

Wayward Hearts

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Dedication

To my wonderful critique partners, Julie, CJ, Eileen,
and now Sally, who have shared their time and talents
to help improve my writing! I appreciate and cherish
our friendship!

1

“Ninth floor penthouse.” The musical voice oozed from the speakers as the elevator slid to a smooth stop.

The doors whispered open, and Maxi North stepped out into the magnificent lobby of *Baronne’s Salon*. She paused, latte in hand, and smiled at the sheer luxury on display. The ornate crystal chandelier glittered above the mahogany reception desk that housed a striking array of orchids. Sometimes Maxi had to pinch herself to make sure she wasn’t dreaming—that this former farm girl from Rainbow Falls, North Dakota, now worked as a junior stylist in one of the top salons in New York City.

She hiked her purse farther onto the shoulder of her satin jacket as she strode into the heart and soul of the salon—the chrome and glass stylist stations, where the employees worked their magic for a pampered clientele. The familiar scents of floral shampoos, coconut conditioner, and hair spray swirled around her.

Coming in for the afternoon shift meant that most of the stations already bustled with activity. On the way to her own station, second chair from the back, she waved to her friend Cherise. With a contented sigh, Maxi set down her latte, threw her purse in the bottom drawer, and plugged in her curling irons.

“You’re early today.” Cherise stood on tiptoes, stretching to reach one of the sliding cupboards at

Maxi's right. She grabbed some towels and blew her pink-tinted corkscrews off her forehead before flashing a dazzling smile.

"Nothing to do at home. My Internet connection died, so I figured I might as well come in and get a head start on my shift." Maxi fished her cell phone out of her jacket pocket and deposited it on the counter in front of the huge beveled mirror. "Mrs. Rothman's my first customer. You know how picky she is."

Cherise snickered. "Uh-huh. Better you than me." She swung back toward her customer, then pivoted, her ebony eyes twinkling. "Rumors are flying today. Philippe and the other partners have been in a meeting all morning."

The numerous cups of coffee Maxi had already consumed churned in her stomach. "Good news or bad, do you think?" She hadn't dared heed the latest gossip that the Baronnes might be considering taking on another partner.

"Hard to tell." Cherise nodded toward the hall leading to Philippe Baronne's private office. "Guess we'll know soon enough."

Lillian Rothman's formidable figure crossed the room, a frown already creasing her forehead under the silver-gray swoop of hair, leaving Maxi no time to dwell on what may or may not be happening in that meeting.

Maxi put on her brightest smile. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Rothman. How are you today?"

"Terrible, if you must know. Let's get on with it, shall we?"

Maxi gritted her teeth and managed to keep her expression pleasant. "Of course. Please have a seat."

After washing and setting Mrs. Rothman's hair in

large rollers, something the eccentric woman insisted on instead of curling irons, Maxi positioned her under one of the dryers and provided her with an espresso and some biscotti before ushering the next client to her chair. Once Maxi finished the quick trim, she finally found a spare minute for a sip of her now-cold latte. She grimaced and swallowed, her eye catching a movement in the mirror. The two other senior partners spilled out of Philippe's office. Philippe's wife, Suzanne, laughed before flitting off in the direction of the spa, high heels tapping across the marble floor.

The timer dinged, signaling Maxi to check Mrs. Rothman. She escorted the woman back to her station, and as Maxi started to remove the rollers, heavy footsteps sounded behind her.

"Miss North, my office, ten minutes." Philippe barked the order and disappeared down the back corridor.

Maxi froze, hand poised over her client's head. Why would her boss want to see her now? Could it have anything to do with the morning pow-wow?

She bit her lip at the giddy thought. Then she quickly dismissed the idea. They'd never consider someone so young for the position of partner. In all likelihood, Philippe wanted to review her list of clientele. Or discuss the new ad campaign. Still, as Maxi continued styling Lillian Rothman's hair, she couldn't help but fantasize about the possibility.

"Quit daydreaming, girl. I haven't got all day." Mrs. Rothman's raspy voice brought Maxi crashing back to reality.

Keep the customer happy. Maxi repeated the salon's mantra to herself and pasted on a smile. "Yes, ma'am. I'll be done in a jiffy."

Ten minutes later, with Mrs. Rothman primped, sprayed, and satisfied, and a sizeable tip tucked in Maxi's pocket, Maxi crossed the busy salon, neatly avoiding Cherise with a tray of color. Outside Philippe's office, she smoothed down her green jacket and knocked on the door.

