



# A Christmas Dream (Hudson House Holiday #1)

**Author:** *Shanna Hatfield*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** e came to build the house of his dreams, but found a home for his heart.

After an extensive search for the ideal location to build a house he's spent years designing, Brant Hudson knows he's found the perfect site the moment he sets foot on the land near Silver Bluff, Oregon. However, frustrating delays leave him laboring alongside the very crew he hired to finish the house in time for Christmas. His work leads the woman who catches his eye to believe he's a carpenter rather than the owner of the grand manor.

Holland Drake grew up on a farm, but she aspires to secure a position as a housemaid at Hudson House. While delivering lunch to her brother at the worksite, the door opens to a job when Holland encounters a strikingly handsome carpenter whose charm captivates her. Soon, Holland discovers the enchanting man is none other than the owner of the house and her new employer.

As the holiday season arrives amid a flurry of excitement and possibilities, Holland and Brant face choices that could change their lives forever. Will fear hold them back from stepping into the future together, or will their Christmas dreams of love come true?

**Total Pages (Source):** 16

# Page 1

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Silver Bluff, Oregon

April 1889

“Right there, Rem. Right there is where we are going to build it.” Brant Hudson turned from gaping at the splendid landscape before him to look at Remington Monroe, his best friend. The man had also been his butler, valet, manager, and assistant since they’d both turned sixteen.

Remington wasn’t quick to answer. It was one of the things Brant most appreciated about him. Rem wouldn’t say what he thought Brant wanted to hear. He could always be counted on to speak the truth.

“The location is as grand as any I’ve ever seen, Brant. The ground is fertile. It’s close to Silver Bluff to have easy access to supplies and the rail line, but far enough out in the country to leave behind the bustle of town. If you can buy the land around it, like you’ve discussed, it could be a self-sustaining estate. I can see you spending many happy hours here. However, you must keep in mind it’s a half-day of travel by train from Portland to Silver Bluff, then thirty minutes out here. Are you sure this is where you want to build the house you’ve been dreaming about for the past ten years?”

Brant grinned and thumped Remington on the shoulder. “I’m sure, Rem. As sure as I’ve ever been about anything. I don’t know what it is about this place, but it feels right.”

“I assume it feels right due to the superb location.” Remington waved his hand toward the mighty Columbia River below as it wound along a curved section of the

gorge. All around them, a spectacular array of wildflowers filled the landscape with brilliant splashes of color. Overhead, the sky was a deep, rich blue, dotted with fluffy cotton-white clouds.

A chuckle rolled out of Brant. “It is magnificent. I can see why the town was named Silver Bluff, positioned up on the steep slope above the river. I’ve noticed when the sun or the moon hits the water at a particular angle, it looks like silver. Not only that, but all the sagebrush in the area can appear to look silvery in the right light.”

“It’s a fitting name for the town.” Remington motioned to the spot where Brant wanted to build his house. “What will you name the house, or estate, if you create one?”

“Hudson House.”

“Why am I not surprised? No vanity in that at all, Sir Hudson,” Remington said dryly. “If we’re going to get this house built for you, we best start by buying the land.”

“I already contacted the owner of this piece of ground. We have a meeting with him at two in the hotel’s lobby.”

Remington pulled a pocket watch from his vest pocket. “Then it would behoove us to hurry.”

Brant wasn’t at all concerned about arriving back at the hotel in time for the meeting. It might have taken more than thirty minutes to reach this beautiful property from town in a buggy, but riding the fast horses they’d rented at the livery, they could be back in Silver Bluff in less than ten minutes.

Slowly turning in a circle, Brant surveyed the landscape, thinking of the years he’d waited for this day.

He'd been seventeen when his parents had sent him off to Europe for a year with Remington at his side. The two of them had explored Spain, France, Italy, England, Ireland, and Scotland. In every village and town they'd visited, Brant had gathered ideas for the home of his dreams. Five years ago, he'd hired an architect to turn all his ideas and sketches into plans for a grand home.

Armed with the blueprints for the house, Brant had waited until he'd found the perfect spot to consider building it. Now he was ready to see the house that existed in his mind become the country estate he could escape to whenever life pressed too heavily upon him.

Brant—the third son in his family, and therefore useless to his father—had known he was never going to be involved in the Hudson family business of real estate and investments in New York. Not when his two older brothers had taken the helm of the company and all but slammed the door in his face. He'd been trained to manage companies, to know a good business venture from a bad one, to handle finances and make sound investments.

With astute business ventures, and a few that were risky, Brant had doubled the money he'd inherited when his grandfather had passed away. Then he'd doubled it again. Now able to support himself without touching a penny of his father's money, Brant had been looking for opportunities to expand and grow.

Thank goodness for his sister Eloise's husband, Dean Mitchum. Long before Eloise had caught Dean's eye, he and Brant had been friends, first becoming acquainted at school when Brant had been twelve and Dean was all of fourteen. Dean was an integral part of the Mitchum Shipping empire that had begun four generations earlier. The company had hundreds of ships in its fleet, traveling all around the world hauling freight, passengers, and trade goods.

When Dean had invited Brant to join him in a new business enterprise on the West

Coast last year, Brant had jumped at the opportunity. Dean and Eloise had packed up their life in New York and moved to San Francisco where they'd established the headquarters of Pacific Horizon Shipping Company. Brant had supplied half the funds needed to get the new partnership off the ground. The original plan had been for Brant to remain in New York, but once he'd traveled to San Francisco to help Dean with the business, he'd stayed.

Six months ago, Brant and Remington had boarded one of the Pacific Horizon ships sailing up the rugged Pacific coast bound for Seattle with supplies, freight, and trade goods. They disembarked from the ship in Astoria, and traveled from there all the way to Pendleton, Oregon, by train, studying the Columbia River and the opportunities Pacific Horizon Shipping could pursue along the water route and inland.

Immediately, the obvious need for more tugboats to tow ships over the deadly bar where the Pacific Ocean and the Columbia River met had been evident to Brant. Any ship seeking to travel to Portland along the river had to be towed across the bar. Within a month, Pacific Horizon Shipping Company had purchased half a dozen tugboats and established themselves in the towing business.

An office in Portland had been necessary for conducting business along the river. Brant had found a suitable building, purchased it, and hired competent staff. He bought an Italianate-style home a few blocks away, as well as a wharf, and soon a warehouse took shape with their company emblem painted on the outside of the building. Pacific Horizon ships arrived in the port with items from around the world, bringing sought-after goods to Portland or leaving them to be loaded onto railcars to be taken inland for sale. The ships sailed out with loads of wheat, timber, and wool to be sold in foreign markets.

Although his brothers and father had no use for him, Brant was a perceptive businessman with a sharp mind and an innate sense of which deals were worth

pursuing. It had served him well, made him his own fortune, and allowed him to chase his interests as well as his dreams.

Dreams such as building the house he'd been waiting so long to call his home.

Brant pulled himself from his musings and settled his hand on Remington's shoulder, giving it a light squeeze. "Can't you just picture it, Rem? The drive will be long, with an entry on the right side, circling in front of the house, then departing to the left. The house will look like it was transplanted from an old European estate with turrets on each side of the second-floor balcony, and a wide window beneath it. Over there, to the east, is where I'll want the stables. We'll have at least a dozen stalls, tack rooms, a place to store the conveyances, rooms for the men to live in on the second floor. We'll build barns, a greenhouse, and fenced-in pastures for both beef and dairy cattle. I also want to raise pigs, and possibly even chickens."

"Chickens?" Remington asked, appearing decidedly wary at the prospect.

Aware of his friend's aversion to the birds, Brant grinned. "You won't be required to go near the chickens."

Remington appeared relieved. "That's a good thing, Brant, or you might be looking for a new butler."

"Never, old friend." Brant's hand swept out in a grand gesture over the landscape as they faced the river. "I want the view from the house to the river to remain unobstructed, and as natural as possible. I need to find a landscape architect who can keep the wildflowers and native plants, but create something beautiful with walking paths and benches, like a stroll in a park, except without trees marring the view. Trees will be planted on the sides of the house and further back to the south for a windbreak as well as shade. We'll have a glorious yard with fountains and statues, and roses of every color."

Remington pointed to a tree-covered hillside in the distance. "If you buy that property, you'll have your own source of timber." He shifted slightly and motioned to the southwest. "There's an established apple orchard over there. I believe that ground we passed when we diverged from the main road would be well suited to growing wheat."

"I noticed that as well." Brant slapped Remington on the back. "Now, let's go see about buying this perfect piece of land."

"It is perfect for what you've been waiting to build, Brant," Remington said in agreement.

Brant swung onto the back of his rented horse, then gave his trusted friend a broad smile. "This seems like a momentous undertaking, Rem, but I know it's going to be worth it."

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:42 pm*

Silver Bluff, Oregon

September 1892

“It’s a nightmare, Rem. Why did you let me take on this albatross?” Brant wiped the sweat dripping off his brow onto his shirt sleeve and glowered at his friend.

Remington handed him another narrow slat of oak wood and shook his head. “It’s not a nightmare, Brant. It’s a process, that’s all. Just because everything has taken longer than you anticipated or planned doesn’t mean this grand dame is an albatross. Quite the opposite, I believe. When this spectacular home is completed, you’ll appreciate it all the more because you’ve been involved in every step of its creation, and worked so hard to see your dreams fulfilled.”

Brant gave him a doubtful look but took the slat of wood he held out and fitted it into the chevron pattern of the parquet floor they were installing in the library. The alternating oak and walnut pieces were striking in design and the reason why Brant had chosen the particular colors of wood as well as the pattern for the room. In fact, there were several rooms and hallways that would boast the same pattern on the floors when the house was finally finished. Although, at the moment, it felt as though that would never happen.

Patience had never been Brant’s strong suit, and his had been sorely tested as he oversaw the building of his dream home.

Purchasing the land for the house and several surrounding properties had seemed a simple task compared to everything that had followed. Once the building crew had



been hired, they'd had to wait for the ground to dry after spring rains to dig out the foundation and begin the process of building.

There had been a delay in acquiring the sandstone blocks being used for the exterior walls of the house from a quarry across the river in Washington. The head stone mason he'd hired had been killed in a brawl in a saloon in The Dalles, and Brant had spent the better part of a month locating another skilled man to take on the job. The windows Brant had ordered had taken three months longer than anticipated to arrive. At every turn, it seemed there were delays compounded by more delays.

In addition to the delays with the house, he'd had more heaped on him with the various other buildings being constructed. Even the landscaping had run into one setback after another, although it had taken shape nicely last summer, and had looked even better this year.

Brant was frustrated beyond words that the property he'd hoped would take only two years to build had exceeded three. Despite his annoyance with the lagging timeline, he planned for the house to be finished by the end of November, if not before.

Invitations had already been extended to Eloise and Dean to join him for Christmas. By then, the house absolutely had to not only be finished, but also fully staffed and running smoothly for his sister's visit.

"Have you made any progress finding a head housekeeper, or a cook?" Brant asked as he picked up a walnut slat and fit it into place.

Remington shook his head. "Not yet. I still have a dozen applicants to interview. We may have to extend our search to Portland, though. Attempting to find a local cook with the experience required to run your kitchen has proven challenging at best and headache-inducing at worst."

Brant nodded. "Agreed. If there isn't anyone suitable from the latest round of applicants, put the word out when we return to Portland on Monday and see what, or perhaps I should say whom, you can find to fill the positions."

"I intend to do that very thing," Remington said as he worked beside Brant.

While they installed flooring near the exterior wall where the trim was finished and the floor-to-ceiling bookcases were complete, workmen hustled to complete the trim on the opposite side of the room.

Normally, Brant would have insisted the flooring wait until the workmen were completely finished with the trim work, but he needed to be able to use the library as his office as soon as possible. He'd been spending more and more time in Silver Bluff and less at his home and office in Portland. It was exceedingly difficult to work from the room he'd rented the past three years at the Silver Bluff Hotel. He'd decided the first room they would finish at Hudson House would be the library. He expected to use it to conduct business as well as a place to relax when he wanted to lose himself in a book, if he ever had time for reading again. He purely missed a leisurely evening by the fire with a good book in his hand.

"How is that trim coming along, Denver?" Brant called to one of the local young men he'd hired who excelled at carpentry work. Denver Drake was a hard worker and good at his job. He'd taken over as the head carpenter when the older gent Brant had originally placed in the position had resigned due to failing health. Denver resided in one of the tents that had been set up for those who didn't want to trek back and forth from their homes every day. There was a camp cook who made breakfast and supper in the evening, providing meat and bread for the men to take with them for their lunches.

Denver worked upstairs in the library, installing the trim around the upper-floor bookcases.

“We should be finished with the trim along this wall today, sir. I’ll work on the stairs tomorrow. Once we install the flooring on the steps and the handrail, they’ll be finished.”

“Splendid, Denver. That is splendid news.” Brant smiled upward at the young man and returned his attention to the flooring. It was a laborious task, but one that left him too much time for thinking, mostly about his house and how antsy he felt to move into the place.

Brant loved the spiral staircase located to the right of the big fireplace in the library. It had four carved mahogany posts surrounding it that stretched up to the second floor. The railing was wrought iron and would be topped by a mahogany handrail that matched the stair risers and treads.

With his hands braced on his thighs, Brant tipped his head back, looking around the two-story library. He had an inkling it would become one of his favorite rooms at Hudson House in the years to come.

The ceiling, painted in shades of pale blue accented with white, mimicked the appearance of a soft spring sky dotted with fluffy clouds. The blue in the ceiling would be highlighted by the furnishings he planned for the room.

Dark-blue damask wallpaper for the walls that weren’t covered by bookcases had been installed. The pattern looked quite majestic, if he said so himself. The furniture and drapes were made from silk cut velvet that matched the wallpaper, in deep-blue damask. The carpet he’d selected to eventually cover the floor by the fireplace was also deep blue with gold and cranberry accents.

While the center of the room was open and soared up two stories, bookshelves lined the walls around the second story, stretching from the side walls around to the fireplace wall where a huge mahogany overmantel above the ornately carved black

marble fireplace hid the entry to the second-floor hallway from view.

Brant had already purchased a large landscape painting of the popular waterfall near Portland to fill the space of the overmantel between two hand-carved mahogany statues of young maidens, gowns flowing from shoulder to foot, holding books in their hands. At the top of the overmantel, decorative plasterwork encircled the ceiling. A wide railing surrounded the walkway around the bookshelves on the second floor and matched the wrought iron railing on the spiral staircase.

The room, even in its not-quite-finished state, appeared regal, rich, and masculine—exactly what Brant had wanted.

Remington had already promised to oversee the shelving of Brant's collection of books. At last count, Brant had more than three thousand titles, and frequently added to the collection on his travels. He also had crates full of keepsakes he'd collected that he intended to put on display on the room's ample shelves.

Despite the extravagance of it, electric lights had been installed throughout the house. It had been no small feat to get electricity out to the property, but Brant had refused to give up on his plans.

Just like his insistence on providing a suite of rooms for Remington on the main floor. Most people would have given Remington a room in the basement or attic, but Brant had included a set of rooms for him in his original designs.

Located at the end of the hallway by the kitchen, the suite had its own bathroom, sitting area, and private entry. Remington had balked at the idea, but Brant had insisted it was necessary, especially since his best friend was far, far more than just his butler. The man was intelligent, quick-witted, observant, discreet, and loyal, not to mention talented at knowing what Brant wanted or needed, sometimes before he even realized it.

Besides, with the sitting area, it would give Remington somewhere to meet with staff if he needed to have a private word with any of them, as well as a place to relax at the end of the day.

Brant had no idea where he'd be, both figuratively and literally, without Remington. The man was a wonder, and as steadfast and true as the day was long. If Brant had only one person in the world he could count on, he knew Remington was one in whom he could put complete trust.

A loud growl echoed through the room, and Brant was chagrined to realize it came from his own empty belly. He'd eaten a hearty breakfast at the hotel's dining room that morning, but he'd worked it off as he'd spent the past several hours down on his hands and knees laying the parquet floor.

Remington smirked at him as Brant got back to work. Thankfully, Denver didn't comment on the noise as he kept his attention on his own work.

Another thirty minutes passed, during which time Brant envisioned thick slices of smoky ham encased between fluffy biscuits hot from the oven as he worked. He was just about to suggest to Remington they take a break for the noon meal when a woman as pretty as any Brant had ever encountered breezed into the room carrying a large basket covered with a blue-checkered cloth.

"Denver! I thought I'd never find you in this colossus of a house. I saw Colin outside and he said you were in the library, but so much has changed since the last time I was in here, I thought I might wander around lost until you starved to death." The woman's gaze shifted from the carpenter on the second floor, taking in Brant and Remington as they hastily stood. "Oh, hello."

Denver scrambled down the ladder where he'd been working on the trim at the top of a bookcase. Brant was surprised he didn't fall and break his neck the way he skipped

the last four rungs, using just his hands on the sides of the ladder to slide to the floor. It was a trick Brant intended to have Denver teach him another day.

“Holland, I didn’t know you were coming today. I would have met you outside.” Denver glanced nervously from the young woman to Brant, and then back to the fetching female as he raced down the spiral staircase.

The woman shrugged. “We wanted to surprise you.”

Did Denver have a wife and children awaiting him at home in Silver Bluff? In the three years of Hudson House’s construction, Brant had gotten to know the names of every worker and thought he had a thorough mental list of those who were married and those who were not. How had he overlooked Denver’s family? Especially when the man had such an attractive wife?

Shiny brown hair she wore pulled back from her face, fastened with a ribbon at the nape of her graceful neck, fell in glorious waves to her waist. Freckles splattered a narrow, upturned nose. Her bottom lip, fuller than the top, rested in a natural pout that was most alluring. Her brown eyes snapped with intelligence and interest when they landed on Brant again. Her features were delicate and decidedly feminine, and she owned such a happy countenance, it made Brant want to smile just being in the same room with her.

Denver Drake was a most fortunate man if the woman holding a basket from which delicious aromas emanated was, indeed, his wife.

“Who might this be, Denver?” Brant asked, taking a step closer to the couple, curious and oddly interested in the answer.

“Holland Drake,” Denver said, taking the basket from the woman and giving her a slight nudge forward.

A wave of disappointment washed over Brant. So, she was married to Denver.

“My sister,” Denver continued.

The desire to raise his fist and cheer was almost more than Brant could contain, but he managed to tamp down his victorious feeling and school his features into what he hoped was a welcoming expression. The lovely woman was not married, at least not to Denver.

“Miss Drake,” Brant said, closing the distance between them and taking her hand in his. He raised her slender fingers to his mouth, pressing a kiss to the back of her hand while holding her gaze.

Her eyes widened slightly, though he could see curiosity lingering there, and she quickly pulled her hand away. “I haven’t seen you working around the house before. Are you new?”

It was on the tip of Brant’s tongue to tell her the truth. To say he was the one who would eventually live in the house that had once been a dream scattered across multiple sheets of paper. Instead, he decided he wanted to get to know this woman, not as the owner of a fancy home, but as one of the many men helping to build it.

“I’m not new, but help was needed in the library today.” That wasn’t a lie, but the stark truth. He and Remington would likely contribute countless hours of physical labor if the house was to get finished by his own self-imposed deadline prior to his sister’s holiday arrival.

“Mister ...” Denver started to speak up, but Brant gave him a brief shake of his head along with a warning look. The young man swallowed hard and nodded once in understanding. “Mr. Hudson is hoping to be able to use the library soon. It will also serve as his office, and he’d like it to be the first room completely finished. That’s

why we're all working so hard to make that happen."

"It is a delightful room," Holland said in a smooth voice, that settled on Brant's ears like a morning birdsong. Her gaze traveled around the rich wood of the bookcases to the elaborate carvings flanking the marble fireplace.

She turned and looked at Brant. "Does Mr. Hudson have enough books to fill all these shelves?"

"I believe he does, Miss Drake," Remington said, stepping forward and saving Brant from answering. "At last count, he has three thousand, two hundred, and thirty-seven books."

The woman's eyes grew as round as saucers. "We have a dozen at our house," she said quietly, then smiled at Remington. "I don't believe I've met you before, sir."

Remington offered a grin that would have charmed a woman regardless of her age, and bowed slightly.

Before he could state his name, Brant stepped in front of him. "This is Remington Monroe. He's Mr. Hudson's assistant, butler, and right-hand man. There's not much Mr. Hudson does that Remington doesn't already know about. I'm Alex." There, that wasn't a complete lie since Brant's middle name was Alexander. He rarely used it, except on legal documents. The lone member of his family to call him by the name was his mother, and that was only when he'd done something terribly wrong that left her vexed with him beyond immediate redemption. She'd been known to use all three of his names and pelt him with dark glowers until he confessed to whatever mischief he'd landed in during his younger years.

Remington cast him a cool glare, but Brant ignored it, then motioned to the basket Denver held. "We won't keep you from your lunch."



“I brought plenty, if you’d like to share,” Holland said, taking the basket from her brother. “Perhaps we could eat outside? It is such a resplendent day.”

“Yes, let’s do that.” Brant opened the slender door set between two floor-length windows. Unless someone knew it was a door, they would likely never realize it wasn’t a third window. He stepped outside and smiled at Holland. “I know just the spot,” he said, leading the way to the garden on the north side of the house.

Hunter Lawson, a sought-after landscape architect, had come all the way from New York to transform the grounds around Hudson House into a thing of natural beauty. He’d started implementing his plans around the same time they’d begun placing the house’s foundation. Thanks to Lawson’s efforts, the gardens had quickly taken shape. The man intended to return in the spring, once all the debris of construction was removed, and complete the landscaping. For now, though, the gardens were thriving and flourishing thanks to the gardener and his staff Brant had hired three years ago to work alongside Lawson.

The strolling garden behind the house faced the river and was well on its way to becoming magnificent. Brant led their little group among the shrubs, flowers, and plants, around statues and bubbling fountains to a wide stone bench. The shrubs blocked the wind, making the bench one of Brant’s favorite spots to absorb the absolutely astounding view.

“Have a seat, Miss Drake,” he said, motioning to the bench with a flourish of his hand.

Holland settled her simple calico skirts around her, but her smile was wide and infectious as she took in her surroundings. “I’ve never seen anything to compare to this place. It’s like Mr. Hudson saw the opportunity to take nature’s beauty and elevate the perfection.”

In that moment, Brant concluded that perhaps a poet resided inside the woman who appeared innocent and unaffected. No one had ever said anything that pleased him more than her heartfelt comment.

“That is exactly what Mr. Hudson was striving to achieve,” Remington said, settling onto the grass near the bench.

“Scoot over, Holland, so Mist ... so there’s room for one more.” Denver gave Brant an apologetic look.

Brant shook his head and took a seat on the grass next to Remington. “It’s kind of you to share your lunch with us. Are you quite certain you have enough?”

“I’m certain,” Holland said, lifting the cloth off the basket and draping it over her lap.

Denver flopped onto the grass on the other side of the bench, as though he feared getting too close to his employer. Brant would speak to the young man later and assure him he needn’t worry. His job was secure, and he’d done nothing to warrant any concern.

“I only have two plates with me,” Holland said, lifting out two heavy cracked earthenware plates with chipped edges.

“Rem and I can share,” Brant said, looking to his friend who was still glaring at him like Brant had lost his mind.

Perhaps he had.

After all, it wasn’t like him to bend the truth as he had since meeting Holland Drake. He’d likely never see her again, so he didn’t see the harm in pretending, just for an hour, that he was merely one of the workers at Hudson House and nothing more.

The reason for his deception wasn't anything immoral. It was simply because Holland Drake would act far differently if she knew he was Mr. Hudson, the lord of the manor, as it were.

For once in his life, Brant wanted to be an ordinary fellow sharing a meal with an intriguing, unaffected girl.

"Mama fried two chickens this morning," Holland said, pulling out a bowl heaped with crispy golden pieces of chicken. "I brought boiled eggs, fresh peaches, those little cucumbers you like so much, Denver, wedges of cheese, and an apple pie that was still warm from the oven when I set it in the basket. Our apple crop this year is the best one yet, or so Papa says."

"Apple crop? Does your family have an orchard?" Brant asked, accepting the plate full of food Holland handed to him before holding it out to Remington. His butler hesitated, but finally selected a chicken leg.

"We do. We have cherries, peaches, pears, and apples. Papa says the apples and pears aren't as easy to bruise as the peaches and have a longer selling period than the cherries. Mama cans jars and jars of cherries and peaches, as well as the pears, though, and we enjoy eating them all winter long." Holland looked at Denver. "Before we tuck into this meal, how about a word of thanks, brother?"

Denver turned to Brant, and he nodded in agreement. When Denver bowed his head, Brant cast a covert glance at Holland. The sun shined like a halo behind her bent head while she held her hands pressed together and clasped beneath her chin in a pose so sweet it stole Brant's breath from his chest.

He wished he had his sketchbook and could draw her, but instead he dropped his head, closed his eyes, and listened as Denver asked a blessing on their meal and on the hands that prepared it.

After their amens floated away on the warm breeze, Brant held up a piece of chicken and tipped it in salute to Holland. “Thank you, again, for sharing your meal with us. It was more than kind.”

“Our pleasure, Alex.” Holland bit into a chicken leg and ate with a good appetite.

Brant wasn’t sure he’d ever seen any woman eat her food instead of daintily nibble at it. It was a wonder the females he knew hadn’t withered away to nothing. More than once, he’d considered if women had meals brought to their rooms after their corsets were removed so they could enjoy a filling meal. He might have to ask Dean the next time he saw his brother-in-law if that were the case with Eloise. Not that he cared. He was merely curious.

As he bit into a crispy chicken thigh, Brant closed his eyes and savored the bite. He’d eaten food all around the world, and that bite of chicken was among the best things he’d ever tasted.

“Your mother is an excellent cook,” he said after he’d taken a second bite.

“So is Holland. She does most of the baking,” Denver said, grinning at his sister.

“Only because Mama doesn’t enjoy it as much as she used to.” Holland dabbed at her lips with a napkin, then looked out at the river. “I could stay here all day, soaking up the peacefulness of this view. Are you certain Mr. Hudson won’t be upset we’re out here?”

“I’m absolutely certain,” Brant said, giving Remington a nudge with his elbow.

“He won’t mind a bit, miss,” Remington said, offering Holland a reassuring smile. “Now, if half the town trooped out here, he wouldn’t appreciate it, but this is perfectly fine.”

Holland nodded and picked up a small cucumber from the plate she'd set on the bench between her and Denver, taking a bite from it.

Brant held the plate he shared with Remington out to his friend, giving him an encouraging look to take more than the one chicken leg he'd eaten. Remington selected a boiled egg and bit into it.

They ate until Brant was so stuffed he was sure he couldn't hold another morsel, then Holland served the pie, already cut into generous slices. She placed two slices on each plate.

Brant's mouth watered as he picked up a piece with his fingers and took a bite of the flaky crust filled with cinnamon-laden tender apples.

"That is wonderful pie," he said, quickly devouring a second bite. "Have you ever thought of becoming a cook for an estate? I heard Mr. Hudson is looking for a cook as well as kitchen help."

Holland laughed. The sound rang out like the peal of church bells and resonated in Brant's heart. He'd never experienced such a strange reaction to a female and wasn't sure he liked it now.

Denver smirked. "I assure you, sir, you would not want to turn Holland loose in the kitchen. The food would be good, but the mess to clean up afterward would be monumental."

The woman shrugged, then gave her brother a good-natured shove. "I can't help it if it takes every dish and spoon in the kitchen to fix a big meal. Besides, I wouldn't know the first thing about making the kind of fancy food that will be served here. Once Mr. Hudson starts hiring, I'm applying for a position as a housemaid." She turned her attention to Remington. "Not that I'm expecting to get a job, but ever since

we heard about this place being built, I've been dreaming about working here. My sister and I both want to be housemaids."

"They are hard workers and quick learners," Denver said, casting Brant a quick glance before he focused his attention back on his slice of pie.

Brant had no doubt about Holland's ability to work. Quite the contrary. If she worked even half as hard at a task as her brother, she'd make a good housemaid.

The thought of seeing her in passing in his house made him want to smile. She would bring energy and joy to the place, of that he was certain. If she did indeed apply for a job, he intended for her to receive one of the positions.

In fact, it would soon be time to begin hiring the household staff. They could assist in setting up the rooms. Once the installation of the trim and flooring in the library was complete, there would be days of cleaning and polishing ahead before Remington could oversee the unpacking of Brant's things.

"Perhaps you and your sister should see Remington about applying for those jobs. I heard Mr. Hudson is of a mind to hire help soon to get started cleaning the rooms once each one is finished before the draperies and furniture are installed."

Remington gave him an understanding, subtle nod, then looked back at Holland. "If you are indeed interested, Miss Drake, you and your sister could come Saturday afternoon at two for an interview. Bring along any letters of referral or notes of recommendation. I'll be leaving Sunday morning with Mr. Hudson for our offices in Portland, and I'm uncertain when we will return. Saturday would be the best opportunity for an interview."

"Of course we'll be here." Holland beamed at Remington.

Brant wanted to slug the pleased smile off his friend's face as a spurt of jealousy surged through him. He knew it was ridiculous, but the feeling was there just the same.

As soon as the last bite of pie had been consumed, they handed the plates to Holland and watched as she repacked the basket with the empty dishes. She stood and took in the view once more, as though she drank in the amazing vista before her. "This is such a spectacular place in the spring when the wildflowers bloom. I can hardly imagine how beautiful it will look next year with the plantings Mr. Lawson has made."

"It will be something to see." Brant rose to his feet, wanting to keep her talking just for the thrill of hearing her alluring voice.

"That was as fine a meal as I've had in a long, long time, Miss Drake. Thank you for sharing it with us," Remington said, offering her a courteous bow.

She grinned and dipped into an energetic curtsy. "You are most welcome, Mr. Monroe. Thank you for inviting me to apply for one of the housemaid positions. I know that's not a promise of work, but I'm grateful for the opportunity. I've heard Mr. Hudson is firm but fair. In my head, I picture him as an older fellow with a paunchy belly, yellowed teeth, and thinning hair, likely on the shorter side with a penchant for smelly cigars."

Red crept up Denver's neck to his ears while Remington turned aside and coughed in an attempt to hide a bark of laughter.

"Can't say that I've seen a fellow fitting that description around here," Brant said, grinning at Denver, hoping the young man didn't spill his secret right then and there.

Remington gained control of his humor and turned back to Holland. "I do believe

you'll find Mr. Hudson to be full of surprises."

"That sounds intriguing, and a bit mysterious," Holland said, her grin wide and infectious. "I must say I do enjoy surprises from time to time."

Brant moved so he stood beside Holland and held out an arm to her. "May I walk with you, Miss Drake?"

"You may," she said, demurely dipping her head in his direction. "I hope you'll call me Holland. It might seem silly, but I feel like we've become friends."

"Not silly at all, Holland. I feel the same." That was the unvarnished truth.

In the short time he'd spent with Holland, Brant felt as though he'd made the acquaintance of a true friend. Strangely, a part of him marveled at the feeling that he'd always known her, at least had been waiting to meet her. "Perhaps it's the wonderful food you shared that has gone to my head." Brant winked at her, and her cheeks took on an even rosier hue of pink.

She shifted her gaze from him to his home. "I love looking at Hudson House. From any angle, it is perfectly marvelous. It's a French-inspired design, isn't it?" Holland asked, glancing at Remington for an answer.

The man nodded. "A French Renaissance-style chateau with sandstone walls and a red-tiled roof. The turrets are capped in copper, and the doors are solid oak."

"It's breathtaking. I've never seen anything like it—so grand and elegant. The gardens are also quite remarkable. I probably shouldn't have, but I've walked through the rose garden, the spring garden, and now this brilliant garden behind the house. Will it have a name?"



“The river garden,” Brant said, then pointed to the conservatory at the bottom of a sloping hill. “Someday, if you are interested, you should allow Remington to give you a tour of the flower gardens and conservatory.”

“That would be most splendid,” Holland said with enthusiasm as she took a few bouncing steps, beaming at the butler.

Denver cleared his throat, and Holland returned to a more sedate, ladylike walk.

When they reached the front of the house, Brant once again held her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. “It was enchanting to make your acquaintance today, Holland. I hope we’ll meet again.”

“I do as well, Alex.” She gifted him with a smile so warm he felt as though it contained sunbeams before she turned to Remington. “It was a delight to meet you, Mr. Monroe. My sister and I will be here Saturday afternoon at two. Should we come to a back door?”

“With the place in such a disheveled state, the front would be best, Miss Drake.”

She smiled. “Holland, please, sir.” Then she turned to Denver and gave him a big hug, banging the picnic basket against his back. “Stay out of trouble, brother dear. I’ll bring you another basket of food on Saturday. Any requests?”

“Peach cobbler,” Denver said, giving her a gentle push toward the road. “Tell the family I miss them. I’ll see everyone Sunday at church.”

“Goodbye!” Holland waved, then rushed down the cobblestone-paved drive that made a big U in front of the house. The fountain in the midst of the expanse between the two arms of the U gurgled with a pleasant sound.

Brant, Remington, and Denver watched as Holland swung onto the back of a black-and-white Appaloosa horse, riding astride instead of sidesaddle.

Rather than being shocked, Brant felt respect and admiration fill him for the woman's evident horsemanship skills. She waved to them, then rode off toward the road that would lead back to town.

"That's incredible coloring on the horse," Brant commented to Denver, searching for some reason to continue watching the man's sister.

"Holland got Meadow from an old peddler who was passing through the area. He claimed the little filly had gone lame and was going to kill her, but Holland begged to keep the foal. The old man gave the horse to her, and our father helped Holland nurse Meadow back to health. She was mostly starved and scared. My sister trained her all by herself. She loves all animals, but Meadow is by far her favorite."

"She's done an admirable job with the horse," Brant observed, then reluctantly turned to the house.

"Back to work," Remington said, giving Brant an accusatory glare as they moved toward the door. "Perhaps you should go without any supper tonight after lying to Miss Drake. Why on earth would you do that?"

"I didn't outright lie. My middle name is Alex, after all," Brant huffed, needing to convince himself as well as Remington he hadn't been completely untruthful. "She would have acted far differently, I'm sure, had she known I was the pot-bellied, balding Mr. Hudson with yellowed teeth. I wanted her to relax and enjoy her time with her brother."

