

When Love Lasts Chapter 14

Chapter 14

Heather pursed her lips and turned to head down the path that cut through the farmlands. These days, Lara was the talk of the town, even though she had already gone back to Wrewell. Her grandparents made sure to tell anyone who would listen that she was the best granddaughter they could ask for and that she was about to marry the tall, rich and handsome man that she bagged in the big city, which counted as an informal invitation to the wedding reception that would eventually happen. In actuality, from the moment Lara came home to the little town to the moment she left, not one of the townsfolk had actually seen this elusive boyfriend of hers, which was strange considering she had come to visit her grandparents and made an elaborate affair out of it. Everyone was wondering if it wasn't common courtesy for her boyfriend to have come along with her. This clearly haunted Lilly, because she decided to bring it up during dinner that evening. As usual, she was condescending and spoke out of jealousy. "The guy's rich, but he didn't have the good sense to come back with Lara to visit her grandparents. Must be some shady character!" Heather came to Lara's defense as she pointed out, "If the guy's rich, then he's probably busy making money and counting them. Besides, it's not as if they're meeting each other's parents, so don't go and make up salacious lies about the man." Lilly shot her a hard look and snapped, "You brat. Why are you sticking up for others all of a sudden?" Pressing her lips into a thin line, Heather took a deep breath before pointing out curtly, "I'm not sticking up for them, just telling you that you shouldn't badmouth someone you've never met." "Forget it. I don't even want to argue with you about this. It's not like I'm pinning my hopes on you ever marrying rich anyway," Lilly said huffily with an exasperated roll of her eyes, then resumed eating. This whole time, Alaric stayed silent. After dinner, Heather fished out her phone and gave her brother, Elliot, a call. "Elliot, it's me, Heather!" "When did you change numbers?" he asked on the other line. She explained, "I came home, and the phone card I had was the one I used while I was at the Academy of Engineering in Wrewell, and it'll cost a lot more for me to use it back home, so I got a new card instead." "Wait, you're home? That's sudden! I mean, you still have a month left before the new term starts, right?" Instead of answering him, Heather asked bluntly, "Elliot, do you think you could lend me ten grand?" Elliot asked immediately, "What do you need ten grand for?" "For my sophomore year tuition, and also for my own expenses." "Why don't you just ask Mom and Dad for the cash?" "I did, and they said no..." He sighed. "I'd love to help you out, but I don't have that much money. I can barely get by with what I have, and you know I still need financial help from Mom and Dad because I don't have any savings!" Heather's face fell when she heard this. "Well, then, I guess I'll just have to figure something out..." Feeling apologetic, Elliot offered, "How about if you come over to my place for the last month of summer break and find work here in this city? I am in Ockford, after all, and it's one of the few big cities in the country." The prospect was an attractive one, but as things were, Heather had lost all her confidence. "How will I find work there if I can't even get a job in Wrewell?" He chuckled. "Okay, stop with the defeatist attitude. You'll find a way to make something of yourself. Come over tomorrow. I've got you covered for a month, and I'm sure you'll be able to find a job and pay your way through the second year of college." All of a sudden, Heather was inspired, and she said with renewed determination, "Then I'll go over right now!" Elliot was astonished to hear this. "What, like, right now?" She replied firmly, "Yes. In fact, I'm going to buy the train ticket right away!" "Okay, but you have to be careful on your way here, and call me when you reach the station!" She hummed in response and ended the call, feeling as if she had just regained her spirits. It was easy enough for her to get the train ticket, seeing as she lived nearby the train station. Not long after the call, she was pulling her suitcase behind her as she made her way to the door, but that was when Alaric came out with his crutch under his arm. She had been in her third year of high school when Alaric, a construction worker, fell from the third floor of the building site. While he survived the fall, he broke his leg, and he never fully recovered from it. Presently, he limped over to her and shoved a wad of crumpled bills into her hands. It was two thousand in cash, and he leaned forward as he whispered, "I've been saving up in secret, but you'll need this more than I do for now." He smiled affably at her, his eyes crinkling as fine lines made themselves present on his slightly weathered face. "Don't let your mother know about this." Heather's nose prickled as she gazed at Alaric, and with tears spilling down her cheeks, she reached out to wrap her arms around her father's slightly hunched figure. "My good girl, be sure to take care of yourself while you're out there. Don't be too caught up in the little things and focus on the big picture. Looking on the bright side is what matters most. Also, there are plenty of bad men in this world who will take advantage of you if you let your guard down, so stay safe," he reminded, though he had been saying the same things so many times that the words were burned into the back of her mind. She nodded nonetheless as she dried her tears and forced a smile. Dragging her suitcase with her, she turned and walked out the door. She dared not look back at Alaric, fearing that she would cry even harder if she did. She had made up her mind that after leaving home this time, she would not come home without first contemplating the consequences several times over. Regardless of how miserable or downtrodden she might be in the future, home would never be a safe harbor for her to return to. So where is my safe harbor then? The darkness of the night seemed to swallow her lonely figure as she headed for the station. It wasn't a long walk, but for some reason, she felt as if she was taking the first few steps of an endless journey. Moments later at the train station lobby, Heather stood in front of the ticket counter as she demanded emphatically, "What do you mean there are no more hard seats? What about hard sleepers? Or soft sleepers? I just need a ticket, any ticket at all!" She hadn't expected a ticket to Ockford to be such a precious commodity tonight. The ticket seller was getting impatient with her. "All the seats are sold out! I only have tickets for the day after tomorrow, so why don't you get one of those instead?" Just then, at the ticket refund counter next to Heather, a husky male voice said, "Excuse me, I'd like to get a refund for this soft sleeper ticket that I have bound for Ockford tonight." Heather picked up on this immediately, and when she locked in on the word 'Ockford', she rushed up to the man and grabbed his hand. "Sir, could you give me that ticket instead?" she pleaded, and she saw nothing else other than that ticket he was holding. Her hand was trembling as she clutched his hand, and her pale face was tear-stained. She looked so sad that it was almost heartbreaking. The man could tell that she really wanted to go to Ockford. Feeling a rush of sympathy for her, the man said gently, "Of course, but you're going to have to let go of my hand so that I can give you the ticket." It was only then that Heather realized she was gripping his hand, which would inevitably have made her seem rude and demanding. As such, she quickly let go, and she blushed as she apologized profusely, "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" "It's okay," he said kindly, his voice pleasant and soothing. Upon registering the way his voice sounded, Heather looked up at the man. He was wearing a dark gray suit with a flattering cut. He was tall, standing at about six feet, but not intimidatingly so. He also boasted chiseled features that looked like the work of the heavens, the delicate angles and planes of his face making him resemble one of those handsome European TV stars. He's gorgeous! That was the first thing that came to her mind when she saw him. This could very well be the first—or more accurately, the second—time a man's good looks made her feel like she had butterflies in her stomach.