Rebecca's Journey

By
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Dedication

To my husband Rex and my daughter Miya,
for their endless encouragement, patience,
and unwavering belief in me.

Contents

Chapter 1 5
Chapter 2 27
Chapter 3 57
Chapter 4 80
Chapter 5 118
Chapter 6 138
Chapter 7 153
Chapter 8 173
Chapter 9 189
Chapter 10 213
Chapter 11 236
Chapter 12 253
Chapter 13 267
Chapter 14 282
Chapter 15 297
Chapter 16 308
Chapter 17 322
Chapter 18 333
Chapter 19 348
Chapter 20 362

Chapter 1

Rebecca Donovan grew up her entire life in foster care. She never knew her parents. Her mother had died giving birth to her, and her father was heartbroken. He had just lost his wife, the love of his life, and was left with a newborn to care for. At the time, he was in no position to raise a child alone. As much as it broke his heart, he had no choice but to give her up for adoption. He knew she would be better off with both a mother and a father.

Before saying goodbye, he named her Rebecca after her mother. “I can’t give you anything,” he whispered, “but I can give you your mother’s name.” With tears in his eyes, he kissed her tiny head and said softly, “I love you, Rebecca Lynn Donovan.” Then he left the hospital heartbroken; he had lost everything.

Through the years, Rebecca was moved in and out of several foster homes. Some were good, and of course, some were bad, but she managed to make the most of it. As she got older, she became more of a babysitter for the foster parents who had younger children in their care, which she didn’t mind. She understood what those children were going through, their fears of starting new schools, making new friends, and their heartbreak when they weren’t adopted.

Rebecca learned to adapt to whatever was expected of her and grew especially attached to the younger children. When she was fourteen, she was once again moved to another foster home. She

couldn't help but wonder, *Will this be the last one? Will it ever end? Is this going to be my life forever?*

The next afternoon, Rebecca left with her caseworker, Mrs. Gallagher, to go to her next home. They drove for what seemed like hours. Rebecca sat quietly in the backseat, wondering where her life was about to take her. Along the way, she noticed a sign that read *Oklahoma City, 150 miles.*

After a few more hours of driving, Mrs. Gallagher turned into a driveway with a closed gate. She pressed a call button to be let in, and they continued down a long, winding drive that led to the house. It was a large brick home with white pillars in front. Rebecca had never seen anything so beautiful in her life.

They walked up to the front door, which opened before they even had a chance to knock. Mrs. Gallagher introduced herself and then introduced Rebecca.

"Hello!" Rebecca said politely.

"Rebecca, this is Mr. and Mrs. Malone," Mrs. Gallagher said with a smile. They were probably in their early forties, never having had children of their own. It was definitely different from most of the homes she had been in. Rebecca had learned a lot from being in foster care, respect for her elders, and gratitude toward the complete strangers who took her into their homes and cared for her.

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Malone," Rebecca said softly.

Mrs. Malone was a beautiful, petite lady, well-dressed, looking as though she had just stepped out of a magazine. You could tell she was probably very high-maintenance. Mr. Malone

was tall, masculine, and quite good-looking. Rebecca thought they made a good couple.

Mrs. Gallagher spoke with the Malones for several minutes, which felt like forever to Rebecca, and then she turned and walked out the door.

"Let me show you around," Mrs. Malone said to Rebecca.

Rebecca set her small suitcase and purse down and followed Mrs. Malone. To the left of the foyer was Mr. Malone's office. "He spends a lot of time here," Mrs. Malone explained. She then showed Rebecca the kitchen, where all of their meals were prepared. It was huge and filled with the most modern appliances you could imagine. Cabinets lined the walls, both upper and lower, and a long island stood in the middle with several barstools.

She introduced Rebecca to Miss Hettie, who looked to be in her mid-fifties. She had been with the family for many years. Hettie was a cheerful, pleasant woman, and it was clear Mrs. Malone respected her very much. As they left the kitchen, they entered the dining room. "This is where we eat our meals," Mrs. Malone said. "We believe it's very important for families to eat together and share their daily activities."

She then led Rebecca to the living room, where Mr. Malone was watching TV. "And this room," she said with a chuckle, "is Mr. Malone's man cave. When he's home or not in his office, this is where you'll find him." It was a huge room with a giant TV, and he loved watching sports. Every room was so elegantly decorated.

Down the hall was a theater. She then led Rebecca downstairs to the basement area. "This, Rebecca, is where all the laundry is done. You just put your clothes in the chute located in your

bathroom, and they'll come down here to be laundered and returned to you by the next day."

She showed Rebecca her office, where she spent a lot of her time. The room next to it was hers and Mr. Malone's bedroom. It was immaculate, unlike anything Rebecca had ever seen before in her life. They even had a library; she had never seen so many books.

Following Mrs. Malone out the back door, Rebecca was amazed to see a huge inground pool along with a pool house. *They must entertain a lot here,* she thought.

As they reentered the house, Mrs. Malone pointed to the left of the kitchen. "That's Miss Hettie's room, actually; it's a one-bedroom apartment now. Mr. Malone thought it suited her better that way, so she could have her own space. We won't go in there," she added. "I don't like to invade her privacy."

Mrs. Malone looked at Rebecca. "You must be very tired after your long drive. Let me show you to your room so you can get settled in."

They walked down a long hall and up a set of stairs. "There are four bedrooms up here, but I picked out the one I thought would suit you best. I hope you like it."

Mrs. Malone opened a door. "This will be your room," she said. It was beautiful. Rebecca had never had a room she didn't have to share with someone else.

Mrs. Malone noticed tears streaming down Rebecca's face. "Is everything okay?" she asked gently. "If you don't like the room, we can change it however you'd like."

“No, no, it’s not that, Mrs. Malone,” Rebecca said quickly. “These are tears of joy. I’ve never had anything this beautiful in my life, let alone a room of my very own.”

“You mean you had to share a room with other children?” she asked softly.

“Oh yes,” Rebecca replied. “Most of the time, there would be several children in one room.”

“Oh, I see,” Mrs. Malone said, not wanting to pry further. “Well, I’ll let you get settled. Just let me know if you need anything. I’ll be downstairs.”

Before she could close the door, Rebecca said, “Mrs. Malone, thank you.”

She turned back to face Rebecca and smiled. “Jill. My name is Jill.” Then, she smiled again and closed the door.

Rebecca stood in awe of her new room. The room was quite large, of course, it would have to be to hold a king-size bed. The walls were painted a soft lavender, and to the right of the bed was a huge bay window with a window seat. She could already picture herself lying there, reading a book, which was what she loved to do most.

On the far wall at the end of the bed was a large TV mounted on the wall. A spacious chest of drawers stood nearby for her clothes, though she knew she could fit everything she owned into just one drawer. She didn’t have much; most of her clothes had come from donations to foster homes.

There was even a desk for her to do her homework, complete with a personal computer and a printer on top. Rebecca was somewhat familiar with computers from school, though she still had a lot to learn about them.

She looked around and opened a door, which led to a big walk-in closet. Then, she noticed another door to the left of her bed. When she opened it, she could hardly believe her eyes. It was a massive bathroom, fully stocked with everything she could possibly think of or need.

Rebecca decided to freshen up before going downstairs. She turned on the shower, got undressed, and stepped in. The warm water felt wonderful on her tired body, and she stayed there for quite some time.

When she stepped out of the shower, she wrapped herself in a towel as big as a blanket and stood in front of the mirror. Rebecca was turning into a beautiful young lady. Her brown hair hung well below her waistline, and her face was flawless, not a blemish in sight. She always took good care of herself, especially her teeth, which were perfectly straight and white.

She looked around for a hairdryer and found one in a drawer of the vanity. Drying her hair took some time; she had a lot of it. Then she went into the bedroom and picked out her best dress and shoes. Although she didn't have much, she wanted to make a good impression on the Malones.

She looked in the mirror one last time before heading downstairs.

As Rebecca left her room and walked down the hallway leading downstairs, she noticed all the beautiful artwork hanging

on the walls. Never in her life had she seen such beauty. She took her time descending the stairs, soaking in the magnificence of the house. She couldn't help but wonder what fate had brought her here.

As she entered the living room, Mr. Malone was sitting in his recliner watching TV. He noticed Rebecca and said, "Come on in, dear. I'm just catching up on the daily news. I hope your room is suitable."

Rebecca turned to face him. "Yes, sir! It's perfect. Thank you."

Mr. Malone smiled and asked her what she liked to watch on TV. Rebecca told him she didn't have a preference since, in most of the homes she had been in, she hadn't had the chance to watch much television.

Just then, Mrs. Malone entered the room to let them know dinner was ready. "You look very nice," she said to Rebecca with a warm smile.

"Thank you, Mrs. Malone, Jill, I mean," Rebecca replied shyly. Jill smiled, and they all walked to the dining room. Mr. Malone sat at the head of the table, Jill to his right, and Rebecca on the left.

Rebecca noticed how elegantly the table was set. There were so many eating utensils that she couldn't tell one from the other. All of a sudden, Miss Hettie came out carrying a tray with three bowls of soup and placed one in front of each of them.

"Rebecca, this is Miss Hettie, our cook and general housekeeper," Jill said. "She prepares our meals and does the

laundry. We have a cleaning service that comes in once a week to clean the house."

"Nice to meet you, Miss Hettie," Rebecca said politely.

Jill could see that Rebecca was struggling to figure out which utensil to use for each dish. Discreetly, Jill would tap the correct utensil, not wanting Rebecca to feel embarrassed. Rebecca followed her cues and was very grateful.

After the main meal, dessert was served, and it was just as delicious as the rest of the dinner. Rebecca asked Miss Hettie if she needed any help in the kitchen, cleaning up, something she had always done in every foster home she'd been in. Miss Hettie looked a little surprised by the offer but politely said, "No, thank you."

After dinner, they all got up from the table. Rebecca asked Jill and Mr. Malone if it would be all right for her to turn in early, as it had been such a long day.

Jill smiled kindly. "That's perfectly fine, Rebecca. We know you've had a lot to take in today. Sleep well."

Rebecca turned away and headed to her bedroom. She went into the bathroom, changed into her pajamas, and crawled into bed. It was so comfortable that before long, she was sound asleep.

Rebecca woke around nine the next morning. She wasn't used to sleeping that late; normally, she was up by seven every day. She figured she must have been more tired than she thought to have slept in so long.

She went into her bathroom, got dressed, and was ready to see what the day would bring. After making her bed and tidying up

her room, she headed downstairs. As she entered the kitchen, the smell of fresh bacon filled the air.

"Good morning," Miss Hettie greeted her warmly, setting a plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast in front of her, along with a glass of orange juice.

Rebecca ate quietly while Miss Hettie cleaned up. "Miss Hettie," Rebecca said after a moment, "can I ask you a question? How did you learn to cook so well?"

Miss Hettie looked at her with a smile. "A lot of years of experience," she replied. "When I was younger, I went to culinary school and graduated at the top of my class."

"You like to cook?" Rebecca asked.

"Well," she said, "I've never really done what you'd call *cooking.* Most of what I've made was just heating something in the microwave. But I've always wanted to learn."

"Well, I could teach you," Miss Hettie offered.

"Oh, I would like that very much!" Rebecca said eagerly.

Miss Hettie was mixing what looked like dough. "What's that for?" Rebecca asked.

"This is dough for making lasagna noodles," Miss Hettie explained. She showed Rebecca how to roll and cut the noodles, then said, "Now we make the sauce."

“Do you always make everything from scratch?” Rebecca asked in surprise.

“Oh yes,” Miss Hettie said proudly.

After preparing the sauce, they began assembling the lasagna, layer by layer, until it was ready to be baked. Miss Hettie covered the dish and placed it in the refrigerator to be cooked later that afternoon.

Next, they started preparing the salad. Rebecca chopped vegetables while Miss Hettie cut up lettuce. Before long, they were finished with the evening menu.

“Thank you for all your help, Rebecca,” Miss Hettie said with a smile.

Rebecca went to her bedroom and decided to change into a pair of shorts. She grabbed her book and headed to the pool to read. Sitting down on a lounge chair, she began enjoying the sunshine. She opened her book and started to read.

In the meantime, Jill returned home from her meeting. She walked to the kitchen to get a drink of water, then looked out the window and saw Rebecca by the pool. She wondered what Rebecca’s life in foster care must have been like. Being moved from one home to another couldn’t have been easy, she thought. If only Rebecca knew how much her father, Mr. Donavan, her biological father, really loved her. But that was something she and Mr. Malone couldn’t reveal to her or Hettie until she turned eighteen. They had made a promise to him, and they fully intended to keep it.

Jill went to her bedroom, changed into her swimsuit, and headed to the pool. She looked at Rebecca and said, “Do you care if I join you? It’s such a good day for a swim.”

Rebecca replied, “No, not at all,” though she thought to herself, *after all, it’s your pool.*

Jill jumped into the pool and swam from one end to the other. When she got out, she sat in a lounge chair beside Rebecca. “I see you like to read! You know, Mr. Malone is an avid reader himself. He loves books, so feel free to read any of the books in the library. Would you like to go for a swim?” she asked.

Rebecca replied, “I don’t have a swimsuit, and I sure don’t know how to swim.”

Jill smiled. “That’s not a problem. There are swimsuits in the pool house. Pick out whichever one you like.”

Rebecca did as she said. She went into the pool house, down the hall to the ladies’ room, and looked at the rack of swimsuits. There were several, and she didn’t know which one to choose. She decided on the peach-colored one, after all, it was her favorite color. She got dressed and went back to the pool, where Jill was waiting.

“Very nice,” Jill said. “That color suits you.”

All of a sudden, Mr. Malone appeared. He walked to the diving board and made a big splash as he dove into the water.

“He’s such a show-off!” Jill said with a laugh. “Mr. Malone was on the swim team in high school and won many medals.”

He swam to the end of the pool where Jill and Rebecca were sitting, picked up a towel, and dried off. Jill told him that Rebecca didn't know how to swim and that they needed to teach her.

Mr. Malone smiled and said he would be glad to help. He helped Rebecca into the water. She was a little skeptical at first; she had never been in a pool before. Mr. Malone slowly began showing her what to do, and she started to feel a little less nervous about the water. He was very patient with her, and by the end of the lesson, she was beginning to relax.

As they left the pool, she thanked Mr. Malone for helping her. He smiled and said, "Please, call me Andrew. The pleasure is all mine."

That evening at dinner, Miss Hettie brought in the meal, homemade lasagna with fresh bread and a salad, just as Mr. Andrew had requested. "I had a little helper preparing this evening's meal," she said with a grin. "Miss Rebecca was such a great help."

Andrew looked at Rebecca and said, "Consider it an honor to be in Miss Hettie's kitchen. She always runs me out of there."

"Only because you like to stir in my pots!" Miss Hettie chuckled as she left the room.

Jill looked at Rebecca and said, "How would you like to have a girls' day out tomorrow?"

Rebecca wasn't quite sure what that meant, but she smiled and said, "That sounds like fun."

“Great!” said Jill. “We’ll leave around nine in the morning.” She then told Miss Hettie not to worry about dinner the next evening, as they would be home late.

After dinner, Rebecca went to her room. She had really enjoyed spending time with Andrew and Jill, as well as helping Miss Hettie prepare dinner. It was the first time she had ever felt like she was truly part of something. She was looking forward to spending time with Jill the next day.

She sat down at her desk, opened her sketch pad, and began to draw, something she had always loved to do. It was getting late, so she crawled into bed, and before she knew it, she was fast asleep.

She woke up early the next morning, anxiously waiting for what Jill had called a “girls’ day out.” She put on her best clothes and went downstairs, heading straight to the kitchen, where Miss Hettie was. After she and Jill finished their breakfast, they were off on their big adventure. As they drove into the city, Rebecca was amazed at the tall buildings. Soon, they turned into a mall where Jill parked her car. When they entered, the mall was filled with so many shops. Rebecca had never been to a mall before, so she didn’t know what to expect. As they walked down the hall, she saw shoe stores and several clothing stores.

Jill entered one of the clothing stores, and Rebecca followed her. As they walked around, Jill said, “Do you see anything you like?”

Rebecca replied, “I like them all. They’re beautiful.”

“Well, let’s pick out some for you to try on,” Jill said with a smile.

Rebecca picked several dresses, some shirts, and of course, blue jeans. She went into the dressing room to try them on. Each time she tried something, she walked out to show Jill, hoping for her approval. She was very pleased with the clothes she had chosen. Jill continued showing Rebecca outfits she thought she might like, and Rebecca kept changing; she must have tried on everything in the store.

The very last thing she tried on was a turquoise dress. It looked beautiful on her; the color suited her perfectly. As Rebecca went to change, Jill said, “No! You should wear that one now, just keep it on.”

Jill also picked out undergarments, shoes, and, of course, purses. Then she walked to the cashier to pay for everything she had selected. Rebecca was in shock; never before had she seen so many clothes.

The cashier greeted her with a smile. “Hi, Mrs. Malone, nice to see you.”

Jill signed a paper and instructed her to have all the items Rebecca had picked delivered to her house immediately. “Yes, ma’am,” the cashier replied.

Rebecca left the store wearing the turquoise dress and matching shoes. They continued down the mall and came to a hair and nail salon. Jill walked in with Rebecca by her side.

The girl at the desk looked up and said, “Mrs. Malone, it’s so nice to see you. How can we help you today?”

“I’d like to get Rebecca the star treatment today, you know what I mean,” Jill replied.

“Yes, ma’am, we’ll take very good care of her,” the girl said, leading Rebecca to the back. She washed, trimmed, and dried Rebecca’s hair, then moved her to the manicure station, where she had her nails done, followed by a pedicure.

Rebecca felt like a princess; she had never received this kind of treatment in her whole life. Next came makeup. She had never used any and didn’t know how to apply it, but the makeup artist was very helpful in helping her choose what would best suit her.

When she was finished, she looked in the mirror and could hardly believe her eyes. She looked so beautiful.

Jill looked at Rebecca and said, “I’ve never seen anyone more gorgeous than you. You look magnificent.”

Before they left the salon, Jill bought the makeup that the stylist had recommended for Rebecca.

It was getting close to lunchtime when Jill said, “I have an idea, let’s go to Andrew’s office, surprise him, and take him to lunch.”

Rebecca was thrilled at the idea. She would love to see him and where he worked.

Jill drove to a very tall building in the center of downtown. She pulled into a parking garage and parked in a lot reserved for owners only. She opened the door, and Rebecca followed her as

they headed to the elevator. Jill pressed the button for the top floor, and when the doors opened, Andrew's office was right in front of them.

Jill opened the door, and his secretary, Mrs. Stallings, was on the phone. After ending her call, she greeted them. "Hello, Mrs. Malone. How are you today?"

"I'm fine, thank you for asking, Mrs. Stallings. Is my husband very busy today?" Jill replied.

"Well, Mrs. Malone, you know he's never too busy for you," Mrs. Stallings said with a smile. Jill returned the smile and opened the door to Andrew's office.

Andrew was on the phone, but motioned for them to come in. When he hung up, he said, "Well, what do I owe this honor? Two beautiful ladies in my office at once!"

Jill smiled. "Well, Mr. Malone, we're here to take you to lunch, if you're available."

"Let me check my schedule," he said playfully as he thumbed through his calendar. Looking up at Jill, he added, "It just so happens I'm free for the rest of the day."

"Is Maurice's okay for lunch?" Jill asked.

"It's perfect," Andrew said. "I've always loved that place."

As they walked down the street, Rebecca was amazed at all the shops and restaurants; she wasn't used to this kind of life. On their way to Maurice's, Andrew spotted an electronics store.

“Let’s go in here for a minute,” he said. He went straight to the cell phone section, picked one out, paid for it, and then they all continued on to the restaurant.

As they waited to be seated, Andrew handed Rebecca the cell phone he had just purchased. “Everyone these days needs a cell phone,” he said. “They can be your friend in times of need.”

Rebecca had never had a cell phone before. “I can help set it up for you if you like,” Andrew offered.

“That would be great,” Rebecca replied with a smile.

Once they were seated at their table, the waiter came to take their order. Rebecca chose the chicken parmesan; it was the only thing on the menu she was familiar with.

After finishing their lunch, Andrew said, “How about a movie?”

Jill smiled. “What a good idea. It’s been a while since we’ve done that.”

They went to the theater next door to the restaurant, where a musical called *Kinky Boots* was playing. Rebecca was very impressed; she had never been to a musical before.

It was about six o’clock when the show ended. Jill turned to Andrew and said they should be heading home soon. They walked him back to his office, said their goodbyes, and told him they’d see him at home. He kissed them both on the cheek before turning to head back to his office.

Jill and Rebecca returned to the car and started their journey home. “What a great day this has been,” Rebecca thought to herself.

As they entered the gate to the house, Rebecca told Jill how wonderful the day had been for her and how thankful she was for Jill’s kindness.

After they entered the garage and parked the car, they stepped out and headed indoors. As soon as Andrew got home, he showed Rebecca how to set up her cell phone, just as he had promised. He also added Jill’s and Hettie’s phone numbers, along with his own, in case she needed to reach any of them.

It was getting late, so Rebecca decided to call it a night, so to speak. She thanked Jill again for the wonderful day she had and then headed to her room.

When Rebecca opened her bedroom door, she noticed boxes everywhere. She started to open them and soon realized they contained the clothes she had picked out at the store. She opened box after box and began putting everything away. She had never seen so many clothes in her life; there were several pairs of shoes, purses, and just about everything she could imagine.

Rebecca had a hard time falling asleep that night. She kept thinking about her day and how much she had enjoyed spending time with Andrew and Jill.

Rebecca woke up early the next morning, picked out her clothes for the day, and headed downstairs to the kitchen.

“Good morning,” she said.

Miss Hettie greeted her with the same and asked how the girls' day out had gone. Rebecca filled her in on everything they had done.

As she ate her breakfast, Rebecca looked up at Miss Hettie. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," Miss Hettie replied.

"What do the Malones do for a living?"

"You mean you don't know?"

Rebecca shook her head. "No."

"Well, you know when you went shopping yesterday, did you notice the name of the store you were in?"

"I do believe it was Jillian's," Rebecca said.

"Well, Jill is short for Jillian. That's one of Jill's many clothing stores; she has them all over the United States. She designed everything in them."

"Wow!" Rebecca said. "She sure has an eye for fashion."

"Oh yes," Miss Hettie smiled. "She's worked hard over the years, and when things started to take off, she built a thriving business."

Andrew, on the other hand, well, let's just say he dabbles in a lot of things. He went to college to become an architect, which he succeeded at very well. He has designed several bridges, shopping

malls, office buildings, and apartments, many of which he owns, not only in Oklahoma but also in several other states.

"Why did they not have any children?" she asked.

"Well, in their younger years, they spent most of their time getting their careers started. Before they knew it, time had gotten away from them, and they felt they were getting too old to start a family, so they never did."

"That's a shame," Rebecca said. "They would have made great parents."

Rebecca then asked, "Miss Hettie, are you married?"

She said no and went on to explain that she had been in a relationship, but he had passed away suddenly.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Miss Hettie," Rebecca said. She could see the look on her face as she remembered him, so Rebecca decided she would never ask her about it again.

Over the next few weeks, Jill and Andrew continued to teach Rebecca how to swim. Before long, she was becoming a very good swimmer, although she never dove off the diving board, which she was fine with, since she wasn't too fond of heights. They spent most of their afternoons at the pool.

Time quickly went by, and it was almost time for Rebecca to start at yet another new school. But this time would be different; she would be going into high school.

That evening was the open house for students, and to her surprise, both Andrew and Jill took her. As they drove and entered

the school parking lot, she couldn't help but notice how big the school was. They walked through the front doors and into the gymnasium, where several tables were lined up.

A short gentleman walked up to the Malones and said, "What do we owe the pleasure of having you at our school this evening?"

"Hi, Mr. Stallings," Andrew said, shaking his hand. "We're here to enroll a new student, this is Rebecca Donavan."

"It's so nice to meet you, Rebecca. What grade will you be in?" he asked.

"I'll be a freshman," she replied.

"We always enjoy having new students," he said, then directed them to a table where they could proceed with her enrollment.

Jill filled out papers for what seemed like forever, while Andrew talked with Mr. Stallings. Jill then handed the lady at the table a packet, which Rebecca thought must be her transcripts from her previous school.

After all the paperwork was completed, they gave Rebecca her class schedule. Mr. Stallings then went to the podium to welcome everyone and went over the school rules and the events that would take place over the next few weeks. After he finished his speech, he dismissed everyone. Rebecca went around to all of her classrooms to meet her teachers. First on her list was Ms. Logan, who was her homeroom and math teacher. Then, they went down the hall to her next class with Mr. Hastings, her science teacher. Mrs. Lakin was next on her list; she had her for social

studies. For English, she would have Mrs. Keller, and for Physical Education, Mrs. Cain.

She also had an art class with Miss Larkin, which she thought would be one of her favorite classes since she loved art. Another class on her schedule was Home Economics, where they would learn how to cook and sew; Mrs. Belk was the teacher for that class.

Her last class of the day was study hall, which she liked. She thought she could use that time to do her homework, study for a test, or read a book if she wanted. After she met all of her teachers, Rebecca felt a little more at ease about her upcoming school year. As they headed toward the front door to leave, Rebecca noticed a shadow box on the wall filled with trophies. She stopped to look at it. There were various trophies and medals inside, and then she saw a picture of Andrew, who had won a medal for his swimming abilities.

They paused to admire the awards displayed there. Andrew was very well known at the school, as was Jill. They had been crowned King and Queen of their senior year. They didn't look much different now, Rebecca thought; the years had been very good to them.

As Andrew and Jill reminisced about their time at this very same high school, Rebecca could see how much they had loved each other then and how much they still did now.

Chapter 2

Rebecca woke up early that Monday morning and started getting ready for her first day of school. She had picked out her clothes the night before, a pair of blue jeans and a shirt that Jill had helped her choose.

After getting dressed, she brushed out her long hair and carefully applied her makeup. Jill had taught her how to do it properly, and over time, Rebecca had gotten quite good at it.

She grabbed her backpack and purse and went to the kitchen, where Hettie, of course, already had breakfast waiting. Jill was sitting at the bar, sipping her morning coffee and reading the newspaper.

“Good morning,” they said to each other as Rebecca sat down to eat.

Jill looked up from her paper and asked, “Are you nervous about starting your new school?”

“A little,” Rebecca admitted. “But I’m also excited.”

Jill smiled over the top of her newspaper, thinking about what a beautiful young lady Rebecca had become and how much joy she had brought into their lives. Jill was starting to feel a deep attachment to her. There was just something about Rebecca she couldn’t quite explain.

As they headed out to the car, Jill handed Rebecca some money for lunch. Rebecca tucked it into her purse, and soon they were on their way to school.

When Jill pulled up to the high school, Rebecca opened the door to get out. Before she could close it, Jill called out, “I hope you have a great day! I’ll be here to pick you up after school.”

Rebecca smiled and nodded before heading toward the entrance.

Inside, she managed to find her way to her homeroom with Ms. Logan, who would also be her math teacher. Ms. Logan seemed like a cheerful older lady, Rebecca thought.

Her next class was science with Mr. Hastings. He didn’t look like what she imagined a science teacher would, no pocket protector or nerdy glasses. He was well-dressed and spoke with confidence, which impressed her.

Mrs. Lakin, her social studies teacher, seemed like the kind who could make class fun. Mrs. Keller, the new English teacher, was enthusiastic and eager to get started in her first year at the school. Mrs. Cain, the physical education teacher, looked strong and athletic, clearly someone who took good care of herself.

Then there was Ms. Larken, the art teacher, who looked young enough to still be in high school herself. And finally, Mrs. Belk, the home economics teacher, struck Rebecca as warm and practical. Her last class of the day was study hall, a welcome break she was happy to have.

Rebecca's first day mostly consisted of meeting her teachers and learning her way around the building. Each teacher went over their classroom rules and what would be expected from the students.

Lunch turned out to be better than she expected. She had the late lunch period, around 11:00, and made a mental note to bring a small snack next time to tide her over until then.

When the last class ended, Rebecca went to her locker, which had been assigned earlier that day. As she was gathering her things, a girl approached the locker next to hers. She was a little on the heavy side but had a very pretty face.

"Hi!" the girl said brightly.

"Hello," Rebecca replied.

"Boy, what a day this has been," the girl said with a grin. "I must've gotten lost at least five times today."

Rebecca laughed. "I had trouble finding all of my classes, too. Maybe tomorrow will go a lot smoother."

"I hope so," the girl said. "By the way, I'm Gisselle Reed." She explained that although she was a sophomore, there weren't enough lockers in the sophomore hall because of all the new students, so she'd been assigned one in the freshman hall.

"I'm Rebecca," she replied with a smile.

The two girls walked out of the school together, chatting until they reached the front entrance, where their rides were waiting.

"Bye!" Rebecca said as she spotted Jill's car.

"See you tomorrow!" Gisselle called back.

Rebecca climbed into Jill's vehicle. As they drove away, Jill asked, "So, how was your first day?"

"It was good," Rebecca said. "So far, I like all of my teachers. We didn't really do much classwork today; it was mostly just getting adjusted to everything. Oh, and the lunch was actually really good."

Jill chuckled. "That's always a bonus."

All day, Jill had found herself thinking about Rebecca, wondering how she was doing, if she'd made friends, if she felt comfortable. She had missed being at home. In such a short time, she had grown used to having her around, and the quiet house had felt a little emptier without her.

As they pulled into the garage and got out of the vehicle, Rebecca headed straight to the kitchen to see Hettie and maybe grab a snack. Hettie was excited to see her; she, too, had missed having Rebecca around.

Rebecca told her all about her day while nibbling on her snack. When she finished, she thanked Hettie and headed upstairs to her room.

The moment she opened the door… she could tell the cleaning service had been there. The room smelled fresh and spotless. She set her backpack down and sighed with relief. *Boy, what a day.* The first day of school was always the hardest, she thought, but

she was glad it was behind her. Still, she couldn't help but feel excited about going back tomorrow.

Rebecca had always loved school and done well in her classes. Even during the summers, she tried to keep learning as much as she could.

She quickly changed into a pair of shorts. Catching her reflection in the mirror, she noticed how tan she'd gotten over the summer months. She smiled, tied her hair up into a ponytail, and decided a swim sounded perfect.

In the pool house, she changed into her swimsuit and slipped into the cool water. The pool shimmered in the afternoon light, and she felt her body relax with every stroke. After a while, she climbed out, wrapped herself in a towel, and stretched out on a lounge chair. She began reading her book, but before long, she drifted off to sleep.

She woke to the sound of Jill calling her name.

"Hi, Jill," Rebecca said sleepily. "Guess I dozed off for a bit."

Jill smiled and sat in the recliner next to her. She looked tired. Rebecca could tell she'd been in meetings all day.

"That's okay," Jill said gently. "I just wanted to let you know dinner will be ready soon." Then she stood and headed back toward the house.

Rebecca quickly changed out of her swimsuit and followed.

At dinner, Hettie brought in a fresh salad for each of them, along with warm bread. As they ate, Rebecca mentioned that she had seen Jill and Andrew's prom picture in the shadow box at school.

"You both don't look much different than you do now," she said with a grin.

"Well, thank you!" they both said, laughing. "But we can assure you, we're very different from the people in that picture," Andrew added with a smile.

They all shared stories about their day. Then Jill looked at Rebecca and said, "Rebecca, I have to go to the warehouse that makes my clothing line on Saturday. Would you like to come along?"

"Yes!" Rebecca said immediately, her face lighting up.

"It's about an hour away," Jill said, smiling at her enthusiasm.

"So, we'll need to get an early start."

Just then, Hettie brought in the main course with vegetables. The food looked and tasted delicious. Rebecca thought to herself how lucky the Malones were to have Hettie.

After dinner, Rebecca excused herself and went upstairs to her bedroom. She laid out her clothes for the next day, a habit she had learned from her time in foster homes. With so many kids trying to get ready at once, it had always made mornings easier.

She climbed into bed, pulled the covers around her, and within minutes, drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, Rebecca got up early once again. She got dressed and headed downstairs for breakfast, which had quickly become part of her morning routine.

She ate in silence for a few minutes, wondering where Jill was, when Jill finally came into the kitchen. Jill looked a bit tired. Her new clothing line was launching soon, and it had been taking up most of her time. Rebecca wished there was something she could do to help.

As they headed to school, Rebecca glanced over and asked softly, “Are you okay?”

Jill smiled faintly. “It’s just part of the business,” she said. “It takes a toll on you after a while—so many deadlines to meet and so little time to do it all. But I’ll make it happen, like I always do.”

When they arrived at school, Jill parked in front of the building. Before Rebecca got out, she reminded her, “Andrew will be picking you up this afternoon. I have meetings all day.”

Rebecca nodded. “Okay. I hope your meetings go well.”

“Thanks, sweetheart,” Jill said with a smile. “Have a great day.”

Rebecca waved as Jill drove off, feeling a quiet admiration for how hard she worked and how much she handled with grace.

Rebecca went to her locker to grab her book for her first class, which was with Ms. Logan, her math teacher.

Ms. Logan was a jolly woman, but also quite stern with her students. You could tell she had been teaching for years; she knew exactly how to handle a classroom. She had everyone open their books and began her lesson. Math had always come easily to Rebecca, and much of what Ms. Logan covered, she already knew.

Ms. Logan wrote a problem on the board and asked if anyone could solve it. Rebecca immediately knew the answer, but decided to wait and give someone else a chance. When no one raised their hand, she finally lifted hers.

“Yes, Rebecca?” Ms. Logan said.

Rebecca gave the answer confidently.

Ms. Logan’s eyebrows lifted in pleasant surprise. “That is correct,” she said with a smile. “Very good, Rebecca.”

Usually, she would have expected a student to come to the board and work the problem out, but Rebecca had solved it entirely in her head.

When the bell rang, Rebecca gathered her books and followed the other students out into the hallway, heading for her next class.

Mr. Hastings, her science teacher, looked as if he were mad all the time and rarely smiled. His lectures were dry and monotonous, making it hard to stay focused. Still, Rebecca took careful notes and paid close attention. She knew the material would be important later in the school year.

When the bell rang again, she picked up her belongings and hurried to her next class.

Mrs. Lakin, her Social Studies teacher, was the complete opposite of Mr. Hastings. She was full of energy and enthusiasm, and it was clear she loved what she taught. Rebecca could already tell this was going to be one of her favorite classes.

Next came English with Mrs. Keller. She was very well-spoken, though, as Rebecca thought to herself with a smile, you'd expect nothing less from an English teacher.

By the time lunch rolled around, Rebecca was relieved. She had one of the later lunch schedules, and her stomach was already growling.

As she stood in line, she spotted Gisselle, the girl she'd met on her first day, the one with the locker next to hers. Gisselle waved her over excitedly and motioned for her to join them.

Rebecca paid for her lunch and walked to the table where Gisselle sat with a boy and two other girls.

"Rebecca, this is Sebastian Cain, Savannah Rivers, and Cheyenne MacGregor," Gisselle said cheerfully.

"Nice to meet you," Rebecca replied, smiling as she sat down.

They chatted while they ate, talking about how their day was going, which teachers they liked, and which ones they didn't. The conversation flowed easily, and Rebecca found herself laughing along with them. It felt good to fit in.

When the bell rang, they all got up and headed to their next classes.

Rebecca's next period was Physical Education, a subject she didn't particularly care for. She had never been much of an athlete, but she told herself, *I'll do the best I can.*

After P.E., she went to her art class with Ms. Larkin, the one she'd been most looking forward to all day. Rebecca loved art; she couldn't wait to get started.

At the beginning of class, Ms. Larkin walked around the room, handing each student a sketch pad with their name written neatly on the front.

"I want each of you to draw something on the first page that makes you happy," Ms. Larkin said. "It could be a sunset, a person, a pet, anything that brings you joy."

Rebecca smiled to herself as she opened the blank page, already thinking of what she might draw.

The students spent the rest of the class sketching quietly. Rebecca found it easy; she had done plenty of sketching before, so she decided to draw something she truly enjoyed, just as Ms. Larkin had suggested.

When she finished, she took her sketchpad to Ms. Larkin's desk just as the bell rang. She gathered her belongings and headed out the door, feeling pleased with her work.

Her next class was Home Economics with Mrs. Belk, and Rebecca was genuinely excited about it. These were the kinds of

things she'd always wanted to learn, practical skills she could use every day.

After that, she headed to her last class of the day, study hall. She was thankful for the break; it had been a long day, and she was ready for a little quiet time.

When the final bell rang, Rebecca went to her locker to collect her things and made her way toward the front of the school.

Andrew was waiting in the long line of cars picking up students. When he spotted her, he noticed how tired she looked and thought she must have had a full day.

Rebecca smiled when she saw him, opened the car door, and climbed in.

As Andrew drove away from the high school, he asked, "How was your day?"

"It was good," Rebecca replied. "Thank you for asking." She went on to tell him about all her teachers and how she had met a girl named Gisselle.

Andrew smiled to himself. She was starting to fit right in.

As they pulled through the gate of the Malone property, Andrew stopped the car and waited for the gate to close behind them. Then he turned to her.

"Do you know how to drive, Rebecca?" he asked.

Rebecca shook her head. “No, I’ve never driven a vehicle before.”

Andrew smiled. “Would you like to learn?”

Rebecca’s eyes lit up. “Yes!”

Andrew chuckled softly, got out of the driver’s seat, and walked around to the passenger side. Rebecca slid into the driver’s seat, her heart racing with excitement as she adjusted the seat and mirrors.

Now, the first thing you do,” he said, “is put on your seat belt.”

She did as she was told.

“Now you want to adjust your mirrors so you can see out your side mirrors and your visor mirror. That way you’ll know where the other vehicles are.” He showed her where the brake and gas pedals were.

“Okay,” he said, “put the truck in Drive and slowly take your foot off the brake, then give it a little gas.”

She did, but she pressed the gas pedal too hard, and the truck shot forward down the driveway.

“Whoa! Let up on the gas, just take it slow,” he said with a laugh.

Rebecca took a deep breath and followed his instructions. Before she knew it, she was doing quite well—keeping the truck on the driveway and not going too fast.

As they reached the front of the house, he told her, “Tap the brake lightly and stop the vehicle.”

She did, but hit the brake too hard, and they jolted forward.

“It’s fine,” he reassured her, smiling. “That happens to first-time drivers.”

Rebecca shifted the truck into Park and exhaled with relief. She actually thought she did pretty well, considering it was her first time behind the wheel. After all, it wouldn’t be long before she could get her permit, so she needed the practice.

They got out of the truck and headed inside.

“You did very well for your first time,” Andrew said.

“Thank you,” Rebecca replied, setting her backpack down before heading into the kitchen.

Hettie had several different snacks spread across the counter. She must’ve been testing new recipes again, Rebecca thought. Each one she sampled was delicious. She had to be careful, though; if she kept eating like this, she’d surely gain a few unwanted pounds. Still, she didn’t want to hurt Hettie’s feelings.

Rebecca noticed Jill’s car in the garage.

“Is Jill home?” she asked.

“Yes,” Hettie said. “She’s in her office working. She has to finish her clothing line by tomorrow, so it’ll probably be a late night for her.”

Rebecca nodded, picked up her backpack, and headed to her room. She changed clothes and decided to visit the library. When she opened the door, her eyes widened; she couldn't believe how many books were in there.

She wandered around until she found one that caught her interest, then sat down in one of the large chairs. It wasn't long before her eyelids grew heavy, and she drifted off to sleep.

She woke to the sound of Hettie's voice over the intercom announcing that dinner was ready.

It was just Rebecca and Andrew at the table that night.

"Jill ate earlier," Andrew said. "She's working hard to meet that deadline."

After dinner, Andrew excused himself to his office to work on paperwork, while Rebecca gathered the dishes and carried them to the kitchen. She rinsed them before placing them in the dishwasher.

"You know, you don't have to do that," Hettie said.

"I know," Rebecca smiled, "but I kind of like helping."

After a pause, she added, "Do you think it would be okay if I took Jill a cup of coffee and a snack? I'm sure she must be tired."

Hettie smiled warmly. "Sure, I bet she'd love that. She needs a little break anyway."

After the coffee was made and the snack arranged on a small plate, Rebecca started down the hallway that led to Jill's office. When she reached the door, she knocked lightly.

A soft voice called out, "Come in."

Rebecca opened the door and stepped inside. "I brought you a cup of coffee and a snack," she said with a smile. "I thought you might need a little break."

Jill looked up from her desk, which was covered in sketches and scattered papers. "Oh, yes! I could sure use one," she said gratefully. "I'm having what writers would call writer's block, only in my case, it's a fashion block." Jill chuckled softly. "But you know what I mean."

Rebecca smiled. "What are you working on?"

Jill sighed. "A dress design. I can't decide if I like the way it looks for the clientele I'm trying to reach."

"Do you mind if I look at it?" Rebecca asked.

"Not at all," Jill replied, handing her the sketchpad. "Maybe another set of eyes is just what I need."

Rebecca studied the drawing for a moment. "What kind of women are you trying to attract with this dress?" she asked.

"Well," Jill began, "it's basically for businesswomen, teachers, dinner parties, nothing too fancy. Just something dressy that can fit almost any occasion."

Rebecca nodded thoughtfully. “What if you got rid of the poofy sleeves and made them a bit longer, maybe just below the elbow? I’d keep the neckline as it is, but make the skirt part a little longer, just below the knees.” She smiled faintly. “I always loved how a dress feels when it brushes against your legs.”

Jill listened intently as Rebecca continued. “And maybe, make it a black dress, but add a black and white belt, intertwined together, that fastens in the back. It would offset the solid black nicely.”

As Jill began sketching the changes, her eyes lit up. When she finished, she looked at Rebecca and exclaimed, “That’s it, Rebecca! It’s absolutely beautiful. That’s exactly what I was looking for all along.”

She refined the sketch just as Rebecca had described, and when she finished, she leaned back in her chair, smiling. “My collection is now complete,” she said with relief and joy in her voice.

Then, Jill looked up at Rebecca and asked, “Do you mind if I use the changes you suggested?”

Rebecca smiled modestly. “No, not at all.”

“Now,” Jill said with a spark of excitement, “we need a second opinion. Let’s go see what Hettie and Andrew think.”

She picked up her sketchpad, and the two of them walked down the hallway together. Jill called for Hettie and Andrew to meet them in the dining room, where she carefully spread her sketches out across the table.

“Okay,” she said with a smile, “tell me what you think.” She placed the *before* and *after* sketches side by side, the original design and the one she and Rebecca had just finished together.

Andrew chuckled. “Jill, you know I don’t know a thing about women’s clothing.”

Jill grinned. “Alright, let’s say you and I were going out to dinner or somewhere fancy. Which one would you pick?”

Hettie studied both designs for a moment, then pointed to the one Rebecca had helped create. “That one,” she said confidently.

Andrew nodded in agreement. “Well, if I had to choose, I’d go with that one too,” he said, gesturing toward the same sketch.

Jill smiled knowingly. “That’s exactly what I thought,” she said, beaming at Rebecca. Then she gave her a warm hug. “Thank you, Rebecca! You don’t realize how much you’ve helped me today. All I have to do now is get my sketches together and take them to the factory for processing. I’m actually a day ahead of schedule, thanks to you!”

Rebecca felt a deep sense of happiness. She was glad she could be of some help to Jill, and in truth, she had grown quite fond of her in the short time she’d been there.

After a few more words of thanks, Jill excused herself and headed back to her office to organize her work. Rebecca went upstairs to her room, feeling the weight of the long day finally catching up with her. She changed into her nightclothes, slipped under the covers, and before she knew it, she was fast asleep.

The next day at school, Rebecca couldn't wait to have lunch with her friends. She was happy—not only because it was the last day of school before the weekend, but also because she would be going to the factory with Jill the next morning.

That night at dinner, Jill reminded Rebecca of their outing. Rebecca smiled. "I haven't forgotten. I can't wait to get there and see how the process works."

"I'd like to leave by seven a.m.," Jill said. "That way, we can beat the early morning rush hour."

After dinner, Rebecca headed to her bedroom, her safe haven at times, and sat down at her desk. She decided to sketch in her sketchpad for a while. About an hour later, she had drawn the most beautiful wedding dress, one like no other. Designing wedding gowns had always been her dream. She wanted to make and sell them one day, but she knew she didn't have the money for that now. Still, she was good at it, very good.

As Rebecca lay in bed that night, she thought back to the first day she had arrived there. She had been skeptical at first, unsure of what to expect, but over time, she learned to just go with the flow. What else could she do? After all, she had been in so many foster homes that she'd taught herself not to get attached to anyone.

The next morning, Rebecca got ready for school, excited that it was finally Friday. Jill dropped her off, and Rebecca went straight to her locker, grabbed her book for first period, and headed down the hall. She went through her daily routine, counting down the hours until lunch with her new friends.

When the bell rang, Rebecca picked up her tray and headed to their usual table. “Hi, everyone!” she said cheerfully.

“Hey, Rebecca!” they replied in unison. She sat down, smiling, and joined their small talk about how their day was going and how glad they all were that it was Friday.

Rebecca was just as glad, maybe even more, because she knew tomorrow, she’d finally get to go with Jill to the factory. Before they all got up to leave, they exchanged phone numbers.

“See you on Monday!” they said as they headed off to their next class.

When the final bell rang, Rebecca could hardly contain her excitement. She couldn’t wait to get home.

That evening, she told Hettie all about her day and how she had met some new friends. Hettie smiled warmly. “I’m so glad you’re starting to fit in at your new school,” she said.

Rebecca nodded and then grabbed her backpack, heading up to her room. As she climbed the stairs, a wave of sadness came over her. She knew she shouldn’t get too close to the Malones or even to Hettie, because she could be moved at any time. The thought made her chest tighten. She had grown to like them all very much.

She had been there for five months now, and though she tried not to think about it, the fear was always there, lingering in the back of her mind, that one day she might have to say goodbye.

The next morning, Rebecca woke up early to start her day. She got dressed, then went into the bathroom to fix her hair and makeup before heading downstairs to meet Jill. Jill was already in the kitchen, having coffee with Miss Hettie.

“Good morning,” they both said as Rebecca walked in.

“Good morning,” Rebecca replied with a smile.

“Would you like a cup of coffee, Miss Rebecca?” Hettie asked.

Rebecca had never had coffee before, but she decided to give it a try. “Yes, please,” she said politely.

Hettie handed her a steaming cup, and after taking her first sip, Rebecca thought it actually tasted pretty good.

A few minutes later, Jill and Rebecca were on their way. As they headed toward the city, Jill glanced over and asked, “How about some breakfast?”

“That sounds wonderful,” Rebecca replied as Jill pulled into a small restaurant.

After they ate, Jill paid for their breakfast, and they continued downtown. Rebecca watched through the window as the city grew busier and brighter with every block. Jill maneuvered through the traffic so effortlessly that Rebecca couldn’t help but admire her confidence.

Soon, Jill pulled into the parking lot of a tall building with *MALONE'S* written across the front in bold letters. Rebecca's eyes widened. She was impressed.

Jill parked in a space marked Reserved and led Rebecca inside. Since it was the weekend, the building was quiet and still. Jill entered a code on the keypad by the door, and when it clicked open, she disarmed the alarm before they stepped inside.

The lights flickered on, revealing a massive open space. Rebecca gasped softly. It was much larger than she had imagined.

The first area they visited looked like a design studio, with long drafting tables and rolls of paper scattered across them. Jill laid her sketches out neatly on one of the tables so the team could start working on them first thing Monday morning.

Next, she led Rebecca into another room. Rebecca stopped in her tracks, amazed. Bolts of fabric filled the space, every color and texture imaginable. Soft cottons, rich silks, shimmering satins, it was like walking into a rainbow of creativity.

"There are big machines over there that can cut several layers of fabric at once," Jill explained, pointing toward a row of sleek industrial cutters.

Then she opened another door and smiled. "Now, this is where all the magic begins."

Rebecca stepped inside and couldn't believe what she saw: a large room filled with sewing machines, easily a hundred of them.

“I have some of the most skilled seamstresses in the city,” Jill said proudly. “Most of them have been with me since I started. They know what I want and can bring my designs to life perfectly.”

Rebecca nodded, completely in awe. She could feel the passion in Jill’s voice and the energy of the place, even when it was empty.

Rebecca was fascinated by everything that went into making Jill’s clothing line. As she walked around the room and looked at the garments displayed on the racks, she was deeply impressed by how well-structured and beautifully crafted each piece was. There were rows upon rows of clothing ready to be shipped out to stores.

Jill explained to her that when the first of her designs was finished, she would come in to inspect each one. If it matched her vision, production would begin. Rebecca could hardly contain her excitement.

Wow! she thought. *How amazing would it be to have a place like this someday?* But then she brushed the thought aside, thinking it was far-fetched for someone like her.

Still, she couldn’t help but wander around, wanting to see everything. She made a mental note to ask Jill someday if she could come back when all the seamstresses were there sewing. She imagined the sound of machines humming, scissors snipping, and fabric being transformed into beautiful clothes.

At the end of each row of sewing machines stood a mannequin displaying the final piece from that line. Rebecca guessed this was where Jill inspected each finished item and decided whether it met

her standards. She realized then just how much went into designing and producing clothes. *No wonder Jill's been looking so tired these past few weeks,* she thought. There was so much to handle before the clothes ever reached the racks and shelves in her stores.

As Rebecca continued walking around, she found herself wondering how many hours Jill must have poured into making her business so successful. This wasn't something handed to her; she had built it from the ground up. That thought made Rebecca respect her even more. Jill had sacrificed a lot for her dream, and it had paid off.

Jillian's has become one of the most popular clothing stores in the entire United States. Rebecca even overheard kids at school talking about shopping there and how Jill had the best styles. Some were already excited about her upcoming clothing line, which they said would be hitting stores soon.

Rebecca smiled to herself. *I could spend hours here,* she thought.

Jill noticed how engrossed Rebecca was, watching her eyes light up with curiosity and admiration. A warmth filled her chest; she was growing very attached to the girl. *If Andrew and I had ever had a daughter,* Jill thought, *I would have wanted her to be just like Rebecca. I wouldn't change a thing.*

Her thoughts drifted to Markus. *If only he had lived to know his daughter and see what a wonderful young lady she's become. He would have been so proud.* Jill's eyes welled up as she remembered him, the fine man he was, and the love he had for Rebecca even before she was born.

One day, she promised herself, she would tell Rebecca the whole story, how much her father had loved her and how deeply he had wanted to be a part of her life. But for now, that would have to wait.

Jill blinked away her tears, composed herself, and called out gently, “Rebecca, it’s time to go.”

So, they headed back the way they had come in, turning off the lights as they went. Once they reached Jill’s SUV, they got in and started toward home. After a few minutes of driving, Jill glanced over at Rebecca and asked,

“Have you ever thought about having your ears pierced?”

Rebecca looked at her in surprise. “I’ve always wanted to,” she said shyly. “Does it hurt?”

“You’ll feel a little sting at first,” Jill explained kindly, “but after that, not really. As long as you take care of them and follow the instructions so they heal properly, you shouldn’t have any problems.”

“Would you like to do that?” Jill asked with a smile.

“Yes, I do think I would like to,” Rebecca replied, her voice filled with excitement.

“Okay then, let’s do it,” Jill said with a little chuckle.

They drove to a small salon not far from where they were. As they got out and walked toward the door, Rebecca started to feel

a flutter of nervousness in her stomach, but having Jill beside her made her feel safe, like everything was going to be okay.

Inside, Jill told the lady at the counter what they wanted, and she led them back to a small room where the piercings were done. Rebecca took a seat in the chair, her hands resting in her lap. The lady began marking small dots on her ears to show where the earrings would go, making sure both sides were even.

Then…came the fun part, choosing her earrings.

After they picked out a simple but pretty pair, it was time. Rebecca tensed up a little, bracing herself for pain, but before she knew it, it was all over.

"There," the lady said with a smile. "All done."

Rebecca blinked in surprise. She hadn't felt much at all. When the lady handed her a mirror, she gasped softly. The earrings sparkled under the light, and she thought about how much more grown-up they made her look.

The lady then explained how to clean and care for her newly pierced ears, making sure Rebecca understood every step. Before leaving, they stopped to browse a display near the counter, picking out several pairs of earrings, a jewelry box, and a few necklaces.

Rebecca was absolutely thrilled with all of their purchases. As the cashier bagged everything up, she couldn't stop smiling. By the time they walked out of the salon, she felt not only a little older but also a little more confident.

Rebecca thanked Jill for what she had just done for her, like she always did. She was ever so grateful to anyone who treated her with kindness. As they headed back onto the freeway, Jill thought they should grab a quick bite before going home. Rebecca noticed that everywhere they went, people recognized Jill and treated her with the utmost respect.

As they entered through the gate leading to the house, Jill cleared it and put the SUV in park.

"Andrew told me how he let you drive the other day," she said with a grin. "Ready for your next lesson?"

Rebecca's eyes lit up. She was so excited but still a little nervous. "Yes," she said eagerly, "I'd love to! But I'll tell you, I'm not very good at it yet."

Jill smiled warmly. "I'm sure you'll do just fine."

Rebecca remembered everything Andrew had told her: put on her seatbelt, check her mirrors, adjust her seat. Then she put the vehicle in drive, released the brake, and slowly pressed the gas pedal until they began to move down the driveway. She managed to keep the SUV steady this time. As they neared the house, she gently slowed down and, after stopping, put the car in park.

"You did wonderfully," Jill said proudly. "You're going to be a great driver."

Rebecca thanked her but knew she still had a long way to go. Even so, she felt she was off to a good start. As she got her purchases out of Jill's car, they both headed inside.

Hettie was in the kitchen when they came in. “Looks like you two had a great day,” she said with a smile.

Rebecca’s face brightened as she told Hettie everything they had done. Hettie could see the joy in Rebecca’s eyes, and she also noticed how happy Jill looked. She could tell Jill was forming an attachment to Rebecca, and Hettie herself couldn’t deny that she had grown very fond of her too.

Rebecca showed Hettie her newly pierced ears and all the earrings she had bought. Jill smiled and said she had a few phone calls to make before dinner. As she headed toward her office, she winked at Rebecca and said, “See you at dinner.”