Remington laughed, but Denver looked like he'd swallowed something bitter.

Brant chuckled and thumped the young man on the back. “You have nothing to worry about, Denver. In fact, I owe you an apology for my deception and making you part of it. I didn’t and don’t mean anything untoward by it. I just wanted to see what it was like to interact with a female who possessed no knowledge of who I am. It was most refreshing.”

Denver nodded once as they made their way into the library.

“I meant what I said, Denver. You don’t need to worry. Although, I am slightly remorseful we ate all the food that was intended for you. It likely would have been enough for your supper and lunch tomorrow.”

“I was happy to share, sir. Holland and my mother are both fine cooks. I’ll get to sample more of their cooking Saturday when Holland returns, and Sunday when I spend the day at home with them.”

Brant dropped to his knees and picked up a walnut slat, prepared to return to the task. “Are your sisters truly interested in working here?”

Denver nodded. “Yes, sir. They’ve both been chattering about applying for jobs since I started working here three years ago. Savannah is more interested in keeping house than Holland, but they’re both good girls, work hard, and will do a good job.”

“I’m sure if they are anything like you, Denver, they can be trusted to do their jobs, do them well, and give a little extra than expected.” Brant offered what he hoped was an encouraging look.

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate the kind words.” Denver took a step toward the ladder, then stopped and looked back at Brant. “If you don’t mind my saying, sir, it’s really something to see you working alongside us. Most people in your position wouldn’t do it, even if they knew what to do. You sure seem to have a lot of useful skills.”

Brant grinned. “Thank you. I spent many years when I was younger working at various enterprises, learning as many skills as possible. It’s certainly been helpful when it comes to this house.”

Denver nodded, scurried upstairs, and hurried up the ladder while Brant returned to installing the floor. While he and Remington alternated the slats for the chevron pattern taking shape across the expanse of the room, his thoughts remained on Holland Drake.

He’d never met anyone quite like her, and found himself hoping he encountered her again. Which was precisely the reason he would return to town Saturday before she and her sister arrived for an interview. The last thing he needed was to run into her and be forced into not just stretching the truth, but telling an outright lie to hide his previous deception.

Regardless, though, he wished again he’d had a sketchbook and pencil in hand to capture how she’d looked, drenched in autumn sunlight with the beauty of the river garden surrounding her. His thoughts danced around images of her as he labored through the afternoon.

The clang of a metal bar hitting a triangle over at the stable resounded across the property, signaling the end of the workday.

Denver continued working until Brant and Remington gathered their tools and stored them in a locked toolbox. After Denver put away his tools, he walked over to where Brant and Remington surveyed the work they’d accomplished.

“Sir, may I speak to you? Freely?” Denver swallowed nervously and twisted the cap he’d worn between his hands.

“Of course, Denver.” Brant clapped him on the shoulder, hoping to set him at ease

with a friendly smile. “What is it?”

“It’s about my sister, sir. I understand why you didn’t tell her who you were, but Holland’s a bit on the feisty side and has a temper when riled. She won’t tolerate anything but the truth. When she finds out who you really are, I have a feeling she’ll be about as furious as a scalded bobcat.”

Brant considered Denver’s words while doing his best to ignore the smug look on Remington’s face. “I appreciate your sharing that with me, Denver. I have never seen a bobcat, scalded or otherwise, but I shall offer your sister a sincere apology and set matters straight when the opportunity arises.”

“That’s good, sir.”

Brant smiled again and gave Denver’s shoulder a squeeze. “Go on, and enjoy your evening.”

“I will, sir. Thank you.”

Remington waited until Denver left through the side door to turn to Brant and open his mouth to speak.

Brant held up a hand to stop whatever words of wisdom his friend prepared to spout.

“Before you start telling me what I already know, just keep your commentary about Miss Drake to yourself, Rem. I don’t need to hear it.”

Not when his own sense of right and wrong left him sorely convicted.

That night, as he tossed and turned in his otherwise comfortable bed at the hotel, a vision of Holland’s smile filled his thoughts. He owed her an apology for his

deception and likely wouldn't rest well until he delivered it.

If she was as feisty as Denver said, he hoped she'd accept it instead of delivering a well-deserved slap to his face.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:42 pm*

Holland studied her image in the small mirror above the washstand in the room she shared with her sister Savannah, adjusting a curl she'd fashioned by her temple.

"You look nice, Holland. Let's go. I don't want to be late." Savannah handed Holland the hat she intended to wear to their interview with Mr. Monroe.

"We won't be late," Holland assured her, settling the hat on her head, then poking in a long sharp pin to hold it in place.

Savannah sighed as she tugged on a pair of gloves. "If you don't cease your dawdling, we will be. It's not like we can ride like a couple of untamed heathens over to Hudson House. We'll need to go at a sedate pace, or all this time we've spent looking our best will be wasted."

"It's not far from here to there if we ride through the orchards, as you well know. We've got an hour before we need to be there." Holland gave the reflection in the mirror a final glance, then turned to pull on the gloves she'd set out. "If you were so concerned about appearances, why didn't you insist on taking the wagon?"

Holland hid her grin when Savannah sighed a second time. Vexing her sister was something so easy for her to do, and all too often proved enjoyable.

"You know I hate climbing up in the wagon," Savannah said with a scowl. "There is no graceful way to do it, at least that I've found. I sure wish we had the money to buy a buggy."

"Well, like Papa always says, 'If wishes were horses, every beggar would ride.'"

Savannah looked like she considered walloping Holland with her reticule. Holland had no doubt she would have if it wouldn't further delay them to restyle the hair they'd carefully arranged at the back of their heads.

Holland glanced in the mirror at her recently refurbished hat. It might not be new, but it rested at a delightfully sassy angle on top of her head. The hats had been castoffs from Mrs. Eunice Clampton, who claimed they were dreadfully out of style, even though they'd been new three years earlier.

Holland and Savannah worked for the persnickety woman from time to time when she needed extra hands to help with cleaning or serving at her home. The woman was married to a retired Army general and thought that gave her the right to look down her hooked nose at everyone else.

Regardless of the woman's finicky ways, Holland was grateful for the apparel she'd shared with them this year. The two weeks in July she and Savannah had worked for Mrs. Clampton as she prepared for a large summer dinner party had netted an unexpected bonus. After the party, when the sisters had returned to help clean up, the woman had gifted them with four gowns. The styles were tragic, overdone with ruffles and trim, but the fabric was expensive and far better than anything they could afford. Holland had chosen a teal-green gown, while Savannah had preferred one in a pale-peach hue. They'd given the blue gown to their mother, and a light-pink dress had been dismantled to make a dress for their little sister Charlotte with enough fabric left over to sew a shirtwaist for Savannah.

Holland and Savannah had remade their gowns, with the help of their mother, into current styles. They were as well-dressed as farmer's daughters could be.

A thrill of excitement shot through Holland as she looped her arm around Savannah's and pulled her toward the door. Savannah picked up the letters of recommendation they'd collected from people they'd worked for, including cranky Mrs. Clampton.



Together the sisters made their way downstairs.

“Here’s the basket for your brother,” their mother said, holding out the large picnic basket, then motioning to a smaller one. “And one for you to give to Mr. Monroe. From what you said the other day, Holland, the man was nearly starved for home cooking.”

“He ate with slightly more decorum than Alex. I didn’t realize until I’d returned home that Alex never stated his full name.”

“I’m sure the young man was probably so surprised by your arrival, he forgot to share it with you,” said Sarah Drake, patting first Holland’s and then Savannah’s cheek. “If he’s working there today, he might forget his first name when he sees my two beautiful girls.”

Holland laughed, while Savannah scowled and picked up the basket intended for Mr. Monroe. She frowned at their mother. “We aren’t going to Hudson House to cast flirtatious glances at the men laboring there. We’re going to seek gainful employment, in case either of you have forgotten.”

With a grin, Holland snatched a warm-from-the-oven sugar cookie off the tray where they were cooling. “How could we? You’ve mentioned our need to seek gainful employment there a hundred times if you’ve uttered it once since I came home and told you about the interview today. I haven’t heard a word of gratitude from you for my part in the interview being arranged. Perhaps I should tell Mr. Monroe you have no interest in working there.”

“If you dare do such a thing, you’ll wake up in the morning to find yourself as bald as old man Musser.”

Holland paid no mind to her sister’s threat, knowing Savannah would never carry

through with it. She kissed her mother's cheek, shoved the cookie in her mouth, and led the way out the door.

"Holland! Savannah!" Their youngest sibling, Charlotte, better known as Charli, waved at them as she sat in Holland's saddle on Meadow while their fourteen-year-old brother, Austin, led the horse, along with Savannah's gentle mare, Fiona, toward the house. "May I go with you?"

Holland smiled at the five-year-old, but shook her head. "Not today, Charli, but we'll go for a ride another day. I promise."

To her credit, Charli didn't pout. Instead, she gave their brother an imperial glare. "Help me down, please."

Austin rolled his eyes but lifted Charli off the mare's back and set her down by Holland.

Charli surveyed both of her sisters, then smiled widely. "You are beautiful!"

"Thank you, Charli." Holland bent down and kissed the little girl on the tip of her pert nose. "You keep Austin out of trouble while we're gone."

"I'll try, but it's a big job." Charli stuck her tongue out at Austin when he scowled at her.

Austin took the baskets Holland and Savannah held and waited until they were mounted to hold them up to his sisters. Holland was glad she'd insisted on adding fullness to their skirts with hidden pleats so they'd be able to ride astride without their dresses creeping up to their knees. They didn't own a sidesaddle, and she likely would have refused to ride it if they did have one in their possession.

She took the basket from Austin, blew Charli a kiss that made the child giggle, then turned Meadow and headed in the direction of the cherry orchard.

“Are you sure we won’t get in trouble for riding through Mr. Hudson’s orchard?” Savannah asked as she waved to Charli and Austin.

“I’m certain. As long as we aren’t stealing the fruit, no one will care if we ride down the path through the trees.” Holland cast a glimpse at her sister and held back a sigh. If Alex, the handsome charmer with coal-black hair and brilliant blue eyes she’d met the other day in the Hudson House library, did happen to be there this afternoon, he’d take one look at sweet Savannah and forget Holland existed.

Savannah was glorious, especially when she smiled. Although the two sisters were nearly the same size, Savannah’s hair was closer to blonde than brown and her eyes were a stormy hue of gray. Unlike Holland, her skin was flawless without freckles, and her upper lip fuller.

Anyone with eyes in their head would skip right past Holland and fasten their gaze on her exquisite sister. Not only was she prettier, Savannah was extremely sensible, intelligent, dependable, and owned a far sweeter disposition, at least to Holland’s way of thinking.

She considered her siblings. Denver, at twenty-three was the oldest. He’d been just two when Holland had come along, and a year later, Savannah had arrived. Boston was born when Denver was six, followed three years later by Austin. They’d all been surprised when Charli had joined the family nine years after Austin’s birth.

While Denver had no interest in farming and loved to work with wood, Boston and Austin both lived and breathed the farm. Austin preferred caring for the animals and milking their small herd of dairy cows while Boston liked working in the orchard best. When they were old enough, Holland knew her brothers would one day take

over the farm.

Three years ago, when a stranger had come to Silver Bluff and began buying up land and existing farms, Holland's parents had been worried about being forced to sell, but Mr. Hudson hadn't approached them. He had purchased the farm next to theirs, though, where the Langleys had grown apples. The elderly couple had packed up and moved to Salem, to be close to their son and his children.

Mr. Hudson's workers had cleaned up the orchard, built a road for wagons to get out to the trees during harvest, and removed a derelict fence bordering the Drake property that had been an eyesore. A sturdy pole fence with a wide gate Holland used when she rode over to take food to Denver had replaced it.

"It's a lovely day," Savannah observed as they rode to the end of their rows of cherry trees.

"It is a beautiful day, and so warm and sunny. I'll be sad when the air turns nippy."

Savannah grinned at her. "That's because it means the fall work will be completed and you'll be stuck inside more of the time helping Mama in the kitchen."

"Or, we'll both get jobs at Hudson House and Charli will have to start learning to help instead of being a pampered little princess," Holland said as she leaned over, flipped the latch on the gate, and pushed it open. Savannah rode through, and Holland followed her, then turned Meadow so she could secure the latch.

"We were younger than Charli when we started helping in the kitchen and around the house," Savannah observed as they continued on their way.

"Exactly. If we don't get out of the house, that child will never learn how to do anything. She's far too bossy as it is." Holland imitated the face Charli made when

she wanted one of her siblings to do something for her.

Savannah laughed. “She is a bossy little thing. If she weren’t so adorable, it would be far easier to tell her no.”

“I know exactly what you mean.” Holland reined Meadow to a stop as they rode out of the orchard. Hudson House filled their view in the distance. The red roof tiles struck a sharp contrast to the bright blue sky dotted with wispy white clouds. The copper caps on the turrets glistened and sparkled in the sunlight, making the place look more like a castle than a home.

“Oh!” Savannah said, sucking in an awed gasp as she stopped beside Holland. “It is remarkable, isn’t it?”

“It really is. From every direction, it is amazing.” Holland pointed to the east side of the house. “See the stables? Denver showed me how big the stalls are. They’ve set up working areas for the carpenters and stone masons in there. The tack room is nearly as big as our house, and that wing on the side is where they’ll keep Mr. Hudson’s carriages, buggies, and sleighs. The stables have electricity and plumbing, and brass fixtures and hardware. It’s far nicer than most of the houses in Silver Bluff. Denver said the second floor of the stable is where the male staff, with the exception of Mr. Monroe, will sleep. He’ll have a room in the house near the kitchen.”

“And Mr. Monroe is the man we are meeting today?”

Holland nodded. “Yes. He’s Mr. Hudson’s assistant and butler. If I understood correctly, he is the one in charge of hiring the household staff, so you better be ready to dazzle him.”

“I have no intention of dazzling anyone, Holland, and you know it. If we are hired, it will be because we are the best qualified candidates for the positions.”

A snort rolled out of Holland, although she didn't mean for it to escape.

Savannah frowned at her. "What was that for?"

"Because, darling sister, the best positions are not always given to those who are most deserving of the job due to their skill and ability. The prettiest or those who have a connection to someone at the establishment can hold more sway with the decision makers."

Savannah appeared to mull that over a moment before she glanced at Holland. "If looks alone secure a position, then you should undoubtedly ride home today with a job at Hudson House."

Shocked by her sister's words, Holland smiled at her. "I was thinking the same of you. You truly are a picture of beauty." When Savannah blushed at the praise, Holland pointed to the conservatory just down the hill from the house. "That's the conservatory. Denver said they grow vegetables all winter long. Can you imagine such a thing?"

"No, I can't, but I'd sure like to see it. Just think about how delicious a fresh tomato or crisp cucumber would taste in January."

"Maybe something exotic like oranges or bananas grow there too."

Savannah grinned. "You and your oranges. I think the only reason you love Christmas is because we always get an orange."

"Oranges are one of the many reasons I love the holiday season." Holland rode past the gardener's cottage, a quaint brick home that looked as though it had been plucked from an English landscape painting and dropped down at the Hudson estate for the man who oversaw the care of the extensive yard and gardens.

When they reached the end of the wide cobblestone-lined drive that made a U shape in front of the house, Holland stopped and swung off the back of Meadow. She envisioned what the expanse between the two sides of the drive and the house would look like once the plantings were finished in the spring and grass began to grow. Even now, the huge fountain flowed with water that refracted the afternoon sunlight. Denver had mentioned he'd heard the gardener and his crew discussing a lily pond and plantings of flowering trees for the area between the drive and the conservatory located down a slope on the west side of the house.

"Why are we stopping here?" Savannah asked, stepping out of the saddle and looping Fiona's reins around the same hitching rail where Holland had tied Meadow at the far end of the drive.

"I don't want the horses to leave a mess by the house for someone to clean up. Out here, it just gets ground into the dirt." Holland took the basket from her sister while Savannah smoothed her hair and skirts, adjusted her hat, then pinched her cheeks to add a little color. Savannah held the baskets while Holland tidied her appearance. Together they turned and faced the house.

"Nervous?" Savannah asked as they started down the brick path that ran alongside the cobblestone drive.

"Yes. You?"

"Definitely. What if we don't get the jobs? What if we do?" Savannah looked both hopeful and terrified.

Holland laughed and shifted the basket she carried to her other hand, then gave her sister a one-armed hug. "Whatever happens, it will all work out for the best. We just have to trust in God's plans, even if we haven't the slightest idea what they might be."

“I know, but it is sometimes rather challenging to do that when I prefer things planned out and plainly stated.”

Holland bumped her hip against Savannah’s. “You need more adventure in your life.”

Savannah tossed her a teasing grin. “You provide more than enough adventure for ten people to endure.”

“I take offense at that statement,” Holland said with feigned dismay. “I only try to keep you from dying of boredom.”

“That will never, ever happen, sister dear.” Savannah looped her arm around Holland’s as they rushed up the steps together, and walked through the exterior entry area with a high-domed ceiling lined in cream tiles arranged in a chevron pattern. Three more steps brought them to the big oak door flanked on each side by stained glass panels featuring a bright-blue fleur-de-lis pattern accented by gold scrolls entwined with green leaves.

Holland had just raised her hand to lift the knocker on the door when the portal swung open and Remington Monroe greeted them with a smile.

“Welcome, Miss Drake, and Miss Drake.” He stepped back so they could walk into the marble-floored foyer.

Light spilled into the octagon-shaped space from the semicircle window above the door as well as the round skylight set into the white-tiled ceiling. The walls, also tiled in white, made the area seem clean and bright. The tiled walls and marble floor would be easier to keep clean than wood or painted walls and carpeted floors.

“Thank you for coming today.” Remington took another step back.



“Thank you for the invitation to interview, Mr. Monroe. Please, call me Holland. I’d like to introduce my sister, Savannah, to you, sir. Savannah Drake, this is Mr. Monroe.” Holland made the introduction while observing the man’s state of dress. The other day he’d been attired in canvas work pants with a cotton work shirt and scuffed work boots. Today he wore an expensive tailored suit in stark black with a deep-blue brocade vest, a crisp white shirt, and an expertly knotted dark-blue tie. His hair was immaculately styled, adding to his impeccable and somewhat intimidating appearance.

Then he smiled, and Holland felt at ease, recalling their impromptu picnic with the fabulous view of the river.

“Please, come in. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Savannah, and a treat to see you again, Holland. The place, as you know, is in quite a disastrous state, but the library should be completely finished next week. Mr. Hudson would like to have staff ready, as soon as it is completed, to begin the monumental task of cleaning. Construction dust coats everything. He wants each room cleaned, top to bottom, before a curtain is hung or a stick of furniture carried in, then you’ll likely end up cleaning each room again once the furniture is installed and the appropriate adornments are in place. After the house is up and running, we intend to keep two housemaids and at least two parlormaid on staff to see to the cleaning and upkeep. Mr. Hudson likes things to be dusted daily, then there is the matter of airing the bedding, cleaning the bathrooms, mopping floors, shining windows and mirrors, that sort of thing.”

“Would we be required to handle the laundry?” Holland asked as they followed Remington from the entry past the grand curving staircase, through a room with a bank of windows along the wall, then into a hallway where two workmen were laying more parquet flooring like she’d seen in the library the other day.

“You would not. We’ll hire women to see to the laundry. In a house this size, something needs to be washed, dried, and pressed every day, but Sunday. Mr. Hudson

believes everyone needs a day of rest on the Lord's Day, and no one would be expected to work on Sundays. Employees are also given an additional day off during the week, but those days are staggered so there is always staff on hand. There may arise times when everyone is pressed into service without a weekday off, if the house is full of guests, but other than that, all employees will have two days off each week."

Holland glanced at Savannah, and they both nodded as Remington guided them into the kitchen. There was a huge sink on one wall, a massive cooking stove on another, and a small sturdy table located beneath one of the windows with four chairs placed around it. Cabinets had been built into one wall, with a long worktable taking up a good part of the floor space. The blue and white tiles on the floor looked like puzzle pieces and made a fascinating pattern Holland had to force herself not to study as Remington pulled out a chair for her and then Savannah at the table.

"May I offer you tea?" Remington asked, pointing to a kettle on the stove.

"That's kind of you, but we don't want you to go to any trouble," Holland said as she and Savannah took seats at the table and set the baskets they carried beneath their chairs.

"It's no trouble at all, although I must apologize for our primitive dinnerware," Remington said, looking somewhat distressed. "The butler's pantry and the other storage areas are not quite ready for the dishes to be unpacked, so we are making do with what we must for the moment."

Holland watched as the man poured hot water into a plain white teapot, set on the lid, and carried it to the table. He took three plain white cups along with saucers from a crate sitting near the sink and set them on the table, then retrieved spoons and a canning jar full of sugar.

"I'm sorry I have no fresh cream to offer you. I failed to have any delivered from the

dairy this morning.”

“This is wonderful, Mr. Monroe. We don’t generally drink cream in our tea.” Savannah offered the man a smile and sat forward slightly in her chair.

After he poured the tea and Savannah and Holland each stirred a spoonful of sugar into the steaming brew in their cups, Remington cleared his throat, apparently ready to get down to business.

“Do you have any letters of referral or recommendation?” he asked.

Savannah pulled the stack of letters from her reticule and slid them across the table.

“I’ll take a quick glance at these whilst you drink your tea,” he said, then rose from the table with the letters and left the room.

“This house,” Savannah whispered. “I can’t even imagine anything like it. It’s so ...”

“Grand. Elegant. Magnificent,” Holland supplied when her sister seemed unable to land on words to describe it.

Savannah grinned. “Exactly.”

Quietly, they sipped their tea. From their positions near the window, they could see into a shrub-enclosed space Holland was sure would become the kitchen garden. She could almost envision rows of beans, carrots, and potatoes growing alongside fronds of dill while fragrant stems of sage blew in a summer breeze.

Footsteps alerted them to Remington’s return. Both she and Savannah straightened their already stiff postures, set their nearly empty cups in the saucers, and placed their hands in their laps when he stepped into the room.

“These are excellent, Holland and Miss Drake. Excellent, indeed.”

“We’re pleased to hear that, sir,” Savannah said with a smile. “And I hope you’ll refer to me as Savannah.”

“Savannah,” he said, then took a seat at the table and sipped from his cup of tea that had to be lukewarm now instead of hot. “Would either of you have a problem living here to work? I realize your family has a farm nearby, but once the house is fully functioning, we’d like the house staff to reside on the premises.”

“We wouldn’t mind,” Holland said, speaking for both of them. Savannah nodded in agreement.

Remington proceeded to interview both of them, asking dozens of questions about their experience, how they would handle specific cleaning issues or situations, then he gave them both long observant glances.

“Would you like a tour of the house?” he asked, pushing back from the table and rising.

“We would, sir.”

He grinned and motioned toward the doorway. “Please, call me Monroe. It’s how all the staff will refer to me.”

“Very well, Monroe,” Savannah said, seeming quite taken with the man who was handsome and regal.

Although he seemed older than his years, Holland guessed him to be in his mid-to-late twenties, not all that much older than she.

Remington showed them the space that would become the butler's pantry, then walked them through the food pantry, a storage room for table linens, and a cold storage room that left both Savannah and Holland marveling over an entire room used to keep food chilled. At the end of the hallway, he pointed to a door and said, "Those will be my quarters," then directed them back to the dining room and on to the formal parlor.

In each empty space they passed, he explained what it would eventually become, such as a sunroom filled with so much light and warmth from the sun streaming through the windows, Holland wished she could have curled up on a window seat, if one had existed, and taken a nap like a lazy feline.

"You'll recognize this room, Holland," he said, guiding them into the library. The floor was nearly finished, but it appeared the trim Denver had been working on was now complete.

"Oh, my heavens!" Savannah said, gaping at the gleaming wood and rich blue wallpaper. "It is glorious!"

Remington chuckled softly. "Admittedly, I believe this will be my favorite room. That said, I think the winter months will find me enjoying the sunroom whenever possible."

"Isn't it wonderful?" Holland asked, smiling at the man, then walking to stand in front of the massive marble fireplace. She tipped her head back to study the carvings, amazed at the ability of the artists to turn stone and wood into such spectacular creations.

"It is wonderful," Remington stated. "I am most anxious to see how this room appears with the draperies and furniture in place, not to mention Mr. Hudson's collection of books and artifacts."

“Artifacts?” Holland asked, turning to look at Remington. “Will we be expected to dust them?”

“Yes, you will, as well as the books. Not every day, mind you, but once a week the shelves and their contents are to be dusted. You will likely have a schedule of thoroughly cleaning each room on specific days of the week.”

“But what if we break something?” Holland had visions of accidentally dropping an ancient treasure that couldn’t be replaced.

“The preference would be that you didn’t, but accidents do happen. We will encourage the staff to be watchful and careful when they are handling priceless antiquities.”

“Are there many priceless antiquities?” Savannah asked, her pale skin turning even whiter.

Holland could read her sister’s thoughts since they reflected her own. What if they broke something? Would they be fired on the spot? Not only would it bring shame to their family, but it could hamper their ability to gain future employment. Perhaps interviewing here was a terrible idea. The most valuable thing in Mrs. Crampton’s home was a sword her husband had been given by a past president. It hung above the fireplace in their parlor in a place of honor.

“Some,” Remington answered cryptically as he gave them both long glances. “Just for the sake of walking through a potential circumstance, let’s pretend Mr. Hudson is in possession of a vase from Greece that is thought to be more than a thousand years old. And let’s say you are dusting a shelf, pick it up, and the vase slips from your fingers, breaking into a hundred pieces. What would you do?”

“Cry,” Savannah said with blunt honesty. “I would cry, then gather the pieces, and

come find you.”

Remington looked like he worked to hold back a smile. “Other than the crying, that is a good answer, Savannah.”

“Would we then be dismissed?” Holland asked, her voice quiet in the stillness of the room.

“No, not unless you purposely broke it. My suggestion would be to use the most diligent care in handling objects throughout the house. Additionally, because there will be valuables in the house, we must be able to trust each member of the staff. It would be tragic to have the sheriff involved if one of our employees attempts to pilfer something for their own coffers.”

“We would never, sir!” Holland said, taking immediate affront at the very notion someone might accuse them of stealing.

“Never,” Savannah repeated, sounding equally offended.

Remington held his hands in front of him in a placating motion. “I certainly wouldn’t think fine ladies such as the Drake sisters would ever do such a thing, but I provide the same information to all of our staff members. Now, would you care to look upstairs?”

“Yes, please,” Holland said, feeling only slightly mollified as Remington led the way to the second floor up the curved staircase at the front of the house.

He showed them the many bedrooms, including the one that would be Mr. Hudson’s, with a balcony outside and the most breathtaking view of the river in the distance. The walls sported the same deep-blue damask wallpaper that the library boasted.

“I’m getting the distinct idea Mr. Hudson favors that rich shade of deep blue.” Holland dared to reach out and touch the velvet-flocked wallpaper with the tip of her index finger. It felt every bit as luxurious as she imagined.

“It is his favorite color. Has been for as long as I can remember.”

Savannah turned from gazing out the balcony doors to look at Remington. “How long have you known him?”

“All my life,” Remington said, staring off into the distance. “My father was in charge of his father’s stables. We grew up together, as playmates and friends. When I was eight, it was decided I would begin training to become Mr. Hudson’s butler. At fifteen, I stepped into that role in a formal capacity and have been with him since.”

Holland felt her eyes widen in surprise. If anyone on the planet knew Mr. Hudson, it was definitely Remington. “What’s he like? Mr. Hudson?”

Remington gave her a thoughtful look, then grinned. “I shall wait for you to form your own opinion of him, Holland.”

A dozen questions poised on her tongue, ready to leap out of her mouth, but she swallowed them back and followed as Remington continued their tour of the upstairs which included nine additional bedrooms, six with private baths, a large bathing room with a huge clawfoot tub, and a sitting room for guests to use for reading or relaxing near the stairs. He led them up to the third floor, which had storage rooms, bedrooms for house servants, and two bathrooms at either end of the hall the staff would share.

“Please, follow me,” Remington said, opening a door at the end of the hallway to the back stairs.

Savannah looked at Holland and fell in step behind the butler as the three of them



returned to the main floor, then continued descending the stairs to the basement. Remington led them to the far end of the hallway and opened a door.

“As you can see,” he said, motioning with his hand into a long room with semicircle windows that opened to let in air, “this is the laundry room.” Half a dozen deep tubs with faucets above them lined one wall. Several pieces of unfamiliar equipment drew Holland’s interest. She pointed to what appeared to be a crude wooden cradle. “What is that?”

“A hand-agitated washing machine,” Remington said, taking hold of the handle at the top. “The interior of the cradle is ribbed. You add water and the clothes, or linens, push the handle like this, and it moves the clothes back and forth, washing them.” He stepped back and grinned. “Come with me. I’m sure you’ll enjoy seeing this.”

He walked into the room across the hall and approached an odd contraption. A solid oak beam was suspended from the ceiling by three vertical brackets. A dozen cast iron rods attached to it on the long side of the beam, then fastened to the wall across the room. On either side of where the rods connected to the wall were six-inch-wide oak boards joined together by wrought iron handles on the front of them.

Remington grabbed on to a handle and pulled, moving backward as a rack slid out of the wall, gliding along the rod on a pulley system. Inside the rack, thick wooden horizontal dowels were fastened to the boards on the open end and fit into small brackets on the wall side of the device.

“For drying sheets, or toweling, or whatever needs to be dried on a rainy day,” Remington explained, motioning for Holland and Savannah to look inside. “The racks can be left sitting out like this to dry, or pushed back into the wall cabinet where coils in the floor are heated with electricity. Mr. Hudson is quite pleased with this innovation.”

“I should think so,” Savannah said, placing her hand on the handle of the rack Remington pulled out. “May I?”

“Of course.” He stepped back, and Savannah pushed in the rack, then pulled it out again, delighted as a child with a new toy. “I wish we could show this to Papa. He would build one for Mama if we had a place for it.”

“I don’t think the barn would be the logical place to dry clothes, since that is the only spot with room for something like this at the farm,” Holland observed, earning a glare from her sister.

From the laundry room, they visited the furnace room, then toured the additional bedrooms for the female servants.

“How wonderful!” Holland exclaimed, shocked by the ample size of the bedrooms. “How many girls will share a room?”

“No one will be asked to share. Each woman we hire will have her own room. Everyone needs a private place to think and relax at the end of the day.”

Savannah’s jaw dropped, and Holland had to press her lips together to keep from looking like a gawping fish.

“These rooms are meant for one occupant?” Holland asked, convinced she’d heard Remington incorrectly.

“That’s right. Each room will have a bed, washstand, dresser, mirror, and a comfortable chair. Any thoughts on the color of the rooms? We’ve painted them white for now, but Mr. Hudson isn’t averse to giving the walls a bit of color.”

Holland walked around the room, liking the clean white walls and the light that came

in through the semicircle windows along the top of the wall. “I like the white walls. They brighten the room and make it seem not so much like a basement space. What will the floors look like when they are finished?”

“They’ll be oak, same as the bedrooms on the third floor,” Remington said, showing them the rest of the bedrooms as well as a sitting room and a dining area for the staff, the dumbwaiters that would be used to transport laundry and supplies to other floors of the house, and another bathroom for the use of the staff.

The basement also included storage for dishes, shelves for canned goods, and a storage room for household supplies like soap, towels, and additional linens.

“I failed to show you the attic. It will be used only for storage.” Remington guided them back to the main floor, and they returned to the kitchen where Holland and Savannah retrieved the baskets they’d left there.

“If I offered both of you ladies jobs as housemaids, when would you be able to start?”

“Next week,” Holland and Savannah said together.

Remington grinned. “I was hoping that’s what you’d say. Work might be a bit sporadic at first until the rooms begin to come together, but once they do, you’ll be working long, hard hours, likely right up to Christmas. I feel you both will do a good job here at Hudson House. I am quite certain I can put my trust in you, as can Mr. Hudson, to give your best each day. Would you like to become the first female employees on staff?”

Savannah glanced at Holland and the two of them exchanged a look of agreement without speaking a word.

Holland stepped forward and held out her hand. “We would very much like that, sir.

Savannah and I accept the jobs of housemaids and are pleased with this opportunity.”

“Wonderful. I’ll have a bit of paperwork for you to complete on your next arrival. I’d like to have you come Thursday morning at eight. The library should be completely finished by then. If that changes, I’ll get word to you. As for living accommodations, until we finish the staff bedrooms and have a cook hired, do you mind remaining at your family’s farm?”

“Not at all. As long as Mr. Hudson doesn’t care if we cut through the orchard. It shortens the ride considerably.”

“He won’t care in the least. In fact, he’d be happy to know you are using the wagon road through the orchard.” Remington moved into the hallway, and Holland and Savannah followed. “Oh, I just remembered I’ll be in Portland with Mr. Hudson all this coming week. Let’s plan on both of you starting the following Tuesday. Please arrive by eight that morning.”

“We’ll be here,” Holland said, handing Remington the basket of food they’d brought from home.

“Whatever you brought smells divine. Thank you both so much. I look forward to working with you. Also, until we get uniforms, which should be soon, please wear whatever you don’t mind working in with a white apron, if you have them. If you don’t, I’ll see what I can find.”

“We have aprons, Monroe,” Savannah said with a reassuring smile. “Thank you for giving us this opportunity. We truly are so grateful.”

“My pleasure, Savannah. You both have a delightful weekend, and I’ll see you a week from Tuesday.”

“Thank you, sir. Goodbye!” Holland grabbed Savannah’s hand, and the two of them rushed outside. They waited until they’d walked around the corner of the house toward the stable to share exuberant hugs and release a few excited squeals.

“We’re going to be working in Hudson House! I can’t believe it!” Savannah said, pressing her hands to her rosy cheeks. “I’m so nervous and excited, my mind feels like it’s whirling in a dozen different directions all at once.”

“Believe it, Savannah. Oh, this is beyond wonderful. I can’t wait to tell Mama and Papa, and Denver. Shall we go find our brother? I’m sure he’ll be anxiously awaiting our news as well as the food.”

