



Somebody To Love (Hqn)

By Kristan Higgins

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Editorial Review

Review

"A funny, poignant romance....Readers will be cheering for Harper all the way."

- Publishers Weekly, starred review, on My One and Only

"Cheeky, cute, and satisfying, Higgins's romance is perfect entertainment for a girl's night in."

-Booklist on Too Good to Be True

"Higgins (My One and Only) employs her usual breezy, intimate style, which is sure to engage her fans."

-Publishers Weekly on Until There Was You

About the Author

Kristan Higgins is a New York Times and USA TODAY bestselling author and two-time winner of the Romance Writers of America RITA Award. Her books have been praised for their "genius level EQ, whippet-fast, funny dialogue and sweet plots with a deliciously tart edge" (USA TODAY). She lives in Connecticut with her heroic firefighter husband and two extremely advanced children, one shy little mutt and an occasionally affectionate cat.

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Chapter One

"And with that, the six Holy Rollers—Golly, Polly and Molly, Ike, Mike and Spike—took off their magical roller skates for the last time. Their job on earth was done. They'd earned their beautiful, sparkly angel wings and could stay in heaven forever...and ever...and ever. The end."

Parker Harrington Welles suppressed a dry heave, closed the book and tried not to envision smothering the fictional angels, no matter how much she would've enjoyed it.

Don't kill us, Parker! squeaked the imaginary voices in her head, their voices helium-shrill.

I can't kill you. You're immortal. Unfortunately. One of the huge downsides of writing the series—the little pains in the butt talked to her. Another downside—Parker talked back.

Seven or eight little hands shot up in the air.

"Please write more Holy Rollers books, Miss Welles."

I'd rather bathe in my own blood, kid, thought Parker. "No, sweetie, the Holy Rollers are in heaven now," she answered. "This is the last book in the series. But you can see them in a movie this summer, don't forget."

Today at her son's preschool, the Holy Rollers, a book series so sickeningly precious it made *The Velveteen Rabbit* look like a chapter out of *Sin City*, was officially done. Though they had made Parker moderately famous in the world of kiddie lit, had been translated into sixteen languages and had print runs in the gazillions, there was no getting around the fact that their author hated them.

Hate is such an angry word! chorused the child angels. *We love you, Parker!* Honestly, they were a Cartoon Network version of a Greek chorus, always popping into her head with unwanted advice.

"Did you write *Harry Potter*?" was the next question, this one from Nicky's friend Caitlin.

"No, afraid not, honey. But I love those books, don't you?"

"Sometimes I get the Warm Fuzzles, just like the Holy Rollers," Mariah said, and Parker nearly threw up in her mouth. Had she really invented that term? Had she been drinking at the time?

"Are you rich?" Henry Sloane asked.

"Well," Parker answered, "if you're asking if I make a lot as an author, the answer is no. All the money I get for the Holy Rollers goes to a charity called Save the Children."

"That's for kids who don't have enough food," Nicky said proudly, and Parker smiled at her son. It was the one good thing about the book series. Parker didn't need the money, so right from the get-go, she'd donated all proceeds to the charity, which took away some of the nausea.

"But you live in a mansion," Will Michalski stated with authority. "I've been there. You have twenty-nine bathrooms."

"True enough," she said, a twinge of discomfort flashing through her.

"It's a mansion. It's a castle! I want to live there when I grow up!"

"Are you going to write another book?" asked Amelia.

Excellent question. Parker might not love the Holy Rollers, but new ideas hadn't exactly been pouring out of her. "I hope so."

"What's it about?"

"Um, I'm not quite sure yet. But I'll let you know, okay? Any other questions? Yes, Ben."

After another half hour, as the questions dwindled into what color wings Golly should have, the teacher finally stepped in.

"Miss Welles has to get going, I'm sure," she said. "Kids, can you say thank-you to Nicky's mom?"

"Thank you, Nicky's mom!" the kids chorused, then rushed her, hugging her legs, the payoff for reading *The Holy Rollers Earn Their Halos* out loud.

"Am I staying with Daddy this weekend?" Nicky asked as they walked to the car.

"You sure are," Parker answered. She stroked her son's dark hair. Ethan's weekend had come awfully fast, it seemed. She gave her son a kiss, then bent to buckle him into his booster.

"I can do it myself," Nicky said.

"Right. Sorry, honey." She got into the driver's seat and started the car.

A weekend alone. Parker tried not to sigh. She really needed to find another idea for a series. The Holy Rollers had been born as a spoof, sure, but they'd been her job for the past six years. Aside from staring at a blank computer screen and possibly watching a Gerard Butler movie or three, she had no plans.

"You should sleep over, too," Nicky suggested, practically reading her mind. "We could have popcorn. Lucy said she's making me a cake."

"The woman can bake, that's for sure," Parker said. "What kind?"

"My favorite kind. With the frosting and the coconut. I can eat seven pieces, she said."

"Did she, Nicky?" Parker cocked an eyebrow. Truth wasn't a strong point for her little guy these days.

"I think so. She maybe said five. But it was a lot."

Nicky continued to chatter about the joys that lay ahead of him for the weekend: eating cake; a sail on Ethan's boat; more cake; sleeping with Fat Mikey, Lucy and Ethan's cat; possibly taking a bath with Fat Mikey; having cake at midnight; and finding the pirate's cave that Mackerly, Rhode Island, supposedly possessed. Like his grandmothers, Nicky had been born with the gift of chat.

As she pulled onto Ocean View Drive, Parker frowned a little. The preschooler's comment about living in a mansion had struck a nerve. Lately, she'd been thinking of moving, concerned over the idea that Nicky would be thought of as the rich kid. It hadn't helped her; trust funds were hard to get past for a lot of people. But Gray-hurst had been in her family for four generations, built by her great-great-grandfather at the turn of the century, and though she'd grown up in New York City, Parker had moved to Mackerly permanently after she'd gotten pregnant. She had a lot of happy memories of childhood summers—tea parties with her three cousins, learning to sail with her father. Ethan lived in town, and she'd wanted Nicky to grow up knowing both his parents, even if they'd never been married. But two people, living in a mansion in which they really only used a few rooms...it didn't feel right.

The place was gorgeous, though, she thought as they pulled into the driveway. Silhouetted against the aching blue of a June sky and bathed in the golden sun of late afternoon, the gray stone building looked like a stately grande dame gazing out contentedly over the acres of manicured lawns, flower beds and mature trees. Frickin' huge, but beautiful.

Ethan and Lucy, Parker's closest friends, were already here, holding hands as they sat on wide front steps that led from the driveway to the enormous entryway. Ethan jumped up to open her door as she pulled in.

"Daddy!" Nicky yelled, scrambling out of the car.

"How's my guy?" Ethan asked, scooping him up.

"So," Lucy said, "are congratulations in order?"

"I am officially done with the Holy Rollers. Let the good times roll."

"Good for you, Parks," Ethan said, kissing Nicky's cheek. "You proud of Mommy, Nick?"

