

Chapter One

Hollyville certainly lives up to its festive name. This close to Christmas there are lights festooning the lampposts and wreaths on the door of every business. Music pours from the little shops, and icicles hang from peaked roofs in perfect winter style.

I had been sceptical about moving to a mountain town in December, but even I had to admit that the place had charm. The local ski lift hasn't yet been discovered by the big city folk three hours away, and there is a thriving local artisan community, judging by all the pottery shops and art galleries I've passed.

But it's not art I am looking for on this sunny December morning. It's a coffee shop. Grandma Maggie's lawyer said he'd meet me at Kats and Koffee, and let me into the neighboring shop, which I just inherited.

I'm still spinning from the news. I never knew my grandmother, she and mom had a falling out before I was born, and the thought that she would leave me anything at all was stunning, let alone an entire business. What I was going to do with a New Age store, though... That was the next problem.

The first problem? Finding the coffee shop. It shouldn't be this difficult. Hollyville only had one Main Street, and it's not that long. And yet, all the cute little shops were blending together, and nothing stood out as being the building I wanted. This early in the morning, the streets were empty; I couldn't even ask for help.

My heels slip a little on the icy sidewalk as I pull to a stop and check my watch. A cloud of white puffs from my lips as I groan. 7:08am. I was supposed to meet the lawyer at 7:15. The app on my phone says I'm pretty much right on top of the coffee shop, but all I can see is a deli and a boutique clothing store.

Agitation churns my empty stomach. I'd rather gnaw off my hand than be late. I stuff my phone away and chafe my hands, trying to warm them. Hollyville winter was a far cry from what I am used to in the city and I don't think I'll ever get used to the cold.

My hand goes to the heavy pendant under my jacket. Another inheritance from Grandma Maggie. The lawyer had given it to me yesterday after the reading of the will and I fell in love with it immediately. It was a rough cut emerald that practically spat green fire. Antique diamonds spun around it in whorls of gold, far richer than anything else I owned. I had been too nervous to leave it in the hotel room.

I trace the shape of it through the fabric of my jacket. The will said Grandma Maggie had hoped it would bring me as much luck as it had her. Well, Grandma Maggie. If you are listening, I could use some of that luck now.

Was that my imagination, or did my fingers just tingle? I smile and let go of the necklace. What can I say? The Christmas spirit of this place has me nostalgic for magic. But it wouldn't help me find the coffee shop. I square my shoulders and take a step.

Someone bumps my shoulder and the world spins as I lose my footing on the slippery ice of the sidewalk. I squeak and brace for impact, but the fall never comes. Someone grabs me by the waist, and I cling to them as I attempt to right myself.

"Are you okay?" The voice rumbling from the chest in front of my nose is deep and worried and very male.

I try to straighten, but my heels slip again, and I am forced to clutch the front of the strange man's jacket to keep from falling again. Firm hands steady my hips as I get my feet under me, and I can feel heat radiate off my cheeks.

"I am so sorry," I say, my voice betraying me with its unsteadiness.

"No, it was me. I bumped into you. You are okay, aren't you?"

I look up into the face of my captor, and feel my blush get a thousand times worse. He's cute. Real cute. Golden hair frames concerned blue eyes even curlier than my own. He said something, but I don't quite catch the words. His concern increases, and he puts a hand at the small of my back and begins leading me down the street.

I catch the word coffee. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

He looks down at me with a smile. "I said I'll take you to my coffee shop. Lilly will get you sorted out."

"Oh, I don't need sorting, you just cut me off-guard, that's all, really." I wave my hands, then pause. "That wouldn't happen to be Kats and Koffee, would it? I'm supposed to meet someone there in..." I look at my watch and gasp. It's 7:17am. "I'm late!"

The man holds open a door for me and hustles me inside. I'm hit by a warm wave of coffee beans and freshly baked scones, and my mouth waters, even as my glasses fog up. I look up at the man, and he smiles and gestures widely.