Arm in arm, they walked into the stables, eager to step into their future.

## Page 4

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Despite his plans to remain in Portland for a few weeks, Brant felt drawn to Silver Bluff after being in the city only a few days.

He wanted to blame it on his desire to watch every step of progress being made at Hudson House, but he found his thoughts circling around Holland Drake.

In spite of her modest upbringing, the woman was lovely, charming, and full of life. Being around her was akin to drinking an elixir full of sunshine. She'd been so open around him, so unaffected, he couldn't work up a suitable amount of regret at having deceived her in regard to his identity.

The part of him that detested lying of any type had wanted to tell her before she'd left that afternoon who he was, especially after she had offered such an unflattering description of him. But he couldn't. Not when it had been so refreshing to be around a woman who seemed to enjoy his company without having any idea he was worth millions and came from a lineage that could be traced to early American settlers.

He wanted Miss Holland Drake, with the gleaming hair and sparkling brown eyes, to like him for him, not because of his name, bank account, or status in society. Remington had lectured him endlessly about setting a poor example of honesty for Denver. The man wasn't wrong. Not only had he bent the truth to suit his purposes, he'd involved Denver in his deception.

Before he'd left for Portland, he'd made it a point to find Denver and apologize, and reiterated his promise to set things straight with Holland the next time he saw her. Which was why he'd departed for Portland two days earlier than planned, leaving Remington to interview the Drake sisters without any chance Brant might encounter

Holland and have to explain himself.

He knew he'd have to do it sooner rather than later, but he dreaded it. Denver's warning about a scalded bobcat made him question if Holland had a terrible temper. What would he do if she decided to unleash it on him?

Then again, Remington had hired Holland and her sister to begin working at the house next week. Surely she wouldn't erupt in a fit of anger if she was worried about keeping her job. Not that he'd fire her, or allow Remington to, if she completed her duties satisfactorily.

Unable to concentrate on the work piled on his desk, Brant finally gave up and stuffed his leather satchel full of files, bid a quick farewell to his secretary with instructions to forward any necessary correspondence to him in Silver Bluff for the next two weeks, then rushed home.

Remington opened the door as Brant charged up the front steps. "What brings you home in the middle of the morning?" his butler asked as Brant strode inside.

"Silver Bluff. I can't explain it, but I feel an urgent need to get back to Hudson House. If transportation on the afternoon train can be arranged, I'd like to leave today."

"I'll telephone the depot right away," Remington said, hurrying off to Brant's library where one of two telephones were located in the house.

Without waiting to hear Remington's answer, Brant rushed upstairs and packed a bag with essential things he'd need, then carried it downstairs. He recalled what Holland had shared about her family having so few books and stepped into the library as Remington hung up the telephone.

“We’ll need to leave shortly if we plan to catch the train.” Remington gave Brant a curious glance. “Does this sudden rush back to Silver Bluff have anything to do with Miss Drake?”

“No! Don’t be ridiculous,” Brant snapped as he strode over to one of the bookshelves and searched for a title.

Remington chuckled. “I do believe your abrupt protest is quite telling, sir.”

“Don’t you have a bag to pack?” Brant cast a dark glower over his shoulder at his friend. He felt like slugging the man when he chuckled, knowing him far too well.

“I suppose I do.” Remington grinned and backed toward the doorway. “I’ll be ready to leave in ten minutes.”

Brant nodded but didn’t turn back around. He returned to perusing the shelves, searching for a book his sister had sent to him a few months ago.

“There you are,” he said, snatching the book from the shelf, then grabbed a few more.

He’d just added them to his bag when Remington rushed down the hallway from the direction of the kitchen, a coat tossed over his arm, hat askew on his head, with a traveling bag and a basket Brant was sure held their lunch in his hands.

“You haven’t said if you plan to keep this place once Hudson House is finished,” Remington said, opening the door while Brant settled his hat on his head and slipped on his coat against the rain that had begun to fall outside.

“I’ll keep it. The location is ideal, and the house is convenient for entertaining when the necessity arises for business purposes. After I move to Silver Bluff, it will be nice to have a comfortable home here for the times I must attend to business in the city.



Besides, it gives Dean and Eloise adequate accommodations when they are in Portland.”

“It certainly does,” Remington agreed, pulling the door shut behind him against the autumn wind. He somehow managed to don his coat while following Brant down the steps to the hansom cab that waited to transport them to the train depot.

Brant climbed in, grateful to be out of the cold drizzle of rain, and studied his friend. Remington did his job so well, so flawlessly, Brant knew he often took him for granted.

Such as arriving home unannounced, eager to head to Silver Bluff without a thought to the hasty arrangements his butler would have to make. Remington placed a few telephone calls and everything was quickly taken care of so Brant could travel in comfort and ease.

“Thanks, Rem,” he said, nodding at the man seated beside him in the cab. Their shoulders bumped with each bounce in the road, but Brant didn’t mind. Remington was closer than a brother to him. He always had been, and Brant couldn’t foresee that changing regardless of what the future might bring.

“For what?”

“For being you.” Brant thumped him on the leg, then settled back in the seat. “You work far harder than anyone I know, yet you make everything appear so easy and simple. Like you snap your fingers and magically there’s a cab waiting to take us to the train depot, where my private car will be ready to transport us in every possible comfort available.”

“It’s my job, Brant, but more than that, you’re my friend. You have such a busy, hectic life. It’s my pleasure to do what I can to make things, as you said, easier and

simpler for you.”

“I don’t say it often enough, Rem, but I appreciate you. Truly, I couldn’t manage anything, let alone the enormous project Hudson House has turned into, without your help. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Remington gave him a sly grin. “If you’re in a generous mood, perhaps I should request an increase in wages.”

Brant chuckled. “Done! You’ve more than earned it.”

“Thank you, Brant.”

“Of course. Now, speaking of earning their keep, how will the two Drake sisters do as housemaids?”

“Very well, I think, at least from my initial impression. Savannah seems more serious than Holland, but they both are intelligent, aren’t afraid to ask questions, and took to heart my lecture about being careful with priceless antiques. From the letters of referral, I believe they will be trustworthy employees. I’ve been putting off ordering uniforms until we have more staff in place, but we might need to look into purchasing something for the women to wear in the meantime. I’d hate for them to ruin any of their personal clothing.”

“Can something suitable be purchased in Silver Bluff?” Brant asked as the cab rolled to a stop at the train depot.

Remington smirked at him. “I can honestly say I have not taken an inventory of the apparel options available for females in town.”

Brant grinned and waggled an eyebrow at Remington. “Perhaps you should. If

Savannah looks anything like Holland, she's likely lovely."

"Beautiful, actually," Remington said softly as they stepped out of the cab and he paid the driver.

Brant heard the comment and made a mental note to find reasons to place Remington and Savannah together. If he had to enlist Holland's help, even better. He certainly wouldn't complain about time spent with the lively, vibrant woman.

Since his encounter with her last week, she'd never been far from his thoughts. Her smile was full of joy and light, just like her warm brown eyes. Holland was neither too tall nor too short, although she leaned more toward thin than plump. She possessed a full bottom lip, positively made for kissing, with freckles that danced across her cheeks and cute nose. The woman was a blend of girlish charm and feminine attraction, all wrapped up in one enticing package.

Brant considered what his parents would say if they ever met Holland. Most likely, their choice of words would land somewhere between thoroughly unsuitable and illiterate spawn of a farmer .

Thankfully, his parents were all the way across the country in New York and would "never in this lifetime visit that heathenish land you've run off to," or so his father had written in his last missive which Brant had read, wadded into a ball, and tossed into the fireplace. He took more satisfaction than he should have in watching it burn.

That had been two months ago. He'd half expected a letter from his mother or one of his other New York siblings to arrive, chastising him for his poor choices in moving to Oregon, but they hadn't written. Truthfully, he didn't care. He'd severed his ties with his relatives in New York when he'd gone into partnership with Dean and moved across the country.

Eloise, his favorite sibling and the only one whose opinion mattered to him, wrote frequently. Often she sent him little things she thought he'd enjoy, like drawings made by her children, or an article she'd found interesting, or even a new tea she thought he might like to try. He sent her sketches he made in his travels, a leaf or interesting rock he happened upon for his nephew Mayes, and dainties such as a hair ribbon for his three-year-old niece Clara.

Although he saw Eloise, Dean, and their children whenever he traveled to San Francisco, he was already looking forward to hosting them for Christmas this year, provided the house was finished and livable by then.

Thoughts of Hudson House brought his wandering mind right back around to Holland. He certainly hoped Denver had been exaggerating when he'd claimed she'd be livid when she found out he'd pretended to be someone else. Surely she'd see it as a joke. Wouldn't she?

For the moment, he needn't worry about her reaction. There would be time enough to set things right with her later, when she and her sister began work on Tuesday. Right now he was anxious to return to Hudson House and see what he could do to help move things along toward the finish line of the house being ready before his sister's arrival in December.

"I'll see if your car is ready, sir," Remington said, shifting into the role of butler as they entered the depot building. He took the bags Brant carried from his hands.

"Thanks, Rem. I'll pick up a copy of today's paper." Brant turned and headed toward the newsstand where passengers could purchase newspapers, a limited supply of books, sacks of peanuts, and dry, tasteless sandwiches.

He'd just stepped into the line when he heard a snuffle and turned to see a little boy who appeared to be near the age of Eloise's son, Mayes. Big teardrops rolled across

the silent child's cheeks as he leaned against the legs of a tall woman dressed in an immaculately clean and pressed traveling suit that was at least ten years out of style. It was meant to be worn with a bustle, but the fact that she'd left it off was likely the only reason the somewhat ill-fitting garment covered her long frame.

"I'm sorry, baby, but we'll have to make do for now. I still have half a biscuit left you can eat for your lunch, and I saved a shiny red apple for your supper." The woman offered her son a tender smile.

Brant had a notion she would have picked up the child and comforted him if her hands hadn't been full of bags that appeared as well-used as their attire. The woman glanced around, and Brant saw desperation in her expression along with hunger, exhaustion, and fear.

Growing up with every luxury anyone could ever wish for, Brant had never done without. Even when he'd struck out on his own, he'd lived in luxury. In a physical sense, he'd never experienced the pangs of hunger. Never been homeless. Never knew the terror of wondering if he'd have a warm bed to sleep in or a roof to keep off the rain.

However, suffering of the heart knew no division between wealthy and poor. Brant had spent a good part of his life starved for affection from his family. His grandparents, when they'd been alive, and Eloise were the only ones to give him love and kindness.

Brant knew about exhaustion and fear, and he was acquainted well enough with desperation to recognize it in a fellow traveler along life's journey. As he waited in line, he kept an eye on the woman, who appeared to be anxiously studying the crowd.

Brant felt a little nudge in his spirit to speak to her. He purchased two newspapers, a bag of peanuts, and a sack of penny candy, then dropped the peanuts and candy into

his pocket and tucked the newspapers beneath his left arm as he walked over to the woman.

“Pardon me, ma’am,” he said, politely tipping his head to her when she turned to face him.

“Yes?” she asked, tensing, as though she expected him to insist she leave or some other nonsense.

“Are you waiting for someone? Something?” he inquired, wondering why he was bothering the poor female who looked one disaster away from all but giving up.

She shook her head, then lifted her chin a notch, her gaze meeting his. “No, sir. We’re alone.”

From a distance, the woman had appeared attractive, but up close, she was undeniably lovely with dusky skin, the greenest eyes he’d ever seen, and ripe rosy lips. Her brown hair with lighter streaks of blonde running through it was lush and thick, twisted into a bun at the base of a slender neck. Although some would say she was stunningly beautiful, Brant couldn’t help but prefer Holland’s impish face.

“Are you traveling somewhere today?” he asked.

The woman held his gaze and attention. “I had hoped to leave town today due to unacceptable circumstances at my former place of employment, but I had no idea train tickets would be so expensive. Quite honestly, sir, I’ve been standing here, praying for a miracle.”

Brant knew he was about as far from a divine gift as any that could ever be offered, but he could help this woman and her son. The way she mentioned her former place of employment made him wonder what had taken place to cause her not only to leave

her employer, but to flee Portland.

“May I offer my assistance, ma’am?” Brant doffed his hat and bowed to the woman, then smiled at her son. “My name is Brant Hudson. My brother-in-law and I own Pacific Horizon Shipping Company. Perhaps you’ve heard of us?”

She nodded slowly, cautiously, as though she wasn’t certain he could be trusted.

“I own a house here in Portland and one I am most eager to finish building in Silver Bluff, which is where I’m traveling. Would you care to join me and my butler as we travel? I promise I am quite harmless and can provide a reference from the stationmaster if you so desire.”

“It’s kind of you to offer, Mr. Hudson. Under normal circumstances, I’d refuse, but I can’t help but think you are an answer to my desperate pleas for assistance. If you wouldn’t mind the reference from the stationmaster, I would be most grateful.”

“Of course.” Brant returned his hat to his head, took the bags from her right hand, then motioned to the counter where Remington spoke with one of the depot agents. “This way, please, Missus ...”

“Anders. My name is Dulcie Anders.” She glanced down at the little boy who had stopped crying and looked at Brant with open curiosity. “This is my son, Bobby.”

“Mrs. Anders. It’s a pleasure to meet you and Bobby.” Brant gave the boy a reassuring smile, then started toward the ticket counter. “Right this way. I’ll see if Mr. Oakbrook has a moment to speak with us.”

The woman took the little boy’s hand in hers and followed as Brant led the way to the counter. Remington turned around and gave him a questioning glance, but offered Mrs. Anders a polite nod. “Your car will be ready momentarily, sir.”

“Excellent, Remington. This is Mrs. Anders and her son, Bobby. I invited them to travel with us today, but she would like to hear a reference from Mr. Oakbrook to confirm I am who I say I am.”

“Understandable. A reprobate like you could cause any number of questionable problems.”

Brant scowled at him, Remington grinned, and Mrs. Anders barely hid a hint of a smile.

Remington motioned to the agent he’d just been speaking with, who walked over to them. “Mr. Hudson requires a word with Mr. Oakbrook, please. It will only take a brief moment of his time.”

The man nodded and scurried over to a doorway with a brass plaque beside it that read Stationmaster . He tapped on the door, pushed it open, nodded once, then hurried back to the counter. “Mr. Oakbrook will be out shortly.”

“My thanks to you, good sir.” Remington offered the man a tip, which he took with a pleased nod, then rushed over to help the next passenger waiting for assistance.

It only took a moment for Mr. Oakbrook to appear in his doorway. He looked around, caught sight of Brant, and headed toward them.

“Mr. Hudson! To what do I owe the pleasure today?” Mr. Oakbrook asked, reaching out to shake Brant’s hand. “Shipping more supplies for your house? How is it taking shape?”

“Mr. Oakbrook. No supplies today, at least that I’m aware. The house should be finished on time, barring any further delays. You’ll have to come see it in the spring when the wildflowers are in bloom.”



“My wife will likely hold me to your invitation.” The man grinned and placed his hands on the counter. “How may I be of assistance?”

“Our traveling companions would feel a measure of ease if you would verify who I am and how we are acquainted.”

Mr. Oakbrook looked both confused and amused, but leaned toward Mrs. Anders. “You’re traveling with this shyster?”

Her eyes widened and she took a step back before Mr. Oakbrook burst out in a deep laugh.

“I’m joshing with you, ma’am. Brant Hudson, co-owner of Pacific Horizon Shipping Company, has been a frequent traveler through this station for more than three years. Our train cars have hauled more building supplies for his property in Silver Bluff than I could begin to list. His private car is being hooked to the train heading to Silver Bluff as we speak, and you’re in for a treat if you’re riding in it with him today. This man”—he placed a hand on Remington’s shoulder—“is his faithful servant and friend, Remington Monroe. If you ask any of Mr. Hudson’s staff, Monroe is the center cog that keeps all the wheels turning.”

Brant watched an expression of shock register on Rem’s face. The man was humble to a fault, but Mr. Oakbrook wasn’t one given to idle claims. Everything would fall apart without Remington.

“He speaks the truth, ma’am,” Brant said, careful not to mention her name in case someone came around asking after her. “I’d be lost without Mr. Monroe.”

“I see,” she said quietly. She gave Brant an observant look before studying Remington with the same intensity, then faced Mr. Oakbrook. “I thank you for your time, Mr. Oakbrook, and the clarification that these men are trustworthy.”

“They most certainly are. Just to set your mind at rest, Mr. Bingley is the conductor on the train. Should you have any trouble at all, you tell him I said for him to provide whatever assistance you require.”

“Thank you, sir.” Mrs. Anders looked near tears as Mr. Oakbrook nodded at her, shook Brant’s hand a second time, then strode back to his office.

“Hudson! Boarding now may take place,” a loud voice called across the station.

“That’s us,” Brant said, hunkering down and looking Bobby in the eye. The child backed into his mother’s skirts, shyly glancing at him. “Mind if I carry you, Bobby? That way you can see everything as we board.”

The boy looked up at his mother, who nodded once, then he stepped forward as he swiped the sleeve of his thin jacket across his still-damp cheeks.

Brant lifted him with the arm not holding half of Mrs. Anders’ bags and started toward the door as Remington took the rest of her bags and added them to those he already carried.

The little boy’s head swiveled back and forth as they exited the station, crossed the platform, and walked up the steps to Brant’s private train car. Brant thought Bobby’s eyes might bug right out of his head when he pushed open the door to the car and carried the child inside.

“Do you like it, Bobby? Think you can ride in here for a while?” Brant asked, wondering what the private car would look like to a little boy.

“Yes, sir!” The child nodded his head with such enthusiastic force, the little cap he wore sailed right off his head and landed on the Chinese Peking rug done in shades of blue and cream.

Brant set him down, and Bobby latched onto his hat, tugging it back on his head of dark hair. The boy's skin was several shades lighter than his mother's, but he had the same green eyes and determined chin.

"This is ..." Mrs. Anders stopped just inside the door. "It's too much, sir. Are you certain you want to endure our company?"

Brant laughed and swept off his hat, hanging it on the coat rack just inside the door. "It is you who will be forced to endure ours, Mrs. Anders. Please, come in. Make yourself comfortable."

"Thank you," she said humbly, and walked over to stand by her son. He gawked at the rich mahogany paneling, the plush sapphire blue velvet upholstery on the chairs and couch, and the writing desk in the corner.

"Might I offer you a tour, Mrs. Anders?" Remington said as he closed the door behind him, set the bags beneath the coat rack, and removed his hat, hanging it next to Brant's.

"Yes, please."

Brant removed his coat and hung it from a hook, then found the basket of food Remington had no doubt asked the cook to prepare for their lunch. She always sent twice as much as they needed, so he knew there would be plenty to share with the mysterious Mrs. Anders and her son.

While Remington showed Mrs. Anders and Bobby the sitting room, the dining area, and the bathroom, Brant carried the basket to the dining area where a large booth served as the table and seating. In a pinch, the table could be folded up, and the bench seats pulled out to make a bed.

There were also beds that could be pulled out from the overhead storage in the dining area. Brant rarely needed to use the beds in this car because it was only a half-day's journey from Portland to Silver Bluff. When he traveled to San Francisco, or other destinations farther afield, he had a larger car he used with a full-sized bed and a kitchen.

This car was his favorite, though, because Eloise had taken charge of decorating it in his preferred hue of rich blue. The brocade curtains hanging at the windows were almost a match for those he'd ordered for the library at Hudson House.

Brant went into the bathroom to wash up just as the train lurched forward. He heard Bobby giggle and stepped out of the room to see Remington holding the child around his middle, one hand braced on the back of an upholstered bench seat at the table, while Mrs. Anders was sprawled across the opposite bench, hat askew and hiding one eye.

"My apologies, ma'am. I guess we're more used to the unsteady movement of the train than most," Brant said, walking over to the table and lifting Bobby into his arms. "What do you think, young man? Are you ready for an adventure?"

"Yep! Ventures are fun!" Bobby clapped his little hands together and then gave Brant a hug that tugged at his heartstrings. "Thank you."

"You're most welcome." Brant motioned to the basket he'd set on the table. "I'm starving. Do you think you might be able to help me and Mr. Monroe eat the lunch our cook sent?"

Bobby nodded as his mother untangled her skirts and managed to stand. She unpinned her hat, swept the cap from her son's head, and gave Brant a look so full of gratitude, it made him want to squirm. He wasn't used to people looking at him like that, and the raw honesty in her expression was unsettling.

“I don’t know how I can ever repay your kindness, Mr. Hudson,” Mrs. Anders said, standing with her hands at her sides, her hat and Bobby’s still clutched in her hands.

“Don’t give it another thought, Mrs. Anders. Please, have a seat. Relax. Enjoy the trip.” Brant set Bobby on the bench seat closest to his mother.

Remington took the hats she held and carried them to the rack by the door before he washed his hands, then returned to the table.

“Would you like to wash up before we eat, Mrs. Anders?” Remington asked.

She nodded, took Bobby’s hand in hers, and led him to the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

Remington fetched plates, cutlery, and napkins from their storage place in a cabinet built into the wall opposite the table. “What happened to them?” he asked on a whisper as he set the table.

Brant shrugged. “No idea, but she looked both desperate and downtrodden. The whole time I was in line to buy the newspapers, a little voice kept whispering in my heart to speak to her. I’m rather glad I did.”

“I’m also glad you did, Brant. I believe you might fill the role of guardian angel today.”

“Me, angelic? Hardly.” Brant chuckled as Mrs. Anders and Bobby returned. He curtailed his amusement and stood while they took seats in the booth. Brant slid into the booth and waited until Remington sat beside him to bow his head and ask a blessing on their meal. He gave thanks for their unexpected guests and prayed they would be held in the Father’s hand throughout their travels.

When he said “Amen,” he looked across the table to find Mrs. Anders’ pretty green eyes swimming with tears.

Before she started to cry, he grinned at Bobby. “I hope you’re hungry, young man. Our cook always packs more food than we can eat.”

Bobby, who could barely see over the table, got up on his knees, tongue tucked into his cheek, and nodded.

Remington opened the basket and removed four hearty beef and cheese sandwiches on the rye bread Brant favored, sliced dill pickles, boiled eggs, four fresh pears, and a dozen oatmeal spice cookies.

“I’m sorry we don’t have any coffee or tea to offer you,” Brant said, glancing at Remington.

“But we do have a jar of cook’s lemonade,” Remington said, pulling a canning jar from the basket.

“Excellent,” Brant said as Remington poured the lemonade into four glasses.

Bobby dug into his food like he hadn’t eaten for days. Mrs. Anders ate with excellent manners, her posture erect, but she appeared as hungry as her son.

Brant asked Remington a few questions about a shipping account they’d planned to discuss that evening. It wasn’t until Mrs. Anders and Bobby had finished eating that he felt the woman might be willing to answer a few questions.

“Are you running toward or away from something, Mrs. Anders?” Brant asked bluntly as the woman wiped her fingers on a napkin embroidered with a flourished H, as were nearly all Brant’s linens.

“Both, I suppose. Toward a better future for Bobby,” she said, feathering her fingers through her son’s thick hair. When he glanced up at her, the smile she bestowed on her son held such love, it was impossible not to notice. Brant wondered what it would be like to know that kind of deep, unbridled affection from a mother, or anyone. “Away from unexpected and unacceptable circumstances.”

Brant glanced at Remington, surmising the woman would be more forthcoming with information without her son present. “Rem, do you think Bobby might like watching out the window? I wouldn’t want him to miss a chance to see that waterfall we chug right past.”

“What’s a wallerfall?” Bobby asked as he climbed onto his mother’s lap, sweetly kissed her cheek, then jumped out of the booth as Remington stood and held out a hand to him.

“Well, you see, it’s when water ...” Remington explained the intricacies of waterfalls as he led Bobby into the sitting room.

When they were occupied watching out the window, Brant poured the last of the lemonade into Mrs. Anders’ glass, and held out the packet of cookies to her. She’d eaten only one cookie as they’d finished their meal, but he had an idea she was likely still hungry.

She took a cookie, set it on her plate, and broke off a small piece. “Your cook is good. Thank you for providing lunch and such luxurious accommodations.”

“You are welcome, Mrs. Anders. I’m glad you enjoyed the meal.” Brant leaned back and tried not to toy with his cutlery or the napkin still draped across his lap. “You don’t owe me any explanation, but if you tell me what sent you to the train station, desperate to leave town, I may be able to help.”

“I don’t want to bring any trouble to your door, Mr. Hudson. Not when you’ve been so kind.”

“Whatever you say will stay between us. I won’t even tell Mr. Monroe, if you prefer.”

She took a long sip of lemonade, appearing to consider what to say and how much to share.

Brant thought about assuring her he was capable of keeping secrets and minding his own business, but something about the woman made him conclude she needed a friend, one who would listen.

“My husband was a logger, and a good man,” she finally said. “A chain broke, and a load of logs fell on him. The logging company did nothing for us, other than bury him. That was two years ago. Bobby was only two, and it felt like the world was falling in around me. I tried taking in laundry and selling baked goods at the logging camp, but it wasn’t enough, so I sold what I could and moved to Portland where I was hired as a cook’s assistant in one of the newer homes near Mount Tabor. The cook was kind and patient, and I was allowed to bring Bobby with me. Everything was fine until the lady of the house invited her brother to live with them two months ago. He, um ... well, he ...”

Her cheeks turned red, and Brant could just imagine what the brother had done—or attempted to do—to the winsome widow.

“He behaved inappropriately toward you,” Brant said not as a question, but a statement.

Mrs. Anders nodded. “Yes. It started with a comment here or there in passing, but then he started following me if I left the kitchen. Twice he pawed at me like a rabid



beast, but before any harm was done, I managed to get away. Two days ago, he threatened to kill Bobby if I didn't do as he said, so I packed what I could and ran away. I figured the faster I left Portland, the better."

"Indeed. If you are ever inclined to share his name, I will make certain he doesn't bother you or anyone else again."

Mrs. Anders nodded, somewhat warily. "Thank you. For now, it is enough to be away from him. In my haste to leave, though, I couldn't collect my last month's wages, so I was short on funds to purchase two train tickets. I stood at the depot, uncertain what to do beyond praying for guidance, and then you appeared, asking if you could help. I don't know how to thank you."

"I'm grateful I was there at the precise moment you needed my assistance, Mrs. Anders. However, I'm going to make a request of you for entirely selfish reasons."

She stiffened, and hesitation filled her expressive green eyes.

"Nothing like that, Mrs. Anders. What I'm wondering is if you'll consider cooking for me? We have yet to hire a cook for my house in Silver Bluff. The house isn't quite finished, but I believe you and Bobby could be comfortable there. If you're interested, you could ride out with us to see the house, and once we have the kitchen set up, perhaps you'd consider cooking an audition meal, of sorts. If either one of us felt the arrangement wouldn't work out, we wouldn't be under any obligation. If I like the meal you prepare, and you like the house and think you could tolerate working for me and with Mr. Monroe, I'd provide a room for you and Bobby, as well as a competitive wage. You'd have Sundays and Tuesdays off each week."

Mrs. Anders went from looking at him like he was in league with shysters to one of relief. "Truly? You'd consider hiring me?"

“I most certainly would, at least after I taste some of your cooking. Want to give it a try?”

“I do, Mr. Hudson, and I thank you for that generous offer. I promise I’m a good cook. I might not be much else, but I can cook, and after my last position, I know how to make food that would do any hostess of a dinner party proud. If you prefer simpler fare, my granny taught me how to make the most tender, fluffiest biscuits you’ve ever tasted.”

“With butter and jam?” Brant asked, already looking forward to eating one hot from the oven.

“Is there any other way to eat a hot biscuit?” she asked with a smile.

“Only if there’s a slab of smoky ham tucked into it.” Brant eyed the woman and felt a sense of rightness in offering her a job. He couldn’t help but think divine guidance had led them together today. He offered a brief prayer that he might be a blessing to Dulcie Anders and her son in the years to come.

The woman sobered and leaned forward slightly, lowering her voice so it was barely more than a whisper. “Since you so kindly offered an opportunity to work for you, I’m compelled to be completely honest with you, sir.”

“About?” Brant asked, wondering what it was she was hiding, or thought was a secret she needed to share.

“My background.”

“Go on.” Brant waited for her to speak as she took another sip of lemonade, followed by a deep breath as though she needed to fill her lungs before she launched into a rather unexpected story.

“My granny, the one who taught me so much about cooking, was a slave from Mississippi. Her father was the plantation owner, and her mother worked in the kitchen. When Granny was fourteen, her half-brother—her father’s oldest heir—beat her within an inch of her life and left her in the woods to die. My grandfather was a peddler with hair so blond it reflected like the sun, and eyes so green they held waves of the Irish Sea in their depths, or so Granny used to say. He found Granny in the woods, loaded her in his wagon among his trade goods, and nursed her back to health as he traveled west. As soon as she was well, they wed and made their way to Oregon. He opened a mercantile, and they ran it together until he died when I was three. Then Granny moved in with my parents and helped raise me. I felt you should know, Mr. Hudson, that I’m not all white.”

“I figured as much, Mrs. Anders, and it makes no difference to me if you’re purple or green with pink polka dots as long as you can make biscuits as good as you say.” Brant grinned at her. “And maybe some berry jam. We have a blackberry thicket not far from the house, my gardener has strawberry plants started in the greenhouse, and there are orchards that yield apples, pears, cherries, and peaches. The gardener planted two dozen nut trees last year, mostly hazelnuts. We also have a dairy on our property, a herd of beef cattle, and we raise some of the finest hogs in the region. I plan to add sheep next year because I do enjoy a nice leg of lamb with mint sauce. You’ll have all the milk, meat, fruit, and eggs you could possibly need for cooking, fresh from the source. The landscape architect designed a fenced kitchen garden to keep the wildlife out. You may certainly put in requests for the spring plantings if there are particular vegetables you’d prefer.”

“I appreciate that, sir. I’ve never been in charge of my own kitchen, but the cook at my previous position taught me everything she knew. She was hoping to retire next summer and leave me in charge, but she knew what was happening with the missus’s brother.”

“Don’t give any of that another thought, Mrs. Anders. You’re free from worry. As

long as you are working for me, you'll be under my care and protection."

"Thank you, sir. I'm so grateful. I hope you don't mind Bobby being with me. He's a good boy, and minds well, but he is four, and inquisitive, and I've seen gnats with longer attention spans than that child has some days."

Brant laughed. "He'll have room to run at Hudson House. I will warn you, though, the Columbia River is below the house. I've erected a walled fence about twenty feet back from the banks of the river, but I want you to be aware it is nearby."

"Thank you. There was a river near the house where we've been. I worried Bobby would fall in, but I didn't often let him out of my sight. I'll be watchful of him."

Brant nodded. "Do you prefer I call you Mrs. Anders, Cook, or Dulcie?"

"I feel like I've made a friend today, Mr. Hudson, so if you would like to call me Dulcie, I'm agreeable to that."

"Very well. Dulcie it is. I'd offer to allow you to call me Brant, but I have a feeling you won't."

"You're correct in that assumption. As my employer, I'll continue to refer to you as Mr. Hudson, but it will be with much gratitude. Sincerely, I am in your debt, sir."

"Nonsense." Brant rose and held out an arm to escort her into the sitting area. "Now, tell me more about these biscuits. What do you think about pie? I am quite partial to a decadent chocolate pie, or spicy apple, or juicy blueberry, or—"

"Pie, Mrs. Anders. He is quite partial to two kinds of pie: hot or cold," Remington said with a cheeky grin, making them all laugh.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:42 pm*

“O h, my!” Dulcie said as the carriage Brant had rented rounded a bend and the vista of Hudson House became visible in the distance.

He’d traveled the road so many times the past three years, he’d grown accustomed to the scenery, the unexpected views, and glorious trees and plantings that could make a trip on the road feel like traveling through a magical woodland.

However, at the look of wonder on Dulcie’s face, Brant leaned forward and tapped the driver on the shoulder.

“Stop for a moment, please,” he requested.

The driver nodded and brought the carriage to a stop in the middle of the road.

When Hunter Lawson had discussed his plans to build the road through existing trees, following the natural curve of the hills, Brant had told him it sounded fine, had provided the funds needed for the work, and hadn’t given it another thought.

Now, though, with the trees beginning to take on the ornamental hues of autumn, and the sunlight gliding through the leaves, Brant sat back, trying to envision what it must look like to Dulcie and her son.

Bobby, who sat between him and Dulcie in the back seat of the conveyance, stood up, leaned over his mother to get a better view, then turned to Brant with a wide grin. “Is that a fairy castle?”

Brant smiled, picked up the lad, and settled him on his knee. “Not quite, but I hope

you'll like it."

"I will!" Bobby proclaimed, craning his neck to see more of the Hudson House estate.

"The house you mentioned is that one?" Dulcie asked, pointing to the grand dame, as Brant so often thought of the house when he wasn't exasperated and referring to it as a money-sucking albatross.

"It is."

"Even from here, it is a sight to behold, sir. And this road is like traveling through an enchanted forest, if one ever existed. At every turn, there is something more beautiful and intriguing to see. What a clever and inspiring way to welcome guests. Was that your intention, or was it a natural bit of fortune?"

Brant motioned for the driver to continue. The man snapped the lines, and Brant leaned back in the seat with Bobby still perched on his lap.

"My landscape architect, Hunter Lawson, is the brilliant mind behind all this earthly beauty. Actually, I should rephrase that to say he and the Master Creator designed the landscape. Hunter used what was already here and found ways to enhance it. The Hudson House property line began where we turned off the main road about twenty minutes ago. Since the drive from there to the house is a rather lengthy one, we wanted visitors to be intrigued and awed as they neared my home."

"Really? How many acres are included in the property?" Dulcie questioned.

Remington glanced back at Brant from his seat next to the driver and raised an eyebrow, as though daring him to admit how many acres he'd purchased since their initial investment of the bluff overlooking the river where the house had been constructed.

“As of last month, Hudson House encompasses seventy-one thousand acres.”

Dulcie’s mouth dropped open in shock.

Brant grinned. “Insanity on my part, most likely, but I wanted to diversify the property. Some of the ground is in timber, some in rangeland for our beef. As I mentioned earlier, we have orchards, a dairy, and raise hogs. We also grow all the feed for our animals, and will have our first wheat harvest next year.”

