



Lily's
SECOND CHANCE

WILLA LYONS

Lily's Second Chance

A Small Town Fake Wedding Romance

Willa Lyons

Blurb

Swept into a dazzling charade by my former crush, his fake proposal blossoms into a floral fantasy.

A pretend Valentine's Day wedding is his clever business strategy.

High school chemistry brought us together, but I was too shy, and he was leagues above me.

Alex is now a billionaire CEO, desperate to shield his legacy from a conniving cousin's thorns.

He pledges to rescue my flower business from bankruptcy if I play his blushing bride.

But the delicate petals of our fake love conceal a garden where hope and deception intertwine

As we stage lavish displays of affection, I melt under the warmth of his charm.

My foolish heart envisions a fairytale engagement that could lead to happily ever after.

But my logical mind knows that underneath the veil lies a deal as delicate as a carefully arranged bouquet.

When our wedding day arrives, a symphony of hopes and fears blooms within me.

I hope my dream man doesn't discard me after we say I do.

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Also By Willa Lyons

Chapter One



Alex

I sat hunched over my desk, bleary-eyed, reviewing the quarterly reports. The glow of my computer illuminated the dark office. It was nearly midnight, but I couldn't tear myself away. Montgomery Industries was my life, my family's legacy.

A knock at the door jolted me from my focus. I looked as Tom poked his head in.

“Got a minute?” he asked.

“For you? Always,” I said, waving him in. “Have a seat.”

Tom sank into the chair across from me, his face grim. Dread pooled in my gut. Something was wrong.

“Alex, I'm so sorry to tell you this, but your grandfather passed away suddenly today.”

My breath caught in my throat. “What? No, that can't be right.”

Tom stood, came around the desk, and squeezed my shoulder.
“I'm afraid it's true.”

I stared down at my desk, grappling with this news. Grandpop gone? Impossible. We just had coffee together yesterday.

“Hey, let's get out of here. I'll buy you a drink next door to toast Granddad Harry's memory,” Tom said gently.

I nodded numbly and stood. As we walked to the elevator, my mind swirled with memories of fishing trips with Grandpop, his booming laugh, that glint in his eye when he talked about the company he built from the ground up. The company that was now my responsibility.

Tom and I stepped out into the cool night air. Oak Barrel Pub's neon sign glowed warmly as we approached.

Inside, the dark wood and leather booths exuded a homey vibe. The hostess greeted us.

“Evening, boys. Finishing up another late one?”

“You know it, Janie,” Tom said with a tired smile.

She showed us to our regular booth near the back and handed us some menus. “Two pints?”

“Two pints and an order of pretzel bites and cheese, please. And a third pint for a toast to Granddad Harry, who crossed over today,” Tom said.

“No!” Janie replied in dismay. “Not Harry Montgomery?”

“I'm afraid so,” Tom said with a somber nod.

Janie shook her head. "I'm so sorry, Alex. He was a wonderful man. He'll be missed around here."

"That he will, Janie," I agreed. "Thank you."

"I'll order those drinks for you," Janie replied with a sympathetic look.

She hurried off as we settled into the worn leather booth.

Tom studied me from across the table. "How are you holding up?"

I shook my head, still processing everything. "I just can't believe he's gone. We were planning a fishing trip next month."

"Yeah, I know. Hey. Let's go anyway in his memory."

"I don't know."

"Well, we can talk about that later. Remember the time he took us fishing in Costa Rica? What a trip that was."

I smiled softly. "Yeah, that was one for the books."

"And what about the time he camped out in the backyard with us?"

"Yep. That thunderstorm sent us scrambling back into the house."

"Not before we got soaked to the skin, though. And Grandma Esther warmed us up with dry clothes, cookies, and cocoa in front of the fireplace."

"So many good memories. Grandpop and Gran were the best."

Janie arrived with our drinks and snacks. Tom lifted his pint.
“To Granddad Harry. One of the best men I've ever known.”

“Hear, hear,” I said, clinking my glass against his. We took a long swig in honor of the man who meant so much to us.

After sharing more fond memories, Tom became serious again.

“I'm sure you know Granddad Harry left a will,” he said.

“Of course.”

“When would you like to go over it? There's no rush.”

“Might as well get right to it. No sense dragging things out.”

“Right. But there's nothing wrong with taking some time to process your loss either.”

“What does your schedule look like tomorrow morning?”

“Well, if that's what you want, why don't we meet first thing?”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Okay. It's getting late. Let's call it a night. I'll order a ride share to take you home.”

“Thanks, buddy.”

The next morning, I hurried into Tom's office, eager to get the will reading over with. There was a lot of work ahead in transitioning the company. My mind had been full of thoughts about it all as I'd tossed and turned through the night.

“Morning, Alex,” Tom greeted me, gesturing to the seat across from his desk. His normally cheerful demeanor was subdued.

I sat down, fidgeting with my tie. “Let's just get this over with.”

Tom sighed, opened the manila folder on his desk, and paused.

“Well? What's it say?” I asked impatiently.

Tom sighed, meeting my eyes. “As you know, Granddad Harry wanted you to take over Montgomery Industries upon his death.”

“Yes, *and*?”

“However, he stipulated that you must marry by next Valentine's Day to inherit the company.”

My mouth dropped open in disbelief. “What?” I shook my head. “Why would he do that? Did you know about this?”

“I did.”

“Why didn't you tell me before?”

“Granddad Harry asked me not to reveal it to you. You know he'd been working on you for some time to settle down and start a family. It's no secret he was concerned that you were following in your Dad's footsteps.”

“Sure, but...!”

“He didn't want you dropping dead from a heart attack like your old man. You live and breathe the job just like he did. Have you heard of work/life balance?”

I sprang from my chair, pacing the office. “This is unbelievable! Grandpop knows how important the business is to me.” I threw my hands in the air in frustration.

Tom stood. “Hey, take it easy. We'll figure this out.”

The walls of Tom's office felt like they were closing in. I turned and headed toward the door. “I need some fresh air,” I called out as I left his office.

You could see my breath as I walked through the streets of downtown Denver. The brisk air helped to cool me off.

After about an hour, I found myself at my apartment. There was a voice message from my mom in my voicemail. “Alex, honey. I just heard about Grandpop. I'm so sorry. Please call me when you get a chance. I love you.”

After three rings, my mom answered. “Hello, honey. How are you doing?”

“Hi, Mom. So you heard?”

“Yes, Tom called me after you left his office.”

“Then you know about Grandpop's will.”

“I do, and I think it's fabulous.”

“What!?”

“Why yes, sweetheart. You know Grandpop and I have been concerned about you. We were both devastated when your father died. Even though I divorced him, I loved your dad very much.”

“I know, Mom. You both think I'm a workaholic like Dad was. But requiring that I marry by Valentine's Day. Ridiculous! What about the company if I don't pull it off?”

“I could care less about Montgomery Industries. I care about you.”

“And what about the fact that I'm not even dating anyone, and Valentine's Day is less than five weeks away?”

“Well, I admit Grandpop was a hopeful romantic.”

“He sure was, and I'm in a mess because of it. I don't know what I'm going to do.”

“Alex, why don't you come for a visit? You love the fishing here in Costa Rica. And there are oodles of pretty girls here who would love to marry a handsome, rich American.”

“Oh, mother. You and your crazy schemes.”

“You must admit, it's not the worst solution. At least promise me you'll give it some thought.”

“Before I even consider it, I'm going to see if Tom can find some kind of loophole.”

“I could come for a visit, hon, if you need me there.”

“Thanks, Mom. But I need to focus on the situation here. We can talk about getting together once this is all settled.”

“Alright, honey. Promise me you'll take care of yourself, please.”

“I will, Mom. Love you.”

“I love you bunches, son. Goodbye for now.”

“Bye.”

I suddenly felt exhausted. I'd been pacing like a caged animal the whole time I was on the phone. And I hadn't had anything to eat all day. But I didn't feel hungry.

My phone rang. It was Tom.

“Hey, Tom. I'm sorry I left you like that.”

“No worries. Where'd you go?”

I caught Tom up on the past few hours and my conversation with Mom.

Tom chuckled. “Sounds like your mom. It's not a bad idea, you know. We could both move to Costa Rica, marry a couple of pretty girls, spend our days fishing and lounging on the beach.”

“Ha, Ha!” I replied wryly. “And what about the family business?”

“We could leave it to Ronnie to run.”

“Ronnie! Grandpop would die all over again.”

“Kidding, buddy. Lighten up,” Tom chuckled. “Have you had anything to eat today?”

“You know me too well. Of course not.”

“What do you say we meet at “UrbanBite” for lunch in an hour.”

“Sounds good. I'll see you there. Bye, Tom.”

“Goodbye, Alex.”

On my way to the restaurant, I remembered Grandpop's advice.

“You can't let the business consume you, son,” he'd said on more than one occasion. “Life is meant for living.”

Maybe the old man had a point. But he'd sure left me in a bind.

Tom was already at a table when I arrived at “UrbanBite”. He waved me over. My stomach rumbled, and my mouth started watering when I saw the plate of Zesty Cauli Bites—crispy cauliflower on the outside, tender inside, with a burst of flavors that dance on your taste buds.

“Yum, my favorite. Thanks, Tom. I'm hungrier than I realized.”

“You're welcome, buddy. Have a seat and dig in.”

We both became quiet as we enjoyed the tasty dish and a pint.

The waitress stopped by to ask how everything was.

“Amazing as usual,” Tom replied. “Alex, Do you want to split a mushroom and Swiss burger and truffle fries?”

“Sure, that sounds good.”

“Do you fellas need another pint?” the waitress asked.

I shook my head.

“Nah, we're good, thanks,” Tom replied.

After the waitress left, Tom made a suggestion.

“Why don't you use all this as a fresh start? Take a break and come with me to our high school reunion this weekend. Might help get your mind off things.”

“You sound like my Mom. What about the company? Besides, you know I don't enjoy large gatherings. And I haven't stayed in touch with anyone from high school except you.”

“You know Granddad Harry would want you to go.”

“Yeah, I know. But we still need to come up with a solution and fast.”

“We'll have plenty of time to strategize on the way to Rosewood Falls.”

“Okay. But you know I'll hold you to it.”

“I wouldn't expect anything else, buddy.”

Chapter Two



Lily

I blinked awake as the first rays of dawn crept through the single window of my cramped apartment. Stretching, I rose from the narrow twin bed tucked into the small alcove, its faded blue walls chipped and peeling. I filled my watering can and tended to the potted flowers lining the sill—small bursts of life in this dreary space.

Chrysanthemums and orchids—their vibrant petals, gave me hope. Someday, I'd expand beyond this tiny shop and grow acres of blossoms.

Shaking dreams from my head, I splashed water on my face and changed into jeans and a faded sweater. No makeup today. Another day's work awaited. Orders to fill, arrangements to craft. Bouquets to nourish dreams.

The heavenly scent of myriads of flowers greeted me as I descended the stairs and entered the shop. Breathing deep, the

perfume of lavender soothed my worries, even if only for a moment.

I moved through the small storefront, running my fingers over the velvety petals. Vibrant colors filled my vision—fiery oranges, sunshine yellows, passionate reds, and purples—so much beauty within their delicate forms.

There was comfort in the routine as I watered buckets of blooms and tidied shelves. The work was constant, but my love for it was deep. Financial struggles weighed on me, but I still had passion and dreams yet to unfold.

At 7:30 sharp, the bell above the shop door jingled merrily, announcing the arrival of my favorite Tuesday morning visitor—Mrs. Hancock—the sweet eighty-year-old who came like clockwork each week to purchase flowers for her garden club’s weekly luncheons.

“Good morning, Mrs. Hancock!” I exclaimed, rushing to wrap her in a gentle embrace. She always smelled of rose and vanilla. Her bony arms squeezed me fondly like my grandma used to do.

“Don’t you look as fresh as these flowers today, sweet girl,” she said, patting my cheek before shuffling over to inspect my assortment of pail-bound blossoms.

I suggested an arrangement featuring chrysanthemums. Their festive colors and lush, full blooms would brighten up any table.

“The burgundy mums would look lovely with these bronze daisies, don't you think?” I asked, holding up the pair for her to inspect.

Mrs. Hancock clapped her hands in delight. “Oh, what a fine match!”

As I snipped the stems and wrapped everything in brown paper, her satisfied smile reassured me as she inspected my handiwork.

“Lovely as always, Lily. You’ve got the touch just like your dear mother,” she remarked.

“Thank you. Mom taught me everything I know,” I replied. “Enjoy your luncheon, and I’ll see you next Tuesday if not before.”

“Have a lovely day, my dear,” she called as she opened the shop door and headed outside.

After Mrs. Hancock left, I focused on the sizable wedding job I had taken on. I hoped doing florals for the Pearson-Lockhart extravaganza might expose my talents to the county’s posh social circles. More upscale clients meant I could finally hire some help around here.

First, I gently inspected the merlot-colored garden roses I'd ordered special for the bride’s bouquet. Then checked for any imperfections that might mar their velvety petals. After de-thorning each stem, I artfully arranged the dramatic blooms with sprays of bronze-hued mums and cascades of burgundy *Amaranthus*.

Next, my fingers worked swiftly from muscle memory to construct the smaller bridal party bouquets and boutonnieres.

Finally, I began assembling the towering reception centerpieces, incorporating artfully weathered wood urns overflowing with all the blossoms in the bridal bouquets. I pictured the country club transformed into a floral showcase.

As I reached for more supplies, my gaze fell on a photo of my mother tucked into the corner of my worktable. She'd named me after her favorite flower. A bittersweet pang hit my heart, remembering how we used to create arrangements side-by-side. She would have loved crafting for a wedding of this scale. I wished I could share this moment with her.

"Don't worry, Mom," I whispered. "Someday, this little shop of ours will be so much more. Just wait and see."

The shop door's bell filled the air, startling me from my reverie.

"I brought lunch!" my best friend Grace Erickson called as she joined me in the back room.

"It's lunchtime already?" I replied. "Geez, the time is flying, and I have so much to do."

"Holy cow, girlfriend! These arrangements are gorgeous," Grace enthused as she plopped a sack from Mike's Deli on the counter.

"Oh my gosh, you brought me the best ever chef's salad sub?"

"Of course. You've been ordering the same sandwich since we were in high school."

“You know me so well!”

“You know it, babe,” Grace agreed, giving me a high five.

As I unwrapped the crinkling white paper, the tangy scents transported me instantly back to simpler times, gossiping with Grace in Mike's red vinyl booths after school.

“Check out the ideas I have for the centerpieces for the reunion,” I suggested as I pulled up photos on my phone.

Grace grabbed my arm excitedly. “Lily, those purple and gold arrangements look ah-mazing. But maybe incorporate some candlelight too for a romantic glow?”

