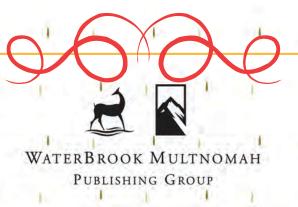
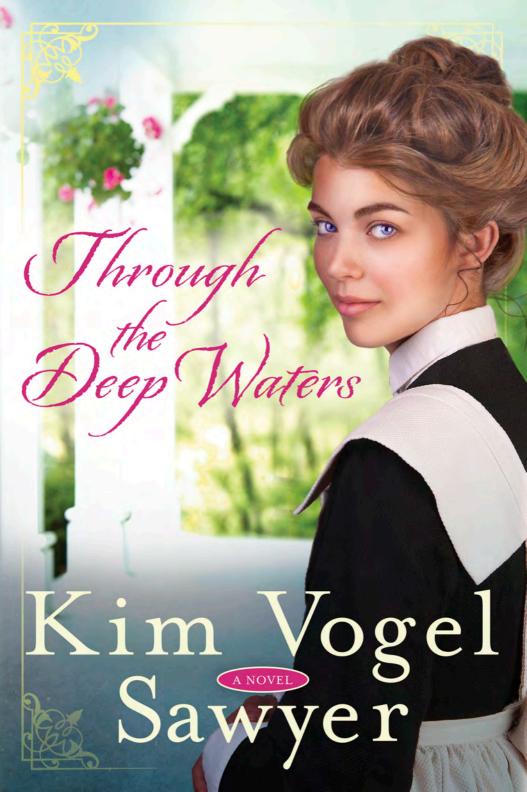


Through the Deep Waters by Kim Vogel Sawyer
Thief of Glory by Sigmund Brouwer
A Love Undone by Cindy Woodsmall
When Mercy Rains by Kim Vogel Sawyer
The Daughter of Highland Hall by Carrie Turansky

Where Treetops Glisten by
Tricia Goyer, Cara Putman and Sarah Sundin





Chapter 1

Chicago, Illinois, 1883 Dinah

inah Hubley curled her arms around the coal bucket, hunched her shoulders to make herself as small as possible, and then made a dash for the kitchen. The odors of stale tobacco, unwashed bodies, and stout whiskey assaulted her nose. Each time she made this trek through the waiting room, she tried to hold her breath—the smell made her want to give back her meager lunch. But weaving between the haphazard arrangement of mismatched sofas and chairs all draped with lounging men took longer than her lungs could last. So she sucked air through her clenched teeth and did her best to make it all the way through the room without being stopped.

No such luck. A man reached out from one of the overstuffed chairs and snaked his arm around her waist.

Dinah released a yelp as the man tugged her backward across the chair's armrest and into his lap. Lumps of coal spilled over the bucket's rim and left black marks on the bodice of her faded calico dress. But she was worried about something more than her only dress being soiled.

Keeping her grip on the bucket, she pushed against the man's chest with her elbow. He held tight and laughed against her cheek. "Hey, what's your hurry, darlin'? Stay here an' let ol' Max enjoy you for a bit." He nuzzled his nose into the nape of her neck, chortling. "I always did like gals with brown hair. Brings me to mind of a coon dog I had when I was a young start."

His foul breath made bile rise in her throat. She rasped, "Let me go, mister, please? I have to get the coal to the cook."

Max plucked the bucket from her arms and held it toward a lanky man who'd sauntered near. "Take the coal to the kitchen for this little gal, Jamie. Free her up for some time with me."

Jamie took the bucket and set it aside. Then he caught Dinah's arm and gave such a yank, she feared her arm would be wrenched from its socket. She didn't lose her arm, but the drunken man in the chair lost his grip. Her feet met the floor. She would have stumbled had Jamie not kept hold, and a thread of gratitude wove its way through her breast.

She regained her footing and offered the man a timid smile. "Th-thank you, mister."

Jamie's eyes glittered. Dinah knew that look. She tried to wriggle loose, but his fingers bit hard while his thumb rubbed up and down the tender flesh on the back of her arm. Shivers attacked her frame. He leaned down, his whiskered face leering. "How about ya show me instead of tellin' me? Gimme a kiss." He puckered up.

Dinah crunched her eyes closed. Her stomach rolled and gorge filled her throat.

A voice intruded. "Jamie Fenway, if you want to keep coming around here and making use of my girls, you'd better let loose of that one."

Relief sagged Dinah's legs when she realized the proprietress of the Yellow Parrot had entered the room.

The man released Dinah with an insolent shove, sending her straight against Miss Flo's ample front. Barrel-shaped and as strong as most men, the woman didn't even flinch. She took hold of Dinah's upper arms, set her upright, then turned her kohl-enhanced glare on Jamie and Max. "How many times do I have to tell you no free sampling, fellas? Everything you want is waiting upstairs, but until you've paid, you keep your hands, your lips, and whatever else you think you might be tempted to use to yourself."

The men waiting their turns with Miss Flo's girls laughed uproariously. One of them wisecracked, "Besides, Jamie, that one you grabbed on to ain't hardly worth stealin' a pinch. If she was a striped bass, I'd throw her back!" More guffaws and sniggers rang.

Jamie's slit-eyed gaze traveled up and down Dinah's frame. "Even the smallest fish tastes plenty good when it's fresh."

Dinah hugged herself, wishing she could shrink away to nothing.

Miss Flo grabbed a handful of Dinah's hair and gave a harsh yank. "What are you doing carting coal through the waiting room, anyway? I don't want that mess in my parlor."

A few smudges of coal dust would hardly be noticed among the years' accumulation of tobacco stains and muddy prints on the worn carpet. But Dinah ducked her head and mumbled meekly, "I'm sorry, Miss Flo."

"I know you're sorry, but that doesn't answer my question." Miss Flo's voice was as sharp as the teacher's—the one who berated Dinah for wearing the same dress to school every day and checked her head for lice in front of the whole class. "We've got a back door to the kitchen. Why didn't you use it?"

Dinah winced and stood as still as she could to keep her hair from being pulled from her scalp. "I couldn't get in through the back. The door's blocked."

"By what?"

Miss Flo's newest girl, Trudy, liked to meet one of the deputies on the back stoop. He was so tall Trudy had to stand on the stoop for their lips to meet. The image of them pressed so tight together not even a piece of paper could come between them was seared into Dinah's memory. But she wouldn't tattle. It was bad enough she had to listen to the taunts in school and on the streets of town. She wouldn't set herself up for belittling under the only roof she'd ever called home.

When Dinah didn't answer, Miss Flo growled and released her hair with another vicious yank. "Get that coal out of here."

Dinah bent over to grab the handle of the discarded bucket.

Miss Flo kicked her in the rear end, knocking her on her face. "And don't let me see you traipsing through this room again. Next time I might not be around to stop the men from taking their pleasure from you." She stepped over Dinah, the full layers of her bold-yellow skirt rustling. "All right, fellas, how about some music while you wait?" Men cheered and whistled. Miss Flo, her

smile wide, plopped onto the upright piano's round stool and began thumping out a raucous tune. Drunken voices raised in song.

Dinah scrambled to her feet, grabbed the coal bucket, and raced from the room. She darted straight to the coal box in the corner and leaned against the wall, panting. So close... Jamie'd come so close to claiming her lips. She covered her mouth with trembling fingers as Miss Flo's warning screamed through her mind. The proprietress often screeched idle threats in Dinah's direction, but this one was real. The older she got, the more likely it became that the men who flocked to the Yellow Parrot after sundown seven days a week would see her as more than Untamable Tori's unfortunate accident.

The cook, a hulk of a man with a bald head and forearms the size of hams, glanced in Dinah's direction. "You gonna dump that coal in the hopper or just stand there hugging the bucket?"

Dinah gave a start. "S-sorry, Rueben." She tipped the bucket and dumped the coal into its holding tank. Black dust sifted upward. Some of the black bits were sucked up inside her nose. She dropped the dented bucket with a clatter and turned to cough into her cupped hands.

Rueben stirred a wooden spoon through a pot on the massive cast-iron Marvel range. The rich smell of rum rose. Another cabinet pudding in the making—Tori's favorite. For years Dinah had suspected Rueben was sweet on her mother, and when Dinah had been much younger, she harbored the whimsical idea that he might be her father. But when she asked him, hoping she'd finally get to call somebody Pa, he laughed so hard she scuttled away in embarrassment. Now, at the wise age of sixteen, she realized the question of her paternity would never be answered. Not with Tori's occupation being what it was.

Dinah inched toward the stove where the scent of the pudding's sauce would be stronger. The smell of rum on someone's breath turned her stomach, but somehow when rum was blended with cream and sugar, it became delightful. She leaned in, and Rueben grinned knowingly.

"Wantin' a sniff, are you?"

Everyone who called the Yellow Parrot home and everyone who visited knew better than to disturb Rueben when he was cooking. He considered preparing tasty dishes an art, and he tolerated no intrusion on his concentration. But he'd never sent Dinah away. She nodded.

"Well, tip on in here, then."

She put her face over the pot's opening. Steam wisped around her chin, filling her nostrils with the sweet, rich aroma. The foul smells from the parlor drifted away, and Dinah released a sigh of satisfaction.

"All right, move back now. I need to dump this over the sponge cake an' get it in the oven if it's gonna be done by suppertime."

Suppertime at the Yellow Parrot was served well after midnight. More often than not, Dinah was asleep by then and didn't have any supper. But Rueben always put a filled plate in the stove's hob for her breakfast. Rueben poured the thick sauce over chunks of sponge cake dotted with chopped figs and currants. She licked her lips. "What else are you fixing besides the pudding?"

"Got a leg of lamb with cherry sauce slow bakin' in the oven out back. I tucked in some whole sweet potatoes studded with cloves, too—I'll mash 'em with pecans and cinnamon."

Dinah's mouth watered.

"Plannin' to steam a batch of brussels sprouts and fix up a cream sauce to pour over 'em to kill the smell. You know how your ma pinches her nose when I fix those things. But she always gobbles them up anyway." He shrugged. "Nothin' much." Rueben moved to the washbasin and began trimming the thick stems from the brussels sprouts with a flick of a paring knife.

She should go upstairs. Her duties for the day were done, and unlike Miss Flo's girls, she didn't have the luxury of sleeping until noon. But instead, Dinah perched on a stool in the corner and watched Rueben work. She preferred the kitchen to any other room in the stately old house outside of town that Miss Flo had turned into a place of business. The good smells, the warm stove, the clean-scrubbed floor and work counters—Rueben wouldn't allow even a speck of dirt to mar his domain—provided her truest sense of "home." Until Rueben told her to get on up to her room, she'd stay.

Rueben sent a brief frown in her direction. "I heard the commotion in the parlor."

He had? "I didn't do anything wrong."

"You were in there durin' working hours. That's wrong."

Dinah's face flamed.

Rueben tucked the pudding into the oven, closed the door as gently as a mother placing a blanket on her sleeping newborn, then faced her. He put his beefy hands on his hips. Although he didn't scowl, his huge presence was intimidating enough. "I know why you used the front door instead of the back. I'm gonna tell Flo she needs to keep a tighter rein on Trudy. But that don't excuse you. You've gotta defend yourself, Dinah. You ain't a little girl anymore."

Dinah cringed, recalling the way Max's hand had roved across her rib cage. Although not as buxom as her mother's, her chest strained against the tight bodice of her one calico dress. She was womanly now. And in a place like this, being womanly was an invitation.

He went on in the same blunt tone—not kind, not harsh, but matter-of-fact—as if Dinah should already know these things. "If you want to carry coal through the back door, then you need to tell whoever's in the way to step aside. If you don't want somebody pestering you, then you need to come right out and tell 'em to leave you alone. If you don't want to stay in a brothel, then you need to pack a bag an' move on."

Dinah's jaw fell slack. She'd never had the courage to stand up to the sniggering schoolboys or snooty girls who taunted her. How could Rueben expect her to be brave enough to set out on her own? He'd lost his senses. "Where would I go? What would I do?"

He sauntered to the oak secretary where he planned his meals and made shopping lists. He pulled down the drop door that formed a desktop and reached into one of the cubbies. When he turned, he held a scrap of newsprint that he laid flat against the desk's scarred surface. "C'mere."

On quivering legs, Dinah obeyed.

He tapped one sausage-sized finger on the paper. "Read this."

She leaned over the desk. The dim light made it difficult for her to make out the print, but she read slowly, painstakingly, reciting it word for word inside her head. "Wanted: Young women 18 to 30 years of age, of good moral

character, attractive, and intelligent, to waitress in Harvey Eating Houses on the Santa Fe in the West. Wages: \$17.50 per month with room and board. Liberal tips customary. Experience not necessary. Write Fred Harvey, Union Depot, Kansas City, Missouri."

The reading complete, she hunkered into herself, deeply stung. Didn't Miss Flo call her an ugly duckling? Didn't the teacher at school remind her on the days she managed to attend classes she should just stay away because she'd never amount to anything? She was neither attractive nor intelligent and everyone knew it. Why would Rueben—the one person who'd been kind to her—tease her this way?

He bumped her shoulder. "What'd you think?"

She set her jaw and refused to answer.

He caught her chin between his thumb and finger and raised her face. "There's your chance. Write to this Fred Harvey. Get yourself outta here."

Rueben had chided her to speak up and say what she thought. She jerked her chin free of his grasp and spouted, "He won't take me! I'm— I'm—" She couldn't bring herself to repeat the hurtful words people had thrown at her all her life. So she said, "I'm only sixteen."

He snorted. "You won't be sixteen forever. An' with hotels an' restaurants poppin' up along the railroad line all the way to California, he'll be needing waitresses for a good long while." He folded the advertisement and pressed it into Dinah's palm. "Keep that. Write to him when your eighteenth birthday's past. Because, girlie, sure as my pudding'll come out of that oven browned just right and tastin' like heaven, if you stay here, you're gonna end up bein' one of Flo's girls." He curled his hand around hers, his big fingers strong yet tender. "Wouldn't you rather be one of Harvey's girls?"

Chapter 2

Dinah

ouldn't you rather be one of Harvey's girls?" Over the next weeks as Dinah browsed the markets and filled shopping lists for Rueben, she thought about becoming one of Harvey's girls. When she washed the soiled linens and ironed the working girls' fancy robes and underthings, she imagined being one of Harvey's girls. As she sat at the desk in the back corner of the schoolroom completing lessons, she daydreamed about becoming one of Harvey's girls. Late at night in her attic bedroom, listening to the noises coming from the rooms below, she longed to become one of Harvey's girls.

Toward the end of May, school ended for the season. Although she'd passed the exams, she didn't attend the graduation ceremony to receive her eighth-grade certificate. If only she could be like the other students who walked across the teacher's platform and received the rolled document tied with a crisp black ribbon! But she'd look the fool, being so much older than the others who were privileged to attend daily rather than hit or miss. And she had no one who would attend, smile with pride from the audience, and offer congratulations afterward. Thus, participating in the ceremony for which she'd worked so long and hard held little joy.

Her seventeenth birthday arrived the first day of June. Rueben prepared her favorites for lunch—glazed ham with scalloped potatoes and steamed green beans seasoned well with bacon and onion—and baked her a spice cake with a half inch of fluffy vanilla cream between each of the three moist layers. All of Flo's girls trooped downstairs and partook of her birthday treat, but they fussed about eating such a heavy midday meal in place of their customary noon breakfast. They didn't sing to her, and no one gave her a present. Everyone else's

lack of attention made Dinah appreciate Rueben's gesture all the more. She thanked him over and over for his kindness until he told her, "Hush now. You're embarrassing me."

When the girls shuffled back upstairs for a few hours of rest and quiet before the men began storming the doors, she offered to help clean up the mess. But Miss Flo looped elbows with her and tugged her away from the table.

"No dish washin' on your birthday. Come into the parlor with me instead."

Dinah caught a glimpse of Rueben's brows descending in a scowl, but Miss Flo ushered her out of the dining room so quickly she didn't have a chance to explore the reason for it. Miss Flo aimed Dinah for the bay window where two brocade chairs were crunched close together beneath heavy draperies. It would be a cheerful spot if the curtains were ever separated to let the sun pour in.

Miss Flo pointed to one chair, and Dinah sat while the proprietress flopped into the other with a loud *whish* from her silk skirts. Miss Flo folded her hands in her lap, crossed her legs with another wild rustling of skirts, and smiled—the warmest smile she'd ever aimed at Dinah. "Well now, seventeen, are you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And as unsullied as new-fallen snow..."

An uneasy feeling wriggled through Dinah's belly. "Ma'am?"

Miss Flo barked a short laugh. "Oh, I was just thinkin' how different you are from the girls upstairs. Them all bein' so...experienced. You're something of an oddity in a place like this, Dinah." Her well-rouged cheeks and kohldarkened eyes gave her a hard appearance, yet Dinah believed she caught a hint of envy in the woman's expression. "By the time I was your age, I'd been workin' for over two years. Young but old already. This work will make you old fast. All you gotta do is look at your ma to see how this work ages a person."

Yes, Tori appeared much older than her thirty-nine years. She applied kohl to her eyes and bold rouge to her lips and cheeks, powdered her pale face, and dyed her hair with India ink—all attempts to look youthful. But nothing hid the truth. The woman who'd been known as Untamable Tori to the men of Chicago for the past twenty years was worn out.

Dinah's chest constricted. "I know."

"And she's sick, too."

Miss Flo spoke so flippantly Dinah wasn't sure she'd heard correctly. She crunched her brow. "What?"

"Sick. She's sick." Miss Flo examined her long fingernails, then picked at a loose cuticle. "It happens in this business if you ain't careful." She raised one brow and aimed a knowing look at Dinah. "An' considerin' that you came to be, we both know Tori ain't careful."

She'd noticed Tori's drop in weight and the dark circles under her eyes, but she'd just thought her ma was tired. "She's with child?"

Miss Flo rolled her eyes. "She's sick, I said."

Then Dinah understood. Twice before she'd watched one of Flo's girls succumb to a sickness that turned her skin yellow and made her waste away to nothing. And now the sickness had its hold on Tori. Dinah folded her arms across her ribs and held tight as fear and worry attacked.

Miss Flo lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "She didn't want me to tell you, but I figured you have a right to know. She is your ma, after all."

Dinah had never been allowed to call Tori by anything other than her name—she always claimed the men wouldn't be interested in her anymore if they knew she had a child. The few times she'd slipped and said "Ma" or "Mama," Tori had slapped her hard, so Dinah learned not to say the terms out loud. But inwardly she'd called her mother by the affectionate titles and longed for the day they'd leave this place and become a real mother and daughter. Another dream that would never come true.

Tears stung. She forced her voice past her tight throat. "Is there anything you can do?"

Miss Flo shook her head. The feathers she wore in her streaky black-and-gray hair gently waved, as if offering a sweet farewell. But there would be nothing sweet about Tori's passing—not if she had the same sickness as those other girls. "Not a thing. In fact, I ought to make her leave. Another week or two and she won't be able to work anymore. And you know everyone has to earn their keep around here."

In all of Dinah's lifetime, Tori had never set foot outside the confines of

the Yellow Parrot. She rarely even ventured into the yard. Tori would die of fright if told to leave. Dinah clutched the carved armrests to keep herself in the chair. "But you can't send her away!"

"Well, I can't have her fillin' a room meant for moneymakin'." Miss Flo glared at Dinah. "This is a business, not a charity or a poor farm. If she can't earn, she can't stay."

No poor farm would take in a soiled dove. No charity house would extend a kind hand to someone who'd sold herself to men. Dinah's heart beat fast and hard. Panic made her dizzy. The girls of the Yellow Parrot were trapped here like birds in a cage. She hung her head, helplessness sweeping over her with the force of floodwaters breaking through a dam.

"But maybe..."

Dinah jerked her gaze at Miss Flo. The woman was smiling again. Sweetly. Invitingly. Whatever idea she had to keep Tori from being tossed onto the street, Dinah would listen.

"I could let your mama stay here through her last days. It would be hard on her, wouldn't it, to be sent off somewhere to die all alone? So I could put a bed for her in the attic, let her live out her final days under the roof where she's been sheltered an' fed all these years."

Hope ignited in Dinah's chest.

"I could do that if you'll give me, say, twenty-five dollars."

The hope fizzled and died.

"See, I figure with her bein' sick, she won't eat much. Accordin' to the doctor, she ain't gonna last even another three months, so I figure twenty-five dollars'll cover the rest of her life."

Dinah sagged in resignation. "I don't have twenty-five dollars."

The woman's gaze narrowed, her smile changing to a knowing smirk. "You could earn it."

Oh. no...

Miss Flo leaned forward, bringing her rouge-brightened face close to Dinah's. "I know a man—a rich businessman who doesn't visit the brothels. He has very specific...wants. And he pays well."

No, no, no...

"For settin' it up with him an' providing a room, I'd need to take my standard half. But your share would be fifty dollars, Dinah." Miss Flo's tone became wheedling. "Twenty-five to give for your ma's keep, an' twenty-five to use for yourself any way you please. A new dress—two or three, even. Some new shoes an' stockings an' hair ribbons. All kinds of things. Fifty dollars is more than most people earn in a whole month, an' you could make it just like that." She snapped her fingers and Dinah jumped. Miss Flo reached across the short distance between the chairs and took Dinah's hand. Her cold fingers squeezed, squeezed, squeezed, squeezed. "I'll get it arranged. Yes?"

Dinah's ears rang. One line from the advertisement she'd memorized screamed through her mind: "...of good moral character." She'd given up on so many dreams—having a father, a mother, a home. Could she let her dream of becoming one of Harvey's girls die, too?

She yanked her hand from the woman's grip and leaped to her feet. "I'll find another way to take care of Tori!" She turned and raced for the stairs.

Miss Flo's mocking voice trailed after her. "No pay, no stay—for either of you. Remember that."



Every day during the month of June, Dinah set out in search of a job. She spoke to shop owners, café owners, clinic directors, and business office receptionists. She offered to mop floors, to scour pots, to wash linens or scrub aprons, to deliver messages—no job was too menial. And in every case when she answered the simple question, "Where do you live?" she was sent away with a firmly stated, "We don't need your kind around here."

After weeks of fruitless searching, she came to a grim realization. Her eighth-grade certificate, so slowly and painfully won, didn't matter. Her willingness to work hard at whatever task she was given didn't matter. By association, Dinah was tainted—trapped in the same cage that held her mother captive. She'd never find a decent job. Not in this city. And to get out of the city would take money.

With the summer sun waiting until late to creep over the horizon, the working hours at the Yellow Parrot moved forward. The customers preferred to visit under the cover of darkness. Dinah had always found it ironic that men who so eagerly and unashamedly forked over their dollars to Miss Flo didn't want to be seen coming or going. As summer descended, the most booming business took place between ten and midnight, with a few stragglers sticking around until two or three in the morning until Miss Flo finally gave them the boot.

On the last day of June, Dinah managed to stay awake until the very last man clomped off the porch, straddled his horse, and moseyed toward home. She waited until the girls had eaten their supper and returned to their rooms. She waited a little longer, until all murmuring and bedspring squeaking had hushed. Then she crept down the narrow enclosed stairway from the attic to the second floor and entered her mother's room.

Scant moonlight filtered through a slit in the heavy curtains and fell like a pale thread across Tori's sleeping face. For a moment Dinah hesitated. Despite her illness, Tori had worked tonight. She had to or Miss Flo would send her away. Her sagging skin and slack mouth proved her exhaustion. Maybe Dinah shouldn't disturb her. But by morning the others would be awake and would possibly overhear. And Dinah needed this conversation to remain private.

Drawing in a breath of fortification, she leaned forward and shook Tori's shoulder. "Tori? Tori, wake up."

Tori snuffled and slapped at Dinah's hand.

Dinah shook her again, more forcefully this time.

Slowly Tori's eyelids rose. Her bleary gaze settled on Dinah's face, and she scowled. "What're you doin', pesterin' me? Get outta here. Lemme sleep." She started to roll over.

Dinah caught her mother's arm, holding her in place. "You can sleep in a minute. I need to talk to you. It's important."

With a grunt, Tori wrenched her arm free. "What's so blamed important it can't wait until morning?"

After easing onto the edge of the bed, Dinah clutched her hands together and whispered, "You." She swallowed. "I know you're sick, Ma."

Tori's face pinched into a horrible grimace. "I told her not to say nothin' to you. An' don't call me Ma."

"I can call you Ma now. Nobody's around to hear. I needed to know about you being sick. You should've told me." Even as she chided her mother, Dinah realized the pointlessness. She and Tori had never talked—not the way she imagined mothers and daughters were supposed to talk, sharing secrets and laughs and concerns. Mothers and daughters were supposed to look out for each other. They might have failed in every other sense, but maybe they could do at least one thing right. "Miss Flo says if you can't work, you can't stay here anymore."

"Stingy old biddy." Bitterness tinged Tori's weak voice. "All these years I stayed, lettin' her get rich off me, an' now she's ready to put me out like some dried-up milk cow. She don't know the meaning of loyalty."

"I want to help you."

A soft snort left Tori's throat. "You got a cure up your sleeve?"

Dinah hung her head. "I can't make you well. But I...I want to take care of you. I can't let Miss Flo send you away. Not when there's a way to let you stay here."

A glimmer of hope appeared in Tori's purple-smudged eyes. "How?"

Why couldn't life be like the stories in the fairy-tales book Rueben had given her one year for Christmas, where a knight rode to the castle and rescued the distressed maiden from the dungeon? No knight would help her or her ma. Dinah had to depend on herself. "If I give Miss Flo some money, she'll let you stay. Until you..." She couldn't make herself say the word *die*.

"Where are you gettin' money?"

Dinah forced a glib shrug. "I found a way."

For long seconds, Tori stared at her through mere slits. "I wanted to get rid of you when I found out you were comin'. There're ways, you know."

Chills rolled through Dinah, as if her blood had turned to ice water.

"But I'd already done so much wrong, an' doin' away with you wouldn't fix none of it. So I went ahead an' brung you into the world. Brung you into this...this *den of iniquity*. An' over an' over I've wished I'd done different way back then. Wished I'd not brought you here at all."

Realization bloomed. Tori didn't regret Dinah's birth because she hated her, but because she hated the life into which she'd been born. Which meant her ma cared. Cared about *her*. The ice in her veins turned liquid and warm. Tears filled her eyes, and they pooled in Tori's eyes as well.

Tori continued brokenly. "Now here you are, a woman grown, offerin' to take care of me when I never in all your life did nothin' to take care of you." One tear rolled down her sunken cheek. "I don't deserve any kindness, Dinah. I don't deserve bein' cared for."

The rejections she'd faced over the past days, the past months, the past years swirled up like a giant whirlpool and threatened to topple Dinah from the edge of the bed. Even if she was just the illegitimate child of a prostitute, she'd deserved to be treated better. And even if Tori had sold her body to men to make a living, she didn't deserve to die alone on the streets. Why couldn't those high-and-mighty people in town turn up their noses at the men who paid the dollars instead of saving all their disgust for the women who pocketed the coins? Things sure were backward in the world.

She smoothed the tousled, dry strands of hair on her mother's head. "You deserve to be cared for, Ma, an' I'll see to it you are. You'll die warm in a bed instead of cold on a street."

Dinah returned to her room so her mother could sleep. She dropped into her tiny bed, resigned but also resolute. Tori would enjoy one small good in a whole host of bads. And Miss Flo said Dinah could use the money to buy anything she wanted. She'd use her twenty-five dollars to buy a train ticket and take herself to Mr. Harvey. So far away from Chicago nobody'd know where she'd been or what she'd done to earn her freedom. She'd be one of Harvey's girls, and nobody would look down his or her nose at Dinah ever again.

Chapter 3

Dinah

inah perched on the end of the hotel room bed, where Miss Flo had directed her to sit. The woman, her face crunched in concentration, arranged Dinah's skirt just so and finger-combed her hair into a fluffy veil that tumbled across her shoulders. Then she stepped back, gave her a frowning examination, and finally nodded. "You'll do." She aimed her finger at Dinah's nose. "Stay right there so he'll see you when he comes in the door. He'll be here soon."

Dinah licked her dry lips. "What should I say to him?"

Miss Flo laughed. "He ain't comin' for conversation, Dinah."

Embarrassment heated her face. She hunkered low.

Hard fingers gripped her chin and yanked her upright. "Don't pull into a burrow like a scared rabbit."

Miss Flo's makeup caked in the lines of her mouth and eyes, drawing attention to every wrinkle. Dinah was glad she hadn't been told to paint her face. Up close, it looked terrible. The woman pinched Dinah's chin hard, as if she'd read Dinah's thoughts, before releasing her and moving toward the door to the adjoining room. "Just sit there, like I told you, and wait." She glanced back, her face impassive. "There's no reason to be scared. It's nothing, really, for the female. He'll do it all. You just do what he says, an' everything'll be fine." She swept through the doorway and clicked the door closed behind her.

And Dinah was alone. The gentleman coming was too fine to make use of one of the rooms at the Yellow Parrot so he'd rented a hotel room uptown. She'd never imagined being in anything so luxurious. A large gilt mirror on the wall reflected ceiling-to-floor damask draperies and an enormous four-poster

brass bed with a lacy canopy. The thick mattress wore a silk cover of deepest green—dark as fir needles. Dinah cringed, imagining how she must look in the midst of such beauty. Like a thistle in a rose garden.

She folded her hands on the lap of her dress—her familiar blue-flowered calico—and crossed her bare feet. She'd wondered if she would have to wear one of the bawdy costumes the other girls wore for greeting the men, but Miss Flo said her everyday dress was best for this man. Dinah had been relieved. She felt like herself in this simple frock, even if it was faded and too tight in some places. Dressed like this, she didn't feel like a harlot. But she supposed even if she didn't dress like one, she was one. Miss Flo had waved the money—a fanned display of crisp bills—in excitement when the appointment was set. She hadn't given Dinah her half yet. She'd get it later. Afterward.

Nausea attacked. Could she do this? She swallowed. She had to do it. For Ma. To get out of this place. One time. Only one time. She could do it one time.

She stared at the raised paneled door. "He'll be here soon," Miss Flo had said. If Dinah's heart didn't settle down, she might be dead by the time he arrived. She never felt such a thud and thump in her chest. Every muscle in her body was tight and aching, too. How had her mother borne this awful anticipation, night after night for years on end? Maybe she couldn't do this...

A scrape-click sounded—a key in the lock. Dinah pressed her palms against the cool silk bedspread and held her breath. The door eased open on silent hinges, and a long, trouser-covered leg slipped through. Dinah, her chest aching to hold its lungful of air, slid her gaze from the trouser leg to the buttoned vest and open suit coat, to the crisp white collar, and finally to the goateed face of a distinguished-looking gentleman.

Her breath whooshed out. He looked so different from the rough men who visited the Yellow Parrot. Clean shaven. Well dressed. Sophisticated. Even, she dared to reflect, fatherly with his nickel-colored, slicked-back hair and top hat held in his gloved hand. Her deepest apprehensions melted as she took in his appearance.

When he spotted her, a smile lifted the corners of his mouth, and Dinah

found herself offering a timorous smile in reply. He tossed his hat onto the nearby dresser, took off his gloves, and closed the door with a sharp snap. Then he slipped his thumbs into the little pockets of his vest and gave her a thorough appraisal from her bare toes to her hair. His gaze seemed to linger on the thick, wavy tresses.

Should she have tied it back? She self-consciously reached to toss the strands over her shoulder.

"Don't."

Dinah froze with her fingers caught in the heavy strands.

"Leave it alone."

Miss Flo had told her to do what he said, so she lowered her hand to her lap and linked her fingers together again.

He removed his jacket and tossed it carelessly next to his hat. Then he began unbuttoning his vest. Little by little, the vest opened to reveal a white shirt straining against a well-filled belly. "Flo told me you were a pretty little thing."

