



Mrs. Pettigrew's New Year's Match (Holiday Matchmakers #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: A poor young woman in need of rescuing.

A rich man determined to change his ways.

And one big fat looming threat...

Holly Turtledove was in a pickle. Okay, make that a life or death situation! One that she manages to escape. But for how long? Caught in a snow storm and seeking shelter, she manages to find some in the most unlikely place. Little does she know how her hiding spot would change her life.

Joseph Bradshaw was done being a cad. He saw the love his friend and neighbor Dalton found and wanted the same thing. Problem was, the pickings among Denver's high society was slim. What was he to do? Then they found her. A bedraggled young woman in dire need of assistance. She was everything he was taught not to associate with, but he couldn't help himself. Did he dare lose his heart to one such as her, or leave her to the whims of fate?

Find out in this sweet historical western full of pure fun and romance!

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CHAPTER 1

Denver, Colorado December 1882

Holly Turtledove's heart pounded as she strained to listen to her brother's voice.

"What do you bid, gentlemen?" Drifted up through the grate in the floor.

She gasped and doubled her efforts to untie herself. She had to be quiet, lest Randall discover her attempts to escape. When he told her that morning he'd finally figured out a way to make some good money, she had no idea it meant selling her to the highest bidder! Not until he wrestled her to the floor two hours ago, trussed her up and gagged her, then left the dingy room they were staying in. Denver's lowest class had pockets of subpar humanity she had no idea existed until now, and she wanted no part of it.

Randall was always out to make a fast dollar and had sunk to a new low. And here she thought his stealing was bad!

Thankfully, her brother was a poor judge of fabric. She'd chewed through the flimsy gag and was now working on the ropes he'd used to tie her hands to a bedpost. They were on the second story of the dilapidated hotel they were staying in. There was a saloon on the first floor, and it was full of drunken, jeering men. She had no idea if Randall was offering her to the highest bidder for the night or outright selling her to a brothel. Either way, Holly didn't plan to stick around to find out.

Holly grunted when she pulled at the knot with her teeth. Lucky for her, Randall

wasn't good at tying knots either. She pulled the knot loose, wiggled her hands free of the rope, then untied the rope around her ankles. That done she tossed her only other dress and her Bible into her small carpet bag and headed for the window. Their room faced the back alley, and there was a small porch beneath her window. She crawled onto its roof and edged to the end of it. A wagon was passing through the back alley and had a few wrapped bundles of something in the back. She prayed it wasn't crates of something that might break her legs right before she jumped.

"Hey now!" The driver exclaimed. He turned on the wagon seat and glared at her. "What are you about, missy?"

"Sorry!" She climbed over the canvas wrapped bundles and pondered if they were sheep's wool. She jumped out the back of the wagon and landed in a huge puddle. "Forgive me!" Holly was off like a shot running down the alley, ducking around corners now and then to catch her breath. She didn't know how much time she had to get away and needed to figure out where to go. She darted up one street, then another, trying to find her way out of the seedy neighborhood Randall brought them to.

By the time she got to the edge of the neighborhood and entered another, she was breathing like a winded horse and was growing tired. Randall said they were out of money, and she hadn't eaten in two days. She was freezing, thirsty, and hungry, but none of that mattered. She'd escaped and had to keep moving.

Holly found a park and took refuge under a huge fir tree as snow began to fall. Was today Christmas? Randall had eaten some bread and cheese he'd gotten a hold of and told her she could eat tomorrow as a Christmas present. Only instead of giving her anything to eat, he bound her to a bedpost, gathered men downstairs, and got them bidding on her! She always knew her brother was a cad, but this?

She shivered beneath the tree, then figured she'd better get moving. Before she did, she pulled her other dress out of her carpet bag and wrapped it around her shoulders.

Something was better than nothing. In her panic, she didn't think to grab her shawl.

She shivered, left the concealment of the tree, and hurried to the other side of the park and up the street. Holly kept going, until she thought she couldn't take another step, and realized she was in an upper-class neighborhood. Maybe she could find shelter somewhere. A carriage house perhaps? At this point, she'd curl up in a doghouse.

She pushed herself and wondered how long she'd been running. A couple of hours? Three? She didn't know. Holly crossed into another neighborhood and headed up a slight hill. She wasn't sure she would make it and clung to a wrought iron fence for support. Surely Randall wouldn't pursue her this far? If he'd sold her, what would happen to him when he took her buyer up to their room and discovered she'd escape? He might have a knife in his belly at this point.

Holly forced herself to trudge up the hill and prayed she made it to the top. Once there, she would find shelter then hope and pray she made it through the night. The snow was getting heavier, and it was becoming hard to see. Maybe that was a good thing. She was using a dress for a shawl and probably stood out like a sore thumb what with her shabby clothes and unkept appearance. But Randall had sold the brush and comb set Mother left her right before she died. He'd sold everything but the clothes on their backs, and instead of selling those, he decided she was next on his list.

Tears stung the backs of her eyes at his terrible betrayal. How could he do this to her?

But she knew how. He was a louse. A bad person who didn't care about anyone but himself. She concluded the only reason he'd dragged her to Denver in the first place was so he'd have something to use to either bargain with or sell as a last resort. And this was it.

She cut down an alley between two mansions, heading for a grouping of large trees.

There was a gate to her left and what looked like a stable and carriage house. If she was lucky, she'd find an unlocked door.

Holly looked around, unlatched the gate and slipped through. That done she slinked along the side of the building to a side door of the carriage house. She tried the doorknob, and miracles of miracles, it opened!

Tears streamed down Holly's face as she entered the darkened carriage house and softly closed the door behind her. She was shaking so hard from the cold at this point she could hardly get her hands to work the handle of the nearest carriage. The owner must be rich indeed to have two carriages! She climbed into the one, figuring there might be a blanket inside. Sure enough, there was, and she was quick to make use of it.

Holly wrapped the thick wool blanket around herself, curled up on the carriage seat, and thanked the Lord she'd made it this far.

She shivered as tears continued to stream down her face, her breathing ragged. Now all she had to do was hope she didn't catch her death. If she was alive in the morning, then she'd have to figure out where to go and what to do. But for now, all she cared about was that she'd escaped Randall's sinister plans for her and found shelter.

Her shivering slowed, and it wasn't long before Holly drifted off to sleep.

"Mrs. Pettigrew!" Mr. Prosser called as he entered the breakfast room.

Mrs. Pettigrew looked up from the newspaper she'd been reading. "What is it, Mr. Prosser? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Her stable master clutched his hat in his hands. "You'd best come see for yourself."

Mrs. Pettigrew gave her assistant, Chastity Eastwick, a profound look of curiosity. “We should see what this is about, ma petite .”

“Yes, Mrs. Pettigrew.” Chastity left her chair.

“Best get your coats,” Mr. Prosser advised. “I’ll be in the carriage house. Please hurry.”

“You’re acting most curious, Mr. Prosser,” Mrs. Pettigrew said. She rose from her chair and was about to call for Mr. Tugs, when he suddenly appeared with her cloak. “Why, thank you, Tugs.” She put it on as Chastity hurried from the room to fetch a coat.

“I’ll be in the carriage house, ma petite ,” Mrs. Pettigrew called after her.

“I’ll join you in a moment,” Chastity called back.

Mrs. Pettigrew followed her stable master and hurried across the snow-covered expanse of back lawn and gardens to the carriage house and stable at the back of the property. When she finally reached the carriage house, she caught her breath and went inside. “Now, what’s all the fuss...”

“Shhh,” Mr. Prosser said and held a finger to his lips. He stood next to an open carriage door and pointed at something inside. “There,” he whispered.

Mrs. Pettigrew raised a suspicious eyebrow and joined him. “Oh!” She lowered the hand that was now at her chest and stared at the ragamuffin wrapped in her wool lap blanket. “What’s this?”

“I found her, and tried to wake the child, but she barely stirs, ma’am,” Mr. Prosser explained.

“I don’t think that’s a child, but a young lady.” Mrs. Pettigrew reached into the carriage and put a hand against the young woman’s forehead. “Goodness gracious, she’s burning up! Fetch a doctor, quick!”

“Yes, Mrs. Pettigrew, right away!”

“And send Tugs and Mrs. Fraser out here, oh, and see if Mr. Simpson is home. If he is, send him over. We need to get her into the house.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Mr. Prosser left the carriage house just as Chastity entered.

“Adelia, what’s wrong?” Chastity joined her and looked in the carriage. “Oh my! Who is she?”

“I have no idea, but she must have sneaked in here to escape the cold last night.” Mrs. Pettigrew sighed. “Look at her clothes, ma petite . She is certainly not from around here. Most curious.”

“A servant maybe?”

“No, look at her pale skin, her gaunt features. She’s known hunger. We will get her to the house, put her in a guest room, and let Dr. Gibbons see to her. I’ll not have the poor thing die in my carriage.”

“Die?!” Chastity exclaimed.

Mrs. Pettigrew gave her a grave look. “She burns with fever, ma petite . I only hope we found her in time.”

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CHAPTER 2

Joseph Bradshaw was just coming down his walk to the front gate when he spied Mrs. Pettigrew's stable master, Mr. Prosser running into the Simpsons' house. "What the devil?" Joseph went through the gate and crossed the street. He made his way a few houses down to the Simpsons' and hovered near the gate. It wasn't long before Mr. Prosser emerged from the house, Dalton Simpson in tow, and hurried for the gate.

"Simpson, what is it?" Joseph called. "What's wrong?"

"There's trouble at Mrs. Pettigrew's." Dalton went through the gate and hurried down the sidewalk toward the Pettigrew mansion.

"What?" Joseph trotted after him and noted Mr. Prosser was hurrying in the opposite direction. "Where's her stable master going?"

Dalton Simpson, stopped at Mrs. Pettigrew's drive located between her property and the next, and hurried down it. "To fetch a doctor. Come on, Bradshaw, you can help."

Joseph's eyes widened. "Is someone hurt? Is it Chastity?" Chastity Eastwick was Dalton's betrothed. He proposed Christmas Day to the young lady, but no wedding plans had been made yet.

Joseph followed Dalton down the drive to the stable and carriage house at the back of the property.

Chastity was waiting outside the carriage house. "In here." She waved them inside where they found Mrs. Pettigrew standing next to the open door of one of her carriages.

"Thank goodness you're here," Mrs. Pettigrew said. She eyed Joseph but said nothing. He hadn't exactly been the nicest of people over the last few months. Make that years and had a lot to atone for. But old habits were hard to break, and he was the first to admit it was hard to change.

"Adelia," Dalton said as he tried to catch his breath. "What's wrong?"

She pointed at the interior of the carriage. "I need her brought into the house."

Dalton exchanged a look with Joseph, and the two went to the open door and looked inside. "Great Scott!" Joseph exclaimed. "Is she...?"

"Not yet," Mrs. Pettigrew said. "But she is very ill judging from her fever. Please, we need to get her inside and into a bed."

Joseph stared at the bedraggled looking specimen curled up on the carriage seat. She'd wrapped herself in a wool blanket. "Was she in here all night?"

"Looks that way," Mrs. Pettigrew said. "Dalton, be a dear and bring her." She turned on her heel and left the carriage house.

"Mrs. Fraser is already making some broth for her," Chastity informed them.

"Good," Dalton said. "Joseph, give me a hand."

The two men gently pulled the young woman from the carriage, and since it was easiest for Joseph to get a good hold of her, he carried her out of the carriage house

and headed for the manse.

“Careful now,” Dalton said. “Don’t slip.”

“I won’t,” Joseph said. “She weighs nothing.”

Dalton put an arm around Chastity. “You just found her?”

“Yes. Well, Mr. Prosser did.” She practically had to trot to keep up with their longer legs.

Joseph didn’t slow. The young woman in his arms looked flushed with fever, and he knew how dangerous that could be. “What the devil was she doing in Mrs. Pettigrew’s carriage?”

“Seeking shelter,” Chastity said. “At least, that’s what we think.”

“You mean to tell me she was out in that storm last night?” Dalton asked.

“Looks that way.” Chastity jogged toward the house. “I’ll inform Mrs. Fraser we’ve brought her to the house. Take her upstairs to whatever guest room Adelia wants to put her in.”

When Joseph and Dalton reached the manse, Dalton opened one of the French doors for him. “Do you want me to carry her the rest of the way, Bradshaw?”

“No,” Joseph said and went inside. “There’s not much to her.” He headed for the grand foyer and the staircase. Mrs. Pettigrew was waiting at the top of the stairs.

“Up here, gentlemen.”

Joseph carried his load up the stairs and followed Mrs. Pettigrew down the hall a few doors and into a guest room. The room was done in pale yellow and pink, and was cheery and bright.

“Put her on the bed, Mr. Bradshaw,” she ordered.

He’d just done so when Mrs. Fraser, the cook, entered the room. “Oh dear, will you look at that.” She picked up one of the young woman’s hands. “She’s hot.” Mrs. Fraser began to pull the blanket away.

“Let’s get her out of those clothes,” Mrs. Pettigrew said.

Chastity joined them. “I’ll help.”

“That’s our cue to leave, Bradshaw,” Dalton put a hand on Joseph’s shoulder. “Come along.”

Joseph stared at the woman. She looked like she crawled out of some hole. Her long blonde hair was dirty, as was her face. Her clothes tattered and torn. “What’s that?”

Dalton turned around as Mrs. Fraser pulled a dress from around the young woman’s shoulders. “Looks like she was using that to keep warm,” he said.

“Looks like it needs to be burned,” Mrs. Fraser commented with disgust. She tossed the dress to the floor.

Joseph studied it. “Where did she come from?”

“We’ll find out when she comes to,” Mrs. Pettigrew said. “If she does.”

Joseph’s chest tightened, and something deep within him stirred. “You’ll keep us

informed?”

Mrs. Pettigrew looked up from her work. “If that’s what you wish.”

“I do.” He gave the women a nod and left the room with Dalton.

“You’ve lost your hat,” Dalton pointed out.

Joseph put a hand to his head. “I left it in the carriage house.” He took it off when he reached into the carriage to bring the young woman out. “I’ll get it.”

“I’ll wait here for the doctor,” Dalton said.

Joseph gave him a wave and retraced his steps to the French doors leading to the back of the property. He trudged through the snow to the carriage house all the while pondering what could have happened to the young woman now in Mrs. Pettigrew’s home. She looked poor, half starved. Which begged the question, what was she doing here? Why wasn’t she on the other side of town with the rest of the lower classes?

He entered the carriage house, saw his hat sitting on the back of the carriage, and retrieved it. He noted the carriage door was still open and went to close it. Joseph stopped up short when he spied a carpetbag on the carriage floor. “What’s this?”

He pulled it out and opened it. The only thing inside was a tattered Bible. He took it out and opened it.

“To my darling Holly. May the Lord bless you and keep you, my lovely daughter. Mother.” He looked in the carpetbag again to see if maybe he’d missed something. But no, it was empty. Joseph frowned. “You had nothing but a dirty dress and a Bible when you left?” He went to the side door of the carriage house closest to the gate and opened it. It snowed hard last night, so any footprints from last night were covered up

this morning. But this must be how she got in.

“Hmm,” he mused. “Intriguing, and a mystery to be solved.” He closed the door, went to the carriage and looked at the door on this side. “You entered here, found the blanket, and wrapped yourself in it.” He nodded. “Okay, that wasn’t hard to figure out. But what were you doing here?”

Joseph left the carriage house and headed back to the manse. He didn’t expect to have so much excitement on his morning walk but got it anyway. Now what was he going to do with it? Mrs. Pettigrew had a ragamuffin in her home and had sent for the doctor. Would he have done the same thing?

Joseph was halfway back to the manse when he stopped. “I’d have probably called the police and had her removed from the premises.” He swallowed hard. He’d been less than charitable aside from being little more than a cad. He’d like to blame it on his association with Rebecca Harrington, but he couldn’t use her as an excuse.

When he reached the French doors, he went inside and waited with Dalton for the doctor. When he showed up, they let the balding Dr. Gibbons in and led him up to the patient’s room. By now Mrs. Pettigrew and the others had changed the young woman into a nightgown. Abigail, Mrs. Pettigrew’s maid, stood off to one side holding the young woman’s two dirty dresses. “What shall I do with these, Mrs. Pettigrew?”

“I still say we should burn them,” Mrs. Fraser grouched. “Give them to me.” She snatched them out of Abigail’s hands and headed for the door. “Shall I bring some broth, Dr. Gibbons?”

Dr. Gibbons was examining the patient. “Not just yet, Mrs. Fraser. I’ll let you know when.” He shook his head. “Tsk, ts, ts. We need to cool her down.”

“She’s in good hands now, Bradshaw,” Dalton said in a quiet voice. “Let’s leave the

doctor to his work.”

Joseph glanced between him and the woman on the bed. “I found something in the carriage. I left it downstairs.” He stepped to the doctor and tapped him on the shoulder. “I believe her name is Holly.”

“Holly, you say?” Dr. Gibbons huffed. “Well, all right. Now give me some room.”

Joseph took one last look at the young woman, then left. Downstairs he and Dalton took tea in the formal drawing room.

“Thank you, Tugs,” Dalton said. “Bring some extra cups and saucers. I’m sure Chastity and Adelia will want some tea when they come down.”

“Yes, Mr. Simpson.” Tugs began to shuffle away. “Will you be staying, Mr. Bradshaw?”

Joseph looked toward the staircase. This was none of his business and besides, he had errands to run. “No, Tugs, thank you. I’ll finish my tea then take my leave.”

“As you wish, sir.” Tugs gave him a small bow and left the drawing room.

“Holly, eh?” Dalton said.

“Yes, it’s written in a Bible in the young lady’s carpetbag.” He nodded at a chair where he’d set it down after retrieving it then sending Tugs for tea.

Dalton took the Bible from the carpetbag and read the note written on one of the first few pages. “Hmmm, a gift from her mother. And nothing else in the bag?”

“No.” He turned to Dalton, cup and saucer in hand. “My guess is she left in a hurry.

No time to pack.” He took a sip of tea and let the hot brew warm him.

“But what is she doing here?” Dalton mused.

Joseph thought about it. A young woman from the lower classes taking shelter in a carriage house in his neighborhood with nothing but a couple of dirty dresses and a Bible. “She’s running from something, Dalton.” He looked him in the eyes. “And I hope Mrs. Pettigrew discovers from what.”

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CHAPTER 3

Holly opened her eyes slowly. She saw yellow, pink and red. Where was she? She blinked a few times and tried to focus, but it was difficult. The last thing she remembered was crawling into a carriage and praying she didn't freeze to death. Oh no! Had she?

But her chest hurt, and her throat was sore, and she ached everywhere.

"Yer awake!" she heard a woman exclaim. "I'd better fetch Mrs. Pettigrew!"

Holly tried to track the sound of the woman's voice but couldn't manage it. She sounded like she had an Irish accent.

Holly closed her eyes and tried to breathe. It wasn't easy, and even though she hadn't caught her death, she was sick and felt terrible. What was to become of her? Where was she? And oh! Randall!

She opened her eyes, took in the four-poster canopied bed, the expensive linens and sheets and tried not to moan. Had Randall succeeded in selling her? Had he found her and dragged her off somewhere while she was locked in a fever induced sleep? She had a faint memory of being carried, then it was gone.

Holly tried to sit up but didn't have the strength. "What happened to me?"

"You were discovered and rescued, ma petite ."

Holly turned her head toward the voice. A stunning woman with dark hair and crystal blue eyes was looking down at her. She wore an expensive looking dark blue dress and a diamond studded monocle over one eye. She was also smiling. “Who are you?” came out a whisper.

“I am Mrs. Pettigrew, and I’m going to see that you get well, mon chérie .”

Holly put a hand over her chest. “I am ill...”

“Yes, very, but we will set you to rights in no time. But first, what is your name my dear?”

“H-Holly... Tur...Turtledove.”

“Turtledove,” Mrs. Pettigrew breathed. “How magnificent !”

Holly heard the woman’s odd accent. Was she French? “Help...”

“ Oui , that is what we are doing,” Mrs. Pettigrew said. “Now, you must eat something. You are nothing but skin and bones!”

Holly shook her head in protest, but her stomach picked that moment to growl.

“Mrs. Fraser, some help please,” Mrs. Pettigrew snapped.

Another woman entered the room. She was middle aged and wore a sour expression. “Ah, she’s awake. Good. That soup downstairs needs to get eaten.”

“Serve it for dinner if you need to, Mrs. Fraser,” Mrs. Pettigrew advised. “Now help me get her up so she can eat.”

Holly moaned when they sat her up and propped her against some pillows. She was weak as a kitten and though hungry, didn't think she had the strength to eat.

The woman called Mrs. Fraser disappeared as Mrs. Pettigrew pulled up a chair next to the bed and sat. "Now, while we are waiting for your dinner, you can tell me a few things about yourself. Like, where do you live?"

Holly swallowed. It hurt. "I'm not...from anywhere. I... ran away..."

"What's this?" Mrs. Pettigrew cut in. "Running away?"

Holly nodded. "From my... brother..."

"Why would you do such a thing, ma petite?"

Holly opened her eyes, not caring if the agony she was feeling showed on her face. "He tried to sell me." She caught the woman's horrified look right before her eyes drifted shut. Even talking was an effort.

"I see," Mrs. Pettigrew breathed. "Sell you?"

"What?" came a man's voice.

Mrs. Pettigrew turned toward the door. "Mr. Bradshaw, what are you doing here?"

Holly didn't have the strength to look at the newcomer. In fact, it was all she could do to not fall asleep. But they said they were bringing food, and who knew when she'd get another meal?

"I came to check on the patient. And I brought these."

“How beautiful!” Mrs. Pettigrew gushed. “What lovely flowers. Put them by the bed.”

Holly felt the woman pat her hand, but her eyelids were too heavy to lift.

“There, there, ma petite . Rest until your food comes, then I will feed you.”

Holly didn’t respond, she was too tired.

“How is she?” a man asked.

“I’m afraid I do not know, but at least we have a name. Holly Turtledove.”

“Turtledove,” the man repeated in a soft voice. “I don’t know any Turtledoves myself.”

“No, and why would you know one related to her? She is not from this part of the city. You and I both know that.”

Holly tried to open her eyes again, but it wasn’t going to happen. So, they must have found her in the carriage. Was it the owner of the carriage that sat at her bedside?

“What did the doctor say?” the man asked.

“She needs bed rest. She is still feverish, but at least the poor little thing has awakened. We’ll get some food into her and let her rest. Thank you for coming by and inquiring after her welfare, Mr. Bradshaw.”

“You’re most welcome, Mrs. Pettigrew. You’ll keep me informed?”

“Of course.”

“And let me know if I can help in any way.”

There was a pause, then Mrs. Pettigrew said. “Such concern, Mr. Bradshaw. That seems out of character for you.”

