

Sisters in Spirit #1

Marianne
EVANS

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Aileen's Song
SONG OF THE SPIRIT

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Marianne Evans

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Aileen's Song

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Dedication

I've always admired those skilled musicians and performers who take to and command the stage--filling it with energy and life. This story, this series, is dedicated to them. Thank you for the joy you've given.

Praise

Aileen's Song

...their story flows easily from faith and friendship to fierce love. ~ Ruth Ryan Langan NY Times Bestselling Author

Devotion... a beautifully written, compelling tale of love, loss and second chances. ~ Love2Read Novels

Hearts Surrender... a lovely romance...an affecting love story." ~ RT Book Reviews

Hearts Communion

...a heartwarming romance. ~ RT Book Reviews:

The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. ~ Romans 13:12

Prologue

Six Years Ago

“Guys, you’re not going to believe what my parents did! I’m serious—you’re not going to believe it!”

Aileen Brewer couldn’t slam her bedroom door closed fast enough. No one would yell at her for the silence-shattering gesture; her parents were long gone for the weekend, and her three best friends had preceded her to the inner sanctum. Kassidy Cartwright flopped onto the king-sized sleigh bed of mahogany with its down comforter of pale green.

Siobhan Douglas, meanwhile, spun toward Aileen in a typical display of her natural, fluid grace. She pointed at the small plastic drug store bag which presently bumped against Aileen’s hip. “What’s that?”

“This is what my parents gave me just before they left to go to the city for the weekend. I’m telling you, it freaked me out!”

Rounding out the quartet, Maeve Callahan tucked close to Aileen’s side, her fiery hair a tumble around a heart-shaped face. “Come on, then! Don’t keep us in suspense!”

Sucking in a breath, Aileen turned the bag upside

down and shook it until the contents spilled free and bounced across the bed, landing next to Cassidy's long, slim thigh.

It was a box of condoms.

A unified gasp filled the air.

Aileen, who counted herself as pretty sophisticated—she was nearly eighteen, after all—stared at her parents' parting gift stunned anew by their audacity. In basic terms, her mother had given Aileen permission to have sex, as long as she was "safe" about it and didn't get pregnant. Didn't her mom and dad realize anything about the beliefs she had grown to love and embrace when she started attending services at Holy Spirit Catholic Church a handful of years ago? Had they no respect...or a brain in their heads?

That irreverent, harsh thought crashed and burned against the reality of her life.

What she'd never tell anyone—even her very best friends, and especially her dearest friend Siobhan Douglas—was that her parents had urged the latex birth control devices upon her because they were spending an anniversary weekend in Manhattan, and they knew Liam Douglas, Siobhan's older brother, was in town from college and just might be paying a visit to say hello.

They were keen enough to sense a girl with a crush. Liam was Aileen's deepest temptation toward love and passion, but Aileen wasn't foolish. First, any time spent with Liam Douglas would be the very definition of the word innocent. They might share a quick interlude of friends becoming reacquainted, but that would be the end of it. Second, he was older by four years and would never think of her in terms of

romantic interest.

Still, the idea left her cheeks to burn. Considering a romance with Liam Douglas quite neatly set fire to Aileen's senses and left her skin tingling.

But even if he were interested, there was no way Aileen would demean the act of making love by offering herself so readily outside of marriage—even to Liam—whom everyone seemed to know she adored. Except Liam.

Pushing that bout of drama to the side, the greater message of her parents' condom delivery reasserted itself.

Do what the other girls do, Aileen. Fitting in with everyone else and being more social just might help you keep up with the other kids your age. We're not naive. We know what's what. You're going to have sex, drink, and probably sample smoking and the like—just do it within reason.

Which, Aileen knew, translated into: Do what you like, but don't ever bring shame to the family name around the exclusive enclave of Westerville. Image and acceptance was everything.

Aileen snorted, shaking her head. Sure. As if stupid decisions and the results thereof couldn't touch this well-to-do community in upstate New York.

She huffed. "They bought me these wretched things because they believe they're looking out for my best interests. They wanted to—how did my mom put it?—spare me the embarrassment of having to purchase them for myself, thereby ensuring safety as I indulge in a bit of hanky-panky." In sarcastic emphasis, she shimmied her shoulders—and hoped her glowering expression spoke volumes. "They're afraid I'm being cut out of all the fun things in life.