Rebecca carried her packages upstairs to her room, excitement bubbling inside her. She couldn’t wait to set everything up on her vanity. One by one, she unpacked her purchases, carefully placing each item where she could easily find it later. She smiled at the thought of swapping out her earrings someday soon.

She looked in the mirror one last time and thought how beautiful she looked with her new pierced ears. Then she sat down at her desk to do a few sketches in her sketchpad. After all, she was feeling inspired by everything she had seen that day with Jill.

She began sketching something different from her usual wedding dresses and gown designs. This time, she drew a picture of herself with Jill and Andrew. When she finished, tears filled her eyes. She stared at the drawing, her heart tightening. There was no going back, she thought. She had fallen in love with Andrew and Jill; it would be so hard to leave them.

She had never stayed in a foster home for long before being moved again, and she knew her time would come soon. She was so tired of being moved around. All she wanted was a family that would love her. That wasn't too much to ask for, she thought. It was a lot for a teenager to carry, but given her circumstances, she had learned to think about the long term.

By the time she went down for dinner, she was still emotional but tried to pull herself together. She didn't want Andrew, Jill, or Hettie to see her looking sad. She wiped her eyes, but they were still puffy. Hopefully, they wouldn't notice.

But of course, they did.

Rebecca avoided eye contact, hoping to hide her tears, but it was obvious she had been crying. No one said a word, though. Andrew and Jill were both heartbroken, knowing how much pain she carried inside. Dinner was quiet that evening.

As they got up from the table, Andrew and Jill gently told Rebecca that if there was ever anything she wanted to talk about or share, all she had to do was ask.

Rebecca couldn't hold it in any longer. She hugged them both and started crying uncontrollably. No words were spoken, and none were needed.

When she finally dried her tears, she excused herself and went to her room. She didn't understand what had just come over her, why she felt so emotional, but the weight of her feelings was too much to hold in.

In her room, she closed the door, went straight to the bathroom, and began removing her makeup. Tears still slipped down her cheeks, but she tried to pull herself together. She changed into her pajamas, turned on the TV, and watched for a while before sleep slowly overtook her.

The next morning was Sunday, her last day off before the school week began again. She was feeling calmer, though she wished she hadn't broken down in front of the Malones the evening before. She just couldn't help herself.

After making her bed and tidying her room, Rebecca walked over to her desk, where the sketch of her, Andrew, and Jill lay open. She felt tears threaten again. Quickly, she closed the sketchbook and headed to the kitchen.

She poured herself a cup of coffee.

"Ready for breakfast?" Hettie asked.

"Yes," Rebecca replied.

They made small talk while Rebecca ate. When she finished, she cleared her dishes and set them in the sink. Before leaving, she asked where Jill and Andrew were.

"They're in Andrew's office, going over some paperwork for Jill's new design," Hettie told her.

Rebecca walked down the hallway toward Andrew's office, rehearsing what she wanted to say. She needed to apologize for her outburst the night before. When she reached the door, she hesitated, taking a breath to steady herself before gently knocking.

“Come in,” Andrew called.

Rebecca stepped inside. “I’m sorry to bother you,” she said softly, “but I’d like to talk to you both, if that’s alright.”

“Of course,” Andrew said, smiling. “You can talk to us anytime.”

He motioned for her to take a seat across from his desk, where he and Jill were working. They both turned their attention to her, waiting for her to begin.

“I just wanted to say I’m sorry,” Rebecca said, her voice trembling slightly. “For breaking down last night. I’ve just been thinking a lot about my future, and... the older I get, the more scared I feel.”

Andrew frowned gently. No teenager should have to carry that kind of worry, he thought.

Jill reached over and placed a comforting hand on Rebecca’s arm. “You know, Rebecca,” she said, “Andrew and I were teenagers once, too, but we never had to go through what you’ve been through. We admire your strength. You’re at an age where you shouldn’t have to worry about your future yet. We understand why you do, but believe us, you have nothing to be afraid of. We have it all under control.”

Relief washed over Rebecca. She smiled, stood, and hugged them both before heading back to her room.

Chapter 3

As Rebecca got ready for school the next morning, she felt better about herself after talking to Andrew and Jill. She grabbed her backpack and purse and headed downstairs to meet Jill. Rebecca skipped breakfast that morning; she wasn't very hungry after the big meal they'd had the night before. Jill dropped her off at school before heading out to start her day.

At her locker, Rebecca saw Gisselle, and the two walked down the hall together before heading to their first classes. Rebecca's day went very well; she had a pop quiz in her math class, which she aced, and she was proud of herself for that. The rest of her classes went like clockwork.

At lunch, she met up with Sebastian, Savannah, Cheyenne, and, of course, Gisselle. Rebecca learned that Sebastian's father was a doctor, his mother had passed away from a terminal illness about a year ago, and that he was an only child. Savannah's parents were both high school teachers at the school they all attended. Cheyenne's father owned a construction company, and her mother was a real estate agent. Gisselle's family owned several hardware stores in the city.

Sebastian asked Rebecca, "What do your parents do?"

Rebecca replied, "Unfortunately, I don't know my real parents. My mother died giving birth to me, and my biological father gave me up for adoption shortly afterward because he had

no means of taking care of me. Right now, I'm in foster care with Andrew and Jill Malone."

Sebastian felt bad for asking about her parents after hearing her story. He told her how sorry he was and that if he had known, he surely wouldn't have asked. Rebecca assured him it was quite all right; he couldn't have known. They finished their lunches and headed to their next classes.

That Friday after school, when Jill picked her up, she asked Rebecca, "Would you like to go to my shop and pick out some winter clothing? You know the weather is starting to get colder, and it's never too early to get started."

Rebecca told her she'd like that very much. Jill added, "After that, if you'd like, we could go to the plant and look at the clothes I've designed; they're ready for my approval."

Rebecca was so excited; she wanted to be there to see the final product after it was made. They made their way to Jill's shop, where they picked out sweaters, coats, boots, hats, scarves, gloves, and more blue jeans. Jill told the clerk, "You know what to do," and then they were on their way to the plant.

When they arrived, Jill parked, and they went inside. They entered the section of the plant where the seamstresses were making the clothes. At the end of every line was a mannequin displaying a model of each outfit Jill had designed for her new clothing line. As Jill walked down the line, she gave her approval on all of her designs. The last one they looked at was the dress Rebecca had helped design. They were both speechless; neither of them had thought it would turn out as well as it had. It was perfect, it looked so elegant. The fabric was light and gave it a wonderfully

comfortable appearance. Jill inspected it thoroughly. *It's perfect,* she thought.

She asked Rebecca, "How do you feel about your first design?"

Rebecca didn't know what to say. On the way home, they talked about the dress and how they hoped it would do well in Jill's shops.

The next month flew by for Rebecca, and before she realized it, the holidays were approaching: Thanksgiving, then Christmas. *Where has the time gone?* She wondered. It had been almost six months since she had first come to live with the Malones.

Rebecca loved the holidays. About a week before Thanksgiving, she found herself smiling at how families took time out of their busy schedules to spend time together. Hettie was planning a big Thanksgiving feast, and Andrew and Jill had even invited their parents, along with some of their colleagues, a gesture Rebecca later learned was very unusual for them. According to Hettie, they usually took six weeks around the holidays to go on vacation.

Rebecca was very excited about meeting Andrew and Jill's parents. *They must be wonderful people,* she thought, *to have raised such great children.*

During Rebecca's last week of school before Thanksgiving, she couldn't wait to have some time off. She had worked very hard and truly applied herself in all her classes. On the last day before the holiday break, she said goodbye to her friends and headed out the door. Like her, they were all ready for a much-needed break from school.

When she got home that evening, she went straight to the kitchen to ask Hettie if she could help prepare for the Thanksgiving meal. Hettie was very grateful for the help, considering the number of people who would be attending.

The next day was the day before Thanksgiving, and they spent the entire day in the kitchen preparing everything for the big feast. They worked for hours, making sure every detail was perfect. To their surprise, even Jill joined in to help.

Hettie hand-washed all the china; it all had to be perfect. With the table beautifully set, she turned off the light and went back to finish the meal preparations. All that would be left for tomorrow was to cook the turkey and the side dishes.

After cleaning up the kitchen, they decided it was time to call it a night. They all went to bed feeling very accomplished with what they had achieved.

Thanksgiving dinner was to be served at 1:00 the next day. By 11:30, all the guests had begun to arrive, and Andrew and Jill were there to greet them.

Rebecca picked out one of her favorite dresses, a burgundy number with matching heels, which she thought would be perfect for the occasion. She headed downstairs to where everyone was gathered. As she walked down the stairs and into the living room, all the guests turned to look at her. Everyone stopped and stared; none of them had ever seen a more beautiful young lady.

Andrew and Jill walked over to meet her and introduced her to all their guests. From the way they looked at her, it was clear they were very proud of her.

Rebecca really liked Andrew and Jill's parents. Andrew's parents, Jackson and Angela Malone, were very friendly toward her, and she could easily see where he got his good morals and values. Jill's parents, Brad and Coreen Sloan, were, as Rebecca could tell, more of the high-society type than Andrew's parents, but they also treated her with the utmost respect.

When Hettie entered the room, she informed everyone that Thanksgiving dinner was about to be served. The guests moved into the dining room and took their seats. Rebecca sat beside Andrew and Jill.

As the meal was served, everyone engaged in small talk, no business discussions, just warm conversation. It was all about family time, friends, and togetherness.

As Rebecca looked around the table, she felt so happy to see everyone enjoying themselves, taking time away from their busy lives to simply be together and share joy. After all, that was what it was all about.

After dinner, once the last of the guests had left, Rebecca made her way to her bedroom to change clothes before heading back downstairs to help Hettie clean up. Hettie had done such an amazing job; she deserved some help with the cleanup.

When Rebecca walked into the kitchen, she found Miss Hettie sitting on a barstool at the counter, tears streaming down her face. Rebecca sat beside her, placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, and asked if she was okay.

Hettie told her that this time of year was very hard for her because she missed the love of her life so much. She spoke softly

about how she and the man she was going to marry had both loved the holidays, and how deeply she missed him. After wiping her tears, Hettie said, “I guess I need to get busy cleaning up.”

Rebecca told her she was there to help. As they both got busy tidying up the kitchen and putting things back in order, Hettie began to seem a little better. Rebecca thought maybe staying busy helped Hettie cope with missing the man she had loved so deeply, the one who had passed away so suddenly.

Once all the leftovers were put away, they moved into the dining room and began gathering the dirty dishes. Each dish was washed carefully by hand and placed back in the china cabinet, Jill’s pride and joy, passed down from her beloved grandmother. They were only used on special occasions.

After all the cleaning was done, Rebecca and Hettie made some coffee, cut themselves a slice of pie, and sat down to rest. They talked about what a wonderful day it had been. Miss Hettie smiled and remarked how good it was to see the big house full of joy again. What she meant by that, Rebecca didn’t quite know.

Hettie asked, “Rebecca, if you don’t mind me asking, what have your years in foster care been like?”

“Well,” Rebecca said, “I don’t remember much from the earlier years, but most of what I do remember is being moved around from one home to another. There were times I felt so lost and unloved. I always wondered if there was something about me that no one wanted, or if they saw something so bad in me that they didn’t want to take a chance and adopt me. I always felt like I wasn’t good enough.

"I tried to be the best person I could be and hoped that maybe someday, someone would see that in me, too. I did what I had to do to get by and not cause any problems for anyone. Most of the foster homes I stayed in treated me well, but I could tell they were only in it for the money they received for fostering children. The better behaved you were, the fewer problems you had, and that had always worked for me, so I stuck with that way of life. I knew it would make things easier in the long run.

"There were times I remember being moved from one foster home to another in the middle of the night. I never knew when it would happen or why. So, Miss Hettie, if I ever get moved from here without being able to tell you goodbye, I just want you to know how thankful I am to have known you, and what an impact you've made on my life."

Miss Hettie couldn't speak; she was so overwhelmed by what Rebecca had shared. All she could do was hug her and tell her she would never forget her, and that Rebecca had made just as great an impact on her life, one unlike anyone else ever had.

Hettie told Rebecca, "Always be true to yourself, and you'll never go wrong. Don't ever forget that, Rebecca."

Rebecca told her goodnight, turned around, and headed to her room. She changed her clothes and got ready for bed. Lying there that night, she thought, *Is this what a family is supposed to be like?* She had never really had one, so she wasn't sure. She reflected on how much she had enjoyed meeting everyone at dinner, though she'd been nervous at first; everyone had made her feel comfortable.

Jill and Andrew were so impressed by how the whole day had gone and were very pleased that everything had fallen right into place. As they were getting ready for bed that night, Jill asked Andrew, “Do you ever regret us not having children?”

Andrew looked at her and said, “Jill, in case you haven’t noticed, we *do* have a child right in front of us. No, she may not be our biological child, but we both know we’ve grown to love her like our own.”

Jill smiled, relieved that he felt the same way she did. “She’s been the best thing that’s ever happened to us,” Jill said softly.

“So, what do you suggest we do, Andrew?”

“We both know what we need to do; it goes without saying. Even though that wasn’t part of what Marcus asked us to do, I think he would have approved.”

Jill smiled, kissed Andrew, and drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, they got up and had breakfast together. When they were finished, Jill said, “You all know what today is, don’t you?” Everyone shook their heads no.

“Well, do I need to remind everyone that today is Black Friday, one of the biggest shopping days of the year? After all, Christmas will be here before we know it!” She looked at Andrew and Rebecca and asked, “Are you two up for it?”

Rebecca, of course, thought it was a great idea, and Andrew said, “You can count me in, too.”

“Great! It’s all settled, then. What do you say we get ready and plan on leaving in about an hour?”

They all agreed, left the dining room, and headed to their rooms to get ready. Rebecca picked out a pair of blue jeans and one of her new sweaters, deciding to wear a pair of her new boots as well.

She went into the bathroom to get ready. She changed her clothes, brushed her hair, and applied her makeup. Then she went to her closet to pick out a jacket. She decided on one that wasn’t too heavy since her sweater was quite warm. Grabbing her purse, she headed downstairs.

Rebecca laid her jacket across the sofa and set her purse down. Andrew and Jill entered the room. Andrew pulled Rebecca aside and handed her an envelope, which she could tell had money inside.

“For your shopping,” he said.

Before she could say anything, he walked away. Jill arrived shortly afterward and handed her another envelope with money. Rebecca told her that Andrew had already given her some. Jill smiled and said, “I know, but what do men know about shopping? We ladies always need more.”

Rebecca put both envelopes in her purse. Jill told Hettie not to worry about preparing anything for dinner that night; they would just eat before heading home. Andrew helped Jill and Rebecca with their jackets, and shortly afterward, they were off on their shopping spree.

When they arrived at the mall, almost all the parking spaces were taken. They drove around until they finally found one very close to the entrance. As they entered the mall, it was extremely crowded. *So…this is what Black Friday shopping is,* she thought.

They made their way through the mall until they found a shop they wanted to go into. *Maybe we'll be able to find something in there,* Rebecca thought to herself. She wondered what Andrew and Jill would like, after all, they already had everything she could think of. And then there were Miss Hettie, Sebastian, Gisselle, Savannah, and Cheyenne.

As they walked around the mall, Andrew said, "I think I'm going to go off by myself. There are some things I'd like to look at." With that, he went on his way.

Jill and Rebecca continued walking until Rebecca saw a jewelry store, and they decided to go have a look around. She thought about Miss Hettie as she looked at the necklaces and found one…she thought would be perfect for her, so she purchased it.

Jill said, "Hettie will love this, Rebecca." She also picked out earrings for Savannah, Gisselle, and Cheyenne. Now she was down to Andrew, Jill, and Sebastian.

Jill told Rebecca, "I have an idea. Why don't we go our separate ways for a while to do some shopping? We can meet up at the entrance we came in. Let's meet at 5:00."

Rebecca said, "That would be great," because she had seen an art store she wanted to check out. Jill told her she would call and

let Andrew know of their plan and meet him there. As Jill left, she told Rebecca to call her if she needed anything.

Rebecca entered the art store. They had everything you could think of, and she picked out several things for Jill. She continued down the mall. By this time, her hands were full of everything she had bought that day. She stopped to sit down and rest for a few minutes, then went on with her shopping.

She saw a men's shop and decided to go in, maybe she could find something for Andrew there. She picked out several ties, cufflinks, and some funny socks that she thought were cute. He had such a great sense of humor, she knew he would wear them.

At another store, she picked out some scarves for Jill that she thought she would like.

Now, Sebastian, she thought, *what would he like?* She knew he liked anything to do with electronics, so she went into an electronics store that had things she didn't even know the use for. She looked at everything in the store and decided to get him a battery charger that he could use in case his phone ran out of charge; he could just plug it right into the charger.

Rebecca was very pleased with everything she had chosen. She looked at her phone and saw that she had 15 minutes left until she was to meet Jill and Andrew at the front entrance. So, she started walking toward the entrance. She walked what seemed like forever until she finally reached the entrance where Andrew and Jill were waiting. They both had several packages, and Rebecca wondered if everything was going to fit in Jill's SUV.

Andrew helped Rebecca carry some of her packages as they headed to the vehicle. It was a tight squeeze, but they managed to get everything in. Once they got into the vehicle, Andrew asked where they would like to have dinner.

Jill said, “How about we try that new Italian restaurant called Moscato’s? I hear they have good reviews.”

“Moscato’s it is, then,” he said.

As they entered the restaurant, the hostess greeted them and seated them at a table. They were given menus to look over, and the waiter took their drink orders. Rebecca looked over the menu and decided to try the spaghetti and meatballs. Andrew and Jill also gave their orders to the waitress.

About fifteen minutes later, their entrées and salads arrived. After that came their main courses. The portions were very large, and Rebecca knew she wouldn’t be able to eat them all. She did the best she could; she didn’t like to waste food. She had been taught in foster care*: “Waste not*, *want not.”*

As they left the restaurant, Andrew said, “I need to make a quick stop at my office if you ladies don’t mind. I have something I need my lawyer to work on.” He winked at Jill. She smiled, and he was gone.

While they waited in the vehicle for Andrew, Rebecca told Jill she had no idea how to wrap presents and asked if she would mind helping her. Jill, of course, said she would love to help; maybe they could do all of that tomorrow.

Rebecca told Jill she had quite a bit of money left and took it out of her purse to hand to her. Jill refused and told her to keep it in case she decided she wanted to get other things.

They saw Andrew returning to the vehicle. He got in, put on his seatbelt, and shifted into reverse. Then, he looked at Jill and smiled. As they headed home, Rebecca could feel a sense of happiness as they drove between Andrew and Jill, and she wondered what it could be.

It took about an hour to get home, and by that time, Rebecca was ready for bed. As they unloaded all their packages and headed inside, Rebecca grabbed what she had bought and went to her room. She set her packages down and changed into her pajamas. After washing her face to remove her makeup, she went into her bedroom.

She opened all her packages and laid them out. She was so happy with the gifts she had chosen and hoped everyone would like them. Wanting to do something special for Hettie, Andrew, and Jill, she sat at her desk and opened her sketchpad.

She started with Hettie and thought about how she had lost her soulmate. Rebecca first sketched a picture of Miss Hettie looking up toward Heaven, a big smile on her face as if she could see her soulmate. Although she didn't know what he looked like, she tried to imagine what kind of man he must have been to have stolen Hettie's heart the way he had.

After adding her final touches, Rebecca grew tired and decided it was time to turn in. After all, she had plenty of time to finish her special projects for the people she loved most. She closed her sketchpad and crawled into bed.

The next morning, they all slept in. After such a long day before, Rebecca thought they all deserved it. She came downstairs to breakfast still in her pajamas. Finally, after everyone made their way to the kitchen for a late breakfast, Hettie was making everyone's favorite meal. By this time, she knew exactly what each person liked, including Rebecca.

As they all ate breakfast, it was clear everyone was still sluggish after staying up so late the night before. Once they finished eating, they went back to their rooms to get dressed. Rebecca got into the shower, which helped her wake up and feel more alert. She was slow about getting dressed, not realizing how tired she still was; all she wanted to do was go back to bed. She finally got dressed, putting on some comfortable clothes, a pair of sweatpants, and a T-shirt, and tied her hair up. She went downstairs to the living room, where Andrew was watching a football game, and sat down on the sofa to watch it with him. He explained to her how the game was played and told her about the rules.

She lay on the sofa, and before she knew it, she was fast asleep. Just before she dozed off, she could feel someone laying a blanket over her. She must have slept for about an hour or so, because when she woke up, she noticed Andrew was watching a different football game.

She got up and decided to go find Jill; she was anxious to start wrapping her gifts. She found Jill in her office and asked if, when she wasn't so busy, she could teach her how to wrap her gifts.

"Of course, I will help you," Jill said with a smile.

Jill turned off her computer and told Rebecca she would get the wrapping paper, tape, ribbons, bows, scissors, and name tags,

and that they could meet at the dining table to get started. Rebecca went to her room to gather all of her gifts, except for the ones she had gotten for Hettie, Jill, and Andrew. She figured once she knew how to wrap presents, she could wrap theirs in her room later.

When Rebecca got to the dining room, Jill already had everything laid out on the table. Even Hettie decided to help, she had gifts she needed to wrap for some of her family and friends as well.

Rebecca started with Andrew's gifts first since he was in the next room, and she didn't want him to come in and see them before they were wrapped. Jill and Hettie showed Rebecca how to measure out the paper and where to cut it to fit her gift. They demonstrated how to fold up the ends of the paper so it fit the box perfectly, and then she taped it.

The first one didn't look very good, but she thought it was okay for her first time wrapping a gift. They then showed her how to put the ribbon around the box, and she added the bow on top. With the ribbon and bow in place, it looked much better; it hid all the little mistakes she had made while wrapping it. The more she wrapped, the better she got at it. Rebecca thought it was kind of fun. After what seemed like hours, they finally finished wrapping all the gifts. As they wrapped each one, they piled them in a corner of the dining room.

Rebecca asked Jill if she could take some of the paper and supplies to her room because she still had wrapping to do. Jill told her that it would be fine. Rebecca picked out some paper she wanted to use, grabbed the rest of her supplies, and headed to her room. She cleared off her desk and got busy.

It wasn't long before she had every one of her gifts wrapped, and she was very happy with how they all turned out. She gathered up her supplies and headed downstairs to return them to Jill.

After dinner that night, Jill came in holding some bags and handed one to each of them, including Hettie. She said, "These are for our family Christmas cards." Everyone opened their bags and pulled out matching Christmas pajamas.

She added, "After we all get dressed, I'll grab my camera, and we'll take pictures to see which one we like best for our cards."

They all went their separate ways to change. Every pair of pajamas was the same; they had a big Grinch on the front of each top, and the pants were covered with smaller Grinch faces. Rebecca looked in the mirror and smiled. She thought they were perfect and couldn't wait to see everyone in their new pajamas.

After everyone got dressed, they met in the living room in front of the fireplace, which Jill thought would be the perfect spot for their picture. Jill set her camera up on a tripod and began lining everyone up in the order she thought would make a good photo. She had Andrew stand in the middle, with Jill on one side and Hettie on the other. She positioned Rebecca in front of Andrew, snapped a few pictures, and when she was happy with them, she moved everyone around and took more. Then she said, "Okay, now let's take some silly ones." She had everyone make a silly face or gesture and snapped several more photos.

Afterward, they all sat down and looked through the pictures she had taken, picking out the one they liked best. Although Rebecca loved the picture they chose for the cards, she loved the silly ones the most and asked Jill if she could have a copy of them.

Jill nodded and told her she would make sure to get them printed for her.

"I'll take these to the photo store tomorrow and have them printed," Jill said.

Rebecca asked if it would be okay if she tagged along since she needed to find a couple of frames for a project she was working on. Jill said that would be fine.

Rebecca excused herself and headed to her room to prepare her things for school the next day. Before getting dressed for bed, she sat down at her desk, opened her sketchpad, and continued working on the drawing she wanted to give Andrew and Jill.

She started with a sketch of herself and Jill standing on each side of Andrew, his arms around both of them. They were all smiling; she wanted to capture what a happy family they had become. She signed her name in the lower right-hand corner the same way she had signed Miss Hettie's: "Becca."

When she finished her drawing, she looked at it, smiled, and felt very happy with the result. She closed her pad and went into the bathroom to get ready for bed.

She woke the next morning to the sound of her alarm. She rolled over, turned it off, and got out of bed. She made her bed and headed straight to the bathroom. After she finished getting ready, she grabbed her jacket, backpack, and purse. Before she left, she remembered the sketches she needed to have framed, so she placed them carefully in her backpack and headed downstairs.

After Jill dropped her off at school and drove away, Rebecca thought about how good her Thanksgiving break had been. She was glad to be back at school and excited to see her friends again.

At lunch, she met up with her friends, and they all shared stories about their family time together. They also talked about how happy they were that Christmas break was coming up soon and how they hoped it would snow for Christmas.

As the day came to an end, Rebecca grew excited about picking out frames for her sketches. Jill was waiting for her when school let out, and as soon as Rebecca got into the SUV, they headed to the photo store. While Jill was talking to the clerk about which pictures she wanted on the Christmas cards, Rebecca was looking at the frames for her sketches. The clerk was very helpful. She selected the frames she wanted and gave the clerk her sketches so he could begin working on them. When he finished and showed her the final result, she was amazed at how well they had turned out. The frames made them look even better.

She paid for her purchases, and the clerk carefully placed them in boxes to keep them from breaking. Jill then showed Rebecca the finished cards, and Rebecca thought they had done a wonderful job. Jill ordered several copies and also had the pictures Rebecca wanted printed.

While waiting for the order to be completed, they walked around the shop, looking at different things. When everything was ready, Jill paid for her purchase, and they headed out the door.

As they entered the gate to the house, Rebecca noticed several vehicles parked out front. As they got closer, she saw several men hanging Christmas lights and wrapping the white pillars on the

front porch with wide red ribbons, giving them a candy-cane look she thought was beautiful. A huge Christmas wreath hung on the entry door.

When they stepped inside, the house was being decorated as well. The Christmas tree was tall and full, standing proudly in the corner of the living room. Two ladies on tall ladders were hanging ornaments. Green garland and candles of varying sizes adorned the mantle above the fireplace, along with stockings with each person's name. The staircase leading upstairs was wrapped in garland, with red bows spaced every two feet. Everywhere she looked, it was Christmas.

Every bathroom had Christmas towels hung, and even the toilet lids had festive covers. Rebecca walked around the house, taking in all the decorations. She had never seen anything so beautiful in her life. She thought about how Jill always made everything so special for all of them in everything she did.

When Andrew arrived home and saw all the commotion in the house, he smiled at the joyful scene taking place. He thought everything was coming together so perfectly and was very pleased with all the decorations. Rebecca thought he, too, was getting excited about Christmas.

After all the decorations were completed and the crew had left, they stood around admiring the beautiful work they had done.

After dinner that night, Jill asked Hettie and Rebecca if they would help her with the envelopes for all the Christmas cards. Jill must have had a hundred or more cards. They worked for several hours, each with a list of names, writing the names and addresses on each envelope.

As they worked on the card list, Rebecca thought to herself, *We are making memories, ones I will never, ever forget.*

Finally, all the cards were complete. Jill thanked them both for their help and said she couldn't have done it without them. She gathered up all the cards and put them in a box to drop off at the post office the next morning. Rebecca asked Jill if it was okay for her to have some of the cards to give to her friends along with their gifts. Jill handed her several, and she also had enough to give to each of her teachers.

A few days before school was to let out for the Christmas holiday, Jill received a call from Mr. Stallings, the school principal, asking if she and Andrew could come in the next morning for a meeting to discuss Rebecca. Jill picked a time they both agreed on and hung up the phone. Later that day, when Andrew got home, she told him about the meeting and what time to be there.

The next morning, as they entered the school and headed to Mr. Stallings' office, his secretary led them inside. He greeted them both warmly and told them to have a seat. He began by saying, "Rebecca is not in trouble by any means. Actually, all of her teachers have reached out to me to say what a bright student she is. She's well ahead of all the other students in her grade level and has excelled in all of her classes. She has the highest grade point average in the entire freshman class. I guess what I'm trying to say is that Rebecca has a brilliant mind."

Andrew and Jill were at a loss for words; they didn't know what to say. Mr. Stallings then had Ms. Larkin, the art teacher, come in. She laid a sketch pad on the other side of Mr. Stallings' desk and asked them both to take a look. As they opened the sketch

pad, they could hardly believe what they were seeing. There were drawings of sunsets, people, animals, you name it, it was in there. Ms. Larkin smiled and said, "The next few pages are what I think you'll be especially impressed with, Jill, being a well-known designer like you are."

As Jill turned the page, her mouth dropped. She had never seen anything so beautiful in her life. There were sketch after sketch of wedding gowns that Rebecca had drawn. They were magnificent. She hadn't realized how talented Rebecca was until now. Jill saw how Rebecca had captured every detail in her sketches; they were remarkable. She thought to herself, *She's better than I've ever thought of being.*

Andrew and Jill's hearts were filled with pride at that moment. They had always known Rebecca was special, but they hadn't realized the full extent of her capabilities. Mr. Stallings looked at Andrew and Jill and said, "I'd like to make a recommendation to you both. I feel that it would be appropriate at this time to move Rebecca up to her sophomore year after the Christmas break, and if she continues to excel as she has been, which I have no doubt she will, she'll be a junior when school starts in the fall."

Andrew and Jill were still trying to take in what Mr. Stallings had just said. They finally gathered their thoughts enough to respond. "We'd like to discuss this with Rebecca before making a final decision, if that's okay," they said. They stood up, shook his hand, and told him they would talk to Rebecca later that day and get back to him tomorrow.

Andrew and Jill both left the school speechless. Ms. Larkin let Jill take the sketch pad with her. When they got into the SUV,

Jill was in tears. She had never been so proud of anyone as she was right now; she just couldn't wait until Rebecca got home.

After dinner that night, Andrew and Jill went into Andrew's office, getting ready to discuss everything with Rebecca. Rebecca was in her room when she received a phone call from Jill, asking her to come to Andrew's office because they wanted to talk to her. Rebecca paused before replying and said she would be right there.

What could this be about? she thought. She knew it could only mean one thing: she was going to be moved to another foster home. Tears started to well up in her eyes as she made her way to Andrew's office. She tapped lightly on the door before entering.

Andrew and Jill were standing behind Andrew's desk, and they motioned for her to sit down. Andrew started by telling her that they had a meeting with Mr. Stallings that morning. He went over everything they had discussed, including how she was far more advanced than the other students in her freshman class. He explained that Mr. Stallings felt it would be a good idea to move her up to a sophomore class after the Christmas break, and if she continued to do well, she would be a junior when school started in the fall.

They then asked her how she felt about the idea. Rebecca was taken aback; this was not what she had expected at all. She did have to admit to them that she was bored at times in her classes because she already knew the work they were doing. She told them she thought it was something she would like to do; after all, it would mean she could graduate earlier than expected.

Before she left, Jill pulled out the sketchpad from Andrew's desk and laid it in front of her. Rebecca recognized it immediately.

Jill proceeded to tell her that Ms. Larkin wanted her to see it, especially the sketches at the end of the pad.

"Rebecca," Jill said, "I was speechless when I saw these drawings of the wedding dresses you designed. I have never seen anything so beautiful in my life. You have a talent and a good eye. You have a bright future if you ever want to pursue designing wedding dresses."

Rebecca felt it was an honor for Jill to praise her like that; after all, Jill Malone was a well-known designer who had done very well in her career. Rebecca left Andrew's office feeling very proud of herself; it certainly wasn't anything she had expected. She went to her bedroom feeling pretty good. As she was getting ready for bed, she thought about her future and what she wanted to do after graduation. She had always wanted to design wedding dresses. She always dreamed of her own wedding and how she wanted her dress to look. She believed this was something every teenage girl dreamed about, and that was what she wanted: to make their dreams come true.

Chapter 4

As Rebecca was getting ready for school the next morning, she was so excited to tell her friends the news about becoming a sophomore when they all returned from their Christmas break. She went to her locker and saw Gisselle at hers, and she couldn't wait to share the news. Gisselle was so happy for her and hoped they would have some classes together.

That day at lunch, as Rebecca sat down, Gisselle asked if she had any news to share with the rest of their group. Rebecca told them all what was going on, and they were very happy for her. They told her which teachers she would like and which ones not so much. She then asked all her friends if they planned to be at school the next day, as she wanted to give them the gifts she had bought.

During study hall, the last class of her day, she was summoned to the office to see the school counselor about her class schedule for when she returned in January. Mrs. Richards was very nice and helpful. She told Rebecca she would have to take Algebra 2, English 2, World History, Biology, and PE. She could still take her art class and home economics, and of course, she would have her study hall at the end of the day.

Rebecca was happy with her schedule. She thought that on the last day of school, which would only be a half day, she would like to go around and meet her new teachers. The next morning, as

Rebecca was leaving for school, she made sure she had all the gifts for her friends and the cards for her teachers.

As she entered the school that morning, she met up with all her friends. They were all carrying gifts and handing them out to one another. Rebecca was the first to give her gifts. She gave Sebastian his phone charger, Gisselle her necklace, and Savannah and Cheyenne their earrings.

Sebastian then handed each of them a box. Inside was a bracelet that said *Best Friends Forever*, and he had one too. They were all so excited to put them on.

Next was Savannah. She knew Rebecca loved art, so she got her art supplies. Gisselle received makeup and jewelry, Cheyenne got hair accessories because she always had something in her hair, and Sebastian got an assortment of books since he loved to read.

Gisselle was the last to give out her gifts. She said, "I've thought long and hard about what to give everyone, but the only thing I could think of was to give from my heart because you all mean so much to me." She handed each of them a small box. Inside was a necklace with a heart that opened up, and each necklace had a picture of all of them in it. She said it was so they'd never forget her.

Everyone got a little tearful after that. They all hugged each other and went their separate ways. Rebecca then took some time to go around and meet the new teachers she would have after coming back from Christmas break. After meeting them all, she headed to her locker to gather her things. She picked up her backpack and gifts and headed out the door to meet Jill.

When she got into Jill's vehicle, she apologized for taking so long and explained that she just wanted to meet her new teachers when she returned to school after the Christmas break. Jill said, "That's fine. I'm glad you took the time to do that."

Rebecca looked at Jill and could tell she had been to the salon; her hair and makeup were perfect. Rebecca told her how beautiful she looked. Jill said, "You know, tonight is the night for Andrew and me to have our Christmas party for our employees, so I just wanted to look my best."

Rebecca told her she looked gorgeous and couldn't wait to see her dress. "It's one of a kind," Jill said. "I had my best designer create it for the occasion."

"I can't wait to see it," Rebecca told her. Jill smiled, thinking how surprised Rebecca was going to be when she saw it.

After dinner that night, Jill and Andrew were getting ready for their night out. Rebecca loved it when they took time out for one another; she could tell how much they loved each other. When Andrew came into the living room, he looked so handsome in his tuxedo. Then Jill came out in a red evening gown. Rebecca recognized it; it was the dress they had designed together, but with a longer train. It was absolutely stunning on her.

Rebecca had tears in her eyes as she watched them both. Andrew handed Jill a white mink that went perfectly with her evening gown. Rebecca hugged them both and told them how beautiful they looked together, wishing them a wonderful evening. Before they left, she took a picture of them on her cell phone, and then they were on their way. As the door closed, she thought about what a great couple they were.

Rebecca went to her room, took a nice hot shower, and changed into some comfortable clothes. She didn't expect Andrew and Jill to be home for hours. She thought it was funny how it felt like she was home waiting for her parents to return; usually, it was the other way around. The thought brought a smile to her face. Rebecca turned on the TV, watched for a while, and then drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, Jill and Andrew came down to breakfast carrying a big box. They set it in front of Rebecca and told her to open it. As she did, she wasn't quite sure what it was. It looked like a white snowsuit to her, and she had no idea what it was for. Seeing her puzzled expression, Jill told her it was a ski suit.

Rebecca didn't really know what that meant until Andrew spoke up and explained that every year around this time, they go to Aspen, Colorado, to ski, and this year, they would love for her to join them. "We'll fly out tomorrow," he said.

Rebecca had never flown on an airplane in her life, and it was clear she was terrified. "It's okay," Jill told her reassuringly. "We'll be with you." She added that they would be back in time for Christmas, arriving home at the airport on Christmas Eve.

Rebecca was so honored that they wanted her to go with them that she accepted without hesitation. She asked Jill what she would need to take, but Jill told her not to worry, they would get whatever she needed once they got there.

Rebecca began to feel excited about the trip, though she was still a little nervous about flying. They were set to leave for the airport at 3:00 p.m. the next day to check in for their 6:00 p.m. flight to Colorado.

Rebecca packed the things she thought she might need for the trip. She was scared and excited at the same time. She had no idea how to ski, and the thought of it scared her to death; all she could think about was breaking a leg.

She woke up early the next morning and went down to see Miss Hettie, who was in the kitchen preparing breakfast. She told her about their trip and how she was both excited and scared at the same time. Miss Hettie told her not to worry, Andrew and Jill would take very good care of her, and they just wanted her to have a good time. Rebecca had no doubt they would take the best care of her.

She went back to her room and started packing. She packed plenty of sweaters, blue jeans, undergarments, socks, boots, hats, gloves, scarves, and winter coats; you name it, she had it covered. She actually thought she had overpacked, but she wanted to make sure she had everything. She also packed her cosmetic bag after finishing with it, and by noon, she was all ready to go. She even tucked her sketch pad into her suitcase; she just knew she would be able to capture something beautiful there.

At 1:00, they started loading their suitcases into Jill's vehicle and got ready to head to the airport. Hettie was with them to drive the vehicle back home. As she dropped them off, they said their goodbyes and headed to the airport. They checked their luggage and headed to their gate, where their plane was scheduled to depart. They waited for their seats to be called and, since they were flying first class, boarded first.

Shortly after all the passengers were on board, the hatch was closed, no turning back now, she thought. You could hear the plane's engines as it backed up and began its descent down the

runway. As the plane began to accelerate and lift off, Rebecca closed her eyes and grabbed Andrew's and Jill's hands. It wasn't long before they were above the clouds, and the flight became smoother. Rebecca started to feel more at ease.

It didn't seem long before they landed at Aspen/Pitkin County Airport. Rebecca was so glad when they landed that she could almost kiss the ground. After they got off the plane and collected their luggage, Andrew took them to pick up their rental car, a four-wheel-drive, and then they headed to the chalet.

It was the same chalet they always stayed in when they visited, a two-bedroom, two-bath retreat with all the amenities. They unloaded their luggage from the vehicle and went inside. It was very cozy, with a fire crackling in the fireplace and a Christmas tree glowing in the corner of the room. It was perfect.

Rebecca went into her room, which was small but felt warm and relaxing. She unpacked all her clothes and put them neatly in the drawers. Then she decided to take a quick shower before they headed out to eat. They went to the ski lodge, which had every amenity you could think of, including a restaurant inside. It was quite full, but they managed to get a table fairly quickly.

Andrew and Jill both ordered filet mignon, a baked potato, and a salad. Rebecca decided to try the grilled chicken, broccoli, and a twice-baked potato. The waitress brought their drinks, and Andrew asked Rebecca what she thought of the place so far. She told him she loved it and really liked the chalet they were staying in. Jill mentioned that this was one of their favorite places and that they came here skiing every winter.

Rebecca looked out the restaurant door into the lodge and thought she couldn't wait to explore it all. When the waitress brought their food, it looked delicious, and tasted just as good. Jill told Rebecca, "Tomorrow we thought we'd do some skiing. Andrew has already talked to an instructor about teaching you. Your first lesson starts at 11:00."

Although Rebecca had never skied before, she was eager to start learning. She told Jill she couldn't wait. When Andrew went to pay the bill, Jill and Rebecca waited for him at the entrance. Then they all headed into the lodge.

Rebecca was very impressed. It had a huge fireplace with a roaring fire, and the whole lodge was decorated for Christmas. Several sofas were arranged in front of the fireplace, where people sat and chatted. Others were at tables playing cards or working on puzzles. There were also several little shops, a huge arcade room filled with kids playing video games, an indoor ice-skating rink, and even a place where you could go sleigh riding. She could see why Andrew and Jill loved coming here so much. As they made their way back to their vehicle to head home, Jill noticed that one of the shops carried some of her clothes. She went into the shop, pretending to be a customer, and walked over to the rack displaying her designs. She asked the clerk who made those gorgeous clothes. The clerk told her that a very well-known designer from Oklahoma had designed them. Jill asked whether they sold well, and the clerk replied that they had a hard time keeping them in stock because they sold out so quickly.

"They sure are beautiful," Jill told the clerk. She thanked her for her time and headed out of the shop.

When they got back to the chalet, they all decided to call it an early night and head to their rooms. Rebecca got out her sketch pad and started drawing. She looked out her bedroom window at the snow-covered trees and marveled at how beautiful everything looked. She hoped she could capture its true beauty. Feeling tired, she decided to turn in. She changed into her pajamas, went to the bathroom to brush her hair and teeth, and then crawled into bed.

She woke early the next morning, put on her robe, and went into the kitchen. She started a pot of coffee. Andrew and Jill were still sleeping, so she decided to surprise them with breakfast. She took a frying pan out of one of the cabinets, went to the fridge for the bacon, and started frying it. Pouring herself a cup of coffee, she went back to the fridge for the eggs, then located the toaster on the counter and got the bread out of the breadbox. She had everything ready that she needed to finish breakfast by the time Andrew and Jill got up.

After the bacon was done, she laid each piece on a paper-towel-lined plate and placed it in the microwave to keep warm. Ten minutes later, Andrew and Jill came into the kitchen. Jill said, "We smelled the bacon and got hungry!"

Rebecca started cooking the eggs and put the toast in the toaster. Soon, they were all sitting down to breakfast. Both Andrew and Jill complimented her on what a good job she had done. Rebecca thanked them and said she had a good teacher in Miss Hettie.

After breakfast, she cleaned the kitchen, put the dishes away, and went to sit with Jill and Andrew in the living room. They started watching a movie, which they were all really enjoying. They hoped it would finish before they had to leave because they

didn't want to miss the ending. When it was over, they all talked about how good it was.

Rebecca asked Jill if she would French braid her hair before they left so it wouldn't fall in her face during her ski lesson, so she could see where she was "falling," she joked, and they all chuckled. Andrew thought about how great her sense of humor was. Considering everything she had been through in her young life… he was very impressed with what a well-rounded person she was.

It was about time to start getting ready, so Rebecca went to her room, got out her ski suit, and started to get dressed. Jill knocked on the door and asked if she was ready for Jill to do her hair, and she was. Rebecca sat on the edge of the bed while Jill braided her hair.

After Jill finished, Rebecca grabbed her matching ski jacket, hat, and gloves, and went into the living room. Jill and Andrew came out of their bedroom… all dressed for a day of skiing. Before they left, Jill said, "We need a selfie!" Everyone gathered together, and she snapped a few pictures. Then, they put on their jackets and headed out the door. They arrived at the lodge about thirty minutes before Rebecca's lesson was scheduled to begin. They walked over to where the instructors were; some were already busy teaching other students. Andrew told them who he was, and they guided them straight to Rebecca's instructor. When Rebecca saw him, she thought he didn't look old enough to spell the word *ski*, much less teach it.

He introduced himself, looked at Rebecca, and said, "I'm Maverick." She told him her name and that it was nice to meet

him. Jill told Rebecca that she and Andrew were going to hit the slopes and that they'd see her in a couple of hours.

As they were walking away, Rebecca called out, "Aren't you going to tell me to break a leg?" They all laughed and went on their way.

Maverick took Rebecca to get fitted for a pair of ski boots. She thought about how heavy they were and how awkward they felt to walk in. Once she was fitted, he picked out a pair of skis and poles suitable for her.

"Now the fun begins," he said with a smile.

He started her off on a flat patch of snow to get her used to skiing. He laid one ski on each side of her, handed her one pole to help with balance, and then instructed, "Start with the toe part of your boot and insert it into the slot on the ski. Then push the back part of your boot into the other slot until you hear it latch."

She did one, and he handed her the other pole. She latched the other boot, and as soon as she had both skis on, she began to slide forward. He told her not to worry, assuring her he wouldn't let her fall. He adjusted her hands in the loops on the poles, showing her how to hold them properly and maintain a good stance. "Remember," he said, "the smaller the wedge you have, the slower you'll go."

She did as he said. "This is so awkward," she told him as she slowly glided forward. She thought she was getting the hang of it until both of her skis crossed, and she hit the ground.

Now, getting up, she thought, would really be a challenge. He told her to straighten her skis, turn them sideways, and use her poles to push herself up once she got into position. It took her several tries, but she finally managed to stand. “There are several ways you can get up after you fall,” he said, “but I like to do it this way.”

Next came learning how to stop. He showed her how to twist her hips and legs to come to a halt. Once she got the basics down, she began pushing herself forward with her poles, moving a little faster each time. He’d call out for her to stop. It was tricky at first, but she eventually got it.

She spent the next hour practicing everything he had taught her. She fell a lot, but she persevered through it all. When they finished, they took off their skis and headed back to the lodge to return all their equipment. They met up with Andrew and Jill inside the lodge. Andrew said, “Would you two like to get a late lunch?” Of course, they both agreed, and the group went into the restaurant, where the waitress seated them. She took their drink and food orders, then left.

As they waited for their food, Jill asked Rebecca how the lesson went. She replied, “The first hour, I spent mostly on my butt.” They all chuckled. “But after that,” she continued, “I think I started doing better.”

Maverick said she did very well on skis for her first time. Soon, the waitress brought their drinks and food. They chatted a lot and learned quite a bit about Maverick. He told them his parents owned the ski lodge and several of the chalets, and how hard they had worked to build it into what it was today. He helped his parents with the business. During the winter months, he

worked at the ski lodge, teaching people how to ski. He mentioned he had been skiing since he was about five years old.

He said this job helped him earn extra money for college. He would be graduating from high school in May, and the extra income would come in handy. Rebecca asked him about the summer and whether they shut down the lodge then. He said, "No! We're just as busy in the summer as we are in the winter. The chalets are always booked. We offer lots of outdoor sports like hiking, fishing, swimming, just about anything you can think of."

Andrew said, "We've never been here in the summer. Maybe we'll check it out sometime."

Before Andrew got up to pay for their meals, Maverick asked Andrew and Jill if Rebecca might like to come out again, since tomorrow was his day off. He said he'd be more than happy to get her started on the beginner slope.

Of course, they both looked at Rebecca and asked if she would like to do that. She was more than happy to accept, but didn't want to answer too quickly; she didn't want to look too eager. Maverick said, "OK, Rebecca, let's plan on meeting up around 11:00 if that's okay with you." She said that sounded fine. Maverick thanked Andrew and Jill for lunch, excused himself, and then he was gone.

Andrew had already gone to pay the check when Jill looked at Rebecca and said, "He sure seems like a nice young man." Rebecca agreed and said he was a lot of fun and easy to talk to. Before they left, Rebecca noticed Andrew and Maverick talking and wondered what that was all about.

Before leaving the lodge, Jill took Rebecca into one of the shops that sold ski outfits and told her she needed to pick out a couple more outfits because she didn't want her wearing the same one the whole time they were there. Rebecca picked out a purple one and a blue one, both of which she really liked. Jill paid for the purchases, and they left the store and got into the vehicle.

As Andrew backed out of the parking space, he said, "So, you have a date tomorrow," looking at Rebecca in the rearview mirror with a smile on his face. She blushed and said, "I don't know if it's a date or just two friends hanging out." Jill spoke up and said, "Take it from me, it's definitely a date," and smiled at her.

They got back to the chalet, and everyone took a shower and sat down to relax. Andrew said, "Tonight I'll be cooking. I'm making steaks on the grill along with baked potatoes and a salad." Jill said, "It's been a long time since you've done that! I've missed your grill master days," and smiled at him. Jill informed Rebecca that Andrew was a master when it came to grilling. Rebecca never knew he liked to grill and was excited about it.

They all sat on the sofa and started watching a movie together. Before they knew it, each one of them had fallen asleep. Andrew was the first one to wake up, and he went into the kitchen to start preparing the meal he was about to make. Rebecca and Jill heard all the commotion in the kitchen and thought it was a good idea to investigate where all the noise was coming from. They could hear Andrew talking to someone, and when they entered the kitchen, they saw Andrew and Maverick both wearing aprons and preparing a salad. The guys looked up, smiled, and told the ladies not to worry, they had everything under control.

The girls couldn't help but notice all the dirty dishes and the mess in the kitchen. They laughed, especially at the sight of the two men wearing what they called "girly" aprons. Andrew was marinating the steaks, rubbing in the seasonings, and then placing them in the fridge for later. After that, he got back to helping Maverick with the salad. There were vegetables everywhere. Jill and Rebecca sat at the bar, watching them and laughing. All Rebecca could think about was what a mess it was; no wonder Miss Hettie didn't let Andrew in the kitchen.

Once they finished cutting everything up for the salad, they got the potatoes ready to bake. Andrew put them in the microwave, first rubbing oil on each one to make sure they were covered. He laid a wet paper towel in the microwave, placed the oiled potatoes on top, then covered them with another wet paper towel before starting to cook them.

When that was done, he and Maverick went outside to start the grill. Once it was hot, they put the steaks on. It didn't take long since no one liked their steaks well done. They brought the steaks inside, set the table, and placed the salad, which had been chilling in the fridge, on the table as well. They plated the steaks and potatoes, setting one in front of each person, and everyone helped themselves to salad and dressing. Maverick poured sweet tea for everyone, and then they all sat down to eat.

The meal was delicious. They talked and laughed about how they had wanted to surprise the girls with a great meal. After they finished eating, Rebecca told the guys that since they had done all the cooking, the least she could do was clean up. Maverick told her he would help.

Rebecca and Maverick started cleaning up the kitchen, which took some time since the menfolk had made such a mess. They washed all the dishes, wiped off the table, cleared the countertops, and cleaned them thoroughly. Before they knew it, everything was done. Rebecca put the last of the dishes away, hung the towels on the hanger, and the kitchen was spotless.

As they left the kitchen and entered the living room, Maverick thanked Andrew for inviting him to dinner. He put on his coat and headed out the door to his truck. Before he left, he told Rebecca that he would see her tomorrow. He asked Andrew and Jill if it would be okay for him to pick their daughter up tomorrow instead of them having to bring her to the lodge. Andrew and Jill looked at each other, smiled, and said that would be fine. The sound of being called their daughter. She told them both goodnight and headed to her room. That night, she thought about Maverick a lot. *Could this be a first date?* she wondered to herself. She fell asleep quickly, after all, she was tired from all the skiing that day.

The next morning, Rebecca got up around 8:00 and went into the kitchen, where Jill was already busy making breakfast. Rebecca greeted her with a cheerful "Good morning" as she poured herself a cup of coffee. Jill smiled and said, "How about French toast this morning?" Rebecca grinned and replied, "That sounds great." Jill then asked if she was excited about her date, and Rebecca blushed and said, "Yes!"

Jill said, "I remember my first date, it was with Andrew. He was such a gentleman. We went out to eat and then watched a movie afterward. We were inseparable after that, and well, I guess you know the rest of the story," she said with a smile.

Rebecca looked at Jill and said, “I’ve never been on a date before. What do I do?” Jill smiled warmly and replied, “Just be yourself, and you’ll be just fine, I promise.”

Andrew came into the kitchen, poured himself a cup of coffee, and sat down beside Rebecca. He looked at her and asked, “Are you ready for your big date today?” She blushed and kept sipping her coffee. Jill laughed and said, “Andrew, quit teasing her.”

Andrew smiled and apologized. Rebecca said it was okay. Then she asked them what their plans were for the day. Jill replied, “Andrew and I are going to drive around and look at the beautiful snow-covered mountains, and then we might spend the rest of the day in the chalet.”

Rebecca went to her room to start getting ready for her big day with Maverick. She decided to wear her purple snowsuit…. She really liked how she looked in it. Jill helped her braid her hair and pick out which makeup would go best with her outfit. Rebecca hugged her and told her she hoped she’d have a great time, then left the room.

Maverick arrived right on time to pick her up. He complimented her on how nice she looked and told her how much he liked her snowsuit. She grabbed her matching jacket, and they headed out the door. He opened the truck door for her, and as she got in, she noticed Andrew and Jill watching from the window. Once he put the truck in drive, they were on their way.

When they arrived at the lodge, Maverick got out, opened the door for her, and helped her down from the truck. They headed into the lodge. He showed her around and told her the history of the place and how it got started. She was very fascinated by his

story. “Every year my parents would add something new, and before long, it had everything you could think of,” he said.

They decided it was time to tackle the beginner slope. They got their boots, skis, and poles and headed out. Rebecca remembered how everything went, and they made their way to the ski slope. She felt a little scared when she saw it, it looked a bit more advanced than what she had started with. Maverick told her to remember everything he had taught her and that she would do just fine.

They put on their skis, and he showed her how to get on the ski lift. He told her that when it was time to get off, she should keep her skis close together and that she wouldn’t be going too fast until she felt more comfortable. She did exactly what he said and exited the lift perfectly. Although she was going downhill, she managed to keep it at a speed she felt comfortable with. She couldn’t believe she was actually skiing.

As they were coming to the end of the slope, he told her, “Remember how I showed you how to stop?” Before she knew it, she twisted her body, turned sideways, and made a complete stop. She was so happy she hugged Maverick and told him she couldn’t have done it without his help. He took her by the hand and asked if she would like to do it again. She said she would love to.

They must have skied for hours. After a while, he could tell she was getting tired, so he suggested they go back to the lodge and visit the arcade. They returned all of their equipment and headed to the arcade. There were several people inside, but they managed to find a couple of games they could play. Rebecca had never played an arcade game before, but he showed her how the game was played. They played several rounds and then decided to get something to eat.

As they sat at their table, Rebecca told Maverick how much she was enjoying herself and thanked him for spending his day off with her. Maverick told her he was having a great time and hoped he could see her as much as possible before she had to leave.

The waitress took their order; they both ordered a cheeseburger, fries, and a drink. After they finished eating, Maverick asked if she would like to take a walk and look at the mountains, and she said yes. When the waitress brought the check, Maverick paid, and they headed out the door. She put on her toboggan and gloves, wrapped her scarf around her neck, and they headed out the door.