"Welcome to Kats and Koffee, the finest coffee shop Hollyville has to offer. I hope you aren't allergic, we've got a few cats from the shelter here."

A long bar dominates the back wall of the coffee shop, lined with jars of beans and expensive looking espresso machines. Clusters of plush chairs and sofas fill the remaining floor space, interspersed by low tables. Cat art is everywhere, from paintings to statuettes, all with price tags and signs promoting the local artists.

I spot the lawyer sitting in front of the lawyer and gasp. Right. I was so caught up by the cute blonde I had almost forgotten. The lawyer gives me a small wave and gestures at the chair in front of me.

I turn to my saviour. "Thank you. I can't believe the coffee shop was right here in front of my eyes."

He chuckles. "You wouldn't be the first person who can't find the place. Seems like only the regulars know where we are." He shrugs off his jacket, revealing a maroon button-up shirt embroidered with 'Kats and Koffee' on the breast. "Can I get you something to drink? My way of apologizing for almost bumping into you."

I glance over at the lawyer and my rescuer follows my gaze, then gives me a nudge.

"Go ahead and sit down. I'll bring you out whatever you like."

The scent of hot chocolate makes up my mind. "A mocha, please." I slip away before I can say anything dumb and embarrass myself further, and take the seat across from the lawyer.

"I am so sorry, I couldn't find the place. Have you been waiting long?" I cringe internally at how pathetic I sound and do my best to put a smile on my face.

The lawyer, Mr. Pritchard, waves my concern away with a thin hand. Everything about him is thin, his face, his hairline, his figure. But he has been polite and patient with me as I've processed Grandma Maggie's passing.

"Miss Thornton, welcome. I just got here myself, don't you worry yourself."

I nearly strangle myself pulling my scarf off, and my brown curls are in complete disarray by the time I get my jacket off. Mr. Pritchard watches this with the calm of a winter lake, and simply nods when I finally settle in my seat, slightly out of breath.

"Thank you for meeting me so early, Miss Thornton. I appreciate it. Now, as we discussed yesterday, Maggie Thornton left everything to you - her home and her business, her earthly belongings, her bank account, however meager. I've got the keys to *Oleander and Sage* here," he pauses to pat his suit pocket. "And all the paperwork here. We signed everything yesterday, so all that's left to do now is to head on over."

The cute blond comes over and puts a steaming to-go cup in front of me. He winks over his shoulder and heads back to the counter. I smile after him, not quite hearing what Mr. Pritchard was saying.

"...employees."

"Sorry, what?"

Mr. Pritchard's smile is as thin and polite as ever. "You have several employees. It is up to you whether you want to retain them. I've noted their numbers for you in this file here." He reaches into his suitcase and pulls out a thick stack of paperwork that I recognized from his office yesterday. He hands it to me and I thumb through it. The building rental contract is there, along with a document about the history of the business, and several years of tax information. The place did alright for itself, enough to support a single woman and two part-time employees, anyway.

“Now, it should all be in there, but if there is anything you need, you have my business card. Are you ready to head over?”

I take a sip of my mocha and set it down with a smile. It’s delicious, the perfect blend of sweet chocolate and bitter coffee. I struggle back into my jacket and scoop my mocha up. The barista offers a wave from behind the counter as I trail after Mr. Pritchard. I nod back with yet another blush.

Chapter Two

The December air hits like a freight truck, and I flinch, wishing I had put my gloves and scarf back on as well. But Mr. Pritchard doesn’t go far. The neighboring storefront is painted a deep azure blue, the glass windows flanked by wooden pillars painted a complimentary forest green. Inside the store are racks of tumbled rocks and rows of candles, and a lot of clutter I can’t quite identify through the windows.

Spidery silver lettering across the door spells out *Oleander and Sage - Metaphysics and Supplies*.

“Metaphysics, huh?” I say as Mr. Pritchard pulls the keys from his pocket.