"*Entrez.*" Philippe's lilting French accent made Maxi's lips twitch.

She opened the door and stepped inside, inhaling the scent of opulence. Each time she'd had the occasion to come into this office, the magnificence of the space took her breath away. A huge picture window overlooked the spring greenery of Manhattan's Central Park. To the right, Philippe's oversized chrome and glass desk sat on a rakish angle. An impressive space for an impressive man. She still couldn't believe her luck in landing a job here.

Maxi shifted her gaze and frowned at the sight of Sierra Scott, one of the other junior stylists, already seated in a guest chair. As usual, Sierra had her honey hair pulled back in a perfect coif, complementing her champagne blouse and black skirt. Maxi resisted the urge to fiddle with her own hair or adjust her clothing. In comparison to Sierra's sleek style, Maxi always felt garish and overdone. Today, with the help of some styling gel, Maxi's red hair spiked out in all directions. The total opposite of Sierra's chic elegance.

Maxi ignored the smug expression on the other woman's flawlessly made-up face and smiled at Philippe. "Here I am. What's up?"

"Have a seat." Philippe waved to a second guest chair. For a man in his early fifties, Philippe's vitality gave him the air of a much younger man. Faint threads of silver at the temples, as well as a few lines around

his eyes, were the only concession to his age. His steely gaze could still wither anyone with one glance. Now his guarded expression gave nothing away as he watched Maxi sit down.

"I'll get right to the point," he said, looking from one girl to the other. "You may have heard rumors that we are considering taking on another partner for the salon."

"There's been talk." Sierra crossed her long legs, accentuated by her skimpy mini-skirt.

Philippe raised a well-groomed brow. "Well, for once the rumors are correct. We are looking for a new junior partner."

A surge of adrenaline spurted through Maxi's system. She didn't dare breathe in case she missed her mentor's next words.

Philippe leaned back in his leather chair and waved a hand in the air. "We would like our new partner to be someone young and vibrant. Someone with fresh, innovative ideas, full of creative energy, who will attract a younger clientele."

Maxi forced her brain to slow down and take in every word Philippe said.

"After much consideration, we have narrowed our choice down to you two." He looked at his watch. "I have a conference call soon, so I'll make this brief." He slid two large brown envelopes across the desk. "Over the next few weeks, we will make our final decision. Here are the details of what a partnership would entail. You will find we require a substantial investment fee, should you be chosen. Please read the documents carefully, and if you're interested, give me your answer by tomorrow. I'll need an updated portfolio as soon as possible as well." He rose, indicating the meeting was

at an end. "I wish you both *bonne chance*."

Maxi picked up the envelope with a smile. "Thank you, Philippe. I'm honored to be in the running, and I am very much interested."

Sierra stood and took Philippe's hand. "Oh, I'm definitely interested, Philippe."

A slight frown creased his brow. "You must read the paperwork before you give me your answer."

Undaunted, Sierra winked. "Believe me, I will."

As she left the office, Maxi pushed back her annoyance at the other woman's blatant flirtation with their *married* boss and focused instead on the amazing opportunity just handed to her—the very real possibility that her lifelong dream could now be within her grasp. Excitement buzzed through her veins while her mind reeled.

The diversity of her skills gave her a distinct advantage. She could do almost any job in the spa. Pedicure, manicure, any style of hair—even colors, weaves, and extensions. And she was learning more every day. She breathed a sigh of thanks to Peg Hanley for taking her under her experienced wing while Maxi was still in high school. Who would have imagined that working at the *Cut 'N Curl* in Rainbow Falls would lead to a position in the top salon in Manhattan?

Memories of Peg brought about a sudden, sharp pang of homesickness. Maxi absorbed the wave. Then with great effort, she shook it off. She could not afford to be distracted from her goal. Instead, she strode over to her station, deposited the envelope in the drawer, and tidied her area in readiness for her next client.

Still, Maxi couldn't seem to shake her lingering thoughts of Peg. She longed to call her and share her incredible news about the partnership. But Maxi

couldn't be sure *he* wouldn't answer the phone.

Before she could stop herself, Maxi rifled through the contents of her drawer in search of the treasured dog-eared photo within. The familiar shaft of joy and sorrow seared through her at the sight of Jason Hanley's engaging grin. It seemed a lifetime since she'd seen Jason or heard his voice. Peg had snapped this picture of them at their high school graduation several years ago. He stood with his arm draped around her shoulders. Both their faces were filled with youthful exuberance—one of those perfect moments in time, captured forever.

If only they could've stayed in that moment.