Another pause, and Holly briefly wondered if her words were meant as a slight.

“I am...trying to be better, Mrs. Pettigrew. Keep better company, that is.”

“Bravo for you then, young man. Now if you’ll excuse us? Mrs. Fraser, be so kind as to put the tray just there, yes, that’s it...”

Holly heard a tray being placed on the bed. She had to open her eyes. How else was she going to eat? Holly managed to turn her head left, then right, but it took so much effort.

“Now, ma petite , open your mouth,” Mrs. Pettigrew ordered.

Holly did, by letting her jaw naturally drop. A warm spoon touched her lower lip, and she clamped her lips around it, the hot broth spilling into her mouth. It was heavenly. She swallowed the soup then opened her mouth again.

Mrs. Pettigrew spoon-fed her slowly, and the next time Holly opened her eyes, she was on her back, snuggled under the luxurious comforter and staring up at the lace canopy overhead. The room was filled with daylight, and she wondered what time it was.

“Oh, glory be!” came the Irish accent. “Yer awake. How do ye feel?”

Holly looked to her right, saw a red-headed maid standing over her with a smile, and gave her a weak smile in return. “I... I’m not sure.” She swallowed. Her throat was

dry, and still hurt, but not as bad as the last time she woke up. “Water...”

“Of course, miss!” The maid hurried to the other side of the bed where a pitcher of water sat atop a dresser. She poured Holly a glass and set it on the nightstand. “Now, let me help you sit up.”

Holly tried to do it herself but couldn’t. “It’s no good...”

“Nonsense, ye’ll be fine. Here, I’m strong enough to lift ye.” The maid sat on the bed and pulled Holly up to a sitting position. That done she reached behind her for the glass of water and held it to her lips. “There now, Miss Turtledove. Drink up. That’s it...”

Holly spilled some water down her front but didn’t care. She drank what she could before her eyes closed, and she sensed she wouldn’t be able to open them again. What had happened to her? “Sick...”

“Oh aye, that ye are.” The maid helped her lay back down and tucked the covers around her. “There now, that’s better. Are ye hungry?”

Holly shook her head. She just wanted to sleep.

“Well, the next time ye wake up, we’ll get some food in you. Mrs. Fraser is making ye something special. Oh, and ye had a visitor earlier. He brought ye flowers.”

“He?”

“Aye, Mr. Bradshaw. He’s the one that carried ye from the carriage house here.”

Holly wanted to open her eyes but doggone if it wasn’t happening. But then, didn’t she already figure she wouldn’t be able to?

“There now, poppet, rest,” the maid soothed. “I’ll be right here if ye need me.”

What? Right there? Was the maid watching over her? But why? Holly didn’t know these people. They were under no obligation to care for her. They could have just as easily booted her out of that carriage and sent her on her way.

Oh, except she was too sick to leave.

“Where am I?”

“The Pettigrew mansion, miss. Yer the guest of Mrs. Adelia Pettigrew. It’s a good thing we found ye when we did, or ye might have...” she stopped and cleared her throat. “Well, yer safe now, and that’s what counts. Ye just get better. I’m Abigail by the way, and I’ll be helping take care of ye.”

Holly nodded and let herself relax into the feathery soft mattress and let sleep take her. When she woke up again, the room was dimly lit, and someone new was in the room with her. “Hello,” she said, voice weak.

“Miss Turtledove,” a young woman with dark hair and eyes said. “I’m so happy to see you’re awake. You must be hungry. I’ll ring for a tray to be brought up.”

The woman left the chair by the bed and went to a bell pull near the door. She was well dressed, with not a hair out of place. Holly watched her turn and smile at her. “I’m Chastity Eastwick. You gave us quite a scare yesterday.”

Holly didn’t say anything. She was still so tired. She offered the woman a single nod instead.

“You poor thing,” Miss Eastwick said. “The doctor was here earlier. Your fever has gone down, so that’s a good thing.”

“Fever...”

“Oh yes, yesterday you were burning up with it.”

Holly forced her eyes to open. “I don’t mean to be a bother.”

“It’s no bother at all.” She returned to the chair by the bed. “We’re just glad we found you when we did.”

Holly looked at her. She was the second person to say that. “I’m sorry I broke into your carriage.”

“Nonsense, you were cold and sought shelter.” She put a hand over one of Holly’s. “Mrs. Pettigrew is a very generous woman. So don’t fret over being in her care. The last thing you need is to worry yourself silly when you’re already so ill.”

Holly looked at her as tears stung the backs of her eyes. “Thank you.”

Miss Eastwick gave her a warm smile. “You’re very welcome. Now let me see what’s keeping Mrs. Fraser. I believe she’s prepared something a little more substantial than chicken broth.”

Holly’s eyes closed just after the young woman disappeared out the door. Thank the Lord for the blessing that was Mrs. Pettigrew.

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CHAPTER 4

When Miss Eastwick returned, it was with the cook, Mrs. Fraser. “Well, “the cook drawled. “It’s a fine thing to see you sitting up with open eyes.”

“Come now Mrs. Fraser,” Miss Eastwick said. “You make the poor girl sound like she was completely incoherent. Or unconscious.”

“Or at death’s door?” Mrs. Fraser tacked on. “The poor thing was, as far as I’m concerned. If Mr. Prosser hadn’t discovered her when he did...”

Miss Eastwick held up a hand to silence her. “That’s quite enough, Mrs. Fraser. We don’t want to scare the poor young lady.”

Holly blinked a few times in confusion. She knew she was sick, but had she been that bad off? “Am I going to get well, or die?” she asked in a weak voice. She tried to clear her throat, but it hurt too much.

“There, there, dear,” Mrs. Fraser soothed. As much as one could considering her gruff looks. “I’ve made a nice beef stew. I do hope you can keep it down. You’re nothing but skin and bones.” She nodded at the tray on the bed. “And there’s some fresh bread too. Now I’ll fetch the tea.” She hurried from the room with a sweep of her skirt.

“You’ll have to excuse, Mrs. Fraser,” Miss Eastwick said. “She tends to look at the worst possible outcome in a situation.”

Holly gulped. “Did I almost die?”

Miss Eastwick looked at the floor. “You were in a bad way. It’s a good thing we found you.”

“That’s not the first time I’ve heard that. I’m sorry to be such a bother.”

Miss Eastwick sat on the bed, picked up the tray, and placed it on Holly’s lap. “You mustn’t say such things. We found you, now we’re going to take care of you.”

Holly bit her lower lip to keep it from trembling. These people were being so kind! How was she going to repay them? And, oh dear, what of Randall? What was she going to do about him? What if he found her?

She coughed and looked at the hearty stew Mrs. Fraser brought. “This looks delicious, but I’m not sure how much I can get down.”

“Oh goodness, is your stomach upset?”

“No, it’s just that...” Should she tell her how long it had been since she’d eaten? She had the broth earlier, of course, but...

“Here, take this and dig in,” Miss Eastwick ordered and handed her the spoon.

Holly took it and tried a small bite. The stew was delicious! The best she ever had. She took a few more bites and closed her eyes in bliss. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Miss Eastwick smiled. “You eat as much of that as you can and have some hot tea.”

No sooner than she said it, Mrs. Fraser re-entered the room, carrying another tray.

This one laden with a teapot, cups, saucers, and a plate of cookies.

Miss Eastwick took one look at the cookies and frowned. “Mrs. Fraser, is that the sort of food that’s good for a patient?”

Mrs. Fraser’s hands went to her hips. “May I remind you that I’ve taken care of Mrs. Pettigrew for years. Mr. Pettigrew as well. Not to mention everyone else in this household, a few cookies isn’t going to harm the girl.”

Holly smiled. “Thank you, Mrs. Fraser.”

“You’re welcome, dear. Eat what you can and have some tea while it’s still hot. I need to check on a few things. Oh, and Tugs was just letting that Mr. Bradshaw in while I was coming up the stairs. He’s in the drawing room.” She looked at Holly. “My guess is he’s here to see our patient.” She left the bedroom.

Miss Eastwick poured Holly a cup of tea. “Cream and sugar?”

“A little sugar, please.” Holly swallowed hard, her throat still hurting. She took the cup of tea gratefully and enjoyed a sip.

“I’m sure that feels good on your throat. Can you manage while I go downstairs and see what Mr. Bradshaw wants?”

“Yes. I’ll be fine.” So long as she didn’t spill hot tea all over herself or knock the bowl off the tray. She tended to be clumsy at times and didn’t want to spill anything on the expensive looking comforter.

“I’ll only be a moment.” Miss Eastwick slipped from the room and disappeared.

Holly continued to eat, and it wasn’t long before she was full. She wanted to eat

more, her fear of going without racing to the forefront of her mind. The last few days and that dingy hotel room over the saloon were horrible and only made worse by Randall's ill intent. Sell her? How could he think such a thing? The thought made her heart ache, and she had to bat the emotions down when Miss Eastwick returned with a handsome gentleman in tow.

"Miss Turtledove, may I present Mr. Bradshaw? He helped us the day we found you in the carriage."

Holly's jaw dropped. It was most unladylike, no matter what her station. And his was obviously way above hers. He wore a dark brown suit, crisp white shirt, a gold waistcoat, and an expensive looking dark brown coat and green scarf. He obviously wasn't staying long, or the butler would have taken his coat, hat and gloves. She noticed he held his hat and gloves in one hand as he looked at her and smiled.

"Miss Turtledove, it's a pleasure to finally meet you and to see you have improved. Though I understand you're still quite unwell."

She nodded and thought of how awful she must look! Why did Miss Eastwick have to bring him up?

"I'm sorry for the intrusion," he said with a sympathetic smile. "But I had to see for myself that you were doing better. I'm so glad you are. "

Holly stared at him like an idiot, words failing her. Why would someone of his station be concerned about the likes of her?

It took Holly a moment to get her mouth to work. "Thank you, kind, sir. Thank you for helping."

He took a step toward the bed, his eyes full of sympathy. "It was my pleasure. Now

I'll leave you to your rest. I just wanted to check on you." He gave her a slight bow, smiled, then left the room.

Holly stared after him, and realized her mouth was hanging open again. It was bad enough she dredged herself up to this part of the city from the rat hole of Denver, but to be rescued by some of Denver's high society, was almost more than she could bear. Would they demand payment? What were they going to do with her when she was better? They'd boot her out into the street no doubt. That meant she'd better come up with a plan and fast. Randall would be looking for her, and who knew how much help he'd have?

"Oh, dear," Miss Eastwick said. "You're growing pale. Perhaps you'd better lie down."

Holly realized how exhausted she was. "I think you're right. Who was that again?"

"Joseph Bradshaw. He's a neighbor and lives down the street a few houses. When we sent for one of the other neighbors to come help, Joseph came with him. He was the one that carried you from the carriage house here."

Holly's face screwed up in confusion. It seemed she'd heard that before.

Her cheeks heated with the realization that the terribly handsome Mr. Bradshaw had carted her feverish body across the property, into the house, up the stairs, and put her in this very bed!

Her heart melted at the thought.

"Oh, and now you're getting flushed!" Miss Eastwick said in alarm. She put the back of her hand against Holly's forehead. "You're warm, but not as feverish as you were yesterday, thank heaven. Still, you'd better lie back and rest. The doctor will be by

soon.”

Holly nodded as Miss Eastwick removed the tray from the bed and set it on a small table by the window. “Thank you again for all your kindness.”

“Think nothing of it. Be glad Mrs. Pettigrew is such a generous woman. She wasn’t about to send you on your way. Not that you could’ve walked out the door to begin with.” Miss Eastwick poured more tea into Holly’s cup that now sat on the nightstand, and smiled at her. “There, try to have a few more sips, then sleep until the doctor comes.”

Holly tried to pull the comforter up to her chin but couldn’t quite manage it. She was still weak as a kitten.

“Let me help you,” Miss Eastwick said gently.

“Do you live here?” Holly asked, hardly recognizing her own voice.

“I’m Mrs. Pettigrew’s assistant. Well, I was a maid but acted more like an assistant. I’m getting married so she’ll be looking for another one.” Miss Eastwick tucked her in, smiled, then left the room.

Holly lay there, staring at the lace canopy above her. The room was cheery and inviting. She’d never been in such a fancy place. Not even when she and her parents had dinner one night with the mayor of their little hometown back in Oklahoma.

But Mrs. Pettigrew’s mansion was a far cry from Tumbleweed, Oklahoma. She vaguely recalled what Mrs. Pettigrew’s home looked like from the outside. She knew it was big and looming and had a good-sized carriage house with two carriages! One enclosed, and one open as she recalled. The woman was rich, and if her guess was right, a widow? Didn’t Mrs. Fraser mention she’d taken care of both Mrs. Pettigrew

and her husband? But no one made mention of him now, so he must be deceased.

Seems she almost joined him. Holly shivered at the thought and tried to burrow further under the covers. Her mind drifted to Mr. Bradshaw, and the fact he carried her all the way up to this very room. She was dirty, disheveled, and had been running and stumbling through the streets of Denver until she could run no more. What must he think of her?

Her cheeks heated at the thought, and she wished he'd never seen her at all. A man like him wouldn't even consider someone like her. But it was nice to have a memory of a chivalrous act, and be the recipient of it. But a memory was all it could ever be. Men like Mr. Bradshaw did not entertain the idea of being around one such as her unless they absolutely had to. That told her she really had been close to death. Otherwise, he'd have never soiled his hands by pulling her from that carriage and carrying her up to this room.

CHAPTER 5

Joseph paced back and forth in his family's parlor while he waited for the tea his father ordered.

"Did Mrs. Pettigrew tell you anything about the young lady?" Father asked.

"No, other than her name." He stopped his pacing. "Really, Father. She's quite ill and doesn't have the strength to talk much."

"But she will, and when she does, and Mrs. Pettigrew finds out more, I'm sure she'll send the creature on her way. The very idea of keeping such a woman in her home. I'd have called the police!"

Joseph sat and sighed. "Father, she was close to death."

"And who told you that?" He shook his head as their maid, Sarah, brought their tea. "Joseph, you don't need to play the hero with such riffraff."

He stilled and fought against a glare. "Where is your compassion?"

Father poured himself a cup of tea. "I'm just saying that Mrs. Pettigrew doesn't need to feel obligated to take care of the girl. As soon as her fever breaks, she should send her on her way."

Joseph poured his own cup. "She hasn't any belongings."

His father eyed him over the rim of his cup. "Don't tell me you feel sorry for the beggar?"

"Father!"

He rolled his eyes. "Forget about Mrs. Pettigrew's unwanted houseguest, and let's discuss my party. All the invitations have been sent, and I must see to the menu. I thought sure Mrs. Pettigrew would have a party, but as we've not received an invitation, my guess is, her little Christmas ball was all she could manage. So, that means our New Year's Eve party won't have any competition."

Joseph forced a smile. His mind kept wandering to the poor young woman in Mrs. Pettigrew's care. He wanted to know more about her, find out where she lived. Maybe once she was better, he could see that she got home safely. Great Scott, her family must be worried sick about her! Had Mrs. Pettigrew discovered where Miss Turtledove's home was? Did she need someone to contact her family and tell them she was all right?

"Joseph!" Father snapped.

He jumped and almost spilled his tea. "What?"

"You haven't heard a word I've said!" He set his cup and saucer down. "Can't you keep your head out of the clouds for one minute?"

He sighed. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"I asked if you'd spoken to Rebecca since Mrs. Pettigrew's Christmas ball?"

"No, I've not seen Rebecca or her parents."

“Well, I suppose they’re avoiding folks considering the way Mrs. Pettigrew put them in their place at her ball. Personally, I don’t know what all the fuss was about.”

“Rebecca was being a witch,” Joseph pointed out. “She treated Miss Eastwick cruelly. Dalton is still upset about it.”

“I don’t know what he sees in the girl. She’s not one of us.” His father sipped more tea and didn’t look at him. It was his way of avoiding a retort on Joseph’s part. He should say something, but his mind kept gravitating back to Miss Turtledove. When he’d taken her in his arms and carried her from the carriage to the manse, something deep inside him came to life. Protective instincts? Compassion? Fear? A combination of all three? He only knew that the young lady was in a bad way and in need of rescuing. If transporting her to a guest room would take care of it, then that’s what he’d do and did. Part of him was more than a little satisfied that he’d done a good deed, and he wanted to do more. The question was, what? He’d already offered Mrs. Pettigrew his help, but it was up to her to take him up on his offer. In the meantime, all he could do was sit and wait.

He realized Father was prattling on about their party again and tried to pay attention but gave up when he recalled how Miss Turtledove didn’t look quite so pale when he visited her today. She was sitting up, staring at him with those lovely green eyes of hers. She was still dirty but at least was dressed in clean nightclothes. But what would become of her now?

“... should invite Rebecca for a carriage ride.”

Joseph cringed and looked at his sire. “What?”

Father sighed. “Rebecca. See that she gets out of the house. I’d hate to see the young woman be treated as a pariah. You and I both know she means well.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Rebecca? We are talking about Rebecca Harrington, right?”

“Of course,” Father huffed.

He sat back in his chair. “Rebecca’s actions are done for one person and one person only. Herself.”

“Nonsense, she’s a fine young lady. You’d do well to court her.”

Joseph almost choked on his tea. “Wh-what?!”

“Come now, Joey, you’re going to have to take a wife sometime.”

“It won’t be Rebecca Harrington,” he quipped and set down his cup.

“Then who? She’s one of the few young ladies of marriageable age this season.”

Joseph shook his head. He’d fancied Rebecca for a moment, but after her cruel and selfish treatment of Chastity Eastwick, he decided she wasn’t worth his trouble. She’d be nothing but a headache as a wife and would probably drive him round the bend.

Joseph saw what he wanted in a wife the night of Mrs. Pettigrew’s Christmas ball. Dalton Simpson opened his eyes that night, and Joseph saw the appeal of Miss Chastity Eastwick. She was kind, generous, looked out for others, and did what she could to protect Mrs. Pettigrew.

“I suggest you call on Rebecca...”

“Father,” he said, cutting him off. “Do not tell me what to do. I will court whom I wish.” He left his chair.

“Where are you going?” Father asked with a hint of alarm.

“I need a walk.” He went to the front hall where Capra, their butler, was fiddling with a vase of flowers on a high table. “My coat, hat, and gloves, Capra.”

“Right away sir.” Capra, who was seventy if he was a day, bowed and headed for a closet off the grand entrance of their modest mansion. It wasn’t as big as the Pettigrew mansion but impressive all the same. He had to get some air and clear his head. Father had a point, but he hated it when he tried to push his ideas on him.

Capra returned with his coat and things, and Joseph quickly donned them. Outside he reached the front gate, went through, and found himself headed for Mrs. Pettigrew’s house. He shouldn’t pay another visit; he’d already been there. But paying another call didn’t mean he had to see Miss Turtledove. He could speak to Mrs. Pettigrew and find out if she had any more information on the young lady. Perhaps he could offer to deliver a message to her family.

He rang the bell and waited for Tugs to answer. He knew it might take a while. Tugs moved like a turtle, but then, Capra wasn’t much better.

“Mr. Bradshaw,” Tugs said as his bushy eyebrows shot up. “Two visits in one day.”

Joseph ignored the remark. “I’d like to speak to Mrs. Pettigrew. Is she in?”

“Right this way, sir.” Tugs moved out of the way and let him in. “She’s in the drawing room.”

Joseph removed his coat and hat and handed them to Tugs. He took off his gloves as his eyes gravitated to the grand staircase. “Thank you.” He handed his gloves off to Tugs and headed for the drawing room. “No need to announce me.”

“Obviously, sir.” Tugs shuffled off as Joseph took one last look at him before giving his attention to Mrs. Pettigrew.

She stood by the fireplace, a sheaf of papers in her hands. “Why, Mr. Bradshaw. What brings you here?”

“You, actually. And of course, your guest. How is she?”

“Resting.”

“What did the doctor say? He’s been here, hasn’t he?”

“He has.” She put the papers on a small desk and motioned for him to sit. “You seem unusually interested in the young lady.”

“My intentions are pure, I assure you. It’s just, she was so ill, so helpless...”

“Yes, indeed she was. And still is. Have you come to offer help?”

He sat in a chair opposite her. “I have. Do you know where her family lives? Perhaps I could tell them where she is, if you haven’t sent word already?”

“I have not.” She folded her hands in her lap. “I will not.”

He started at her words. “I beg your pardon?”

Mrs. Pettigrew looked him in the eyes. “Miss Turtledove was almost the victim of a heinous crime. She escaped, wound up here and took refuge in my carriage.”

He stared at her as his jaw tightened. The thought of anyone trying to harm that poor defenseless woman rankled. “What happened?”

“I don’t have all the details yet, but suffice to say, her circumstances are dire. Therefore, as I will soon be short one assistant, I shall see if Miss Turtledove can fill the position once she is on her feet.”

“But... you know nothing about her.”

“No, but I can find out what I want by simply asking her. So far, she’s been most grateful for my hospitality. However, there are those that may still wish to harm her. If she goes to work for me, she’ll need some sort of escort while running errands. Would you be interested in accompanying her on some of them if needed?”

Joseph’s eyebrows were still raised as he stared at her. “Who is trying to harm her?”

“A relative. Are you interested or not?”

He nodded without thinking. He had work obligations, but he could manage to accompany Miss Turtledove a few times a week. “I can help you when my schedule allows.”

“I understand. Let me know what it is, and I’ll make sure I send Miss Turtledove out when you’re available. Will you agree to that?” She wore a slight smile on her face as she waited for his answer.

He shouldn’t be doing this. It was silly really. Yet there was something about Miss Holly Turtledove that pulled at his heart strings. She was nothing but a guttersnipe compared to those in his world, yet... was it through any fault of her own? He had to know more. “I agree.”

Her smile bloomed. “Excellent. Why don’t you call on Miss Turtledove tomorrow? Perhaps you could read to her?”

He nodded. "I shall call on her in the morning." He stood. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have some work to do."

Mrs. Pettigrew smiled in satisfaction. "Until tomorrow."

Joseph gave her a slight bow and left the drawing room with the distinct feeling that Mrs. Pettigrew had just gotten away with something.

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CHAPTER 6

“Miss Turtledove?”

Holly heard the voice but wasn't sure what it was at first. She was cocooned in her blankets and was wonderfully warm.

“Miss Turtledove?”

There it was again. That voice. Was it a man? Holly poked her face out from beneath the covers and blinked back sleep. A man hovered near the bed. A very handsome man. She sucked in a tiny breath. It was the man that rescued her!

Holly ducked beneath the covers.

He chuckled. “You're awake,” he said in a soft voice. “Shall I read to you, or are you of a mind to get more sleep?”

She lowered the blankets enough to look at him with wide eyes. “Wh-what are you doing here?”

