

An Independence Falls Superhero Romance

# SPARKED



BONUS STORY

LILY CAHILL

## Cora

CORA TIED A RED RIBBON around her ponytail with trembling hands. Today was the big day. She'd been up half the night putting the finishing touches on the bakery below her apartment: adding cookies and pies to the display cases; making sure there were sharp pencils next to her brand new order slips; cleaning every last corner for the millionth time. Even if no one showed up, she wanted it to shine.

"Knock-knock," Clayton called from her apartment door.

Cora's heart fluttered at the sound of his voice. Clayton was exactly what she needed to calm her nerves.

"Hi," she said brightly.

Clayton swept her into a kiss then pulled back to look at her. "How's the prettiest entrepreneur in the world doing this morning?"

Cora hung her arms around his neck. "Nervous, but excited. Part of me wants the whole town to come, and part of me is terrified they will."

"Well," he said, pressing his forehead against hers with a smile, "you better get settled with the part that wants people to come. There's already a line."

"What? No, there's not."

He had to be teasing her. *Had to*. She wasn't even scheduled to open for another twenty minutes.

"Come see," he said, tugging her toward the living room window that looked out over the street below.

Sure enough, there was a line. And not just a line, but a big one. It was halfway down the block!

Cora's forehead wrinkled. "Clayton Briggs," she said. "What did you do? Did you pay those people to be there? You paid them, didn't you."

Clayton let out a hearty laugh. "Not a cent."

"You have to tell me the truth. I can't handle any tricks today."

"On my honor. It's all you."

"What's going on?" Bethany asked from the door to her bedroom. "What are you guys looking at?"

"Come see for yourself," Clayton said. "Your sister has caused quite a stir."

Bethany ran over, the wide skirt of yet another new dress swishing around her in a pink haze.

"Oh, Cora!" she said, squeezing between them. "You're going to be a millionaire!"

"I hardly think twenty people constitutes millionaire status," Cora laughed.

"Don't be so sour. It's loads more than twenty. Just promise you'll remember the little people when you're famous," Bethany said, her voice dreamy.

"Bakers don't get famous," Cora said. "At least, I hope they don't."

Clayton turned to Bethany, "Ready to go, Bug?"

Bethany rolled her eyes. "I wish you'd stop calling me that. Insects are disgusting."

Clayton smirked. "Would you rather I call you booger? 'Cause that was my second choice."

Bethany sighed dramatically. "I used to think you

were the most elegant man I'd ever met," she said. "Let me get my purse."

Cora shot Clayton a look of thanks. He'd volunteered to keep her little sister occupied for the day. Bethany had wanted to help, but her help generally consisted of taste-testing everything and offering a waterfall of wild suggestions where cookie decorations were concerned. Cora thought it would be better to handle opening day on her own.

"Don't forget, we're having a celebratory dinner Saturday night," Clayton said as Bethany left the room.

"You don't have to do that," Cora said.

"It's just a small dinner. Only family and close friends. They want to celebrate your success."

"But I don't even know if I'll be a success yet," she said.

"I do," Clayton said, circling his hands around her waist.

"What if my nerves kill me before I even open the door?"

"I know exactly how to make you forget all about your nerves." His voice had grown husky and his eyes had gone dark. He kissed her deeply and Cora felt heat rush up from the tips of her toes to the top of her head.

"Don't you start," she said, though she wished they had time to do just that. "I can't afford any distractions."

"You're loss," he said with a smirk.

"I'm well aware."

"Ugh!" Bethany said from the doorway. "Can't you two keep your hands off each other for two minutes?"

Cora moved to pull away from Clayton—she did *try*

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to keep things as modest as possible around Bethany—but Clayton wouldn't let go. Instead, he dipped her low like they were on the dance floor and kissed her again.

"Sorry, kid," he said. "But I'm not even going to try."

"Kid?" Bethany exclaimed. "That's even worse."

## Clayton

ONCE THEY WERE CLEAR OF the bakery, Clayton whirled on Bethany with a grin. "I've got something I really need your help with, Bug."

"I told you not to call me that," Bethany said, pouting.

"I'm serious. This is important."