“Candlelight would be perfect. I can't believe our ten-year reunion is this weekend. Are you still planning on helping me?”

“Of course. I have Friday off, so I'm all yours.”

“What would I do without you?”

Grace winked, stealing a pickle from my sandwich bag. “Let's not find out.”

As we slurped the last remnants of our root beers, I broached an idea with Grace, seeking her opinion.

“So I'm thinking of raising my rates. You know, make my pricing reflect more of a high-end boutique kind of model,” I ventured slowly, fiddling with my paper straw wrapper. “Especially for bigger weddings and events. I mean, I really pour so much effort and expensive specialty flowers into those custom orders.”

“Yes! Your designs are pure art. I bet you could go thirty, even forty percent higher than your current rates.”

I bit my lip. “Yeah, but won't I risk losing budget-conscious brides if I hike costs that much?”

Grace reached over to still my nervous hands, forcing my gaze to meet hers. “Honey, believe in yourself. Talented artists know their worth, right? Have some faith. Besides, I can help you work out pricing to meet any budget.”

“That would be a great help. Thanks.”

As we gathered our trash, Grace suddenly snapped her fingers. “Oh my gosh, idea! As part of my historical society gig, I'm constantly applying for preservation grants and seeking philanthropic sponsors for our projects, right?”

“Sure.” I nodded, recalling the museum addition made possible by her skilled grant proposal work.

“Well,” Grace continued, “I could totally do some digging into small business grants or artistic sponsorships for you.”

“Wow, really? You think funders might sponsor a tiny florist and flower farm?”

“Are you kidding? A passionate young entrepreneur committed to pushing creative boundaries while respecting nature and the value of community? That is absolute catnip to artistic patrons!”

She gripped my hands tightly, eyes shining. “Let me work my fundraising magic for you. This could be huge, Lily!”

I pulled Grace into a fierce hug. “You truly are my fairy godmother, you know that?”

“Let's get your carriage ready for the ball, Cinderella!”

Chapter Three



Alex

I shoved the last dress shirt into my garment bag, trying to ignore the growing pit in my stomach. With a multi-million dollar company to run, I didn't have time to go back to Rosewood Falls. Especially not for some stupid high school reunion.

The ticking of the grandfather clock set my nerves on edge. Valentine's Day crept closer by the minute. I had to find a wife soon, thanks to Grandpop and that blasted stipulation in his will. But how could I think about romance at a time like this?

A sharp rap at the door startled me. I zipped up the bag and tossed it over my shoulder. Tom's grinning face greeted me when I opened the door.

“Ready for the road trip down memory lane?” he asked, clapping me on the back.

I grimaced. “Do I have a choice?”

Tom took my suitcase and pushed the elevator button while I locked up. “Come on, it won't be that bad. Besides, the scenery is gorgeous.”

“I could care less about the scenery,” I grumbled. “We should be taking the helicopter to save time. I have a company to run, in case you forgot.”

“Alex, you need this break. I'm worried about you.” Tom's brow furrowed with concern. “Granddad Harry just wanted you to be happy. Try to relax and have some fun this weekend.”

I sighed, my shoulders slumping. “Fine. But I'm not staying long.”

“Atta boy. Now let's hit the road,” Tom encouraged as we placed our bags in the back of his SUV.

Reluctantly, I slid into the passenger seat.

I couldn't help but admire the panorama before us as we left the city. The snow-capped mountain range stood proudly against the clear blue sky. I took a deep breath and allowed myself to experience the sense of stability these mountains had always given me. Maybe Tom was right. Time away from it all might help me gain some perspective. Maybe.

Tom grinned over at me as we drove past a trailhead. “Remember that backpacking trip we took the summer after high school graduation? I thought I would die trying to keep up with you.”

I chuckled. “Hey, going uphill fast was the only way to make sure we had time to fish at the alpine lakes. That *was* a great trip.”

“It was totally worth the muscle aches. My favorite part was kicking back next to the fire and looking at all those stars.”

“No light pollution up there.”

“Remember mountain biking around Vail? That was some beautiful scenery.”

“And perfect singletrack trails.”

“I definitely prefer mountain biking over backpacking,” Tom said ruefully. “How about when we rented snowmobiles up near Winter Park? Now that was an adrenaline rush, carving through fresh powder.”

“Yeah, we’ve always had good adventures together. Maybe I should make more time to get away. But how can I do that now with everything that's happened?”

“Well, maybe Granddad Harry’s unusual proviso is a blessing in disguise. Could be a wake-up call to recalibrate, make your health and relationships more of a priority.”

“What am I going to do, Tom?” I said, irritation creeping into my tone. “Valentine’s Day is right around the corner. There has to be some way around this stipulation.”

Tom shook his head. “Buddy, we've explored every angle. No loopholes. Your granddad's will is airtight.”

I dropped my head into my hand, exhaling in frustration. “A few weeks isn’t enough time to meet someone and get married. And you know me—I can barely keep a goldfish alive, let alone a relationship.”

Tom chuckled sympathetically. “There has to be a logical way forward. Grandad Harry was one of the best strategists I knew.”

I brightened a little, straightening in my seat. “He was. So... maybe this is his way of issuing a challenge from the grave. One last lesson.”

“Could be. He always pushed you to grow, to better yourself.”

“He knew I prioritized work above all else. But marriage requires compromise and balance.”

“Exactly. This stipulation forces you to practice those relationship skills if you want the company.”

“So I shouldn’t view it as a punishment but as a challenge,” I said thoughtfully.

“It could make you a better leader in the long run. More empathetic, less closed-off. If you let it.”

I pictured Granddad’s smiling face, his warmth and understanding. “Alright. If he wants me to evolve, I’ll find a way to fulfill his wish. And maybe discover a partner who complements me along the way.”

Chapter Four



Alex

“Look,” Tom said, pointing to a wispy waterfall cascading down a rocky cliff. “Bridal Veil Falls. Remember how we used to picnic there with Granddad Harry and Grandma Esther?”

I smiled faintly as bittersweet memories washed over me—lazy summer days exploring the woods and wading in the creek. Gran unpacking a feast of sandwiches and lemonade. Granddad telling stories around the campfire at night, the sparks rising to join the stars. His deep, rumbling laugh as we roasted marshmallows for s'mores.

“He really loved this place,” I murmured.

“He'd be happy you came back. Maybe being here will help you figure out what he wanted you to learn.”

Gazing at the waterfall, I recalled the way Granddad's eyes crinkled when he looked at Gran. They'd been married for

over 50 years when she passed.

Maybe he just wanted me to experience that kind of love.

I sighed, leaning my head against the window. If only it were that simple.

Just then, we drove past the 'Welcome to Rosewood Falls' sign. The population number—5,200—seemed frozen in time, just like this quaint mountain town.

“Hard to believe it's been ten years since we graduated,” I mused.

“We're going to have a great time this weekend. Remember all the trouble we used to get into?” Tom said, giving my arm a friendly punch.

I smiled, thinking back on our high school shenanigans - skipping class to go fishing, TP-ing the vice principal's house, and getting caught trying to sneak into the girl's locker room. Good times.

“We sure gave the teachers heck,” I chuckled.

“And now look at us—a hot-shot CEO and a big city lawyer. Who would've thought?”

I shook my head. “Well, one of us grew up. The other's still just a big kid at heart.”

Tom grinned. “You know you love me.”

I had to laugh. Tom's easygoing nature balanced out my tendency to be wound up and intense. He'd been there for me through thick and thin.

“Seriously though, thanks for dragging me out here,” I said. “I needed this.”

Tom gave me a wink. “What are friends for?”

We pulled into the parking lot of the Rosewood Inn, a cozy lodge nestled amidst majestic mountain peaks. As I stepped out of the car, the crisp mountain air filled my lungs. It already felt rejuvenating to be back.

Across the street, the door to Lily's Blooms swung open. A woman with long auburn hair stepped out, cradling a large bouquet of sunflowers.

Even from a distance, I could tell she was gorgeous - tall and slender, wearing a flowy floral dress that complimented her hair perfectly. She glided over to a delapidated periwinkle delivery van with the florist shop's logo on the side.

“Hey, isn't that Lily Adams?” Tom asked.

I looked again, squinting. “Are you sure? The shy wallflower with the frizzy hair and thick glasses?”

“Yeah. Your lab partner and tutor in chemistry class. She sure grew up nice,” Tom said appreciatively.

I nodded, impressed at the transformation. As Lily loaded up her van, she happened to glance our way. She lifted a hand in greeting.

“Well, are you going to go say hi or what?” Tom elbowed me.

I took a deep breath and crossed the street. She watched me approach with a curious smile.

“Lily Adams?” I said. “It's me, Alex Montgomery.”

Her eyes lit up. “Alex! Wow, it's been ages. I almost didn't recognize you.”

We exchanged an awkward hug. She smelled like roses and sunshine.

“What are you up to these days?” I asked.

“Oh, I took over my mom's flower shop,” she said, gesturing to the storefront. “And I have a little flower farm just outside of town. Keeps me pretty busy, but I love it.”

“That's great,” I said. “You always had such a talent for arrangements.”

She blushed at the compliment. “What about you? I imagine you're doing big things in the city.”

I shrugged. “Mostly just work. I run my grandfather's company now.”

Her eyes clouded with concern. “I was so sorry to hear about your grandfather's passing. I know you two were close.”

I nodded, touched that she remembered. We chatted easily, catching up on old times. I realized how much I enjoyed her quick wit and intelligence. She wasn't just beautiful—she was captivating.

Too soon, Tom waved me over. It was time to head to the Inn for the reunion happy hour. I turned to Lily.

“It was really nice seeing you again,” I said. “Are you going to Alumni Libations Night tonight?”

“Maybe. If there’s time after I get these deliveries done.”

“Ok. Well, I hope to catch up with you sometime this weekend.”

“I’d like that.” Lily smiled.

I rejoined Tom, my mind still on the enchanting Lily Adams. Something told me this reunion weekend was about to get a lot more interesting.

Later that evening, as happy hour wound down, I found myself alone with Lily on the Inn's back patio. The golden glow of string lights illuminated her face as she sipped a glass of wine.

“It's so nice to be back here,” I said, leaning on the railing. “This town has a lot of good memories.”

Lily nodded. “I know what you mean. I could never bring myself to leave. Especially now that Mom is gone. I can't let her legacy die with her.”

“When did she pass?” I asked as I gestured to the table next to us and held out a chair for her.

“Two years ago.”

“I'm sorry to hear that, Lily.”

“Thank you. Don't get me wrong, there's no place I'd rather be. It's just been a struggle running things on my own without any help.”

“Why haven't you hired somebody?”

“I can barely keep my head above water, let alone pay somebody else.”

“Yeah, that's tough. You know. I've got a pretty good head for business. Maybe there's something I can do to help.”

“Really? You'd do that for me?”

“Sure. I'd be glad to help. Besides, I owe you for all of your help with chemistry in high school.”

“True,” Lily chuckled. “I guess you do owe me. Do you remember Grace Erikson?”

“You're trusted sidekick who was always the life of the party?”

“That's the one. She writes grants for the Historical Society and thinks she might be able to find funding or even a partner for my flower business.”

“That's a great idea. Do you want to meet for coffee tomorrow to see if we can start roughing out some more plans?”

“I'd like that. We could meet at the Rosewood Roasts. Say 7:30?”

“It's a date...um...well, you know what I mean,” I said as a blush rose on my cheeks.

“I know what you mean, Alex,” Lily chuckled and stood. “It's getting pretty late. I think I'll turn in.”

“Yes. I'm ready for some shuteye after the long drive today. Can I walk you home?”

“It's just across the street above the flower shop.”

“Great, I can stretch my legs a bit before bed.”

“Well, if you insist.”

Lily let me take her hand as we left the Inn and walked across the street.

“Thanks for seeing me home, Alex,” Lily turned to me as we reached her door. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Goodnight, Lily,” I said as I kissed the back of her hand.

Chapter Five



Lily

The warm bathwater lapped at my skin as I sank into its comforting embrace. I closed my eyes, Alex's handsome face swimming before me. The shy smile he gave me outside my flower shop last night had made my heart flutter, just like it did in high school.

It was hard to believe that he had been paying so much attention to me since he'd arrived in town. I still felt like the science geek who had a hopeless crush on him in high school.

I toweled off, recalling our coffee date at Rosewood Roasts. Alex had listened intently as I shared my business struggles, his piercing blue eyes filled with compassion. He'd offered idea after idea to boost sales and cut costs. His business savvy impressed me.

As we were leaving the coffee shop, he turned to me with a shy smile. "Would you do me the honor of being my date for

the reunion banquet tonight?”

“I’d like that, Alex.”

“Great! I’ll see you tonight.”

My pulse quickened, imagining Alex taking me in his arms on the dance floor tonight, our bodies swaying as one. “*Cool it, Lily! He’s just here for the weekend.*” I chastised myself.

I slipped on the emerald cocktail dress I’d chosen to accentuate my eyes and re-curled my hair. A touch of lipstick and I was ready, giddy with anticipation.

The grand ballroom was alive with twinkling lights and joyful chatter. I navigated through familiar faces until I finally spotted Alex. He looked incredibly handsome in his impeccably tailored suit, a sleek and dark charcoal gray. A crisp, white dress shirt peeked out from beneath the suit jacket, its collar smartly buttoned up. His silk tie had a subtle design that glinted in the light, matching the twinkle in his eyes.

Our eyes met, and he excused himself from his friend, never breaking our gaze.

As he drew nearer, I couldn’t help but admire the way he carried himself—with a quiet, captivating, and reassuring confidence.

“You look beautiful,” he whispered as he kissed my cheek. The woodsy scent of his cologne enveloped me. My skin tingled from his lips’ caress.

Alex took my hand and led me to a table in a quiet corner of the ballroom. He gently brushed my shoulders as he removed

my shawl and pulled out a chair for me.

“Are you responsible for the centerpieces?” He asked as he sat down next to me.

“Yes, and Grace helped too.”

“Well, you two did a beautiful job.”

“Thank you. I admit I'm proud of how they turned out.”

“You should be.”

“And thank you again for all of your help this morning.”

“It was my pleasure. I meant everything I said - I want you to succeed,” he said earnestly. “Can I get you a glass of wine?”

“Yes, please.”

I watched Alex walk away from the table, struggling to believe we were spending this romantic evening together.

“Honestly. I'm surprised you recognized me after all these years,” I admitted when he returned with the wine. “I figured you were too busy with baseball and your popular friends to remember the awkward girl who tutored you.”

Alex grinned affectionately. “Are you kidding? I looked forward to our study sessions. Honestly, helping *me* pass chem was probably your biggest challenge.”

I smiled, recalling how Alex would ramble about curveballs and fastballs instead of paying attention to electron configurations.