He smiled. “I can leave if you prefer...”

She lowered the blankets some more, exposing her face. “Why are you here?”

“Mrs. Pettigrew thought you might be bored and sent me up to read to you for a bit.”

Holly pushed the blankets away a little further. “Read?”

He gave her a gentle smile. “You seem out of sorts. Perhaps some water?” He went to the pitcher on the dresser and poured her a glass. When he turned back to her, he gave her a tender look. “Here.” He looked at the bed and smiled. “You’ll have to sit up if you want a drink.”

Holly pushed herself up to a sitting position. It wasn’t easy. Thank goodness she looked better than she had. Abigail the maid and Mrs. Fraser had washed her face, brushed and braided her hair, and helped her change into a new nightgown. It was beautiful with tiny lace bows.

“Are you alright?”

She looked at him. “Huh?”

“You’re quite flushed.” He sat in the chair near the bed. “If I may?” He put the back of his hand to her forehead. “You’re warm, but not burning up like the night we found you.”

She swallowed hard. “Thank you.”

He smiled. “You’re welcome. Here.” He handed her the water.

She drank and wondered where everyone was. She was alone with a gentleman, after all. Her eyes darted to the door.

“Oh, you needn’t worry. Abigail is sitting right outside, knitting.”

Holly stared at him. “She is?”

“Mm-hm. Abigail!”

The maid hurried into the bedroom. “Do ye need something, Mr. Bradshaw?”

“I was just reassuring Miss Turtledove that we are not entirely alone. Thank you for coming so quickly.”

Abigail bobbed a curtsy. “I’m right outside, Miss Turtledove.” She smiled and left the room.

Holly lowered her hand with the glass, and Mr. Bradshaw quickly took it from her. “You’re weak. I must remember that.”

She looked at him. “Thank you for the water.”

He set the glass on the dresser. “I hear the doctor was here earlier.”

“Yes, he said I’m recovering.” She stared at the blankets. “But it will take time.”

He nodded and pulled a book from the inside pocket of his jacket. “I’ve brought a novel.”

Holly smiled. “You’re really going to read to me?”

He nodded. “Is that so surprising?”

“It is.” She tried to take a breath, but her chest felt tight and achy. “No one has ever read to me before.”

“Not even your mother?”

“Mama couldn’t read.” Her cheeks heated at the admission, and she could just imagine what he thought of her now.

“But you read,” he stated.

“Yes.” She sat back against the pillows, suddenly tired.

“I don’t want to wear you out,” he said. “Tell me to stop if you wish me to leave, or...”

“It’s fine, sir. You may read if you wish.”

He smiled. “Very well.” He started to read a book called *The Princess and the Pirate*. It was an adventure story that she was sure had to have some romance in it. He barely got through the first chapter when her eyelids grew heavy, and she could no longer keep them open. The next thing she knew, someone was tucking the blankets around her, and she was once again cocooned in her little nest.

When she awoke sometime later, Mrs. Pettigrew was sitting by her bedside reading a book. The woman smiled when Holly poked her head out from underneath the blankets. “Good evening, Miss Turtledove. Did you enjoy your visit with Mr. Bradshaw?”

Holly tried to take a decent breath, but her chest still felt like an anvil had been laid on top of it. “He read to me,” she whispered.

Mrs. Pettigrew frowned. “Oh, dear. Perhaps some soup for dinner? Are you able to sit up?”

Holly shook her head.

“Very well.” Mrs. Pettigrew left the room. She returned moments later with Abigail who helped Holly sit up.

“There ye are, Miss Turtledove,” Abigail said. “Dinner will be right up.”

Holly noticed there was no sign of Mrs. Pettigrew. “Abigail?”

“Aye?”

“How long will I be able to stay?” There was no mistaking the worry in her voice.

“Now don’t ye worry about that. Ye concentrate on getting well first.”

“I... need to speak with Mrs. Pettigrew.” She surveyed the room. Even when dimly lit, it was cheery.

“I’ll let her know. I believe she’s gone to check on your dinner.”

Holly nodded. “Thank you.” She fiddled with the lace trim of her bed sheets. They were lovely, and such a pristine white.

“Yer worried, aren’t ye?”

Holly’s head came up. “What?”

“Ye needn’t be, ye know. Mrs. Pettigrew is a generous soul. A little odd perhaps, but she won’t turn ye out.”

Tears stung the backs of Holly’s eyes at Abigail’s words. “That’s good to know.”

Abigail smiled at her and slipped from the room. As soon as she was gone, Holly let

the tears fall. She'd managed to escape, found her way to this place. But how long would her refuge last? Was Randall combing the streets for her? Would he come to this part of town?

"Here you are," Miss Eastwick said and placed a tray on Holly's lap. "Soup and biscuits. You'll let someone know if you're still hungry when you're finished?"

Holly noticed the woman was dressed up. "Are you going out?"

Miss Eastwick blushed. "I am. My betrothed and I are attending a small gathering of his friends."

Holly's mouth curved into a smile. She'd never owned anything so fine. "You look beautiful." Her voice sounded like a frog's.

"Thank you. Now eat, and Mrs. Pettigrew will be up shortly." Miss Eastwick patted her dark hair and left the room.

Holly said a quick blessing over her food and began to eat. She was halfway done with the food when Mrs. Pettigrew joined her. "Well, your appetite seems to be getting better."

Holly nodded, her mouth full of biscuit. She chewed and swallowed. "Thank you for taking care of me. I don't know how I'm ever going to repay you."

"Well," Mrs. Pettigrew drawled. "I think I have a solution to that."

Holly paled. "I haven't any money, ma'am..."

Mrs. Pettigrew shook her head and smiled. "I'm not talking about taking money from you. On the contrary, I'd like to pay you."

Holly almost dropped her spoon. “I beg your pardon?”

“I want to hire you as my new assistant. Miss Eastwick will be leaving me, and I’ll need someone to take her place. Rather than have to interview a bunch of applicants, I thought you might be interested in the position.” She smiled again but said nothing more.

Holly openly gawked. The woman was offering her a job?! Tears stung the backs of her eyes as she gaped at Mrs. Pettigrew. “Th-thank...” she buried her face in her hands, unable to keep the tears from coming.

A warm hand touched her shoulder. Holly looked up at Mrs. Pettigrew. “I’m sorry.” She sniffed back tears. “But... you have no idea how much this means to me, you giving me a chance.”

Mrs. Pettigrew gave her a heartfelt smile. “Oh, but I think I do, ma petite .” She gave Holly’s shoulder a gentle pat and sat in the chair at her bedside. “Now finish your dinner, and we’ll discuss things in the morning. I don’t want to tire you out. Miss Eastwick can fill you in on your duties and help you until she’s unable to perform those same duties.”

“When is she getting married?”

“June, but a wedding takes time to plan, mon chérie , and Miss Eastwick will be far too busy to do the work of both.”

Holly sniffed back more tears then wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands. “Thank you again, Mrs. Pettigrew. This means the world to me. I’ll work hard for you, I promise.”

“See that you do.” She eyed Holly for a moment. “Now if you would be so kind as to

give me the name and a description of your brother.”

Holly paled as a hand flew to her chest.

“Come now, mon cherie . If what you say is true regarding the man, then I want my staff to know what to watch for. I’ll not have such a reprobate let into the house.”

Holly lowered her hand. “Randall Turtledove. He’s tall, nearly six feet. Brown hair, green eyes.”

“And dressed much the same as you when we found you?”

“If you mean in raggedy clothes, then yes. After our parents died Randall got it in his head to sell the farm and come west. Denver is as far as we got. We had little from the sale of the farm, as our father had debts...”

Mrs. Pettigrew gave her a sage nod. “I understand. And when the money finally ran out, rather than get a job, he decided to start selling things off, including you, is that it?”

She bit her lower lip at the sheer horror of it and nodded.

Mrs. Pettigrew let out a long breath. “You are safe here, ma petite . You escaped him then?”

Holly drew in a shuddering breath and recounted the story of how Randall subdued her and everything that happened up to the point of taking refuge in the woman’s carriage. “And then I woke up here,” she finished and patted the bed.

Mrs. Pettigrew shook her head in amazement. “You are lucky to be alive, ma petite . When I think of all that could have happened to you!”

Holly nodded and stared at what food remained. She set the tray to the side, unable to eat another bite. She was growing tired again, and hoped she recovered quickly. Holly didn't want anything to jeopardize the blessing Mrs. Pettigrew was granting her.

"Get some rest," Mrs. Pettigrew said and rose from her chair. "We will speak again in the morning."

"Yes, ma'am." Holly gave the woman a smile, then settled back and within moments, fell fast asleep.

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CHAPTER 7

Joseph rang the bell and waited. Tugs answered the door, raised one bushy eyebrow and cleared his throat. “To what do we owe the pleasure, Mr. Bradshaw?”

Joseph fought a sardonic smile and drew in a deep breath. “Look, I realize what you may think of me.”

Tugs cleared his throat again.

“But I’m... trying. May I come in?”

Mr. Tugs’ other eyebrow went up. “Trying?”

He let the breath out. “To be a better man.”

A smile slowly curved Mr. Tugs’ mouth. “Well then. Come in.”

He stepped aside and allowed Joseph to step through the door. His eyes gravitated to the grand staircase. “How is Miss Turtledove this morning?”

“Still in bed, but the doctor just left and said if she feels up to it, she may spend some time in the drawing room today.”

“That’s splendid, Tugs.” He smiled and headed for the stairs.

“Ah, ah, ah!”

Joseph spun to the old butler. "I beg your pardon?"

"Abigail and Miss Eastwick are helping Miss Turtledove dress. You can wait in the drawing room."

"Oh, yes, of course." Joseph headed that way.

"I'll bring you some tea," Tugs called after him.

"Thank you, Tugs!" He entered the well-appointed drawing room made up of blues and whites and headed for the fireplace. Mrs. Pettigrew's Christmas tree was still up, and he realized poor Miss Turtledove had spent Christmas night huddled in that freezing carriage. He shivered just thinking about it and went to stand before the fire.

Mrs. Pettigrew swept into the room wearing a royal blue dress of velvet trimmed in white lace. She was a stunning woman that any man would want to marry, his father included. But everyone knew she was still grieving the death of her precious Xavier. Who knew if she would ever remarry?

"Mr. Bradshaw," she crooned. "How nice to see you. Come to pay Miss Turtledove a visit?"

His cheeks heated. "Yes. How is she? Tugs said the doctor was here this morning."

"He was. We're going to bring her downstairs for a time so she can enjoy the tree."

He glanced at the wonderful Christmas tree. "It is something." Joseph looked at the fire. "Did she tell you much more?"

"No, not much." Mrs. Pettigrew joined him in front of the fire. "Have you thought about what I said the last time we spoke?"

“I’ve not changed my mind, if that’s what you’re asking,” he said. “I’ll escort Miss Turtledove whenever you have need of me.”

She smiled and glanced toward the grand hall. “And this act of kindness isn’t so you can feel better about yourself? You genuinely wish to help the young lady?”

He gaped a moment. “Of course I do. And yes, my past behavior has been less than savory, and I apologize.”

“You don’t need to apologize to me, Mr. Bradshaw, but I do suggest you apologize to Miss Eastwick.”

He hung his head. “Oh, yes. Miss Eastwick.”

“And here she is now...”

He looked up to see Chastity Eastwick and Abigail help a pale Miss Turtledove down the stairs. Joseph’s breath caught. They’d dressed their patient in a day dress of robin’s egg blue and styled her blonde hair in a simple bun atop her head. Tiny wisps of hair framed her face, and her green eyes were brighter than when he last saw her. Some time downstairs would do her good.

He smiled as they approached and quickly pulled a wing chair closer to the fire. “Here, if you please. The fire will keep her warm.” Joseph made himself wait by the chair as the women guided Miss Turtledove his way.

They eased her into the chair, and she immediately sat back and took a few deep breaths.

“Are you able to breathe better?” Joseph asked gently. “What did the doctor say?”

“Give her a moment,” Mrs. Pettigrew advised.

He stepped back from the chair and hoped he didn’t look too eager. Even ill she was lovely now that she was cleaned up and wearing a fashionable dress.

Miss Turtledove looked up at him. “Mr. Bradshaw,” she greeted in a breathy whisper. “How nice to see you.”

His heart clenched, and he was kneeling before her, unable to stop himself. “Do you need to return to your bed?”

She shook her head. “I want a little time out of it, if you don’t mind.” She coughed and held a lace handkerchief to her mouth.

Joseph cast Mrs. Pettigrew a worried look.

“She will be fine,” the woman assured. “But we must make sure we don’t wear her out.”

Joseph stood. “I could read to you while you rest in front of the fire.”

Miss Turtledove smiled. “That would be nice. Thank you.”

“Before he does,” Mrs. Pettigrew said. “I believe Mr. Bradshaw would like to have a few words with Chastity. When he’s done, he will help you to the other chair so you may view the Christmas tree while he reads to you.”

Miss Turtledove’s eyes lit up. “Oh, yes. I would very much like to gaze upon the tree.”

Joseph smiled. “And so you shall. Tugs is bringing tea. I’m sure a cup will do you

good.” He met Chastity’s curious gaze, clasped his hands behind his back and nodded at the tree. “A word, Miss Eastwick?”

“Of course.” She glanced at Mrs. Pettigrew and back, then walked to the tree.

Joseph followed. He wanted to make this quick so he could rejoin Miss Turtledove.

“What is this about?” Chastity asked when she reached the tree.

Joseph took a deep breath. “I apologize for my previous behavior whilst in your company, Miss Eastwick. I was rude, condescending, and said and did things that I shouldn’t have.”

She stared at him a moment with raised eyebrows. “Well, I suppose the company you’d been keeping might have had something to do with it.”

He pressed his lips into a firm smile. “Some, but most of the fault was with me. Please accept my most humble apologies. I will be speaking to Dalton as well. I don’t fancy a punch in the nose.”

She smiled. “He’d have already done it.”

“Even so, you are his betrothed, and I should apologize for the way I treated you.”

She stood still a moment then gave him a nod. “Apology accepted. Now why don’t you read to Miss Turtledove?”

Joseph smiled. “Thank you, Miss Eastwick.”

“Call me Chastity. Especially if we’re to be friends.”

“Friends?” He hoped his face hadn’t gone red. He didn’t expect her to offer him friendship.

“Are you not friends with Dalton?” She asked and ran a finger over a branch of the tree.

“More acquaintances at this point. I’m not sure your betrothed considers me a friend.”

She looked at Miss Turtledove. “What about Mrs. Pettigrew’s guest? Do you seek her friendship?”

His heart beat faster at the thought. “I would indeed befriend Miss Turtledove. She seems to need a few friends right now.”

“She’s a kind, sweet thing,” Chastity said. “And yes, she can use some friends. I hope to be her friend too.” She returned her attention to him. “She’s a little skittish and scared. The poor thing has been through something awful, I just know it.”

He nodded but said nothing. So, Mrs. Pettigrew hadn’t told Chastity about Miss Turtledove’s circumstances. It was just as well. The fewer people who knew at this point the better. If the young lady was prideful, she wouldn’t want people fussing over her. Still, she needed protection, and Joseph said he’d give his, and intended to do so.

“Thank you for accepting my apology,” he said. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I must see to Miss Turtledove.”

Chasity smiled and nodded.

He rejoined Mrs. Pettigrew and Miss Turtledove at the fire and helped the latter to the

other chair. Once she was settled, he moved the chair she'd occupied next to hers and sat beside her. "Now, what do you think of Mrs. Pettigrew's tree?"

Miss Turtledove gazed at it in awe. "I wish I could have seen it all lit up."

"You can this evening if you wish," Mrs. Pettigrew said.

Miss Turtledove let go a tiny gasp of delight, then coughed.

Joseph patted her on the back. "Easy now."

She nodded and sat back in her chair, as if those few coughs had exhausted her. Miss Turtledove gazed at the tree and smiled. "Lovely."

Joseph studied her. "Indeed."

"Ah, Tugs," Mrs. Pettigrew said. "There you are. Please pour the tea."

Miss Turtledove closed her eyes a moment, and Joseph cast Mrs. Pettigrew a worried look.

"Some tea will do Holly good," she assured.

He nodded and watched as Tugs began to fill everyone's cups. "Holly, what a lovely name," he said aloud.

Miss Turtledove smiled, but didn't open her eyes. "Thank you."

"Tea?" he asked.

"Yes, please."

Joseph drew closer. “Will you be able to hold it?”

“Yes, I think so. Just let me rest my eyes a moment.”

“Sugar?”

“Please. One spoonful.”

“As you wish.” He fixed her cup then held it as she rested. Her face was pale, a little drawn, but she was still lovely to look upon. What cad, let alone a relative, would wish to harm her?

“Miss Turtledove?” He said gently. “Your tea?”

She slowly opened her eyes. “Thank you.”

Mrs. Pettigrew bent to her and helped her sit up straight. “There now, ma petite , enjoy your tea and my wonderful tree.”

Miss Turtledove smiled as she took in the tree before the tall front windows. “It’s so big.”

“Indeed, it is,” Joseph agreed.

“I... didn’t have...” She hung her head, a sad look on her face, and took a sip of tea. Joseph wondered if it was taxing her to lift her cup.

“Is it good?” he asked softly.

She looked at him and smiled. “Yes.”

He smiled back. “Would you like me to butter you a scone?”

She looked at the plate of scones on the tea tray. “Thank you.”

He happily got to work. “You were saying?”

She watched him as her smile faded. “It’s nothing.”

Joseph stole a glance at Mrs. Pettigrew who was frowning. That told him it was something. “You didn’t have a Christmas?” he guessed.

Miss Turtledove closed her eyes and began to lean into her chair. “It doesn’t matter. I’m here.”

“Yes, you are, ma petite . Safe, warm, and in want of nothing,” Mrs. Pettigrew said. “Your only job is to get better. You will do that for us, oui ?”

Miss Turtledove’s eyes met Joseph’s. “I can try.”

He gave her a gentle smile. She looked so helpless. “You will get better. And when you are, you have a wonderful...” he glanced at Mrs. Pettigrew, who nodded and smiled. “... new job awaiting you and this beautiful house to live in.”

Miss Turtledove’s eyes widened. “What?”

“Did I not tell you, ma petite , that my assistant lives here in my mansion?”

Miss Turtledove’s jaw dropped.

Joseph chuckled. “I don’t think she realized that.”

Mrs. Pettigrew smiled at him. "I believe there are many things she does not yet realize." She looked him in the eyes. "Nor you, for that matter." Mrs. Pettigrew winked at him then sipped her tea.

CHAPTER 8

Holly took in the beautiful Christmas tree standing majestically at the front of the huge drawing room. Having never ventured from the cheery bedroom Mrs. Pettigrew placed her in, she wasn't sure what to expect. The Pettigrew mansion was overwhelming, and she wanted to cry at the sight of the grand staircase that led to a large foyer complete with chandelier, paintings of what had to be the Pettigrew family, among some pastoral scenes, and then the drawing room itself. It was decorated in blues and whites with the occasional pastel piece of furniture.

The tree was trimmed in red ribbon and bows, and of course glass ornaments. A star graced the top and candles decorated different branches. She could only imagine what the tree looked like when they were lit and couldn't wait until evening came. She just hoped she had the energy to come downstairs and enjoy the sight.

"You like it," Mr. Bradshaw stated. He sat across from her and peeked around the side of his chair to look at the tree. "It's bigger than ours. Much bigger."

Holly pulled her gaze from the beautiful sight and smiled at him. "I'm sure it's a fine tree."

"Oh, to be sure," he said. "But it won't win the same affection from you, I guarantee you that. Not when one considers the look of admiration you're giving to the tree behind me."

She met his gaze again. "It's just... I'm so grateful for all Mrs. Pettigrew has done for me." Tears stung the backs of her eyes again just thinking about it. "I don't know

what would have happened had you not found me...”

Mr. Bradshaw held up a hand. “The important thing is that you’re safe and recovering from your ordeal.”

She clutched her teacup to her chest. Did he know what her ordeal was? Did he know about Randall? She unconsciously glanced at the grand foyer. What if Randall were to track her here? But then, how could he? Her brother had no idea where she went. Even if he coerced some men into helping him look, would they have made it this far?

“Something troubles you,” Mr. Bradshaw said in a gentle voice.

She held her cup closer then decided she’d better take a sip of tea. Holly held her cup again, soaking up the warmth, and forced a smile. “I have a lot to think about as well as be thankful for.”

“Getting well is all you need think about right now,” he advised. “You have plenty of time to think on other things later.” He leaned forward and rested his forearms on his thighs. “You have so much before you, Miss Turtledove.”

“Please, call me Holly.” She smiled again, a genuine smile this time. “You’ve read to me.”

He leaned back in his chair again. “I had no idea reading was so intimate. You wish me to address you by your Christian name?”

“Mrs. Pettigrew has me calling everyone else by their first name. Except her of course. But Abigail told me she’ll have me calling her Adelia in no time.”

He chuckled. “That is true. Though I’ve yet to be given the honor.”

“You have to pass muster, I hear.” Holly smiled and drank the rest of her tea.

“Give me your cup, I’ll refill it,” he offered.

She held it up as he left his chair and watched him head for the tea tray on a low table. He was handsome, well-dressed, and attentive. But if he knew where she came from, would he act so interested? Fool that she was, Holly wasn’t even sure if she could call it interest. Maybe it was pity and nothing more.

He refilled her cup, added some sugar and gave it a stir. She took it from him with a smile and noticed the warm brown of his eyes. There was a hint of sadness in them she couldn’t fathom. How could someone that was obviously from the city’s higher echelons of society be sad? They had everything. Food, fancy clothes, wealth, power, and enormous homes with servants. Yet...

“You look puzzled, Miss...that is, Holly.” Mr. Bradshaw gave her a gentle smile. “You must call me, Joseph.”

She stared at him as her heart skipped. Oh dear, that wasn’t from her ailment. That was from...attraction? “Very well. Joseph.” She said his name softly, trying it out. “It’s a nice name.”

He shrugged. “I like it.” He scanned the room. “It seems everyone has abandoned us.”

Holly leaned forward, her cup held with both hands, and looked around. “You’re right. Where do you suppose everyone went?”

He stood. “I can check.”

She shook her head as a bout of dizziness hit. “No need. I’ll be needing to return to

my room soon.”

“Do you wish to go now?”

“I can last a while longer. I like looking at the tree.” She took in the tree and smiled.

Without warning, Joseph approached her chair and tucked the blanket on her lap around her tighter. “I don’t want you to catch a chill.”

She looked at him. He was so close, and she caught the tiny gold flecks in his eyes. “No, I don’t want that.”

“Of course not,” he said softly. He gazed into her eyes a moment, then straightened. “Drink your tea, it will help warm you. Shall I build up the fire?”

