

The Summer of Lost Wishes: *Bonus Epilogue*

by Nikki Godwin

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The Wedding

“I don’t understand the appeal of the camels,” Mom says, stuffing flowers into the centerpiece. The bright pink roses look great in the bronze flower holder.

Mom spent two weeks looking for a centerpiece that fit Rosa’s likings. Finding a bronze-colored camel that you could stick flowers in? Not the easiest feat. But Mom’s built a reputation for herself – if you want it, she’ll find it. If it’s not local, she’ll order it. If you dream it, she can make it happen. I seriously think she needs a better tagline on her business card because she really is the wish granter of Coral Sands these days.

“Rosa likes camels,” I say, trying to brush it off like I don’t know why. “People probably wonder why I have deer heads on my wall. Or my flamingo. You know, if Rooks and I get married someday, we’ll probably have flamingo stuff at our wedding.”

Mom holds up her hand to stop me. “Don’t even go there,” she says, straightening out the table cloth. “I don’t want to think of your wedding yet, and I do not want to imagine tacky flamingo décor.”

“You’d have so many pink color schemes to choose from,” I tell her, even though I know my imaginary wedding probably gives her anxiety. I grab the other corner of the cloth and help her flatten it out over the table.

“Piper, you’re seventeen. You’ve been dating the boy for a little over a year,” Mom reminds me. She stops arranging table settings and stares at me, head tilted in sternness. “Don’t start dreaming about your wedding to him just yet.”

I almost argue that Rooks and I have been together longer than Mac and Rosa, but I can’t bring myself to say it. She doesn’t know any better, but this wedding is so long overdue that I can’t even back my own argument with it.

“Okay, that’s the last one,” Mom says, tugging at the corner of a placemat on the final table. She places her hands on her hips and glances around, taking in the full effect of her handiwork. “Not my usual décor but not too shabby,” she says.

Personally, I’m in love with the decorations – the twinkle lights, the camel flower holders, and the pinks and oranges that match the summertime sunsets. It’s like the county fair wrapped up in a jar of happiness and love, sparkling for all of Coral Sands to see.

“We should probably get out of here,” I say, even though I could linger in this reception hall all night and still be in awe of its beauty.

Mom nods. “We don’t want to miss the actual wedding,” she agrees.

We exit the reception hall, and I kind of like being the daughter of the wedding planner. It’s the first time Mom has done something like this, but she’s been the type-A ball of glue that kept this wedding from coming apart at the seams.

Rows of white chairs are lined up throughout the room. Mom slips away to the side wall and eases her way down the outer row until she’s at the front of the grand room of Town Hall. She whispers something to the officiant and takes a seat on the second row. I scan the room for my second date since my real date is the best man.

Riley glances over her shoulder and subtly waves to me with her wedding program. This girl is worth her weight in hidden love letters. She was new to Coral Sands, having relocated here after Tropical Storm Ophelia left her childhood home halfway underwater. She was already dating the Stingrays’ short stop, having met him during the disaster clean up, so it was only right that she became best friends with the star pitcher’s girlfriend. She’s been my sanity through those incredibly long, boring baseball games all season.

I hurry over to where she sits, saying ‘excuse me’ over and over while trying not to step on the other attendants. I ease onto the chair next to Riley and take the program she hands me, even though I already know every detail of it because I helped Mom finalize the design.

“About time,” Riley whispers. She holds her program up to hide her mouth. “I thought I was going to have to go sit with Mr. Carter.”

I shrug. “Sorry,” I whisper. “You know how my mom is when it comes to centerpieces.”

She stifles a giggle and looks around the room. Then she leans closer to me. “Did you see what Natalie is wearing?” she asks, her voice still barely audible.

That pastel pink halter dress that washes out her skin completely and leaves her looking like a pale fish on the shoreline? Definitely not her color.

“Yeah, not a good look for her,” I whisper.