"You know you don't stand a chance against me." The hiss of Sierra's voice behind her startled Maxi out of her daydreams.

She turned to glare at the tall blonde. "Don't go ordering your new nameplate yet."

Sierra snorted. "I'm not intimidated by a farm girl from Hicksville. As far as I'm concerned, the partnership is already mine." With a dismissive wave of her hand, Sierra sashayed back to her own area.

Maxi let her irritation roll over her and slide away. Sierra would not ruin the deliciousness of this moment. Maxi's days in "Hicksville" were long over, and her future as a partner at *Baronne's* shimmered as brightly as the mirrored lights. Nothing or no one would get in her way.

She allowed herself one last glance at the tattered photo in her hand before slipping it into the pocket of her purse inside the drawer. With one sharp click, she shut away the past and focused her energy on the future.

A little after nine o'clock, Maxi jogged up the stairs to her second floor walkup on West Fifty-Sixth Street, excitement pumping through her system. Fumbling with the key in the door, she pushed her way inside, dropped her takeout Chinese food on the scarred coffee table and kicked off her heels. She already itched to take out her portfolio and see where she could improve it. Ideas buzzed in her head for innovative, new hairstyles.

Her cell phone jangled as soon as she opened the takeout container. She jumped to grab it out of the jacket she'd draped over the arm of the lumpy brown couch. Must be Lance. He said he would call her tonight to make a date for the weekend. She smiled, ready to share her good news with the man who was becoming an important part of her life.

But it wasn't Lance.

She stared at the display and blinked, not believing her eyes.

Jason Hanley?

Her heart took off at a gallop in her chest. Why, after two years of silence, would he call now? On the very day she'd dug his picture out of her drawer. Maxi's hands shook so hard she had to set the phone on the couch beside her. What would she say to him? Unbidden memories of their last encounter crowded her thoughts. The ugly accusations, the words hurled in anger. She wasn't prepared to deal with all that right now. So, coward that she was, she let the call go to voice mail.

Her relief was short-lived when the phone chimed again seconds later.

She groaned. Knowing Jason, he'd keep calling until she picked up. She paused for one deep breath. "Hello?"

"Maxi?"

Her heart stuttered at the gruffness of his voice. "Yes."

"It's Jason. Sorry to call out of the blue like this."

The serious tone had her rising off the sofa to pace the small living area. Something was wrong. She could sense it. Panic clutched her throat. "What is it? Is Mama all right?" Her mother's multiple sclerosis had been under control, but you never knew when a setback could occur.

"Bernice is fine."

Thank You, God. If anything had happened to her— "It's your dad."

A flash of hot anger shot through her chest. She tightened the grip on the phone until the metal bit into her flesh. Hadn't her father caused the family enough misery? "Let me guess. Another drinking binge?"

"Not this time." He paused long enough for Maxi's palms to grow damp. "There's been an accident at the farm. Your mom asked me to call you."

Maxi eased herself down onto the arm of the sofa, dread pasting her mouth closed.

Jason gave a long sigh. "There's no easy way to tell you this, Max. Charlie's dead. You need to come home right away."

2

Jason Hanley ran his fingers around the tight collar of his dress shirt and wished he could loosen his tie. If he lived to be a hundred, he'd never get used to wearing a suit. Felt like a straitjacket, all stiff and confining. The last time he'd worn this brown monstrosity had been at Lily and Nick Logan's wedding. Now, seated in the fifth row of the Good Shepherd Church, he waited for Charlie North's funeral to begin.

Jason's stomach did a slow roll in anticipation of seeing Maxi again. He hadn't heard from her since she'd left for New York over two years ago. Any minute now, she'd walk through that door, and Jason wasn't sure how he felt about that.

His mother sat beside him, dressed in black, a tissue pressed to her nose. Jason draped an arm around her shoulder and squeezed, eliciting a watery smile in return. Ever since Maxi had worked at his mother's beauty shop during high school, Ma had looked on Maxi as the daughter she never had. Today, she likely grieved more for Maxi's pain than for the loss of Charlie North.

The organ began its sad refrain. From his position at the end of the aisle, Jason turned his head to watch the procession enter the church. Pallbearers carried the coffin up the main aisle, followed by the somber figures of the family. Jason's pulse sprinted as he

strained to see around them. Right behind the coffin, Calvin North pushed his mother in her wheelchair. Multiple sclerosis had ravaged the proud woman and turned her into an invalid. His gaze moved past them and a burst of red made Jason's lips twitch. Maxi hadn't changed her hair, at least not the color. But today her usual spiky cut was tamed into submission. She looked different somehow. All sleek and sophisticated, like a real city girl.