Dinah gave a start. She had? She'd always called Dinah homely.

"She was right."

Heat filled Dinah's cheeks. Miss Flo had told her she didn't need to speak, but according to the deportment lessons at school, she should acknowledge his comment. "Th-thank you, sir."

He chuckled. "And polite, too." He tugged off the vest and sent it flying. It landed on the jacket and then fell to the floor. He left it there. He took a step toward her, his gold-flecked brown eyes pinned on her face. "I think we're going to get along just fine, Diana."

"Dinah."

"Dinah. Of course." He reached out with one hand and caught the trailing end of a strand of her hair. Slowly, he wound the freshly washed length around his finger, inching closer with each turn. Dinah sat as still as a mouse, hands in her lap, heart hammering. His trousers brushed her knees, sending a prickle down her spine. When his knuckle touched her temple, he arched one brow and gave her a pensive look. "Are you as innocent as Flo proclaimed?"

Unsure of what he'd been told, Dinah didn't know how to answer. She lifted her shoulders in an uncertain shrug.

He tugged on the strand of hair, and she tipped her head in response. Without warning, he planted his mouth over hers. His lips hadn't looked hard beneath his neatly trimmed mustache, but they felt hard. Demanding. Bruising. She tried to draw back, but his grip on her hair prevented her from moving. She whimpered.

He straightened as abruptly as he'd leaned in and released her hair with an impatient yank.

She touched one hand to her sore mouth and the other to her stinging temple. She blinked back tears.

He gazed at her, satisfaction glowing in his eyes. "Completely unspoiled." He tugged the shirttails from his waistband and began unbuttoning his shirt, the motions jerky and eager. "You'll be worth every penny of that two hundred dollars."

Two hundred? Dinah pulled in a startled breath and looked toward the adjoining door. Miss Flo had lied to her about the money. Other things the woman had said played through Dinah's memory. "It's nothing, really, for the female... You just do what he says, and everything'll be fine." Had she lied about all that, too?

She bolted to her feet, determined to fetch Miss Flo, but the man caught her arm.

"What are you doing?"

She strained to free herself. "I...I need to talk to Miss Flo."

With amazing ease, he lifted her and threw her onto the bed with the same indifference as he'd used when tossing his clothes aside. "You don't need Flo. I'll show you what to do."

Dinah scrambled for the edge. "No. I want Miss Flo."

His gaze hardened. "I don't give a fig what you want." He gave her a vicious shove that sent her backward. Her skirt flew up, and his gaze fell to her exposed limbs and ruffled underthings. His eyes glittered in a far-too-familiar manner. Had she really thought him a gentleman? He was no different than

Jamie or Max or any of the others who'd sent lecherous looks her way in the past year.

Dinah quickly shifted to a seated position and pushed her skirts down until they covered her ankles. Her ears rang. Her head throbbed. Her heart pounded so hard her chest felt ready to explode. "Please get Miss Flo. She's in the room next door. I don't want to do this."

"Shut up." He reached for her bodice.

His fingertips connecting with her collarbone ignited waves of shame and fear and revulsion. Dinah pushed his hands away and began to cry. "Please... Let me talk to Miss Flo."

"Didn't I tell you to shut up?"

She pulled as much air as possible into her heaving lungs and bellowed, "Miss Flo!"

He swung his palm against her cheek with a resounding smack. The force sent her flat against the mattress again. She yelped, and he silenced any further sound by clamping his hand over her mouth. The soft edge of his palm blocked her nostrils. She couldn't breathe. Panic thundered through her veins. His face loomed over hers, his expression forbidding. "This can be easy or hard. Do what I say, and it will be easy. Keep fighting me and…"

He didn't finish the threat, but he didn't need to. Her throbbing cheek communicated his meaning. And she needed air. Stars were dancing behind her eyes. She bobbed her head slightly. A smile reappeared on his face, and he moved his hand. Dinah sucked in a long, shuddering breath.

"Good girl." He patted her face on the same spot he'd slapped. She bit her lip to keep from whimpering. He slipped his fingers beneath her collar. With one fierce jerk, he tore open the bodice all the way to her waist.

She shivered as nausea rolled through her stomach. She was going to be sick. If he slapped her for talking, he'd surely beat her senseless if she dared to vomit. Dinah crunched her eyes closed. This was a dream. Only a dream... A nightmare, yes, but not real. It couldn't be real.

Over the next hour she learned Miss Flo wasn't the only liar. Dinah had lied to herself—it was real, not a nightmare. And he'd lied, too. There was

nothing *easy* about what he did to her. When he finished, he made use of the water in the pitcher, dressed, and left without a word.

She lay on the soiled mattress, curled in a discarded ball, for nearly another hour before she found the courage to unfold her sore, aching body. Bruises dotted her wrists. More decorated her thighs. Warm, silent tears rolled down her cheeks as she haltingly gathered the torn remnants of her dress, petticoats, and chemise.

As she eased herself up with her wadded clothing in her arms, she caught a glimpse in the mirror of a pale face wearing a pinkish-purple smudge on the cheekbone and surrounded by a mass of tangled hair. She blinked twice in confusion. Was that truly her? She took two stumbling steps closer and stared hard at the image. Yes, her own face—and yet a stranger's face—peered back at her.

She dropped her clothes, covered her face with her palms, and burst into loud, pain-filled sobs. Her entire body convulsed with the force of her crying, but the torrent of tears did nothing to wash away the pain and degradation of the past hours.

A door latch clicked, footsteps approached, and someone slipped something warm and soft around her bare shoulders. Hands guided her to the bed and eased her onto its edge. Then fingers caught her bruised wrists and pulled them downward. Despite the thick robe covering her nakedness, chills shook Dinah's frame. She looked at Miss Flo, who stood before her. Tears veiled her eyes, making the woman's image waver, but she heard clearly her calm, unconcerned statement.

"I've ordered a tub an' hot water. You'll feel better after you've soaked a bit an' had a good wash."

Dinah might have foolishly believed such a statement earlier, but her innocence had been shattered. That man—that so-called *gentleman*—had left his imprint on her soul just as he'd left his mark on her face. She'd never be clean. She'd never feel better. She touched her bruised cheek with her trembling fingers and grated out, "Liar."

She expected Miss Flo's anger, but instead the woman laughed. She kicked

at the pile of clothes on the floor. "I'm glad I thought to bring another dress. You're gonna need it."

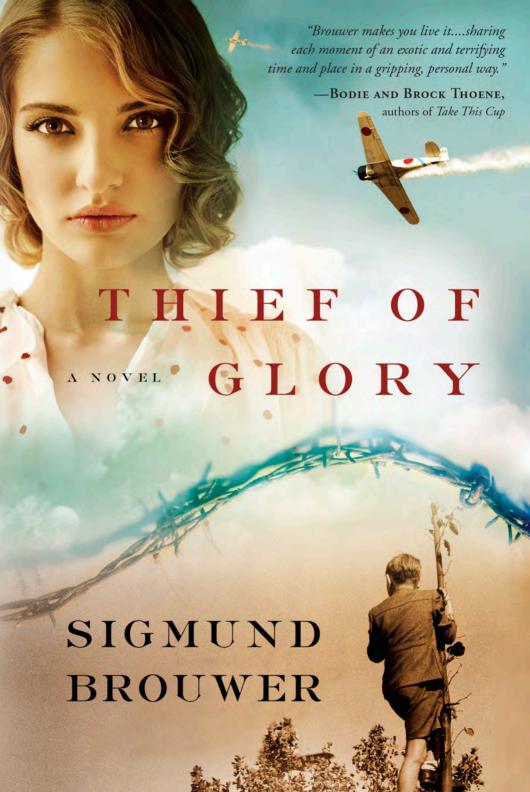
Dinah swiped the tears from her face with her wrists, then hunkered into the robe. "I don't want your dress." She didn't even want the promised money. But she'd take it. She hated how much she needed it. She hated herself for how much she needed it.

Miss Flo balled her hands on her hips. "Well, you can't leave here in the altogether. So you'll have to take it whether you want it or not." She sighed and plopped down next to Dinah. "Listen, honey, take it from someone who knows. It'll never hurt like this again. But there's only one first time. That's why you gotta get as much as you can from it." She reached out as if to pat Dinah's knee, but Dinah jerked away. Miss Flo sighed again and rose. "I'll go hurry them up with that tub. Just wait there." She left the room.

Naked and so sore it hurt to breathe, Dinah had no choice but to wait. One of Miss Flo's comments returned to haunt her. "There's only one first time." She found no reassurance—if it were even true—that it would never hurt like this again, but it mattered little compared to the realization now collapsing her heart.

Her entire life she'd envied the children who went home to a mother and father, who fought and shared and played with brothers and sisters. She'd dreamed of the day she would grow up, marry, have children, and be part of such a family herself. Why hadn't she stopped to think about the future, being courted, giving herself to her husband on her marriage bed?

"There's only one first time." She had just sacrificed something she could never get back. No decent man would want her now.



Journal 1—Dutch East Indies

banyan tree begins when its seeds germinate in the crevices of a host tree. It sends to the ground tendrils that become prop roots with enough room for children to crawl beneath, prop roots that grow into thick, woody trunks and make it look like the tree is standing above the ground. The roots, given time, look no different than the tree it has begun to strangle. Eventually, when the original support tree dies and rots, the banyan develops a hollow central core.

In a kampong—village—on the island of Java, in the then-called Dutch East Indies, stood such a banyan tree almost two hundred years old. On foggy evenings, even adults avoided passing by its ghostly silhouette, but on the morning of my tenth birthday, sunlight filtered through a sticky haze after a monsoon, giving everything a glow of tranquil beauty. There, a marble game beneath the branches was an event as seemingly inconsequential as a banyan seed taking root in the bark of an unsuspecting tree, but the tendrils of the consequences became a journey that has taken me some three score and ten years to complete.

It was market day, and as a special privilege to me, Mother had left my younger brother and twin sisters in the care of our servants. In the early morning, before the tropical heat could slow our progress, she and I journeyed on back of the white horse she was so proud of, past the manicured grounds of our handsome home and along the tributary where my siblings and I often played. Farther down, the small river emptied into the busy port of Semarang. While

it was not a school day, my father—the headmaster—and my older half brothers were supervising the maintenance of the building where all the blond-haired children experienced the exclusive Dutch education system.

As we passed, Indonesian peasants bowed and smiled at us. Ahead, shimmers of heat rose from the uneven cobblestones that formed the village square. Vibrant hues of Javanese batik fabrics, with their localized patterns of flowers and animals and folklore as familiar to me as my marbles, peeked from market stalls. I breathed in the smell of cinnamon and cardamom and curry powders mixed with the scents of fried foods and ripe mangoes and lychees.

I was a tiny king that morning, continuously shaking off my mother's attempts to grasp my hand. She had already purchased spices from the old man at one of the Chinese stalls. He had risen beyond his status as a *singkeh*, an impoverished immigrant laborer from the southern provinces of China, this elevation signaled by his right thumbnail, which was at least two inches long and fit in a curving, encasing sheath with elaborate painted decorations. He kept it prominently displayed with his hands resting in his lap, a clear message that he held a privileged position and did not need to work with his hands. I'd long stopped being fascinated by this and was impatient to be moving, just as I'd long stopped being fascinated by his plump wife in a colorful long dress as she flicked the beads on her abacus to calculate prices with infallible accuracy.

I pulled away to help an older Dutch woman who was bartering with an Indonesian baker. She had not noticed that bank notes had fallen from her purse. I retrieved them for her but was in no mood for effusive thanks, partly because I thought it ridiculous to thank me for not stealing, but mainly because I knew what the other boys my age were doing at that moment. I needed to be on my way. With a quick "Dag, mevrouw"—Good day, madam—I bolted toward the banyan, giving no heed to my mother's command to return.

For there, with potential loot placed in a wide chalked circle, were fresh victims. I might not have been allowed to keep the marbles I won from my

younger siblings, but these Dutch boys were fair game. I slowed to an amble of pretended casualness as I neared, whistling and looking properly sharp in white shorts and a white linen shirt that had been hand pressed by Indonesian servants. I put on a show of indifference that I'd perfected and that served me well my whole life. Then I stopped when I saw her, all my apparent apathy instantly vanquished.

Laura.

As an old man, I can attest to the power of love at first sight. I can attest that the memory of a moment can endure—and haunt—for a lifetime. There are so many other moments slipping away from me, but this one remains.

Laura.

What is rarely, if ever, mentioned by poets is that hatred can have the same power, for that was the same moment that I first saw him. The impact of that memory has never waned either. This, too, remains as layers of my life slip away like peeling skin.

Georgie.

I had no foreshadowing, of course, that the last few steps toward the shade beneath those glossy leaves would eventually send me into the holding cell of a Washington, DC police station where, at age eighty-one, I faced the lawyer—also my daughter and only child—who refused to secure my release until I promised to tell her the events of my journey there.

All these years later, across from her in that holding cell, I knew my daughter demanded this because she craved to make sense of a lifetime in the cold shade of my hollowness, for the span of decades since that marble game had withered me, the tendrils of my vanities and deceptions and self-deceptions long grown into strangling prop roots. Even so, as I agreed to my daughter's terms, I maintained my emotional distance and made no mention that I intended to have this story delivered to her after my death.

Such, too, is the power of shame.

aura.

Beneath the banyan, a heart-stopping longing overwhelmed me at the glimpse of her face and shy smile. It was romantic love in the purest sense, uncluttered by any notion of physical desire, for I was ten, much too young to know how lust complicates the matters of the human race.

The sensation was utterly new to me. But it was not without context. At night, by oil lamps screened to keep moths from the flame, I had three times read *Ivanhoe* by Sir Walter Scott, the Dutch translation by Gerard Keller. As soon as the last page was finished, I would turn to page one of chapter one. I had just started it for the fourth time. Thus I'd been immersed in chivalry at its finest, and here, finally, was proof that the love I'd read about in the story also existed in real life.

I was lost, first, in her eyes—unlike many of the Dutch, a hazel brown—which regarded me with a calmness that pulled stronger than gravity. She looked away, then back again. I felt like I could only breathe from the top of my lungs in shallow gasps. Her hair, thick and blond and curled, rested upon her shoulders. She wore a light-blue dress, tied at the waist with a wide bow, with a yellow butterfly brooch on her right shoulder. She stole away from me any sense of sound except for a universal harmony that I hadn't known existed. So as the nine-year-old Laura Jansen bequeathed upon me a radiant gaze, I became Ivanhoe, and she the beautiful Lady Rowena. Standing at the edge of the chalked circle, I was instantly and irrevocably determined that nothing would stop me from becoming champion of the day, earning the right to bestow upon her the honor of Queen of the Tournament.

As I was to discover, it was Laura's third day in-country and her first visit to the village. This meant I was as much a stranger to her as any boy could be, but the emotions that overwhelmed her, which she recounted to me years later, were as much a mystery to her young soul as my emotions were to mine.

I would shortly discover that Laura had accompanied her *oma*—grandmother—on the voyage from the Netherlands. Her *oom* Gert—uncle Gert—worked for the Dutch Shell Oil Company as a refinery engineer, and his wife had recently died from pneumonia. Laura and her oma had come to help Gert and his large family through the difficult situation.

That morning I surveyed my opponents gathered around her, a motley bunch of boys I'd vanquished one way or another at events where Dutch families gathered to celebrate a holiday or other special occasion. From marble games to subsequent fistfights that resulted from marble games, the fathers monitored our battles but wisely kept them as hidden from the matriarchs as we did. I knew all of these boys. Except one.

As the other boys took involuntary steps backward in deference to my established reign, I felt goose bumps run up my spine. The parting of this group had revealed a boy at the center whom I'd never seen before. He was kneeling, with a marble held in shooting position on top of the thumbnail of his left hand, edge of the thumb curled beneath index finger, ready to flick. Left hand.

The marble I noticed too. For good reason. It was an onionskin, purple and white, with a transparent core. The swirls were twisted counterclockwise and that made it even more of a rarity. Inside the chalked circle was an X formed by two lines of twelve marbles. At a glance I could tell none were worth the risk of losing the onionskin. Without doubt, stupidity was not part of this boy's nature, so either he was very good or he came from wealth that allowed him to not care about the worth of the onionskin.

When he stood, it was obvious that he had two inches on me, and a lot of extra bulk. His arched eyebrow matched my own. Dark hair to my blond.

Khaki pants and tousled shirt to my pressed-linen shorts and shirt. Wealth, most likely, against the limited salary of my father's headmaster position.

I would learn his name was Georgie Smith. He was the son of the American sent to oversee the refinery where Laura's uncle worked as an engineer. He'd arrived by the same ship that had carried Laura and her oma.

I doubt Georgie's conscious brain registered the deferential movements of the other boys, but his animal instinct would not have failed to miss it. Or the reasons for it. Like an electrical current generated by rising tension, hatred crackled between us. I believe that had we each been armed with clubs, we would have charged forward without hesitation at the slightest of provocations.

This unspoken hatred was established in the time it took to lock eyes. With effort, I pretended not to see him as I moved to the edge of the chalked circle and squatted. I could feel the burn of his gaze on my right shoulder, as I imagined the caressing smile of Laura warming my left shoulder. It was no accident I had chosen a position that placed me between them.

"Who is next?" I asked, keeping my eyes on the marbles.

"We've been saving a place for you," Timothy said. He was eight years old, and a snot-nosed, obsequious toad, but his answer established that I was leader.

Still watching and waiting for the onionskin to enter the circle, I fumbled with my belt. I always carried two small pouches of marbles tied to my belt and tucked inside my shorts.

"He's not playing," Georgie said.

This earned a respectful gasp from the other boys.

I turned my head to give him a direct stare.

"He wasn't here when the game started so he can't be part of it," Georgie continued, speaking of me in the third person as if I were not there in front of him. "He should run back to his mother and she can inspect his pretty clothes so she can make sure he hasn't smudged himself or wet his pants."

He smirked and waited for my response.

THREE

ith Georgie only a few steps away, every nerve of mine tingled; I was intensely aware of the full challenge he had thrown at me and of the significance of how I responded. Not only in Laura's eyes, which was what mattered most, but in how it might change my status among my peers. Over the years, my role in the pack of local boys had been clearly established. I could roam through their territory as I pleased with a well-earned diplomatic pass. Preteen boys do not articulate this, but our genetic imprint demands a pecking order. It unfolds whenever boys who are old enough to walk grasp at toys in the hands of other boys.

I looked away from Georgie.

"What is your name?" I asked Laura, for of course, I didn't know it then. What I believed already, without doubt, was that she was destined to be my lifelong love.

"Laura," she answered. "My name is Laura Jansen."

Laura.

"Her father works for my father," the American boy said. His Dutch had an accent to it, but, I had to admit, he appeared to be able to speak it fluently. "At the refinery."

At this, I saw the slightest flinch on Laura's face.

The power of the human brain to read mere flickers of body language, the tiniest of voice inflections, and the subtlety of eye movement, all to draw instant and subconscious conclusions beyond the reach of studied logic, should never be underestimated. Children learn early to assess a parent's mood and react accordingly. Because I was the only one seeing her face—absorbed in it

as I was, despite the threat from Georgie—only I understood I had just won the war against the boy I already hated. What remained, however, were the battles.

"Hello, Laura," I said, as if only she and I shared the shade of the banyan, for in a way, of course, that was true. "My name is Jeremiah Prins. Are you here at the market with your parents?"

"I was told to watch her," my enemy said, giving more evidence that she was someone he wanted to impress. "She came with me."

Laura flinched again, and those hazel brown eyes lost some calm.

"I came with my oma to the market," Laura answered. "Georgie asked to join us because he was bored."

She finally glanced at him. "I don't need anyone to watch over me."

He understood how clearly she was making her choice known, and his body went rigid.

"This seems to be an unpleasant situation," I told Laura, echoing how I believed a knight like Ivanhoe would speak. "Would it be all right if I took you to your oma? The market is confusing, and if it's your first time, I can make it easier for you."

I was rewarded with the smile. I reached for her hand, and she took a step toward me. Away from Georgie.

"Coward," Georgie said with full sneer.

"Oh," I said, having fully expected and anticipated that he would not let me walk away without a challenge. I did not want to walk away. "Coward? Afraid of what?"

"A fight," he said.

I was disappointed that my hand had not reached Laura's and that I needed to turn to face him before I could feel the touch of her fingers against mine.

"Who wants to fight me?" I asked. Already I could tell that I would be able to twist and skewer him with words.

He grunted with frustration. "I just called you a momma's boy."

"Actually," I said, "you suggested that she inspect my clothing. I don't need help with that. It's rather silly to suggest that a boy our age needs help to know if he's wet his pants."

I paused. Timing is everything. "Unless it's happened to you."

That earned laughter. Like an arrow, it had the desired effect on Georgie, who clenched his fists.

"I was insulting you," he said. "Are you that stupid? It should make you want to fight me. Unless you are chicken."

"If you want to fight," I said, "why don't you just ask?"

This was entertaining for the other boys. I knew it and enjoyed it.

Georgie spit in my direction. "I'm going to pound you so bad you'll bleed from your ears."

"How can that be if we don't fight?" I asked.

"See. Chicken."

"That doesn't sound like a question to me," I said. I turned to Laura, who had giggled when the other boys laughed. "It will be embarrassing to him if I need to explain what a question is. Let's find your oma."

Georgie began to gurgle. Such is the power of deliberate insouciance.

"Come on," Georgie half shouted. "Let's fight."

"All you need to do is ask," I said. "Is that so difficult to understand?"

Georgie had no idea how easily I had taken control of the situation. But then, I had no idea of the extent of his cruelty and preference for inflicting pain. Yet.

Before Georgie could do what I was essentially commanding him to do, Klaus Akkermans stepped onto our stage. Klaus was one of the older boys, almost thirteen. Slicked-back hair and a gap between his front teeth. Twenty pounds heavier than I. During our fistfight a few months ago, he'd hit me so hard in the belly that I had thrown up on his feet.

"I wouldn't ask," Klaus told Georgie. "Jeremiah doesn't lose fights."

"He's fast," Timmie the Toad said. If Timmie was publicly choosing sides this early, then the invisible opinion of the group had shifted in my favor. "When Jeremiah was four, a cobra crawled into his bed. He grabbed it by the neck and went into the kitchen and cut off its head. Right, Jeremiah?"

I shrugged. Truth was, I couldn't remember it, and family stories, I'm sure, have a way of getting exaggerated with each retell.

"It's not that he's fast," Klaus told Georgie. "Although he is. He just doesn't lose fights."

Georgie looked back and forth between Klaus and Timmie the Toad, trying to evaluate this new information.

"Not even the teenagers fight him," said Alfie Devroome. He had the slightest of a clubfoot on his left side. When we chose teams for races, I always made sure he was my second or third pick. First would look too patronizing.

"He can't win fights against teenagers," Georgie said. "Look at how little he is."

Klaus shook his head. "Nobody said he *wins* fights. He just doesn't lose them. We've just about all had our turns against Jeremiah." He glanced around, then looked back at Georgie. "When I fought him, I hit him so many times my hands hurt, and he was bleeding everywhere. He even threw up on my shoes. It only ended because I had to tell him I was tired."

Klaus put his hands on his hips. "Like I said, he didn't win. But he didn't lose. Older boys know they would have to kill him to end the fight, so they leave him alone."

"You also lost some teeth," Timmie the Toad reminded Klaus. "He did hit you a couple of good ones."

"I've told you," Klaus answered. "Those were loose anyway."

"And don't forget about how he whacked a sow in the head with a hammer and killed it," added Simon Leeuwenhoek, a chubby kid and the only one in the bunch I had not fought. Simon was too good-natured for that. And his parents were rich so he didn't care much about how many marbles he lost. "Jeremiah was only nine."

This I did remember.

"I didn't kill it," I said. "I just hit it once. Because it was attacking me."

The previous summer, we had been visiting a plantation of a family whose children attended my father's school. I had ignored my mother's warning to stay away from the sow and piglets inside the pen, and the sow had torn a chunk out of my left calf as I was scrambling to climb out.

As happened when I was threatened physically, a switch inside of me had flipped on and numbed my body to anything except cold and calculating rage, accelerated by all the benefits of accompanying adrenaline. It means that when I fight, I still have clarity of thought, and I'm aware that this is a rarity of inheritance in which I can and should take no pride.

I'd returned to the pigpen with a hammer found in a nearby shed. When the sow charged me again, I had brought it down with both hands and solidly struck it between the eyes. Knocked it cold. The fathers had not chosen sides, but an argument escalated between the mothers. Mine made the accusation that dangerous animals should be controlled, and the other mother suggested that I, not the sow, was the dangerous animal and that I was a bad example to the other children. Even though the sow only swayed sideways when it got up and walked, and I needed thirty stitches to pull together the ragged skin and muscle of my calf, the other mother insisted I was to blame and we hadn't been invited back. I'd promised not to do something like that again because it had upset my mother. She spent hours alone in a dark, cool room when things upset her. Her spells frightened all of us children in the family.

"I'm not scared," Georgie told our audience. To his credit, he didn't sound scared. He wanted to fight me as badly as I wanted to fight him.

"Then ask," I said. I could sense the coldness at the edge of my gut, and I

wanted to feel his nose crack against my fist. "I'm not allowed to ask for a fight. And I'm not allowed to take the first swing."

Those were my father's rules. He said Jesus had not been one to fight. However, Father allowed that it would be impractical to live without any kind of self-defense. His corollary advice was that if you had to strike back, do it far out of proportion to the attack because that will discourage future attacks. This counsel had a certain kind of logic if you were hoping to be able to settle back to living like Jesus, but Georgie, as I would learn in the coming years, was just as determined to escalate his hatred against me as I was against him.

There was silence as Georgie realized that asking me to fight would be his first defeat, but he had no choice.

"Will you fight me?" Georgie finally asked. His tone suggested that he was stunned to find himself in the position of a supplicant, and still trying to figure out how it had happened.

"Yes," I said. "But first I'd like to ask Laura if she will leave and shop with her oma in the market. This will be ugly."

"I'm not afraid of ugly," she said. "I'm not a sissy."

A slight flicker of indignation crossed her face. This girl, it was obvious, did not like being told what to do. That simply made her Dutch. I recovered with an immediate explanation.

"I just don't want you to have to lie about it when the mothers ask later," I said. "If you don't see anything, you won't have to lie. It's a way of protecting me."

Lots of unspoken assumptions in there, all favoring me, like the assumption that she would want to protect me, even enough to lie for me. What was artful was that nothing in my request suggested she should protect Georgie, even though his father was the boss of her father.

"Oh," she said to me. "Since you asked. Yes."

It hadn't occurred to me that she would give any other answer.

I turned to Georgie. "We're going to need to find a place where mothers can't see us. Just past the village there's a stream and a small fenced pasture for goats. The boys will take you there and I'll have both pieces of rope. I know where I can find some in the market."

"Rope?" Georgie would have been inhuman not to ask.

"I don't want you running away," I said. The cold inside me was mush-rooming, and horrible as it is to confess, I was savoring the sensation and the chance to inflict punishment on him. I had no concern about the punishment I'd have to endure for that chance. "The pasture is fenced. We tie our own waists to a fence post with enough slack in each rope that we can reach each other. Once we are tied to the fence posts, one won't be able to run away from the other. Then we fight."

I grinned at the taller and broader boy in front of me.

"Unless," I said, "you are chicken."

CINDY WOODSMALL

New York Times Best-selling Author of The Winnowing Season

A Love Undone

An Amish Novel of Shattered Dreams and God's Unfailing Grace

osanna peered out the kitchen window, trying to see through the sheets of rain. What was taking her husband so long? Had the wheels of his rig gotten buried in mud somewhere? After days of hard rain, the ground was saturated. Or was her very social husband simply visiting with his brother, thinking he had more than enough time to get Rosanna to Viola Mae's house?

Rosanna glanced at the clock. Viola Mae had called two hours ago, thinking her labor may have begun. Perhaps it had, but from her experience as a midwife, Rosanna was pretty sure Viola Mae's first child would take all night and perhaps half of tomorrow before entering this world. And that was *if* Viola was actually in labor.

Nevertheless, the young mom-to-be had to be seen tonight. Rosanna drove herself when the weather was good or even half-decent, but her easygoing, supportive husband insisted on driving her whenever there was snow, fog, or heavy rains. If Rosanna's examination indicated Viola Mae was in labor, Rosanna would stay the night, and her husband would return home.

She wished, and not for the first time, that the Amish in Winter Valley weren't so cut off from the rest of the world. The serenity of living in northwestern Pennsylvania couldn't be beat, but there wasn't a clinic or doctor in the valley, and after her *Mamm* passed away, Rosanna was the only midwife in the region. When at twenty

years old Rosanna had given birth to her first child, her own Mamm had delivered the baby girl, declaring the little one would also become a midwife. That was nineteen years ago, and Jolene was many wonderful things, but a midwife was not one of them.

A thud pulled Rosanna's attention to the happenings in the room. A book had fallen from the kitchen table. Her three schoolage children were sitting around one end of the kitchen table, homework spread out in front of them as Jolene helped. Four-year-old Hope sat at the table with them, but she wasn't in school yet. She liked homework hour, though, and Jolene had her close to reading and writing already. But the child who required the most help was Ray. After his near-fatal accident three years ago, no one had believed he'd be able to attend school at all—no one except Jolene. Rosanna's chest tightened with anxiety when she considered how difficult an adjustment Ray would have when Jolene moved out of state.

The light aroma of cooked celery hung in the air. Dozens of jars of freshly canned goods filled half the kitchen table. She and Jolene had made good use of the last three days of rain, finally catching up on their canning of September's produce, especially the overabundance of celery for Jolene's wedding. They'd planted more potatoes than ever before just for the wedding feast, but they didn't need to can those. Her eldest child, the one Rosanna couldn't get through a day without, would marry and leave the state in a few weeks. Was Rosanna doing a decent job of hiding the grief she felt? As for her daughter, she was so excited to embrace her future she could hardly sleep.

Where had all the days gone between giving birth to her and giving her away to be wed?

Jolene glanced up from the mounds of papers and looked out the kitchen window. "Is that his rig coming down the road?"

Rosanna couldn't tell, not yet. But she did notice her lone and beloved dogwood, the one her husband had given her as a wedding present. Most of its red leaves had been beaten from the branches, and it'd been looking rather puny the last few years. Would its roots survive such a drenching? At the end of last winter, she and Jolene had cut a few shoots from the tree, hoping to grow new trees before this one died. They should've started that years ago when the dogwood was still healthy.

"It's Daed." Jolene recognized his rig before Rosanna.

She didn't have to ask Jolene to finish helping with homework or to get supper on the table. If Viola Mae wasn't in labor and Rosanna returned home in a couple of hours, the kitchen sinks and counters would be spotless. Maybe the floors too if Jolene and her siblings got into another soapsuds battle. They loved those, and the upside was that the floors had to be mopped dry when they were through.

But on the nights when their Daed wasn't home by eight, Jolene would put her sixteen-year-old brother in charge, and she'd retreat to the phone shanty to talk with Van Beiler for hours. Jolene's loyalty to her brothers and sisters had a clearly marked line when it came to Van. Once he was home from work or arrived for a date or visit, he came first. Rosanna supposed that was how it should be, especially since Jolene was mere weeks away from her wedding. And when he'd said he thought the best place for them to live was in Ohio near his parents, Jolene hadn't hesitated for a second. She'd said that as long as he was by her side, she could live anywhere and survive anything. Later Jolene told Rosanna that Van wanted to move there to support Jolene's desire to do artwork. Painting and drawing scenery and animals and people weren't considered idolatry by the bishop in that district. Van was perfect for Jolene, but did he have to take her to Ohio?