She looked at the fireplace. The fire burned low. “Yes, thank you.”

He put more wood on and stoked the embers. The flames rose, and Holly closed her eyes a moment enjoying the heat. When she opened them, Joseph was back in his chair, cup and saucer in hand, gazing at her with the same admiring look she’d been giving the tree.

She closed her eyes, opened them. She must be imagining the look on his face.

“Are you alright?” Joseph asked with concern.

Holly looked at him again and noted his eyes matched his voice. “Why do you care?”

He straightened, clearly taken aback. “Excuse me?”

“Why do you care about what happens to me?”

His jaw slackened, for a moment before he frowned. “Holly, is it a crime to care? Shall I be better off treating you with indifference? We found you freezing to death in Mrs. Pettigrew’s carriage. We rescued you from the elements and brought you here to be cared for. Of course I care. And will continue to do so. If that makes you feel uncomfortable then I’m sorry. But I will not back down.”

“Back down?”

“Of course not. I’ll see you get well, as will the rest of us.”

Holly sank a little in her chair. She wasn’t expecting such a speech. Had Randall’s betrayal jaded her against the kindness of others? “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

He drew in a breath. “What happened to you, Holly?” Joseph leaned toward her again. “What did he do to you?”

She shrank back and almost dropped her teacup. “Wh-what are you talking about?”

“Your relative.”

She sucked in a breath. “Mrs. Pettigrew...”

“Don’t be angry with her. She only told me so that I can help keep an eye out for the blackguard.”

Her eyes widened. “He won’t come here, will he?” Holly heard the panic in her voice and hoped he hadn’t. She wasn’t that lucky.

“What did he do?” Joseph asked and left his chair. “Who is he?”

Holly's lower lip trembled but she said nothing.

"You don't have to tell me if it's too much for you. But know that I will protect you from him."

Holly closed her eyes. When he found out where she came from, he might not be so eager. She was wearing a pretty dress, Abigail styled her hair, and her face was clean. She saw herself in the mirror in her room and marveled at her appearance. She'd never worn a dress so fine, and loved how it brought out the green in her eyes. But she was from the lowest of the low as far as class went, and no man of his ilk would ever be interested in her. She was chattel to men like Joseph Bradshaw and nothing more. For goodness' sake, she was chattel to the men at the rundown hotel she and Randall were staying at. What was its name again? The White Horse? She couldn't remember. Everything was muddled. Maybe because she was trying harder to forget about her ordeal than remember it.

"I've upset you. I'm sorry," Joseph said. "Forgive me."

She looked at him. He was standing by the fire now, inching his way toward her. "No... I'm... fine."

"You're not. And you looked as if you're growing tired."

Holly tried to take a deep breath. It hurt. "Perhaps I should return to my room."

"An excellent idea," Mrs. Pettigrew's voice called from the other side of the drawing room. "Joseph, help Holly to her feet."

Holly watched him look at something behind her chair. It must be Mrs. Pettigrew approaching. "Yes, ma'am." He took Holly's teacup and saucer from her, then pulled her to her feet. The blanket slipped to the floor, and Mrs. Pettigrew picked it up and

wrapped it around her shoulders.

“Thank you,” Holly said, her eyes glued to Joseph’s.

“Joseph, carry her upstairs to her room,” Mrs. Pettigrew ordered. “I’ll not have her tiring herself out.”

Joseph stood straighter, gave Holly a warm smile, then looked at Mrs. Pettigrew. “With pleasure.”

Before Holly could protest, he swept her into his arms and began to carry her toward the grand foyer.

“But... Mrs. Pettigrew!” Holly cried. “There’s no need...”

“There’s every need, Holly, dear,” Mrs. Pettigrew said with a smile.

Holly gaped at Joseph. With the blanket around her shoulders and arms, she couldn’t even wrap her arms around his neck to lessen his load.

He didn’t seem to mind as he carried her up the stairs to the second floor and into her room. Once inside, he set her on her feet by the bed. Abigail came into the room and put an arm around her. “Let’s get you into your nightgown. You’ll be more comfortable.”

Holly ignored her as her eyes locked with Joseph’s. He stepped back, smiled, and bowed. “My work here is done.” He straightened. “Unless of course you’d like me to stay and read to you a bit after you’re in bed.”

“Of course she’d like that,” Mrs. Pettigrew said as she entered the room. “Now off with you while we get Holly ready.” She waved Joseph out the door then smiled at

Holly. “Now, ma petite , let us make you irresistible.”

Holly’s eyes widened. What in the world was she talking about?

CHAPTER 9

I rresistible , Holly learned, was a dressing gown trimmed in lace, her hair brushed and cascading over one shoulder, being propped against pillows followed by Abigail pinching Holly's cheeks. "Ye look pale and need some color," the maid said in explanation.

Holly gaped at her. "Mrs. Pettigrew..."

"Now, now, ma petite , do you not wish to look good for visitors?"

"But we were just having tea downstairs," Holly said then coughed.

"Do not speak. Let Mr. Bradshaw read to you, then rest." Mrs. Pettigrew turned toward the door. "I'll have tea sent up."

Holly was quickly learning there was no use arguing with the woman. She watched Mrs. Pettigrew slip from the room, followed by Abigail. She hadn't seen Miss Eastwick and figured she must be spending time with her betrothed, Mr. Simpson.

She sat back against the pillows with a sigh, coughed some more, then tried to catch her breath.

"Here now," Joseph said as he hurried into the room. He pulled her forward and rubbed her back. "Relax and it will pass easier."

Holly coughed a few more times, which didn't detract from the fact the man's hand

was gently going up and down her back. It was relaxing, and she didn't sit as rigid as before.

"There, you see?" he said in a soothing voice. "Let me get you some water. Mrs. Pettigrew said she was having tea sent up." He turned toward the dresser to pour her a drink.

She watched him a moment, and before she could stop herself, said, "Why are you being so kind to me?"

He turned, pitcher in hand, and arched an eyebrow at her. "As I said downstairs, you were in a bad way, still are from what I can see. We're just trying to help you."

"But you don't know me," she pointed out.

"Do we need to know a person in order to help them?"

"What if I was wanted by the law for some heinous crime?" She was pushing him but couldn't seem to help herself. He made her nervous. In her experience, no one was this kind.

"Are you?"

Holly blinked. "Uh, what?"

"Wanted by the law?"

"Of course not." But she knew who was. Holly looked away. Randall had done things and never told her what. But then, she didn't want to know. Knowing what he was about to do to her was bad enough.

“You’re growing pale,” Joseph said and brought her the glass. “Here drink this.”

She did as he asked and handed the glass back. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He pulled a chair up and sat. “Do you need rest?”

Holly looked in his eyes. They were full of concern, and she didn’t know what to say.

“I... don’t know how long it will take me to recover.”

He gave her a gentle smile. “Mrs. Pettigrew will let you take all the time you need.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. And she’s to train you up as her new assistant, I’m told.” He sat back and studied her. “When you’re up to it, we can walk to the park, drink hot cider and watch the skaters.”

“Skaters?”

“Yes. Mrs. Pettigrew has been planning a skating party. She was going to have it at the end of the month, I hear, then decided to hold it on New Year’s Day.”

“I’ve never skated.” Holly folded her hands in her lap and stared at them. She’d never done a lot of things, but when you grew up poor like she did, there wasn’t a lot of opportunity for things like skating.

“We’ll remedy that.” Joseph reached for a book on her nightstand. “Shall we continue where we left off?”

Holly sat back. “To tell you the truth, I don’t remember where that was.”

“You fell asleep.”

Her mouth curved into a smile. She didn’t want to enjoy his company so much, but it was hard not to. “No one’s ever read to me before.”

“No one?”

Holly shook her head. Now that she thought of it, her life had been miserable, full of toil and angst. She had a chance to have something better here working for Mrs. Pettigrew. She’d be a fool not to take the woman up on her offer.

“Holly,” he said, voice soft. “Perhaps you should rest.”

She looked at him. Her eyelids were growing heavy. “Perhaps so.”

Joseph put the book back on the nightstand, then scooted his chair closer. “Do you wish to lie down?”

“No, sitting up I don’t cough as much.” Holly looked into his eyes. There was that concerned look again. “I barely escaped.”

He gave her a sage nod.

She didn’t know why she said it, but there it was. “After I climbed out the window, I had to jump and landed in the back of a passing wagon. Then I ran and ran.”

Joseph’s jaw tightened ever so slightly as he put a hand over hers. “You’re safe here. And you’re going to get well. Then you’ll work for Mrs. Pettigrew and live in this mansion and...” he smiled. “Well, who knows what will happen then.” Joseph gazed into her eyes and for a moment, Holly saw a glimmer of hope that maybe her life could be so much more than what it had been all these years.

“Thank you for your kind words,” she said.

“You’re welcome.” He patted her hands. “Rest now, princess.”

Her heart skipped at the endearment and an odd tingle went up her spine. She didn’t say a word, she couldn’t!

Without taking his eyes from hers, Joseph stood, gave her a warm smile, then left the room.

Holly leaned against the pillows and had the sensation that her heart just went out the door with him.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Mr. Bradshaw.”

Joseph fought an eye roll as he turned to face Rebecca Harrington. “Good afternoon.” He tipped his hat and made to leave. He’d gone to the park and was watching the skaters. He wanted to plan his outing with Holly down to the minute detail. Should they have cider or hot chocolate? Should he take her to lunch first? Would she be well enough to walk or should they take the carriage?

“You’re awful quiet, Joseph,” Rebecca purred. “That’s not like you. You’re not even insulting me.”

He sighed. “I apologize for that.”

She laughed. “Apologize? What’s gotten into you? I enjoyed exchanging barbs with you.” She sidled up to him. “Trouble brewing?”

“No.”

“Then what is it? Your father said you needed comforting.”

Joseph’s eyes went wide. “He said what?!”

Rebecca laughed. “I knew that would get your attention.” She wrapped an arm around one of his. “Let’s go skating.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Then what are you doing here? You look like... hmm, I’m not sure what. I’ve never seen you like this before.” She turned and leaned against the fence that bordered the pond near the skate shack. “What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing. I’m just...” he turned and also leaned against the fence. “... trying not to be myself.”

She laughed. “What?”

He frowned. “You’d do well to change your ways too, Miss Harrington.”

She gaped. “Miss Harrington is it? Well!”

He tried not to roll his eyes. “Try being nice for once. It will do you good.”

Rebecca laughed like it was the most ludicrous idea she’d ever heard. “Oh, that’s something coming from you. That tongue of yours is just as wicked as mine. You set your sights on something, and you do what you have to in order to get it, just like me.” She waved a hand between them. “We’re a lot alike, you and I. We don’t change our stripes overnight.”

Okay, she had a point. He was going to have to work on this. And she was right when

it came to doing what needed to be done to get something he wanted. But he wasn't going to be ruthless about it like she would. "One can change if they wish."

"Ha!"

"You should try."

She laughed again. "You are so naive."

"No, just tired of being an idiot." He turned around and leaned against the fence again.

"I hear Mrs. Pettigrew has a houseguest."

He stiffened. "Who told you that?"

"Mother."

"How does she know?"

"She spoke to your father."

Joseph sighed. Figures. "So what of it?"

"He said you've been spending time over there."

Joseph gave her the side-eye. "I've paid Mrs. Pettigrew a visit."

"And her guest? What is she to you?"

He eyed her again. "What do you want, Rebecca?"

“Gossip, I’m bored.”

He came away from the fence. This wouldn’t bode well for poor Holly if Rebecca started spreading rumors. “Then I suggest you take things up with Mrs. Pettigrew and ask her about her guest.”

“But you’ve been to the Pettigrew mansion, you’ve seen her.”

“Speak to Mrs. Pettigrew if you’re so curious,” he reiterated. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to be getting home. I have some work to do.”

“Good, I’ll accompany you.” She grabbed his arm again.

He sighed. “Rebecca...”

“Ah, we’re on a first name basis again. I knew you loved me!”

He glared at her which only made her laugh. “You’re so easy to manage, Joseph!”

He extracted his arm from her hold. “You’re not going home with me. I’ll accompany you home, but nothing more.”

She frowned back. “Fine, you may accompany me. But only if I can be on your arm.”

“What?”

“Oh come now, you’re a gentleman, aren’t you?” she shot back.

“Are you a lady?”

“Joseph Bradshaw!” She gasped loud enough to wake the dead. More than a few

heads turned in their direction.

He sighed again and offered her his arm. “Behave. Or you’re walking home by yourself.”

She looped her arm around his. “Never.”

He started walking, the sooner he was rid of her the better. It rankled that he wasn’t much better than Rebecca, and that he still needed to do so much to right the wrongs he’d done. But at least he was trying, unlike the viper on his arm. He wasn’t sure if she’d ever change. After this, he’d have to avoid her as much as possible. He didn’t want to risk slipping into any of his old ways. Not when...

He stopped.

“What’s wrong?” Rebecca asked.

He glanced her way. “Nothing.” Joseph started walking again and finished his thought; ... not when he was interested in courting a sweet, innocent, woman like Holly Turtle dove.

CHAPTER 10

The next day Mrs. Pettigrew dressed Holly in a light green velvet outfit trimmed in brown. Even the big brown buttons down the bodice were covered in velvet. Holly couldn't get over how good she looked. She stared at herself in the full-length mirror in her room, mouth agape for several moments before Abigail shooed her to the vanity where she styled Holly's hair. She was a little tired afterward but still wanted to venture downstairs. If her guess was right, Joseph would call on her and read to her in front of the fire. She looked forward to his visits, the more strength she gained. He had a pleasant voice, and the fact he was nice to look at made the experience even nicer.

Once downstairs in the drawing room Holly put her feet up on an ottoman Mr. Tugs provided her with but didn't cover up with a blanket. She found the fire sufficient to keep her warm.

Mr. Tugs served Holly and Mrs. Pettigrew tea, and Holly noted a third cup and saucer on the tray. Was Chastity joining them this morning, or had he put it there for Joseph?

Mrs. Pettigrew caught her looking at the tea tray. "Chastity is out with Dalton running a few errands for me. Soon you'll be doing the same thing."

Holly cringed. "Wh-what?"

"Oh, don't worry, I've already arranged an escort for you, just to be on the safe side. I did tell you I have someone tracking down your brother, didn't I?"

Holly sucked in a breath. Had she? Joseph managed to wheedle more information out of her, but she was too tired to resist his questions. "I'm not sure..." She sounded like an idiot. Did the woman still want to hire her as an assistant?

"Not to worry, ma petite . You have been through much and are not recovered. It wouldn't surprise me if you forgot half our conversations."

Holly blushed. She was right, she didn't remember everything they talked about. Probably because she fell asleep while Mrs. Pettigrew was speaking to her. She'd done the same thing with Joseph, come to think of it.

The doorbell rang, and Holly watched as Mr. Tugs shuffled his way across the grand foyer to answer it.

"That's probably Mr. Bradshaw," Mrs. Pettigrew commented. "I hope you've been enjoying your time with him. It's nice to have someone read to you, is it not?"

Before Holly could answer, Joseph glided into the room, a huge smile on his face. "You're out of bed already. That's wonderful!" He approached, a book in his hand. "How are you feeling this morning?" He pulled a chair closer to Holly's and sat.

She watched him, cup and saucer in hand and smiled. "Good morning."

"She is better," Mrs. Pettigrew said. "But don't wear her out. We don't want her to have a relapse."

"No, of course not," Joseph said. He gave Holly a warm smile, and her heart skipped a beat. "Would you like to continue *The Princess and the Pirate* , or would you like me to read you a little Jane Austen?"

Holly's eyes lit up. "Jane Austen? I love her books." She smiled. "You read Jane

Austen?”

“My mother did. She has all her books,” Joseph said.

“Did?” Holly asked in a small voice.

“She passed on more than five years ago.” He held the book up. “Pride & Prejudice?”

“That would be lovely,” Holly said and held up her cup. “Tea?”

He glanced at the tea set. “Don’t mind if I do.”

“I’ll leave you two to the delights of Miss Austen,” Mrs. Pettigrew said. “There’s something I need to speak to Mrs. Fraser about.” She left the drawing room and once again, Holly realized Mrs. Pettigrew had left them alone. Abigail or Mr. Tugs must be hovering about in the grand foyer. It was the only thing she could think of. Surely Mrs. Pettigrew wouldn’t leave them completely unchaperoned.

Holly almost laughed at the thought. Randall had no sense of propriety. Especially as he was going to sell her to the highest bidder. Joseph was much different. A real gentleman.

“Holly,” Joseph said with concern. “Sweetheart, your hands are shaking.”

She looked at her teacup as she raised it to her lips. It was true, her hands were shaking. She lowered the cup to its saucer with a clink, and wanted to let go of it to hide her hands, but with her luck, she’d spill her tea.

“Holly?”

She looked at him and locked gazes. His eyes were a mix of concern and admiration. "I'm fine."

"No, you're not." He scooted to the end of his chair. "What can I do? Should I fetch the doctor?"

"Oh, mercy no. There's no need for that." She put a hand to her chest and tried to draw in a deep breath. "I... was thinking of things I've been trying not to."

Joseph sat back. "Regarding what happened to you?"

Holly looked away. "Yes."

He reached out, tucked a finger under her chin and brought her face to his. "You're safe here, remember that."

Holly nodded. Randall had no idea where she was. How could he? "Yes, you're right. But..."

"It's okay, you don't have to talk about it." He sat and watched her, his eyes still full of concern. She remembered asking him why he cared. And... did he call her sweetheart a few moments ago?

"How about I read to you for a bit, then if you're up to it, perhaps Mrs. Pettigrew will let me show you the rest of the mansion."

She smiled. "Do you think she would?"

He shrugged. "It won't hurt to ask. The library has a lovely view of the back of the property. She has a huge rose garden, a maze, and there's even a large pond. Mr. Pettigrew loved to fish and kept it stocked. I don't know if it still is."

“How did he die?” Holly asked, curious.

“Influenza. Poor man. He made his fortune with a huge gold strike.” He glanced around the drawing room. “He built this house for Mrs. Pettigrew, and they’ve been here ever since. Well, Mrs. Pettigrew has. Xavier died a couple of years ago.”

Holly gave him a sympathetic look. “You miss her, don’t you. Your mother?”

“Of course.” He glanced at the book in his hands. “What about your parents?”

“They died about a year ago.”

He gave her a slow nod. “I’m sure you miss them very much.”

Her lower lip trembled. “I do.”

Joseph reached over and put a hand on her arm. “You don’t have to worry, Holly. You can start a new life here.”

“But...”

“Don’t doubt Mrs. Pettigrew’s intentions. Nor mine.” He went to the first pages of the book. “Chapter one...”

Holly listened to him read and tried to relax. But in her experience, if something was too good to be true, it usually was. That meant either Mrs. Pettigrew would decide she didn’t want to hire her after all, or by some chance, Randall would find her and carry her off to finish whatever transaction he’d already started with his highest bidder. What a nightmare that would be!

“You’re pale,” Joseph commented, drawing her out of her thoughts.

“Oh, sorry.”

He chuckled. “You’re apologizing for turning pale? You don’t need to be sorry for being ill. Do you need to return to bed?”

She shook her head.

“Do you require a blanket? Are you warm enough?”

Holly marveled at the man in the chair so close to hers. “Are all men like you? Men that live like you do?”

He sat back, eyebrows raised. “Well, no. Not all.” He closed the book and ran a finger up and down the spine. “I... I’ve had to mend my ways.”

She made a scoffing sound. “I find that hard to believe. You’ve been nothing but kind to me.”

He smiled. “Thank you for saying that. But I’m afraid there was a time I would not be sitting here reading Jane Austen to you.”

Holly wasn’t sure if she should comment on his statement or not.

“Have I shocked you?” he asked.

“No, it’s just, you’ve mentioned that before, I think. But I still don’t see that in you.”

“Trust me, it was there.” Joseph looked at the fire. “Still is. I’m not a changed man yet, Holly. Just so you know.”

Her heart fluttered at his honesty. “Were you terrible then?”

He gave his attention back to her. “You would have no patience for me. In fact, you’d think me a cad.”

She swallowed hard. He didn’t know the meaning of the word as far as she was concerned. “But you’re not.”

Joseph gave her a warm smile. “I’m glad you think so. Maybe I’ve changed my ways more than I thought.” He set the book on the low table and picked up his cup and saucer. “I’d like to take you on an outing when you’re up to it. Perhaps lunch and the book shop.”

Her cheeks heated. No man had shown any real interest in her except the unwanted kind.

“Here now,” Joseph said and left his chair. He set his cup and saucer down and knelt before her. “You’re trembling.”

A chill went up her spine, and she hardly noticed when he took her cup and saucer and set them on the table next to his. “Holly, what is it?”

She swallowed hard. “It was awful,” she rasped. “I can’t help the shaking when I think of it.”

He took her hands in his. “You’re safe here, remember that.”

She nodded. “I still fear my brother will come knocking on Mrs. Pettigrew’s door and drag me away.” A tear fell, then another. She felt so weak, but didn’t care.

“It’s alright,” he said and wiped a tear away with his thumb. “If I must guard Mrs. Pettigrew’s front door to make you feel more secure, I’ll do it.”

Her eyes widened as her heart melted into a puddle. “You... you would do that?”

“If it would make you feel more secure. Yes.”

She smiled. “I hardly think it necessary. But I can’t help how I feel. Randall has no idea where I am. I’m... I’m being irrational.”

“Maybe so, but can anyone blame you?” He gave her hands a squeeze and drew closer. “You will always be safe with me.”

Tears filled her eyes, and she noticed he didn’t so much as flinch hearing her own brother was the culprit. Had Mrs. Pettigrew already told him? “Thank you, Joseph.”

He gave her a nod and squeezed her hands again before returning to his chair and picking up his book. He cleared his throat. “Chapter three.”

Holly sat back, closed her eyes, and listened, feeling so much safer than she had before.

CHAPTER 11

Joseph seethed. He had to find Holly's brother and see him brought to justice. He couldn't stand the thought of her living in fear because of the lout. But could he have him arrested? He'd need proof if he was to put the man behind bars. That is, if he could even find him. For all he knew Randall Turtledove had left Denver. Then again, would he give up tracking down his sister so easily? Especially if she cost him a beating from an upset bidder?

Perhaps he should ask Mrs. Pettigrew about the man she hired to find Holly's brother. Joseph would help him if he could.

He'd read to Holly until she was too tired to continue and left her in the care of Mrs. Pettigrew and her staff. He would return tomorrow and if Holly was up to it, show her around Mrs. Pettigrew's home. He asked the matchmaker's permission before he left, and she happily gave it. A little tour would do Holly good and help get her mind off things. Besides, he'd always wanted to explore the mansion, and this was his chance to do so.