"Yup. What's for snack? Is cake for snack?"

"No cake till after supper," Lucy said. "Unless your dad decides otherwise."

"Decide otherwise, Dad!" Nicky commanded, cantering ahead.

"Parker, do you have plans tonight?" Lucy asked. "I figured the boys could have some time alone, and we could hang out."

Saved! "I would love that! We can break open some of my father's wine and gossip about Ethan's flaws all night."

Lucy reached for his hand. "He's driving me crazy. I'm thinking marriage was a huge mistake."

"My God, it's like you're reading my mind," Ethan said. "Shall I call an attorney?" They grinned at each other.

"Guys, I just ate, okay?" Parker said, cocking an eyebrow. The tiniest swirl of envy threaded through her. Lucy and Ethan were crazy in love, and yep, Ethan was the father of Parker's child. It wasn't as freaky as it sounded. Or maybe it was, and Parker was in denial.

"We brought the itinerary for our trip," Ethan said, standing back to let the ladies go in first. "Figured you'd want a copy."

"Great!" Parker said firmly. "I'm dying to see it."

Her friends had gotten married in February, but they hadn't had a honeymoon yet; instead, they were taking Nicky to California as soon as preschool finished. San Francisco, Muir Woods, Yosemite. After that, Ethan would be occupied with the reopening of his restaurant, so the timing seemed perfect.

It was just that it was for three weeks.

Three weeks without her boy.

"Daddy!" Nicky galloped back and grabbed his father's hand. "Come see my room! I cleaned it yesterday. Mommy made me. She said it was a sty. Where pigs live. I found Darth Vader's head!" He tugged his father up the curving staircase.

Parker and Lucy went through the house to the kitchen, Parker's favorite place in the house. "I brought us sustenance," Lucy said, holding out a bag. "White-chocolate macadamia cookies."

"Satan, get thee behind me." She took out a cookie—heck yeah, still warm!—and took a bite. Bliss. "Do you know I've gained eleven pounds since last year? You hit thirty-five, and bam, all those things you ate in your

twenties launch themselves onto your ass." Parker raised an eyebrow as Lucy laughed. "You'll see."

"I already see," her friend said. "So what? You're a size eight now? The horror, the horror."

"Oh, I hit double digits some time ago. Let's never speak of it again."

"You bet," Lucy said.

Marriage agreed with her, Parker thought. Lucy'd had it rough; widowed before her first anniversary years ago. Jimmy, her husband, had been Ethan's older brother; Ethan and Lucy had been college friends; the shared loss brought them closer together. About six years after Jimmy died, Ethan and Lucy had finally hooked up.

And somewhere in there, long before Ethan and Lucy had anything romantic together, he'd dated Parker for about two months. The guy had been great on paper, save for one minor detail: he'd been in love with Lucy. Parker always thought it funny that more people hadn't seen it. She broke up with him—it wasn't terribly hard; they'd already seemed more like old pals than anything—then found out six weeks later that she was pregnant. They'd shared Nicky from the beginning.

She took another cookie out of the bag and ate it. "Holy halos, these are good. Shoot me if I eat another. Where's the itinerary? It's color coded, right? Tell me it's color-coded."

"Of course it is," Lucy said, unfolding a three-page spreadsheet.

"So you'll be in San Fran for three days?"

"Four." Lucy pointed. "See? San Francisco's in pink."

"Of course." Parker bent over the paper, grateful for Lucy's organizational skills. She'd know where her son was every minute.

Ethan came into the kitchen and helped himself to a cookie. "Parker, what are your plans while we're away?" he asked. "Got anything lined up?"

"Oh, I might bop out to Nantucket and see some old pals out there. Go into the city. Maybe visit my mom. You know." She reached for another cookie.

The truth was, she hadn't made any solid plans. The idea of having her son four *thousand* miles away made her want to sleep at the airport, in case something went wrong. *Which it won't*, the Holy Rollers assured her. *Lucy and Ethan are the best! Plus, it'll be good for Nicky to see what a healthy adult relationship looks like!*

Take a bite, Parker thought. So she hadn't been in a relationship since Ethan. So she'd yet to go on a second date with anyone in five years. So what? She tended to attract emotionally unavailable men, anyway. Married men, engaged men, sociopaths, that sort of thing. Better not to date at all. The fact that she'd spent a lot of time watching gritty TNT dramas and eating Ben & Jerry's should not be construed as jealousy. It was more like a filling of the gap.

A gap that would now be uninterrupted for three weeks.

When Ethan broached the vacation idea back in March, it had seemed like a fabulous idea...Parker, on her own, free to do whatever she wanted—sleep past 5:00 a.m., for example, as Nicky was like a rooster about mornings. Find that elusive new idea for a book series. Just because Parker had been born with a trust fund didn't mean she wanted to build a life around shopping for handbags.

But as the spring progressed, she did nothing. What if something happened with Ethan's restaurant, and the trip had to be canceled? What if a new book series came to her, and she was on fire to write it, the way she'd heard other authors describe? She should probably stay home, in case something came up.

It didn't. And now with ten days to go, the time alone seemed to loom like a mine shaft. She didn't even have the Holy Rollers to keep her busy, and the fact that this even caused a twinge was deeply disturbing.

"I was hiding! No one found me! I beat you all."

Nicky charged into the kitchen with Elephant, his favorite stuffed animal.

"Nicky, you can't hide without telling us, remember?" Parker said. "It's not a game that way."

"But I always win," her son pointed out.

"He has a point," Lucy said.

Parker grinned and knelt down. "Kiss me, mister. I love you."

"I love you, too. Bye, Mom! Bye, Lucy!" He bolted out of the kitchen.

"That's my cue. See you, girls. Have fun tonight." Ethan kissed Parker on the cheek, then went out to the foyer with Lucy, where Parker presumed he would kiss her goodbye a little more intensely.

For a second, she wondered if Lucy was here out of...well...sympathy. Once, she, Ethan and Lucy had been three single friends. Now, instead of three, it was two and one.

So? Get a boyfriend, Golly advised. Since the release of the final book, it seemed to Parker that the Holy Rollers were aging in her imagination. They were depicted in the books as being about eight, but here Golly was already trying on mascara.

"Right. A boyfriend," Parker answered. "I need that like a stick in the eye."

She headed down to her father's beloved wine cellar, complete with a stone tasting room—fireplace and all. Thousands and thousands of bottles, including the bottle of Chateau Lafite supposedly owned by Thomas Jefferson. Or not. Harry was quite a liar.

She hadn't seen her father for a while now; the last time was when he'd held a wine-tasting dinner down here with a few sycophants from Wall Street, his omnipresent personal attorney and one of the Kennedy clan, who was up for reelection. Her orders were to bring Nicky down to be introduced, then bring him back upstairs. And stay upstairs with him. Not that she'd have stayed even if asked. Which she wasn't.

