

*Sisters in Spirit* #3

Marianne  
**EVANS**

A ROMANCE



*Kassidy's Crescendo*  
CRESCENDO OF THE SPIRIT

Kassidy's  
Crescendo

Marianne Evans

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## **Kassidy's Crescendo**

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Cover Art by Nicola Martinez

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC  
[www.pelicanbookgroup.com](http://www.pelicanbookgroup.com) PO Box 1738 \*Aztec, NM \* 87410

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2014

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-436-7

**Published in the United States of America**

## Dedication

This story is for those who long for reform and search for God's grace. May Cassidy's and Drew's story touch your heart and affirm that quest.



Be sure to pick up all the Sisters in Spirit stories

Aileen's Song  
Siobhan's Beat  
Kassidy's Crescendo  
Maeve's Symphony



## Praise

"Does it make a difference to rely on the Lord for strength and help? Can you find peace in difficult times? You'll find out when you read *Search & Rescue*. If you like loveable characters, then I recommend you drop by *Sal's Place*. You'll be glad you did!" ~ Sherry K. Love2Read Novels Book Review

### *Devotion*

"...There were so many things about this story that I appreciated that I am just going to say, you need to read this book." ~ That's a Novel Idea

"...a book with a real message that will leave you filled with hope. *Devotion* is so very worth reading." ~ Long & Short Book Reviews

I love it when a short story can transport me to a different country and allow me to experience the culture and holiday festivities. Marianne Evans is a gifted writer who has done just that in *Finding Home*. Peter and Alexa will warm your heart. ~ Author Carla Rossi

You will find, as you read, a love so tantalizing you will want to dig deeper into God's intriguing word. I know I did. ~ Renette S on *Search & Rescue*







*Teach us to say 'no' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.*

*Titus 2:12*

# Prologue

*Six Years Ago*

Nothing compared to football Friday in Westerville, New York. Just moments ago, the Westerville High Eagles had delivered a bone-crushing loss to the Teesdale Vikings, Westerville's bitterest rival. That made tonight's victory twice as sweet for seventeen-year-old Kassidy Cartwright.

She trooped away from the football field, one among hundreds, trailing after her friends. She tossed a paper bag of popcorn—contents mostly consumed—into the trash before she passed beneath a soaring wood archway adorned by the Eagles logo and painted in the school's colors of white and gold.

Aaron Gilbert, Kassidy's boyfriend of almost two months, captured her hand in a loose swing, and they exchanged greetings with a few friends who passed by. A wisp of air danced against her skin and hair, flavored by the aroma of a dying bonfire that had illuminated the school's before-game pep rally.

When Aaron angled toward the parking lot, Kassidy stepped a bit closer, both to tuck next to him

and to keep warm. "Aren't we going back to the school? To the dance?"

He released her hand and hooked his arm around her shoulders. "Actually, we received a better offer."

The flirty glint in his eyes, the charm-packed smile, ignited a fire beneath Kassidy's skin. Wind ruffled through his light blond hair and the image, paired with the exuberant evening they shared, was nearly enough to settle her growing disquiet about their relationship. Kassidy relinquished their plans to his care with a nod of agreement.

Her senior year had just begun, and she intended to savor every minute. For this brief, shining moment, it felt incredible to rule the school, to command the hallways, to brag about college acceptances, share plans for intended majors and grand life plans, to live through the season of fall as though springtime graduation, and separations, would never take place.

They strolled to a stop at Aaron's older-model BMW. He wasn't the chivalrous type, but Kassidy was reconciled to that fact. He didn't open the passenger side door for her, or guide her into the car, but that was OK. Sure, he was kind of smooth and showy, but he oozed a type of magnetism, an aura of confidence, that was dazzling. He made her pulse pound. For now, that was enough.

Kassidy opened the door and folded into the vehicle while Aaron claimed the driver's seat. After clicking her seatbelt into place, she propped her back against the door and studied him. Doing so caused her senses to flutter and swirl. Aaron Gilbert was the assistant captain of the Westerville High basketball team. Good looks and a strong, well-sculpted build made him a source of romantic fantasy for many girls

on campus.

But he had chosen Kassidy.