Bethany's eyes grew wide. "What is it? Are you sick again? Is Cora?"

Clayton laughed, "No. Nothing like that. I want to surprise Cora. I want us both to surprise her."

"Anything," Bethany said, her eyes bright with excitement. "How can I help? What do you want to do?"

"I want to marry your sister. You know that, right?"

"Why else would you give her a ring, silly?"

"Well," he said, "I don't want to wait any longer. I want us to get married this weekend."

Bethany looked confused. It took a moment for her face to turn from excited to horrified. "No. You wouldn't."

"Why not?"

Bethany stared at him like he was growing horns from his forehead. It wouldn't have been the weirdest thing that had happened to him lately, but he was

quite sure his head was in the same shape it'd been when he last looked in the mirror.

"No." This time, the single word from Bethany was emphatic. Not an exclamation of shock, but an order.

"Bug, listen—"

"No." Bethany held up a single finger, indicating he should wait, then pulled a notebook out of her purse—a notebook that looked twice the size it should be. There were glossy magazine pieces sticking out all over. Clayton could see the flowers, dresses, and cakes peeking out from the pages.

"What is that thing?" Clayton teased.

"It's my bible," Bethany said, her brow furrowed. She was giving him her best take-me-seriously look. It was working.

"Looks a little ratty for a bible."

"It's not ratty! It's loved. And it knows more about weddings than you ever will. Look."

Bethany flipped it open to an image of a huge tented wedding with bulbed lights lining the roof and a long table spread with the finest linen and the most extravagant looking food. Clayton had been around the world and dined at endless Michelin-rated restaurants, but even he couldn't identify some of the food.

"What is that supposed to be?" Clayton asked.

"Your wedding, if you just give me the time to set everything up. One week!" she scoffed, slapping the book closed.

"Is the wedding in that picture really what Cora would want, Bug?"

"Who wouldn't want it?" Bethany asked, collapsing on a bench, throwing her arm over her eyes, and exhaling a sigh that made her sound like she was

dying. "It's absolutely perfect."

He knelt in front of Bethany and squeezed her hand. "Perfect for someone else, maybe," Clayton said. "But perfect for Cora?"

He could imagine their perfect wedding. In his mind, he could see Cora's face as she stepped into the boathouse full of their closest friends and family members. She'd be so relieved not to have to plan a big event where everyone would stare. This would just be like a big dinner party, and then they would be husband and wife. He knew she'd love it.

"It's not what Cora would want," he said. "Trust me."

"But what about what you want? Or your mother and father? This is the sort of thing that's expected from a family of your stature. We have to make sure Cora makes the right impression on your set."

Bethany was biting her lower lip, the same way Cora did when she was worried. Clayton felt a rush of affection for the girl. The Murphy men might be scoundrels, but the Murphy women were pure gold.

"Cora doesn't need a fancy party to make the right impression. And neither do you."

Bethany sighed. "Who else knows?"

"Just you," he said.

"You told me first?"

"Your sister is the love of my life, but you're my best girl, right?"

Bethany stopped chewing on her lip and smiled. "You're too charming for your own good, Clayton Briggs."

Clayton laughed. "So you'll do it?"

"Is there anything I can say that will change your mind?"



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"Not a chance," Clayton said with a wide grin.

"Fine. I'll do it on one condition," she said. "I get to pick out the dress."

In truth, getting Cora a dress hadn't even crossed his mind. But now that Bethany said it, it seemed obvious. He was glad he'd decided to include her in the plans.

"Deal," he said.

Bethany popped off the bench and grabbed his hand. "Well, come on then," she said, tugging him down the street. "We have a million things to do."

## Cora

CORA DIDN'T THINK THERE WAS a thing in the world that could make her happier than she was in this moment.

It was only noon, but the bakery case was nearly empty and Cora's desk was already stacked with order slips. For the first time all day there was no one in the shop. If things kept up like this, she was going to have to hire help. Already she knew she'd be spending every spare moment tucked inside her little shop, surrounded by sacks of flour and sugar and piping bags full of frosting in every color. The thought lit a warm glow in her heart.