He responds with a shrug. “Not my area of expertise, certainly, but the shop seems popular enough.” The door opens under his touch, and he gestures for me to step inside.

The air is heavily scented; sandalwood dominates the air, but it’s the only scent I recognize, aside from the scent of candles. I don’t even know where to look. Displays of crystals fought for attention with rows of books and packs of tarot cards. Baskets held charms and packs of incense, and jars of neatly labelled herbs dominate an entire wall.

On the right wall, across from the front door, is a long glass counter housing shelves of jewellery, and on top of it is a cash register. A beaded curtain blocks the entrance to a small back room, and a second one hangs open to the back left of the door, revealing a low table surrounded by plush chairs. The narrow staircase leading to the apartment upstairs is hidden behind a thick wooden door marked ‘employees only’, and a heavy lock keeps it shut.

Mr. Pritchard spread his hands wide. “This is it. *Oleander and Sage*. Purveyors of fine metaphysical wares since 1982. All yours.” He drops the keys in my hand and gestures towards the folder tucked under my arm. “Now, if I were you, I’d take a few days to take stock, call the employees, get the lay of the land. You don’t have to reopen right away, but your grandmother didn’t leave you much, so you’ll want to start bringing in money right away.”

The keys dig into my palm as my hand tightens. I can do this. “Thank you, Mr. Pritchard, you’ve been very kind.”

He waves away my compliment with an unconcerned hand. “Just doing my job. And Maggie Thornton had been a loyal client for years. This is the least I can do.”

I tuck the keys into my jacket pocket and set my coffee and folder onto the counter. “Well, I appreciate it anyway. And I’ll be sure to give you a call if I run into any trouble with the paperwork.”

Mr. Pritchard dips his head in thanks and disappears out into the December morning. I slump against the counter as soon as he is gone. A New Age shop. What even is all this stuff? I get using crystals for decor, but all the herbs, the candles, the rune stones? I don’t even know where to start.

I straighten and take a determined sip of my mocha. I may not know much yet, but there is no time like the present to learn. The back room is my first stop. I push the green and blue beads aside and am greeted by a rickety desk with an ancient computer perched on a stack of old books. A thick cream envelope sits on the desk, a thin layer of dust already accumulated. Shelves of extra stock take up the walls of the long, narrow room and cleaning supplies are tucked out of the way at the back. A single high window lets in a little sunlight, and the smell of incense isn’t as strong here.

The envelope calls my attention. I sink into the ancient desk chair in front of the desk and pull it towards me. It is addressed to me and a chill goes up my spine. How had Grandma Maggie known to write to me? From what I understood, her health had deteriorated quickly, and she spent her last month in the hospital.

The heavy cream paper is smooth under my fingers. Why am I hesitating? I shake myself, then rip open the envelope and pull out a handwritten letter. I take another sip of my mocha as I smooth out the page and examine the shaky writing.

My Dearest Candy,

I apologise that we couldn’t have met face to face. I wanted to meet you so badly, but time has run out for me, and so I must try to put my thoughts in this letter.

There is so much I want to write. It is my deepest regret letting my relationship with your mother sour, but you know how she holds grudges. But let’s not dwell on the past. You have a history, and a family, people who want to meet you! People your mother has kept from you. There is a box of family history upstairs, and a list of phone numbers, should you want to meet any of your cousins. I suggest starting with Maybelle; she lives nearby and is almost your age.

Candy, I love you. I never got to meet you, but you’ve been in my heart always. I will always regret not making amends with your mother, and I hope you can learn to remember me fondly.

Remember, we Thornton women are made of stern stuff! I believe you can take what I’ve built here and make it even better. Best of luck, my dear, and may the goddess watch over you.