Well. Here was that nice 1994 Domaine de la Romanee-Conti Harry had bragged about. Eight grand a bottle, far less than the 1996 vintage. Surely Harry wouldn't mind if his only child and her best friend drank that,

right? He had a whole case, after all. She wouldn't tell Lucy how much it cost. Lucy was a little scared of Harry. Most people were.

Parker went back upstairs, uncorked the wine and let it breathe a little. Got out some goat cheese and grapes, some of those crumbly crackers. It was so great that Lucy had decided to hang out. Maybe too great. *You've got to fill these empty hours somehow*, Spike said.

"Hush," Parker said. "You're dead to me. Go. Fly off to heaven." She poured two glasses of the wine and set the cheese plate on a tray.

"Who are you talking to?" Lucy asked, coming back to the kitchen.

"Spike."

"Oh, dear. Well, listen. The books were very, um...entertaining. And they did a lot of good for a lot of kids. To the Holy Rollers." Lucy clinked her glass against Parker's.

"May they rest in peace," Parker said, taking a healthy sip of wine.

Six years ago, Parker had been sitting in the office of a Harvard classmate, hearing for the fifty-seventh time that *Mickey the Fire Engine*, the children's story she'd written, wasn't good enough.

"I'm sorry, Parker," George had said. "It's a little familiar."

Familiar? Mickey was wonderful! And really, what the heck? She had a double degree from Harvard in literature and ethics. Half of her graduating class seemed to be writing romance novels; Parker had fifty-six rejections to her name. Make that fifty-seven. Mickey was full of sincerity and good messages—having a purpose, commitment, courage, second chances. With all the schlock that was out there, it was hard not to feel bitter.

"Got anything else?" George asked, already glancing at his watch.

"Yeah, I do," Parker said. "How's this? A band of child angels are sent to earth to teach kids about God. Right? They haven't earned their wings, though, so they roller-skate everywhere—they're the Holy Rollers. Do you love it? All they eat is angel food cake, and they live in a tree fort called Eden, and whenever a regular kid is up against a tough moral decision, in come the Holy Rollers and the preaching begins." She rolled her eyes. "It's *The Crippled Lamb* meets *The Little Rascals* meets *The Exorcist*." She sighed and stood up. "Well, thanks for your time, George. Good to see you."

"Hang on," he said.

The next week, she'd had an offer and a contract, and she and Suze, her old roomie from Miss Porter's School, had come to Grayhurst to celebrate, eat whatever Harry's chef felt like cooking them, swim in the indoor pool and laugh at life's ironies. The second night, they'd gone to Lenny's, the local bar, and there was Ethan Mirabelli, who'd flirted with them equally, despite Suze being gay and built like a professional wrestler. When Ethan had asked for Parker's phone number, Suze had given her a heavy elbow to the ribs, her way of indicating approval. And the rest, as they say, was history.

Parker and Lucy took their goodies into the front room and were laughing over Lucy's in-laws' propensity for

dropping by during certain intimate moments. "It's like they know," Lucy said. "Honestly, some days I think they have the apartment bugged."

"They might," Parker agreed. Her phone rang, and Parker glanced at the screen "Oh, speaking of difficult parents, it's my mother. I bet she has a husband for me."

"Goody! Put her on speaker so I can hear, too!" Lucy clapped like a little kid.

Parker clicked on. "Hi, Mom."

"Darling, I have someone for you!" Althea Harrington Welles Etc. Etc. sang out.

Parker pulled a face for Lucy. "Hooray! Don't even worry about us meeting—just start planning the wedding."

"Sarcasm is the lowest form of humor, haven't you heard? Anyway, his name is...oh, well, I don't remember. But his last name is Gorman, as in Senator Gorman from Virginia? His *father*. Those charges were dropped, by the way. Isn't it exciting, sweetheart? I'm thinking The Caucus Room for your engagement announcement party, the National Cathedral for your wedding, reception at the senator's home on the Chesapeake. It's stunning. I looked it up on Google Earth."

"Just tell me when to show up in the big white dress."

"Can I be matron of honor?" Lucy whispered.

"Definitely. Mom, Lucy's here."

"Lucy?"

"My best friend?"

"I'm aware, dear. Hello, sweetheart."

"Hi, Mrs.—um...Althea," Lucy said.

"Lucy, maybe you can make her take this seriously. She's so obsessed with that child, she hasn't noticed she's getting old! Honestly, my only daughter, never married."

"It's awful," Lucy concurred, grinning. "I tried to fix her up with my mute assistant at the bakery, but she said no to him, too."

"I'd rather date Jorge than a senator's kid," Parker said. "His tattoos are amazing. That one of the crucifixion? So lifelike."

"Fine. Make fun of me, girls. Oh, did you see my Facebook? I'm auditioning for *Real Housewives* out here. Maury thinks it's a great idea."

Parker mimicked a scream, then said, "That's great, Mom. So you think you might come visit next month?"

"I'm not sure yet. Maury has this thing. How's Nicky?"

"He misses you," Parker said, playing the guilt card.

"Well, you kiss that beautiful boy for me, all right? And seriously, sweetheart, think about the Gorman heir. I hate to think of you in that hideous old house, all alone except for your toddler."

"He's five and a half, Mom."

"Oh. Well, when does one stop being a toddler? Anyway, it's not my point. My point is—Oops! Maury's ringing in. Kisses to my grandson! Nice to hear your voice, Lisa. Bye, Parker! Talk soon!"

"Bye, Mom." Parker sighed. "More wine, Lisa?"

Lucy laughed. "I like your mom."

"I'd like to see her more, that's for sure," Parker grumbled.

Just as they'd finished their first glass of wine and were debating on whether to Google the Old Spice man or Ryan Gosling, they heard the crunch of tires on the long gravel driveway. "Think Nicky forgot something?" Lucy asked, going to the window and pushing back the silk drapes. "Eesh! It's your father. And his entourage."

"Oh, bugger and damn. Do we have time to hide?"

"I think *I'm* allowed to hide," Lucy said. "You probably have to say hi."

"Don't you dare go anywhere," Parker ordered.

A flare of nervousness—her trademark reaction to Daddy Dearest—flashed through her stomach. Almost automatically, she smoothed her hair and glanced down at her attire. Since she'd been at Nicky's school as Parker Welles, Author, rather than Nicky's Mom, she'd dressed up a little...beige silk shirt, ivory pencil skirt, the fantab-ulous leopard-print shoes. Good. A little armor.

She joined Lucy at the window and looked out. The driver of the limo opened the back door, and Harry Welles emerged into the sunlight, followed closely by Thing One and Thing Two, his minions.

Technically, Grayhurst was Harry Welles's home, though he lived in a sleek and sterile duplex on Manhattan's East Side. He only came to Rhode Island to impress clients or when he couldn't avoid a family event. He was the third generation to run Welles Financial, once a conservative financial-services firm, which Harry transformed into the kind of Wall Street playah that was often picketed by students and teachers' unions. He never traveled alone—flunkies like Thing One and Thing Two were part of Harry's makeup.