It’s a bummer about Natalie. I’ve never had a problem with her, even after the great Shark Island abandonment with her boyfriend last summer. I doubt she knows what happened, but she does know that something went down between Rooks and Hector. She wasn’t part of the welcome committee that was so incredibly great when Rooks and I started at Coral Sands High

School. But then again, maybe it's fate – Hector plays football. Rooks plays baseball. And the baseball versus football rivalry is pretty intense at CSHS.

A piano instrumental plays softly over the speakers, and everyone shifts in their seats, rustling their wedding programs to see what's about to happen. All eyes turn to Hector's younger sister, Adriana, in her bright pink dress. She clutches her flowers nervously, shifting her eyes around as if she's about to step on stage in a leading role.

Rooks had offered to walk her down the aisle after she made her nerves public knowledge at last night's rehearsal dinner, but she politely declined. Part of me wonders if Hector had a role in that. As she treads slowly down the aisle, I shift my eyes toward the front of the room, where Mac stands with Rooks. My boyfriend catches my gaze and smiles.

When Mac asked Rooks to be his best man, his reasoning was that he didn't have a son or grandson of his own, and Rooks is the closest he's ever gotten. I think the fact that Rooks knows the truth and can appreciate it a little more than most people helped too. And who am I kidding? The boy looks incredibly handsome in a tux.

Adriana takes her place across from the guys, angling herself back toward the aisle. The wedding march plays, louder than the previous music, and everyone rises from their seats. My heart dances in my chest, thumping along with every step Rosa is about to take. Please, spirits of love letters from the past, keep me from falling into the emotional mess that is lurking deep within me and waiting to surface.

I don't normally cry over engagements or weddings or babies, but this wedding – this moment in time – is so different from any other wedding I've ever attended. Hector takes Rosa's arm before taking the first step onto the aisle.

Everything about Rosa is unconventional, and I love that about her. When she said she wasn't wearing white in the wedding, her family gasped, and her daughter-in-law told her it wasn't a wedding if the bride didn't wear white. Rosa ignored the comment and chose a vintage peach dress suit to wear. Mom said it was 'very Carrie Bradshaw in the courthouse wedding scene.' Rosa was pleased with Mom's Sex and The City comparison. Today, seeing her walk down the aisle, I'll even admit that the peach looks great on her.

Hector steps away, leaving his grandmother at the altar with Mac. He squeezes into the space that his mom and Natalie left for him with the family. Everyone else takes a seat as well,

and the ceremony begins. Mac and Rosa hold hands while the officiant recites a poem about a garden and compares it to marriage.

“Today, we’ve gathered to root these two individuals into one marriage that will grow, flourish, and spread their love over time,” the officiant states. “Mac and Rosa have chosen a symbolic flower – a rose – to plant together today.”

My mom brings over a small plastic flower pot as well as two mason jars of dirt. She hands the pot to the officiant instead of the happy couple. It’s already half full of soil, but that’s not the point – or so she told me beforehand.

Rosa tears open a small packet of seeds and sprinkles them into the plastic pot. Then she and Mac twist the lids off of their jars and slowly pour the dirt over their future roses.

Twenty minutes later, Rooks stands outside of the grand room of Town Hall waiting for Riley and me. That was probably the quickest wedding ceremony in the history of weddings, but Mac and Rosa kept it simple and to the point.

“If I’d known we were just planting some seeds and saying ‘I do,’ I wouldn’t have rented a tux,” Rooks says, reaching an arm out to wrap around my shoulder.

Riley nods in agreement. “I really expected something much more extravagant,” she says. She glances around before speaking again. “Especially if they waited that long.”

She doesn’t know the truth about Mac, but we did tell her that Mac and Rosa had a secret relationship in high school but couldn’t be together because times were different. Riley swears they are the epitome of true love and happily ever afters. I think she’s right.

Then Riley quickly backtracks. “Don’t get me wrong. It was sweet, symbolic, yada yada yada, but I would’ve thrown the wedding of the century instead.”

We follow the crowd of people into the reception hall, where Mom’s decorations are praised by every female in the room. Someone says she’s going to hire Mom for her own wedding, and I wish I had a business card to hand her.