“And you oversee all of it?” Dulcie asked, her eyes fixed on the house in the distance.

“Heavens, no! I have all I can handle right now with the shipping business and my house. I’ve hired whom I feel to be the best of the best for each industry. I have a manager for the dairy, another for the beef, and one who is in charge of our happy hogs.” Brant teasingly poked Bobby’s side, making him giggle. “There is a manager in charge of the crops, and a gardener with a crew working with the landscape architect. If they have questions, they bring them to Remington, who either handles them or seeks my input.”

“But isn’t Mr. Monroe your butler?” Dulcie asked, looking from Brant to Remington.

“He is my butler, my friend, my estate manager, and all-around grand fellow. Without him, none of this would be possible,” Brant said, aware of the red stain tipping Remington’s ears. Any form of praise generally left him embarrassed, but every word Brant had said was true.

“And Mr. Monroe will also be in charge of the house. Correct?” Dulcie questioned as the house disappeared from view behind a craggy wall of rock where intrepid sagebrush and native grasses grew from the surface.

“That’s correct. I plan to hire a housekeeper to be in charge of the household staff,

but she would answer to Mr. Monroe. For now, he's stuck handling everything."

"Stuck is right," Remington said, grinning over his shoulder at them, then looking to Dulcie. "And please, call me Monroe. No need for adding the mister, Mrs. Anders."

"Then you best call me Dulcie."

"I will." Remington pointed ahead. "Be sure you watch because the sight when we come around the next bend is one you don't want to miss."

Brant shifted Bobby so he'd have a better view, then they all looked forward as the carriage rounded the last turn and the house stood like a stalwart sentinel on the bluff, with the sandstone blocks of the exterior and copper-topped turrets reaching upward into the brilliant blue sky.

"It's glorious!" Dulcie proclaimed, her hands clasped beneath her chin. "I've never seen anything quite so grand in my life."

"Thank you. We're pretty fond of the place." Brant smiled at her, then pointed out the stables, the conservatory, and various buildings as the carriage rolled onto the cobblestone-paved drive and stopped in front of the house.

"Is this our new house, Mama?" Bobby asked as Brant set the boy on his feet and climbed out of the carriage.

"It might be, baby," Dulcie answered, her eyes wide as she seemed to take in everything at once.

"But first, young man, would you like a tour?" Brant asked, lifting the child out of the carriage, then holding out a hand to Dulcie. She took it with a grateful nod, stepped down, and then captured her son's hand in hers.



Thirty minutes later, Brant and Remington stood in the kitchen doorway watching Dulcie run her fingers over the stove and the cabinets that had been installed. She turned on the hot and cold water in the huge sink, then gazed out the bank of windows that filled the space with light.

She spun around and nodded at them. "I would very much love to be your cook, Mr. Hudson, but before you can agree, I need to prepare a meal. Is the stove working?"

"It does work. So does the water, as you saw. The coolers are functioning as well." Brant motioned for her to follow him down the back stairs. He pushed open a door near the stairs and stepped back, pleased to see the floor had been finished in his absence. "We need to bring in furniture, but would this room suffice for you and Bobby?"

Dulcie stepped into the room where a semicircle window let light into the basement room. The walls were painted soft white and brightened the space. It was the biggest bedroom in the basement. Brant had originally planned to give it to the head housekeeper, but at the moment, keeping a cook happy seemed more important.

"You'll have a private bath." Brant opened a door where floor-to-ceiling gleaming white tiles covered the walls. A toilet, clawfoot tub, and pedestal sink filled the space. "There's also a closet." He walked across the room and opened another door. "It might even work as a bedroom for Bobby for the time being since it is rather spacious." He'd designed the oversized closet, thinking there might be things a head housekeeper would choose to store there.

Dulcie glanced into the bathroom, then walked into the closet that could easily hold a child's furnishings with room to spare. She moved back into the bedroom and faced Brant, her expression one of humble thanksgiving. "This is more than I could have hoped for, Mr. Hudson. I don't know how to thank you."

“How about some of the biscuits you mentioned earlier?” Brant asked in a teasing tone.

Remington shook his head in mock disgust, while Dulcie laughed. She swept Bobby into her arms and kissed his rosy cheeks.

“Welcome to Hudson House, Dulcie. Welcome,” Brant said, then led the way out to the carriage.

“Are you sure we can’t stay here? Bobby and I could sleep on the floor.” Dulcie looked with longing at the house as Remington helped her into the carriage.

“We’ll purchase furnishings for your bedroom first thing in the morning. Other than a few odds and ends in the kitchen, you’ll need to purchase pots, pans, knives, bowls, and whatever else is needed to create your culinary masterpieces,” Brant said as he climbed in beside her.

Dulcie settled Bobby between them and opened the reticule she carried, searching through the contents.

“Is there something you need, Dulcie?” Brant asked as the carriage rolled along the cobblestones of the drive, heading back toward town.

“I thought I had a pencil and paper tucked in here. I was going to start a list.”

“You’ll have time enough to work on it after a proper supper at the hotel. I’ll pay for you and the young one to have a room there for as long as needed. Tomorrow you and Remington can shop for necessary supplies. If supplies are obtained in a timely fashion, the day after that, I’ll expect to sample a lunch you prepare. How does that sound?” Brant would have waited a week or two to have her cook a meal, but he had a feeling the sooner Dulcie could prove she was capable of running his kitchen, the

happier she would be.

“Perfect. What are your favorite foods?” Dulcie asked, and Brant discussed his likes and dislikes, expectations for meals and mealtimes, and the number of staff he thought would be needed to assist her in the kitchen on an average day, and a day when the house was full of guests.

Remington reminded him of the crates of dishes in the rooms used for storage in the basement waiting to be unpacked.

“Perhaps the Drake sisters could be enlisted to help unpack the dishes and clean the pantry,” Remington suggested as they neared Silver Bluff.

A vision of Holland, her smile radiating warmth, speared into Brant’s heart. “That’s a sound idea, Rem. Perhaps you could ask Denver to get a message to them.”

The following morning, after perusing the list Dulcie had made, Brant instructed Remington to add whatever he thought necessary to it and to make sure a comfortable bedroom set was purchased for the woman along with a smaller set for her son.

Feeling stifled and in need of fresh air, Brant retrieved his horse from the livery stable and decided a brisk ride out to Hudson House was exactly what he needed. Rather than take the road directly to the house, he chose to survey the acres that would yield wheat next year, then rode through one of the orchards.

He thought he heard a woman’s laughter and stopped, listening to see if his mind played tricks on him. A soft murmuring assured him he wasn’t imagining things, and he urged his horse toward the sound. He rode through a gate and discovered Holland Drake standing on the back of her Appaloosa horse, reaching up into a tree to pick pears. A ladder propped against a nearby tree made him question why the woman didn’t use it. Perhaps it was too heavy for her to move.

He almost shouted at her to get down before she broke her neck, but refrained. He feared if the horse spooked, Holland would be gravely injured.

As quietly as possible, he swung off Gentry and left him ground-tied a dozen yards away, then made his way to her horse. She appeared to be a gentle, well-trained mare as she stood perfectly still, munching on an apple.

He let the horse draw in his scent before he placed a hand on her neck, latching on to the bridle lest she decide to make a sudden move.

“Just a few more, Meadow, then we’ll be finished with this tree,” Holland said as she stretched up, standing on the tips of her toes to reach the last of the pears near the top of the tree with one hand, while the other held the corners of her apron like a makeshift basket. From the way it dipped in the center, he was sure it was full of just-picked pears.

Brant looked around and saw a wagon nearby full of bushel baskets. Half of them were full of pears, the other half waiting to be filled.

“Got it!” Holland said in triumph, settling another pear in her apron basket. One moment she was standing on the horse. In the next, she’d turned and dropped astride the equine with such ease and grace, it was almost like watching a dancer perform.

When she noticed him standing beside Meadow, she gasped in surprise. “Oh, hello. I didn’t see you.”

“My apologies. I thought I heard voices through the trees and rode over to investigate. Harvesting pears?” Brant asked, wondering if she’d recognize him. The day she’d come to the library with Denver’s lunch, Brant had been dressed in work clothes, his hair uncombed, and a growth of dark scruff on his face from putting off shaving for a few days. He accumulated a heavy shadow of beard by late afternoon

every day. If he were required to attend a formal dinner, he sometimes had to shave twice a day just to look presentable.

But that day he'd not shaved, not been at all groomed, never expecting to see a female in the house, let alone one who captured his attention like Holland Drake had somehow managed to do.

Today he was shaved, groomed, and attired in a tailored suit. He'd paid an early visit at the bank to retrieve funds for Remington and Dulcie to go shopping for the kitchen and her bedroom. He'd met with the attorney he'd hired in town and discussed a few contracts, then had eaten breakfast with Remington, Dulcie, and Bobby before meeting with a man about four teams of horses he wished to purchase. By the time he'd paid for the teams and arranged for their delivery to the stables, he felt in need of a ride.

He hadn't bothered to change out of his suit. His focus had been merely on escaping his duties long enough to feel the autumn air on his cheeks and the sun on his face.

However, as Holland gazed at him as though he were a complete stranger, he rather wished she would see him as Alex, a coworker of her brother with whom she'd seemed interested.

"Are you alone?" Brant asked, sure he'd heard more than one voice earlier, along with laughter.

"At the moment. My sisters were helping me, but the youngest got a sliver in her hand, so Savannah took her to the house to dig it out. They'll be back soon. At least I hope they will. We still have several trees to finish, and we don't have much time."

"Is there a storm predicted?" Brant asked, wondering if the weather lent the sense of urgency to her work.

“No,” Holland said, agilely sliding off the horse and walking over to the wagon, carefully emptying her apron full of pears into a basket. “Savannah and I are starting work at Hudson House next week and we have a long list of chores we’re trying to finish before then.”

“Hudson House?” Brant internally debated continuing the charade or telling Holland the truth of his identity. Denver’s warning about the fury of a scalded bobcat pricked his conscience. Was it better to evoke it now or have to face it later when others might witness the spectacle?

“Are you familiar with the place? It’s not all that far from here, at least if you cut through the orchard. The house is spectacular. I can hardly wait to see the grounds next year, when the wildflowers are blooming and the gardens are all planted. It’s going to be glorious!”

Unable to hide his smile, Brant nodded in agreement. “It will be glorious, and I am quite familiar with Hudson House,” he said as he patted the horse. When he stepped around the mare, he found Holland staring at him, hands propped on her slender hips.

“Do I know you, sir? You seem familiar, although I can’t place the reason why.”

“From Hudson House. You brought lunch to your brother last week and graciously shared it with two hungry men who worked with him in the library.” Brant removed his hat and bowed as though he faced the queen, although when he’d met her majesty two years ago, he hadn’t felt the nerves jittering through his system that he currently experienced.

“You weren’t there that day. It was Denver, Mr. Monroe, and Alex ...” Her voice trailed off, and she frowned. “Alex?”

“Brant Alexander Hudson at your service, Miss Drake.” He straightened, set the hat

on his head at a jaunty angle, and hoped she wouldn't see the way his fingers shook when he stuffed them into his pockets.

"You're Mr. Hudson? The Mr. Hudson?" Holland's entire face turned red, no doubt recalling the unflattering description of him she'd shared at lunch. He hoped she found him slightly more appealing than a balding, paunchy man with bad teeth.

He feigned a carefree grin. "None other."

"I ... you never said ... why ... but Denver ..." She pressed her lips together, and her expression rapidly changed from confused to furious. "How dare you pretend to be a worker! What sort of game are you playing, sir? What do you hope to gain? Or is it just for your own perverse entertainment, pulling the wool over the eyes of the country girls too stupid to realize you're a ... a ... cad!"

Brant held his hands in front of him in a mollifying gesture, but it only seemed to stoke her ire.

Holland stamped both feet and clutched her fists at her sides. "What are you about, sir? What could you possibly hope to gain by tricking me?"

"I didn't intend to—" Brant spluttered as an overripe pear splattered against his chest and chunks of it flew into his face.

"Holland, please. Let me explain!" He ducked just in time to avoid a pear to his jaw. "Holland! Enough!"

She launched another pear, catching him on the shoulder as he rushed toward her. He managed to wrap his arms around her, preventing further assault with her hands pressed to her sides. He hoped if he held her a moment or two, she'd calm down. Instead, she struggled against him like a wild thing. He let go when she delivered a

backward blow to his shin that made him wince.

“Stay away. Don’t touch me!” she said, jumping into the wagon and out of reach. She armed herself with two pears she grabbed out of the nearest basket and pulled back her arm, prepared to lob one at him.

“Please, stop. Listen. Just for a moment.” Brant held his hands up in surrender. “Then, if you feel inclined to continue abusing me with your pears, so be it.” Part of him felt as though he were truly surrendering to this woman. He’d been fascinated with her from the moment they’d met, entranced by her smile and laughter while admiring her pretty face and attractive figure. He’d sensed a kindness in her that day. A generous spirit given to joy. An intelligence and wit she didn’t try to hide.

Yet, seeing this side of her—full of ferocity and spunk, eyes firing sparks of indignation—only increased his desire to know her better, to know everything about her.

Holland lowered her arm, cocked a hip, and offered him a petulant glare. “Say whatever it is you feel compelled to share. I won’t throw another pear until you finish.”

Brant would have preferred she not throw any at all, but he wasn’t in a position to bargain with her.

“The day you came to the house, I was working in the library with Rem and Denver to help speed things along. I might have money, but I am capable of doing work, a fact your brother can confirm. When you walked into the library, it was like someone opened a door and filled the room with sunshine. You are a breath of fresh air, Holland, and I knew if you realized I was Mr. Hudson, you wouldn’t relax and enjoy yourself. I wanted you to feel at ease, which is why I introduced myself as Alex. It was wrong, and misleading, but the reasons behind my ... duplicity were not



nefarious. I simply wanted to savor an hour spent in the presence of a sweet girl who had no idea I was the owner of the house. I apologize for any discomfort my deception has caused you.”

Holland moved to the end of the wagon, tossed him one of the pears she held, and took a seat on the tailgate. “How am I supposed to work for a man I can’t trust, even if you decide not to fire me for assailing you with rotten fruit?”

Brant had to work to keep from grinning at her. Instead, he bit into the pear, swiping the back of his hand across his chin to catch the juice. He took another bite, then looked at Holland. Beams of sunlight streaming through the trees surrounded her, making her appear more like a dream, or a fairy tale, than the irate woman who’d flung pears at him only moments before.

“I have no intention of firing you, Holland. Not over this. It’s my own fault. Denver warned me you have a temper. I see he spoke truthfully on the matter.”

Holland’s cheeks turned pink and she ducked her head as she took a bite from her pear.

Brant finished his pear, tossed the core into the grass that grew thick in the orchard, and removed a pristine white handkerchief from his pocket. He wiped his sticky fingers and face, brushed away remnants of pear from his clothes, and stepped closer to Holland, holding the handkerchief out to her.

She tossed the core she held, accepted the handkerchief, and wiped her hands on it.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Hudson. I do have a temper. Despite what you just endured, I assure you it won’t erupt while I’m working.”

“That’s good to know, Holland. Would you be willing to start over? Give me a

second chance? Perhaps we could pretend we haven't yet met and begin anew. I'll forget you tried to bludgeon me to death with pears, and you can forget I pretended to be Alex, a carpenter. What do you say?"

Holland seemed to consider his request for several moments, then she slid off the back of the wagon, held out her hand, and smiled at him.

"Mr. Hudson, it's nice to meet you. I'm Holland Drake. Mr. Monroe hired me and my sister to work for you as housemaids. We are so pleased with the opportunity and look forward to keeping your incredible house spotless."

Brant smiled and took her hand between both of his, feeling something warm flow through his veins as he looked into her eyes that no longer appeared to be flaming with anger but glowed with mirth and compassion. "It is my distinct pleasure to meet you, Miss Drake. May I call you Holland? It's a lovely name."

"Of course, sir. My parents named all of us after places, like Denver, and Savannah."

"And there are six of you?"

"Correct. Charli, the youngest, is five."

Brant's smile widened. "I just hired a cook yesterday. She has a son, Bobby, who is four. Might Charli and Bobby enjoy an opportunity to play together?"

Holland nodded. "I'm sure they would, and we can make arrangements. Will your cook attend church on Sunday? If so, perhaps she'd like to join us for lunch and stay the afternoon. Denver could escort her back to the house, if that's where she's staying."

"She will be, as soon as we can get a room set up for her and Bobby. Mrs. Anders is a

widow, and quite eager to begin setting the kitchen to rights. We realized yesterday we have any number of crates filled with beautiful china, crystal, and fine serving pieces, but nothing, really, in which to cook the food or prepare it. Other than a dented tea kettle and a few plain pieces Rem has picked up in town, we're a mess."

Holland laughed, as he hoped she would. "I'm sure Mrs. Anders will get you straightened out shortly. Is she at the house today?"

"No. I left her and Remington in town to buy food supplies and furniture for her room. If they can't find what they need there, I'll place an order with one of my suppliers in Portland."

Holland nodded and started to hand him back his handkerchief.

He wrapped her fingers around it. "You keep it."

She studied him a moment, then tucked it into the pocket of her apron. "I apologize, Mr. Hudson, for getting so mad at you. I don't like to be lied to, and it felt like you were up to trickery by pretending to be someone you weren't."

"Remember, new beginnings, Holland. And when it's just the two of us, I do hope you'll call me Brant. Or even Alex."

"I'm not sure that would be proper, sir." Holland took a step back and bumped into the wagon, as though she'd momentarily forgotten it was there. "It is nice to meet you, though. I'm quite pleased to discover you aren't paunchy, and your teeth aren't tragically yellow."

Brant felt a self-conscious need to race to a mirror and check his teeth. Then he caught Holland's teasing grin and shook his head. "You are something else altogether, Holland Drake."

She shrugged and walked over to the ladder.

“If His Highness isn’t above such menial tasks, would you help me move this ladder?”

Brant hefted the heavy wooden ladder, realizing why Holland hadn’t moved it on her own. It was indeed a cumbersome thing. “Where would you like it?”

“Right over here,” she said, patting her hand on the base of a tree a few feet in front of him. When he set it in place, she picked up one of the empty baskets and started up the ladder, stopping when she was three rungs up.

She glanced down at him with a smile that warmed him clear to his heart. “If my friend, Alex, would like to come for supper tonight, he’d be welcome. We eat at half past five.” Holland pointed through the trees. “Our house is on the other side of that hill. If you’re coming from town, we’re the third place past the tree with the double trunk. Mama made the boys paint the house white with blue trim back in the spring. You can’t miss it.”

“Thank you for the invitation. Your friend Alex gladly accepts. Is there anything he could bring?”

“Just an appetite.” Holland grinned at him before she scurried up the ladder.

Rather than stare at her, Brant walked over to where he’d left Gentry, swung into the saddle, and rode to his house, mulling over what had just taken place with Holland. If any of his staff had dared speak to him that way, let alone bombard him with pears, he would have fired them on the spot.

But Holland’s reaction only increased the fascination he’d already felt for her. He had no idea what it was about the woman that intrigued him so, but something about her

drew him as no other female ever had.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:42 pm*

Brant spent the day doing the last of the finishing trim work in what he'd decided would be Dulcie's room, thinking about Holland, life in Silver Bluff, and his future.

At four, he gathered his pear-smeared suit, rode into Silver Bluff, and returned to the hotel where he bathed, shaved, and stood in nothing more than his cotton drawers trying to decide what to wear when a knock resounded from the adjoining door between his room and Remington's.

"Come in," he called, and Remington stepped into the room, looking both tired and pleased with his day's adventures.

"How did things go with Dulcie?" Brant asked as Remington lifted an eyebrow at Brant's state of undress.

"Fine. We were able to purchase everything on her list, and several things that weren't. What are you doing?" Remington asked with a smirk. "Thinking of posing for a statue? It might get a bit drafty in the winter months."

Brant glanced down at his bare chest and shook his head. "Hardly. I have an invitation to dine with the Drake family at five-thirty. Well, Alex has an invitation to dine with them. Holland made it quite clear Mr. Hudson was not included in the invitation." He sighed. "Denver was not exaggerating about her temper."

"Do tell," Remington said, stepping over to Brant's wardrobe and looking through the clothes hanging there.

"I went for a ride and happened upon her picking pears. You should have seen her,

Rem, standing on the back of her horse to reach up into the tree. For a moment, I was terrified the horse would move and she'd break her neck. Anyway, she recognized me, or at least thought I looked familiar. Rather than draw out the deception, I admitted to being Mr. Hudson. You won't believe her reaction."

Remington looked from one side of Brant's face to the other. "I don't see any lingering handprints, so she must not have slapped you, even though you probably deserved it."

"Probably," Brant said dryly. "She threw rotten pears at me. No one has ever done anything like that in my life, Rem, other than the time we were five and rolled around in that basket of tomatoes because we were pretending to be wounded soldiers valiantly fighting off the foe."

"That was during your buccaneer phase, I do believe," Remington said, handing him a blue-striped shirt with a band collar from the wardrobe. "She really threw pears at you?"

"Yes. Would have caught me square in the face if I hadn't ducked, but they splattered all over my clothes. Once she calmed down and listened to my explanation, she agreed to my idea to pretend we'd just met and begin our friendship anew. Then she invited me, or Alex, rather, to come for supper."

"Well, then you best not be late. Are you thinking of taking a gift for the family?"

"I thought about it. What would you suggest?"

"A box of candy they all could share, or a game they could all play together."

"I like the idea of candy. Can you acquire a box before I need to leave?" Brant asked, slipping his arms in the sleeves of the shirt while Remington took a pair of navy

trousers and a matching vest and sack coat from the wardrobe. The clothes weren't costly, but they were tailored to fit Brant's broad shoulders and thighs which were thickened with muscles from both working hard and riding Gentry.

"I'll see about the candy while you finish dressing. What did Holland say, exactly, when she invited you?" Remington asked as he stopped in the doorway to his room.

"She said if her friend Alex would like to come for supper, he'd be welcome."

Remington nodded. "Don't wear a tie, leave your hair a bit mussed, and wear boots instead of the shoes. I'll return shortly."

In the time it took Brant to pull on his trousers and socks, tuck in his shirt, tug on his boots, finger comb his hair, and stuff a few things in his pockets, Remington returned with a large box of chocolates from the nearby mercantile.

"Thanks for that, Rem," Brant said as he slipped on the vest and fastened the buttons along the front of it. "How did things go with Dulcie?"

Remington grinned. "Very well, Brant. She is a force to be reckoned with when she has her mind set on something. She seemed fearful of spending too much money on supplying the kitchen, but once I got her to understand we prefer good quality, she chose cookware and knives, and all manner of things that will last for years. She also purchased food supplies, necessary things, really, to begin cooking. I figure even if you decide not to keep her as the cook, she's done a huge service in selecting the basic kitchen supplies. She should be compensated for her efforts."

"We'll pay Dulcie. Don't doubt that for a minute. Besides, I'm confident she'll work out just fine. Even if she's a terrible cook—which I can't imagine—I can't turn her and Bobby out on the streets. The poor woman has been through enough losing her husband and being forced to quit her job."



“Dulcie told me about that today while Bobby was napping. It’s a terrible business when a fine woman like her isn’t safe in her own employer’s home.”

“Agreed. I would shoot anyone who made a female member of my staff feel threatened.” Brant shrugged into his sack coat and turned to face Remington. “Well, what do you think?”

Remington reached over and mussed Brant’s hair, then handed him a cowboy hat he preferred to wear. “It looks like Alex is off to dinner at the Drake home. Did you ask Holland if she and her sister would like to come to work sooner than Tuesday?”

“I was going to, but the reason she was out picking pears is due to the girls trying to get a bunch of work taken care of before they start at Hudson House. I didn’t want to make her feel as though she had to choose between helping her family or keeping her job. I have a feeling Dulcie will want to set up everything in the kitchen herself, and there is no rush since it’s just the two of us who will be in the house for a while anyway.” Brant picked up the books he’d brought for Holland from his Portland residence, as well as the box of candy.

“Agreed.” Remington stepped into the hall with him and walked as far as the stairs. “Have a nice time, Brant. I’ll be ready to head out to the house in the morning and get to work. Dulcie will likely be sitting in a wagon loaded with supplies, ready to go at the crack of dawn.”

“Then we best be up early and ready to go.” Brant settled a hand on Remington’s shoulder. “Thanks for all you do, my friend.”

“My pleasure, Alex ,” Remington said in an exaggerated tone. “Have fun.”

Brant hurried outside to where he’d left Gentry at one of the hitching rails, tucked the candy and books into his saddlebags, then mounted the horse and rode out of town.

He had a vague idea of where to find the Drake home. Following Holland's directions about the tree with the double trunk, he arrived at a white house painted with light-blue trim right on time.

He left the horse tied to a rail outside the fenced yard, walked through the open gate beneath an arbor of climbing roses with the books and box of candy in hand, and made his way to the front door of the two-story farmhouse. Inside, the hum of voices and laughter could be heard before Brant raised his hand and knocked on the door.

Silence followed, then the sound of footsteps approaching the door. When the portal swung open, Brant found himself looking into the face of Denver, only this version was a good twenty-five years older.

"Greetings. I'm Brant Hudson." Brant held out his hand, pleased the man with a broad smile shook it firmly. "Your daughter kindly invited me to join you for supper. I hope it isn't an imposition."

"Not a bit. I'm Jack Drake. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Hudson. Come right in." The man stepped back and welcomed him into the cozy, inviting home that radiated family and love.

In that moment, Brant realized that feeling was what he wanted for Hudson House, what he'd been seeking when he'd decided to build a home. He longed for it to be a place that felt welcoming. A place full of love and joy. A place he, and those he loved, would feel at home.

A little voice whispered in his thoughts that the secret to a joyful home wasn't in an elaborate building constructed with every modern convenience. It would start in the heart, with Holland.

Uncertain what to make of that thought when he'd barely met the woman, he set it

aside and focused on trying to make a good impression on her family.

“The girls just about have supper on the table. Holland baked a pear cobbler for dessert, and Savannah whipped up a bowl of sweetened cream. You are in for a treat,” Mr. Drake said, looking Brant over from head to foot. “You can leave your coat and hat here on the hall tree.”

Brant set the books and candy on the upholstered bench seat of the walnut piece, hung his hat on a hook, his coat on another, and avoided giving in to the temptation to smooth his hair in the beveled mirror before he picked up the box of chocolates and held it out to Mr. Drake. “I thought your family might enjoy these, sir.”

“Well, that’s mighty kind of you, Mr. Hudson. Thank you.” He looked at the books, then at Brant. “Might as well leave the books here until later, or my children will have their noses buried between the pages and forget about supper.”

Brant smiled and followed as Holland’s father walked down the hall and into a dining room. A cabinet built into the wall held various dishes. None of the pieces looked expensive, but Brant had a feeling they were priceless to Mrs. Drake.

A door swung open, and six expectant faces entered the room, each person from oldest to youngest carrying a bowl or platter to the table.

“Mr. Hudson, I’d like you to meet my wife, Sarah,” Mr. Drake said, motioning to an attractive woman with plump rosy cheeks, hair several shades lighter than Holland’s, and a smile Brant realized she shared with her daughter.

“Thank you for allowing me to intrude on your meal this evening, Mrs. Drake. I’m grateful.”

“It’s an honor to have you join us, sir,” Mrs. Drake said, dipping her head in a polite

gesture.

Mr. Drake set the box of candy on the buffet behind him, then stepped over between Holland and a young woman who looked a good deal like her, only fairer of hair and bearing stormy gray eyes rather than brown.

“You know Holland, of course,” Mr. Drake said, then placed his hand on the shoulder of the other woman. “This is Savannah, who’ll be working for you starting next week. Next to her is Boston, then Austin, and the little one who can’t seem to stand still for more than five seconds is Charlotte, better known as Charli.”

Savannah was beautiful, and Brant could see why Remington would be taken with her. His gaze roamed over the two boys who shared similarities with Denver and their father in their appearances. Little Charli, though, caught him by surprise. He’d been so sure the name belonged to a boy, not an adorable little imp with her mother’s nearly blonde curls and her father’s gray eyes.

Brant bowed, then straightened and smiled at his hosts. “I’m grateful to join you all this evening. Thank you for welcoming me into your home.”

“Please, have a seat, Mr. Hudson,” Mrs. Drake said, pulling out a chair in the center of the table.

Brant found himself seated between Charli and Boston with Holland directly across from him. Although he’d hoped to dine directly beside her, he decided it was advantageous to sit where he could watch every expression that crossed her face and the way she interacted with her family.

After Mr. Drake asked a blessing on their meal and offered a word of thanks for Brant joining them, they enjoyed a delicious meal of chicken and dumplings, fresh sliced tomatoes, pickled beets, and slices of bread—warm from the oven—slathered

with butter and peach jelly. The conversation as they ate was carried mostly by Brant and Mr. Drake, with Boston and Mrs. Drake asking an occasional question.

They had finished eating and were waiting for Savannah and Holland to serve the pear cobbler when Brant felt a tug on his sleeve and looked down into Charli's charming face. Freckles stood out on her nose and cheeks, and there was a gap in her smile where a front tooth was missing.

He found her to be thoroughly delightful.

"Mister Hudson?" the little girl asked, lisping slightly around the missing tooth.

"Yes, Charli?"

"Are you made of money?"

Brant heard Mr. Drake choke on the coffee he'd been sipping. Mrs. Drake inhaled so sharply he was afraid she might suck the silverware right off the table. Holland, who had been carrying in the large pan of cobbler, nearly dropped it. Only Boston's hand darting out to support the bottom of the pan kept dessert from turning into a disaster.

"I'm not made of money, Charli." Brant held his hand out to her. "Go ahead. Touch my hand. It won't make quarters squirt out of my fingers or my nose."

Charli giggled and pushed a pudgy little finger into the back of his hand.

"What about you?" Brant asked, bending closer to the child as he covertly dipped two fingers into his vest pocket and pulled out a coin, keeping it hidden in his hand. "Are you made of money?"

"No," she said, giving him an earnest look. "I only got three pennies!"

“Then what is this?” Brant gently tugged on her delicate earlobe, then held out his palm with a dime on it. “You have money falling out your ears.”

“I do?” Charli asked, eyes wide in surprise. She vigorously shook her head to the left, then the right, attempting to dislodge more loose change. Savannah placed a hand on the child’s curls lest she rattle her brains.

“Mr. Hudson is teasing you, Charli. No one is made of money. We’re all human,” Savannah said, giving Holland a scorching look.

“But Holland said Mr. Hudson is—”

Savannah’s hand over the child’s mouth cut off whatever she was about to say.

Curious and amused, Brant did his best to keep his face devoid of expression as he looked at Holland. She set the cobbler on the table and began scooping servings onto plates while Savannah added spoonfuls of sweet thickened cream.

“Shall we eat dessert?” Mrs. Drake asked, her face three shades paler than it had been five minutes earlier. “Holland uses a delightful blend of spices to get the seasoning on the pears just right. Do you enjoy cinnamon, Mr. Hudson? Nutmeg?”

Brant assumed the woman’s rambling generated from nerves over Charli’s question.

The cobbler was better than any Brant could recall eating and wondered if he and Rem had made a mistake in not hiring Holland to work in the kitchen. Regardless, with Dulcie there to fix meals, they needed every available hand they could find to start putting the house into order.

After the meal, Savannah and Boston did the dishes while the rest of the family gathered in the parlor.

Brant retrieved the books he'd brought for Holland. Her family didn't appear destitute, but he'd assumed there may have been some lean years on the farm due to the mention she'd made about the lack of books in her home.

Between the farm and keeping six children clothed and fed, there probably wasn't a spare dollar left over for any extravagances, like books or fripperies for their home.

As he took a seat on the sofa with Austin and Holland, Brant observed the decorations were all handmade, which added to the home's appeal in his estimation.

Mr. Drake sent Austin to retrieve the box of chocolates once Savannah and Boston joined them. Everyone chose one piece of candy from the box before Mr. Drake returned the lid to it and set it aside.

Brant listened as Holland read the first page from *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson, *Heidi* by Johanna Spyri, and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* by Mark Twain. He could tell by the reactions of the family Mark Twain's book would be the first one they enjoyed together, but Holland seemed the most interested in the little girl named Heidi.

"In the winter evenings, Holland and Boston take turns reading to us. The school has a library they encourage the children to share with their families," Mr. Drake said, pulling Charli onto his lap when the child couldn't seem to decide on a place to land. The big man kissed his daughter's rosy cheek, and the child settled against him with a contented sigh.

Brant had always wondered what it would feel like to know affection and love from his parents, particularly his father, who was a cold and distant stranger. Someday, if the Good Lord blessed him with children of his own, Brant hoped to have the kind of relationship with them he witnessed in the Drake home. Unbidden, a vision of Holland as their mother, of them seated in the library at Hudson House around the

fire on a chilly winter's evening, filled his mind.

Unsettled by how real the picture seemed in his mind, he experienced an overwhelming urge to flee. He waited a few moments, listening as Austin answered his mother's question about schoolwork, then rose.

"I do not wish to overstay my welcome, but can't thank you all enough for a wonderful meal and a memorable evening," Brant said, shaking Mr. Drake's hand when the man stood with Charli clinging to him like a little monkey dressed in pink ruffles. "Thank you for welcoming me into your fine home."

"Thank you for joining us, Mr. Hudson. We hope you'll come again," Mrs. Drake said, smiling at him as she rose. She took the books Holland still held and gave her a push toward him. "Holland will see you out, sir. Have a safe trip into town."

"I will. Thank you again for your hospitality." Brant tipped his head to Holland's parents, tweaked Charli's cute little nose, then stepped into the hall and pulled on his sack coat before settling his hat on his head.

He opened the door and watched as Holland snatched a shawl from a hook before marching outside into the chilly evening air.

It was hard to believe how much the weather had changed in just a week. Denver had mentioned autumn seemed to be in a hurry to arrive this year, which Brant took to mean it wasn't always this nippy at night in September. He couldn't recall when the seasons had changed the past few years because he'd been too busy to pay much mind.