As they started walking, Rebecca thought it was so beautiful, the way the snow hung on the trees. The mountains were snow-covered; it looked just like a Christmas card. As they walked, he asked Rebecca, “What do your parents do?” She told him Andrew was an architect and that Jill was a clothing designer.

“Do you always call them by their names?” he asked.

She proceeded to tell him that they were her foster parents and were the best ones she ever had. He told her, “Well, you couldn’t tell that they weren’t your real parents. I see the way they look at you and the way you look at them.”

She smiled at him. He took her by the hand, and they walked deeper into the trees. They enjoyed spending time together. It was getting late, so they decided it was time to head back to the lodge so he could take her home.

When they got back to his truck, he opened the door and helped her in. She sat down and put on her seatbelt. He leaned over and gently kissed her on the cheek.

"Thanks for such a great day," he said.

He closed her door, got in the driver's seat, started the truck, and headed down the highway to the chalet. When they arrived, they got out of the truck and realized Jill and Andrew had company. They walked into the living room, where everyone was. Maverick looked shocked to see his parents there. He introduced Rebecca to them; by this time, she was in total shock.

Mr. Rodgers said, "I see where your daughter gets her great looks from; she has very handsome-looking parents." Rebecca, Jill, and Andrew just smiled. Andrew proceeded to tell Rebecca and Maverick that his company was the one that had designed the lodge many years ago, as well as some of the chalets, especially the one they were staying in. Andrew mentioned that Mr. Rodgers had another project he would like him to do.

Mrs. Rodgers was a very beautiful lady, and Jill and she seemed to get along very well. "There are food trays in the kitchen, along with fruits, vegetables, cheese, and crackers if you two are hungry and would like a snack," Jill told them. Rebecca and Maverick said that sounded great and headed to the kitchen for a snack.

As they got into the kitchen, he looked at Rebecca and said, "I didn't know Mr. Malone was the one who designed the lodge so many years ago. He and my parents go way back."

"Such a small world, I guess," Rebecca said.

They got a plate and started filling it with snacks from the trays. They sat at the bar, ate, and just enjoyed talking to each other. After they finished, they put the lids back on the trays, placed them in the fridge, and cleaned up.

Shortly after they had finished, Mr. and Mrs. Rodgers told Maverick that they needed to be heading home since it was getting so late. Andrew told Mr. Rodgers that as soon as he got home, he would draw up the plans and get back to him. They were all very tired, so they decided to turn in for the night.

Rebecca went to her room and thought about how great a time she had with Maverick. She was really starting to like him.

The next morning, Andrew heard a knock at the door, and someone handed him an envelope. He came into the kitchen and laid the envelope on the counter. Jill opened it, and it was an invitation to the Christmas Gala, which would be held at the Lodge the day after tomorrow. Everyone was encouraged to dress accordingly, which Jill explained to Rebecca meant wearing a ballroom gown or fancy dress since it was a Gala.

Anyone interested in entering the Prince and Princess Pageant should plan on attending. Maverick had told Rebecca about the Gala, but she wasn't quite sure what he was talking about at the time. He had asked her to be his date, which she had eagerly accepted.

Rebecca told them that Maverick had mentioned it to her and asked her to be his date for the Gala. Jill said, "You know what this means, don't you, Rebecca? We need to go shopping." Then she turned to Andrew and asked, "Will you be joining us so you can find something to wear?"

He said, “I think I’ll pass. I’ll just get a tux at the men’s shop in the Lodge. Besides, I have to meet up with Mr. Rodgers to go over some things.”

Jill and Rebecca headed into the city. Jill had pulled up several dress shops on her phone for them to visit in hopes of finding the perfect gown. They went into several shops but didn’t find anything they both liked. There was one more on the list, so they decided to go there.

When they entered the shop, it was huge, and dresses hung on racks everywhere. *Surely, we can find something here,* Rebecca thought to herself. They started to look around, and Jill found a mauve dress she really liked. It was gorgeous, with spaghetti strap sleeves and a long train. She went to try it on, and when she came out to show Rebecca, Rebecca thought about how beautiful Jill looked in the dress she had chosen.

Next, they were on a mission to find Rebecca a dress. They looked through several racks until a dress caught her eye. It was a peach-colored gown. Rebecca decided to try it on, and they both agreed it was the one.

Jill said, “We need to find shoes now.” So, shoe stores were next on the list. They tried to find shoes that matched the color of their dresses, but it was hard to find the exact shade, so they settled on silver low-heeled ones, which would work just as well.

While they were shopping, they decided to find shirts for the guys that matched their dresses. They went into a men’s clothing store and had no problem finding what they needed.

They decided they should get their nails done and were taken in right away since there was no waiting list. They didn't have anything extravagant done to their hair; Jill was good at doing hair, so they decided on just a shampoo and a trim.

When they got back from shopping, Andrew and Maverick were sitting in the living room watching football. They had ordered pizza and made a salad. As the women walked into the house, the guys were yelling at the TV.

"Men and their sports," Jill said with a laugh.

Rebecca went into her bedroom to hang up her dress and put away her shoes, then came back into the living room. She brought the shirt she had picked out for Maverick, showed it to him, and asked if he would try it on to see if it fit. He headed to the bathroom to change, and when he came out, it was clear the shirt fit him perfectly.

Rebecca asked if he liked the color, and he said he did. "I'll go tomorrow and get my tux," he added.

Jill and Rebecca sat down to eat. It was actually good, they thought. After the football game ended, Maverick said it was time for him to head home since he had a busy day at work tomorrow. Rebecca told him she would walk him out.

He said good night to Andrew and Jill, then grabbed his coat, and he and Rebecca headed outside.

Outside the door, Maverick took Rebecca's hand, and they walked to his truck. As he opened the driver's side door and started the engine, he turned to Rebecca, gently placed his hands

around her face, and kissed her. She smiled at him, and he kissed her again, longer this time. When he raised his head, he said, “I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

She told him she was looking forward to it. Then he drove off, and Rebecca headed back into the house. She closed the door after she got inside, took off her coat, and hung it up. When Rebecca came back into the living room and sat down, Andrew and Jill asked her if she felt comfortable being by herself tomorrow because the Rodgers wanted Andrew and her to look at the property they planned to renovate. Rebecca said she would be fine and would just go to the lodge to do some skiing. They said, “Well, you know if you need us, we’re only a phone call away. We’ll probably be getting home late, so here’s some money to get yourself something to eat.”

They handed her the money, and she told them to have fun tomorrow with the Rodgers and that she’d see them when they got home. Rebecca headed down the hall to her bedroom. When she got in, she lay on her bed, took out her phone, and looked at the pictures she and Maverick had taken together, remembering their first real kiss. She lay there for a while, then decided it was time to get ready for bed. She changed into her pajamas, turned on the TV, and watched a sitcom for a while until she drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, when she woke up, she looked out her window, and it was snowing, and it was so beautiful. She went into the bathroom, washed her face, brushed her hair, and got dressed. She decided to wear her blue snowsuit today. After putting on her makeup and taking one last look in the mirror, she headed out the door.

Jill and Andrew were already up. This morning, Andrew was cooking breakfast; he was making waffles. They smelled amazing, and she hoped they tasted as good as they smelled. Andrew fixed them a plate and said, “Breakfast is served.” They all sat down to eat. The waffles actually tasted even better than Rebecca had expected, considering she had never really seen Andrew cook before, except for grilling steaks.

Rebecca told them she would clean up so they could get ready. They thanked her and headed to their bedroom. They were supposed to meet up with the Rodgerses at 10:00. By the time they finished getting ready and came back to the kitchen, Rebecca was putting away the last of the dishes. They let her know they were ready to leave. She gathered up all her things, and they all headed out the door.

When they got to the lodge, they noticed how full it was. Rebecca thought to herself that business was really booming for the Rodgerses, and she was happy for them; they seemed like good people. After saying goodbye and wishing them a good day, she headed to the slopes. She had told Jill earlier that Maverick would take her home, so not to worry.

Rebecca went to get her boots, skis, and poles and was on her way. She laced up her boots, put on her skis, and got on the ski lift. From there, she could see Maverick teaching a class. She thought about how much he loved doing that and how good he was at it.

Rebecca had skied for several hours and decided it was time to head back to the lodge. After all, she wanted to find gifts for Miss Hettie and her friends at school. She turned in all her equipment and went inside the lodge.

She visited several shops and found a few things she thought Hettie would like. Hettie collected refrigerator magnets, so Rebecca picked out several she thought she might enjoy. She also chose sweatshirts for each of her friends. When she was done shopping, she sat down on one of the benches to rest for a while.

Her phone rang; it was Maverick. He told her he was done for the day and asked if she would like to get something to eat. She said she would and told him she'd be waiting for him at the entrance of the restaurant. She couldn't wait to see him again.

It wasn't long before he arrived. He kissed her, and together they entered the restaurant. Rebecca decided to try something different this time and ordered the salmon with vegetables.

When the waitress brought their meals, Maverick handed Rebecca a small box.

She looked puzzled. "What is this?"

"Open it," he said with a smile.

She did, and inside was the most beautiful necklace she had ever seen. It was a pair of crossed skis, and on the back of each ski, their names were engraved. "Just a little something so you don't forget me when you go back home," he said softly.

Rebecca had to hold back her tears. She thanked him and kissed him on the cheek. They finished their meal, and as Maverick was paying the bill, Rebecca noticed two girls looking at her with angry expressions. She didn't know who they were or why they were staring at her that way.

Rebecca told Maverick she needed to go to the restroom. While she was in one of the stalls, she heard the door open and two girls talking about Maverick. They were wondering who the girl he was with was. She heard one of the girls say, “I don’t know, but I’ll make a fool of her at the dance.” The next thing she knew, they were gone, and the door slammed behind them.

Rebecca left the stall, washed her hands, and went back to meet Maverick. She opened the box with the necklace he had just given her and asked him to put it on her. Then she asked if he would mind taking her home since her parents would be getting home late. He said he would love to.

As they left the lodge, Rebecca couldn’t help but wonder what the girl had meant about wanting to make a fool of her at the dance. When they got back to the chalet, Maverick built a fire. Rebecca went to change out of her snowsuit and then returned to the living room.

He asked her if she was excited about the dance, and she said she was.

It wasn’t long before Jill and Andrew arrived home. Maverick said he had to get going, but before he left, he told Rebecca he would be there to pick her up around 5:30, and then he was gone.

Rebecca turned to Andrew and said, “I need your help.” He looked curious and asked what he could do for her. She said, “You need to teach me how to dance.”

He laughed and said, “Well, let’s do it then.” He walked over, put on some music, and started showing her what to do. Jill

watched them dance and thought how perfect this moment was; it looked just like a father-daughter dance.

After a few hours, Rebecca was finally getting the hang of it. She thanked Andrew for helping her, said her goodnights, and headed to her room.

The next morning, they all slept in. When Rebecca woke up, all she could think about was the Christmas Gala later that evening; she couldn't wait. She went into the kitchen, where Andrew and Jill were, poured herself a cup of coffee, and sat down. Jill asked if she wanted breakfast, but Rebecca said no, that she wasn't hungry. Jill then asked if she was excited about the Gala, and Rebecca said she was really looking forward to it.

They all decided to spend the day in the chalet instead of going out, which was fine with Rebecca. She felt she needed the time to rest and get ready for her big evening with Maverick. They all went into the living room to watch TV; Andrew picked out a movie, and they settled in together.

As they watched, Rebecca started to feel sleepy, and before she knew it, she had drifted off. Jill grabbed a blanket, gently covered her, and let her sleep. Rebecca must have slept for hours before waking up. When she looked at the clock, it was 1:00. She thought she must have been really tired to have slept that long.

Looking around, she saw that Jill and Andrew had also fallen asleep. She thought it was so sweet the way Andrew had his arm around Jill as they snuggled together. She lay there quietly for a while so as not to wake them, then, as quietly as she could, she managed to get up and go to her bedroom. When she got to her room, she looked at her phone and saw a message from Maverick.

He just wanted to tell her how much he was looking forward to the Gala. Rebecca decided to go ahead and take her shower. When she got out, she dried off, put on her robe, brushed her long hair, and blow-dried it. She liked the way it felt against her skin.

Jill knocked on the door and opened it. “Just wanted to see if you were okay,” she said, before mentioning that she was going to take her shower. She added that after she was done, she’d come back and do Rebecca’s hair for her. It was almost 3:00 by this time.

Shortly after, Jill came into her room carrying curling irons, pins, hairspray, and everything you could think of. She had Rebecca sit at the makeup table and got busy. She curled, sprayed, and curled some more. About 45 minutes later, as Jill was doing the final touches, she turned Rebecca around. When Rebecca looked in the mirror, she could not believe what she was seeing. Jill had put her hair up, rolled it around in the back, and added the most beautiful pins. She left a few strands of long hair in the front, which she had curled so they hung softly by the sides of her face.

“It looks beautiful, Jill. I love it. Thank you so much,” Rebecca said.

Jill smiled and told her she had a gift for her. She handed Rebecca a box, and when Rebecca opened it, inside was the most beautiful pair of diamond earrings she had ever seen. Tears flowed down her face. Jill told her not to cry because she didn’t want her to have puffy eyes for the Gala, and they both smiled. Rebecca hugged Jill and told her that she knew she wasn’t her real mother, but if she had one, she hoped she would be just like her. Jill hugged her back and then turned away so Rebecca wouldn’t see her cry.

Jill gathered up all the hair products and went to her room to get ready. Around 5:00, Rebecca started doing her makeup. She wanted to make it look extra special tonight. She walked to her closet to get her dress, unzipped the bag, and took it out. She took off her robe and slipped into the dress. When she looked in the mirror, she couldn't believe it was her; she thought she looked beautiful.

She put on her shoes, took one more look in the mirror, grabbed the wrap she had picked out for this dress, and headed to the living room. Before going in, she stopped by Jill's room, cracked the door open a little, and asked if she could come in.

"Of course, you can," Jill replied.

When Rebecca opened the door, and Jill turned around, she brought her hand to her mouth and said, "Oh my goodness, Rebecca, I have never seen you look more beautiful." She had Rebecca turn around so she could see the full picture of her dress.

Jill was just getting ready to put on her own dress. She took off her robe and carefully pulled the dress over her head so as not to mess up her hair, then smoothed it down. She looked gorgeous. She put on her shoes, grabbed her wrap, and they walked together to the living room, where Andrew and Maverick were waiting.

Before they entered, Jill called out to Andrew and Maverick, asking if they were ready to see their dates for the evening.

They both replied that they would love to. Jill told Rebecca to go out first, and she did. As Rebecca walked into the living room, she twirled around, and Maverick took her hand, saying, "You look amazing."

“Well,” Rebecca said as she looked at Andrew, “Mr. Malone, here is your date for the evening.”

When Jill came out, Andrew’s mouth dropped open. He walked up, took her hand, and led her into the living room. Looking at her, he said, “I’ve never seen you look this beautiful since our wedding day,” then leaned in and kissed her cheek.

Both Andrew and Maverick had corsages for them, which they gently placed on their wrists. The ladies had also gotten them flowers, which they pinned to their tuxedos. Andrew looked at Maverick and said, “I think we have the most beautiful ladies as our dates for the Gala. We’ll be the envy of the ball.” They all laughed.

The guys put on their overcoats and headed to the door. Rebecca and Maverick rode in his truck, while Jill and Andrew rode together.

It wasn’t long before they were pulling up in front of the lodge, where valet parking was available. Maverick got out of the driver’s side, walked around, and opened the door for Rebecca. He held out his hand, and she placed hers in his as he helped her out. He shut the door, and the valet got into his truck and drove off. Andrew and Jill weren’t far behind them, so they waited at the front entrance for their arrival.

As they all entered the room where the Gala was being held, Maverick’s parents stood at the entrance greeting their guests. They complimented everyone on how well they looked. Andrew and Maverick took off their overcoats and removed the wraps from Jill and Rebecca.

The ballroom was decorated so elegantly—Mrs. Rodgers had done an amazing job with the décor. They walked around until they found their name tags on the table, then sat down. Each table had its own waiter waiting to take drink orders.

As Rebecca looked across the room, she noticed the girl she had overheard talking about her and Maverick in the bathroom. She leaned over and asked Maverick who she was.

"That's Jonnika," he replied, "the most spoiled little rich girl you'll ever meet. Why do you ask?"

"For no particular reason," Rebecca said. "I've seen her around the lodge and on the ski slopes and was just wondering who she was."

He continued, "The girl sitting at the same table with her is Renae—her little puppet on a string. She'll do whatever Jonnika tells her to do. They're both in my graduating class."

The waiter brought them their drinks. Rebecca noticed that the room was really starting to fill up. When the last of the guests arrived, the entrance doors were closed. Mr. Rodgers went to the podium to welcome all of their guests and thanked everyone for coming. He told them to enjoy their meal and reminded them that the Prince and Princess would be crowned later that evening.

The waiter took their food order early and told them that dinner service would begin at 7:00. Maverick asked Rebecca if she would like to dance, and she said she would love to. She looked at Andrew, who winked at her as they left the table.

Several couples were already on the dance floor, including Jonnika, Renae, and their dates. Jonnika kept staring at them—so much so that even Maverick noticed. She began what could only be described as dirty dancing with her date, drawing the attention of many people around them, which, from what Rebecca gathered, was exactly what Jonnika wanted.

Maverick and Rebecca kept moving farther and farther away from where she was, but everywhere they went, Jonnika seemed to follow. Maverick told Rebecca to just ignore her. They danced a few more songs before the chef announced that dinner was about to be served and asked everyone to take their seats.

Everyone made their way back to their tables. The waiters began bringing out trays and trays of food to serve the guests. Their waiter arrived at their table and served their meals—everything looked delicious. As they ate, they talked about how beautifully the place was decorated. Maverick said, "My mom loves doing this kind of thing, and she always looks forward to this time of year."

At 7:45, Mr. Rodgers stepped back up to the podium and invited anyone who wanted to compete for the title of Prince and Princess of the Gala to step forward and take a number. He explained that the contestants would be judged throughout the rest of the evening, and the winners would be announced at 9:00.

Maverick took Rebecca's hand and said, "Let's go do this—what have we got to lose?"

They went up and got a number. There were a total of about seven couples. Mr. Rodgers told them not to leave after receiving their numbers because the first dance was meant to introduce all

the contestants to the judges. Each contestant completed a form with their name on it. Maverick filled out the card for himself and Rebecca, which also had their number written on the back — they were number 4.

As Mr. Rodgers began calling out each number, starting with 1, the contestants were introduced to the judges. Jonnika and Renae also entered the contest with their dates. As the evening continued, the judges observed how well the contestants matched with their dates, how they were dressed, their personalities, and how they interacted with others.

Rebecca noticed Jill and Andrew going around, meeting and chatting with several guests. Maverick saw some of his friends he wanted Rebecca to meet. He introduced her to them, and they hung out for a while. Most of the guests knew who Maverick was and would stop to say a few words to him as they walked through the crowd.

As they headed back to their seats, Rebecca grabbed her handbag and told Maverick she needed to go to the ladies' room. While making her way toward the back, she saw Jonnika get up from her seat and start walking behind her. Rebecca turned around, and just as she did, Jonnika tossed a glass full of grape juice all over the front of her dress.

Rebecca stood there in shock, tears rolling down her face. Jonnika quickly apologized, claiming the glass had slipped from her hand — but Rebecca knew she had done it on purpose. Rebecca ran to the bathroom. She could hear Jonnika and her friend Renae laughing as she opened the restroom door. Rebecca fumbled with her handbag until she finally pulled out her phone to call Jill.

When Jill answered, Rebecca was crying so hard that Jill had trouble understanding her. Jill told her to calm down, take a breath, and explain what was going on. Rebecca did, and before long, Jill entered the restroom.

She looked at Rebecca's dress and saw what a mess it was. Rebecca was trying to clean it with some paper towels, but it was only making things worse. Jill told her, "That's not going to work."

Rebecca said, "Jill, I can't go back out there like this."

Jill replied, "I know, but I have an idea. You stay in here until I get back." Then she headed out the door.

About ten minutes later, Rebecca called Maverick and told him what had happened, saying they should drop out of the competition. Jill walked back into the restroom just as Rebecca was talking to Maverick. She overheard her saying they needed to drop out of the competition. Jill took the phone from her and told Maverick to get Andrew and come to the ladies' room door.

When they showed up, Jill handed Andrew a white shirt and told him and Maverick to go to the men's room. She instructed Andrew to give Maverick his shirt and put the white one on, and then meet them outside in the hall. They did as she said.

Jill then went into one of the stalls and changed into a blue dress that looked really good on her. She handed Rebecca her dress and told her to put it on. Rebecca did as Jill said and came back out wearing Jill's dress, which fit her perfectly.

Jill said, “Take your arms out of the straps,” and tucked them down into the dress, making it strapless.

“Maybe people won’t notice that I wore it in,” Jill said.

Rebecca looked in the mirror and thought it looked perfect.

“Now,” Jill said, “we need to fix your makeup.”

Jill took her makeup out of her handbag, started applying it to Rebecca’s face, and then handed her the lipstick, which Rebecca put on in front of the mirror. Rebecca hugged her, and they both headed out of the restroom. They could hear Mr. Rodgers talking, announcing that it was time to reveal the new Prince and Princess of the ball. He called all the contestants back up to the dance floor.

Maverick kissed Rebecca’s cheek, and they started walking that way. They were the last ones to make it to the dance floor. As they walked in, everyone stopped, turned around in their seats, and watched as they made their way to the front.

Mr. Rodgers asked the judges if they had picked a winner. They said they had and handed him an envelope with the winners’ names in it. He started by thanking all the contestants for their participation, saying that they were all beautiful couples, but unfortunately, there could only be one winner.

He opened the envelope and announced, “The next Prince and Princess of the Christmas Gala are Maverick Rodgers and Rebecca Malone.”

Maverick had filled out their entry card and had written Rebecca’s last name as Malone, which she was perfectly fine with.

Everyone got to their feet and started clapping. Maverick and Rebecca hugged, and then Mr. Rodgers placed the crowns on their heads. Mrs. Rodgers wrapped the sashes around them.

She asked her son what had happened because she noticed Rebecca was wearing a different dress and he had changed shirts. He simply said, "Jonnika happened."

She replied, "You need to say no more."

Rebecca was presented with a bouquet of red roses. Everyone began coming up to congratulate them, and lots of pictures were being taken. Mrs. Rodgers had a professional photographer there to take pictures of the new Prince and Princess of the Gala.

They did what Rebecca would call a photo shoot and then went to meet up with Andrew and Jill. Rebecca hugged Jill tightly and thanked her for what she had done.

Rebecca was on cloud nine at that moment—until she saw Jonnika head toward the restroom, with Jill right behind her. Rebecca followed but didn't go inside; she cracked the door open slightly so she could hear what was being said. Jill told Jonnika that what she had done to Rebecca was despicable.

Jonnika said, "I don't know what you're talking about. It was just an accident."

Jill replied, "You know, I was in high school once, and I saw all the antics that took place. So…believe me, this was not an accident. I've forgotten more about these kinds of things than you'll ever know. But your plan backfired. I hope you've learned your lesson."

Before Jill left, she turned and said, “Don’t ever mess with my girl again.”

Jonnika looked at her and said, “Is that a threat, Mrs. Malone?”

Jill looked at her and said, “No, that’s not a threat. That’s a promise, my dear.”

As Jill was leaving, she remembered the drink she had in her hand and tossed the whole glass all over the front of Jonnika’s dress. “Now we’re even,” she said and left the restroom.

Rebecca was waiting outside for Jill. She smiled at her, and they left to meet up with the guys. Jill and Rebecca were laughing as they went to find their dates. Jill met up with Andrew, and they decided it was time to leave. They made their way to thank their hosts and then headed out the door.

Maverick and Rebecca stayed a few more hours before deciding to call it a night. When they got into Maverick’s truck, he kissed her and said, “This has got to be the best date I’ve ever had.”

When they got back to the chalet, Jill and Andrew were still up. They greeted them and told them how very proud they were. Andrew took Rebecca’s flowers and went into the kitchen to find a vase to put them in.

Maverick kissed Rebecca on the cheek and said goodnight before leaving. Rebecca told Jill how thankful she was that she had been there for her.

Andrew came back into the room with the vase full of flowers and set it on the coffee table. “What a night this has been,” he said. “I haven’t had this much fun in a long time.” They all laughed.

Rebecca excused herself and went to her room.

Chapter 5

When Rebecca woke the next morning, she was still on cloud nine. Then it hit her — this was the last day of her winter vacation; they would be flying out tomorrow. She started to feel sad because she knew she would have to leave Maverick. The week had flown by — it had been one of the best weeks of her life.

She took a shower and went into the kitchen, where Jill and Andrew were sitting. On the table was a newspaper, and she had to take a second look because, on the front page, there was a picture of her and Maverick. *"The Prince and Princess of the Christmas Gala,"* the headline read.

Rebecca and Maverick had planned to spend her last day together, and she hoped Jill and Andrew wouldn't mind. *Now's a good time to ask them,* she thought. Jill commented on what a great picture it was of her and Maverick, saying they both deserved the honor of being named Prince and Princess.

Rebecca asked Andrew and Jill if it was okay for her to spend the last day of their vacation with Maverick. They said it was fine with them and mentioned they planned to spend the day on the ski slopes. They, too, seemed sad about having to leave the next day.

Maverick picked Rebecca up at 10:00. As they were leaving, Jill told them to have a good time. When they got into Maverick's truck, he asked if she had seen the morning paper. She told him she had and thought it was a great picture of them.

As they headed toward what she thought was the lodge, Maverick continued to drive past it. He turned down a snow-covered road in the middle of nowhere. “I’ve never shown anyone this place before,” he said. “It’s going to be my forever home someday.”

It was a quaint little cottage tucked away in the woods — if you didn’t know exactly where it was, you’d never find it. He parked the truck and went around to the driver’s side to help Rebecca out. As they entered the cottage, he said, “I inherited this property from my late grandparents and decided to build a cottage on it. I have over 100 acres to do with as I please. I come here a lot just to get away from everyday life, which can be very stressful at times. I plan on moving in here when I graduate in the spring.”

Rebecca walked around the cottage, and it felt so welcoming. She was happy for Maverick to have a place to call his own.

“I plan on becoming a CPA,” he continued, “which will help with the family business and save a lot of money for the Lodge. I also want to get a business degree. I love the Lodge and what my parents have built into it. Someday, I know I’ll take over where they left off, and I want to be prepared. I love this place as much as my parents do. My older brother Tanner is in the Marines. He never liked this kind of life — he wanted to see the world. He also loves his country and wants to make a difference, and for that, I am very proud of him. By the way,” he added, “my parents don’t know it yet, but he’s planning to surprise them for Christmas. They haven’t seen him in four years.”

Rebecca thought that was so awesome — what a close-knit family they were. She always wondered what that would be like.

He showed her around the cottage, saying, “Someday, I plan to raise a family here.” Rebecca saw that he had big dreams and hoped that all of them would come true.

As they left the cottage, he said, “There’s one more thing I’d like to show you.” He headed past the cottage, and Rebecca could not believe her eyes. It was the most beautiful place she had ever seen. Behind his cottage stood a snow-capped mountain — one unlike anything she had ever seen before. It was magnificent. She took several pictures of it on her phone. *What a beautiful place,* she thought. *No wonder he loves it here so much.*

As they headed back to town, Rebecca could tell he seemed a little sad, so she asked what was wrong. He said, “You might not understand, but I feel like I’m about to lose my best friend.”

He continued driving them back to the Lodge to share their last dinner together. They had a nice, quiet meal and walked around the Lodge for the last time.

“I need to say goodbye to you now,” he said softly, “because I want to remember us forever.” He drove her back to the Chalet. As she got out of his truck, she kissed him on the cheek and said, “I will never forget you, my friend. Thanks for the memories.”

As she walked back into the Chalet, Jill and Andrew could tell she was upset about leaving Maverick the next day. They tried to get her mind off him and onto something else. Andrew said, “How about we go ice skating?” He hated to see Rebecca so sad and wanted their last night there to be a happy one. Jill said, “I think that would be a great idea.”

Although Rebecca wasn't really in the mood, she decided it might be fun after all. They loaded up in the jeep and off they went.

When they got to the ice-skating rink, Jill and Rebecca picked out their skates and headed onto the ice. Jill held Rebecca's hand until she thought she was getting the hang of it, then she let go. Rebecca smiled as she started skating on her own — she felt like she had accomplished something.

Rebecca was beginning to enjoy herself when a voice came over the loudspeaker announcing that it was time for all skaters to get off the ice because the rink was closing. Rebecca and Jill took off their skates, put their shoes back on, and headed to the counter to turn them in. Then they got into the jeep and headed back to the Chalet.

Once they were back, Rebecca went to her room and started packing her things for their flight home the next day. They were to be at the airport by 10 a.m.

She went to the kitchen for a snack and found cheese, crackers, and meat. As she ate, she thought about how Jill and Andrew had taken her on their winter vacation. She realized there was no reason she couldn't try to make the best of her last night. So, she decided she would make their final evening together as fun as possible. She made cheese and meat crackers and headed to the living room, where Jill and Andrew were sitting. She set the platter on the coffee table and said, "Is anyone up for a game of Monopoly?"

Jill and Andrew said they would love to. They set up the board, and Andrew took the role of banker. They spent the rest of

the evening playing the game, laughing whenever one of them landed in jail. They played for hours and must have lost track of time — before they knew it, it was almost midnight.

They decided they'd better get to bed since they had a long day ahead of them. Rebecca put the game away and went to her room. Although she was sad about leaving, she was also looking forward to seeing Hettie and all of her friends. She couldn't wait to give Hettie, Jill, and Andrew the Christmas gifts she had picked out for them.

The next morning, they all got up early, packed the vehicle with their luggage, and made sure the Chalet looked as clean as it had when they first arrived. Andrew left a sizable tip on the counter for the person or people who would be cleaning it after they left.

They headed for the airport around 8:00 a.m., as they still had to return the rental vehicle. After returning it, they went inside the airport terminal, checked in their luggage, went through security, and then made their way to the gate where their plane would depart.

Rebecca was still a little uneasy about being on an airplane, but it wasn't as bad now that she knew what to expect. When their flight number was called, they got up and boarded the plane. After the last passengers were on board, the doors were once again closed.

The pilot taxied the plane to the runway, and soon they were on their way home. Once they arrived at the airport, Hettie was all smiles — she was so happy to see all of them. She hugged them tightly, and then they got into Jill's SUV and headed home.

Rebecca told Hettie all about her vacation during the drive. You could hear the excitement in her voice as she talked a mile a minute. Jill and Andrew just laughed, glad that she had such a wonderful time.

As they entered the gate to their house, Rebecca thought it looked so beautiful. She hadn't realized how much she had missed it until that moment. They unloaded their luggage from the SUV and went inside.

Rebecca noticed that there were twice as many presents under the tree as there had been when she left. She took her luggage and headed to her room. As she put her clothes away, she thought about how much she had missed her room. She couldn't believe that tomorrow was Christmas Day.

She took out her phone and texted Maverick to let him know they had made it home safely. She also texted her friends from school to let them know she was back and suggested they get together before everyone had to return to school. Rebecca continued to unpack, putting all of her dirty clothes down the chute in the bathroom so that Hettie could wash them. She placed her empty suitcases back in her closet. Then she decided to take a shower before heading downstairs to find everyone.

When she went downstairs, no one was in sight, so she went into the library to find a book to read — something she hadn't done in a while. She must have been reading for hours. She was really getting into her book when she heard Hettie over the intercom announcing that dinner was ready.

She got up and went to the dining room, where Jill and Andrew were already seated, and took her place at the table. As

they ate dinner, Jill told her that every Christmas Eve they watched *The Grinch* — it was their little Christmas tradition — and asked if she would like to join them. Of course, Rebecca said she would love to.

After dinner, they planned to meet in the theater. Since it was Christmas Eve, Rebecca decided to wear her Grinch pajamas that Jill had given her. When she went downstairs, Hettie told her everyone was already in the theater room getting ready for the movie.

Rebecca made her way there and found that everyone else was also wearing their Grinch pajamas. As Andrew set up the movie, they all grabbed their popcorn and drinks and sat down to watch.

It had been a long time since Rebecca had seen *The Grinch*, and she thought it was wonderful — a movie that should be watched every Christmas. It was the perfect way to end their Christmas Eve.

By the time the movie was over, it was late, so they all decided it was time for bed. Rebecca picked up her drink and popcorn bowl and headed to the kitchen. She put her glass in the sink, emptied the leftover popcorn, rinsed the bowl, and placed it in the dishwasher. By then, Rebecca was more than ready for bed.

The next morning, Rebecca woke up early. She looked out her window and saw that it was snowing. It made her think of her vacation in Colorado — and of Maverick.

She went into the bathroom, brushed her hair and teeth, and then headed downstairs. “Merry Christmas!” she said as she entered the kitchen. Everyone smiled at her and returned the greeting.

After breakfast, Andrew said, “Okay, it’s time to open presents!” Rebecca was excited — she couldn’t wait to give Hettie, Jill, and Andrew the gifts she had bought for them. It seemed like it took hours to open everything. Each of them took turns handing out gifts.

Rebecca couldn’t believe how many packages were under the tree for her. As she opened her presents, she thanked everyone for what they had given her. Then, there were just a few last-minute gifts left under the tree. Rebecca went first — she handed Hettie her gift, then walked over and gave Andrew and Jill theirs. “This is my special gift to you all,” she said.

After they opened their gifts, they all had tears in their eyes. No one said a word at first. Finally, Rebecca spoke up. “I wanted to give each of you a gift from my heart,” she said softly, “and the only way I knew how to do that was through my art. I hope you all like it.”

They smiled at her, and after pulling themselves together, each one of them came over and gave her a big hug. Then Andrew and Jill stood up. “We also have a special gift that we’d like to give you, Rebecca,” Andrew said.

They walked to the mantel over the fireplace and picked up an envelope. Andrew opened it and began to read. He and Jill looked at Rebecca, and he said, “Rebecca, since you came into our lives, you’ve been such a great joy. You don’t know what a blessing

you've been to us. You've been here now for about seven months, and we've grown to love you very much. You are like the child we never had. We would consider it an honor if you would let us adopt you." Rebecca was in shock. *Finally, someone loves me enough to want me to be part of their family,* she thought to herself. By this time, tears were rolling down her cheeks. She stood up and said, "You know, I've only been here a short time, but you've all made me feel more than welcome. All my life, I've dreamed of this. Since I've been here, I've felt like this is my home because of how welcome you've made me feel. The honor isn't yours — it's mine. It's my honor to be part of this family. So, the answer is yes — I would love it very much if you adopted me."

They all hugged, and many tears were shed. Rebecca couldn't believe her dream had finally come true.

Andrew said, "After the first of the year, I'll have my lawyer draw up the papers."

Rebecca thought to herself, *I will finally have a mom and dad.*

They spent the rest of the day enjoying each other's company and embracing the joy of what was to come. Finally, Andrew said, "How about we celebrate?"

Jill smiled and asked, "What do you have in mind?"

Andrew replied, "After our Christmas dinner, we should take a ride around the property on the ATVs. Rebecca, in case you didn't know, we have about 200 acres here. Jill and I each have an ATV to explore the property, but we've been so busy with everyday life that we haven't used them much."

Rebecca grinned and said, “I’ve never driven or ridden an ATV, but I’m game!”

If only they knew how much she loved them. This had to be the best day of her life. She could hardly put into words how deeply she felt in that moment.

As they all enjoyed their Christmas dinner together, everyone was filled with joy and happiness. Andrew said, “Okay, I’ll meet you, ladies, at my truck in 30 minutes. We have a lot of acres to cover.” So, they all went to get dressed for the weather and met back downstairs. Andrew had the truck running and was ready to go. They all got in and headed to the pole barn where the ATVs were stored.

As they arrived, they got out of the truck and went inside. Rebecca could tell no one had been in there for a while, judging by all the cobwebs hanging everywhere. Andrew uncovered the ATVs and started each one to let them warm up. After a while, he said he thought they were ready to drive. The property had a paved trail for them to ride on.

Jill and Rebecca got on one ATV, and Andrew took the other.

They drove around for what seemed like forever. Then, all of a sudden, Rebecca asked Jill to stop. She looked at Jill and said, “Do you see that spot over there?” as she pointed. “That would be a great place for a house — it’s so gorgeous. This is the most beautiful piece of land I’ve ever seen.” There were cottonwood trees everywhere.

Jill laughed and said, “You know, that’s where I wanted Andrew to build the house we live in now, but he didn’t want to build it there. I’m glad you see the beauty in it as I did.” Rebecca was enjoying herself so much.

Then Andrew decided it was time to head home since it was getting late. *Home.* Rebecca liked the sound of it. She would never have to move again — this was her forever home. As Andrew put the ATVs back in the barn and covered them up, she looked around and thought, *What a beautiful place this is.*

When they got home, Rebecca went to her bedroom to take a shower and soak in everything that had just happened. It was a lot to take in. In a matter of minutes, her whole life had changed — she went from being homeless to having a home.

As she entered the living room, she saw Jill and Andrew hugging each other with big smiles on their faces. She watched them for a moment, then quietly slipped into the kitchen where Hettie was washing the dishes.

"You made two people very happy today," Hettie said.

Rebecca smiled softly. "Hettie, I'm the lucky one. I never thought I'd have a family of my own. I love Jill and Andrew so much. My only fear was that any day, I'd be moved to another foster home. You don't know how much this means to me."

"Well, you don't ever have to worry about that again," Hettie said reassuringly.

Rebecca asked Hettie if she had known about the adoption plans. "No," Hettie replied, "but I suspected it would happen."

Rebecca left the kitchen and headed to her room. She couldn't wait to tell Maverick and all her friends at school. She texted Maverick, telling him what had just happened. He quickly responded, saying how happy he was for her. Then she texted her

friends at school and told them everything. Everyone replied except Gisselle.

She thought maybe Gisselle was just busy, but still felt worried. So she decided to call her. The phone rang several times before Gisselle finally answered.

"How are you?" Rebecca asked.

"I'm okay," Gisselle said — but Rebecca could tell something was wrong.

Rebecca shared the good news about Jill and Andrew wanting to adopt her. "Rebecca, I am so very happy for you," Gisselle said.

They talked for a while, but Rebecca couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. So, she asked if Gisselle and the rest of the gang would like to hang out at her house — maybe watch a movie or something.

Gisselle hesitated for a moment, then finally said, "Sure, that would be fun."

Rebecca smiled. "I'll have my parents call your parents, and then we can set something up, okay?"

Still, she couldn't help but feel concerned about Gisselle.

Rebecca thought she would go to the kitchen for a snack. As she was leaving her room, she saw the bag for Miss Hettie. It contained the things she had bought for her while they were on vacation. She thought, *since I have time, I'll take it to her.* She picked up the bag and headed downstairs.

She walked to Miss Hettie's apartment and knocked on the door. She heard her say to come in. Rebecca opened the door and told her she hoped she wasn't bothering her, but had some things to give her from their vacation.

Miss Hettie said, "No! You're by no means a bother, Miss Rebecca." Rebecca closed the door, walked over to where Hettie was sitting, and handed her the bag. As Miss Hettie was taking things out, Rebecca noticed the picture she had sketched for her already hung on the wall.

"Mr. Andrew came and hung it for me," she said. Then she told Rebecca, "You sure have a talent for art, and I hope you'll always continue doing it." Miss Hettie was very pleased with the things Rebecca had picked out for her.

Rebecca looked around the apartment and thought how extra clean it was—but she knew Hettie was OCD when it came to anything she did.

Miss Hettie said to Rebecca, "I want you to know something, but you must never speak about it after you leave this room. You know, Jill and Andrew were never like this before you came here? You know the pool they taught you how to swim in? Well, it hadn't been used in about five years. This house hasn't been decorated like this for Christmas in I don't know how long. This is the first time in years that both of their parents have been invited to any holiday whatsoever. So, take it from me, Rebecca—they not only saved your life, but you saved theirs."

By the time she left, she was once again in tears. Before Rebecca left, Hettie told her how happy she was to know she

would be a part of the family. “Now you won’t ever have to worry about anything else again,” she said.

Rebecca hugged her and then left. She would never have to move again. She loved Jill, Andrew, and Miss Hettie with all her heart.

That night, she brushed her hair and teeth, put on her pajamas, and turned on the intercom to tell Jill and Andrew goodnight—hearing them both say the same back to her. As she lay in bed, she replayed the entire day in her mind. She had never been this happy before. She turned on her TV, and before long, she was fast asleep.

The next morning, Rebecca got up and got dressed. She was still a little sluggish from staying up so late. She went downstairs to have breakfast. Miss Hettie was whistling as she came into the kitchen.

“Hi, Miss Hettie. You seem very chipper this morning,” Rebecca said.

“I have a lot to be happy about today,” Miss Hettie replied. “We’ll have a new family member soon, which I’m very happy about, and Mrs. Jill’s new clothing line will be out soon.”

Rebecca poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down at the bar. A few minutes later, Jill and Andrew came into the kitchen and sat beside her. Rebecca thought now would be a good time to ask if it was okay for her friends to come over the next day to hang out, maybe watch a movie, and catch up on how their Christmas vacation had been.

Jill smiled and said, “This is your home too, Rebecca. You don’t need to ask if you can have friends over. Besides, we know all of their parents, and they’re very good people. I’ll call them all later this afternoon. We want you to treat this home like your own. And by the way, I was wondering if you’d like to look at the other bedrooms in case you might prefer one of them. You can always switch rooms if you want to.”

Rebecca thought about it and said she’d look at them and see what she thought.

Later that afternoon, Jill called the parents of all of Rebecca’s friends, just like she promised, to see if they could come over for a visit the following day. They all said it would be fine. Rebecca was so excited about having her friends come over to hang out—she could hardly wait for the next day.

Since Sebastian was the only one with a driver’s license, he was going to drive all of them to her house around noon. Rebecca went to her room and decided to call Maverick. He answered on the first ring. She told him she hoped he’d had a good Christmas with his family and asked if his brother had made it home in time for the holidays.

He said yes, that his brother had made it in, and that his parents were thrilled to see him. He also told her he’d been accepted to Colorado State University and would start in late August. Rebecca told him she was so happy for him.

Maverick then told her that he missed having her around the Lodge and that the place didn’t feel the same without her. He mentioned how busy the Lodge had been since she left and how

everyone was talking about her—especially what a beautiful Christmas Gala Princess she had been.

The next day was the day all of Rebecca's friends were coming over. She was so excited—she hadn't seen them since before Christmas. She kept glancing at the clock, eagerly waiting for them to arrive. Finally, around noon, they reached the gate, and Rebecca hurried to let them in. They pulled up to the front of the house, and as she opened the door, Gisselle said, "I thought there would be armed guards at the front door. This place is amazing!" They all laughed.

As they came into the house, Jill and Andrew were already there, awaiting their arrival. Rebecca introduced Jill and Andrew as her mom and dad, which made them very happy. Andrew shook Sebastian's hand, as most men do. Savannah, Cheyenne, and Gisselle all greeted them warmly and thanked them for letting them hang out together that day.

However, they all noticed that Gisselle didn't look too well, and their concern grew. Rebecca showed them around the house and then took them to her room. "How about we watch a movie?" she suggested. Everyone agreed enthusiastically, so she led them to the theater room. Miss Hettie had already prepared fresh pizza, popcorn, and drinks for them.

They chatted for a while as they enjoyed their pizza, and Rebecca felt overjoyed to have her friends over. She thought maybe they could do this again sometime. Before they sat down to watch the movie, Gisselle stood up and said she had something to tell them. Everyone looked puzzled, but could tell from her expression that it was serious.

Gisselle took a sip of her drink, tears filling her eyes. “I know you’ve all noticed that I’ve been losing a lot of weight and that I haven’t been in the best of health,” she began softly. “Well, I found out the week before Christmas break that I have leukemia. I’ve been sick for quite some time, and I tried to hide it from you all.”

When they heard the word *leukemia*, everyone froze in shock and fear—they couldn’t imagine losing her. For a moment, no one could speak. Finally, Cheyenne broke the silence and asked, “So what happens next?”

Gisselle replied quietly, “I have to go through chemotherapy to hopefully kill the cancer. I start chemo next week.”

Rebecca, Savannah, and Sebastian were speechless.

Finally, Rebecca said to Gisselle, “I remember when you gave all of us the Christmas gifts you had for each of us — the necklaces with a picture of all of us in them.”

Gisselle replied, “Yes, I remember.”

“Did you know you had leukemia then?” Rebecca asked softly.

Gisselle nodded. “Yes, I knew.”

Rebecca’s voice trembled. “Is that why you said it was so we would never forget you?”

Gisselle just nodded again, her eyes glistening.

All they could do was hug her and let her know they were there for her.

As they sat down to watch the movie, Rebecca was glad she had picked a comedy. She was thankful for that choice…they all needed to laugh instead of feeling sad.

Gisselle looked at all her friends and said, “Please don’t be sad, and whatever you do, don’t pity me. I’m a fighter, and I plan on fighting every step of the way. I just need my friends by my side.”

They all promised her they would be there for her every step of the way.

They watched several movies together until Sebastian finally said it was probably time to leave since he had to be home before dark. They all thanked Rebecca for inviting them over, told her what a good time they had, and agreed they needed to get together more often.

Rebecca walked them all to the door and said goodbye. Tears filled her eyes as she went to find Jill and Andrew. She found them in the kitchen having a snack.

They immediately noticed something was wrong and asked her what had happened. Rebecca told them what Gisselle had shared. Jill and Andrew hugged her tightly and told her how sorry they were. They tried to reassure her that with all the new

technology and treatments available these days, Gisselle had a very good chance of overcoming this.

Rebecca felt a little better after talking to them, but deep down, she knew Gisselle had a tough fight ahead — the chemotherapy would take a lot out of her. She hated the thought of losing her friend to cancer — it just didn't seem fair. Rebecca went to her room and tried not to think about Gisselle's illness, but it didn't work. She took a shower, put on her pajamas, and sat down at her computer. She wanted to learn as much as she could about leukemia, so she searched the internet for hours.

She also looked up information about chemotherapy and what it would do to Gisselle's body. She learned that it could make her very sick to her stomach, cause vomiting, and lead to hair loss. Rebecca's heart ached for her friend.

As she got into bed that night, she said a quiet prayer for Gisselle and then slowly drifted off to sleep.

Rebecca woke up the next morning thinking about Gisselle and how hard things must be for her. She was so sick, and Rebecca just wished she could do something to make her friend feel better. Her heart ached at the thought of losing her. Gisselle had been the first person to talk to her on her very first day of school, and that had meant so much to Rebecca. Since then, they have grown to become best friends.

She decided to go see Jill, since she knew Gisselle's family, to find out if there was anything she and her friends could do to help. When she spoke to Jill, Jill said she would call Gisselle's mother to see if there was anything they could do.

That day was New Year's Eve. Jill told Rebecca that she and Andrew would be attending a New Year's Eve party that night and would be home late. Rebecca told them to have fun...she loved it when they took time out for each other.

Later that evening, after Jill and Andrew left, Rebecca went to her room to watch the ball drop...if she could stay awake long enough. She managed to stay up for the New Year's countdown and even texted all her friends and Maverick to wish them a Happy New Year. Not long after, she drifted off into a deep sleep.

Chapter 6

When Rebecca woke the next morning, many things were going through her mind. It was a new year. The next day, she would be starting her sophomore year at school. In just a few weeks, she would be adopted by Jill and Andrew, and Jill's new clothing line would be coming out soon. And, of course, Gisselle would be starting her chemotherapy, which made Rebecca sad, but she wanted to stay positive about it.

Rebecca didn't plan on doing much that day since she had to go back to school the next morning. She spent most of her day preparing for how things would go tomorrow. It would be the first day she wouldn't see Gisselle at school, which made her feel down, though she was glad she'd still have her other friends there. She knew Gisselle would be starting her chemotherapy and imagined how scared she must be. Rebecca only wished she could be there with her.

A little later, Jill called her on the intercom and asked if she wanted to go into the city with her to help set up some of her new clothing line at one of her stores. Rebecca was more than happy to accept the offer—besides, it would help take her mind off Gisselle—and she told Jill she would get ready. After getting dressed, she headed downstairs to meet her. As they headed to the city, Rebecca asked Jill how her New Year's Eve party was. Jill told her it went very well but that she had a hard time staying awake. They both laughed.

When they arrived at Jillian's, everyone was setting up new displays for her clothing line. Most of the new collection was in the front of the store. The dress that Rebecca had helped design was displayed on a mannequin in the front shop window. She had to admit—it looked really good. People were stopping to admire the dress and then coming into the store. Jill had several racks of dresses, which were made in a variety of colors.

Many customers were asking about the dress and where to find it, and the rest of the clothing line was getting a lot of attention as well. Jill and Rebecca stood off to the side, watching as customers browsed through the racks of clothes. Jill was very pleased with their reactions. She even overheard one customer say she wished she could buy them all.

The store only had a limited amount of stock for Jill's new line; she wanted to wait and see what customers preferred at each location before restocking accordingly. Rebecca watched in amazement as the dresses were being bought so quickly—it seemed like they couldn't keep them stocked fast enough. Jill told Rebecca not to worry; she had saved the first dress Rebecca helped design just for her.

This was the first store to launch the new clothing line, and Jill was thrilled with how well it was received. One of the customers recognized Jill and went over to speak with her. She asked how Jill came up with the design for the new dress. Jill told her that her daughter, Rebecca, had helped with the design.

The woman looked at Rebecca and said, "You have a very good eye for fashion. I can see where you get it from," she added, glancing at Jill. They both thanked her and were glad she liked the new collection. The store stayed busy for the rest of the time they

were there, until almost all of the new line was sold out. Jill was so happy with the outcome that she couldn't wait to get her new line into the rest of her stores. She spoke with the store manager for a while, giving her instructions on how to display the clothes. As they were leaving, the manager asked how soon they would be getting more of the new line, since customers were already asking when the next shipment would arrive. Jill told her she would call soon with a delivery date.

As they left the store, Rebecca couldn't believe that almost everything from Jill's new collection was gone. "Are you going to be able to keep up?" she asked. "It looks like everything is going really fast."

Jill smiled and said, "I sure hope so. This is probably the best collection I've ever had so far, and the dress you helped design is going to be a big seller. We make a pretty good team, don't you think?"

Rebecca smiled back at her, and they headed out the door. "We need to call Andrew and have him and Hettie meet us for a celebration dinner," Jill said. She called Andrew and told him how well things had gone, asking him and Hettie to meet them at Moscato's for dinner. He agreed and said they'd meet them there.

By the time Jill and Rebecca arrived at Moscato's, they had already gotten a table. It wasn't long before Hettie and Andrew showed up. As they sat down, Jill excitedly told them how well things had gone and how happy she was that the clothing line was such a success.

They ordered their meals, and when the food arrived, they began to eat. The food was delicious—even Hettie had to agree.

Jill was so thrilled about her new collection that she couldn't wait for it to be in all her stores.

As they finished dinner and headed out the door, Rebecca told them both how she couldn't wait until she was officially their daughter. Jill and Andrew hugged her, and together they all walked out the door. When they got home, Rebecca told them she was going to head to her room since she had a long day ahead of her tomorrow. She hugged them all and said goodnight before heading upstairs.

Once she got to her room, she couldn't stop thinking about what a great day it had been. She was so happy about how well Jill's clothing line had done and was grateful to have been a part of it. After taking a shower and getting ready for bed, she looked over at the clothes she had already laid out for the next day. She felt a little excited about her first day back at school.

When Rebecca woke up the next morning, she thought about how the last few weeks had been. There had been highs and lows. She felt a little nervous about starting her sophomore year, but also a bit excited.

When Jill dropped her off at school that morning, she told Rebecca to have a great day and that she couldn't wait to hear all about it when she got home.

When Rebecca got to her locker, she noticed a woman at Gisselle's locker taking out her books and other belongings. Rebecca greeted her, and the woman introduced herself as Gisselle's mother.

"Are you Rebecca?" Mrs. Reed asked.

"Yes," Rebecca replied.

Mrs. Reed smiled. "Gisselle talks about you and the rest of her friends a lot. Thank you for having her over for movie day—it meant a lot to her."

As Mrs. Reed was getting ready to leave, Rebecca asked how Gisselle was doing.

"She's hanging in there," Mrs. Reed said softly. "She starts her chemotherapy tomorrow, and she's a little scared."

Rebecca asked if she and Gisselle's other friends could visit when Gisselle was feeling better.

"That would be wonderful," Mrs. Reed said warmly. "Gisselle would love that."

Before leaving, Mrs. Reed told Rebecca how glad she was to finally meet her, though she hated that it had to be under such circumstances. Then she turned and walked away.

Rebecca watched her go, noticing the worry on her face. *It must be so hard for her,* she thought.

Rebecca went to her first class, which was math. The teacher introduced her as a new student, even though everyone in the class had seen her around school before. Ms. O'Connell seemed very nice but also quite stern—you could tell she loved what she did. As she began teaching, Rebecca made sure to take as many notes as she could. Much of what Ms. O'Connell covered, she already knew, but she wanted to stay prepared. Ms. O'Connell always

gave the students enough time at the end of class to complete any homework they might have.

Next, Rebecca had Mrs. Roberts for English II. She enjoyed the class—it required writing a lot of essays, which Rebecca loved doing.

Her American History teacher, Mr. Hawkins, made his class fun. Rebecca thought she would really enjoy being in his class; he had a way of explaining things that made history easier to understand, and he had a great sense of humor.

Next was Mr. Taylor for Biology. He was pretty laid-back and made his class interesting as well.

When Rebecca went to lunch, she met up with her friends. It just didn't feel right without Gisselle there, and they all said the same. Rebecca told them she had met Gisselle's mother that morning and that she had asked if they could all come visit Gisselle when she was feeling better.

When the bell rang, Rebecca headed to her P.E. class. Later, in her Home Economics class, they began learning how to sew, which caught her attention—she knew it would help her in the future, especially if she decided to go into fashion design.

Her Art class was her favorite; she still had the same art teacher, whom she liked very much.