Love,

Grandma Maggie

I stare at the letter for a long time, breath fogging in front of my face. I read it over and over, soaking in the words. Grandma Maggie. Mother told me nothing about her, just that they weren't on speaking terms. I set the letter down on the counter with a sigh. I would find no answers here. The knot that had been in my heart since my mother died tenses and I rub my chest absently. It's like Grandma Maggie says. Let's not dwell in the past.

The beads clack as I push my way back into the main store. I toss the letter beside the mocha and put my hands on my hips. This place is mine. The thought stutters through my brain, not quite making sense. I own a shop. A *metaphysical* shop.

I spend the next hour examining everything in the shop. I spend the most time examining the small shelf of books beside the register. Books about Wicca and paganism dominate, and a book comparing different witch traditions particularly catches my eye. I pull it out and tuck it into my purse. I technically own it, right? And I definitely had some learning to do.

And some soul searching. My mocha's cold by the time I take another sip, and I grimace at it. I should probably turn the heat on. Though that will cost money, and judging by Mr. Pritchard's paperwork, there wasn't very much of it. So that means I had a question to answer. Do I really want to do this?

I jingle the keys in my palm and approach the locked door to the upstairs. I could go back to my job in the city. Data science wasn't a passion, but it paid the bills. But...

The lock pops open under my touch, and a dark, narrow staircase proceeds up into the darkness. The midmorning sun doesn't penetrate very far into the darkness, and a chill of foreboding goes up my spine. I grope for the light switch and breathe a sigh of relief when a cheery bright light shines down on me.

Green striped wallpaper lines the stairway, but it is barely visible behind rows of neatly arranged photographs. They span the decades, showing smiling faces and places I don't recognize. I do recognize Grandma Maggie from the picture in the obituary. She appears over and over again, arms around people young and old.

I pull off a picture of her around my age, the tack tinkling to the floor. On the back is the date it was taken and a caption of 'Mags in the garden'. She is beautifully posed against a spray of lilacs, the color faded with age. Her smile is small and secretive, like the Mona Lisa, and I can't help but smile. She looks like someone that would be a good friend.

The picture rejoins its companions, and I continue up the stairs. There is a window at the top with the curtain drawn. I open it, but the sight of the back alley greets me with rude graffiti, and I close it with a snicker.

A kitchen opens to my left, and a living room to my right. I turn to the kitchen first, smiling at the tidy organization and little labelled jars on the open shelves. It's homely, if chilly, and a reclaimed wood island looks like the perfect place to host.

Host who? I don't know anyone here. Blue eyes flash through my head. Well, there is the cute barista. I might develop a coffee addiction if I stay. I cross over to the other side of the room, where benches built into the wall under sunny windows, covered with embroidering cushions. The walls are painted a pale blue, and the cupboards and shelves are a delicate white.

I skim my fingers over the table and turn my attention to the door tucked away in the corner. It revealed an enormous bathroom, complete with a claw tub and wide vanity. Another door stands at the far end of the room, and a small table with candles and a fern sits beside the tub.

Okay, maybe this place has potential. My apartment back home only has a shower. A few more plants, maybe... But let's not get ahead of myself. I cross over to the far door and step into the bedroom. A large bed covered in a handmade quilt dominates the room, with a deep closet on the far wall lined with sliding mirrors. The art here is all landscapes, peaceful pastoral scenes, and the dusty rose of the rooms reminds me of a doll's house.

One last door leads me to a living room with an antique television and plush couches, with bookshelves taking up the remaining available wall space. An archway leads back to the stairs, and I stand with my hands on my hips, absorbing the place.

It felt like a home. Lived in, cared for. I could practically feel Grandma Maggie here, a warm presence. I sink into the couch with a sigh, and rest my head on my hand. My options are to quit my job and move here, becoming a... what, a metaphysical shop keeper? Or I could sell the shop and get back to life in the city.

Life in the city. I snort. What life? I work, I go home, and I read. On Tuesday, I go to the bookstore and on Thursday I get groceries. I never did click with anyone at work, so it's not like I'd be leaving friends behind. Let alone a partner. Those blue eyes flash through my head again, and I firmly shove them away. No matter how attractive the barista is, he is not a deciding factor.