Mac and Rosa wait at the front of the room, hugging friends and members of Rosa’s family. I keep a lock on Rooks’ arm as we weave throughout the maze of people to find the table with our name plates.

We take a seat, and Rooks leans in where only I can hear him speak. “Did you bring it?” he asks, barely even whispering.

I simply nod in reply. This wedding hasn't been typical. There was no bridal shower. No bachelor or bachelorette parties. No housewarming gifts or wedding presents. While Mac and Rosa are happy and excited about this new phase of their lives, they're not "just starting out" like many couples. They don't need anything more than each other. I sort of envy that.

It didn't stop me from bringing a wedding gift, though.

Everyone shuffles around, finding their seats and settling in, before Rosa rises in front of us, a smile adorning her face.

"Thank you so much for being here today," she begins. "It's not every day that you have a second chance to fall in love again. I feel incredibly blessed to have found someone who makes me feel like I'm seventeen again."

Rooks reaches over under the table and squeezes my hand. I dare to glimpse his way, just to see the look on his face upon hearing Rosa's hidden secrets in her words. My heart flutters when my eyes meet his, and I'm not sure if it's because he's incredibly stunning in his tux or because we share this half-century secret and we're forever connected because of it.

An applause from around us breaks our eye contact as Rosa welcomes everyone to enjoy a night of friendship, family, good food, and dancing. People move from their seats to the dance floor and buffet-style tables. I, however, excuse myself from the table and make a mad dash outside to Rooks' truck. He isn't far behind.

"You didn't leave them in the apology newspaper, did you?" he asks, unlocking his vehicle. "I just don't think the 'I'm sorry' message matches the vibe for today."

I pull the passenger door open and reach under the seat for the small box wrapped in shiny coral-colored paper. My original excuse was that it matches the wedding colors, but really, I wanted it because it matched the name of Coral Sands. It felt symbolic of the new life I've formed here, and I owe so much of it to the letters inside this box.

We slip back inside through the side door, and I leave the box on the gift table among the other bags. So much for 'no wedding gifts, please.' Mom would call this a perk of living in a small town.

The night dances around us, spinning in circles of twinkle lights and laughter, as guests come and go. After Riley heads home, and Mom resumes 'business mode' to make sure she's

made good connections with every vendor on site, I retrieve the little coral box and my boyfriend to complete tonight's mission.

Mac may have told me to keep the letters from my bedroom wall, but on this particular night, I feel they need to be given back to the two hearts who wrote them.

"I know you said 'no gifts,'" Rooks says, as we approach the newlyweds. "But you know Piper is stubborn and as any good boyfriend would do, I let her have her way."

"These were never mine to keep anyway," I add, handing the box over to Rosa.

I know she knows who Mac really is, but to this day, I'm still not sure if she knows that we know or how we know. It's been a very deeply buried secret, even in the last year. We never let on that we know anything other than what the rest of this town knows.

Rosa peels back the paper carefully and slowly wiggles the lid from the small box. She unfolds the tissue paper from around the stack of letters, and instantly, her eyes glisten with tears and awe.

"I never thought..." her voice trails as she brings a hand up to her mouth. "You've known?" she asks.

"They have," Mac chimes in, clasping his hand onto Rooks' shoulder. "They're actually the reason tonight is happening. I owe them many thanks."

"Well then," Rosa says, "so do I."

Mac assures Rosa that we'll discuss this all in depth later and takes her out to the dance floor for one last dance before the DJ dismantles his table and leaves with the cloud of wedding sparkles when tonight is over.

Rooks wraps his arm around my shoulder as we head out of the reception area.

"Looks like they finally got to go dancing," I say, thinking back on Rosa's big dreams in her letters.

Rooks stops next to one of the reception tables and glances back at them. Then he reaches over and picks up one of the centerpieces.

"Maybe we should ask your mom to hold on to these for our own wedding someday," he says. "You think she'd totally freak out?"

"Yes," I tell him. "Besides, I already told her we're going with flamingos instead."