He went to his family's place of business, worked for a time, had a meeting with his father to go over a few things, then attended an opera that night. But all he could think about was Holly's wide-eyed look when he told her he'd protect her. She was obviously not used to a man wanting to protect her. Quite the opposite.

Every time he thought about her brother mistreating her, he wanted to either beat the man to a pulp or shoot him. But no, Randall Turtledove needed to face justice and be sentenced like any other criminal.

By the time morning rolled around, Joseph imagined a dozen different outcomes to the horrid man's trial. But picturing Holly's brother rotting in prison the rest of his life or hanging from the highest gallows did nothing to still the gnawing in his heart. No, there was only one thing that would do that, and it was Holly herself.

He dressed, told his father he had a meeting this morning and would come to the office later, then headed straight for Mrs. Pettigrew's.

Once Tugs ushered him into the drawing room, he paced in front of the Christmas tree as he waited for Holly to be brought down. He didn't bring a book today as he figured the tour would tire her. Perhaps he'd take her to the library first, let her see Mrs. Pettigrew's collection of books and sit with her in front of the fire there. Then they could inspect some of the other rooms in the house.

"Joseph," Holly said with a hint of cheerfulness. His chest swelled at the sound. She was happy to see him.

"Holly." He met her in the middle of the drawing room. "You look better today." He took in her cranberry-colored dress trimmed with black lace and black buttons. "My, but that's a lovely dress." He held her hands and noticed they were cold. "Do you need a shawl? Your hands are like ice."

She shook her head. "I'm a little chilled but will be fine."

He frowned. "Abigail, fetch Holly something to keep her warm."

"Right away, Mr. Bradshaw." The maid hurried from the room, heading for the stairs.

"While she's getting you a shawl, let's have you sit." He guided Holly to her chair by the fire. "Now you can warm up." He knelt before her and rubbed her hands with his.

“My hands are cold, but the rest of me doesn’t feel so bad,” she said.

“Even so, I don’t like the fact they’re so chilled. Hold them toward the fire.”

She did as he asked, and he took his usual chair next to hers. “You’ll enjoy the library.”

Holly smiled. “Mrs. Pettigrew was telling me about it this morning. She’s going to have Abigail serve us tea there.”

“Good. We’ll spend some time in the library, then if you’re feeling up to it, explore more of the house. If not, you can return to your room to rest.”

“Thank you,” she said, and he caught the sincerity in her voice. “I know there are other things you could be doing this morning. Mrs. Pettigrew told me you and your father own several businesses. I’m sure they keep you busy.”

“Indeed, they do. But you are... important to me,” he said. “I want to spend time with you.”

Her eyes went wide with disbelief, and it made his gut twist. Did she think all men were bad? Of course, considering that her own flesh and blood tried to sell her for money, could he blame her?

She didn’t comment as Abigail returned with a heavy shawl for Holly. “Here ye are. This will keep ye nice and warm.”

Joseph took it from her, pulled Holly to her feet, and put the shawl around her shoulders. “Better?”

Holly pulled it close. “This is nice. Thank you, Abigail.”

The maid bobbed a curtesy. "I'll make sure your tea is being prepared." She smiled at Holly and left the drawing room.

Joseph put a hand to the small of her back. "Shall we?" He motioned to the grand foyer.

Holly's eyes brightened, making his chest warm. "Yes."

Joseph gave her the gentlest of nudges with his hand and they were off. They stopped in the grand foyer first, and he told her what he knew of the portraits there, then led her down the hall toward the sets of French doors that looked out over the back of the property. He stopped before them. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Holly's eyes rounded to saucers. "Y-you carried me all this way?!"

He smiled as his chest swelled with pride. It was silly really; he was doing what needed to be done at the time. But the wonder in her eyes was hard to miss. "You were in trouble."

"Yes, I...suppose..."

He almost laughed. "A few more hours and who knows what would have happened to you. Thank Heaven Mr. Prosser found you when he did."

"Mr. Prosser? Who is that?"

"Mrs. Pettigrew's stable master."

She gave him a slow nod. "I should thank him."

"I can have that arranged." Joseph took her by the elbow and steered her left down

another hall.

“The library is this way?” she asked.

“Yes.” He turned left again and opened a heavy wooden door. “Mrs. Pettigrew’s library.”

Holly’s jaw dropped. “Oh my!”

Joseph smiled. Mrs. Pettigrew should be enjoying this, and he belatedly realized how much he was. Anyone else in his circle of friends would think nothing of a library. But to Holly, he might as well have just given her the moon.

She stepped inside, eyes wide and jaw slack, and turned a full circle. “There are so many books!”

“Indeed, there are. I think Mrs. Pettigrew has one of, if not the biggest library in Denver.”

She gravitated toward the fire pulling the shawl closer and continued to take in their surroundings. The library was richly appointed with dark woods, green and brown leather furniture and paintings of hunting scenes and country manors. There was a pickax hanging over the fireplace, and Joseph wondered how long it would take Holly to notice it.

Xavier Pettigrew’s desk sat at the other end of the room near a window with cranberry colored velvet curtains with tasseled green ties.

“What a lovely room,” Holly commented. “So masculine, yet so cozy.”

“As I understand it, Mr. and Mrs. Pettigrew spent a lot of time in here together. Mr.

Pettigrew was very fond of reading, so is Mrs. Pettigrew.”

She went to one of the leather wing chairs near the fire and sank into it. “It feels good to sit again. I’m weaker than I thought.”

He took the other chair. “It’s quite all right. We can enjoy some tea then you can return to your room to rest.”

She nodded in agreement and sat back, closing her eyes. He hoped he wasn’t wearing her out. But she needed a little outing, even if it was the library.

Abigail brought their tea along with some lovely raisin scones and clotted cream and jam and prepared them each a cup. As soon as she was done, she bobbed a curtsy and was off again.

Holly sat, cup and saucer in hand, and smiled as she stared at the fire.

“Better?” Joseph asked.

“Yes, much.” She looked at him. “I hope I’m not boring you.”

“No, not at all.” He sipped his tea and realized he wasn’t bored in the slightest. “So, what do you like to read?”

She blushed.

“Oh, don’t tell me... The Princess and the Pirate ?”

Her blush deepened. “I admit, I’ve not read a book like that before, but I think it’s becoming my favorite.”

“So, adventure and romance. Daring heroes, damsels in distress...”

“The princess is hardly a damsel. She’s clobbered more than a few bad men already.”

“Ah,” he said wagging a finger at her. “But had she not had that frying pan, they’d have subdued her for certain.”

Holly shrugged. “But she’d have been rescued.”

“By whom? Our hero hasn’t arrived yet. His ship hasn’t docked. Who would rescue her?”

She lowered her gaze. “Oh, you have a good point.” When Holly looked at him, she was frowning. “But she got out of her predicament herself. It’s good to be able to rescue yourself.” She swallowed hard. “Many times, there’s no one else you can depend on.”

He scooted to the end of his chair. “Here now, don’t think about what happened. You did admirably escaping your brother the way you did. Now concentrate on getting well, beginning your new job for Mrs. Pettigrew, and creating a life for yourself.”

She looked him in the eyes. “You make it sound so easy.”

“It is. You needn’t worry about things.”

“But I do, Joseph. I can’t help it.” She sipped her tea then let go a weary sigh. “I’ve worried all my life about so many things. Where the next bit of food was coming from. Where to find water, will we have enough money, is there enough wood for the fire?” She closed her eyes. “I don’t know anything else.”

He stared at her pale face and the way her lashes rested against her skin. She

reminded him of a delicate porcelain doll in that moment, one that needed protection from everything that could harm it.

“Now you won’t have to,” he said gently. “You’ll see.”

Holly opened her eyes and smiled. “I so hope you’re right, Joseph.”

CHAPTER 12

Mrs. Pettigrew walked the trails on her property and finally entered the hedge maze. She found Tugs trimming some branches and stopped to speak to him. “Isn’t it a little early to be cutting things back?”

“I’m just tidying things up a bit.” Snip, snip, snip. He stopped and turned to her. “May I ask you something?”

“Of course, Tugs, anything.” She rolled her shoulders to fend off the chill in the air. She wore a light-blue wool coat and would have to think about getting one for Holly.

“Will you be greatly disappointed to have not made a match by New Year’s Day?” Tugs asked.

She arched an eyebrow at him. “Not at all. Miss Turtledove is a special case, but she will be matched.” She studied her soft leather gray gloves trimmed with black fur. “I do believe she’s melting young Mr. Bradshaw’s heart. So long as they’re matched sometime near the beginning of the new year, I’ll be happy. Then I’ll have to start thinking about Valentine’s Day.”

Mr. Tugs smiled. “You were serious then, about trying to make a match for every holiday?”

She lowered her hand and stared at him. “Whatever has gotten into you, Tugs? Why the worry?”

He set the hedge clippers down and adjusted his scarf. She knew gardening soothed him and pondered if there was something else bothering him. “Miss Turtledove will need a good protector. Are you sure Mr. Bradshaw is it?” He stuck his hands in his coat pockets and took in their surroundings. “It wasn’t long ago he was mistreating Chastity.”

She gave him a sage nod. “True, but he’s realized the error of his ways and is making a course correction. I commend him for that. Besides, Holly likes him, and he’s given her no reason not to. I commend him for that as well.”

“So, you’ll continue the match?” Tugs asked.

Mrs. Pettigrew smiled. “Dear Tugs, I’m simply letting nature take its course. Now if you’ll excuse me, I must meet with Mr. Forsythe, the Pinkerton I hired. He’s to report in any time now.” She examined the wall of the hedge Tugs had been trimming. Her gardener, Mr. Bekins, was off for a week-long Christmas holiday spending time with his family. “Carry on, if it suits you. I’ll tell Mrs. Fraser to expect a guest for tea and have her or Abigail serve.”

“Thank you.” He picked the hedge trimmers back up and returned to work.

Once she gave Mrs. Fraser her orders, Adelia went into the drawing room to await the arrival of Mr. Forsythe. He was a handsome young man, but all too serious, and she wondered if he was betrothed. She didn’t think so and might have to ask a few questions during their meeting. Let’s see, would he like a sweet girl that liked living in the city, or perhaps a young woman with an adventurous spirit?

It wasn’t long before the doorbell rang, and Abigail hurried across the grand foyer to answer it. “Good afternoon, sir,” Adelia heard Abigail greet.

A few moments later Abigail entered the drawing room. “A Mr. Forsythe to see ye,

Mrs. Pettigrew.”

“Thank you, Abigail. Now check with Mrs. Fraser and see if the tea I told her to make is ready.”

“Aye, ma’am, right away.” Abigail scurried off.

Mrs. Pettigrew studied Mr. Forsythe as he took a seat opposite hers. “Well, sir, what have you to report?”

He looked at the fire across the room and heaved a sigh. “Randall Turtledove was staying at The White Horse Hotel but has been gone for days. Probably moved to another hotel in case his sister ratted him out to the police.”

“No doubt. What else did you discover?”

He sat back in his chair and crossed his legs. His clothes were well kept, not shabby like some Pinkerton’s she’d seen. He was also handsome, with chestnut hair and blue eyes, and a nice broad chest. She noted how tight his jacket sleeves were and the size of his arms. Mr. Forsythe had a muscular build and large hands which she was sure could do some serious damage in a fist fight.

“He’s made a few enemies since his little stunt,” Mr. Forsythe commented. “Seems two of the brothels in the neighborhood aren’t happy he was trying to take their business from them. Talk is, one of the madams paid him a visit, and gave him what for. He then offered her his sister.”

“What?!” Adelia gasped. “How could he do such a thing? He has no idea where she is?”

“True, and also figured she couldn’t have gotten far. How he coerced the madam to

help him look is beyond me, but that's the news from the street."

Abigail entered with a tea tray and set it down. Once she served them both she disappeared again, and Adelia noted the appreciative look Mr. Forsythe gave her maid.

Adelia cleared her throat. "Well, that's disturbing news." She held her cup and saucer tighter than she should and tried to relax. "Is she safe here?"

"Perfectly," Mr. Forsythe assured. "But if you'd like, I can have some men watch the house."

"No, that won't be necessary."

"Do you have any outings planned for the young lady? Perhaps it would be safer if she stayed indoors until we apprehend her brother."

"She's not ready to venture out."

"I hear you have a big skating party on New Year's. Will she attend?"

"Not now. Besides, it's still too early for her to be out."

"Perhaps... when the time is right, she should go out."

She set her cup in its saucer and put them on the table. "What are you saying?"

"Maybe if her brother caught word of the neighborhood she's in, he'll come sniffing around here and we can catch him."

"I'm sure you're perfectly capable of catching him wherever he is, once you find him."

Didn't you just tell me he's probably slinking around some other hotel?"

"Possibly, or the madam he made the bargain with has him stashed somewhere. Word is, his sister is a beauty, and would bring a good price no matter which brothel got a hold of her."

Adelia turned away. "How barbaric."

"Yes." He took a sip of his tea and said nothing more.

"I want Miss Turtledove protected; do you hear me?"

"I understand, Mrs. Pettigrew. We'll do all we can. But the sooner we apprehend her brother the better. She'll not be safe until we do. Once he's behind bars, the madam he's dealing with will stop searching as well, cut her losses, and move on."

"One can only hope." Adelia picked up her teacup and sipped slowly as Mr. Forsythe studied his surroundings.

"Where are you from, originally?" she asked. "You sound like you're from back east."

He smiled. "Massachusetts, originally. Though I've spent time in New York. I went to university there."

"Did you now?" she said with interest, happy to no longer be speaking about Randall Turtledove's heinous crimes. "Is your family still back east?"

"They are. I've two younger sisters, and both our parents are still alive."

"Whatever are you doing here in Denver?"

He grinned. "It's wilder here."

Adelia laughed. "Gracious, you'll be heading west the minute Denver becomes boring."

He shook his head. "I'm not so sure about that. Denver has enough of an underbelly to keep me busy for years." He drained the rest of his cup and got to his feet. "Well, if there's nothing more, I should be on my way. Remember what I said. Keep your guest tucked away for now, but later, if we haven't apprehended her brother, we may need her to draw him out."

"I'm not comfortable with that," she stated and rose from her chair.

"It is my sincere hope, Mrs. Pettigrew, that we will have nabbed Turtledove before then."

She nodded, crossed the room to the bell pull, and gave it a yank. "I'll have Abigail fetch your coat and hat."

"Thank you." He looked at the tea tray, plucked a scone off the plate, and wrapped it in a napkin. "For later," he said in explanation.

Abigail entered the room. "Ye rang, ma'am?"

"Yes, Abigail, be so kind as to fetch Mr. Forsythe's coat and hat."

Abigail looked at him, blushed, then bobbed a curtesy. "Right away, ma'am."

Adelia watched Mr. Forsythe with a practiced eye. His were glued to Abigail's backside as she scurried across the grand foyer to the coat closet. A smile formed on her lips as Abigail returned with the man's things.

“Here ye are, sir.” Abigail helped him on with his jacket then handed him his hat.

“Thank you...?”

“Abigail,” Adelia volunteered.

“Abigail,” he repeated. “Short for Abbey?”

“Aye, sir.” Abigail’s eyes darted to Mrs. Pettigrew, who continued to watch them both.

He donned his hat. “I’ll let you know if anything comes up.” He touched the brim in farewell then headed for the front door, Abigail scurrying ahead of him to open it.

Adelia watched from the drawing room, saw him tip his hat to Abigail, wish her a good day, and leave. She didn’t want to have to replace Abigail, but if the two began to form any sort of attachment, she wasn’t going to get in the way. Besides, Abigail could still work for her as a maid even if she was married...

“Here she is,” Joseph said as he guided Holly into the drawing room. “We were wondering if we’d find you here.”

“I was just having some tea,” Adelia said. She would tell Joseph what Mr. Forsythe found out but wait to tell Holly. She wore a big smile, even if she did look tired.

Adelia returned to her chair and picked up her cup and saucer. “Joseph, ring for more tea, will you?”

“Of course.” He went to the bell pull and gave it a tug. That done, he joined Holly near the fire.

“Do sit down, dear,” Adelia suggested. “You look tired.”

“I am, but we had such a nice time in the library, I didn’t want to leave.” Holly sat in her chair by the fire.

Adelia watched her a moment, her heart going out to her. How could someone so gentle and sweet be related to such a cad? “Joseph?”

“Yes?” He crossed the room to her. “Can I get you something?”

“Yes,” she said in a low voice. “Some peace of mind.”

He frowned and looked at the tea tray. “You had a visitor.”

“Indeed, I did. We will speak of him later. Right now, I’d like to know if you’re available for my skating party?”

“You, um, didn’t send me an invitation,” he pointed out.

“Not to attend.” She looked across the room at Holly. “But to stand guard.”

He followed her gaze. “Of course. Consider it done.”

She gave him a warm smile. “You don’t mind missing the party?”

His eyes flicked to Holly again. “There are more important things than a social function.”

Her smile grew. “Indeed, there are.”

CHAPTER 13

The next several days went by much as the others did. Holly came downstairs for a little while, and when tired, returned to her room to rest. Today was New Year's Eve, and she was looking forward to joining Mrs. Pettigrew, Chastity and Mr. Simpson, her betrothed, and Joseph for dinner. He didn't visit her this afternoon for fear of tiring her out before the evening meal, and she wanted to enjoy a more formal dinner in the impressive mansion. She was still marveling over the library and its many books. What a wonderful room! She could live in it!

"The pink I think," Mrs. Pettigrew was saying as she entered Holly's room. "Ah, wonderful! You're not napping." She went to the chair by the bed and sat. "I'm having some dresses made for you, ma petite , and we need your measurements."

Holly gaped at her. "What?" She looked at the woman now standing in the doorway. "Is... that a dressmaker?"

"Yes, it is, and she is in a hurry. Mrs. Cortez must return to her shop, you see."

Holly tossed aside the throw she'd put over her legs to keep them warm. "Very well." She left the bed. "Where do you want me?"

"First you must strip down to your underthings," Mrs. Cortez instructed. She looked at her over her spectacles, and Holly noted the measuring ribbon draped over her shoulders. "Yes, of course."

Mrs. Pettigrew rose to help. "I'm having a few day dresses made, some tea dresses,

and of course you'll need several ball gowns to get started..."

"What?" Holly breathed. "No, no I don't need..."

"You will," Mrs. Pettigrew cut in. "Isn't that right, Mrs. Cortez?"

"Indeed." The dressmaker stood straight before the window, still eyeing Holly over the rim of her spectacles. She reminded her of a strict, sour-looking schoolmarm itching to punish a student.

Holly stilled as Mrs. Pettigrew unbuttoned the back of the day dress she wore. "But..."

"Don't argue, ma petite, this is something I wish to do for you. As my assistant, you will be expected to attend some of the same social functions I do."

Her shoulders slumped. Okay, that made sense. "I see." She took off her dress, the petticoat, and let Mrs. Cortez measure her for new clothes. By the time she was done Holly felt like she had to lie down and did. She wasn't sure how long she slept, but soon Abigail was waking her to help her dress for dinner.

"Does everyone always change their clothes just to eat in the formal dining room?"

Abigail laughed. "Of course, silly lass." She presented Holly with a beautiful pink dress trimmed in white lace. The pink taffeta material shimmered, and it reminded Holly of icing on a cake.

"I've never worn anything so lovely," she whispered. "I... I don't know what to say." She pinched her arm, felt the pain, and still wasn't convinced this wasn't a dream.

"Ye have yerself a good time, tonight, miss," Abigail advised. "Ye'll be set to rights

soon enough and then yer job will start. Mrs. Pettigrew is a fair mistress, but she's busy, that one. Ye'll not lack for things to do."

Holly nodded, determined to do well for her new employer. She could read and write and do sums, but wasn't sure if that was going to be enough. "Abigail..."

"Aye?"

"What if... what if I'm not good enough?"

Abigail stopped helping her on with a fresh petticoat. "Nonsense, ye'll be fine. Chastity got a job here as a maid and wound up as Mrs. Pettigrew's assistant. And she's done all right."

Holly drew in a deep breath and let it out. "But what if I'm not smart enough?"

"Of course ye are. Ye were smart enough to hide in Mrs. Pettigrew's carriage to escape the cold, and ye made it all the way here in a snowstorm. That takes gumption, fortitude, not to mention a courageous heart."

Holly hadn't thought of that and smiled at her words. "Thank you, Abigail, for saying such nice things."

"True things, ye mean." She went around Holly and began to tighten her corset. I'll not make this too tight. I'm sure ye want to be able to breathe in case ye start coughing. Though I notice ye've not been doing that as much."

"Nor at night. In fact, I seem to be recovering faster than what the doctor thought, aren't I?"

"Oh, aye," Abigail said happily. "Ye'll be up and about like normal folks in no time."

She got on with her work and when she was done, took the dress from the bed and helped her on with it.

“How do I look?” Holly asked.

Abigail finished with the last few buttons then stepped in front of her. “Like a fairy princess!”

Holly blushed then went to stand before the full-length mirror on the other side of the room. “Oh my!”

“Now yer hair! And I have just the thing to put in it!” Abigail went to the vanity and practically shoved Holly into the chair.

She laughed at the maid and noticed that all the servants in Mrs. Pettigrew’s employ seemed healthy and happy. Had she met them all? “Abigail?”

“Aye, miss?” She continued to pile Holly’s long blond hair atop her head in an intricate style.

“How big is the staff here?”

“Not large at all, miss. “I’m the only maid, then there’s Mrs. Fraser the cook, Mr. Tugs the butler, Mr. Prosser the stable master and Mr. Bekins the gardener, though Mr. Tugs often helps him out as he has a thing for plants and shrubbery.”

Holly’s eyes widened. “Is that enough?”

“For Mrs. Pettigrew it is. Except of course when she hosts a ball or party. Then she sometimes hires extra help. Having ye here will be a blessing, I can tell ye that.”

Holly stared at herself and Abigail in the mirror. She knew rich people did some strange things, and she'd heard a few times during her stay that Mrs. Pettigrew was a little eccentric. Joseph let it slip during some of their conversations over the last couple of days.

Joseph. He would be her escort tonight. He'd teased her about it yesterday during another excursion to the library. He'd be escorting her from the drawing room to the dining room!

She giggled at the thought, catching Abigail's attention. The maid's eyebrows shot up, and she smiled.

"It's nothing," Holly said. "Just a stray thought."

Abigail kept smiling as she continued her work. When she was done, she stepped back. "Well?"

Holly sat stunned. "It's beautiful. Where did you get the flowers?"

"The hothouse, of course." Abigail adjusted a few pins then sighed in satisfaction. "Ye should be going to a grand ball, instead of the dining room for dinner."

Holly blushed. "Dinner in the dining room is fine by me. I've never been to a ball and wouldn't know how to act."

