

Betrayed Hearts

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Dedication

To my husband, Bud, and my kids, Leanne and Eric,
for their constant love and support.

Prologue

The click of the door echoed as loud as a gunshot through the silent house. Lily Draper's heart battled to escape her chest. She pressed her back against the cool wall of her father's office and made a valiant effort to calm the roar of blood in her ears.

No time for fear. Focus on what you're here for.

The familiar scent of cedar and moth balls threatened to swamp her with nostalgia, causing memories of her beloved mother to spring forth with a ferocity that spiked an ache of longing through her.

Mama, how I wish you hadn't died. If you were here now, my life wouldn't be such a disaster.

She pushed away from the wall, grim determination stiffening her resolve. She refused to dwell on thoughts of her mother, knowing how disappointed Mama would be with the drastic action Lily was about to take.

She felt her way in the dark to the desk where she snapped on the brass lamp. Dust motes danced under the short beam of light aimed at the open Bible. With a pang, Lily ran her fingers over the worn pages. She used to love when Mama read her stories from the Bible. But that was before God took her mother away and left her with Tobias. With each punishment Tobias doled out, he cited a judgmental, angry God who waited to punish Lily for the least transgression. Lily wanted no part of a God like that. She shook her head

to clear her thoughts and focus on her mission.

Dirty coffee mugs and stacks of newspapers littered the surface as well as much of the floor. Obviously, her father needed a housekeeper, though she doubted Tobias would ever find someone willing to put up with his clutter or his surly personality.

Not her problem. Hadn't been for years.

She pulled open each desk drawer, rifled through the contents, but didn't find what she sought. Where did Tobias keep his emergency money? She fought to recall his routine when she'd lived here. A mysterious, metal box came to mind.

The clock on the bookshelf ticked out its ominous threat. *Hurry, Lily*, it seemed to chant. Beads of perspiration slid down her back, gluing her T-shirt to her skin. According to the church website, Tobias' weekly Bible study lasted two hours. Still, she needed to *borrow* the money and get out as soon as possible. If she were lucky, he would never even realize the money was missing until she could return it.

Lily scanned the cluttered room, where long shadows danced over the piles of papers and books. The box could be anywhere. Her gaze swept past the long window shuttered by wooden blinds to the closet in the corner. She crept to the other side of the room and opened the door. A puff of stale air wafted out. Lily pulled the cord and a single light bulb flared, revealing an equally messy storage space. She moved the clothes aside, peered on the floor, and found nothing but shoes. She straightened, pushed up on her tiptoes, and brushed her hand over the shelf above. When her fingers met cool metal, her pulse jumped.

She reached up to pluck the box from its resting place and carried it over to the desk. The lock wouldn't

be a problem. She had her penknife. One useful thing she'd learned from Curtis before he put a hole in her living room wall.

She jimmied the lock with the thin blade and flipped the lid. The sight of a large stack of cash made her knees weaken in relief. Thumbing through the bills, she estimated over eight hundred dollars. If she were careful and found somewhere modest to live, this money could tide her over for a month or two—until she could put her wreck of a life back together.

Lily didn't know what made her look at the papers underneath. The documents seemed harmless enough, yet as she pulled out the first tattered page, nerves fluttered in her stomach.

Could her self-righteous father have something to hide? Secrets that might prove he wasn't so holy after all? Lily wet her dry lips. After all the torment he'd put her through, she had to find out.

She opened the first page, a newspaper article from more than seventeen years earlier, describing a murder-suicide. A well-known doctor, David Strickland, had shot and killed his wife and two sons before taking his own life. Police found six-month-old Chloe Strickland unharmed in her crib but did not expect five-year-old Addie Strickland to survive.

Lily frowned. What did this have to do with Tobias? She removed the remaining documents from the box. The first, a set of adoption papers, was of little interest. Her adoption was not news to her. The second piece, however, caught her attention. It took a moment to register that she was looking at her own birth certificate. Lily Adelaide Strickland. Mother: Margaret Ann Sullivan. Father: David Allen Strickland.

The blood in Lily's fingers turned to ice water. The

man from the article—the man who had murdered his family—was her biological father?

She snatched the article and re-read it. The older daughter...Addie Strickland...critical condition. They'd been talking about her. She was the girl not expected to live. But obviously, she had. Another more important detail burned into her brain—a baby girl had survived as well.

