered, the words catching in my throat. “You’re sure?”

He smiled softly, his eyes warm with affection. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

Tears welled up in my eyes, but I fought them back, not wanting to cry in front of him. Instead, I closed the distance between us and wrapped my arms around him, holding him tightly.

“I’m so glad,” I murmured against his chest.

He held me for a long moment, his arms strong around me. Finally, he pulled back slightly, cupping my face in his hands. “You’re everything I’ve been looking for, Clarabelle. And I’m not going anywhere.”

I looked up at him, my heart swelling with happiness. “You’ve made me so happy, Max. You have no idea.”

He grinned, leaning down to kiss me gently on the forehead.



## *The Decision*

"I think I have a pretty good idea."

We stood there for a moment, just taking each other in, before Max broke the silence. "So, what do you say we go do something fun now? I've been thinking about how we should spend today, and I have a few ideas."

I raised an eyebrow. "What kind of ideas?"

He grinned mischievously. "Let's just say I've got a few surprises for you."

The rest of the day was nothing short of perfect. Max's presence was like a balm to my anxious mind. We spent the afternoon wandering around the city, visiting some of his favorite spots, laughing and joking as we went.

We grabbed lunch at a cozy café, sitting in the window seat, our feet brushing beneath the table. There was an ease between us now, a comfort that felt completely natural. We talked about everything—his band, my writing, our childhoods, our hopes for the future. There was no tension, no awkwardness, just the soft hum of a relationship slowly becoming something more.

After lunch, Max surprised me with a trip to the botanical gardens. He'd mentioned that he loved nature, but I hadn't realized just how much he appreciated it until we spent hours walking through the lush green pathways, admiring the flowers and trees.

"This is beautiful," I said as we sat down by a small pond, the sunlight filtering through the leaves.

"It is," Max agreed, his eyes glancing over at me. "But not as beautiful as you."

I rolled my eyes, though my heart fluttered at his words. "You're such a charmer."

He laughed, leaning back against the bench. "Just being honest."

## *Dreams of Forever*

We spent hours at the gardens, just talking and enjoying each other's company, and by the time the sun started to set, I felt like I was walking on air. Max had made his decision, and now it was just the two of us, in this moment, with no more uncertainties between us.

As we walked back to my apartment, I couldn't stop smiling. Every moment felt like it was leading us to something even greater.

When we got to the door, Max stopped, turning to me with a grin. "You know, I'm really glad you decided to take a chance on me."

"I'm glad you chose me," I said, my voice soft but sincere.

Max leaned down and kissed me, the world fading away as I melted into him. In that moment, nothing else mattered. We had made it through the uncertainty, the doubts, and the fears. And now, it was just us.

"I'm never letting you go," he whispered against my lips.

"Good," I whispered back. "Because I'm not going anywhere either."

We stood there, wrapped in each other's arms, as the world around us continued to spin. But for the first time in a long time, it didn't matter. We had made it—together.

## Eight

### *Forever Together*



It had been a few months since Max made his decision—the one that had changed everything for us. The decision that, yes, he wanted to be with me. It wasn't something that happened overnight, but every day since had been a step in the right direction.

We'd spent those months settling into the comfort of being a couple. Weekends were filled with little adventures—trips to the coffee shop, spontaneous outings, and long, lazy afternoons watching movies in the quiet comfort of my apartment. Every time we talked, every moment we shared, I felt my love for Max grow deeper.

But it wasn't just about love. It was about trust. It was about understanding one another in ways that went beyond words. Max didn't just listen to me, he heard me. And I did the same for him. We were in sync—sharing our dreams, our fears, and everything in between. We had our ups and downs, of course.

No relationship was perfect. But I could feel the foundation of something real beneath us.

And then, one cool Saturday morning, something unexpected happened.

We were sitting on the porch of my apartment building, sipping coffee and talking about everything and nothing all at once. Max was telling me about an upcoming gig, and I was laughing at the way he mimicked the drummer's antics on stage.

"You're funny," I said, grinning at him.

"I'm funny?" Max smirked. "I'm hilarious, babe."

"You're hilarious," I agreed, rolling my eyes. "But seriously, when's your next show?"

"Next Friday," he answered, leaning back in his chair. "You coming?"

"Of course. Wouldn't miss it for the world," I said, grinning.

Max paused, his smile fading slightly as he set his coffee cup down. He turned toward me, his gaze growing serious.

"Clarabelle," he began, his voice a little softer than usual. "There's something I've been meaning to ask you."

My heart skipped a beat, and I set my cup down, sensing the weight of the moment.

"Okay... what is it?" I asked, a mixture of curiosity and nerves filling me.