He walked her to class, called her all the time, sent her flowers and candy grams on school spirit days. Still there were moments when something prideful, something akin to arrogance, rode just beneath the surface of his actions. Prompted by her convictions, reinforced by the life stances of her three closest friends—Aileen, Siobhan, and Maeve—Kassidy wondered if she might be able to be an example of how to live more solidly for the type of faith and values that had come to govern her life over the past few years.

Aaron shot her a quick smile and leaned across the seat to kiss her cheek before engaging the car and sending them on their way. She returned the smile and drifted back to her thoughts as the lights and quaint, brick buildings of downtown Westerville flew past the windows. Aileen Brewer. Siobhan Douglas. Maeve Callahan. The trio formed the closest thing she'd ever known to having sisters, and they were hers by choice—by heart. They formed a stronghold for her spirit.

Passing car lights glinted off the surface of a thick, twined band of silver that rested—always—on the third finger of her right hand. Her friends wore matching pieces—a symbol of love, a symbol of commitment, a symbol of purity. The rings they wore represented a vow to God to remain pure of body and maintain their solid bond of friendship as God led them forward in life.

*I am my beloved's...and my beloved is mine.*

Determined to be a positive influence on Aaron, Kassidy straightened her legs and settled more comfortably. "So where are we headed, mystery man?"

Aaron chuckled, wagging his brows at the flirty moniker. "How does an after victory party at Zach Martin's sound?"

If Aaron expected that disclosure to be pleasing, or impressive, he was sadly mistaken. Zach Martin was an arrogant, entitled jerk—full of his own glory because last year he had earned a single-season scoring record for the Westerville basketball team. For now, she kept mum, because Zach was one of Aaron's best friends.

"His folks left for a trip to the west coast yesterday." Aaron spoke, executing a lane change and darting her a glance. "He's got the place to himself until the middle of next week, so there's going to be a massive party tonight,"

Kassidy's stomach plummeted, pushed hard and fast by a sense of foreboding that erased her dreamy mood and moved tension through her arms and shoulders.

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*I shouldn't be here. Fine hairs danced along the back of Kassidy's neck. This isn't where I belong.*

Holding hands with Aaron, she tried to get over her trepidation. She stilled her nerves and followed him down a narrow set of stairs into the basement of the Martin's luxurious, river-side home. The air vibrated with music that was heavy on the bass. Voices rose and fell on waves of laughter and shouts for attention. A haze of ghostly smoke brought with it a sweet, yet acrid aroma.

Pot.

Kassidy's nose twitched in rebellion. She went taut, but Aaron pulled her forward. "C'mon. It'll be

OK. It's not like I'm not gonna get stoned or anything."

The words weren't at all assuring, because his annoyed tone made it clear her frosty body language had ticked him off.

"Man, have you gone ultra-conservative in the past couple of years. You used to love parties—you'd have a beer or two. You've changed since you started hanging out with that chubster from choir and her posse."

Kassidy's temper flamed hot and strong. Her mouth flew open, and she pulled Aaron to a hard stop, searing him with a look. "Are you referring to Aileen Brewer? Because if you are, I'm telling you right now—don't ever say anything like again or you and I are finished. Aileen Brewer is beautiful."

"She is, she is!" Aaron lifted both hands in mock surrender. "Let go of it. I was only joking around."

A snide spark lit his eyes and flattened his lips. She used to think that mouth was so sweet—so full and tempting. Not anymore. Was any guy worth this kind of turmoil and temptation to compromise?

"Aileen isn't *chubby*, or a *chubster*, as you like to say. She's got curves, and I resent ignorant people who don't know how to be kind."

"Well, I resent you being so uptight over a harmless comment." He latched onto her hand and delivered a rough tug. "Let's just kick back and enjoy, OK? This is the *best*. Let's cut loose for a few minutes and unwind."

She understood the drill. Scoring an invite to one of Zach's victory parties—especially when the parental units were in absentia—was the equivalent of being handed a golden ticket to A-crowd paradise. Walking away from such an 'event,' on the other hand, would

earn a person permanent exile. That mattered a great deal to Aaron. *Too much*, from Cassidy's point of view.