“Hey, remember when you used color-coded diagrams and drawings to explain atomic charges?” Alex asked, a smile

spreading across his face. “You made elements almost as interesting as RBI stats.”

“I always see the art in science.”

“Speaking of art. Do you know I still have the caricature you drew of me playing baseball?”

“Oh my gosh! That was such a silly thing,” I chuckled.

“I always appreciated your droll sense of humor.”

“Really? I never thought of myself as funny.”

“That surprises me. I also have a caricature of Mr. James.”

“Oh, yes. The one with atoms, molecules, and chemical formulas coming out of his mouth and floating around the room.”

We both laughed at the memory.

“Do you remember the time you almost blew up the chem lab?” I asked.

“Oh yeah. I thought Mr. James was going to explode along with the Bunsen burner that shattered.”

“I warned you that the heat was too high.”

“Go big or go home, right?” Alex winked. “I’m so glad we were lab partners.”

“Me too. We sure had some fun times together.”

As we enjoyed our dinner, we shared more memories and laughs.

“Did you play baseball after graduation?” I asked as we were finishing dessert.

“No, I went to work at Montgomery Industries while getting my business degree. There just wasn’t time. Grandpop encouraged me to continue playing, but I didn’t listen.”

“Why didn’t you listen?”

“Grandpop said it was because I took after my dad.”

“How so?”

“He worked all the time and was rarely at home. But that’s enough about me,” Alex said as he stood up and offered his hand. “Would you do me the honor of dancing with me?”

“Um...I’ve never danced with anyone before.”

“No! Really? Well, then, we need to correct that right now. Do you trust me?”

I smiled up at Alex as I took his hand. The butterflies in my stomach flapped wildly as he led me onto the dance floor.

“Just follow my lead,” he said reassuringly as he drew me close. The opening notes of “Unforgettable” filled the ballroom, and Alex guided me smoothly across the floor.

At first, I stared down at my feet, afraid to make a wrong move. But Alex tilted my chin up gently so my eyes met his. “Just look at me, Lily. You can trust me to guide you,” he murmured. As we moved together, the rest of the room seemed to melt away. I was only aware of Alex's firm hand on my back, his blue eyes gazing into mine.

I laid my head against his broad chest. His heartbeat pulsed steadily under my cheek. I had never felt so safe, so cherished.

Too quickly, the music ended, the last notes fading away. Alex's eyes searched mine. "Thank you for the dance, Lily," he said softly. "It was my pleasure."

I smiled up at him. "No, thank you. I've never danced like that before."

Alex grinned. "Well, maybe we could do it again sometime." He squeezed my hand gently.

As we walked outside into the cool night air, I exhaled slowly, still floating from our dance. I knew my heart was lost, but with Alex, it felt less like losing and more like finding.

Alex walked me home, his hand warm on my back. Outside my apartment, he turned to face me.

"Sweet dreams, Lily," he murmured. Then he leaned in and kissed my cheek, his lips lingering for a moment.

I watched him walk away, one hand pressed to where his lips had been. The spot tingled.

As I climbed into bed, visions of our dance replayed in my mind. The way he had looked at me, touched me... It was as if he could see the real me. Hugging the bear Mom gave me when I broke my arm in 9th grade, I fell asleep with a smile on my face.

Chapter Six



Alex

The blaring alarm jolted me awake. I groaned, images from last night still swirling through my mind—Lily's emerald dress glittering under the ballroom lights as we swayed across the dance floor, her soft skin under my lips as I kissed her cheek. My heart fluttered, remembering her radiant smile.

I hauled myself out of bed. A quick shower and shave before meeting Tom for breakfast. As I combed my hair, my mind drifted back to Lily. Something about her lit me up inside. I wanted to shelter her bright spirit from anything that might dim its shine.

Tom spotted me as I stepped into the diner and waved me over to where he sat at a table by the front window.

Tom's grin told me he already knew where my thoughts had been.

“So, Lily, huh?” He smirked.

I felt my neck flush. “We just danced together.”

“You spent the whole evening together. Admit it, you've got a thing for her.”

I rubbed the back of my neck, a shy smile escaping. “Maybe.”

Tom laughed and then scratched his chin in mock concentration. “An eligible bachelorette right under your nose who might just fit the bill.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Granddad Harry’s will,” Tom chuckled.

I raked a hand through my hair. The mention of Grandpop’s will knotted my gut.

The waitress brought us our menus and asked if we’d like coffee.

I stared out the window and spotted Lily bundled in a wool coat and hat. She hurried down the sidewalk with her head ducked against a mounting snowstorm.

My heart gave a little lurch. The sight of her sparked an impulse that both thrilled and terrified me.

“Good morning, Judy,” Tom flirted with the waitress. “What do you recommend?”

“I like the breakfast burrito,” Judy responded with a smile.

“What do you think, buddy?” Tom asked me. “Do you want to split the breakfast burrito and some home fries?”

“Sure, whatever you’d like,” I responded, still distracted by the idea forming in my head.

“You heard him,” Tom said as he turned back to Judy. “We’ll split the breakfast burrito and some home fries, and we’d each like a cup of black coffee, please.”

“Good choice,” Judy replied. “I’ll be right back with your coffee.”

As she walked away, I turned back to Tom.

“You know Tom. You might be onto something,” I said slowly.

“What! You know I was just joking, right?” Tom backtracked.

“What if I proposed a marriage of convenience to Lily? Hear me out,” I added, seeing Tom's eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

“Turns out Lily’s business is struggling. She puts on a brave face, but I can tell she’s barely holding things together. This could solve both our problems. I’d ensure her business stayed afloat, and she could fulfill the terms of the will.”

I held his incredulous stare, the crazed notion sinking its hooks deeper into me. Could this work?

Tom leaned back, regarding me seriously. “Whoa there, Alex. I know you want to help, but this is Lily's future, too, not just yours. And what about your real feelings about her?”

He was right. I couldn't make this choice rashly or selfishly. But the seed of this crazy idea had been planted. I needed to talk to Lily right away.

I threw some cash on the table and stood abruptly. “You're right. I need to think this through more carefully. But first, I have to find Lily.”

I strode quickly down Main Street. My footsteps felt oddly buoyant despite the weighty proposition taking shape in my mind. Lily's Blooms came into view.

I spotted her petite figure struggling to shovel the heavy, wet snow accumulating on the sidewalk outside her shop. I hurried over.

“Here, let me help with that,” I said, taking the shovel from her mittened hands.

Lily looked up, surprise flickering in her hazel eyes. “Alex! What are you doing out in this storm?”

I shoveled steadily, clearing a path to the door. “I was having breakfast with Tom. Then I saw you out here and thought you could use a hand.”

“My hero,” Lily said with a chuckle as she curtsied and crossed her hands over her heart in a flourish.

“Lily, you've always been there for me. Let me be there for you, too.” My thumb gently caressed her knuckles. The touch felt natural, right.

Lily blinked at me, surprise mingling with something warmer in her eyes. My heart pounded wildly. Was this crazy idea truly so impossible? I let myself imagine a future by Lily's side for a fleeting second—a real marriage.

I took a deep breath, squeezing her hand. “Come on, let's get inside where it's warm. We have a lot to talk about.”

Chapter Seven



Lily

The memory of gliding across the ballroom floor in Alex's strong arms faded away as the alarm clock coaxed me out of sleep. My cheeks flushed as I recalled our slow dance at the reunion, his hand on my lower back, our bodies swaying in time to the music. I'd dreamed of that moment for years.

Shivering, I forced myself from the warm cocoon of blankets out into the frigid room. I had to get ready to meet Grace at the coffee shop. Pulling on my warmest clothes, I smiled, thinking of my best friend and her relentless teasing about my crush on Alex.

Icy flakes stung my cheeks while I trudged down the snowy sidewalk to Rosewood Roasts. A bell jingled overhead as I entered the cozy cafe.

Grace waved at me from our usual spot by the fireplace. I sighed in relief as the warmth seeped into my cold bones.

“One chai latte for the snow princess,” the barista said with a wink, placing my favorite drink on the table.

“Thanks, Jack.” I wrapped my frozen hands around the cup, letting the heat thaw my stiff joints.

Grace's eyes twinkled mischievously. “So, tell me everything about last night with Alex.”

I took a long sip of chai to avoid answering.

“Oh, come on, Lily! You two were together all evening.”

I bit my lip, unable to stop a smile from spreading across my face. “Okay, fine. He asked me to dance, and it was... perfect.”

Grace squealed loudly, then composed herself. “I knew it! You two are meant for each other.”

I rolled my eyes, but a part of me wondered if she was right. Alex had come back into my life so unexpectedly. It felt like fate giving me a second chance.

I cleared my throat, eager to change the subject before I said too much.

“Anyway, Alex has some great ideas to help my business.”

Grace's eyebrows shot up. “Spill!”

“It's not a big deal,” I said, waving it off. “He agrees with you about raising my rates. And he offered some suggestions, like partnering with wedding venues in nearby towns and offering flower subscriptions. He really seems to understand managing a small business.”

“Well, he is a successful CEO,” Grace pointed out.

I nodded, thinking back to our conversation yesterday morning. Alex had listened so intently; his blue eyes focused solely on me. For the first time in a long while, I felt a sense of hope about the future of my business. Just having his support meant the world.

Grace leaned in eagerly. “So, what's the deal? Are you two official now?”

I almost choked on my chai. “Grace! It's not like that. We're just...getting to know each other again.”

“Well, you must admit he's a catch. And just think of the *millions* of ways he can help you out, if you know what I mean,” Grace said with a suggestive wink.

“Oh my gosh! Grace!”

“You're right, I'm sorry. I was thinking out loud again.” Grace reached over and squeezed my hand. “You know me, no filter.”

“You say some of the wildest things,” I said as I stood up. “It's time to open the shop.”

The snow nearly blinded me as I stepped out into the blizzard.

When I got to the shop, drifts of snow blocked the front door. I found a shovel and started digging it out, my nose already numb from the cold.

Suddenly, Alex appeared through the swirling snow. We talked as he finished shoveling, and then he took my hand and said

something about needing to talk.

We entered the dark shop, stamping our snowy boots. I flipped on the lights and blinked against the sudden brightness.

“Wow, this is really something,” Alex said, glancing around the shop. His eyes lingered on the rows of flowers, taking in the riot of color.

“Thanks.” I smiled. “Can I get you some tea to warm up?”

“That would be great.”

I busied myself, filling the kettle and setting out mugs. Alex wandered through the store, leaning down to smell some roses.

“Lily?”

I turned to see him watching me, his expression serious. He crossed the room in a few long strides. Gently taking my hand, he said, “I want to discuss a business proposal with you.”

My heart leaped. A proposal? Did he mean...? No, Lily, don't be silly. Not that kind of proposal.

“What kind of proposal?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Well, I was thinking...” Alex began, but his phone rang loudly just then. He checked it with an annoyed look. “Sorry, it's Tom. I should take this.”

I nodded understandingly as he answered. “Hey Tom, can this wait?”

Alex's brow furrowed. “Right. Hold on a second, okay?” He covered the phone and said to me, “Estate stuff. I'll just be a

minute.”

“No problem.”

Alex started pacing as he listened, running a hand through his damp hair. I busied myself with the tea again, curiosity burning through me. What sort of business proposal could he have in mind?

Alex ended the call with a frustrated sigh. He turned to me with an apologetic look.

“I'm really sorry, Lily, but I have to return to Denver immediately. Something urgent has come up.”

My heart sank, but I tried not to show my disappointment.

“Oh. That's too bad. Is everything okay?”

“It will be. I was hoping we could talk more.” He moved closer, his blue eyes intent on mine. “But I definitely want to explain my proposal soon. Are you free tomorrow night for dinner?”

“Yes, tomorrow's great!” I said a little too eagerly.

Alex smiled, looking relieved. “Good. I'll call you with the details.”

We walked to the front door. I shivered as the cold air swept inside.

“Drive safely,” I said. “The roads look pretty bad out there.”

“I will.” Alex paused, like he wanted to say more, but then just squeezed my hand. “Talk soon, Lily.”

I watched his tall figure hurry across the street, hunched against the swirling snow.

I closed the door, my mind spinning. What sort of proposal could practical, serious Alex have in mind? My romantic heart dared to dream up wild possibilities. But I checked my runaway imagination. Best not to get my hopes up too high.

Shaking my head to clear it, I got to work on the floral arrangements for the masquerade ball in nearby Silver Valley. I needed to focus on my business, not daydream about handsome CEOs.

Still, I couldn't stop a smile as I turned up the radio and hummed along to a sappy love song. No matter what happened next, I was grateful fate had brought Alex back into my life, even if just for a little while.

Chapter Eight



Alex

The helicopter's roar drowned out everything as we lifted off the tarmac. I settled into the plush leather seat next to Tom. The Rockies fell away behind us as we flew over the foothills.

Tom took a deep breath beside me. "I have something to tell you. It won't be easy to hear."

I steeled myself, gazing out the window as the foothills blurred into suburbs below.

"Go ahead," I told him. "I'm listening."

Tom leaned over, his voice low and serious.

"Ronnie's been stirring up trouble since Granddad Harry passed away. Spreading rumors about your capability as CEO and trying to rally Board members against you."

His words hit like a punch to my gut. I rubbed my temples, struggling to process this betrayal from my own cousin. We'd

been so close as kids.

I let out a frustrated sigh. “I’m not surprised, but I’d hoped inviting him back into the company would help heal our relationship.”

Tom shook his head. “Looks like he’s still jealous of your rise through the ranks. It’s hard to believe he thinks he deserves to be at the helm. All he does is party and work to undermine your credibility.”

“Yeah,” I muttered, rubbing my temples. “I guess Grandpop was right to fire Ronnie after he was caught embezzling. He warned me not to be fooled by him—that giving him another chance would be a mistake. But I didn’t listen.”

“I know,” Tom said sympathetically. “It’s not easy letting go of hope, especially when it comes to family. Granddad Harry should have pressed charges against Ronnie, though. Then he’d be out of your hair.”

“I just wanted to believe he could be different. But it seems he’s still the same conniving Ronnie.”

“That’s always been his nature. He’s never had your integrity or selflessness.”

“I know you’re right,” I said as I stared out at the Denver skyline. “But part of me still wants to believe there’s good somewhere in him.”

Tom placed a hand on my shoulder. “That just shows how kind-hearted you are, Alex. Just don’t let him take advantage of that.”

“I just don't know if I have it in me to cut ties with him completely.”

“I understand. But Ronnie's proven he'll exploit any sliver of trust. You have to protect yourself and the company.”

“You're right. I know he's toxic, but still...” I trailed off, memories of kinder times flashing through my mind.

“Hey,” Tom said gently. “No one would fault you for holding out hope. But there's too much at stake here. Let's meet with him together, present a united front.”