Abigail patted her on the shoulder and started to put the hair things away. "Don't forget yer gloves."

Holly gasped. "There's gloves too?"

"Of course. They're on the bed."

She spied them and turned to the mirror again. The only jewelry Holly wore was a pearl necklace and some matching earrings. The white satin gloves would top off the outfit, and she really would look like a princess! Minus the tiara of course. But from what she heard, rich people wore them just like royalty did. It seemed scandalous to her.

Holly pulled on the gloves. “There, I’m ready.”

Abigail preened and clasped her hands before her. “Poor Mr. Bradshaw doesn’t stand a chance with you in that dress. Yer picture perfect!”

Holly’s face fell. “What?”

Abigail blushed. “Oh, nothing.” She plastered on a smile and shooed Holly from the room. “Off with ye now. Downstairs ye go!”

Holly wanted to ask her more about Joseph, but decided she’d ask Joseph herself if she got the chance.

He stood at the bottom of the stairs in black evening wear. She’d never seen him dressed so fine, and almost tripped midway down the staircase!

Joseph hurried up the stairs to her. “Holly!”

She gripped the stair rail. “I’m alright. Just clumsy.”

He stood before her, as if she’d go tumbling down the stairs at any moment. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

She nodded as she looked into his eyes. “You look... wonderful.”

“You really think so? You’re not looking at my clothes.”

A blush heated her cheeks, and she looked away. “I saw enough.”

He tucked a finger under her chin and brought her face back to his. “I know. Then you tripped.”

She giggled. “So, it was your fault, is that it?”

“It seems so.” He came alongside her and offered his arm. “Here, you can hang onto me and the railing.”

“Probably wise. I always was clumsy.”

“If that’s true, then no doubt being weak as a kitten while ill doesn’t help. I’m so glad you’ve recovered enough to join us for dinner.”

“Do you eat here often?”

He slowed, as if thinking about his answer, then stopped. “To tell you the truth, I’ve spent more time here with you than I have while attending any of Mrs. Pettigrew’s balls, parties, or dinners. But my father and I were here for a dinner Mrs. Pettigrew hosted before Christmas. Considering my behavior, I’m surprised she invited us to her Christmas ball.”

She frowned. “What did you do?”

“I told you I’m trying to change my ways. I was, in a word, selfish and uncharitable.”

“That’s two words,” she said without thinking.

He smiled at her. "You are a dear."

They reached the bottom of the stairs, and he said nothing more on the matter. Should she ask about the comment Abigail made about him earlier? Would that be considered improper?

Chastity and Mr. Simpson were already in the drawing room standing in front of the Christmas tree. "Holly, it's so good to see you up and around," Chastity said.

Mr. Simpson inclined his head to them. "Bradshaw. Miss Turtledove."

"It's good to see you again, sir," Holly greeted.

"You look much improved," he said in return. "Chastity and I were just discussing Adelia's skating party tomorrow."

"It's a shame you aren't well enough to attend," Chastity said.

Joseph patted Holly's hand. "She'll be entertained all the same."

"What's this?" Mr. Simpson said.

Joseph smiled. "I'll be keeping her company along with Mrs. Fraser while the rest of you enjoy the party."

Mr. Simpson smiled. "Wonderful. I was afraid you'd be bored to tears all by yourself."

"No," Holly said. "Joseph offered to stay with me so I wouldn't be in this big house alone. Even though Mrs. Fraser will be here, it hardly seems so when she's so far away in the kitchen."

“But she’ll be joining us for lunch tomorrow,” Joseph said, “and we’ll play a game or some such thing.”

Mr. Simpson smiled. “That’s Adelia for you. What other person in our class would let her cook lunch and play games with a recovering houseguest and Bradshaw here?”

Holly felt Joseph stiffen next to her. Had Mr. Simpson been referring to something else? She pushed the thought aside as Mrs. Pettigrew joined them and sat in her favorite chair. Maybe she should ask her what Abigail’s little comment meant.

CHAPTER 14

Joseph fought against a sigh. Simpson probably didn't mean anything by the way he said his name a moment ago, but even if he did. Well, he deserved it. "Simpson, a word?" He smiled at Holly, let go of her arm, and steered her to the nearest chair. "Sit, rest. I won't be a moment."

She smiled at him as he and Simpson headed for the fireplace, and out of earshot.

"What is it?" Simpson asked.

Joseph, his eyes on Holly, turned to him. "I owe you an apology."

"For what?"

He hoped Simpson didn't want to accept his apology with a punch to the nose later, just to make himself feel better. "For the way I treated Chastity. Everything that happened with Rebecca... all of it."

"Oh, that," Simpson drawled. "Chastity mentioned you apologized to her. I'm glad of it." He stuck his hands in his pockets. "You've been spending an awful lot of time with Miss Turtledove..."

"At Mrs. Pettigrew's request," he added.

Simpson smiled. "Still not allowed to call her Adelia, eh? Despite the amount of time you've spent here, and now tomorrow too?"

“Don’t rub it in,” Joseph said and fought an eye roll.

“No, I suppose I shouldn’t.” He glanced at Holly. “What are your intentions toward Miss Turtledove?”

Joseph’s jaw went slack. “What?”

He shrugged. “It’s a legitimate question. Why else would you be spending so much time with her?”

“I am spending time at Mrs. Pettigrew’s request.”

Dalton Simpson stared at him like he’d grown a third eye. “Oh?”

“Miss Turtledove finds herself in a predicament, and I was asked to watch over her. Is that so hard for you to believe?”

Simpson blinked a few times. “Yes and no, but if Adelia thinks you’ve come around, then I’ll not argue. Just, don’t lead the poor girl on. She’s been through enough.”

“I would never...”

“You have in the past.”

He had him there. “That was the past.”

“Then strive for a better future,” Simpson advised. “Apology accepted.”

“Thank you.” He gave his waistcoat a little tug. “Now if you don’t mind, I’d like to attend to Holly.”

Simpson smiled. "Calling each other by your Christian names, are we?"

Joseph didn't fight this eye roll. "She needs protection."

"Yes, I understand. But protect her heart as well, that's all I'm saying." He leaned closer. "And yours for that matter. Do not play with either of your feelings. Now that you have some, I'd hate to see you abuse them." He patted Joseph on the back a couple of times, then headed for the women.

He watched him go, noticed Mrs. Pettigrew eyeing him, and approached her chair. "Good evening."

She smiled at him. "Good evening, Adelia."

His eyebrows shot up.

"You've earned it."

He sighed. "Then why don't I feel like it?"

She rose from the chair. "Don't feel like you have to make amends to everyone, Joseph."

"You're right, there are far too many people."

"Come now, you were never that bad. You recognized the path you were on was the wrong one and took a different one. Some will never leave the path they're on. Take the Harringtons for example." She glanced at Holly across the room speaking with Simpson and Chastity. "Rebecca Harrington and Randall Turtledove may never mend their ways. I dare say, of the two, I'll take Rebecca any day."

He nodded his agreement. Rebecca may be a witch at times, but she wasn't completely heartless.

Mr. Tugs shuffled into the drawing room. "Dinner is served, Madame."

"Very well, thank you, Tugs." She smiled at Joseph. "Best fetch your lady, sir."

Joseph's heart swelled at her words, and he crossed the room to do just that. Simpson's words also echoed in his mind with each step. They were wise words that he never would have heeded a month ago. But that was his old self, and he was coming to like his new self very much. But Simpson was right. He needed to realize what his feelings were for Holly and act appropriately.

She looked up at him as he came to her chair and offered her his hand. "Thank you." Holly let him pull her to her feet.

He extended his arm. "Shall we?"

She blushed, and he realized how becoming it was on her. "Thank you."

"Escorting you to the next room is hardly taxing, m'lady."

She giggled. "I mean for everything. I don't know how..."

"To repay me?" he finished.

"Yes." She stopped them in the middle of the drawing room. "I'll earn a wage, but I'm afraid I don't know what that is yet."

He smiled then realized what she might be saying. "Are you talking about paying me back for my time spent with you?"

She tucked her neck into her shoulders a little, reminding him of a turtle. “Well, yes...”

“Absolutely not.” He didn’t mean to snap and let go a patient sigh. “Holly, I’ve enjoyed our time together. You’ve... been a bright spot this week. I can’t begin to tell you how much. Please don’t think you owe me. If I didn’t want to be here, I wouldn’t be.” He drew closer, and against his better judgement, kissed her on the forehead.

She sucked in a tiny gasp of surprise and blinked at him a few times in response.

“Now, we’d best join the others before Mrs. Pettigrew comes looking for us.” He adjusted her arm around his and led her from the room.

By the time they reached the dining room, everyone else was already seated. He pulled out Holly’s chair, got her settled, then sat next to her.

Mrs. Pettigrew sat at the head of the table with Joseph on her left, Simpson on her right. “Well, isn’t this cozy?” She rang a little bell, and Abigail the maid entered and began to serve the first course. At home Capra would serve, and a footman would be present. To have a maid serve wasn’t following proper decorum, but Mrs. Pettigrew never was one to do so. With her money, she could do whatever she wanted. Including hiring half-frozen ragamuffins found curled up in one of her carriages.

Dinner was seven courses, and Joseph kept a close eye on Holly, who took in the elaborate place settings with a combination of awe and trepidation. She watched Chastity and copied her every move when it came to the silverware, and it was apparent to everyone that the poor girl didn’t know much about table etiquette. It was a silent lesson they all helped with amidst smiles and pleasant conversation. Holly, trooper that she was, didn’t become flushed with embarrassment or make any sort of fuss. It was refreshing, and he found he didn’t think ill of her lack of etiquette. It was a skill she could learn, like so many other things.

By the time the meal was over, Joseph could tell she was growing tired. “Would you like to retire to your room?” he asked.

Holly put a hand to her forehead and nodded.

“Are you feeling feverish?” Joseph left his chair.

“Holly dear,” Mrs. Pettigrew said. “Are you quite alright?”

“I’m tired is all.” She closed her eyes a moment and it was all the cue Joseph needed.

“Come, let’s get you upstairs.”

“Ahem,” Simpson cleared his throat.

“Let him be, Dalton,” Mrs. Pettigrew said. “Joseph is quite adept at looking after Holly.”

“Yes, but I think I’ll accompany them,” Chastity said.

“Fine, the two of you take Holly upstairs. I’ll send Abigail up in a moment,” Mrs. Pettigrew said.

Holly opened her eyes, and she looked paler than before. “Are you feeling unwell?” Joseph asked with concern.

“I’m... very tired.”

She gave him a helpless look and his eyes widened with concern. “Shall we call the doctor?”

Holly put a gloved hand to her forehead. “No, I...”

Joseph removed her hand and put his against her forehead. “You’re warm. You’ve done too much today.” He helped her out of her chair, walked her out of the dining room into the hallway, and scooped her into his arms. “Allow me,” he said with a smile.

She smiled back, looking as if her eyelids were growing too heavy for her to keep open. “Seems I have little choice.”

“It’s my pleasure to serve you, m’lady.” He carried her upstairs to her room, and just before he set her down, her head fell against his shoulder. He took the liberty of holding her a moment longer, then lowered her to the bed. “There now, Chastity will take good care of you. I’ll see you tomorrow. We’ll play games, I can read to you, and if we play our cards right, we can get a rise out of Mrs. Fraser.”

She smiled as she slowly fell to one side and closed her eyes. “That sounds wonderful.”

“Come now, you can’t sleep in that gown,” Chastity said and tugged on one of Holly’s arms.

Abigail came into the room. “Well, she lasted longer than Mrs. Fraser thought she would. Let me help ye now.”

Joseph stepped around the bed to the door, his eyes on Holly as she limply let Abigail and Chastity pull off her gloves. “Good night.”

“Good night,” Chastity said. “And thank you for all your help.”

“It was my pleasure.” He smiled and left the room. Joseph noted Holly didn’t say

goodnight, and hoped she was alright. People could relapse, and many did and died. He prayed that wouldn't be the case here, that she only did too much today. He didn't think he could stand it if something happened to her. He'd grown more than a little attached to the young lady.

He pondered that as he descended the stairs. Is that what Simpson was warning him about? But why warn him against falling in love? Other than the fact she was from the poorest of the poor. Yet, she was everything he'd want in a wife as far as sweetness went. She was also a decent conversationalist and laughed at his jokes.

Downstairs he headed back to the dining room to let Mrs. Pettigrew know Chastity and Abigail were putting Holly to bed and that she was more than a little tired. He'd suggest she have the doctor come by and check on Holly. He for one, would feel much better if the doctor did.

CHAPTER 15

Holly woke up the next day to a visit from the doctor. He poked and prodded, asked questions and generally made a nuisance of himself. But he also told her to take care and not do too much. Last night was proof of that, and more likely the reason he was here this morning.

“You heard what he said, ma petite,” Mrs. Pettigrew scolded as she pulled on a pair of soft leather gloves. “You will rest today and not do too much. If you need to come up to your room, let Joseph know and he and Mrs. Fraser will take care of you. He will be here until my return, so you needn’t worry about being left alone.”

Holly was sitting up in bed, resting now. Yesterday took more out of her than she thought. She was looking forward to learning some new games and playing them with Joseph and Mrs. Fraser. If she was too tired to dress and go downstairs, could they play here?

“Are you listening, ma petite?”

Holly nodded. “Yes, of course.”

“Good. Now I must away. I’m having food and refreshments brought to the skating rink, and I want to make sure the people I hired get everything set up the way I want it. I’ll see you later this afternoon, after the party.”

“Have a good time. I hope all goes well,” Holly said.

“So long as no one spikes the punch or we get any uninvited guests eating all the food, things should go smoothly.” Mrs. Pettigrew smiled at Holly. “Enjoy your day with Joseph and Mrs. Fraser.” She leaned toward her. “Don’t play poker with my cook. She’ll win every time.”

Holly laughed. “I’ll try to remember that.”

Mrs. Pettigrew left the bedroom, leaving Holly to her thoughts. She lay back against the pillows and closed her eyes for a few minutes. When Holly opened them again it was to Mrs. Fraser giving her a gentle shake. “Wake up, child.”

She blinked a few times. “Wh-what?”

“Mr. Bradshaw is downstairs. Are you up to sitting in the drawing room for lunch?”

“Oh, yes, of course.” She looked at her nightgown. “Could I wear my dressing gown?”

“You’ve done it before.” Mrs. Fraser grabbed the dressing gown off the end of the bed and helped her put it on. That done she rebraided Holly’s hair, had her put on some slippers, and down to the drawing room they went.

“Good morning,” Joseph greeted. “Or should I say good afternoon?” He crossed the room and guided Holly to the fire. “Sit, get comfortable.”

Holly did, and he covered her legs with a blanket. The warmth of the fire and the blanket made her feel sleepy again, and she didn’t want to dose off on him, so did her best to give him her full attention.

He handed her a cup of hot cocoa, then got one for himself. “Mrs. Fraser brought this earlier.”

“She’s a dear.”

“She frightens me.”

Holly laughed. “Well, I suppose she intimidates those that don’t really know her.”

He looked at her aghast. “You mean she doesn’t scare the wadding right out of you? I find that hard to believe.” He took a sip of hot cocoa. “Divine.”

“Exactly. How can anyone who cooks the way she does and makes such wonderful cocoa be scary?” She took a slow sip of her own cocoa and closed her eyes in bliss.

When she opened them, he was smiling at her. “What should we play? Or would you prefer I read to you?”

She felt tired, but didn’t want to admit it yet. “Why don’t you tell me an adventure tale. Only it must be one of your adventures.”

“Mine, you say?” He laughed. “Well, I’ve not carried off any princesses lately, and I’m no pirate. Even if I was, I don’t have a ship, so there’s that.” He lifted his cup to her. “One cannot have adventures as a pirate without a ship.”

“True. What then will you regale me with?” She gave him a mock pout.

He stared at her a moment, his lips parted, then went to stand before the fire. “Well, let me see. There was the time... oh, no. Best not tell you that. You’ll think less of me. Oh, wait, there was the time...” his face fell. “Nope. Not that either. You’ll think even less of me. Hmmm...”

She smiled as her eyes drifted closed. “Then tell me a story.”

“A story?” he said with a hint of amusement. “You mean, make one up?”

“Why not?” Holly wanted to open her eyes, but it was nicer to keep them closed.

“Very well, a story,” he said. “Now let me think.” She heard him pace back and forth. “Once upon a time, there was a lovely princess. Only... she didn’t know she was a princess. You see, no one bothered to tell her. Not her parents, or her grandparents, and certainly not her brother. So, the princess went through life ignorant of her true station in life.”

“Wait a minute,” Holly said interrupting. “If she’s a princess, then her parents must be a king and queen.”

“Hmmm, more than likely,” he agreed.

Holly heard him sit in the chair near hers. “And the grandparents? Were they the old king and queen?”

“Again, most likely. But, for all we know, they fell on hard times, had to sell off the castle, and go find someplace new to live.”

She smiled, and still didn’t open her eyes. Could she? Oh dear, was she about to nod off?

“So, the princess grew up thinking she was no better than the lowliest peasant,” Joseph went on. “Until circumstances forced her to travel to another kingdom, where she found herself escaping a violent storm and taking refuge in the stables of the queen that ruled over that land.”

“Hmmm...” Holly managed. The warmth of the fire and Joseph’s soothing voice were becoming too much. She couldn’t open her eyes, even when she tried.

“The Queen’s servant discovered the princess hiding in a stall, dragged her out, and took her to the queen. Thankfully, the queen took pity on the princess and allowed her to stay in the castle while the storm raged outside.”

“Lucky princess.” Holly frowned. Did she just say that, or was she dreaming?

“A prince from a neighboring kingdom showed up not long after the storm broke. He took one look at the princess dressed as a beggar, and was smitten by the look the girl gave him. Right before she ran off to hide.”

Holly’s head moved left, then slowly right, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t open her eyes. So she gave up.

“Well,” Joseph went on. “The prince was there to meet not one, but several princesses from which he was to choose a wife. He could have had them come to his kingdom, but his sister was annoying and would have tried to make the choice for him.”

Holly smiled at that.

“Now the queen had seen the look he gave the beggar girl found in her stable and decided to do a little matchmaking. She cleaned up the princess that didn’t know she was a princess, dressed her in fine clothes, and presented her to the prince when the other princesses presented themselves. And guess what happened?”

She shook her head; it was all she could manage at this point.

“The prince picked her!”

Holly felt Joseph take her hand, but it hardly registered. She was falling asleep.

“And it didn’t matter to him that she had grown up poor, or that in essence, she had no kingdom of her own, or riches. She was delightful and pure and all the things he wished he’d become himself. But he could also see how she would make him a better man.”

Holly’s lips parted when he whispered in her ear. “And so, he married the princess, who didn’t know she was a princess, and gave her the life she deserved all along.”

“Should we let her sleep so much? She needs to eat...”

“What?” Holly opened her eyes. “The story...”

Joseph smiled down at her. “That was hours ago.”

She blinked back sleep. “What? Hours!”

Mrs. Fraser attempted to fluff the pillow Holly was leaning against in the chair. “What time is it?”

“Well past lunch time,” Joseph said. “Are you hungry?”

Her stomach growled in response. “Oh, it seems I am.”

“I’ve made a hearty stew and biscuits,” Mrs. Fraser announced. “I’ll fetch the food. I’ve been keeping it hot on the stove.” She left the drawing room.

Holly yawned. “I’m so sorry I drifted off.”

“It’s quite alright. You did too much yesterday. Some food will do you good.”

She nodded. “Help me out of this chair?”

“Of course.” He offered her his hands and pulled her to her feet. “Would you like to walk about until Mrs. Fraser returns with lunch?”

“Yes, please. You were telling me a story?”

He smiled. “A silly story. It was nothing.” He looped her arm around one of his and walked them into the grand hall, then toward the French doors.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“There is a water closet down this way,” he stated simply. “I don’t believe it was part of our earlier tour. But you should know where it is, in case you’d ever like to examine it.”

She looked at him, blinked, then it dawned on her what he was offering. “Oh, yes, indeed.” She blushed a deep red. “Perhaps I’ll examine it now.”

“Wonderful. I shall await you in the drawing room.” He turned on his heel and left. Holly headed in the direction of the library, found the water closet, and made quick use of it. Joseph was so gentlemanly and kind, that sometimes she didn’t know how to respond to him. He was a far cry from Randall or other men she knew.

Finished with her examination, she returned to the drawing room where Mrs. Fraser was spooning stew from a tureen into three bowls. “Lunch is served,” the cook announced.

The three sat down and shared a meal and conversation. Most of which was dominated by Mrs. Fraser, who told them some of the Pettigrews’ adventures when Mr. Pettigrew was still alive. They were grand adventures of the mining towns the Pettigrews lived in when they were first married, the gold strike that made them some of the richest folks in the country, and how it did little to change who they were.

Holly was happy to hear the couple didn't boast about their money or think they were better than everyone else. Instead, they helped people like her who were down on their luck or were having a bad string of it. Holly still didn't know what would have become of her if she hadn't picked Mrs. Pettigrew's carriage house to take refuge in that fateful night, and didn't want to think of the outcome if she hadn't. All she did know was that she owed her life to Mrs. Pettigrew and her kindness, not to mention how it allowed her to make some new friends.

CHAPTER 16

A week passed and Holly was feeling much better. She joined Mrs. Pettigrew and Chastity in the breakfast room. “Well, ma petite ,” Mrs. Pettigrew drawled. “You are much improved.”

Holly eyed the sideboard and the platters of food adorning it. “Yes,” she said absently. Her appetite had also improved, and the sight of so much delicious food made her mouth water. There were scrambled eggs, fruit, potatoes, sausages, bacon and ham. Good grief, it was more than enough for the three of them. Did the servants eat whatever was left over for their own breakfast?

Mrs. Pettigrew laughed, catching Holly’s attention. “I’m sorry, did you say something, ma’am?”

Mrs. Pettigrew exchanged a look with Chastity. “No, but I will say something now. I think you are ready for a little outing. Are you up to going to the bookshop and picking up something I ordered?”

Holly cringed. “Bookshop?”

“Yes, it’s not far. About six blocks. There are all sorts of things in the business district of our little neighborhood. Shops and eateries that I’m sure you’ll love to see. You can take the carriage if you think the walk might be too much for you.”

Holly stared at her benefactor, her heart in her throat. “I’m not... sure.”

“Joseph will accompany you of course.”

Holly’s shoulders slumped in relief. “He will?”

“Naturally. I don’t expect you to go out by yourself in a neighborhood you’re not familiar with.” Mrs. Pettigrew eyed her, a smile on her face.

Holly was nodding before she realized it. “Fine then.” She turned to the sideboard, took a plate, and began to fill it. So long as Joseph was with her, she’d be fine. He knew the area, probably knew the bookshop’s owner, and would protect her in case...