Rosanna bit back her tears. Was it this hard for every mom whose child moved far away? She tried to focus on the bright side of today. "Despite the rain it will feel good to get out. Except for church the Sunday before last, I haven't been off this farm in weeks."

Jolene picked a pencil off the floor. "If you feel cooped up, you should've gone out with Van and me the other night like we asked."

Rosanna clicked her tongue at the absurdity of that idea—her on a date with them. It was ridiculous, but the invite had tempted her and made her feel loved.

Van would make a wonderful son-in-law. He was thoughtful and kind, and he and Jolene were so good together. Rosanna had absolutely no doubt they'd make a strong family unit. Van was older than Jolene, and she had been in love with him since he'd moved here to work in his uncle's blacksmith shop when she was fifteen. But Van hadn't noticed her until two years ago. To hear him tell it, he wasn't interested in finding somebody. A girlfriend came with too many responsibilities for his liking, especially since he was still a teen. Then one day he'd barreled out of his uncle's blacksmith shop hurrying to grab lunch at the nearby bakery, and he saw Jolene trying to open the door to the bakery while balancing a basket of pastries. He said she'd owned his every thought since.

Rosanna had never seen a man as much in love as Van was, so she couldn't begrudge him for taking Jolene to live elsewhere. Since Jolene had never really been allowed to paint, maybe she'd give it a try and decide it wasn't that important to her after all, and then she and Van would move back.

A mother could only hope.

The door banged open, and her husband walked in carrying a large package. His blue eyes held the same zest for life she'd fallen in love with more than twenty years ago.

She put her hands on her hips. "Benny Keim, what have you done this time?"

He grinned. "A surprise for Jolene. But first"—he held up the gold, shiny box—"cookies."

"Benny." Rosanna frowned. "Not before supper."

He walked over to her. "But I need to distract them." He raised his eyebrows up and down. What did he have up his sleeve?

"Fine."

He kissed Rosanna's forehead, and then he pointed at Jolene. "You stay put."

Jolene grinned and pointed at the floor. "Won't budge." But she looked quizzically at her mom, and Rosanna shrugged, feeling a tingle of excitement.

Her husband set the box on top of the homework papers and opened it. "Only two cookies for each of you until after supper."

Benny returned to Jolene and unbuttoned his coat, revealing a brown paper package about the size of a flat shoebox pressed against his chest. He held it out to her. "It's not for anyone to see except you."

Jolene kept her back to her siblings and opened it. Before Rosanna could see what it was, her daughter's eyes filled with tears, and she engulfed her dad. "*Denki*," she whispered.

Rosanna's heart sang, but she hid all joy from her tone. "Well, let's see what he's done this time."

Jolene released him and let Rosanna peer over the brown paper. Paintbrushes. While she was hoping her daughter wouldn't like to paint and would talk Van into returning here to live, Rosanna's husband was encouraging her to paint. "I can't believe you."

Benny put an arm around her shoulders. "She's been obedient all these years, Rosie. We couldn't have asked for a better daughter. Let her enjoy the gift."

He was right, but it was so hard to let Jolene move that far away. He released Rosanna and touched the paintbrush with the longest bristles. "When I ordered them, the lady on the phone said they're the very best."

Jolene shook her head. "No, they aren't." She hugged him again, tears trickling down her cheeks. "You're the best."

Benny grinned, his face red from the fuss Jolene was making over him. "Well, we'd better go before Viola Mae's husband passes out from panicking."

Rosanna opened her special kitchen drawer, lifted the false bottom, and waited as Jolene put the contraband next to a few forbidden photos of the family. Jolene's radiant smile warmed Rosanna's heart. This time next month Jolene would be married and finally living under a bishop who would allow her to discover if she had a gift for creating artwork. That thought would bring Rosanna a lot of comfort when she desperately missed her daughter.

She put on her coat, and before long she and her husband were in the buggy, lumbering toward the next town. It'd be nice if she weren't the only midwife in this area who could help deliver babies. Maybe one of Rosanna's other daughters would enjoy such fulfilling work. Torrents of rain fell from the sky, and she was grateful her husband drove her in foul weather and never complained that birthing babies was an interruption to their home life.

Memories of yesteryear filled Rosanna's heart. When Jolene was little, they'd played dolls, snuggled while reading, attended church, and caught fireflies. By the time she was three, they began to welcome new babies, tend the garden, and end the day playing simple board games. As she grew, they sang while canning goods for winter, sewing clothes for the little ones, and washing mountains of diapers. Jolene's childhood days had rolled in and out day after day.

As much as Rosanna tried, she had never learned how to grab hold of even one day and make it stand still. In what seemed like a blink of an eye, Jolene's school days were behind her, and at fourteen she began to work for the local bakery. Not long after that she'd shared her greatest secret just with Rosanna—her dream of one day marrying Van, if only he'd notice her. He'd moved to their district at seventeen years old to apprentice under his uncle, and all the teen girls had their eyes on him. Especially Donna Glick, Jolene's most ardent competitor since they were schoolgirls.

The rig wobbled hard, and she was pulled from her yesterdays, feeling sudden concern for today. The rains fell harder the farther they went. Could her husband see the lines on the road? She couldn't.

Benny gripped the reins tightly. "We have to turn back." The alarm on his face assured her there were worse things than letting a new mom deliver a child without a midwife.

She nodded.

But before he could turn the rig around, something hit one of

the wheels, and the rig jolted hard and then seemed to float several feet.

What was happening? Rosanna's head spun, and nothing seemed to make sense. Why was Benny pulling back on the reins but the rig continued to move?

Their carriage struck a yellow sign with the symbol for a river, and the rig floated right past it. "We're in the river!" Her husband's scream pierced her heart.

The rig tipped, and water rushed inside. Benny's strong hands pulled her out.

The world became a blur of muddy snapshots. Branches of trees overhead. Debris floating downstream with her. Gray raindrops hiding the sky.

Two weeks later

olene stood at the kitchen sink, her hands in sudsy water as she stared out the open window. Rays of golden light spread across green fields with patches of brown, dying grass. The dark silhouette of almost-barren trees reminded her of ink art from one of her books. The weather was tranquil, just another beautiful fall evening before sunset.

The serenity of it contradicted their reality. The heavy rains were long gone, leaving two deaths in their wake. Viola Mae had given birth to a healthy son at four in the morning, delivered into the hands of a shaky mother-in-law. Mom and baby were fine. But it had taken a rescue team four days to find the bodies of Jolene's parents.

Then the Amish community had put two caskets in the ground. Since that day a week ago, whether awake or asleep, Jolene continually saw Amish men holding on to ropes as they stood on each side of the grave, lowering two pine caskets into the ground.

Jolene's vision blurred, but she was used to her eyes brimming with tears these days. The world felt huge and gray, as if she could become lost in the vastness of its fog, and yet the air itself seemed to press in on all sides trying to squeeze the breath right out of her.

Warm hands rested on Jolene's shoulders. "Jo." Van's lips were near her ear. She tried to answer him, but the more days that passed, the harder it was to respond to the world around her. She'd been strong for her siblings at first to help guide them through the process, but now her strength seemed gone.

Was the bishop right? Would her parents expect her to accept the decision her uncles had come to?

Van squeezed her shoulders reassuringly. "We need to talk before the others return."

It couldn't be time for that already. She looked at the clock. How were the hours slipping by into nothingness? At her request Van had sent home all her Amish relatives, friends, and church leaders earlier today. She, Van, and her siblings needed to talk among themselves before tonight's meeting.

Tonight. The thought of it stole her breath—if she was actually breathing. Nothing felt real. Absolutely nothing.

"Kumm." He eased her away from the sink, and she watched as dirty water and melting soapsuds fell from her hands and plopped on the floor. "Leave it." He guided her toward the kitchen table.

Her siblings were there, each in a chair. Had he called them to gather, or had they been sitting at the table while she'd been at the sink *not* washing dishes? Their eyes were fixed on her. Jolene's heart thudded. She'd dreaded this chat to try to separate their emotions from the honesty of their needs so she could understand what was best for them in the long run.

Jolene sat looking at her five siblings—Josiah, Michael, Naomi, Ray, and Hope. Van moved next to her, ready to speak for her or to her as needed.

Twelve-year-old Naomi cleared her throat. "What will happen to us?"

Jolene intertwined her fingers, noticing how wet her hands were. It seemed odd how grief magnified little details while blocking out the big things. She was keenly aware of the damp smudges her hands were making on the table right now, but she couldn't recall what they'd eaten for dinner...or if she'd thought to provide drinks.

Ray climbed into her lap. Since he was eight years old now, Mama had said he was too big to sit in Jolene's lap anymore, but at the moment he felt as tiny and frail as a kitten. Was that feeling God's way of letting her know how Ray felt? Hope moved to the side of Jolene's chair, and Jolene shifted Ray to one leg and put Hope on the other.

They were orphans now, and by the looks on her brothers' and sisters' faces, they were well aware of what that meant. After a few years would Hope remember their parents? Would Ray have more than scattered memories of them?

Jolene licked her lips. "Your uncles have offered a plan." It wasn't one she liked, but what could she do about it? Her siblings would be separated, living with different uncles. Their uncles had large and growing families, and they felt they could take only one child each with the exception of Uncle Pete. He had all sons so far, and he and his wife were willing to take both Naomi and Hope back to Indiana with them. But the fog engulfing Jolene wasn't thick enough to keep her from seeing how awful that plan was.

Van drew a deep breath. "It won't be possible to stay together, but if we can, we'll give you say-so concerning which uncle you'd like to live with."

Her siblings gasped, and all except sixteen-year-old Josiah burst into tears.

Jolene's face flushed as her feelings of helplessness changed to anger. What was Van thinking to blurt that out? After much discussion among themselves, her uncles and the church leaders thought it was the only solution to "the situation," but Jolene had not agreed to the plan. When did a family, its hearth and home and loyalties, become no more than a *situation*?

A vision of the pine coffins being lowered into the ground circled to the forefront of her thoughts again, and she knew the answer—when the ones who had created the family died.

Josiah rapped on the table, and Jolene looked at him. "This is the plan—to divide up what's left of us like a litter of puppies?" He studied Jolene, his tender heart evident in his eyes, but he seemed confused by her willingness to consider what her uncles and the church leaders wanted.

She lowered her eyes, looking at the smudges of water on the table. "It's a plan made by good people who love us."

Van slid his hand over Jolene's. "It's okay if you're not ready to accept your uncles' offer yet, but it isn't as if there are a lot of choices, Josiah. At your age I doubt you can begin to understand what it takes to feed, house, and raise a family like this."

Did Van hear himself?

Jolene pulled her hand from his. "Do not talk about us as if we're cattle that need to be rebranded and sold at auction."

Van nodded. "Sorry. I don't mean it that way. You know I don't."

Fourteen-year-old Michael glanced at Josiah before turning to Jolene. "Why can't we live here with you and Van?"

Was she really supposed to marry next week? She couldn't find

one familiar thought or feeling. How could anyone marry in such a state? "This house is a rental and not one Van and I could afford."

"We don't own it?" Ray asked.

She shook her head. Her parents actually owned very little, but Mama had always said it's what owns your heart, not what you own, that matters. Mamm had given birth to all her children under this roof, but Jolene couldn't see any way they could hold on to it. But couldn't she and Van hold on to the children? It'd be a really tight fit, but they could make do in the carriage house apartment in Ohio with all her siblings, couldn't they? Had Van really considered the possibility? All she could recall was his guidance on what he needed her to do. Perhaps they needed to talk about what *she* wanted.

"Josiah, would you take the children upstairs and read to them?" Had they finished *Charlotte's Web*? She'd begun it with them the night her Daed didn't return. When Viola Mae's husband had called the phone shanty around eight thirty that night, Jolene had been on the phone with Van. So she'd switched over to see who was calling, thinking it might be Daed saying that he'd been held up talking with the dad-to-be and that he'd be home soon. He often stayed with Mamm and visited with the expectant Daed. But it hadn't been her Daed on the line. That's when she learned that her parents hadn't yet made it to their destination. It should have taken them forty minutes at the most to arrive at Viola Mae's, but they'd been gone more than three hours. When Viola Mae's husband called back at midnight to say they'd never arrived, Jolene knew...but she kept snuggling with her younger siblings, who would fall asleep and wake, asking for Mamm and Daed.

Jolene should remember if they'd finished the book in the following days, shouldn't she? As much as she loved that book, the words had been meaningless to her as she filled the hours reading aloud, giving the children some small reprieve from their new reality.

Josiah nodded and stood. She kissed Ray and Hope on their heads and sent them off. Josiah waited for the younger ones to go up the stairs. "I vote no to separating us"—his eyes filled with tears—"if it matters what a sixteen-year-old thinks. I'm willing to do all I can to keep the little ones together. Not for me or you, but for them."

Van propped an elbow on the table and rubbed his forehead. "You're a good man, Josiah, and I've wrestled with those same desires since the day we learned your parents died, but taking on that responsibility is no life for Jolene or you."

Josiah dipped his hands into his pockets and stared at the floor, probably trying to gather his thoughts. Their dad often teased his oldest son that he was as scattered as hayseed shooting out of a spreader, but Daed promised him he would produce a bumper crop in due time. Would he? If he did, would Jolene see it come to fruition? Their uncle in Ohio wanted Josiah to go with him. Josiah lifted his head. "Maybe our response to this tragedy isn't about *us*. Or how to piece it together so we can be as happy as we would've been if our parents had lived." Josiah stood straighter, looking his sister in the eyes. "Maybe we were given life and are in this family for *their* sakes."

Jolene's heart felt as if it had stopped beating. How did a person of so few words say something that profound? As the eldest Keim daughter, was she put in this place for such a time as this? She nodded at her brother. "Maybe so."

He went upstairs.

Van turned to her. "Jolene, you're not thinking straight. How could you be? You need to trust me when I say it's too much to take on. Hope could easily need to live with us for maybe twenty years." He stood and began to pace. "You've made great strides with Ray, but everyone has known since the day he was struck by lightning that he could end up needing to live with his parents for the rest of his life." He paused. "What about us? We'll start adding our children into the mix within a year or so of marrying. We can't do what you're considering, Jo. I'm telling you that spiritually, emotionally, physically, and financially we can't."

A hint of beautiful, warm light filtered through some of the fog, and she had a fleeting moment of clarity. Was his insistence on the decision she needed to make the cause of some of her confusion? "We can't, or you can't?"

"We. One hundred percent, Jo." He closed the gap between them. "We are in this together. But there's no time to prepare ourselves emotionally to take this on, not with the wedding next week."

She couldn't believe the words that came to her, but she let them flow from her unchecked. "Then we need to postpone the wedding."

He nodded. "A few weeks or months might help. It would give us time to get everyone situated."

"Can't we talk about keeping them together?"

"Jo, that's all we've been talking about."

Was it? While she'd gone through her days in shock, he'd been

a constant support, showing his love for her and his grief over her loss, but he'd also assured her at every turn that she needed to follow the guidance of her bishop and her uncles.

A knock on the door interrupted them, and a moment later Uncle Calvin and Aunt Lydia walked in. They spoke a greeting, as did each of the men in the procession of uncles and church leaders who also entered. The last person to come in was an unfamiliar, middle-aged *Englisch* man.

After Lydia asked Jolene and Van if they needed anything, she went to the kitchen sink and began washing the dishes Jolene had left. Calvin moved to the empty seat next to Jolene. He rubbed her shoulder as he sat, but he didn't say anything. What could he say? Make silly small talk or assure her that everything would be fine? Of all her uncles, he was the most like her dad, and during the meetings she found herself watching him for clues of what she should do. But for the most part, he'd been quiet and stoic.

The church leaders and her other uncles had definite opinions about what had to be done, and they seemed weary of walking softly around her now that their minds were made up. She tried not to take it personally. They had families and businesses to get back to. But she was grateful that Calvin had not let them bully her into agreeing before she was ready. Despite having eight children of their own, he and Lydia had asked to take the one child no one wanted—Ray.

The men filled the chairs, and some remained standing. There was no small talk, and Lydia didn't offer to make coffee or bring them a slice of cake. The group was short on protocol and tradition these days.

"Jolene and Van,"—Calvin motioned to the Englisch man—

"this is Douglas Piedmont. He's a guardianship lawyer who's here to help us know what we can and can't do. So any questions we have, we can ask him."

The men began to talk softly, reaffirming which child would go where and what furniture went with each child and discussing how to get out of the long lease her dad had signed on this place.

As their voices mingled into an indistinct mumbling, Jolene prayed. What should she do? She looked at Van. Would he stay by her if she chose to keep her siblings with her? If she lost him, she'd lose the life she had been dreaming about for the past four years. And she'd probably have a nervous breakdown, whatever that was.

Rambling thoughts swirled inside her brain, but Josiah's words returned to her: maybe we were given life and are in this family for their sakes.

She tapped Calvin on the forearm, and he motioned for the group to be quiet. "What do I need to do to keep my siblings with me?"

An uproar followed—some men saying that she was dead wrong and that the children would pay the price and some complaining that a young girl shouldn't have this kind of say.

But the lawyer held her gaze for several long moments. "Actually"—he clicked his pen, staring at her until the men became quiet—"it's a viable question. You'd have to go before a judge and prove you're a suitable guardian. You'd need a steady income, an affordable place to live, and home visits by the court—all of which I'd help you set up without cost."

Was this stranger on her side? Aunt Lydia grabbed a dishtowel and dried her hands as she crossed the room and stood beside her husband.

Calvin glanced at her before he leveled a look at Jolene. "No one expects this of you. Don't let a false sense of responsibility cause you to take on more than you should. But if it's what you want, I'll back you in it."

Lydia put her hands on her husband's shoulders. "We will back you in it."

Is this why Calvin had been so quiet? Was he unwilling to hint that she should keep the siblings together and unwilling to support her giving them up?

"You would need to stay in state with your siblings, at least until the courts are satisfied about your capabilities."

She focused on the lawyer. "I don't know a place where we could afford to live."

Calvin nodded, frowning. "This house belongs to Old Man Fisher two districts over. He's cantankerous, but maybe he'd give you a bit of leeway, at least until we can figure out something else."

Lester Fisher scared her, reminding her of the irritable grandfather in the book *Heidi*. Try as she might, she'd never won the man over, not even a smile. Even his children and grandchildren avoided him. "It's worth a try."

"Keeping your siblings is a monumental task," the lawyer said. "They're traumatized and scarred. Grown adults struggle to help children cope with this kind of loss, and you're only nineteen." He tapped his pen on the yellow paper with its blue and red lines.

"Jo, please," Van pleaded. "They need to be in a home with two adult parents, not a teen sister and her twenty-one-year-old husband." His voice trembled.

Fresh pain seared her as she realized where this conversation was

leading. He hadn't wanted a girlfriend because of the responsibility. She'd been surprised when he'd asked her to marry him, thinking he'd wait a good five years or more, but he'd said he loved her too much to wait.

Oh, how she didn't want to lose him.

A door slammed, rattling the kerosene lanterns on the kitchen table. The sound had come from upstairs, and she sat perched, listening, ready to run or relax based on the next few seconds. A thud echoed. And another, And another, each harder than the previous one, and she raced up the steps. She glanced in her bedroom. Charlotte's Web lay on the floor. Its spine faced the ceiling, looking as if it'd been dropped there. The rocker where she often sat while reading swayed back and forth. Her bed was crumpled where the younger ones should be sitting or lying on it while Josiah read to them. Muffled voices floated from somewhere, and she knew her destination. "Ray?" She hurried into the boys' bedroom.

Michael, Naomi, and Hope stood in the middle of the room, eyes large and focused on the closet.

"Kumm on," Josiah whispered at the closet door. He shifted the kerosene lantern in his hand. "Don't do this, Ray. Not now."

Ray sobbed—short, muted noises, probably crying into a blanket or pillow. Jolene's heart broke. She knocked on the closet door and tugged. "Ray." When she encountered resistance, she recognized the pull of Ray's suspenders, a favorite trick of his for securing the closet door when he wanted to be alone. She leaned her head against the frame. Whether together or apart, how were any of them going to survive their loss? Choking back tears, she had an urge to sing their parents' favorite song. The lyrics wobbled as she began. "What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer."

Her siblings joined her. "O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer."

How many evenings had they sung that song as a family before dispersing to go to bed?

The suspenders ricocheted against the door, and she knew he'd either lost his grip or released them. When she opened the door, Ray was sitting against the wall at the back of the closet. His flashlight sat upright on the floor, illuminating the small room. He looked tiny and overwhelmed as he held his favorite stuffed toy in one hand, probably what he'd been sobbing into, and a bat in the other. He'd knocked five or six holes in the wall with the bat before sinking to the floor in a heap. This image pretty much summed up her youngest brother when he was overwhelmed—a childlike gentleness mixed with the occasional destructive outburst. But he never lashed out at or near people. She sat next to him.

He curled against her. "I'm sorry. I know that was wrong. I didn't—"

She ran her hand over his silky hair. "It's going to be okay, Ray. It doesn't feel like it to any of us right now, but it will be. Can you trust me on that?"

He held on to her tightly. "What will happen to us?"

She wished she knew. "We will stick together." But she was a girl facing adult tasks, and it terrified her. Would her brothers and sisters be more scarred in the long run if her best efforts to do them justice were pitiful?

He gazed up at her, and she saw relief overtake his grief for a moment. "Together? Really?"

A knot formed in her stomach, but she put on her best parental face and smiled at him. "Together."

His eyes filled with tears. "I'll do my best to be good. I promise."

"Me too." Tightening her grip around him, she kissed the top of his head and began singing the song to him again. Josiah, Michael, Naomi, and Hope piled into the closet with her, snuggling into a huddle of Keim legs and arms as they held each other.

Van came to the door and peered inside.

Jolene swallowed hard. "I can't let them be scattered to the wind."

Hurt etched itself deep in his face as he nodded. Was that a look of compassion for her and her siblings or heartbreak for himself?

Maybe he already knew what she was just beginning to see. The life they'd wanted was already gone, whether they housed the children or not. They could never be the couple he'd been dreaming of because she was no longer the girl he'd fallen in love with. But she would be. Someday. And she longed to ask, Will you wait for me? Wait for me to raise my siblings? Wait for me to heal and become me again?

But that was too much to ask of anyone. All she could do was hope he'd remain her friend until he fell in love with the person she was becoming.

Ten years later

ndy put fresh straw in the horses' empty stalls before filling the feed and water troughs. A refreshing May breeze flowed through the open barn doors, bringing with it the aroma of an earth coming alive after a long winter. Once the chores were done, he moved to the corridor between the stalls on each side of the barn and began coiling the hose. Amigo stuck his head out of his stall, bobbing it and making low rumbling sounds. He should be eating his oats, but instead the horse was talking to him—in his own way of course.

Andy hung the hose on its wall rack and walked over to him. "What's going on with you today, Amigo?" The horse lowered his head, trying to reach Andy, and Andy moved in closer. Amigo rested his head against Andy's chest. "Ya, I hear you." Andy patted the horse's forehead with one hand and rubbed his cheek with the other.

Sometimes the thoroughbred was aloof and self-assured; at other times he was as needy as a lonely lap dog. Andy assumed it was the ruckus from the newly delivered group of horses corralled in the round pen that had Amigo needing assurance. "It's okay, ol' boy. It's just new thoroughbreds—stallions and mares—stomping around in the pen. They'll settle down in a day or two." The Fishers regularly

brought in plenty of new horses to train, but this was a particularly large and aggressive group.

Andy picked up a brush and went into Amigo's stall. He talked to the horse while he brushed him. Years ago Amigo had thrown his brother, Levi, fracturing his neck and breaking his leg, but Amigo would never be sold. He was trustworthy ninety-something percent of the time. That was good for an animal. Even humans weren't on their best behavior more than that. As horse trainers, he and Levi had learned to develop a gut feeling about a horse and stick with it.

"Daed." Tobias took long strides toward his dad, stretching his nine-year-old legs as far and fast as he could without running, because rowdiness was forbidden in the barn unless it was done intentionally to help train the horses. "You've got to see what I discovered. Uncle Levi didn't see it until I pointed it out."

Andy smiled. What could possibly be in that group of horses that he hadn't seen a hundred times over?

"Tomorrow will be your last day of school for the year."

Tobias grinned. "It's the Friday I've been looking forward to for months. But no changing the subject. Kumm. You've got to see it to believe it."

Andy hoped his son never lost his excitement over God's creatures. If a person bonded with a dutiful creature that has no voice, it meant his heart was capable of deep tenderness and compassion for people. It weighed on Andy that Tobias wouldn't have many more years before his open heart would be tested to its breaking point. One day his son would understand that his mother had abandoned him when he was three years old and that she had not called or sent a letter since. When the full weight of her rejection hit, Tobias would need all the capacity for love and understanding a man could muster.

"Kumm." Tobias motioned for him. Andy patted Amigo before leaving the stall. He put the brush away, grabbed a few rope harnesses, and walked toward the round pen, eyeing the twenty new horses. Even with Levi in the pen feeding and petting a mare, the other horses whinnied, snorted, and herded to the far end.

Sadie's eyes were fixed on Levi, which Andy found amusing. No doubt his brother and sister-in-law were in love—but not some egoboosting, delicate kind of love. What they had was strong and real, and Andy was grateful. After Andy's wife, Eva, left, Levi wouldn't let his guard down long enough to give dating—much less love—a chance. But about two years ago, late on the Fourth of July, Levi was riding across a dark field when fireworks startled Amigo, and the horse threw him. Thankfully, Sadie, a visitor from a district more than a hundred and fifty miles away, was riding horseback through that field. What began as Levi needing Sadie's help eased into a reluctant friendship between them. Each had been wounded—Sadie by a deceptive, cheating fiancé and Levi by Eva, whom he had loved like a sister. He had believed that she loved Andy and Tobias...and then she left.

"Daed, look." Tobias pointed to the horse that was eating out of Levi's hand. "She's the most gentle one in the herd."

Sadie folded her arms across the top of the split rail. "That may not be saying much in this group."

Tobias frowned. "Sadie, you're not helping."

She smiled. "Maybe I am and you just don't know it yet."

Andy moved beside his sister-in-law and propped a foot on the lowest fence rail. "What does Levi think?"

She chuckled. "He's as excited as Tobias was on Christmas morning."

"Gut." They had their work cut out for them with this herd, but he and his brother enjoyed running the horse farm.

Tobias climbed the split-rail fence and sat on the top rail. "Levi, can you bring her over here?"

Levi glanced at Andy, probably wanting to know whether they were going to tamp down Tobias's excitement or address it head-on. Andy nodded, and Levi led the horse to them. For two years Tobias had constantly asked his Daed to give him one of the horses.

"Look, Daed. She's solid black except for the half pastern on her legs and the markings on her face." He pointed at her face. "I've never seen anything like those markings. Have you?"

Sadie leaned in. "Is that what you call an irregular star?"

"A star?" Tobias shook his head. "Women."

Andy was confident that one day Tobias would see Sadie's entry into their lives for what it was—the best gift a motherless boy could have. But since Tobias had no memory of a woman living under their roof, right now Sadie seemed a little too girlish for his liking. To him, a world of menfolk and manly thinking was all life needed.

"Hey." Andy nudged his son's arm. "She doesn't have to know horses like we do."

"I don't see why not. She makes me study math, reading, and writing so I can know them like she does."

Sadie pursed her lips, clearly trying not to laugh. "He does have a point."

"Maybe." Andy studied his son. He appreciated Sadie's sense of humor, which seemed endless. But was he letting Tobias get away with being disrespectful, or was he giving him room to figure out some stuff on his own?

"So"—Sadie angled her head—"what is that shape on her face called?"

"It's unusual. I'll give you that much." Tobias straddled the fence. "I say it's an irregular, thin blaze shaped like a T."

"Ah, for Tobias." Sadie winked at Levi.

Andy hadn't picked up on what Tobias was thinking as Sadie had.

Tobias straightened his straw hat. "Ya, that's right."

A look of amusement passed between Sadie and Levi at Tobias's hint that he wanted the horse.

Andy shook his head. "You're not ready for a horse of your own yet."

"But, Daed,"—Tobias jumped off the fence—"all the boys my age got their own horse, and lots of boys younger than me too, and none of 'em have a dad who owns a horse farm!"

Was Andy too strict about this? In his dream vacation he'd have a week off from second-guessing himself when it came to single parenting. "I don't blame you for wanting one. They're magnificent creatures, but you're not ready yet." Despite its stature and strength, a horse had emotional needs, lots of them, and none were easily conveyed. Most boys rode horses for themselves, for their own joy and pride, but Andy needed more from Tobias than that. And changing people's mind-sets *after* they had what they wanted was tough. He

should know. He dealt with people and how they treated their horses all the time.

Tobias yanked off his hat and threw it to the ground. "Man! That's not fair."

Andy wanted to give the boy his own horse, had wanted to for a couple of years now. It should be one of the natural perks of being Amish and living on a horse farm, but he had to trust his gut, and his gut said Tobias didn't respect the animals enough.

Not yet. He was doing better. Less than two years ago, he would sit on the fence and complain to his uncle for being too patient while training them. Tobias had wanted to use unnecessary force to make the horses comply. He didn't feel that way anymore, which was good, but it wasn't enough.

Levi released the horse's harness, and she trotted off. "You're not helping your case by acting like that."

Tobias folded his arms, staring at his hat.

Sadie pursed her lips and gazed heavenward, looking determined to control her response, but Andy wasn't sure whether it was to keep from teasing Tobias or laughing out loud.

He was grateful that Levi had found Sadie and that she had wanted to move into Andy's home rather than getting a place of their own. The four of them—Andy, Levi, Sadie, and Tobias—made for an unusual family, but the oddity also helped dilute Tobias's reality. As the son of a grass widower, Tobias lived with the constant reminder that, unlike other boys his age, he didn't have a mother.

As for himself, Andy no longer carried the weight of what others thought. He'd dealt with all that years ago, but the frustration of the situation got to him at times. She had all the power—the power to leave or return, the power to have a life he knew nothing about. But there wasn't anything he could do about that. He couldn't even divorce her. It wasn't permitted. Well, there were a few exceptions. If the spouse who left demanded a divorce and a judge agreed, the Amish had to comply, or if the spouse who left threatened to fight for custody unless divorce was granted, the church leaders would grant the divorce to protect the child or children. In all his days Andy had heard of only one Amish person getting a divorce. But the dream of divorcing her lived on, because it would give him some semblance of power and a voice in what she'd done to him and Tobias.

Sadie nodded toward the driveway. "FedEx is here."

The truck pulled to a quick stop, and a man in a navy-andpurple uniform went between the two front seats and into the back of his truck.

Almost every item that had arrived via FedEx the past few years came from the Pennsylvania Humane Society. Andy and Levi housed and retrained the occasional abused or neglected horses the society needed help with. After months of working with the horses, Andy would let the Humane Society know they were ready to be adopted. Andy and Levi had strong convictions about their volunteer service. But the Humane Society always talked to Andy or Levi before sending the written information, which usually arrived a day or two ahead of the horses.

Andy turned to Levi. "We haven't received a call from the Humane Society, have we?"

Levi shook his head, glancing at his wife to confirm.

Sadie held up her hands, grinning as she tossed an innocent look

Levi's way. "I post every message on the refrigerator." A look of amusement passed between the two, obviously an inside joke.

The courier hopped out of his truck. "I need a signature." He held up a large white envelope in one hand and a metal clipboard in the other.

Andy signed for the item and opened it as the courier pulled out of the driveway. "It's from the Humane Society."

Levi left the round pen and fastened the gate. He moved to his wife's side, and they began talking about the horses.

Andy pulled a newspaper clipping out of the envelope and read the headline: "Thirty-Two Horses Seized from Pennsylvania Hellhole." A large yellow note was attached: "We need your help, please. We removed the horses two days ago, but the temporary holding place is unacceptable. If you could take at least half of these horses, I may be able to find a place for the other half. Renee"

He'd worked with Renee for a decade, and she wouldn't ask for this kind of help unless her back was against a wall. But since they had received twenty rowdy horses earlier today, they could take only a couple more.