Finally, she went to her study hall, which she was thankful for. After such a long day, she was glad to have a little break. The last bell of the day rang, and Rebecca was glad her day was finally over. She went to her locker, gathered her things, and headed out

the door to meet Jill, who was waiting for her. On the way home, Rebecca told her all about her day and how well it had gone. She also mentioned meeting Mrs. Reed that morning.

When Rebecca got home, she went straight to her room. She wanted to go over everything she had learned in her classes that day. She was excited about what she was studying in her sophomore year and used her computer to help her review the material. She was determined to keep up with her studies and stay prepared for the following year.

A little while later, Jill and Andrew called her into Andrew's office to tell her that the lawyer had drawn up the adoption papers, and they would be going before the judge the next day to make everything official. Rebecca couldn't have been happier—she was so excited to finally become an official part of their family.

The next afternoon, after school, they went into the judge's chambers along with their lawyer. The judge signed all the necessary paperwork for Jill and Andrew to adopt her. Smiling, the judge said, "This is such a happy day—we need to take a picture."

As they all gathered around, Rebecca held up the adoption papers with a big smile on her face while the attorney took their photo. Afterward, they all went out to celebrate. It was the happiest day of their lives.

That day, she officially became **Rebecca Lynn Donovan Malone.**

As the school year came to a close, Rebecca had once again excelled in her grades. She couldn't wait for summer break to

begin. On her last day of school, she said goodbye to her friends and promised to keep in touch with them throughout the summer, adding that they would all get together soon.

Gisselle had finished her last round of chemotherapy and was waiting to see if it had worked. The weather was starting to warm up—it was almost time to get the pool ready for the summer months ahead, and Rebecca couldn't wait for that. On June 1st, she would be turning fifteen years old, and as her birthday approached, Jill asked if she wanted to have a birthday party and invite her friends. Rebecca thought that was a great idea.

The day before her birthday, Jill was putting the final touches on the party. Rebecca was thrilled with how everything had turned out—the decorations looked wonderful, and she couldn't wait to celebrate with all her friends and family.

Around noon, everyone began to arrive. Gisselle was the first to get there. Rebecca hugged her tightly and told her how glad she was that she could make it. Gisselle looked tired and wore a bandana around her head since the chemotherapy had caused her to lose her hair. She had lost a lot of weight but was still in good spirits. Mrs. Reed stayed for the party as well, knowing that Gisselle would tire quickly and would need to be taken home early.

Next, Sebastian, Savannah, and Cheyenne arrived. It was so nice for Rebecca to have all her friends together on her birthday. Miss Hettie had prepared plenty of delicious food for the party, and everyone was having such a great time.

Maverick had even texted her to say, *Happy Birthday.*

The rest of the summer, Rebecca spent time with Jill, Andrew, and all her friends. She especially spent a lot of time with Gisselle. Jill's stores were really booming at this point—she was having a hard time keeping them all stocked. Rebecca didn't know how Jill managed it, but somehow, she kept everything running as smoothly as possible.

Rebecca helped her whenever she could. She loved going with Jill to see how well the new clothing line was selling. Jill even had to double up on the products she sent to each location, and sometimes that still wasn't enough.

Throughout the summer, Jill and Rebecca traveled to each store to see how things were going. Rebecca was very impressed with how well each business was run and learned a lot about what it takes to be a successful business owner. Jill became her mentor.

She and Jill spent most of their time together, which Rebecca loved. The summer flew by because they were both so busy—but they enjoyed every single minute of it.

Rebecca had a very good summer that year, but before long, it was time to return to school. She couldn't believe she was already going to be a junior in high school. She thought to herself, *Where has the time gone?*

That year, since she was now fifteen, she would be able to take driver's education, which made her very happy. She couldn't wait to get her driver's license and be able to drive herself around. She knew her class schedule would be heavy and that the year would be challenging. At first, she struggled with a few subjects, but it didn't take her long to figure out how to keep up and still remain

an honor student. She knew she would have to work harder to maintain her grades.

Rebecca also wanted to get a part-time job so she could start saving money for a car. She thought about asking Jill and Andrew if they had any kind of job she could do for them in their businesses.

A little later, Miss Hettie came over the intercom to let her know it was time for dinner. When Rebecca got to the dining room, Jill and Andrew were already there. Once she felt the time was right, she brought up the idea of working for them and asked if either of them had a job she could do to help her save for her first car.

Jill smiled and said she had plenty of work Rebecca could help with since her clothing line was doing so well. She told Rebecca she could start right away and work after school and on weekends, which Rebecca thought was perfect.

Rebecca spent the rest of her Christmas break reviewing some of the classwork she expected to encounter in her junior year. She always liked to stay ahead of things and would often search the internet to get an idea of what she would be learning.

Christmas Day was even better than the last. Rebecca loved spending time with her family. They opened gifts and enjoyed the best Christmas dinner ever. Miss Hettie had outdone herself once again. Just when Rebecca thought nothing could top last year's dinner, Hettie managed to pull it off.

Jill and Andrew's parents were also there for Christmas dinner. It had become a family tradition ever since Rebecca had come into their lives.

As she returned to school after Christmas break, Rebecca was excited about her classes since she had already studied some of the material they would be covering. She felt very confident about what she was about to learn. The rest of the year flew by for Rebecca, and she couldn't wait for summer break. She had worked so hard in her junior year. She would also be turning 16 in June, and she couldn't wait. She had already gotten her learner's permit and was eager to get a real license. Jill and Andrew let her drive often, and she was becoming a very good driver.

On her 16th birthday, she once again invited all her friends for a pool party, since it always seemed to be such a big hit. Gisselle was there, and she seemed to be feeling much better. Her hair was starting to grow back in, and even Rebecca thought she looked healthier. She noticed that Sebastian and Cheyenne seemed a lot closer than before; she often thought they made a good couple. Savannah had one boyfriend after another and was a little wild. She tried talking to her about it, but Savannah just brushed it off. Rebecca would go out on dates with some of the guys at her school, but none of them ever seemed to spark her interest. Rebecca had grown into a beautiful young lady, although she didn't see it—but everyone else sure did.

After all of her guests had left, Jill and Andrew asked her to come into the foyer because they had something they wanted to show her. They made her close her eyes as they led her out the front door. When they were ready, they told her to open her eyes. As she did, she saw a Jeep sitting in the driveway. She wondered to herself if the person driving the Jeep was her big surprise.

Then… Andrew handed her the keys and said, “Happy Birthday, Rebecca!”

She couldn’t believe it. She had a vehicle of her own. She looked at both Jill and Andrew with tears in her eyes. She told them that they had already done enough for her just by adopting her and taking such good care of her, and that they didn’t have to do this.

Rebecca went and got into the driver’s seat of the Jeep. She loved the new-car smell. It was perfect. She told them she loved it and would take very good care of it. She asked them if they wanted to go for a drive. They said yes. They all got into her Jeep, and off they went. She drove them around town and back again. When they got home, she hugged them both and thanked them.

She was so excited that she ran to find Miss Hettie and show her the new Jeep she had gotten for her birthday. Miss Hettie was thrilled for her and told her so. She gave Rebecca the birthday gift she had gotten her, which was seat covers for the Jeep and a keychain for her keys. Miss Hettie already knew that Jill and Andrew were getting her a new Jeep. Rebecca told her how sneaky she was, and they both laughed.

Rebecca couldn’t wait to tell her friends about her new Jeep, but she also didn’t want it to seem like she was bragging either.

The following year went by very quickly for Rebecca. She was in her senior year of high school and would be turning 17 that June. It wasn’t that long ago that she had been adopted, and Andrew had been helping her get her driver’s license. Time was passing so fast. She would be graduating as the Valedictorian of her senior class in just a few months, which she was very pleased

about. She was also scheduled to give a speech at the graduation. She worked on her speech for weeks until she felt it was perfect.

She wanted to continue her studies in designing clothing, just like Jill had done. Jill told her what she would need to do and assured her that she would help her every step of the way. After high school graduation, she took a few months off but continued helping Jill with her shops.

A week after she graduated high school, she received the news that Gisselle had lost her battle with leukemia and had passed away that morning. Rebecca was heartbroken. She loved Gisselle so much. Gisselle had put up a good fight, just like she said she would, but her body eventually couldn't handle it anymore. Mrs. Reed asked Rebecca if she would say a few words at the funeral, saying it would have meant a lot to Gisselle. Rebecca accepted right away.

Rebecca didn't know exactly what she would say, so she decided she would simply speak from her heart. On the day of Gisselle's funeral, Rebecca was so emotional that she just hoped she could hold it together long enough to say goodbye to her friend. When it was her time to speak, she stood at the podium and began by telling everyone who she was and that Gisselle had been one of her best friends. Gisselle was a fighter, but this fight was bigger than she was. She loved life like no one I have ever met. She always had a smile on her face, even when she was in pain, because she didn't want anyone to know she was hurting. She was one of the greatest and strongest people I have ever known. So, to my best friend—I will miss you and will never, ever forget you. I'm not going to say goodbye to you, so until we meet again, Gisselle, rest in peace, my friend. I love you.

Rebecca took her seat beside Jill and Andrew. Her eyes were filled with tears as she listened to others speak about Gisselle. It was hard for her to say goodbye to her best friend. As they left the funeral service, Mrs. Reed caught up with Rebecca before she left and handed her an envelope; it was the last letter from Gisselle to her.

After they got home from the funeral, Rebecca went to her room to change. Before she did, she opened the envelope with the letter from Gisselle inside. It read:

Rebecca, I guess if you're reading this, I must have lost my fight. I don't want you to be sad—I'm in a much better place. I want you to know that I thought of you as my very best friend. I will miss you dearly. I want you to remember me always; just look at the locket, ok? Let Sebastian, Savannah, and Cheyenne know that I also loved them dearly, but you will always hold a special place in my heart. I will forever love you, my BFF.

Love you always, Gisselle.

Rebecca's eyes filled with tears. She was going to miss her friend.

That evening, as they had dinner, it was quiet considering the events of the day. Rebecca knew that Gisselle wouldn't want her to be sad, so she suggested to Jill and Andrew that they should ride the SUVs around the property for a while—just to take her mind off the day's events, if nothing else. They agreed.

As they rode around the property, Rebecca was amazed once again at how beautiful it looked. Every time she saw the scenery, she noticed something new. It seemed more beautiful each time

she looked at it. When they reached the piece of property she loved so much, she asked Jill and Andrew if it would be possible for her to build her forever home on that land someday. Of course, they were more than happy for her to do so.

Chapter 7

After high school, Rebecca decided she would take a few months off before heading to college. She had already been accepted into one of the best design schools in the city.

Jill called Rebecca on the intercom and asked her to come to her office because she had something she wanted to discuss with her. Rebecca made her way downstairs to Jill's office to see what she wanted. When she got there, Jill told her to sit down, and Rebecca did as she said.

Jill started by telling her that she knew Rebecca wanted to go into the fashion design field, but instead of going to college right away, she wanted to know if Rebecca would like to work with her for a while. "I can teach you everything you need to know. I already know what you are capable of and what you want to do—bridal dresses. I can show you all the ropes. There is nothing like first-hand experience. I have built this company from the ground up. You are an amazing designer, and I would love it very much if we worked together. You are probably one of the most talented designers I have ever met, and I'm not just saying that because you are my daughter."

They both grinned.

Rebecca looked at her and said, "You would really take me under your wing and teach me everything?"

"Yes! Absolutely," Jill said. "So, what do you say?"

Rebecca was at a loss for words at first. Then, she looked at Jill and said, "You really think I am that good?"

"Oh yes! I know you are that good, Rebecca. I've seen your sketches, and they are like none I have ever seen before. You have a great eye for fashion—especially bridal gowns."

Rebecca thought for a moment and said, "Jill, if you have that much confidence in me, then I would be crazy not to accept your offer. I consider it an honor coming from one of the best designers I know, and I would love to work for you and have you mentor me. I can't wait to get started."

Jill said, "You can start Monday morning. Meet me in my office at eight o'clock."

She went over all of the rules she had always followed and also what would be expected of her. She did say that there would be quite a bit of traveling to all of her shops in the near future, which were everywhere. They discussed her pay, and Jill told her she would get paid every Friday. Rebecca was quite impressed with what she would be making and couldn't wait to get started on Monday.

Rebecca was excited about starting work for Jill, but she was also a little scared. She knew Jill had high expectations and hoped she could meet all of them. She was happy to be working with one of the most experienced fashion designers in all of Oklahoma, but she also had to remind herself to forget that Jill was her mother.

Rebecca took this time to look at all the other bedrooms Jill had told her to check, just in case she liked one of them more than the one she had now. As she walked down the hallway to the next bedroom on the left, she opened the door and thought it was a great room. It also had its own bathroom, but it wasn't as big as the one she currently had.

When she got to the last room, she realized it was a suite. It had about four rooms, and she could see all the potential it held. She would have much more closet space than she had now—her current closets were already pretty full, thanks to Jill. She would have her own space as well as a place to start her design work. It was perfect.

She decided she would talk to Jill about moving into the suite as soon as she could. She hoped Jill would be okay with it. She went back to her room and started working on some designs. She always wondered why they wanted such a big house if it was just the two of them.

After dinner, Rebecca asked, "Jill, I was wondering… I did go look at the other rooms like you asked, to see if there was one I liked better. Well, there is one that caught my eye. I really like the suite."

Jill looked at her and said, "I was hoping you would pick that one. Since we'll be working together now, you do need a bigger space. I'll have the housekeeping crew come in tomorrow and clean it from top to bottom. It hasn't been used in a while. We will need to get you a much bigger desk, also."

Andrew looked at both of them and said, "Looks like my two favorite girls are gonna be very busy."

Jill told him that Rebecca would be a great asset to her business and that she really needed the help. However, she had to face the fact that she and Jill were two very different designers. Jill loved everyday clothing, whereas Rebecca's dream was to make a bride's dream come true. She had even started sketching bridesmaids' dresses and flower girl dresses. This was something she would take up later on; right now, she was to focus on Jill's line and all of her shops.

She couldn't wait to get started.

On Monday at 8:00 a.m., she was at Jill's office, ready to get started working. Jill was already there. Jill had stacks of folders and papers on her desk, along with a lot of spreadsheets. Rebecca walked in and was overwhelmed by the paperwork. Jill greeted her and explained that this was the time of year for inventory in all of her shops, and that the next day, each shop would do a thorough inventory of everything and send all the paperwork to her.

Then she would go over everything, see what sold the best at all of her shops, and decide if she needed to swap things around—especially if one shop was selling her line better than another. "This is the business end of my shop, which I want you to learn first. Designing will come later, and I know you'll have no problem with that. I just want you to understand what it's like to be a businesswoman."

As Jill gathered all of the spreadsheets from last year's inventory, she had Rebecca sort them. The next day, after all the inventories were done, they would compare them to last year's and see where they stood in terms of selling her clothes. Once the inventories were completed, they would have a better idea of what

her biggest sellers were, and then she could stock her shops accordingly.

Jill told her there would be some traveling in her job and that she tried to visit each of the shops at least once a year, though sometimes she didn't make it to all of them. As Rebecca looked at the spreadsheets, she glanced at Jill and asked, "Just how many shops do you have?"

Jill laughed. "So far, I think I have around 37, all in different states."

"You *think*?" Rebecca said. "You mean you don't really know?"

Jill replied, "To be honest with you, I really don't. That's why I hired you—so you can help me be more efficient."

Rebecca realized then that she had a lot of work to do. She handed Rebecca a printout of all of her shops with their phone numbers, the store manager's name, and even a list of every employee in each shop that worked for her, which she said was all up to date.

Rebecca got busy aligning the spreadsheets with the locations of the shops, and when she counted all of them, there were 43. She told Jill she had 43 shops, not 37. Jill looked at her and smiled, "Now you see why I need help?"

Rebecca smiled and said, "Yes."

Jill pointed to all the file cabinets she had in her office. She said, "Anything you need to know is in these file cabinets. Past

inventories, how much each shop made in the past three years—anything you need to know will be in there. The older files are stored in my storage room down in the basement. I never throw anything away. I have everything from the very beginning.

"Now, Rebecca, what I really want us to work on is visiting each of my shops personally to see how things are going. After all the inventory sheets are sent to me tomorrow, we will know which ones we need to visit first. Some shops need more attention than others, so we need to find out which ones need the most help." Rebecca was excited about being able to visit each of Jill's shops and get a better idea of how things were run in each one. Jill handed her all the spreadsheets from each of her shops and told her to go over every one with a fine-tooth comb. "I want to know that each one meets my expectations."

Rebecca really didn't know what she wanted her to do with all the spreadsheets, but she would do her best. Since this was all new to her, she figured she would start with last year's figures and go from there. Then, if she needed to dig deeper, she would. She had a good idea of where to start, so she began gathering all the information she needed for each shop, and when she got the inventory sheet the next day, she could compare all the records accordingly.

She spent the rest of the day getting all the previous information for each shop together. She and Jill worked until about 5:00 p.m. that day. Rebecca didn't realize it was so late until Miss Hettie came over the intercom, letting them know it was dinnertime.

As Rebecca and Jill headed to the kitchen, Jill looked at her and said, “I hope your first day wasn’t too overwhelming. It gets pretty crazy sometimes.”

Rebecca smiled at her and said she enjoyed every bit of it and knew exactly where to start with all the information Jill had given her. Miss Hettie could tell Rebecca looked very tired after all—she and Jill had worked all day long without a break. They had both been so busy that the time just got away from them.

Jill excused herself after dinner and went to her room. Rebecca also decided it was time to call it a night. She went to her room, got a shower, changed into her pajamas, and went straight to bed.

The next morning, as they started to work, Jill told her that it would be another long day. Throughout the day, they would be getting all the inventory information from each store. As all the information came in, Jill and Rebecca could start to work. Jill went over all the information she would need in order to get the final results she was looking for.

As the information continued to come in, they started to compare all the figures with last year’s. Most of the ones they had already gotten matched up. They seemed to be feeling good about the results—until Rebecca noticed a sizable discrepancy with one of the shops in Ohio. As she showed Jill what she had found, Jill became intrigued with what she had to say. As Rebecca explained what she meant, she told her, “It seems to me that this shop has ordered a lot of extra stock, but for some reason, the sales weren’t what they should be. If you ordered extra stock and the sales weren’t up to par, then you would have a lot of extra stock in your stockroom. And why would you order more?”

Jill looked over what Rebecca was looking at and said, “You are right. Why would you order extra stock and your sales not be going up?” Something was definitely wrong here. They both decided this shop would be first on their list to check into.

Jill told her the manager of this shop was Macy Andrews, and she had been with her for about three years. Rebecca said, “You ever thought about doing an *Undercover Boss* thing?”

Jill told her, “No! I’ve seen it on TV where people who owned businesses would go in disguise and check on their companies, but I’ve never thought about doing it. I don’t think I could pull it off—**but you could**. Would you like to do something like this?”

Rebecca thought this was intriguing and said she would love to do it. “But how do we do it?” she asked.

Jill said, “That is no problem. I will let Macy know that, since she is doing so well at the shop and sales are up, I will get her more help. That’s where you come in. That would mean you would have to fly to Ohio and work in the shop for a while and see if everything is on the up and up, so to speak.”

Rebecca was excited about the idea but also a little nervous. Still, she agreed she would be willing to do it. Jill told her not to worry, that she would take care of all the technicalities and would let her know when everything was set into place.

Since all of Jill’s shops seemed to be in order except for this one, that was where they would begin. Jill wanted to go to each one, but she really wanted to focus on this one first. She thought Rebecca had come across something that didn’t seem right. So, Jill had to trust her instincts and make sure everything was up to

par. Jill was really hoping that everything was okay with this shop; she hated the thought of anyone trying to take advantage of her.

Jill made all the arrangements for Rebecca to start work at the shop the following Monday. She had to admit that when she talked to the manager, Macy Andrews, about bringing in some extra help, Macy didn't seem too keen on the idea. She said she didn't think she needed any help at this time. But Jill was so persistent about getting her some help that Macy eventually backed down. As Jill hung up the phone after talking to her, she got the feeling that something could very well be wrong. She just had a bad feeling about it.

She called Rebecca to her office to go over everything she needed to do. Jill explained that she would fly out on Saturday, stay at a hotel, and go to the shop on Monday. Jill gave her all the paperwork she would need, including the document from the temp agency, which she would need to make everything look straightforward. She handed her the flight schedule and told her that a suite was already booked for her at a local hotel not far from the shop. Then she asked Rebecca, "Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

Rebecca told her that she did. Jill handed her a company credit card and told her to use it for anything she needed. Rebecca went to her room and started getting ready for her trip. This would be the first time she had flown by herself, and she was going to a place she had never been before. She was to pick up a rental car when she got off the plane. She would have plenty of time to rest up and gather her thoughts before going to work on Monday. She began to pack for her trip, but she wasn't sure what to pack. She decided on some dress clothes as well as blue jeans, a few dresses, and some shoes. She figured if she needed anything else, she

would get it while she was there. She didn't know how long she would be there, but hopefully she would find everything in order and be able to return right away.

Jill had told her before she left the office that if things got too bad, "Me and your dad are only a phone call away, and if there is any sign of trouble, you are to call the police." Rebecca told her she understood and that she would do as she asked.

As they had dinner that night, Miss Hettie made her favorite meal, which was Mexican food. Andrew looked concerned about her doing this. He said, "Rebecca, you know if you need us, you know what to do. I'm sure your mother has gone over this with you. Promise you will call us every night before you go to bed, just so we know you're okay." After dinner, she hugged them both and told them not to worry that they had raised her to know that when something didn't feel right, she could always count on them to be there.

She helped Miss Hettie clean up after dinner. Miss Hettie told her she would dearly miss her and to be very careful. Then she told her she had something for her. She handed her a can of pepper spray, just in case she needed it, and said, "Don't be afraid to use it." Rebecca took the can of spray and headed to her room.

She was to leave the next day for the airport by 10:00 a.m. Her plane would leave at 12:10, but she had to be there early.

The next morning, Jill and Andrew took her to the airport and waited with her until it was time for her to board the plane. She hugged them both and told them not to worry because she had the best parents in the world and that they had taught her well. They

told her to call them once she got to her hotel room so they would know she had made it, okay. She told them she would.

As she boarded the plane, she looked back, and they were still there watching her. She waved at them and then turned around and walked away.

When she landed at the airport in Columbus, Ohio, she went to get her luggage and then made her way to where she would pick up her rental car. She filled out all the paperwork, and then they handed her the keys to the car. She took her luggage and put it in the trunk of the car. When she got in, she turned on her GPS so she could find her way to the hotel.

As she drove away, she noticed how busy this city really was. She had no problem finding the hotel in which she was to stay. She parked her car in front of the door and went inside. She told the receptionist who she was, and the receptionist pulled her name up right away. She handed her the key to her room, and Rebecca went to park her car.

She got all of her luggage out of the car, which took her two trips because she just knew she had overpacked. When she got to her room, she opened the door and looked around. Jill had picked out a very nice suite for her, which she didn't feel like she needed. She went to get the rest of her luggage from the car. When she had finally gotten everything into her room, she decided she would call her parents and let them know she had made it safe and sound. Jill answered on the first ring and told her she was so glad she had made it safe and sound. Rebecca told her she was going to unpack and go downstairs to eat her dinner and that she would call them before she went to bed.

Rebecca made her way downstairs to the restaurant of the hotel for dinner. The waitress seated her quickly, took her order, and said she would be right back with her drink. The waitress brought her drink to her, and as Rebecca was waiting for her meal, she got to thinking about what her first day of work would be like. She was getting kind of nervous about the whole thing. This was the first time she had been away from Jill, Andrew, and Miss Hettie for a long period of time. Although she could talk to them on the phone, it just wasn't the same.

Rebecca decided she would get her shower and then take it easy. As soon as she was done with her shower, she called Jill once again to let her know she was getting ready to turn in for the night. She told Jill she would call her tomorrow and that they could go over everything she needed to look for when she started her new job. She hung up the phone and crawled into bed, and before long, she was fast asleep.

She woke up early the next morning. She thought that after she had breakfast, she would drive to where Jill's shop was, so she would have an idea of how long it would take her to get there. She got dressed, put on her makeup, and pulled her hair up. She grabbed her purse and keys and headed out the door.

She decided she would stop at one of the restaurants along the way instead of eating at the hotel. She put the address in her GPS, connected it to her rental car, and off she went. The GPS said she was only eight miles from the shop. She pulled out of the hotel and headed down the road. She saw a restaurant, so she thought she would stop to have breakfast.

She went inside. It was a pretty nice place, and the people were very nice. She ordered her breakfast, which was pretty much

the same thing she would have at home. She also thought that since her room had a kitchenette, she would stop at the grocery store to pick up some things so she wouldn't have to go out every time she wanted something to eat.

After she ate her breakfast and paid her check, she headed to the shop. It was only a few more miles down the highway. She parked in one of the back parking spaces. She had seen several people going into the shop, and most of them came out empty-handed. She didn't understand that—surely there was something in there that they liked.

Rebecca was about to drive away when she saw a lady come out of the shop who worked there. Rebecca could see her name tag on her blouse. The lady got into her car and pulled around to the back of the building. Rebecca decided she would follow her, but she had to be very careful not to be seen.

As she slowly made her way toward the back of the shop, she found a parking space at the side of the building, where she had a pretty good view of her. She saw her putting things in the back seat of her car. She had to take a second look. It was Jill's clothes that she was putting in her car. About five minutes later, she got into her car and drove around to the other side of the building. As Rebecca turned her car around, she saw her come out the other end of the building, so she decided to follow her. Rebecca didn't follow too closely; she stayed at least two cars behind.

The car eventually turned into what looked like a subdivision, and finally into a driveway. Rebecca pulled over to the curb and watched as she got out of her car, opened the back door, and picked up a stack of clothes. She made about three trips carrying clothes into the house.

Rebecca pulled away, noticing the name on the mailbox: **Andrews**. So, this was Macy Andrews' house—the manager of Jill's shop. Rebecca couldn't wait to get home so she could call Jill and tell her what had just happened.

On her way back to the hotel, she spotted a grocery store and stopped to buy a few things. What she thought would be "just a few things" turned out to be much more. When she got back to the hotel, she parked her car, grabbed a luggage cart, loaded all her groceries onto it, and headed to her room.

After making her way upstairs to her suite, she unloaded her groceries and started putting them away. As she did, she dialed Jill's number and put her on speakerphone. She told Jill everything that had happened, and Jill said she would be on the next plane out—she wanted to catch her red-handed.

Jill did scold her for what she had done, but she was also very proud of her. Later that evening, Jill called back and told her she would arrive around lunchtime the next day. Then she and Rebecca would sit down and discuss their next steps.

Rebecca told her that when she started work the next morning, she would try to find out as much as possible. Jill told her to be very careful and not to say too much, and that once she arrived, she would take care of everything.

Rebecca got up early the next day and got ready for work. She put on her dress clothes, did her hair and makeup, and waited until it was time to head to the shop. She had a bowl of cereal and a cup of coffee. Then she rinsed out her bowl and coffee cup and put them in the dishwasher. She grabbed her purse and keys and headed downstairs.

It took her about fifteen minutes to get to work. She pulled into a parking space and got out of her car. When she went inside the shop, she told the lady at the register that she was there to see Macy Andrews and that she would be starting work that day. The lady introduced herself as Margie and told her it was nice to meet her. Margie was a well-dressed, middle-aged woman. She said she had been there since the shop first opened. When her husband passed away, she needed something to keep herself busy. It was supposed to be temporary, but *as you can see,* it didn't turn out that way, she said with a smile as she walked away.

She went to get Macy. Rebecca introduced herself as Rebecca Donovan. Macy took her to her office and went over everything about the job and what would be expected of her. She made her a name tag, had her fill out paperwork, and told her she would have a work schedule for her by the end of the day. Rebecca could tell she didn't really want her there by the way she acted toward her.

Macy then took her back to the front of the shop and told her she would be working with Margie, who would show her everything she needed to know. Margie showed her around the shop, pointing out where the restrooms and break room were. Then she showed her the stockroom, which had very little stock in it.

Rebecca commented to Margie that they must sell a lot of clothes since the stockroom was so empty. Margie smiled and said that one day it would be full, and before you knew it, within a few days, it would be empty again. She added that Macy would be placing another order with the owner to get more stock for the shop, and hopefully, it would arrive soon.

It was almost time for the shop to open, so they headed back to the front. Macy opened the doors. Margie began showing Rebecca how to use the cash register. Rebecca also helped keep the racks organized and greeted customers when they came in.

Many customers told her that when they asked about certain pieces of clothing, those items would already be out of stock before they could buy them. They were always told by the manager that another shipment would be coming soon, yet it never seemed to arrive. Rebecca didn't know what to say. Something was definitely wrong here.

As the day went on, Rebecca asked Margie about Macy and mentioned that she didn't seem happy to have her there. Margie explained that Macy didn't like having too many people working in the shop because she didn't trust them, and the fewer employees she had, the less she had to worry about.

"How many people work here?" Rebecca asked.

"We have four, including you—and that's not counting Macy," Margie replied. "We have two daytime employees, who are you and me now, and two part-time employees who work in the evenings and on weekends."

The rest of Rebecca's day went by smoothly. She noticed that Macy stayed in her office most of the time. As customers came into the store, Rebecca greeted them and helped many of them pick out outfits that suited them. They thanked her for all her help, and after they chose what they wanted, Margie helped her ring them up at the register. Margie was very impressed with Rebecca's ability to sell clothing and told her so.

When it was Rebecca's lunchtime, she grabbed her purse and keys and headed out of the shop to get something quick to eat. She went to a little fast-food restaurant close to the shop. When she got her food at the drive-thru, she headed back to the shop and decided she would just sit in the parking lot and eat her lunch. She could see Macy talking to Margie and wondered what was going on. Margie didn't seem happy from the look on her face.

Rebecca finished her lunch and headed back into the shop. She put her purse and keys back in her locker and went to the front of the shop. Margie was very distant toward her for a while.

It was time for Margie to go to lunch. Macy told Rebecca that she would be in her office if she needed any help or had any questions. As the shop started getting more and more customers, Rebecca began to feel overwhelmed. She helped one customer after another, and things were actually going pretty smoothly. Rebecca made a lot of sales during this time. She was proud of herself—she was even able to use the register and ring up all the sales on her own without any help.

It wasn't long before Margie returned from lunch.

Rebecca looked at her and asked if she was okay. Margie told her she was fine and explained that she and Macy didn't get along very well at times. "She's always trying to find something wrong with everything I do," Margie said.

Rebecca asked her why. That's when Margie told her that her twin sister, Hettie, worked for Jillian Malone, the owner of the shop. Rebecca was in shock—she really wasn't expecting that. So, this was Hettie's sister. She had often heard Hettie talk about a sister and how close they were. Once Rebecca found out that they

were sisters, she began to see the resemblance. Margie continued to tell her that Macy was always thinking she was telling her sister things, and that her sister was then telling Mrs. Malone—but she reassured Rebecca that she wasn't. Rebecca told her it sounded like Macy was paranoid about something, and that maybe she did have something to hide. Margie said she had noticed a lot of things about the shop that didn't seem right, but she always kept her opinions to herself.

As their day ended and the other employees took over, they both headed home. Rebecca told Margie goodbye and said she would see her in the morning.

Rebecca couldn't wait to get to her car so she could call Jill. Jill answered on the first ring.

She asked Jill if she had made it in. Jill said yes, and she had been able to get the room right next to hers—it was a connecting room to the suite Rebecca was in. Rebecca told her she would be home in about fifteen minutes and that they had a lot to discuss, then hung up the phone.

When Rebecca arrived back at the hotel, she unlocked her door and went inside. Jill was already there. She had opened the connecting door between the rooms. Rebecca hugged her. As they sat at the table, Rebecca told her everything. Rebecca asked Jill if she knew that Miss Hettie's twin sister worked there as well. Jill told her she knew Hettie's sister had worked in one of her shops, but didn't know it was this particular one.

Jill said they needed to decide how to handle the situation. Rebecca suggested hiring a private investigator to watch Macy for a while and see if she was doing anything illegal. Jill thought it

was a good idea. She called Andrew and told him everything that was going on and what she wanted to do. He told her he would talk to their attorneys to see if they could recommend a good private investigator in the area.

Jill decided they would order room service instead of going out to eat. She didn't want to take the chance of Macy seeing her. As they sat at the table eating, Jill told her what a great job she had done so far and that she really had a good eye for business. Rebecca continued telling her what some of the customers had said about the shop and how they wished it could be stocked better, especially with more of Jill's new designs that they had seen at other shops.

As Jill was getting ready to go to her bedroom, her phone rang. She picked it up to see who it was. It was Macy. Jill and Rebecca were still sitting at the table when Jill answered the call. She put the phone on speaker and motioned for Rebecca to stay very quiet.

As Jill said hello, Macy's voice came over the phone. Jill made small talk with her, asking how she was. Macy told her things were going well. She said the new employee had started working that day, but she really didn't know if she was going to work out. Jill told her that since it was her first day, she needed to give her a chance—and Jill's voice was very stern when she said it.

Then Macy told her she needed more stock for the shop because they were starting to get low, and that sales were looking very good. Jill told her how happy she was to hear that and said she would get a truckload there by the first of next week.

Macy said that the new designs were doing very well and asked if Jill could send as many of the new pieces as possible, because customers kept requesting them. She added that she didn't want to lose any of her frequent customers. Macy thanked Jill for always being so accommodating. Jill told her to let her know if she needed anything else and thanked her for calling.

As Jill hung up the phone, she said, "She is a real work of art."

Rebecca agreed. They decided to turn in for the evening. They said their good nights to each other, and before Jill could close her door, Rebecca told her how glad she was that she was there. Jill smiled and closed her door.

Rebecca went to get ready for bed. She had a hard time falling asleep that night. When she finally drifted off, it wasn't long before her alarm clock went off. Rebecca got up and made coffee, struggling to stay awake. After getting dressed, she noticed Jill sitting at the table having her coffee. Jill was on the phone with Andrew, the call on speaker. He was telling her that he had located a private investigator and that Jill had an appointment with him later that morning.

Rebecca said, "Hi!" to Andrew as she poured herself a cup of coffee and told him she missed him. He told her to be very careful because they still didn't know what they were dealing with. He told them both that he loved them and hoped they would be home soon.

Once Rebecca was ready, she said goodbye to Jill and told her she would see her later that day.

Chapter 8

When Rebecca got to the shop, Margie held the door open for her and locked it so no one could get in until it was time to open. Margie could tell that Rebecca looked tired. She asked if she was okay, and Rebecca told her that she hadn't slept very well. They both started getting the shop ready for opening.

It wasn't long before customers began to show up. Margie was busy helping a customer while Rebecca was cleaning the mirrors. Rebecca thought now would be a good time to talk to Macy about her schedule. She knocked on Macy's office door, and Macy told her to come in. Rebecca said she hated to bother her, but was wondering if she had her schedule made out yet. Macy said yes and handed her a piece of paper.

"Will that be all, Rebecca?" Macy asked.

Rebecca thanked her, then turned and walked out, closing the door behind her.

As Rebecca looked over her schedule, she saw that Macy had her working Monday through Thursday, from eight to four, and that it was meant to be her regular schedule. The rest of the day was very busy, and the shop seemed to be doing very well. Maybe Rebecca had been wrong about Macy, and she even started to feel bad about doubting her—until she noticed that some of the clothes on the racks were not the ones Jill had designed.

She continued looking through the other clothes and could see they weren't Jill's either. Even though they had Jill's logo embroidered on the inside of each piece, there was something about the logo that didn't seem right. Rebecca told Margie that she had seen a dress she liked and was thinking about buying it. Margie told her that only Macy could ring up an employee sale.

Rebecca picked out a dress and set it aside. She would get with Macy at the end of the day so she could purchase it.

Macy was busy all day bringing out clothes from the stockroom for Rebecca and Margie to sort and place where they belonged. Rebecca had not seen these clothes before. She didn't know where they came from, but she could tell they were not Jill's. They were much cheaper-made—not terrible, but definitely not Jill's work. Rebecca couldn't figure out where they were coming from. They weren't there that morning. Margie made a remark to Macy, saying, "I see we must have gotten a shipment in. I can't wait to see them."

Macy said, "No. These are from her other shop on the other side of town, and I thought they would hold us over until we get our next shipment. I picked them up on my way into work this morning."

She had several items, and before long, all the racks were full again. Rebecca could tell that if someone didn't know Jill's clothes well, they wouldn't be able to tell the difference.

Just before it was time for Rebecca to go home, she asked Macy if she would ring up her sale for her. Macy told her she would. Rebecca went to get her purse.

While Rebecca was standing at the register and Macy was ringing up her dress, she mentioned that she had a wedding to attend in a few weeks and thought this dress would be perfect. She handed Macy cash for the purchase—she didn't want to take any chances using the credit card Jill had given her.

As Macy was putting the dress in a bag, Rebecca thanked her and headed out the door. She put the dress in the back seat and drove back to the hotel.

When she got to her room, she laid the dress on her bed and went to look for Jill. Jill had left her a note on the table saying that the investigator was running late and she would be back shortly.

About fifteen minutes later, Rebecca heard Jill come into the living room. Rebecca had two dresses lying across her bed—one was an original dress of Jill's, and one was not. She asked Jill to pick out which one was hers.

Jill looked puzzled, but did as she asked. She studied both dresses and knew right away which one was hers.

"What is this all about?" Jill asked.

Rebecca picked up the dress she had just purchased at the shop. "Jill," she said, "I just bought this dress at your shop."

Jill looked at it and said, "That's not one of my dresses."

Rebecca told her she already knew that and asked her to look at the logo. Jill examined it and said, "It's close, but it's not my logo."

Rebecca explained how Macy had brought in clothing earlier that day and placed them on her racks, claiming she had gotten them from one of Jill's other shops on the other side of town to hold them over until the next shipment arrived. Jill went to her computer, pulled up all her shop locations, and said, "Rebecca, I don't have any other shops near there."

That's when it hit her — Macy had to be taking her clothes, swapping them with someone else's, and passing them off as Jill's. She could not believe this was happening.

Rebecca asked, "But how can we prove it?"

Jill took a moment, then began telling her how her appointment with the private investigator had gone. This new information would have to be relayed to him as soon as possible so he'd know what was happening and what to watch for. He was scheduled to start his investigation the very next day.

Jill took his card from her purse and called him. She explained what had happened and what they suspected might be going on. He thanked her for the information, said it would be very helpful, and assured her he would keep her updated.

They ordered room service and ate their dinner.

By the end of the week, the private investigator called Jill and told her that they really needed to talk. He said he had all the information he believed she would need. Jill told him to come to their hotel room so he could go over everything with them.

He told her he would be there later that day and that he would call when he was on his way. Jill and Rebecca had not expected

to hear from him this quickly, but they were both excited to find out what he had discovered.

Later that day, Jill received a call from Mr. Gleason, letting her know he was on his way. About ten minutes later, there was a knock at the door. Jill opened it and invited Mr. Gleason inside. Rebecca immediately noticed the file he was carrying and how thick it was. Jill introduced him to Rebecca, and the three of them sat down at the table. Jill offered him a cup of coffee.

As they settled in, he began by telling them that they had every reason to be suspicious of Macy Andrews. He opened the file and laid out the pictures he had taken. The photos showed Macy going into the shop after closing and loading clothes into her car, making several trips back and forth. Then there were pictures of her bringing clothes back into the shop—"These are probably the ones she tried to pass off as yours," he explained.

He also showed them pictures of Macy unloading clothes at her house.

"After I dug a little deeper," he continued, "I found out exactly what she was doing. She was taking your clothes, replacing your design logo with her own, and selling them on a website she created. The name of the website is *Creations by Macy*. She was also going to different stores around the city, buying clothes at much lower prices, putting your logo on them, and selling them at your shop. That way, you would never know that the shop wasn't making money."

He took out his computer, pulled up the website, and showed it to them. Jill's mouth dropped when she saw her clothes. Macy

was even selling them for a much higher price. He said she had been doing this for some time.

He then pulled out more pictures—this time of two people entering Macy's house late at night and not leaving until early the next morning. Rebecca immediately recognized them. They were the two girls who worked at Jill's shop part-time.

After further investigation, he explained that Macy had arranged for UPS to make daily stops at her house. She would package the clothes and send them to her customers. "I can almost bet that her house is full of your clothes," he said.

After Jill pulled herself together, she asked him, "So now what do I do?"

He told her that she needed to notify the authorities right away. He handed her the file. Jill thanked Mr. Gleason for all the work he had done, and then he headed to the door.

Jill immediately got Andrew on the phone and told him everything. He said he would be on the next flight and that she shouldn't do anything until he arrived. Andrew came later that night; Rebecca was already asleep, so she didn't hear him come in.

When she woke up the next morning, she could hear him and Jill talking in the kitchen. Rebecca was relieved that he was there. She got dressed and went into the kitchen, where she hugged him. Jill was fixing breakfast. Rebecca poured herself a cup of coffee and sat at the table.

Andrew looked at her and told her how proud he was of her. He said, “Rebecca, we probably wouldn’t have known this if it weren’t for you.” He continued by telling them that he had already notified the authorities and that detectives would be coming today to speak with them.

Rebecca was glad that it would soon be over—she was ready to go home.

When the detectives arrived, Jill and Andrew showed them the file and went over everything with them. The detectives took both Jill’s and Rebecca’s statements. They told them that they had enough evidence to make an arrest of everyone involved. Of course, they would need a warrant for the arrests, and they would also have to get a search warrant for her house. Jill would have to identify the stolen clothing.

Jill asked when this would happen and mentioned that she would like to be there when Macy was arrested. They said they had no problem with her being present and that they would be in touch as soon as all the paperwork was ready.

Jill told them that Macy didn’t work weekends and that she would be back at work on Monday morning. Jill was ready to see Macy face-to-face. Rebecca asked Jill if it was okay for her to be there as well. Jill told her absolutely—she wanted Rebecca to be the one to fire her, and they both smiled.

On Monday morning, Rebecca showed up to work. Margie was already there. Macy was in her office, as usual. Rebecca put all of her things away and went to see Margie. They got the shop ready to open. As Rebecca was unlocking the door, she noticed

that the police had already arrived. Jill and Andrew were behind them.

Margie saw the police cars and started wondering what was going on. As the officers entered the shop, they told Margie that they were there to see Macy Andrews and asked if she was present. She told them yes and that she would go get her.

When Macy came out of her office and saw the officers, she started getting very nervous. The officers asked her if she was Macy Andrews, and she said yes. They proceeded to tell her that they had a warrant for her arrest and instructed her to turn around while a female officer handcuffed her. She asked them what this was all about, and they read off the charges for which she was being accused. They then read her…her rights.

About that time, Jill and Andrew walked in. Jill looked at her and asked her why she did it. Macy didn't say a word. She simply said that she wanted a lawyer. Jill told her that her daughter had something she would like to say to her.

Rebecca walked up to her and said, "That's right. Jillian Malone is my mother. Macy, my mother has been very good to you, and then you do something like this to her. You might have gotten away with it if you hadn't gotten so greedy." Macy just looked at her. Then Rebecca said, "By the way, you're FIRED!"

Jill told the officers to get her out of her shop. Jill locked the door as soon as they left and put the *Closed* sign back on the glass. Jill hugged Rebecca and said, "How did that feel?" Rebecca told her it felt great to finally be able to do that. Macy had made her life hard the whole time she was there.

Margie was standing off to the side in amazement at what had just happened. Jill went up and hugged Margie and told her how nice it was to finally get to meet her, and how unfortunate it was for it to be under these circumstances. Jill told her that she was sorry she had to witness what had just happened. Margie smiled and said, “Don’t be. I loved every minute of it. Macy got everything she deserved.”

Margie walked up to Rebecca and said, “So you’re the Rebecca that my sister speaks so highly of.” Rebecca just smiled and said, “I guess so.”

Jill went to the shop office and made a sign to hang on the front door that said, **CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE!** and hung it on the inside of the door. Jill asked Margie if she would be willing to help them get the shop back in order, as it was supposed to be. Margie gladly accepted.

Jill’s phone rang.

It was a police officer who wanted her to come to the Andrews house to identify her stolen dresses. She wrote down the address he had given her. She told Margie to take the day off and that they would start to work on everything the next day. Margie got her things and left. Jill shut off all the lights, made sure everything was locked, and then they were off to the Andrews house.

When they arrived, there were several police cars there. People were standing outside their houses, wanting to know what was going on. As they walked through the front door, Jill could not believe her eyes. There were clothes everywhere. The more they walked around, the more they found. Jill didn’t think there would be this many— even the basement was full. There had to

be several thousand dollars' worth of clothes throughout the whole house.

She had to sit down for a minute to take it all in. She looked at Andrew and said, "Now what!" Rebecca had never seen so many clothes in all her life; like Jill, she could hardly believe it. Andrew knew this was really getting to Jill. He told her not to worry—he would go rent a truck and get everything out of there and back to the shop. One of the officers was nice enough to take him to where he could rent a truck.

About an hour later, he was back. They spent the remainder of the day getting everything into the truck. It took two big truckloads to get everything Macy had stolen. They were running out of room in the stockroom, so they had to start putting things wherever they could find space. Jill made one last look around the house to make sure she had gotten everything. As she left, the officer locked the door.

After they had gotten everything to the shop, Andrew told them that was enough for one day. They were all very tired. Jill and Rebecca followed Andrew so he could return the truck. Andrew asked them if they would like to get something to eat. They were all very hungry; they had not eaten anything since breakfast. When they got back to the hotel room, they all took showers and went straight to bed.

They all woke up early the next morning. They knew it was going to be another long day. Jill called Margie and asked if she would like to join them for breakfast before they got started. She said she would, and they agreed to meet at the little diner not far from the shop. As they ate their breakfast, Margie asked about Hettie and wondered how she was doing. Jill told her Hettie was

great and that she was glad Hettie was there to take care of them all.

When they finished their breakfast, they headed to the shop to get started. Margie could not believe all the clothes. Jill told them, as they were getting started, that they needed to remove all the clothes from the racks that were not hers. So, Margie and Rebecca got started on that and put everything in a pile. Jill and Andrew were busy going through all the clothes they had gotten from Macy's and writing down the price of each one so that Jill would know the total cost and how much was recovered. By the end of the day, they had gone through every piece of clothing and had also put up more racks to hang even more clothing. It wasn't long before the media got news of what had happened, and reporters were lined up outside. Jill decided she needed to talk to them, so she unlocked the door and went outside. She answered one question after another. She also announced that anyone who had bought any of the clothes from the shop over the last two years should bring them in, and if the item wasn't an original, she would gladly replace it with the real thing. She came back into the store, and the reporters started leaving.

Later that evening, Rebecca and Margie finished with the stockroom and had everything neat and orderly. Jill was in the office, going over files and looking through the computer that Macy used daily for the business. Jill had been in there for hours, so Rebecca thought she would go check on her. Jill was sitting there crying. Rebecca didn't say a word; she just went up behind her and hugged her. She told Jill how sorry she was that she had to go through all of this. Jill managed to pull herself together and told Rebecca that she was also sorry she had to go through the same.

The next day, Jill decided to remove anything that had to do with the shop when Macy was in charge and start fresh. She planned to have the computer shipped to her accountant along with all the files from the past two years, letting him go over everything. Jill replaced the old computer with a new one and got it all set up. When she opened the safe to collect whatever money was left, she wasn't surprised to find it empty.

Jill thought to herself, *I'm going to need a new manager for the shop, along with some new employees.* She called Rebecca and Margie into the office and had them both sit down. Looking at Margie, she said, "I know you've been here for a while and that you understand how everything is run. Would you consider being the manager of this shop and running it for me? I really need someone I can trust." Margie was in shock; she wasn't expecting this. Jill had already spoken to Rebecca about it, and she thought it was a great idea. Before Margie could say anything, Jill said, "Rebecca and I are willing to stay for a couple more weeks to help you get acquainted with everything if you accept the position."

Margie looked at her and said, "I really don't know what to say." Jill told her she could start by saying yes, then she grinned. Margie said, "I would love to be the manager of the shop. I would consider it an honor."

Jill was so relieved when she accepted; at least that was one less thing she had to worry about. She told Margie that they would start in the morning, getting the shop ready to reopen. Jill was also going to call the temp agency to see if they had any applicants who could fill at least four positions. Rebecca and Jill would be there to help with the customers until Margie was fully staffed.

When Andrew felt like things were getting under control, he headed home.

A few days later, Jill opened the shop back up. People were lined up waiting for the doors to open. Several of them were carrying the clothes they had bought when Macy was the manager. Rebecca recognized one of the girls immediately and went to help her.

"Is that really Jillian Malone?" the girl asked. Rebecca smiled and told her that it was.

Margie was busy at the register, exchanging clothes for customers. Before long, they had a huge pile of clothes that didn't belong to Jill but had been bought there. Some of the customers even bought more clothes while they were there. It was nonstop all day.

As the racks would get empty, Rebecca would bring more out to restock them, and they were always full. Rebecca noticed how Jill was interacting with the customers and how much she loved doing what she does. Jill was starting to get back to her normal self again. Rebecca was very proud of her; this whole ordeal had taken a lot out of her.

The shop stayed busy right up until closing time. After the last customer left, Jill locked the door, grabbed the till from the register, and they all went to the office to sit down and just breathe. Jill decided she would just put the till in the safe and count it in the morning before they opened, because they had all worked so hard that day.

Rebecca couldn't wait to get back to the hotel and get into bed; she was exhausted and knew Jill and Margie were too. Jill turned off all the lights, and they all went out the back door. Jill

set the alarm and locked the door. When they got back to the hotel, they grabbed something quick to eat and headed to bed.

The next day started off the same way as the day before. By lunchtime, it began to slow down a bit. Jill got a call from the temp agency saying they were sending some applicants over to fill the positions she had opened. The agency let Jill know that the applicants had been screened very thoroughly and that complete background checks had been done.

Jill was excited about getting the shop back on its feet. She spent a lot of time working with Margie, and Margie picked things up very quickly. As the applicants came in, Jill and Margie took them back one at a time to the office to talk to them. Rebecca stayed up front and helped any customers who came into the shop.

When Jill and Margie had finished with the last applicant, they informed Rebecca that all of them would be starting the next day. Jill closed the shop early that afternoon so they could all go home and get some much-needed rest.

When they got back to the hotel, Rebecca asked Jill what she planned to do with the clothes that had been returned, because they were really piling up. Jill told her she was going to remove the logo that Macy had put on them and donate them. Rebecca thought it was a very good idea. She told Jill she would get started on them tomorrow.

After they both cleaned up, they decided to treat themselves to a nice dinner. Jill picked out a nice restaurant, and they made their way downstairs.

When they got back, they changed into comfortable clothes and decided to watch a movie. Neither of them made it very far before they were both fast asleep.

Rebecca woke up in the middle of the night and noticed Jill wasn't there, but she had thrown a blanket over her and let her sleep. Rebecca smiled and then fell back to sleep.

The next morning, after they had their coffee, they got ready and headed to the shop. The new employees were starting work that day, and Rebecca was going to help train them. When they all arrived, she took them to Margie's office so she could complete the paperwork and issue their badges, then she brought them back out to Rebecca.

Rebecca introduced herself and told them she was Jillian's daughter. They seemed a little nervous at first, but it didn't take long for her to make them feel comfortable. They could see she wasn't just some spoiled little rich kid. She went over all the do's and don'ts of the job and explained what was expected of them.

When the shop started getting busy, she told them not to worry—she would be there to help. They interacted very well with the customers. As each one made a sale, Rebecca showed them how to ring it up. Unlike when Rebecca had started working, all of them were already familiar with running a cash register, so it came easily to them.

It wasn't long before Jill came out of the office, and Rebecca introduced her to the new employees. You would have thought she was a celebrity from the look on their faces; they couldn't believe they were meeting Jillian Malone, a well-known designer, in person. Jill spoke to them and welcomed them to Jillian's.

It was almost closing time for the shop. Rebecca told the new employees how well they had done that day and that she would see them all tomorrow. Rebecca locked the door after the last customer left and put up the “Closed” sign. She took the till out of the register and headed to the office. Jill was sitting at the desk, and Rebecca set the till down so she could count it and get it ready for the next day’s deposit.

Things were starting to run a lot smoother. Jill told her that if things kept up the way they were, they would be going home soon. Rebecca welcomed that thought. Jill finished what she was doing, and they both gathered their things and headed out the back door.

Jill looked at Rebecca and said, “How about we go to the spa?” Rebecca said that would be wonderful. “But do you think any will be open?” Jill took out her phone and started searching. She found one not too far from their hotel that was open late. She called and made appointments for both of them.

They had the star treatment: a massage, hair washed, cut, and blow-dried, a manicure, and a pedicure. When they left, they both felt so much better. They grabbed a quick dinner and then went back to the hotel.

Jill worked with Margie for the next two weeks. Jill felt very comfortable that Margie could handle things by herself now. The next day, Jill made plans for her and Rebecca to return home.

Chapter 9

When they arrived at the airport, they returned their vehicles and headed to the terminal. Rebecca finally realized how much she missed being home. She decided then that traveling just wasn't for her—at least not for such a long period of time. Andrew was there to meet them when they got off the plane. They got their luggage and headed home.

Rebecca was so happy when they turned into the gate of the house. After Andrew parked the car, they all got out and walked inside. She didn't worry about getting her luggage out; she was just so glad to be home. She went to her suite, which she really hadn't had time to decorate before she left. She was anxious to get started on getting everything in order. The cleaning service had cleaned it from top to bottom, and it smelled clean and fresh. Everything looked new to her since she had been gone so long.

She lay down on her bed and took a long nap; she didn't realize how tired she was. When she woke up, she went downstairs. She got her luggage and took it back to her room. Then she went to the kitchen to find Hettie, who was preparing dinner. She hugged Hettie and told her how much she had missed her. They talked a lot about Margie. Rebecca told her what a great person she was and that she hadn't known her sister worked for Jill.

Over the next several months, Rebecca and Jill spent a lot of time visiting her shops. They would fly from one city to the next. Rebecca got acquainted with each of the managers at all the shops.

She wanted to know all about them and make sure another situation like the one with Macy would never happen again. She was much more cautious now.

Jill enjoyed having her there with her. Not only was Rebecca a very good designer, but she was also becoming a very good businesswoman.