Somewhere out there, she had a sister.

A slow burn rose up Lily's spine and settled into a tight band across her chest. Tobias had lied to her about so many things. About her birth family, about her real name, about how they'd come to adopt her. Her family hadn't died in a tragic fire as he'd claimed—they'd been murdered. Worst of all, he'd never told her she had a sister.

The papers floated to the floor as Lily grappled with the enormity of the discovery. Had Tobias kept this information from her mother as well? Or had Mama planned to tell her when Lily was older?

Older...

Lily scrambled to the floor to retrieve the papers. Hunched over her knees, she read the article again. The date...seventeen years ago. Her sister would be almost eighteen by now.

Where? Rainbow Falls, North Dakota. What were the odds that her sister would still be living in the same town all these years later?

The sound of gravel crunching in the driveway seeped through the fog in Lily's brain. A car door slammed.

Lily jerked up from the floor. Tobias was home early.

Panic clogged her throat and threatened to choke

her. She jammed the papers and the cash into her purse, yanked the chain to turn off the lamp, and forced herself to think logically. There was no way to reach the back door without passing the front entrance. The only way out was the window.

She wrenched up the blind, flipped the lock, and pushed open the window. With one leg over the sill, she glanced back at the darkened interior and then froze. The metal box sat open on the desk, the closet door ajar. Tobias would realize right away the money was gone.

No time to worry about that now.

She dropped onto the damp grass below the window, thankful for the high row of hedges surrounding the yard—even more thankful she knew a shortcut through the back alley to the street where she'd left her car.

Ignoring the cold fear in her belly, she sprinted through a gap in the shrubbery and ran.

Lily's steps faltered the moment she pushed through the door into Hank's Tavern. How was she going to do this? Say good-bye to the one person who treated her as though she mattered?

The familiar smell of stale beer and barbecue sauce teased Lily's nose as she crossed the floor. The loud hum of voices competed with the overhead TVs. Lily scanned the room, noting Tracy, the other full-time waitress, lugging a large tray of drinks over to one of the corner tables. For a Wednesday night, Hank's place was uncommonly busy—probably due to the hockey playoffs. Lily walked farther into the bar, clutching her

shoulder bag to her body, as if the unusual amount of cash inside would jump out and proclaim her a thief.

"Hey, kid. You OK?" Hank set a foaming glass on the counter in front of a beefy customer and peered at her. "You look a bit seasick."

"I'm fine." Lily attempted a smile to reassure her boss. She didn't want him asking a bunch of questions she couldn't answer.

"That low-life ex of yours isn't bothering you, is he?" Behind the bar, Hank set down the towel he was holding.

"No. Curtis won't be back." Now that he'd bled her bank account dry and gotten her evicted. Her gaze bounced around the room not knowing where to land.

"Something you want to tell me?"

Two customers seated on stools at the bar did nothing to disguise their interest in the conversation.

Lily swallowed before meeting Hank's gaze. "I'm leaving, Hank. First thing tomorrow." The heaviness of her lie weighed on her conscience like the leaden wad of cash in her purse. She'd be gone long before tomorrow.

He scowled. "What did you do now?"

It was scary the way Hank could read her. "Nothing you need to worry about."

Hank picked up a wet rag to scrub the countertop. "You able to work your shift tonight?"

Lily sneaked a glance at the clock over the bar. Had Tobias gone into his office or straight to bed? Lily couldn't take the chance that he'd alerted the authorities. "If you can manage without me, I think I'll call it a night."

Hank squinted at her. "You sure you're not sick?"

"I'll be fine by tomorrow."

Hank studied her for a moment longer and then nodded. "Go on. Tracy can handle this crowd."

"Thanks." Lily headed toward Hank's small office in the back of the tavern, but her feet stalled. Ever since her landlord had evicted her two weeks ago, Hank had set up a cot for her there. Never once pressured her to get out or grumbled about the food she had eaten. Never even took a penny out of her pay. Hank was a good man—the only man she trusted—and she owed him everything.

Lily changed directions and moved behind the bar to lay a hand on his arm. The tension in his jaw told her how much the news of her departure worried him. And it wasn't about her job. He could replace her with a new waitress in minutes. Hank was like a father to her—the one Tobias should have been.

