



# *The Story of Us*

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*A* BELL TINKLED OVERHEAD AS HE pushed the door open, announcing his arrival. But the sound might as well have indicated he was stepping back in time, because even though the bookshop had clearly been updated in the years he'd been away, simply breathing the air in the old building made him feel steeped in memory. He took a deep inhale, savoring the comforting scent of ink on paper with a touch of something else—warm vanilla, maybe—a unique fragrance he'd forever associate with young love.

With Jamie.

Even now, all these years later, he couldn't walk into a library or a used bookstore without thinking about the feeling of her hand in his or the graceful tilt of her head when she bent over a

book, her blond hair falling over her shoulder in a smooth, glossy curtain.

He blinked. Hard. It was strange the way memory worked, wasn't it? It could catch you off guard at the oddest moments. When he opened his eyes, the first thing he noticed was an orange tabby cat lying on the sales counter, flicking its tail and gazing impassively at Sawyer.

A bookshop cat? Cute.

He took a tentative step toward the animal. It blinked lazily at him, so he offered his hand and was rewarded with a loud purr as the kitty rubbed its cheek against his knuckles.

The cat was definitely new, as were the white-washed furnishings and bouquets of flowers that decorated nearly every surface. Painted mason jars filled with peonies and hollyhocks were tucked among the shelved books, and the old pink piano stood in the corner, piled high with hardbacks and a vase of white roses. *True Love* had always been a sort of monument to romance, hence its name. But since the last time Sawyer had spent any time there, someone had lovingly transformed the shop from its charming beginnings to a breathtaking ode to love and literature. The architect in him was nearly as impressed as his inner hidden romantic.

He was ambling deeper into the shop, running his fingertips over a row of books down a narrow aisle, when a voice suddenly pulled him out of his memories and back to the present.

“Look out!”

Out of pure instinct, he reached up and caught a falling book before it hit him in the head. But it must have still knocked something loose inside him because when he glanced up, he was transfixed by the sight of a woman perched atop a rolling ladder staring down at him, wide-eyed.

Not just any woman, but *her*—Jamie Vaughn, his high school sweetheart.

“Good catch,” she said with an unmistakable hint of wonder in her tone.

Sawyer would know that voice anywhere. He wasn’t dreaming, was he? It was really Jamie.

*Kerpow.*

A wistful smile tipped her lips. “Sawyer.”

He’d never experienced such a loss for words before, so he said the first thing that popped into his head. And since he’d unexpectedly found himself staring into the eyes of the girl who loved books more than anyone else he’d ever met, those words happened to be borrowed from William Shakespeare.

“But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?”

“What?” She blinked, and he was suddenly acutely aware that Jamie wasn’t a high school girl anymore. Her face was more angular now, giving more definition to those high, delicate cheekbones and porcelain complexion. Her adorably awkward teenaged frame had been replaced

with willowy grace. Sawyer's favorite bookworm had grown into a beautiful woman while he'd been away.

His heart thumped hard in his chest. "It's *Romeo and Juliet*. You, uh, look like you're up on a balcony."

She didn't move. She just kept standing up there in her prim black cardigan and polka dot pencil skirt, staring down at him as if he'd arrived via time machine. It sort of felt like he had.

"There was no balcony," she said.

Sawyer tightened his grip on the book in his hands. Why was he sweating all of a sudden? "What?"

"In the story. She's just standing at a window. Everybody gets it wrong."

Sawyer knew better than to argue. Still, this unexpected little reunion wasn't progressing at all the way he'd always imagined it would. Not that he'd been planning, or even hoping, to see her while he was back in Waterford. The last he'd heard, she was thinking about moving to Texas. But he'd be a liar if he said bumping into her hadn't crossed his mind over the years. He'd just never considered he might botch Shakespeare when it finally happened.

He swallowed. "Oh."

"I'm sorry. Um. I'm just..." She deposited her armload of books onto the top shelf and climbed down the ladder so they stood face-to-face. "Completely thrown."

Had her eyes always been such a startling shade of blue?

“Yeah, so was I. I suppose I shouldn’t be. This was always your favorite place.” He couldn’t believe she still worked there, though. How was it possible that everything in Waterford had changed and yet somehow, stayed exactly the same?

“Let’s start again.” She smoothed down her dotted skirt, and Sawyer couldn’t help but smile because polka dots had always been her trademark. “Hi, Sawyer!”

“Hey, Jamie.” He was beginning to feel like a kid again, walking his girl to work after school. “You dropped this.”

He offered her the book that had nearly fallen on his head.

She took it, and her grin wobbled just a little. If he’d blinked, he would have missed it entirely.

“Thank you.” She stared for a beat at the illustrated cover of the book’s blue dust jacket.

It was only then that Sawyer noticed which flying novel he’d managed to narrowly avoid—*Persuasion* by Jane Austen. Oh, the irony.