That I'm somehow being overlooked because I don't hang with the fast moving, glam-crowd at Westerville High."

This time it was Cassidy who made a derisive sound. "Anyone who's heard you sing at church or in the choir at school would never say you're overlooked. Your voice moves people to tears it's so beautiful."

Maeve nodded sharply. "Here, here!" She settled on the edge of the bed next to Cassidy.

Aileen cast her friends a grateful glance, but anger continued to roll. She possessed the hot spirit of the Irish, but for the most part, capped that particular trait. "They want their pleasingly plump, mousey little girl to embrace what other kids do so she'll be accepted. Well, that's so not going to happen, I don't care how much it disappoints them!"

Still, she was human. She could easily imagine the feel of being in Liam's arms; she had often fantasized about the touch of his lips, the glide of his fingertips against her arms and her waist as he pulled her in for a long, warm embrace. The idea was enough to drive her crazy and send her mind into a dizzy, warm free-fall.

"Pleasingly plump my sweet you-know-what! You're perfect, Ailee! You're absolutely gorgeous, and you have an hour glass figure most women can only wish for! Don't you dare listen to them about anything having to do with your personality, your social standing, or your weight!"

Siobhan chimed in and a chorus of support followed. Oh, how Aileen loved and relied on these wonderful girls. Siobhan was Liam's sister and a ballerina—tiny and as graceful as a feather cast to a gentle breeze. Tall and curvaceous, Aileen had always wished she were just the same.

"And for sure don't let them grab hold of your beliefs and twist them around." Kassidy rolled from her back to her side and focused on Aileen who still stood in the center of her room, boiling and affronted. "You've always led by example. If you didn't, I sure wouldn't be part of Holy Spirit Church."

Kassidy Cartwright—KC to her closest friends—was the tough-minded, soft-hearted, ex-wild-child of their group. Now a devout Christian, Kassidy's decree set a mysterious seal on Aileen's heart. An idea dawned.

"OK, then here's how we'll fight back." Aileen pursed her lips, considering for a moment before she continued. Sparkles of excitement danced through her chest, against her fingertips, her legs and toes. For some reason, this moment felt huge. "Let's make a vow. A promise to one another, and to God, that we're going to hold firm to what we know is right. It'll be a pact. A pact between the four of us. Come with me. We're going shopping for something...something I'm going to give to each one of you as a gift. Let's go."

The shopping trip didn't take long. An hour later, they were ensconced in Aileen's bedroom once more. They sat cross-legged, in a circle, on a hand-tufted Aubusson rug of deep burgundy patterned by elegant swirls of crème that covered a shimmering parquet wood floor. Materially, Aileen Brewer didn't want for a thing. Her parents saw to that. What she longed for most, however, remained just out of reach—a sense of her own self-worth.

For a moment, she considered her friends, regarding them individually. Their love and her faith formed the bedrock of Aileen's life. The four of them had grown up together, friends since elementary

school. Now, as adulthood called, so did a commitment—to one another, and to God.

That's what this moment was all about.

They were knee-to-knee; before her, and before each of her friends, rested a plain, padded white ring box. Following a nod from Aileen, they opened the cases and extracted the jewelry from inside—a silver ring with two blended bands engraved with the words: *I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine.*

"The verse is from the Song of Songs in the Bible," Aileen began. "It always hits me in the heart when I read it. It's a vow from God that if we honor Him, He will honor us with a love that's forever." The girls studied their rings. "That's what I want. For all of us. I want us to promise our friendship to each other. And I want us to make a promise to each other that we'll wait for the love of our lives, for marriage, to give any man the honor and privilege of possessing our bodies."

"A purity vow. A friendship vow." Maeve gathered her thick red curls and swished them to one side so her hair was out of the way. "I love it." She squiggled then sat straight. "What do we do?"

Everyone's attention rested on Aileen, who acknowledged Maeve's soft green eyes and eager posture with a smile of appreciation.

"Put the ring on and simply say"—Aileen slid her ring onto the third finger of her right hand—"I vow."

"I vow." Siobhan slid her ring into place, her smile radiant. Powerful.

"I vow." Cassidy spoke with quiet reverence, her eyes fixed intently on the freshly placed band.

"I vow." Maeve whispered the words, and Aileen noticed the spray of gooseflesh that danced against her friend's tenderly freckled skin.