She took a long look around the four walls of her new business, feeling like she should pinch herself to see if it was real. Had her life really changed so dramatically in just a few weeks? It wasn't just the realization of a lifelong dream that had her feeling so lucky. It was the support by so many people in her life. Everyone she loved had stopped in today. Practically everyone she knew.

Meg Fields and Clayton's mother, Florence, had come in together to place an order for Meg and Will's wedding cake—a five-tiered tower covered in vanilla buttercream and hand-sculpted flowers. With nearly four hundred guests attending, it was going to

be the largest thing Cora had ever done, and she was excited for the challenge. The only thing she wasn't excited about was the idea that her own wedding was expected to be just as lavish. The thought made her cringe. She wondered how hard it would be to convince Clayton they should elope. All she wanted was to be married to him. The party was a necessary evil. And couldn't you get a fast, quiet wedding in Niagara Falls or Las Vegas? But she chastised herself immediately for the idea. It was only one day. A big event was the least she could do after the Briggs family had been so kind to her.

Meg and Florence weren't the only ones who had come by. Will, June, Ivan, Charlie, and Frank had also stopped in and all made a point to purchase something. And nearly all of her old clients had visited as well.

Really, the only person who hadn't stopped by was Clayton's father, but she hadn't expected him to. Things were still difficult there. Every day she worried her presence had forced Clayton to lose one of the most meaningful relationships in his life. It was a personal mission of hers to restore things between them, but so far she hadn't been able to figure out how.

Cora's eyes fell on one of the remaining cookies in her bakery case—a gooey chocolate chip she had made from a recipe her mother had taught her. It was one of the first things she ever remembered baking.

Everybody liked cookies, didn't they?

Cora hung a sign in the window that read OUT TO LUNCH then carried a small bakery box across the town square to Briggs Bank. It wasn't quite so

intimidating walking in anymore—she'd been by several times to visit Clayton—but crossing the threshold to the old establishment still felt like entering another world.

"Cora!" June called from behind the teller counter. "What are you doing here?"

"Just popping in," Cora said. She marveled at how casual she sounded, when her stomach was doing somersaults. "Is Mr. Briggs in?"

"Upstairs in his office. What have you got in that box?"

"Just a cookie," she said, folding back the crisp white paper lining the box so June could take a peek.

"You only brought one? You're a cruel woman," June teased.

"I'll save one for you," Cora said. June was one of the wonderful new things in her life—a friend. She never realized how small her life had been before she met Clayton. "I'm going to bring it up to Mr. Briggs. Do you think he'll like it?"

"Of course he will. I'll give him a buzz so he knows you're coming up."

Cora felt the glow of friendship and success fading with each step up to Mr. Briggs' office. Though he was perfectly polite to her, she knew that all Mr. Briggs saw when he looked at her was her family. The worst part was, she understood. He had good reason to hate her father and brother, and as for her ... she was marrying Clayton and ruining all of the man's plans for his son. And she thought she could make it all better with a chocolate chip cookie? She would have turned back, but June had already told him she was coming.

She knocked tentatively at the door.

"Come in," Mr. Briggs called in his booming voice.

He sat behind a mahogany desk that Cora was certain was worth more than her childhood home. He didn't rise to greet her; instead, he glanced up while he continued writing a memo. "Just a moment," he said.

Cora stood awkwardly by the door, holding the white bakery box behind her back.

Finally he stopped writing. "Hello, Cora. What can I do for you?"

"Nothing," she said, too quickly. "I ... I'm taking a break from the bakery. We opened today, you know."

"I know." He tapped his pen on his desk. "I believe Florence was planning on stopping in."

"She did. She ordered Meg's wedding cake." She smiled, hoping the mention of his elder son's much-more-suitable fiancée would cheer him, but he didn't return her smile. "Anyway ... we had a lull, and since I didn't see you today I thought—"

"I'm a very busy man," he said curtly. "I had an important lunch meeting and a number of matters to attend to."

"Of course, of course," Cora said. Her cheeks were hot and her hands were shaking. "I just meant ...," she pulled the box from behind her back and held it up. "I brought you a chocolate chip cookie. It's not much, but Florence says they're your favorite."