The three men came up the walkway and into the house, Thing One and Thing Two trailing at a respectful distance behind him, like castrati guards in a harem.

Her father scanned her, unsmiling.

"Hi, Harry," she said, keeping her tone pleasant. "How are you?"

"Parker. I'm glad you're here." Her father glanced at her friend. "Lucy."

"Hello, Mr. Welles. Nice to see you again."

Harry took a deep, disapproving breath—well, it seemed disapproving. "I have something to discuss with you, Parker. Is Nicky here?"

"He's with his father this weekend. But I can run over and get him." There was that pesky, hopeful note in her voice. *If you don't like me, at least like my kid, Dad.*

"No, that's just as well. We need to discuss a few family matters." He looked pointedly at Lucy, who smiled sweetly and, bless her heart, didn't move a muscle. Harry's eyes shifted back to Parker. "How's Apollo?"

"Still alive."

"Good." Pleasantries finished, he strode down the hallway. "Join me in the study, please," he added without looking back.

"Miss Welles, your father would like you to join him in the study," said Thing Two somberly. The man held a long and meaningless title at Welles Financial, but so far as Parker could tell, his job was to echo her father and occasionally slap him on the back in admiration. He fell into step behind Harry, keeping six or seven paces behind.

"Parker. Always lovely to see you."

And then there was Thing One.

It was his customary line, usually delivered with a raised eyebrow and a smirk, and she hated it. Yes, Thing One was attractive—Harry would never hire an ugly person. The whole cheekbones and perfect haircut and bored affect...okay, okay, he was hot. But he knew it, which detracted significantly, and that line—*Parker, always lovely to see you*—blick. Add to the fact that he was a Harry-in-the-making, and his appeal went down to nil.

Thing One didn't work for Welles Financial; he was Harry's personal attorney, having replaced the original Thing One a few years ago—why change a perfectly good nickname? He lived somewhere here in Rhode Island and did things like...well, Parker really didn't know. Occasionally she'd have to sign a paper he brought by. Otherwise, he seemed fairly useless, glib, smug and so far up her father's butt she wondered how he could see daylight.

"Thing One," she murmured with a regal nod. Miss Porter's hadn't been for nothing.

"It's James, since you can't seem to remember. I also answer to Mr. Cahill."

"Thing One suits you so much more."

He gave her a sardonic look, then turned to her friend. "Hello, Lucy," he said. He'd met her at a number of Nicky-related events—God forbid Harry come alone. "Congratulations on your wedding."

"Oh, thank you," Lucy said, looking a little surprised that he knew. Parker wasn't. Harry was hardly a doting grandfather, but he did keep tabs on Nicky's life. Or had his people keep tabs, as the case might be.

"After you, ladies," he said. He looked somber. Parker was more accustomed to seeing him in full-blown slick-ster mode, kissing up to her dad, glad-handing whoever was around him. A small quiver of anxiety ran through her gut. Something was...off.

As they walked down the hall, Parker rubbed the tip of her ear. It was itchy. Stress eczema, probably, brought on by dear old dad.

Harry never did any real work in the study. So far as Parker could tell, he used it to impress and intimidate his colleagues. The room was beautiful, though, filled with first-edition books, Tiffany windows, a state-of-the-art humidor and a desk the size of a pool table. Harry sat in his leather chair now, his thick gray hair perfectly cut, his suit Armani, his eyes cool. Around his arm was twined Apollo, her father's pet ball python.

Yeah. You are your pet, right? Apollo was maybe four feet in length—Parker didn't spend a lot of time looking at him, as he gave her a hearty case of the heebie-jeebies. Nicky, though...in case living in a mansion wasn't cool enough, he loved to impress his friends with Apollo, whose glass cage, it must be noted, was always locked. Didn't want to have a python slithering around the house, no indeed. The gardener was charged with feeding him and cleaning his cage.

"It's so Dr. Evil," Lucy whispered, giving Parker's hand a squeeze. She went to a window seat and curled up there, nearby, but at a distance.

"So, Harry," Parker said, that nervousness flaring again. She sat in one of the three leather chairs in front of the desk. Things One and Two stood to one side, like soldiers at a funeral. "How are things? Are you here for the weekend?"

"No. And things have been better. Is my grandson almost finished with school?"

"Yes. Then he's going to California with his dad and Lucy."

Harry glanced at Lucy. "Glad to hear it."

"Glad to hear it," echoed Thing Two, scratching his stomach. Parker waited for Thing One to chime in, too, but he remained silent, his arms folded.

Harry gazed at his pet, then kissed the snake's head. Parker tried not to flinch. That snake would make some very attractive shoes. Otherwise, he was her rival for Harry's attention. Well, hardly her rival. Apollo was ahead by miles. Her father looked at his minions. "Gentlemen, have a seat."

Thing One and Thing Two obeyed, taking the seats on either side of her. She glanced at Lucy, who gave her a nervous smile of solidarity. There was definitely something in the air, and for the life of her, Parker felt a little bit as if she was about to be sentenced. She wasn't far off.

"Well, there's no easy way to say this," her father said, stroking his snake.

"No easy way," Thing Two murmured.

Harry didn't look up from the snake. "We're broke. You have to move."

Chapter Two

James Cahill, also known as Thing One, closed his eyes. Granted, Parker Welles was not his favorite person, but even so. Hearing it put so baldly...uncool. Her friend gave a little squeak. Otherwise, there was silence.

He glanced at the princess. She didn't move for a second, then tucked her hair behind one ear, the tip of which was growing red. Otherwise, she just sat there, her profile to him. She crossed her legs. Said legs were flawless—long, smooth, perfect. Not that he was allowed to look at them—she'd put him in his place quite a while ago, and yes, she was being informed of her financial ruin, but man, those legs were incredible.

"Broke?" she said, then cleared her throat.

"That's right," Harry answered, petting the snake. "You've heard of broke, I assume?"

Now, James knew that Apollo was some kind of security blanket for Harry; easier to break the news to his only child if he had something else to look at. Their whole vibe was always wicked uncomfortable; James hated having to go to Welles family events, but if Harry invited him, he'd come along. It was the least he could do, given what Harry had done for him. Didn't make things fun, though.

Parker took a deep breath, her breasts rising under her silky shirt. Nice. *Focus, idiot.* The perils of being a straight guy in the room with a beautiful woman. Even one who loved putting him down.

"What happened, Dad?" she asked, her voice more gentle than James had ever heard it. And "Dad." He couldn't say he'd ever heard her call him anything but Harry in the six years he'd been working for the guy.

Harry shifted Apollo to his other arm. "Just a bump in the road. For now, there's no more money."

"No more—"

"James, fill her in."

"James, why don't you fill her in?" Vernon echoed, parrotlike.

Right. Time to earn that salary. "Okay, well, it's a little complicated," he began.

She gave him a razor blade of a look. "Try me. I'm a Harvard grad."