Aileen's Song

Following a deep breath, Aileen looked at the ring. She noticed the others in her quartet did just the same. Then, as if on some mystical cue, they burst into girlish giggles. Seriousness dissolved into the music of their history and affection.

"Well. What next?" Siobhan posed the question, her gaze bouncing from one girl to the next.

While Cassidy and Maeve shared grins and shrugs, Aileen dared to form an answer that spoke to the deepest wish of her heart. "I say we take the world by storm. Agreed?"

Four hands came together in the middle of the small circle they had created, the physical acceptance and culmination of a pact. Unblemished silver caught the light from overhead and caused it to shimmer.

"Agreed!" Four voices lifted as one.

1

Present Day

The first Scripture reading of the Mass had just concluded at Holy Spirit Catholic Church. Aileen stood and left the dais where she sat with the choir. She strode to the simple wooden lectern at the side of the altar and performed a subtle mic adjustment. “Our responsorial Psalm is Psalm Thirty Three. The plans of the Lord stand firm forever.”

Following the introduction, Aileen awaited her entry cue from the music director who began a brief piano interlude. She launched into the musical refrain then the congregation joined in.

While she offered the piece, one thought filled her heart. It was so good to be home. She sang, the music held so deeply in her spirit she didn’t even require sheet music. That luxury afforded her the opportunity to see the faces of those gathered—many of them familiar—and her joy in returning to Westerville was complete.

How fitting was this Sunday’s Psalm, which she continued with a power of conviction and love that filled the church. “Sing joyfully to the Lord. Sing to Him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy.”

The notes lifted from deep within, pure and sweet, transporting. Just to the right, Aileen spied Cassidy, who sat next to Maeve and Maeve’s family. Her friends watched and sang the response, wearing smiles that

fueled her spirit. Not far away, the Douglas family filled about half the side pew.

That's when Aileen's breath caught in a way that, skilled and trained though she was in music performance, nearly caused her singing to stumble. Liam sat next to Siobhan, and Aileen felt helpless against the brushstroke of his gaze. She willingly absorbed each vibration of his intent regard.

"For the word of the Lord is right and true. The plans of the Lord stand firm." Her voice rang clear and true, despite that wonderful sizzle of energy. After concluding the passage, Aileen garnered her presence and control. She stepped back from the ambo and dipped her head in reverence before returning to her seat.

Shortly thereafter, the Lord's Prayer was recited. Handshakes of peace and greeting were exchanged throughout the congregation. When extraordinary ministers stepped forward to assist with the distribution of Holy Communion, Liam slid smoothly from the pew, joining Father Jacobs at the altar. Aileen watched him—hard not to, tall, dark, and handsome as he was—and she moved toward the choral lectern, so she could lead the church in singing the Communion hymn.

In passing, Liam caught Aileen's eye and lifted his chin. He delivered a wink of acknowledgment, and Aileen smiled, but nerves came through, revealed in the restless way she twitched her fingertips against the pages of the open hymnal. Oh, great, she thought. There went her heart, jumping and pounding beneath her chest. Didn't the good Lord know she needed to be able to breathe?

Assailed by a flood of warmth, she watched parish

members file slowly forward. Liam began to serve, and she nearly missed her musical entry cue. Again.

Focus reclaimed, Aileen began to sing, but Liam stood to her right, distributing the Host, his wide shoulders swathed by a black silk blazer. Dark hair glinted beneath the lights. He was fantastic to behold. As always.

But, honestly, Aileen thought. Would her heart never learn what she could...and couldn't...attain?



“Ailee!”

A unified, boisterous greeting came from Siobhan, Cassidy, and Maeve. The outcry might have been a tad indiscreet, seeing as how Aileen still stood in the sanctuary, gathering music sheets and song books. She glanced their way as she accepted compliments and hugs from a number of regular church members who welcomed her back to Holy Spirit.

Once the way was clear, her friends charged forward, beaming smiles and opening their arms. She released a short, happy squeal, leaving everything behind, including decorum. She flung herself into a four-way embrace that felt like the very best of homecomings.

Naturally, everyone started speaking at once.

“College graduation has most certainly agreed with you, you lovely thing! I’ve missed you too much to even discuss.” Siobhan pecked both of Aileen’s cheeks then offered an extra-long squeeze.