"Thank you for coming," Holland said quietly as she walked with him out to his horse. She pulled half an apple from her pocket and held it out to Gentry. The horse greedily ate it from her hand.



“What’s his name?” she asked, patting the animal with a gentle hand.

“Gentry. He’s been my faithful companion for almost seven years.”

“What breed is he?” Holland asked, continuing to pet the horse as Brant released the reins from the hitching rail.

“American saddlebred. His ancestry is an intentional mix, with a healthy portion of thoroughbred and Morgan.”

“He’s beautiful. A handsome fellow who seems to take good care of his master.”

Brant grinned. “That he does. Thank you, Holland, for inviting me this evening. I enjoyed the meal and the company.”

“You don’t have to stretch the truth on my account, Mr. Hudson. My family can be an acquired taste for some.”

Brant shook his head, shifted the reins in his hand, and began leading Gentry away from the house. Holland fell into step beside him. “I’m not exaggerating, Holland. I had a nice time, and the food was wonderful. If you ever decide you prefer working in the kitchen at Hudson House to cleaning, just tell Remington. You’re a great cook.”

“Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind. Have you found a head housekeeper yet?”

“No, but I sent a telegram to my sister to see if she’ll have any luck finding a suitable applicant.” Brant glanced down at Holland. The moon, bright and full, spilled silver light onto her face, making her seem almost ethereal. Perhaps she was more fairy or pixie than human, he mused.

“I hope she finds someone. I know Savannah and I will have much to learn, but we’ll work hard and do our best, Mr. Hudson.”

Brant stopped and turned to face Holland. “Please call me Brant, or even Alex. This ‘Mr. Hudson’ business is most tiresome. You invited your friend Alex for dinner, and that is who stands before you now. Your friend. I had a wonderful time. My only regret is how quickly the evening passed. Well, I may also regret that Charli wasn’t able to make quarters pop out of my fingers since you told the poor child I’m made of money.”

A sheepish look stole over Holland’s features. “I apologize for that. I was still a little upset with you when I returned home this afternoon after picking pears. Mama helped me see things from your perspective, but not before I said a few things to which I had no idea Charli was listening. I’m sorry for that.”

“Don’t be. I found it quite humorous.” Brant smirked at her. “Do you really think I’m made of money?”

“No. Like Savannah said, we’re all human. Some just have more money than others.”

Brant shrugged. “But others are rich in ways some of us are terribly destitute.”

Holland appeared to consider his words. “I am grateful for my family, for growing up in a happy, loving home. I know not everyone experiences that, and I’m sorry if you didn’t.”

Before Brant knew what she was about, Holland wrapped her arms around his waist and gave him a hug. It was one of the most astounding things he’d ever experienced. Immediately, he felt embraced in warmth, caring, and something that felt like love.

Lest he read more into it than she meant, he lightly patted her shoulder, then stepped

back. “Thank you, Holland. I’ll look forward to seeing you at church on Sunday.”

“I’ll save you a seat,” she said, smiling at him as she cocked her head to the side. “Why haven’t I seen you there before?”

“Rem and I usually sit in the back row and leave before anyone has time to pelt us with questions, if we happen to be in town. Often we are on a train bound for Portland on Sundays.”

“But you’ll be there this week?”

Brant nodded and swung onto the back of Gentry. “I plan to stay for two weeks before business draws me back to Portland. Thank you, again, Holland, for your kindness. It won’t be forgotten.”

“My pleasure, Alex,” she said with a teasing grin.

He touched the brim of his hat with his fingers, turned Gentry, and rode back to town, wondering if the ache in his chest was what it felt like to fall in love.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:42 pm*

“I ’m so hungry, I could happily eat my own cooking,” Denver said as Holland set a large basket on the bench in the river garden while Savannah spread an old quilt on the ground.

It was an unseasonably warm day for November, and the three siblings had agreed to take advantage of the sunshine and pleasant temperatures while they shared lunch. Dulcie had packed a basket with enough food to feed eight people instead of four. No one ever turned down the opportunity to eat the woman’s food. She was a wonder in the kitchen, and Holland looked forward to learning from her once additional housemaids were hired and she could shift to working in the kitchen.

For now, Holland and Savannah, and two other girls from Silver Bluff who had been hired to help with the cleaning, had been working at a mad pace to get rooms ready, one by one, as the construction workers finished them. They had completely finished the rooms on the main floor, except for the dining room, and had completed half the second-floor bedrooms, including Brant’s.

With so few women on staff, they’d all taken up residence in the basement with Dulcie since the floors in the bedrooms there were installed and the rooms were ready for occupancy, now that the furniture had arrived and Remington had overseen the stable hands carrying the pieces down to the basement.

For now, Savannah and Holland shared a room, which didn’t bother either of them in the least. They’d shared a room as long as either of them could remember. At the end of the day, Holland liked whispering to her sister in the dark as they discussed whatever new treasures they’d unpacked or expensive goods they’d cleaned.

Life at Hudson House was so different than anything Holland had known or imagined, but she loved it there. There was a hum of energy and excitement in the air, as though everyone was waiting for something, although no one knew exactly what.

Dulcie's little boy, Bobby, kept things lively. On Dulcie's day off, she sometimes left him at the Drake home to play with Charli.

Holland grinned, thinking of how much her little sister adored the charming boy with the easy smile. Although he was active and inquisitive, Bobby minded well, and everyone kept an eye on him when he was at Hudson House, Brant included.

Thoughts of Brant made Holland feel a tragic combination of elation and wariness, so she cast them aside, at least while she enjoyed this sunny hour with her siblings.

Colin, Denver's best friend who also worked at the estate, gave Savannah a hand as she settled onto the quilt, then Denver set the basket in the middle of the covering and Holland plopped down next to her brother.

"It's your turn to say grace, Denver," Savannah said, eyeing him as she primly folded her hands in her lap.

"So it is." Denver bowed his head and gave thanks for their meal, the hands that prepared it, and asked for guidance for each of them for the remainder of the day.

In the six weeks Savannah and Holland had been working at Hudson House, time had flown by in a blink. Not a day went by that they weren't busy from the moment the work began until it ended in the evening.

True to his word, Brant gave them Sundays and Mondays off, allowing Holland, Savannah, and Denver to have two days at home with their family. It was fun for them to spend those days with their parents and younger siblings.

Thanks to the funds they'd been contributing to the family coffers, along with a heavy yield from the fruit harvest, the Drake family had paid their bills and had money left over in the bank. For once, their parents could breathe easy about making it through the winter months.

"If I thought she'd have me, I'd march into the kitchen and ask Mrs. Anders to marry me today," Colin said as he filled his plate.

Denver glowered at him, which Colin either chose to ignore or failed to see.

Holland hadn't said anything, but Denver seemed quite protective when it came to the cook of Hudson House. Holland couldn't help but wonder if he'd developed feelings for the woman and her little boy.

Colin closed his eyes and moaned in pleasure as he bit into one of Dulcie's signature buttermilk biscuits. They'd been hot out of the oven when Dulcie had packed them on a plate wrapped in a thick towel. She'd included fried chicken, slices of cheese, sticks of celery, and apple slices for their meal. For dessert, Dulcie had prepared coconut macaroons dipped in chocolate, which seemed more like candy than a cookie, but everyone loved them, particularly Brant. If he knew Dulcie had a fresh batch of them, he'd contrive a flimsy excuse to visit the kitchen and snag a handful.

In her time at Hudson House, Holland had worked hard, made new friends, and peeked around the edges of a lifestyle she could hardly begin to imagine. Wealth, costly treasures, prestige, pedigrees, and ancestry were things she knew so little about, but they seemed to be quite important to those with money, or those who thought they had money and sought to improve their social standing.

Recently, a few women from surrounding towns hoping to pair Brant with their daughters had shown up uninvited, daughters in tow. Brant usually sent Remington out to deal with them. After giving them tea in the formal parlor and assuring the

women Mr. Hudson was not available, Remington escorted the would-be matchmakers out the door.

Last week a mother had arrived with all five of her daughters and refused to budge from the parlor settee until she met Brant in person. The woman had traveled from somewhere in Washington with the intent of not returning home until Brant had chosen which one of her daughters he would wed.

Holland, Savannah, Dulcie, and Remington had all listened from the music room next door to the parlor, entertained by the unfolding drama.

Leaning on his considerable charm, Brant had managed to compliment the woman and her five tittering offspring, assure them he was a terrible choice for a husband, and send them on their way in the time it took him to drink a cup of tea. Holland and Savannah had replayed the entire conversation several times, laughing over Brant's ability to wiggle his way out of circumstances others would have found impossible to navigate.

One thing Holland had observed was that wealth didn't add beauty nor kindness to the women who came around intent on snagging a rich husband. Love was neither mentioned nor a factor in their minds. It was all about making a prestigious, advantageous match.

Despite the fact that it would set gossiping tongues wagging should they find out, Brant had made it a habit of eating dinner with the household staff in the evenings. A staff dining room had been intended for the basement, but after observing how much work it was for Dulcie to cart the food down there, even with the help of the dumbwaiters, Brant had decided to turn a space intended for linen storage on the main floor into the staff dining room. It was just down the hall from the kitchen and simplified things immensely for Dulcie.

Those meals at the end of the day, when they all relaxed and joked and laughed, made Brant seem so much more like Alex, Holland's dear friend, than Mr. Hudson, the reserved and aloof lord of the manor.

She doubted any other man of Brant's wealth and station would roll up his sleeves and help carry dishes to the kitchen at the end of the long day, or sit at a table eating with his household staff.

Fully aware she loved him, loved the man she saw and the one he had yet to become, Holland hadn't yet concluded what to do about it. Nothing was the most prudent and intelligent answer, especially after watching the women parade their eligible offspring in front of Brant.

Holland couldn't compete with wealth, or social standing, or pedigree. She was a farmer's daughter, and the only thing special about her, in her opinion, was her family because they always made her feel loved.

"Will everyone be at the dance tomorrow night?" Colin asked as he helped himself to another cookie when they'd all eaten their fill, pulling Holland back into the conversation and their picnic lunch.

"By everyone, are you inquiring about a certain housemaid named Serena?" Savannah asked in a sing-song voice.

Colin blushed. "I meant everyone. You'll all be at the harvest dance, won't you?"

"We haven't missed one yet," Denver said, thumping his friend on the shoulder, then handing Holland his empty plate as he hopped to his feet. "Come on, lazy bones. I'm hoping to finish the upstairs sitting room before tomorrow night. We still have a lot of work to do if we're going to make that happen."



Colin snagged one more cookie then stood and bowed to Savannah and Holland with a flourish of his hand. “Fare thee well, fair Drake sisters.”

Holland laughed and tossed a napkin at him. He caught it and threw it back to her. She helped Savannah pack the empty plates into the basket, then took one of the cookies, leaned back on an elbow, and lifted her face to the sun.

“I could stay out here all afternoon,” she said, closing her eyes as she ate a bite of the tender cookie.

“Stay a few minutes, Holland. We have twenty minutes before I told Monroe we’d be back to work in the dining room. Honestly, I needed a rest from handling all those expensive breakables we’ve been putting away this morning.”

The dining room, which was more like a hall since the table could expand and the room could accommodate seating for a hundred, had fireplaces on both ends, and the interior wall in between them was covered with a massive built-in mahogany china hutch that featured leaded glass doors in the cabinets.

Like most of the other rooms, the dining room was decorated in shades of blue. The rug, a blue background with burgundy and gold scrolls, complemented the lighter-blue striped wallpaper that matched the silk curtains pulled back to allow in welcome light through the bank of windows opposite the china hutch.

Holland had spent most of the morning with nerves taut as she and Savannah had set the dishes Dulcie had carefully washed into the hutch. They’d had no idea how to arrange them, and had sought Remington’s guidance in the matter.

After the nerve-wracking morning, Holland wouldn’t complain about a few extra minutes of rest.

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Savannah shook her head. “Take your time.”

Holland listened to her sister’s receding footsteps as she took the last bite of the cookie. She shifted so she rested on her back with her head cradled in her hands, and sighed in contentment. As she relaxed, she felt her limbs growing heavy. If she didn’t get up soon, she knew she’d fall asleep, and that would never do. Maybe just a moment longer wouldn’t hurt.

The next thing she knew, something tickled her ear. She swatted at it, assuming it was a bug, but there it was again, brushing against her skin. Recent weeks had brought a heavy frost and chased away most creepy crawlies, so she had no idea what was disturbing her rest.

Had she fallen asleep? What if it were far later than she thought?

Concerned, Holland sat up with a gasp and nearly bumped noses with Brant as he leaned over her, a leaf from a plant she’d heard the gardener refer to as lamb’s ear in his hand. He didn’t bother to pretend to look guilty at tickling her ear with the velvety-soft leaf.

“What are you about, Mr. Hudson?” Holland asked, rubbing her eyes, feeling as though cotton packed the space between her two ears. She must have fallen asleep. Had Savannah sent Brant out to find her?

Not likely.

Her sister would have been more inclined to fetch her herself before anyone spotted Holland snoozing in the garden that faced the river.

“I saw you and the others eating lunch out here earlier. I was on my way out to the stables and wanted to see if you were still enjoying your rest in the sunshine. Your snores could have awakened some long-slumbering river monster, so I decided I had better wake you before the whole estate and town of Silver Bluff was in peril.”

Holland laughed as he’d known she would.

Today Brant was her Alex, the easygoing man who’d become a friend she cherished. She had such a hard time reconciling this persona to the immaculately groomed Mr. Hudson in his elegant suits, with perfectly polished manners.

She found Mr. Hudson intriguing, fascinating, incredibly intelligent, and kind. Alex told preposterous tales to make her laugh, folded newspapers into paper hats for Charli and Bobby to wear as they played a rousing game of pirates, and looked ruggedly handsome with his unshaved cheeks and mussed hair. She loved both versions of Brant, but neither one of them would ever be attainable. He would never be hers.

“I didn’t mean to fall asleep. The sun felt so good, and we were all stuffed from one of Dulcie’s delicious meals. I was only going to rest a minute.” She blinked against the bright light, then looked to him again. “I hope I’m not horribly late returning inside. Savannah won’t let me hear the end of it.”

“It’s not yet one, so if you told her you’d return then, you’ll be fine. I’d hazard a guess you’d barely closed your eyes when I happened upon you, like a damsel in distress from a fairy tale, waiting for the handsome prince to wake her from sleep.”

Holland grinned at him, stood, and gave him a shove to move off the quilt. He rolled to his side and rose to his feet.

“If you happen upon any of those handsome princes, send them my way,” she teased

with a saucy smile.

Something passed across his eyes before he gave her a puckish grin. “Maybe I’ll steal you away for myself, happy Holland. You are one of the most joy-filled people I’ve ever met.”

Holland had no idea what to say to that, so she lifted the quilt, gave it a shake to dislodge anything clinging to it, and hastily folded it.

“Will you be at the dance tomorrow?” Brant asked, walking with her toward the back door by the kitchen.

“Yes. We’ll all be there. Are you planning to attend?” Holland tried to keep the interest from her voice. She didn’t want to plead, but she certainly hoped he’d attend. It would be good for him to socialize with the community and meet people who didn’t work in the bank, hotel, or lawyer’s office.

Brant had attended church each Sunday he’d been in Silver Bluff, but despite her invitation to sit with the Drake family, he and Remington continued to sit in the last pew and escaped right after the service. Considering all the females in town who would set their cap for him given any hint of interest, she couldn’t blame him for remaining standoffish.

Yet, he was missing out on the sense of community Holland and her family enjoyed by participating in events. She wanted him to know he’d be welcomed in Silver Bluff, but he’d have to learn that for himself.

Nevertheless, a good start would be at the dance.

Brant gave her a long studying look, although she had not a clue as to what he saw when he looked at her. No doubt, the knot she’d fashioned on top of her head had

already started sliding sideways. She likely had smudges of dust on her cheeks from cleaning the china hutch early this morning. Depending on how long she'd slept in the sun, she might even have a pink sunburned nose.

Then he smiled at her in the way that always made her stomach feel utterly weightless, and she knew all was right between them.

"I'll be there, Holland. Save me a dance?"

"Of course I will, but only if you promise not to trounce on my toes."

"No promises, but I'll do my best."

"You generally do," she said and nodded to him as he pulled open the door for her. She started to step inside, then stopped. "May I offer a suggestion?"

Brant raised a dark eyebrow. "You may."

"Come as Alex, the friendly, hard-working fellow who enjoys making new friends, not the lord of the manor who sometimes is so remote people wonder if his sour countenance is due to acute indigestion."

Brant laughed at her teasing. "Suggestion taken. Enjoy your afternoon, Holland."

She rushed inside, left the quilt on the bench by the door, then hustled to the dining room where Savannah was busy putting away more dishes.

"I was going to come get you, but saw someone beat me to it. I thought for sure he was going to kiss you," Savannah said in a whisper so the girls working in the butler's pantry wouldn't be able to hear her.

Holland winked at her sister. “For a moment, I thought he would too!”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:42 pm*

“Let’s go!” Charli shouted as she raced into Holland’s room and grabbed a fistful of Holland’s skirts in her hand. “Come on, Holland. Mama said everyone is waiting on you.”

“I’m coming, Charli, but let me take a breath.”

Her little sister released her skirt, which Holland smoothed, then Holland gave her reflection one last critical glance in the mirror. She wore the made-over teal dress from Mrs. Clampton and a comfortable pair of black shoes. Her hair was curled and pinned into a riotous pile at the crown of her head. A few tendrils escaped to frame her face in a manner she hoped was becoming and not merely untidy.

Holland decided she’d done the best with what she had to work with. She hastily indulged in touching a drop of perfume that had been a birthday gift from her siblings last year behind each ear.

“Me too! Do me, Holland!” Charli begged, so she added one of the precious drops to the inside of Charli’s wrist, where the child could sniff it all evening.

“Race you to the wagon,” Holland said, taking a step toward the door. Charli ran past her and noisily made her way down the stairs while her giggles floated back up to Holland.

Holland slipped on her coat, stuffed a handkerchief and a few coins in her reticule, and hurried downstairs and out the door.

Charli had been correct that everyone was waiting for her, but no one seemed put out

about the delay. In fact, the way Savannah fussed with her skirts, she'd likely just taken her seat between Austin and Boston.

Denver swung Charli into the wagon, then reached down and gave Holland a hand. She wasn't fully seated when her father smacked the lines and the team started down the lane to the road.

"I think we should sing to pass the time," her mother said from her position on the wagon seat next to her husband as she looked back at her offspring in the wagon bed.

Denver launched into the chorus of a rowdy saloon song Holland was sure he'd learned from the men at the estate. Sarah Drake reached back and swatted him with her reticule, making them all laugh.

"Try again, son," Sarah ordered, scowling at her eldest child.

Denver cleared his throat and began to sing "How Beautifully Blue the Sky." They all joined in and rode the rest of the way to town singing in harmony and enjoying the precious moments spent together.

As they neared the community hall where the dance was being held, they waved at friends and neighbors, all of them excited for a fun evening ahead. Jack Drake pulled the wagon to a stop beside the line of others already parked outside the hall, set the brake, and looked back at his children.

"I expect each one of you to be on your best behavior. No fighting"—he stared at the boys—"no whining"—he looked at Savannah and Holland—"and no crying." The last comment was directed to Charli.

"Promise, Papa!" Charli stood and held her arms up to him.



Jack lifted her and kissed both of her cheeks, then handed her to Denver when he jumped out of the wagon and reached up for his sister.

“Come on, Denver. I’ll show you how to dance,” Charli said, patting his cheeks, making the rest of them grin as they stepped out of the wagon. Holland, Savannah, and their mother gathered the pies and cookies they’d made to contribute to the dessert table. As a group, they made their way inside.

Holland set the custard pear pie she’d baked alongside the other desserts already filling the table and looked around.

“Here, I’ll take your coat,” Boston offered, tugging gently on the back of her collar.

“Thank you, Bost.” She smiled over her shoulder at her brother as she unfastened the buttons and slipped her arms from the sleeves. Austin took Savannah’s coat and their mother’s, then the two boys made their way to the storage room that had been cleaned out to hold coats, hats, and bags for the evening.

Holland watched as their mother made her way over to a group of her friends. Charli squealed and raced over to Dulcie and Bobby who stood near the refreshment table, looking uncertain.

Holland elbowed Savannah when Denver headed toward Dulcie. “I think our brother might be smitten.”

“There’s no might about it. He is completely smitten, and I’m glad. I adore Dulcie, and Bobby,” Savannah said, slipping an arm around Holland’s waist as they surveyed the crowd. “He’s almost as loopy over Dulcie as you are over Brant.”

Holland opened her mouth to protest, but she wasn’t going to lie. She was besotted with Brant, thoroughly.

The fact that she was infatuated with her employer bothered her no small amount, though, especially when he strode into the building with Remington, looking handsome and rugged in the navy sack coat and canvas trousers he'd worn to their house the first time he'd come for dinner. He'd been to lunch one Sunday after church, and to dinner another evening when their father had invited him to come. It seemed Brant had a multitude of questions about orchards, and the two men spent the better part of the evening discussing varieties of apples, pruning techniques, and harvest yields. There wasn't a single romantic thing about his visits, but Holland enjoyed watching him interact with her family.

Rather than dwell on her inappropriate feelings for Brant, she cast her sister a sly glance. "What about you, Savannah? Are you ready to admit you are enchanted with Remington Monroe? Don't you dare deny it."

Savannah shrugged. "I wasn't going to, but like you, there's nothing to be done about it. Remington is, well, that," she said, pointing to the gentleman with nary a hair out of place, his attire perfectly pressed, even his shoes polished to a high shine.

"Is there any harm, just for tonight, pretending they are regular fellows who've never heard of Hudson House?" Holland asked, smiling broadly when Brant caught her eye and headed toward her with Remington on his heels.

"Just for tonight," Savannah repeated as the two men bowed to them.

"Ladies, you both look most fetching this evening," Brant said, lifting Holland's hand and kissing the back of it. She felt something zing up her arm at the contact and would have backed away if she'd had anywhere to go.

"Might you care to dance, Miss Savannah?" Remington asked, offering Holland's sister a look of such longing Savannah appeared slightly dazed as she nodded her head and took his hand.

“You do know he’s quite taken with her,” Brant said, bending his knees so he spoke directly into Holland’s ear. The warmth of his breath on her skin made a shiver of anticipation glide along her spine. Would Brant kiss her? Did he want to? She’d been so certain yesterday when she’d awakened and sat up that he would have kissed her the previous day if there hadn’t been any number of eyes watching their every move.

“Does he realize she’s infatuated with him?”

Brant straightened and shook his head. “Not in the least. If his level of density in matters of the heart increases, he’ll turn into a boulder.”

Holland grinned and Brant smiled. For the moment, for tonight, she wanted to pretend they belonged together. Come Tuesday morning, when she and Savannah arrived for work, they’d return to being nothing more than the housemaids.

A fairy tale Charli loved entered Holland’s thoughts, and she smiled, wishing some magical being might appear and grant her the dearest wish of her heart—a wish to make dreams come true.

“You look lovely, Holland. That gown is a wonderful color on you. Did you do something different with your hair?” Brant asked as he took her hand and led her toward the dance floor.

Suddenly self-conscious, Holland touched her curls to make sure they hadn’t slipped out of place. “Savannah and I helped each other with our hairstyles this evening.”

“You both are beautiful, but only one of you makes me want to spout poetry about a lady fair of face and full of grace.”

“Since I’m neither graceful nor fair of face with these blasted freckles, I will assume it’s Savannah of whom you speak,” Holland teased.

Brant swept her into the dance. “Hardly, Holland. It is you, dear girl, who captures my attention and my ...”

He paused, and Holland willed him to continue, but he remained silent for the length of several dance steps. When he appeared to be struggling to find the words to say, she took pity on him and changed the subject.

“Tell me about places you’ve traveled. I heard Remington mention to Dulcie that you’ve been all over the world.”

“I have been.” Brant performed the dance steps flawlessly as though they were a natural part of him. Goodness only knew how many women he’d danced with over the years, how many he’d charmed.

Holland derailed that train of thought before it built any steam. What mattered was the moment, and it was here, dancing with Brant.

“What would you like to know?” he asked, spinning her around.

“Anything. Have you been to Europe? Asia? What was the place you liked the best? The worst place? The city you’d like to see again?”

Holland listened to the cadence of his voice, admired the light in his eyes as he spoke, and lost herself in his arms. She had no idea when one dance stopped and another began as they swayed across the floor. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw someone begin to approach them, but Denver intervened. She’d have to thank her brother for that later.

“What’s it like, sailing on the ocean? Are you ever frightened?” Holland asked.

Brant nodded. “Sure. Plenty of times. Whenever a storm arises, it reminds me that we

are no bigger than a sparrow in the Master's hands, but He counts every hair on my head and is with me always."

"It's comforting, isn't it, to know we are never truly alone."

"It is," Brant said in agreement, then abruptly changed the subject. "Have you ever seen a sea otter?"

Holland wondered at his question. "No, but I have seen river otters. They remind me of a weasel, only wet."

Brant grinned. "Same family tree. Sea otters are much larger than river otters—they have big fuzzy heads—but the thing I admire about them is the way they help each other. When they sleep, they wrap their paws together so they don't drift away and get lost. When a group of them do it, it's called rafting, but it is one of the sweetest things in nature I've witnessed."

"Really? I would love to see that. They hold hands, or paws, to ensure no one is left adrift or behind. Is that correct?"

"That's right. Perhaps one day you'll be able to see the wondrous sight in person."

Holland highly doubted that would ever happen, but she nodded. "Perhaps, someday."

When the song ended, Brant placed his hand against her back and leaned toward her. "Would you care for a cup of punch and a rest?"

"That would be nice. Thank you." Brant escorted her off the dance floor and over to a table where Austin and Boston were digging into plates piled high with desserts. He studied the variety of sweets, then glanced at Holland as he pulled out a chair for her.

“What did you make?”

“A custard pear pie. Savannah made molasses cookies, and Mama baked an apple pie.”

“I look forward to tasting all three,” he said, then strode over to the refreshment table, returning with two cups of punch before he perused the desserts and returned with two plates holding an assortment of sweets.

“I wasn’t sure which apple pie your mother made,” Brant said as he settled into the chair beside Holland.

“You got the right one,” she said, motioning to a sliver of apple pie on his plate. “Mama always sprinkles sugar on the crust. None of the other ladies do that.”

“Do you like chocolate, Mr. Hudson?” Austin asked, eyeing the assortment of treats he’d selected.

“As a matter of fact, I do. What’s your favorite sweet, Austin?”

Holland watched her brother point to the last bite that remained of a piece of chocolate cake. “Mrs. Hillard makes the best chocolate cake, but don’t eat her pie. It’s awful.”

Brant grinned. “Noted. What else is safe to eat, or should be avoided?”

Holland sipped the punch and ate a piece of pumpkin pie from her plate while her brothers educated Brant about the best baked goods in town.

“One of you should take pity on Alice Perrigan,” Holland said when there was a lull in the conversation. “The poor girl looks positively heartbroken, sitting all alone over

there.”

“I’m not dancing with her,” Austin declared, giving Boston a shove that nearly sent him toppling from his chair.

“Fine,” Boston scowled as he righted himself. “I’ll dance with her, but if she starts bugging me, you have to fix it, Holland.”

“Gladly.” She hid a smile behind her cup of punch and watched as Boston wiped his mouth on a napkin, tossed it on the table, then rose and strode across the room to the girl who’d been watching him all evening. Holland knew Alice had a crush on Boston and had been waiting for weeks for him to catch on, but he seemed as oblivious as certain present members of the male species.

After watching Alice’s face light up when Boston asked her to dance, Holland’s attention swiveled to the man beside her.

His gaze tangled with hers and beneath the table their fingers entwined. When he smiled, she felt like her heart might burst with the joy she found in his presence.

“I need a rest,” Savannah said, plopping into a chair and breaking the spell of the moment. She looked at Holland. “Are you the reason Boston is dancing with Alice?”

“I’m sure I don’t know a thing about that,” Holland said cheekily.

Savannah laughed, then looked at Austin. “You better watch out or you’ll find yourself dancing with Mamie Easterly.”

“No, I won’t! I’ll walk all the way home before you make me do that.” Austin shoveled in a big bite of pie as though that settled the matter.

Remington set two cups of punch on the table, one in front of Savannah, and took a seat beside her. “It’s quite a lively celebration. And you say this happens every year?”

“Yes,” Savannah said, lifting the cup of punch to her flushed cheeks. “After harvest, but before Thanksgiving. It’s a time to celebrate another year of being part of our community.”

Holland nodded in agreement to her sister’s explanation. “We’re so glad you both are here, and Dulcie too.”

They all turned to watch Charli and Bobby dance together. The two children bobbed around like corks caught in a tempest, but they appeared to be having a fantastic time.

“Rem, did you teach Bobby all your best dances?” Brant asked with mock seriousness, making everyone at the table laugh.

“I thought he observed you, Sir Blunderfoot,” Remington said, lifting his punch in a mock toast.

“Blunderfoot, is it? I ought to—”

“Ask me to dance again,” Holland said, amused by the good-natured ribbing between the two men.

“What she said.” Remington sat back in his chair and took a long drink of his punch.

Brant rose and held out a hand to Holland. “If it so pleases you to gift me with another dance, Miss Drake, I’d be most delighted.”

“Then gifted you shall be.” Holland took his hand with a laugh, and they joined the group of dancers swinging across the floor in an energetic quadrille.



They finished the dance, then danced three more before Holland realized she had monopolized Brant's entire evening. When the song ended, she stepped close to him.

"I'm so sorry, Brant. I've kept you from dancing with others this evening and meeting more people. I can introduce you to some of the girls in town."

He settled a hand at her waist and dipped his head so his lips nearly brushed her ear. "Don't you dare, Holland Drake. I've had a perfectly wonderful evening and you're threatening to ruin it. Please don't."

She looked into his face, his blue eyes bright as they gazed at her with mirth and affection, and she wanted desperately to hug him, to kiss him, to love him. Before the temptation became too much to resist, Remington and Savannah bumped into them as the next dance began.

"Last dance of the evening," a voice called over the room.

"It seems too soon for that," Brant said, dancing Holland toward the door instead of across the floor. He didn't bother with coats, just swept her outside into the frosty night air. With her hand clasped in his, he tugged her around the side of the building into the shadows.

"Before you freeze to death or slap me silly for dragging you out here, I just wanted you to know I've had a marvelous evening and enjoyed every moment of dancing with you, Holland. I wish I could take you home, but I do believe it's far better to bid you a good night now." Brant kissed her cheek. "You smell luscious, Holland."

Before she could gather her wits enough to reply, he'd led her inside the building. The final song had ended, and people were gathering their coats and empty dessert dishes.

“Until Tuesday,” Brant whispered in her ear, then he disappeared into the crowd.

All the way home, as she rode huddled beneath heavy blankets with her siblings, a sleepy Charli cuddled on her lap, Holland recalled the entire evening with Brant, of how attentive, amusing, and sweet he’d been. How urgently she’d wanted him to kiss her.

It had been the best evening of her life, and she didn’t want to forget a single detail.

As soon as she arrived home and helped her mother tuck Charli into bed, Holland took out a journal she’d begun keeping a few months earlier, and recorded all her memories of the dance so she’d never forget them.

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*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:42 pm*

Brant dipped his pen into the inkwell on his desk, signed his name to several documents, and looked at Remington when he finished. "That should do it."

Remington nodded. "I'll have someone run these papers into town so they'll go out in tomorrow's mail. How does it feel to be part owner in a railroad?"

"Not any different than I felt five minutes ago." Brant grinned, returned the pen to its holder, and sat back, hands laced behind his head. "It's a good investment. The spur lines alone should make a tidy return on the initial investment. The opportunity is ripe to become a partner because we can influence the transfer of goods from our ships to train cars and take them inland to people who previously didn't have access."

"I agree it is a smart investment, especially when the contract includes the clause about loading goods from Pacific Horizon Shipping Company directly from the ships in specific ports. Very prudent on your part to include that, Brant." Remington picked up a copy of the contracts Brant had just signed and sealed in an addressed envelope.

"You know what? I'll take that into town myself. I've been meaning to drop by the bank, and Mr. Drake invited me to stop by for a taste of the latest batch of apple cider he pressed over the weekend."

Remington lifted an eyebrow as an unconvinced expression filled his face. "Why don't you just admit you miss Holland and wish to see her?"

"I never said a word about Holland, Rem. Not one word. I could say the same about Savannah and you. Don't think I haven't noticed you eyeballing her whenever you think no one is watching."

“It’s hardly the same thing, and you know it. Besides, Savannah is too young for me, and she could do far better than a butler.”

“There is no one better than you, Rem. Any girl would be fortunate and blessed to have you, but since I have no more inclination to discuss my love life, or lack of one, than you do, let’s not speak of it again, at least not today.”

“Agreed. Tomorrow is a new day. Holland will be here, bringing her own special sunshine to these dreary November days.”

Brant stood and took the envelope from Remington. “The house always feels warmer and brighter when she’s here, doesn’t it?”

“Of course it does,” Remington said, looking like he wanted to say more, but refrained. He glanced at the clock on the desk. “I suppose you’ll eat lunch in town?”

“Most likely, although I’ll miss whatever deliciously wonderful thing Dulcie is preparing. Eat a double helping for me.”

“I will try to force myself to endure the torture of near gluttony for your benefit,” Remington said dryly, following Brant out of the library and down the hall. “Do you want Gentry saddled, or a buggy?”

“Gentry, please,” Brant said as he started up the stairs to his room. “I’ll be ready to leave in ten minutes.”

Brant knew Remington would personally dash out to the stables and request Gentry be saddled and waiting at the side entry he preferred to use. Although a telephone and intercom system had been installed in the house, the connection to the stables only functioned about half the time. A repair had been requested, but goodness only knew when the work would be completed since the company that installed the equipment

was based out of Portland.

It was a marvel to be anywhere in the house, push a button, and have someone respond to an immediate request. Not that Brant used it often. In fact, he'd never enjoyed having people wait on him as if he were an invalid incapable of caring for himself.