Cora placed the box on Mr. Briggs' desk and stepped back. She had to clutch her hands together behind her back to hide how they shook.

"That's true," he said, but didn't touch the bag. "I'm sure you have customers to whom you should be attending."

"Yes, of course," she said, grateful for a reason to

escape. Would it always be like this? She was marrying his son. He didn't have to love her, but he needed to understand her. "I suppose it's the only way I can thank you. For Clayton, for Bethany, for forgiving my father's debt. I'll repay you for that, but the rest of it ...."

She thought about how it felt to be in her own clean, sweet apartment, to have a purpose and a challenge in her business, to see her sister healthy and happy and just a little spoiled. To have a man who loved her.

"I know I'm not what you imagined for your son, but I'm going to work hard to prove to you he made the right choice."

Mr. Briggs stared at her for a long moment. She got the feeling he was seeing her for the first time.

"I should go. I've got baking to do if I want to keep anything on the shelves."

He didn't say anything as she left. But as she closed the door, she thought she heard the distinctive rasp of a bakery box opening.

## Clayton

BY THE END OF THE week, Clayton was certain he had made a huge mistake. By enlisting Bethany's help, he'd figured he'd be able to hand off some of the wedding planning duties while also bonding with his soon-to-be younger sister. He hadn't realized he would be allying himself with a pint-sized dictator who had no qualms about using his time—and his money—to plan her sister's perfect day.

She had kept him busy all week with a million chores and errands that had him scrambling around town when he wasn't working at the bank. She had proved to be tyrannically organized, producing lists that seemed to multiply by the hour, and her exacting specifications had him ready to tear his hair out. He was almost glad Cora had been so busy with the bakery, because she was too distracted to notice that both he and Bethany were making themselves crazy with preparations.

"No, no, they are only supposed to be five per bag," Bethany said, rapidly untying the muslin-wrapped bundles of Jordan almonds that had taken Clayton most of an hour to create.

"That's ridiculous," Clayton fumed. His fingers ached from perfecting the tiny bow Bethany insisted was

necessary. "Five nuts is barely a mouthful. What kind of wedding favor is that?"

"The nuts represent happiness, health, longevity, wealth, and fertility," Bethany said primly. "It's not supposed to be a full meal."

"Good, because we wouldn't want to ruin anyone's appetite. Not with the feast you're planning."

Bethany bristled. "It's traditional to offer a fish course and a meat course."

"And the poultry course?"

"Well, we wouldn't want to seem stingy, would we? You come from an important family, and we have to treat this day with dignity."

"You sound like my mother," Clayton griped.

"I take that as a compliment. Now, you never told me which one of these napkins you prefer," Bethany said, dangling three scraps of fabric in front of him.

After yesterday's lecture on the difference between cream and eggshell, Clayton knew better than to admit they all looked identical to him. "This one," he said, pointing to a napkin at random.

"Really? You like the lace? I think the damask might be more appropriate, but ...."

"That's what I meant. The damask," he said quickly, wondering what the word meant.

"Come on, Clayton. You've been to society weddings in the past. What type of napkins are most popular?"

For the life of him, Clayton couldn't remember a single napkin from any event he had attended. "I don't know. Who notices napkins? You wipe your mouth with it, what does it matter?"

Bethany's eye roll was so huge Clayton thought her blue eyes might get lost in her head. "Of course it



matters. It all matters.”

“No, it doesn't. I told you—I want a simple wedding with friends and family. Something Cora would like. Not this Hollywood production you've been staging.”

“Oh, you don't understand anything,” she yelled, stomping her foot. “This is the most important day of Cora's life, and it has to be perfect!”

“It will be perfect!” he yelled back. “We're happy, we're in love. What could be more perfect than that?”

“Fine then,” she said, throwing a bag of Jordan almonds in the air and showering them both. “You can be the one to make sure the plates and silverware and tablecloths all look perfect together. You can be the one to worry about where everyone will sit, and where to set up the band, and whether it will rain. You can be the one to find Cora's dress, and get it fitted. You can trick Cora into making her own wedding cake! Not to mention the invitations and the menu and the flowers. If you're so smart, you can plan this wedding yourself!”