Holly drew in a shuddering breath as she spooned eggs onto her plate. Would Randall even recognize her? She wore a dress of robin’s egg blue with dark blue embellishments. Abigail said the outfit had a matching hat and gloves and was typical of the wardrobe Mrs. Pettigrew’s assistant would wear.

“Is there anything else Holly can do for you today?” Chastity asked. “That is, since she’s going out?”

“Well, let me think,” Mrs. Pettigrew said. “I should send a tip to Mr. Ross for being so gracious at my skating party.” She smiled at Holly. “If you take the carriage, do you think you could handle that small task as well?”

Holly came to the table and sat. “You want to send money with me to give to a man?”

“Yes, he runs the skate shack at the pond in the park,” Mrs. Pettigrew said. “He rents skates to people who don’t own any of their own.”

Holly had never been entrusted with money before. What if she lost it?

“Don’t look so worried, ma petite . Joseph will be with you. It’s not as if you’ll be

accosted with him along.”

Holly put her napkin on her lap and nodded. “No, of course not.” She said a quick blessing over her food and began to eat.

“Then it’s settled,” Mrs. Pettigrew said. “We’ll consider this your first day of work. You are now on the clock.”

Holly choked down the next bite of food. “Yes, ma’am.”

Mrs. Pettigrew smiled. “Come now, ma petite . Don’t look so frightened. You will be fine.”

Chastity, who was sitting next to her, reached over and put a hand on her shoulder. “She’s right. And I’ll help you, remember.”

Holly smiled at Chastity. “Thank you. It’s just that, I’ve never had a job like this before and want to make sure I get things right.”

“I’ll have Mr. Prosser prepare the carriage,” Mrs. Pettigrew said and left her chair. She started for the door. “If you’re feeling up to it, you and Joseph can have lunch somewhere.” She left the room and disappeared into the hallway beyond.

Holly set down her fork, a hand to her chest, and tried to breathe.

“Why, Holly, what is it?” Chastity asked with concern.

“I’m... I’m...” She gave her a panicked look. Holly didn’t know what was happening. Only that part of her was terrified to leave the mansion.

There came a knock on the door jamb, and Joseph swept into the room. “Good

morning. It's good to see you eating breakfast downstairs." He stopped up short. "Holly, what's wrong?"

She shook her head, unable to speak.

He took the chair on the other side of her and pulled her into his arms. "Darling, do you need the doctor?"

"She's frightened," Chastity stated.

"What? Why?" he asked.

"Mrs. Pettigrew wants me to run an errand for her," Holly said into his chest. She shouldn't let him hold her like this, but he made her feel safe.

Joseph pulled back, as if realizing it too. "Errands. Then I'm going along."

"Of course you are," Chastity said. "Mrs. Pettigrew was going to ask you."

"I just saw her as Tugs let me in. She only told me that the two of you were in here and to have some breakfast."

"She'll get around to it," Chastity said. "Or expected me to tell you, which I've done."

Holly took a deep breath, feeling more settled now. "Thank you." She gave him a tiny shrug. "I'm sorry, I... don't know what came over me."

"I do," he said. Joseph tucked a finger under her chin. "There's no shame in being afraid. Not after what you've been through. If you don't want to go out, then we won't."

“But Mrs. Pettigrew asked me to. I start work today.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Oh, I see. Well then, we’ll work together.”

“Do you have the time to spare?” Chastity asked.

“Yes, I do,” he said with a smile. “Now, eat your breakfast, and I’ll join you.” He left his chair and went to the sideboard to fix himself a plate.

Holly watched him, her nerves settling with each passing moment. What were the chances of running across Randall in a posh neighborhood? Slim to none. She had to stop worrying. He was probably long gone by now and heading west. That is, if he had any money to do so. If not...

Joseph sat next to her and ate heartily. The last few days he’d spent less time with her as he had business to attend to, but the man still showed up and read to her, told her stories, and took tea or a meal with her. But how attentive was he going to be once she was well and on her feet? While working for Mrs. Pettigrew, would he still come to tea? Would he still read to her? Part of her didn’t think so, and she’d be wise to quell any thoughts of having anything more than friendship with this man.

Yet, there were a few times they were together that she thought there could be more. She had to have been mistaken, he pitied her, nothing more.

After breakfast Mr. Prosser brought the carriage around to the front of the house wearing a driver’s livery. Holly stood in the doorway and pulled on her gloves. Mrs. Pettigrew had given her an envelope with some money in it to give to the man at the skate shack, and money for the bookshop owner. It was in her reticule, which of course matched the rest of her outfit.

“Are you ready?” Joseph asked beside her.

“Yes.” She took a deep breath and stepped outside into the crisp, January air. “It’s so cold.”

“You’ve been cooped up too long,” he said. “But I dare not let you linger in the cold either. Come along, let’s get you settled.” He took her by the elbow and led her down the walk to the waiting carriage.

Mr. Tugs opened the door, and Joseph helped her inside. As soon as she was seated, he climbed in himself and unfolded the blanket next to him and placed it over her legs. “There, that ought to keep you warm.”

Holly stared at the blanket. It was the same one she’d wrapped herself in that fateful night. “Thank you.”

Joseph smiled as Mr. Tugs closed the carriage door then waved at Mr. Prosser. The carriage lurched forward, and they were off.

“Will the carriage slide down the hill?” Holly asked with concern.

Joseph chuckled. “No, darling.”

She thought she heard affection in his voice. And why the endearment? Was it because they’d become friends? Holly brushed at the blanket with her gloved hand. “Is it far?”

“Not at all. I prefer to walk, myself, but none of us wants to see you tire yourself out.” He looked out the window and sighed. “Where shall we dine?”

“We just had breakfast,” she pointed out. “Don’t tell me you’re hungry again already?”

“No, but after we pay a visit to Mr. Ross at the skate shack, and visit the bookshop, I’ll have worked up an appetite.”

She smiled. “I suppose those two things would take some time.”

He winked at her, making her heart flutter. “Especially the bookshop.” Joseph let go a sigh. “Seems it doesn’t matter how big one’s library is, there’s always the need for more books.”

Holly blushed. She’d never been much of a reader. There was never enough time in the day for it. That and her family didn’t really own any books. But since living at Mrs. Pettigrew’s and discovering the library, Holly had been able to start reading for pleasure and found she adored it. Even if she was allowed to read all day every day, she couldn’t begin to read everything in Mrs. Pettigrew’s library.

They passed mansions for blocks that eventually gave way to businesses. Mr. Prosser knew to take them to the park first, and when they reached it, Holly noticed more than a few eyes on their carriage. “Why is everyone looking at us? We haven’t even left the carriage.”

“Because of the big ‘P’ on the carriage doors. Everyone knows this is Mrs. Pettigrew’s private carriage.” He opened the door and got out. “Here, let me help you down.” Joseph extended a hand to her, and Holly slowly took it.

When she stepped out, more than a few heads turned. One young woman’s eyes grew wide, then quickly narrowed before the look was replaced by a bright smile.

“Well, if it isn’t Joseph Bradshaw!” The woman sashayed her way up to them and looped an arm around one of Joseph’s. “What brings you to the park, and in Mrs. Pettigrew’s carriage no less?” She looked Holly up and down. “Friend of yours, Joseph?”

Holly turned to him. Joseph looked like he was counting to ten. “Rebecca Harrington, meet Mrs. Pettigrew’s new assistant.”

“How charming,” Rebecca said before he could say Holly’s name. “I suppose she had to get a new one seeing as how Dalty snatched up the last one. The fool.”

Joseph extracted his arm from the woman’s. “If you don’t mind, I’m assisting the young lady with some errands Mrs. Pettigrew has tasked her with.”

The young woman all but sneered at Holly, then gave Joseph a pouty look. “We should have lunch together while the assistant goes about her business. She doesn’t need you.” She eyed Holly. “Unless of course Mrs. Pettigrew doesn’t trust her.”

Holly let go a sigh.

“Rebecca,” Joseph snapped. “Mind yourself.” He took Holly by the arm and steered her toward a large shack near a huge frozen pond. “Now if you don’t mind, we’ve business to attend to.” And with that, they marched off, leaving the woman behind.

Holly smiled, unable to help herself, and let Joseph pull her along.

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CHAPTER 17

O f all the people to run into, Rebecca Harrington had to be it. Joseph marched toward the skate shack. The sooner they got this errand done the better.

“Who was that?” Holly asked.

“An acquaintance,” he said. “Though there was a time we were friends. But people change. I changed.”

“What do you mean, changed?” she asked.

“I did; I’ve explained this to you before.”

She stopped and looked at him. “You said you used to be an unkind man. I’ve not seen you do one unkind thing since I’ve known you.”

Joseph glanced at Rebecca, who was still standing where he’d left her, glaring daggers at him. “No, but she and I used to do unkind things together. I’m not proud of it.” He patted Holly’s hand and continued on toward Mr. Ross’ shack.

When they reached it, Mr. Ross had his back turned to them, muttering something about uppity customers. Joseph cleared his throat. “Ahem.”

The old man turned around. “Mr. Bradshaw,” he looked past him. “You’re not here with that Rebecca Harrington are you?”

“Does this look like Rebecca?” Joseph asked and gave a nod to Holly.

Mr. Ross looked her up and down. “Indeed, she does not. Fine. Two pairs of skates?”

“Not today, we’re here on behalf of Mrs. Pettigrew.”

Mr. Ross’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh? What did she want? She’s not planning another skating party, is she?”

“No, sir,” Holly said, speaking up for the first time. “She was so happy with the one she had, she sent you this.” Holly pulled the envelope of money out of her reticule and handed it to him.

Mr. Ross looked at it with wide eyes, opened it and peeked inside. “Jumpin’, Jehosaphat!”

“Just a small token of her appreciation,” Joseph said with a wink. “You worked hard and served her well.”

“I noticed you weren’t there,” Mr. Ross quipped. “So why are you delivering me this?”

“I am,” Holly said. “He’s accompanying me.”

“You weren’t there either. Who are you?” Mr. Ross stuffed the envelope into an inside pocket of his jacket

“I’m Mrs. Pettigrew’s new assistant.” Holly gave him a smile, then flashed it at Joseph.

“Since Mr. Simpson is now betrothed to Mrs. Pettigrew’s old assistant, she was in

need of a new one,” Joseph explained.

Mr. Ross’ eyes flicked between them. “So why weren’t the two of you at the party?”

“I wasn’t feeling well, I’m afraid,” Holly said. “And Mr. Bradshaw was kind enough to keep me company.”

The old man’s eyebrows shot up again. “Oh he was, was he?”

“We were properly chaperoned,” Joseph pointed out, authority in his voice.

Mr. Ross took a step back. “I see, well, so long as everything was done, proper like. I guess there’s no reason you can’t spend time with the young lady.” He looked at Holly and studied her. “You look sort of pale. Are you alright?”

“Quite,” she said, then turned to Joseph. “We should get the rest of the errands done.”

“You’re right, of course,” he said, and offered his arm again. “Have a good afternoon, Mr. Ross.”

“You too and tell Mrs. Pettigrew I appreciate this!”

Holly looked over her shoulder as they departed. “Don’t worry, we will.”

Joseph patted her hand as they strolled back to the carriage. “You did fine, Holly. That wasn’t so hard now, was it?”

“No, but then, you know the gentleman. What if I had given the money to the wrong person?”

He gave her a warm smile. “You wouldn’t have because you’d have found out if that

was Mr. Ross or not. Why are you so nervous?"

She stopped again and looked into his eyes. "Because I don't know what I would do without the chance Mrs. Pettigrew has given me, and I don't want to do anything to jeopardize it."

He sighed and gave her a warm look. "Darling, you worry too much." Without warning, he kissed her on the forehead, then escorted her to the carriage. Rebecca still hadn't moved an inch and was glaring at them with the most venomous look she could muster.

Joseph ignored her and helped Holly into the carriage. He climbed in after her and rapped the ceiling with a fist. Mr. Prosser knew to go to the bookshop next.

"Miss Harrington doesn't seem to like you very well," Holly said in a small voice.

"That's because I'm not running amuck with her causing trouble anymore." He glanced out the window, but there was no sign of Rebecca. Joseph didn't wonder if she'd stomp all the way home just so she could throw a temper tantrum.

"Why are you smiling like that?" Holly asked.

Joseph did his best not to laugh. "I'd rather not say."

She flashed him a knowing look and picked at a piece of lint on the blanket "This wouldn't happen to have anything to do with Miss Harrington, would it?"

Joseph gave her a playful shrug "And if it did?"

"You shouldn't be smiling at someone else's discomfort, even if she is, shall we say, less than savory?"

“You’re right, of course. But Rebecca causes her own mischief that gets her into trouble. I’ve seen her do it countless times and the woman never learns.”

“And you did?”

It was a legitimate question. “You know you’re smarter than you let on.”

She smiled and looked away.

“No, really, Holly. I don’t think you give yourself enough credit. You have what it takes to be Mrs. Pettigrew’s assistant. Don’t think you’re not capable “

She gave him a hopeful look. “You really think so?”

“I know so. You’re articulate for one. Maybe you haven’t read a lot in your lifetime, but you pay attention to how people talk, and I assume read when you could.”

She folded her hands in her lap. “You assume correctly. We didn’t grow up with many books, but I do like to listen to people talk. I like how speech varies from person to person.”

“And thus, you were educating yourself,” he pointed out. “Bravo.”

She blushed head to toe, and his heart skipped at the sight. He’d been calling her darling today, it slipped the first time, then again, and at this point, he didn’t care. She was darling , and he’d like to make her his darling. But would she even believe him if he told her? They were so different, like night and day, and of course his father would never approve the match. He might even disown him.

But the more time he spent with Holly, the more enamored with her he became. She was everything he could want in a wife, sans equal social standing, of course. The

question was, what was he willing to give up to have her? Or could he find someone as equally sweet and kind among his own class?

Joseph made a huffing sound. No. He could not.

“What was that?” Holly asked.

“It was nothing. Don’t mind me, I’m being silly.” He gave her another warm smile and looked out the carriage window. They were just pulling up in front of the bookshop. “Ready for another great adventure?”

Holly giggled. “Looking through dusty old books?”

“The books in the shop are hardly dusty, and you’ll love the shop owner.”

“Then by all means, let us go in,” she said.

They disembarked the carriage, went inside, and Joseph smiled at the tiny gasp Holly emitted at the site of the shop. It was quaint, cozy, and he had to admit one of his favorite places in the neighborhood. “Like what you see?”

“Oh,” she breathed. “This is almost as nice as Mrs. Pettigrew’s library.”

Mr. Troeh, a middle-aged man wearing a pair of spectacles, came around the counter and smiled at them. “Mr. Bradshaw, it’s nice to see you again. Picking up a book for your father or for yourself?”

“Neither. I’m here with Miss Turtledove on behalf of Mrs. Pettigrew. Miss Turtledove is going to be Mrs. Pettigrew’s new assistant.” He turned to Holly. “You and Mr. Troeh will be spending quite a bit of time together from now on. Mrs. Pettigrew orders a lot of books.”

Holly smiled and blushed. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Troeh.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Miss Turtledove. I take it Miss Eastwick is marrying Mr. Simpson?” he asked glancing between them.

“That is correct,” Joseph said. “Now, I believe you have a book for Mrs. Pettigrew?”

“Yes, I’ll fetch it. It’s in the back. Browse while you wait.” He turned and headed toward the back of the shop.

Joseph swept a hand toward the many books around them. “You heard the man. Take a look around and see if there’s anything you’d like.”

Holly flushed again. “I’m afraid there’s not much I can do if there is. I’ve not been paid yet. This is only my first day as Mrs. Pettigrew’s assistant.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll buy you a book. Any book you want.” He gave her a brilliant smile and hoped she said yes. He wanted to give her things. Lots of things...

Her eyes went wide. “Oh, but I couldn’t...”

“It’s a gift, Holly. There’s nothing wrong with accepting a gift from a friend.”

“But...”

He held up a hand. “There’s no sense arguing with me. When I’ve made up my mind about something it’s done.”

She sighed as her shoulders slumped. “Very well.” She looked at the surrounding stacks, went to one, pulled out a book, and began to leaf through it.

Joseph smiled. The building of Holly Turtledove's library had just begun.

CHAPTER 18

Holly picked out a romance novel. She just couldn't help it. She was enthralled from page one of *Pride and Prejudice* the minute Joseph started reading it to her. Though she was familiar with some of her books, she didn't own any herself.

"Find something that suits you?" Joseph asked from the other side of a bookshelf.

Holly pulled a few books out and peeked through the hole at him. She giggled, giving herself away, but didn't care.

He moved a couple of books and peeked back, a wide smile on his face. "Whatever are you doing?"

She laughed. "Looking at you."

"I can see that, but why?"

"You spoke to me, for one. It would be impolite to call things to you through a wall of books, don't you think?"

His smile grew. "Indeed, it would, darling."

Her heart fluttered. He'd been calling her that all day. He probably didn't mean anything by it, no more than when she thought about the endearment earlier that day.

Holly licked her lips and glanced at the book in her hands. "I found a book."

“You did? You must show me.” He put the books back on the shelf and came around the wall of shelves. “What is it?”

She held up the book so he could read the title.

“A good choice. I must not be reading it to you fast enough. But doesn’t Miss Pettigrew have all her books?”

A dull ache started in her heart. “Yes, but... I want my own collection. I’ll buy *Pride and Prejudice* , then *Emma* .”

“I own them all,” he said as he stared at the book.

“You? But... they’re romances.”

“Indeed, they are.” He ran a hand over the cover. “I inherited them from my mother. I mentioned before she owned them all. I read them because she loved them so. Besides, there’s nothing wrong with reading a little romance, now is there?”

Holly stared at him in awe. He was so unlike any man she had ever known. “You... like romance?”

He took a step closer. “Indeed, I do.”

She held the book to her chest and looked into his eyes. “Why?”

Joseph smiled. “Because it reminds me that romance exists. That there is good in it. And that no one should be alone.”

Tears stung the backs of her eyes at his words. She never thought she’d find love, and here she was, staring into the eyes a man that... oh dear. Had she fallen in love with

Joseph Bradshaw? “No one?” she echoed, her voice barely audible.

He took one of her hands in his. “No one, Holly.” Joseph raised her hands to his lips and kissed it. He let it go just as quickly and backed away.

She stared after him as he reached the end of the aisle and went down the next. Holly let out the breath she was holding and looked at her hand. If she didn’t think she was in love with him before, there was no doubt now. Her heart was beating like a hummingbird’s, and she couldn’t speak! And all the man did was kiss her hand! What was to become of her now? He belonged to the highest social class in the city! His people didn’t mix with hers. Ever. She’d be a fool to think he’d ever have any sort of romantic notion for her.

But... he’d just kissed her hand in the aisle of a bookshop!

Holly swallowed hard and shook her head. He was rich; rich people did whatever they wanted. Joseph Bradshaw would be no exception. For all she knew he was toying with her.

Her heart thudded in her chest, the ache in it growing. What a horrible thought! But that didn’t mean it wasn’t true. Maybe he was bored, and she had become some sort of challenge for him to practice doing good. She would become bragging rights, nothing more.

She bit her bottom lip to keep it from trembling. Holly hated thinking such things, but she had to consider it. Maybe spending so much time with him wasn’t such a good idea, but she was too afraid to wander this area of the city by herself. She didn’t know her way around yet, and though the chances of Randall looking for her here were slim, there was still a chance. And with her luck, he’d find her.

A hand flew to her chest at the thought, and she quickly pushed it from her mind. She

had to think about her job and pleasing Mrs. Pettigrew. Nothing else mattered.

Holly straightened; her book held to her chest and thought of putting it back. But... she so wanted to own her own books...

“Still here?” Joseph teased as he showed up at the end of the aisle. He looked at the book she had clutched to her chest. “Let me take that to the counter for you.” He held out a hand for it.

Holly looked at the book, his hand, then forced herself to give it to him.

“You look as if that strained you,” he quipped. “Are you alright?”

She nodded, but didn’t say a word.

Joseph watched her a moment then smiled. “Are you through browsing?”

She shook her head. “I’d like to look some more if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.” He turned and left and once again, Holly’s shoulders slumped. This was becoming too nerve wracking! And what if she found another book she wanted?

She blew out a breath and left the aisle she was in. She dare not choose another book. Besides, it would be better to be organized about this and start with buying her own set of Jane Austen books. Yes, that was the wise thing to do.

Holly browsed through several more aisles before finding Joseph. He was at the counter hovering over a small stack of books, one of which was hers. “Are you buying those?”

“I am.” He held his three books up for her inspection. One was on gardening, the

other two looked to be adventure novels.

“You garden?”

He blushed. “I admit I do. My mother loved to garden, and I do my best to keep everything up the way she would want it.” He shrugged. “What can I say? Gardening relaxes me.”

The ache in Holly’s heart increased. Joseph Bradshaw seemed every inch the nice man she thought him to be. But what if she was wrong? What if, this self-reformed rake went back to his old ways? Could she trust him not to, even if all she had was the pleasure of his friendship?

“Holly?”

She started. “Sorry, I... was thinking.”

He chuckled. “Yes, I can see that. Hungry? Perhaps you’ve worked up that appetite we knew you’d have earlier.”

She started again. “Me? We were talking about you!”

He laughed. “You are precious. And I admit, I could do with a snack. How about you? I know a lovely little café not far from here. We could walk.”

She nodded. Mrs. Pettigrew did suggest they have some lunch while they were out. Did she know how long they’d be out running a couple of simple errands?

Joseph purchased their books, thanked Mr. Troeh and they were off. They left the books with Mr. Prosser and the carriage and started up the street after asking him if he’d like anything from the café.

Holly stole glances at Joseph as they walked and wondered if all men of his class were like him. Randall told her rich people were cruel, heartless, and treated all servants abominably. But that wasn't the case at all. Not so far as Holly had witnessed being in Mrs. Pettigrew's care. But maybe the eccentric widow was the exception to the rule. Maybe being "nice" is what made people think she was eccentric.

They each ordered a sandwich and bought one for Mr. Prosser. As soon as the waitress took their order, Holly studied her surroundings. The café was quaint, charming, just the sort of place Randall might try to rob, using her as a decoy. Which... made her an accomplice. She shut her eyes against the thought.

"Holly," Joseph said gently. "Are you not feeling well? Do we need to return to Mrs. Pettigrew's?"

She looked at him, her chest tight, but it wasn't from being sick for so long. No, this was caused by something else entirely. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure? We can take our food with us if you'd like."

She glanced at the café's front windows and thought of Mr. Prosser sitting atop the carriage's driver's seat. "Well, we could do that. It's awful cold out."

"But we're inside where it's warm, darling."