So much for her soft edges. And God forbid he forget that her blood ran crimson. James himself had gone to Boston University; once, he'd flirted with a Harvard girl and told her he went to BU. "Where's that?" she'd asked, because if you went to Harvard, other schools didn't exist.

She had, however, gone home with him.

"Magna cum laude," Parker added.

"Should I kneel?" he asked. Harry snorted, and Parker's mouth tightened. Not cool. James hadn't meant to make it seem as if it was boys vs. girl here. Even if it kind of was.

Parker's friend cleared her throat. "Um, Parks, you want me to, uh, get started on dinner?"

"I'd rather you stayed," Parker said. Her tone was locked into rich-girl drawl. "Please continue, Thing One."

Yes, Majesty. "It seems that Harry got mixed up in an insider-trading deal."

She looked back at her father, who was stroking his snake. "Oh, Harry."

"Let him finish," Harry said, not looking away from Apollo.

James shifted in his seat. "Harry made a sizable investment in a company on which he'd had inside information—"

"I know what insider trading is," she said.

"—and that was obviously unethical, but more to the point, the results weren't what the information promised." Okay, here came the hard part. "To cover the losses to investors, your father needed to, ah, liquidate certain assets."

She blinked, and James felt a pang of sympathy for her as realization dawned in her eyes. "Which assets, Harry?" she asked, her voice calm.

Harry looked at the python. "Your trust fund."

She looked at her hands, her mouth tight. "Granddad set that up for me."

"Well, I've been managing it most of your life," Harry snapped. There was a pause, and the grandfather clock in the corner ticked ominously. "Nicky's, too," Harry added in a softer voice.

James couldn't help but wince. It had to hurt, hearing your father had sold you down the river. Your kid, too.

"You stole your grandson's trust fund, Harry?" Her voice was harsher now.

Harry's lips pressed together. "I'm the administrator of the Welles family trust, Parker, as you're well aware. I liquidated it temporarily."

"Liquidated it temporarily," Vernon echoed, smiling like an idiot. James had almost forgotten he was here.

"How temporarily?"

"Yo!" came a voice. A shaggy-haired guy wearing overalls stood in the doorway. "Hey there, gang, sorry. Is this the Welles place?"

"It is," Harry said.

"It's awesome, man! Really nice! So, like, we're the movers? Gonna start in the game room, okay?"

"Billiard room," Harry muttered.

The mover laughed. "Totally! Colonel Mustard in the billiard room with the candlestick! Dude, is that a snake? Nice! Okay, better get going. This place is frickin' huge! See you later!"

Parker's mouth was open. "They're taking stuff already? I— Wow, Harry. You don't mess around."

Her face was pale now, and James wished he could, well, make this easier for her somehow. "Parker, anything that you bought for you or Nicky or the house is yours. Everything else, I'm afraid, falls under Harry's assets, which the Feds have seized. The investigator is aware that you're living here, and you have a little time to, ah, pack."

"My God." She squeezed her little finger and glanced at her pal, who was frozen.

"It'll be okay," Lucy murmured automatically.

Harry cleared his throat. "Obviously, Parker, having these vultures pick over our belongings is not my choice. I'll get everything back."

"Really," she said faintly.

"Eventually. I'm a little...constrained for the immediate future."

"A little constrained indeed," Vernon said.

That was one word for it. James rubbed his forehead. Wicked headache coming on.

"So." Parker shook her head. "About my trust fund, and Nicky's. Don't you need my signature to just...empty it? There must be something left."

Nope. There was nothing, and Harry had only needed James himself to file the paperwork. Poor planning on her part, that was for sure. At any time since her eighteenth birthday, she could've taken full control of that money. When her son was born, same deal.

She never had.

"Your signature wasn't required," Harry said. "Nor was your consent."

"Your consent was not required," Vern said, nodding cheerfully. There was a crash and a curse from somewhere in the house.

Parker took a deep breath "Wow, Harry. So it's *gone*? That was a lot of money."

"Yes, Parker!" Harry barked. "I'm sorry to say you'll have to make do for a while. Until I can recover some losses."

"How long will that take, do you think?" Again, Harry's eyes sought out James. Shit again.

"That's undetermined right now," James said. "Your father is being sentenced Monday morning."

Parker's hand went to her mouth. "Oh, Dad." Twice in one day. "Can I do anything?"

"Like what, Parker?" he asked.

"I—I don't know."

"I'll be fine. I have a great team."

"A great team!" Vernon agreed.

Lucy got up from the window seat and went to Parker's side. Took her hand. Good girl, James thought. Parker would be needing her friends, and so far as he could tell, Lucy here and the Paragon of Perfection otherwise known as Ethan Mirabelli were her closest. Or so it seemed from those dreaded family events he'd attended.

"It's really nothing," Harry said. "I'm not even sure I'll have to serve any real time."

James was sure. Oh, yeah. Harry was looking at somewhere around five years. His case wasn't the clusterfuck that some Wall Streeters had been involved in of late, but it was a clear-cut case. And after Bernie Madoff and the Occupy movement, there wasn't a judge in the country foolish enough to go easy on a case like this.

"As I said, you'll have to move," Harry added. "I'm hoping you'll take Apollo."

You know, James had to wonder sometimes what the hell was wrong with Harry. He loved the guy, yeah. But he was a pretty big idiot around his daughter. And yep, here it came.

Parker's voice hardened. "Take *Apollo*? You're worried about your snake, Harry? How about your *grandson*? The one you robbed? Where should I take your *grandson*, Harry?"

"I'm sure his father would take him."

"I'm not living away from my son!" she exclaimed. Her ears were burning red now.

"You can both live with us, Parker," Lucy said. "We'll figure something out."

"No! Lucy, thank you. But no. Harry, Ethan and Lucy just got married. I'm not moving in with them! What about your apartment? You could sell that and—"

"Parker," James said as gently as he could. "The SEC has seized all your father's assets. The apartment, this house, the place in Vermont...everything."

She glanced out the window. "There goes the Stein-way. Holy crap." She swallowed, then looked at James, her expression bleak. "When do I have to be out?"

"They'll leave your rooms for last," he said. "You have till the end of the month."

"This month?"

"This month," Vernon confirmed.

She squeezed her pinkie again. "Okay," she said, biting her lip. "Well, that's... I was actually thinking it might not be a bad idea to move to a smaller place."

"Smaller place. Not a bad idea," Vernon echoed, and James resisted the urge to duct-tape his mouth shut.

"Let me go call Ethan, okay, Parker?" Lucy said.

"Okay," Parker said distantly.

"Look," Lucy said more firmly. "You're not alone in this. Okay? I have some money put aside, and you'd do the same for me. We're family."

Harry made a rude snorting noise.

"Shut up, Harry," Lucy snapped. "You should be grateful she has friends when her own father does this to her."

Score one for Team Lucy.

"Thanks, Luce." Parker said. "But it's fine. I'll be fine. But sure, go call Ethan. Fill him in."

Whereupon the Paragon would no doubt charge up the driveway on his white horse and rescue the mother of his child. Which, no doubt, Parker would love. James sighed.