They finally returned home after about a month of traveling. They had been to all of Jill's shops. She didn't think they would be gone that long, and as much as she hated traveling, it was something that had to be done.

As things finally slowed down, she got back to what she loved the most.

Rebecca got a call from Cheyenne later that day. She told her that she and Sebastian would like to talk to her. Rebecca, of course, was glad to have the chance to see them again. After all, she hadn't seen them since graduation.

When they arrived, Rebecca was there to greet them. She hugged them both and told them how good it was to see them. They went to the kitchen for a cup of coffee and sat at the bar.

Rebecca asked them, "What is going on?"

They looked at her with smiles on their faces. Cheyenne finally said, "Sebastian has asked me to marry him, and I have accepted."

Rebecca had always thought they made a good couple. She told them how happy she was for them.

"What about college?" Rebecca asked.

Sebastian said, "We are still planning on going to college. Actually, we both start in the fall. I still plan on being a lawyer, and Cheyenne still wants to be a doctor. None of that has changed. We just plan on being married when we do it."

Rebecca thought to herself that maybe they were moving too fast, but she didn't say it.

Finally, Cheyenne said to her, "I would like it very much if you would design my wedding gown and also the dresses for my wedding party. And of course, I would like it if you were my Matron of Honor at my wedding."

Rebecca was at a loss for words. She gracefully accepted and couldn't wait to get started.

What a day this has turned out to be, she thought. Before they left, Rebecca told Cheyenne that they would get together on the first of the week to get things started. Rebecca couldn't wait to tell Jill. She walked down the hall to Jill's office, where Jill was sitting at her desk doing some paperwork. Rebecca tapped lightly on the open door. Jill turned around and told her to come in.

Rebecca told her about seeing Cheyenne and Sebastian and everything that was going on in their lives. Jill was very happy to hear all the good news they had come to share. Jill told Rebecca, "You know, this is your chance to show your designs off to the public."

Rebecca asked her, "What do you mean?"

"Well, Sebastian's father is one of the most well-known cardiologists in the country. Cheyenne's father owns a huge construction company, and her mother is the highest-selling real estate agent in Oklahoma City. So, you see, Rebecca, both Sebastian and Cheyenne come from very prominent families. There will be a lot of guests at their wedding, and that means the more people who see the dress you design for Cheyenne, the more people will want you to design theirs. This would get your foot in the door, so to speak. It's a great way to start promoting your talents and getting your name out there. You have to start somewhere."

Rebecca had never thought about this as a way to show people her designs and create the perfect dress for any bride. She began to get excited about designing Cheyenne's wedding dress. She thanked Jill for her input and went to her room to get started. She sketched out several dresses she thought Cheyenne would like, but of course, she needed her approval.

Cheyenne got to the house around 9:00 that Monday morning, eager to get started. They had breakfast together and then went to Rebecca's suite. Rebecca went to her sketch table and asked Cheyenne, "What do you have in mind?"

Cheyenne wasn't sure what she wanted, but asked to see Rebecca's sketches to find out if any of them caught her eye. When she spotted the one she liked, she said, "That one is it," as she pointed to her favorite.

The dress she chose was sleeveless—perfect for a June wedding, she thought. The top had two-inch shoulder straps that dipped slightly into a V-neck, which she felt would beautifully show off the necklace she would be wearing. The back was low-

cut, reaching to the middle of her back, and it had a long train. It was quite revealing, and Rebecca was surprised she had picked this one.

The sides of the gown had an eight-inch slit on each side, held together with satin lacing. The front was not like a typical wedding dress; it didn't go to the floor. Instead, it hung just below the knee and draped toward the back where the train began.

Rebecca asked if she wanted to change anything about it, and Cheyenne said, "I don't want to change a thing."

Rebecca went to the intercom to have Jill come up to look at the dress she had chosen. When Jill arrived and saw it, her eyes lit up. She knew Rebecca was talented, but she didn't realize just how talented she truly was until now.

Jill told Cheyenne, "I'm sure your mother would love to see the dress."

Cheyenne said, "I would love for her to come over now if it's okay with you. I'm anxious for her to look at it." Jill said, "By all means, call her."

Mrs. McGregor came over right away; she was excited to see it too. She arrived within half an hour. Jill met her downstairs, and they talked briefly before going up to Rebecca's room.

When Jill and Mrs. McGregor got there, Rebecca and Cheyenne were talking about the Matron of Honor dress and the Bridesmaid dresses, and what color she wanted them to be. Rebecca looked at Mrs. McGregor and told her how nice it was to see her again.

“Please, Rebecca, call me Zoey. After all, I feel like you are part of my family.”

As Zoey looked at the dress, she started to cry. She looked at Rebecca and said, “You designed this?” Rebecca just nodded. Zoey couldn’t get over how beautiful it was and how different it was from most wedding dresses.

Cheyenne looked at her mother and said, “So what do you think, Mom?”

She said, “It’s perfect.”

Zoey looked at Jill and told her what a talented daughter she had. Jill smiled.

Zoey said, “I’m anxious to see what you come up with for the other dresses also.”

Jill told Zoey, “I can have my best seamstress come to the house for all the fittings once all the dresses are chosen, if that is better for everyone.”

Zoey said that would be great. Zoey then asked Rebecca and Jill, “Now what will all of this cost?”

Jill said, “Rebecca and I have discussed a price, and she would like to do this for free. It would be a way for her to get her designs out to the public, because I’m sure there will be a lot of potential brides at the wedding.”

Zoey was at a loss for words. She told them that they were already expecting about 300 guests at the wedding, and possibly even more.

Jill said, “Then it’s settled. As soon as Cheyenne decides on the other dresses, we can get ready for all the fittings.”

Zoey and Cheyenne were both excited. Jill took Zoey downstairs for a cup of coffee.

Rebecca and Cheyenne continued working on the other dresses for the rest of the day. Cheyenne wanted them to be lavender, which was her favorite color. Rebecca had sketched several Bridesmaid dresses so they could choose the one they liked best. Cheyenne wanted all the bridesmaids dressed alike.

The next day, Cheyenne was going to bring all of the bridesmaids over to Rebecca’s so they could decide which dress was best. Since Rebecca was the Matron of Honor, her dress would be different. Cheyenne left it up to her to decide how she wanted it, as long as it was lavender.

Rebecca also sketched a dress for the flower girl, which Cheyenne thought was beautiful. By the end of the day, Cheyenne had picked out all of the dresses for her wedding.

Cheyenne stayed for dinner with them that evening. They spent most of their dinner talking about her wedding. Jill and Andrew just looked at each other, thinking that someday they would be planning their own daughter’s wedding, and it brought a smile to their faces. After Cheyenne had left, Rebecca went to her room. She was so happy for Cheyenne and Sebastian; she just wished that Gisselle and Savannah could be there.

She decided she would call Savannah again; she had not been able to get a hold of her for some time. The call went straight to voicemail again. She was so worried about her. She thought that maybe she would call her mother to check on her.

When Mrs. Rivers picked up the phone and said hello, Rebecca told her who she was and that she was just wanting to check up on Savannah because she had been unable to reach her on her cell phone. Mrs. Rivers told Rebecca that Savannah had started hanging out with the wrong people, and she hadn't heard from her in months. Rebecca told her how sorry she was to hear that and that if she ever heard from her, to please let Savannah know she was trying to get in contact with her.

Mrs. Rivers thanked Rebecca for calling to check up on her and said she wished she had better news. As Rebecca hung up the phone, she felt sorry for Mrs. Rivers. She could tell how heartbroken she was.

Rebecca decided she would start working on her room. She got the rest of her clothes hung up in her closet along with her shoes. She rearranged her bathroom. She made several trips from her old room to her new suite but eventually got everything into her new room. She looked around, and stuff was everywhere. She continued putting things away until she had most of it completed.

The next morning, Rebecca got up and was dressed in no time, ready to start preparing Cheyenne's dresses. She was also anxious to see what they would look like in person. Cheyenne called around ten o'clock and told her she could have the girls there by noon to go over which dress they liked best.

Rebecca went downstairs for a quick breakfast and then headed to meet up with Jill. When she got to Jill's office, Jill was already working on getting the designs to Mrs. Wilkins, her head seamstress. She told Mrs. Wilkins that they would be in later that day to talk to her about the designs.

When all the girls arrived, Rebecca met them at the door. Cheyenne introduced them all to her. She had her sketches set up in the dining room. Miss Hettie came in and offered them drinks and cookies, which they all were very grateful for. Rebecca had each sketch on an easel, which made it easier for the girls to get a better view.

As the girls were looking at the sketches, she excused herself to see if Hettie needed any help. A few minutes later, they came back with the drinks and cookies. The girls were still studying the sketches—three of them liked one design, and the other three preferred a different one. Rebecca pulled Cheyenne aside and asked her, "What would you think about the girls wearing the ones they like? Since you have six bridesmaids, you can alternate them as they walk down the aisle."

Cheyenne thought for a moment and said, "You know, that just might work. That way, none of them have to wear a dress they don't like."

Cheyenne told the girls that whichever one they picked, they should let Rebecca know so she could get started. Rebecca wrote down their names and put which dress they picked beside each one. She also told them that their shoes would be lavender as well, which they would pick out sometime this week.

After they all left, Jill and Rebecca went to see Mrs. Wilkins to give her the sketches for the dresses, plus the one Rebecca had designed for herself that Cheyenne had not seen. Mrs. Wilkins looked at the sketches and thought how beautiful they were and what talent Rebecca had. She said she would get started right away.

Jill talked to her about coming to the house and doing all the fittings there, which she didn't have a problem with. Mrs. Wilkins wanted to know when the wedding was to be held. Rebecca told her, "June 15th at 4 o'clock."

"I should be able to do a first fitting in two weeks," Mrs. Wilkins said.

When Jill and Rebecca got back into Jill's vehicle, Rebecca said, "I sure didn't realize what all went into planning a wedding."

Jill smiled and said to her, "Just think—someday we'll be planning *your* wedding."

Rebecca smiled.

Zoey had hired a wedding planner to take care of the rest that needed to be done. All the invitations had been sent out, and 300 of the 350 guests invited had already said they were going to be there.

Cheyenne and Sebastian picked a church that they both thought would be a beautiful place for their wedding. It was quite large, so there was enough room to accommodate the number of people who were attending. There was also plenty of parking for all the guests.

The next day, they were to pick out the wedding and groom's cake. Following that, Cheyenne had to pick out the flowers and decide how she wanted her bouquet. Next would be finding a place for her reception and finalizing the meal choices.

Cheyenne decided on a DJ for the music. She was to meet with him on Friday. Rebecca could tell that Cheyenne was starting to

get stressed out, so she decided to surprise her with a spa day, just the two of them.

Cheyenne showed up at Rebecca's to go over some of the meal choices. Rebecca took her by the hand and said, "Not today. We have other plans."

Cheyenne said, "Rebecca, we only have six weeks to pull all this together. We can't waste any time."

Rebecca told her, "We are not wasting time, but you also need to take a day to relax, and today is the day. So, let's go."

Cheyenne didn't argue with her, and they headed out the door to Rebecca's Jeep. Cheyenne started to relax as they made their way to the spa.

When they got to the spa, Rebecca told the girl at the front desk who she was and that they had an appointment. They were taken back right away. They got a massage, a facial, their nails done, and a pedicure. When they were done, they felt so much more relaxed.

As they got back into Rebecca's Jeep, Cheyenne said, "You know, you were right. I needed this today."

Rebecca took her to lunch at Moscato's, which was wonderful as usual. They got back to Rebecca's later on that day. Rebecca told Cheyenne to go home, take a nice, long bath, relax, and get some sleep. They would start again tomorrow.

Cheyenne said, "Yes, ma'am," and hugged her as she left.

The next morning, they got started early. Rebecca noticed that Cheyenne looked a lot more rested and less stressed. Cheyenne thanked her for making her take a day off. When Cheyenne and Sebastian went to pick out the cakes and flowers for the wedding, Rebecca called the photographers that Cheyenne had given her a list of. She told her that any of them would be acceptable; they all came highly recommended.

So, Rebecca got busy calling. She was able to get one that was available for that day and time and arranged for them to meet with Cheyenne and Sebastian the next day. Another thing marked off the list, she thought.

The wedding planner had several ideas for where the reception could be held and also the meal choices. She called Cheyenne and asked if she and Sebastian could meet her so she could show them what she had in mind. They looked at several places and finally decided to book the one they both liked.

Then she sat down with them, and they decided on what the meal would be. She chose prime rib and chicken, with potatoes and fresh vegetables.

By the end of the day, they felt like things were finally coming together. They checked their list to make sure everything was covered. The planner was going to decorate the church and reception hall the evening before the wedding. They still had to find a salon that could get all of them in for their hair and nails to be done on the day of the wedding. Rebecca called the salon that she and Jill used, and they were able to get them all in on the day of the wedding.

They looked over their list again to make sure they hadn't forgotten anything. Over the next several weeks, Cheyenne was starting to get very nervous; the wedding was in two weeks. Mrs. Wilkins was bringing all the completed dresses by that evening. Rebecca hoped they looked just as good in person as they did on paper. She was a little nervous.

Mrs. Wilkins wanted all the girls to be there just in case there were any last-minute alterations that needed to be made. Rebecca also wanted her mom, dad, and Miss Hettie to be there to see her very first designs.

Mrs. Wilkins was the first to arrive. Rebecca helped her get all the dresses in the house. They were all in white individual bags, with each girl's name on the outside, including the one for the flower girl. Cheyenne's niece was going to be her flower girl at the wedding, and she was going to bring her with her when she came. It wasn't long until all the girls had arrived. Everyone was so excited; they couldn't wait to see the dresses, especially the wedding dress. Zoey and Cheyenne's dad, Baron, was also there, waiting anxiously like everyone else. Jill, Andrew, and Miss Hettie were already in the living room waiting for the big reveal.

Each girl got her dress, and they headed upstairs to Rebecca's suite to get changed. After the girls got dressed, they all looked into the floor-length mirror, and they could not believe their eyes. They were amazed at how well the dresses turned out and how beautiful they looked on them. The color was perfect.

Cheyenne looked at Rebecca and said, "You've done an amazing job." The girls agreed.

Rebecca went to put on her dress. Cheyenne would be the last one to change since she was the bride. When Rebecca came out of the bathroom, they all stopped and stared. She had chosen to do something no one expected. The top of her dress was made just like the bridesmaid dresses, and the skirt was made of three-inch strips all the way around that hung to the ground. It had a lavender slip underneath all the strips.

Cheyenne's mouth dropped open, and she said, "I have never seen anything like this ever. You look absolutely beautiful." All the girls congratulated her on what an amazing job she had done.

Rebecca said, "Not so fast. We still have one more dress to see." Cheyenne took her dress into the bathroom. When she came out, Rebecca saw that Cheyenne had tears in her eyes. She couldn't talk—she just hugged Rebecca and whispered, "I absolutely love it."

As they all put on their matching shoes, they headed downstairs. They entered the living room in the order in which they would be walking down the aisle at the wedding, with Rebecca going first. When she turned the corner, everyone's mouths dropped. Then all the other girls came in one at a time.

Then it came time for Cheyenne. As she walked into the room, Zoey had tears streaming down her face. Her dad also looked like he was about ready to cry. Everyone looked at the dresses and was truly in shock. They spent the next ten minutes just admiring all the dresses and thanking Mrs. Wilkins for the wonderful job she had done.

Mrs. Wilkins also gave Cheyenne the shirts that the groom and ring bearer would be wearing, which were lavender as well,

to go with their tuxedos. Jill, Andrew, and Miss Hettie all went up to Rebecca and hugged her. No words needed to be spoken—Rebecca could see how proud they were of her.

As the girls went to change, Jill, Hettie, and Zoey went into the kitchen to get something for everyone to drink, along with a snack and a fruit tray. Andrew and Baron stayed in the living room talking about sports.

When all the girls had changed and come back downstairs, they helped themselves to something to drink and eat. Mrs. Wilkins stayed for a little while. She said goodbye to everyone, and Jill walked her to the door. When Jill returned, Zoey mentioned to her that Rebecca needed to get business cards made up and have them displayed at the reception. Jill thought that was a wonderful idea.

Once everyone left, Rebecca helped Hettie clean up. Jill and Andrew said, “Rebecca, do you realize you will be eighteen in about a month?” Rebecca had totally forgotten about her birthday since she had been helping Cheyenne plan her wedding.

She finally spoke up and said, “Wow, looks like your little girl is growing up, huh?” They all laughed. Jill said, “Well, you'd better rest while you can, because I can see you getting a lot of phone calls from brides wanting you to design their dresses.”

Rebecca smiled at the thought and how good it sounded.

The next morning, when she got up, she had a dentist appointment and had to go into town. As she was getting ready, Jill called her on the intercom, asking her to come to her office before she left. When she got there, Jill was going over some

papers that were lying on her desk. Jill asked Rebecca, “What do you want to call your business? I have the papers here to fill out for your business license.”

Rebecca thought for a moment and said, “Becca’s Bridal. What do you think of that name?” she asked.

Jill said, “I like it.”

“Okay, now we need to order business cards so they can have them ready for the reception. I will call them today.” She also told Rebecca that there was plenty of room at the plant to add the bridal section, too. “We will have to hire more seamstresses and get more machines, of course.”

Rebecca said, “Do you think we are moving too fast? I haven’t even gotten any clients yet.”

Jill said, “Trust me, when the word gets out about your dresses, you will be covered up.”

Rebecca smiled at her and told her she needed to get going so she wouldn’t be late for her appointment.

As she got in her Jeep, she was thinking about what Jill had said. She had to admit the whole idea of having her own line of bridal dresses made her feel good. She just hoped that she was good enough to pull it off.

She finally arrived at the dentist’s office, went inside, checked in, and sat down. She noticed people were kind of staring at her, which made her feel uncomfortable, but she just brushed it off. Before long, she was called back for her appointment. After her

cleaning, the dentist came in and spoke with her. “You’re Andrew and Jillian Malone’s daughter, aren’t you?” he asked. Rebecca replied, “Yes, I am.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” he said.

“All good things, I hope,” she smiled.

“Oh! Yes, very good things,” he smiled back.

He made small talk throughout the rest of her exam, and when he was finished, he told her he would see her in six months.

It was almost lunchtime when she finished, so she thought she would go see her dad and take him to lunch, if he wasn’t too busy.

When she got to Andrew’s office, Mrs. Borden, his secretary, was on the phone. When she hung up, Mrs. Borden said to Rebecca, “What can I do for you today, Miss Becca?”

Rebecca said, “Well, I’m here to see my dad. If he’s not too busy, I thought I would take him to lunch.” Mrs. Borden said he should be about finished with his meeting. She messaged him and told him that his daughter was there. He told her to send Rebecca in, as he was finished with his meeting.

Rebecca opened the door and walked in. Andrew got up, hugged her, and kissed her on the cheek. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything,” she said. When she turned around, she was probably looking at the most handsome man she had ever seen. He was maybe in his mid-twenties or a little older, she thought. He was dressed in a black suit with a lime-green shirt and a tie. He was tall, muscular, and had the most beautiful eyes.

"No, not at all. Mr. Ratcliffe and I were just finishing up." Andrew looked at Mr. Ratcliffe and said, "Rogue, this is my daughter Rebecca. Rebecca, this is Rogue Ratcliffe."

He held out his hand to shake hers. She put her hand in his and said, "Very nice to meet you, Mr. Ratcliffe."

He said, "Please, call me Rogue."

She replied, "Well, very nice to meet you, Rogue." He smiled at her.

Andrew asked her, "What do I owe the pleasure of my daughter coming to work to see me?"

She replied, "Well, I thought if you weren't too busy, and since I was in town, that maybe you would like to get some lunch."

He looked at her, then walked over to his desk and told Mrs. Borden that he would be going to lunch with his daughter and would be back in a couple of hours.

Rogue was putting some papers in his briefcase when Andrew asked, "Rogue, why don't you join us? I mean, if you don't have anything else planned for a couple of hours."

Rogue looked at Rebecca and said, "Well, if Miss Rebecca doesn't mind, I would love to."

Rebecca said, "No, I don't mind at all." She was actually glad that her dad had invited him; she just couldn't get over how handsome he was and that he also had a great smile.

Andrew grabbed his suit jacket and put it on. He looked at Rogue and said, “Moscato’s okay with you?”

“That sounds great. They always have good food,” he said.

They all decided to drive separate vehicles since they were going in different directions after lunch. They arrived at Moscato’s at the same time. Andrew opened Rebecca’s door when she parked and held out his hand to help her get out. She thought about what a gentleman he was; no wonder her mom loved him so much.

When they got inside, the waitress seated them right away. Rogue pulled her chair out for her to sit down, and she smiled up at him. Andrew and Rogue waited until she was seated before they took their seats.

As they gave the waitress their order, Rogue looked at Rebecca and said, “So, you are the Rebecca Malone everyone has been talking about?”

She said, “I’m not quite sure what you're talking about.”

“Have you not seen today’s newspaper?” he said.

Rebecca replied, “No, I have not.”

He called the waitress over and asked her if she had a copy of today’s paper. She returned with the paper and handed it to Rogue.

On the front page was Sebastian and Cheyenne’s wedding announcement. As Rebecca read the article, which was quite long, there was a part in it that talked about the bride’s dress and all the dresses that the bridesmaids and the flower girl would be wearing.

It read: *Rebecca Malone, daughter of designer Jillian Malone, had created all the stunning dresses for the bride and the rest of the bridal party. She will soon offer her services to the public. Rebecca has a good eye for fashion, just like her mother.*

Rebecca laid the paper down, looked at her dad, and asked him if he had also read it. He said, "Yes, this morning."

"Well, I guess I'm the only one that hasn't read it—until now, that is," she said. She thought to herself that must be why the people at the dental office kept staring at her. When she gave the receptionist her name, they must have read the article.

Rebecca asked Rogue, "So you're a lawyer, is that correct?"

He said, "Yes, I am. I work in my father's law firm."

"I'm sorry," she said, "but you look too young to be a lawyer."

He laughed and said, "I was fifteen when I graduated high school, and from there I went straight into college and then to law school. I graduated from law school when I was twenty-two, and now I am twenty-seven. I've been at my father's firm for the past four years."

Andrew said, "He is a fine lawyer. He has done a lot of work for me. I will say I was a little skeptical at first because of his young age, but he has proven himself to me." Andrew continued to tell her that his father, Beckett Ratcliffe, had been his attorney since he went into business for himself, and that Beckett wanted to slow down a little so he and Mrs. Ratcliffe could do some traveling. So, he wanted Rogue to take over Andrew's legal matters.

Andrew looked at Rebecca and said, “But guess what Rogue is best known for?” He said it with a chuckle.

Rogue spoke up and said, “Andrew, do you really have to go there?”

Andrew said, “Yes.”

Rebecca thought this must be an inside joke between the two of them. So, she said, “Okay, now I really have to know.” She looked at Rogue and asked him, “So what are you best known for?”

Andrew was already laughing.

Rogue said, “If you really must know, Rebecca, I was voted the most eligible bachelor in Oklahoma City.”

Rebecca didn’t know what to say. “Well, that’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

Andrew started to laugh even harder. Rebecca asked her dad, “Why are you laughing so hard?”

Andrew caught his breath and said, “You see, Rebecca, Rogue graduated top of his class from Harvard Law School, and instead of him being recognized as a top-notch lawyer, he is classified as a pretty boy.”

Rebecca had to start laughing.

Rogue said, “I’m so glad the two of you find this so funny. Andrew, you’re just jealous, and someday that jealousy will eat

you alive." Rogue, too, began laughing. Rebecca was having such a good time with both of them. Rogue had a great sense of humor, and she could tell that her dad really thought a lot of him.

Rebecca looked at Rogue and said, "Rogue, I'm sorry for my father's insensitivity."

Rogue said, "Aww, Rebecca, don't worry about it. Just wait until he gets my bill." They all smiled.

As they were eating their lunch, they continued talking with each other. She had never talked so much or laughed so hard in all her life. Finally, Andrew said, "I guess I should get back to the office." Rebecca and Rogue also agreed it was time for them to go.

When the waitress brought the check, before Andrew could pick it up, Rogue grabbed it and said, "Since you and your daughter have shown me such a good time, lunch is on me." He paid the check, and they headed out the door.

Rebecca looked at Rogue and said, "It was so nice to meet you." He said the same back to her. He handed her one of his business cards and told her that when she got things rolling on her business, she should give him a call if she needed any legal advice. He added, "Oh, by the way, I will see you at the wedding and can't wait to see your designs."

Andrew opened up Rebecca's door, and she got in and drove off. As she was driving home, she thought about Rogue and what a nice guy he was, and how he didn't act at all like she thought a lawyer would. She thought he would be all business, but to her surprise, he was more like an average person—just being himself.

When she got home, she went to her room to change into a pair of shorts and a tank top, then headed back downstairs. Jill was sitting out by the pool, so she decided to join her. They sat and just talked. Rebecca apologized to her because Cheyenne's wedding was taking up so much of her time. But it would be over soon, she told her, and they could get back to things as planned.

Jill said, "Rebecca, you have nothing to apologize for. You have earned a break—not that this is much of a break. You've been working nonstop on this wedding for months. What you've done to help me with Jillian's…I couldn't have done it without your help. Everything is running perfectly now."

Jill then said, "Your dad told me that you surprised him and took him out to lunch."

Rebecca replied, "Yes, I did."

"And that Rogue Ratcliffe joined you," she said with a smile. "I guess you know by now he is the most eligible bachelor in all of Oklahoma City?"

Rebecca said, "Yes, and I can see why. He is gorgeous."

They both laughed.

Rebecca said, "I had the best time with both Rogue and Dad. Rogue will also be at the wedding along with his parents."

Jill said, "It looks like someone made a good impression on you."

Rebecca just smiled.

Jill said to her, “By the way, have you thought about what you want to do for your birthday? It will be here before we know it.”

Rebecca told her that she really hadn’t thought about it. “Maybe just something simple.”

The day before the wedding, they had their wedding rehearsal and the rehearsal dinner. Everything went perfectly. Cheyenne gave all of them a pair of lavender earrings to wear; that was her gift to them for being a part of her wedding.

Rebecca said a few words to the soon-to-be-married couple, and the best man also did the same. The rest of the evening went very well. Mr. Cain, along with Sebastian’s new stepmother, made a speech and welcomed Cheyenne into the family.

Chapter 10

Rebecca woke up early; today was the day of the wedding. She, Cheyenne, and all of the bridesmaids were to meet at the salon in just a few hours. Everyone arrived on time and was taken in immediately. They started off by getting their nails done and then a pedicure. After that, their hair was washed, dried, and styled. It took several hours for all of them to finish. Cheyenne was very happy with the way everyone looked.

Rebecca decided she would wear her hair up, and the rest of the girls chose to do the same. Cheyenne, on the other hand, wanted her hair down. She looked so beautiful. She also chose a tiara instead of a veil. After the salon, the girls all went their separate ways and would meet at the church by 2:00.

When Rebecca returned home, Jill was going to do her makeup and any remaining touches that needed to be made.

Rebecca got to the church a little before 2:00. Cheyenne was already there, giving them some time to spend together before the wedding. Cheyenne thanked Rebecca for all of her help with the wedding. Rebecca could tell Cheyenne was just a little bit nervous. Rebecca told her how special it was to be a part of her special day.

Cheyenne said, “I just wish Giselle and Savannah were here.”

Rebecca said to her, “They may not be here in person, but somehow… I believe they are here. Giselle and Savannah would be so happy for you and Sebastian right now.”

Cheyenne hugged Rebecca and told her that she loved her so very much and thanked her for being there on her special day.

As guests started to arrive for the wedding, they were seated in the church. The church was decorated so beautifully. When the time came, all the girls took their positions. Rebecca was the first to go down the aisle, followed by the bridesmaids, the flower girl, and the ring bearer. The guests were in awe of all the dresses.

As all the bridesmaids and the matron of honor were in place, the bride entered. When the wedding march started playing, everyone stood to their feet as the bride entered the room. Cheyenne and her dad, Baron, headed down the aisle. Cheyenne looked so beautiful, and at the end of the aisle was her husband-to-be. He wore a tuxedo with the lavender shirt that was made for him.

The preacher asked, “Who gives this bride away?” and of course, Baron said, “Her mother and I do.” He kissed her cheek and placed her hand in Sebastian’s hand. The preacher read their nuptials and pronounced them husband and wife. Sebastian kissed his bride.

As Sebastian and Cheyenne headed down the aisle, everyone stood once again. The remainder of the wedding party followed. It was the most beautiful wedding Rebecca had ever seen. As the wedding came to an end, everyone headed to the reception hall.

The reception hall was decorated wonderfully. All the tables had white linen tablecloths on them, and each table had place settings for every guest. On each table, there was a vase of lavender flowers. The bride, groom, and the wedding party had a table at the front of the hall, and they were to be served first.

Once their meal was over, the bride and groom had the first dance, then the father-and-daughter dance followed. Cheyenne looked so happy. Rebecca went to the table where her parents were seated. Rogue and his parents were seated with them, and Rogue introduced Rebecca to his parents. Rebecca took a seat with them.

As her mom and dad got up to dance, Rogue asked Rebecca if she would like to dance. Rebecca replied, “I would love to.” As they headed to the dance floor, everyone was watching them. Rogue and Rebecca started dancing, and Rogue said, “How does it feel to dance with the pretty boy, as your dad calls me?” She smiled. Rogue grinned. Rebecca replied, “How does it feel to dance with a soon-to-be well-known designer?” He said, “Well, I guess you got me there.”

They danced several dances together and then went back to the table. Andrew and Jill said, “Rebecca, it’s getting late, and we were thinking about heading home. I know you probably don’t want to leave just yet, so we could come back and pick you up.” Rogue butted in, “I would be more than happy to bring Rebecca home after the reception, if she would like, and if it’s okay with both of you.” Andrew said, “That would be fine with us. What about you, Rebecca? Is it okay with you?” She said, “That would be great, and thank you, Rogue, for offering.” Andrew and Jill made their way out the door to leave.

Rebecca and Rogue sat down at the table and talked for what seemed like hours. The time flew by. As people started leaving, Rebecca told Rogue, “We should probably leave now also—the room is starting to clear out.” Rebecca went to find Cheyenne and Sebastian to let them know she was getting ready to leave. Cheyenne hugged her and said, “I don’t know if you noticed or not, but all of your business cards are gone. You have been the talk of the town tonight— not to mention Rogue Ratcliffe has been by your side all night.” Rebecca blushed. She told Cheyenne they should get together when she got back from her honeymoon. She went back to meet up with Rogue, and soon they were headed out the door. When the valet brought his vehicle, he held the door open for Rebecca as she sat down. He got in the driver's seat, and they drove away.

Rebecca thanked him for his company tonight and for taking her home. He said, “No need to thank me. It was all my pleasure. I sure had a good time tonight, thanks to you.” Rebecca smiled at him.

As he was about to approach her house, he asked her, “Would you like to go out sometime with me for dinner and maybe a movie?” She replied, “I would like that very much. Let me give you my cell phone number.” He said, “I already have it. I managed to get one of your business cards at the reception.”

As he pulled up to the front of the house, Rogue walked her to the front door. He told her what a great time he had. He kissed her on the cheek and said goodnight. She watched him as he drove away.

She opened the door and went into the house. The house was very quiet; everyone was already in bed. She made her way to her

room. What a great night this turned out to be, she thought to herself. She couldn't help but think about Rogue and what a remarkable person he was.

She managed to get a shower, put on her pajamas, and went straight to bed. She was very tired from all of the events of the day. She couldn't believe the most eligible bachelor had asked her out on a date. When she fell asleep, she had a smile on her face.

When Rebecca got up the next morning, she was still tired. She felt a sense of relief knowing that she didn't have anything to do for the day. She needed a day for herself. When she went downstairs to get some breakfast, Hettie told her what a wonderful job she had done on all the dresses and how she could hear people talking about them all night long.

Rebecca finished her breakfast and went to the pool just to relax. As she sat there with the book she had brought to read, she could feel herself dozing off to sleep. She didn't know how long she had been asleep until her dad woke her up. He sat down in the lounge chair beside her.

"I guess you stayed up too late last night, huh?" he said.

She told him it was late when she got home.

"I'm glad Rogue got you home safe and sound," he said.

"Yes, he did, and we had a wonderful time," she replied.

"You know, he asked me if it was okay to ask you out on a date?"

She seemed surprised. “And what did you tell him?” she asked.

“I told him that it would be entirely up to you.”

“Well, he did ask me to go out with him, and I told him yes!” she said. “But Dad, I need to ask you a question.”

“Okay, what is it?” he asked.

“Do you think he is too old for me?”

“Well,” he said, “if you were an average teenager, I would say yes. But you are a very mature young lady for your age. I trust that you can make that decision on your own. You have good morals and values. Besides, you will be eighteen in just a little over a week.”

She said, “I just don’t want to do anything that you and Mom would not approve of.”

“I’ve talked to your mother about it, and she feels the same way I do. But do me one favor.”

She asked, “What is that?”

“Don’t let that pretty boy get in the way of your dreams, okay!”

She looked at him and said, “I won’t, I promise. I love you, Dad.”

He replied, “I love you too, Rebecca.”

They decided it was time to go in; Rebecca could feel her skin burning from falling asleep in the sun. She went to her room and took a cool shower. She put lotion on to try to soothe the burn. Then she went to her desk and started to sketch a wedding dress that had been in her mind for quite some time. *This one,* she thought to herself, *will be my wedding dress someday.*

As they had dinner that evening, Jill told her that in the morning, a representative would be there to set up a website for her new business. Rebecca was getting so excited; soon, people would be able to see her designs. They would go to the plant in the morning and get things ready. Rebecca was nervous and excited at the same time; everything was happening so fast. She knew she had to be prepared for what she hoped was about to happen.

She decided she would go ahead and have some dresses made to put on her website page. She also talked to Cheyenne and the girls in the wedding party to see if it was okay with them to put their pictures in the dresses she had designed on the website. They all agreed it was fine with them, but Jill had to cover all bases and have them sign a waiver to say it was okay, which they had no problem with. They would be featured on the website.

Rogue had called her several times that week. She was so glad; they decided that they would meet up and go to a musical the following week. *West Side Story* was playing at the local theatre, and he asked her if she would like to go. She told him she would like that very much and that she would meet him there since she would be at the plant and it was close by.

Rebecca was nervous about her date with Rogue, but also couldn't wait. That Friday, she met him at the theatre, and she was

so excited to see him again. As they entered the theatre, Rebecca was amazed at how well the place was kept up. As she watched the performance, she thought it was spectacular.

Afterward, Rogue told her that he had reservations at a restaurant close by. When they entered the restaurant, everyone there seemed to know Rogue, and they were seated very promptly. Rogue looked at Rebecca and said, “Why is it that I can’t stop thinking about you?” Rebecca said, “Because you know a good thing when you see it,” she replied with a smile.

As they ate their dinner, they were both enjoying each other’s company. Rebecca finally asked Rogue, “So, do you have a girlfriend or someone that you may be interested in?” Rogue looked at her and said, “There is only one girl that I am interested in at the moment. I just hope she feels the same.” Rebecca blushed.

As they left the restaurant, Rogue walked her to her car. She thanked him for such a great evening. He put his arm around her and kissed her, not on the cheek this time, but on the lips. She returned his kiss. She smiled at him and said, “Time for you to get home, pretty boy!”

He walked away smiling, put his hand up in the air, and said, “Whatever.” He turned around, blew her a kiss, and got into his car. Rebecca had a big smile on her face as she headed home. Rogue was like no one she had ever met before. She was really starting to like him a lot. But she had to remember what her dad said: “Don’t let anyone get in the way of your dreams.”

The next day was Rebecca’s eighteenth birthday. She woke up early that morning and ate her breakfast with Miss Hettie.

Rebecca felt a little uneasy that day; she didn't know why, but she was soon to find out.

Andrew and Jill called both Rebecca and Miss Hettie into the dining room. As they entered, they noticed two boxes on the dining table. Andrew stood up and said, "Before either of you asks any questions, please let me finish what I have to say."

He looked at Rebecca and said, "About four and a half years ago, an employee of mine came to Jill and me to tell us that he had been diagnosed with lung cancer and that he only had a short time to live. He was one of our most loyal and trusted employees. We asked him if there was anything we could do for him. He hesitated, and then he said, 'There is one thing you could do for me, and it is an awful lot to ask of anyone. My daughter Rebecca has been in foster care for almost fourteen years. She has been moved from one foster home to another. I guess my dying wish would be—would you both consider being her foster parents until she is eighteen? You are both good people, and I know you will teach her good morals and values. I just want my daughter to have some stability in her life instead of being moved around all the time. Knowing that she is with both of you, I can rest in peace.'"

He continued, "I don't want to put you on the spot. If you both would just think about it and get back to me, I would appreciate it. And if it's too much to ask, I will understand."

Jill and I talked about it, and we decided that was the least we could do for Marcus—after all, he was trusting us with his most prized possession. After we discussed it among ourselves, we told him that we would.

Rebecca, I guess by now you know who we are talking about—you. Your father worked for us for many years. He made us promise not to tell you until you reached the age of eighteen. Through the years, your father kept in touch with Mrs. Gallagher, the social worker who brought you here. Mrs. Gallagher did things for your father that she shouldn't have done, like sending him pictures and letting him know how you were doing. She could have lost her job for helping him as she did."

Rebecca and Hettie sat in silence for the longest time. Hettie finally spoke up. "You're talking about Marcus Donavan, right?"

Andrew shook his head yes.

"So, you're telling me that Rebecca is Marcus's daughter?"

He again nodded yes.

"Rebecca, there is a reason that Hettie is here also," he said.

Before he could continue, Hettie asked, "May I tell her?"

He replied, "Yes."

Hettie took a deep breath. "You see, Rebecca, your father is the man I was telling you about, the one I was so in love with. We were planning on getting married the following year, but he didn't make it. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't think of him. Your father was a good, kind, gentle man. He told me he had a daughter he had to give up for adoption, and that he had named you before he did so. He wanted you named after your mother, Lynn. When his wife passed away while giving birth to you, it devastated him. He was unable to take care of an infant by himself,

and he thought it was the best thing for you. He talked about you a lot.

As Andrew had said, Mrs. Gallagher played a big role in his life. She kept him updated on you all the time, and he would show me the pictures she sent him. There were times he would have tears in his eyes. He was so thankful for any information Mrs. Gallagher could get about you. Every year on your birthday, he would buy a cake to celebrate. A few weeks after you came here, I knew there was something special about you, and now I know why. Now that I know, I can see the similarities between you and your father. I never knew your mother, but I can tell you your father loved her very much."

By this time, Rebecca had tears flowing down her face. Jill handed her a box of tissues, which she gladly accepted. As she wiped her tears and was finally able to talk, she realized she had so many questions but didn't know where to begin. She looked at Andrew and Jill and said, "My father just wanted you to keep me until I was eighteen years old, but you decided to adopt me. Why?"

Jill spoke up and said, "We didn't know that we would get so attached to you and love you the way we do, that's why we did it. We were so glad that you felt the same way. I think your father would have approved. Rebecca, he was a good man, and it broke his heart to have to give you up. We admired him so much that we agreed to be your new foster parents. Your father was the maintenance man at one of our apartment buildings, and he also lived there. We provided him with an apartment of his own and a handsome salary for taking care of the complex, which, by the way, he did a wonderful job with. All the tenants loved him and

would always brag about him to us. They would tell us how he would take care of any of their issues right away."

"Did you ever meet my mother?" Rebecca asked.

"Yes, we knew your mother. She actually worked at Jillian's. I was getting ready to make her the manager of my shop here, but unfortunately, her life ended too soon. She was a smart, honest, and caring lady. You actually look a lot like her."

Rebecca could not believe what she was hearing. She was at times at a loss for words.

Hettie said, "I have to ask—Marcus said that he named Rebecca after her mother, but Rebecca was not her name."

Rebecca told her, "My name is Rebecca Lynn. Lynn was my mother's name." Hettie finally made the connection.

Finally, Rebecca asked about the two boxes on the table. Andrew said, "These boxes contain things that Marcus wanted us to give you and Hettie. I don't know what is in them, but this is one of his last wishes." He set the boxes in front of them, each with its name on it.

Andrew and Jill told them both that they would step out so they could open the boxes.

Rebecca said, "Please don't. I would like both of you here when I open my box."

Hettie, on the other hand, took her box and headed to her apartment.

As Rebecca started to open her box, Andrew handed her a letter that was to be read before she did so. It was a letter from her father. It read:

"My dearest Rebecca, today you are eighteen years old. I know you don't know me, but I am your biological father. My name is Marcus Donavan. In this box, you will find lots of journals that I have written to you from the time you were born. I just want you to know that not once did I ever forget about you. Enclosed are some pictures of your mom and me. This box contains my most special memories, and I hope you will feel the same way someday. I guess by now you have met Hettie. She was so special to me. When your mom passed, Hettie and I became very close. I planned on marrying her, but the cancer had other plans. Hettie helped me get through some rough times in my life. She was the best thing that ever happened to me after your mom passed away. She became the love of my life.

I remember the day you were born and when your mom took her last breath. She smiled at me and told me that she loved me, and then she was gone. When I saw you for the first time, my heart melted. But deep in my heart, I knew that I didn't have any means of being able to take care of you. To make a long story short, I did what I had to do. I hope that someday you will be able to forgive me. I love you, Rebecca Lynn Donavan."

Rebecca looked at Andrew and Jill, unsure of what to say to either of them. Jill told her, "I know this is a lot to take in, and I know you probably need some time to yourself for all of this to sink in. But we just want you to know that we love you, and that will never change." Rebecca hugged them both, picked up her box, and headed to her room.

When Rebecca got to her room, she opened her box. Inside were several journals that her dad had written to her. There were birthday cards for every year of her life. There were pictures of her mom and dad when they were younger, and a picture of their wedding day. She opened an envelope, and inside it was her mother's wedding ring. There was also an envelope that had a large amount of money in it; he said it was for college if she decided she wanted to go.

The next envelope took her by surprise. It was a life insurance policy in which she was the beneficiary. It was a large amount of money—over a million dollars. Rebecca was so overwhelmed with everything that she needed to see Andrew and Jill to talk about all that had been given to her by her father. She called both of them on the intercom and asked if they could come to her room.

When they arrived, Rebecca showed them the policy and hoped they could tell her what it meant. Andrew looked over all the documents and said he would have Rogue take a look at them in the morning. They both asked her if she was okay. She told them she was; it was just a lot for her to take in at the moment. She looked at both of them and reassured them that this did not change how she felt about them. They were her parents, and she would always think of them as that, and she loved them very much.

When they left her room, she started to read the journals her father had written to her. Each one was numbered so she knew where to begin. He started off by telling her how much he loved her and hoping she was doing well. Each page had a date and time on it. Rebecca thought he must have really loved her to take the time to notate everything.

As she read the journals, she somehow got to know the man who was her father. If she had been with him, she would have been proud to call him Dad. He talked about her mother a lot and how she had been so eager to meet her. He wanted her to know her mother; even though she wasn't there, he wanted her to know what a great person she truly was. She still had several journals to read; it looked like he had written one for every year of her life.

Rebecca actually felt like she was loved and that her parents wanted her. She felt like she was really somebody and not just another kid in the system. When she got ready for bed, she was emotionally drained from all that had happened that day. Before she got into bed, she called Hettie to see if she was okay. Hettie told her that she was and that she was still trying to process everything that had just happened. Rebecca told her goodnight and hung up the phone.

The next morning, when Rebecca got up, she thought about what had happened the day before. She felt good knowing about her past and how much she was truly loved by her biological parents. As she got ready to start her day, Rogue called her.

"Good morning, beautiful," he said.

She replied, "Good morning to you, kind sir! And what do I owe the pleasure of this call?" she asked.

"Well," he said, "your dad dropped off the insurance policy you got from your biological father, and I'm happy to inform you that it is legit. Your father paid all the premiums for several years in advance, and it is still good. I've talked to the insurance company, and they are ready to make a deposit into your account. You, Rebecca Lynn Malone, are a millionaire."

Rebecca had to sit down so she could take all of this into perspective.

"Oh my goodness, Rogue, do you know what this means? I can get my business off and running a lot sooner than I thought!" she said. He asked her for her bank name and account number so he could get things started. He hung up and told her he would call her later.

Rebecca went to find Jill. As usual, she was in her office.

"Mom," she said as she entered her office, "I need to talk to you."

Jill looked at her and asked, "What's on your mind, Rebecca?"

Rebecca told her what Rogue had just said about the insurance policy. Jill was so happy for her. Rebecca said, "This means I can go ahead with my plans."

"But I need your help. Will you be willing to help me and show me the ropes?"

Jill told her that she would love to.

"As soon as the money is in my account, I want to get started," Rebecca said. She looked at Jill and added, "I guess my father was looking out for my best interest after all, and I want to make him very proud."

Jill hugged her and said, "Just never change, Rebecca, and always follow your dreams."

Rebecca felt herself tearing up. She told Jill, “Promise me that you will always be here for me, no matter what.”

Jill said, “I promise.”

When Andrew got home that evening, he brought Rogue with him to have dinner. Rebecca didn’t realize he was there until she went into the kitchen. She told Hettie, “I need to sneak upstairs and get a little more presentable.”

Hettie smiled. “Rebecca, you look just fine. You are very beautiful inside and out.”

Rebecca said, “You know what, Hettie? You are right. He needs to see me when I’m not looking my best, that way he knows what he is getting himself into.”

They both smiled at each other.

Rebecca went into the living room, where both her dad and Rogue were. She was dressed in a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. She had no makeup on, and her hair was pulled up in a ponytail. She had a very good tan from spending a lot of time at the pool.

When Rogue saw her, he thought to himself...*What a beautiful woman she was.* He was really starting to get attached to her.

“Hi Rogue,” she said.

He replied, “Hello, Rebecca.”

Jill came into the room. When she saw Rogue, she told him how nice it was to see him again. She asked about his parents and if they were doing well. He said they were.

Andrew asked Rogue if he would like a drink before dinner, and he gladly accepted. They both looked like they must have had a bad day.

Rogue told Andrew and Jill what a nice home they had. He said, "I noticed the picture of the three of you hanging over the fireplace. Who did it for you, if you don't mind me asking?"

Jill looked at him and smiled. "Well, if you really must know, we know the artist very well. We think she did an amazing job."

Rogue said, "The detail is perfect. The artist captured all of you very well."

Andrew finally spoke up and said, "Rogue, that was a Christmas gift from Rebecca. She sketched the picture—she is the artist."

Rogue was surprised. He looked at Rebecca and said, "You are very talented. I would have never guessed you had done it."

Rebecca thanked him and said, "It's just something I did on the spur of the moment. It turned out better than I thought it would."

"How long have you been sketching?" he asked her.

She said, "Since I was about ten. It's something I always enjoyed doing."

Before he could say anything else, Hettie came and told them dinner was ready. Andrew and Rogue set their drinks down and followed Jill and Rebecca to the dining room. They all sat down, and Rebecca took a seat beside Rogue.

Hettie brought out their dinner. As they all ate, they did a lot of talking and just enjoyed each other's company.

Rogue said to Andrew and Jill, “You sure have a beautiful place here.”

Jill told him, “We have about two hundred acres. It’s very nice and secluded. We love it. Actually,” she said, “after dinner, you should have Rebecca show you around, maybe check out the grounds. We have some ATVs in the pole barn and trails that we always ride on.”

He looked at Rebecca and said, “That would be great if you’re up to showing me around.”

Rebecca told him she would love to.

As they finished their dinner, Rogue told Hettie, “Miss Hettie, dinner was delicious. Thank you.”

She said, “Mr. Rogue, you are very welcome, and I’m so glad you enjoyed it.”

Rebecca told Rogue that as soon as she went and put on some suitable shoes, she would be ready to show him around. She went to her room, took a quick look in the mirror, put on a pair of tennis shoes, and headed back downstairs.

She asked Rogue, “We can walk to the barn, or I can drive us. It’s up to you.”

He said, “I think we should walk.”

They went to the back door, walked around the pool, and went through the gate. He reached down and took her by the hand. When they got to the barn, Rogue opened the door, and Rebecca uncovered the ATVs.

“Guess I know which one is yours?” he said.

She looked at him and grinned. “Just what gave it away?”

He smiled. “That’s why I am a top-notch lawyer. I pay attention to detail.”

“I guess the tag with my name on it had nothing to do with it, huh?” she grinned.

He looked at her and said, “Since you know the trail, you can lead the way.”

She said, “Ok, hope you can keep up,” and smiled.

They started down the trail, and Rogue told her how beautiful everything was and that he could see why her parents loved it so much.

As they approached the part of the property that Rebecca loved the most, she stopped and got out. She looked at Rogue and said, “You see that piece of land over there?” As she pointed out, “That’s where someday I plan on building my dream home.”

He got out, and they started walking over to the very spot. He put his arm around her and said, “I can see why you love this particular spot; it is very beautiful. You plan on building a big house?”

She said, “At least five bedrooms. I want kids in the future. As you can see, they would have a big yard to roam around in and maybe even get a dog. But of course, that will be a long time from now. I have a lot to do before now and then.”

“You have a bright future ahead of you, Rebecca. I have no doubt that you will make all this happen.” He kissed her. “We probably should head back. It will get dark soon.”

They walked hand in hand until they got to the ATVs. They put them in the barn, covered them, and Rogue closed the door.

When they got back to the house, Rogue told them he needed to head home and thanked Andrew and Jill for dinner. Rebecca walked him to his car. He told her what a great time he had and what a wonderful family she has. He hugged and kissed her, then got into his car and left.

Rebecca went inside. She told Jill and Andrew she was going to her room and would see them in the morning. When she got back to her room, she looked at her phone and saw she had a couple of voice messages. They were about her designing wedding dresses for their upcoming weddings. She got so excited, she ran downstairs to find her mom and dad were still up. She couldn’t wait to tell them.

Jill said, “Oh, honey, that is wonderful news! I knew you would be hearing from people soon.”

Rebecca said, “I wasn’t prepared for this so soon. I don’t even know where to begin. Mom! I’m gonna need your help.”

Jill smiled. “Rebecca, you need to quit worrying. You know I will help you. Things will be fine. We can go over everything tomorrow, okay?”

Andrew spoke up and said, “Your mom is right. You don’t need to worry.” He hugged her and told her how proud he was of her.

Rebecca hugged Jill and told them both goodnight.

When she got to her room, she had to call Rogue and tell him what had just happened. He answered right away.

“Miss me already?” he said.

Rebecca smiled to herself. “Of course, I do, but I also have some good news to tell you.” She continued to tell him about the phone calls she had gotten.

He said, “Rebecca, darling! I am so happy for you. If there is anything I can do to help, just let me know.”

They talked for a little while longer. Before they hung up, he said, “We need to celebrate. How about dinner on Friday?”

She told him she would love to. He said he would pick her up at five o’clock.

After she hung up the phone, she got a long hot shower, got dressed, and got into bed. She had a hard time falling asleep,

between thinking about Rogue and her new career she was about to start. She just didn't want to fail at either one of them.

Chapter 11

Rebecca and Jill got started the next morning, working on her meeting with her new potential customers. Jill told her it would be good for her to meet them at maybe a small café somewhere in the city. Rebecca was to call each of them in the morning to set up meetings. Jill explained to her about pricing her designs, and thought that the price Rebecca came up with was not unreasonable. She told her what questions she needed to ask them and everything else she needed to know in order to design the perfect dresses for them. Rebecca felt so much more at ease about the whole thing after talking to Jill; after all, her mom knew how to organize these things.

Rebecca returned each of the calls the following morning. She was to meet with the first one at eleven o'clock, and the next meeting would be at one o'clock. She chose to meet each of them, of course, at separate times, at the same café.

Her first client was Allison Canon; she was very adamant about what she wanted. She could tell she was a spoiled little rich girl who always got what she wanted and was not concerned with the cost, since she wasn't paying for it. Rebecca sketched exactly what she had described to her, and she seemed very happy with it. Rebecca also asked her if she wanted her to do her wedding party dresses. She said "Yes," and that she thought that was a given.

She was a very rude young lady, and Rebecca couldn't help but feel sorry for the man she was about to marry. They went over the colors she wanted for her bridesmaids' and matron-of-honor

dresses. She asked her what she had in mind for the designs, and when she described them, Rebecca liked the design she had chosen. Rebecca wasn't fond of what she wanted, but she did what she was asked to do. After all, it wasn't her wedding.

Rebecca thanked her and told her she would get back to her as soon as it was time to take all the measurements. Before she left, Rebecca had her sign a contract before she started on the dresses, which she was glad to sign, and she even gave her the down payment.

The next client she had, Michelle Van, was the total opposite. She was a sweet young lady and wasn't sure what she wanted. Rebecca helped her by asking what she liked, and from there, she sketched out one design and then the others for her wedding party. It was very simple but elegant. She also signed a contract and paid a down payment.

Rebecca couldn't wait to get home to Jill and tell her how things went. She went straight to Jill's office and showed her the designs for each of the girls, then handed her the contracts and the down payments they had given her. Jill was very impressed with what she had accomplished in such a short time; she had managed to get two contracts in just a matter of hours.

The rest of the day, Rebecca and Jill worked on what they needed to do to get her business started. They had a lot of things that needed to be taken care of. All week, they worked nonstop on everything that needed to be done.

When Friday finally arrived, Rebecca was glad for a break and to see Rogue. He arrived at five o'clock sharp. Rebecca had chosen to wear her favorite dress, which she had gotten at Jill's

shop. Rogue had made reservations at a very fancy restaurant. He was dressed in a suit, and she thought he looked very good in it.

As they sat down to eat, they made small talk until their dinner arrived. As they enjoyed their meal, Rogue said, “My parents are asking a lot of questions about you.”

“Oh?” she said.

“They want to know more about you since you’ve sparked my interest, and they would like to get to know you better,” he said. He continued, telling her that they would like him to bring her to dinner next Saturday. “So, what do you say? Would you like to have dinner with my family?”

Rebecca grinned and said, “So I have sparked your interest, huh?” Before he could answer, she told him she would like that very much and hoped they liked her.

He said, “You don’t have to worry about them not liking you. I think they will love you.”

She smiled.