He took a deep breath, his eyes never leaving mine. "I've been thinking a lot about us lately. About how we've been together for a while now, how we've built something really special. And I know I've told you I'm not going anywhere, but I want to be more than just your boyfriend, Clarabelle. I want to be the person you lean on, the person who's there for you through everything, no matter what."

I felt my heart thud in my chest, both excited and a little

nervous at his words.

“You already are, Max,” I said softly, my voice filled with emotion. “You’re already my person.”

Max smiled, a glimmer of something in his eyes. “Then will you... will you move in with me?”

The question caught me off guard. It wasn’t something we’d talked about seriously yet, but in that moment, I realized it felt right. I didn’t need time to think it over. The idea of sharing a space with Max, of waking up to him every day, felt natural.

“Yes,” I said without hesitation. “I want that. I want to be with you, always.”

We both grinned, relief and joy washing over us. The decision to move in together felt like the next step—one more layer added to the foundation we were building.

The next couple of months were a whirlwind of packing boxes, choosing furniture, and slowly making a home together. It was strange at first, living in the same space all the time, but it felt like it was meant to be. We built routines, like cooking dinner together or playing random board games on lazy evenings. Max was a great cook, and I found myself always looking forward to his impromptu pasta dishes and homemade pizza.

But beyond the daily activities, something else was growing inside of me—an understanding that, with every day, my feelings for Max deepened in a way I hadn’t expected. He was more than just the guy I was dating. He was the person I wanted to spend my life with.

As the months passed, I noticed subtle changes in him too. He was still the funny, adventurous Max I had met on that fateful night when we first connected. But now, there was a quiet confidence in him—a knowing that, no matter what happened,

he and I were a team.

The night of his next show, he looked different than usual. His smile was a little brighter, his eyes a little more intent. I didn't know it yet, but he had been planning this moment for weeks, and tonight, he was going to ask me the question that would change everything.

The venue was packed, and the energy in the air was electric. Max's band had just finished their set, and the crowd was buzzing with excitement. I stood backstage, waiting for him to come off the stage, feeling the rush of adrenaline from the performance.

When Max finally came through the door, his face lit up when he saw me. "Hey, beautiful," he said, wrapping me in a quick hug.

"You were amazing out there!" I grinned, pulling back slightly to look at him.

"Thanks, babe." He grinned, his eyes softening. Then, his expression shifted, becoming more serious. "Hey, there's something I need to talk to you about."

I felt a familiar flutter in my stomach. "What's up?"

Max took my hand, leading me to a quieter corner of the venue. The noise of the crowd seemed distant as he looked at me, his gaze steady.

"Clarabelle," he began, his voice a little hushed, "I've been thinking a lot about the future. About us. And there's one thing I know for sure."

My heart raced, my palms suddenly sweaty.

"I can't imagine my life without you," Max continued, his thumb gently brushing over my hand. "You're everything I've been looking for, and more. And I don't want to wait any longer. So, I have to ask you something important."

## *Forever Together*

I held my breath, waiting for the words.

Max took a deep breath, then smiled that smile that made my heart skip. “Will you marry me, Clarabelle? Will you be my forever?”

Time seemed to stop. I could barely hear anything over the pounding of my heart. My hands trembled as I looked up at him, eyes filled with emotion.

“Yes, Max,” I whispered, a tear slipping down my cheek. “Yes, I will marry you.”

Max’s face broke into a grin, and he pulled me into his arms, holding me tight as if he never wanted to let go. I could feel the weight of everything we’d been through together—the ups, the downs, and the moments that had brought us closer. This was the moment that sealed it all.

And in that moment, I knew—forever had just begun.

The following months were a whirlwind of wedding planning, excitement, and anticipation. We found the perfect venue, picked out the most beautiful details, and began to envision the life we would share. It wasn’t perfect in the traditional sense, but it was ours. Our love was built on trust, respect, and a deep connection that would last a lifetime.

And as the days passed, and the wedding day grew closer, I couldn’t help but feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude. I had found the one person in the world who truly understood me, who saw me for who I was and loved me anyway. Max was my person. And now, we were about to start a new chapter together.

When our wedding day finally arrived, everything was perfect. Max looked breathtaking in his suit, his eyes locked on me as I walked down the aisle. The moment I said “I do” was the moment I knew I was home—forever with the man I loved.

## *Dreams of Forever*

As we exchanged vows, I felt like the luckiest person alive. I had my dreams, my love, and now, my forever.

Max and I spent the rest of our lives building memories together—facing challenges, overcoming obstacles, and celebrating every moment. And no matter what, we always knew we would face it together, because we had each other. And that was all we needed.