On that dramatic pronouncement, Bethany flounced out the door.

Clayton surveyed the mess she had left behind. His family's boathouse looked like some sort of wedding bomb had exploded, scattering fabric, boxes of candles, and a dozen types of silverware all over the room. Bethany's lists were spread over the table, mixed up with images cut from fashion and celebrity magazines. It looked like Bethany was taking inspiration from Elizabeth Taylor's character in “Father of the Bride.” Clayton caught himself rolling his eyes and realized with horror that the very fact he could recognize her influences meant Bethany was rubbing off on him.

He gathered up the pictures and found Bethany sitting on the edge of the dock, trailing her feet in the cold water of Lake Perseverance. She looked like a pouting child, despite the grown-up navy pumps sitting next to her.

She had to hear Clayton's footsteps approaching down the dock, but she didn't look up. When he slipped out of his own boat shoes and sat down next to her, she stubbornly looked away. "Aw, come on, Bug. Don't be like that."

"Don't call me Bug," she sniffled.

Clayton realized she was crying. That wasn't so unusual for Bethany, but it still tugged at his heart. "You know I love your sister, right?"

"Yes."

"And I know you love her too."

"Of course."

"You know what I think Cora would like, instead of lace or damask? Plain linen napkins. I think she'd want a big table with a bunch of different dishes we all share, not courses with servers. She doesn't want all that fuss and bother."

"Are you ashamed of her?"

"What? Of course not."

"You keep saying you want to keep it simple and small. Is that because you don't think she's worth the sort of to-do that Meg and Will are planning?"

He was so shocked it took him a moment to respond. "I think she's worth everything. If she wanted a big fancy wedding at McPherson's Supper Club, I would give it to her. If she wanted to do it in Denver, or Paris, or on the moon ... I would give her that." He hesitated, suddenly unsure of himself. Bethany was Cora's sister, after all. "Do you think

that's what she wants?"

"That's what she deserves. Don't you see? She ought to have a special, magical day where she gets to be a princess." She snatched the pictures out of his hand. "This is what it's supposed to be like. A big, fancy soiree where everyone oohs and aahs and feels so jealous they could spit."

He chuckled despite the martial light in Bethany's eyes. "Now that's something my mother would never say."

"She doesn't have to. She puts on the finest parties in town. If you would just let me ask for her help—"

"No way. With the two of you ganging up on me, this will turn into a satin-covered circus. That's not what Cora would want."

"But what about what you want?"

He looked out over the lake, thinking of the night that had brought them together. "All I want is her. I want to be married to her. I want to share my mornings and evenings and nights with her. All of this," he said, gesturing to the boathouse behind them, "is just the show. The only part that matters to me is the moment where I promise to be hers, and she promises to be mine."

Bethany sniffled beside him. "Trust you to fight dirty. It's not fair to win me over with romance."

He threw an arm over her shoulder. "A man's got to use the weapons available to him. Come on, what do you say? Let's put together something that you and Cora will both love."

## Cora

"I STILL DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY we're having dinner so early," Cora complained as Clayton tugged her up the walk to his family's boathouse. Like everything else the Briggs owned, it was lovely, gracious, and large. "It's only four o'clock. I barely had time to finish this practice cake for Meg and Will's wedding."

"It's beautiful. You're beautiful. But we're already late," Clayton said, dashing ahead of her to open the double doors. She barely had time to gape at the house's wrap-around porch and gabled porticoes before he was gesturing her inside.

The entryway was awash with golden sunlight that gleamed off the wide pine floors and elegant furniture, but that wasn't what caught Cora's eye. Florence, Meg, and Bethany were standing there, beaming at her.

"What's going on?" Cora asked, looking from one face to the next. "Where is everyone?"

"They'll be here at seven," Meg said, grinning.

"Everyone's very excited to celebrate with you," Florence said with a wry twist to her smile.

"I'll take that," Bethany said, whisking the large bakery box from her arms. "Get her upstairs! We have to start getting her ready."

"Ready for what?" Cora asked. She turned to Clayton. "What haven't you told me?"