Here in the West, where the rules of society were more relaxed and the forked tongue gossips who had watched him from seemingly every street corner in New York were few and far between, Brant felt free to be himself. To not worry about social class, rules of propriety, or any of the drivel he so detested from the popular set in New York. The garish, gaudy, overdone lifestyle of so many was one of the many reasons he'd felt the need to leave his family there and not look back.

Thoughts of family reminded him he needed to sit down with Dulcie soon and go over menu ideas for Christmas. Thanksgiving was a few days away, and then it would be time to begin decorating the house for the holidays before his sister and her family arrived. The last telegram he'd received from Eloise said they would arrive on the twenty-first of December and stay until the fourth of January. He'd have two full weeks to spend with his sister, his brother-in-law and business partner, and their two children. He could hardly wait for Bobby to meet Mayes and Clara. They'd have a marvelous time playing together.

At least the house would be ready for their arrival. Everyone had worked so hard to finish the rooms. The housemaids, Holland and Savannah included, had put in long hours to not just clean each room as it was finished, but also add the special touches and details that made each space inviting.

Brant knew the gardener had both flowers and vegetables growing in the conservatory, but it made him smile to step into a room and spy a vase of fresh flowers on a table. He'd noticed the arrangements set out on Saturday had taken on a

fall theme using branches, pine cones, pheasant feathers, leaves, and even nuts as decorations.

Perhaps the centerpieces weren't something of which his family would approve, but they were perfect for him and his home. The arrangements showed originality, and he appreciated that creativity more than picture-perfect flowers.

Brant changed into a warm woolen suit, pulled on an extra pair of socks, then wrapped a scarf around his neck before grabbing his coat and gloves as he left his room.

Remington met him halfway up the stairs with a tin in his hands. "Dulcie said if you plan to visit the Drake family to take these cookies to make up for all the food Bobby gobbled up last week when he visited Charli."

"I will happily deliver the cookies and the message. Anything else?" Brant asked, shrugging into his coat as they reached the main floor and made their way toward the side entry. Remington snagged Brant's hat off a rack and set it sideways on his head, making Brant roll his eyes as he adjusted it.

"Does Dulcie need any supplies from town?" Brant asked as they neared the door.

"No. The delivery wagon will bring out the weekly order tomorrow. Stay warm and safe. If you aren't back by suppertime, I'll take over your spot in the library with my toes perched by the fireplace, although everyone will likely think the resident bear has gone into hibernation if you aren't in there snoring."

"I don't snore!" Brant glowered at Remington. The man chuckled and held open the door as Brant strode outside. "I should return by midafternoon. Keep everyone out of trouble. Oh, and tell whoever made the fall floral arrangements that they look very nice."

“Tell her yourself. That was Holland’s doing.” Remington waved, then closed the door against the chill in the air.

Brant had experienced enough of the fickle weather along the mighty Columbia to know when it felt like a storm was rolling in. Although the sky was blue and sunny, the temperature was cold and the ground heavily frosted. The air smelled of snow to him, so he wouldn’t dawdle on this trip.

Honestly, he had no real reason to ride into Silver Bluff, other than he missed Holland and needed a distraction from his thoughts of her. A ride in the brisk air would do both him and Gentry a world of good.

“Thank you,” Brant said to the stable lad who held Gentry’s reins. He took them from the boy, swung into the saddle, and headed toward Silver Bluff.

He would see to his errands and return home before snow could begin to fall, avoiding the temptation to see Holland. Yesterday he’d sat behind her in church, admiring the rich luster of her hair, her slender neck, and the graceful curve of her shoulders.

Since the night of the harvest dance when he’d dragged her outside into the shadows of the building like a primitive cavedweller on the prowl, he’d wondered a hundred times why he hadn’t used the opportunity and moment of privacy to kiss her.

Goodness only knew they were never alone the rest of the time. At Hudson House she was working, flanked by either her sister or Dulcie, or sleeping. He certainly couldn’t approach her at church on Sundays.

Besides, he tried to leave her alone on her days off, even if once in a while he found himself sitting at the Drake family dining table enjoying an excellent meal Sarah Drake and her lovely daughters created.

Aware of Holland's desire to shift from housemaid to kitchen help, Brant hesitated to make the change, not because Holland lacked the skill required, but because he feared he'd see less of her around the house.

Her task of cleaning rooms brought her to the library every morning where he could linger in her presence as she worked. If she were in the kitchen, he'd have no reason to seek her out there.

Often, if he happened to be in the library when she came in to clean, they would discuss a topic they'd read in the newspaper, or one of the books she'd borrowed from his vast collection. Holland had proved to be intelligent and witty, and she never seemed fearful of offering her opinion. Brant found himself taking an opposing view to hers just to watch her eyes fire with excitement as they debated a topic.

If she were stuck in the kitchen, he would greatly miss those precious moments with her each day.

Honestly, Brant had no idea what to do about Holland Drake.

He tried to envision her at one of the parties he'd attended in New York in the past, but the picture refused to take shape in his mind. The razor-tongued crowd of high society would snip her to ribbons within the first five minutes of meeting her. Holland was too kind, sweet, and joyful to be subjected to the cutting, barbed insults he was sure would come her way.

Yet, when he considered his future, he could so easily imagine her beside him. Not as a housemaid or kitchen help, but as his wife.

However, he wasn't certain she felt the same about him. As far as he knew, she much preferred the persona of Alex he slid into when he was in his working clothes than she did Mr. Hudson. It was his own fault, of course. Had he been forthright with her



that first day they met, she'd never have seen that side of him that could be playful and open without the weighty responsibilities that came from being Mr. Hudson, partner in a thriving and growing shipping company, investor in any number of enterprises, and unconventional millionaire who had dared to build a mansion on the bluffs above the river.

He wondered, in time, if Holland would come to hold any measure of affection for him, for who he was as Brant. Not Alex. Not Mr. Hudson. Just Brant. Or maybe he was Brant because he could be Alex, the fun-loving, and Mr. Hudson the reserved businessman.

Regardless, there were far too many things happening in the coming weeks for him to ponder huge life-altering questions like whom to marry and when. He was still young. He had what he hoped would be a bright future ahead of him. No need to rush into anything.

First, he needed to get through the holiday season, which he, admittedly, was greatly looking forward to. Eloise and Dean were among his closest friends, as well as the only relatives he truly liked. He couldn't wait for their arrival. He'd already compiled a list of activities he thought they might enjoy.

Brant rode directly to the post office and mailed the contract, then stopped by the bank to make a withdrawal. On a whim, he decided to visit the mercantile. He told himself it was to look for a new pair of work gloves, but Brant was thinking of Holland and Christmas when he walked into the store.

"Hello, Mr. Hudson. Welcome," said the store proprietor. Graham Gibson and his wife, Laura, were a friendly middle-aged couple who operated a clean business that offered a variety of wares.

Brant had been in the store only a few times since coming to Silver Bluff, usually

sending Remington on his errands, but the couple always made a point of greeting him when he walked in, as well as at church if they caught him before he left after the service.

“How does this day find you, Mr. Hudson?” Laura Gibson asked. She was short and plump with a ready smile and a gentle manner that seemed to put everyone at ease.

“Very well, Mrs. Gibson. How are you faring in this cooler weather?” He smiled and took a step closer to the counter where they both stood. It appeared Laura had been stocking a wooden case that held various colors of thread while her husband polished the glass chimneys of new oil lamps.

“We’re getting along just fine. Before we know it, there’ll be a foot of snow on the ground, and everyone will be bustling about with Christmas drawing near,” Graham said.

“I noted earlier the air felt like it might snow.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me a bit.” Graham glanced outside through the paned windows of the storefront, then returned to polishing the lamp chimney he held in his left hand.

“Is there anything we can help you with today, Mr. Hudson?” Laura asked as she started to step from behind the counter to assist him.

“I happened to be passing by and recalled I need a new pair of work gloves. Do you have any in stock this size?” He held up his hand with a broad palm and long sturdy fingers. His father had once commented his hands were more suited to a common field laborer than someone born of his lineage.

Brant had taken it as a compliment instead of the insult his father had intended.

“Why, Mr. Hudson. Look at the nicks and callouses on your hands!” Laura appeared surprised to see them. “You must still be working hard on your house.”

“It’s been quite a project, but we are nearing completion. My sister and her family are coming for Christmas, and everything must be ready before their arrival. I want them to feel at home and welcomed.” Brant had no idea why he was rambling to the woman. It wasn’t like his sister’s arrival was a secret, but Brant rarely divulged personal details to people who were more stranger than friend.

“How delightful you’ll have family joining you for the holiday. If you need any decorations or gift ideas, we’re more than happy to assist you, sir.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Gibson.” Brant hadn’t given a thought to decorations, other than looking forward to seeing some in his home. He hoped Remington and the housemaids had plans in mind. He would check with Rem as soon as he returned to the house.

He followed as Laura led the way to a display of leather gloves. To her credit, she showed him several options in his size, then pointed to a brand of glove that wasn’t the least nor most expensive. “These are the most comfortable and wear the longest, or so our customers have said.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Gibson.”

“I’ll leave you to your shopping, but let me know if I can help with anything, Mr. Hudson.” The woman returned to the counter and resumed stocking the case of thread.

Brant tried on five pairs of gloves before finding a pair that felt good on his large hands. They were the brand Mrs. Gibson had suggested. Since he was in the store anyway, he selected a full spool of red satin ribbon, thinking it could be used

somewhere in the house for the holidays, even if it was just to wrap packages.

Brant then recalled he hadn't thought of a single gift for Eloise and her family. He looked around until he found a section of children's toys. He liked a Noah's ark filled with animals for Mayes, and thought Clara would enjoy a tin filled with paper dolls. He chose a storybook for each of them that he didn't think they already had, then realized there were other children for whom he wished to shop. He carried the ark to the counter along with the paper dolls, storybooks, and gloves.

"Are you starting your Christmas shopping early?" Graham asked as he cleared a spot for Brant's selections.

"I guess I am. Do you have a box I could use for packing a selection of books?"

"Of course. How big do you need?" Graham asked.

Brant showed him the size he had in mind, then turned back toward the toys.

"May I help carry anything, Mr. Hudson?" Laura followed him down the aisle.

He smiled at the woman. "Yes, please. Also, do you have paper for wrapping gifts?"

She nodded. "I have white or brown paper in stock. We carry red paper closer to Christmas."

"White will do nicely, with dark-blue satin ribbon. If I pay for your time and services, would you be able to wrap the gifts for me and have them delivered to the house sometime in the next week or two?"

"Of course. I'd be pleased to do that, Mr. Hudson." Laura stopped as he looked at the toys.

He'd give Bobby one of the arks, along with a storybook, and for Charli Drake, he chose the fanciest doll in the frilliest dress. "Are there more clothes for the doll?"

"Yes. This little trunk has quite an assortment." Laura opened a small wooden trunk painted with pink and yellow roses on the lid. Inside were dresses, shoes, coats, and hats, even a little parasol.

"I'll take the doll and trunk, another ark, and two of those storybooks with the collection of children's stories."

"Yes, Mr. Hudson," Laura said, hurrying to carry the items to the counter. While she did that, Brant thought about other people to whom he wished to give gifts.

Holland's gift had to be special and required more thought, but he could see to the rest of his shopping.

"Here's that box, Mr. Hudson," Graham said, handing him a small wooden crate with a sliding lid.

"This is perfect. Thank you, Mr. Gibson." Brant filled the box with books he thought the Drake family would enjoy. Then he added a stereoscope with a box of assorted photo cards he knew they'd like. It would be something the entire family could take pleasure in using.

He purchased gloves for Mr. Drake and all three of his sons, then asked Laura to stuff the gloves with blue bandanas. For Savannah, Mrs. Drake, and Dulcie he chose soft woolen scarves with matching mittens that were made by a local woman.

Dean's great-grandfather had started the family's shipping empire with one boat, of which he'd been captain. A finely crafted nautical sextant would be an ideal gift for Dean. Brant took the sextant nestled in a wood case to the front counter and inquired

if anyone in town did special engraving, then made arrangements for Mr. Gibson to drop it off with an engraver who would add the Pacific Horizon Shipping Company emblem to the lid of the case.

Brant landed on a gift idea for Eloise, and concluded he'd create something similar for Holland. He loved to sketch—when he had time, which wasn't often—and Eloise had begged him for a drawing the last time he'd been in San Francisco. He selected two gilded picture frames, intending to draw something for Eloise and for Holland.

The only one left on his list was Remington, and Brant hadn't seen a single thing in the store that would do for his friend, but he did have a gift in mind. One he thought would be perfect, if Rem would accept it.

Satisfied with his shopping, Brant returned to the counter and the pile of purchases.

Laura set a stack of blank cards, like one would use as a calling card, in front of him, along with a fountain pen. Brant had tried to use a few previously, but preferred an inkwell.

“If you write the names of each recipient on the cards, I will attach them to the appropriate gift when I wrap them,” Laura said.

“Brilliant, Mrs. Gibson. Thank you.” Brant began writing names on the cards, fascinated with the Waterman fountain pen as he worked.

“Anything else?” Graham asked when he handed his wife the last of the purchases and she tucked a card into a pair of gloves for Mr. Drake.

“I'll buy a box of pens, a spool of dark-blue ribbon for wrapping the gifts, and a sack of assorted penny candy, please.”

“A box of pens?” Laura asked, as though she’d misheard him.

Brant nodded, holding up the pen in his hand. “I fear my inkwell has just met its demise. These pens are a wonder!”

Laura laughed and went to retrieve the pens. They didn’t have a full box in their inventory, but Brant bought a dozen pens and asked them to order another two dozen. They were so handy, he intended to keep them everywhere. He wondered if Dean had tried them. He’d give one to him, and make sure Remington had a supply of them as well.

“Don’t forget to add the charge for wrapping the gifts and delivering them,” he said when Graham gave him the total.

“It’s already added in, Mr. Hudson. We both are most grateful to you for your business.”

“My pleasure, Mr. Gibson, and Mrs. Gibson. I’m thankful you carry such a fine selection of goods and are willing to wrap the gifts for me. Left to my own devices, they would be poorly presented or not wrapped at all.”

“We’ll have these delivered next week. If you want to add anything to the delivery, let us know at church, or have Mr. Monroe get word to us.”

“I will do that.” Brant paid for his purchases, tucked the bag of candy in his pocket along with the new pair of gloves, and left with a jaunty wave. He felt almost giddy after his shopping excursion. He couldn’t recall ever purchasing gifts for anyone before. It was a heady, wonderful feeling, and he concluded he’d no longer send Remington to buy what was needed when he could see to it himself and derive the pleasure that came in the choosing of presents for a specific recipient.

He walked outside and nearly ran into Holland and Savannah as they were about to enter the mercantile. Their cheeks and noses were pink from the cold, but they both wore broad smiles as they stood with their arms interlocked, each of them holding an empty basket they no doubt planned to fill in the mercantile.

“Mr. Hudson! What brings you to Silver Bluff today?” Savannah asked as they stood outside the mercantile. The breeze had picked up, and the air carried a definite bite of snow.

“I had some errands to attend to, and I needed a new pair of work gloves. They have quite a fine selection here.”

“They do. We were on our way to pick up a few things for Mama,” Savannah said, then appeared to nudge Holland since she’d done nothing more than study him. “Holland is helping her make applesauce today, and I have the propitious task of mending socks.”

Brant chuckled. “I would never have thought to describe mending socks in such a manner, but, then again, I’ve never mended a sock. Is it hard?”

Savannah shook her head. “Not at all. Holland detests the chore, but I find it relaxing.”

“I don’t detest it. There are merely eight hundred and seventy-three other things I’d rather do than sit and darn socks,” Holland said.

Brant’s smile widened. “Are you in a hurry? Have you eaten lunch?”

“No and no,” Holland said, looking to Savannah. “Mama told us to take our time, and we considered eating lunch at the hotel but hadn’t yet arrived at a decision.”



“I’m starving, and the hotel sounds perfect. Might I request the presence of the lovely Drake sisters as companions for a meal? If I insist, then I must buy your lunch.”

Holland glanced at Savannah, who nodded enthusiastically, then she smiled at Brant. “We accept the invitation, kind sir.”

Brant held out an arm to each girl. Holland stepped next to him on his right side, while Savannah took the left. He asked questions about the farm as they walked across the street and down the block to the hotel’s dining room.

“Mr. Hudson! What a pleasant surprise to see you. Please, follow me,” the dining room manager said, leading the way to a table where Brant and Remington had frequently dined when they’d stayed at the hotel, which was often in the past three years. The secluded table in a corner with a view out of the window of the river rolling by below them offered a quiet place to dine and enjoy a meal.

Brant helped Holland then Savannah remove their coats and seated them before he shed his coat and hat and settled into the chair across the table from the sisters.

“What did you say your mother is making today? Apple something?”

“Applesauce,” Savannah said, accepting the menu the waiter held out to her.

Brant already knew what he wanted to order without looking at the menu, but he took one and quickly glanced through it while Holland and Savannah studied theirs. He assumed they didn’t have frequent opportunities to dine out, and hoped their experience would be one they both enjoyed.

The waiter brought a china teapot of Brant’s preferred tea, as well as three glasses of water.

“Thank you, George,” Brant said when the man set the beverages on the table. He looked to the Drake women. “Do you know what you’d like to order?”

Holland glanced at her sister, then nodded. “I believe we do.” She shifted her gaze from Brant to the waiter. “I’d like the pork chops, please.”

“Excellent choice, Miss Drake. And for the other Miss Drake?” he asked.

It was then Brant realized the young man had likely gone to school with the girls, or was familiar with them from growing up in the same town.

Savannah gave her menu one last glance, then handed it to George. “I’d like to try the ham steak.”

“Very good, miss. And for you, Mr. Hudson?”

Brant handed George his menu. “The usual, please. Thank you.”

The young man nodded and hurried off in the direction of the kitchen.

Holland took charge of pouring three cups of the steaming tea. Brant grinned when she stirred a heaping spoonful of sugar into hers and Savannah did the same.

“This tea is delicious,” Holland said after she’d taken a sip. “What is it? Do you know? It almost tastes like Christmas in a cup.”

Brant nodded and took a sip. “Black tea leaves are blended with cinnamon, sweet clove, and orange rind. It’s been my favorite of all the teas I’ve tried here in Silver Bluff. In fact, I had Remington order some tea for the house. It should arrive soon, I would think.”

“It’s very good, sir,” Savannah said, still formal around him, even though the rest of her family had ceased acting as though he were royalty visiting whenever he dropped by their home.

Except for Holland.

Brant wasn’t sure how to categorize her behavior in his presence. He supposed part of her reaction depended on where they were and who was around. He most enjoyed time with her when she seemed to forget she was his employee, and remembered they were friends.

“How does your father’s latest batch of cider taste?”

Holland wrinkled her nose. “Consider yourself fortunate you weren’t around and forced to sample it.”

“It was awful,” Savannah said, making a face that caused Brant to laugh.

“What did it taste like?”

“Watery rotten apples with a dash of cinnamon.” Holland grimaced. “Mama asked him if he’d boiled dirty socks and added the liquid to the cider.”

Brant smiled. “I’m sure your father appreciated the commentary on his creation.”

“Hardly. Mama thought it might be good if we left him in peace for a little while, hence our trip into town,” Holland said.

As they waited for their food, Brant asked the sisters about various townspeople, including the pastor of the church—a man who offered thoughtful and often thought-provoking sermons, but whom Brant didn’t feel he knew well.

George brought their meals and Brant's mouth watered at the sight of the thick juicy steak cooked to his ideal of perfection. Beside it was a pile of crispy fried potatoes, a yeasty roll, and a serving of buttered corn.

"Is your steak bleeding?" Holland asked, leaning forward to study the slab of prime beef on his plate.

"It isn't bleeding. It's just a little pink, exactly how I like it. Want a bite?"

Both girls looked as though he'd offered them poison as they turned up their noses.

"No, thank you," Holland said.

When the girls bowed their heads, Brant did as well and offered a quiet word of thanks for their meals and the unexpected time together.

The conversation was lively as they ate. Holland and Savannah traded bites of their meals. After much cajoling, Holland finally tried a bite of his steak. He watched her eyes light up in surprise at the rich flavor of the beef.

"Oh, that is quite good," she said after she'd chewed the bite. "It's so much different than I expected, and nothing like the steaks we have at home." Holland leaned forward and dropped her voice. "Mama thinks if there is any pink left in beef, we'll all die of some dreaded disease."

"She prefers dry, tasteless meat. Is that what you're telling me?" Brant teased as he cut another small piece off his steak and held it out to Holland. It pleased him when she accepted the bite straight from his fork. Lest it appear he paid far too much attention to Holland, he glanced over at Savannah. "Are you certain you wouldn't care for a taste, Savannah?"

“Positively, absolutely certain, but thank you. This ham is good. Papa should inquire how they cure it.” Savannah leaned closer and dropped her voice to a whisper. “It’s not as good as yours, though, Mr. Hudson.”

“The difference is in the cure and the brine,” Brant said, knowing from having studied the various methods when he’d decided to invest in raising hogs. So far, the enterprise had been profitable, and it would keep the kitchen at Hudson House supplied in the choicest pork available in the region. “A dry cure involves smoking the meat, then a long, slow cure that can take months, or even years. The curing time and aging process intensifies the flavor and alters the texture. A wet cure means the ham is soaked in saltwater brine for days, sometimes weeks. It’s both smoked and cooked. The result is a moist, tender meat with a slightly sweet flavor.”

Holland grinned and forked the last bite of her meal. “I had no idea you were a ham connoisseur, sir.”

“You learn something new every day,” Brant quipped, then took another bite of his steak. The girls shared a slice of lemon pie, while Brant ate a piece of chocolate cake.

After he paid the bill, he couldn’t think of a single reason to tarry, even though Holland didn’t seem to be in a rush to part ways. The three of them stepped outside into wind that pricked their skin with tiny pellets of ice.

“Do you need a ride home?” Brant asked as he escorted them back to the mercantile, where he’d left Gentry tied at the hitching rail.

“No. We brought the wagon,” Holland said, huddling into her coat against the nippy air. “Thank you, again, for lunch, Brant. It was such a wonderful treat for us.”

“Before I forget, Dulcie sent cookies to say thank you for Bobby’s visit last week.” He retrieved the tin from his saddlebag and handed it to Savannah.

“Thank you, Mr. Hudson,” Savannah said. “I suppose we’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” he repeated, watching as the Drake sisters dashed inside the warmth of the store.

He had no other reason to linger in town, so he untied Gentry’s reins, swung onto the horse, and had just turned the corner to ride out of town when he heard someone calling his name. He spun the horse around and noticed one of the messenger boys from the depot racing toward him.

“Mr. Hudson!” the boy called, waving a hand over his head.

“What is it, Tommy?” he asked, hurrying toward the boy who stopped and bent forward to catch his breath.

“There’s a bunch of people at the depot asking for you. She said to give you this.” The boy held out an embossed calling card with his sister’s name printed in the center of the expensive paper.

“Eloise is here?” Brant glanced from the card to the boy. “The woman who gave this to you, does she have dark hair, and blue eyes, and looks like me?”

The boy nodded. “Yes, sir. She has a little boy and girl with her, and several other people.”

Brant had no idea who the other people might be, but he was both elated and concerned by the reason his sister had arrived in town so unexpectedly.

“How many people are with her, Tommy?”

“Besides the kids, I think there were half a dozen, maybe more.”

Brant wondered who had tagged along with Eloise, but he supposed he'd soon know. It wouldn't surprise him if she'd dragged half of her household staff with her.

He took a five-dollar gold coin from his pocket and tossed it to Tommy. "Would you run to the livery and have them bring two carriages, buggies, or whatever they have to hold that many people, preferably enclosed, along with a wagon for their baggage, and tell them we'll need a driver for each conveyance? Tell them to put it on my account and charge me double if they can be at the depot in twenty minutes or less. If you do that, you can keep that coin, Tommy."

"Yes, sir!" Tommy took off at a run for the livery stable, while Brant turned and headed for the train station. He left Gentry tied outside and hurried into the warmth of the depot building, immediately spying Eloise as she held Clara in her arms while Mayes sat beside his nanny on a bench.

"Eloise!"

His sister spun around and offered him a relieved smile. He wrapped his arms around her, giving her a welcoming hug until Clara, her three-year-old, fussed.

"You're smooshing me, Uncle Bant!" Clara declared, shoving at his chest.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Clara." He kissed his niece's plump little cheek, then looked to his sister for an explanation. "What in the world brings you to Silver Bluff a month ahead of schedule?"

"Dean's uncle on his mother's side is not well. He went to say his goodbyes. The children and I decided rather than sit home alone, we'd spend the time with you. Dean will come straight here when he returns from New York, rather than go to San Francisco and then make the journey north." Eloise patted his arm. "It's so, so good to see you, Brant. What about you seems different?"

“Nothing, I’m sure.” He wasn’t about to admit to his sister he’d fallen in love. “You know I hired a cook, and she’s wonderful. Maybe I put on weight and didn’t realize it.”

Eloise shook her head, making the burgundy plume on her hat twitch like a nervous chicken. “No, that isn’t it. In truth, you look as fit and hearty as I’ve ever seen you. This Oregon country air and hard labor seem to agree with you, little brother. I’m most relieved the station boy was able to locate you. My excitement at surprising you outweighed my sense, evidently, because I gave no thought as to how we’d traverse to your home from town, or even how to find it.”

Brant grinned. “Most anyone in town could point you in the right direction. It’s about a thirty-minute carriage ride from here to there. Do the children need to eat or anything before we depart?”

“No. We ate on the train. Other than loading our baggage, we are ready to depart. I’m so looking forward to finally seeing Hudson House.” Eloise shifted Clara and squeezed his hand. “I hope it will not be an undue burden that we arrived unannounced.”

“Not at all. We finished the bedrooms recently, and we have plenty of food on hand. It appears you brought enough staff to attend to your needs.” He tipped his head toward three women he didn’t recognize and two young men who looked familiar, but he had no recollection of their names. He did know the children’s nanny, and the seventh member of the party was Eloise’s lady’s maid. Eloise never went anywhere without Lila.

“Oh, they aren’t all my staff, Brant. I brought you an experienced head of housekeeping, a parlormaid and a scullery maid to help in the kitchen, as well as two young men I believe should train with Monroe. If you expect him to manage your estate as well as serve as your personal butler, it’s too big of a burden. These two are



anxious to train with him, because Remington Monroe is their uncle.”

“What?” Brant turned and studied the two good-looking tall young men who were clearly brothers. After a closer study, he could see they had the Monroe chin and eyes. “They can’t possibly be Kari’s boys. When did they grow up?”

“Time passes for us all, brother dear.” Eloise motioned for the two young men to step closer. “Brant Hudson, I’m pleased to reintroduce you to Dalton and Gareth Steele.”

Brant reached out and shook the hands of the young men who did bear some resemblance to Remington. “I knew your mother when we were growing up. How is Kari? And your father?”

“Both very well, sir. Mama sent her regards and a letter we have in our bags,” said the one Brant thought was Dalton. “We’re most pleased to be here and are thrilled at the opportunity to work with Uncle Remington.”

“He’ll be so happy to see you boys.” Brant glanced outside and saw a wagon and two carriages pull up in front of the depot. Tommy hopped out of one of the carriages and waved at Brant through the window. “It appears your transportation has arrived. Might you Steele boys help load the baggage?”

“Happy to, sir.” It took only minutes to load all the trunks and baggage in the wagon. The larger carriage was filled with the staff, while Eloise, her two children, and the nanny occupied the smaller carriage.

“I’ll see you at the house when you arrive,” Brant said to his sister, then motioned for the driver to head out.

He swung onto the back of Gentry, made a quick stop at the livery to pay for the rentals along with a generous tip, then he raced out of town. Rather than travel along

the scenic winding road, he headed out to the Drake farm, and cut through the adjoining orchard.

In a matter of minutes, he pulled Gentry to a stop outside the stable and let the head of the stable know conveyances full of guests and baggage would arrive shortly, then dashed into the house through the back door, startling Dulcie as she lifted a spice cake from the oven.

“Don’t drop it,” he cautioned as she gasped and jumped. The cake pan fell from her grasp, but Brant grabbed a towel from the worktable and managed to catch it before it hit the floor.

“Mr. Hudson! You gave me a start,” Dulcie said with her hand pressed to her throat. “Has something tragic occurred?”

“Not at all,” he said, setting the pan on a folded cloth pad to cool, then handed Dulcie the towel. “However, ten unexpected people are arriving any minute. My sister has come a month early and brought the children, their nanny, a lady’s maid, as well as a head housekeeper, a housemaid, a scullery maid, and two young men for Remington to train.”

“Oh!” Dulcie’s eyes widened in shock before she began setting out mixing bowls on the worktable. “Supper won’t be fancy, but I can make plenty.”

“That’s all I ask. I can send one of the maids in to help you. Serena and Trinity are here today, aren’t they?”

Dulcie nodded. “They are, but they’ll have their hands full getting everyone settled in rooms. Thank heaven Savannah and Holland finished setting up the last bedroom on Saturday.” She glanced over her shoulder at Brant. “I sent Bobby downstairs to take a nap, but he’s likely playing in our room. I know I shouldn’t ask, but could you tell

him I need his help? He can handle some of the smaller tasks.”

“I’m happy to do that since it is my unannounced company that is causing the frenzy of activity here.” Brant raced down the narrow back stairs so fast he nearly missed the last three steps and had to catch himself on the banister.

He opened the door to Dulcie’s room to find Bobby sitting on the floor, galloping a crudely carved wooden toy horse across the rug.

The child looked up when Brant stepped into the room. Bobby hopped up and stood with his feet together, shoulders back, as though Brant was a general and he were the lone soldier at his command.

“Your mother would like you to help her, Bobby. Do you need a ride up the stairs?” Brant asked.

The child grinned and nodded his head. “Yes, please!”

Brant bent down and Bobby scrambled onto his back, wrapping his little arms around his neck as Brant straightened. He braced the child with a hand to his backside and rushed up the steps, making Bobby giggle the whole way.

After depositing him in the kitchen with Dulcie, Brant charged up the servants’ steps to the second floor and ran to his room. Serena was dusting the furniture in the hallway, and gaped at him in shock as he dashed past her. He skidded to a stop and turned to her.

“Serena, please fetch Remington right away. Tell him it is most urgent.”

“Yes, sir!” Serena took off at a trot toward the curving grand stairs. Brant assumed Remington was somewhere in the front of the house, likely the library or the

sunroom. They seemed to be his two favorite places if duties didn't call him elsewhere.

By the time Brant had washed up and changed into a suit appropriate for dinner, Remington appeared in his doorway.

"What is it, sir? Serena seemed to think something is terribly amiss."

Brant smiled. "Not amiss, but Eloise and an entourage have arrived. They should be here momentarily. She brought a number of servants with her, some of her own, and some for Hudson House. I would appreciate it if you'd take charge of them while I settle her and the children in their rooms. The nursery is completed, isn't it?"

Remington nodded and stepped forward, adjusting Brant's tie, then smoothing a wayward lock of his hair. "Yes. It's a room any child would adore. Bobby has given it his glowing approval."

"Perfect. We'll put the children in there, Nanny Lewis in the adjoining room, and Eloise across the hall. You know she likes to be close to the children."

"Very well, sir." Remington smirked and hurried downstairs.

Brant gave the nursery—an inviting space filled with toys, books, small beds, and colorful pictures—a glance, then stepped across the hall and opened the door to the room he intended to be Eloise's.

Brant thought the cream wallpaper embossed with a rolling floral pattern, the golden oak floors, and windows that faced the river made the room feel drenched in light. A fireplace boasted hand-painted Austrian tiles on the chimney. Each tile featured a burgundy rose in bloom with green leaves and accents. The chairs, upholstered in burgundy rose in bloom with green leaves and accents. The chairs, upholstered in burgundy brocaded velvet, matched the curtains, and a floral velvet coverlet on the

bed complemented the roses in the fireplace chimney. The large rug on the floor added a warm finishing touch done in cream with burgundy and green accents.

Without further time to consider the comfort of his sister and new employees, Brant started down the stairs, pleased to hear voices and laughter beginning to fill his home.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:42 pm*

“What is happening around here?” Holland asked as she and Savannah left their coats in their room and hurried to change into pressed uniforms. After consulting with Dulcie, Remington had selected ready-made dresses for the female staff members in a rich, dark shade of blue. They all wore white aprons. As housemaids, Savannah and Holland had a bit of lace on their aprons, whereas Dulcie’s dress and apron were of the lightest weight of unadorned cotton, and she most often wore a cotton cap over her hair to keep it out of her way and the food.

“Hurry, girls. Mr. Hudson has guests, and there is much to be done this morning. Start with the bedrooms. Oh, there’s also a new parlormaid and help in the kitchen. Introductions will have to wait,” Remington said in passing as they stepped into the hallway near the kitchen. Rather than stop for their morning cup of tea with Dulcie, the sisters raced up the servants’ stairs to the second floor, retrieved their cleaning supplies, and started with Brant’s room.

Savannah opened the windows to air the room while Holland made the bed, inconspicuously drawing in the decadent, masculine scent that was all Brant. Holland tackled his bathroom while Savannah dusted the bedroom and emptied ashes from his fireplace.

Working together, they were soon finished with Brant’s room and moved down the hall. It appeared whoever was staying had children as the nursery looked like a whirlwind had touched down inside it. Once it was set to rights, they hastily cleaned what was set up to be the nanny’s adjoining room.

Holland had just closed the window from airing the room when she heard voices and stepped into the hall in time to see a beautiful dark-haired woman give Brant a tight

embrace, kiss his cheek, then take his hand in hers as they descended the grand curving staircase.

Emotions, unfamiliar and bitter, surged through her. Anger. Jealousy. Envy. Disappointment. Despair. Wave after wave of them washed over her until she felt a hand on her shoulder and looked over at her sister.

“What’s the matter, Holland? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“No ghosts, just ...” Holland sighed. “It’s nothing.”

“Well, nothing is using up precious minutes we should be working.” Savannah pointed to the bedroom across from the nursery. “Let’s finish this room. It appears to be the last one used last night, then we can help downstairs.”

Holland nodded and returned to work.