“Ditto to you, Siobhan!” Tears of happiness stung Aileen’s eyes.

“Your hair has gotten so long! It’s beautiful!”

Maeve gave her a hug as well. "How was Europe? I want to hear absolutely every detail!"

Maeve stepped to the side only so Cassidy could get her fair share of love and affection, which Aileen doled out with abandon.

"I'm with Maeve." Cassidy's cheek pressed firm and warm against Aileen's as they shared an embrace. "Your postcards were stunning, but way too brief! Sounds like you had the best time! Did you meet a prince? Is there a fantastic royal wedding in the offing or anything else of a romantic nature you might just be dying to share?"

Aileen dissolved into laughter, linked close to her three best friends. "Oh, come on. As if!"

Aileen's heart filled to overflowing. Each of them had gone their separate ways after high school. Over the years, they'd played catch up during breaks from college, but now that school had ended for good, all four of them were reunited in Westerville—and all four still wore their purity rings. That recognition caused Aileen's throat to tighten against an influx of bittersweet, loving emotion. The simple band of silver with its delicate engraving would always signify their promise to believe in the power of God, and the power of their friendship.

While they carried on, Aileen's attention zeroed in on Liam who meandered down the sloping main aisle, his gaze trained on their group despite a number of interruptions and greetings. The closer he came, the more a magnet went to work through her heart, pulling and pushing. Aileen's senses woke up, and she realized in a hurry that she needed to focus...and divert.

She did her best to ignore him and return to the

conversation that buzzed. “You know, the three of you should have been right up here with me. Oh, how I’ve missed singing with all of you.”

“Absolutely. After all, I’m quite certain the Westerville High choir and drama departments have yet to recover from our collegiate absence.” By design, their actress, Maeve, assumed an exaggerated air of snobbish arrogance that sent laughter rolling through the air once more.

“Actually, I think that’s a great idea.” With that declaration, Liam stepped into their circle.

“What do you mean?” Siobhan posed the question while Aileen lost herself in Liam’s rich, deep green eyes.

“Singing. The four of you. Together.” His attention homed in on Aileen. “Welcome home, by the way, and all hail the summa cum laude graduate of NYU.” His eyes sparkled. “Where’s my hello hug?”

Dazzled, captivated, Aileen stepped into his arms, praying like mad he couldn’t feel her heart thundering. He smelled so good—it seemed sandalwood remained his cologne of choice. Simultaneously she realized she lingered a bit too long in what was meant to be nothing more than a friendly and casual embrace. Friendly. Casual. The words framed in the very definition of their relationship.

Inwardly Aileen took an ice bath.

She slipped away, once again thinking: divert, focus. What had Liam been talking about? Oh, yeah. Singing. Aileen looked at her friends. “You know, he might be onto something. Why not sing together? I’m sure the choir director would give us the chance to—”

“Ha! Me? Never.” Siobhan interrupted and shattered the idea promptly. She threw her head back

and laughed; the sound sparkled bright, just like her. "Every one of you knows I can't carry a tune to save myself. All the same, I'd happily cheer for the rest of you."

"But you dance like no one else I've ever seen. That would work." Liam added.

Precocious and playful, Siobhan fluttered her lashes upon receiving her brother's compliment. "You're so sweet I'm almost tempted to take back every mean thing I ever did to you during our childhood."

Liam snorted and rolled his eyes. "Like that time you used my set of mint condition Yankee baseball cards as photographs of potential date options for your fashion dolls? That one lives in infamy. If memory serves, you bent and creased and—"

"Oh, for crying out loud. I was seven when that happened, and you really need to get over it."

"Never."

Aileen puzzled over the point Liam attempted to make. "What are you getting at, singing and dancing? Last I checked dancing was somewhat frowned upon during Mass."

"Ailee..." The slow, velvety way Liam spoke her nickname ignited a starburst of delight that trailed through her body. "I'm talking about something else entirely." He shot her a quirked grin full of intrigue and secrets. "While I'd love to fill you in on specifics, ladies, I'm afraid that'll have to wait until later." He took hold of Siobhan's elbow. "Mom and Dad are waiting for brunch. Which reminds me, they're planning on all of you for that reunion dinner party tonight. Is everyone still planning to attend?"

A chorus of accepting chatter ensued along with a