He traced her puzzled face with his fingertips, then clasped her hands in his. "I wanted to surprise you. I know how busy you've been. You've sold out every day this week, and everyone in town is talking about how great the bakery is. I'm so proud of you."

She blushed in pleasure, but she still didn't understand. "Clay, if you wanted to throw me a surprise party, shouldn't everyone else be here first?"

"This is more than a party." He took a deep breath and looked deep into Cora's eyes.

"This is our wedding."

"What?" Cora looked around, taking in the long trestle table that dominated the dining room. There were bushels of wildflowers spread across the table and stacks of dishes waiting to be wiped clean of dust. "Our wedding?"

"Is that all right?" He looked adorably anxious. "I wanted to make this easy for you. I know you don't have time to plan a wedding. And I can't wait to be married to you."

Tears sprang to her eyes. "Oh, Clay."

"We can cancel, if it's not what you want," he said quickly. "Bethany thinks you ought to have something fancier. If you want to wait—"

"Absolutely not," she said, launching herself into his arms.

She kissed him with all the joy and gratitude she could muster. Her heart was hammering in her chest. She was going to marry this man. This beautiful, generous, thoughtful man was going to be hers.

She might have gone on kissing him, but Bethany brusquely pulled them apart. "There's plenty of time

for that later. But for now, we're on a schedule."

Cora tried to reign in her thoughts. "Of course. What can I do to help?"

"Get upstairs and get in the bath. You've got to start getting ready. When was the last time you washed your hair?" When Cora's hand went protectively to her simple braid, Bethany shook her head. "Don't worry about it, I'll take care of everything. And you," she said, pointing at Clayton. "There are forty vases in the kitchen that need to be cleaned and filled with water. Then you can help Mrs. Dunder with dinner. I'll come check on your progress in thirty minutes."

Florence chuckled and winked at Clayton. "Better listen. Or she might take you over her knee."

"I have to get ready too," Clayton protested.

Bethany sniffed. "You were born in a suit. Will and Charlie will be here at six, and you can spend an hour being manly then. In the meantime, there's still work to do." She turned to Cora. "And what are you still doing here? Get upstairs!"

Cora jerked into action. Bethany followed close behind. When she glanced back at Clayton, he was standing at the bottom of the stairs, watching her ascend with a smile.

The next three hours were a whirlwind. With full access to Florence Briggs' cosmetics collection, Bethany could do a lot better than beet juice. She, Meg, and Florence fluttered around Cora, doing inexplicable things to her hair and face while Cora muttered weak protests about not going to too much trouble. At some point, Meg pressed a glass of Champagne into Cora's hand with a wink.

"All right," Bethany said finally, looking critically at

Cora's face. "I think we're ready for the dress."

Until that moment, Cora hadn't given any thought to her wedding dress. "Oh, but I haven't picked out a dress yet. Mama's dress was ruined the last time I wore it."

"It's taken care of," Bethany said as she opened a tall wardrobe to reveal a garment bag. Meg and Florence sighed in chorus as Bethany unzipped the bag, but Cora was too stunned to make a sound.

The dress was tea-length, with a flirty hem that would tease her knees. Its pristine silk skirt was bolstered with layers of tulle, nipped in at the waistline by a white silk sash. The fitted bodice had a Bardot neckline trimmed with a filmy gauze that just barely exposed her shoulders while leaving her collarbones bare.

"Where did you ... how did you ...?"

"It just came in at the dress shop. I had them rework the top a bit and shorten the hem, to make it more you. Do you like it?"

The child-like question made Cora think back on all the years she had taken care of Bethany. The nights they went hungry or nursed the bruises Huck had given her. But there were good nights too, nights when they'd giggled over Bethany's latest crush or talked for hours in the dark of their room.

She had been obsessed with protecting Bethany, but in this moment she realized it was really Bethany who had protected her. As long as she'd had her sister, Cora couldn't give in to weakness or despair. The younger girl had given her a reason to work, and fight, and live. And now Bethany was giving her this—a chance to celebrate her new, wonderful life. Cora pulled the girl into a wordless hug.

"You'll ruin your makeup!" Bethany squealed, and Cora found herself laughing through her tears.