All morning, as she dusted and mopped and straightened rooms, her stomach tied itself in a tighter and tighter knot until she thought she might be ill. When she reached the library, she half hoped and half dreaded finding Brant there, but he was nowhere to be seen.

In need of a moment to collect herself, Holland pushed open the hidden door and stepped outside, only to observe Brant strolling with the woman she’d seen earlier clinging to his arm. The woman said something, and Brant threw back his head in laughter, looking so happy it made Holland’s heart hurt to witness his pleasure in a female that wasn’t her.

Disgusted with herself—and with him for letting her think he cared about her—she marched into the library, closed the door, and spun around to find herself facing a stern-faced gray-haired woman who appeared to dine on lemons and green

persimmons for breakfast.

“What are you doing?” the woman asked, glaring down her sharp, thin nose at Holland.

“Cleaning the library,” Holland said, noting the woman wore a dark blue dress, similar to their uniforms but made from more costly fabric. She had an ornate chatelaine fastened at her waist from which hung a watch, a pair of swan-neck scissors, a brass tube for needles and thread, tweezers, and a few empty rings which would likely hold keys in the not-too-distant future.

Apparently, a head housekeeper had finally been hired. Holland had been dreading the day. She and Savannah had learned what they could about being maids in a large elaborate home, but she knew Brant and Remington had given them—all of the staff—quite a bit of leniency because there wasn’t a housekeeper in charge. They all did their work, kept the house spotless, but Holland had a feeling this sour-faced woman was about to change everything.

“Are you the new head of housekeeping?” Holland asked, forcing a smile to her face, although it felt fake and stiff.

“I’m Mrs. Mirabel Sanders. I was hired by Mrs. Mitchum to take charge of this place. I see much training is in order before the staff is able to function at the level of exceptional service that I demand and Mr. Hudson should expect. Who might you be?”

“Holland Drake, Mrs. Sanders. My sister and I were the first two female staff members hired. We enjoy working here, but we also know we have much to learn.”

The woman didn’t reply, merely glared at Holland. Finally, she pointed to the fireplace ashes that needed to be emptied and the kindling to be reset for lighting later



in the day. “You had best get to work. There is much to be done and little time to do it.”

“Yes, Mrs. Sanders.” Holland strode toward the fireplace, relieved when the woman marched off, the items dangling from her chatelaine clinking together as she walked.

Despite her earlier anger with Brant and the unknown woman, and the abrupt and rather rude woman who brashly announced she was now in charge, Holland grinned, likening Mrs. Sanders to a cow with a bell. At least with her chatelaine chiming discordantly with each step, it would be easy enough to keep track of her.

Holland worked straight through lunch. She discovered the new parlormaid—a red-haired Irish lass named Kierney—working in the music room, and welcomed her. Finally, when she couldn’t ignore the growling in her stomach any longer, Holland dashed to the kitchen only to find Dulcie chatting with a girl named Ellen who introduced herself as a new scullery maid. Holland wasn’t even sure what that meant, but she was glad to see someone giving Dulcie a hand.

“I saved a bowl of stew for you,” Dulcie said, retrieving a small crockery bowl from the warming oven along with two biscuits.

“You are an angel of mercy,” Holland said and kissed Dulcie’s cheek.

“Hardly, but you need sustenance if you’re going to keep up with today’s hectic pace.”

“It has been a busy day,” Holland agreed. She rolled back her sleeves, washed her hands and face, then took a seat at the small table where she and Savannah had interviewed with Remington in what seemed like a lifetime ago but had only been a few months.

After offering a silent word of thanks for the meal, Holland buttered the biscuits, slathered them with a thick layer of apple butter, and bit into one.

“Savannah rushed in long enough to stuff a slice of ham and cheese between a biscuit before she and Serena were sent downstairs to help in the laundry,” Dulcie said, raising her eyebrow as she stirred what appeared to be a pot of custard filling. “Apparently, Mrs. Sanders is bent on reorganizing everyone.”

“I did make note of that.” Holland wanted to take time to savor her meal, but ate quickly lest Mrs. Sanders catch her and decide to fire her for taking a break, or leave her to scrub all the chamber pots. She shuddered just thinking about the odious task that Trinity never seemed to mind doing.

“We simply need more staff,” Holland observed as she bit into her second biscuit. “You worked in a large home, Dulcie. Was it as big as this one?”

“No, it wasn’t nearly as large, but there were five more house staff than we have. With guests here, one person can’t handle all the laundry, we need one if not two more sets of hands in the kitchen, and if herself,” Dulcie said, referring to Mrs. Sanders, “starts moving maids from upstairs to the basement, who will clean the rooms there? On top of that, Monroe has two young men shadowing his every footstep to learn how to be butlers from him. Did you know they are his nephews?”

“Nephews?” Holland asked. She had no idea they’d arrived, let alone were related to Remington. “He must be pleased to have his relatives with him, even if it is for a brief time while he trains them.”

“He did seem quite pleased,” Dulcie said as she poured the custard filling over pears Ellen had arranged in pie shells.

“I made a custard pear pie for the Harvest Dance. Bran ... I mean Mr. Hudson

certainly seemed to enjoy it.”

Dulcie grinned as she scraped the last of the custard filling over the pears. “Why do you think I’m making the pie? He described it in decadent detail and requested I make it for dessert tonight. Savannah gave me your basic recipe. I hope it tastes as good as yours. If not, you’ll have to write down the exact ingredients, and I’ll try again.”

Holland took the last bite of her stew, used her biscuit to mop up the remaining juice and shoved it in her mouth, then set her dishes in the sink and washed them. “You’re an excellent cook, Dulcie. I’m sure everything will turn out perfectly.” Holland swiped her finger around the inside of the pan to taste a remnant of the custard and grinned. “It’s delicious.”

Dulcie playfully swatted at her with the towel she’d been using to keep the hot pan handle from burning her hand. “Go on with you. If you find a spare minute, Monroe mentioned a fresh arrangement for the table in the entry, and one for the table in the breakfast room. Apparently, Mr. Hudson prefers to dine in there this evening.”

“I’ll check on Kierney and see if she needs help mopping the last of the hallway floor, then I’ll see to the arrangements.” Holland sped out of the room and nearly collided with two young men who bore a resemblance to Remington. They were both handsome, tall, and appeared to be close to Savannah’s age.

“Hello,” she said with a friendly smile. “You must be related to Monroe.”

The taller of the two smiled and politely tipped his head to her. “Dalton Steele at your service, miss. This is my brother, Gareth. I believe we met your sister earlier. You are Holland.”

“That I am.” She shook their hands. “It’s wonderful to meet you. I hope to hear about

your journey and what brought you to Silver Bluff later. Perhaps after dinner things will quiet down. It's certainly been an unusual day."

"That's what Uncle Remington said as well. He's in a meeting with Mr. Hudson at the moment and told us to see if Dulcie might be willing to part with a few cookies," Gareth said, looking with longing into the kitchen as delicious aromas drifted into the hallway.

"Ask her nicely, and I'm sure she'll even give you milk to enjoy with the cookies." Holland backed toward the stairs. "It's nice to meet you both. Welcome!" With that, she turned and raced upstairs, found Kierney finishing the last of the mopping, and hurried back downstairs. Holland snagged an old shawl she wore outside while she was working and dashed for the conservatory. It had snowed an inch last night, and the heavy gray clouds overhead indicated they'd receive more snow soon.

Chilled by the time she opened the conservatory's heavy door, Holland eagerly stepped into the welcome warmth and gave herself a moment to breathe in the earthy aromas. She knew Brant intended to eventually expand the already large conservatory to allow experimenting with plants, but for now, it served the purpose of providing a place to grow vegetables and flowers through the cold winter months.

The entry area was filled with tropical plants that fascinated Holland. Their bright colors and unusual blooms intrigued her. A small room to the left held orchids and lilies. The room farthest to the right was long and deep, where raised beds held an assortment of vegetables. One wing held bulbs in various stages of being forced to bloom and flowers she had no idea what they were other than beautiful. Another wing was dedicated to herbs and edible flowers. There was even a room where nothing but roses grew. She knew the gardener hoped to plant most of the flowers in beds in the spring.

Holland left her shawl on a hook by the door, snatched a strawberry from the bed at

the back of the vegetable section, then wandered through the wings and connecting rooms, choosing a stem here and a blossom there. She pilfered a few more strawberries, returned the clippers she'd used to the hook above the planting table, and walked back to the entry. After covering the basket she held with a piece of burlap to keep the flowers from freezing, she was just about to wrap her shawl around her shoulders when the door opened, filled with a large presence.

Brant moved inside, shut the door behind him, and gave her a long studying glance.

"Mr. Hudson," she said, dipping her head in a polite gesture. She was still angry with him, although he'd done nothing to deserve her ire. If she were addlepated enough to think he might ever hold any interest in or affection for her, that was entirely her doing, not his. She'd been a stupid, silly girl to even dream he might one day see her as more than just a maid in his house.

But in reality, that's all she was. Hired help. Nothing more.

"Oh, I'm Mr. Hudson today, am I? You know there isn't anyone else out here, don't you? I was upstairs and saw you run out here. Have you had a moment to rest today?" His voice held a tenderness that made her want to throw herself into his arms and plead with him to notice her, to see how much she cared for him, but she didn't.

Instead, she straightened her spine and lifted her chin. "Mrs. Sanders runs a tight ship. Food and rest do not seem to be on her list of acceptable reasons to stop working."

"Is that so? A regular old dragon, is she?" Brant asked, taking a step closer to her, his incredible blue eyes dancing with mirth. "Did she breathe fire?"

"Almost. Or it might have been the garlic I smelled on her breath."

Brant chuckled and placed his hands on Holland's arms, rubbing up and down. "Are

you cold? Do you want my coat?” He started to slip it off, but Holland shook her head.

“I’m fine, Mr. Hudson. Is there something you need?”

He looked like he was about to say something, then changed his mind. “I needed to see you, Holland. It’s been a topsy-turvy day, and I wanted a few minutes of sunshine.”

“Sunshine?” she asked, confused. “It’s so dark and cloudy out there, it might as well be dusk. What are you talking about?”

Brant moved closer to her, stopping only when the toes of his boots touched the hem of her dress. “You, Holland, are my sunshine. I need a daily dose of your jubilant spirit, or things just don’t seem right. I missed your bright smile this morning when I was in the library.”

“Oh,” she said, backing up until she bumped into one of the tables holding a potted lemon tree. “I assumed you were busy with your friend. Or is she your fiancée?”

“So, that’s the reason you look like you ate something tart. I thought your vinegary attitude was because of dragon-breathing Mrs. Sanders. You’re jealous of Eloise. Is that it?”

“Of course not,” Holland snapped, but the lie tasted terrible on her tongue. “Maybe,” she admitted, sagging in defeat. Then the name he spoke registered in her mind. “Eloise? As in your sister who’s coming for Christmas?”

Brant nodded. “The very one. She surprised me in town yesterday. She had her own entourage with the children, their nanny, her lady’s maid, and the others in tow. Did you meet Ellen and Kierney, and Remington’s nephews?”

No longer feeling as if her dreams had all died, Holland realized Brant had followed her out to the conservatory because he missed her. Missed their morning library chats as she cleaned.

She smiled. “I did meet them. The boys look like their uncle, don’t they? Will they study long with him? Will they stay here when they’ve completed their training?”

“They do look like Rem. I think it will take a few months for them to learn the basics, longer to become proficient. Remington has suggested I need a footman, a valet, a butler’s assistant, and any number of positions. We’ll see how the boys work out. It might be that one or both of them will work into positions here.”

“I’m sure Remington will be thrilled to have them nearby if they stay. Does he have many siblings?”

“No. Just one sister. She was eleven when he was born and married young, but she and Rem have always stayed in touch. Kari has the two boys, and a daughter, who is thirteen, I think.”

“How did they come to be with your sister?”

Brant stepped past her and wandered past a display of ginger root. “Dean’s uncle is dying, so he went back to New York to say his farewells. Eloise asked him to pay a call to Kari and see if the boys might be interested in training with Remington. They were excited by the prospect. As a surprise to both me and Remington, Dean put them on a train. It just happened to work out they arrived in Silver Bluff a few hours ahead of Eloise. She’d wired a message for them to wait for her, and that’s how they all came to be here.”

“It’s wonderful. Your sister must care a great deal for you to go to so much effort to try and fill your house with appropriate staff.”

“Speaking of staff ...” Brant turned to face her with his arms over his chest. “Tell me how you think we should distribute the house staff. I heard from Dulcie that Mrs. Sanders sent Savannah and Serena down to help in the laundry. I don’t think that is a particularly good use of their skills. I also know you would like to move to the kitchen. Is that still your desire?”

Holland nodded. “It is, but only if it doesn’t leave the housemaids short-staffed.”

“I sent Remington to town to see if he can hire more help in the laundry. Provided he hires someone today, or soon, you can plan to work in the kitchen tomorrow. That should leave adequate staff among the housemaids, don’t you think?”

“I do, but why are you asking me all this? I’m just one of the maids.”

“No, dear Holland, you are not. You’re my friend, and I value your insight and opinions.” Brant brushed his finger along her jaw before gently tipping up her chin. “Do you not know how important you are to me?”

Holland felt lost as she fell into the heat of his gaze, drowning in its depths, but there was no other place she wanted to be.

“Sweet, sweet Holland,” Brant whispered as his head descended toward hers. She closed her eyes, feeling his breath caress her cheek, the peppermint scent of the candy he so enjoyed mingling with the unique masculine scent of him.

Often she’d dreamed of what it would be like to kiss him, to be held in his strong arms, to be surrounded by his love.

Before she could discover that particular bliss, they were interrupted.

“Mr. Hudson, I wanted you to know, the—” The gardener who walked in abruptly



stopped talking as Brant turned to face him.

Holland, feeling both irritated and embarrassed to be caught with Brant in the conservatory of all places, tried to gather her composure. She picked up the basket of stems she'd cut, grabbed her shawl, and nodded to the two men. "Thank you for your assistance, sir."

Coward that she was, she ran all the way back to the house and retreated to the basement to arrange the flowers, knowing Brant wouldn't come down there seeking her. For reasons she didn't entirely understand, she felt as though he'd held a beautiful gift out to her, and it had been snatched away before she could even untie the ribbon.

Holland finished the arrangements and carried them upstairs. She was just leaving one in the breakfast room when she saw Brant walk by with a little girl in his arms. The child had to be his beloved niece, Clara.

Footsteps stopped, then backed up a few paces. Brant peered around the edge of the doorway and smiled. "The arrangements are lovely, Holland. Thank you." He spoke in a soft, low voice.

"You're welcome. I enjoy creating them." She walked over and gazed at the beautiful sleeping child he held. "Clara?" she whispered.

"Yes. It's past her naptime, and she refused to go to sleep until I carried her around a few minutes and she could no longer keep her eyes open. Eloise and Nanny Lewis are trying to get Mayes to take a rest as well. I thought I'd put Clara on the couch in the sitting room."

"I'll help you settle her." Holland followed him to the sitting room done in light woods, with multiple windows. The furniture was covered in soft brown leather with

wide comfortable seats and cushions. The walls, painted a pale shade of green, felt both welcoming and calming. It was the most peaceful room in the house, and the most comfortable.

Once Brant placed Clara on the couch, Holland lifted a blanket from a cedar lined chest placed against the far wall and covered the child. She brushed the curls from the little one's face, seeing a resemblance to Brant in her nose and chin.

"She's lovely," Holland whispered when she and Brant stood in the doorway, watching to make sure Clara continued to sleep.

Brant glanced at Holland, his gaze intent on her lips. They tingled, remembering how close she and Brant had been to kissing earlier. Perhaps it had been divine intervention the gardener had interrupted when he had.

"You are lovely, Holland. I'm sorry about earlier. I likely won't have a chance to see much of you later. I did speak with Mrs. Sanders about moving you to the kitchen beginning tomorrow. She didn't appear particularly pleased, but then her face seems to be stuck in a permanent scowl."

Holland did her best not to giggle, but it took effort on her part. Brant had accurately described the woman. She felt bad for leaving Savannah on her own to deal with the dragon-breath woman, but perhaps things would smooth out if Remington hired additional staff for the laundry.

"If you have any more trouble with anyone, let me know. I want all my employees to be happy here. Eloise has assured me Mrs. Sanders comes with a long list of references, but we'll see if she's a good fit for Hudson House. I have a feeling she's all bark and no bite."

"Maybe. Time will tell." Holland smiled up at Brant, feeling the undeniable, nearly

indescribable pull between the two of them. If she lingered any longer, she wasn't certain what she'd do if he attempted to kiss her again.

She left the room and returned to her duties, realizing she'd eagerly kiss him back.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:42 pm*

“D o you have a moment?”

Brant looked up from reviewing reports of his railroad investments to see his sister standing in the doorway of the library.

“Of course. Come in.” He rose and stepped around his desk, motioning for her to take a seat in one of the velvet upholstered chairs facing the fireplace.

Eloise walked into the room with her customary grace and style. She and the children had been there a week, in which time they’d settled into Hudson House quite nicely.

Mayes and Clara both loved playing with Bobby. Eloise convinced Dulcie it was a good thing to let Bobby play with her children, and Nanny Lewis kept an eye on all three of the young ones. Brant had even convinced Holland and Savannah to bring Charli with them to spend the day when they came to work Tuesday morning. The little girls had a grand time playing together, and Clara had cried when Denver had taken Charli home.

Denver had moved into the quarters for the male staff members above the stables. Brant could keep the carpenters busy for the next dozen years and not run out of projects for them to work on. He liked that Denver was close by for Holland and Savannah to talk to when they needed a listening ear.

The two sisters, who had been nearly inseparable, seemed to have adjusted to working in different areas of the house. Dulcie offered pleased reviews about Holland’s help in the kitchen, and Mrs. Sanders had figured out which maids did their best work in specific areas of Brant’s home. Thankfully, Remington had been able to

hire two women to work in the laundry, and an experienced footman.

With a full staff, even if several of them were not yet fully trained, the house operations had begun to run smoothly. No longer were the evenings too quiet. Instead, they were filled by the sounds of children giggling, people laughing, and a house settling into a home.

Eloise perched on a chair and waited for Brant to sit in the one across from her. He could tell she had something on her mind, something she wanted to discuss, or rather, inform him he needed to do.

“What is weighing on your mind, Eloise?” he asked, leaning back in the chair and stretching out his legs toward the fire that had been burning cheerily in the hearth when he’d entered the room earlier. He missed his morning conversations with Holland as she cleaned, but perhaps it was for the best. He had to wander through the house to the kitchen at least once a day just to see her, and it gave him an opportunity to observe more of what was taking place beneath his roof.

He’d noticed Dalton and Gareth seemed taken with Savannah, which both amused and annoyed Remington. Denver’s friend Colin was sweet on Serena, and Denver seemed to find excuses to visit the kitchen to check on Dulcie.

Perhaps the upcoming holiday season carried a hint of romance in the air.

“Christmas, Brant,” his sister said, drawing him back to their conversation. “You don’t have a single decoration for the holidays and none anywhere in storage that I’ve found. I realize most men seem to think a magic being snaps his fingers and the house is transformed with garlands and bows, but I assure you it takes weeks of planning and preparation.”

“I hoped Remington had something planned.”

Eloise scowled at him. “When would he do that? Between managing everything for you, serving as your butler, valet, and footman, not to mention the million other things he does around here, when would he have time? I’m not certain the poor man ever rests, which is why I thought it would be good to train Dalton and Gareth.”

“I agree, and I have plans I’m working on, so let’s revisit your opinions on all that after Christmas.” Brant sat forward and braced his elbows on his knees. “I don’t have the slightest idea where to begin with Christmas decorations. I did buy a spool of red ribbon at the store last week that should be delivered any day. Do you need me to order some things? Are decorations something that can be found in Silver Bluff? If it’s just going to be us, what is required beyond a tree for the children to enjoy on Christmas Day?”

“About that.” Eloise glanced at the fire instead of him, a sure sign he was not going to like whatever she had to say. “From what I heard at church Sunday, people are anxious and excited to see your home, Brant. I propose hosting a Christmas ball on Christmas Eve. Nothing too elaborate. Then on Christmas Day, I think we should open the doors to your employees and their families. Serve a simple meal, present a gift to each family, and a toy to each child.”

Brant liked the ideas but had no notion how they’d accomplish so much in such little time. “There isn’t any way we can decorate the house for the holiday, arrange a ball for a hundred people, feed another two hundred people on Christmas Day, and buy gifts for all the little ones. How could we possibly make that happen?”

“By enlisting the help of the ladies in the community. I mentioned my ideas to Holland and Savannah. They thought their mother might be able to gather women to help with the decorations. It wouldn’t be hard to compile a list of your employees and their family members, then acquire the ages of each child. Think of it, Brant. Some of these children may not receive any gift but the one you give.”

He could almost hear violins playing a sad, maudlin tune as Eloise spread the guilt over him like a wet, moldy blanket.

“Fine. Charge ahead. What do you need me to do?”

She offered him a pleased, somewhat smug smile. “Set a budget for each category. I need to know how much to spend on decorations. Gifts. Food. The ball. Also, we will need to hire temporary staff for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.”

“You better start asking around now if additional staff is needed. You might have to haul them in from The Dalles, or even Portland if you can’t find any locals willing to work.”

“I don’t think we’ll have any trouble finding enough people.”

Brant walked over to his desk, wrote out a bank note, and handed it to Eloise. “Will this cover everything?” he asked.

She smiled, hopped up, and gave him a hug. “Thank you, Brant. I just want this first Christmas in your lovely home to be one you’ll always remember.”

“I will, because having you and the children here has made the house feel much more like a home. I’m so glad you came, Eloise.”

She squeezed his hand and headed for the door. “I am too, dear brother. Did I hear mention you have timber on your property?”

“Yes. About ten miles from here. Why?” Brant couldn’t imagine what she’d need in the woods.

“Trees, Brant. We need Christmas trees. Greens for garlands and wreaths, and boughs

to drape on fireplace mantels. Will Remington know where to find the trees?”

Brant nodded. “Yes, but let me speak with him. How many trees do you require?”

Eloise tapped a finger to her chin. “I’m not entirely certain. I’ll have a number for you when we dine for lunch.”

“That will be fine. Thank you, Eloise.”

She tilted her head in a manner that reminded him of their mother, although Eloise’s personality was nothing like hers. “For what?”

“For reminding me it’s important to open my home and heart for the holidays.”

“I’ll remind you every day if necessary,” she said with a wink, then breezed out of the room.

Brant returned to his desk and sank into the chair. Sometimes being around his sister was like trying to harness a hurricane, but she meant well and her heart was in the right place.

He hurried to finish reviewing the reports, wrote a letter to send to his investment manager and addressed it, then pulled out a file with records of his current employees. In addition to the household staff, those working in the stable and those doing jobs elsewhere on the estate were the head gardener and his staff, the dairy manager and his employees, the hog division, the farm manager and his workers, and others he’d nearly forgotten about.

It made Brant feel slightly better to realize he knew which of his employees were married, if they had children, and their spouse’s names. He might have been raised to treat people “beneath him,” as his father would say, as though they didn’t matter, but



Brant had never felt that way. Without the people he employed, he wouldn't have a beautiful home or growing businesses on the property that he hoped would, in the near future, make it one of the most successful enterprises in the West.

After jotting down several pages of notes about the staff, he started another list including names of people from Silver Bluff to invite. Few people in town were wealthy, but that didn't matter to him anyway. He wanted the ball to be a celebration of the people who had welcomed him to Silver Bluff and made him feel part of the community.

No one had done a better job of that than Holland. Could he somehow convince her to attend the ball with him? There was no one else he'd rather have by his side.

If Brant cared to admit it, he was head over heels in love with her. The question that he couldn't quite seem to answer was what he planned to do about it.

Brant refrained from making any trips to the kitchen all morning. He joined Eloise in the breakfast room for lunch, then they bundled up and went for a walk. It had been so chilly and snowy the past week, they'd hardly had time to explore the grounds, but the sun shining brightly and the sound of icicles dripping assured him the weather was warmer than it had been.

"Tell me again why you chose sandstone for the house," Eloise said as they walked around the south side of the house where the warmth of the sun reflected off the building.

"One reason is the quarry across the river could produce enough to meet my demands," he said as they stopped and both stared up at the towering structure. "The stones are fire resistant, the rain won't ever damage them, and they'll last beyond my lifetime."

Eloise's hand, where it rested on his arm, squeezed gently. "It's a magnificent home, Brant. I know you spent years planning each room, and all your effort and dreams have become a beautiful reality that's providing jobs for many people in this area. Although Dean and I questioned your sanity when you said you were buying land in Silver Bluff, it's been just the right thing for you to do."

Brant chuckled. "I know. Dean told me as much. The first time Rem and I came here and stood on the bluff looking down at the river, I knew I'd found the place I wanted to build my home. I don't know how to explain it other than to say I knew I had to build my home here."

"It does feel like home, here, Brant. Like you've found the place you were always meant to be. It couldn't have been easy to sever all your ties with Father and the family business, but I'm proud of you for striking out on your own."

"Thank you, Eloise. You know how he is, how both Mother and Father are. That's not how I want to live my life. Besides, Father always said he already had an heir and a spare when I came along, which made me both irrelevant and useless."

Eloise frowned. "It was cruel of him to ever think that, let alone say it. Repeatedly. He acted like it was a funny joke he could take out and share at parties."

Brant shrugged, and they began walking toward the fountain that had been drained before the ground frosted. "It doesn't matter now. What's in the past is behind us, and an exciting future stretches out before us."

"Regarding your future, I've noticed any number of interested girls would gladly become Mrs. Hudson."

Brant shook his head. "No, Eloise. I don't need any matchmaking on my behalf."

“Only because you’ve already fallen in love.”

“I have n—”

She waggled a gloved finger at him. “Don’t try and deny it. As soon as you and Holland were in the same room, it practically lit up with sparks. How long has that been going on?”

“From the day we met.” Brant sighed, recalling how he’d pretended to be Alex, then shared the story with his sister.

Eloise swatted him. “That was a ridiculous thing for a grown man to do. It serves you right if she likes Alex better than Mr. Hudson. Have you ever considered the notion that she might just love all of you, not only bits and pieces?”

“No one has said anything about love, Eloise.”

His sister lifted an eyebrow. “Perhaps it’s far past time you did.”

“Just leave it be, Sister. However, I do want to inquire if you think Holland might accompany me to the Christmas Eve ball. I assume the staff, particularly the kitchen staff, will be stretched thin that night. Will she feel she must stay and help Dulcie? Or do you think she’d be willing to attend?”

“I have no idea, Brant. The only one who can answer your questions is Holland, and until you ask her, you’ll never know. By the way, I asked Mrs. Sanders and Remington to gather all the staff for a meeting first thing in the morning to discuss the Christmas decorations, ball, and party. Dulcie will prepare coffee and muffins for everyone. We’ll meet in the dining room at eight. It will also provide an opportunity to see how the table looks when it is stretched all the way out.”

“That’s fine. Anything else I should know?”

Eloise appeared thoughtful for a moment. “Not at the moment. The lists you made will be most helpful in planning. Oh, I believe we’ll need a dozen Christmas trees. Two of them should be exceedingly tall. One should go at the base of the stairs. The other in the dining room. If the branches are sturdy enough, the dining room tree can be decorated with the wrapped gifts we’ll give to the employees’ children on Christmas Day. For the ball, the most suitable space is the attic. Nothing is stored up there, and it offers ample space for dancing. I realize access is not ideal for an entire party to troop through the servants’ quarters to reach it, but I truly think it would work. I had Remington escort me up there before lunch. Electric lights that work have already been installed in the attic. You could have one of the carpenters build a platform for the musicians. We’ll need refreshment tables, and tables and chairs for guests, and linens. I may need to send off for some of those things. What do you think?”

“To summarize, you want enormous trees, when we have nothing to decorate them. You plan to invite a hundred or so people to traipse to the furthestmost corner of my house and encourage them to dance in the empty attic. And you don’t seem to think it is a tragically terrible idea for me to invite Holland to the ball.”

“Exactly. You do catch on quickly, Brant. I’m so proud of you,” she said drolly.

Brant felt like his sister was patronizing him, but chose to ignore it. Instead, they returned to the house. After leaving Eloise by the fire in the sitting room, he went in search of Remington. If they were going to pull off a Christmas celebration unlike any Silver Bluff had ever known, it was going to require intricate planning on everyone’s part.

Two hours later, Brant felt the need for what he’d come to think of as his sunshine break. A moment to bask in the warmth that was all Holland. He stepped into the

kitchen to find her alone in the spacious room, kneading a large lump of yeasty dough on a marble-topped table that hadn't been there the previous day.

"Where did that come from?" he asked as Holland glanced over her shoulder at him.

"Dulcie asked Remington to order it. She claims the marble turns out the best pastries, breads, and biscuits."

Brant grinned. "I don't know how she could improve on perfection. Her biscuits are the best I've ever tasted."

"I know! I've watched her make them a dozen times, copied the exact ingredients and measurements, and mine never turn out as good as hers. I think there's some secret ingredient she's failed to share."

Brant washed his hands at the sink, dried them as he watched Holland work the dough, then sauntered over to the big cookie jar Dulcie kept on the kitchen table. He fished out two cinnamon cookies laden with walnuts, then returned the lid to the jar and poured a cup of coffee from the pot on the back of the stove. He dunked his cookie into the steaming liquid and took a bite before going over to lean against the wall by the table where Holland worked.

"Have you heard about the Christmas festivities?" he asked, taking another bite of the cookie.

"The ball, the Christmas party for the staff, or the decorations and tree-fetching expedition?" Holland glanced at him and then returned her focus to kneading the bread.

"There's an expedition?" Brant hadn't heard about that. He really needed to start a detailed list and follow up with Remington on each point.

“Why, Mr. Hudson! You best keep up, or you’ll be left out in a snowbank,” Holland teased, then gave him a somber look. “Honestly, Brant, the plans are all wonderful. The staff is already buzzing like bees about the Christmas party. The community will soon be thrilled to learn about the ball. Did I hear mention your sister wants to hold it in the attic?”

“That’s what she said. I didn’t build the house with a ballroom, and all that empty space up there seemed to be calling to her.”

Holland laughed. “With enough help, it could be a beautiful space, especially with all the windows offering amazing views. You have electric lights installed there already. A few decorations, maybe a tree or two, and it will spruce the space right up. I also heard you are thinking about giving gifts to children of employees.”

“Yes. I’ve started a list. I may require assistance to ensure no child is forgotten.”

“Of course. Savannah and I can help, and so can Denver. He knows most of the fellows who work around the property.” Holland lifted the huge lump of dough, turned it over, and continued kneading. Watching her hands work in and out of the dough was almost mesmerizing.

Brant cleared his throat and tried to focus. “I want to give a gift to each employee. Other than a monetary gift, does anything come to mind as a suggestion?”

“It may seem a silly thing to you, but oranges are a special tradition in my family. Each year for Christmas we get an orange. They are hard to come by, and costly, so it is a special treat. You could gift each employee’s family with a basket of oranges if you wanted to do something special and generous. I think they would be appreciated. If that is too much or too extravagant, perhaps something like a smoked ham for each family.”

“I like the idea of oranges. It’s something that would keep awhile, and could be enjoyed in the days and weeks after Christmas.” Brant smiled at her as she began forming the bread into loaves. “I have one more question for you.”

“Certainly. What is it?” she asked as she tucked the dough into the prepared loaf pans on the worktable behind her.

“Would you consider attending the ball with me, Holland? There is nothing that would make me happier.”

For a moment, he thought she was going to drop the dough in her hands. She managed to plunk it into a loaf pan before she wiped her hands on her apron and turned to stare at him as though he’d begun speaking in foreign tongues.

“You want me to go to the ball? Your Christmas ball?” The strange look on her face and her eyes made it hard for him to know if she was excited, scared, angry, or elated. “With you?”

“Yes. Will you accompany me to the ball?”

Instead of answering, she threw him completely off kilter by asking, “Why?”

“Why? Because it’s a ball. It’s Christmas. I want ...” Brant wanted her beside him always, but thought the ball might be a good first step in the right direction. “It would make me quite pleased if you agreed to go with me.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea, Brant. People will talk. I’m your employee. You’re ... you.” She slid the loaf pans into the oven. “I wouldn’t want to embarrass you, Mr. Hudson.”

Brant felt like banging his head on the marble table in frustration. Instead, he dumped

what was left of his coffee down the drain, set his cup in the sink, and shoved the last bite of his cookie in his mouth before he walked over to where Holland fussed with a bit of dough stuck to her finger.

He took her hands captive between his. “Holland, you should know by now I don’t care if people talk. It doesn’t matter to me if you’re my employee or not. And you could never embarrass Mr. Hudson, nor your friend, Alex. In fact, can’t you come around to the idea that they are all the same person? That they are me?”

“That’s part of the problem, Brant. You are wealthy and handsome, and intelligent and amazing. You deserve a woman who will make you proud and know which of the six forks at the dinner table to use, or how to ask a question in French. I’m a farm girl who enjoys baking and arranging flowers. That does not make for a good match.”

“How do you know? Aren’t you even willing to take a chance? To follow a dream, Holland? You once told me it was your dream to work here. What would you do if I said you’re my dream?”

Holland pulled her hands away from him and stepped over to look out one of the windows. “I’d say you are likely eating too much dessert that is causing indigestion that leads to nightmares if you think I’m your dream. How can I be, Brant? I’m never going to be more than Holland Drake.”

He knew she’d meant her comment to be funny, but it made him angry. “I don’t want or need you to be anyone more or different, because you are the one who has captured my interest. If you don’t believe me, then explain this.”

Without considering where he was, who could walk into the kitchen at any moment, nor how Holland would react, Brant pulled her into his arms and kissed her. At first, it was a kiss of tenderness, of introduction, but then she slid the arms he’d trapped between the two of them along his shoulders and around the back of his neck,



drawing herself closer in his arms. The kiss turned to one of hunger and acceptance, of exploration and connection.

“Brant,” she whispered in a ragged voice when he finally lifted his head from hers.

“Hmm?” he asked, lost somewhere between the dream of Holland and the kiss that left him weak in the knees.

“I’ll go to the ball with you.”