The blush on my cheeks betrays my lie. Who am I kidding? Coming here has been the most lively I've been in months, and that barista is a major part of that feeling. In fact, I could do with another coffee. I think I know what my gut wants, but a decision like this deserves another coffee.

Chapter Three

"I was *not* making eyes at her, Lilly!" I say to my coworker over the hiss of the milk steamer. "She was lost, and I helped her find the shop, that's all."

Lilly takes the hot milk from me and pours it into a shot of espresso, swirling the foam. "Hmm. And the blushing was from the cold, no doubt."

"You get it." I wipe down the steamer and reach for the now empty milk jug.

The waiting customer takes his latte from Lilly with a grunt, and she waves her rag at me. "Don't you play coy with me, boy. Your eyes *sparkled* when she smiled at you."

I make a disgusted sound and take the milk jug to the sink. "I do *not* sparkle.

Lilly put her hands under her chin and fluttered her eyelashes at me, and I can't help but laugh. "Please tell me I didn't look like that."

She laughs with me. "Okay, maybe not that bad. But she was cute. You can't say she isn't."

The warmth in my cheeks is probably from the hot water in the sink. "She's cute, okay yes. And very polite. But I know nothing about her, so it doesn't really matter if I was making eyes."

Lilly wipes down the counter with a wink. "You don't know anything about her yet. But you'll get to know her."

"What makes you think that?"

Lilly motions for me to lean in. "She's just inherited Maggie's shop. She'll be right next door!"

I shake my head. "Lilly, how could you possibly know that?"

Lilly rolls her eyes. "I've got ears, dummy. I heard Sam say it."

"Mr.Pritchard? Wait, you were eavesdropping?"

Kris, darling, my innocent angel. Yes, I was eavesdropping. Maggie left her *Oleander*, so you'll have plenty of opportunities to get to know her."

gnaw on my bottom lip. "But what if she doesn't come into the coffee shop?"

Lilly snorts. "Then you can develop a sudden interest in crystals and visit *her*. Now, go check the milk stand. I'll take my break when you're done."

The rest of the morning passes quickly. Customers come and go, and none of them are her. I know it's silly, but I can't help but replay the moment when she fell over and over again. The way her big green eyes widened with surprise, and the way her body pressed into mind when she clung to me.

I'll admit, each time the door chimed, I couldn't help but look up, much to Lilly's delight. I wonder what she is doing next door. I wonder what her name is. I spill milk and over-pour coffee, and by the time lunch rolls around, I'm nursing a full-blown crush.

My vigilance finally pays off, and in she walks. The woman from this morning. Her expression is distant, but she smiles when she catches me looking. Lilly nudges me in the ribs and dashes off to the back room, leaving me alone at the register.

"Hey, hi! Welcome back!" She approaches the counter, and I begin to babble as panic rises. "How's shop?"

She pauses, pink lips parting. Was she wearing lip gloss? Damn, I'm staring at her lips. My mouth opens, and more words spill out. "I mean at the shop. How are things at your shop?" She looks at me blankly, and I bravely plough on. "*Oleander*? It's been locked up for a couple weeks, and we've kept an eye as best we can, but I don't know if anyone's been in to check on the pipes, or....what?"

The woman giggles and holds up her hand to stop the flow of my words. "Things are fine, thank you. It's, well, it's a lot to take in. I've been looking around the place. It's a lot." She pauses, eyes going wide, and she thrusts out her hand. "I never introduced myself, I'm so sorry! I'm Candy. Candy Thornton."

I reach over and take her hand and give it a firm shake. "Kris Kane, local barista." I don't know what else to say, and a moment of silence stretches as we stare at each other over our joined hands. I clear my throat and pull my hand away, resisting the urge to wipe my suddenly sweaty palms on my apron. She tucks her hand under her arm and looks down at the counter.