Harry was staring at the python, and James thought, not for the first time, that if he gave his daughter as much attention as he gave the snake, things would be a lot less chilly in the Welles family.

"So my trust fund's gone," she said. "The stock market's not too bad these days. How's my portfolio doing?"

Harry still didn't look at her. "Anything you had through Welles Financial is now unavailable."

"Unavailable?"

"I'll get it back, Parker!" Harry snapped. "You have what's in your checking account at the moment. Do you have anything in savings?"

"No! You told me the stock market was better than...well, what am I saying? You're a felon. I took advice from a felon. Good God. I guess I should've stuffed some cash into the mattress." Parker gave a shaky laugh.

Clearly the news was catching up with her. She ran a hand through her long hair, the strands falling back into place. Smooth, silky hair that—*Been there, worshipped that*, his conscience chided.

"I can believe you took my money," she said. "But I can't believe you stole Nicky's. That's really low, Harry. Even for you."

"It was necessary," he barked.

"For what? For covering your ass?"

James held up his hands. "Okay, okay, let's just...let's try to calm down. This is a lot to take in. Your father made a mistake—"

"How much did you lose, Thing One?" she asked abruptly.

James hesitated.

"Oh. I get it," she said, and if looks could kill, James would be lying in a bottomless puddle of blood right about now. "So you knew. Well. Do go on."

"You have six thousand dollars in your checking account, and since that's in your name only, it's free and clear."

"I have to make a phone call," Harry said, unwinding his pet and putting him back in the case. "Vernon, come with me, please. I need the information on the drug-company stock. Parker, James can fill you in on the rest."

"There's more? Are you going to beat me with a rubber hose, Thing One? I can't wait."

James waited till the study door closed, leaving him alone with Parker. And Apollo.

Nope, not alone. The mover was back. "Okay if we start on the dining room? Packing up that china's gonna take a while. It's really nice! Expensive, I bet."

"Go for it," Parker said. When he was gone again, she looked at James. "Is Harry really going to jail?" she asked, and James had to say, it wasn't the question he imagined she'd ask.

"Yes. He went to the D.A. and confessed this morning, so that's why it hasn't been in the news yet. Monday morning, though."

She gave him an odd look. "He confessed? That doesn't seem like him."

James looked at his hands. "Yeah." There was that ticking noise again.

Parker sighed. "So, all this other stuff...Granddad's boat and the paintings and Grandma's china...it doesn't belong to us anymore?"

He turned to face her. "Anything in this house that you personally bought stays with you—your clothes, artwork, your car, anything you bought for your son—but the rest will go to refund what Harry's clients lost."

"So I have no savings, no portfolio, no trust fund, and we have to move. Is that it in a nutshell?"

"Harry was able to secure another five thousand in cash for you." James reached into his briefcase—a gift from Harry—and handed her an envelope, which she took automatically. "You have some jewelry that's yours, right?"

"I guess so," she said. James knew exactly what she had, as it was listed on the insurance forms. Nothing

spectacular—some aging pearl necklaces, a few antique stickpins from her grandmother. All in all, maybe worth another couple grand. Parker wasn't the type to drape herself in diamonds or redecorate or buy a sports car—she drove a Volvo Cross Country that was a good five or six years old. She didn't even travel that much. She was more like the Welles family of yore—quieter, old-money New England wealth.

Harry was the new breed—make sure the world knew how much you had by spending every cent.

And even though she'd handed him his nuts on a platter a few years ago, he couldn't help feeling really shitty about the whole situation. "I know this is a lot to take in," he said gently, and she cut her eyes over to him. Yikes.

"I suppose there was no way you could've given me a heads-up, Thing One."

"No. I'm sorry. Attorney-client privilege."

"Hope that lets you sleep at night."

"Moving on," James continued, "you do own the house in Maine."

"Which house in Maine?"

Rich people. Honestly. "Your great-aunt Julia Harrington left you a house when she died six years ago.

Ring a bell?"

She frowned. "Oh, my gosh, right. I was just about to have Nicky when she died. Where is it? I never did make it up there."

James kept his expression neutral. How do you forget about inheriting a house? "The house is in Gideon's Cove," he said, handing Parker the folder. "North of Bar Harbor." He knew the town...or he did once. His bachelor uncle owned a bar up there, and James had spent a couple of summers with him as a teenager.

"So I could sell that, right?" Parker asked, her expression brightening a little. "Sell the house and have a nest egg?"

"You could," James said. He didn't know which house was hers, though he had a copy of the deed. If he remembered, Shoreline Drive had some nice places on it.

"Fine." She was quiet for a minute. "I'll go up there when Ethan and Lucy take Nicky on vacation, slap on some paint and get it listed with a real-estate agent."

"Sounds like a plan," he said. His own experience was that life was rarely that easy, but for her sake, he hoped it was.

"You reminded her about the house?" Harry asked, striding back into the room. "Yes, sir," he answered.

"Good. Parker, James knows the area. He'll go with you and check out the property." Right. She'd love that. God save him.

"He'll go with you," Vernon agreed.

"No, he won't," Parker said. "But thanks all the same, Thing One."

"Don't be foolish," Harry said sharply. "You'll need help."

Parker turned to James, her eyes about as warm as Apollo's. "Thing One, my father is so very kind to offer your services, but no thank you."

"Fine," Harry said. "Do whatever you want. You always do. We'll be in touch."

"Harry," she began, standing up. There was the pinkie squeeze again. "Are you sure I can't do anything for you?"

"I'll be fine." He flashed her a toothy smile that was so far from sincere it made James wince. Then Harry strode back out, looking every bit the master of Wall Street he used to be, Vernon murmuring on his heels.

And James, he well knew, was expected to follow. He stood up, then turned to Parker, who was staring at the snake. "I'm really sorry about all this, Parker," he said. "I'll do whatever I can to help."

She gave him a look they must've taught her at her fancy prep school. *I'm sorry, and you are... ?* "Save the ass kissing for my father, Thing One."

Sigh. Some people never changed. "I mean it."

"So do I."

Okay, enough with the princess act. "I *am* good for some things," he said. "As you might remember. Carpentry is one of them."

"Really. How fascinating. Bye-bye, Thing One. And tell my father I'm not taking that snake."

James stood there another minute, torn between guilt—his favorite pastime—the desire to help her in some way and the fact that he could see down her shirt a little bit from here. Fantastic view.

You don't take anything seriously, do you? his father's voice demanded in his head.

Hard to deny. "I loved the last Holy Rollers book, by the way," he added.

"Then your IQ is even lower than I thought."

He couldn't help a smile. Parker looked away. "Call me and let me know what happens on Monday," she said.

"Will do." He picked up his briefcase and turned back to her. "See you in Maine."

She shot him an icy look. "Not if I see you first. The gun laws are pretty clear about intruders on private property." He said nothing. "Go, Thing One. Your master awaits."

James obeyed. There was nothing else he could do. For now, anyway.