"Thank you, Hank. For everything."

He turned abruptly to the cash register. "No need for thanks."

"Yes, there is. I don't know where I'd be if you hadn't hired me two years ago. I'm going to miss you."

He cleared his throat just as he always did when getting emotional. "I'll miss you too, kid. Keep in touch...when you can."

She reached up and kissed his cheek. "I will."

He shot her a sidelong glance. "If you need money, you only have to ask."

"It's more than the money. There's something I have to do." Lily fingered the strap of her purse, picturing the papers inside. "Turns out I might have a sister. I have to find out for sure."

His eyes widened. Knowing of her estrangement from the only family she had, Hank would understand the significance for her.

He gave a sage nod. "Good luck with that."

"Thanks. I'm not going to tell you where I'm going. Better that you don't know."

Hank closed the till with a sharp bang and ran a hand over his close-cropped salt and pepper hair. "Try to stay out of trouble for once, will you? I got enough gray hair without you adding more."

She managed a sad smile. "I love you, too, Hank."

1

Parked across the street from the two-story red brick house, Lily loosened her death grip on the steering wheel of her beat-up Toyota. “At least this one’s not a dump.”

In a small town like Rainbow Falls, North Dakota, decent lodging appeared to be a scarce commodity, unless you liked rats for roommates. This house would make the third rental property she’d seen since yesterday, and so far from the outside, it seemed the most promising. Maybe the third time would be a charm.

It had to be. She was running out of options—and money.

With unsteady hands, she adjusted the rearview mirror, reapplied a layer of strawberry-flavored lip gloss and patted her dark hair into submission.

“That’s as good as it’s going to get.” She scowled at the smudges shadowing her brown eyes. What she wouldn’t give for one decent night’s sleep.

Taking a deep breath for courage, she stepped out of the car and crossed the street to the flagstone walkway leading up to the house. A wide porch, complete with a wicker rocking chair, gave the building a homey feel. A pang of longing shuddered through her, but she shook it off. No time for regrets. She was here on a mission and needed to keep that at the forefront.

Shoulders squared, Lily climbed the stairs to the front door and jabbed the bell, taking in the pot of pink geraniums in the corner while she waited. A cool spring breeze rustled her hair and lifted the collar of her thin jacket. Seconds later, the door flew open in front of her.

"I can't believe you're on time for once—" The pixie-like woman in the doorway sported spiky red hair—definitely not her natural color—and large, silver hoop earrings. "Oh, you're not Jason." Wide hazel eyes held Lily in a curious gaze.

Doubts wreaked havoc with Lily's composure. Could she have the wrong address? "I'm looking for a Mr. Logan."

"Of course you are." The girl grinned, scanning Lily from the toes of her pointed shoes to the top of her windblown curls.

Lily tried to shake the feeling she'd missed the punch line to some unknown joke.

Still grinning, the girl—not a teenager, now that Lily looked closer—cocked her head to one side and folded her arms over her tiny torso. "Obviously you haven't met him, or you'd know what I mean."

A low-grade headache brewed at Lily's temples. It had been a long day, and all she wanted was to find a place to stay. Not play word games with a stranger. She straightened to her full height. That, along with her heels, gave her a decided advantage over the shorter, barefoot girl. "No, I haven't met Mr. Logan. But I have an appointment with him."

The girl's face brightened. "You here to look at the apartment?"

"That's right." Now they were getting somewhere.

"Great. I hope you take it. We'll be neighbors then."

My name's Maxi. Maxi North. Short for Maxine." She held out her hand and smiled again, revealing two rows of even, white teeth.

Lily frowned slightly and accepted the young woman's outstretched hand. "I'm Lily." The wary city-girl in her declined to give her full name.

"Nice to meet you." The sound of a vehicle pulling into the driveway pulled Maxi's gaze over Lily's shoulder. "That's him now."

Lily turned. A battered red pickup jerked to a halt, and the driver's door swung open. Lily wiped damp palms on her jeans.

Please let things be better this time.

She checked her thoughts. That had sounded too much like a prayer. Prayer, she'd discovered long ago, got you nowhere.

"Hope to see you again, Lily," Maxi said. "Oh, and don't mind Nick. He's a bit on the serious side." With that, she waved to the man getting out of the truck before she disappeared inside.