"Um," we both start at the same time.

"Oh, no, you go ahead," says Candy.

I shake my head. "No, please. I was just going to ask what you wanted. To drink, I mean."

Heat burns my cheeks, and I physically bite my tongue to keep from speaking.

Candy's cheeks color, and she stares up at the menu. A crease appears between her eyes, and I retreat to the comfortable space of customer service mode.

"We have a big menu. I'm happy to tell you about what we've got."

"Caffeine. Definitely something with caffeine. And hot. I still haven't found the controls for the heat next door."

I nod. "The entire block is creatively wired, our controls are in the back of the broom closet."

Candy looks thoughtful. "I'll have to check there. My mocha was totally cold by the time I finished my tour."

“Let’s fix that. Right now, we’ve got a white chocolate peppermint mocha that is delightful, and the salted caramel latte is always a hit. The secret is the extra drizzle.” Feeling brave, I toss in a wink. She laughs, and I nearly pass out from relief.

“A caramel mocha sounds nice. And I’m paying this time.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” I say, tapping buttons on the register. She taps her card, and I disappear behind the espresso machine. The routine of grinding and pressing the beans soothes me, and I make her latte without incident.

Candy meets me at the far end of the counter and I hand her the drink with a flourish.

One caramel latte for the pretty lady.” The words just tumble out, and I stop breathing.

She blushes a deep red and buries her nose down into her scarf. But she looks up at me through her eyelashes, shy as a deer, and my crush intensifies.

“Um, thank you,” she says into her scarf. “You’ve been very nice to me.” Hesitation mars her voice, and I raise an eyebrow.

“Everything okay?” I lean forward, concern creasing my brow.

“Yes, it’s fine, I’ve just got a lot on my mind.”

That doesn’t sound good. I grab a rag and wipe the pristine counter. “Anything I can do to help? I’m a great listener.”

Her blush deepens, and she glances over her shoulder towards the chairs. “Well, if you have a moment...”

My feet move before I’ve fully absorbed her words, carrying me towards the back room. I poke my head in. Lilly is paging through a magazine and doing her best to not look like she wasn’t listening at the door.

“I’m taking my break!” I don’t give her a chance to reply and spin on my heel to go find Candy.

But someone else has found her first. I don’t recognize him. He’s about my age, with light brown hair, a faded t-shirt and snow-soaked jeans. He’s taken the chair across from Candy, and is leaning towards her with a grin.

Candy doesn’t look happy about it. In fact, she’s doing her best to pretend he isn’t there. But that doesn’t stop him from talking.

“I saw you sitting here all alone, and thought to myself ‘Now there is a pretty little thing. I can’t let her sit there looking so lonely.’ So I’ve come to rescue you from your boredom,” He thrusts his hand out at Candy to shake, and she looks at it with a curled up nose.. After a moment, he withdraws it and continues. “My name is Jason. What’s your name?”

Candy looks away, and Jason puts his elbows on the table and leans his chin on his hands. "A shy one, huh? That's okay. I can take care of you. If you tell me your name." He clears his throat impatiently and she flinches.

"Candy," she mutters.

"Candy! A name just as sweet as you look. When can I take you for dinner?"

She looks up and meets my eyes and gives me a pleading look. No need to ask me twice. I stride over and sit on the couch beside Candy, slinging my arm over her shoulders.

"You are bothering my girlfriend. Please leave." Kris's voice is polite, but firm, and Jason shrinks under his glare, confidence wilting.

Jason stands, shoulders squared, and I mimic him, rising to my feet. I am almost a full head taller than Jason, and he drops his shoulders.

"Hey man, didn't mean anything by it."

I say nothing and just cross my arms. Jason opens his mouth to say something else, but I narrow my eyes and he skulks away.

As soon as the cafe door closes behind Jason, I collapse into the seat across from Candy and scrub my face with a groan.

