

The Story of Sydney Smith

Never in my wildest dreams would I have predicted that two short years after opening the business I hoped to own my entire life, the world would be consumed by a climate crisis. Ever since I was a kid, all I ever dreamed of was having my own restaurant. I used to cook with my mom and play chef with my little sister in hopes that one day I could live out my dreams, so even though my business may have started rather small and relatively unsuccessful, I kept my head up. I didn't want to let go of everything I had worked so hard for. Right when my diner was about to go under, the climate crisis struck. I had nothing to my name so my sister and I were left here in Weeping Willow while we watched our friends and most everyone else pile onto spaceships and leave.

I gave Margaret a job at my diner mostly out of pity. After mom died, Margaret lost it. She never went to college and had hardly any skills, but she's my sister and I love her so I decided to bring her on board with my team. Before the whole climate thing went down, me and Margaret were dating these brothers who would regularly come to the diner. They were successful businessmen and Margaret said they'd be good options for us. I was dating Connor and Margaret was with Brad. Brad was definitely the more attractive of them but Margaret "called him" first, and because she always has to have her way I let her take him and went out with Connor. I never thought these relationships would go anywhere but we kept dating and I'm still not quite sure why. I never really liked Connor. He was nice and seemed to care, which seemed good, but even while I was with him all I thought about was Brad, and he thought about me too.

Brad and I started secretly meeting up to be together. He told me he was ending it with Margaret, and that we could be together soon. He even would write me letters and slip them to me while I was working. When the climate crisis went down though, Brad and Connor jumped at the chance to hop on a spaceship and leave the destroyed Earth. Margaret cried for weeks after he left, she was so heartbroken wondering why he hadn't asked her to come with him. Before he left, he gave me one last letter saying he wished he could've asked me to come with him. He said he'd told his brother everything so Connor knew things would be over between us. Brad said he wanted me to come to space but he couldn't do that Margaret so he thought it was best to leave us and not ruin our sisterhood. I understand why he did what he did, but I still have hopes I can make it up to space eventually and reconnect with him. I've been secretly saving up money for a while now and I've been hiding it in a shoebox along with Brad's letters under my bed. Margaret has no idea about Brad or the fact that I'm saving up. I didn't tell her because the last thing I wanted to do was hurt her feelings.

Yesterday was a madhouse at the diner. We had more customers than usual so service was slow, considering we have a quite limited staff consisting of only three people.

Margaret dropped at least five plates of food so I'll have to talk to her later about being more careful. I love Margaret but she can be so clumsy sometimes. At least Paul was on top of it today, I don't know what I'd do without him. Paul is my other chef over at the diner. He's very creative and a great problem solver. One of my biggest worries at the moment is the fact that slowly but surely, we're running out of food. Paul's been a big help with that. He's mastered how to make pancakes still turn out fluffy and delicious with only a quarter of the mix. I want to keep all my customers happy and well fed but who knows how long stock will last us. Our appliances barely even work anymore so anything perishable is practically gone. Luckily we still have bulk in most packaged foods and mixes that last us a while, but Margaret suggested rationing. I didn't like the idea at first because I knew the customers wouldn't be too happy about smaller portion sizes, but Marge insisted it was for the best, and as much as I hate to admit it she's probably right. Anyway, yesterday was crazy. The restaurant was packed with angry customers arguing with each other while impatiently waiting for their food when all of a sudden we heard a loud "SNAP!"

"What was that" Margaret shouted

"I don't know I'm about to go check it out," I said tossing off my apron as I made my way to the big window when I saw what's become the biggest gossip in Weeping Willow since, well, forever.

"Oh no," I hear someone whisper from across the diner. After numerous gasps and sighs from my nosy customers, they start stampeding each other out the door.

"Great there goes all our customers" Margaret complains.

"What happened I missed it" Paul shouts

"A little girl just broke a branch off the Willow tree" I reply.

Margaret is freaking out at this point, and while I may appear slightly less panicked, I'm freaking out as well. I'm not big into superstitions, but one thing I know about this town is that the willow tree is not to be messed with. Weeping Willow is filled with very intense people who believe this tree is the sole reason we're alive today. Whether or not I actually believe that, the tree breaking can't be good. Paul tries to calm down Margaret while I reassure our few customers who didn't sprint out the door that everything's going to be alright.