"Thank you," Cora said, her heart too full to say anything else. "Thank you for doing this for me."

"It was Clayton's idea."

"But you made it happen. I'll never be able to thank you enough."

"You have nothing to thank me for," Bethany said. Despite her admonitions about the makeup, she was beginning to tear up herself. "After all you've given me, after all you've done. It could have been better, if I'd had more time."

"What do you mean? What could be better than this?"

"I wanted to throw you a big party," Bethany said, pouting. "But Clayton insisted on keeping it simple. You can still change your mind," she said, brightening. "If you want to wait, I'll order the swans and the ice sculptures and get a ten-piece band."

"No." Swans? Where on earth was Bethany planning to get swans? She had to remember to thank Clayton for reining in her imaginative sister. "I cannot imagine a more perfect day," Cora said, giving Bethany one last squeeze. "And this dress! It's ... it's ...."

"Perfect?" Bethany suggested.

"Stunning?" Meg supplied.

"Gorgeous?" Florence added.

"Too expensive," Cora finished. "Where did you get the money for this?"

"Clayton paid for it. You can pay him back, if you insist," Bethany said, overrunning Cora's protest. "But I'm pretty sure he won't let you. He's the one who fell in love with this particular dress. He said that when he



dreams of his wedding day, he sees you in this dress.”

Cora’s heart melted. She was still getting used to the idea that money could be spent on anything other than the bare necessities, and she wasn’t sure she would ever be comfortable with how free Clayton was with his checkbook. But for this day—this dress—she was willing to make an exception.

Slipping into the dress was like transforming into another person. The woman who wore this fragile, white silk didn’t need to scrub floors; her delicate white heels would never be sullied by the dirt road outside of her childhood home. She felt like herself, but not herself. Cora Murphy could never wear a dress like this. But she was about to become Cora Briggs.

“The fit came out beautifully,” Florence said as she fastened the last of the tiny pearl buttons running up the back.

“Do you think so?” Bethany asked. She had changed into a pale pink bridesmaid gown with a wide satin belt at the waist. Meg wore a matching dress, and it made Cora weepy all over again that Meg was excited to stand up for her on her wedding day.

“Let me see for myself and I’ll tell you,” Cora begged. Bethany, always a sucker for drama, had covered the mirror with a sheet so Cora couldn’t tell how the dress looked.

“Okay, okay. Ready?” Bethany paused a moment then tugged the sheet away from the mirror. “Here it is.”

Cora’s breath caught when she saw herself. Her hair fell in rich waves over her shoulder, held back with an art deco hair clip—a Briggs family heirloom

that Florence had offered up for "something old." It perfectly framed her face, demure behind a lacy white veil except for her ruby red lips. The veil was "something new," as Bethany had designed it when none of the other veils were quite right. A real diamond bracelet glittered at her wrist—"something borrowed" from Meg.

"We can't forget this," Bethany said, draping the sapphire necklace from Clayton over her neck.

Cora's hand clutched possessively over the brilliant stone. "Something blue," she said, her voice dreamy. "I look ...."

"You look lovely," said a deep voice from the doorway.

All four women turned to see Lowell Briggs, a stunned look on his face.

"Oh, no," Bethany said fretfully, looking at her wristwatch. "We need to be in our places. You too, Mr. Briggs. You're sitting in the front row."

"In just a moment," Florence said to Bethany, then squeezed Cora's hand. "Lowell would like a word with you alone."

Cora looked frantically at Bethany and Meg, but they left in a quick flurry of hugs until she was alone with Clayton's father.

"Five minutes," Bethany said from the door, shooting one last worried look at Mr. Briggs before she left.

For a long moment, no one spoke. "That sister of yours is quite the go-getter," he said finally, pacing the room. He looked incongruous there in his dark suit, amongst the flotsam of a primping party. "She makes a habit of getting things done."

"I'm sorry if she's been rude," Cora said softly. "I

know she can be headstrong.”

Mr. Briggs waved that away. “It’s a good quality. It shows leadership and clarity of vision.”

“Or bone-deep stubbornness.”

He smiled. “That too. I never expected any Murphy could be industrious or determined. And it seems I was wrong.”