As they left the restaurant, he put his arm around her as they walked to his car. He held the door open for her as she got in, then walked around and got into the driver’s seat. On the way home, they talked about everything. She was really starting to like him. They always had such a good time together. She didn’t know where this relationship would lead, but she was excited about how far it had come.

Rebecca told Jill about Rogue wanting her to meet his parents and that she was a little bit nervous about it. Jill told her, “Don’t be nervous, they are very good people and will make you feel very comfortable. I have known the Ratcliffes for years, and trust me when I say this, you could not ask for any better people in your life.” Then she added, “Sounds like Rogue is getting very serious about you if he wants you to meet his parents.” Rebecca said, “You really think so? Because I am getting very attached to him also.” Jill replied, “Trust me, I know so.”

During the following week, Rebecca and Jill worked long hours getting things set up for the new clients’ dresses. They went to the plant and started working on the new room, getting everything organized. The machines had already been ordered, and Mrs. Wilkins had names of reputable seamstresses lined up to be interviewed. Rebecca didn’t realize how much had to be done. She was so thankful for Jill being able to help her.

By the end of the month, things were starting to shape up. The machines were in place, fabric was ordered, and interviews were scheduled. They were ready to move forward. Rebecca’s office was completed, and she would be working there from now on.

By Friday, they felt like they could finally take a break, so they had lunch together, went to the spa, and even did some shopping. Rebecca bought a few things to decorate her office with. Jill had a big surprise for her, a neon sign that hung outside the building that said “Becca’s Bridal Boutique” in big letters. Rebecca cried when she saw it. She couldn’t believe her dreams were finally coming true. She hugged her mom and thanked her, telling her this couldn’t have happened without her.

When they got home that evening, they were both exhausted. Rebecca went to her room. She sat down and thought about how her life had changed in such a short time. She picked up another one of the journals her biological dad had left her and started reading it. The more she read, the more she felt like she was getting to know him. She looked at the pictures of her mother and thought about how much she resembled her. She could finally put a face to the man that Hettie loved and missed so much. She could see why he had been such a handsome man. Her mother was a beautiful woman.

She tried every chance she could to read as many of the journals as possible. She thought he must have really loved her to go to such extremes to make sure she knew about her roots.

She noticed an envelope in the box that she hadn't seen before. When she opened it, she found a set of wedding rings. They were beautiful. She tried them on, and they fit perfectly. She and her mother must have been about the same size, she thought. There were so many answers in this box to questions she had carried for years. She was very thankful her father had taken the time to do all of this.

Rogue picked her up at 5 o'clock on Saturday for dinner with his parents. She was excited about meeting them. He arrived on time, as usual; he was always very punctual. As they headed to his parents' house, he seemed excited about meeting them. When they arrived, his parents met them at the door.

Mrs. Ratcliffe said, "Hi, Rebecca. So nice to finally meet you. I know we met briefly at the wedding, but never really got a chance to talk."

Mr. Ratcliffe shook her hand and welcomed her into their home. They walked into the living room, which was quite spacious. The house was beautiful and huge.

"Rogue has told us so much about you," Mr. Ratcliffe said.

"I hope it was all good," she replied with a smile.

"Oh yes, it was very good. He told us about your new adventure. We think you'll do very well. We saw the reactions on everyone's faces at the wedding when they saw your designs."

"Thank you," she said. "I love what I do."

Rebecca looked at Mrs. Ratcliffe and told her what a beautiful home she had. Mrs. Ratcliffe thanked her and told her to call her Blanche. Mr. Ratcliffe shared that he had been her father's lawyer for years until he handed everything over to Rogue. He continued to tell her how he and Blanche wanted to slow down, travel, and see the world. Rebecca told them how wonderful that was and that they had left everything in good hands with Rogue. When it was time for dinner to be served, the cook came in and told them it was time to eat.

As they sat down, Rogue, as usual, waited until Rebecca was seated before he took his seat. While they ate dinner, they all got to know each other more. She learned that Rogue was an only child and had been a handful at times.

Rogue looked at his mother and said, "Please don't tell me you're going to tell her about my childhood and show her baby pictures?"

Blanche said, “Don’t tempt me, son!” and they all laughed.

Beckett Ratcliffe looked at Rebecca and said, “You know, I remember when your parents came to me and told me they wanted to adopt you. It was the happiest day of their life. You will never have two people who love you more than Andrew and Jill Malone.”

Rebecca said, “I feel the same way, Beckett. They are the best parents anyone could ever have. I love them both so very much.”

When dinner was over, they headed out to the terrace. Rogue put his arm around Rebecca and told her this was his favorite spot. Beckett had drinks brought out to them. Rebecca wasn’t used to drinking, but she decided she would have a glass of wine. They must have sat there for hours just enjoying each other’s company.

Rebecca finally realized how late it was and told Beckett and Blanche that she should be getting home. She told them what a great time she had. They walked her and Rogue to the door. Beckett and Blanche both hugged her and told her they hoped she would come back.

Rogue took her by the hand and headed out the door. He looked at her and said, “Well, what do you think of my parents?”

She said, “They are fantastic. I had such a great evening with them and you, too, of course,” as she winked at him.

He kissed her and said, “I think my parents really like you.” She smiled at him.

As he drove her home, she said to Rogue, “I need to know something.”

He said, “What do you need to know?”

“I just want to know straight up, and I’m not pulling any punches, where is this going with us?”

He pulled the car over. She kept talking about all the reasons why they shouldn’t be together, the age difference, and so forth.

He stopped her. “Rebecca, I know all the things you’re worried about, but as far as I’m concerned, they don’t matter to me. People are going to think what they want. It doesn’t matter.”

Rebecca looked at him and said, “I don’t know if you’re ready to hear this or not, but I am in love with you. So, if you don’t feel the same way, you need to let me know now so that I can learn to get on with my life without you.”

Rogue looked at her and said, “Rebecca, I have loved you since the first day I met you in your father’s office. I don’t know what it was about you, but you captured my attention from the very beginning. I love you, Rebecca Malone.”

She said, “I love you too, Rogue Ratcliffe.”

Following the next few months, Rebecca had gotten so busy. She and Jill worked endless hours on dresses for new clients. Everything was going very well. She had also picked up more clients, and her business was really getting off to a good start.

No matter how busy she got, she always made time for her family, Rogue included. Mrs. Wilkins was a big help; she assisted

with interviewing the new seamstresses. Before long, all the machines had ladies sitting at them, doing what they did best.

Rebecca was pleased with what she had accomplished thus far. She was always there in case anyone had any questions about the design of the dresses.

Rogue stopped by later that day to see if she would like to have a late lunch. She was eager to accept, as she hadn't had time to take a break all day. They went to a small café just down the road. She ordered a salad and a glass of water. Rogue had a burger and fries, along with a glass of tea.

As they ate their lunch, they made small talk. Rogue looked at her and said, "Rebecca, you're not overdoing it, are you? I can see how tired you've been lately."

"I'm fine, Rogue. I promise," she said.

That night at dinner, Rebecca noticed Hettie was all dressed up, like she was going out on a date. Rebecca asked her who the lucky man was. Hettie blushed. "Well, if you must know, his name is Joseph. I met him at the garage where I get my oil changed. We've been talking for a while. He asked me out, and I told him yes."

Andrew said, "Good for you, Hettie. I hope you have a great time."

Hettie excused herself and said she had to get going. Rebecca told her that she would clean up. Hettie smiled at her and headed out the door.

When everyone had finished eating, Rebecca cleared the table and headed to the kitchen. As she put the last of the dishes in the dishwasher, she heard a loud thump. She went to the living room and saw her father lying on the floor. She ran over to him and screamed for Jill. Jill came running and saw Andrew lying on the floor. Rebecca immediately called 911 and automatically opened the gate to the house so they could get in.

Jill was checking Andrew for vital signs; there were none. The 911 operator was telling Jill what to do and asked if she knew CPR. Jill said yes, but that it had been a while. The operator talked her through what she needed to do, and she continued CPR until the ambulance arrived.

Rebecca met them at the door, and they ran to Andrew. Rebecca was crying uncontrollably; she had never been this scared in her life. The ambulance technicians took over. Jill went over to Rebecca and clung to her. Andrew was still not responding. They brought out the defibrillator paddles. It seemed like they worked on him forever. Then one of the technicians said, “We have a heartbeat.”

They waited a few minutes and then started putting him on the gurney. Jill rode with Andrew in the ambulance, while Rebecca followed in her car. On the way to the hospital, she called Hettie and Rogue; they both said they would meet her there.

When they arrived at the hospital, they took him right in. Rebecca and Jill waited outside while they worked on him. It wasn’t long until Hettie and Rogue arrived. Hettie was hysterical, and Jill took her aside, and they sat down. Rogue made his way to Rebecca and wrapped his arms around her. She held onto him and cried. As she started to calm down, he handed her tissues.

They both went to sit with Hettie and Jill. Rebecca sat on the other side of her mom and held her hand. She could tell that Jill had been crying.

About an hour later, the doctor finally came out to talk to them. He took them into a small room. He looked at Jill and said, “Mrs. Malone, your husband has had a heart attack, a pretty bad one at that. We have him stabilized for now, but he is not out of the woods yet. We are running tests on him and monitoring him closely. He is in the ICU. Mrs. Malone, I guess what I am trying to say is that we just have to wait and see.”

Jill asked if she could see him. The doctor told her that once they got him situated in his room, they would come get her, but only for a short time. The doctor looked at Jill and said, “Mrs. Malone, I wish I had better news for you, but I promise you that we will do whatever we can for him.”

They all went back out into the waiting room. A few hours passed when a nurse came out and told Jill she could go in and see Andrew. She told her that there was an ICU waiting room where everyone could wait. Everyone followed her, and she told Jill that she could only stay for ten minutes once an hour.

Rebecca could see her dad through the window. He was hooked up to so many machines; he looked lifeless, just lying there. Rogue put his hands on her shoulders. Tears flowed down her cheeks as she stood there, watching him. She put her hands on his and said, “He has to be all right, Rogue. He promised me that someday he would walk me down the aisle. There are so many things we haven’t gotten to do yet that we were going to do. Mom and I both need him to be all right. I just can’t imagine life without him.”

Over the next few days, they all took turns going in to see Andrew. Nothing had changed; he was still just lying there. When it was Rebecca's turn to go in and see him again, she sat by his side, holding his hand and talking to him, reminding him of all they still had to do and that he just couldn't leave her.

Rebecca and Jill stayed at the hospital. Hettie brought them fresh clothes every day. They could shower at the hospital, and anything else they needed, Hettie saw to it. Sebastian and Cheyenne came almost every day. Their hearts were breaking for Rebecca and Jill. Rogue stopped by after work and stayed for hours with them.

Many people called to check on them. Jill's and Andrew's parents were there every day. Mrs. Wilkins was handling everything at the plant and in Rebecca's office. Rebecca called her periodically to check in and see if she needed anything. Mrs. Wilkins assured her that everything was under control and told her not to worry.

That evening, when it was Rebecca's time to go in to see her dad, she was so tired she could hardly keep her eyes open. She held his hand and rested her head on his arm. All of a sudden, she felt him squeeze her hand. She looked up and saw that he was trying to open his eyes. She immediately called for the nurse.

The nurses rushed in, and Rebecca went back to the waiting room. She looked for Jill, but she was nowhere in sight. Rebecca called her on the phone, and Jill answered right away. She had stepped out for a cup of coffee. Jill threw the coffee in the trash and ran to the waiting room.

Rebecca hugged her and said, “Mom, he squeezed my hand and was trying to open his eyes. The nurses and doctor are with him now.” Jill was so happy she could hardly wait for the doctor to come out and talk to them.

About a half hour later, which seemed like a lifetime, the doctor finally came out. He looked at them and said, “Well, it appears that your husband is finally responding to treatment. We will continue to monitor him closely. This is a very good sign, but as I said before, he is still not out of the woods. I will be back later to check on him.”

Jill and Rebecca thanked him as he walked away. They were both so happy; finally, some good news, they thought. Jill called both her parents and Andrew’s parents to let them know what was going on. Rebecca called Hettie, Rogue, and Cheyenne.

It wasn’t long before the nurse told Jill she could go in and see her husband. Jill walked around the bed, took him by the hand, and talked to him. He was still very weak, but his vital signs were starting to improve. When her time was up, she kissed his hand and walked out of the room.

Andrew’s and Jill’s parents didn’t waste any time getting there. The nurse let both of Andrew’s parents go in to see him. When they came out, his mother said that his color was starting to look better and that she just couldn’t wait for him to wake up. They stayed for the rest of the day.

Rebecca told Jill, “I think I’m going to go get us some real food. I’m tired of eating this hospital food.”

Jill replied, “That would be so good. Whatever you get is fine with me.”

Rebecca hugged her, grabbed her purse, and headed out of the hospital. When she got outside, she had to adjust her eyes to the sunlight; she hadn’t been outside for several days. The sun felt good, and it was nice to get some fresh air. She made sure she wasn’t gone too long.

When she got back, she and Jill sat down at a table and finally had somewhat of a family meal together. Rebecca had gotten them Mexican food, which was Jill’s favorite, and she liked it too.

Rogue stopped by after work to check on them and see if they needed anything. He was so happy that there had been some improvement in Andrew’s health. He was glad to see that Rebecca and Jill were a little more at ease, but he also knew Andrew still had a long way to go.

When Rogue decided it was time for him to leave, Rebecca walked him to his car. He hugged her, kissed her goodbye, and told her he would see her tomorrow.

Later that night, the nurse came out and told them that Andrew was awake and that they could both go in to see him. When they entered the room, Andrew looked at both of them and smiled. They each kissed him on the cheek. Finally, he asked, “What happened?”

Jill told him that he had collapsed and had to be taken to the hospital. She asked if he remembered anything. He said, “No.”

About that time, the doctor came in. He looked at Andrew and said, “Glad to see that you’re awake. Mr. Malone, do you know where you are and why you’re in the hospital?” Andrew said that he didn’t. The doctor continued, “Mr. Malone, you have had a heart attack...a very bad one, I might add. You have several blockages, and as soon as you’re able, probably within the next day or so, we will have to go in and put stents in. You are a very lucky man. Thanks to your wife and daughter’s quick reaction, it probably saved your life.”

Andrew looked at both of them, tears in his eyes. He never spoke. After the doctor left, Andrew looked at them again and told them how much he loved them. Rebecca was just so glad to hear his voice again. They both kissed him and told him to get some rest and that they would be back later.

That night, they decided to go home. The nurse told them she would call if they needed to get a hold of them. Jill and Rebecca were so glad to finally be able to go home for a while. They called Hettie when they got into the car to let her know they would see her soon.

When they pulled up to the house, they both couldn’t wait to get inside. Hettie was at the door waiting for them. She hugged them and said, “This big old house sure has been empty… without both of you. I’m so glad you’re home.”

Mrs. Hettie had a snack waiting for them. As they ate, they filled her in on all of Andrew’s health issues. “He will have a long recovery, Hettie,” Rebecca said, “but I am so thankful he is still with us.”

“Me too,” replied Hettie.

Jill and Rebecca excused themselves and went to their rooms. Rebecca unpacked her overnight bag and put her dirty clothes down the chute. She grabbed her pajamas and went to take a nice, long, hot shower. She stood there for a long time; it felt so good.

When she finished and got dressed, she went to her bedroom. She was so tired that all she wanted to do was sleep. She crawled into bed and drifted right off to sleep.

Rebecca woke up early the next morning feeling much more rested. She went downstairs to see if Jill was up yet. Jill and Hettie were sitting at the bar, having their morning coffee. Rebecca poured herself a cup and sat down.

Jill said, "Your dad's nurse called to let me know they'll be doing his procedure this morning."

Rebecca told her, "Then we should probably get ready and head to the hospital." Jill agreed, and they both went to get changed. Hettie said she would come over later.

By the time they arrived at the hospital, Andrew had already been taken in for the procedure. About an hour later, they brought him back. He was still a little groggy. Later that evening, he began to come around and seemed more like himself.

The doctor came out and spoke with Jill and Rebecca, informing them that they had placed four stents. He also said that by the next day, Andrew would be moved out of the ICU and into a private room. They were so glad to hear that. Hopefully, by the end of the week, he would be able to go home.

Rebecca thought to herself how much life could change in just one day. She felt even more thankful and blessed to have such a wonderful family.

Chapter 12

By the weekend, Andrew was able to come home. As the nurse was getting him ready to leave, Rebecca went downstairs to move the car to the front of the hospital. It wasn't long before he was being wheeled out in a wheelchair, with Jill following behind them. Jill was given all the instructions from the doctor and was told to call if she had any questions.

They helped him into the back seat of the car, and Jill sat with him. As Rebecca drove them home, she could see Andrew looking out the window. She could only imagine what he was thinking.

Andrew finally said, "You should never take life for granted. It's amazing how I can see things now that I never saw before, but have always been here. I was just too busy to notice and appreciate them. This heart attack has made me see things in a different light. I am so thankful to be alive. Not everyone is given a second chance."

Rebecca said, "Dad, we thought we had lost you for good. Mom and I have never been so scared in our lives. We are so thankful to still have you around."

Jill spoke up and told Andrew, "You scared us both to death, but you are a fighter, always have been."

Andrew said, "I have a lot to fight for," as he hugged Jill and kissed her on the cheek. "You and Rebecca are my life," he said.

When they entered the gate to the house, they were all so happy. Finally, they were all home. Hettie met them at the front of the house. She couldn't wait to see Andrew. She hugged him and said, "So, if you think you're going to be waited on hand and foot, I have news for you, Mr. Andrew, you'll have to work for it."

He smiled. "Good to see you too, Hettie," he said as he hugged her.

He walked into the house. "It is so good to be home," he said. He wanted to sit in his chair in the living room, which he did. Hettie asked him if he needed anything. He said he didn't; he just wanted to take a nap in his chair.

Andrew slept for most of the evening. Periodically, Jill and Rebecca checked on him, just to make sure he was still breathing. Andrew woke up when Hettie had dinner ready. He was still weak but managed to get to the table on his own.

Rebecca could tell a difference in her dad. It was as if he were so thankful to be alive and cherished every minute of it. He was a changed man for sure, she thought.

Hettie had fixed Andrew's favorite. As they all sat down to eat, Andrew asked them to join hands, and he said a prayer over their meal. It felt so good to have the family together again for dinner.

Over the next few months, Andrew was getting stronger. He decided it was time for him to return to his office. He sat at his desk, and Mrs. Borden came in and went over everything with him. He was so happy to be able to return to work. Mrs. Borden

filled him in on everything that was going on. He was still a little sluggish when it came to what he needed to do, so Mrs. Borden had Rogue come in later that day to help him.

Rogue filled him in on what he needed to take care of first. Rogue could tell Andrew wasn't himself, so he helped him with all the legal matters he needed to handle. Rogue was a big help to Andrew.

Rebecca and Jill were a little skeptical about Andrew returning to work, but they also understood that he needed to resume life as usual. Jill and Rebecca went back to work as well.

Rebecca's business was doing very well, and she had a lot of new customers. First, she worked on the dresses she already had orders for. They were magnificent. She poured her heart and soul into them. The brides loved them and couldn't wait to see them.

Rebecca felt a sense of relief. Thanks to Mrs. Wilkins, things were running smoothly. Rebecca spent the rest of her day in her office. She had a lot of new clients who wanted to schedule meetings with her and understood that, with her father's illness, she needed time, but they were willing to wait.

She returned each call, set up appointments with them, and thanked them all for their patience during this time, letting them know she looked forward to working with them. It wasn't long before Rebecca had her phone ringing off the hook.

She hadn't seen Rogue for a while, and she was really missing him, so she decided to call him. He answered right away.

"Hello."

Rebecca said the same. She told him how much she had missed him and how much she would like to see him. He said he would like that very much and asked if she would like to have dinner that evening. She told him she would like that very much. So, they decided they would meet and have a late dinner together.

Rebecca met him at a small restaurant later that evening. She was so happy to see him. He took her by the hand, and they entered the restaurant. As they sat down, she turned to him and said, "Rogue, I know things have been a little crazy between us lately with my dad being sick. I just want you to know that my feelings for you have not changed. If you have different feelings for me or have changed your mind, please let me know. I will walk away right now and move on."

Rogue looked at her and said, "Rebecca Malone, I have never loved anyone as I have loved you, so if you think you're going to get rid of me this easily, you're wrong."

Rebecca hugged him.

After dinner, they decided to go see a movie. It was a comedy. Rebecca hadn't laughed like that in a long time. It felt so good spending time with Rogue again, she thought to herself.

The following week was a very busy time for her. She had appointments scheduled for every day. She enjoyed meeting with her new clients. As she finished her last appointment for the week, she let out a sigh of relief. It was later in the afternoon when Rebecca finished the final touches on all the designs. She gathered them and dropped them off so her team could start on the patterns. It would take them a few days, and then Rebecca would need to approve all of them before the dresses were made.

She decided to leave early, but on her way home, she stopped by to see Rogue. His secretary showed her in right away. Rogue was sitting at his desk, going over some paperwork. When he saw Rebecca, a smile crossed his face. He stood up, kissed her, and asked, “So what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

“Well, I decided to leave work early today and just wanted to see you before I headed home,” she said.

“Well, I’m glad you did. I needed a break.”

He had his secretary bring them some coffee and a snack. They sat down and simply enjoyed each other’s company. As Rebecca got up to leave, he told her that he loved the time they had spent together and that she needed to stop by more often. Rebecca kissed him goodbye and said, “I love you, Rogue Ratcliffe,” as she walked out the door. He smiled at her and told her that he loved her, too.

When she got home, she went into the kitchen to see Hettie. Hettie was surprised to see her. “You’re home early, darling,” she said. Rebecca told her she had finished up early, so she thought she would come home. Hettie could tell she was tired and told her she needed to slow down some. Rebecca went to her room to rest for a while before dinner. She didn’t realize how tired she was until she lay down and fell right off to sleep.

Jill came upstairs to check on Rebecca. She opened the door, saw that Rebecca was fast asleep, and decided to let her sleep.

As Rebecca’s business really started to take off, she had to hire more help. She even hired an assistant, Maggie Rhodes. Maggie was good at what she was hired to do and was a lot of help

to her, keeping things running smoothly. Rebecca was thankful for all the extra help.

Jill's shops were doing very well, and she even had a new line out that was selling like hotcakes. Jill and Rebecca had gotten so busy that they seldom had time for a mother-and-daughter day anymore. Andrew stayed very busy at work. He had several big projects he was working on at the same time, and Jill worried that he was taking on too much at once.

Rebecca and Rogue spent a lot of time together. Cheyenne and Sebastian were very busy as well. They now had a child of their own, a little boy named Blake. They didn't let being new parents stop them from completing their education. Rebecca would watch Blake sometimes so they could have time together, which she enjoyed. She couldn't wait until she had children of her own someday.

Rebecca continued to try to reach Savannah, but no one had heard from her in years, including her parents. Rebecca could tell they were heartbroken. The weather was starting to cool down, and winter was just around the corner.

Andrew and Jill had asked Rebecca and Rogue if they would like to go to Aspen for Christmas. Rebecca hadn't been in years, and Rogue quickly accepted. Rebecca was excited about going as well; she remembered how beautiful it was. Of course, she would probably see Maverick and Jonikka, but she was okay with it now that she knew Rogue would be going. She filled Rogue in on what a beautiful place it was and how every year, there was always something new added. Rogue, unlike Rebecca, knew how to ski.

Andrew had each of them look at their schedules and pick out a week that would be good for everyone. They all decided that the week before Christmas would be a good time. Andrew put it on his calendar and told them he would make all the arrangements.

As Thanksgiving was getting closer, Jill, Rebecca, and Hettie started making plans for their dinner. Andrew and Jill's parents were coming, just as they always had. They also invited Rogue and his parents. Cheyenne, Sebastian, and Blake would be there as well. Hettie even asked if she could invite Joe. After all, they had been dating for a couple of years now. Joe was a very nice man and was good to Hettie. He was starting to feel like part of the family, so of course, he was more than welcome.

They made out a menu and were excited to start preparing for their meal.

A few days before Thanksgiving, Hettie, Jill, and Rebecca went shopping for their meal preparations. They couldn't wait to get started. The day before Thanksgiving, they began getting ready for their feast. They worked all day making desserts and some of the other fixings they could prepare beforehand.

The next morning, they all got up early to help Hettie with the final preparations. They were so excited about what they had done that they couldn't wait for their guests to arrive. Jill and Andrew's parents were the first to arrive, followed by Cheyenne, Sebastian, and Blake. Rogue and his parents, along with Joe, were the last to get there. Everyone loved this time of year; it was all about spending time with family.

When Hettie announced it was time for dinner, everyone gathered around the table. Jill and Rebecca helped her bring out

the food. Once everyone sat down to eat, Andrew said a prayer and asked everyone to share something they were thankful for. He started by saying he was thankful to be alive and to have such a wonderful family.

When it came to Rebecca's turn, she said, *"Like my father, I am thankful that he is with us, considering all that he has gone through. I am also thankful for my mom, who helped me become the person I am today. I thank God for giving me such good friends,"* she said, looking at Cheyenne and Sebastian. *"And last but not least, I thank Rogue for coming into my life. I love you so very much,"* she added as she raised her glass to him. *"I thank everyone for being here today and for being a part of my family."*

They all spent the rest of the day simply enjoying each other's time together, something they didn't get to do as much anymore. Everyone was in the living room when, all of a sudden, Rogue spoke up and said, *"Can I have everyone's attention, please? I wasn't planning on doing this now, but I feel it is the right time."*

He walked over to Rebecca, pulled something out of his pocket, got down on one knee, and said, *"Rebecca Lynn Donovan Malone, will you do me the honor of being my wife? I have loved you for a long time and can't imagine my life without you in it. I know I'm not much, but I promise I will love you for as long as we both shall live."*

Rebecca was shaking, with tears in her eyes. She wasn't expecting this. She looked down at him and said, *"Rogue, I sure wasn't expecting this. We have been through a lot together, and you never left my side. I have loved you for so long. I would consider it an honor to be your wife, Mr. Ratcliffe."*

He placed the ring on her finger, stood up, and kissed her. The rest of the evening was magical for Rebecca; she was so happy. Everyone congratulated them on their upcoming marriage and couldn't wait for what was to come.

After everyone had left, except for Rogue, Rebecca asked her mom and dad if they had seen her ring and how beautiful it was. Her dad and mom said yes, they had both seen it the week before, when Rogue asked them if it would be okay to ask their daughter to marry him.

Rebecca said, *"Wow! You two were very sneaky."* They all laughed.

Rogue finally said to her, *"You didn't think I would ask for your hand in marriage if your parents didn't approve, would you?"*

She replied, *"I guess not. That's why I love you so much, you're a true gentleman."*

Over the next couple of weeks, as Rebecca prepared for their family vacation, she couldn't believe she was going to be Mrs. Rogue Ratcliffe. They hadn't picked out a date yet, but of course, they had plenty of time to do so.

The week before their vacation was to begin, Rebecca stayed busy wrapping up all the loose ends for her clients' upcoming Christmas weddings. All the dresses had been delivered to the soon-to-be brides. Rebecca was so thankful that they had met all of their approvals. With everything completed, Rebecca was ready for some much-needed rest and relaxation.

She was also ahead of schedule, so when she got home that evening, she asked Jill if she needed any help with her last-minute details before they were to leave. Jill still had stacks of paperwork on her desk that needed to be finished, so Rebecca jumped in to help her. When they reached a point where they both felt they could finish the rest the next day, they stopped for the night. Jill was so relieved that they had accomplished so much in one evening. She hugged Rebecca and told her she couldn't have done it without her.

Rebecca had always encouraged Jill to get an assistant to help her, and Jill finally told her she would be doing that after the first of the new year. She said things were starting to get overwhelming now that her business was getting bigger and bigger. She had opened more shops, and Rebecca could tell it was starting to take a toll on her. Still, Jill loved it and would do it as long as she was able.

At dinner that night, Andrew talked about their upcoming vacation, and Rebecca could tell he was getting excited, too. Over the weekend, Rebecca started packing for their trip. She decided she would pack light, but it ended up being two suitcases full. She had to laugh at herself for thinking she wasn't packing much.

She and Jill finished everything that needed to be completed before they left, and Jill could finally concentrate on getting away.

The house had been decorated for Christmas as usual, with even more added to it. Every year, it seemed to get bigger and bigger. This year was even more special for Rebecca, considering Rogue had asked her to marry him, and this would be their first vacation together.

She couldn't help but wonder what it was going to be like when she saw Maverick and Jonikka. After all, it had been a few years since she had last been there. Hopefully, it wouldn't be too awkward. She couldn't wait to see what new things had been added to the Lodge.

Andrew had always stayed busy doing projects for Mr. Rodgers.

Rogue's parents had invited her to dinner that evening, and Rogue picked her up around six. When they arrived, the Ratcliffes met them at the door. Rogue took Rebecca's coat and hung up his own as well. Beckett and Blanche Ratcliffe were always nice to her; she loved spending time with them.

When dinner was ready, they all sat down. Dinner was delicious, as usual. Blanche asked Rebecca, "Have you and Rogue picked out a date yet?" Rebecca told her they had not, but they hoped to do so after the first of the year. Blanche said, "Well, if you need any help with wedding preparations, just let me know. I would love to help." Rebecca thanked her and told her she would love that.

Beckett asked Rogue, "Son, any ideas on where you and Rebecca will settle down after your marriage?" Rogue said, "I have an idea, but I need to discuss it with Rebecca first. We have a lot to talk about."

After dinner, they all went into the living room. They had a great time together, talking about Christmas and Rebecca and Rogue's upcoming wedding. Rebecca loved how Blanche had the house decorated. There was a fire in the fireplace, and the house was warm and cozy. It had already started snowing.

Rogue decided he should get Rebecca home before the roads got bad. She thanked Beckett and Blanche for having her over for dinner and told them how much she enjoyed spending time with them.

Rogue got their coats, and they headed out the door. It was freezing cold outside. Rogue helped her into his truck, and off they went. The ride home was a little tricky; the roads were very slick. When they finally made it to Rebecca's house, Andrew told Rogue he needed to stay put; it looked like the snow was settling in for the night. Jill showed him to a room where he could stay. He called his parents to let them know he would be staying at the Malones' until the weather had cleared.

When everyone had gone to bed that night, Rebecca went to Rogue's room. He was still awake, watching TV. She crawled into bed beside him. That was the first night that he and Rebecca had an intimate relationship.

She woke the next morning lying in his arms. She felt safe and loved. She watched him as he lay asleep, thinking about how peaceful he looked. She loved him so much. She couldn't wait to be his wife. She let him sleep and headed back to her room before it was time for everyone to wake up. When she got to her room, she climbed into bed, and all she could think about was Rogue holding her in his arms and how good it felt.

When everyone got up the next morning, it was still snowing outside. Rebecca went downstairs. Rogue and her dad were sitting in the living room, talking. She said good morning to them. Rogue kissed her on the cheek. She went into the kitchen to see if Hettie needed any help. Jill was already there helping. They let her know

that breakfast would soon be ready. Rebecca poured herself a cup of coffee and sat at the bar.

Hettie looked at Rebecca and said, “You look different today.”

“Oh, how is that, Miss Hettie?” she asked.

“Well, you’re glowing,” she said.

Rebecca felt her face flush. *Did she know that I spent the night with Rogue?* she wondered.

Rebecca quickly replied, “Well, Miss Hettie, I guess since I’m going to be marrying the love of my life, I look different. I’ve been on cloud nine ever since.”

Jill started taking all the food out to the dining table. Miss Hettie looked at Rebecca and said, “Your secret is safe with me,” as she grinned.

“Does anything ever get by you in this house?” Rebecca asked her.

“No! It never has,” she replied.

Rebecca smiled at her as she picked up some plates of food to take to the table. When everything was ready, Jill called everyone to breakfast. Andrew said a prayer over the food, something he had always done since he had his heart attack. As they ate breakfast, they talked about their upcoming vacation. They would be leaving in two days, Rebecca thought to herself.

Jill spoke up and said, “I think we all need this time to get away. Everyone has been so busy with work, and we hardly see each other anymore.”

They all agreed. When breakfast was over, Rebecca and Rogue cleared the table and washed the dishes. Rogue looked at her and said, “Last night was wonderful. I just can’t wait to make you my wife.”

Rebecca kissed him and told him she couldn’t wait to be his wife.

As the snow stopped and the roads became passable, Rogue headed home. He thanked Andrew and Jill for letting him stay the night. Rebecca walked him to his truck. She kissed him goodbye and waited until he drove off before she went back into the house. She still had a few things to do before their trip, so she went to her room to finish up.

Chapter 13

The following day, everyone was getting ready for their trip. Andrew, Jill, and Rebecca were packed and ready to go. Rogue was going to spend the night with them, and all of them would head to the airport the next morning. They spent the rest of the day preparing for their trip.

Rogue arrived that evening, brought all of his luggage into the house, and set it in front of the door. They began loading everything into Jill's SUV so they would be ready to leave early the next morning. After everything was put into the vehicle, they all sat down to enjoy their last evening at home for a while.

After dinner, Rogue and Rebecca decided to take a walk. When they reached the barn, they decided to take out one of the ATVs. As they drove along the trail, Rogue stopped at the spot Rebecca loved so much. He asked her, "What do you think about us building our dream house here?"

She looked at him and said, "You would actually want to live this close to my parents?"

He smiled and said, "As long as I am with you, I don't care where we live. It's not like we would be living in their house; we would have our own home."

She smiled at him and said, “You know this has always been my favorite spot, and I’ve always wanted to build a home here. So, if you approve, this is where I would love to live.”

He kissed her and said, “So let’s do it. We need to talk to your parents. If they approve, I would like to begin as soon as possible. I want us to have our home ready to move into after we are married.”

Rebecca was so excited about the thought of them starting to build their dream home. She had mentioned it to her parents years ago, and they were happy that she had chosen that spot and said they were okay with her doing whatever she wanted with the property. However, they still needed to discuss it with Andrew and Jill.

When they arrived home, Rogue asked Andrew if they could talk privately. Andrew and Rogue went to his office and were there for a long time. Afterward, Andrew asked Jill and Rebecca to come to his office for a family conference. Jill looked at Rebecca and said, “This must be serious, but a good thing, perhaps.”

Andrew began by saying to Jill that Rogue and Rebecca wanted to build a house on the property that Rebecca loved so much. Jill was thrilled about the idea and said she approved. Andrew and Jill said they would sign over fifty acres to them as a wedding gift. Of course, there would be stipulations in case of a divorce, and the property would come back to them. They all agreed.

So, it was all settled, Rogue and Rebecca could start building their home. Rogue asked Andrew if it was okay for him to start

making preparations for the house to be built and if he could draw up the house plans.

Andrew was more than happy to do so. Jill hugged Rebecca and said, “Your dream is finally coming true. You and Rogue will soon have a home of your own. But I don’t know what we will do without you being in the house. You’re growing up, Rebecca, and soon you’ll be a married woman. I am very happy for you, although you won’t be living in this house, you will always be our little girl. If you ever need us, we will always be here for you, no matter what.”

Jill looked at Rogue and said, “You promise you will always take care of my girl, no matter what?”

He looked at Jill and said, “I will always take care of Rebecca. I have loved her for a long time. She is not only special to you, but she is also very special to me. I promise I will always love her and take care of her.”

Early the next morning, they all got up and began getting ready to leave for the airport. Miss Hettie was going to drive them there and then drive the vehicle back. They were all excited about leaving; of course, Jill and Rebecca were the last to be ready. Andrew and Rogue waited patiently for them at the front door.

Miss Hettie dropped them off at the front of the airport. She hugged them and wished them a good trip. They entered the terminal with their luggage and checked in. When they reached their gate, which was quite a walk, they decided to get a bite to eat since they had some time before their flight. They went to a small restaurant and sat down, and the waitress took their order. The breakfast was good, but not as good as Miss Hettie’s.

After they finished eating, they went back to their gate, which was starting to board. Once all the passengers were on board, the airplane made its way down the runway. Andrew looked at Rogue and Rebecca and said, “Since we have some time, do you two know what kind of house you want to build?”

Rogue said, “Well, we know we want five bedrooms for whenever we decide to start a family. We would like the master bedroom to be a good size. The other bedrooms can be a normal size. We want five and a half bathrooms, each bedroom will have its own bath, and we would like the half bath downstairs for guests. Two bedrooms downstairs and three upstairs. We will both need an office, which we would like on the main level, a big kitchen, a laundry room, and a good-sized living room with a fireplace. We also want a basement, which we can convert into a large game room later on, with a bathroom as well. We want the outside of the house to have a log home look, with a wraparound porch.”

Andrew looked at them and said, “Looks like you’re planning on a pretty sizable home. Are you sure you want to build one that big? It could get quite expensive.”

Rogue said, “We’re sure. My grandparents left me a large amount of money when they passed. There is more than enough to build what we want.”

Rebecca spoke up and said, “Rogue, I’m not exactly penniless. I can also pitch in.”

Before she could say anything else, he looked at her and said, “I know you can, Rebecca, but this is what I want to do. My father

raised me to be a man who takes care of his family, and that is exactly what I intend to do."

Jill looked at Rogue and said, "Looks like you have already made up your mind about this."

He looked at Jill and said, "I have, as long as Rebecca doesn't have a problem with it."

Rebecca said, "I don't have a problem with it. It's just that I want to contribute to our future too. I at least want to buy all the furnishings for our new home. Will you let me do that?"

Rogue could tell that Rebecca felt like she needed to help with something as far as the house was concerned, so he said, "Well, as long as our bedroom isn't going to be pink, then we have a deal."

They all started laughing. She kissed him and told him purple it is, then grinned.

The airplane was getting ready to land, so they all put on their seatbelts. When the plane landed, and the door opened, they exited the plane. Rebecca looked around and thought it was just as beautiful as it had been the last time she was there. They picked up their luggage and headed to the car rental counter. Rogue went to drive the Jeep around so they could load their luggage, and then they were off to their chalet.

The weather was bitterly cold, and the wind didn't help much. Rebecca just wanted to get somewhere warm and have a nice cup of hot coffee. Andrew opened the door to the chalet, and it was absolutely beautiful. Jill and Rebecca checked everything out

while Rogue and Andrew grabbed the luggage from the Jeep. Jill went over to the gas fireplace and turned it on.

On the coffee table was a beautiful bouquet of flowers. Jill opened the card and read it. It was from the Rodgers, welcoming them back and saying how they couldn't wait to see them. There was also a bottle of champagne and some chocolates. Rebecca thought it was very sweet of them to do that.

They went downstairs, where there was a huge game room with a billiards table and lots of games. There were two bedrooms, each with its own bathroom. Rebecca picked one, and Rogue took the other. Rogue brought her suitcases into her room and began to unpack and freshen up before they went to dinner.

When she got back upstairs, Jill had made coffee, and they all sat at the table. Andrew was looking tired; since his heart attack, he had gotten tired very easily. Jill asked him if he was okay. He said he was, but thought he might take a little nap before dinner. Jill went to her bedroom to unpack all of her and Andrew's suitcases.

Rogue asked Rebecca if she would like to take a walk, and she said she would. He took her by the hand and led her down the steps. Rogue told her what a beautiful place it was and that he could see why her parents always loved coming there. Rebecca noticed all the skiers on the slopes and how much it looked like business was booming. She couldn't wait to see the lodge; Mrs. Rodgers always did a wonderful job decorating it for the holidays. Andrew had told her how there were more restaurants in the lodge now, and she couldn't wait to try something different.

She and Rogue walked for a long distance, just enjoying each other's company. Rebecca commented on how nice it was to be able to spend time together without either of them having to hurry off to work. Rogue seemed relaxed, but she could tell he had other things on his mind. She asked, "What are you thinking about?"

He said he was thinking about everything they would have to do when they got home. They had a wedding to plan and a house to build. She told him, "Rogue, we are on vacation, and we don't need to be thinking about everything that has to be done. We need to enjoy ourselves."

He hugged her and told her she was right. Then he said, "Rebecca, if nothing else, can we at least decide on a wedding date while we are here?"

She replied, "That's something I need to talk to you about. How about June? I know our house won't be ready by then, but we could stay at my parents' house until it's finished. You're right, we do have a lot to do when we get home, but until then, we're going to relax."

He told her June sounded great to him and that he couldn't wait. He put his arm around her, and they started walking back to the chalet.

When they got back, Jill and Andrew were all dressed and ready to go to dinner. Rebecca and Rogue went to their rooms to get ready. Rebecca decided to wear a pair of dress pants and a sweater. She fixed her makeup, grabbed her purse, and headed back upstairs. She was hoping that she wouldn't run into Maverick and Jonikka, but she also knew it would happen eventually. Before they were all ready to leave, Rogue went to warm up the Jeep.

When they got to the lodge, Rebecca couldn't believe all the new additions that had been made. The whole place was a lot bigger than the first time she had been there. When they entered the lodge, the first people they saw were the Rodgers. They saw Jill and Andrew and made their way over to them. Jill thanked them for the flowers, champagne, and chocolates. Mrs. Rodgers looked at Rebecca and couldn't believe how much she had grown and what a beautiful young woman she had turned into.

Rebecca introduced Rogue to them as her fiancé. Mrs. Rodgers congratulated them on their upcoming marriage as they all headed off to see what new restaurants were available.

They noticed a steakhouse, which they all agreed would be perfect. The waitress led them to a table and took their drink orders. Rebecca already knew what she wanted, so there was no need for her to look at the menu. The waitress returned with their drinks and took their food order. The meal was delicious.

After dinner, they all decided to walk around the lodge. Jill and Rebecca went into the shops to see what new clothing was in fashion. As they walked around, Rebecca noticed a bridal shop, so they went inside. As they were getting ready to leave the shop, Rebecca turned around and ran right into Jonikka.

Jonikka looked at her and said, "Rebecca Malone, is that really you? I haven't seen you in years."

"Yes, it's really me, Jonikka. How are you?" Rebecca replied.

Jonikka smiled. "Maverick and I are great. We're actually planning our wedding. I'm here looking at wedding dresses. I've found a few that I like, but haven't decided on one yet. I've also

seen dresses from this new designer I found on the internet, and I absolutely love her work. I think I'll be contacting her, since I can't seem to find the one that suits me best."

She looked at Jill and said, "You might know the designer, since you're in the business. It's called Becca's Bridal Boutique."

Jill replied, "Yes, I do know the designer. She's very talented. People come from all over to have her design their wedding dress."

"Then it's settled," Jonikka said. "I'll be getting in contact with her after the holidays." She thanked Jill for her input, knowing that if Jill Malone recommended her, then she must truly be good.

Rebecca and Jill said their goodbyes and headed out of the shop. Rebecca looked at Jill and said, "She is really going to be shocked when she finds out that I'm the designer."

They both laughed and went to look for Andrew and Rogue.

They found Andrew and Rogue in the main part of the lodge, talking with Mr. Rodgers and Maverick. Rebecca was a little nervous about speaking to Maverick. She walked up to Rogue and kissed him. Finally, she said to Maverick, "I see you've met my fiancé." He shook his head yes. She asked Maverick how he was doing, and he said he was doing very well. She told him they had run into Jonikka at the bridal shop and congratulated him on his upcoming marriage. It wasn't long before Maverick excused himself, saying he had some business to take care of. He shook Andrew's and Rogue's hands, told Rebecca how good it was to see her again, and then left. It was a little awkward for Rebecca to

see Maverick and Jonikka again, but she thought she handled it all very well.

When they finally got back to the chalet, they were all exhausted. It had been a long day for them. Jill and Andrew decided to turn in for the night and head to their bedroom. Rebecca and Rogue thought they would watch a movie and just unwind. After the movie, Rebecca went to her room to take a shower and changed into her pajamas. When she returned, she saw that Rogue had done the same. She looked at him and thought about how handsome he was, and couldn't believe that she would be his wife in six months. They both decided to get to bed, as they wanted to hit the slopes early the next day. They walked downstairs, and Rogue stopped at her room, kissed her goodnight, and told her he would see her in the morning.

They got up early the next day, and after breakfast, they all headed to the slopes. They picked up their skis and boots and made their way to the ski lift. It had been some time since they had all been skiing, and Rebecca hoped it would come back to her because it was too late to turn back now.

When it was time to get off the lift, she exited perfectly. Once she got started, everything came back to her. As they approached the end of the slope, Jonikka and some of her friends came flying up beside her. Before Rebecca could safely move out of the way, Jonikka caught her ski and tripped her. Rebecca went flying through the air and landed hard on her right leg.

Jonikka stopped and told Rebecca how sorry she was, saying she hadn't seen her until it was too late. But there was a smirk on her face. Rebecca knew she had done it on purpose and that she hadn't changed at all, despite what Maverick had said.

Rogue rushed over to help Rebecca up. When he got there, she tried to stand but immediately fell back down. She looked at him and said, “I don’t think I’m going to be able to stand up. I think my leg might be broken.”

Rogue immediately called Andrew and Jill, and it wasn’t long before they were beside her. By this time, Rebecca was in tears from the pain. Andrew called the lodge for assistance to help get his daughter to the hospital. It wasn’t long before help arrived. Andrew and Jill told her they would meet her at the hospital, while Rogue rode with her in the ambulance.

Rebecca looked at Rogue and said, “Rogue, she did this on purpose. She is a mean, vindictive person.”

Rogue replied, “Rebecca, you need to calm down and stop thinking about what she did. I saw it, and yes, she did trip you on purpose. Right now, we need to get you to the hospital and find out if your leg is broken.”

When they arrived at the hospital, Rebecca was taken in for X-rays. Unfortunately, her leg was broken in two places, and there was also a problem with her knee. The doctors wanted to keep her overnight, but she refused. They bandaged her leg, told her to see her doctor when she got home, gave her a prescription for pain medication, and sent her back to the chalet.

When they arrived, Rogue carried her inside and laid her gently on the couch. He carefully propped her leg up with pillows, then went to the kitchen to get her a glass of water so she could take her medicine. Rebecca was in a lot of pain throughout the night, and Rogue never left her side. When she finally fell asleep,

it was almost daylight. At that point, all she wanted was to go home.

The next morning, Andrew and Jill decided it was time to go home so Rebecca could see her doctor. Rebecca felt terrible because she believed she had ruined everyone's vacation. Andrew made all the reservations for them to leave as soon as possible, but the only available flight wouldn't depart until the following morning.

During the rest of the day, they packed and prepared to leave. Maverick, Jonikka, and Mr. and Mrs. Rodgers stopped by to see them before they left and told them how sorry they were to see them go. Jonikka once again told Rebecca how sorry she was about the accident, but by this time, Rebecca was not very friendly. She looked at Jonikka and told her that she knew she had tripped her on purpose and that it was a mean thing to do.

Jonikka leaned in and whispered that Rebecca deserved it, then grinned. Rebecca wished she could have gotten up because she would have slapped her.

Rogue heard what Jonikka said and addressed her. "Jonikka, you might not know me, but I am Rebecca's fiancé, and I watched you trip her on the slope. I also heard what you just said to her about how she deserved it. I don't know if you're aware of this, but I'm also a lawyer...and a very good one, I might add. What you did to her was completely uncalled for. When we get home, I will be drawing up paperwork for you to cover all of her expenses while she is incapacitated."

Jonikka didn't know what to say. She looked at Rogue and replied, "What happened was an accident."

He told her it wasn't, because he had seen the whole thing.

She then asked what they wanted. Rogue said they expected her to pay for all the hospital bills related to the incident. "If you would like me to discuss this matter with Maverick, I will."

She stopped him before he could approach Maverick and said that she would take care of everything.

The next morning, they packed their suitcases and headed to the airport. Rebecca was still in a lot of pain and couldn't wait to get home. They finally boarded the plane and headed home. When they reached the airport, they wheeled her out in a wheelchair, got their luggage, and waited outside the terminal for Miss Hettie. When Miss Hettie arrived, she drove them straight to the hospital.

As Rebecca waited to be examined, they informed her that she would have to be admitted and scheduled for surgery on her leg, including a total knee replacement. As they got her settled into her room, her doctor came in to see her and go over the procedure. Her surgery was scheduled for the next morning.

Rebecca was in so much pain at this point that she just wanted to get it over with. Rogue told Andrew and Jill that he would stay with her so they could go home and get some rest. They gladly accepted.

The next morning, her dad, mom, and Hettie were there waiting for her surgery to be completed. While she was in the recovery room, the doctor came out and told them the surgery went well, but there was more damage to her knee than he had expected. Not only did he have to do a total knee replacement, but

he also had to put pins in her leg, and she would have to go through therapy afterward.

When Rebecca woke up, her parents, Hettie, and Rogue were there. She smiled at them and dozed back off to sleep. A few hours later, they had moved her into a room of her own. When she finally woke up later in the day, Rogue was in the room; he had fallen asleep in the chair. She watched him as he slept and thought to herself what a man he was to be by her side through all of this.

When the nurse came in to check on her, Rebecca was finally awake. The nurse checked her vitals and asked her if she was in any pain. Rebecca told her no, that her pain level was tolerable at this time. Rogue woke up and held Rebecca's hand. Rebecca looked at him and said, "Sorry, I ruined everyone's vacation."

Andrew, Jill, and Hettie came into the room. Andrew said to her, "When I said go break a leg, I really didn't mean it." They all laughed. He kissed his daughter, told her he loved her, and asked her if she needed anything. Rebecca looked at all of them with tears in her eyes and told them again how sorry she was.

A few days later, Rebecca was released from the hospital. It was only three days before Christmas, and she hadn't even wrapped her gifts yet. Hettie and Jill told her not to worry, that they would be there to help her. There was an extra bedroom on the main level of the house, and Hettie had it cleaned and set up for her.

When Rebecca got home, Rogue helped her up the stairs to the front door. She used her crutches to move around. Rebecca was so glad to finally be home. What a nightmare this vacation turned out to be for her, she thought to herself.

Hettie was fixing dinner when they got there. The hospital food was not very good. When they all sat down to dinner, and Andrew said the prayer, they began to eat. Hettie waited on Rebecca hand and foot. Andrew looked at Hettie and said, “Why is it that Rebecca gets waited on, and you told me that if I thought you were going to wait on me after I came home from the hospital, I had another thing coming?”

Hettie turned around with a smile on her face and said, “Mr. Andrew, someday that jealousy is going to eat you alive.” They all laughed.

Later that evening, Hettie, Jill, and Rebecca decided they would wrap some of the Christmas presents they had bought. They spent hours doing so, and Rebecca loved it when they all spent this time together. It had become a tradition for them every year. Rebecca wasn’t able to help with all the Christmas cards, which she was very disappointed about.

When everything was wrapped, Jill and Hettie put the presents under the tree. Rogue and Andrew helped carry them into the living room, where the tree was. Rebecca was getting tired, so she told everyone that she thought she would turn in. Rogue helped her to her room. She put on her pajamas, and then he tucked her into bed.

Hettie brought her the pain medicine that the doctor had prescribed and told her that if she needed anything during the night, to call her. Rogue stayed with her until she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 14

On Christmas morning, Rebecca woke up early. As she was getting dressed, her phone rang. It was Rogue, wishing her a Merry Christmas and telling her he would be seeing her soon. She wished him the same and told him how she could not wait to see him and his parents for dinner.

Rebecca grabbed her crutches and headed to the living room, where everyone was waiting. Hettie brought out coffee and fresh Danishes for them. After everyone opened their gifts, it was not long before their guests began to arrive.

Rebecca went back to her room to put on something nice for dinner. Around eleven-thirty, everyone started to show up. She went to check if Miss Hettie needed any help. She was not able to do much, but she was willing to help in any way she could.

When everyone had arrived, Rogue helped set the table. As Rebecca looked around at everyone seated there, she thought about how good it felt to have such a loving family.

Later in the afternoon, she and Cheyenne had a chance to talk about Rebecca's upcoming wedding. Cheyenne was so happy for her and Rogue. Rebecca asked if Cheyenne would consider being her Matron of Honor, which Cheyenne gracefully accepted.

There were so many plans to make, and Cheyenne was ready to get started. They decided to begin working on the wedding plans after the New Year.

During the next few weeks that followed, Rebecca attended therapy three times a week. She was determined to hurry her recovery along as quickly as possible. She had so much to take care of and did not want to rely on crutches to get around. She was getting around better every day and did whatever it took to be able to walk without any help.

Eventually, she returned to work. Her assistant, Maggie, had been doing a wonderful job and kept her up to date on everything. On her first day back, she and Maggie worked all day on the new clients they had picked up. As Rebecca reviewed the potential clients, she noticed that Jonikka had contacted them about her dress. Rebecca focused on that request first and decided to have Maggie call her.

When Maggie called, Jonikka was more than willing to pay whatever it would cost for her dress. Rebecca told Maggie to charge her double for the dress. Maggie was puzzled but did as she was told. Jonikka accepted the offer and asked to be told what Rebecca wanted in a wedding dress. Rebecca and Maggie went over the design and sent it to her.

Jonikka was more than happy with it and told them she needed it by July, but she did have one stipulation: she wanted to meet the designer in person. Maggie told her that it could be arranged, but it would most likely be after her wedding due to the owner's busy schedule. Jonikka hesitated for a moment and then said, "Well, I do not guess I have a choice then. After the wedding, it will be."

Rebecca could not wait to see the look on Jonikka's face when she found out that she was the designer. *Priceless*, she thought.

Rogue had already started on the plans for the house. He and Andrew had the plans drawn up and were just waiting for Rebecca's approval. Later that afternoon, they were to meet with Andrew at his office. Rebecca looked over all the plans for the house. She did have a few things she wanted to change, but nothing major. As she studied what her new house was going to look like, she became very excited. She could not wait for things to get started.

Rebecca and Rogue left Andrew's office feeling relieved. She knew her dad would make everything just perfect for them. Things were starting to be put into action. Rogue already had construction companies lined up and ready to get started.

Rebecca and Rogue had lunch together that day to go over their plans for the house. They both agreed on everything and felt ready to move forward. January was coming to an end, and Rebecca still had so much to do to plan for her wedding. She and Jill were constantly busy making preparations. They only had five months to pull everything together, but things were moving smoothly, thanks to Cheyenne's help as well.