Lily clutched her shoulder bag, mentally preparing for the dreaded tenant interview, while Mr. Logan strode up the driveway. Her internal radar zoomed in on the fact that this was not the overstuffed bear of a middle-aged man she'd pictured. Clad in a light blue shirt, snug fitting jeans, and western style boots, this man could pass for an urban cowboy. Broad shoulders complemented well-muscled arms, hinting at work that included physical labor. When he reached the stairs, he pulled off a baseball cap to reveal a thick crop of blond hair. Intense blue eyes stared into hers then crinkled at the corners. Just the sort of good-looking complication she did *not* need now that she'd sworn off men.

“Lily Draper?” His smile could stop traffic, even in a town the size of Rainbow Falls where none existed. When she nodded, he held out his hand. “Nick Logan. Hope I didn’t keep you waiting.” His deep voice slid over her like silk.

“No. I just got here myself.”

His hand, warm and firm, dwarfed hers. The handshake of someone dependable.

“Good. I see you met Maxi. She lives on the main level.” He crossed the porch to pull open the front door. “The house is divided into two apartments. The unit for rent is upstairs. Come on in.”

As she entered the house, Lily tried to ignore his larger-than-life presence and concentrate on the building. The main entryway was wide and welcoming with gleaming hardwood floors. A framed mirror hung above a narrow table holding a vase of fresh flowers. She inhaled the appealing floral scent. So far she liked what she saw.

In more ways than one.

“Maxi’s place is down the hall.” Nick pointed toward the rear of the building. “The only thing you’ll have to share are the laundry facilities in the basement.”

Lily frowned as she followed him up a set of narrow stairs. He sounded as if she’d already agreed to take the place. Maybe the rent would be outrageous. Maybe the roof leaked. Maybe Mr. Logan would see right through her façade of respectability and send her packing. But instinct told her that wouldn’t be the case—if only she could keep her nerves at bay.

When they reached the narrow landing, Nick unlocked the door and stepped aside to let her in. “It’s nothing fancy, but it’s clean and neat with lots of

windows, so the lighting's good."

Lily held her breath as she entered the apartment. She wanted to like it so bad, she was almost afraid to look. His voice faded into the background while she took in the high ceilings, the sculpted crown moldings and the wide arched entrance into the living room. Good solid bones, Mama would've said.

Nick continued his commentary as she moved around the room. "You can walk into town from here. The grocery store, post office, and the church are all close by."

She gave a polite nod, though church was the last place she'd be going. Hadn't darkened the door of one since she'd left her father's tyrannical rule and didn't plan to start anytime soon.

She eyed the overstuffed green sofa and matching chair. "Does it come furnished?"

"Yes. Unless you've got your own things."

"No. The furniture will be fine."

He raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "From out of town I take it?"

"Yes." She turned to avoid his curiosity—something she didn't need. Especially when trying to keep a low profile.

Down a small hallway, she found two bedrooms. The larger one had an airy quality, painted light blue with white lacey curtains. She gave an inward sigh, imagining herself sleeping in this beautiful setting. Quite a step up from the back room at Hank's.

The spare room was just as inviting. Nick hadn't exaggerated about the windows either. The lighting would be perfect for painting, with lots of room for her easel.

"What do you think?" Nick's voice startled her

from her daydreams.

She turned to find him—and his broad shoulders—filling the doorway.

“I like it.” She folded her arms in front of her, pushing back the anxiety that clawed its way up her spine. If only he’d move away from the door...

The sudden piercing shriek of a police siren split the silence. Lily jerked backward, smothering a scream. Her bag slipped off her shoulder, landing with a clatter on the hardwood floor.

Had Tobias found her already?

Nick strode into the room and bent to help her. “Are you all right?” A frown creased the space between his eyebrows.

“I...I’m fine.” Her hair shielded her face as she grabbed for the lip gloss and nail clippers that had spilled onto the floor. “The noise startled me.”

He gave a low chuckle. “That’s the chief testing his siren. Doesn’t get to use it much around here, so about once a week, he turns it on to make sure it still works.”

“Oh.” The elastic band around her lungs loosened a notch.