He removed the note and grimaced as he read the details in the newspaper article. The rescue team had removed thirty-two Morgan horses from a dilapidated farm near Hershey before sickness and starvation killed them. It had taken the fifteen-person team all day to round up the feral horses from filthy pastures knee-deep in mud and with manure piles almost four feet high. After making an initial visit because of an anonymous tip, the director of the Humane Society had obtained a search warrant, and she and the team of rescuers had returned to the farm. Clearly, the horses had received no veterinary or blacksmith care. Very young horses, pregnant mares, and stallions were all roaming together in the same pasture, and a nine-month-old horse was locked in a dark, crumbling barn.

Andy's reservations melted. He had to find a way to help as many horses as possible. But how?

He passed the article to Levi and waited as he read it. Levi shook his head. "What kind of people treat animals like this?" He handed it to Sadie.

Andy shoved his hands into his pockets. "Maybe people who are hoarders by nature and they're hoarding animals. I recently read an article about people who did that with cats and dogs. Whatever their reason, the owners of those horses are looking at some stiff jail time, but that won't help the horses. Renee is looking for places to board them and for people who can help acclimate them to human handlers, getting them used to halters so they can be examined by a vet."

"I get how you feel, and I feel the same way, but our hands are tied, aren't they?"

"Maybe." Andy pondered the issue, and an idea came to him. "Do you think Uncle Lester would let us use his corrals and barns for this?" Their great-uncle used to train horses too, so he had the facilities.

"Even if he would, his place is three hours from here by car, and those horses could need boarding for months." Levi pointed to a line in the article. "It says the horses might not be eligible for adoption until after the trial."

"We can't think about all that right now. The Humane Society has an immediate goal: to calm the horses where they'll let a vet and blacksmith tend to them. That's where we come in. Then after the initial health care, we begin taming them."

"Which could easily take three to four months," Levi said.

"Ya, it could."

Tobias took the article from Sadie, running his finger under the headline as he read it. "What happens to them if no one steps up?"

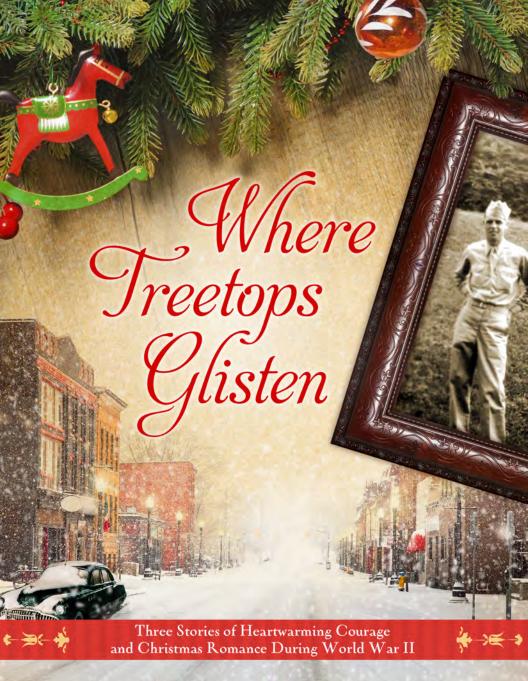
Levi's shoulders slumped. Apparently the reality Andy saw was just now dawning on his younger brother. "They'll try rescue organizations first, but the resources are always stretched for those groups. They'll be left resorting to questionable places, causing the horses to become more traumatized. The weakest and most temperamental—often the ones who were the most abused—will probably be euthanized."

"Daed, we can't allow that."

"I agree," Levi said. "It would be hard to live with ourselves if we don't respond to this plea for help."

Sadie returned the article to its envelope. "Call your uncle and see if he's willing to board them for free and if he knows anyone who could help you tend to them. Levi and I will ask your Daed to help us run the farm for the summer. Surely you could have most of them ready to be adopted in three to four months."

It was a huge sacrifice of time and money, but how could they make a living from buying, training, and selling horses and not give back when the need arose?



Tricia Goyer Cara Putman Sarah Sundin Thursday, October 29, 1942 Lafayette, Indiana

Ackle your greatest fear?

Professor Plante had smiled as he issued his challenge, as if the assignment was easy to achieve. Even a privilege. Yet five minutes after class ended, Abigail Turner remained frozen at her desk. A school project worth twenty-five percent of her grade tied to her greatest fear? And one that had to be developed and completed before the holidays? The professor called it a simple way to overcome the past by focusing on the future. A way to explore the principles they'd discussed and apply them to their own lives before trying the ideas on future clients. Didn't he see how tied the two were? How there was nothing simple about confronting dark moments in the past that were best avoided?

Abigail pushed back from the desk and joined the last students streaming through the door to the hall. She didn't notice anyone else who had broken into a cold sweat at the professor's instructions. In fact, most joked and bantered like another week of school was almost over, leading to another weekend of studying, Purdue football, and any odd jobs they worked. Maybe her fellow students didn't carry the fears and weight of the past as tightly as she did.

She tried to shake it off as she'd done over the years. She still had weeks to create the right experience for the project—at least until the end of the semester. Professor Plante had even made it sound like the students could have longer if they didn't mind an incomplete on their transcript.

As Abigail entered the hallway of Purdue's University Hall, she froze. The October wind gusted through the door and toyed with her hat, but that didn't account for her inability to move. No, she could only blame that on the reality that if she was truly to do this assignment, she had to find a way to open her heart to someone else. How could she make Professor Plante or anyone else understand that she couldn't do that? Not when it risked someone else leaving her.

"I have to get to work." She whispered the words as she tightened her grip on her bag, which was loaded down with textbooks, then forced her legs to move.

What would her life be like if Sam Troy, her high school love, hadn't enlisted and then died that terrible day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor? With his death, her carefully constructed dreams for the future crashed into an abyss, one she couldn't seem to climb from.

She glanced at her watch and frowned. If she dawdled any more, she'd miss the bus that would carry her down the hill, across the Wabash River, and to downtown Lafayette in time for her shift at Glatz Candies. With the weekend approaching, she looked forward to a couple of days to concentrate on the confections that made the restaurant and candy shop known around town. Soon she'd learn the secret to making the popular candy canes. Maybe she could coax the owner into teaching her the tricks to the twisted sweet that night.

"Slow down, Abigail."

Abigail grinned as her classmate Laurie Bertsche hurried up, her polo coat buttoned to her throat. Abigail nudged her friend in the shoulder. "It's not cold enough for that coat yet."

"I'm from Florida. We don't do cold."

"Then why pick Purdue?"

"It picked me, since it was as far away from home as I could afford." Laurie shuddered and gripped the coat around her throat. "What do you think of that

assignment?" She rushed on before Abigail could interrupt. "It should be fun to think of something. There are so many people who need help." Laurie paused, frowned for a moment, then shrugged. "I'm not sure what I'll do yet. Do you have ideas?"

"Not yet."

"You're so intense; I know you'll come up with something brilliant." Merriment danced in Laurie's green eyes. "I need a favor tomorrow night. One of the guys I know from town asked me to a movie and dance. I said yes, but the problem is he has a buddy. Say you'll join us."

"You know my stance on boys."

Laurie singsonged as they waltzed through the doors. "No dating until this war business is over." She paused and a serious glint entered her expression. "This isn't a boy like you'd see here. He's not a student, but a man supporting his family."

"I can't, Laurie. If he's not in the military yet, he will be any day. Life is too uncertain to risk even friendship." Abigail had certainly learned that lesson between Sam, her brother Alfie, and her sister Annie. Professor Plante wanted her to confront her fears by acting in opposition to those very fears that life had branded into her. How could she do something and then write an essay explaining how the action had changed her? What if she did something and found she was still afraid of losing someone she loved? Should she help the military boys in some way? Or should she focus on children? Would either satisfy her professor?

"You mean you won't." Laurie's words jarred Abigail from her thoughts. "I intend to have a great time with Joey, but I wish you'd come. Joey's friend seems nice, and you don't need to worry that it will be for more than one night. Now if something develops with Joey, that's just icing for me."

"Try ice on the Wabash," Abigail mumbled. "The kind you fall through." The kind that broke your heart into shattered pieces, like the fragile ice coating the wide river, and left you frozen inside when you fell into the cold current.

Laurie shook her head. "Too early for that kind of ice. I'll have enough fun for the two of us. Call if you change your mind. If not, I'll see you in class Monday."

The rumble of the bus on State Street warned Abigail she'd better hurry. *Don't leave! I can't be late for work.*

She waved frantically as the driver shifted the bus into gear. She rushed into State Street, waving. Brakes screeched and someone tugged her back to the curb right before a car whizzed by, horn blaring. Her heart stuttered in her chest. She'd come too close to landing under the wheels of that car.

"You all right, miss?"

"Thanks to you." She turned to her rescuer, and his gaze captured her, a mix of sadness and concern swirling in his eyes.

"You coming? Or standing out there all day?"

Heat flooded Abigail's cheeks at the bus driver's barked words. After checking for traffic, she hurried across the street, then tripped up the stairs, thrust a token into the box, and stepped down the aisle, barely noticing the young man who had rescued her following with a slight limp. The grinding gears and the bus's accompanying lurch pushed her down the aisle, and she collapsed onto an empty seat. The young man took the one opposite her.

She glanced at him under her lashes, noting the broad shoulders that indicated a life of work. There was something about him, as if his dog had just died, that made her want to reach out.

He slouched in his seat, hands clasped in his lap, shoulders slumped forward. A hat was crammed on top of dark hair that curled at the nape of his neck, longer than the regulation cuts worn by enlisted men. There was something familiar about him, yet she was certain they'd never been introduced. Abigail shrugged off the feeling. Even in the United States' heightened war machine during 1942, Purdue's campus flowed with men. The difference was many wore a uniform. This one didn't. Why? Could it be whatever had caused his limp?

His glance rose, colliding with hers. Caught. He'd discovered her staring.

Still she couldn't look away, not when such uncertainty resided in the pools of his hazel eyes. Something inside her froze, caught between wanting to help and distancing herself from the pain she saw reflected in the depths of his gaze. Maybe the pain was what she recognized.

She swallowed around a sudden tightness in her throat. "Thank you for what you did out there."

"You're welcome." His deep voice made it sound like it was nothing. He simply took heroic actions every day.

"I'm Abigail. Abigail Turner."

"Jackson Lucas." He looked back down at his hands.

Abigail felt the chill of the disconnection. She yanked a psychology text from the bag at her feet and opened it to the next chapter. The short ride would be better used preparing for Monday's class than wondering about the man seated across the aisle from her.

Her vow to avoid romantic relationships, no matter how casual, had not been some fly-by-night decision. She had carefully considered her course after Sam's death.

The war that had torn the world apart had arrived in the United States. Sure, it hadn't physically touched the nation since Pearl Harbor, but to see the war's effect, all one had to do was look at the men in uniform walking the streets or notice the blue and gold star flags hanging in homes across town. The war had touched so many lives, even in this sheltered city. She would never forget the pain that stabbed through her each time she drove by the Troys' home and saw the gold star flag hanging in the front window. Such a simple symbol that communicated so much senseless loss.

Abigail forced her gaze to remain firmly on the page even as her thoughts wandered. She'd made the right choice. She was certain. Nothing was worth risking the pain of losing more people she loved. Not when her big brother Pete was finishing requirements to be a fighter pilot while her sister Merry was training to be an army nurse. She couldn't bear the thought of losing them, and she

wouldn't risk opening her heart to anyone who could be taken by the vagrancies of war.

Jackson Lucas felt the weight of the envelope shoved inside his jacket as if each page were a solid plank of the heaviest walnut rather than smashed wood pulp. When had he started comparing weight to wood? His heritage belonged to a farm, not a plant, yet he'd moved to Lafayette to work in a factory rather than sell the farm and force his mother and sisters to move. He'd worked hard and saved every extra penny, all in an effort to fix what the lean years, the thirties, had stolen from them.

Now it was clear he shouldn't have moved away, even if it had meant earning the money his family needed to keep the farm.

The papers inside his jacket proved he'd failed in that effort. Somehow even after all his work and focus, his family would still lose the only home his sisters had known. What would Mother do now? How could he provide for them without the farm?

What a mess.

He studied his hands. The calluses had shifted—similar but not the same—as his work had changed. He raised a hand and twisted his wrist, examining every line, smudge of oil, and mark.

If only he could trace his thoughts as easily.

Without the sun shining on him, he felt different. Like one of the cardboard cutouts his employer transformed into toys that thrilled children. He had nobody to thrill, not when he was as lifeless and bland as the cardboard before the adhesive and pictures were applied.

The bus rumbled to another stop, and a young woman hurried on board. This one wasn't as clumsy as the previous gal, Abigail. Jackson glanced her way again. What had she seen when she studied him?

Did she find him wanting too?

He shook his head. He had to clear his thoughts, or he might as well not

go on the date his buddy had set up. Why had he agreed to it? The words of the letter threatened to derail any chance he had of salvaging the evening, but Joey had refused to listen when Jackson argued he wasn't interested. He guessed he'd complained one too many times that Lafayette would never feel like home. His friend had lost patience and ordered him to appear at the Glatz Candies shop downtown on Friday night to meet a local girl.

"Nobody likes being alone." Joey's words couldn't have been truer.

"Excuse me?"

Jackson jolted as the gal across from him leaned into the aisle, the thick textbook in her lap threatening to tumble to the floor.

"Did you say something?" Her eyes danced as a curl slipped free of her headband.

"I don't think so." Surely he hadn't repeated Joey's words out loud.

Her smile widened. "Oh."

"Oh?"

"You're one of those." She tapped a page of the textbook as the bus lurched through another gear, chugging across the bridge that separated Purdue's campus and Lafayette.

"I don't understand."

"One of those men who likes to deny he might have a feeling." She eyed him a moment, then turned back to her textbook. "That's what my professor likes to claim, anyway. All men deny their emotions. I find his statements rather overbroad and all-inclusive. Don't you?"

Jackson felt his collar tighten as if someone had yanked back on it. How had he landed in the middle of this conversation? "I don't know."

"I'll admit my father and brother don't walk around spouting emotion." She paused as if caught in a thought, and her face twisted in a way that indicated it wasn't pleasant. "Still, they don't exactly hide what they're thinking. How about you?"

"I have sisters. Three of them."

"Oh."

After an uncomfortable moment, Jackson felt the bus grind to another stop. "Looks like this is me. Nice to talk to you, miss."

"Miss Abigail Turner," she said again. The smile that accompanied her name warmed him. "This is my stop too. Thanks again for your help."

Jackson nodded and waited for her to move ahead of him. She slipped past and then off the bus. He looked at her seat and saw a black book lying near the window. Picking it up, he noticed her name on the cover. By the time he stepped off the bus, book in hand, she'd disappeared.

How could he find her to return it? He cracked the cover and noted it was a calendar that included an appointment today at Glatz Candies. Since it wasn't out of his way, he could take the book there and try to catch her. He tucked it into his deep jacket pocket, and his fingers brushed the envelope.

Jackson's thoughts moved faster than his feet as he trudged toward the corner, weighed down by the words that filled the envelope. He pushed its message to the side, and his thoughts turned to the events on campus. Could a young woman like that ever give him a second glance? He doubted he compared favorably to the men she saw on Purdue's campus every day. At one time he'd dreamed of studying a subject like agriculture or engineering, using an education to get off the farm or improve it. After Dad died, he thought studying might give him techniques to improve the farm. Now he knew just what a pipe dream he'd fostered. He shoved his hands deep in his trouser pockets as he waited for the bus to move on and traffic to clear.

He crossed the street and headed up Main to the shop. It hadn't taken many days in Lafayette to realize Glatz's was a popular lunchroom and candy store, a favorite of locals and college students. Maybe on the way he'd find a convincing reason for why he'd agreed to this foolish date or a way to talk Joey out of including him. The bus ride served as exhibit A for why he shouldn't pretend to be suave and talk to young women he didn't know.

Who did he think he was? Cary Grant?

bigail pushed through the heavy front door at Glatz Candies, enjoying the *ting-a-ling* of the bell. The solid counters stood separated by an aisle. One was lined with candy displays, the other with the soda fountain and a food preparation area. Large metal cash registers sat on each counter near the door. Business was slow as usual during this lateafternoon slot. The after-school rush had ended, and people's stomachs hadn't reminded them it was time to eat again.

"Good afternoon, Hannah," Abigail said to the girl behind the soda fountain counter.

"Like a Coke before you head upstairs?"

Abigail considered the idea for half a second before nodding. Once she started making whatever candy the store needed, she'd get hot quickly. "Add an extra squirt of cherry?"

"Of course." Hannah Morris blew blond hair out of her eyes and then pumped squirts of Coke chased by cherry into a glass before adding ice and the fizzy water. After a few quick stirs with a long-handled spoon, she slid the drink across the counter. "Here you go."

Abigail took a sip, savoring the sweetness. "Perfect. What do we need today?"

"Not sure. The boss said he'd leave a list for you."

"All right." She guessed she wouldn't make candy canes today. "See you later."

The book bag pulled at her shoulder as Abigail hiked up two flights of wooden stairs. Behind a closed door, away from prying eyes, stood the room

where the magic of candy making occurred. Her parents had told her the store hadn't changed much since their visits during the early years of their marriage. Now she was part of its story.

Some would think it a nuisance to spend hours away from others while repetitively creating candy. Abigail used it as a chance to review whatever lectures she'd heard. Other times she'd memorize a list of terms while stirring the sugary or chocolate confections. She maintained top grades in her classes while earning the extra money to not be dependent on her parents. She might not have left home like Merry, but she liked gaining a measure of independence while she figured out her future, a future that would allow her to help struggling children. Her time at the Purdue Nursery School had only added to her commitment to learning more about how children coped with the strains of life.

Still, she couldn't study all the time, despite Merry's teasing, so she'd brought a small radio to break the silence. She flipped the machine on, found the list of candies, and started compiling the ingredients she'd need to make the candied fruit slices. Some girls might prefer the chocolates or caramels, but she'd take the lightly fruited sweets any day.

Time passed as she measured ingredients, stirred the concoction, and poured out the candy. After an hour, she wiped sweat from her brow. Time for a break while the latest batch cooled and set.

She slipped down the stairs, the empty Coke glass in her hand. Tables had begun to fill with a small supper clientele. Hannah took an order while one of the new cooks hustled about, filling other orders. Abigail slipped past him and refilled her glass with water. The coolness of the restaurant felt so good, she decided to sit for a few minutes and enjoy it before heading back to the superheated kitchen.

As she scanned the tables, her gaze landed on the young man who had saved her from being hit by a car. He looked as perplexed and lost as he had on the bus. His shoulders slumped over an empty plate from a weight she couldn't see, but she imagined it had something to do with the papers he studied. The

way he looked at them that hard for so long, it was a good thing he didn't have Superman's x-ray vision, or the words might have burned off the pages.

There was only one thing to do—see if she could help.

No, she didn't know him. And yes, he might not be comfortable opening up to a stranger. But he bore the burdened look of someone who needed a friend. If her mama had taught her anything, it was to reach out to those who were alone. He certainly looked alone as he stared at the papers in his hands.

Abigail edged toward the empty seat at the small table next to his. In the tight space, she jostled his table before sitting down. "Sorry." She turned her brightest grin toward him. "I've been upstairs making candy and needed a drink desperately." She took a sip through the straw in her water glass. "Do you need a refill?"

"What?" The skin across the bridge of his nose and around his eyes wrinkled as he turned toward her. "Say, I've been looking for you."

"Really?"

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small black book. "Is this yours? It was on your seat after you left the bus."

"My school calendar." She took it. How had it escaped her bag? "I didn't realize I'd left it behind." She exhaled heavily. Her life was cataloged in the diary's list of dates and assignments. "Thank you. I've got everything I need to get through the semester in there." She smiled. "Your glass is empty. Can I get you more? It's the least I can do. Please tell me you haven't waited for me for an hour."

"Has it been an hour?" He glanced at his watch. "I lost track of time after I ate. I don't need a refill."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm fine."

"You don't look it." She covered her mouth. That wasn't what her mama had in mind when she encouraged her children to befriend the friendless. "Sorry. My mouth can rush ahead of my brain sometimes. It's a real problem." Silence settled over them, and she peeked at the papers. It looked like they

bore a legal header. Bad news more than likely. He shoved the papers, words down, on the table. Heat climbed her neck. Had he caught her looking?

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have tried to read your papers."

He expelled a heavy sigh. "I wish I didn't have to."

"Do you have anyone to help?" She raised her hand as he stared at her. "I don't mean me. My father's an attorney, one of the best in town. I'm sure he can help you. Well, unless you murdered someone. But I know you haven't or you'd be in jail. And even then, he's the only attorney in town I'd really recommend."

Take a breath! All this babbling made her look nervous. Surely she wasn't, not around a near stranger. Men simply didn't affect her that way. Not since her pact to maintain her distance for the duration of the war.

He chuckled, low and pleasant. "Are you always this talkative?"

"Not usually." She grinned. "If your problem is legal, you need to talk to an attorney before you decide what to do. I've heard my dad tell more than one person that he could have helped if they'd only given him time." A thought popped into her mind, and she blurted before common sense could stall the words. "Why don't you come to dinner tomorrow night? My mama enjoys cooking for company, and you can show Father the papers. It's perfect."

"I don't know."

"Really, I insist. After all, you did bring my book to me."

His intense eyes studied her a moment. What did he see when he looked through her like that?

"All right. I can reschedule an appointment." He shrugged as if shifting the weight that balanced between his shoulder blades.

"You're sure? You'll come?"

"I said yes, didn't I?" His lips tipped into the beginning of a smile.

"Wonderful. Our house isn't far from here." She gave him directions, then stood. "I need to get back to the candy. See you tomorrow night, Mr. Lucas."

"Until then."

The way he looked at her, sadness burdening him, almost broke her heart. What had she gotten herself into?

- VICE-

The next evening, Abigail scurried around the table adjusting the napkins and silverware until they were precisely placed at each setting. She'd already changed her dress twice since getting home from school and couldn't stand still.

Grandma came up behind her and reset the forks, a twinkle in her chocolate eyes.

"Grandma, please."

"Why are you so intent on the table?" A knowing smile settled over her face, as if she could sense tonight was more than a normal dinner for Abigail.

"I've invited someone to dinner."

"Really?" Grandma settled against the solid buffet that lined the wall, her gray curls shifting. "I knew something was up. You don't act like this normally. Is it a young man?"

Heat rushed into Abigail's cheeks.

"So it is."

"Grandma, I simply invited him so Father could give him advice. I want him to feel welcome while he's here."

Grandma tilted her head like a bird who'd identified her next meal. "Of course straight napkins will ease his loneliness."

Abigail picked up a navy-blue napkin, then set it down as Grandma chuckled.

Grandma turned as Mama entered the dining room. "Did you know about this, Rose?"

"I did." A soft smile curved Mama's mouth. "Abigail, what has gotten into you? You know we'll do all we can to make him comfortable and welcome."

Abigail huffed a curl out of her eye. She knew they meant well, but their

attention could be intense without her siblings around to help deflect their focus. Still, why did she care? She barely knew Jackson Lucas. She shook her head. Maybe that would dislodge the interest she'd taken in him.

The doorbell rang and she hurried toward the door. Grandma followed, but Abigail stopped by the fireplace.

"Well, aren't you going to let him in?" The twinkle in Grandma's eye indicated she knew Abigail didn't want her grandmother to open the door. Who knew what the woman would say?

Abigail took a breath. Jackson had really come. She hadn't been sure he'd clear whatever appointment he'd had to dislodge. As soon as she'd heard he had an appointment, she should have offered an alternative, but she hadn't. Abigail caught her breath and prayed the evening would go well. Could Father ease the tension from the young man's face?

"Open it already."

Abigail scrunched her nose as she turned her back on Grandma. When she opened the door, Jackson stood there looking a bit like he was ready to bolt.

"You made it." Abigail shivered as a breeze swirled in the house, the bite in the air proclaiming it was nearly November. She took his arm and gently tugged him inside. "I'm so glad you found our house. Perrin Avenue is tucked at such a funny angle, it can be tricky to locate."

"Thanks again for inviting me." He held out a small box of chocolates. She smiled as she saw the Glatz label. "I wasn't sure what you'd like. Flowers are hard to find this time of year."

"Thank you. These are my favorites. In fact, I made some last night."

Mama cleared her throat.

"Jackson, may I introduce my mother, Rose Turner, and my Grandma Louise? Mama, this is the young man I told you about. Jackson Lucas."

"Ma'am. Thank you for allowing me to join you." He bowed slightly, his wool Mackinaw jacket tightening across his shoulders.

"So glad you could." Mama smiled as she gestured toward the matching wing chairs set near the fireplace. "We'll be ready to eat as soon as Mr. Turner

arrives." She glanced at her slim watch. "That should be any minute, unless he got caught at court."

Abigail looked at their living room, which flowed into the dining room. A davenport covered in brocade tapestry sat in front of the window box, forming a comfortable conversation area with the navy wing chairs. An oriental rug covered the hardwood floor, and a marble-topped coffee table rested between the furniture. The roses carved into the couch and table brought the room together. To the side, by the wall between the living room and dining room, stood the piano that Merry hadn't played very well when she was home. Abigail had always thought it a welcoming room, but how would a man perceive it?

She jiggled the box. "Let me put the candy in the kitchen."

When she returned to the living room a moment later, Jackson stood in front of the fireplace, his coat now on the coat tree, staring at the family photo perched on the mantel. Abigail shoved down the bitter anxiety that chased the sorrow. The photo always looked incomplete, sitting there without any acknowledgement of her brother who had died in a car accident and sister who had died of influenza. They might have died years ago, but it still seemed wrong to have a photo with only the five who remained.

Her eyes landed on Pete, handsome in his dress uniform, pilot's wings affixed over his left breast pocket, the US and Army Air Force prop insignia on his lapels.

"Your brother?" Jackson asked.

"Yes. He's training to fly fighters. We don't know where or when he'll deploy." *Please keep him safe.* She couldn't bear to lose another sibling.

Jackson studied her as if something in her words hinted at more than she'd offered.

The door banged open. "I'm home and famished."

Her father's boisterous voice caused Jackson to turn. He stiffened as he did, feet spread wide.

Father walked toward him, his topcoat open to reveal the charcoal threepiece suit he usually wore on court days. He'd loosened the knot of his red and navy striped tie, signaling the end of a long day doing battle in a courtroom. He flipped his hat onto the coat tree nestled into the alcove, then slipped his coat off. "Welcome to our home, young man. I understand you have legal needs."

"I…"

"Robert, give the poor man a chance." Mama pulled off her apron as she stepped out of the kitchen. "Jackson, I apologize for my husband. He's very focused on fixing problems."

"Makes me a good attorney."

"An excellent one. But please save the legal discussions for after dinner." She gestured toward the dining room. "If you'll all have a seat, we can have our meal."

As Jackson held out a chair for Abigail, he cleared his throat. "Is that a roast, ma'am?"

Mama smiled. "With all the fixings."

Grandma leaned toward Jackson as he sat. "Rose makes the best mashed potatoes." Abigail bit back a giggle as Jackson nodded. Grandma edged even closer and dropped her voice to a stage whisper. "Butter would make them better though."

Father cleared his throat and led the family in a quick blessing for the food. As soon as he finished, he said, "So tell us more about yourself, Mr. Lucas."

Jackson shifted in his seat, rubbing his right leg as if it hurt. "I work for the puzzle company. On one of their lines."

"I love working their puzzles." Grandma waved her hands as she talked about piecing together one of the five-hundred-piece puzzles that had a dozen birds tucked within its perimeter.

"Do you like what you do?" Mama's tone was interested as she passed a basket of bread.

"Yes. It's not the same as being on the farm, but I enjoy it. I'm still getting used to working inside all day, but I enjoy watching the process. Right now

we're working on toy kits for Christmas presents." There was a slight hesitation in his tone that made Abigail wonder what the *but* he didn't speak was. "It's a good job, and I'm grateful for it."

"Honest work is always something to be grateful for." Father launched into an example from a current client's battles. As he listened, Jackson rubbed his leg a few more times. It seemed to be an unconscious gesture, and he always returned to the same spot.

"We talked about the importance of meaningful work in one of my classes today." As Abigail had sat in the classroom, she had wondered what hers would be. She thought she knew, but sometimes she wondered if she dreamed of doing something impossible.

"I always thought my work would be on the farm, but life changed that vision." Jackson shrugged. "I'm learning to adjust my plans."

Father launched into another story, and Grandma interjected her insight with a touch of humor.

Abigail picked up the bowl of green beans and held them toward Jackson. "We canned these this summer. Hottest day of the year too."

"You should have seen her. Wet curls all around her face." Grandma's smile coaxed an answering one from Abigail, and Jackson turned to her with a smile. It was the most relaxed she'd seen him.

"My sisters aren't fond of canning either," Jackson said.

"Oh, it wasn't so bad. My sister Merry usually helps, but she was gone, so it was my turn."

The meal passed in a blur of circulating bowls, clanking silverware, and conversation. At one point Abigail noticed Jackson patting his shirt pocket. Did he wonder if the legal papers were still there? Abigail glanced at her father and smiled as he regaled them with another story. Surely he could do something to ease the shadows from Jackson's eyes.

She hadn't learned much about Jackson the night before, but he had a story. Would he reveal it to her and let her share the burden? She felt drawn to him, and it made her pause. What was it about this man and his quiet ways that made her want to help him?

After a bit, Mama signaled it was time to clear the dinner plates. "Abigail, will you help while I cut the cake?"

Abigail nodded and took Jackson's plate. "You'll love Mama's angel food. She makes the best cake in the world. I'm just grateful Father finally got her an electric beater, so we don't have to take turns whipping the egg whites into submission."

Grandma pulled a silly face as she studied Jackson. "If I'd known we'd have company, I'd have made some of my famous cookies and saved Rose from beating those eggs for twenty minutes."

"I don't mind." Mama handed a plate to Jackson. "I enjoy baking for company. We'll have a bowl of canned strawberries out in a moment if you'd like to add some to your cake."

Abigail returned from the kitchen with a bowl of strawberries and another of whipped cream. She set them in front of Jackson, then sat down as the easy conversation continued. She loved the way her family could make anyone feel at home. It was a special gift they offered others. Conversation slowed while everyone dove into the cake. Abigail enjoyed every bite of the fluffy delicacy. With sugar rationing in place and Grandma hoarding what they did have, she'd better enjoy the sweetness while sugar remained available.

Father patted his stomach. "Thanks for another great meal, Rose."

"My pleasure."

While they said the same words almost every night, it didn't stop Mama's cheeks from coloring with a sweet rose.

"Mr. Lucas, when you're ready, Abigail can show you to my office." Father nodded to them all, then stood and strode toward his second office.

Jackson pushed his plate back and placed his fork across it. "Can I help with the dishes?"

"Certainly not." Mama softened her words with a smile. "You're our guest. Besides, I know you have a problem Mr. Turner can help with. Go on back." "Here. I'll show you." Abigail prepared to stand, but before she could, Jackson was on his feet and poised to help with her chair. "Thank you."

"My mother raised me to be a gentleman." The faintest twinkle surfaced in his eyes. "In a house full of girls, I had plenty of opportunities to practice."

"So I see."

"Let me grab my papers."

While he retrieved them, the thought flitted through Abigail's mind that with manners like that, any girl would be blessed to have him as a partner through the days of her life.

She tucked her chin and led him to the back of the house.



What had just happened?

It seemed like the manners his mother had drilled into him had somehow bothered Abigail. Yet she hadn't seemed offended. On the contrary, she'd seemed grateful, until she tucked her chin and wouldn't meet his gaze.