“I appreciate the support, Tom. But I'm pretty sure he'll feel cornered and become defensive if we confront him together. I should meet with him alone.”

Tom looked skeptical but said, “That's fair. Just be cautious. And know I've got your back.”

“Thanks, man,” I said, clapping his shoulder. “Don't know what I'd do without you.”

Tom grinned. “Probably something stupidly naive. That's what I'm here for.”

I took a deep breath, steeling myself. “Okay. I'll confront Ronnie directly, make it clear his manipulations won't work.”

“You've got this, buddy,” Tom said as he punched me gently on the arm.

I nodded, determined not to let Ronnie destroy everything Grandpop had worked for—no matter how difficult it may be.

I called my assistant Nancy and asked her to schedule a meeting with Ronnie in my office in an hour.

I stood at my office window overlooking the city, arms crossed.

My thoughts drifted to Lily—the earnest look on her face—right before my bungled attempt at proposing something that would benefit us both was interrupted.

Lily was guileless, wearing her heart on her sleeve. Ronnie wielded charm like a weapon, aiming for the jugular when it suited him.

I thought back to our childhood. Even then, Ronnie gravitated toward sycophants who boosted his ego, while true companions like Tom meant everything to me.

Maybe Ronnie wouldn't have strayed so far if I'd tried harder to guide him down a nobler path. But it was too late for what-ifs. I had to shield everything our grandfather built from Ronnie's avarice.

Steeling myself for the confrontation ahead, I put on one of my best ties and the cufflinks Grandpop gave me to celebrate my promotion to CEO. I had to approach this coolly but firmly, with unflinching conviction.

No more pulling punches—the gloves were coming off. For Grandpop's legacy, for the company, and my own peace of mind, Ronnie's schemes ended today.

At the appointed hour, my assistant Nancy buzzed that Ronnie had arrived. I straightened my cuffs and tightened my tie before asking Nancy to send him in.

Ronnie sauntered through the door, grinning widely. He offered me a bottle of our grandfather's favorite scotch. I waved off the gift, all business.

Ronnie's smile faltered briefly at the rebuff, but he recovered quickly, making himself comfortable in the chair across from me.

“So, Alex, I heard you made it back for the high school reunion in Rosewood Falls. I'm surprised you found time to get away during all this mess after Granddad's untimely death. Me, I haven't left the office, trying to keep things running smoothly.”

“My dedication to Grandfather's legacy is unwavering.” I shot back. “He trusted me implicitly to lead this company with integrity, not self-interest.”

Ronnie's eyes narrowed slightly. “No need to get defensive, cuz. We're family. I just want what's best for the company.”

“And you think going against Granddad's wishes is best?” I challenged him. “I know all about your underhanded tactics since his passing.”

“You always were the old man's favorite. He was never interested in what I had to offer,” He spat back. “So I have to take what I deserve.”

“You mean steal? You're lucky Granddad kept you out of prison.”

Ronnie started to retort, but I held up my hand to silence him.

“I was a fool to give you another chance. But don't mistake my empathy for weakness,” I warned. “You've left me no choice.”

I stood, signaling the conversation was over. Buzzing Nancy, I asked her to send in the security guard I had requested.

“I'll email you the details of your severance package,” I told Ronnie coolly as the guard entered my office.

“Thank you for coming, Allen,” I said to the guard. “Please see Mr. Montgomery to his office so he can pack up his things and then escort him out of the building.”

Ronnie's composed facade started to crack. He forced a smile that didn't reach his eyes and stood up.

“I'll leave you to your work,” he said smoothly, turning for the door. “We'll surely speak again soon.”

This was far from over; I knew Ronnie would seek revenge, and I would be ready.

Chapter Nine



Lily

A sweet country tune played on the radio as I arranged sunflowers and daisies in an old copper watering can. The bell above the door rang as Charles Barnett lumbered inside.

“Good morning, Mr. Barnett. Can I help you find anything?” I asked politely, setting my unfinished arrangement aside.

Barnett ambled around the shop, poking at a potted orchid. “You have a nice little place here. Be a shame if anything happened to it.”

My breath caught, and I straightened my shoulders. “I manage just fine, thank you.”

“Of course, of course,” he said lightly. “A pretty young thing like you should focus on finding a nice husband. No need to worry yourself over a silly flower shop.”

Anger flashed hot inside me, but I kept my voice calm. “I enjoy my work very much. Now, if there's nothing I can help you with, I should get back to it.”

He sauntered up to the counter, beady eyes glinting. “I wanted to have a chat with you, Lily. Just us two.”

I stiffened. Something about his oily tone made my skin crawl. “About what?”

“Your financial situation.” He leaned an elbow on the counter, “I know you've been struggling. Word gets around in a small town.”

My cheeks burned with shame. It was true. I was barely keeping afloat. But how did he know? I hadn't told anyone except—

Grace. My best friend must have let it slip. Anger and hurt swirled inside me.

Barnett continued, “I'd be happy to help you out. For the right price, of course.”

I paused, thinking hard. I needed the money badly. But was it worth making a deal with this slimy man?

I hesitated, wary of his offer but desperate for a way out.

“What did you have in mind?” I asked slowly.

Barnett's lips curved into a sly smile. “Just a simple partnership. I'll pay off all your debts *if* you make me an equal partner.”

He withdrew a thick packet of paperwork from his suit jacket and slid it across the counter.

My heart raced as panic set in. “My mom built this business from scratch. I've been working here since I was in Kindergarten.”

“Of course,” Mr. Barnett interjected. “And I don't intend to change a thing. I just want to ensure that Violet's legacy and her lovely daughter continue to prosper.”

“What do *you* know of my mother?”

“Didn't she tell you? Violet and I were lovers before she married your good-for-nothing father.”

I was dumbfounded, and he went on before I could gather my wits and respond.

“Yes, after graduation, I joined the Army. When I returned to Rosewood Falls, your mother had married, and you were three years old. I suspected that she was pregnant with you when I left and had married out of desperation. But I never shared my suspicions with Violet because I cared for her and would *never* do anything to hurt her. After she divorced your father, I hoped she would come to me with the truth, but she never did. I suppose she was just too ashamed.”

“I think you should leave,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Don't be too hasty, my dear. You're dangerously close to foreclosure.”

Just then, the bell above the door rang, and Grace burst in, “Lily, I need to talk with you!” She noticed Barnett and

frowned. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Not at all," Barnett replied smoothly. "I was just leaving." He tucked the paperwork back inside his jacket. "I'll be in touch, Ms. Adams." With a thin smile, he lumbered out.

Grace grabbed my arm, glaring daggers at Barnett. "What was that all about?"

"You tell me? How did that snake find out my business is in trouble?"

"What? I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't said a thing to anyone."

"Then how did he know? You know I love you, but even you admit you have a loose tongue sometimes."

"I swear, Lily. It didn't come from me. Please tell me what's going on." Grace pleaded as she pulled me into the back room.

"He offered to pay off my debt in exchange for an equal partnership," I told her as we sat across from each other.

"Oh my gosh! That's why I'm here." She said to me, eyes blazing. "I just found out about Barnett's plans for your block at the historical society meeting."

My heart sank. "What plans?"

"He wants to bulldoze everything to build some gaudy hotel complex."

I stared at Grace, realization dawning. He didn't care about helping me or my shop. He just wanted the land. Fury rose

inside me, hot and fierce. How dare he try to manipulate me like that!

Grace squeezed my hand supportively. “Don't worry, we'll figure this out together. Do you want some tea?” She asked as she stood up.

“I'd like that, thanks,” I said, and then I remembered what Barnett had said about me and my mom.

“Grace?”

“Yep.”

“Barnett told me that he and Mom were lovers before she married my dad, *and* he thinks I'm his daughter,” I sighed.

“What?” Grace shouted. “No way!”

“I can't believe it. Mom would have told me. Wouldn't she?”

“Of course, she would have told you.”

“But what if it's true and she was too ashamed?”

“Well, I think it's a big fat lie, but there are ways of learning the truth. *If* you really think you need to know.”

“I just don't know what to think.”

“I understand. Why don't you give it some time?”

“You're right. I'm not sure I even want to know if he really is my father.”

Just then, my phone rang. It was Alex.

“Hello, Alex,” I answered.

“*Hello, Lily. How are you?*”

“I've had better days, actually.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. Is there anything I can do?”

“Not really, but thanks for asking. How is everything on your end? Were you able to work out the problem that had you rushing off yesterday?”

“Yes, thanks. Are we still on for dinner night?”

“Sure. Are you really coming all the way back here for dinner?”

“Of course. I told you I have something important to discuss with you. Can I pick you up at 7?”

“Yes, I'd like that.”

“Great! I'll see you then. Goodbye, Lily.”

“Goodbye, Alex.”

As I hung up, a glimmer of hope washed over me that maybe I wouldn't have to face my struggles alone.

Chapter Ten



Alex

As we finished dinner, the candlelight flickered, casting dancing shadows across Lily's face. I took a deep breath to steady my nerves. This was it—time to propose a partnership that could save her livelihood and my family's legacy.

“Lily,” I began, meeting her hazel eyes. “There's something I need to discuss with you.”

She tilted her head curiously. “What is it?”

Another deep breath. *Just rip off the bandaid.* “My grandfather left a rather unusual stipulation in his will. I need to be married by Valentine's Day to inherit the family business.”

Lily's brow furrowed as she processed my words. “Why would your grandfather make such an odd request in his will?”

I shook my head. “My grandparents were very happily married, and their wedding was on Valentine's Day. Grandpop

was a hopeful romantic who wanted the same for me.”

“But why such a tight deadline? Valentine’s Day is only a month away.”

I paused, gathering my thoughts. “Grandpa worried about me becoming a workaholic like my father. Dad died suddenly of a heart attack—he never made time for anything but the business. Grandpa didn't want that for me.”

I gave Lily a rueful smile. “I guess forcing me to get married was his last-ditch effort to make me focus on more than just work. He was always playing matchmaker.”

“Well, I guess it’s *one* way to get what he wanted.” Lily nodded slowly. “Are you dating anyone?”

“That’s where you come in.”

“Me?”

“I know this seems sudden,” I said gently. “But it could be a real win-win situation. You'd get the financial backing to stabilize your business, and I'd keep Grandpop's legacy intact.”

Lily's eyes widened in surprise. I rushed to explain before she could object.

“If I don't marry in time, the company could go to my cousin Ronnie. He's ruthless, Lily. He'll run everything my grandfather built into the ground.”

I reached across the table to take her hand in mine but she put her hands in her lap. She dropped her head and stared at the table.

“This wouldn't be a real marriage, Lily. I promise I won't make any demands on you. But if you and I were to marry, even just on paper, we could both benefit.”

“But I don't need to be rescued,” Lily whispered.

Lily lifted her eyes to meet mine, and I saw the conflict in their green depths.

“I know you don't need rescuing,” I said gently. “You're one of the most capable, independent people I know. But even the strongest among us sometimes need help.”

Lily started to protest, but I held up a hand.

“Please, just hear me out. I know your business has hit some rough patches lately. You've put your heart and soul into making it succeed, but the economy hasn't been kind.”

Lily sighed, her shoulders slumping. I could tell my words had hit home.

“With my backing, you could expand, hire more staff, upgrade your equipment and facilities,” I continued. “Your talents would be supported, allowing your creativity to truly thrive.”

I paused, letting her absorb my words before pressing on.

“I don't see this as a rescue mission, but as an investment—an investment in your vision. All I ask is that you consider it.”

Lily bit her lip, clearly torn. I held my breath, waiting for her response.

“I'll think about it,” she finally conceded. “But I can't make any promises right now. This is a lot to take in.”

I let out a relieved breath. “That's all I ask. Take your time and really consider it. And if you have any other questions, you know you can come to me.”

Lily nodded, though her eyes were still troubled. I longed to embrace her, to smooth away the creases of worry from her brow, but I restrained myself.

“Thank you,” I said simply. “For being open to the possibility. That means the world to me.”

We sat in pensive silence as the candle flames danced, both lost in our own thoughts about the future.

Finally, Lily glanced at her watch. “It's getting late,” she murmured. “I should head home.”

“Of course.” I waved over the waiter for the check, then helped Lily into her coat.

We stepped outside into the cold, clear night. The stars glittered brightly overhead as we walked across the quiet street.

When we reached Lily's apartment, we paused awkwardly in front of her door. I hesitated, then said gently, “Remember, there's no pressure here.”

Lily gave me a small, grateful smile. “Thanks, Alex. I appreciate that.” She brushed a loose strand of hair from her face. “And...thank you for dinner. For laying it all out there. I know this can't be easy for you either.”

“I meant every word,” I said earnestly. “This could be good for both of us if we do it right.”

Lily nodded slowly. “Well...goodnight, Alex.”

“Goodnight, Lily.”

I waited until she had disappeared inside before I turned and walked back across the street. The future felt uncertain, but a spark of hope still glimmered inside me. I clung to it as I returned to the Inn under the starry sky.

Chapter Eleven



Lily

I jolted awake, heart pounding. The morning sun streamed through my apartment window, mocking my restless night. Alex's proposal echoed in my mind. It made logical sense, but my heart churned with doubt.

I sighed, pushing back the covers. Can't hide in bed all day. I shuffled to the bathroom, splashing cold water on my face. I stared at my reflection and whispered, "What should I do?" The wide-eyed woman gazing back had no answers.

At the bank, I forced a smile as I slid my deposit slip to the teller. Before I could escape, Mrs. Fisher's voice rang out. "Lily! Got a minute, dear?"

I cringed as the plump, white-haired woman bustled over. Nosy, as always.

“I heard the most troubling rumor about that horrid Barnett man.” she leaned in, whispering conspiratorially. “He's trying to buy up everything on your side of the block. Wants to build some monstrous hotel!”

My shoulders slumped. Was nothing in this town secret? I managed a weak nod. “I know. It's... complicated.”

Face pinched with concern, she gripped my hand. “Well, you should know. Barnett's loathsome lawyer was asking about the mortgages on your flower shop and farm.”

“You're kidding! This is the last thing I need.”

Mrs. Fisher pulled me into one of her famous bear hugs. “You'll figure something out, my dear. A smart girl like you always lands on her feet.”

If only that were true. I extricated myself with a murmured thanks, heart heavy as lead. My problems were piling up like snowdrifts, and I was buried.

Outside, I gulped lungfuls of crisp mountain air. Time for reinforcements. I pulled out my phone and dialed.

“Grace? Can you meet me at Roasters? I really need to talk.”

Fifteen minutes later, I clutched a steaming chai latte as Grace slid into the seat across from me, brows knitted.

I took a deep breath. “Alex proposed.”

Grace's eyes bugged. “What?”

I explained about the contract marriage, the words spilling out in a rush. Amazingly, saying it out loud lightened the weight in

my chest ever so slightly.