They rose together, Lily clutching the bag to her body like a lifeline. She struggled to keep her expression calm, one ear attuned to any noise on the staircase. At last, when certain the police weren’t about to break in, Lily forced her muscles to relax and stepped out into the hall.

“How much is the rent?” she asked once they’d returned to the living room.

He studied her as though trying to learn the secrets of her soul. She ignored his gaze and ran her fingers over the smooth wood of the fireplace mantel, allowing the calming effects of the green-hued room to

soothe her jangled nerves.

When he named the price, disappointment slid through her. The amount was more than she'd hoped. But she couldn't pass up this apartment. Not after the other horrible ones she'd seen. If it meant working two jobs, then that's what she'd do.

It'd be worth it to find her sister.

"I'll take it," she said. "If it's all right with you."

His blue eyes held hers like a magnet, and a string of tension hummed through her veins. Why did she get the feeling Nick Logan could throw a big monkey wrench into her plans if she weren't careful?

At last, he nodded. "The place is yours."

The tension across her shoulders eased. "That's great. Thank you." She rifled through her bag and pulled out a wad of bills. "I can give you a deposit right now."

Nick shifted his weight away from the living room doorframe, hands up. "Whoa. That's a lot of cash to be carrying around." He scratched his head. "Why don't you give me, say, one hundred dollars for today, and we can settle the details later."

Her hand with the money froze in mid-air. "What details?"

"The lease, for one thing. I'm sure you'll want to read it over before you sign it."

"Is a lease really necessary?"

His gaze narrowed. "Why? Is it a problem?"

She shifted under his direct stare. *Stay cool, Lily. Don't blow this.* "I'm not sure how long I'll be staying. A couple of months, maybe more."

"I see." Nick pursed his lips. "How about an open-ended lease then? Or a month-by-month contract?"

She took a moment to consider. "Either of those

options would be fine." She handed him the deposit, which he took without counting the bills.

"When would you like to move in?"

Lily bit her lip, not wanting to appear desperate, yet not willing to waste her dwindling cash supply on another night at the Rainbow Falls Motel—a luxury she'd allowed herself after two uncomfortable nights in her car. She ran her hand over the plush back of the sofa. "I was hoping today. If that's not a problem."

His mouth fell open before he clamped it shut and scrubbed a hand over his jaw. "I suppose that'll be fine." He paused as though trying to digest the swiftness of the transaction. "Do you need help with your bags?"

"No, thanks. I can handle it."

"All right then." He fumbled in his pant pocket until he pulled out a small key ring and a slightly battered business card. "Here's the key to the front door downstairs and one to your apartment. And my contact info. If you need anything, don't be shy."

His fingers brushed hers as she took the items from him. She jerked her hand back from the heat of his touch and stuffed the keys, along with the card, into her bag.

"Thank you." She tried to manage a smile, but couldn't quite force her lips to comply.

"Welcome to Rainbow Falls, Lily." His baritone whisper resonated inside her.

He studied her for another moment, then tugged on his cap and left.

Lily stared at the door after he'd shut it behind him, allowing her emotions to settle. A few seconds later, his footsteps echoed down the stairs.

One thing for sure, Nick Logan was like no other

man she'd ever met. Half an hour in his company and he hadn't even hit on her.

Lily had just finished hauling the last of her bags from the car when a loud knock shattered the silence of the apartment. Her suitcase slipped from her hand, landing on the bedroom floor with a thud that matched her heart rate. When a louder knock followed, she slipped down the hall to the entrance, wishing for a peephole in her door.

"Who is it?"

"It's Maxi. From downstairs."

The air whooshed out of Lily's lungs in one great gust. *Not the police. Thank goodness.*

"Just a minute."

Before she opened the door, she schooled her face into what she hoped was a normal expression.

"Hi," Maxi said before Lily could speak. "I noticed you bringing your things in. Does this mean we're neighbors?" Her face wore an expectant smile, her eyes friendly.

"It does."

"Terrific." Maxi whipped a container out from behind her back. "I brought some homemade cookies as a welcome."

Lily blinked, trying to reconcile the spiky-haired girl in the flowered halter-top to a person who baked cookies. "Thank you." She took the tin, as Maxi breezed past her. "I'd offer you coffee, if I had any." Lily kept close to the door, hoping her new neighbor would take the hint and leave. All she wanted right now was a hot shower, some Chinese take-out, and a