Chapter Three

In the two weeks since her father's bombshell, Parker thought she'd done a pretty good job of holding it together. She was a mother...you don't get to walk around cursing like Job or crying. And Lucy had been amazing that first weekend, helping her through the initial shock, going through the house, determining what could reasonably be called Parker's as the movers tagged and wrapped her family's belongings.

Not a lot was Parker's outright. Her Mac, of course. A few pieces of furniture, a couple of paintings, a few little things for the house—a vase, some throw pillows, nothing tremendously valuable.

"You know I'll help with money," Lucy'd said at least fifteen times. "I have Jimmy's life insurance, and—"

"I appreciate that," Parker said. "But you know what? It's okay. It's shocking, sure, but Ethan's got a nice bit tucked away for Nicky's college, and I can flip the house in Maine and have a little money and write some more books. Or get a job doing something else."

She smiled firmly, trying to forget that she'd A) ignored her father's advice to major in economics and had instead double-majored in two such ridiculously unemployable fields that she actually woke up covered in a cold sweat one night—English was bad enough, but Ethics? *Ethics?*?—and B) she hadn't had a new idea for a book series since the hideous Holy Rollers had been conceived. It was *such* bad timing that she'd given the little suckers their wings and halos. She could've milked them forever.

But honestly, after the initial shock, it was a little hard to feel as if a great injustice had befallen her. For thirty-five years, she'd had more privilege and wealth than ninety-eight percent of the world. When she'd watched the footage of the Occupy Wall Street gang, back before she was broke, she couldn't help thinking they had a point.

And now the point had been made. Now, she was normal. Better than normal, according to Lucy—she had a little over eleven grand in her bank account, no debt and a house on the coast of Maine. By Paris Hilton standards, she was destitute; by normal-people standards, sitting kind of pretty.

"I'm going to miss coming over here," Lucy said as she folded a sweater. "Guess I'll need to find another friend with a mansion."

Parker smiled, appreciating Lucy's attempt to keep things light, not to mention her help at packing. Lucy was very organized. "Good luck with that."

"How does Nicky seem to be doing?"

"Well, you know how he is. One minute, he thinks it's great that we're moving, the next he forgets why we're packing. I don't think he's really wrapped his brain around the idea that we won't be coming back to live here. But I was thinking of moving anyway. It's easier than explaining why my father's in jail."

"He told Ethan that Grandpa Harry was in a time-out."

"Yeah, that's how I put it. He had to go away and think about playing by the rules and being greedy." She winced. "Nicky still took it pretty hard. But Harry'll probably be out on good behavior and all that in a couple years." Years. Crikey.

"And how are you doing with that, Parker? I know you and your father aren't really close, but still."

"Yeah. But still." She gave Lucy a quick look. "I don't know. I feel bad for him on the one hand. On the other, he deserved it. Then again, I've lived off family money all my life, and I never really looked at where it came from. So anyway, it all belongs to the Feds now."

"It must be hard, though."

Parker swallowed. It was hard. The people from the SEC had been here last week, and they'd let her keep a few sentimental things—a model of a duck that her grandfather had carved, the little white vase her grandmother had let her fill with flowers from the garden. "Well, I did snag a few bottles of wine from the cellar."

"Priorities."

"Exactly. And it was nothing really expensive."

"So tell me about your cottage in Maine. Am I wrong to think Bush compound? Sort of like this place, but with gray shingles?"

Parker snorted. "I don't know. I only met my great-aunt a couple of times. You know my mother, always dragging me off to a new stepfather. When we did see family, someone was always having a nervous breakdown. There were no picnics, no bonfires, no uncles who dressed up as Santa. One of my few memories of Aunt Julia is that she told me to start smoking or I'd get fat. I was probably about thirteen at the time." She gave Lucy a rueful smile.

"Jeesh, Parks! How come you're so normal?"

"I'm probably not," she admitted, tossing some socks into her suitcase.

"So you barely see your relatives, but you inherit their summer homes."

"Yes. It's our own form of guilt and family obligation and to make up for decades of bitterness, alcoholism and neglect."

"Weren't you curious about the house?"

Parker shrugged. "Well, I was nine months pregnant when Julia died. Then that colic—remember? I could barely say my own name for six months. The truth is, I kind of forgot about it." Parker zipped up a suitcase. "I did a Google search of the address, but all I got was a spot on a map; no satellite pictures available. Apparently I have a second or third cousin up there, according to my mom. I left a message on what I think is her machine."

"Well, it's great that you'll have someone close by."

"I know. I did see pictures of the town, and it's really pretty, Luce. Like a postcard...lobster boats and pine trees. And I do know the house has a water view, so how bad can it be?"

"Right. I bet it's beautiful."

"So I'll zip up there, spend a little money, flip it, zip back down here, find a place for us to live, and we should be all set before Nicky starts kindergarten." She folded a cashmere hoodie. "It'll be fun. It'll be good for me."

"And what about a new book series? Think you'll get some writing done up there?"

The million-dollar question. "I hope so. I figured my father's crimes would hurt sales, right? But no. The opposite, and now my publisher is all over me for another idea before the notoriety fades. Can you believe that?"

"Well, that's good, I guess. That you're wanted."

"Yeah." It *was* good; it was just a little disheartening to picture writing another sappy series, rather than that elusive, noble, touching *Charlotte's Web* kind of masterpiece she'd been hoping to pull off. *Attitude is everything*, the Holy Rollers chided. "I'm really excited to get started."

That's better! the HRs cheered. They'd aged to about twelve and giggled a lot these days.

"So I was thinking," Lucy said, shooting her a little smile. "No kid for three weeks...you should have a fling."

Parker snorted.

"No, no! It'd be great! A summertime romance with some hot sailing dude or a fisherman. I'm thinking George Clooney in *The Perfect Storm*—"

"His character dies."

"You can do a little swimming, eat some lobster, do whatever else they do in Maine, but live a little, Parker. Find a summer hottie and get it on, girl! What do you say?"

"I cannot believe I'm hearing this from you, of all people. Princess Purity turned pimp."

"Listen, you're the one who admitted to watching Neil Patrick Harris's Emmy speech eight times."

"I'm up to eleven, actually. And I'm convinced I could turn him straight."

"Yeah, okay, we all have that dream. But a fling would be great, Parks! Come on. Who was the last guy you slept with, Parker?"

"No comment."

"Oh, crikey! Was it Ethan?"

Parker winced. "Nope. No, it wasn't."

"It was. Oh, my gosh. Ethan, who is now married to your best friend." Lucy grabbed another sweater and folded it. "That's both sick and sad."

"Please stop pimping me. It's so unlike you."

"Right. Remember that singles thing you made me go to last year? Who was pimping whom?"

"What's pimping?" Nicky burst into the room.

"Yes, ladies, what is it?" Ethan asked, raising an eyebrow.

"It's a grown-up thing," Parker said. "It involves, um, baby making."

"Gross," Nicky said.

"Exactly," Parker agreed, looking at Lucy with a smile.