Why did that thought irk him so much?

Maxi's big hazel eyes stared straight ahead, dulled by sorrow. The smattering of freckles she so hated stood out in stark relief against the pallor of her skin. Knowing firsthand the volatile nature of her relationship with Charlie, Jason guessed she would be suffering from a wide range of emotions—the main one being guilt.

As the procession moved past, Maxi's ravaged gaze flicked over to Jason. Their eyes met and held for a brief moment before she jerked her head back and stumbled forward. Her brother, Aidan, caught her arm to steady her, and they moved past.

Jason hardly heard a word of the service. His attention remained riveted on Maxi several rows ahead. Her shoulders shook as she wept in Aidan's arms, and Jason wished he could be the one to comfort her. Like he had all through high school.

His heart ached for her pain. Despite Maxi's difficult relationship with Charlie, Jason knew his death would devastate her. He shifted on the hard pew, the scent of candles and funeral flowers drifting by him. He must be a real jerk, because in spite of everything, he envied Maxi. At least she knew her dad, even if they never got along. And now she'd have

closure—something he would likely never get with his own father.

When the service finished and the family filed out of the church in solemn procession, Jason hurried after them, hoping to catch a moment alone with Maxi. But as he sifted through the crowds in front of the church, he couldn't see her anywhere. At the curb, Aidan North helped his mother into the car. Jason tried to peer into the backseat, sure Maxi must be inside.

"Hello, Jason." Even after the trauma of losing her husband, Bernice North still had a smile of welcome for him. She looked much older than a woman in her mid-fifties. He imagined her illness had something to do with that.

She held out her hand to him. "Thank you so much for coming. I hope you have time to come back to the house for refreshments. Everyone's welcome."

There would be no trip to the cemetery since Charlie was being cremated. Jason didn't hesitate for a minute. No matter how mad Maxi might be at him, he couldn't pass up the chance to see her again.

"Thanks, Mrs. North. I'll be there."

Maxi moved like a robot through the living room of her parents' sprawling farmhouse, offering drinks and trays of sandwiches to the people who'd come by to pay their respects. Keeping busy allowed her to avoid thinking, or feeling, anything. On automatic pilot, she smiled at neighbors, gave the appropriate responses to their words of condolence, and scurried on to the next guest as soon as it was polite to do so.

She still couldn't believe Charlie was dead.

Crushed by his own tractor. Her family had worried his drinking would end in something like this one day. Now their worst fears had come true.

A waving hand from the other side of the room caught her attention. Her mother motioned her over and a pang of guilt swamped Maxi. She should be paying more attention to Mama, instead of running from her emotions. Mama was the one who'd be most affected by Charlie's death. After all, she depended on him for everything.

Too bad Charlie wasn't dependable.

She set the tray of sandwiches on a side table and weaved her way over to the wheelchair in the corner, crouching down so her face was level with her mother's. "What is it, Mama? Do you need something?" A breeze at the open window lifted the curtain and ruffled Maxi's bangs.

"I'm fine, dear." Despite her assertion, the strain of the past few days showed in the lines on her face. Her light brown hair, streaked with a good deal of gray, needed trimming. Her mother reminded Maxi of a wilted rose—once beautiful but now withered by time and disease. Much like the faded furniture in this living room.

Her mother smiled. "Look who's here. It's Jason."

Maxi's hand froze on the arm of the wheelchair. How had she missed Jason standing off to the side? She grappled to keep her expression neutral as she slowly straightened. Faced with the reality of seeing him again, she found herself unprepared for the onslaught of conflicting emotions. After two years without contact, she had no idea what to say to him. So she said nothing—and simply stared.

He looked so different, she almost didn't recognize

him. He'd filled out through the chest and shoulders, giving him a more rugged look. His hair, which skimmed his collar, had deepened into a beautiful chestnut color. His stunning blue eyes, however, remained as intense as ever. Right now they shone with sympathy.

"Hello, Maxi." He stepped forward to kiss her cheek. "I'm so sorry about your dad."

His breath tickled her ear before he moved back. With that one tiny action, and the familiar scent of his cologne swirling around her, her long-standing crush roared back to life.

"Thanks. You sure look...different." The words were out of her mouth before she could think. In order to steady her hands, she crossed her arms over her chest.

He smiled at her. "I suppose I do."

"Jason was one of the first responders here when I called for help. He's a volunteer firefighter now," Mama told her.