Rebecca took out the dress design she had drawn up years ago and looked it over. She still thought it was perfect. She asked her head seamstress to proceed with the work. No one had ever seen the design and would not until the day of the wedding.

Mrs. Ratcliffe was also a big help with the planning and had many great ideas. Rebecca and Rogue both agreed they wanted a church wedding. Mrs. Ratcliffe showed them a church not far

from where they lived, and it was perfect. Even Jill and Andrew thought so. The church had high cathedral ceilings, with plenty of light shining through the stained glass. It was large enough to accommodate all of their guests.

There were three rows of pews, one in the middle and one on each side, set at an angle, which made it easier for everyone to see the front of the church. Down the hall was a huge banquet room that would be perfect for their reception. Rebecca and Rogue thought it was a great idea to have both the wedding and reception in the same place, as it would be more convenient for their guests.

The banquet hall had many round tables, enough to accommodate everyone. It also featured a stage where the deejay could set up his equipment and a large dance floor. Since Rebecca had helped Cheyenne plan her wedding, she already had a good idea of how everything should go.

They booked the church and the banquet hall. Jill helped her with the flowers and the cake. Hettie was going to do all the food for the reception. Rebecca thought it would be too much for her, but she insisted. The following day, Jill and Rebecca went to see the printer for the invitations. There were so many designs to choose from that she had a hard time deciding. She finally chose one that she really liked and went with it. They still had to decide on the music and get a photographer. Rebecca thought the photographer at Cheyenne's wedding had done a wonderful job, so she decided to call them to see if they were available for that day. Rogue told her that he had a friend who was a deejay and could talk to him about doing the music. Rebecca was very happy with the way things were falling into place. She was well ahead of schedule.

The plans for the house were coming along nicely. Rogue was out there every day to make sure things were going as planned. As Rebecca regained strength in her leg, she would go and see the progress being made on their house. She could not believe how far along they had come in building it.

The next morning, Rebecca and Maggie went over all the orders they had and were ready to get them started. When it came time for lunch, Rebecca thought she would go to the park, which was not far from her office. She needed to get some fresh air. She stopped by a small café for a sandwich and a drink, then made her way to the park. When she got to the bench where she usually sat, there was already someone there. It was a young girl, maybe about her own age. She was wearing ragged clothing, and it looked like her hair had not been done in ages. She smelled as if she had not bathed in a while.

Rebecca sat down and said hello. The girl just nodded. When Rebecca started to eat her lunch, the girl looked at her sandwich as if it were a seven-course meal. Rebecca could tell she was very hungry. As Rebecca opened her sandwich, she looked at the girl and said, “Can you believe this? It is not what I ordered. Would you be interested in eating it? They always seem to mess up my order.” The girl took the sandwich and started eating it right away. When the girl said thank you, Rebecca recognized the voice. She looked at her and said, “Savannah, is that you?”

Savannah looked at Rebecca and could not believe her eyes. They hugged each other, as they had not been in contact since their high school graduation. Rebecca filled her in on Sebastian, Cheyenne, and Blake, and also told her that she would be getting married in June. Savannah’s eyes lit up as they talked about their high school friends.

Finally, Rebecca asked Savannah, “What are you doing living on the streets? You have wonderful parents.” Savannah proceeded to tell her that she got caught up in the wrong crowd after high school, and things did not end up very well for her, so this was her life now. “But why the streets?” Rebecca asked her. She replied, “Rebecca, I did not choose the streets. They chose me.”

By this time, Rebecca’s heart was breaking for her friend. She looked at Savannah and said, “Please let me help you.” Savannah looked at her and said, “Rebecca, when you leave here, forget about ever seeing me. I am a lost cause. I live for the next high I can get, and if you were not a friend of mine, I would be asking you for money right now so I could get my next fix.” She pulled up her shirt sleeves and showed all the needle marks from the prolonged use of drugs. “They are all I think about, Rebecca. But I do want you to know that I am so happy you and Cheyenne have done well with your lives. You both were the best friends anyone could ever have.”

Rebecca told her, “Savannah, here is my phone number. If you ever want to talk, please call me.” She handed her a piece of paper with her number on it, and Savannah stuck it in her dirty shirt pocket. Before Savannah left, she looked at Rebecca and said, “Please do not tell my parents that you have seen me, okay.” Rebecca promised. Rebecca hugged her, and Savannah had tears flowing down her cheeks. “Please let me help you, Savannah,” Rebecca pleaded. Savannah made the heart symbol to her and slowly walked away.

Rebecca watched her until she was out of sight. With tears flowing down her face, she walked back to her office. When Rebecca got back to her office, she fixed her makeup so that no one could tell she had been crying. It was hard for her to finish the

remainder of her day, but she managed to do so. As she was driving home, all she could think about was Savannah and how her life had changed. She wanted so much to help her, but she knew that you cannot help someone who does not want to help themselves. When she got home, she went straight to her room. She needed some time alone to cope with what had happened that day with Savannah.

When Rebecca got to her room, she went to her jewelry box and pulled out the locket that Giselle had made for each of them. She looked at the picture of Savannah and thought about what a beautiful person she was, inside and out. She remembered their high school days and how bright Savannah had been, always with a smile on her face. She missed the Savannah she knew back then.

Jill came and knocked on her door. Rebecca told her to come in. Jill looked at her and could tell she was upset, and asked her what was wrong. Rebecca broke down in tears, and when she was able to, she told Jill about seeing Savannah and the condition she was in. Jill hugged her and told her how sorry she was.

Rebecca looked at her mother and said, “Mom, there is nothing I can do. Savannah does not want any help. She loves the life she has. It is just hard for me to understand how someone could love to live that way.”

Jill looked at her and said, “Rebecca, I know it is hard for you to understand, and I cannot say that I understand it either. Savannah went down the wrong path in life, and now it will take a miracle for her to get out of it. I believe in miracles, but as you said, she has to want to get out of it for it to work for her. Maybe she will come around and see the error in her ways and turn her life around. She has lived this life for a long time now, and this is

her normal. I am not saying give up on her, but all you can do is pray for her. Your prayers will keep her safe."

Rebecca told Jill that Savannah had made her promise not to say anything to her parents and asked her not to repeat it to anyone. Jill said she would not. She hugged her daughter, her heart also breaking because someone she loved so dearly was hurting. Jill told Rebecca she would see her downstairs for dinner. Rebecca said, "I love you, Mom." "I love you too, Rebecca," Jill replied before she left.

That evening at dinner, things were very quiet. Andrew looked at Rebecca and said, "Darling, are you okay? You're awfully quiet this evening." Rebecca replied that she was just tired and that it had been a long day. Over the next few weeks, Rebecca went to the same bench where she and Savannah had sat, hoping Savannah would be there, but she never showed up. She tried to focus on her upcoming wedding, but Savannah was still in the back of her mind. She finally realized she had to go on with her life without any hope of seeing Savannah again, which was very hard for her.

The next week, she and Rogue went by the house site to check on the progress. It was coming along very nicely. Rogue showed her around and told her where everything would be. Rebecca still could not see the finished product. In her mind, she was not sure where one part ended and the other began. She decided she would have to see more before she could understand the layout. At this point, nothing made sense to her. Thank goodness her dad was an architect, she thought to herself. Rogue was so excited about what had been done so far. They were ahead of schedule, he thought, and he was hoping they would be done before the wedding. Rebecca could not believe that in two months she would be

married. She did not think there was any way the house would be done before the wedding.

Cheyenne came over the next day to go over the plans for the wedding again. Jill had already put the announcement in the paper about Rogue and Rebecca's wedding. The news was out that the most eligible bachelor in Oklahoma City was about to be married. Andrew would tease Rogue about not being the pretty boy anymore and that someone else would have to take his place. Rogue told him he was okay with that because he was about to marry the love of his life, and it was all worth it.

Rebecca was starting to get really nervous about the whole wedding and told Rogue that maybe they should have eloped. He laughed and said, "Do you really want to disappoint our guests who are expecting to see a wedding dress like no one has ever seen before?" Rebecca said, "Well, I guess not." That afternoon, Jill and Rebecca went to pick up the wedding invitations. They needed to get started on them right away. Hettie, Jill, Cheyenne, Rebecca, and Mrs. Ratcliffe had already set a time for the following evening to work on them. She and Jill went over all the preparations again to make sure they had not forgotten anything.

Later that evening, Rogue was coming over, and they were going to check on the progress of the house. When he arrived, Rebecca was ready to go. She was so excited to see how different it was now. When they got to the house, Rebecca was amazed at how things were really taking shape. She could actually see it starting to look like a house. Rogue showed her around and told her that next week they would be working on the inside. She could not wait to start shopping for the furnishings for her new home. Andrew and Jill came walking in front of the house.

Andrew looked at Rebecca and said, “Well, what do you think so far?” Rebecca told him how much she loved it and that she could not wait to move in. Rebecca looked at her mom and said, “Mom, when the time comes, will you help Rogue and me shop for the furnishings?” Of course, Jill told her yes and let her know how much she was looking forward to it.

They all walked around the house, picturing how beautiful it was going to be. Rogue took them outside and showed them where the pool was going to be. Jill thought the area they had picked was perfect. When they got back to the house, Hettie had dinner waiting for them.

Rebecca asked Rogue and her dad how much longer it would take for the house to be ready to move in. Andrew told her that Rogue was pushing for it to be done by the time they got back from their honeymoon. Rebecca looked at Rogue and said, “Are you serious? It could be ready by then?” He said, “Yes, that is what I am aiming for. Of course, all the furnishings will not be in by then, but we can take care of that when we return from our honeymoon.”

Rebecca looked at Rogue and said, “Speaking of our honeymoon, where are we going anyway, and how long will we be gone?” He looked at her with a smile on his face and said, “That will be a surprise, and I expect we will be gone for about a week, so make sure you pack enough clothes. You do have a passport, right?” “Yes!” she replied. He sure was not giving her many details about where they would be going, she thought.

The next afternoon, everyone started to arrive to help with the wedding invitations. Jill helped Hettie with the food and refreshments. They all sat at the dining table and got busy. They

were having such a great time, talking, laughing, and just enjoying themselves. Rebecca noticed how Blanche and Jill were starting to become good friends, which pleased her very much. Around four o'clock, all the invitations were finished, which Rebecca did not think was possible since so many guests were invited. When Rebecca looked at the stack of invitations, she asked Jill how many there were. Jill told her there were around 350. This made Rebecca even more nervous, as she had not been expecting that many people.

During the next week, her head seamstress had her wedding dress finished and wanted her to try it on, so she asked Jill to be there as well. Jill could not wait. She knew it would be spectacular. When Rebecca put on her dress and was ready for her mom to see it, she came out of the dressing room. Jill's jaw dropped at how beautiful she looked in her wedding gown. The wedding dress was like none she had ever seen before. Instead of the traditional white gown, it was a light peach color. It crisscrossed in the back and had moon-shaped holes at the bottom and on the train, which was six feet long. The front of the gown laced up like a pair of shoelaces with peach strings. It had an off-the-shoulder look that highlighted Rebecca's skin tone.

Jill looked at her and said, "Rebecca, you have really outdone yourself this time. It's absolutely beautiful." Jill had tears in her eyes as she looked at her daughter. There were a few alterations the seamstress would need to make, but nothing major. The bridesmaids' and matron of honor dresses were just a little darker peach than Rebecca's dress. All of their dresses had the same crisscross in the back and hung to the floor. Cheyenne's dress was more special than the others. Cheyenne's niece and nephew were going to be her flower girl and ring bearer. Rebecca wondered how Rogue would feel about wearing a peach shirt for their

wedding, but it was too late now. He would just have to wear it. Jill hugged her and told her how beautiful she looked in her gown and that she could not wait until everyone else could see it, too.

As Jill drove home after seeing Rebecca in her wedding dress, she became very emotional. She cried the entire way home. Her thoughts drifted back to when Rebecca first came to live with them. Jill remembered how surprised she had been by how well-behaved Rebecca was. In the back of her mind, she had expected a troubled girl who would always be getting into trouble. As Jill and Andrew got to know her better, they could not believe that she had never been adopted. Jill reflected on how Rebecca had changed their lives forever. Life was so much better with her in it. They could not have asked for a better daughter than Rebecca.

It was the middle of May, and the wedding was drawing closer. Rogue and Rebecca once again went to see the house. Rebecca could finally see walls being put up, and it was actually starting to look like what she imagined a house should look like. The contractors were working nonstop, trying to have the house finished before they returned from their honeymoon.

They went back to the house, where Jill and Andrew were by the pool. They asked Rogue and Rebecca if they wanted to join them for a swim. It had been a scorching hot day, and a swim was just what they needed. They spent the rest of the day by the pool, soaking up the sun.

Andrew asked Rogue how the house was coming along. Rogue told him it was coming along nicely and that it should be ready right on time. Jill asked Rebecca, “Have you picked out any of the furnishings yet?”

Rebecca replied, “No, I have been so occupied with work and the wedding that I haven’t really thought about it much.” She added that she thought she might wait until they got back from their honeymoon to do that. Jill told her that it was a good idea and reminded her that she already had enough on her plate right now.

The following week, all the bridesmaids and Cheyenne came to her office for fittings for their dresses. It took most of the morning. The girls absolutely loved the dresses. Cheyenne said, “Just think, Rebecca, in three weeks you will be walking down the aisle to marry your best friend.”

“I know! Cheyenne, were you nervous?”

“Of course, I was nervous, but the minute I saw Sebastian standing there, I felt like it was just him and me in the room. The nervousness went away.” She hugged Rebecca and said, “Don’t worry, everything will be just fine, I promise. Besides, have you really looked at the man you are about to marry? He is gorgeous.”

They both had to agree.

Jill and Andrew had already made reservations at a restaurant for Rebecca’s rehearsal dinner. The rehearsal was to be held a few days before the wedding. Rebecca and Jill picked out some really nice earrings for all the girls as a gift for being part of her special day. Rogue’s best man had a bachelor party planned for him, which he was not too excited about, but he decided he would do it since it was a tradition. Jill had a bachelorette party planned for Rebecca that weekend. There were a lot of girls planning on attending.

It was starting to feel real for Rebecca. The wedding was getting so close. Rebecca was a little concerned that Miss Hettie had taken on a lot by preparing the food for the reception, but Miss Hettie reassured her that everything was under control. Rebecca had decided on chicken parmesan, which was her and Rogue's favorite, along with beef tips and gravy, mashed potatoes, rolls, and some steamed vegetables.

A few days before the wedding, Rogue went to the house to see the progress. As he looked around at the view, he could see why Rebecca loved this particular part of the land. It had lots of trees and plenty of yard space. The land was flat but had a lot of potential. It was so peaceful and quiet. There was always a breeze blowing. He thought about the first day he had met Rebecca and how his life had changed. As he looked back, he realized he had fallen in love with her at first sight.

That evening was the bachelorette party, and a lot of girls were there. The party was a lot of fun, and they played lots of games. Some of Rebecca's gifts made her blush, but she handled them very well. Jill and Hettie did a wonderful job planning the party. They also bought her some very skimpy lingerie, which surprised her, but after all, it was an all-girls party.

After the party, Cheyenne helped her take all of her gifts to her room and then returned to help with the cleanup. Rebecca pulled Cheyenne aside. She wanted to thank her for all of her help, and she also gave her a special gift. When Cheyenne opened it, she started crying. Rebecca had sketched a portrait of her, Sebastian, and Blake.

Cheyenne said, “You are going to have to do another one soon because we are going to have an addition to our family in about six months.”

Rebecca’s mouth dropped, and she hugged her friend and told her how happy she was for them. Cheyenne told Rebecca that she was the first to know and that she had not even told Sebastian yet.

Chapter 15

The next day, they had their wedding rehearsal at the church, and afterward was the rehearsal dinner. Rebecca was still a little nervous about the wedding, but she was also anxious. She could not wait to be Mrs. Rogue Ratcliffe. The wedding rehearsal went very well, and they all met up at the restaurant that Andrew had picked out for the rehearsal dinner.

During the dinner, Cheyenne and the best man said a few words, which made Rebecca tear up. Rebecca passed out the gifts she had for her wedding party, and to her surprise, Rogue had also gotten his best man and groomsman a little gift. It was an engraved keychain that had Rogue and Rebecca's names on it, along with the wedding date.

Beckett and Blanche stood up to make an announcement. First of all, they wanted to welcome Rebecca to their family. They wished both Rogue and Rebecca the best in their upcoming marriage. Next were Andrew and Jill. They looked at Rebecca and said, "Rebecca, you are the apple of our eye and the best thing that has ever happened to us. We are so very proud to call you our daughter. We both wish you and Rogue the best. We love you, our little girl."

Rebecca had tears in her eyes when she got up to hug her parents. When the dinner was over, Rogue took Rebecca home. Before he left, they decided they would not see each other again

until the wedding. Rebecca looked at him and said, “This is your last chance to change your mind.”

He told her the same and looked at her and said, “Guess we are going to be stuck with each other then.”

He smiled at her, kissed her, and told her he would see her on their wedding day, then turned around and walked back to his truck. She watched him drive off before she went into the house.

She woke up early the next day. It was the last day before the wedding, and she had so much to do. She, all of her bridesmaids, and Cheyenne were to meet at her office to pick up their dresses. Afterward, they were going to pick up their shoes, get pedicures, and have their nails done. The following morning, they would all have their hair done. After they finished all of this, they decided they should enjoy lunch together.

Everyone could tell that Rebecca was very nervous, so they tried to make her day as stress-free as possible. When everything was done, they all went in separate directions and told her they would see her the next morning at the salon.

When Rebecca got home that evening, Andrew, Jill, and Hettie told her that they would all like to talk to her. They sat down at the dining room table. Hettie was the first to speak. She looked at Rebecca and said, “Becca, I remember the first day you came here. There was just something about you that made me come to love you so much. You turned this whole family around. Then, when I found out that you were Marcus’s daughter, I realized that was why I had such a connection with you. Marcus left me a large amount of money in his will, and I would like to give it to you and Rogue as a wedding gift. It will be from your father and me.”

Rebecca started crying and told Miss Hettie that her father had left that for her. Miss Hettie said she was well aware of that, but she wanted Rebecca and Rogue to have it. She handed her an envelope. Rebecca hugged her and told her that she loved her very much. She said she could see why her father loved her and that she cared more about other people than she did herself.

Next, Andrew stood up and told Rebecca how she had changed his and Jill's lives, what a blessing she was, and how they could not have asked for a better daughter. They told her how proud they were of the woman she had become. Rebecca was fighting back tears.

Jill looked at her and said, "Rebecca, you remind me so much of myself, your spunk, determination, and your honesty. If people didn't know, no one could ever tell that you weren't my biological daughter. Your father and I just want to say thank you for all the joy you have brought into our lives, and how proud we are to be your parents. You have made us the happiest people in the world. We also have a gift for you and Rogue. We couldn't ask for a better son-in-law than Rogue Ratcliffe. This gift will help you and Rogue get settled into your new home."

She then handed Rebecca an envelope. Rebecca opened it and couldn't believe how generous they were. Between what Hettie and her parents gave her…she could furnish their house with whatever she wanted. Rebecca had to sit down to take it all in. She told them all how grateful she was for their gifts and that she and Rogue appreciated them very much, and what a big part they all played in her life. She told them that she loved them very much and that she was the luckiest person in the world to have them.

Andrew hugged her and told her that if she ever needed them, they would all be there no matter what. Rebecca started crying. She somehow felt like she was saying goodbye to them, although she wouldn't be too far away. They all dried their tears and sat down to have coffee and a snack together. They talked about the wedding, which was the following day. They were all so excited to see Rebecca walk down the aisle.

It wasn't long until Rebecca excused herself and headed to her room. When she got there, she laid the envelopes on her desk and called Rogue. Rogue answered and said, "Don't tell me you've changed your mind." She said, "No! You're not getting rid of me that easily." She told him about the checks that Hettie and her parents had given them as a wedding gift. He was so grateful for their kind generosity. She asked him if he was nervous. He said he wasn't because once he saw her the following day, nothing else mattered. She told him she loved him and that she would meet him at the church the next day.

The next morning, Rebecca got up, took a quick shower, and headed downstairs. Jill and Hettie were in the kitchen waiting for her. They had their coffee and then headed to the salon. Once they got there, they were taken in right away. They got the star treatment, and everyone looked beautiful. In just a few hours, Rebecca would be walking down the aisle to meet Rogue. When they got home, they had enough time for a quick lunch. Hettie had the kitchen tied up with all the food for the reception; Rebecca was glad to see she had hired some help to prepare the meal. Everyone was very busy. Rebecca went back to her room to make sure she had everything ready. She looked at her dress and thought how beautiful it was and how she hoped everyone there would like it.

It wasn't long until everyone was ready to leave for the church. Rebecca thought the morning had flown by. When they arrived, the church was decorated with peach and white flowers, and each pew had a peach bow on it. Rebecca thought that Jill and Blanche had done a wonderful job with the decorations. She made her way to the back of a room where she could get ready. She walked in, hung up her dress, and started to do her makeup. Jill was there to help her. Rebecca was so nervous that Jill did her makeup for her. Cheyenne arrived about thirty minutes before the wedding was to start. She looked beautiful. The bridesmaids were all there and ready to take their places. Rebecca went to the dressing room to put on her wedding dress. When she came out, the room fell silent. Everyone looked at her and thought she was the most beautiful bride ever.

The whole church was full. When it came time for the wedding to start, everyone began to line up. Cheyenne handed Rebecca her bouquet, hugged her, and told her that she loved her. Andrew came out and stood by Rebecca; when he saw her dress, he was astonished at how beautiful it was, and how beautiful his daughter looked in it. The train of her dress lay perfectly on the ground, and the crisscross in the back accented her golden tan. She wore her diamond earrings and the heart-shaped necklace that Gisselle had given her. The music started. Cheyenne was the first to walk down the aisle; the bridesmaids followed her. Next came the ring bearer and flower girl. Everyone could not believe how beautiful the dresses were. When they were all in position, the wedding march began to play, and everyone stood to their feet.

Andrew and Rebecca started walking slowly down the aisle. Everyone watched in amazement. As they walked, Andrew told Rebecca that he loved her, that she was the most beautiful bride he had ever seen, and that Rogue was one lucky man. When they

got to the front, she handed her bouquet to Cheyenne. Andrew kissed her cheek and placed her hand in Rogue's. Rebecca could see a tear run down Rogue's face. The preacher read a few verses from the Bible and then began to perform the ceremony. They repeated their vows to each other and placed the rings on each other's fingers. The preacher told Rogue he could kiss his bride. After Rogue kissed his beautiful bride, Cheyenne handed Rebecca her bouquet and winked at her. Rogue held out his arm to escort his wife down the aisle.

After the wedding party exited, all the guests headed to the banquet hall. Jill and Blanche met Rebecca in the room where she had gotten ready for her wedding. Jill and Blanche were both still in tears. They waited for a little while for all the guests to get settled. When she and Rogue entered the room, everyone stood up and applauded them. They made their way to the bride and groom's table. Rogue held the chair for Rebecca to sit down, then all of the wedding party took their seats. Hettie had done an amazing job preparing all the food. All the guests had taken their seats and were ready for their food to be served. Andrew and Jill had hired waiters to bring all the food out to their guests. The Bride and Groom were served first, along with the rest of the wedding party. After they were served, the waiters began serving the rest of the guests.

When it came time for the Bride and Groom's first dance, everyone stood up waiting for them to make their appearance. They danced to the song "I Cross My Heart." Rebecca looked at Rogue and just smiled. She loved him so much. This was the beginning of their life together. Rogue took her into his arms and held her tight. About the middle of the song, everyone else joined in.

Next was the Father and Daughter dance. Andrew chose the song, “Butterfly Kisses.” As he danced with his daughter, he told her, “You know, Rebecca, there was a point in my life when I didn’t feel like I would be around to give you away, but I am so glad God gave me this chance. If I were to die tomorrow, I would die the happiest man in the world.” Rebecca looked at him with tears streaming down her face and said, “I love you, Daddy.” “I love you too, my darling daughter,” he replied.

When it came time for Rebecca to throw the bouquet, all the single ladies lined up behind her, and to her surprise, Miss Hettie caught it. Rogue sent the garter flying into the air. Joe caught it immediately. Rebecca smiled at Miss Hettie and told her she was next. She just smiled at her and went back into the kitchen to finish cleaning up.

The rest of the evening went as planned. Around midnight, everyone started leaving. Cheyenne and Sebastian came to tell them goodbye, and what a beautiful wedding it was. Rebecca went to find Miss Hettie to tell her what a wonderful job she did with the food. When she got to the kitchen, Margie was the first person she ran into. She hugged Margie and told her that she was hoping she would be able to attend her wedding. Margie played a big part in helping Hettie get all the food ready.

When the last guest finally left, Rogue grabbed his new bride and told her he had a special night planned. Since they weren’t leaving for their honeymoon until the following evening, he had rented a honeymoon suite at one of the city’s most prestigious hotels. Rebecca had already packed a suitcase for the trip; she changed into a dress, and she and Rogue were ready to go.

When they arrived at the hotel and got their room key, they entered their room. Rebecca couldn't believe how beautifully decorated it was. Rose petals led all the way to the bedroom, alongside a bottle of champagne and chocolate-covered strawberries. Rebecca went into the bathroom, put on her negligee, and headed back to the bedroom where Rogue was waiting.

The rest of the evening was magical for both of them. They fell asleep in each other's arms.

The next morning, when Rogue woke up, he watched Rebecca sleeping peacefully. He knew how tired she must have been from the day before. He went to take a shower and then returned to the bedroom. Rebecca was awake, wearing her robe, and standing outside on the balcony, enjoying her morning coffee.

Rogue walked up behind her, kissed her cheek, and told her good morning. She turned around, kissed him, and said the same. She looked at him and asked, "By the way, where are we going on our honeymoon? I'd like to know how to pack for it."

He looked at her and said, "We're going on a cruise to the Bahamas. Since you've never been on one, I thought this would be a good first cruise."

As they drove to her house to get ready, they were met at the door by Andrew and Jill. They both welcomed them home. Rebecca went to her room to pack for her cruise. She was so excited; she had never been on a cruise before. She didn't have much time to get packed and ready to go. When she was finally ready, Rogue took her by the hand, and they were off on their big adventure.

When they boarded the ship later in the afternoon, Rebecca was amazed at how big it was. They went to their cabin, which was much bigger than most. There were rose petals on the bed and animals made out of towels. Rebecca was liking what she had seen so far.

For the remainder of the cruise, they visited several islands and did a lot of shopping at the ports. Rebecca loved the beaches and lying out in the sun. The whole cruise was all-inclusive, so they could have what they wanted to eat and drink anytime. They kept busy for the whole cruise; Rogue had made a lot of plans for them.

On the last night of the cruise, they were to have dinner at the captain's table. Rebecca was looking forward to this. She dressed in an evening gown, and Rogue had on a suit and tie. She couldn't believe that the time had gone by so quickly.

The next day, when they got back home, they were both pretty tired. Although they had a wonderful honeymoon, they were glad to be home. Andrew and Jill told them it was okay for them to stay there until the house was ready, which they were so grateful for.

That evening at dinner, Rebecca told everyone about the cruise and how much she loved it. After dinner, they all went to see all the progress on the house. When Rogue opened the front door, he looked at Rebecca and said, "I think now I am supposed to carry you over the threshold." So, he picked her up and carried her into the house. She kissed him as he put her down.

Rebecca could not believe all the headway the contractors had made. They went into the living room first; over the mantle was a picture of them on their wedding day. Jill had the picture framed

and hung; she wanted to surprise them with it. Rogue and Rebecca thought it was the perfect spot for it. The house had an echo to it since there was no furniture in it yet.

Next, they went to the kitchen, which Rebecca couldn't wait to see. The kitchen was huge and had a lot of cabinet and counter space. While they were there, Rebecca was getting ideas as to what kind of appliances she wanted. They had picked out grey cabinets and had a grey and white backsplash under them, all the way around the kitchen. She decided black appliances would look good. The countertops were white with grey flakes in them. She especially loved the island that was in the middle of the kitchen, which had a place for barstools. She couldn't wait to start shopping for her house. She was taking notes as they did their walk-through of the house.

All the downstairs walls were painted the same color, which was a medium tan. Rogue and Rebecca thought that with a neutral color, any color of furniture would go with it. The dining room was large enough to fit a good-sized table with ten chairs. When they got back to the living room, she was deciding on what kind of furniture would go best in there. Rogue said he didn't care what she picked out, as long as he had a recliner and a huge TV. They all laughed.

Next, they went to the offices; they both thought they could get all their stuff into them easily. When they got to the master bedroom, it was a lot bigger than she had imagined. She especially loved that it opened up to the pool. The master bath was just what she had hoped for, big enough for two people to get ready at the same time. It had a jacuzzi tub, two sinks, and a large walk-in shower.

The other bedroom on the main level was perfect for any guests who came to spend the night or could be turned into a nursery when the time came. The laundry room was huge. The half bath downstairs was the perfect size.

Next, they went upstairs to see the other bedrooms. Every bedroom was also painted the same color, and the carpeting was all the same color throughout the house. Rebecca was very pleased with how they turned out.

Their last stop was the basement; it was very large. The walls were done, as well as the bathroom; all they had to do was decide what they wanted to do with it in time. There were only a few more details that needed to be done to the house before they could move in. The pool wasn't filled with water yet, which Rogue thought should be the last thing done.

Andrew and Jill loved the house; they were so happy for them. Jill and Rebecca were planning on a big shopping trip the next day. Rogue decided he would go to work and try to catch up on some of the stacks of paperwork that must have piled up on his desk. Rebecca knew he was just using that as an excuse, because he was not one much for shopping. Rebecca was okay with him not going; it would give her and her mom some time to spend together.

Chapter 16

The next morning, Rebecca and Jill got up early to go shopping for her house. Rogue had already gotten up and was in the shower; Rebecca thought she would join him. She went into the bathroom, took off all of her clothes, and got in the shower with him. He kissed her and gently caressed her body. When he looked at her, he thought about how beautiful she was and what a lucky man he was. She gently kissed his lips and chest and told him how much she loved him. Rebecca hoped it would always be like this.

When they got out of the shower and dried off, Hettie was on the intercom letting them know that breakfast was ready. They got dressed and went downstairs. Jill and Andrew were already at the table. Hettie poured them some coffee and brought in breakfast. Rebecca was excited about her and Jill's shopping spree. She let them all know that they would be late getting home and not to hold dinner for them. When you mentioned shopping to Rogue and her Dad, they both scattered; Rebecca thought how funny it was. Hettie and Joe had plans for the day, so she wasn't able to go with them.

Rogue got up from the table and said he had better get going; since it was Saturday and no one was at his office, he could get a lot accomplished. He kissed Rebecca and headed to the door. Andrew also said he had a lot of work to catch up on, so he headed to his office. Rebecca looked at Jill and said, "Do you get the feeling that Dad and Rogue just don't want to go shopping with

us?" Jill said, "Oh! Yes, but that's okay; we will have fun without them." They both went to their rooms to grab their purses, and off they went.

Jill asked Rebecca, "Where do you want to start first?" Rebecca replied, "I think I would like to start with all the appliances, since that is my dream kitchen." So…they headed to the appliance store first. When they got there, Rebecca didn't realize that there were going to be so many choices. Rebecca, of course, went to the black ones first; then she saw all the stainless steel and decided she even liked that better, and it would go much better with the kitchen cabinets and countertops.

She picked out a refrigerator and a gas stove with eight burners. There was also a space for a double oven in the house—one she wouldn't have to bend over to reach. Next, she looked at dishwashers and, of course, a washer and dryer for the laundry room. She even selected small appliances that she would need. Jill thought she had made a good choice going with stainless steel instead of black. She also picked out a big-screen TV for the living room and smaller ones for each of the bedrooms and their offices. All were scheduled for delivery the following week.

Next, they went to the furniture store. She began by picking out a recliner for Rogue. After finding one she thought he would like, she looked for matching sofas. She chose tables that coordinated with her selections. Things were starting to come together, she thought. Next were the bedrooms—she would need at least four bedroom sets. She selected a king-size bed for herself and Rogue; the other bedrooms would all have queen-size beds. She also picked out a large dining table with ten chairs, each end featuring a captain's chair. She was very happy with all she had accomplished so far.

It was past lunchtime, so she and Jill decided to get something to eat. They chose to treat themselves at Moscato's. When they walked in, the hostess greeted them by name, as they were frequent guests, and showed them to their table.

When the waitress came to take their order, she congratulated Rebecca on her recent marriage to Rogue. Rebecca, of course, thanked her in return. Rebecca and Jill both ordered a steak. Before their meal arrived, Rebecca pulled out her small notebook and marked off the things she had already gotten. She still had a lot to do. Jill told her to just be patient. They might not be able to get it all done in one day, but she was off to a good start. Rebecca had gotten all the large items they would need in order to move into their house; she could pick up the smaller things as they went.

After lunch, Rebecca decided she would get the smaller items they would need in order to move in, such as towels, dishes, silverware, pots and pans, etc. After lunch, they headed back to their shopping. Rebecca and Jill were having such a good time together. Rebecca was so happy to have a mother to share all of this with. It took a few more hours for her to pick out everything she thought she would need to get started.

As they were loading Jill's SUV with everything, Rebecca wasn't quite sure it would all fit, but they somehow managed. It was starting to get late, so they headed back home, planning to stop by the new house and drop off their purchases. When they got there, the contractors were working on the touch-ups that still needed to be done, such as hanging towel racks and blinds, etc. The alarm company was also there installing the alarm system.

The cable company arrived while they were there. She was glad she was present to show them which rooms needed to be

hooked up. They placed everything they had bought on the kitchen counters and the island. Rebecca couldn't wait to start decorating. The contractor told her he would be finished that evening, and then on Monday, he would have a cleaning service come in and clean the house from top to bottom so it would be ready for when all of the appliances and furniture arrived. Rogue also had a company that would be paving the driveway in a couple of weeks. Jill looked at Rebecca and said, "You know, there is only one thing that I don't like: I won't be seeing your beautiful face every morning. I just want you to know that your Dad and I will miss that the most." Rebecca hugged her and told her that she wouldn't be far away, and that she would miss that the most, too. They made their way back to the vehicle and headed home. When they got back to the house, her Dad and Rogue were in the living room watching the news. Rogue got up, hugged his wife, and asked her how her shopping spree went. She told him all she had done and that she had stopped by the house. He was pleased to know the contractors would be finished that evening and that the alarm would be in place, as well as the cable service and the high-speed internet. He kissed her and told her she had been a very busy lady that day. Rebecca decided she would go to her room, take a hot shower, and unwind after the long day she had. After she showered and got dressed, she headed back downstairs to where everyone else was. Andrew suggested they all watch a movie together, and they all agreed. Halfway through the movie, Rebecca and Jill had fallen asleep. Rogue woke Rebecca up and told her she might want to call it a night and go to bed. Jill decided she would do the same.

When they woke up Sunday morning, Rebecca was well rested. They had their breakfast, and all decided they would just take it easy for the day, since the next day everything would be back to normal. They stayed around the pool for most of the day.

Hettie and Joe even joined them. Cheyenne, Sebastian, and Blake stopped by for a while. They all had a great time just spending the day together. Rogue, Andrew, and Sebastian decided they would cook out for everyone. As Jill looked at everyone, she thought what a great family she had.

After everyone had eaten, everything was cleaned up. Once everyone left, Rebecca and Rogue decided they would go to the house. Once they got there and started looking around, they just couldn't believe that by next week they could be moving into their own home. The contractors had done a wonderful job with the little touch-ups they had done. The alarm system was set up and ready to be activated. All the bedrooms and offices were wired for TV and the internet. Rogue turned on the water spigot in the kitchen, and the water was flowing nicely. The heating and air conditioning units were working great.

They walked outside the house to check on the pool area. The pool was still without water, but should be filled in a couple of weeks. The yard and the landscaping still needed to be done, as well as the paving of the driveway. Rebecca was loving her new home already.

When they got back home later that evening, Andrew wasn't feeling well and thought he needed to go to the hospital. Jill immediately put him in the car, and they all headed to the hospital. When the doctor came in to see him after running several tests, he told him that he had a mild stroke and that they were going to keep him for a few days. Jill told Rebecca and Rogue to take her vehicle and go home, and that she would stay with him. Rebecca was reluctant about leaving, but did what Jill had told them to do. The ride home was quiet. Rogue took her hand and held it; he knew she was worried about her father.

When they got up the next morning, Rebecca called her mom to check on how her dad was. Jill told her that he wanted to go home, so he must be feeling better. Rebecca was relieved to hear that. She and Rogue decided they would go to their offices and stop in to see her dad later that afternoon. Rebecca followed Rogue so he could drop off Jill's vehicle in case she needed to go somewhere, and then she would drop him off at his office.

When she got to her office, everyone welcomed her back. Maggie filled her in on all the orders waiting for her to sign off on so the seamstresses could get started. She also told her that Jonikka Rodgers had called and wanted to set up a date for them to meet. Rebecca was not looking forward to seeing her, but she did promise that she would meet with her. She scheduled it for next week; she would fly down and come back the next day. Rogue said he was just too busy at work and with the house to be able to go with her, and Jill needed to be there with her dad, so Rebecca asked Maggie if she would be interested in going with her. She gladly accepted. Besides, Rebecca thought she could use some downtime. Maggie had been taking care of everything while she was gone, and she deserved to get away, even if it was just a short overnight trip. Maggie made all of the flight reservations and also booked their hotel rooms.

When she picked Rogue up that evening, they went to the hospital to see her dad. He seemed to be feeling much better, but Rebecca could tell that he was having a hard time using his arm, and his speech was a little slurred, which concerned her. Jill and Rebecca went to the cafeteria to have a cup of coffee. Jill told her that they needed to talk about Andrew.

Jill proceeded to tell her that the doctor had said Andrew was going to have to slow down and that his health depended on it.

Rebecca knew that her father wouldn't adhere to this, but he would have to if he wanted to live. Jill and the doctor had already talked to him about it, and he wasn't too happy with the whole idea. Rebecca was afraid that she was going to lose her father if he didn't.

A few days later, Andrew got out of the hospital. When she got home from work that evening, she went straight to check on him. He was in the kitchen with Miss Hettie. He told Rebecca that the hospital food left a lot to be desired and that he couldn't wait to get home to eat some good food. They all laughed. The doctor had even put him on more medication, which he wasn't too happy about.

When Jill came into the kitchen where they all were, she kissed Andrew. Rebecca could tell that her mom was really worried about him. She could also tell that she had been crying. She wished she could do something, but this was out of her hands.

By the end of the week, all the appliances and furniture had been delivered. Rebecca and Rogue spent most of the following Saturday getting everything arranged just the way they wanted. Rogue had hired someone to hang all the TVs and get them programmed, hook up all the appliances, and assemble and place the bedroom furniture in each room. By the end of the day, everything was completed. The house no longer echoed now that furniture filled the rooms.

They decided to spend the night there. They went home to pack a few things they would need for their first night in their new house. Rebecca told Andrew and Jill about their plans and assured them that if they needed her, she was only a phone call away. They

told her they would be fine and promised to call if they needed anything. She hugged and kissed them goodbye.

When Rebecca got into Rogue's truck, she noticed a basket sitting on the back seat. Rogue told her that Miss Hettie had packed it for them, though he didn't know what was inside. When they arrived at the house, Rogue unlocked the door, and they went in. They made several trips back and forth to the truck, bringing in everything they thought they would need. They were both excited to be spending the first night in their house.

In the kitchen, Rogue set the basket Miss Hettie had packed on the counter. Inside was a bottle of champagne with two glasses, chocolate-covered strawberries, cheese, crackers, and a note from Miss Hettie that read, *Hope you enjoy your first night in your new home.* They both thought it was incredibly sweet of her.

Rebecca rummaged through the bags of supplies she had bought for the house, searching for sheets, pillows, and towels for their room. When she finally found them, Rogue helped her make the bed and hang the towels in the bathroom. She loved the bedroom furniture she had chosen for their room.

They went back to the kitchen to organize the cabinets. After running all the dishes through the dishwasher, they dried them and put them away. They unboxed the small appliances Rebecca had bought to sit on the counter. The cleaning service had done a great job after the contractors finished…everything was spotless.

By the time they were done, it was past dark, and they were both tired. After showering, Rogue went to the kitchen to get the champagne and glasses. When he returned, Rebecca was almost finished drying her hair. She was wearing one of the negligees she

had received at her bachelorette party. It was white and red, and there wasn't much to it. When Rogue saw her, he told her how much he liked what she was wearing. He was shirtless, wearing only a pair of shorts.

He poured each of them a glass of champagne, and they toasted to their new house and to each other. He picked her up and laid her on the bed, and they made passionate love. Rebecca felt safe lying next to him, wrapped in his arms. It didn't take long before they both drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, when they both had gotten up, they kissed each other good morning. Rebecca called Jill to check on her dad, and she said he was doing well and had a good night's rest. Rebecca and Rogue got showered and dressed and then went to the kitchen for some coffee. Rogue looked at his wife and said, "It sure feels good to be in our own home, doesn't it?" She replied, "It sure does! We still have a lot to do in order for it to be completely decorated."

He said, "You and Jill sure did a great job picking out the furnishings for the house, and by the way, I like the stainless steel appliances better than the black ones, too." They started making yet another list of things they needed. The list never seemed to end. Rogue told her he would go shopping with her that day since Jill did not want to leave Andrew. They decided they would grab some breakfast before they got started.

After breakfast, they went to several stores that she and Jill had visited and picked out lots of things for the house. Good thing Rogue had a truck, she thought to herself. Rogue was even starting to get into shopping. He had a lot of good ideas for the house and was a big help. He had a good eye for color, and Rebecca could

tell he was having fun. They picked out which bedding he would like for their bedroom. She knew she would probably pick out something girly, but he actually picked out something that they both liked. Then they got all the bedding for the rest of the bedrooms.

She was glad he had come with her because he made choosing things a lot easier. They got more towels, sheets, and more things for the kitchen and bathrooms. Rogue told her that since they were out, they might as well do some grocery shopping as well. Rebecca thought that was a great idea. When they got to the grocery store, they started from one end and worked their way to the other. Since they were starting from scratch, Rogue had to get another buggy. When they reached the end of the store, they both thought they had gotten everything they needed for a while, and probably then some.

After the grocery shopping was finished, they headed home. When they got there, they both made one trip after another, getting everything into the house, which took quite a while. Rebecca was so glad that Rogue had a garage built that would hold three cars and had a door where you could enter through the back of the kitchen, where there was also a huge pantry. It sure made things a lot easier getting everything in and out of the house.

Now came the fun part, or so they thought, putting everything away as they laughed. It took several hours to put everything where it belonged. Rebecca cooked their first meal in their new home, and afterward they decided they would turn in. When they got to the bedroom, Rebecca went to brush her hair and teeth and change into her pajamas. When she got back to the bedroom, Rogue was fast asleep. She watched him for a while and thought about what a good man and husband he was. She loved him more

than he would ever know. She crawled into bed beside him, and it was not long before she, too, was fast asleep.

The following week was when she and Maggie were to go to Colorado to meet with Jonnika. She was not looking forward to it at all. But she had to admit to herself that she could not wait to see the look on Jonnika's face when she found out that she was the designer of her wedding dress. She also knew that the only reason Jonnika wanted to meet with her was to show all of her friends and family that she knew a well-known designer. She would probably even go as far as telling people they were best friends. Jonnika was a spoiled rich girl who tried her best to fit in with people of stature. Little did she know that the person standing before her, once a small foster child, had become who she was today. She did not know how Jonnika would handle the situation once she found out who she really was, but she was prepared for anything Jonnika had to throw at her.

When Rebecca and Maggie boarded their plane the next morning, Rebecca was already missing Rogue and her family. Maggie was excited about going to Colorado since she had never been there before. She could not wait to see how this whole charade was going to take place and was actually looking forward to it. She knew Rebecca's background and how hard she had worked to become the designer she was today. Maggie was always happy when someone who came from a situation like Rebecca's proved that she could be just as good as anyone else, if not better.

When their flight landed, they rented a car and went to their hotel. Rebecca called Rogue to let him know they had arrived. They were scheduled to meet Jonnika later that evening for dinner. Maggie called Jonnika to let her know they were in town and how anxious they were to meet her. After getting settled in their hotel

rooms, Rebecca called Jill to check on her father. Jill said he was always tired but was doing well. She also told Rebecca how much she wished she could be there to see the look on Jonnika's face when she found out just who had designed her dress.

That evening, Rebecca and Maggie got ready for dinner. Once they were ready, they headed to the lodge where they were scheduled to meet Jonnika. Maggie went into the restaurant first and introduced herself to Jonnika. Jonnika had several people there, all waiting to meet Rebecca. She introduced Maggie to everyone, and Maggie explained that Becca was running a little behind but would be there shortly.

It wasn't long before Rebecca walked in. Jonnika looked at her and said, "What are you doing here? This is a private party, so you will need to sit elsewhere." Jonnika had all of her friends seated at her table.

Rebecca looked at her and said, "I am here because you wanted to meet the person who designed your wedding dress. That's right, Jonnika, I'm Becca. You do know that Becca is short for Rebecca, don't you?" She continued, "I'm the one responsible for creating your wedding gown."

Jonnika didn't know what to say. The smirk left her face as she realized she had been trying to impress her rich friends. Finally, Rebecca took over and told everyone that she was Becca from Becca's Bridal Boutique and how nice it was to meet them. She warmly welcomed everyone.

Jonnika's mother was there as well, just like her daughter, very snobby. Mrs. Rodgers was also present and was loving every

bit of it. Finally, someone who could put Jonnika in her place, she thought to herself.

Finally, Rebecca stood up to address everyone there. She thanked Jonnika most of all for inviting her. She went on to tell everyone that she had known Jonnika for several years and what an honor it was for her to be asked to design her wedding gown for such a special day. Jonnika looked at her as if she could bite nails into her. She didn't know what to say.

Rebecca handed each of them a small gift, along with her business card, and let them know that if any of them ever needed her services, she would give them a discount since Jonnika was a valued customer. The girls had lots of questions for Rebecca, which she was happy to answer.

Jonnika had chosen the most expensive dinner on the menu. Rebecca and Maggie were enjoying everything that was taking place. When everyone had finished their meal, the girls flocked around Rebecca with more questions about her dresses. Jonnika and her mother were not very happy with what was happening.

After dinner, once everyone had left, Jonnika told Rebecca she would like to have a word with her. They went out into the lodge where they could talk. Jonnika started by telling her that she didn't appreciate Rebecca not telling her who she was from the very beginning, how she had made it seem like they had been best friends for several years, and what a fool she had made of her in front of her friends and family.

Rebecca looked at her and said, "First of all, Jonnika, you let your friends think that you were good friends with the person who designed your dress. This party was all about you, and

unfortunately for you, it backfired. Everything in your life has always been about you, and you will never change. Congratulations on your new marriage again. I hope you have a happy life."

Before Jonnika could say anything more, Rebecca went to find Maggie so they could leave. As they were driving back to their hotel, Rebecca told Maggie how good that felt. Maggie told her that she enjoyed every minute of it, but she couldn't wait to get back home the next day.

Chapter 17

The next morning, Rebecca and Maggie were scheduled to go home. When they got to the airport and returned their car, they went on to board their flight. All the way home, Rebecca and Maggie talked about what had taken place during their meeting with Jonnika. They both believed this would surely be the last they heard of her. Maggie couldn't believe how someone could be as mean and vindictive as Jonnika. Rebecca assured her that Jonnika was a spiteful, mean human being, and they both hoped they would never have to deal with her again.

When their flight landed and they collected their luggage, Rebecca took Maggie home. Maggie thanked her for such an eventful trip. They both laughed, and Rebecca headed home.

When she arrived, Rogue was not home from work yet, so she decided to fix him something special for dinner, chicken parmesan. Although she hadn't been gone very long, she had really missed her husband. She called Jill as soon as she got home to check on everyone. Jill told her that her dad was doing well and had finally decided to slow down his workload and let his associates handle most of it. Rebecca was so glad to hear that. She hoped that maybe her parents would finally do things together that they had put off for years, like traveling.

When Rogue finally got home, Rebecca could tell he had a hard day. She was thankful she had decided to make their favorite dinner. He hugged and kissed her and told her how glad he was

that she was home. They had a wonderful dinner together. He helped her clean up, like he always did, although Rebecca could tell he didn't really feel like it. She told him to go take a nice hot shower and that she would give him a good back massage, which he welcomed very much. He kissed her as he went to the bedroom.

When she joined him, he was already lying on the bed with nothing but a towel wrapped around him. She told him to turn over and began rubbing lotion onto his back. He slowly started to relax, and before she knew it, he was sound asleep. She covered him up and went back downstairs.

The next morning, Rogue apologized to Rebecca for falling asleep. She told him not to worry about it because she could tell he had been very stressed and tired. He promised he would make it up to her. Rogue got dressed and headed to work.

Rebecca and Maggie decided to take the day off since they had gotten home late the night before. Rebecca got dressed and decided to go see her parents. When she arrived at their house, Andrew and Jill were sitting down to eat breakfast and invited her to join them. Jill asked how things had gone with Jonnika. Rebecca told her everything that had happened, and Jill said she wished she could have been there to see it.

"Surely you will never have to deal with her again," her father spoke up.

"I hope you are right, Dad, but we all know Jonnika. She always has to get the last word in," Rebecca replied.

Before heading home, Rebecca helped Miss Hettie clean up. She hugged her parents and then left.

When she arrived home, she wasn't feeling very well. She was sick to her stomach and throwing up. She went to lie down while she waited for Rogue to get home from work. When he arrived, she was in the kitchen preparing their dinner. He looked much more rested than he had the day before. Rebecca was starting to feel better, so she didn't feel there was any need to tell Rogue that she had been sick earlier.

After they finished dinner and cleaned up, Rogue suggested they spend some time by the pool. They changed into their swimsuits and went to the hot tub, where they sat and enjoyed the little bit of sunlight they had left. He told her about his day, and she shared hers as well.

They loved the time they were able to spend together. With both of them having busy careers, they didn't get much time alone. They both agreed it wasn't the amount of time they spent together that mattered most, but the quality of the time they shared.

The next morning, when Rebecca got up, she was once again sick to her stomach and throwing up. She thought she must have picked up a virus or something on her trip to Colorado. She decided that if she was not feeling better by Monday, she might need to see her doctor. They spent the rest of the day fixing up the other bedrooms and bathrooms. Their office furniture had arrived, so they began organizing their offices. There was stuff everywhere, and Rebecca did not know where to begin. Once she got started, things began falling into place. Rogue's office was coming along nicely. He had his law books on the shelves, and his desk was neat and clean. He seemed much better organized than Rebecca. When she brought him some coffee and a snack, she could not believe how much he had gotten done.

When Monday came around, Rebecca was still not feeling very well, so she decided to see if she could get an appointment with her doctor before going into her office. After Rogue left for work, she called her doctor's office, and they said they could see her first thing that morning. Rebecca let Maggie know that she would be a little late but would be in as soon as she finished her appointment. She got showered, dressed, and made her way downtown to the doctor's office. When she arrived and checked in, she took a seat. It was not long before she was called back. When the doctor came in and asked what was going on, she told him all of her symptoms. He took a few notes, and then the nurse came in to collect a urine sample. About ten minutes later, the doctor returned and took a seat.

"Mrs. Ratcliffe, you are pregnant," he said.

Rebecca could not believe what he had just said. She and Rogue had always talked about starting a family, but she did not think it would happen this soon. Either way, she was very happy. She thanked the doctor before leaving and made another appointment for the following month. As she drove to her office, tears of joy filled her eyes. She could not wait to tell Rogue, his parents, and her parents that she was expecting a child. When she thought back on her symptoms, it never once crossed her mind that she could be pregnant. She decided she would plan a special evening for herself and Rogue so she could tell him that he was going to be a father.

When she got to the office, Maggie asked her if she was okay. She told her that she was, and they got started on work. She thought about what the doctor had said all day. She touched her stomach and could not believe that a little baby was in there. She was also scared about becoming a mother, and she just hoped she

would be a good mom. She knew that Rogue would be a great father.

That day turned out to be very busy for her and Maggie. Many of Jonnika's friends had called about future designs for their wedding dresses. They worked late that evening because they had so many orders that needed to be filled. When they finally left, they were both very exhausted.

When Rebecca got home that evening, Rogue had already started dinner. He had made a homemade pizza. He said that he and his mom used to make it often when his dad was out of town. When Rebecca tasted it, she thought it was delicious. He had also prepared a salad for them.

After they finished eating, Rebecca thought there was no time like the present to tell Rogue that he was going to be a father. As he started to get up to clear the table, Rebecca asked him to sit down, telling him there was something she needed to talk to him about. She could see a worried look on his face.

She began by telling him that since she had not been feeling well that morning, she was able to get in to see her doctor. She noticed the concern in his expression. Then she said, "Rogue, we are going to have a baby."

He looked at her in disbelief, unable to process what he had just heard. Then a smile slowly spread across his face. He knelt down in front of Rebecca and kissed her stomach. Looking up at her, he said, "I can't believe I'm going to be a father." He then kissed her passionately.

Later that evening, as they lay in bed, they both decided they would invite their parents over for dinner on Saturday and share the good news. She could not wait to see the looks on their faces when they found out they were going to be grandparents. They held each other close that night.

The next morning, Rogue called his parents, and Rebecca did the same. They all agreed to dinner that evening. They even invited Miss Hettie and Joe. After all, they were family.

Rebecca was in the kitchen trying to decide what they should have for dinner. Finally, Rogue decided that grilling steaks would be a good idea. So steaks it was. Rebecca would also toss a salad and make baked potatoes. For dessert, she would make a cheesecake. She could not wait to tell everyone that they were going to be parents.

That evening, Rebecca had prepared the salad and had the potatoes ready to put in the oven. Rogue had the steaks marinating, and Rebecca had just finished the cheesecake. Everything was ready, just waiting for their parents, Hettie, and Joe to arrive.

Rebecca spent the rest of her time making sure the house looked spotless. She went to her room to change and freshen up. It was not long before their guests arrived. They welcomed everyone as they came into the house. Rebecca had made coffee for anyone who wanted it.

