

MAX

The final day

It was just after 9:00 pm when Fiona and I turned off our bikes and parked them in front of The Red Room. She tugged off her helmet, shook out her hair, just like she'd done three weeks ago, surprising me in front of my L.A. apartment. In that time, we'd ridden over 3,000 miles together, had seen the Milky Way and the Grand Canyon, countless national parks and mountain ranges, big forests, long highways, and cities that glittered with great music.

But the past few days I'd felt a low, incessant *thrum* in the pit of my stomach, calling me right back here. Right back home.

Only this time, I was returning home with Fiona Quinn, who just so happened to be the love of my life.

She smiled at me beneath the streetlamps, helmet propped on her bike. Behind her, The Red Room pulsed with a heavy bass, lit up by its white marquee.

"You know it's a Tuesday night," she said. "Hand Grenades night."

"Should we head to the fire escape?" I asked.

Her grin turned sly. "I am, you know, looking for a husband so..."

I grabbed her wrist and pulled her flush against me. Tucked her hair behind her ear before kissing her deeply. My arms wrapped around her, lifting her high until she squealed.

"I'm pretty sure you found one, princess," I said against her ear. She shivered, kissed my cheek. We'd only *just* gotten back together and were committed to taking our relationship one day at a time.

Deep down in my heart, though, I hoped Fiona would one day be my wife.

"I'll tear up my contract then," she whispered back. "And I really hope you're coming home with *me* tonight."

"Of course. Per my laminated list, I've got things to do for you. Dress up like David Bowie, for example."

She was still laughing when the old front door to The Red Room creaked open. I looked over as Pop walked outside, Angela right beside him. Unlike last time, he didn't look smaller or older. He looked younger, happier, and much less worried.

My throat got tight as they came right up to us.

"Aw, Pop," I grinned, pulling him in for a bear hug. He returned it, easily, clapping me on my shoulder. "I hope I'm not smashin' your face."

"It's okay," he grumbled, "I kinda like it."

When we separated, he said, "I missed ya, Maxy. You too, Fi. We're real happy you made it home."

Pop and I shared a look that spoke volumes – of my childhood, of Mom, of my years away from this vital piece of my history.

"So are we, Pop," I said, squeezing his shoulder. "So are we."

Fiona and I hugged Angela, who'd sent both of us updates via text on how it was going with Pop. According to her, the romance was strong – long walks, homecooked meals, festivals, and drive-in movies. *The only thing that makes him sad right now is not seeing you*, she'd said.

"I can't wait to go on a double date with you guys," Fiona teased.

"I'm already planning it," Angela promised.

"We threw together somethin' fun for you both," Pop said, leading us back inside. I held Fiona's hand, caught her pretty smile. And barely made it in before a tattoo artist with a shaved head practically ran me over to jump into her sister's arms.

What followed between Roxy and Fiona consisted of a sisterly short-hand I'd never understand but watching their exuberant conversation and hand gestures was worth it. I kept walking with Pop, Roxy and Fiona chatting behind me, when Edward joined us. He was immaculately dressed and holding a gin and tonic.

"Welcome home, mate," he said. "Happy to have a brother I can take to the pub who understands what it's like to be utterly love-struck by a Quinn."

I laughed. "Yeah, *love struck* is about fucking right. Will I ever stop sweating a lot around her or...?"

"Never," he said quickly. "But you'll get used to it in time."

Strong arms grabbed me from behind and shook. I whirled around and caught Mateo in a half-hug, half-wrestling move I'd perfected in high school. Rafael joined in our hug, clapping me on the back with a huge grin on his face.

"Your return perfectly coincides with a shit-ton of wedding planning we need to do," he said.

"I'm your man," I said. "You can ask Fiona. On our trip, I watched a lot of wedding TV shows to get ready."

Mateo rubbed his hands together with excitement. "This city isn't ready for the three of us to be permanently reunited, *hermanito*." He glanced behind me at Fiona, still talking with her sister. "I'm so fucking happy for you. And so fucking *happy* that you're home."

My throat went tight again but I managed a nod. "Thank you. For talking sense into me and putting me back together when I fell apart."

"That's what brothers are for," he replied. "Now come on. We've got a welcome home party to get to."

Fiona appeared by my side a second later, flushed and sparkling. I threw my arm around her shoulder and tugged her close, lips at her temple. "Seems like there's a party in our honor, princess."

"I can't wait," she said. "How many times do you think I can crowd surf in one night?"

"As many times as you want." We stepped into an electrifying crowd of people, cheering and dancing along to The Hand Grenades, shredding a set on stage. Fiona squealed, raised her hands in the air and waved.

Lou and Sandy both noticed her presence immediately. Lou leaned into the mic, swung his guitar behind his back. "And if you haven't noticed yet, our brilliant and amazing daughter and, we're sure of it, future son-in-law are *finally back home*."

There was a wild scream of applause. Fiona was jumping up and down with Roxy, singing along to the song as their parents performed. I grabbed her waist and whispered, “Meet me in the supply closet in a couple hours?”

She winked, blew me a kiss as Roxy tugged her to the front. “Am I your girl, Max Devlin?”
“You better believe it,” I said.

She disappeared into the crowd and wave of peace washed over me. A sense of completion and joy and hope.

Pop patted my back with a nod. I grinned. “You and me. We’re a team, again, okay?”

“Yeah,” he said, eyes twinkling. “Yeah, we are. Welcome home, Maxy.”

THE END

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