Maxi looked down at her mother and blinked. She'd almost forgotten Mama was there.

"Remember, I wrote about it in my last letter?"

Maxi couldn't admit she didn't remember—that she tried her best not to think about Jason Hanley at all. Instead, she shrugged. "I guess." She turned back to the intensity of Jason's gaze.

"I'm training to be a fireman over in Kingsville."

Maybe that explained the fire in his eyes.

"I never thought you'd leave the auto body shop."

Jason tugged at his tie as if he wanted to pull it off. "Guess you didn't hear that Tony's garage burnt down. Ironic that I'd choose firefighting because of a fire where I worked, huh? Anyway, that type of work

never did anything for me. I want to do something that will make a difference for people."

Maxi couldn't conceal her surprise. When had Jason Hanley grown up? Before she left, he'd been adolescent in his ways, riding motorcycles and running with resident bad boy, Marco Messini. A multitude of questions raced through her brain, tangling her tongue, but now was not the time or place to rehash old issues.

"How about you? What are you up to these days?" Jason asked.

"Didn't Peg tell you?" Maxi always worded her letters to his mother in a careful manner, conscious that every bit of news would be relayed to Jason.

"She said something about a swanky shop in New York."

Maxi smirked. Sounded just like Peg. "Yeah. I'm at *Baronne's* on Fifth Avenue. You've probably never heard of it, but it's pretty prestigious."

"I'm glad. I know how much you wanted this."

An unidentifiable emotion flashed across his features. Features she had to admit were very attractive. For several seconds, she couldn't tear her eyes from his.

"I have to go...serve more food." She waved her arms in the direction of the kitchen.

"Sure." He paused. "Listen, can we get together before you go back?"

She hesitated. *Bad idea*, her brain screamed. She scrambled for an excuse to say no, but when nothing came to her, she shrugged. "I guess so."

"Great. I'll call you."

He kissed her cheek again. Maxi closed her eyes, drinking in the familiar scent of him. Then she forced herself to step away into the safety of the crowd.

After the majority of the guests had departed, Maxi sought a moment of solitude outside on the porch steps. With only the family's faithful farm dog for company, she stared out over the expanse of their property. Acres and acres of green pasture interspersed with newly growing wheat fields, spread out as far as the eye could see. Good thing they'd have time to hire workers before the crop would need harvesting. If they didn't sell first. Off to one side, Maxi could see the outline of the barn and the offending tractor parked outside. It sat askew, like no one had bothered to park it properly after finding Charlie underneath it. She wondered who had found him and how they got the tractor righted again.

She swore silently at her father's stupidity to drive such a dangerous machine after drinking. How could he be so reckless with his life and end up leaving Mama all alone when he knew how she depended on him?

Waves of anger rippled through her. How she hated this farm—loathed it with every fiber of her being. She hated it as much as Charlie had loved it. Every bad thing that had ever happened in her life, she blamed directly on this farm.

Including Drew's death—

"There you are. I've been looking everywhere for you."

Maxi jolted on the wooden stair and twisted around to see her best friend, Lily Draper—no, Lily Logan now—step out onto the porch. She stood with one hand on her very pregnant belly and pushed her

long, dark hair off her face with the other.

Maxi tried to smile. "Sorry. Just needed a few minutes alone."

Lily took a seat beside her, her stomach protruding in front. "I thought you might be hiding from Jason." The teasing quality to her voice brought a snort to Maxi's lips.

"That, too."

Lily wrapped an arm around Maxi's shoulders. "I'm so sorry about Charlie. How are you holding up?"

A storm of tears lodged in Maxi's throat. She'd managed fine all day and would not break down now. "I'm fine." *Liar.*

"I know you didn't get along well with him. Still, this must be difficult for you."

Maxi shrugged. "It's no real surprise he's gone. I think we all knew his drinking would lead to this one day." She bit her lip to keep her emotions contained. "It's my mom I'm worried about. She can't live here by herself. Her condition's become much worse since I left."

A soft breeze blew the scent of Lily's subtle perfume across Maxi's nose.

"Is there any way to slow the progress of MS?"

"Not really. Sometimes she's stable for a while. Then she gets worse again."

"So what are you going to do?"

Maxi leaned her head against the railing for a moment and sighed. That one simple question summed up her whole dilemma. "I wish I knew." Maxi pushed to her feet. "I'd better get back inside. Aidan will worry. And the dishes won't wash themselves."

"If I can help in any way with your mom, you know I'm here for you." The sympathy in Lily's eyes