Andrew, Rogue, Beckett, and Joe went outside to get the grill started. When the grill was hot enough, Rogue put the steaks on. Rebecca, Jill, Hettie, and Blanche got the table ready for everyone to eat. When the steaks were finished grilling, they all sat down to

eat. Everyone took their seats while Andrew said a prayer over the food.

They were all having such a good time, just sitting around the table talking. When dinner was over and everything was cleaned up, they all went out on the porch to relax.

Finally, when everyone was settled, Rogue stood up and said, "Rebecca and I have something we would like to say. Rebecca has not been feeling well lately." He could see the concerned looks on their faces. "She went to the doctor today. Rebecca is pregnant."

Jill stood up, hugged Rebecca, and told her how happy she was. All the men shook Rogue's hand and congratulated him. Miss Hettie had tears in her eyes as she hugged Rebecca. Hettie thought to herself how happy this would have made Marcus had he been there.

They were all so excited. When everyone had left except Andrew and Jill, Andrew went over and hugged his daughter. He said, "You have made me the happiest man ever today. I cannot wait to see my grandchild. I love you so much, Rebecca."

After everyone had left, she and Rogue walked back into the house.

That night, as she and Rogue were getting ready for bed, they talked about how happy their parents were to find out they were going to have a baby. They also knew that their parents would spoil their child and give them whatever they wanted, which was something they really did not want to happen. Rebecca could not wait to tell Cheyenne about the baby. She thought she would ask her to lunch the next day so she could share the good news.

Rebecca lay awake for a while, thinking about the baby. She could not believe they were going to have a child of their own. She knew that Rogue was going to be a great father. Neither she nor Rogue cared if it was a boy or a girl, as long as they had a healthy, happy baby.

They both woke early the next morning. Rebecca went to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee and make breakfast. Rogue came in, hugged her, and rubbed her stomach. He was already such a proud father. As they had their coffee and breakfast, they talked about getting the nursery ready soon and everything they would need for the baby. They even discussed names.

When it was time for Rogue to leave, he kissed Rebecca and told her goodbye. Rebecca went to her room and started getting ready for work. When she thought Cheyenne would be awake, she called her and asked if she would like to have lunch that day. Cheyenne said she would, since they had not seen each other for a while.

Rebecca spent most of her morning going over her schedule and reviewing appointments with potential clients for later that afternoon. When lunchtime rolled around, Rebecca got up and grabbed her purse. She told Maggie that she was having lunch with Cheyenne and that she would be back soon. She was meeting Cheyenne at a small café not too far from her office.

Cheyenne was already there when Rebecca arrived and had picked out a table for them. Rebecca looked at her and could tell she was getting close to having the baby. She could see how tired Cheyenne looked. She only had about a month until the baby was due. Rebecca hugged her and told her how good it was to see her.

They both sat down, and the waitress came over to take their drink orders. Rebecca and Cheyenne spent some time catching up since they had not seen each other in a while. The waitress brought their drinks and took their food order.

Rebecca looked at Cheyenne and told her there was something she needed to talk to her about. Cheyenne looked concerned and said, “Rebecca, is everything okay? Are you and Rogue alright?” Rebecca grinned and said, “Yes, we are both fine, even more so now.” Cheyenne asked, “Why, did something happen?” Rebecca said, “Cheyenne, we are going to have a baby.”

Cheyenne jumped up right away, hugged Rebecca, and told her how happy she was for them. The waitress brought their food, and for the rest of lunch, they talked about the baby and how it was going to change Rebecca’s life. Rebecca lost track of time and told Cheyenne she needed to get going. Rebecca picked up the check before Cheyenne could grab it and told her that lunch was on her today.

When Rebecca got back to her office, Maggie had already scheduled several appointments for her that afternoon. Rebecca was okay with that since she did not want to get behind. The whole afternoon was filled with one appointment after another. Once her last appointment was over, Rebecca packed up her things so she could head home. She planned to work on her clients’ sketches later that evening. She had made follow-up appointments for the next week so they could review what she had completed.

After dinner that night, Rebecca went to her office to start working on her sketches for her upcoming clients. Rogue came in and brought her a cup of coffee, telling her she needed to take a break. He reminded her that she did not need to overwork herself

since she was going to have a baby. Rebecca assured him that it was not causing her or the baby any stress because it was something she loved doing.

When she finished, Rogue was already in bed, fast asleep. Rebecca took a quick shower, changed into her pajamas, and got into bed beside him. He hugged her and held her close until they both fell asleep.

The following morning, Rebecca had an appointment with her doctor. She and Rogue had both taken the morning off. When the doctor came in and did the ultrasound, they could see their baby. Rogue had tears in his eyes. The heartbeat was strong, and everything looked normal with the baby.

Before they left, the doctor handed them a copy of the ultrasound. They both kept looking at it, thinking about how they could not wait until their baby arrived. Rebecca made her next appointment with the receptionist, and they walked out the door hand in hand. When Rogue got to his truck, he kissed her and told her he would see her when he got home that evening. Rebecca got into her Jeep and headed to her office.

The next morning, Sebastian called Rebecca to let her know that Cheyenne had gone into labor and that they were at the hospital. Rogue and Rebecca got dressed and headed there to wait for the baby's arrival. A few hours later, Sebastian came out and told the family that it was a girl and that Cheyenne and the baby were doing great.

A couple of hours later, after the family had seen the baby, it was Rebecca and Rogue's turn. Cheyenne was sitting up, holding the baby, while Blake and Sebastian sat beside her. Blake was

already in love with his little sister. Rogue shook Sebastian's and Blake's hands and congratulated them. Rebecca went over and hugged Cheyenne.

Cheyenne asked Rebecca if she wanted to hold the baby, and of course, she was eager to do so. Rebecca washed her hands at the sink and went back over to pick her up. Cheyenne handed the baby to her, and Rebecca sat down. She could not believe how perfect she was. She gently touched her tiny hands. Rebecca thought she looked like Cheyenne, but could also see a little of Sebastian in her.

Rogue washed his hands and took his turn holding her. He was a little nervous at first, but soon he relaxed. He kept looking at her and rocking her in his arms. Rebecca finally asked Cheyenne about all the details. Cheyenne told her, "She weighs five pounds and two ounces, is sixteen inches long, and we named her Mija Nicole Reed."

Rebecca loved the name and told Cheyenne how beautiful she was. They stayed a little while longer and then decided to leave so Cheyenne could get some rest. Rebecca picked up Blake, gave him a big hug and kiss, and told him to take good care of his momma and little sister. She hugged Sebastian and told him they would come to visit once Cheyenne was ready for visitors. She hugged Cheyenne and then left.

Chapter 18

Rebecca was so happy for Sebastian and Cheyenne. They had the perfect family. When she and Rogue got home that evening, they talked about how wonderful it was going to be when their baby arrived. They had already planned to get the nursery ready the following weekend. They both decided they did not want to know the sex of the baby until he or she was born. They were already picking out names.

Neither of their parents could wait until the baby was born, and had already started buying clothes and other things the baby would need. Rebecca had a feeling that her baby would not want for anything if the grandparents had anything to do with it.

Over the next month or so, Rebecca decided she needed to get some clothes that fit her better since she was starting to show. When she got to her office the next morning, Maggie told her they had a busy day ahead and that orders were piling up. As they got busy, Rebecca started not feeling well. Her stomach began to hurt, and she called Maggie into her office and told her that she was not feeling well and needed to go home. Maggie told her not to worry and that she would take care of everything.

When Rebecca got to her Jeep and into the driver's seat, she felt a sharp pain in her stomach. She started the Jeep and headed home, but the pain was so bad that she decided she needed to go to the hospital. She called Rogue and told him what was going on,

and he said he would be there right away to pick her up and take her to the hospital.

When Rogue arrived, Rebecca was in excruciating pain. They took her in right away. Rogue called both of their parents, and they arrived almost immediately. Everyone waited in the waiting room for the doctor to tell them something. Finally, the doctor came out to speak with them. He told them that Rebecca was resting comfortably and that they were going to keep her for a few days.

Rogue finally spoke up and asked, "How is the baby?" The doctor looked at him and said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Ratcliffe, but the baby did not make it. Mrs. Ratcliffe would like to see you now."

When Rogue went into the room, Rebecca was in tears over the loss of their baby. Rogue went over to her and held her as she cried for their child. She eventually cried herself to sleep. Rogue went out to see his family. They all hugged him and told him how sorry they were. They asked how Rebecca was taking it, and he told them not well. They stayed for a little while, then Rogue told them that Rebecca did not want to see anyone yet, and they respected her wishes.

When everyone had left, Rogue went back to be with his wife. As he watched Rebecca sleep, he knew her heart was breaking. She had wanted so badly to be a mother. Rogue did not know what to say to her when she woke up, but he knew he would do the best he could under the circumstances.

Rebecca got out of the hospital a few days later. She was very quiet and kept to herself. Rogue was really worried about her. She stayed in her room most of the time. Maggie was handling

everything at work for her. It was like Rebecca was in a world of her own.

Jill would come over every day to see her, but it didn't help much. Rebecca was just so sad.

After about two weeks of Rebecca not coming out of her room, Jill told Rogue, "It's time for some tough love." She went into Rebecca's room, where she was lying in bed. Jill went over and pulled all the blankets off of her and said, "Are you just going to stay in bed forever? Do you think you're the only one hurting right now? What about Rogue? Don't you think he needs you right now, too? He is hurting just as much as you are. We are all hurting, Rebecca. You are being selfish and only thinking about yourself right now."

Rebecca looked at her mom and said, "Mom, my heart is breaking for the loss of my baby. Can't you see that?"

Jill said, "Yes, Rebecca, I know you're hurting right now, but so are the rest of us. Rogue needs you. He feels like he not only lost his child, but he lost his wife too. Don't you think it's time you get out of that bed and let him know he hasn't lost everything?"

Rebecca hugged her mom and cried.

Jill told Rebecca, "I want you to go take a shower, pull yourself together, and go comfort your husband."

Rebecca got up, went to the bathroom, and got in the shower. Jill got her a change of clothes and took them to her. When

Rebecca came out of the bathroom, Jill helped her to the kitchen, where Rogue and Andrew were.

Rebecca went to Rogue and hugged him. They both cried for the loss of their child. She told Rogue how sorry she was for not realizing the hurt he was feeling and that she had only been thinking about herself.

"Thank you, Rogue, for not leaving me alone and for always staying by my side. I love you so much."

He grabbed her and hugged her.

When Rebecca finally pulled herself together, she looked at her mom and said, "Mom, thank you. I love you very much."

"You're very welcome, Rebecca. Sometimes we all need a little help," Jill said. "I love you very much, too."

Jill and Andrew took their cue that it was time for them to leave. Andrew hugged his daughter, told her he loved her, and then he and Jill left.

When Jill and Andrew left, Rogue made them some coffee, and they sat down at the bar. Rebecca looked at Rogue and said, "Rogue, I am so sorry for being so selfish and only thinking about myself. This was your child, too. Please forgive me."

Rebecca asked Rogue if the baby was a boy or a girl. He told her it was a boy. She thought about the name of their unborn child that they had lost. They had decided that if the baby were a boy, they would name him Rogue Beckett Andrew Ratcliffe. She wondered what he would have grown up to be and where his life

would have led him. It was time for Rebecca to come to terms with the fact that their baby was gone.

She threw herself into her work. She had more orders than she could handle. She and Maggie were working around the clock in order to complete them all. She and Rogue had very little time together. As time went on, her business continued to grow.

Jill stopped by to see Rebecca before Rogue was due to get home. She wanted to talk to her. She told Rebecca that things were starting to get out of hand and that her work was coming between her and her husband. Rebecca told her mother that business was booming and that she was needed at work.

"Take it from me, Rebecca. I went through the same thing, and I almost lost the love of my life because of my career. I do not want the same thing to happen to you. If you love Rogue like you say you do, do not ever let anything get in the way of your marriage."

Rebecca thought about what her mom had said, and she had to admit that her work was starting to come between her and Rogue. She knew she had to do something if she wanted to save her marriage.

That evening, she talked with Rogue and asked him how he would feel about them getting away together. He was all for it. Now they just had to decide where they wanted to go. He reminded her of the cabin his family had in the mountains and how secluded it was. She thought that was a good idea.

Rogue called his parents to see if they could stay at the cabin for a few days. They were more than happy to let them do so, and

they also knew the couple needed to get away. They started packing for their trip. They were both excited about spending time together, something they had not done in a while. They decided to leave early the next morning, so they spent the rest of the evening getting everything ready for their trip.

The next morning, they got up early. Rogue put everything in the truck, and they were off to the cabin. It was about a two-hour drive, but they did not mind. Rebecca enjoyed the beautiful scenery as they drove. They talked a lot and simply enjoyed their time together.

Before they reached the cabin, they decided to stop and get a bite to eat. Rebecca was glad they did because she was starting to get hungry. They found a small restaurant just outside of town. They went in and waited to be seated. After they were seated, the waitress came to take their order.

Rebecca told Rogue, “I see why you like it here. It is so peaceful and beautiful.”

He told her that his parents used to bring him there every summer, something he always looked forward to.

“I just hope you love it as much as I do,” he said to her.

After they finished lunch, they headed to the cabin, which was not very far. When they pulled up, Rebecca loved where it was located. It was surrounded by trees, and the lake was visible from the cabin. It was beautiful.

Rogue pulled up to the front of the cabin, came around, and opened Rebecca’s door. They walked up the steps, and Rogue

unlocked the door. When they went inside, Rebecca could not believe how nice it was. Rogue showed her around. There were three bedrooms. The master bedroom was on the main level, and the other two were upstairs. It had a nice kitchen and living room. It was not big, but it was cozy.

Rogue went back to the truck and brought in all of their things. He carried their luggage to the master bedroom. Before unpacking, they decided to go for a walk before it got too dark. As they walked down a path, Rebecca was in awe of the beauty around her. Rogue took her to the dock where the boat was and told her that if she wanted, he would take her out on the lake the next day.

They walked hand in hand for a long time before deciding it was time to head back to the cabin. When they returned, they unpacked everything.

Rebecca went into the kitchen to put away the groceries they had brought with them. Rogue planned to grill that evening, which she was looking forward to since he was becoming a very good cook. After they finished putting everything away, he took Rebecca out onto the deck. She was surprised to see that there was a hot tub.

She looked at Rogue and said, “We will be using this later for sure,” then winked at him.

When they went back inside, Rogue opened a bottle of wine and started the grill. He had marinated the steaks earlier and kept them in the fridge. After the steaks were done and they finished eating, they decided to get into the hot tub.

Rebecca had not brought a bathing suit, so she put on her robe and walked out onto the deck. Rogue was already in the hot tub.

She removed her robe, and his eyes lit up. He helped her into the tub, and they both sat down.

She looked at him and said, “Sorry, I did not bring a bathing suit. I did not know I would need one.”

He smiled at her and said, “What you have on is just fine with me.” He handed her a glass of wine and put his arm around her.

Rebecca looked at him and said, “Rogue, I know we have not talked much about the baby we lost. I am sorry for neglecting you during that time. Please forgive me for being so insensitive and not taking your feelings into consideration. After all, it was your loss too.”

He looked at her and said, “Rebecca, I know that was a hard time for you. You were carrying our child, and I know a mother has a special bond when she is carrying a baby. You have nothing to apologize for. You were hurting. We can have other children. I know it will not be the same, but we will love our next baby just as much as the one we lost.”

Tears flowed down Rebecca’s face as she looked at him. He pulled her into his arms and held her. When they got out of the hot tub, Rogue wrapped her robe around her. Rebecca went to take a shower, and he joined her. They took their time as the warm water ran down their bodies. They made love like it was their first time together.

When they finally climbed into bed, they both fell asleep almost immediately.

The next day, they went to the lake. They swam for hours and even took the boat out for a while. By the time they returned to the cabin, they were both tired and sunburned. Rebecca fixed something quick for dinner. They decided to build a fire in the firepit and just sit and relax. They did a lot of talking, which was something they had not done in a while.

When they got up the next morning, they both thought about how much they were going to miss the cabin. They had to leave the next morning to go home, but they did make plans to come back. At breakfast, they both realized that neither of them had even looked at their cell phones. They thought it was nice not having a phone ringing all the time.

After breakfast, they took a long walk and admired the beautiful scenery around them. Rebecca thought it was sad that sometimes people are too busy to notice what is around them. It reminded her of what her dad had said when he had the heart attack. Now she could see what he meant. We get too wrapped up in life that we don't notice the world around us.

When they returned to the cabin, they decided to spend the last day inside. Rebecca thought she would go ahead and pack their things and clean up. She wanted to leave the cabin as they had found it, if not better. After they finished everything, Rogue looked at her and said, "How about we go dancing?"

She told him she did not have anything nice to wear; she had only brought jeans and shorts. He said that jeans were fine and that he knew a little place with a live band. She said she would love to go since it had been a while since they had danced together. Rebecca was actually kind of excited about going somewhere they could dance.

When they arrived, they could hear the music before they even went inside. They got a table and then got up to dance. They were having such a good time that they lost track of time…it was almost midnight. They decided they had better get back to the cabin.

When they arrived, they both went straight to bed. The next morning, they slept later than they had planned. Rebecca fixed them some breakfast before they started their journey home. Before leaving, she took one more walk around the cabin to make sure it was neat and orderly.

That afternoon, when they got home, they were both still a little exhausted from staying up late the night before. They unpacked the truck and put everything away. Rebecca called her mom and dad to let them know they were home. Her mom asked about the trip, and Rebecca told her it was fantastic and how good it was to get away. It was just what she and Rogue needed.

She asked her mom how her dad was adjusting to not working so much now. Her mom told her he was adjusting and that some days were better than others. She also mentioned that she had interviewed several applicants for the assistant job she had opened, but none of them seemed to be the perfect fit. Rebecca told her not to worry; the right one would come along. Before they hung up, Jill invited her and Rogue for dinner the following evening.

As their weekend was coming to an end, they stayed around the pool for most of the day, just swimming and taking in the sun. After dinner, Rogue picked out a movie, and they curled up on the sofa to watch TV. They had such a good time together while they were off that they just hated for it to end. But all good things must

come to an end, Rebecca thought. That night, they fell asleep immediately, feeling very relaxed.

The next morning, they both woke up early and started getting ready for work. They ate a quick breakfast, kissed each other goodbye, and were off on their way. When Rebecca got to her office, Maggie was already there, getting ready for what would seem like another busy day.

Rebecca mentioned to Maggie how she wished her mom could find someone as good as her. Maggie asked, “Is your mom looking for an assistant?” Rebecca told her she was. Maggie said, “I might know someone. Her name is Ginger Sloan. We went to college together, and she just moved back into town and is looking for a job. She is very good at what she does.”

Rebecca told Maggie to ask Ginger if she would be interested, and she would talk to her mom about setting up an interview. Maggie said she would call her right away. They got started on their schedule for the day and stayed busy. Later, Maggie told Rebecca that she had spoken to Ginger, and she said she would be very interested in interviewing for the job.

When Rebecca called Jill later that afternoon, Jill was very happy to interview Ginger. They set it up for the following morning. Maggie and Rebecca stayed busy for the rest of the day. Maggie had scheduled many appointments for Rebecca for the whole week.

Rebecca called Rogue just to say hi and hoped he was having a good day. He said he was also covered up for the rest of the week. He joked that maybe they should have stayed at the cabin, and they both laughed.

The following morning, Jill called Rebecca to let her know that she had hired Ginger and was really looking forward to having some much-needed help. Rebecca was so happy for her. Now, in time, she could have a lot more free time to spend with her dad. She talked about how professional Ginger was and how well-organized she seemed. She was to start right away. Jill told Rebecca to thank Maggie for her.

Throughout the day, Rebecca had one meeting after another. She picked up a lot of new clients. She and Maggie were going to be very busy in the months to come. She was already booked up through Christmas. Maggie was great when it came to helping Rebecca design dresses. She had a good eye for fashion. Rebecca did not know what she would do without her. She decided she needed to do something special for Maggie to thank her for all her hard work and creativity.

That evening, after she and Rogue had eaten dinner, she looked at him and said, "Rogue, I need to talk to you about something."

He replied, "Oh! What might that be?"

She continued, "You know, I've been thinking a lot lately about opening a bridal shop in the city. What do you think about the idea?"

"Wow! I wasn't expecting that. There is a lot involved in doing that, and it's a lot of hard work finding the right spot."

She said, "I know, but I was thinking I could put my dresses on display so people wouldn't have to wait for them to be made—they could be purchased right away."

“Sounds like you have been thinking a lot about this,” he said.

“I have, and it is really something I would like to do. It would get my dresses to the public faster,” she said.

He looked at her and said, “Then I think you should do it. I’m sure your dad would know of the perfect spots.”

“Great,” she said. “I was planning on going over later and having a talk with him and Mom about it.”

“Thank you, Rogue,” she added. “I love you.”

After dinner, once they had cleaned up, she went to pay her parents a visit to discuss what she wanted to do. After she explained her plan, her parents told her how hard and time-consuming the work could be. She told them she already knew that, having worked with her mom for so long and seeing what was involved. They told her that whatever she wanted to do, they would stand behind her. She kissed them both and thanked them.

Before she left, her dad told her he would start working on finding some places that he thought would be a good spot for what she needed. Rebecca was starting to get really excited about the new adventure she was preparing to take.

The following morning, she had Maggie come to her office. Maggie arrived immediately, and Rebecca told her what she was about to do. Maggie thought it was a great idea and said she could count herself in.

Her father looked for places that would be suitable for a shop. She and Maggie visited several, and finally, they found one they

both liked that was available. She bought it. They spent the next few months getting everything lined up for the shop. She and Maggie spent endless hours working on it. She had dresses made in various sizes and different styles.

Then she looked at Maggie and said, “This section, Maggie, is for you. Whatever you want to do with it, feel free to do so. Any profit made from it is yours.”

Maggie looked at her and said, “You mean I can do anything with this section that I want?”

“Yes!” Rebecca said. “You have a good eye for fashion and design. I want to dedicate it to you.”

Maggie did not know what to say except, “Thank you.”

“I noticed you have sketched a few designs of wedding dresses that I think will sell very well. You can use that section for your designs or whatever you want to do with it. And you can also name it.”

Maggie hugged her and promised that she would not let her down.

Within a few months, the shop was ready to open. Maggie had several dresses she had designed, along with wedding accessories. Rebecca and Maggie were there for opening day to see how well the shop would do. To their surprise, it was a big hit. They sold a lot of dresses and all the items needed for every bride’s special day.

Maggie's eyes would light up every time someone bought one of her dresses. She hugged Rebecca and said, "I never would have thought anyone would like what I designed."

Rebecca assured her that they were beautiful. The first day of opening was a big success. They planned to have more dresses made for the shop as soon as possible.

Chapter 19

Over the next several years, the shop was doing very well. Rebecca, however, suffered one miscarriage after another. Each loss was harder for her to deal with than the last. Finally, her doctor told her that she would never be able to carry a baby to full term and that she would need a hysterectomy, which was something Rebecca found extremely hard to accept. She and Rogue decided it was the only option, since she could no longer keep putting her body through such trauma. The doctor also talked to them about adoption and fostering children.

They scheduled an appointment for Rebecca to have the surgery. She cried, knowing this marked the end of her dream of ever giving birth to a child. After the surgery, she took some time off work but returned a few weeks later. Since she did not have to do any heavy lifting, the doctor believed it would be safe for her to return. Still, Rebecca struggled deeply with the reality that she would never be able to have a child of her own.

She and Rogue decided they wanted to adopt a baby, so they contacted an adoption agency. They filled out countless forms and underwent thorough background and financial checks. The agency informed them that it could take some time to find a child, but promised to notify them as soon as one became available. Though this was reassuring, they had hoped it might happen sooner. They were also told that finding a newborn was far more difficult than placing an older child. Rogue and Rebecca wanted a newborn.

They did not care whether it was a boy or a girl, only that it was a newborn. Despite the uncertainty, they stayed hopeful.

Rebecca often visited the nursery that they had already prepared for the children they had lost. She would hold the blankets and tiny clothes, longing for the day they would finally be used. Her heart ached for a child of her own.

About a year later, Rebecca received a call from the adoption agency. They had a newborn baby boy who needed a home. She could hardly contain her excitement as she rushed to Rogue's office to share the news. Still, she tried not to get her hopes up, knowing that things could fall through. They were instructed to be at the agency first thing the next morning.

Rebecca was overwhelmed with happiness. That evening at dinner, she and Rogue talked endlessly about the baby. Sleep came slowly that night, as she could hardly wait for morning. When they finally got up and showered, it was nearly time to leave. Upon arriving at the agency, Mrs. Downs welcomed them and led them to her office.

They spoke for some time about the child. He had been born to drug-addicted parents who were killed in a car accident while on their way to the hospital. Miraculously, the baby survived. The grandparents on both sides were unable to care for him, leaving adoption as the only option. Mrs. Downs explained that babies born to addicted parents often suffer withdrawal and could present many challenges. Rebecca assured her that they were ready for whatever lay ahead.

Eager to see the baby, Rebecca listened as Mrs. Downs explained that he was still in the hospital. He was only about a

week old and had been born prematurely. Mrs. Downs told them she would take them there to meet him.

When they got to the hospital, Mrs. Downs led them to the nursery. She pointed out which child it was. Rebecca thought he was so tiny. He was asleep. She also noticed two other cribs, one on each side of the baby they had come to meet. Rebecca looked at the other two babies and commented on how much alike they looked. Mrs. Downs said, “Well, they should; they are brothers.”

Rebecca said, “Wow! So do you have other parents wanting to adopt the other two also?”

Mrs. Downs told her no. Most people don’t want to adopt a child whose parents were addicted to drugs. Rebecca looked at all three boys and thought about how they couldn’t help it; they were born into a situation like this. It just wasn’t fair.

Rebecca looked at Mrs. Downs and said, “When will we be able to take the baby home?”

“Just as soon as the doctor gives the okay,” she said.

Rebecca looked at her again and asked if she could talk to her husband in private. Mrs. Downs led them to a room where they could talk. Rogue looked at Rebecca and said, “I know what you’re thinking. Are you sure this is what you want to do?”

“I’m positive. How do you feel about it?” she asked.

“I think it’s the right thing to do,” he said.

She kissed him and said, “Let’s go tell Mrs. Downs.”

When they got back to the nursery, they asked Mrs. Downs if they could speak with her. She led them into the hallway. Rebecca looked at her and said, “Mrs. Downs, we would like to adopt all three of them. I grew up in foster care until I was fourteen years old. I wasn’t adopted until I was sixteen, and I saw a lot of children cry themselves to sleep at night because they missed their siblings. It was heartbreaking to watch, and we don’t think these boys should be separated.”

Mrs. Downs had to sit down for a moment to collect her thoughts. This had never happened before, and she didn’t know what to think. She finally looked at them and said, “Are you both sure this is what you want to do? It will be very trying for both of you. I just want you to know what you will be taking on.”

They both looked at her and said they were sure.

Mrs. Downs took them back to her office to do some paperwork for the children. After they had finished, Rebecca asked if they would be able to visit the boys while they were still in the hospital. Mrs. Downs told them she would make a few calls and let them know.

On the way home, they talked nonstop. Rebecca and Rogue decided to take the rest of the day off, they had a lot to get ready for with all three boys. Before they got started, they decided to have lunch first to celebrate. They went to Moscato’s, and as they were eating lunch, they decided that they wouldn’t tell their parents they were adopting three babies. As far as their parents would know for the time being, it was only one.

Before they left the hospital, Rebecca took pictures of the boys. She couldn’t help looking at them several times while they

were eating. After lunch, they decided to go shopping for the babies. They still needed two more cribs, lots more diapers, and of course, two more car seats. They also bought a stroller that would hold triplets. They were both so excited that they bought more than they had intended.

That evening, after they got home, Rogue started putting the cribs together while Rebecca washed and put all the baby clothes away. They stayed up late that night. Rogue wanted to finish getting the cribs ready. They never told anyone that they had gone to see a baby who was up for adoption.

Rebecca thought she would wait until the next morning to send her and Rogue's parents a picture of the baby. She had a hard time going to sleep that night; she kept thinking about the boys and couldn't wait to get them home.

The next morning, after breakfast, she sent both of their parents a picture of the baby. The phone rang almost immediately. It was Jill who called first. She couldn't believe it. Finally, she was going to be a grandmother, and Rebecca was going to be a mom. They talked for quite a while.

Then…Blanche called. Rebecca went over everything with her, just like she had with her mom. Blanche congratulated them and said she couldn't wait to meet the baby. Rebecca then got ready and headed to work. Maggie was so happy for them when Rebecca told her about the baby.

Over the following week, Rebecca and Rogue were able to visit the babies, which they did every day. Rebecca watched Rogue when he held the babies; he sure was a proud dad. Rebecca took her turn holding all the boys and thought about how precious

they were. She just couldn't wait for everyone to meet them. She wondered what they would all think about three babies instead of one.

About a week later, they were finally able to bring the babies home. The nurse went over everything with them about the babies. That morning, when they got to the hospital, they picked up each of the babies and put them in their car seats. The nurse helped them get the babies to the car. Rogue strapped them all in, and off they were.

Rebecca felt like her life was now complete. She couldn't believe that they were now a family of five. When they got the babies home and into the house, Rebecca and Rogue changed all of them. Then it came time to feed them. Rebecca heated up the milk, and they sat in the nursery while they fed all of them. It was a challenge trying to feed all of them at the same time, but they managed.

Once they finished eating and fell asleep, they laid them down in their cribs. They looked so peaceful while they were sleeping. They both stood and watched them for a while. They had a baby monitor that they kept with them so they could hear the babies when they woke up.

That evening, the grandparents were coming to meet their new grandbabies. When they got there, Rebecca told them she would go and get the baby. She came out of the nursery pushing a stroller. They all looked at each other, as if they thought this was odd. All three babies were still fast asleep. When Jill and Blanche saw that there were three of them, their mouths dropped. Jill finally said, "Do you two want to tell us what is going on here?"

Rogue said, “Well, when we got to the hospital to see the baby, we soon found out that there were three of them. The mother and father had a car crash on the way to the hospital. Unfortunately, the parents didn’t make it. We just couldn’t separate them, so we adopted all three.”

Andrew said, “Wow! Well, what are their names?”

Rogue said, “Brody, Brock, and Brackett Ratcliffe. They are identical. They all have a bracelet with their names on it so we can tell them apart.”

Beckett picked up one of the babies and sat down on the couch. Andrew was a little nervous about holding them because they were so tiny. Rebecca got a pillow, set it on Andrew’s lap, and laid one of the babies on it. It made it a lot easier for Andrew to manage.

Jill couldn’t believe that they adopted three babies. She was happy for them but knew that they would have their hands full. Both Jill and Blanche offered to help with the babies.

Rebecca couldn’t wait for Miss Hettie to see them. She and Joe had gone out of town for the weekend. Rebecca let them know she would stop by Sunday afternoon when they got home.

The whole evening consisted of everyone holding the babies. They were very happy parents and grandparents that day. Rebecca took lots of pictures; she wanted to remember this day forever. Blanche asked Jill, “Jill, if you don’t have plans for tomorrow, how about we go shopping for our grandkids?” Jill said, “That sounds like a great idea.” Rebecca told them, “I think the babies have everything they need for now.”

“Nonsense,” Blanche said. “You can never have too much. Besides, you have three, and that requires a lot more.” Jill spoke up and said, “Blanche, you are so right.” They decided on a time the next day to go shopping for the boys.

It was almost 7 p.m. when they all left. They kissed each of the babies and hugged both Rogue and Rebecca, telling them how happy they were for them and that if they needed any help, to just let them know. That whole day was magical for Rebecca; she was finally a mother.

They got the boys ready for their baths, dressed them, fed them, and watched as they all faded off to sleep. They were both afraid to fall asleep, afraid they wouldn’t hear the babies. Rebecca could hear Rogue get out of bed several times during the night to check on the boys, and Rebecca would do the same. They took turns getting up, feeding, and changing the babies.

The next morning, when they both got up, they were exhausted from the night before. They brought the babies into the kitchen with them. Rebecca fixed Rogue's breakfast before he left for work. Rebecca was taking a few weeks off work to be with the boys.

Over the next few weeks, several people came to see the babies. Sebastian and Cheyenne brought Blake and Mija. Cheyenne couldn’t believe that they had adopted three babies. Maggie dropped by for a while every day. Rebecca was thankful for any help she could get. Jill and Blanche would come almost every day; every time they came over, they had something for the boys. Miss Hettie also came over every day. She would bring them dinner so Rebecca could tend to the kids.

Most of Rebecca's days were filled with feeding, changing, and rocking babies, not to mention the laundry. Considering the boys came from addicted parents, they would cry a lot, but now they seemed to be more settled. When Rogue came home that evening, and they were having dinner, he told Rebecca that they needed to hire a nanny, or two, if need be, because she needed help with the boys. He could tell how tired she looked.

Rebecca had to agree with him; they were a handful. Although she was managing quite well, she still needed some help. She told him she would call the childcare agency the next morning and start interviewing potential nannies for the boys.

The next morning, after Rebecca got the boys all settled down, she called the childcare agency. She told them she needed to hire two nannies and explained what she was looking for. They told her they would be sending some applicants to her house for her to interview that afternoon.

When the first nanny, Miranda Dobbs, arrived, Rebecca went over what she needed. Miranda was a young woman who loved children, although she had none of her own. Rebecca told her that she would be returning to work soon, on a part-time basis at first, and that she needed someone with flexible hours. Rebecca went over what her duties would be as far as taking care of the boys. She introduced Miranda to them, and she seemed to get along well with them. Rebecca also told her that since there were three babies, she was planning to hire another nanny as well. When the first interview was over, Rebecca felt good about how it had gone.

The second interview didn't go as well. The applicant was an older woman who was very grouchy and didn't connect well with the boys. Rebecca thanked her for coming and told her she didn't

think the job was a good fit for her, and the woman agreed. Rebecca called the agency again, and they sent out another applicant.

The last applicant was a middle-aged woman, Mrs. Dobson. She was very jolly and was good with the boys. Rebecca felt she had chosen the two nannies who best fit what she needed. They were set to start the next morning.

The next morning, both nannies arrived on time and were ready to get started. Rebecca showed them around the house and the nursery. The boys were starting to wake up, and both nannies immediately took charge. Rebecca was very impressed. It was clear that both of them knew how to handle babies. They fed them, changed diapers, and even had some playtime. The first day went very well.

Rebecca introduced them to Rogue when he got home from work. He welcomed them both and thanked them for all their help. When the nannies left, Rebecca started dinner. It was the first time in a while that she was able to cook, as most of her time had been spent with the boys. She and Rogue enjoyed a nice dinner together.

After dinner, once the dishes were done and the kitchen was cleaned up, Rebecca started getting the boys ready for their baths. Rogue held two of them while she bathed one, and then they would swap babies. Bath time was a chore in their house, just like everything else. Each boy had a different routine and his own personality, so tending to them was an all-day task.

As the boys got older and started to walk, they were everywhere. Even though they were identical triplets, they were very different.

They didn't like the same foods or toys; everything about them was different. It took Rebecca and Rogue a while to be able to tell them apart.

Rebecca was finally able to return to work on a full-time basis, and she felt very comfortable with the nannies she had hired. She hated leaving her boys and would call periodically to check on them. She had a few meetings that morning. After her meetings, she asked Maggie if she would like to go to the spa, which Maggie gratefully accepted. They spent the whole afternoon together.

Rebecca did feel a little guilty, as she thought she should be home with the boys. Maggie told her not to… she needed some time for herself once in a while.

When they got back to the office, Mrs. Downs had left a message for Rebecca to call her. Rebecca called her, and Mrs. Downs said she had some paperwork about the biological parents that she thought Rebecca might need. It was basically health records about the parents, in case something came up. Rebecca told her she would stop by her office before heading home to pick them up.

On her way home, Rebecca stopped by to collect the paperwork Mrs. Downs had for her. They chatted for a little while about the boys, and then Rebecca headed home. She tossed the envelope onto the passenger side of her Jeep.

When she got home, the nannies seemed to have everything under control. The boys were sitting in their walkers, and Rebecca went over and kissed each of them. The boys seemed very content. Rebecca thanked Miranda and Mrs. Dobson for taking such good

care of her boys. After the nannies left, Rebecca sat down and played with them. She couldn't believe how big they were getting.

It was almost time for Rogue to get home. Rebecca remembered the envelope Mrs. Downs had given her, so she went out to her Jeep to get it. When she came back into the house and sat down, she opened the envelope. She couldn't believe what she was reading. It detailed the parents' health issues and identified who the parents were. Rebecca couldn't believe it when she read the name of the mother.

Savannah Rivers. Rebecca was in total shock. She couldn't believe it; she didn't even know that Savannah had passed away. She remembered the last time she had seen her sitting on the park bench and how bad she had looked. Rebecca sat on the sofa in confusion over what she had just found out. She couldn't wait for Rogue to get home; they had a lot to talk about.

As she looked at the boys, she couldn't believe that Savannah was their mother. She could see a resemblance now, but it had never occurred to her until this moment. She had so many questions, but she didn't know where to start.

When Rogue got home, Rebecca sat him down and told him what she had just discovered. He was just as shocked as she was. He, too, had many questions. They decided they would start by talking to Mr. and Mrs. Rivers; maybe they could give them some insight into the situation.

After dinner, once the boys were all settled down for the night, Rebecca decided it was time to make the call to Savannah's parents. Mrs. Rivers answered. Rebecca didn't even know how to begin the conversation. She told her who she was, and of course,

Mrs. Rivers remembered her. Rebecca then told her that she had just found out about Savannah's passing away. Mrs. Rivers told her that Savannah had passed away about a year or so earlier. Rebecca expressed how sorry she was for their loss.

Finally, Rebecca said, “Mrs. Rivers, did you know that Savannah was pregnant?” Mrs. Rivers told her that she did.

“Did you know that she was pregnant with triplets?” Rebecca asked.

Mrs. Rivers said, “Not until the adoption agency called me, Rebecca. Her dad and I are in no position to take care of one baby, let alone three, so we had no choice but to put them up for adoption.”

Rebecca said, “Mrs. Rivers, I understand that, but there is something I think you should know. When I got married, and after several miscarriages, I found out that I could not have children. So, my husband and I decided to adopt a baby. The adoption agency called us over a year ago about a baby boy who was up for adoption. Little did we know, there were three of them. We didn’t want them to be separated, so we adopted all three. Mrs. Rivers, we adopted Savannah’s babies. I didn’t know it until today.”

Mrs. Rivers was at a loss for words. The phone was silent for several minutes. Finally, she gathered herself and said, “Rebecca, so you’re telling me that you adopted all three of Savannah’s babies?”

“Yes, Mrs. Rivers, that is what I’m saying,” Rebecca replied.

Then Rebecca asked, “Would you like to meet your grandbabies?”

“Yes, Rebecca, I would love that,” Mrs. Rivers said.

“Would you like to come over tomorrow?” Rebecca asked.

“Yes, we would love that, Rebecca,” Mrs. Rivers replied.

Before they hung up, Mrs. Rivers thanked Rebecca for what she had done, even though she hadn’t known the boys were Savannah’s until that day.

Jill and Andrew came over to see the boys the following morning. They couldn’t believe it when Rebecca told them that Savannah was the biological mother of the boys. They hated to hear that she had passed away and didn’t even get to meet her babies.

They were still there when Mrs. Rivers came to the house. When she saw the boys, tears filled her eyes. She told Rebecca how much they looked like Savannah. She took her turn holding all three of the boys. Before she left, she thanked Rebecca for letting her see the babies. Rebecca told her she could visit them anytime she wanted.

Chapter 20

As the years passed, the boys were really growing up. They were getting ready to start school in the fall. Rebecca had mixed feelings about them going to school. Rogue had all three of them involved in sports, mainly football, so they stayed busy being taken from one game to another. Brackett was a daddy's boy, while the other two were their grandpa's boys. Andrew and Beckett were at every game. They loved football as much as the boys did. Jill, Blanche, and Rebecca would go to a game occasionally; they weren't much into sports.

Rogue was a terrific father. After work every day, he would play with them in the yard or take them swimming. Rogue and Andrew taught all the boys how to swim. The boys' eyes would light up when their dad got home from work. Mr. and Mrs. Rivers also played a big part in their lives. They had a lot of people around them who truly loved and supported them.

A few weeks later, Andrew and Jill stopped by and told Rebecca and Rogue that they really needed to talk to them. Rebecca said, "This must be important by the look on both of your faces." They told her it was.

Andrew started by saying, "Rebecca, you know I have been going to the doctor a lot for my heart condition. My heart is only working at about twenty percent. The doctor told me I need a heart transplant as soon as one can be found. If I don't get one soon, my life is going to be over. I'm on the donor list at several hospitals."

Rebecca tried to hold back the tears, but they started flowing down her cheeks. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Thank goodness the boys were taking their naps. She had to sit down and try to take in everything he was telling her. Jill put her arm around her and told her that her father was going to be okay.

Andrew said, "Rebecca, besides, I have these grandbabies to watch grow up, and I don't plan on missing it." She hugged her dad and just started crying uncontrollably. He put his arms around her and held her for the longest time. Jill had tears rolling down her face. She thought to herself, *He just has to make it. He has to.*

When Jill and Andrew left, Rebecca needed to get away by herself. She told Rogue she was going for a drive to clear her mind. He touched her face, dried her tears, and walked her to the Jeep. He knew her heart was breaking. Andrew was a good father to her and always had been; she loved him so much. As Rebecca got into her Jeep and headed down the driveway, a lot of things were going through her mind. She remembered the first day she came to live with them and how they treated her with respect and love. She couldn't imagine how her mom was really dealing with it. She was trying to be strong for Andrew and Rebecca. Her mom loved her dad so much and needed him more than anyone. They had been through a lot together over the years. Rebecca hated the thought of losing her dad.

The rest of the weekend was hard for Rebecca. She wished there was something she could do. She felt so helpless, but she had to wait like everyone else for a donor to be found. She also hated the thought that his life depended on someone else losing theirs. Either way it went, someone was going to die. She thought about how unfair life can be sometimes.

They had dinner with her mom and dad the next evening. She tried her best not to think about his health and what the outcome might be. She watched her kids sit on his lap while he read to them. They would sit so patiently, even though he had a hard time breathing at times. Brock and Brody loved sitting on their grandfather's lap; Brackett, on the other hand, was always with Rogue. It amazed Rebecca how different they were, being triplets.

When Hettie announced that dinner was ready, the boys took their seats by Andrew. When everyone was seated, Hettie and Jill brought out all the food. They had the best time at dinner that night. The boys always loved going to their grandparents' house. After dinner, they all got dressed and went to the pool, where they spent the remainder of the evening. Rogue and Andrew stayed in the lounge chairs while everyone else swam.

When they got home later that night, the boys were exhausted after their baths. They all fell asleep on the sofa watching TV with Rogue. Rebecca watched all of them while they slept; they looked so peaceful. Rogue also fell asleep, with Brackett fast asleep on his lap. Brackett and Rogue had a stronger connection. Although Rogue loved all of them, he and Brackett seemed closer.

Rebecca picked up each of the boys and carried them to their rooms. By the time she got to Brackett, Rogue had already picked him up and was carrying him to his room. Rebecca and Rogue finally decided they would go to bed as well. As they lay in bed that night, Rogue put his arms around his wife, and they both fell asleep. He loved her more than anything in the world.

The next morning, Rebecca got up first and started breakfast for her family. Rogue wasn't far behind her. She poured him a cup

of coffee, and they sat at the bar enjoying their first cup of the day. They both enjoyed their morning time together.

It wasn't long before the boys woke up. They must have been tired because they had slept in that morning. They came into the kitchen ready to eat breakfast. Rebecca had to make a lot of different breakfast dishes because all the boys had different tastes. Cooking for all of them was an everyday chore, as none of them liked the same thing.

After breakfast, Rogue took the boys to ride the ATVs around the property. They loved spending time with their dad. Rogue had something planned for them almost every weekend. It was a special father-and-son time for them.

Every Sunday evening, Beckett and Blanche would come to pick the boys up and take them to get ice cream. They loved doing that. Then they would take them to the park for a little while. This gave Rebecca a little time to herself. When they got home, Beckett and Blanche would always stay and eat with them.

Rebecca loved her life and everyone in it. Mr. and Mrs. Rivers would come over on Wednesdays and spend time with the boys. She always thought that since Savannah wasn't around anymore, having the triplets in their lives made things feel just a little more complete. They looked more and more like Savannah every day. They all had her beautiful eyes and the same hair color. Savannah would be very proud if she could see her boys right now and see how much they were loved.

The boys' biological father, Rebecca later found out, was a boy she had gone to school with. His name was Craig Anderson. Rebecca asked Rogue if they should get in touch with his parents

to let them know about the boys. He told her he knew his parents and that they never had anything good to say about him.

Rebecca thought they had the right to know they had grandchildren. She decided she would call them and tell them about the boys. Mrs. Anderson answered the phone. Rebecca told her who she was and then explained that she and Rogue had adopted their grandchildren. Mrs. Anderson let her know right away that neither she nor her husband wanted anything to do with their late son's children.

Rebecca thanked her for listening and thought that maybe she would wonder about her grandchildren someday, but since she and her husband didn't want anything to do with them, she was sorry she had wasted her time. Rebecca couldn't believe that any grandparent wouldn't want to know about their grandchildren. But it is what it is, she thought. She never contacted them again.

As the months flew by, the boys would be starting school in a few weeks. Rebecca and Rogue took them shopping for school clothes and whatever else they would need. The boys were placed in different classes. They weren't sure how that would work for them since they were so used to being together, but they thought they would give it a try.

The first day of school was hard for Rebecca. She cried. The boys were eager to go to school; they couldn't wait to meet their teachers. Rogue and Rebecca took each of them to their classrooms, told them goodbye, and wished them a good day. When they got back to the truck and got in, Rogue squeezed Rebecca's hand and told her they had to let them grow up sometime. Rebecca didn't want them to grow up; she wanted to keep them close so she could always protect them.

As she and Rogue went to work, Rebecca thought about the boys all day. She was having a hard time concentrating on her work. She couldn't wait to pick them up from school. She spent the remainder of her day working on some new sketches. She even came up with an idea to talk to her mother about designing a kids' clothing line, something she had been thinking about for a long time.

When it was almost time for Rebecca to pick up the boys, she got a call from her mom. She said that her dad had to be rushed to the hospital by ambulance and that he was not doing well. Rebecca hung up and called Rogue to tell him about her dad. He told her to go to the hospital and that he would pick up the boys.

Rebecca grabbed her purse and ran to her Jeep. When she got to the hospital, Jill was standing outside the ICU room while they worked on her dad. When Jill saw Rebecca, she hugged her and said, "Rebecca, it's not good. He has got to have a heart transplant soon, or he is going to die."

Rebecca had tears streaming down her face. The doctor came out to talk to them. He said that he was stable but very weak right now and that he was resting comfortably for the time being. Jill was very upset. She was afraid that he wasn't going to make it. They could see him through the glass. They could see he was struggling to breathe. They had him hooked up to a breathing machine that was doing most of the breathing for him.

All that Jill and Rebecca could do was wait. They were allowed to go in and see him for a few minutes, but he was unresponsive to their being there. He looked so pale.

For the remainder of the week, Jill and Rebecca took turns staying at the hospital with Andrew. They both needed breaks to get some rest.

On Friday morning, the doctor told Jill and Rebecca that he needed to talk to them. He took them into a room, and they all sat down. He said, “Mrs. Malone, I know this is going to be hard for you and your daughter to hear, but Mr. Malone is not going to make it. I have called every hospital around, and there is just not a heart available for him. Mrs. Malone, you need to make a decision as to whether to keep him hooked up to all the machines or let him go peacefully.”

Jill looked at the doctor and said, “I need some time to talk to my daughter about this before the final decision is made, if that is okay.”

“That is fine,” he said. “I know that it is a tough call to make, and again, I am so sorry.”

The doctor got up and left.

Jill looked at Rebecca and said, “Rebecca, your dad always told me that if anything ever happened to him, he didn’t want to be kept alive by machines. It’s even in his will. I have to honor his wishes.”

Rebecca looked at her and said, “Mom, it’s just hard for me to say goodbye to him. I know that it is probably the best thing to do for him, and we do need to honor his wishes, but before we do, I need to talk to the boys to see if they want to say goodbye to him.”

Rebecca and Jill's hearts were broken, so they decided they would go home and come back the next morning. Rebecca told her mom that when Rogue came home from work, they would talk to the boys after dinner. Jill went to see the doctor and gave him her decision. They decided that after everyone had seen Andrew on Saturday, they could turn off all the machines.

Rebecca drove her mother home and walked her inside. Hettie was waiting for them. Jill told Hettie what the doctor had said and what they would be doing the following day. Hettie started crying. That was the first time Jill had ever seen her this emotional.

Rebecca stayed for a little while longer. Miranda had picked the boys up from school and had already taken them home. Rebecca pulled herself together before she went into the house. When Rebecca got home, Miranda was reading a book to the kids. They all went running to their mom. Rebecca hugged them and asked how school was. They talked nonstop about their teachers and the new friends they were making.

Miranda could tell Rebecca was very upset, but was trying her best not to let the boys see it. When the boys went outside to play before dinner, Rebecca was able to fill Miranda in on what was going on. Miranda felt so bad for her. She told Rebecca that if she needed anything, all she had to do was call. Rebecca thanked her. Before Miranda left, she hugged Rebecca and told her how sorry she was for her and her family.

Rebecca went to check on the boys before she started cooking dinner. When dinner was almost done, she called the boys to come in and get ready to eat. After the boys washed up, she let them watch some TV before Rogue got home. It was almost 5:30, and he should be home soon. When 6:00 came, and Rogue still wasn't

home, she decided to call him. There was no answer. She thought he must have gotten tied up with work.

She and the boys went ahead and sat down to eat. They always had the best conversations at the dinner table. That was probably where they bonded the most. After dinner, the kids went back into the living room. When 7:30 rolled around and there was still no Rogue, she called him again, and there was still no answer.

The boys kept asking about their dad and wondering why he wasn't home yet. She told them he must have gotten busy at work. The boys took their showers and got ready for bed, and she told them that as soon as their daddy got home, he would come in to see them. It wasn't long before they were all fast asleep.

Rebecca went into the living room and turned on the TV. Before she knew it, she was fast asleep too.

Around 9:30 p.m., the doorbell rang. She was still half asleep and went to the door. It was her mom and Hettie, and they both looked upset. It must be about her dad, she thought. She told them to come in and asked what the matter was.

Jill looked at Rebecca and said, "We need to go somewhere private." So, they all went into the kitchen. Hettie started making coffee, which Rebecca thought was odd since it was after 9:00. Jill told Rebecca to sit down and that she needed to tell her something.

"Rebecca," she said, "Rogue was in an automobile accident on the way home from work."

Rebecca looked at her and said, "What happened? Is he okay? What hospital is he in?"

Jill looked at her and said, “Rebecca, Rogue got hit head-on by a drunk driver. He didn’t make it. He passed away at the scene.”

Rebecca said, “No! There has to be a mistake. He has kids who are expecting their daddy to be home any minute. It can’t be true. Momma, please tell me it’s not true.”

“I wish I could, Rebecca, but it is true,” she said.

When Rebecca saw that she was serious, she burst into tears. “No! Not Rogue. He can’t be gone. We still have our whole lives ahead of us, and we have three kids who need him as much as I do. You’re lying!” she snapped.

“Rebecca, I’m not lying. A police officer just stopped by the house to tell me the bad news.”

“I don’t believe it. I want to see him,” she said.

Jill said, “Rebecca, I know this is a lot to take in right now, but it is true. The officer said you need to go to the hospital to identify his body. I will take you.”

Rebecca was in total shock. She couldn’t believe that this was happening. She broke down in tears, and Jill and Hettie held her until she was able to compose herself. Hettie told her she would stay with the boys while she and Jill went to the hospital.

When she and Jill were led to the morgue, he hesitated before he pulled the sheet back. Rebecca nodded and told him it was okay. When he did, and she saw Rogue, she broke down. She held onto him and cried for the longest time. After a while, Jill told her

it was time to go. Rebecca didn't want to leave him. The hospital staff had to lead her out to the car.

On the way home, Rebecca cried the whole way. She looked at Jill and said, "Momma, what am I going to do without Rogue? And Daddy is to be unhooked from all the machines tomorrow. I have lost two of the best men in my life. I'm not sure I can deal with all of this right now."

Jill pulled the car over and said, "Rebecca, I know you are hurting right now, but you have to pull yourself together. You have three boys who have lost their daddy. They are going to need you more now than ever."

"Momma, I don't know if I can deal with this. I just lost my husband, and he is not coming back. Tomorrow, my daddy will also be gone. Life is just not fair."

When Jill and Rebecca got back to her house, Rebecca went to check on the boys. As she looked at them, she thought to herself, *How do I tell them that their daddy is gone and never coming back? And tomorrow they are to say goodbye to their grandpa.*

When she got back to the living room, Beckett and Blanche were there. They all hugged each other, and tears flowed.

This was more than Rebecca could deal with at the moment. Her whole life felt gone. She collapsed on the floor. Beckett picked her up and put her on the sofa. Hettie got some cool towels and put them on her head. She slowly started to come to herself. She couldn't believe that Rogue was gone. *What am I to do?* she thought.

The next morning, her mom called and told her they had found a donor for her dad and that the transplant was going to be that afternoon. Rebecca was grateful to hear that, but she still had to tell the boys about their father.

That morning, the boys came to the table. Rebecca knew they felt something was not right. Brock asked her if she was okay. She looked at all of them and told them she needed to talk to them about something. She proceeded to tell them that their dad had been in a bad car crash the night before and that he didn't make it.

Brackett said, "What do you mean he didn't make it?"

She said, "Boys, your daddy passed away."

Brock said, "Are you saying he is never coming home to us?"

Rebecca said, "Yes. Boys, Daddy is not coming home to us. He is in Heaven now."

"So, we are all alone now without Daddy?" Brackett said.

"Yes, Brackett, we are."

All the boys got up from the table and went to their room. It was breaking Rebecca's heart to see them so sad. As she walked down the hallway past their rooms, she could hear them crying.

Rebecca's heart was broken. Her whole world vanished in front of her. Things would never be the same.