"That wasn't too much, was it? I wanted him to leave you alone, but he looked kind of scared by the end," I exhale noisily. "I hate being the bad guy."

Candy reaches out and pats my hand, and my stomach does something funny. "You were fine, really. I don't think you were too scary. I appreciate the save"

A hesitant smile spread across my face. "Are you sure? I did just tell him you were my..." I trail off and gesture. "You know."

Her cheeks heat up. "Your girlfriend?"

I give a wry smile. "Yeah, that. I'm sorry, it was just the first thing that came to mind."

She waves away my concern. "Fake boyfriend, oldest trick in the book. For some reason, men only respect the word of another man, and a claim of ownership. Ridiculous, but what can I do? I do appreciate you getting rid of him."

I shrug. "I was hardly going to leave you to deal with him alone. No offence, but you looked like you were going to puke."

Candy's eyes drop to the table, tears gathering on her thick lashes. I touch her shoulder with a hesitant hand. "Do you need a moment? The back room is private, if you need some quiet." She nods, and I stand, grabbing her drink as I guide her to the back room.

Lilly opens the door and stands aside, eyes twinkling. Of course, she heard everything. I guide Candy into the back room and turn to leave, but she catches my wrist.

“Could you... could you stay? Just for a minute. I’m sorry, I know you’re on my break, but...”

I close the door, leaving us in the back room alone. The sound of the cafe is muted, and tears begin to spill from Candy’s eyes. Helpless, I gesture with open arms, and she steps into them with a sob.

“I’m sorry, we’ve just met, and I’m crying all over you, but...”

“Shh, shh, it’s okay. That guy really got to you, huh?” I pat her back and scan the cluttered desk for a tissue box. It’s just out of reach.

Candy nods into my apron. “He reminds me of my ex.” She doesn’t say anything more, but her trembling says enough. I simply hold her until the shaking stops and her breathing evens.

My break is surely long over, but Lilly hasn’t come to collect me. I can hear the babble of customers and the whir of the grinder, and the gentle sound of Candy’s breathing.

Candy isn’t wearing her jacket, and unlike this morning when she fell, I can feel every curve of her body against mine. She’s short enough to tuck under my chin, and I stroke her back, trying to project comfort. Candy sighs and sinks into me, and her sniffing slows. We stand like that for I’m not sure how long.

But my mind is not on comfort. It is on the press of her breast against my chest, and the way her fingers have knit into my shirt. Her breath warms my collarbone, and the urge to stroke her soft brown curls is strong. I try to push the growing attraction away, but the touch of her body against mine is like an electric charge, tingling where contact is made.

She smells nice. The sandalwood incense from the shop clings to her, but underneath is the clean smell of her shampoo and something that reminds me of sunlight and dry linen. Fresh, calming. I lean my chin onto the top of her head and try to just enjoy the moment.

Candy rubs her cheek against my shirt, and I lift my head. She sighs again and lifts her face. God, we’re so close. I focus on her eyes, trying not to think of how close her lips are. Tears cling to her lashes, framing the green of her eyes like jewels. A blush grows on her cheeks, but she makes no move to step away.

“Thank you... I promise, I don’t usually cry on a stranger’s shoulders.”

I smile down at her. “Strangers? You’ve cried on my shoulder. I think that makes us friends now.”

Her blush increases. “I’d like that,” she pauses, and my breath stops as her gaze drops to my lips. “I don’t know what it is, but I feel like I can trust you. You’ve been so nice, and I... I like you.”

“Can I take you out on a date?” The words burst from my lips without input from my brain, and I wince as her mouth forms a little ‘o’ of surprise. But then she smiles, and my sudden panic increases.

“I’d like that,” she says, glance darting to my eyes before returning to my lips. “I don’t normally do this.”

I tilt my head. “This?”

Candy leans closer, close enough that I can feel her breath on my lips, and my thoughts turn to static. “This,” she says in a soft voice, and kisses me.