“Unbelievable!” Grace replied. “You didn't accept, did you?”

“Well, I did tell him I'd think about it. And remember, you're the one who thought Alex might be a solution to my problems just the other day.”

“Sure. But you know I was just spitballing.”

“There's something else. Barnett's attorney has been looking into my mortgages at the bank.”

“Oh my gosh! That man really is a snake!” Grace leaned back, letting out a low whistle. “You definitely are between a rock and a hard place, aren't you.”

“I'm not sure I have much choice at this point. I just wish Alex wanted me for me instead of as a means to an end.”

Her brows drew together. “It does solve some problems. If you're careful.”

“Yes, you're right.”

“And hopefully, love will follow.” Grace squeezed my hand, face filled with compassion. “It's your decision, Lily. And I'm here for you, no matter what.”

My eyes prickled with tears.

I pulled out my phone, palms damp. When Alex answered, I spoke with as much conviction as I could muster. “Let's get married.”

“Okay?” Alex answered slowly.

“I've thought it over. And I accept your proposal.” I answered quickly before I had a chance to change my mind.

“Lily, this is a big decision. I want to make sure you're certain.”

“I am,” I said with more confidence than I felt. “Can you meet me at Rosewood Roasts to discuss next steps?”

“Sure, I can be there in 20 minutes.”

“Do you want me to stay?” Grace asked after I hung up.

“No, thank you. I've made up my mind.”

“Call me after, please?”

“Will do. Thanks for everything, Grace. I'm so lucky to have you as my friend.”

“Ditto, girlfriend.”

Grace stood up and gave me a hug.

I watched her walk away and then stared out the window, feeling overwhelmed and numb.

Alex arrived shortly after and slid into the booth across from me.

“I have to admit, I'm surprised to hear from you so soon,” he said.

I nodded.

“Are you really sure about this, Lily?”

“Of course, it's a win-win for both of us. Right?”

“Alright then. If we do this, it needs to appear real to everyone. That means only Grace and Tom will know. I'm not even going to tell my mom the whole truth.”

“Of course. I wouldn't have it any other way.”

Alex leaned forward, eyes intent. “There is one more thing. I'd like us to announce our engagement right away.”

I blinked in surprise. “So soon?”

“I know it's fast.” Alex ran a hand through his hair. “But I want to get ahead of Ronnie. He's furious about Grandfather's will. Who knows what nonsense he'll stir up if he finds out first.”

I bit my lip. It did seem wise to control the narrative. “Alright. How should we announce it?”

“Let's host a dinner party this weekend at the Rosewood Inn,” Alex suggested. “We can share the news with our closest family and friends there.”

My stomach fluttered nervously. But I managed a smile. “Wonderful idea.”

I took a deep breath as I watched Nora Booth climb out of her rental car in front of the flower shop. I was reminded how much Alex looked like her. He had her strong jawline and piercing blue eyes.

Alex had texted me the night before that she was flying in from Costa Rica to attend the dinner party. His text said she

wanted to stop by the flower shop to meet with her daughter-in-law-to-be.

This was really happening.

As she approached, I wiped my sweaty palms on my apron and tried to calm my nerves. Nora had an elegant, sophisticated air about her that intimidated me.

“Lily!” she exclaimed warmly as she entered the shop. “It’s so wonderful to see you again.”

Before I could react, she pulled me into an unexpected hug. I stiffened in surprise before relaxing into her embrace.

“You’re all grown up now,” she said, holding me at arm’s length. “You’re as beautiful as your mother. I was so sorry to hear about her passing.”

I blushed at her words. “Thank you, Mrs. Booth. It’s lovely to see you again, too.”

“Oh please, call me Nora.” She waved her hand breezily.

We chatted as I showed her around the flower shop, Nora oohing and ahing over the arrangements. She was much more down-to-earth than I expected. I found myself looking forward to getting to know her better.

“Thank you, Lily,” Nora said as I handed her the bouquet of sunflowers I had prepared for her as a gift. “We must do lunch soon.”

“You’re very welcome, Nora. Lunch sounds nice.”

“I'll see you at the engagement party this weekend,” Nora said as she waved goodbye and opened the door to the street.

Later that evening, I was tidying up when I overheard Alex's voice in the alley behind the shop. I headed to the back door to let him in.

“It's just a business arrangement,” I heard Alex say sharply into his phone. “I don't know why you keep implying there's more to it.”

My breath caught in my throat. Of course, I knew this engagement wasn't real, but hearing him state it so bluntly still stung.

I took a deep breath as I stood outside the grand ballroom at the Rosewood Inn, clutching Alex's arm. We were about to announce our engagement to all our close friends and family.

“Ready?” Alex murmured. I swallowed and nodded.

We entered the elegant room aglow with twinkling lights. As Alex made the announcement, our loved ones erupted into cheers and applause. I was enveloped in hugs and well-wishes.

Grace pulled me into a tight embrace. “Oh, Lily, I'm so happy for you!” But as she drew back, her brows pinched together. She lowered her voice. “You're sure about this?”

I squeezed her hands, my heart swelling with gratitude for her concern. “It is. I've thought it all through.”

She searched my face and finally smiled. “Well then, I couldn't be more thrilled.”

As I chatted with another friend, a smooth voice spoke behind me. “Lily, what a vision you are tonight.”

I turned to see Ronald Montgomery regarding me with an oily smile that didn't reach his eyes. I glanced around, but Alex was occupied across the room.

“Ronald,” I said politely. “So nice of you to come.”

“Ronnie. Remember? No need for formality among old pals.” He moved closer and whispered in my ear. “You know, I'm not sure my dear cousin is right for you. Perhaps you'd be better suited to a more *passionate* man.”

My cheeks burned, but I held his gaze steadily. “Alex is man for me.”

Ronnie's eyes narrowed. I felt a chill run down my spine. Without another word, he turned and strode away.

Just then, Alex approached and tapped his glass, calling everyone's attention. My heart quickened as he went down on one knee.

“Lily, this belonged to my grandmother,” he said, opening an antique ring box. Inside, a diamond solitaire sparkled brightly.

Murmurs and sighs rose from our friends. My eyes misted over.

Alex took my left hand, his piercing blue eyes looking into mine.

“Gran and Grandpop were happily married for over 50 years. I want you to have it as a symbol of my commitment to you.”

“It's beautiful,” I whispered. “I'll wear it proudly.”

My hand trembled as Alex slid the ring onto my finger, and the room erupted in cheers again.

Alex rose and took me into his arms. I felt as safe as I had when we danced at the reunion.

Then he pulled back and leaned in slowly, giving me time to pull away. My eyes drifted shut as his lips met mine. A spark of dizzying warmth flooded through my body. His hand caressed my neck gently as he drew me closer. I clung to him for support as my knees went weak.

Chapter Twelve



Alex

The sun peeking through the curtains roused me from sleep. A slow creeping warmth spread through my limbs as I blinked awake with a smile. My lips still tingled with the memory of Lily's lips against mine.

I showered and dressed, thoughts drifting to Lily's hazel eyes and auburn hair that fell around her shoulders in waves. Maybe with time, she would grow to love me. I shook my head, grabbing my keys. Focus, Alex.

The bell chimed overhead as I entered Rosewood Roasts. I spotted Tom at a table by the fire and made my way over.

“Morning,” I said, sitting down across from him. “Black coffee, please,” I told the waitress.

“Sleep well?” Tom asked sympathetically. “How are you handling this unusual engagement so far?”

“Honestly? I have no idea what I signed up for with all this. It sounded straightforward in theory, but...” I sighed as I leaned back in the chair and ran my hands through my hair.

“Right, it all makes logical sense, but there are two hearts involved here.”

“You hit the nail on the head, buddy. I’m pretty sure Grandpop had no idea the can of worms he would open up with this ridiculous marriage requirement.”

“Well, now that you’ve put the plan in motion, have you considered working toward a *real* relationship with Lily? She's always seen the good in you, even when you couldn't, Alex.”

I considered his words. Could I leave behind the safety of my structured life and open myself to Lily, risking my heart?

I was about to respond when the bell on the cafe door chimed brightly. I glanced up and saw Lily entering with Grace. Her beautiful eyes shone as she laughed at something Grace said.

My heart skipped a beat seeing her so carefree and happy. She looked over, and our eyes met, a rosy blush blooming on her cheeks. I wondered if she was remembering our first kiss, too.

I felt myself smiling again at the memory.

Grace said something to Lily and steered her towards the counter to order.

“You could have a point, Tom,” I said thoughtfully. “Kissing Lily last night brought up a lot of feelings I wasn't prepared for.”

“Yeah. That kiss didn't look fake from where I was standing.”

“It just felt...right. Like something that's been missing slid into place.”

Tom nodded knowingly. “Well, maybe all this happened for a reason.”

“Maybe it did,” I mused.

Just then, Lily and Grace approached our table with coffee and tea.

“Good morning, ladies,” Tom greeted them warmly. “Would you care to join us?”

“We'd love to!” Grace replied.

Lily slid into the seat next to mine, the light scent of her perfume washing over me. Our knees brushed under the table, sending a tingle up my spine.

“So, did you two hear about the big Winter Snow Festival this weekend?” Grace asked, her blue eyes dancing excitedly. “There's going to be ice skating, sledding, hot cocoa, the whole shebang! And the Winter Snow Ball at the Inn is always magical. I heard they're decorating the entire place with fairy lights!”

“Sounds like fun,” Tom glanced at me with a question in his eyes.

“You two should come with Lily and me,” Grace said.

Before I could think better of it, I reached for Lily's hand resting on the tabletop.

“Would you do me the honor of being my date for the festival and ball?” I asked.

“I'd love to,” she said softly. Her answering smile made my heart soar.

I smiled back at Lily, still holding her hand.

Beside me, Tom seized the opportunity. “Well, in that case, Grace, would you be my date for the festival?”

Grace's eyes widened in excitement, her cheeks flushing pink. “I'd be delighted!”

We all chuckled together, the atmosphere light and happy. I gave Lily's hand a gentle squeeze. She squeezed back, her hazel eyes meeting mine. In them, I saw a glimmer of something more than friendship.

Just then, Grace stood up abruptly. “Oh shoot, I just remembered I have to run an errand before work.” She tipped her coffee cup back, draining the last drops. “See you tonight, Lily?”

“Yes,” Lily nodded. “See you tonight.”

With quick hugs goodbye, Grace rushed out the door.

Tom sat back in his chair, glancing between Lily and me with a knowing twinkle in his eye.

“Well, I should probably get going, too,” he said. “But Alex, come find me later. We'll iron out the details of the Bankhardt deal.” He stood and clapped me on the shoulder.

“Sounds good. I'll catch you later,” I said.

“Good seeing you again, Lily, and congratulations on your engagement,” Tom said as he bent down to give her a hug.

“Thanks, Tom. I'll see you at the festival, if not before,” Lily said as she patted Tom on the back.

With a wave, Tom strolled out of the cafe, leaving Lily and me alone. I turned to her, suddenly nervous.

“I'm looking forward to this weekend with you,” I said.

She smiled. “Me too.”

“The Winter Snow Festival will be the perfect opportunity for us to be seen together around town. To keep up appearances, you know, as an engaged couple.”

Lily's face fell slightly as she nodded. She glanced down as she traced her fingertip along the handle of her mug. “Yes, you're right. We should take advantage of it.”

Clearing my throat, I added, “And the whole town will expect us to be there, considering my family's history with Rosewood Falls.”

Lily took a sip of her tea and set down her mug. “Oh yes, of course. Your grandparents were among the festival's founders, weren't they?”

I nodded. “They helped establish a lot of the town's traditions. So it's important we keep up appearances for the sake of the deal.”

Lily looked thoughtful as she gazed out the cafe window. I wondered if she was having second thoughts about our

arrangement. But then she turned back to me with resolve in her eyes.

“You're right, Alex. This weekend will be good for both of us.”

“I'm glad we're in agreement,” I said as I took her hand in mine.

Chapter Thirteen



Lily

I woke up as the early morning sun began to peek through the curtains. Anticipation and excitement coursed through my veins. Today was the Winter Snow Festival with Alex, Grace, and Tom. After quickly showering, I carefully selected my comfiest sweater and favorite pair of jeans.

I stepped out into the crisp winter air, my breath visible in small puffs. The town square was transformed into a magical winter wonderland. Twinkling lights and garlands of evergreen boughs adorned every building and stall. In the center of it all stood the gazebo draped in shimmering snowflakes.

My heart fluttered as I spotted Alex talking with Grace and Tom.

“Lily! Over here!” Grace called out, waving her mittened hand.

Alex turned, his eyes lighting up when he saw me. “Good morning,” he said.

Alex leaned in to kiss my cheek, his face inches from mine. I caught the clean yet earthy scent of his cologne. His nearness made my pulse quicken, and a flood of warmth spread through me despite the winter chill in the air.

Being this close to Alex always had an intoxicating effect on me, muddling my thoughts. My eyes fluttered half-closed, and I swayed slightly towards him before catching myself. I bit my lip, trying to regain composure. I felt like the smitten schoolgirl who adored him all those years ago. I both cherished and feared what it all might mean.

Grace enveloped me in a tight hug. “Isn't this amazing?” she gushed, gesturing at the decorations. “I can't wait for the ice sculpture contest!”

Together, the four of us strolled through the bustling stalls, each filled with festive decorations and delicious treats. Grace chattered on excitedly about the various activities. “Ooh, we definitely need to do the sleigh ride - so romantic! And we can't miss the bonfire...”

We came upon a ring toss game, its counter lined with prizes like stuffed animals and silly hats.

“Let's play!” Grace said. “I bet Tom and I can beat you two.”

“Oh, it's on,” Alex replied with a grin.

The goal was to hook the rings onto the antlers of a large elk statue that stood proudly in the town square. For the festival, it

was wrapped in twinkle lights and wore a knit hat with a pom on top. I went first, managing to land two rings. Alex stepped up next, focused and determined. He neatly hooked three rings onto the antlers.

“Show off,” I teased.

He flashed me a triumphant smile. “What can I say? I'm motivated by the prize.”

The booth operator congratulated us on our skill. “Pick any prize you want,” he said.

Alex selected a cute stuffed snowman wearing a floppy floral hat. “For you,” he said, presenting it to me with a slight bow.

“Why thank you, kind sir,” I replied in my silliest formal accent with a curtsy. We both laughed.

I chose a blue knit hat with a huge fuzzy pom and silvery snowflakes that flashed LED lights.

“This is for you,” I said, standing on tiptoes to place it on Alex's head.

“How do I look?” he asked.

“Ridiculous, but adorable.”

Grace made the two of us pose together with our prizes while she snapped a photo. Alex crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue, and we collapsed into giggles.