She had lived through scenes like this a few times in her past. A couple years ago, in a quest for popularity and acceptance, she had stupidly imbibed in a couple of beers at a party even though she hated the taste. That behavior had ended promptly just a few months later, in the winter of her junior year, when being accepted into the madrigal choir and tight ties to Aileen Brewer ended that foolish quest. Singing gave her focus, fed a worthwhile passion, and most important of all gained her the friendship of not just Aileen, but Maeve Callahan, and Siobhan Douglas as well.

But even then, even when pressured, she had never sampled pot. Now, the tempo of this party and its intensity left drops of cold dread to trickle down her spine.

"I don't want to stay long, Aaron. Seriously. In and out." Cassidy's eyes roved the packed space. There had to be at least thirty people milling around.

Aaron huffed and rolled his eyes. "Fine."

She noticed the way he scanned the crowd as well, accepting and dismissing attendees at a glance, already wrapped up in the swirl of cliques, bodies, noise...and alcohol.

Alarm growing, Cassidy took note of the long necks carried by a majority of those gathered. Shimmering labels featured a couple of the better-known beer labels. Tucking her fingertips into the front pocket of her jeans, her touch came upon the ridges of her cellphone. The edge of her ring caught against the pocket line and captured her attention.

*The vow*, she thought.



Strength of conviction fed her spirit. She had made a commitment to God and her best friends to maintain a body and spirit of purity...despite overwhelming odds.

Aaron reached into a nearby cooler and palmed a beer, promptly twisting the cap and guzzling. Seeming to remember himself, he secured and opened one for Kassidy as well. Kassidy couldn't have cared less about indulging in a drink.

Now, Aaron fumed. "For real, Kassidy, *chill out.*" He hissed the words into her ear, his breath moist and hot. He monitored those around them who might be close enough to overhear. "A couple beers won't kill me, or leave me incapacitated. I just want to take the edge off. I had no idea you were so *uptight* about stuff like this. It's *harmless*. Get *over* it!" All at once, he guzzled the rest, grabbed another, yanked off the top and tossed the cap away, repeating the process. Drinking in defiance.

The untouched beer she held chilled Kassidy's hand. Condensation dribbled against her fingertips. The room was hot and stuffy, and the wavy layers of pot smoke were enough to make her gag. Now, how could Aaron be trusted to drive?

She set her bottle on a table, turning her back on Aaron as she pulled out her phone. Enough was enough. She needed to find a way home. Maybe Aileen or Siobhan or—

Aaron snagged her by the waist. As though sensing she was about to bolt, he held her tight while a sexy smile danced across his lips, while bedroom eyes roved her body in a way that didn't excite her at all, but instead, crested a further chill against her skin.

"Baby, I'm sorry. Don't be like this." His beseech

was low and placating. It turned Cassidy's heart to stone. "Stay with me; it'll be OK, I promise."

He bent; his lips slid against hers. When he claimed her mouth, he made a low, throaty sound and snuggled his hold on her waist, arms tight as he shifted against her.

This was way out of line, and way out of bounds. Cassidy grappled for sanity and ended the uninvited kiss with a sharp turn of her head. She shoved against his chest with all her strength. "No!"

When she pushed him away, Aaron bumped against the end table and upended her beer. A full bottle of pungent gold liquid poured across the table and onto the carpet as she fled from the room with just one goal in mind.

Escape.

She didn't look left or right. In the throes of outrage and an adrenaline rush, she ran as fast as she could, leaving the dimly-lit basement and its nightmares behind. She didn't stop until she reached the nearest well-lit gas station. She buckled against the cool stone bricks of the building, pulling out her phone. It took two tries for her trembling fingers to execute the sequence that would connect her to Maeve Callahan.

Maeve would be at Westerville High with her boyfriend Josh Andrews, hanging out in the decorated gym, dancing and laughing with classmates. Cassidy bit back tears of anger, shame and sadness. Why, oh why, had she left with Aaron?

"KC!" Maeve answered on the second ring. "Where are you and Aaron? We've been looking for you."

Maeve sounded so chipper and happy. Music and

voices distorted the connection, but Kassidy didn't care. She wanted her friend. "Maeve...oh...man...I need you. I'm so sorry, but I screwed up and I...I need your help."