She led him to a small room behind the kitchen, then paused to point to the room beside it, which had a closed door. "That's Grandma's room. She's lived with us several years and keeps the door closed so her beast of a cat can't escape."

"She keeps things lively around here, doesn't she?"

"She does. I can't imagine her not being here." Abigail opened the opposite door. "Here you go."

She gestured for Jackson to enter the room, then closed the door behind him. At some point it might have been a bedroom, but now the walls contained Mr. Turner's home office. A small yet sturdy desk stood in the center of the room. A typewriter sat on a small table next to it, with a bookshelf behind.

Mr. Turner tugged a chair from the corner and set it in front of the desk. "Have a seat, Jackson. Ready to let me look at your papers?"

"I'd be glad to, sir." Jackson swallowed. "The thing is, money's tight . . ."

Mr. Turner held out his hand. "Let me read the document. If more is needed, we can discuss price. You may not need my services, so there's no need to discuss cost until we know what we're facing. I'm glad to do this for a friend of Abigail's when she asks."

Silence settled over them as Jackson studied Mr. Turner. He seemed sincere, but how could Jackson make him understand the serious nature of his family's finances? He didn't want to accept charity, not when he'd worked so hard so they wouldn't need it. Ever since Dad had died, Jackson had struggled to pull the farm out of the depths created during the years of economic depression. Should he mention he'd only met Abigail yesterday? Would that change Mr. Turner's willingness to help?

Jackson had to face facts.

He didn't understand how the bank could foreclose on the farm when he'd sent money for the payments to his mother month after month. What options did he have? Mr. Turner stood ready to help.

Jackson tapped the envelope, then surrendered it. "Here you go."

Mr. Turner settled back in his chair after placing an empty pipe in his mouth. Time passed with only the rustle of a turning page scratching the moments.

This night had made him miss the cozy kitchen back home and his mother's good meals. This time of year, the produce would be gone, but Mother would have canned enough to keep the family eating like royalty through the cold months.

If only he could somehow travel the thirty miles to Attica and spend one evening with his kid sisters. They poked, prodded, and loved each other with a fierceness he missed. Even more than the easy camaraderie between Abigail and her family. The Turners loved each other, but it wasn't the same as being surrounded by his sisters. Being here made him miss them all the more.

What would they do when he told them they had to leave?

He belonged there with them, on the farm where he knew what to do in every situation because he'd grown up trailing his father and watching his hero's response to each problem. Nothing had fazed the man . . . but Jackson couldn't say the same about himself. The packet of legal documents weighed heavy on his heart. The bank couldn't foreclose.

Not when he'd economized, pinched, and scraped every last penny together to send home.

It hadn't been enough.

All his effort and work hadn't been enough.

hat could they be talking about in there?" Abigail groused as she took another plate from the drying rack and wiped a dishtowel across it.

This length of time usually meant a serious legal problem, and she didn't want to think that a man like Jackson would carry that kind of burden. She'd hoped he'd missed a detail that made the papers unimportant, but they must be as dire as his body language had suggested. At dinner he'd answered Mama's questions with short answers—never rude, but distracted. As if the papers he carried weighed down his soul. Jackson had relaxed a bit as the evening progressed, but the sad aura she'd noted the moment she met him never lifted.

Father had worked miracles for people before. Surely he could do it again.

"Do you want him to sit with you on the swing?" Grandma held her hands under her chin and winked. "It's a perfect night to stare into his dreamy eyes."

"Mama, make her stop. It's too cold and she knows it."

"Just ignore her." Mama shot Grandma a look, then shook her head. "How did you meet him?"

"On the bus. Then at work. I accidentally left my calendar on the bus, but he figured out I worked at Glatz and brought it to me. I could tell he was burdened, and . . . I didn't think you'd mind."

Grandma brought a round of plates to the sink. "Well, he seems very nice. I'm glad you invited him."

"I always have room for one more, especially with Pete and Merry away." Mama rinsed a plate and put it in the drying rack. "We'll see if your father can help him."

"If I know Robert, he'll do all he can." Grandma headed back to the table.

Once the table was cleared and the dishes washed and dried, Abigail flopped onto the couch and pulled a textbook onto her lap. She read one page, then another, then stopped. So far, not a word had penetrated her memory. If asked, she wasn't even sure she'd know the subject. She flipped the book to the cover and sighed. Accounting was not where she wanted to focus her thoughts right now.

A door opened down the hall, and she shot to her feet.

"Relax, Abigail." Mama slanted a look her direction, before glancing back at her *Look* magazine. "I'm sure all is well."

"I appreciate your time and advice, Mr. Turner," Jackson said as the two men walked into the room.

Her father clapped him on the shoulder. "I'll do a bit of investigating and get back to you in a couple of days."

Jackson nodded, then turned toward Mama. "Thank you for welcoming me to your home and for the meal."

"Glad you could join us." Mama grabbed a paper-wrapped package from the counter. "I've put a few leftovers in here for you."

Color flushed his face. "My thanks." Jackson turned toward Abigail, and her breath caught as his hazel eyes found hers. Abigail waited, but he didn't say anything. She shifted her feet, and he blinked as if exiting a dream. "Well, I'd better head home. Thank you again."

He headed for the front door so quickly Abigail had to hustle to catch up. "Was Father able to help?"

He shrugged, a gesture burdened by more than his coat he reclaimed from the coatrack.

"Good luck to you." She bit down on her lower lip and took a step back.

"Thank you." He opened the door, then seemed to gather himself as he stood taller. "I appreciate the chance to meet your family. Good-bye."

"Good-bye." She watched as the young man slipped out the door and down the sidewalk.

"I can see why you need a no-boyfriend policy." Grandma leaned against the door, watching Abigail watch Jackson. "He'll be back."

"Only if Father needs something. And I bet that will be handled at the office. Good night, Grandma."

Abigail turned and hurried up the wide stairs to tackle her homework. As she wrestled with material for her psychology class, someone knocked at her door. She exhaled a breath. "Yes?"

"May I come in?" Father's voice was serious and insistent.

"Yes sir."

Abigail set her book to the side and watched as Father entered and glanced around her room. It was small, but the private space still felt strange after sharing it for so many years with Merry. True, she could now keep it as neat and organized as her studies and work schedule allowed, but she missed the late night talks and the way she could always count on Merry to brighten the dullest day. Even painting the walls a new color couldn't make the room feel like hers alone or remove the memories of years spent giggling together under the covers.

Now her younger sister would brighten the days of men in uniform as she nursed them back from injuries. As much as she sometimes envied Merry's purpose, Abigail knew she wasn't the right person for a nursing position—not when the sight of blood made her stomach turn and her head suddenly lighten. But with Merry finishing nursing school, this room and part of Abigail's life felt empty.

Father sat next to her on the bed. "Your friend is a nice young man."

"I don't know that I'd call him a friend. We only met yesterday."

"All the same, I'm glad you brought him home. He needs help, and you were right to invite him here."

"Can you help?"

"I'll try. There seems to be quite a mess to untangle, but I've done that before." He sighed and pulled his glasses off to pinch his nose. "It's hard to

understand how some things happen, but God has a way of sorting it all out. If it doesn't, I'll just blame you. Say your enthusiasm got the best of you. Ignore the fact that you have one of the kindest hearts I know."

"Father!" He looked at her, and the twinkle in his eyes made her smile. "Is there any way I can help?"

Father's lips firmed into a straight line. "You know I can't discuss my clients' problems. Mr. Lucas is no exception, even if you did bring him to me."

Abigail knew that with those words, the conversation had ended. Father took his ethical obligations seriously and refrained from delving into specific details about clients' ongoing business at home. He might tell stories, but kept them general. That was one reason he kept his home file cabinet locked.

"Are you sure you can't make an exception this one time?" An urge to know what burdened her new friend burned through her. She wanted to help, and connecting him with Father wasn't enough. She wanted to do something herself, something that would ease his burdens.

Father shook his head as he leaned back and then stood. "Any information will have to come from him. I just wanted you to know I'll do my best to help. And I'm proud of you for offering him assistance and friendship. See you in the morning."

Abigail stared at the closed door for some time after Father left. He was proud of her. She would soak in that revelation for a moment. She knew he loved her deeply, but she often felt overlooked in between a fighter pilot and soon-to-be nursing sensation. Her life was quiet and small in comparison, yet she longed to make a difference.

Could that difference come through seeing the deep hurts and loneliness that others carried? No one should walk through life as burdened as Jackson Lucas. Yet could she risk her heart in accepting his pain and having a terrible result? Maybe it was easier—it certainly was safer—to walk through life sheltered from others' hurts. But she sensed an opening in her heart, and it felt good.

Cara Putman

Given time, she'd learn his burdens, and if he'd let her, she'd gladly share them.

-30CE-

Tuesday, November 10

Jackson slogged home after another day at the puzzle plant. The machines had been making cardboard play sets in addition to puzzles for months, in preparation for the rapidly approaching Christmas season. With so many raw materials reserved for war production, many young boys would find a cardboard Old West fort or Civil War play set under the tree this year. Jackson would take each of his sisters one of the dozens of puzzles the machines pressed, rolled, and cut. His ears rang from the level of noise that assaulted them during his shifts.

Days like this left him longing for the peace he'd find in the fields or the gentle sounds of the barn while he milked the cow. The mechanical whirs and bangs of the factory were a stark contrast. Should he look for a job at the Alcoa plant? Do something that was more geared to the war effort? When he'd first arrived in town, this had been the best job he could find, and he guessed if he had to stay inside, working on toys that would bring kids joy was a decent job to hold. It also wasn't as physically demanding as working at Alcoa, so it fit better with his afflicted body.

Some days he rode the bus home, but today he needed to clear his head. His leg didn't bother him, so he headed downtown on State Street. Traffic set a steady pace as he walked toward his boardinghouse, a clapboard home nestled in a small neighborhood near Columbian Park, halfway between the plant and downtown. Lafayette might not be the largest city in Indiana, but with industry ramped up at Alcoa and other companies to meet the military's needs, finding a room had been a challenge. Even if the boardinghouse's proximity to the Columbian Park Zoo meant the monkeys' calls and shrieks woke him in

warmer weather, he appreciated the ability to walk to work or church on Sunday mornings when needed.

Today he'd use the walking time to pray about his family. He'd worked hard to provide for them, and even so, they stood to lose the farm. Then what? He stumbled at the thought. Should they join him in Lafayette? Should he return to Attica?

He shook the thought free. He'd left because he couldn't find a job in his small farming community. Not one that paid the cash his family needed. Until Mr. Turner contacted him, there was little he could do but pray.

Little he could do.

He suppressed a snort. His father would have told him prayer was the most important thing. Deep inside, he knew Dad was right. But God hadn't protected his father during the accident, and He didn't seem up to protecting the family home either. Jackson bit back the bitterness and tried to replace it with gratefulness. Bitterness wouldn't get him anywhere, and they still had the farm . . . at least for now.

His father had carried a tinge of anger over dreams unfulfilled. While Jackson had talked to Mr. Turner, he'd wondered if his dad had dreamed of doing something significant like the attorney. Mother had constantly reminded Dad that farming was good, honest work and necessary. Then the struggles of the thirties had taken the fight right out of Dad.

Jackson refused to let the same thing happen to him.

He hiked up the steps of the boardinghouse to the porch and then in the front door. The Craftsman-style woodwork was oak and gave the home a warm feel. His small room in the attic had the same wood floors and floral wallpaper he ignored. The narrow twin bed had a passable mattress and decent blanket. With the way heat rose in the house, he doubted he'd need a quilt even in the middle of winter. The small dresser served its purpose, since he didn't have much extra in the way of clothes. Three sets of work clothes, a pair of nice jeans, and a couple of shirts. One pair of suit pants for events like church. He'd

36 Cara Putman

sacrificed to send money south each month. It rankled that it hadn't been enough.

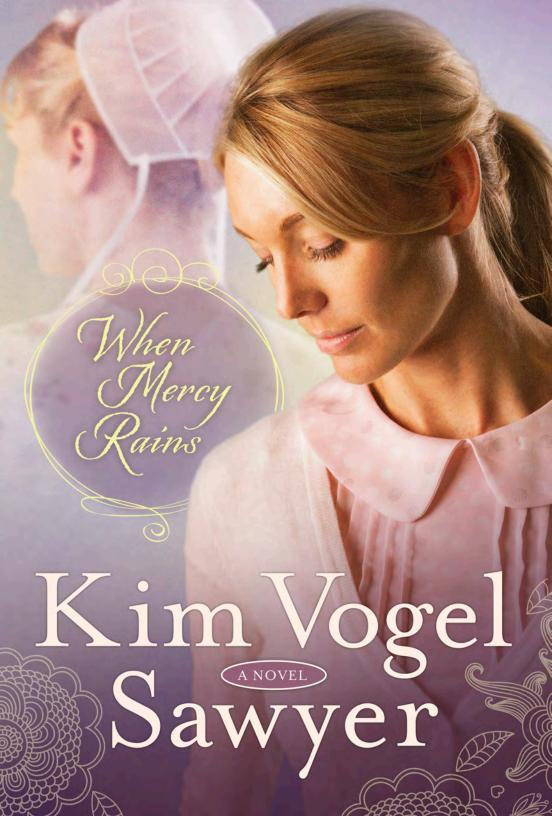
It wasn't the first time he'd failed, but the consequences were more severe this time. If only he knew where the money had gone. The best way to find out was a trip home. He'd have to find the time and funds to make the trip and talk to Mother, since catching her on the phone was difficult. Maybe then he could figure out what had happened and their situation would start to make sense.

Tonight he'd try to forget everything. Tomorrow he was headed to Purdue on an errand for his supervisor. Would he run into Abigail?

He snorted. On a campus that size, he thought he'd find one coed? No matter how beautiful she was, how bright her personality, it would take a small miracle to find her.

Could he have a future with someone like Abigail? No, he'd better get his expectations squarely where they belonged. Right now he needed to unravel the problems with the farm. He couldn't begin to think about a family of his own until his mother and sisters were taken care of. He needed to be realistic and responsible and pray for a solution to the problem perplexing him.

Beautiful women like Abigail Turner could play no role in his life right now.







Suzanne Spring 1994

he hiss of approaching tires on wet pavement broke the tense silence between the mother and daughter seated on the bus-stop bench. Suzy flicked a look at Mother and dared a timorous comment. "Here it comes." Now that her leave-taking was upon her, would her mother's disapproving demeanor soften?

The lines of Mother's mouth remained etched in a stern line, the furrows between her brows forming a V so deep it might never depart. Suzy hunched into her wool coat—a coat far too cloying for the damp May dawn but also too bulky to fit in her small cardboard suitcase. She'd be gone well into the winter months, and Mother insisted she'd need it so she should wear it. And she always did what her mother said.

Well, almost always. Who knew one foolish mistake could hold such farreaching consequences? *I'm so sorry, God.*

The bus groaned to a stop at the curb, and Mother curled her hand around Suzy's elbow, forcing her to rise. Although Mother's grip was hard, impersonal, Suzy welcomed it. Her ordinarily demonstrative mother hadn't touched her even once in the past two weeks, as if fearful Suzy's stains would rub off. So she pressed her elbow against her rib cage, needing to feel the pressure of Mother's

work-roughened fingers against her flesh. But the coat proved too thick a barrier. Suzy blinked rapidly.

"Get your case."

The moment Suzy caught the handle of the old suitcase, Mother propelled her through the gray drizzle toward the bus. The slap of the soles of their matching black oxfords sent up dirty droplets from the rain-soaked sidewalk, peppering their tan hosiery. The dark spots reminded Suzy of the dark blotch now and forever on her soul. She pushed the thought aside and looked into the opening created by the unfolding of the bus door.

The driver glanced from Mother to Suzy, seeming to focus on their white mesh caps and dangling ribbons—Mother's black, Suzy's white. Accustomed to curious looks from those outside her Mennonite faith, Suzy didn't wince beneath the man's puzzled scowl, but she battled the desire to melt into the damp concrete when Mother spoke in a strident tone.

"I am Abigail Zimmerman, and this is my daughter. She is traveling oneway to Indianapolis."

One-way... Suzy swallowed hard.

Mother gave her elbow a little shake. "Show him the ticket, Suzanne."

Suzanne. Not Suzy as she'd been tenderly called her entire life. She gulped again and drew the rumpled ticket from her pocket.

The driver eased himself from the seat and plucked the rectangle of paper from Suzy's icy fingers. He stared at it for a moment and then bobbed his head and waved a hand in invitation. "Come on aboard. Long drive ahead of you."

Suzy gritted her teeth to hold back a cry of agony. He didn't realize how long. She turned to Mother, silently praying the mother who had dried her tears and bandaged her childhood scuffs would reappear, would read the fear in her eyes and offer a hug. A kind word. A hint of forgiveness.

Mother leaned close, and Suzy's heart leaped with hope. "The people at the...in Indianapolis know what to do. You do what they say." Mother's harsh whisper raised a slight cloud of condensation around her face, softening the fierce furrows of anger etched at her eyes and mouth.

"I will." Questions Suzy had fearfully held inside pressed for release. What had Mother and Dad told Clete, Shelley, and little Sandra? Did the fellowship know she was leaving? Would she be allowed to call home?

"Afterward you can come to Arborville again. It will be as though this never happened." Mother took a step back, shoving her balled fists into the pockets of her lightweight trench coat.

Tears flooded Suzy's eyes, distorting her vision. The suitcase encumbered one arm, but she lifted the other, her fingers reaching fleetingly toward her mother. "Mother, I—"

"At least you will be able to bless your cousin Andrew and his wife. God will redeem your sin. Now go, Suzanne." Mother jerked her chin toward the rumbling bus. "Go and put this unpleasantness behind us."

Behind *us...* Suzy's shame had spilled over and tainted her entire family. She bowed her head, the weight of her burden too much to bear.

"I will see you afterward."

Mother's words sealed Suzy's fate. With a heavy heart, she climbed the stairs, the unwieldy suitcase and her trembling limbs making her clumsy. She trudged down the narrow, dim aisle past snoozing passengers to the very last bench and slid in. Hugging the suitcase to her aching chest—to her womb, which bore the evidence of her shame—she hung her head and toyed with the plastic handle of the suitcase rather than clearing a spot on the steam-clouded window to see if Mother might wave good-bye.

The bus lurched forward, jolting Suzy in the seat. She closed her eyes tight as a wave of nausea rolled over her. Her thoughts screamed, *Wait! Let me off!* She didn't want to go so far away. She needed her mother. She would miss her father and sisters and brother.

And Paul.

Her mother's final comment echoed in her mind. "I will see you afterward."

After Suzy delivered this child and handed it to others to raise. The ache in her chest heightened until she could barely draw a breath. She leaned her forehead against the cool glass and allowed the long-held tears to slip quietly down her cheeks. She would leave her home in Kansas, and she would count the days until she could put this nightmare behind her and go back to being Mother and Dad's Suzy again.





Suzanne Twenty Years Later

uzanne Zimmerman balanced a clipboard against her hip and recorded the milliliters of antibiotic-infused solution administered via Mr. Birney's IV, then she checked the box next to "pain medicine dispensed" and confirmed the time on her wristwatch before writing it down. Her clerical duties complete, she slid the clipboard into its plastic pocket on the wall and moved to the side of the tall, railed bed.

The blinds were drawn against the night, and only one small fluorescent bulb glowed from a panel above the bed, but the dim beam of light was sufficient. To her relief, Mr. Birney's face had lost its ashen appearance and his breathing was much less labored than when he'd been admitted three days ago.

As she looked down at him, his eyes fluttered open. His gaze drifted around the room, confusion marring his brow, but then he fixed his faded gray eyes on her face, and his expression cleared.

She touched the man's wrinkled hand. "I'm sorry. Did I disturb you, Mr. Birney?"

"Call me Ed. 'Mr. Birney' makes me feel like some old man."

Suzanne swallowed a smile. According to his file, Mr. Birney had turned eighty-two a month ago. He spoke in a crusty tone, but she admired his spunk. And she was thankful for it. He'd need spunk to recover from his bout of pneumonia. "Ed then. Are you comfortable?"

"As comfortable as I can be in this crazy contraption. Hard as a rock and folding me in half like a pretzel. A bed like this belongs in a medieval torture chamber."

Reflecting upon the proverb about laughter being good medicine, Suzanne teased, "Well now, you guessed our secret. We purchase our beds from Torture Chamber Supply Company. After all, if you're too comfortable, you won't want to get well and go home."

Mr. Birney gave a brief snort of laughter that ended in a cough. He shook his head, the lines of his jowls shifting with the motion. "Torture Chamber Supply Company. That's a good one." His eyebrows beetled, real concern chasing away the glint of humor. "About goin' home…I'll be doing that, won't I?"

Compassion filled Suzanne. She looked directly into Mr. Birney's watery eyes and spoke with great confidence. "You'll be going home. No need to worry."

He heaved a rattling sigh, then set his jaw in a stubborn jut. "Wasn't worried. Just wondering. Somebody's gotta keep the bird feeders filled, you know."

"That's true." Suzanne was glad he had a reason to keep living. So many of the elderly patients who came to Mennonite Manor Hospital and Recovery Home had no motivation to get better. Attitude played a significant role in recuperation, and she suspected Ed Birney would be back in his little home feeding the birds very soon given his plucky attitude.

Apparently reassured, Mr. Birney closed his eyes. Suzanne remained beside his bed for a few more minutes, watching the rise and fall of his chest, then sent up a quick prayer for his full recovery before stepping into the quiet hallway.

In less than half an hour, the day-shift workers would begin to arrive and the hospital corridors would buzz with activity, but night shift was quieter, peaceful. She'd worked the graveyard shift for so many years now, she had no trouble catching her sleep during the daytime hours and couldn't imagine any other schedule.

She rounded the corner to the nurses' station, the rubber soles of her white

lace-up shoes squeaking on the freshly waxed tile. A familiar head of short black waves showed over the edge of the tall counter, and Suzanne gave a little skip to speed her steps. "Linda! You're back!" As she stepped behind the counter, the hospital's longtime bookkeeper rose and held her arms open. Suzanne wrapped her friend's bulky form in a hug.

"'Course I am." Linda banged her thick palm against Suzanne's shoulder several times before pulling loose. "Counted down the days 'til my vacation was finally over and I could head on back here. Whole time I was gone I worried the place would fall apart without me, but look at this—the walls're still standing and nobody seems the worse for wear." She balled her fists on her hips and pasted a fierce scowl on her face. "But these files are a mess and nobody bothered to refill the candy dish. How'm I s'posed to get anything done if I haven't got any black cats to chew on?"

Suzanne laughed. "You and your licorice cats. I'll stop by Sarah's Sweet Treats on my way home this morning and pick up a bag for you." Surely Linda's purchases of licorice cats had kept the little candy shop open over the years.

"And that's why you're my favorite." Linda released a deep, throaty chuckle. She dropped back into the wheeled chair and began organizing the manila files scattered across the long desk.

Suzanne leaned against the edge of the counter and watched Linda work. "Did you enjoy your vacation? I bet the Caribbean islands were beautiful." Every year, Linda and her husband visited an exotic location for her retreat from work. On more than one occasion they'd invited Suzanne to join them, but the cost was always beyond her means. Even so, she wouldn't trade the years of raising her daughter for a hundred Caribbean cruises.

"Beautiful and *hot*." Linda fanned herself with both palms, pretending to pant. "I told Tom next year we're going to Alaska. Polar bears instead of palm trees. Wanna come?"

A vacation with Linda and her teddy bear of a husband would be pure delight. She loved both of them—they'd become her surrogate parents over the years. But she shook her head in gentle refusal.

Linda snorted and returned to her file sorting. "Girl, you've got enough vacation time saved up to take off for six months."

"Seven," Suzanne corrected with a smile.

Linda rolled her eyes. "But do you go anywhere? Huh-uh. Work, mothering, church, work, mothering, church... That's your whole life." She gave Suzanne's elbow a light smack. "You need to do something fun. Live a little. The Bible says, 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

Suzanne burst out laughing. "The Bible says that?"

"So maybe the good Lord Almighty didn't say it, but it's good advice all the same." Linda's round black face pursed into a worried frown. "You know I'm proud of you, Suzanne. Heavenly days, you beat all the odds, having that baby when you were hardly more than a baby yourself and then getting your nurse training without a family to support you. You raised Alexa right, and you made something of yourself. When I volunteer down at the crisis pregnancy center, I hold you up as an example of what those scared girls can be if they put their minds to it."

Suzanne lowered her head, both pleased and embarrassed. With God's help and the loving support of friends like Linda, she'd managed to carve a decent life for Alexa and herself. Even so, the stigma of once having been an unwed teenage mother still lingered. A part of her resisted accepting Linda's praise.

Linda went on in her husky voice. "But that girl of yours is old enough to fend for herself now. Why not take some time off? Do something for yourself for a change?" She leaned close, her dark eyes fervent. "You've earned it, Suzanne."

The mutter of voices and patter of footsteps signaled the arrival of day-shift workers. Suzanne bent forward and deposited a kiss on Linda's plump cheek. "I'll think about it," she said, then turned to greet the incoming nurse.

She updated the day nurse on medications prescribed to patients during the night, listened to one worker's complaint about the hospital's failure to change to computers in lieu of the old record-and-file system, and reminded her—as she'd done dozens of times before—of the small, mission-minded

organization's limited budget, completed and initialed her reports, and then finally headed to the bank of lockers for her coat and purse.

As she pushed her arms into her trench coat, Linda's suggestion to take some time off whispered through her mind. She'd promised to think about it, but thinking was all she'd do. She wouldn't take time away from the hospital. Here she was needed. Respected. And busy, leaving her no time to reflect on the past or how things might have been.

She slipped her purse strap over her shoulder and stepped out into the cool dawn. Beneath a rose-colored sky, she crossed the street to the small, graveled parking lot used by hospital employees and planned her morning. Breakfast with Alexa, a quick jaunt to Sarah's Sweet Treats for a half pound—well, maybe a pound—of licorice cats, then pajamas and bed.

She slammed the door on her late-model sedan, sealing away Linda's suggestion. Her friend meant well, bless her loving heart, but Suzanne was satisfied with her life of work, mothering, and church. God had gifted her beyond all deserving. She had no desire for anything more.



The alarm clock's buzz roused Suzanne from a sound sleep. She slapped it silent, then rolled over and stretched like a lazy cat. After tossing back the covers and slipping her feet to the floor in one smooth movement, she sat on the edge of the mattress for a few seconds and allowed herself to awaken by increments. Yawned. Rubbed her eyes. Yawned again.

Finally awake, she padded to the window and rolled up the blinds. Lateafternoon sunlight poured into the room, making her blink, but she welcomed the splash of brightness. During the winter months she often awakened to a black sky, making her feel as though the sun never shone. But now spring had arrived with its longer days and warmer evenings. Before long she and Alexa would be able to sit on their tiny balcony in the evenings, sip tea, and chat while watching the sun set over Franklin. One of their favorite activities. They'd always been content with little pleasures.

The clatter of silverware found its way past her closed door. Alexa was setting the table, so apparently supper would be ready soon. Knowing how her daughter disliked letting a meal grow cold, Suzanne quickly showered then dressed in a work uniform—flowered scrub top over a long straight skirt, anklets, and her comfortable oxfords. She brushed out her damp hair, braided it into a single plait, and then twisted it into a bun on the back of her head. After running a soapy cloth over her face and brushing her teeth, she made her bed and then headed to the kitchen.

Alexa looked up from chopping a red pepper into thin slices and smiled. "You're just in time to turn the chicken breasts on the grill."

Suzanne raised her eyebrows. "You started the grill? Kind of early, isn't it?" They'd only turned the calendar to April three days ago.

Alexa shrugged, sending her long ponytail over her shoulder. The silky tresses, as richly brown as a mink's fur, fell straight and sheeny down her slender back. "The sun warmed up the balcony, and I couldn't resist having our first cookout." She bobbed her chin toward the sliding doors at the far end of their small combination sitting and dining room. "Better go turn 'em before they scorch."

Suzanne grabbed the two-pronged fork from the end of the counter and stepped onto the balcony. The aroma that rose when she lifted the grill's cover made her stomach roll over in eagerness. She poked the thickest chicken breast with the fork, and clear juices ran out to sizzle on the hot grid. She stuck her head inside and announced, "They're done."

Alexa bustled over with a plate, and Suzanne transferred the chicken from the grill, then turned off the burner and closed the gauge on the propane tank. She entered the apartment just as Alexa carried the bowl of salad to the round table tucked in their tiny dining alcove.

"I hope you don't mind just having chicken and a salad." Alexa lifted a pitcher of tea from the middle of the table and poured it over ice cubes in two

jelly jar glasses. "A light supper will leave room for what comes later." She waggled her eyebrows teasingly.

Suzanne slipped into her chair, smiling. She'd gotten spoiled over the past years since Alexa had taken on the responsibility of cooking. Her daughter was especially adept at creating delectable desserts. Fortunately all of her hallway walking at the hospital worked off the extra calories. "What did you concoct this time?"

"A triple-layer torte with both chocolate and strawberry fillings."

Suzanne nearly groaned. "Oh, that sounds rich. Where did you find the recipe?"

Alexa offered another glib shrug and plopped into her chair. Suzanne would never cease to be amazed at how Alexa could move so quickly and still appear graceful. "I sort of made it up. If it turns out, you can take the leftovers to work and share."

Suzanne had no doubt she'd be sharing with her coworkers. She held her hand toward Alexa, and her daughter took hold. They bowed their heads in unison, and Suzanne offered a short prayer of thanks for the meal. Alexa used a pair of plastic tongs to serve the salad—a combination of colorful chopped vegetables, walnuts, and dried cranberries that was almost too pretty to eat.

Suzanne lifted her knife and fork and cut into the tender chicken breast. At the first bite, she murmured, "Mm...how did you season this?"

Alexa swallowed a bite and took a sip of tea before answering. "I brushed them with olive oil, then sprinkled on dried parsley, basil, a little seasoned salt, and some garlic pepper. I was afraid the garlic pepper might be overboard, but it doesn't taste bad at all."

"It tastes great." Suzanne stabbed up another bite.

"I used the same seasonings and olive oil for the salad dressing but added some fresh-squeezed orange juice and a little bit of sugar."

"Sweetheart, everything is wonderful, as always." Suzanne gave Alexa's wrist a squeeze, pride filling her. "You're going to make a wonderful homemaker for a lucky man one day."

A wistful expression crossed Alexa's youthful face. "Well, you keep praying for my husband-to-be, Mom, and I'll keep my eyes open. So far he's stayed pretty well hidden."

Suzanne forced a light chuckle, but inwardly she cringed. If she'd raised Alexa in the Old Order sect, she'd probably already be published to marry. At nineteen, she was considered old enough to be a wife and mother. Although Suzanne prayed daily for a loving, God-honoring husband and faith-filled home for her daughter, she didn't mind waiting another year or two for Alexa to find the man God had planned for her. She liked having her close. As Alexa had grown older, she'd become more than a daughter—she'd become Suzanne's best friend. Would they be as close if—

She chased away her inner reflections by asking about Alexa's work. Alexa shared a few cute anecdotes about the children who came through the line at the elementary school where she helped prepare and serve lunch each day, then Suzanne told her about Mr. Birney and asked her to pray for his full recovery—as he'd said, someone needed to fill the bird feeders. Their supper hour passed quickly, and when they'd finished, Alexa carried their empty plates to the sink, then removed the torte from the refrigerator.

As Alexa sliced into the towering dessert, she said, "Oh, Mom, I almost forgot. You got a letter today. From Arborville."

"Really?" Letters were rare, usually arriving around Christmastime, the time of year when families were expected to contact one another.