We joined the crowd, gathering excitedly around a long row of towering ice blocks. We had a clear view of the competitors selecting their frozen canvases. Men and women from all over

the country, wearing thick gloves, clutched their chainsaws. The MC explained the rules over a handheld mic.

“These talented carvers have just 60 minutes to transform these massive five-foot-tall ice cubes into intricate works of art,” he announced. The crowd cheered in anticipation.

I spotted a muscular bald man with a flaming skull tattoo assessing the frosty slab before him. Nearby was a short, wiry woman bouncing eagerly on her toes, wisps of hair peeking from her stocking cap.

“Take a look at that gal's chainsaw,” Alex said, pointing subtly towards a tall, wild-eyed competitor wearing a “Lumberjack Legends” jacket over camo coveralls. Her impressive tool roared to life with an aggressive snarl.

“Yikes,” I laughed. “I think he means business!”

When an air horn sounded, the sculptors leaped into action, attacking the ice with their grinders and chisels. Shaved flakes filled the air like snowy confetti as shapes began emerging. We peered over shoulders, witnessing a leaping dolphin, a bald eagle in flight, and a howling wolf take form. The crowd oohed and aahed, thoroughly impressed with their talents.

As time ticked down, the pace quickened frantically. The crowd counted the last ten seconds loudly as finishing touches were enacted with surgical precision.

“Time's up!” The MC called as he blew the air horn again. “Let's hear it for our competitors!” Raucous cheering ensued as the ice artists stepped back, rubbing their sore muscles but

glowing with exhilaration. We all moved forward excitedly to inspect their unique frozen marvels, ready to vote on a winner.

Caught up in the festive atmosphere, we didn't notice Ronnie approaching until he loudly called out a greeting.

“Well, isn't this cozy,” he said with an edge to his voice. Though he was smiling, his eyes were cold and calculating.

Alex's body tensed. “Hello, Ronnie. Wasn't expecting to see you here.”

“And miss all the small-town fun?” Ronnie replied. “Wouldn't dream of it.”

There was an uncomfortable beat of silence.

Grace, ever the social butterfly, tried to ease the tension. “So Ronnie, what do you think of the festival so far? Have you tried the hot apple cider yet?”

Ronnie glanced at Grace dismissively before turning his attention back to Alex and me. “I must say, you two make quite the picture-perfect couple. One might even think it was the *real* thing.”

“We're just enjoying the festival, Ronnie,” Alex replied evenly. “I suggest you do the same.”

“Oh, I intend to,” Ronnie said with a sly grin. “This town has so much...potential.”

Then Ronnie leaned in and whispered in my ear. “You've met with Charles Barnett, I gather.” And then he turned and walked away.

My heart froze. Alex must have seen the alarmed expression on my face because he looked at me with concern and took my hand.

Alex let out a breath, his jaw tight. “Well, that was unpleasant. I apologize for my cousin's behavior.”

Eager to recapture the lighthearted spirit of the festival, Grace grabbed my arm. “Come on, let's go on a sleigh ride!”

We hurried towards a horse-drawn sleigh, its benches piled high with colorful blankets. Alex and Tom followed behind us. We clambered into the old-fashioned sleigh, snuggling under the blankets as the driver clicked his tongue and the horses began trotting forward.

The sleigh bells jingled merrily as we glided through the snowy landscape, mocking the worried frenzy going on in my mind.

I couldn't shake the unease that had settled over me after Ronnie's comment. What did he know about my meeting with Charles Barnett? Were the two of them working together? What did it mean for me and Alex?

Barnett had made veiled threats about taking over my property if I couldn't get the money I owed him. And Ronnie had always resented Alex's success. If they joined forces, could they find a way to ruin both our businesses? And if Alex lost his company because of me, would I also lose any chance of a real relationship with him?

My spiraling thoughts were interrupted when the sleigh came to a stop. Alex helped me down onto the snowy ground.

“You look chilled,” he said, rubbing my arms briskly. “Let’s get you warmed up.”

We made our way to the large bonfire in front of the courthouse. People sat on hay bales, holding their mittened hands toward the crackling flames. The smell of woodsmoke mingled with roasting chestnuts and hot cider in the crisp winter air.

Alex and I settled onto a hay bale. A vendor came by with steaming mugs of rich hot cocoa topped with whipped cream. I wrapped my hands around the mug, soaking in its warmth.

We sat without speaking for a few moments, watching the hypnotic dance of the fire. I wished we could stay here, suspended in this peaceful moment, and not have to face the uncertainty that lay ahead.

Alex turned to me, his piercing blue eyes searching my face in the flickering firelight. “Lily, what did Ronnie say to you earlier? I could tell it upset you.”

I hesitated, but he gently squeezed my hand. “It’s okay. You can tell me anything.”

Taking a deep breath, I explained that Ronnie had mentioned Charles Barnett. “Barnett has big plans for my side of Main Street. He wants to force me and others out to build a glitzy hotel.” I went on to tell him about Barnett’s threats of

foreclosure and his attorney's queries about my mortgages at the bank.

“Oh, Lily,” Alex said, his brow furrowing with concern. “I had no idea things were so serious. Why haven't you told me about this before?”

“I didn't want to worry you. You have enough problems of your own.”

“Your problems are my problems. That's why we're together, right?”

“You're right.”

“I won't let them hurt you, I promise. Tom and I will look into this first thing tomorrow.”

I looked down, unable to hold back the tears that had been threatening to fall. “My mom's flower business means everything to me.” My voice caught.

Alex tilted my chin up to meet his gaze. “Listen to me. We'll fight Barnett with everything we've got. I know how much your business means to you, and I'll do whatever it takes to save it.”

I searched his face and saw only sincerity in his eyes. Impulsively, I threw my arms around his neck in a fierce hug. “Thank you, Alex. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

He hugged me tightly. “We're in this together. I've got your back.”

In that moment, wrapped in Alex's strong embrace, the future didn't seem so frightening.

Chapter Fourteen



Lily

I gazed at my reflection in the full-length mirror, taking in the sapphire gown Grace had insisted was made just for me. The vibrant blue of the dress brought out the hints of blue in my eyes. Grace had raved about the sweetheart neckline and empire waist, saying they highlighted my figure perfectly.

With half of my hair pulled up and the rest cascading in soft waves down my shoulders, I secured a glittering barrette that matched the sapphire earrings Alex had given me. A touch of smoky eyeshadow made my eyes stand out even more. As I applied a coat of rose-colored lipstick, my thoughts drifted back to the magical night at the reunion ball—my first slow dance—the lights twinkling around us like stars.

My stomach fluttered as I remembered Alex confidently guiding me across the floor. My heartbeat quickened at the thought of being back in his arms. But then reality set in. This

was all just a dream, after all. Alex and I were only business partners. And with Ronnie and Barnett plotting against us, what future could we really have?

I took a deep breath and headed downstairs, where Alex was waiting to escort me to the ball.

Alex's eyes lit up when I opened the door. The tux he wore accentuated his tall, athletic frame. "Lily, you look absolutely stunning," he said, smiling warmly as he handed me a corsage.

"How beautiful, Alex. Thank you. Will you pin it on, please?"

"I'm at your service fair, lady." He grinned as he bowed with a flourish, pretending to doff a hat.

I blushed and giggled. "Thank you. kind sir."

After gently pinning the corsage to my gown, Alex helped me with my coat. Then he guided me outside to the horse-drawn sleigh we'd enjoyed with Grace and Tom earlier that day.

"What a lovely surprise, Alex."

"Nothing but the best for you."

Alex helped me into the sleigh, sat beside me, and covered our legs with the heavy red and green blanket. The driver clicked the reins, and we glided through the snowy night.

As we entered the ballroom, I gasped in awe. It had been transformed with twinkling lights, evergreen garlands, and glittering snowflakes. Each table was decorated with centerpieces of winter berries and pinecones I had designed.

Grace waved at us enthusiastically from a table. “Lily, Alex, over here!”

We made our way over to Grace and Tom.

“Doesn't Lily look like a princess tonight?” Grace gushed.

“She certainly does,” Alex agreed, smiling at me in a way that made my heart race.

Tom raised his glass in a toast. “To new beginnings for all of us.”

We clinked glasses, though my thoughts were conflicted. Could Alex and I really have a new beginning with so much uncertainty ahead? For now, I decided to push those worries aside and simply enjoy the magic of the evening.

Alex turned to me, his piercing blue eyes softening as he extended his hand. “May I have this dance?”

I placed my hand in his. “I'd love to.”

He led me to the dance floor as a slow, romantic melody filled the air. Alex pulled me close. We swayed in time to the music, oblivious to the other couples around us.

“You'll always be safe in my arms, Lily,” Alex murmured, his breath tickling my ear.

My heart fluttered, acutely aware of his strong arm around me, his hand holding mine.

Too soon, the song ended. Alex guided me off the dance floor toward a cozy loveseat in front of a stone fireplace. He draped a fuzzy blanket around my shoulders before we sat down.

The fire crackled softly, its golden light dancing over Alex's handsome features. He didn't speak; he just looked at me with an expression I couldn't quite read.

“Thank you for the dance, Alex,” I said softly. “And for this wonderful evening.”

Alex smiled, his eyes locked on mine. “Of course, Lily. Spending time with you has been the highlight of my day.”

I felt shy under his intense gaze. “You know, I don't think I ever asked—what made you decide to go to work at your grandfather's company?”

Alex exhaled slowly, glancing into the flickering flames. “Honestly? It was always expected of me to carry on the family legacy. But lately, I've felt more and more like something is missing.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Work takes up so much of my focus, I sometimes wonder if it's cost me experiences and connections that give life meaning,” he admitted.

“What matters most to you, Lily?” Alex asked, his gaze intent.

“Creating beauty and joy through my flowers,” I said. “What about you?”

Alex was silent for a moment. “I think I'm beginning to understand what Grandpop tried to tell me all along. I want my life to be about more than just wealth and status. I want it to have a purpose.”

As the fire dwindled, a new depth of understanding passed between us. I reached over and gave Alex's hand a reassuring squeeze. "It's not too late to find what you're looking for."

Chapter Fifteen



Alex

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee enveloped me as I pushed open the door to Rosewood Roasts. Tom called out and waved from a corner table by the window.

“Thanks, Tom,” I said as he slid a steaming black coffee over to me. The hot drink warmed my hands.

Tom grinned. “Rough night?”

I chuckled ruefully, rubbing my eyes. “You could say that. The wedding is less than a week away.” Sleep hadn't come easy; my mind churned with thoughts of Lily. “By the way, is the contract ready?”

“Yes. I've given the contract to Lily for her approval, and I sent a copy to your email.”

“Oh, OK. I'll check it out. And Lily has a problem that we need to discuss.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. How can I help?”

I filled Tom in on what Lily had confided to me about Barnett and Ronnie.

Tom whistled in disbelief. “Wow. It sounds like Barnett's planning to buy up Lily's mortgages and foreclose on her.”

“That's what I was thinking. And Ronnie's wormed his way into the whole scheme. Apparently, he's figured out some way to benefit from all this.”

“Typical Ronnie,” Tom scoffed as he shook his head. “Alex, I'm sorry to tell you this, but there's more.”

“More?”

“Yeah. Ronnie's been busy spreading rumors around town and at headquarters.”

“What kind of rumors?” I sighed, running my fingers through my hair.

“That you're only pursuing Lily because of your grandfather's will. Also, that you plan to sell off company assets for quick profit once you gain control.”

“Sell off assets for quick profit!” I whispered through gritted teeth. “That's something Ronnie would do, not me!”

“Take a breath, buddy. We'll figure this out.”

I stared out the window. The sun glittered on fresh snow, but my thoughts were as dark as night. I took a long sip of coffee. The bitter liquid helped sharpen my thoughts.

“Look, Tom. I don't care about what Ronnie is saying about me. But something has to be done about what Barnett is doing to Lily.”

“What if *you* purchased Lily's mortgages, Alex?”

“Hmm. That could put an end to Barnett's plan,” I said thoughtfully.

“Right. Let me do some digging, and I'll get back to you,” Tom clapped me on the back as he stood. “Let's take a walk and get some fresh air.”

“That's a good idea,” I said as I picked up the bill and headed to the counter to pay.

Tom and I stepped outside into the brisk winter air. I took a deep breath, letting the cold fill my lungs.

“Feel better?” Tom asked.

“A little,” I replied. “When will I stop being surprised by Ronnie's actions?”

“Maybe never. It's hard to do anything but see the best in someone you care about.”

We turned the corner onto Main Street, our boots crunching on the salt-strewn sidewalks. Up ahead, I spotted a familiar figure chatting with Lily outside her flower shop.

It was Ronnie.

My steps faltered as I took in the scene. Ronnie leaned against the shop window, far too close to Lily for comfort. Her arms

were crossed, and her body angled away from him. Even from a distance, I could see the tension in her posture.

Ronnie said something with an easy smile, and Lily shook her head, stepping back. But Ronnie persisted, grabbing her arm.

Anger boiled up inside me. How *dare* he?

Before I even realized I was moving, I was striding toward them with purpose. Tom hurried to keep up behind me.

“There you are, darling,” I said brightly as I slid an arm around Lily's waist and kissed her on her cheek.

Lily's eyes widened in surprise, but she quickly composed herself. “Alex! You're early.”

I turned to Ronnie with a tight smile. “Thanks for keeping Lily company, but we have wedding plans to discuss. Have a nice day.”

Ronnie's eyes narrowed, but then the smug grin was back. “No problem.”

“I hope you know what you're getting into, Lily,” he said before sauntering away.

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. “Are you okay?” I asked her.

She nodded, rubbing her arms. “I'm fine. Ronnie makes me uneasy.”

“I know. I'm sorry about him.” I hesitated. “Can we talk?”

Lily glanced at her watch. “I have to finish the arrangements for the Wilson's anniversary party this morning. Raincheck?”

“Of course,” I said, trying not to sound disappointed.

Lily touched my arm gently. “Thanks, Alex. For... everything.”

I smiled. “Anytime.”

I watched Lily disappear into her shop. With Ronnie scheming and Barnett making moves, I knew I had to act fast.

Chapter Sixteen



Lily

The neon lights of Willy's Honky Tonk cast a red glow over our corner booth. Grace raised her champagne flute. “To your happily ever after with Alex!”

I forced a smile and sipped. My stomach churned. Alex. My Alex. The boy I had secretly loved since high school. The man I was marrying tomorrow.

Grace chattered about the weather—a perfect sunny day for a Valentine's Day wedding. I nodded along, lost in thought.

“Lily?” Grace's voice softened. “What's going on in that head of yours?”

I blinked back tears, shaking my head.

Grace reached across the table, grasping my hand. Her blue eyes searched mine. “Talk to me.”