It only took seconds for the sounds of the dance to fade. Kassidy could picture Maeve dashing to a less crowded, quieter hallway of the school, or maybe outside to the parking lot...

"What's going on, KC? Where are you?"

"I'm an idiot. I'll explain later, but right now, I need you...I need you to pick me up at Jennings Gas Station on South Street. Can you do that?"

"We're on our way right now. Hang tight."

Kassidy spoke a weak, though heartfelt 'Thank you,' but Maeve was gone, the line already dead.

We. Maeve had used the word we. She'd be coming with Josh. Awash in a fresh bath of shame, Kassidy considered Maeve's boyfriend of just over a year. What a great guy. He was the quarterback of the Westerville Eagles, and had been the varsity squad's star since freshman year. A three-time member of the all-state football team, recruiters from colleges far and wide were chomping at the bit to get his signature on a letter of intent.

Josh possessed a sense of confidence and the same type of charisma as Aaron, but Josh was driven by a solid core of faith and character. He was devoted to Maeve, and treated her like a princess. He didn't care about what was 'in' or who was 'out.' He was too busy earning scholarship-worthy grades, leading his team, and living out his passion for football. Meanwhile, his love for Maeve shined, and his friends ringed him like a solid wall. For the life of her, Kassidy couldn't figure out why Aaron didn't understand the beauty in that

equation...

She had yearned to find happiness with him, but that wasn't meant to be, and she refused to compromise. Leaning against the glass window of the gas station, she tipped her head back and took in a starlit sky, thinking: Thank God for Maeve...and the spiritual reinforcement of her sisters.

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Kassidy's evening ended on a soul-quieting note when Maeve walked her to the front door of Kassidy's home, their arms linked. "We'll talk more when your nerves aren't jumbled and you've had a chance to settle down, but I'll tell you right now, KC—ditch him. Ditch him at the curb and don't ever look back."

The fire of the Irish could be heard in Maeve's voice. That vindicated a wounded heart and made Kassidy smile. "I'm already there." Kassidy flipped her hair aside. Long and thick, a dark shade of brown, it now reeked of pot smoke. Her clothes, too. First order of business, a shower and a quick load of laundry. She expelled a hard breath. "I'm so sorry about this—I didn't mean to pull you and Josh away from the dance when you probably wanted to celebrate. He had another amazing game."

Red hair shone when Maeve shook her head. "KC, nothing is more important than friends."

That choked her up. "I can't believe how stupid I was. How blind. I always get mixed up when it comes to my heart and who to love versus who not to love."

"How so?"

Kassidy flung her hands in a frustrated gesture. "Oh, this whole situation is a classic example. Aaron is

so great looking, and popular, and he was attracted to me. Now, I feel like I fell into a trap." That fact, more than anything else, wreaked havoc on the part of Kassidy's soul that craved affirmation and affection. Her stomach still rolled. "Thanks so much for the rescue operation, Maeve, and thank Josh, too."

Maeve cast a tender glance toward Josh's car where he waited and fiddled with his cellphone.

Kassidy followed the direction of Maeve's gaze. "Hang on to him. He's a good guy who hasn't let popularity and success go to straight to his ego. He doesn't compromise, and neither do you."

Maeve took hold of Kassidy's arm. "Sweetie, you didn't either. You did a wonderful job of following your conscience. Aaron's loss, not yours."

Kassidy dragged in a shaky breath, not willing to let herself off the hook just yet. "Whatever. I only know this: never again will I fall for the kind of guy who wins my attention with a sexy smile, a charming personality, and a handsome face. I need Mr. Strength of Character more than I need Mr. Gorgeous. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I do."

Maeve's glance drifted to the car once again; the love in her friend's eyes made Kassidy believe that good guys, good days, and happy endings were possible at some point down the road. That wasn't a bad way to end the night.

"You'll be OK," Maeve continued. "You'll hold on to your convictions, and you'll end up winning the heart of a wonderful guy. Believe that, KC. Believe it to your core, and never—ever—compromise yourself."

With a soft, tearful exclamation, Kassidy launched into her friend's arms and hugged her tighter than