"I put it on top of the daily newspaper." She shook her head, pursing her lips in a what-is-this-world-coming-to expression. "Read the article on page three about the abandoned baby a kitchen worker found in the Dumpster behind a restaurant. I can't believe someone would just leave a newborn in the trash that way..."

Suzanne experienced an inner jolt of reaction to Alexa's dismayed comment, but she didn't respond. She knew all too well how children were tossed aside by unfeeling or desperate parents. As she crossed to the far side of the room and picked up the long envelope, she offered a prayer for God to provide

a loving home for the little foundling. Every child deserved to be loved and nurtured by caring parents.

Then she turned her attention to the envelope, and her hands trembled. The return address said Cletus Zimmerman in scrawling penmanship. Clete had never written before. Letters always came from Mother.

"Cletus is your brother, right?" Alexa slid a sliver of cake onto a dessert plate and licked a smudge of icing from her thumb.

Suzanne nodded woodenly.

Alexa snickered. "He should be a doctor with handwriting like that. What does he say?"

"I don't know. I haven't opened it yet."

"Well, don't just hold it. Open it, goofy." Alexa's teasing grin did little to calm Suzanne's rattled nerves.

Suzanne managed a weak smile. She peeled back the flap and removed two sheets of yellow notepad paper. Clete's messy scrawl covered the front and back sides of both pages. Mother's letters, which were meant to encompass a year's worth of news, never filled more than one sheet of paper. Comparatively speaking, Clete had written a book.

Alexa touched Suzanne's arm. She jumped in surprise, unaware Alexa had left the kitchen. A soft smile curved her daughter's lips. "Mom, sit down and read your letter. I'll put the cake back in the fridge, and we'll have it when you're done, okay?"

Suzanne cupped Alexa's smooth cheek in a silent thank-you. Then she sank onto the couch cushion, flicked on the table lamp, and angled Clete's letter toward the light. She read slowly, frowning at times as she struggled to make sense of her brother's sloppy handwriting, but eventually she reached the end. By the time she'd finished, her desire to sample Alexa's triple-layer torte had fled. She wouldn't be able to swallow a bite.

Chapter 2

Suzanne

ou mean to tell me nobody bothered to let you know your mama had been hurt bad enough to put her in a wheelchair?"

Suzanne held a Styrofoam cup of black coffee between her palms and nodded in understanding at Linda's incredulous blast, yet at the same time she felt the need to defend her family. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. After all, I didn't go home when my father died." She hadn't been able to. If she'd missed her boards, she wouldn't have received her nursing license. Alexa's and her future had rested upon her taking those exams. She sighed. "My siblings probably thought I wouldn't care."

"That's a bunch of hooey." Linda's voice rose above the chatter of three young aides taking their break at a table on the other side of the small cafeteria. Her dark eyes flashed. "You're one of the most compassionate people I know. It's what makes you such a good nurse." She leaned in close, the spicy smell of licorice wafting to Suzanne's nose. "What are you going to do, girlie?"

In the three days since the letter from Clete had arrived, Suzanne had thought of little else, yet she had no answer. How could she go? Mother had been so adamant no one ever discover she'd become pregnant out of wedlock. She'd stayed away to protect her secret—to protect the family from finger-pointing and criticism. If she returned now, especially with Alexa in tow, it would open the door to questions and speculation.



She swallowed a lump of agony. "I don't know."

"You been praying about it?"

"Of course I have."

"And the Lord hasn't spoke to you one way or the other yet?"

Suzanne shook her head. Why did her prayers concerning her family seem to go no farther than the ceiling?

"Well, I sure won't be the one to tell you what to do—"

Suzanne tamped down a moan. She'd stayed late this morning and poured her heart out to Linda in the hopes the older woman, so practical yet so wise, could direct her.

"—but I will say you should do nothing until you hear from the Lord."
"And what if He remains silent?"

Linda reached across the table and took Suzanne's hand. Such a simple touch, but the warmth of her palm offered soothing comfort. Sometimes Suzanne wished Linda was her mother instead of her mentor and friend. She blinked back tears as Linda spoke tenderly. "Honey, sometimes God speaks best through silence. We just have to be close enough in tune to read His Spirit. Keep your heart open. You'll know what you're supposed to do when the time comes."

Linda withdrew her hand, and Suzanne lifted her cup to take a sip of the now-cool strong brew. She made a face and set the cup aside. "Will you pray for me?"

"Tom and I pray for you every day anyway, but we'll pray especially for God to direct your thoughts." Linda picked at the doughnut on the paper plate in front of her. "Did your brother tell you when they wanted you to come?"

"He didn't mention a specific date." Suzanne cringed, recalling Clete's strong wording. "We need your expertise. None of us can do what needs doing for Mother." "But the tone of the letter hinted at desperation. I think he hoped I'd come right away."

"Well, at least you know you've got the time if need be. All that saved-up vacation—it could come in handy." Linda spoke in a musing tone, seemingly

unaware of the turmoil her statement stirred within Suzanne's breast. Were all the years of stockpiling vacation days meant to give her the time to care for her mother? If only she knew for sure. "And since it's a family situation, the board of directors would probably give you a leave of absence if you asked. You've been a faithful employee for almost fifteen years. That counts for a lot."

Frustration built and spilled over. "So can't you see my dilemma, Linda? I have the time. I have the training. They really seem to need me. But I can't find peace about packing a bag and returning to Arborville."

To Suzanne's further aggravation, Linda had the audacity to laugh. "Well, honey, why would you? You've been away from there for more than half your life! And your leave-taking wasn't exactly under happy circumstances. Of course you've got apprehensions about going back."

Suzanne cringed. Linda only knew the half of it. And she couldn't bring herself to share the other half. After burying her secret for twenty years, she wasn't sure she'd ever be able to bring it to the surface.

Linda checked her watch. "*Tsk.* Look at the time. I better get to my desk, and you should go home and put yourself to bed. Those circles under your eyes are darker than midnight."

Despite her flustered emotions, Suzanne released a soft laugh. Linda's wry forthrightness always managed to boost her spirits.

Linda pushed herself from her chair and shot a pointed look in Suzanne's direction. "Walk with me." They dropped their breakfast items in a trash receptacle and then ambled through the hallway. Linda threw her arm across Suzanne's shoulders. "What does Alexa think of all this?"

"I haven't told her."

"What?" Linda came to a halt, forcing Suzanne to stop, too. Her surprised expression changed to a disapproving glower. "Why ever not?"

"I told her my mother had been injured." Alexa had clapped her hand to her mouth in horror when Suzanne shared how the three-hundred-pound bale of hay rolled from the transport trailer and pinned Mother to the ground. They both agreed God's hands had sent the rains to soften the ground, giving the slight cushion that prevented her from being crushed to death. Even so, her shattered bones and damaged nerves left her a paraplegic. "But I didn't mention Clete wanting me to take care of her."

"Suzanne, you've got to tell her." Linda shook her head, emitting a little huff. "Alexa isn't a child anymore. She's a young woman, and whatever you decide to do will affect her. Go home and talk to your daughter. Give her a chance to pray for you and with you. Give her a chance to offer you some moral support. After all these years of you doing everything for her, let her do a little something for you. It'll build her character." Taking Suzanne by the shoulders, she turned her in the direction of the lockers. "Go home, Suzanne Zimmerman."

Her head low, Suzanne began moving toward the exit.

Linda called after her, "And when you've finished talking to Alexa, get some sleep. Those raccoon eyes are liable to scare the patients."



Alexa

Alexa inserted her key in the apartment door and let herself in. Humming, she dropped her jacket over the arm of a dining table chair and leaned against the counter to flip through the few envelopes she'd found in their mailbox. Two bills, an invitation to change their television service to a different company—silly, since they didn't even have a television—and a coupon for a Mexican restaurant. Mom couldn't eat Mexican because the spicy food gave her indigestion, so Alexa threw away both the coupon and the TV-service advertisement, then placed the bills in the little basket on the corner of the counter where Mom would be sure to see them when she got up.

She headed for her bedroom to change her spaghetti sauce–stained T-shirt—somehow she'd gotten splashed above the bib of her apron—but before she took three steps, a quiet voice stopped her.

"Alexa?"

Spinning toward the sound, she let out a gasp of surprise. The end-table lamp snapped on, bringing her mother's form into plain view. Alexa pressed her palm to her chest and forced a laugh. "Mom, for heaven's sake, you nearly scared me out of my skin. Why aren't you in bed?"

Mom yawned. "I wanted to be where I'd hear you when you came in. Can you sit down for a minute?" She patted the sofa cushion beside her. "I need to talk to you about something important."

"Sure." After three days of near silence, Alexa welcomed the opportunity to talk. She seated herself sideways, tucking one foot beneath her, then placed her hand over her mother's knee and tipped her head. "Is it bad? You've been awfully quiet the past few days. You've worried me."

A frown pinched Mom's face. "I'm sorry. I've been deep in thought, but I didn't intend to worry you."

Alexa shrugged, eager to put Mom at ease. "It's okay. Maybe a little worry on my end is fair considering all the worrying you've done about me, huh?"

To her surprise, tears winked in Mom's eyes. "You've never given me a reason to worry about you, Alexa. Yes, I've worried about not doing right by you, but you have been a delight from the first moment I held you in my arms. I'm so proud of the young woman you've become. Anyone would be blessed to have you for a daughter."

Fear attacked, making her break out in a cold sweat. She gripped Mom's knee hard. "Are you dying?"

Mom's eyebrows shot upward. "Dying?"

"Are you sick? Is that why you've been quiet? Have you been trying to find a way to tell me? Well, I'm listening now—you can tell me. Please tell me." Her lungs seemed incapable of pulling in a full draft of air, so she heaved in panicked little puffs.

"Alexa, honey, calm yourself." Mom peeled Alexa's hand from her knee and held it between her palms. "I'm not sick."

[&]quot;You're not?"

[&]quot;No."

Alexa slumped forward. "Oh, thank goodness. When you said..." She forced herself to draw a big breath and let it out slowly. Her imagination had run away with her again. But this time she'd had help. Why had Mom given that glowing little speech if she wasn't sick or dying? "Then what is it?"

"Remember the letter that came from your uncle?"

Alexa sat quietly as Mom explained Uncle Clete's request for Mom to come to Arborville and assume nursing duties for their wheelchair-bound mother. While she listened, her heart began a rapid *thump-thump-thump* of excitement, and she found it hard to stay in her seat. Mom was going to Arborville? Then Alexa would finally have the opportunity to meet her grandmother, her uncle, her aunts, and the rest of the family Mom had left behind.

Alexa blurted, "When are you going?"

Mom's mouth dropped open. "You want me to go?"

Alexa threw her hands wide. "Why not?"

"I'd have to take a leave of absence from the hospital, give my church responsibilities to someone else, be apart from our friends, leave you here alone..."

Alexa drew back. "What do you mean, leave me here?"

"Your home is here. Your job is here. Everyone you know is here." Mom bit her lower lip, her brow crinkling in either confusion or consternation—Alexa couldn't be sure which. "You wouldn't want to go there, would you?"

All the longings Alexa had carried from little girlhood welled up. She caught Mom's hands and squeezed, trying to impress upon her how deeply she wanted this chance to know her family. Her father—Mom's best-kept secret—and his family would probably never be known to her. But now she could meet Mom's family and finally feel as if she belonged. "My job is just a job, biding my time until I can decide what I really want to do. This apartment is only home because you're in it. Sure it'd be hard to be away from our friends at church and from Linda and Tom—I love them. But they aren't family."

How could she make Mom understand without hurting her? "I'm curious about your family. *My* family. I always have been. But when I asked you questions about them, I could tell it made you mad. Or sad."

Mom lowered her head. "I'm sorry, honey."

Alexa blew out a frustrated breath. "And now I'm making you sad again. Mom, please listen to me, okay?" She waited until her mother looked up and met her gaze. She spoke gently. "From the time I was a little girl, I've taken the...the snippets of information you've shared about your Old Order upbringing and painted these elaborate images in my head. Pictures of the farm, the people, the small, close-knit community." The imagined scenes paraded through her mind again, making a grin tug at her cheek. She wanted to find out what it was like to be a part of it.

"I love you, Mom. You're fantastic, and you've always given me security and love"—she pressed her hands to her aching chest—"but here, in the center of my soul, there's this empty spot only a complete family can fill." Her throat tightened and tears threatened. She didn't want to crush her mother, but she had to know. So she gathered her courage and dared to ask the question she'd held inside for far too long. "How did you do it? How did you leave them? You are so important to me. I could never walk away from you and not come back—not even for days, let alone for years."

Mom looked away, and the muscles in her jaw clenched. "You don't know everything that happened, Alexa."

Alexa's heart hurt for her mom. Obviously the pain, although decades in the past, was still very much a part of her. "Of course I don't. I wasn't there. But I do know this..." She tipped sideways a bit, trying to make eye contact with her mother. "You gave me life. You're my *mom*. No matter what, if you needed me, I'd be there." Minutes passed in silence while Alexa held her mother's limp hands and waited for her to speak.

Mom remained quiet so long she began to wonder if she'd fallen asleep sitting up. Then a soft chuckle left Mom's lips. She turned toward Alexa. Tears slid down her cheeks, leaving their tracks behind. A wry smile lifted the corners of her lips. "Linda was right."

"Linda's always right. About what this time?"

"You're growing up."

For some strange reason, the comment made her want to cry. She sniffed hard.

"And I guess, when I can get the arrangements made, we'll go to Arborville."

Alexa threw her arms around Mom and let out a cry of exultation. "It'll be great, Mom, you'll see." She could hardly wait to see her words proved true.



Suzanne

uzanne inched up the narrow aisle of the JetBlue aircraft, her carry-on bag bumping the backs of her knees as she went. From behind her, Alexa released a happy sigh.

"Wow, Mom, it almost feels like a dream, doesn't it?"

A dream? More like a nightmare. The past three weeks had been fraught with stress. She'd never imagined how many phone calls, written requests, and face-to-face meetings would be necessary to take a two-month leave from her life in Indiana. But she couldn't stomp on Alexa's happiness. Always much more bubbly than her reserved mother, Alexa had exhibited more enthusiasm about going to Kansas than anything else, ever. She flashed a quavery smile over her shoulder, which Alexa returned a hundredfold.

Suzanne passed the uniformed flight attendants who stood at the doorway thanking the passengers for utilizing their airline. Although she acknowledged their comments with only a slight nod, Alexa replied cheerfully.

"You're welcome. Thank you for a great flight—my very first."

The attendants laughed, and the taller of the pair said, "We hope it won't be your last."

"Me, too."

In the tunnel leading to the terminal, Alexa eased to Suzanne's side. Her shoulder bag swung wildly on its long strap, bumping Suzanne's hip. "Do you

suppose there'll be a welcome committee waiting for us? After all, you haven't been home in...well, forever." Alexa's tinkling laughter spilled out. "Wouldn't that be amazing? Your whole family out there waiting, holding up a big sign and balloons or flowers or something."

Suzanne moved sideways to avoid another whack from Alexa's overstuffed purse. She should have taken advantage of their lengthy flight time and shared the entire truth with Alexa. Her stomach churned. If—and it was a mighty big "if"—her entire family waited, at least one of her long-held secrets would be revealed quickly and she could stop worrying about her family's reaction to Alexa's presence.

She fixed a serious look on her daughter, one she'd perfected over the years in an attempt to squelch her abundant exuberance. "Don't get your hopes up, Alexa. We're arriving on a weekday afternoon. People have jobs and responsibilities. It's very unlikely any of my family is here. They've probably sent a driver to retrieve us."

"Oh." For a moment, Alexa's bright countenance dimmed. But then in typical form, she gave a cavalier shrug and grinned. "No matter. Once we reach Arborville, there'll be a reunion. I'm sure of it."

They rounded the final bend leading to the reception area, and Suzanne caught Alexa's arm, guiding her away from the stream of others making their way to baggage claim. She looked into her daughter's expectant face and feared her heart might break. Why hadn't she told Alexa the truth years ago when she began asking about the big family living on a farm in Kansas? Her mother's harsh command rang in her memory, stinging her anew. "I don't care what you want, young lady. You will give up that baby to your cousins, and no one besides you and me will ever know what you did!" Suzanne hadn't wanted to inflict pain on her precious girl, so she'd sidestepped Alexa's questions rather than divulge the events surrounding her leave-taking.

She'd always admired Alexa's cheerful outlook and active imagination, seeing them as gifts even if she sometimes wished her daughter would ground herself more in reality. For years she'd carried a boatload of regrets, but the

biggest one at that moment was that she had not been completely honest with the most important person in her life. The truth would shatter Alexa.

She gently squeezed Alexa's elbow. "Honey, listen to me. I know how excited you are—how long you've wanted to meet your grandmother and uncle and aunts—but I don't think you fully understand how the Mennonites live."

A sheepish grin climbed her cheek. "Actually, Mom, I know more than you know I know. I kind of researched Old Order Mennonites when I was in junior high." She shrugged. "Curiosity..."

Suzanne cringed. "Well, you still don't know how my family lives. Please don't be hurt if there isn't—"

Alexa's gaze moved beyond Suzanne's shoulder. She jerked loose of Suzanne's light grasp and pointed. "Mom, look. That man over there has a sign with *Zimmerman* on it. Let's go!" Without a moment's pause, Alexa looped her arm through Suzanne's elbow and headed for the waiting man.

He wore the Sunday garb of Suzanne's sect—white shirt buttoned to the collar and tucked into black trousers. A suit coat with no lapels hung open, revealing a sliver of navy-blue suspenders. The man appeared to search the crowd, but as Alexa and Suzanne approached, he pinned his focus fully on Suzanne. His gaze traveled from her face down the line of her simple sweater and matching cardigan, long skirt, and bottom four inches of her low-heeled slouch boots and then up again. His brow furrowed, but he appeared more puzzled than disapproving.

He dropped the crude sign with its block-letter printed name into a nearby receptacle and took two steps toward them. "Suzy?"

Alexa arched her eyebrows, her lips quirking into a teasing grin. "Suzy?"

Suzanne gave her daughter a brief frown, then turned to the man. "I go by Suzanne now, but yes, I'm Suzanne Zimmerman."

The man's puzzlement faded in an instant. He released a self-conscious chuckle. "I'll try, but it'll be pretty hard for me not to call you Suzy."

Only then did she notice the pale scar running from the outer corner of his left eye to his hairline, the result of a childhood encounter with the sharp barb on a neighbor's wire fence. The entire fellowship had praised God for allowing the barb to miss his eye and leave his sight unaffected. A buzzing filled her head and her jaw slackened. "Clete?"

He nodded, his blue eyes sparkling. "That's right. Welcome home, Sis."

And then Suzanne found herself wrapped in her brother's embrace. When she'd left, he'd been a gangly eleven-year-old, the top of his head barely reaching her chin. Now his chin pressed against her temple, and his firm hold spoke of a man's strength.

His deep voice—unfamiliar yet somehow known—filtered past the ringing in her ears. "It's been a long time. Too long." Did a hint of recrimination color his tone?

Suzanne extracted herself and peered into her brother's face. "I'm here now."

Perhaps he recognized the challenge she'd injected in her simple reply, because he gave a nod and his expression softened. "Yes, you are."

Alexa, who'd stood silently by and shifted from foot to foot during the brief exchange, now bolted forward. "Hello." Her greeting whooshed out breathlessly. She took his hand and shook it, her smile growing broader with every pump. "It's so good to finally meet you."

Clete nodded, his gaze zipping back and forth between Suzanne and Alexa. "Yes. Yes, of course it is. Um..." He withdrew his hand and scratched behind his ear, his confused glance landing on Suzanne. "Who is this?"

Befuddlement pursed Alexa's face. "Who else would I be? I'm—"

Suzanne slipped her arm around Alexa's waist. "This is my daughter, Alexa."



Alexa

Surprise widened her uncle's eyes, but as quickly as his startled expression formed, it disappeared, leaving Alexa wondering if she'd seen it at all. He reached for her, and she allowed him to tug her against his broad chest.

For years she'd anticipated this moment—being welcomed into a large circle of family instead of being the only child of a single mother. But now that her uncle's arms held her in what she could only define as an uncomfortable embrace, all the wonderful images of reunion she'd conjured faded. She pushed lightly against his chest, and his arms dropped.

He ducked his head briefly, as if collecting himself, and then he aimed a wobbly smile at Mom. "We'd better get your luggage."

Alexa darted ahead, needing to gather her thoughts. She searched for a positive aspect to the situation. In moments her ready imagination served up a plausible scenario. Mom hadn't told her family she'd be bringing her daughter along. After all, they'd asked her to come to nurse Grandmother. They probably assumed Alexa had responsibilities keeping her in Indiana. So her arrival caught them by surprise. That would explain Uncle Clete's confusion.

She glanced over her shoulder, noting the firm line of her uncle's mouth. Mom appeared equally grim. Although he and Mom hadn't seen each other in two decades, they walked side by side in a tense silence. Shouldn't they be speaking over the top of each other in their eagerness to catch up on their lives? Unease sent a tingle down her spine. Something was wrong.

Most of the passengers had already claimed their luggage, so only a few bags remained on the slow-moving conveyor belt. Alexa snagged Mom's black bag and her own green-with-orange-polka-dots one. To her dismay the brandnew upright cases, purchased especially for their trip to Kansas, bore oil stains and scuff marks. Their damaged appearance too closely emulated the marred expectations of meeting her family for the first time.

Uncle Clete stepped forward and reached for the bags. "I'll get those. I left my truck in short-term parking, so we won't have a long walk. This way." He spoke kindly yet impersonally, the way one might address a stranger.

His tone raised a prickle of resentment. She followed her uncle from the terminal into a cool early evening. The leftover scent of a recent rain filled her nostrils, and she breathed deeply, willing the fresh essence to chase away the unwelcome emotion.

Mom often berated her to act her age, and now Alexa gave herself the same admonition. To expect instant affection was childish and whimsical. She and her uncle were strangers. After twenty years apart, he and Mom probably felt like strangers, too. Alexa would allow a few days for everyone to settle in and get comfortable. They just needed a little time.

Beside her, Mom shivered, and Alexa automatically slipped her arm around Mom's waist. Mom shot her an appreciative smile, and Alexa answered it with a bold wink. Poor Mom... She looked exhausted. She'd worked all night, honoring her responsibility to the hospital right up to the last minute, then traveled all day. Her reticence was probably more a result of tiredness than anything else.

"Here we are." Uncle Clete unlocked the door on a gray pickup truck with a double cab. "Suzy...er, Suzanne, why don't you sit up front and Alexa can have the back." Without waiting to see if they followed his directions, he moved to the bed of the truck and heaved their suitcases over the edge.

Alexa cringed, imagining the additional bumps and scratches his rough treatment would certainly inflict on their luggage, but she held her tongue and climbed into the backseat of the cab. Bits of dried grass and dirt clumps littered the floor, and the distinct aroma of cattle clung to the upholstery. She sucked in one last draft of the rain-scented air before slamming the door closed behind her.

A child's booster seat sat in the middle of the bench, and Alexa pushed it to the far side to give herself more room. Uncle Clete settled himself behind the steering wheel, then sent an unsmiling glance into the back. "Oops. Want me to put that in the bed with the suitcases?"

"It's not bothering me," Alexa said, unexpectedly warmed by his offer. She clicked her seat belt into place. "Who does it belong to?"

Uncle Clete answered as he backed out of the narrow parking space. "My daughter Jana."

"How old is she?" Alexa couldn't quite temper the eagerness in her voice. The yearly Christmas letter coming from Arborville had never told as much as she wanted to know about Mom's family—her family. She wanted to know everything.

"Four."

"And she's your youngest, right?"

He pulled a curled-edge photograph from beneath the sun visor and handed it over the seat. "Youngest of three. Jana's the one on the far left. Jay's in the middle—he's eight. And then Julie's five."

Alexa examined the images in the grainy photo. The trio of children stood at the edge of a wheat field. The little girls wore knee-length gingham dresses, obviously homemade, and the boy's shirt seemed to be sewn from the same blue-checked fabric. Bright sunshine turned their fair hair into halos. Mom craned her neck to peer over the seat, so Alexa gave her the picture as she told her uncle, "They're real cute. Your girls look so much alike and are so close in size, they could be twins."

He stopped at the gate to pay the parking fee. As the truck merged with other cars leaving the airport, he said, "We get asked that a lot. Especially since we have a set of twins in the family."

Alexa leaned as far forward as the seat belt would allow. She searched her memory for details from Grandmother's annual Christmas letters, but she came up empty. "I've forgotten—which of your sisters has twins?" She shouted to make herself heard. Now revving at close to sixty miles an hour, the truck's engine roared like an angry lioness.

"Shelley and her husband, Harper." Uncle Clete yelled, too, turning his face slightly to send his answer into the backseat. "Girls—six years old. Their names are Ruby and Pearl."

Now Alexa remembered. She'd thought the names pretty but old-fashioned. "Does Mom have any new nieces or nephews?" She tapped Mom's shoulder with her fingertips, hoping to encourage her to ask these questions so she wouldn't feel so nosy.

"Our youngest sister, Sandra, and her husband, Derek, have a little boy named Ian. You probably know about him—he turned three last week—but they're expecting another baby midsummer." Uncle Clete flicked a quick look at Mom. "Just wondering... Wasn't your husband able to come with you?"

Mom turned her face toward the side window. Alexa frowned. Mom's family didn't already know she wasn't married? Although puzzled, Alexa found no insult in the question. She'd adjusted to not having a father, and she'd hardly been the only girl in school being raised by a single mother. Mom had explained long ago how a foolish decision to break God's instruction to save sex for the marriage bed resulted in her becoming pregnant.

Watching Mom struggle to provide for her and be both mother and father had been a good lesson for Alexa. She wanted a family someday, but she wanted the support of a husband both physically and emotionally. She'd promised her mother she wouldn't make the same mistake, and she intended to keep the promise.

Mom still hadn't answered, so Alexa piped up. "It's just Mom and me."

Uncle Clete's eyebrows descended. "I see." He aimed his gaze forward, his jaw set so tightly the muscle in his cheek bulged.

Mom stared out the side window at a landscape that looked so much like Indiana's, Alexa had a hard time believing they weren't still in their home state. Silence fell, making the truck's engine seem to increase in volume. Alexa wriggled uncomfortably, wishing someone would say something.

Uncle Clete cleared his throat. "Alexa, how old are you?"

"Nineteen."

Mom suddenly seemed to come to life, sitting upright and turning to face Uncle Clete. Her face glowed bright red, but she spoke in a strong voice. "How long will I be needed?"

He rolled his clenched fists on the plastic steering wheel. He didn't look at Mom. "Why?"

"Because I'd like to know."

Alexa wanted to know, too.

Uncle Clete swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing. "I'd thought...for good."

Mom shook her head as if she hadn't heard right. "I only arranged for a two-month leave."

He pulled in a deep breath and released it, his big frame sagging a bit as the air left his lungs. "Mother is never getting out of that wheelchair. The damage to her spine can't be fixed. None of the rest of us know how to help her. You're the nurse. Our missionary nurse." His tone took on a bitter edge, as if he'd tasted something unpleasant. "Shelley, Sandra, and me...we figured you'd be happy to use your training to serve your mother."

Mom said, "Have you moved her into town?"

Uncle Clete snorted. "She won't leave her house."

"Of course she won't."

Although she'd never seen it, Alexa held a picture in her head of Mom's childhood home. A rambling farmhouse two stories tall with decorative gable trims, an attic, too many bedrooms to count, a spindled porch in front, and a screened sun porch off the kitchen. She'd dreamed about living in a century-old house exactly like the one in which Mom grew up, and even though Mom sounded dismayed, Alexa couldn't resist a rush of elation at the thought of staying, even if only briefly, in the old house out away from town.

"For the past four months, Tanya, Shelley, and Sandra have taken turns caring for her," Uncle Clete went on. "But they have to bring the kids along, and Mother..." He slowed the truck and turned right onto a dirt road. He held the speed to a crawl, but even so, the truck bounced over ruts, making Alexa grateful for the seat belt holding her in place. She hoped the suitcases in the back wouldn't fly over the edge.

"Mother lost most of her patience a long time ago, and now that she's hurting all the time, she pretty much has none. It doesn't work to have the kids underfoot. That's why we thought... We didn't know about..." He snapped his mouth closed again.

Mom sighed. A resigned sigh. "She shouldn't be on the farm. I can't imagine her trying to get around in a wheelchair out there."

"We're fixing that." He eased the truck around a bend. Up ahead, the farmhouse Alexa had envisioned in dozens of childhood daydreams materialized. She leaned forward and stared at the house as Uncle Clete continued. "It's taken a while for him to clear his schedule enough to do everything we need done, but we hired a local contractor to put in ramps, widen the doorways, and rebuild the kitchen and bathroom to accommodate Mother's wheelchair. You might remember him—Paul Aldrich."

A gasp escaped Mom's lips, and Alexa turned her attention from the house's white clapboard siding to Mom's colorless face. A chill wound its way up Alexa's spine. "Mom, are you all right?"



London, England April 1912

If she lived to be one hundred and five, Katherine Evangeline Ramsey would never understand why every debutante must begin the London social season by curtsying to the king and queen. Of course, she was excited to be presented at court and to take part in her first season. She had looked forward to it for years, however, mastering the required skills had proven more challenging than she'd expected.

But her aunt, Lady Louisa Gatewood, insisted that was how every wellbred young lady made her debut into English society and announced she was ready for marriage. Kate certainly hoped her aunt was right. Because marriage to the right man was the only way she would gain control of her life and create a future for herself.

Pulling in a deep breath, she straightened her shoulders and prepared to practice her curtsy once more.

Mr. Philippe Rounpear, her gray-haired dancing master, lowered his bushy, silver eyebrows and pointed his white-gloved finger at Kate. "You must float over the floor like a swan gliding across a lake." He gave a firm nod. "Try again, please."

How many times was he going to make her do this? Kate stuffed down her frustration and cast a heated glance at her aunt Louisa, who sat on a high-backed chair by the piano, taking on the role of King George V.

Her aunt stiffened. "Katherine, the only way you will gain a position in society is to take your training seriously."

"I *am* taking it seriously!" The words flew from Kate's mouth before she could stop them.

"Then you must conquer these presentation formalities and do them perfectly."

Kate swallowed the sharp reply rising in her throat, tugged her skirt aside, and stepped into her next curtsy.

Mr. Rounpear's voice rang out. "No, no! You look as stiff as a broom." He crossed the oriental carpet of her cousin William Ramsey's London drawing room and tapped her left shoulder. "You must relax your posture. Think grace, think poise."

Heat flushed her face. She looked past the dancing master at her younger sister, Penny, who sat next to their aunt, pretending to be Queen Mary. Penny's eyes danced as she waited for Kate to attempt her next curtsy.

Kate narrowed her gaze at her sister. Just wait. In two years you will be eighteen, and you'll have to prepare for your own presentation. You won't be laughing then!

Mr. Rounpear clapped his hands. "Miss Katherine, our hour is almost over. One more time, please."

"All right." Katherine blew out a breath and tried to relax her shoulders. She would get this right or expire in the process. She had to. Her future depended on it.

Lifting her chin, she stepped to the side, then crossed one leg behind the other, and slowly sank down in front of her Aunt Louisa.

"Better." Mr. Rounpear nodded. "Not perfect, but better. Now lower your head, count to three, then rise slowly."

Katherine's legs burned as she waited and then rose.

"Now take two steps to the right, and curtsy to the queen."

Katherine glanced at Penny and took the first step, but when she took the second, her foot tangled in her skirt. She gasped and her hand shot out.

Penny smirked and covered her mouth.

Katherine swayed, struggling to recover her balance.

Mr. Rounpear scowled. "Is that how you will conduct yourself at your presentation?"

"Of course not." Kate untangled her skirt and turned toward the

windows, frustration bubbling up within. This man was impossible! She would like to see him curtsy fifty times and never lose his balance.