I took a shaky breath. “I love him, Grace. So much. But does he love me too?” I swallowed hard.

Grace squeezed my hand, her eyes filled with sympathy. “Oh, sweetie...”

I dabbed my eyes with a napkin, smudging my mascara.

“Want to take a walk?” Grace asked gently. “Get some fresh air?”

I nodded, sliding from the vinyl booth. Grace hooked her arm in mine as we stepped outside.

I shivered, my breath fogging the air.

Grace stopped, turning to face me. “Do you want to go through with this if he doesn't love you back?”

I hesitated. Did I? Saving the flower business my mother started was important. Securing Alex's legacy, too. But my heart ached for real love.

“I hope in time, this could grow into more.”

Grace squeezed my hand, her eyes glistening. “Don't give up on your dreams, Lily. Not for anything.”

I managed a small smile. “You always know exactly what to say.”

“Alex would be a fool not to love you back, Lily. Truly,” Grace assured me.

“Give it time. This whole situation has been sudden. But Alex will see what a remarkable woman you are.”

I exhaled, “I hope you're right.”

“No matter what happens, we'll get through this together,” Grace said gently. “I'll always be here for you, Lily. That's a promise.”

I stopped and turned to give her a hug. “Thank you, Grace.”

Grace squeezed me tightly. “That's what best friends are for.”

“You know. You're right,” I said as I drew back with a hopeful smile. “Alex would be a fool not to love me for who I am. And if this marriage doesn't lead to the real thing, at least I'll have my best friend by my side.”

This partnership with Alex may not be the fairy tale romance I dreamed of, but it was a promising new beginning. And the truest loves were built slowly, rooted in friendship. I would water this budding relationship with patience and an open heart, trusting it could blossom into something real.

Chapter Seventeen



Alex

The sun dipped low behind the craggy peaks of Rosewood Falls, casting long shadows across the restaurant's cozy interior. I sat at the corner table, fingers drumming on the weathered wood, gaze fixed on the dwindling light.

“Tomorrow's the big day,” Tom's voice broke through my reverie as he slid a flute of champagne toward me. “To Alex and Lily,” he toasted, lifting his glass.

I forced a smile and clinked my glass against his. “To new beginnings,” I echoed, the words feeling hollow.

Tom studied me for a moment as he set down his glass. “You've got that look again. The one you get when you're wrestling with something big. Spill it, Alex.”

The bubbles in my champagne danced upward, starkly contrasting the weight pressing down on me. “It's just...” I

started, pausing to take a sip for courage. “I think I'm in love with her, Tom. With Lily.”

His eyebrows lifted, a silent prompt for me to continue.

“The more time I spend with her, the more I realize she's everything I never knew I wanted. But what if it's not the same for her?”

“Alex,” he said, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Lily's not the type to play pretend with something like love.”

“Isn't she?” Doubt threaded through my words. “She's kind-hearted, genuine—qualities I never knew I needed until now. But what if my wealth is just a comfort, a safety net for her dreams?”

“Then you'll be the stable ground she's looking for,” Tom reassured. “And maybe, along the way, she'll see the Alex Montgomery who isn't all business.”

“Maybe,” I echoed, my thumb tracing the rim of the glass. The fear of revealing too much, of losing both Lily and my legacy, battled with the yearning to lay my heart bare.

“Talk to her, Alex. Love's worth the risk.”

“Risk...” I repeated, a laugh devoid of humor escaping me.

“Seems to be the currency of my life these days.”

“Because it's always been easier to face a boardroom than your own heart. But look where that's got you.” He gestured around the emptying restaurant. “On the eve of your wedding, doubting the best thing that's ever happened to you.”

“Tom,” I started, the weight of tomorrow pressing down.
“What if...”

“Stop with the 'what ifs',” he cut me off. “Tomorrow, you marry Lily. That's the only 'what' that matters now.”

“Right,” I muttered, taking a sip of the champagne.
“Tomorrow.”

“Have you told her how you feel?”

I shook my head. “No,” I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper. “How do I say that my heart decided to set up shop in hers without permission?”

“Alex,” he said, his tone serious yet compassionate, “you've got to give her a chance to know the real you—the man behind the contracts and board meetings.”

“Tom, she might think I'm just... overwhelmed by the situation. She might not want the complication of emotions when we've drawn our lines so clearly.”

“Complication,” he repeated thoughtfully, “or completion?”

“Maybe for me, but for her?” I let the question hang between us, heavy with unspoken fears.

“Let's get out of here,” Tom suggested, glancing around at the sparse customers left in the restaurant. “We can talk more upstairs.”

“Good idea.” I nodded, grateful for the escape from prying eyes. Standing up, I felt every muscle tense with anticipation and dread.

Reaching my suite, I fumbled slightly with the keys before swinging the door open.

“Alright,” Tom began, closing the door behind us, “let's get down to brass tacks. You're scared Lily doesn't feel the same way. That's understandable. But don't let fear dictate your future.”

“Dictate my future...” I echoed, sliding my jacket off and tossing it onto the chair. “Isn't that what this whole marriage stipulation is doing already?”

“Maybe,” he conceded as he sat on the edge of the couch, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. “But it's also giving you a chance—a chance at love, at family, something real.”

“Something real,” I mumbled. “That's what I want. More than anything.”

“Then fight for it, Alex,” Tom urged. “Fight for Lily, for yourself. Don't settle for 'good enough' because you're afraid of what 'great' might cost you.”

“But what if in fighting for 'great,' I lose everything that's 'good'?” I asked as I strode back and forth across the floor.

“Alex,” Tom said, his tone softening, “you won't know unless you try.”

I ran a hand through my hair, feeling the familiar weight of responsibility settle on my shoulders. “You don't understand. It's not just about me and Lily. There's the company, Grandpop's legacy...”

“Granddad Harry wanted you to be happy.”

“Happy...” I let out a humorless chuckle, sinking down on the edge of the bed, hands clasping and unclasping as I gazed at the floor. “I don't even know what that looks like anymore.”

“Has it occurred to you that maybe Lily is part of that picture?”

“Of course she is,” I admitted, the words spilling out with an intensity that surprised even me. “I can't stop thinking about her. About us. But there's this gnawing fear that she might just see this... arrangement... as her way out of a tough spot. Not as a start to something more.”

“Then you've got to tell her how you feel, man,” Tom pressed, his voice earnest.

“And risk scaring her off entirely? No, I can't do that. Not now. Not when she needs me.”

“Because of her financial troubles?” Tom questioned, knowing full well the answer.

“Partly,” I confessed, lifting my head to meet his gaze. “I want to help her, truly help her, but not out of some misplaced sense of charity. She deserves better than that.”

“Alex, you're one of the most stubborn people I know,” Tom said, clapping a hand on my shoulder. “But your heart's always been in the right place. Just make sure Lily knows where she stands in it.”

“Time's running out,” I murmured, the weight of the impending ceremony pressing down like a physical force.

“Alex, you'll have to face this sooner or later.”

“I know, I do. But telling her now, just hours before we stand before everyone we know... It feels like setting us up for failure.”

“I can't tell you what to do, buddy. I know you'll do what's best for you and Lily.”

“Right,” I sighed, resting my head in my hands. “For Lily. For us. Whatever that ends up being.”

A sense of clarity began to cut through the fog of my fears. I squared my shoulders, feeling the weight of my decision settle firmly upon them. With a nod to Tom, I strode purposefully across the room to the oak desk where the contract lay—a symbol of obligations and expectations.

My hand hovered over the document, the pen an extension of my resolve. “I'm going forward with this, Tom. For love, for Lily. No matter what happens.”

“Then sign it with all your heart, Alex,” Tom encouraged.

The pen met paper, and with each stroke, I felt the finality of my choice etching itself into my destiny. The sound of my name, written in bold, unfaltering lines, was a testament to my commitment. Maybe my love for Lily would be enough to bridge the chasm of our uncertainties.

“Done,” I exhaled, placing the pen down. “It's done.”

Chapter Eighteen



Lily

The sunlight filtering through the stained glass windows cast a patchwork of colors across the vintage lace of my gown. I stared at my reflection, hardly recognizing the woman gazing back. The dress clung to me in all the right places before cascading elegantly to the floor. My fingers traced the delicate patterns woven into the fabric.

“Wow, Lily,” Grace's voice broke through my reverie, her hands resting gently on my shoulders. “You look absolutely gorgeous.”

“Thank you, Grace.” I watched in the mirror as she picked up the eyeliner.

“Still can't believe you're doing this,” she murmured, dotting the makeup along my lash line with practiced ease.

I gave her a small smile, catching her bright blue eyes in the reflection. “It's for the best,” I replied, though a knot tightened in my stomach. This wasn't the wedding I had imagined as a girl, working in Lily's Blooms with Mom and dreaming of Prince Charming. But Alex... he was something else—my childhood crush and now the man who would save my mother's legacy from ruin.

Grace stepped back, assessing her work with satisfaction. “Perfect. Now, for some blush to bring out your pretty hazel eyes.”

“Feels strange,” I confessed, watching as she swept the brush over my cheeks. “Getting married in a chapel full of flowers that I grew myself, yet it's... well, you know.”

“Fake?” Grace offered, arching an eyebrow.

“Let's say 'unconventional,’” I corrected, trying to stifle the unease bubbling inside me.

“Unconventional or not, you're still the same Lily I've known all my life. The one who makes everything bloom just by being there.”

As Grace finished the final touches on my makeup, I let out a shaky breath, my heart a mix of wildflowers—a vivid tapestry of hope, fear, and the beginning of something new.

A gentle tap echoed against the wooden door.

“Come in,” Grace answered.

Tom stepped inside with a document that seemed as out of place as a tumbleweed in a church.

“Looking sharp, Lily,” he said, the contract in hand extending towards me like an olive branch—or perhaps a lifeline.

“Thanks, Tom,” I replied, my voice steadier than I felt. The pen he offered felt cool and heavy.

As Tom left the room, Grace's eyes flickered with concern.

“Lily, are you absolutely sure about this?”

“I am,” I assured her, the truth of it settling into my heart.

With a decisive motion, I signed my name.

“Everything's going to be okay,” I murmured, more to myself than to Grace, though I caught her nodding in agreement from the corner of my eye.

Grace's arms wrapped around me, her embrace warm and comforting. “I'm so happy for you!” she exclaimed. “Your financial troubles are over.”

“Thank you,” I managed, my throat tight with emotion. This was it—the moment before the leap. We both reached for our bouquets. My fingers brushed over the pale pink peonies and roses, each petal soft against my skin.

As we paused at the head of the aisle, my heart skipped. Alex stood tall at the altar next to Tom. He looked handsome in the classic black tuxedo. I was reminded of all the romantic moments we shared over the past few weeks.

The hush of expectation blanketed the chapel as the heady scent of roses and peonies curled around me. Candles along the aisle lit the path to what I hoped would be forever with the

man of my dreams. I took a deep breath as the processional music began to play.

“Wait!” Alex called out. “This isn't right. Stop the music, please!”

Chapter Nineteen



Alex

The wooden beams of the wedding arch seemed to close in on me. I stood there next to Tom, my pulse thrumming in my ears.

“Stop the music!” I heard myself call out. The organ faltered into silence.

Tom shot me a look, his brows knitting in confusion. “Alex? You good, man?” His voice was a low whisper, only for my ears.

I shook my head, unable to articulate the storm brewing in my chest. Each breath felt like sandpaper against my throat, dry and grating. I couldn't do this. Not like this.

“Excuse me,” I muttered. My shoes echoed against the wooden aisle, each step a declaration. I was breaking ranks,

unraveling the grand plan laid out in my grandfather's will with every stride.

Lily stood like an ethereal vision at the end of the aisle, her bouquet a vibrant contrast to her pale hands, which gripped it like a lifeline. Her eyes, wide pools of emerald, searched mine, seeking answers.

“May I speak with you alone for a moment?” I kept my voice low, a hushed murmur meant only for her. The words felt heavy with intent as they left my lips.

The chapel buzzed with silent questions, but Lily's nod was all the consent I needed. Her eyes, still uncertain, held mine as we turned away from the expectant crowd.

In the privacy of the dressing room, Lily stood motionless by the window.

There it was, lying on the dressing table – the marriage contract. I snatched it up and tore it in two. The shredded remnants fell to the floor, settling like fallen leaves.

The petals of Lily's bouquet scattered as it hit the floor. “Alex! What are you doing?” Lily's voice shook.

I stepped closer and took both of her hands in mine. “I don't want this contract, Lily,” I said with more conviction than I'd felt in a long time.

Her hazel eyes darted from the torn contract to my face, searching for an explanation. “What...what do you mean?”

“Look at me, Lily. I want a real marriage—with you.”

I let go of one hand and sank to one knee.

“Lily Adams,” I implored, my voice hoarse with emotion, “I am completely, hopelessly in love with you. I don't want to waste another minute without you as my wife. Will you marry me today—not for convenience but because you love me too?”

A sob escaped Lily as she dropped to her knees, pulling me into a fierce embrace.

“Oh Alex!” she cried, voice muffled against my shoulder, “I've loved you from the very start! Of course, I'll marry you!”

The world fell away as relief and elation surged through me. Lifting her off the ground, I spun us around, her laughter tinkling in the air, mixing with the rustle of her dress. Our lips met in a fierce yet tender kiss when I set her down.

“We'd better get back out there before they send out a search party,” I whispered breathlessly as we parted. My heart still hammered against my ribs.

I took her hand in mine, and we ran to the chapel doors, our laughter filling the air. Bursting into the sanctuary, my voice boomed. “She said yes!” The words echoed off the walls, met by surprised gasps and raucous cheers from the crowd.

Lily and I ran down the aisle to join Tom and Grace at the altar.

Tom clapped me on the back. “Way to go, Alex,” he said, grinning, his voice thick with pride.

Grace embraced Lily so tightly that I thought she might never let go.

“Congratulations, Lily-bug,” Grace whispered, her voice trembling as tears filled her eyes.

Now facing Lily under the flower-decked arch she arranged herself, my throat tightened.

“From the first moment we met,” I began as I placed the ring on Lily's finger, “you've surprised me, challenged me, captivated me, and frustrated me in the best possible way.” A nervous chuckle escaped me before I could stop it. “You saw through my defenses when no one else could.”

“I promise to love you faithfully, without reservation. To comfort you in times of distress, encourage you to achieve your dreams, laugh, cry, and grow with you in mind and spirit. Always be open and honest with you, and cherish you for as long as we both shall live.”

The congregation seemed to fade away until it was just Lily and me. Her hazel eyes, shimmering with joyful tears, held mine, and I felt that connection—the one that had been there since we were kids, only now it burned brighter, fiercer.

“Alex Montgomery,” Lily's voice cracked, her hands trembling in mine, “standing here now, looking into your eyes, I see everything I need.”