"C'mon Margaret, we need to get back to work," I say, lacing her skates back on "We're going to be fine, I promise" . I only wished I believed what I was saying.

After the excitement died down people started rushing right back into the diner.

"Great" I sigh "They're coming back"

"Any business is good business," Paul adds. Sometimes I wish I could have even half his optimism.

"Yeah, you're right we need the money," I respond.

"What for?" Paul asks.

"I mean you don't think we're gonna be here forever, do you?" I ask.

"I don't know, I wasn't really planning on leaving anytime soon" He responds "Are you?"

"Um.. no," I respond flustered. I forgot I was supposed to be keeping that a secret. "Of course I'm not leaving, how would I even do that," I say trying to cover up what I previously said.

"Don't worry, I'm not accusing you," Paul says. "I think we're doing pretty good here, I mean you're doing great handling all of the crazy people here," he adds.

"Thanks, it means a lot," I say. I notice Margaret staring at us in my peripheral vision. But she turns away as I look in her direction.

"We should probably get back to work," Paul says, heading back into the kitchen.

"Yeah you're right, we're about to have some hungry customers," I reply.

The rest of the night was rather simple, nothing out of the ordinary. At the end of the night, I pop open the register, empty the tip jar, and divide up everyone's share. It was Margaret's turn to close up so I had each person their envelope of cash and head up to my apartment. I pull my shoebox out from under the bed and place the wad of cash in with the rest of it. I pull out one of my letters from Brad to read again when all of a sudden I hear footsteps coming down the hall.

"Hey, Syd!" I hear Margaret call out as she makes her way towards my door. I toss the letter on the floor and kick the shoebox back under my bed as Margaret swings my door open.

"Hey," I respond pulling the pink sheets of my bed down to cover the box.

"Is something wrong, you look nervous?" Margaret asks

"Me? No, I'm fine, just making my bed," I respond smiling to try and cover up how startled I am.

"You should really start making your bed in the morning, it's like 10 pm Syd," she says judgingly.

"You're so right, silly me!" I say with nervous laughter. "I thought you were supposed to close up tonight, what happened?" I add, trying to switch the subject.

"Oh yeah, but Paul said he'd do it for me," She says.

"Oh, that was nice of him," I say.

"Wasn't it!" She says excitedly. "Speaking of Paul..." she adds in a teasing tone.

"What Margaret?" I ask, annoyed.

"I saw you guys today talking, don't you think there's something there?" She says.

"I don't know what you're talking about Margaret"

"I think you don't want to admit it to yourself, but Paul has a thing for you, and you know it," She says

"No, he does not," I retort.

"Yes he does" Margaret argues "And I think you have a thing for him too," she adds.

"Margaret, you're not thinking right, I'm gonna go get us some tea so you can get your head straight," I say exiting the room as fast as I can. Does Paul have a thing for me? I

never really thought about it like that. I had been so focused on getting enough money to leave that I'd barely been paying attention to my surroundings the past couple of months, and with the stress of food supply, I hadn't even had time to think of anything else.

As I'm walking back up the stairs with two mugs of tea, I see Margaret through the propped-open door. She's holding something in her hands, like a small piece of paper... like a letter.

"Oh no," I sigh, running towards the bedroom.

"Margaret I can expl-"

"What is this?" Margaret asks, tears streaming down her face

"Margaret it's not what it looks like," I say

"Really?" she asks, "Because it looks like my ex-boyfriend was cheating on me with you!"

"Okay well maybe it is what it looks like, but I can explain I swear. Just listen to me for a second Marg-"

"No, I don't want to hear it Syd," She says. "You stole my boyfriend and now you're saving money up so you can what? Go be with him in space?" She gets up and begins to storm out of the room.

"I swear Margaret it's not like that!" I call out but she's already down the hall.

"I'm done with this conversation, I'm going to find Paul!" She shouts running down the stairs.