“Bethany worked very hard to put this together.”

“That’s true. But I’m not talking about Bethany. I’m talking about you.”

Cora, already unstable on her unfamiliar heels, felt her legs wobble. “Me?”

Mr. Briggs looked away with a sigh. “I’m afraid I have been remiss in my treatment of you. I assumed that you were only interested in my boy because of his money. But over the past week, I’ve had a chance to look over your business plan and observe your work ethic first hand. I have to say, I’m impressed.”

“Thank you.” Cora was grateful for the compliment, but it niggled at her on some level. He’d never noticed how hard she was working when she was struggling to feed her family.

“And I will admit that, since you and Clayton have been together, my son has also been stepping up to his responsibilities in a way I had ceased to hope for. I chalk that up to your influence.”

For some reason, that annoyed her even more. It had taken years for Mr. Briggs to acknowledge Clayton’s achievements. Clayton had the drive and intelligence to flourish anywhere, but he had chosen to come back here and work with his father. Is that all the gratitude the old man could spare?

When she didn’t reply, Mr. Briggs hurried on. “What I’m trying to say is, perhaps I misjudged you. I

allowed my beliefs about your family to color my opinion of you. In my concern for my son, I may have acted in a manner unbecoming my character."

Cora couldn't help herself. "May have?"

He flushed. "Did. I shouldn't have tried to force Clayton and Violet together. It was a mistake. My wife has made sure I know it." Finally, he turned to face her. "I don't want to make another. I wanted to tell you ... I wanted to make sure you know .... Oh, I'm doing this all wrong."

To Cora's shock, Mr. Briggs tunneled his hands into his hair, ruining the shiny Brylcreem finish. "I'm trying to say I'm sorry. Not just for that horrible party, but for ever making you feel as if you deserved less because of your family connections. I know I have been less than fair to you, and I hope that someday you can forgive me."

Abruptly, he turned to leave the room.

"Wait," Cora said, not sure what she intended to say. Her anger was gone, replaced by a tiny thread of hope. When he stopped, she asked the first thing that came to mind. "Did you like the cookie?"

Mr. Briggs nodded. "Very much."

"Good." Now it was her turn to hesitate. "My father isn't here today. And I'm glad of that. But I wondered if, perhaps ... you would be willing to walk me down the aisle?"

His tense shoulders relaxed. He nodded twice before he could manage the words. "My dear, I would be honored."

There was a sharp knock at the door, forestalling anything else she might say. Bethany stuck her head in without waiting for permission. "I gave you seven and half minutes, and now we are behind schedule."

Enough dilly-dallying.”

Cora and Mr. Briggs smiled at each other as he took her arm.

Time seemed to stretch and fold like pulled sugar. One moment she was at the top of the stairs, and the next she was moving blindly through the rear of the house. She could hear the tinkle of excited voices from the back deck, but it was barely audible over the thump of her heart in her ears. It was like a dream: walking through this beautiful house, wearing this beautiful dress, on the arm of a caring and loving father. Was that music? Was any of this real? Was she about to wake up?

Then she stepped out onto the deck. The long pier was lined with guests, all holding small bouquets of wildflowers. Vases with more flowers were scattered along the railings under strung lights that shone against the last of the summer sunshine. And there, at the edge of the pier, stood Clayton.

His tall, strong form was framed by a streaks of heartbreaking orange and pink at just the moment before sunset. He wore a tailored suit that, as Bethany had said, looked as if he was born to wear it. There were wildflowers in his buttonhole and a handkerchief in just the shade of blue she liked best. But it was his face—his handsome, kind face—that brought her back to earth.

The man she loved was looking at her as if they were the only two people on the planet. And in that moment, they were. His eyes locked on hers and she felt like her heart might spill over with love. She could feel it radiating from him too, drawing her toward him the way he'd been able to from that very first moment their eyes had met at the Firelight Festival. The space

between them suddenly felt painfully long.

She walked so fast she was nearly running, forgetting to keep her steps in time to the bridal march as Bethany had advised. She walked past their wonderful friends and family, past her beautiful sister who's face was drowning in tears.

Cora walked straight into Clayton's arms, and into the rest of her life.