Fling, Lucy mouthed.

"Daddy couldn't find me," Nicky said, jumping on the bed and rolling amid Parker's clothes like a puppy. "I was in the pantry, and he couldn't find me."

"I didn't know we were playing, Nick," Ethan said. "You're supposed to answer when I call."

"Okay. Sorry." Her son began trampolining on the bed. "Guess what, Mom?" *Bounce!* "Daddy says—" *bounce*—"our plane leaves—" *bounce*—"in four—" *bounce*—"more—" *bounce*—"hours!" He jumped off the bed with a thud. "And I might get some peanuts from the waitress."

Parker's throat tightened. She ran a hand through Nicky's hair, which was still baby-soft. *Don't change too much while you're gone.* "You'll have so much fun, sweetheart."

"I know it. You should come, too."

"Well, I'll be up in Maine, so I'll have a vacation, too. And Daddy will bring you up there when you get back. It's really pretty. We can eat lobster. Maybe go sailing."

"Okay. Kiss Elephant." He held up his stuffed animal for a smooch. Parker obeyed, then gathered her son in her arms, breathing in his salty little-boy smell.

"I love you, Nicky," she whispered.

"I love you, too, Mommy," he said. Then he wriggled out of her arms, seeming to see her suitcases for the first time. "We won't live here ever again?" he said, his voice quavering.

"No, honey. I'm sorry."

"Then I want a house just like it."

"We'll have a smaller place. Like Daddy and Lucy's."

"I want *this* house. I'm gonna come back here and live!"

"Nicky, pal," Ethan said, "this house is really big. It's meant for lots and lots of people. But the new house will be yours and Mommy's. And you can help pick it out, right, Parker?"

"Definitely." She gave Ethan a grateful look.

"I want it to be purple." Nick folded his arms across his chest.

"I love purple," Parker said.

Ethan glanced at his watch and gave her an apologetic look. "We really should get going."

This was it. Three weeks—twenty-three days, if one was counting, and Parker definitely was—with her son. She picked him up again and held him tight, relishing his strong little arms around her neck. "I love you, Nick. I'll call you every night. And we can use Skype."

"I'll call *you* every night," Nicky said. "And every morning. And in the daytime, too."

"Anytime you want," Ethan said. "Lucy, can you take Nicky down to the car?"

"You bet." Lucy hugged Parker. "Love you." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Fling."

"Sure," Parker said. "You guys have fun, okay? It's the trip of a lifetime."

"Bye, Mom! Elephant says bye, too!"

"Bye, Elephant! Bye, Nicky! I love you!"

Then Lucy took Nicky by the hand and led him down the long hall. *Don't worry, Parker*, chimed the Holy Rollers. *No one can replace you! You're the mom!*

"Parker." Ethan took the shirt she was folding—and folding and folding, apparently—and put it on the bed. "I know this hasn't been easy. And you've been a rock. But I know it's been...a lot."

His eyes were so kind and nice that Parker could feel her own filling. Dang it. "It's a little overwhelming," she whispered.

"I know. But you're not alone in this. I love you, Lucy loves you, you gave my parents their only grandchild, and they think you walk on water. You have all of us." He kissed her forehead. "Especially me."

Not for the first time, Parker wished things had been different with her and Ethan. The guy was damn near perfect. "I do know that, Ethan. And I appreciate it. Things aren't that bad, really. It's just been...fast. But I'll flip the house up there and we'll be fine."

He looked at her another minute. "Okay." He squeezed her shoulders and let her go. "I'll call you when we land."

"Thanks."

"Have fun in Maine."

"I will. I really will. It'll build character."

"You have plenty of character." With that, he hugged her again and left. A minute later, she heard the echoing thud of the front door closing.

Alone in an eight-thousand-square-foot house.

Once, when she was seven, she'd roller-skated down the big hallways and into the vast kitchen, where Bess, the cook, had given her a slice of rhubarb pie. Most of the year, the Welles family—Althea, Harry and Parker—had lived in New York, in an apartment on the Upper East Side, but Grayhurst had always felt more like home.

When she was very small, her grandfather had still been alive, and she had some cherished memories of a man with a deep voice who smelled like Wintergreen Life Savers. For a few magical weeks each summer, they'd come here and be together, Harry around for dinner, Althea making sand castles on the beach. Her three cousins, all girls, would come over to play, and they'd spy on the grown-ups, and make forts in the endless rooms of Grayhurst. Her dad had taught her to sail, and she and Althea played tennis after dinner.

But when she was ten, her parents divorced, and summer was never the same. Harry became a stranger, and Althea married Clay, the first of Parker's stepfathers, less than a year afterward. Per court order, she'd visit Rhode Island for a week or two in the summer, sometimes foisted off on her aunts, then spending a torturous few days alone with Harry, who'd work most of the time. Then it would be off to whatever summer program was the in thing that year—a summer at sea, another at the Sorbonne, one in Scotland with other daughters of rich people. And don't get her wrong. She'd had some great times, seen some beautiful places.

But those summers here, at Grayhurst, before she realized what kind of man her father was, before her mother had become a serial trophy wife...those summers had been the best. Her fifth birthday party had been here, and there'd been a white pony. When she was nine or so, she'd had a sleepover, and the gardener had rigged up a screen in front of the indoor pool, and Parker and five friends had bobbed around on inner tubes and watched *Jaws*.

And this was where she'd brought Nicky home after he was born. She'd rocked him in her grandmother's Morelock chair and looked out at the sea. How could she not love the place where she learned how to be a mother?

Now Nicky's beautiful room would be someone else's. The dining room where they'd once tied a rope and played Tarzan, the topiary in the back where they'd had so many lunches, the back parlor where she and Lucy had spent many a girls' night, laughing until they cried...all someone else's.

Well. Self-pity wasn't going to get her car packed up. The moving truck was coming to take her clothes and most of the stuff to storage—Nicky's bunk bed, the big white sofa she had in her office, the collection of Holy Rollers books in their many translations. The photo albums and framed pictures of Nicky's artwork.

All her life, Parker knew, she'd had the cushion of not just a trust fund, but the security of being a Welles of the Rhode Island Welleses. John Kennedy had once sailed his boat here and stayed for dinner, as he and her

grandmother were childhood friends. E. B. White had played tennis on Grayhurst's courts with her grandfather.

Now, for the first time, Parker was truly on her own.

It was oddly thrilling.

She'd use what she needed to spiff up the house in Maine and turn a cushy profit—what, maybe a couple hundred grand? Not bad for a woman who was broke.

And you know what else? Maybe Lucy was right. Lady Land had been long ignored. Maybe a little summer romance would be a good thing. Heck yeah! She had twenty-three days on her own. Might as well live a little.

But now, she'd go downstairs, uncork a bottle of her father's cheapest. She'd take it out onto the back terrace and enjoy Grayhurst's view for the last time. And maybe, since no one else was around, she'd have a good cry. And skate down the halls one more time.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Christopher Slowik:

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