"Face this way!"

Kate clenched her jaw and turned around.

"You must never turn your back on the royal family." He motioned toward Penny and her aunt.

"They are not the royal family, and neither are you!"

His eyes flashed, and he lifted his hand. "Very well. That will be all for today."

"Mr. Rounpear, please!" Aunt Louisa rose from her chair. "There's no need to cut the lesson short."

"It appears your niece is tired, and that has made her irritable."

"But Katherine's presentation is Friday."

"Yes, the time is short." The dancing instructor lowered his eyebrows and studied Kate. "I suppose I could come again on Wednesday at three o'clock."

"Yes. Thank you. We'll look forward to it." Aunt Louisa sent Kate a pointed glance and waited for her response.

Kate thanked Mr. Rounpear for the lesson, though it nearly killed her.

Louisa crossed the room and pulled the cord to summon the footman. He arrived and escorted the dancing instructor out. When the door closed, she swung around and glared at Kate. "There is no excuse for your rude behavior toward Mr. Rounpear."

Kate lifted her chin. "I don't see why he has to come back. I know how to curtsy."

"There is more to court presentation than learning how to curtsy."

"Of course, but he's so superior and demanding."

Louisa's nostrils flared, sending a warning. "You will have one more lesson with Mr. Rounpear, and I don't want to hear any more about it."

Kate's face burned. She clenched her hands, barely able to keep herself under control. But her aunt was her presentation sponsor, and if Kate didn't hold her tongue, she might lose her opportunity to be presented.

Louisa didn't seem to notice Kate's response, or perhaps she didn't care. She turned to Penny. "Have you tried on those two new dresses?"

"Yes, but the hem of the green silk is terribly uneven. Should we send it back to the dressmaker, or should I ask Lydia to fix it?"

"Goodness, you would think with the price I'm paying that dressmaker, she could at least hem a dress properly." Louisa motioned toward the open doorway. "I'm going to the Tremblys' for tea at four, and I need to change, but I suppose I have time to look at it."

"Splendid." Penny turned and dashed out of the drawing room.

"Penelope, slow down!" Louisa raised her hand to her chest and hurried after her. "This is not a racetrack!"

Kate shook her head as she watched them go, then turned toward the window. Sunlight poured through the tall panes, drawing her gaze up to the blue sky.

It would be a perfect afternoon for a ride. Of course, a tame promenade down Rotten Row in Hyde Park wouldn't be nearly as exciting as a highspeed race across the beautiful rolling hills at Highland Hall, her country estate in Berkshire.

That thought stopped her cold, and pain pierced her heart.

It wasn't her estate anymore.

It had been almost a year since her father's death, and when she lost him, she lost control of Highland as well. It wasn't right, but it was the law.

She had no brothers, and daughters could not inherit their father's title or the estate that was tied to it. So even though they barely knew him, William Ramsey—her second cousin once removed—had taken her father's title as baronet and become master of Highland Hall. Even worse, her father had named Cousin William to be her guardian until she married, and that had made her life very difficult these last few months.

Of course, her father had not left her penniless. Money had been put aside for her marriage settlement. But if she wanted freedom from her cousin's control and a home of her own, she would have to find a husband this season.

Which was exactly what she intended to do.

She crossed to the center of the room to practice her curtsy a few more times before tea. Perhaps without everyone hovering over her and criticizing her every move, she could relax and master the graceful movements she needed to impress the king and queen. And everyone else who would be watching.

Closing her eyes, she pictured the motions. Then she lifted her hand, stepped to the left, and sank down once more. Lowering her head, she counted to three, then slowly rose. There, that was better. She smiled at the imaginary queen. "Thank you, Your Majesty. I'm very pleased to meet you."

A giggle drifted in through the open doorway.

Kate glanced to the right, following the sound.

Six-year-old Millie, Cousin William's daughter, peeked around the edge of the doorway. Her ginger curls spilled over her shoulder as she leaned in.

A smile broke across Kate's face. "Millie, are you spying on me?"

"No, I'm just watching. What are you doing?"

"I'm practicing for my presentation to the king and queen."

Millie's blue-green eyes glowed. "You're going to the palace to see the king and queen?"

"Yes, I am. There will be two hundred other young women presented that day, but I'll have my turn to meet them, and you'll do the same when you're my age."

Millie's impish smile spread wider. "Really?"

"Of course." Kate's spirit lifted. Millie was right. Presentation at court was an exciting opportunity that would open the door to Kate's future. She shouldn't let her overbearing aunt or her gloomy dancing instructor squelch her happiness.

It was time to make the most of the day. She focused on her young cousin again. "Would you like to learn how to curtsy?"

"Yes!" Millie hurried across the room toward Kate.

"All right. Stand like this." Kate showed her young cousin the first position.

The little girl watched Kate with eager expectation, then lifted her skirt and followed along.

• • •

Jonathan Foster hopped down from the London omnibus and set off across Hathaway Court, a broad, tree-lined street in the heart of Kensington. The late April sunshine warmed his shoulders, and the fresh spring breeze carried a faint floral scent. What a perfect day.

The pleasant spring weather wasn't the only reason for his cheerful mood. In less than two weeks, he would finish his fifth term at medical school, and he could enjoy a bit more freedom and a lot more sleep for the next few months.

Jon glanced at his watch. He didn't need to be back at St. George's Hospital until seven this evening. That gave him plenty of time to call on his sister, Julia, and her future husband, Sir William Ramsey, and welcome them to London.

Although their parents were in favor of his sister's upcoming marriage, Jon wanted to become better acquainted with William and be sure he was the right man for Julia. Ramsey might be a baronet and master of a large country estate, but it was Julia's recent inheritance from their grandfather that had saved Highland Hall from financial ruin just two months earlier.

Did William truly love Julia, or had he pursued her for the inheritance? With their father still recovering from a prolonged illness and living miles away in Fulton, Jon wanted to make sure his sister was protected and her future secure.

He rounded the corner, and Ramsey House came into view. He gazed up at the impressive three-story Queen Anne-style home built of red brick. It had white trim, an intricate dutch gable with a scrolled roofline on the left, and a large round turret at the corner on the right. Another arched gable sheltered the front entrance.

He stopped at the wrought-iron gate and surveyed the property. Two well-kept flower gardens and neat boxwood hedges lined the walkway leading to the front door. They added a warm welcome and softened the formal appearance of the house. His sister, he was sure, appreciated that.

William Ramsey's London home was certainly different from Jon and Julia's simple childhood home at the mission station in India—and the thatched cottage where their parents now stayed in Fulton. His sister would lead a very different life here. But he imagined she would accept those changes with the same grace and goodwill she had always shown.

Still...was this marriage what was best for her? Would she be happy here? That's what he needed to discover.

He pushed open the gate, mounted the steps, and rang the bell.

A few moments later, a stout butler in a neatly pressed black suit answered the door and ushered him in. "Please wait here, sir." The butler motioned toward a chair in the entrance hall.

"Thank you." Jon removed his hat and glanced around as the butler passed through a doorway at the end of the hall.

The interior of the house was even more impressive than the façade, with beautiful hardwood floors, thick carpets, and an elaborately carved wooden staircase leading up to the next floor. A large mirror in a gilded frame hung on the wall to his right between two large family portraits. He stepped closer and examined one of the paintings.

Could that be William Ramsey when he was a boy? The young lad had the same features as the man he'd met at his sister's engagement dinner at Highland Hall in February. Two boys stood with him. Jon guessed they were his brothers. A younger sister and their parents stood with them in a garden setting. If that boy in the middle was William, he looked rather somber, even as a child.

A soft female voice followed by a little girl's giggle drifted from the partially open doorway down the hall.

Jonathan tipped his head and listened. Was that Julia with Sir William's daughter, Millie? Julia had grown very fond of Sir William's two young children since she'd become their governess at Highland Hall six months ago. And in a few months she would become their stepmother.

"Very nice, Millie. Let's try it again."

No, that wasn't Julia's voice. Perhaps it was Katherine Ramsey or her

sister, Penelope. Jon had met Sir William's cousins at Julia's engagement dinner at Highland, and he had seen them again at William's sister's wedding earlier this month.

"Show me again." Millie's young voice carried a smile.

"All right. Follow me."

Jonathan moved closer and looked into the drawing room. The plush furniture had been pushed back. Katherine Ramsey stood in the center of the room wearing a sky-blue dress, with Millie standing beside her. Katherine's back was to the entrance hall, so she didn't see him step into the doorway.

Katherine lifted her skirt a few inches and exposed a bit of ruffle around her slim ankles. "Step to the left and place your right foot behind. Then slowly sink down until your knee almost touches the floor, but not quite."

Millie copied each movement, though hers were not as smooth as Katherine's.

"Now, lower your head." Katherine demonstrated and Millie followed. "Hold perfectly still while you slowly count to three before you rise."

Millie wavered, then gasped and tipped to the side.

Katherine lunged to catch her, but Millie crashed onto the carpet, and Katherine landed in a heap beside her.

Jonathan dashed across the room. "Miss Ramsey, are you all right?"

She looked up at him, and her cheeks flushed bright pink. "Mr. Foster... Yes, of course, I'm fine."

Millie giggled as she pushed herself to her hands and knees and then stood. "I guess I need more practice."

"I suppose I do as well." Katherine started to rise.

Jon extended his hand to her. "Please, allow me."

She glanced up at him, her eyebrows slightly arched. "I promise you I've curtsied dozens of times today, and this is the only time I've fallen."

"Of course. I'm sure it was only because you were trying to help Millie. Now, please, let me be a gentleman and give you a hand." He smiled and continued to hold out his hand.

She hesitated a moment, then reached out and clasped his fingers. He helped her to her feet, then she slipped her hand from his.

"Thank you." As she looked down and brushed off her skirt, Jon had a moment to observe her more carefully. Her long, golden-brown hair was tied back with a blue ribbon that matched the color of her eyes. One wavy strand of hair had come loose when she fell. She reached up and tucked it behind her ear, her hand grazing her flushed cheek.

His gaze drifted from her cheek to her full, pink lips.

She looked up. "Mr. Foster?"

He swallowed and looked into her eyes. "Yes?"

"Have you come to see your sister?"

"Yes."

She glanced over her shoulder and then back at him. "Does she know you've arrived?"

He blinked, struggling to find an answer. "Yes."

She searched his face with a slight frown. "Mr. Foster, are you quite all right?"

"Yes." He shook his head and looked away. What was the matter with him? "The butler asked me to wait in the entrance hall, but I heard your voice and thought you were Julia, so I looked in. Of course then I realized you weren't Julia... You were you." His neck warmed. He was rambling on like an idiot.

A hint of amusement lit her eyes. "Well, we're very grateful you came to our aid, aren't we, Millie?"

The little girl nodded, her curls bobbing on her shoulders. "Are you staying for tea?" Millie looked up at him with a friendly smile and wide, innocent eyes.

He glanced at Katherine.

"Yes, of course. You're welcome to join us for tea. I'm sure Cousin William and Julia will be down soon." She placed her hand on Millie's shoulder. "Why don't you go tell them Mr. Foster is here?"

Millie nodded and turned to go just as William and Julia walked into the drawing room with Andrew, William's eleven-year-old son.

"Jonathan, what a wonderful surprise." Julia crossed the room and greeted him with a kiss on his cheek. "I'm so happy to see you."

"Thank you. I'm very glad to see you as well. Welcome to London." He shook hands with William and turned to Andrew. "How are you, young sir?"

"Very well, thank you." The sturdy little fellow's face was covered with freckles, and his red hair was an even brighter shade than his sister's.

"We hope you're still coming to dinner on Thursday," Julia said.

"Yes, I'm looking forward to it. But my classes were canceled this afternoon, so I thought I'd stop in and say hello."

"That's wonderful." Julia turned to Katherine. "Thank you for entertaining Jonathan while he waited for us."

Katherine shot him a questioning glance, and he returned a reassuring smile. Her secret was safe with him. He would not mention her fall.

"Yes, Katherine and Millie were very kind and...quite entertaining."

"We invited him to stay for tea," Millie added with a proud smile.

William touched his daughter's shoulder. "That was very thoughtful, Millie."

Millie looked up at her father, soaking up his praise.

"Yes, please stay for tea and tell us all your news." Julia took his arm and led him out of the drawing room.

As they crossed the threshold, he glanced over his shoulder at Katherine. Her gaze connected with his for a split second, then she looked away, a hint of a smile on her lips.

• • •

Kate took a sip of steaming hot tea and glanced across at Jonathan, who sat opposite her in the library. He stirred sugar into his tea, his movement smooth and relaxed. The discomfort he'd shown earlier in the drawing room seemed to have disappeared, leaving Kate wondering, *What was that about?*

Julia poured a cup of tea and passed it to William. The children were gathered around a small table near the library fireplace.

William helped himself to a scone and glanced at Julia. "Won't Penny and Louisa be joining us?"

"They've gone to call on the Tremblys, and then they plan to stop at the dressmaker's on the way home."

William lifted his dark eyebrows. "More dress fittings?"

"An adjustment was needed on the hem of one of Penny's dresses."

Kate nibbled on a lemon tart and glanced at Jonathan again. His blue eyes looked very similar to his sister's. But his hair was light brown with a touch of gold rather than dark brown like Julia's. He had pleasant features with a high forehead, straight nose, and a strong, square chin. With his broad shoulders and athletic build, he would be considered quite handsome by most women.

That certainly didn't matter to Kate. She knew what she was looking for in a husband. She and her aunt had discussed it at length. If Kate hoped to gain a place in society, she must marry a wealthy man from an aristocratic family, preferably one in line to inherit a title and estate. Of course, he would also be handsome, with pleasant manners and fine character, but that went without saying.

Jonathan looked up, and his eyes met hers. He smiled, with an invitation to friendship in his eyes.

Was it right to judge a man so quickly because of his lack of fortune and family connections? She looked away, dismissing the slight wave of guilt that pricked her conscience.

William set his plate aside and settled back in his chair. "The stories in the newspaper about the *Titanic* have certainly been tragic."

Julia glanced at the children, concern in her expression. But Andrew and Millie were enjoying their fruit tarts and sandwiches and didn't appear to be listening.

"Did you know anyone on board?" Jonathan asked.

"I went to school with Kirby Brumfield. We belonged to the same club." William lowered his voice. "His wife and two children were rescued, but he was not."

Sorrow flooded Julia's expression. "It's such a tragedy. We must pray for them all."

Jonathan nodded and looked across at Kate. "Have you read the articles about the *Titanic*, Miss Ramsey?"

The temptation to say she had rose in her mind, and her face warmed. A few months ago she would've easily lied to give a better impression, but since Julia's arrival Kate had been learning the value of telling the truth, even when it reflected poorly on her.

She lifted her eyes and met Jonathan's gaze. "No, I haven't."

He studied her for a moment with a hint of disappointment in his eyes, then glanced down at his teacup.

Regret washed over her. Of course she'd heard about the *Titanic* sinking a week earlier, but with their move to London, the dress fittings, and her preparations for the season, she hadn't thought much about it. But now, hearing how William's friend had lost his life, the tragedy seemed more real—and her lack of concern, more shameful.

Julia shifted in her seat and glanced at Andrew and Millie again. "Perhaps we should talk about something else. I don't want to upset the children."

"You're right, dear. That's a topic for another time." William turned to Jonathan. "How is your training coming along at the hospital?"

"Very well. Making rounds with the doctors and observing surgeries is much more helpful than sitting in a classroom or pouring over textbooks."

Julia nodded looking pleased. "You always have liked learning from practical experience."

"That's true." Jonathan helped himself to a small sandwich. "How are your plans coming for the season?"

"Katherine's presentation is Friday." Julia smiled at Kate. "I'm sure she'll receive several invitations after that. We expect to have a very full calendar."

Jonathan turned to Kate. "This Friday?"

A bite of lemon tart stuck in her throat. She nodded and forced a slight smile.

"And her ball is planned for the eleventh of May," Julia said. "We hope you'll be able to come."

"Of course. I'd be honored to." Jonathan glanced around the room. "Will you be holding the ball here?"

"We planned to." William frowned and shook his head. "But Lady Gatewood, Katherine's aunt, insists there's not enough room. We have over one hundred and fifty guests on the list."

A thrill ran through Kate, and she couldn't hold back her smile. "Aunt Louisa helped us make arrangements to hold it at Sheffield House. They have a large ballroom with a lovely terrace and gardens."

"Katherine's aunt is friends with the Tremonts, who own Sheffield," Julia added. "They've been very kind to allow us to host the ball there."

Jonathan focused on Kate with a slight smile. "I've never been to a debutante ball."

"It should be wonderful."

"I'm sure it will be." Julia turned to Jonathan. "So, when will you finish your classes?"

"Just two more weeks. Then I'll start two mornings a week at the hospital for the rest of the summer."

"That should be a nice change for you," Julia said with a smile.

"Yes, I'm looking forward to it, although I'll have to hunt for a new flat right away."

Julia tipped her head. "You're moving?"

"I must. The owner of our building is selling the property. I have to be out by the fifteenth of May at the latest."

William frowned. "That's certainly short notice."

"Yes, it is. Theo Anderson, one of my fellow students, invited me to stay with him, but I'm afraid his flat is even smaller than mine. I'm not sure how well that would work."

"Why don't you stay here?" William set his plate aside and continued. "We have four guest rooms, and we're not expecting to fill them all."

Kate darted a glance at Jonathan. She supposed having him stay with them wouldn't be too awkward, but what would people think? Of course, with her aunt, cousin, and Julia as her chaperones, even London's scandalloving society shouldn't object. "Sarah and Clark will be coming to town for Katherine's ball," William added, "but they're only staying for a few days. We don't return to Highland until early August. You're welcome to stay with us as long as you'd like."

"Thank you. That will give me plenty of time to look for a new flat before classes start again in the fall."

"How soon would you like to bring your things over?" William asked.

"I could come tomorrow, if that fits in with your plans."

"Excellent. We'll send the car around. Just name the time."

"Would three o'clock be convenient? I have a trunk and a few boxes of books, so it would be very helpful."

William nodded and set his teacup aside. "I'll ask Lawrence to arrange ir."

Julia's expression brightened as she looked from William to Jonathan. "It will be wonderful to have you here with us."

Jonathan offered them both a grateful smile. "It will be a pleasure, and it should give me a chance to get to know William and the rest of the family." His gaze traveled around the room, then settled on Kate.

Kate looked down at her plate. She doubted she would see much of Jonathan Foster after her presentation. Once the season moved into full swing, invitations would pour in, and her days and nights would be with filled with parties, dinners, balls, and outings. She glanced at Jonathan once more, and a twinge of regret traveled through her.

• • •

Lydia Chambers hurried down the back stone stairs, carefully carrying Miss Katherine's large lavender hat. Perhaps Mrs. Adams, the housekeeper, would know how to reattach the ostrich feathers that had somehow come loose on the trip from Berkshire to town.

Lydia heaved a sigh as she passed the main floor landing and continued downstairs. She'd been so happy with her promotion from Highland housemaid to lady's maid for Miss Katherine and Miss Penelope. The idea of traveling with the Ramsey family to London had been thrilling for a simple farm girl, but now she had a whole new set of responsibilities: fixing the

young ladies' hair, caring for their clothing, and even sewing their undergarments.

There was much to learn! And if she didn't do it well, she'd be demoted back to housemaid and find herself on the next train back to Berkshire.

Had she been a fool to accept the promotion?

She bit her lip and knocked on Mrs. Adams's door.

"Come in."

Lydia opened the door and stepped into the housekeeper's cozy parlor. "Good afternoon, ma'am."

Mrs. Adams turned in her chair. "What can I do for you, Lydia?"

"Miss Katherine wants to wear this tomorrow." She held out the hat and pulled out the three ostrich plumes. "And I've no idea how to get these blessed feathers back in place."

A hint of a smile touched Mrs. Adams's lips, and her eyes crinkled at the corners. "Let me see it." Lydia handed her the hat, and Mrs. Adams turned it in her hands, inspecting the flowers, feathers, and netting. "My goodness there's quite a garden here, isn't there?"

A smile tugged at Lydia's lips. "Yes, ma'am."

"Well, you've come to the right place." Mrs. Adams looked up, her soft gray eyes glowing. "My mother was a milliner, and I grew up making hats. I'll show you how to fix it."

Lydia clasped her hands. "Oh, thank you. I thought I was going to be sacked before I finished my first week in London."

"Don't worry, my dear. By the time we're finished, Miss Katherine could wear this hat in the worst windstorm and never lose a feather."

"I'm ever so grateful. I really do want to learn to be a proper lady's maid."

"Of course you do, and I'm happy to help. Now let me find what we need, and then we'll take it to the servants' hall. It's almost time for tea." Mrs. Adams handed Lydia the hat, then took her sewing basket from the shelf in the corner. She motioned toward the door. "After you, my dear."

Lydia's tense shoulders relaxed as she walked into the servants' hall and took a seat at the long wooden table. Most of the other servants had

already gathered there and were enjoying their tea and a short break from their busy day.

Ann Norton, the nursery maid, looked up and smiled as Lydia settled in next to her. "You better watch out for that hat. You don't want to get jam or tea on it."

"You're right about that." Lydia carefully laid the hat in her lap. "I wouldn't have brought it in, but Mrs. Adams is going to show me how to fix the feathers." Lydia glanced across the room at the housekeeper.

Mrs. Adams stood at the head of the long table, speaking in a low voice to Mr. Lawrence, the butler. Together they oversaw the staff. Mr. Lawrence took charge of the male servants, including the two footmen, the chauffeur, and a groom. Mrs. Adams watched over the female servants, two house-maids, Ann, and herself.

Mrs. Murdock, the cook, bustled in and set a tray of sandwiches on the table. She frowned at Nelson, the footman, who was already eating. "You're certainly in a hurry. Couldn't you wait for the rest of us?"

"Sorry." Nelson glanced at Mr. Lawrence.

The butler turned to Mrs. Murdock. "I told them to go ahead. We have quite a bit to do, and I saw no need to wait."

Mrs. Murdock rolled her eyes. "Oh well, that explains it."

Lydia and Ann exchanged a smile. Since their arrival in London, Mrs. Murdock and Mr. Lawrence seemed to be testing each other, trying to determine who was truly in charge at the meals. Although Mrs. Murdock oversaw two kitchen maids and all the meal preparations, she still answered to Mrs. Adams and Mr. Lawrence.

Each one had their place and knew they needed to keep to it and show the proper respect to those above them.

Ann glanced at the housekeeper. "That's nice of Mrs. Adams to help you with the hat."

"Yes, she's kind." Lydia leaned closer. "Ever so much nicer than Mrs. Emmitt."

Ann's lips puckered as though she'd tasted something bitter. "I'm glad we won't be taking orders from her when we go back to Highland."

"So am I."

Mrs. Emmitt, the previous housekeeper at Highland, had tried to sack Ann last winter when she'd been caught alone with Peter Gates, a former groom. But Miss Foster had spoken up for Ann and convinced Sir William to overrule the housekeeper and keep Ann on.

Ann brushed a breadcrumb from her apron. "It's good the truth about Mrs. Emmitt finally came out. Imagine, her trying to get rid of Miss Foster."

Lydia shook her head. "She ought not to have done that."

"Especially since Miss Foster and Sir William had feelings for each other."

"It's quite romantic, isn't it—a fine gentleman like Sir William falling in love with a governess?"

Ann shrugged one shoulder. "I suppose. I'm just glad Mrs. Emmitt was the one who was sacked instead of Miss Foster or me."

The staff had been told Mrs. Emmitt had resigned and gone to live with her sister in Bristol, but the truth had been whispered from one servant to the next, and few were sorry to see the old housekeeper go.

Lydia carefully poured herself a cup of tea, making sure not to splash any on Miss Katherine's hat. "Do you think Mrs. Adams will be coming back to Highland, to replace Mrs. Emmitt?"

Ann shook her head. "I heard she has two daughters and a grandchild here in town. I doubt she'd want to take a job so far from her family."

"Well, they'll have to find someone to run the house."

Ann spread butter on a slice of bread. "I wish I could apply, but they probably want someone with more experience."

Lydia nodded. "It's a big job to manage a house like Highland."

Patrick, the second footman, walked into the servants' hall. His light brown hair was neatly combed, and he wore a smart livery. "The afternoon post, sir." He handed Mr. Lawrence a stack of envelopes.

"Thank you." Mr. Lawrence quickly sorted through the pile and set most of the letters aside. He looked down the table. "Lydia, you have a letter." Lydia hopped up to accept the envelope from the butler. "Thank you, sir."

He nodded and passed out two more pieces of mail.

Lydia glanced at the envelope and her spirit lifted. Letters from home were a rare treat, and she eagerly tore open the envelope. She unfolded the one sheet of paper and scanned the first few lines. Her breath caught in her throat as she quickly read the rest.

Your sister Helen has run off, and we are heartsick and so worried. We have no idea who she is with or where she's gone. Have you heard from her>

Your father has spoken to some of the young people in the village and nearby farms. He even offered a reward. No one has come forward yet, but we hope someone will speak up soon. I feel certain one of them knows where she's gone.

Please pray for her and for us. Your father is beside himself, and my heart is breaking. If you hear from her, please send word right away.

I hope you are well and you are able to learn all that's needed in your new position. There are many temptations in London. I hope you will avoid them all and stay on the straight and narrow path.

Your loving Mother

Lydia's hand trembled as she stared at her mother's script. Why would Helen run away? Of course, life on the farm was not easy, but how could she just up and disappear without telling their parents? Where would she go? How would she live?

If she longed to leave home that much, why didn't she take a respectable job in service with a good family, rather than running off and causing so much trouble for their family? But Helen had always been a romantic soul and longed for the day when a young man would woo her and whisk her away to a charmed life.

Foolish girl!

Lydia folded the letter and slipped it back in the torn envelope.

"Lydia? What's wrong?" Ann leaned toward her. "Is it bad news?"

Lydia swallowed and looked around. She couldn't speak of her sister's troubles here in the servants' hall, not with everyone listening.

Ann reached for her arm. "Goodness, your face has gone as white as a sheet."

Lydia pulled away and stood, but her legs felt shaky. "I'm all right. I just need...some fresh air." She turned and strode out of the servants' hall.

"But what about Miss Katherine's hat?"

"I'll come back for it." Lydia hurried down the hall, then pushed open the back door. Stepping out to the rear courtyard, she squinted against the late afternoon sunlight. The smell of horses and hay drifted from the open stable door past the carriage house.

She leaned against a stack of wooden crates and tried to still her racing thoughts.

Oh Helen, what have you done?

onathan walked down the hospital corridor with Theo Anderson, his friend and fellow medical student. The scent of antiseptic hung in the air, and a few small puddles from a recent mopping left a sheen on the edges of the smooth tile floor. Jon lifted his hand to mouth and stifled a yawn.

Theo chuckled. "Don't start that. It's only nine o'clock."

"Sorry. I didn't get to bed until after one last night."

"Studying for exams?"

"That's what I should've been doing, but I was packing up my flat."

Theo glanced at Jon. "You decided to take me up on my offer?"

"I appreciate the invitation, but I've decided to stay with Sir William Ramsey, my sister's fiancé, in Kensington. At least through July."

Theo grinned. "Well, you're certainly moving up in the world."

Jon returned a slight smile. "Yes, I suppose I am."

"That should be nice, having your own staff of maids and footmen."

Jon's smile faded. "I'll take care of myself."

"Maybe at first, but I think you'll get used to having someone clean your shoes and press your suits."

Discomfort tightened Jon's chest. "I'm not staying with them because they have servants. William has a large house with plenty of room, and it's only a ten-minute ride to the hospital."

"That's an advantage."

"It will give me more time with my sister and William...or to do any number of things."

A fleeting vision of Katherine Ramsey passed through his mind, but he quickly banished the thought. She might be beautiful, but she seemed to be self-absorbed and wrapped up in her preparations for the season. She'd rebuffed his smiles and avoided looking him in the eye yesterday. And he

knew why. Julia had told him Katherine's goal was to receive a marriage proposal this season from a titled peer with a family estate. He could never compete with someone like that—

He shook his head at himself. He had no desire to compete, whether he could or not! When he married, *if* he married, it would be to someone who shared his values and goals.

"Moving to Kensington makes sense," Theo said, "especially since you've received that inheritance from your grandfather."

"I won't see any of it until I turn twenty-five in August, but what does that have to do with it?" Jon glanced around, hoping none of the other hospital staff or students had heard. He was still getting used to the idea of the unexpected inheritance from his late grandfather, and he didn't want others to know about it and treat him differently.

"It could open the door for you to be accepted in the better circles of society."

"I suppose, especially if my aunt Beatrice and Grandmother Shelburne have anything to say about it."

Theo's grin returned. "They're still trying to introduce you to all their friends?"

Jon stopped at the end of the hallway, and a smile tugged at his lips. "Yes, it's part of their not-so-subtle campaign to try and convince me to stay in England."

"Really?" Theo lifted his eyebrows, humor reflected in his eyes.

"They're hoping I'll find a wife, sign on for a position at the hospital, and settle down in London."

Theo cocked his head. "Would you consider that?"

Jon shifted his gaze to the windows, a hundred conflicting thoughts running through his mind. "I don't know."

"I thought you were going back to India."

"That was the plan, but I always imagined my father and I would work together."

Theo sobered. "He's not going back?"

Jon shook his head. "It doesn't look like it. His health has improved, but not enough for him to make such a long sea voyage or work in India's climate. His doctor says it would be too hard on him, and I have to agree."

Theo placed his hand on Jon's shoulder. "Why not strike out on your own? With your experience and training, you'd do well wherever you go."

"Thanks. I appreciate your vote of confidence." Jon rubbed the bridge of his nose as another wave of tiredness washed over him. If he was going back to India next year, he should have already started the application process with the London Missionary Society. But each time he pulled out the paperwork, heaviness came over him.

Did he want to spend the rest of his life serving as a medical missionary? Was that the best use of his gifts, talents, and training? Had the Lord provided the inheritance so he could return to India independently, without the support of the missionary society? Or did He have some other plan in mind for Jonathan?

If Jon went overseas as an unmarried man, he would most likely be giving up the possibility of marriage and children—or at least postponing it for a good many years. Was he willing to make that kind of sacrifice?

But how could he stay in England and enjoy the life his inheritance would provide when there was such great need overseas? How could he walk away from all his parents had taught him about living a life focused on serving others and sharing the love of Christ with those who had never heard of Him?

What was his responsibility? What did God want him to do?

Theo thumped Jon's shoulder and stirred him from his reverie.

"One thing is certain—at least you won't have to spend your summer working at Hargrove's like you did last year."

Jon pushed his questions aside to consider later. "Yes, that's a relief." Loading crates of fruit and vegetables onto trucks had provided the funds he needed for his medical training, but it had been backbreaking work.

"Cheer up, Jon. You're the envy of all our friends now."

"You mean because I won't be sweating my summer away on the docks?"

Theo grinned. "Yes, and because of your inheritance."

"I thought I asked you not to say anything about that."

"I haven't said a word to anyone, but George Maddox asked me about it, and I heard Mrs. Worthington mention it to one of the other nurses."

Jon narrowed his eyes. This was not good news. "It must be my aunt then. She seems determined to spread the news as far and wide as possible."

Theo sent him a questioning glance.

"She hopes it will reach the ears of the social matrons, and I'll be invited to some of the events this season."

"That doesn't sound so bad. I wouldn't mind attending a few dinner parties or the races at Ascot."

Jon rubbed his chin. It would be interesting to see how aristocrats entertained and enjoyed themselves. This might be his last chance to take part in events like that if he planned to return to India. But even considering it made him feel a bit guilty. How could he enjoy a lavish lifestyle when so many didn't have the basic necessities?