“That’s good, Holland. That’s very good.” He leaned down to kiss her again, but voices in the hallway sent her scurrying away from him. She turned on the hot water in the sink so steam rose upward, no doubt hoping to blame her red face on it.

“Oh, Mr. Hudson. Is there something I can do for you?” Dulcie asked as she and Ellen carried in jars of canned vegetables and set them on the worktable.

“No, Dulcie. Holland let me steal something sweet. I’ll be on my way.” He walked to the doorway, then glanced back at Holland. Her kisses had been sweeter and better than he had dreamed possible.

Knowing that only made him hungry to kiss her again.

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*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:42 pm*

“I can’t go through with this, Savannah. It’s crazy. Isn’t it?” Holland asked as she and Savannah dressed in their room at Hudson House. Due to the extra staff that had been hired for Christmas and all that had happened since Eloise’s arrival, the sisters had continued sharing a room in the basement.

Holland cherished these quiet moments in the early hours of the morning with Savannah for however long they lasted. She had the most unsettling feeling that life for them all was about to change.

One step in starting that snowball rolling downhill would be Holland accompanying Brant to the ball.

It wasn’t like the invitations to the ball had only gone out to the snobbish and wealthy in the area. Brant had invited the pastor of their church, Mr. and Mrs. Gibson who owned the mercantile, and the couple who managed the hotel. People Holland had known all her life.

But if she stepped into the ballroom on Brant’s arm, it would be stepping into a future she wasn’t sure she was ready to accept, and she certainly wasn’t convinced it was what was best for Brant.

She couldn’t envision her future without Brant in it, but she also couldn’t picture herself ever being as elegant and refined as Eloise. If Brant took her to New York, she’d be labeled a country bumpkin before they ever set foot off the train.

“What’s crazy?” Savannah asked on a yawn as she poked hairpins into the bun she’d fashioned at the nape of her neck.

“Going to the ball with Brant!” Holland said, exasperated with her sister, with Brant, with life in general. Why did everything have to seem so hard? She felt as though no matter what choice she made it would be the wrong one and end up hurting someone she cared about.

“Oh, that. No, you are not crazy to accept his invitation, Holland, but you would be if you lose your courage and don’t go. Brant cares for you. Anyone with eyeballs in their head can see it. Why not give yourself the opportunity to enjoy a special evening with the man who adores you?”

“Because he shouldn’t adore me. He should fall in love with one of Eloise’s friends and marry someone with a pedigree as impressive as his own.” Holland sighed as she tied the apron on over her uniform. “Brant is brilliant and has a bright future ahead of him. I don’t want to be the thing that derails his success or holds him back.”

Savannah rolled her eyes. “I’ve heard Brant tell Monroe he needs his daily dose of sunshine, then he immediately goes to the kitchen to see you. You are his sunshine, Holland. As sweet and ridiculously sentimental as that is, it’s true. Brant wants to be with you. Besides, it’s one party, not a lifetime declaration of intentions. You should go. Enjoy. Celebrate all the hard work we’ve done the past three weeks to pull off what the Silver Bluff newspaper has referred to as the ‘event of the year.’”

Holland scoffed. “That auspicious title doesn’t carry a lot of weight considering the Fourth of July picnic has been the most celebrated event to date.”

A laugh escaped from Savannah as they made their beds, then hurried upstairs to get to work.

“Stop worrying and enjoy your day. If I can steal a few moments away, I’ll help you get ready. Did Mama bring over your dress?”

Holland nodded, thinking of the teal made-over dress she'd worn several times the past few months. It was the nicest thing she owned, even if it wasn't worthy of a ball.

She refused to waste money on a dress she'd likely never wear again, even if she did talk herself into going. Holland had ten hours before the ball to either embrace her courage and her dreams, or let go of her hopes for a future with Brant.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:42 pm*

“There have been excursions to the wilds of faraway jungles made with less fervor and planning than you’ve poured into this ball, sister dear.” Brant scowled from atop a ladder, hanging yet another ribbon-bedecked garland in the attic.

Dean laughed as he steadied the ladder and smiled at his wife. “He’s not wrong, Elle. Military leaders could learn from your ability to unite, organize, and charge onward, taking no prisoners.”

“Hush! Both of you!” Eloise playfully swatted her husband’s arm with the spool of red ribbon in her hands. He jerked, and the ladder wobbled. For a moment Brant wasn’t sure he’d remain upright and quickly finished hanging the garland before he climbed down the ladder.

He stepped back and surveyed the space. When Eloise had first suggested using the attic for the ball, Brant thought she might have experienced a moment of insanity, but she’d been right. The space was perfect.

Denver and Colin had worked at a frenzied pace to finish the trim around the floors, doorway, and windows, then the two of them had built a platform for the musicians, courtesy of the Silver Bluff Community Band. They’d also built long sturdy tables along the far wall which would hold refreshments. The dance would begin at six, with a light supper served downstairs at eight.

The attic looked incredible, thanks to Eloise’s vision and help from everyone who worked in the house. Brant saw Holland’s talented hand in the flower arrangements. He knew her mother had asked all the members of her quilting club to help crochet snowflakes and make paper cornucopias that decorated several of the trees.

Brant had gone with Remington, Dalton, and Gareth to chop down the trees. They'd all thought their toes might fall off before they made it home with two wagons loaded down with trees, as well as greens for garlands and wreaths, but it had been an adventure that Brant looked forward to experiencing every year.

If the ball were as well received as Eloise anticipated, Brant might even be open to holding it again next year. Especially if he could convince Holland she belonged by his side.

He knew the invitation to attend as his guest had taken her by surprise, but he could hardly wait to swing her across the polished oak floor tonight. He didn't care if she had an expensive gown or came dressed in her work uniform. To him, regardless of what she wore or how she looked, she was always beautiful, desirable, and the woman he loved.

As though thoughts of her made her materialize, Holland and Ellen appeared carrying trays loaded with punch cups. Brant and Dean relieved them of the heavy trays and carried them over to the white linen-draped table decorated with two centerpieces of evergreens, pine cones, holly, and red taper candles that would be lit just before the guests arrived that evening.

The holly was something Brant had ordered, along with dozens of hothouse poinsettias, red and white roses, and enough baskets of oranges to present one to each of his employees.

Holland had started to fuss over the extravagance of the flowers and fruit, but her protests died when she began to arrange the flowers into elaborate decorations. Even Eloise had commented on her natural talent and eye for creating spectacular arrangements.

"Has anyone tested the dance floor?" Dean asked, giving Brant a shove toward

Holland. “How do we know it’s safe for your guests?”

“For the sake of safety, I suppose we could give it a try.” Brant bowed to Holland, then held out his hand, hoping she’d take it.

She did, with her customary brilliant smile, and soon they were twirling around the attic. Not to be outdone, Dean swept Eloise into his arms and joined in the fun while Ellen stood by the door and clapped her hands to keep a rhythm going they could dance to.

“Oh, that was wonderful,” Eloise said, pushing in loose hairpins when Dean came to a stop.

“It was wonderful. I thank you, kind sir, for the dance,” Holland said, bobbing into a curtsy before she and Ellen disappeared down the stairs.

Brant went to the intercom system he’d had installed in the attic just last week and pushed the button that would connect him with Remington.

“Yes, sir?” Remington answered on the second buzz.

“The girls are carrying up all the heavy dishes. Have Dalton and Gareth help. If they’re busy, recruit some of the men who are working outside.”

“Consider it done,” Remington said, then disconnected the call.

“That is the handiest thing,” Dean said, admiring the system that allowed Brant to call from nearly any room in the house and connect with the staff person he needed. There was a button for Remington. One for Mrs. Sanders. Another for Dulcie in the kitchen. Repairs had been made to the system in the stables, so it finally worked properly now.

“See what you did,” Eloise complained. “Now Dean will have one of these installed at our house and drive the staff mad.”

“They’re already halfway there, or they wouldn’t work for us in the first place.”

Eloise laughed. “That is true.”

Brant escorted them to the stairs. “There’s so much to be done. What’s left on your list, Eloise?”

“Have you checked outside to make sure your guests will receive a festive entry?” Eloise asked as they walked single file down the stairs.

“Not yet. Shall we take a look?” They made their way down two more flights to the main floor.

Brant didn’t bother with a coat as he hurried out the entry door and down the front steps until he stood in the center of the drive. Snow capped the copper turrets and dusted the roofline as well as the plants on either side of the house. A wreath sporting a fluffy red bow hung from the door, and garlands accented the front of his home.

“It’s perfect, Eloise!”

“I’m glad. Now come inside before you catch a cold,” she said, motioning for him to join them in the warmth of the house.

After checking on the final preparations in the entry, the formal parlor, and even the washrooms, Brant made his way out the back door and walked down the path to the river garden. He stopped and turned, pleased to see the house looked just as festive from this side. Brick-encased pillars held electric lights on either side of the garden walkway, with shrubs and trees draped in snow. It looked wonderful in the daylight,



and he could envision how grand it would appear with the lights glimmering in the twilight and reflecting on the snow.

A simple lunch of chicken soup and bread was served in the breakfast room. Eloise and Nanny Lewis somehow coaxed Mayes, Clara, and Bobby into taking naps. Savannah joined Dulcie, Holland, and Ellen in the kitchen as they worked to prepare the three-course meal that would be served after the dance, as well as ready the refreshments. One of the storage areas on the third floor that hadn't yet been filled was put into use to keep extra trays of cookies and candies ready to replenish the empty trays at the ball.

At four, Brant retired to his room, took a bath, and gave considerable care to his grooming. He selected a high-collared white shirt and silk tie, a deep-red velvet vest, and a black tailcoat suit. Rather than wear the shoes Dalton had polished to a high shine, Brant chose his favorite cowboy boots, hoping they made the statement that although he'd come from the East, he embraced life in the West.

By half past five, Brant's nerves were wound so tight, they felt like they might snap. He opened the balcony door in his bedroom and stepped outside in the gathering darkness. The cold air seeped into him but also calmed him slightly. After one more deep breath of the frosty air, he returned inside, closed the door, and made his way downstairs. He stopped by the kitchen, hoping to find Holland ready and waiting for him, but she wasn't there.

"Is she downstairs?" he asked Savannah as she breezed past him with a tray full of little tidbits that emitted mouth-watering aromas.

Savannah shook her head and set the tray on the work counter. "She said to extend her deepest regrets, but she won't be able to attend the ball."

"What?" Brant shouted, drawing the gazes of everyone in the kitchen. "Where is

she?”

“I’m not certain, Mr. Hudson. She isn’t in our room, and I haven’t had time to search for her elsewhere. My humble opinion is that she’s scared silly because you and this house are everything she’s ever dreamed of, and now that her dreams are within her grasp, she’s terrified of reaching out and grabbing them. She adores you, sir, whether you come to her as Alex her friend, the lord of the manor, or Brant—the man who clearly loves her. I am sorry she let you down.”

Brant could have explained how it was he who’d let Holland down. There were so many things he could have said or done to encourage her these last weeks. Instead, he’d stolen a few kisses in the kitchen, extracted her promise to attend the ball, and found himself so immersed in executing what felt like an impossible Christmas dream, he’d hardly done more than say hello each day when he dropped by the kitchen to see her. No wonder she felt uncertain about attending with him. He could hardly blame her.

Rather than search her out and make things worse, he sent up a prayer, then went to find the one person he was sure could convince Holland to attend the ball.

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Eloise surveyed her reflection in the mirror. The dress she'd chosen was tasteful, not overdone, yet flattered her figure and coloring.

She'd brought three more elaborate gowns with her. In fact, she had offered one of them to Holland, who had quietly and humbly refused.

That's when Eloise had been sure Holland had no intention of attending the ball, but she couldn't dash Brant's hopes. Not when he was so clearly and utterly in love with the woman.

Brant had always been special to Eloise. She remembered when he was born. His first steps. His first word. They'd always been close to each other and avoided their older siblings because they were awful, cruel, selfish people.

Eloise had been so incredibly thankful when Dean had suggested moving to California and invited Brant to become his partner in a new shipping business. It had been the best thing for all of them.

She had worried when Brant declared he was buying property in Oregon along the river and intended to build the dream house he'd talked about for years. Now that she'd spent a month at Hudson House, she could see how Brant had constructed a lasting marvel with the house, as well as a way of life in the community of Silver Bluff that seemed to suit him so well.

He was happier than she'd ever seen him, and a good part of that joy came from Holland Drake.

When Eloise had first realized her brother was in love with one of his employees, she wasn't sure what to make of it. It wasn't until she'd had the opportunity to observe Holland, and the way she looked at Brant with such deep, abiding love, that she knew their match could work.

Oh, it wouldn't be easy. Brant and Holland were both stubborn and prideful. But they belonged together. Eloise could feel it in her bones.

Which was why, when Brant pounded on her door only twenty minutes before the ball was to begin, she knew what he was going to say.

She turned as Dean opened the door and greeted her brother. "Brant. You look quite festive."

"So do both of you. That blue dress is a wonderful color on you, Eloise." Brant tried to smile, but it was lost in the sorrow of his expression.

"She's not coming. Is that the problem?" Eloise questioned.

Brant nodded. "Savannah shared Holland's regrets. She has no idea where she's gone. I could search for her, but I don't know what to say to convince her to come. It's not just about the ball, Eloise. I love her, with all my heart, and I want to spend my forever beside her. If she won't even attend a simple ball with me, what hope do I have?"

"Hope is no meager thing. Don't give up, Brant," Dean said. "Any idea of where to find her?"

Brant nodded. "The library. She loves it there. Or the sunroom, but it doesn't hold as much interest once the daylight fades."

Eloise gave herself one last glance in the mirror, walked over to her closet, and lifted out a gown. “Dean, be a darling and have one of the maids press the wrinkles from that, please, then ask Lila to be ready to work a miracle on a moment’s notice. Brant, go stand at the front door and greet our guests. The early arrivals may want a brief tour. I’ll join you as soon as I am able.”

Without waiting to see what her husband and brother would say or do, Eloise rushed out of the room and down the hallway to the library. She stepped out of the shadows of the hidden entrance to the second floor. Listening. Observing. Other than the fire crackling in the fireplace and light glowing from the lamps on the desk and side tables, the room seemed quiet, then she thought she heard a sigh that sounded like it rolled all the way up from someone’s tortured soul.

Eloise moved until she could look down into the library. Holland curled into the chair behind Brant’s desk, appearing as though she’d lost her last friend.

“Holland Drake!” Eloise yelled. “You have more spunk and gumption in your little finger than fifty other girls. Stop that sniveling and come up here this instant.”

Holland gasped and gaped at her with wide eyes.

“What are you doing?” Eloise asked, waving a hand toward the ceiling. “The ball will start in a few minutes. There’s no time to waste!”

“I’m not going.” Holland sat up in the chair. “Nothing you can say will change my mind.”

“Oh? Are you sure about that?” Eloise felt indignant and angry on Brant’s behalf. She lifted her skirts and charged down the spiral steps.

Holland stood, looking defiant as she faced her. “I can’t go, Mrs. Mitchum. I just

can't."

Eloise felt like shaking the woman, but refrained. Someday, when Holland was her sister-in-law, she wanted them to be friends, not enemies. Holland was a good, kind, caring, loving person. She was also smart, witty, loved children, and would be so good for Brant.

If only she could convince Holland of that.

"I won't leave until you provide a valid reason for breaking Brant's heart this evening. Why won't you go to the ball with him?"

"Because he's so wonderful, Mrs. Mitchum. He's strong and handsome, hardworking and honest, generous and funny. He deserves so much more than I could ever give him."

"That is balderdash." Eloise crossed her arms over her chest and glowered at Holland, hoping she looked half as intimidating as Brant did when he struck a similar pose. "What utter rubbish."

At Holland's shocked expression, Eloise pressed onward. "Brant loves you with all his heart. What right do you have to throw that back in his face? To decide who is and isn't good for him? That's not your choice to make. It's his. Are you saying you don't care for my brother? That you don't love him? That you don't want the best for him, or wish him every happiness in life?"

"I do love him, Mrs. Mitchum. I love him so much I'll walk away from here tonight and he'll never see me again if it would make him happy. If it is the best for him."

Eloise wrapped her arms around Holland, pulling her into a hug. "You silly goose. The one thing in this world that brings Brant the most joy is you. You are what's best

for him. Don't deprive him of that happiness, or yourself. You belong together, but you need to decide right now if you're brave enough to step into your dreams with Brant. Are you, Holland? Because the choice you make right now will determine the course of your future."

Holland hesitated, then slowly nodded, brushing at the tears gliding down her cheeks. "I love him so much, I can't picture any part of my future without him in it."

"Then let's not waste another minute. Come with me. We need to get you ready for the ball, and for heaven's sakes, call me Eloise." She didn't wait for Holland to utter any protest. She grabbed her hand, tugged her up the stairs, and hastened to her room.

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Holland drew in a calming breath, willed her legs to stop shaking beneath her, and scowled when someone nudged her from behind.

She glanced over her shoulder at Denver.

“So help me, if you don’t march up those stairs, I will throw you over my shoulder. It won’t do good things for the dress Mrs. Mitchum insisted you borrow or that fancy hairstyle her maid gave you. If you love Brant and want him in your life, hustle your bustle up those stairs, Holland Drake.”

She might have stuck her tongue out at her bossy brother, but she was trying to behave like a well-mannered lady. “You’re a good brother even when you are infuriatingly right, you know.”

“I know.” Denver placed a hand on her shoulder and gave it an encouraging squeeze. “Now, move those feet.”

Before she turned tail and ran like a coward all the way home to her childhood bedroom, Holland lifted the skirt of the fawn-colored satin gown trimmed with Venetian lace Eloise had insisted she wear, and rushed up the stairs.

Conversations and laughter filled the attic as the musicians tuned their instruments on the platform at the far end of the open room.

The sparkle of the festive decorations was reflected in the excited faces of those who’d come to celebrate Christmas, see Hudson House, and officially welcome Brant into the Silver Bluff community.



Holland scanned the crowd and saw Brant smiling at something Laura Gibson said while shaking her husband's hand before he moved on to greet the pastor.

One of the hundred things she admired about Brant was the way he truly cared about people. He knew the names of not only his employees, but their families. He knew details about people in town—Holland's own friends and neighbors—simply because he listened with an open heart and mind.

Brant wasn't perfect. Holland was mindful of that fact. But she couldn't think of anyone better suited for her.

He was her Christmas dream. Her forever wish come true.

At least he would be if he forgave her for nearly missing this opportunity to share in what would surely become a treasured memory for them both.

She studied him, the cut of his elegant suit coat snug on his broad shoulders, and the thick waves of his short black hair. The white shirt he wore made his tanned face appear even darker and more rugged. When she realized he wore his cowboy boots, it made her smile. It was one more way he sought to become part of the community. Such a little thing, but so significant to her.

Holland knew the moment Brant saw her. His head lifted, and his eyes filled with delight. A smile radiating happiness filled his countenance. She rushed toward him, and he met her halfway across the floor, capturing her hands with his before he kissed her cheek.

"You're here. I'm so glad, Holland. So deeply and profoundly pleased you came."

"Eloise hardly left any room for argument," Holland said, only half joking. The woman had known exactly what to say to change Holland's mind. It had also helped

to know Eloise approved of her for Brant. If the woman had detested her, Holland would have quit her job and never returned because she wouldn't ever want to come between Brant and his family.

As it was, Holland admired and respected both Eloise and her husband, Dean. Holland adored Mayes and Clara, and looked forward to getting to know them all better.

While Eloise had helped Holland dress and her maid had styled Holland's hair, Eloise had spoken of her home in San Francisco and extracted a promise from Holland to visit the next time Brant traveled there on business.

Only a few hours ago, Holland had been sure she faced a bleak and lonely future, and now, with Brant beside her, anything seemed possible.

"You are glorious, Holland, and I'm not referring to the dress or your hair. It's you that adds the warmth and glow to my Christmas."

Holland cupped his cheek, wishing there was time to say all the things in her heart, but the words would have to wait until after the party. "You are the best thing that's ever happened to me, Brant. I'm honored to be here with you."

He smiled at her, nodded to the band, then took her hand and led her to stand with him on the platform.

"Good evening, everyone! I am most thankful you could join us tonight to celebrate this wonderful eve of Christmas. Welcome to Hudson House!"

Cheers and claps erupted around the room before they quieted again.

Brant smiled and looked out across the crowd, oozing the easy charm Holland

associated with his persona of Alex from the first day they met. “Please enjoy the evening. There are refreshments on the table at the back, courtesy of our wonderful kitchen staff, and at eight a light supper will be served in the dining room to any who are interested. Happy Christmas Eve!”

“Happy Christmas Eve!” the crowd echoed, then the musicians began to play the first song.

Brant held out his hand to Holland. She took it and curtsied as he bowed to her, then they led the first dance with Eloise and Dean joining in.

The next two hours were filled with music and laughter. Brant never got far from her side, other than when he danced with Eloise, Holland’s mother, and old Mrs. Pringle, who could barely totter around the dance floor. Brant escorted the woman back to her seat at the end of the dance, then returned to Holland’s side.

“It was kind of you to dance with her. The stout odor of the liniment she rubs on her knees keeps most people away,” Holland said with a grin as Brant slipped his arm around her waist, took her right hand in his as they joined the next dance, and looked at her with such love in his eyes she almost missed the first step of the dance.

“You mustn’t look at me like that while we’re dancing,” she said, feeling breathless when his gaze continued to hold hers.

“I mustn’t? How should I look then?” He crossed his eyes and made such a ridiculous face, Holland couldn’t help but laugh.

“Just like that, the rest of the evening,” she said, grateful they were once again on solid footing and could joke with one another.

Holland knew their future, if they were to have one together, wouldn’t be all roses

and walks in the moonlight, but she also knew Brant would make her laugh. He would challenge her and feed the need in her to grow into the person God wanted her to be. Life with Brant would mean their opinions often clashed. They would no doubt argue and debate, but they would also share friendship.

Their love would be deep, enduring, and true.

The very thought of it left her humbled, overjoyed, and thankful that Brant had come into her life, even if he'd pretended at the time to be an estate worker named Alex.

No longer did she think of him in terms of different personalities—Alex versus Mr. Hudson. She'd realized there were many, many layers to the man she loved with all her heart, and it would take years to reveal them all.

Holland looked forward to each discovery.

When the dance ended, the guests who wished to stay adjourned to the dining room. Many departed, eager to get home to their own celebrations and tuck weary children into bed.

Eloise had hired three girls from town to help Nanny Lewis keep an eye on all the children who attended the festivities. They played games, made crafts, and enjoyed listening to stories read by the fire in the parlor.

Before they departed, each child was given a peppermint stick, a little sack of nuts, and an orange.

The light supper was a three-course meal featuring a creamy vegetable soup with rolls Holland herself had helped bake, roasted beef with potatoes and carrots for the second course, and apple cake for dessert. The food wasn't fancy or pretentious, but it was delicious and filling.

When guests began to depart, Brant held on to Holland's hand and stood at the door with Eloise and Dean, wishing each attendee the happiest of holidays.

Once all the guests departed, Brant gave his sister a meaningful glance, then led Holland into the sitting room, where a low fire added warmth and an amber glow to the room. The Christmas tree filled the space with a decadent aroma that mingled with Brant's scent in a heady combination.

Holland studied him, with the firelight emphasizing the line of his jaw, the breadth of his chest, his handsome features. If she mussed his hair, she would see the playful, friendly man she'd met that first day she'd stepped into the library and lost her heart.

Brant bent and retrieved a box from beneath the tree wrapped in silver foil paper and tied with a red bow. He held it out to her.

"Does your family exchange gifts on Christmas Eve instead of Christmas Day?" Holland asked as she took the box from him and sat on the couch.

Brant turned on the lamp on the nearby table, then sank onto the soft cushions beside her. "No, they do not. Gifts, if we received any, were given Christmas morning. Eloise is a stickler for no peeking or opening of gifts early. However, tonight seems like the right time to give this to you."

Holland untied the ribbon and set it aside. If nothing else, Charli would love to have it tied in her hair. She carefully removed the paper, then lifted the lid on the box.

Set in a beautiful gilded frame was a watercolor painting of two adorable sea otters floating on their backs in the water, paws held together as they nestled close. Holland recalled what Brant had shared the night of the harvest dance about sea otters holding on to each other so they didn't drift apart and were never alone. In the bottom right corner was the painter's signature, a simple B and H.

“Did you paint this, Brant?”

He nodded.

“It’s incredible. I had no idea you could paint as well as sketch. I love it.”

He smiled and pointed to the painting she held. “This might sound ridiculous and seem quite ludicrous, but you are my sea otter, Holland. The one who keeps me from going adrift. The one who ensures I’m part of something bigger than myself. You’re the one person in all the world I want as my anchor in the seas of life. Together, holding close to one another, we can weather any storm, and celebrate the days when the waters are calm. Perhaps I’m saying this quite badly, Holland, but I—”

Holland pressed a finger over his lips to silence him. “You’re saying everything most spectacularly, Brant. Please continue.”

He smiled, lifted her left hand to his lips and kissed her fingers, then slid off the couch and onto one knee. “Holland, I love you with a depth and surety that is sometimes both frightening and exhilarating. I’ve never felt like this about anyone. If I live to a hundred, I can’t imagine loving anyone else the way I love you. I also can’t imagine my future without you in it, beside me always. Would you please do me the great honor of marrying me, of joining our lives and hearts together, for always? I’ve already spoken with your father, as well as your mother and Denver, and they’ve all offered their blessing and approval.”

Holland set the box with her precious gift on the table by the couch, then took both of Brant’s hands in hers, tugging on them until he resumed his seat beside her. “Are you certain, Brant? I’m not a grand lady. My parents have no fortune or social standing, and neither did any of my ancestors. I don’t bring a thing to you in marriage except a wealth of love, devotion, and sincere promises to walk beside you every day of my life.”

“That is exactly why I want to marry you, Holland. Because no matter what comes, I know you’ll stand beside me, walk with me, and love me. That’s all I need. The rest seems so insignificant and unimportant, doesn’t it, when one is presented with the gift of true love.”

Tears burned the backs of her eyes as she considered the first true gift of Christmas. The gift of love.

She nodded her head. “Then yes, I’ll marry you, Brant Alexander Hudson. It would be an honor to become your wife.”

“When, Holland?” He slipped a wide platinum band on her left ring finger. The oval diamond sparkled in the firelight. Brant stood and lifted her into his arms, holding her so close and so tenderly, she hoped he’d never let her go. “When will you marry me?”

“Before Eloise, Dean, and the children return to California. Do you think a New Year’s Day wedding might be an apt time to begin our life together?”

Brant grinned as his head lowered to hers. “It would be hard for me to forget an anniversary on the first day of the year,” he teased, but the look in his eyes, reflecting the firelight and the fire in his heart, assured her of the truth. He loved her, she loved him, and together they would build a life here at Hudson House.

Holland lost herself in his kiss, in the promises they shared, before Dean cleared his throat from the doorway, startling them both.

“Eloise has commanded I play the role of chaperone. It’s time for bed, kiddies. Ol’ Saint Nick won’t visit if we aren’t all slumbering soon and dreaming of sugar plums.”

Holland laughed as Brant carried her, arms wrapped around her waist while hers

encircled the back of his neck, toward the door.

“Did you loiter at the door long enough to hear the good news, Dean?” Brant asked, smiling at Holland, his gaze never leaving hers.

“No, but I can tell she said yes. When will the happy nuptials take place?”

“New Year’s Day. Think your wife can plan a wedding in a week?”

Dean groaned and covered his face with his hands. “Here we go again. You thought she was militant barking orders for Christmas. That won’t even hold a candle to a wedding.” The man lifted his head and smiled at Holland before kissing her cheek. “Welcome to the family, sister Holland. I wish you both all the happiness your hearts can hold.”

“Thank you, kind sir. I’m not sure mine can hold much more without bursting.” Holland gave Brant one more tight hug, then tapped his shoulder and he set her on her feet. She retrieved her sea otter painting, holding it tightly to her chest. “I love this gift, Brant, more than any I’ve received, and I love you. Sweet dreams. I’ll see you in the morning before we leave for church.”

Holland hurried through the house and down the back stairs to the room where Savannah was just climbing into bed.

She froze, studying Holland’s face, caught the shimmer of the diamond on her finger, then let out a squeal that drew the rest of the staff who slept in the basement to their door.

Holland held up her ring finger, and the rest of the women, even dragon-breath Mrs. Sanders, cheered, offering hearty congratulations.



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Brant cleared his throat, fighting the urge to tug on his collar as he stood with the pastor in the church. Remington and Dean waited beside him for his wedding to begin.

Eloise had fussed and planned, barked orders, and worked miracles to transform the church and the Silver Bluff community hall into winter gardens of rare beauty. He had no idea how many train car loads of flowers and greens had been express shipped from California, and he didn't care. All that mattered was that Holland was marrying him and they were beginning this new year as husband and wife.

The church pianist switched songs, and Brant straightened, watching as Savannah, and then Eloise, marched toward them along the aisle of the church which was lined with dainty bouquets of white flowers and ivy tied with delicate peach-colored bows.

Brant thought about all that had happened in the past week. He'd hosted his first event at Hudson House, been heartily welcomed into the community he'd formerly skirted around, and Holland had agreed to marry him.

He'd known with absolute clarity she would be a wonderful partner by his side during the party and luncheon they'd held for the estate employees on Christmas. As he watched her pass out gifts to the children that she'd helped select and wrap, and encouraged each family to take a basket of oranges from the stack piled head high in the entry, he knew God had given him the perfect helpmate in Holland. Together they would step into their future and walk the journey ahead of them, holding tightly to each other lest one of them go adrift.

He smiled, recalling when Holland had insisted on hanging the sea otter painting in

the sitting room. She was so proud of the art that would always serve as a sentimental reminder of the love they shared.

Eloise had also been pleased with the watercolor he'd made of her family. Unbeknownst to her, he'd sketched them one evening as they all sat in the library around the fireplace while Dean read the children a story. It had been a touching scene to witness, and Brant had been able to capture it on paper. His sister had tears in her eyes when she'd opened the gift Christmas morning and had given him a hug so tight it had nearly cut off his air supply.

Brant had discovered how happy it made him to make others happy through the gifts he'd chosen.

Remington had been speechless when Brant had presented him with his gift. He'd promoted the man to the official title of estate manager and increased his wages accordingly. Gareth had shown an affinity for serving as a butler, and Remington would continue training him to take over that role, while Dalton worked to learn all he needed to know about being the head footman.

In addition to the increase in pay, Brant had also given Remington the deed to ten acres of property located on the west side of the estate, near the apple orchards on a slight hill. The view was stupendous, but more importantly, it gave Remington something of his own. Included in the gift was the building of a house come spring when the laborers could lay the foundation.

His lifelong friend had tried to explain the gift was too much, but Brant refused to listen. Remington had always been there for him, and Brant wanted him to know how much he valued his friendship, support, and wisdom.

A giggle drew his thoughts back to the moment as he watched Mayes and Bobby somberly walk down the aisle, each of them carrying a pillow with a ring tied to it, followed by Clara and Charli, who tossed rose petals with such abandon, they floated

in the air and landed on guests in aisle seats.

Brant tried not to laugh at their antics.

The music shifted again and everyone in the church stood, watching as Holland floated down the aisle on the arm of her father in a gorgeous gown Eloise had express shipped from a well-known dressmaker in Baker City. The simple style of the glistening white silk gown accented with rich lace trim suited Holland.

As she walked toward him, her gaze tangled with his. Brant smiled, knowing he was looking into his future, seeing it filled with laughter, joy, and love.

The ceremony proceeded in a tender, heartfelt manner that left nary a dry eye in the church. Thankfully, Charli added a bit of humor when the pastor announced it was time for Brant to kiss his bride.

She glanced over at Mayes and made an exaggerated kissy-face that caused everyone to laugh, including Brant and Holland.

Eloise had refused to allow Holland to see the community hall, so Brant was prepared for her gasp of surprise when they walked into the building half an hour later after standing at the door of the church greeting their guests.

Bowers of greens, tables adorned with flowers and candles, white linens and silver place settings made it feel as though they'd stepped into a tea party at the home of an elfin king. When his sister had insisted the reception should be held in Silver Bluff, Brant had wanted to argue. They could have held it at Hudson House using the dining room and formal parlor, or even the attic, which was still decorated from the Christmas Eve ball because the children had found such delight in playing up there.

Eloise had been right again, though. By holding the wedding and reception in Silver Bluff, the entire community had felt involved in the event, and it gave Holland's

family a better opportunity to be part of the planning and decorating.

“This is the most glorious, spectacular thing I’ve ever seen,” Holland said, giving Brant a hug, then allowing him to lead her to the head table where they would sit for the meal. Dulcie and the kitchen staff had been cooking for days, but Dulcie had assured him it was her gift to them—preparing a wedding feast—even if parts of it had been transported from Hudson House into town the day before.

Brant didn’t care about the decorations or the food, or even the photographer who’d come all the way from California to take photos of the special day. It was about Holland and the love they shared that Brant knew would never dim, only grow deeper and richer with time.

Hours later, after the luncheon had been cleared away, the cake cut and served, and guests sent home with little boxes of butter cookies in the shape of wedding bells, Brant escorted Holland out to the carriage that would take them to his private train car.

He had no desire to be anywhere except with Holland, but they’d decided to spend a week at his home in Portland. Dean, Eloise, and the children would join them there for a few days before they began their trip home to San Francisco. Holland and Eloise were already talking about a shopping excursion. He was exceptionally pleased the two women who meant the most to him in the world were already becoming good friends.

Although Brant had offered to take Holland on a honeymoon to Paris, London, or anywhere she wished, she had sweetly kissed his cheek and told him the only place she really wanted to be was with him.

That was just one more of the many, many reasons he loved her.

“Are you ready?” Brant asked as he gave Holland his hand and helped her up the

steps of his private train car.

“I’m ready for whatever lies ahead, husband of mine, as long as we travel this journey together.”

“Always.” Brant kissed her fingers, then wrapped her in his embrace. He might have built the house of his dreams on the bluff overlooking the river, but the woman in his arms, so full of light and joy, was where he knew he’d finally found a home.