“I vow to support you, honor you, love you unconditionally, even when we disagree about which flowers to plant in our garden.”

A soft laugh rose from the guests, and I squeezed her hands, anchoring myself to the spot, to the moment, to her.

“I choose us. I choose every single part of this crazy, beautiful life with you, Alex. From this day forward, until forever.”

Hearing her say my name and feeling the weight of her words was more than I'd ever hoped for. It was real, tangible. As I stood under that arch with the girl who'd grown into an extraordinary woman, I knew this unplanned, impromptu leap was the best decision I'd ever made.

“By the power vested in me,” the pastor's voice rang out, “I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Our lips met, and the world spun around us. The chapel erupted in cheers.

“Alex!” she whispered against my lips, her voice threaded with wonder and excitement.

“Forever, Lily,” I murmured back. Her soft curves melded perfectly against my chest, her warmth seeping into my bones.

Hand-in-hand, we turned to face our future, stepping into it not as two friends pretending for convenience but as a united couple, bound by a love that had quietly woven its way through our lives.

“Let's do this,” I said, grinning at her.

“Let's,” she agreed, her grip tightening in mine.

As we walked back down the aisle, the cheers of our friends and family sending us off into our new life together, I knew that every step we took was toward a future brighter than we could have imagined.

Chapter Twenty



Lily

The crowd's cheers faded into a hush as the bouquet arced through the air. It landed gracefully in Grace's outstretched hands, her blue eyes wide with disbelief and joy.

“Grace!” I called, my voice catching with laughter. “Looks like you're next!”

“Lily!” she squealed, grabbing me by the arm and tugging me aside, “Tom and I—we're engaged!”

“Engaged?”

“During all the wedding fuss, we fell in love. Can you believe it?”

“Believe it? I'm thrilled for you both.” My smile stretched till my cheeks ached. “Come here, you,” I pulled her into a tight hug. “Congratulations!”

The first chords of “Can't Help Falling In Love” swirled through the air. Alex joined us and took my hand. Our eyes locked, and he led me to the dance floor.

“I'll never stop dancing with you, Lily,” he promised. “You're the partner I've been waiting for my whole life.”

“Alex,” I murmured against his cheek. “I—I can't believe this is real.”

“Believe it,” he said, pulling me closer. “This is our beginning.”

The song ended, but we kept dancing, lost in each other. His steps led me in a dance that felt like it could go on forever.

Alex drew back, his eyes searching mine until they sparkled with mischief. He leaned in, and his lips brushed mine in a kiss that was sweet and full of promise. “Have I told you yet how stunning you look?” he murmured against my ear.

My cheeks flamed with color at his words, my skin tingling where his fingers traced the line of my jaw. Loving the way his gaze drank me in.

“You take my breath away, Lily.” I closed my eyes, savoring the moment.

The reception hall buzzed with the clinking of glasses and the soft hum of conversation. The evening wore on, a perfect tapestry of laughter and music.

“Hey, Lily,” Tom's voice cut through the din. His broad shoulders eclipsed the crowd as he approached.

“Tom!” I exclaimed, my arms wrapping around him in a spontaneous hug. “Grace told me the good news. Congratulations!”

His cheeks flushed. “Thanks, Lily. It's been a whirlwind, you know?”

“Tell me about it,” I laughed, stepping back to see him more clearly.

“Listen, there's something you need to know. I went to see Charles Barnett a few days ago.”

A chill trickled down my spine at the mention of that name.

“You did?”

“Yeah.” He ran a hand through his hair, looking every bit the protector. “I confronted him about the whole... father situation.”

“And?” My heart skipped.

“He refused to give any DNA proof.” Tom's eyes held mine firmly, a silent vow of solidarity within them.

“Refused?”

“Flat out refused. I'm sorry, Lily.”

“It's okay, Tom.” A shaky breath escaped me, and I felt a strange sense of release. “Thank you for trying. For giving me closure.”

“Always,” he said softly as he squeezed my shoulder. “There's no proof, but it looks like he was lying to manipulate you.”

“I think you're right, Tom. I'm pretty sure Mom would have told me if he was my father.”

“There's one more thing. Barnett is under investigation for fraud.”

Nora interrupted us and gave Tom a hug. “I'm so happy to hear about you and Grace. When's the big day?”

“Thanks, Nora. We haven't set a date yet. Excuse me, please. They're playing our song.”

Tom left to find Grace.

“I've never seen Alex so happy and at peace,” Nora said as she hugged me. “Thank you for being exactly what he needed.”

Tears pricked the corners of my eyes. “I love him so much, Nora.”

She smiled, a knowing look that spoke volumes. “He loves you too, dear. More than you can imagine.”

Feeling embraced by her words, I nodded, my throat tight with gratitude.

As the night drew to a close, Alex found me. He took my hand. “Come with me,” he said, his voice low and full of excitement. We stepped into the cool Colorado air, the night sky a canvas of twinkling stars.

“Alex, what is it?” Curiosity laced my question as he reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a bundle of papers.

“Deeds,” he said, handing them to me with reverence. “To your flower shop and farm.”

“Deeds?”

“They're yours. Free and clear.”

“Free and clear? But the mortgages—”

“Consider it my wedding gift to you.” He placed a finger over my lips, silencing my protests.

“Alex...” The word was a breath, a prayer of thanks. “But why?”

“Because I love you. Because you deserve a life free from worry. And because I want our future to be about us, not about debts or fears.”

“This day, marrying you... it's more than I ever dreamed of,” I whispered.

“Good,” he said, pulling me close once more. “Because I plan on spending every day making sure our life together is the dream you deserve.”

And as we kissed again, I knew without a doubt that this—this love, this man, this moment—was where I was always meant to be.

Epilogue



Alex

The soft morning light filtered through the white lace curtains as I balanced the breakfast tray in my hands, its contents arranged with care. Steam rose from the heart-shaped French toast, a crimson ribbon of strawberry syrup zigzagging across the golden-brown surface. The aroma was a sweet reminder of our mornings in Costa Rica, where the sun had kissed our skin, and the future seemed as endless as the horizon.

Trading city skylines for Rosewood Falls' open skies had realigned something deep within me. My grandfather's will may have been the catalyst, but Lily—her dreams—anchored me here.

The bedroom door creaked softly as I nudged it open with my foot. She slept peacefully, a cascade of auburn curls framing her face.

“Good morning, my love. Happy anniversary,” I whispered. My fingertips brushed away a stray lock of hair from her cheek as I kissed it gently.

Her eyelids fluttered open as a sleepy smile graced her lips, and the world outside our little haven might as well have ceased to exist.

“Morning, sweetheart.” Her voice was a melody.

“Breakfast in bed. Your favorite.”

“French toast hearts?” She sat up, tucking the quilt around her waist. “You remembered.”

“Of course. How could I forget the morning we spent in that tiny café by the beach? You said it tasted like love.”

“Love and strawberries,” she corrected me, laughter dancing in her eyes.

“Alex,” she said after a moment, pausing with the fork halfway to her mouth, “this... us... it's more than I ever hoped for.”

“Me too, Lily.” I reached for her hand, lacing my fingers with hers. “Me too.”

“Speaking of hope,” she began as she nibbled on the French toast. “How are things going with the non-profit? With Ronnie?”

“Good. Better than I expected, actually. You were right about him, Lily. About giving him a chance to prove he's more than his past mistakes.”

“Everyone deserves a shot at redemption,” Lily said, squeezing my hand reassuringly. “Even Ronnie.”

“His sobriety has held since rehab,” I continued, pride warming my voice. “The non-profit is taking shape. We're building something that could really make a difference.”

“Tell me more,” she urged, a spark of excitement in her hazel eyes.

“Ronnie's been invaluable, honestly. His insight into addiction is personal and real. He's been suggesting therapies... even alternative treatments like acupuncture. And life skills classes, too, for those piecing their lives back together.”

“Sounds like you two are a good team.”

“Never thought I'd say this, but yeah, we are a good team.” A chuckle escaped me—one of disbelief mixed with newfound respect. “We've come a long way from the boys who used to argue over who had the fastest bike.”

It wasn't just Ronnie who was awakening to the truth, I mused. It was me, too. In this quiet corner of the world, with Lily by my side, I found the courage to face vulnerabilities I'd once armored in cynicism.

“Thank you for believing in me, too, Lily. For seeing something in me I didn't even see in myself.”

“Always, Alex.” Her reply was a simple promise, an echo of the unspoken vows we lived every day.

“Always,” I echoed back, a silent pledge to the woman who transformed the boy with a guarded heart into a man willing to

embrace second chances.

A moment later, Lily's expression shifted from contentment to surprise. Her fork clattered onto the plate as she gasped, her hands instinctively cradling her belly.

“Alex,” she breathed out, her eyes wide with urgency. “It's time.”

Time seemed to stand still as I processed her words. The baby was coming—our baby. A surge of adrenaline hit me like a freight train.

“Okay, okay...” I stammered, springing into action. My heart thundered in my chest as I swept the tray aside and helped her sit up, steadying her trembling frame. “Easy, does it,” I murmured, trying to keep my voice calm despite the chaos erupting within me.

With one arm wrapped securely around her, we shuffled towards the door, each step careful and measured. I could feel the tightness in her body, the fear mingled with excitement that mirrored my own.

“Doctor's number, Alex,” she reminded me, her voice strained through gritted teeth.

“Right.” I fumbled for my phone with my free hand, dialing the familiar number by muscle memory alone. I relayed the news curtly, every word laced with an urgency I couldn't contain.

“Water broke... contractions close... we're heading to the hospital now.”

The drive was a blur, a haze of red lights and honking horns that I navigated with a singular focus. Lily's hand gripped mine, her nails digging into my skin.

“Almost there, love,” I reassured her, though my nerves frayed at the edges.

When we finally arrived, the world transformed into a whirlwind of scrubs and hurried instructions. I stood by her side, helpless, as she endured wave after wave of pain until the crescendo of a baby's cry pierced the air.

The nurse placed a tiny, bundled form into my arms.

“Welcome to the world, little one,” I whispered. Her weight in my arms was monumental—a tangible representation of love and life that surpassed any business deal or corporate achievement.

Her tiny fingers curled around mine, and I felt it—the shift of every priority I'd ever had. She was perfection. Her delicate features a blend of the woman I loved and the future we'd created together.

“Your mommy's a dreamer, and your daddy's learning,” I continued softly, my voice catching with emotion. “You're going to have the best of both worlds.”

I bathed my minutes-old daughter, marveling at the resilience of her tiny body. Each gentle stroke of the cloth was a silent vow—a promise to protect, cherish, and guide.

“Your grandpop used to say family comes first,” I told her, the lessons of my past converging with the hope of my future. “I

didn't understand it then, but holding you now, I've never understood anything more clearly.”

The nurse showed me how to swaddle her as my heart swelled to new bounds.

“Are you ready to meet the rest of the world?” I asked her, a smile breaking through the tears that welled in my eyes.

“Because they're ready to meet you.”

With a tenderness I reserved only for her and Lily, I cradled my daughter close, ready to introduce her to the love that awaited her. I turned, facing the small congregation of eager faces. They stood in a semicircle around us, a tableau of anticipation and joy.

“Everyone,” I announced, my voice brimming with pride, “I'd like you to meet Violet Nora Montgomery, named after her grandmothers.”

One by one, I introduced her to each person.

There was Lily. I took a breath, steeling myself against the torrent of emotion as I approached her bedside. “Look, sweetheart,” I whispered, lowering Violet into Lily's arms. “This is your mommy, the most caring and talented woman in the world.”

Lily's eyes lifted to mine, brimming with tears and adoration. She gazed at our daughter, unspeakable joy radiating from her. I watched, mesmerized by the silent strength and boundless love in her features. It was a moment captured in time, the

culmination of every decision, every leap of faith that had led us here.

“Violet,” Lily murmured, her voice barely above a whisper, “I've waited my whole life for you.”

I leaned down, kissing Lily's forehead, then Violet's, sealing the promise of a new beginning. Taking Violet carefully in my arms, I moved toward my mother. Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears.

“This is Grammy Nora and Grandpop Ted.” I nodded to where Ted stood beside Mom, his face crinkled in a wide grin. “They moved back to help Mommy with the floral shop and be here with you, dear Violet. We're so happy to have them close by.”

“Hello, my precious girl,” Nora cooed, her voice breaking with joy. She traced a gentle finger down Violet's cheek. Ted rested a hand on Nora's shoulder.

I turned toward Ronnie. “Violet, meet your cousin Ronnie. I'm so thankful he's here today.” Our eyes locked, two blue stares holding a conversation without words. In that look, I forgave him for our past grievances.

“Hey there, Violet,” Ronnie murmured. “Welcome to the family, kiddo.”

“Violet, meet your godmother, Grace.”

Grace beamed as she stood with a hand resting on her blossoming belly. “Hey, sweetie, I can't wait for our little ones to grow up together. Just like your mommy and me.”

Lily giggled. “You're going to spoil her rotten, aren't you?”

“Absolutely,” Grace confirmed, her laughter joining Lily's.

“Violet, meet your godfather, Tom. He's helping me restructure Montgomery Industries. We're making sure every employee knows family comes first.”

“Hey there, little one,” Tom said gently. “Your daddy and I are going to make sure this world's a better place for you and all the other kids out there.”

I turned to my mother, who had been watching the exchanges with a tender smile.

“Grammy Nora. would you like to hold your new granddaughter?”

“Would I ever,” she replied, her voice laced with joy as she extended her arms towards me.

Carefully, I passed Violet into Mom's waiting embrace.

“Violet,” she cooed softly, “this is your Daddy, Alex.” Her gaze lifted to mine. “He learned what matters most, just like your Granddad Harry.”

My throat tightened as I took in her words. Grandpop had been right all along. Love, family, being there for each other—that's what truly counts.

“Thank you, Mom,” I managed to say, my voice barely a whisper.

“You've done well, Alex. Ted and I are so proud of you.”

I scanned the room, taking in the faces of those who meant everything to me. “You all are what life is about,” I

announced, my voice steady despite the swell of gratitude building within me. “Thank you for being here today.”

Afterword

Dear Willa Lyons Romance Readers,

Thank you for reading Lily's Second Chance.

If this story touched your heart, please leave a review on the platform where you purchased this book. Your words can make a difference, helping others discover the wonder of small-town romance and encouraging me to continue crafting tales for you to enjoy.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts and exploring more stories together.

Best wishes, and have a lovely day,

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enough fire to warm his heart.**

Butch, a damaged loner with a mysterious past, rescues Joelle
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Joelle, the 'new' girl in town, is the daughter of the man who
was once his best friend.

She aims to repay this quiet cowboy for his kindness.

Unable to resist her charm, Butch reluctantly lets her work for
him on his ranch.

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