I probably should've gone after her and tried to explain but I knew I'd only upset her more. My worst fears have come true. Margaret found out my secret, she hates me now, and even worse she's going to turn Paul against me too. The truth is, the past couple of weeks have changed things for me. I like Paul, I don't want to be stuck in the past anymore. I know how important the diner is, not only to me but to Margaret and Paul too. I'm going to keep saving up because I know the money will help in the future. None of us can change the fact that food stock will slowly run out and we may need my savings later down the line, but I'd rather stay here and figure it out with the people I love. I just wish I could explain this all to Margaret before she gets Paul upset too. I decide to go back to the diner in hopes of finding Margaret and Paul while he's closing up. To my surprise, the diner is filled with people and Paul and Margaret are both working.

"Margaret, what's going on?" I ask, but she just turns around and walks away from me.

"Paul?" I ask, but he just sighs and goes back to making a pot of coffee. Great, nobody's talking to me. It's almost as if I was invisible.

I resort to the last people I can talk to, my customers. They're all huddled around talking about something.

"Hey guys, what's going on?" I ask.

"Someone's really upset about the girl who broke the branch," One of them says.

"Yeah, and I heard if the tree breaks we could all die," Another chimes in.

"I thought we already knew all this," I add.

"Well yeah, but they're thinking of doing something to her, you know, the girl,"
Someone else adds

"But she's just a kid, I mean we aren't really all going to die from a tree breaking are we?" I ask.

Paul comes out from behind the counter with a fresh pot of coffee. "No, we're not going to die," He says. "But rumors spread fast in this town. People seemed upset so we opened back up for them to have a coffee and talk about it."

"Oh okay, that's fine," I reply. "Besides, this tree is the least of my worries at this point," I add.

"What do you mean?" a customer asks "Did something else happen?"

"Well I don't want any of you guys to worry, but we only have so much food left," I say worried about how they'll react.

"No need to worry!" I hear someone yell "I've been going hunting every now and then, I can bring some meat!"

"And I have a bunch of boxed foods in my bunker!" Someone else says, "I don't need it, I'll just bring it here."

And before I knew it I had so many people yelling out what they could bring that I didn't even know what direction to look. I turn to see Margaret smiling in the corner.

"Can we talk?" I say walking towards her

"I guess," she says, rolling her eyes as I slide into the booth.

"I'm really sorry about Brad, I wish I could've told you earlier but I knew how upset you'd be. I know that's not an excuse and I feel terrible Margaret I really do. It was a terrible thing for me to do as a sister and I never want to hurt you like that again," I say looking up at her "And I think I'm getting over Brad anyway," I add "Even though we're in a tough situation here, there's a lot of great things *and* people that I'd hate to leave."

"Do you mean that?" Margaret asks "Are you seriously reconsidering trying to find a way out?"

"I don't know, it depends on how bad things get down the line, but for now yes, I wanna stay here in Weeping Willow," I say "Because while things may be difficult, there's nobody I'd rather face these issues with."

"I guess I'll forgive you," Margaret says smiling

"Good, I can't have you mad at me, especially when we have so much work to do," I say "I can't believe how much supplies people are willing to bring us."

"I know it's a miracle," Paul says. I didn't even know he was right behind us.

"Paul, were you listening to that entire conversation?" I ask.

"Maybe a little bit," He says with an awkward laugh. "I mean Margaret kind of told me what happened, but I'm glad to hear you've had a change of heart," He adds.

"Yeah me too," I say. "Oddly enough, I think there's a lot of good things for me here".

It was pretty late at this point and most people were heading out so we decided to close up for the night and get back to work tomorrow. Each day following that night, more and more people were donating anything they could to support us. I'd never felt more grateful in my life. I'd realized how much I'd taken being here for granted, and while I'm unsure what the future holds I know that for now, Weeping Willow is where I have to be. With my sister, Paul, the diner, and the town, I don't want to go anywhere else. I still held on to my savings in case one day we needed to find a way out, but at the moment, we're doing great. I also threw out all of my old letters from Brad. Margaret helped me realize that It was time to move on, and I have everything I need here. She and Paul helped me notice that I was too worried about what could happen in the future instead of what's happening in the present, so I've learned to take it day by day. The world's a scary place right now, but unless I absolutely have to leave, Weeping Willow is where I'll stay.