He shook his head. He might be uncertain about taking part in the season, but one thing was clear: he did not want to become the focus of gossip. He turned to Theo. "If you hear anyone else discussing my inheritance, I hope you'll put a stop to it."

"I will. You have my word."

"Thank you."

Dr. Alfred Pittsford strode down the hall toward them. He wore a white physician's coat, and a stethoscope hung around his neck. In his arms he carried a stack of bulging file folders. Dr. Pittsford taught two classes for the medical students, but he spent most of his time working at a free clinic he had opened on the East End.

"Good morning, gentlemen." Dr. Pittsford's close-clipped red beard and moustache partially hid his smile.

"Morning, sir," they both replied.

"Mr. Anderson, it was good to have you at the Daystar Clinic last Saturday. Will you be joining us again this week?" "Yes sir. I have a commitment in the morning, but I plan to come for the afternoon."

"Very good. We'll be open until seven. With the warmer weather there has been a rise in the number of patients. We'll be glad to have your help." Dr. Pittsford shifted his gaze to Jon. "And what about you, Mr. Foster? Have you made a decision about volunteering at Daystar?"

Jon looked up and met the doctor's gaze. "I'm still considering it, sir."

"Why not come along with Mr. Anderson on Saturday and see the work for yourself? It would be a great opportunity to gain more practical experience. And I think you'll find it very gratifying to help those in the East End who have no other access to medical care."

"I'd like to, but I have an engagement on Saturday."

A shadow of disappointment crossed the doctor's features, then disappeared. He gave a slight smile. "Well then, maybe next week." Dr. Pittsford bid them good day and continued down the hallway.

Theo watched him go, then turned to Jon. "Are you sure you can't come on Saturday?"

"Positive." Jon started down the hall toward their next class.

"I thought you'd be one of the first to sign up to help at Daystar. The work sounds very similar to what you did in India."

"Our focus there was rescuing young girls from a terrible life in the temples and caring for children who were abandoned."

"But you provided medical care for the poor, didn't you?"

"Yes, my father and I worked side by side at our clinic in Kanakapura."

"That's what we're doing in the East End, and every patient who comes through is offered prayer and spiritual counsel as well as a physician's care."

"I have no doubt it's worthy work. But I can't come this week. Dr. Gleason and his wife invited me to a garden party at their home. And you can't very well say no to the president of the hospital."

A smile formed on Theo's lips. "Ah, now I see what's happening." "What?"

"Dr. Gleason has three unmarried daughters, and he'd like nothing

better than to marry one of them off to a promising young medical student like you."

Jon shook his head. "I'm sure that's not why he invited me."

"Sorry, Jon, but that's the most likely reason. That, and he's probably a good friend of your aunt's."

"Now I wish I'd sent my regrets."

"Don't worry. I hear the older two daughters are a bit long in the face, but the youngest is quite pretty. She's just coming out this season."

Jon stifled a groan as he pulled open the door to the lecture hall. "Wonderful."

"I expect a full report on Monday." Theo chuckled and followed Jon through the doorway.

• • •

Kate stared at her reflection in the bedroom mirror and pulled in a slow, deep breath. She hardly recognized the woman looking back at her. Dressed in her white satin presentation gown, with an abundance of petticoats, lace, and beading, she looked like a princess. In three hours she would face the king and queen and step into her future as a debutante.

Her hand trembled as she reached up and adjusted one of her pearl earrings.

"Oh, Kate, you look so beautiful. I can't imagine a lovelier dress." Penny gazed at her with a dreamy smile. "I'm going to wear one exactly like it for my debut."

Julia stood behind Kate, affection shining in her eyes. "You do look lovely, Kate."

"Thank you," Kate murmured. She glanced over her shoulder at the yards of white fabric, edged with lace, swirled on the floor behind her. "I hope I can manage this long train."

Her aunt's brow creased as she stepped closer to examine the train. "Mr. Rounpear should've had you wear it for your final practice session."

Kate wished he had, but there was nothing to be done about it now. She glanced at her aunt's stern expression and decided it was best not to reply.

Louisa would accompany Kate to the palace as her sponsor, and she was dressed for the occasion in an elegant dark-green brocade gown. A diamond tiara had been tucked into her upswept hairstyle, and around her neck she wore an elaborate emerald-and-diamond necklace.

"I'm sure Kate will do well." Julia reached out and gently ran her hand over the satin-covered buttons that attached Kate's train to the back of her dress at her shoulders. "She has natural grace and poise." She caught Kate's gaze in the mirror once more and sent her a reassuring smile.

But Louisa's lips tightened to a firm line. "When you enter the palace, you'll carry the train over your left arm until you reach the throne room, then you gently ease it down to the floor. The pages will spread it out behind you before you approach the king and queen."

Kate nodded, though it seemed her mind was swimming through a thick fog.

"Remember to carry your bouquet in your right hand, and your presentation card in your left. You won't be allowed to take anything else into the palace with you."

Kate nodded again. She had gone over each step in her mind countless times. But what if she dropped her bouquet or her mind went blank and she forgot how to curtsy? There was so much to remember, and she had only one opportunity to do it well.

Louisa narrowed her eyes as she looked into the mirror. "Her hair is fuller on the left than it is on the right. That will never do." She turned toward Lydia with an impatient huff. "Chambers, fix her hair."

"Yes, m'lady." Lydia picked up the comb, stepped around to the right, and carefully fluffed out Kate's hair a bit, checking her handiwork in the mirror.

"That looks perfect," Julia said. "Thank you, Lydia."

Louisa motioned toward the gauzy veil on the bed. "Attach the headpiece, and we'll see if her hair still looks balanced."

Lydia placed the comb on the dressing table and carefully lifted the veil with the two white ostrich plumes attached at the top. The feathers

trembled slightly as she placed them at the back of Kate's head, poking the comb and hard tip of the feathers into Kate's hair.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, girl, that is not the right angle!" Louisa slapped Lydia's hands away. "Do you want her to look like a peacock?"

The maid gasped. "No, m'lady. I'm sorry. I've never seen one of these before."

"Don't make excuses. You are a lady's maid. You should know how to arrange hair and attach a headpiece."

"Yes, m'lady." Lydia blinked several times as she stepped back.

"It's all right, Lydia." Julia laid her hand on the maid's arm. "This is new to all of us."

"Except Aunt Louisa," Penny added. "She was presented to Queen Victoria."

"That's right." Louisa's frown faded and a faint smile lifted her lips. "I was only seventeen, and I kissed her hand."

Kate shuddered at the thought. "I'm glad they've dropped that part of the presentation."

Louisa turned her attention back to attaching Kate's headpiece. "It must be lower, so the plumes rise just a few inches above her head." Her aunt jammed the feathers in deeper.

"Ouch!" Kate winced and pulled away. "That's my scalp!"

Her aunt ignored her cry and wiggled the feathers into place. "We don't want them to come loose or flop about."

Penny laughed and shook her head. "No, we wouldn't want that."

Louisa glared at Penny. "This is not a laughing matter, Penelope. Katherine's every move will be judged and reported in the newspaper tomorrow. And all the society matrons who have eligible sons will be reading the article and taking notes."

Julia glanced at Louisa. "Surely with so many young women being presented, they won't all be mentioned in the paper, will they?"

"No, they won't, but Katherine will. I've made sure of it."

Kate swung around and faced her aunt. "What do you mean?"

"My brother-in-law is acquainted with the owner of the *Daily Sketch*. And your uncle Albert paid a generous sum to assure that you will be one of the debutantes who is mentioned."

A bolt of panic shot through Kate. "Oh, Aunt Louisa! Now I'm going to be even more nervous."

Her aunt's cheeks flushed, but she waved away Kate's words. "You should be grateful. Only six girls will be featured in the article."

Kate stood and tried to take a deep breath, but it was impossible. "Can we please loosen this corset? I can hardly breathe."

"We don't have time for that now." Louisa fussed with Kate's train.

"I have to catch my breath, or I'm sure I'll faint dead away before I even reach the throne room!"

Louisa gripped Kate's shoulder. "Look at me, Katherine."

Kate stilled and focused on her aunt.

"Your uncle and I have invested a great deal of money in your gowns and lessons, and you've spent months preparing for today. Now you must pull yourself together and act like the gracious and confident young woman you've been trained to be. Do you understand?"

Making a good impression at her presentation would help her be accepted in London society, and that was her key to freedom...the only way she could have a life of her own. She swallowed and nodded.

Louisa stepped closer, and her stern gaze became a glare. "Promise me you'll do your best."

Kate straightened and met her aunt's gaze. "I will."

"All right." Louisa stepped back. "I need to collect a few things from my room before we go. I'll meet you downstairs in five minutes." She turned to Lydia. "Help Katherine manage the train."

"Yes, m'lady." Lydia bobbed a quick curtsy.

Louisa turned and sailed out the door with a swish of her emerald gown.

"I wish I was going." Penny released a wistful sigh.

Julia placed her hand on Penny's back as she guided her toward the door. "I'm sure you'll do just as well as Kate when it's your turn. Let's go find

Millie. She wants to help see Kate off." Julia turned to Kate with a smile. "We'll see you downstairs."

"All right." Kate turned and stared toward the mirror once more. She might not appreciate her aunt's tone, but what she said was true. Kate had dreamed about her presentation for months, and she must make the most of this opportunity, especially now that a reporter would be watching.

Being featured in the newspaper would practically guarantee that she would receive invitations right away—if everything went well.

She turned to Lydia. The maid stood by the bed, slump-shouldered, staring at the carpet. "I'm sorry my aunt was so harsh. I'm afraid she's not known for her patience, especially with the staff."

Lydia looked up. "It's all right, miss. I'm used to it." Her expression remained pained and somber.

"Is there something else?"

Lydia bit her lip, and her eyes filled. "I was thinking of my sister Helen."

"Your sister? What's wrong? Is she ill?"

"No, miss, she's run away from home, and we don't know where she is." Kate pulled in a sharp breath. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you, miss."

Kate's mind spun. How could the girl just disappear? That didn't make sense. "Surely someone knows what's happened to her."

"My father has been searching for her and talking to the folks in the village. He's even offered a reward."

"That should prompt someone to come forward."

"I hope so, miss." Lydia sighed and shook her head. "Helen's a dear girl, but she's a dreamer."

"That's not always a negative quality."

"No, but it can leave a woman open to temptation, and I'm afraid that's what's happened to Helen." Tears glistened in Lydia's eyes. She sniffed and looked away. "I'm sorry, miss. I've no call to get all teary-eyed and put a damper on your happy day."

"It's all right. If anything happened to my sister, I know I'd be upset and want to do whatever I could to help her." "That's just it, miss. There doesn't seem to be anything I can do."

If only she could give a practical suggestion to ease Lydia's distress. Julia would probably offer to pray for Lydia right then and there if she were with them. Kate wished she could do the same, but she wasn't comfortable praying aloud. She'd only been learning to say private prayers these last few months, since Julia had come to stay at Highland as her governess

She reached for Lydia's hand. "I'll pray for Helen and for you."

Lydia's expression eased. "Thank you, miss. That's very kind."

Kate shook her head, wishing it were more. "It's the least I can do."

Lydia bent down to pick up the end of Kate's train. "We'd better go downstairs."

"Yes, I suppose you're right. We don't want to keep my aunt waiting too long."

A slight smile lifted the maid's lips. "No, miss. We most definitely do not."

on slid his draught piece across the board and glanced at Andrew. The lad was a surprisingly skilled opponent, and he had already jumped several of Jon's pieces.

Andrew studied the board a few seconds, then a smile broke across his face. "I see what you're doing." He picked up one of his pieces and jumped over one of Jon's, and then jumped a second, landing in the corner space of the last row. "Crown me!"

Jon groaned and sat back. "How did I miss that?"

Andrew's eyes danced as Jon crowned the boy's piece.

William lowered his newspaper, glanced at his son, and then at the board. "Don't be too hard on him, Andrew."

Jon held up his hand. "No, play your best game, Andrew. Don't hold back on my account."

The boy grinned. "All right, I will. It's your move."

Jon rubbed his chin and studied the board.

Millie rushed into the drawing room. "It's time! Kate's ready. Come and see."

Andrew spun around and knocked into the draughts board, sending the pieces flying across the drawing-room carpet. He winced and looked at Jon. "Sorry."

"It's all right." Jon bent and scooped up a few pieces.

Andrew scrambled across the rug to help.

William stood and folded the newspaper. "Let's clean up the rest later. We don't want to miss seeing Kate off."

Andrew jumped up and dashed out to the entrance hall. William sighed with a weary smile. "I'm sorry. Andrew rarely slows down."

"It's all right. I enjoy his zest for life."

William chuckled, and he and Jon walked into the entrance hall together.

Julia met them at the bottom of the stairs along with Millie and Lady Gatewood. Lawrence and the two young footmen waited by the front door.

Penny appeared at the top of the staircase and leaned over the banister, her face glowing with a happy smile. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, we're all waiting," Lady Gatewood replied with an impatient sigh. Penny moved to the side, and Kate stepped into view.

From where Jon stood, he could only see her head and shoulders, but that was enough to make him catch his breath.

Kate's golden brown hair was swept up in a most appealing fashion, and two white feathers fluttered softly overhead as she began her descent. Around her neck she wore a pearl choker with a diamond-and-pearl pendant. One look at her creamy white neck and shoulders above the beaded bodice of her dress was enough to make him swallow hard.

Kate's usually confident expression had been replaced by a guarded, searching look as she continued down the stairs. When she rounded the turn at the lower landing, the rest of her figure came into view. Her dress looked like a shimmering cloud of white, with its full skirt and the lacy veil and long train spreading out behind her on the stairs...just like a royal bride dressed to meet her noble groom.

All he could do was stare in stunned silence. He swallowed again and tried to take a breath, but his chest seemed locked tight.

"So, what do you think?" Kate directed her question to William.

"You look beautiful. I'm sure every head will turn when you walk into the throne room."

Millie stepped forward. "Here are your flowers." The little girl held out a large, fragrant bouquet fashioned of white roses and jasmine with a few trailing vines of variegated ivy.

Kate reached for the flowers. "Thank you, Millie." She lifted her gaze to meet Jon's, a question shimmering in her blue eyes.

He opened his mouth, wanting to say she looked breathtakingly

beautiful, but somehow he couldn't form those words. Instead he forced a smile. "Good luck, Kate. I hope it goes well."

Her countenance faltered for a split second. "Thank you," she murmured, then turned away.

"Come along." Lady Gatewood swept toward the front door. "There will be a huge crowd of carriages, and we don't want to be last in line."

Julia stepped forward and kissed Kate's cheek. "We'll be praying for you." "Thank you." Kate glanced at Jon once more.

He sent her what he hoped was an encouraging smile.

Lawrence opened the door, and Lady Gatewood led the procession outside. Millie scurried to help Kate with her train.

Lady Gatewood turned. "For goodness' sake, Katherine, pick up your train and place it over your arm. You don't want it to get dirty!"

Kate's face flushed as she bent to scoop up the train and carefully drape it over her left arm.

Everyone followed Kate out the door and down the front steps. The carriage waited on the drive, the door festooned with flowers and ribbons that matched Kate's bouquet. One of the footmen sprang forward, opened the carriage door, and offered Lady Gatewood his hand to help her climb in. Kate climbed in after, and the second footman tucked her long train around her feet before he carefully closed the door.

Julia slipped her arm through Jon's and leaned closer. "I hope she'll be all right."

"I'm sure she'll be fine," he answered in an equally low tone.

"Kate puts on a brave front, but I can tell she's nervous."

"Really? She always seems so confident."

"Didn't you see her hand shake when she took her flowers?"

He tensed and glanced her way. "No, I didn't notice."

The two footmen climbed up to their position standing at the back of the carriage. The smartly dressed driver slapped the reins, and the horses pulled forward. Kate looked out the carriage window, lifted her whitegloved hand, and waved as the carriage rolled down the drive. "Good-bye!" Penny followed the carriage until it passed out the gate and into the street.

Jon waved with the others. Too bad they couldn't all go along to the palace and see how Kate fared. But that wasn't done. Her aunt would accompany her into the throne room, but Kate would be on her own, those last few steps, as she curtsied before the king and queen.

Be with her, Father. Give her courage and grace. Guide her through today and into the right path for her future.

Andrew tugged on his sleeve. "Can we finish our game?"

Jon watched the carriage disappear around the corner. He lowered his gaze to the lad. "I'm afraid we'll have to start over."

"That's all right. Maybe it will give you a chance to win."

Jon's teasing growl filled the air as he chased Andrew up the steps and back into the house.

• • •

Kate gripped the ribbon-wrapped stem of her bouquet and followed the long procession moving slowly down the high-ceilinged hallway of Buckingham Palace. The scent of roses and jasmine floated in the air.

She glanced at the women walking ahead of her. Each one who would be presented wore a white satin gown with a veil and carried her long train draped over her arm just like Kate. Their dresses were unique, though the rules of court dress made them share some common features.

The soft red carpet hushed their footsteps, and the only sounds were the rustle of satin and petticoats swishing around the women's ankles and an occasional hushed exchange between a debutante and her sponsor.

Aunt Louisa walked beside Kate, scanning the line and sizing up the other women. She leaned toward Kate. "There is Gertrude Hoffman," she whispered, "and I believe that is her new daughter-in-law, Priscilla."

Kate nodded, though she had no idea which women her aunt was talking about.

The procession slowed to a stop as the next group entered the throne room, and a decorative barricade was placed in front of the open doorway.

Kate shifted her weight from one foot to the other, feeling her shoes sink into the carpet. Her left shoe felt tighter than the right, and that foot was beginning to go numb. *Wonderful*. Soon she'd be hobbling her way into the throne room. She wiggled her toes trying to relieve the painful sensation, but it was useless. If only she could sit down, remove her shoe, and rub her toes back to life.

Hoping to distract herself from her painful foot, she glanced at the large painting on the wall to the left, but the rather gruesome battle scene didn't hold her interest. She scanned the line of women ahead, trying to tell how long it would be until she reached the throne room.

Why was it so warm and stuffy? The heavy train draped over her arm felt like a hot, sticky blanket. Moisture gathered between her shoulder blades and trickled down her back. She sighed and glanced toward the tall window to her right, wishing someone would push it open and let in a cool breeze. She smoothed her gloved hand over her skirt.

"For heaven sake, hold still and stop fussing," Aunt Louisa hissed.

"I'm not fussing. I'm simply trying to get comfortable." Kate straightened her posture and tried to look serene, but doubts stormed her heart.

She tried to recall the compliments William had given her before she left the house and Julia's encouraging words, but they faded as her aunt's critical comments flooded back. The entire ride to the palace Kate had listened to a litany of her shortcomings and warnings of what would happen if she failed to remember her training. Why, just once, couldn't her aunt say something encouraging or reassuring?

The memory of Jon watching her come down the stairs rose in her mind. He seemed impressed at first, but his bland comment left her feeling deflated and full of doubt. "Good luck"? What kind of send-off was that? It sounded like something you said to a pal heading off to school to take an exam. If only he had said she looked beautiful, then she might have believed it.

Up ahead, two pages dressed in black-and-gold uniforms removed the barricade and signaled the next group to enter the throne room. Kate's stomach tensed. It was almost time.

Her aunt gripped her forearm. "This is important, Katherine. Remember your training."

Kate clenched her jaw. How could she forget?

The page motioned them ahead. "This way, please. Have your card ready." He lowered his voice. "You will curtsy three times—to the king, the queen, and to Princess Mary."

Kate swallowed and nodded. Her aunt would accompany her through the doorway, but then she would step back and let Kate go ahead.

The page pointed at her arm. "Your train, miss."

"Oh, yes." She lowered her arm, and the fabric slid to the carpet. The page used his long wand to straighten out the material behind her. "Thank you," she murmured and started to step forward.

But he held out his hand. "One moment, please." He watched the young woman in line ahead of her approach the queen and begin her curtsy, then he turned and nodded to Kate.

She pulled in a deep breath and stepped forward. "Think grace, think poise." Mr. Rounpear's words floated through her mind as she followed the red carpet to the center of the room where the king, queen, and princess sat in elaborate chairs on a dais.

The Lord Chamberlain—a distinguished man with silver hair, who was dressed in white tights, black knee-length pants, and a black-and-gold jacket—stood to the left of the king. Kate's hand trembled as she handed him her card. The young woman in line in front of her made her final curtsy to Princess Mary.

The Lord Chamberlain nodded to her, and she crossed in front of King George.

"Miss Katherine Evangeline Ramsey, daughter of the late Sir Randolph Ramsey, Baronet of Highland Hall, and the late Lady Eden Ramsey. Presented by her aunt, Lady Louisa Gatewood of Wellsbury."

A dizzy wave swept through Kate, and all the air seemed to rush out of her lungs, but she had to keep moving. She focused on the king's shoulder as she stepped to the right and sank down for her first curtsy. Lowering her head, she counted to three. As she rose, the king offered a slight smile, which she returned.

He was a small man, almost frail-looking, with large blue eyes and a neatly trimmed dark brown beard and moustache. He was not nearly as impressive as the paintings she had seen of him.

Her train swept along beside her as she crossed in front of Queen Mary and began her second curtsy. Her legs shook, but she managed to sink down and then rise without swaying.

The queen wore a beautiful royal-blue gown, a pearl necklace with several strands, and a sparkling diamond-and-pearl tiara. Her blond, wavy hair was beautifully styled, and she acknowledged Kate with a brief nod, her delicate pearl earrings swaying as she did so.

Relief flowed through Kate. Just one more curtsy and she would be finished. She stepped to the right two paces and faced Princess Mary. The young woman's bored gaze drifted around the room.

Kate tensed and waited, but the princess did not look her way. *How rude!* Princess or not, she ought to at least acknowledge those who bowed before her. Perhaps she should just stand there until the princess met her gaze. Or what if she tossed her bouquet into the princess's lap? That might get her attention.

Kate dismissed those thoughts. It might give her a moment's pleasure to startle the princess, but it would probably give her aunt a heart attack and make Kate a social pariah.

She sank down before the princess and lowered her head, but she didn't bother to count to three. Why should she? The princess was obviously bored and eager for the event to conclude.

She rose, thankful to be finished, and turned to go. The whole room suddenly grew quiet. She glanced back. The princess's eyes flashed to life and drilled into her.

Kate froze. Mr. Rounpear's instructions flooded her mind. Turning her back on the royal family was a supreme insult. She was supposed to back out of the room and keep her face toward them at all times. Heat surged up Kate's neck and into her cheeks. Slowly, she turned and faced the royal family again.

The princess glared at her, then lifted her chin and looked away.

Kate lowered her gaze, took a step back and then another, but her shoe snagged her train. She tried to kick it gently to the side, but the heavy fabric tangled around her foot. Everyone watched her now. She had to keep backing up and make her way out of the throne room, but how could she get her feet free from the volumes of material now swirled around her? She glanced around, desperately wishing her aunt or a page would come to her aid, but no one moved toward her.

The next young woman in line approached the Lord Chamberlain, but then hesitated as she watched Kate.

Kate pulled in a deep breath. It seemed she would have to solve the problem herself, and that was precisely what she would do. "Excuse me, Your Highness." She gave a firm nod, lowered herself as gracefully as possible and untangled the train from around her feet.

The crowd gasped.

Kate's face flamed as she spread the train out to the side. Then she rose and backed across the carpet, and this time her train flowed along beside her. As she passed through the doorway, her legs turned to jelly, and she reached out toward the page.

He grabbed her arm. "Are you all right, Miss?"

"Yes, yes...I'm fine." But that was one of the biggest lies she had ever told.

He scooped up her train and waited. "Your arm, miss."

"Oh yes, thank you." She barely managed to choke out the words and accept the train before she fled down the hallway, her face on fire and her heart racing like a thoroughbred at Ascot.

• • •

Jon glanced at the clock on the library mantel, then lowered his gaze to his textbook. He thought Kate would be back by now, but there was a reception following the presentation, and he supposed that was what had kept her out so late.

The evening had turned cool, and a faint breeze from the partially open window drifted in, carrying the fresh rain-washed scent from the front garden. Jon sighed and settled back in his chair. Everyone else had gone to bed, content to wait until morning to hear Kate's report about the evening. But he had had decided to stay up and use the time to review several chapters for his exams next week.

He wasn't really waiting up for Kate. He needed to study.

He turned the page, stifled a yawn, and focused on the description of the techniques for throat surgery. But the words faded, and the image of Kate descending the stairs rose in his mind. He didn't think he had ever seen anyone quite so beautiful.

He shook his head. He ought not to think of her that way. It would only make things uncomfortable between them.

The sound of a coach approaching broke through his thoughts. He rose from his chair and crossed to the window. Pushing aside the curtain, he glanced outside. The Ramsey family carriage rolled to a stop on the front drive. The footman sprang down from his perch on the back and opened the carriage door.

Lady Gatewood reached out, took the footman's hand, and stepped down. "I don't understand how you could forget something so important." Her harsh tone cut through the quiet evening air.

Katherine followed her aunt out of the coach. "How many times do I have to say I'm sorry?"

"Until I believe you truly mean it!"

"I made a mistake. It was a difficult situation. I did the best I could."

"The best you could? The best you could!" Lady Gatewood huffed, lifted her skirt, and marched up the front stairs. "After all the money your uncle and I have invested in your preparation, you could have at least made an effort to remember the most basic rules of etiquette."

Jon stepped back from the window and shook his head. After only a few days staying with the Ramseys, he had developed a strong dislike for Kate's overbearing aunt. The woman never had a kind word for anyone, especially Kate, though she usually managed to cover her disapproval with false smiles and thinly veiled sarcasm.

Nothing was veiled tonight.

He crossed to the library doorway and glanced across the entrance hall. Lawrence opened the front door. Lady Gatewood strode past the butler without a word and marched up the stairs, her face a fuming mask.

Kate walked in, her shoulders sagging as her gaze followed her aunt up the stairs.

Lawrence closed the front door. "Good evening, Miss Katherine."

"Good evening, Lawrence." She sighed and handed the butler her wilted bouquet. "Could you take care of this?"

"Of course, miss." Sympathy filled the butler's eyes. "May I assist you in any other way?"

"No, thank you." She turned and saw Jon in the doorway, and her face blanched.

"If you don't require anything else, miss, I will bid you good night." Lawrence locked the front door, then walked down the servants' stairs.

Kate clasped her hands and looked up at Jon. "I'm sure you heard my aunt's comments."

"Yes. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to eavesdrop."

Kate sighed. "How could you help it? I'm afraid she's quite upset."

He nodded, then glanced over his shoulder, debating his next words. "I've been studying in the library. There's still a nice fire. Would you like to join me?"

Kate glanced up the stairs, then back at Jon. "I suppose it would be all right. It wouldn't do any good to go up to my room now. I'm sure I won't be able to fall asleep for quite some time."

Jon motioned for her to go ahead, and she walked past. The scent of jasmine floated around her. He inhaled, savoring the sweet aroma.

She crossed the room and sank down on the settee by the fireplace, her train pooled at her feet. "I know it would be terribly rude, but my foot is throbbing. Would you mind if I took off my shoe?"

Jon grinned. "Not at all. It's your home. Take them both off if you like." She bent and slipped off her shoes, then proceeded to rub her left foot. "I'll probably be permanently crippled if I ever have to wear these shoes again."

"Too tight?"

"Yes. They felt fine when I first put them on, but after standing in them for several hours, I'm sure the left is a size smaller than the right. Either that or my feet are different sizes." She smiled, though there was still a trace of sadness in her eyes.

He returned her smile. "It sounds as though this evening didn't go as well as you'd hoped."

"That's putting it mildly."

"Care to tell me about it?"

"I might as well. I'd rather you hear my version before you read it in the newspaper tomorrow."

Jon cocked his head. "You think it will be in the paper?"

"Probably. My aunt and uncle arranged for a social columnist to attend specifically to report on my presentation, and I'm afraid I put on quite a show."

"What happened?"

"Well, I didn't fall, if that's what you're thinking."

He held up his hand. "Please, I'd never think such a thing."

She shifted on the settee. "I'm afraid my temper got the best of me."

"Really?" He struggled to suppress his grin. During the last few days, he'd seen a few examples of Kate's rather strong personality, but he didn't find it offensive. In fact, he rather liked her more for it. She didn't put on airs like other women he'd met. Instead, she said what she was thinking and took action rather than sitting back and waiting for someone else to solve a problem.

"It was all terribly nerve-racking. I had to wait in line at least two hours before I could walk into the throne room, and then everyone's eyes were on me." Kate stared toward the fire. "I did fine with my curtsies before the king and queen, but Princess Mary was so bored she wouldn't look my way."

"Not even a nod?"

"No, not even one. And that made me so flustered that as soon as I rose from my curtsy, I turned away to walk out." She closed her eyes and shook her head. "You must never turn your back on royalty."

"I didn't know that."

She opened her eyes, and he couldn't miss the dismay in them. "Well, I did. It's one of the first lessons they teach you when you're practicing for your presentation."

He sent her a sympathetic look, but he was surprised to hear such rules still existed.

"As soon as I realized my mistake, I faced them again, but when I backed up to leave, I stepped on my train, and I couldn't get it untangled from around my feet."

Jon grimaced.

"No one would help me, so I had to bend down and untangle it myself. I did it as gracefully as possible, but the whole room fell silent and stared as though I had crashed onto the carpet." She rubbed her forehead and sighed. "Now I'll be the laughing stock of London—the girl who insulted the royal family and destroyed her chances of being invited anywhere this season." She lowered her hand and looked at Jon again. "At least, that's my aunt's opinion."

"I wouldn't worry. I'm sure it wasn't as bad as you think."

Kate sent him a doubtful look. "I've heard of girls being scorned the entire season for much less than that."

Jon frowned and drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair. "I know you want to make a good impression, especially on potential suitors, but do you really think you'll be judged worthy or unworthy based on one small mistake?" He studied her for a moment. "A man choosing a bride is more interested in her character and personality than her ability to curtsy or remember the rules for a royal presentation."

She stilled, her gaze fixed on him.

Did she think he was talking about his own preferences? Heat rose up his neck. "I mean...I know every debutante hopes to receive a proposal her first season."

"Yes, of course." Her voice sounded soft and strained. "That's what's expected."

"Well, just remember you're a unique young woman with many fine

qualities. I'm sure you'll handle yourself well at the next event, and the whole thing will soon be forgotten."

Her expression softened, and appreciation filled her eyes.

"Katherine?" Julia stepped through the doorway, wearing her dressing gown and slippers. "I thought I heard you come in." She noticed Jon and questions filled her eyes.

His back stiffened. "Kate was just telling me about her presentation."

Julia shifted her gaze back to Kate. "How did it go?"

"It was very long and stressful, but I only made one mistake, and Jon thinks it won't really matter in the long run."

"Good." Julia held out her hand to Kate. "Come upstairs. I'll help you get ready for bed, and you can tell me more."

Jon rose from his chair. He should have known better than to invite Kate into the library when no one else was present. He'd known it wasn't usually done, but they were almost like family...

Indeed? And is that how you see her? As family?

He brushed the disturbing thought aside, watching Kate scoop up her shoes and rise from the settee.

"Good night, Jon. Thank you for listening to my tale of woe." She offered him a fleeting smile, then walked out of the library with Julia.

As she disappeared from view, he blew out a slow, deep breath, sorry their conversation had been but short. Truly, he could have enjoyed her honesty and humor all night...

His eyes widened. What was he thinking? Kate was young, self-focused, and caught up in the season. And yet...

He studied the empty doorway. She hadn't seemed self-focused tonight. In fact, she'd seemed charming and delightful.

That thought propelled him from the room. It was a good thing Julia had come in and interrupted their conversation when she did.

He needed to focus on his training and his plans for the future and not on Miss Katherine Ramsey—no matter how delightful she might be.