Her heart melted at the endearment. "Mr. Prosser isn't."

Joseph sat back in his chair. "No, he's not. Very well then." He left his chair, found their waitress, and spoke a few words to her. That done he returned. "There, all taken care of."

“Thank you.” She breathed easier, and realized he’d done this for her, but maybe, for a shivering Mr. Prosser too. She hoped.

Their waitress brought them a bag with their sandwiches in it, and as soon as Joseph paid, they left. “We’ll give Mr. Prosser his when we return to the mansion,” Joseph said.

“Thank you. I’m sure you don’t go around buying your staff lunch.”

“No, because I know they’re doing their job, and that they have scheduled meal times like most of us.” He stopped and smiled at her. “You don’t have to feel sorry for him. If you were running around in the cold for Mrs. Pettigrew as part of your job, are you not going to then sit down with her later and have a meal?”

Her eyes became downcast. “Oh, I see what you’re saying. I’m... sorry.”

“Well, it is chilly out, and I’m sure Mr. Prosser will appreciate the gesture. But I also suspect he’ll wolf down this sandwich, then go have whatever lunch Mrs. Fraser’s whipped up for the staff today.”

She sucked in a breath. “I hadn’t thought of that.” Which only drove his point home even more. “Forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” he said. “You have a big heart, and there’s nothing wrong with that. But be wise.”

He wagged a finger at her for good measure and she smiled. “I will.”

“See that you do.” They reached the carriage. “Take us straight to the carriage house, Mr. Prosser.”

“As you wish, Mr. Bradshaw.”

Holly smiled up at the older man. “We bought you a sandwich.”

Mr. Prosser beamed. “Did you now? Thank you, Miss Turtledove!”

She smiled then let Joseph help her into the carriage. It didn't take long for them to be on their way, and Holly thought about everything Joseph said. She learned things today, some of which were of her own making, and Holly wasn't sure if she should put much stock in those thoughts. And she realized she fell woefully short of knowing everything there was to know about dealing with people belonging to Denver's high society. But with Mrs. Pettigrew's help, and hopefully Joseph's, she'd learn and quickly. Holly just hoped she didn't completely lose her heart to the man sitting across from her as she did.

CHAPTER 19

When they returned to the manse, Joseph helped Holly from the carriage then showed her the expansive grounds behind the house. It was one thing to view them from the mansion itself, quite another to look at the back of the mansion from across the acreage. “Is that a pond over there?” she asked.

“Yes, Mr. Pettigrew liked to fish. It’s stocked.” He gave Mr. Prosser his sandwich then wrapped her arm around one of his. Joseph began to escort her toward the mansion. “The rose garden is over there, and the hedge maze is beyond that.”

“Oh, how lovely! Have you ever gone into it?”

“Not me. It’s bigger than it looks. But one of these days I’ll brave it.” He winked at her. “Perhaps you’ll brave it with me?”

She blushed and smiled before she caught herself. Was he flirting?! No, toying. He could just as easily be toying with you!

Either way, she had to stop this somehow. Her heart was already gone; to lose it completely would be devastating.

“I’d show you the pond, but you’ve been out in the cold long enough as it is. Best I get you inside where it’s warm, and you can have a nice hot cup of tea.” He took them down a snow-covered path and he was right. She was cold. A shiver went through her, and he stopped. “Here, hold this.” He handed her the bag with their sandwiches.

Holly took it. “What are you doing?”

Joseph took off his coat and put it around her shoulders. Warmth engulfed her and she went a little weak in the knees. The masculine scent of him surrounded her, only making it worse.

“Here now, are you okay?”

She would never be okay again. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?” He got them walking. “You must be hungry by now. You’ll eat as soon as I get you inside.”

She nodded and hoped he didn’t hear her stomach growling over the crunch of the snow beneath their feet.

When they reached the French doors, Joseph smiled as he ushered her inside. “Let’s see if there’s a fire going in the dining room.”

They made their way to the room, and to Holly’s delight, a fire was going. “Oh, how wonderful.”

He led her to the table, had her sit, then headed for the door. “I’ll give these to Mrs. Fraser to serve. If we’re lucky, there’s soup to go with them.” He disappeared and Holly sat, staring at the fire across the room.

“There you are , ma petite ,” Mrs. Pettigrew said as she glided into the room. “Did you get my book?”

Holly held up the book wrapped in brown paper. “Joseph bought some books too.” She nodded at the bundle of wrapped books tied together with string. “He... bought

me one.”

Mrs. Pettigrew gave her a warm smile. “Did he? How kind. Joseph Bradshaw is coming along nicely.”

Holly frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I’m sure he’s told you he wasn’t always this nice?”

“He’s mentioned it.”

“Well, it’s true. I’m glad to see he is truly changing his ways. It makes my heart glad to see him dote on you.”

She stared at the fire again. “Perhaps I’m his... project?”

“Oh no, ma petite .” She pulled out a chair and sat. “He genuinely cares.”

Tears stung the backs of Holly’s eyes. She wanted to believe her, but how could a man like Joseph Bradshaw ever come to really care for her? She was a practice in kindness, nothing more.

“Why the long face?” Mrs. Pettigrew asked.

Holly wiped a tear from one eye. “I was... cold.”

Mrs. Pettigrew took in the coat she was wearing and smiled. “I see. But how could one be cold when she is wearing a handsome man’s coat?”

Holly’s cheeks heated, and she wished she could slide under the table and hide. She was contemplating how to do just that when Joseph returned. “Mrs. Fraser will be

serving lunch momentarily.” He smiled at Mrs. Pettigrew. “Errands are done.”

“Thank you, Joseph for accompanying Holly. Nothing unusual happened?”

“No. I’m happy to report all was well.” He made a face. “Except of course when we ran into Miss Harrington in the park.”

“Oh, how unpleasant,” Mrs. Pettigrew said. “I hope she didn’t harass the two of you.”

“Rebecca was simply Rebecca.” He took a seat across the table from Holly and gave her a warm smile. “Better?”

She began to shrug out of his coat. “Yes, much.”

“Leave it on for now, keep warm,” he said. “Mrs. Fraser is bringing soup to go with our sandwiches.”

Holly turned to Mrs. Pettigrew. “We brought some home, I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all, but why didn’t you eat them where you bought them?” She turned her inquisitive expression to Joseph.

“Holly was worried about Mr. Prosser sitting out in the cold,” he explained.

Mrs. Pettigrew smiled. “I see.” She turned to Holly. “You are a benevolent soul, my dear. There is nothing wrong with that. But Mr. Prosser knows his job.”

Holly nodded as her cheeks heated again. Her first day was riddled with mistakes!

“Fear not, I’m sure he enjoyed his sandwich very much,” Joseph said with a chuckle.

“I suspect he’ll be in the kitchen soon for his mid-day meal,” Mrs. Pettigrew assured.

Holly blushed even more. Hadn’t Joseph told her the same thing?

Mrs. Fraser entered the room carrying a tureen of soup. She pulled bowls from a fancy hutch, served them, and left the tureen on the table. When she entered the room again it was with their sandwiches on a plate for each of them. Mrs. Pettigrew had her own sandwich and ate as she asked Joseph questions about his father. “You should both come to dinner tomorrow evening,” she said.

Joseph’s eyes darted between the two women. “Tomorrow, I’ll check with him, but it might be too short of notice.”

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Pettigrew said. “I’m sure he’d much rather eat here. He’s been after Mrs. Fraser for years to come work for him. Who am I to deny him another opportunity to shower her with compliments on her cooking?”

“Well, when you put it that way,” he laughed. “How can Father refuse?”

“Besides, it’s time he met the young lady his son rescued.”

Holly blanched. “What?”

Mrs. Pettigrew gave her a wide smile. “Well, of course, ma petite . A parent wants to know with whom their offspring spring has been spending their time.” She patted Holly’s hand. “He’ll love you, I’m sure.”

Holly swallowed hard. She couldn’t say the same. Joseph might be practicing kindness, generosity, and all that, but would his father? She came from the gutter, and if she wasn’t careful, she’d be tossed right back into it. She could not jeopardize her new position with Mrs. Pettigrew.

They finished their meal then Joseph offered to show Mrs. Pettigrew the books he'd bought. The three retired to the drawing room where he unwrapped his purchases and showed their hostess each one. Holly sat in her usual chair by the fire and soaked up the warmth as the two spoke. Meeting his father made her nervous, and she had no doubt that if he found out where she came from, he'd insist Mrs. Pettigrew toss her out of her home!

Holly squeezed her eyes shut against the thought. She shouldn't think such things. If Mrs. Pettigrew didn't want her here, she would have sent her on her way already.

"Holly..."

She looked up at the sound of Joseph's rich, warm voice. "Yes?"

"Your book." He handed it to her then knelt near the chair. "I must go now. I've some work to do, but I'll see you tomorrow for dinner."

She looked at him and couldn't help but smile. "Thank you for accompanying me today."

"It was my pleasure." He took one of her hands and kissed it. "Until tomorrow." He let go her hand, stood, and left the drawing room.

Holly stared after him with wide eyes. If only...

"He enjoys your company, ma petite . Very much."

Holly turned in her chair to look at her employer. "He is just being kind."

"By kissing your hand?" Mrs. Pettigrew said and sat in the chair Joseph usually occupied. "Do you even know how a gentleman acts when he is interested in a

woman?”

Holly's cheeks flamed. She closed her eyes and shook her head.

“My poor, sweet child. You have so much to learn.” She patted Holly on the leg, making her open her eyes. “I will teach you.”

“You will?”

“But of course. You must learn the actions of a man who is in love! Especially if you are to work for me.” She rose from her chair and went to the small desk and sat. “I have some letters to write. Read your book *ma petite*. Rest. You have done enough for one day.” She turned in the chair and smiled at her. “Tomorrow will come soon enough, and you will see your handsome Joseph once again.”

Holly gasped. “Oh, but Mrs. Pettigrew, he's not, that is, there's nothing...”

Mrs. Pettigrew laughed but said nothing more.

Holly sat back in her chair, her book in her hands, and watched the fire. She didn't belong here, never would, and tomorrow night she would probably be reminded of the fact by Joseph's father. Rebecca Harrington looked at her with hatred today. She'd seen that look before on Randall's face and wasn't sure if it stemmed from jealousy or something else. She only knew that the woman despised her immediately.

She tried to read but couldn't concentrate. Holly let the book sit in her lap as she went back to watching the fire. It would be nice if Joseph had stayed and read to her, but she was going to have to remind herself that all this was coming to an end. She would work for Mrs. Pettigrew, learn all she could from the woman, and keep this job for as long as possible. It was a dream come true, and it would have to be enough.

She thought of Randall again and pondered where he might be. Jail? Some dingy hotel somewhere? San Francisco? In the time she'd been here, he could have gone anywhere. Yet that same hateful look she saw on Rebecca's face gave her pause. Randall didn't like to lose, and especially not to her. If he was mad enough, his hatred might be enough to make him look for her until he found her. And if he did, he would probably kill her.

CHAPTER 20

The following evening it was all Holly could do not to fidget. She was meeting Joseph's father for the first time and wanted to make a good impression. She wasn't sure why. It's not as if Joseph was interested in the likes of her no matter what Mrs. Pettigrew implied.

She wore a copper-colored gown decorated with brown tear-drop shaped beads. It was the fanciest dress she'd worn to date, even outshining the pink gown she wore to dinner when Joseph escorted her from one room to the next. Such an evening it was! Holly felt like a fairy princess, and for a few moments pretended Joseph was her handsome prince.

"Stop fussing with your hair, ma petite," Mrs. Pettigrew scolded. "You'll muss all of Abigail's hard work."

"I'm sorry, I can't help it." Holly sat in her usual chair by the fire and fought the urge to pace.

"Mr. Bradshaw is a reasonable man once you get to know him. He still grieves the loss of his wife, I'm afraid. Just as I grieve the passing of my dear, sweet Xavier."

Holly mustered up a smile for Mrs. Pettigrew. She knew the pain of losing one's parents but couldn't begin to imagine the loss of a spouse. "I'm still nervous about meeting him."

Mrs. Pettigrew gave her a warm smile. "It is understandable."

“It is?”

“Of course.” She winked at Holly. “Joseph is turning out to be quite the young man, and you are taken with him, oui ?”

Holly gasped. “That, no... I... of course not.”

Her new employer laughed.

Holly went red as a beet. “Besides, what does it matter if I were to get sweet on him? He has no interest in me. Even if I am working for you.”

Mrs. Pettigrew’s laughter doubled. “Oh, ma petite , you have much to learn!”

Holly unconsciously wiped her gloved hands on the skirt of her dress. Good grief, was she sweating?

She caught sight of Mr. Tugs as he made his way to the front door. Did the bell ring? She didn’t even hear it!

Sure enough, he opened the door, greeted someone, then stepped out of the way allowing Joseph and an older gentleman to enter the house. He took their coats and hats and headed for the closet. The men didn’t wait for Mr. Tugs to announce them and entered the drawing room.

“Mrs. Pettigrew,” the older gentleman said. “It’s so nice to see you again. I trust you enjoyed your skating party?”

“I did, though you were not there to partake in the festivities.”

“I’m afraid I had too much to do. I apologize for my absence.” He gave her a small

bow, then took her hand and kissed it. "But I'm here now." He let go her hand and straightened. "And look forward to a pleasant evening."

Holly gulped. It was all so formal, and she wasn't accustomed to such things.

She gulped again when Mr. Bradshaw turned to her. She took in his salt-and-pepper hair, his strong features, the same ones Joseph possessed, as he studied her with brown eyes.

"May I introduce my new assistant, Miss Holly Turtledove," Mrs. Pettigrew said and swept an arm toward Holly.

She stood, not knowing what else to do, and crossed the room to them.

"Holly, this is Joseph's father, Mr. Humphrey Bradshaw," Mrs. Pettigrew said. "He's in steel, among other things."

Mr. Bradshaw took Holly by the hand and kissed it just as he'd done Mrs. Pettigrew's. She did her best not to snatch her hand away. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Bradshaw."

"The pleasure is all mine," he said, straightening. "So, you now work for Mrs. Pettigrew? How fortuitous for you that she needed another assistant."

Holly noted Joseph eyeing his father and wondered if his comment was meant as a slight. "Yes, indeed."

Mr. Bradshaw turned toward Mrs. Pettigrew. "I'm sure this one won't be getting herself betrothed any time soon. You may have a chance to train her up."

"I intend to. But one never knows. Some handsome young man in want of a wife

might come along and snatch her away from me. Alas, then I'll have to find myself yet another assistant."

"Nonsense," Mr. Bradshaw said with a chuckle. "I doubt such a man exists in this neighborhood. For where else would he come from? She's not fit for anyone from our class."

Mrs. Pettigrew bristled, her back going ramrod straight. "Don't be so sure, Mr. Bradshaw. Look at Chastity and Dalton."

Mr. Bradshaw arched an eyebrow but said nothing more.

Holly didn't know much about Chastity's background. She was Mrs. Pettigrew's former assistant, and therefore part of the "working class" as far as anyone was concerned. Now that she thought of it, the fact a man like Dalton Simpson had asked her to marry him, was unusual, but what were the chances of the same thing happening to her?

Joseph came alongside Holly. "Good evening. You look lovely."

Holly blushed. "Thank you." She took in his evening wear. "You're quite handsome yourself."

He smiled at his attire, then her. "Don't mind my father," he whispered. "He wants nothing to ever change. But one cannot move forward with the times with that sort of thinking."

Holly nodded, not quite understanding what he was talking about, and jumped when Mr. Tugs announced dinner was ready.

Joseph offered her his arm. "Shall we?"

Holly noticed Mr. Bradshaw had offered his arm to Mrs. Pettigrew. She took it as they chatted about her skating party and all the fun he'd missed. "Your father scares me," she confessed.

Joseph chuckled. "That's quite alright. He scares half our employees, including me sometimes. But he's an old softie when it comes down to it. Don't let him intimidate you. Just be yourself this evening."

She hung her head. "Maybe that's not such a good idea."

He turned to her, put a finger to her chin, and lifted her face to his. "You're sweet, kind, forthright and willing to work hard for Mrs. Pettigrew. Those are all admirable qualities in my book." He winked. "That and you like to read." He gave her hand a pat and continued toward the dining room.

Holly let him pull her chair out for her, sat, and tried not to fidget. She wished Chastity and Dalton were dining with them tonight, but they were attending a ballet. She watched Joseph, who sat across the table from her, and followed his lead when it came to which fork or spoon to pick up next. The first course was served, then the second, and the conversation centered around Mr. Bradshaw's talk of his factories and the small steel mill he owned. Mrs. Pettigrew asked him what Holly interpreted as hard business questions, and she quickly formed a newfound respect for the woman's obvious business savvy. Mr. Bradshaw seemed to hang on every word that came out of Mrs. Pettigrew's mouth, as did Joseph, who for the most part kept quiet. When he did enter the conversation, he asked questions, and even his father listened to his son's subsequent conversation with their hostess.

By the time the main course came, Mrs. Pettigrew had managed to help the two see a better way to handle some of their manufacturing, and Holly marveled at the intelligent conversation. She also marveled at the fact she was able to understand a lot of it.

“I hope we’re not boring you,” Joseph said as they finished their main course of roasted pheasant.

“Not at all, I found your conversation very interesting. In fact, it’s not much different than raising chickens and selling eggs. You make a product people need, sell it to them, then find out how to sell more.”

He smiled. “And what would you sell if you only sell eggs?”

“Milk, of course, or chickens. I could also raise the grain to make into feed and sell that.”

Mr. Bradshaw and Mrs. Pettigrew’s current conversation stopped. They stared at her, the latter with a big smile on her face, the former with a frown.

Holly dabbed at her mouth with her napkin and once again willed herself not to fidget.

“What’s this?” Mr. Bradshaw said.

Joseph smiled. “It might interest you to know, Father, that Miss Turtledove understands business.”

Mr. Bradshaw’s eyebrows slowly rose. “Is that so? And how would she know anything of business?”

“Come now, Humphrey,” Mrs. Pettigrew said. “You know nothing of Miss Turtledove’s background. How can you make the assumption that she knows nothing?”

Mr. Bradshaw’s cheeks flushed. It was the first time all evening that Mrs. Pettigrew

used his Christian name. Did it take him by surprise?

“Oh, well, I only meant...”

“You think she’s brainless because she’s not one of us?” Mrs. Pettigrew stated. She sat back in her chair with a casual air and waited for his answer.

“I didn’t mean to imply the girl was stupid, just that...”

“Someone from her class couldn’t possibly know anything about business?” Joseph challenged.

Mr. Bradshaw glanced between them then eyed Holly. “What is your background, girl?”

“Mr. Bradshaw!” Mrs. Pettigrew said as if scandalized. “Do not address my assistant as if she’s some beggar in the streets.”

Mr. Bradshaw narrowed his eyes at her. “Adelia, I’m only going to say this once. That girl could be nothing but trouble for you! You’d be wise to be rid of her before it’s too late!”

Holly gasped.

“Father!” Joseph snapped.

“Well, what is one to think? It’s all over town that she’s taken in some guttersnipe.”

Tears stung the backs of Holly’s eyes. “Y-y-you don’t know me, sir. How d-d-dare you!” Of course, he was right. She was no better than a beggar, the lowest of the low. But that was in her past. She had a job as an assistant to a rich widow, and by golly

she'd do whatever it took to better herself and become the woman Mrs. Pettigrew wanted her to be.

"You're upsetting my assistant," her employer pointed out. "Besides, do you honestly think I would hire someone incapable of performing the duties of the position?" Her eyes narrowed at Mr. Bradshaw, who blanched.

"No, Adelia, of course not..."

"Seems to me you're insulting my intelligence," Mrs. Pettigrew drawled. "How boorish and unintelligent of you."

Mr. Bradshaw gulped. "I apologize. I didn't mean it to come across as an affront to you..."

"But that's exactly what you did." She turned to Joseph. "You've spent plenty of time with Holly. What do you think of her?"

Joseph smiled. Holly took in his look and half of her melted while the other panicked. "I find Miss Turtledove to be kind, sweet, clever, and firm when she has to be. She's also witty, and... well read." His smile grew as he locked gazes with her. "In fact, she has all the fine qualities of a good wife."

Holly gasped. So did Mr. Bradshaw. "Just what are you saying?" His father asked.

"Well if you can't figure it out, Father, then there's something wrong with your intelligence."

Holly stared at him, slack-jawed. Was Joseph saying what she thought he was?

CHAPTER 21

Joseph seethed. How dare his father think so ill of Holly! He was of a mind to propose to her right then and there!

He blinked once, twice. Great Scott! Why shouldn't he? He knew he had growing feelings for her, but enough to propose? Or did he just want to spite his father?

"Ah, dessert," Mrs. Pettigrew announced. "How lovely."

Mr. Tugs placed a beautiful chocolate cake on the table as Abigail set a stack of plates down. The two proceeded to cut the cake and serve it as everyone watched, jaws tight. Okay, Holly's was trembling. Joseph looked at her, met her despairing gaze, and gave her a reassuring smile. "Any man would be proud to call you wife." He reached for the coffee Abigail just poured and smiled again.

Her jaw stopped trembling as she sucked in a breath and held it.

"That's very true, m a petite . I could match you in no time," Mrs. Pettigrew said. "But I am loath to part with another assistant so soon." Her eyes flicked to Joseph and back.

Mr. Bradshaw was watching Mrs. Pettigrew, his own eyes darting between her and Holly. When he finally looked at Joseph, he frowned. "Did I tell you that Joseph and Rebecca Harrington are courting?"

Joseph spewed coffee. "WHAT?!"

Holly yelped in surprise when some of it hit her chest, and she immediately wiped at the hot brew with her napkin. “Oh, goodness!”

“Rebecca Harrington is the worst sort of harpy,” Mrs. Pettigrew said. “And judging from your son’s reaction, you just made that up.”

“I did no such thing,” Mr. Bradshaw said. “Rebecca told me herself. I’ve been waiting all evening for Joseph to make some sort of announcement, but it seems he’s tongue tied.”

Joseph laughed. “Rebecca told you? And when was this?”

“The other day. I don’t see why you felt you couldn’t tell me, other than the fact it proved I’m right,” Father huffed.

If he was mad before, it was nothing compared to the way his chest tightened, or how he was breathing like an angry bull. “Rebecca lied. I have not and will never, have any interest in the likes of Rebecca Harrington. Do you understand?”

His father huffed again but said nothing. If there was one thing Father hated, it was being wrong. And in this instance, it was on all counts.

Holly drew in a breath as she set her napkin on the table. “I’d like to be excused. I’m afraid I’m not feeling very well.”

Abigail set the last plate of cake down, in front of Mrs. Pettigrew, and went to her. “I’ll see ye to yer room.”

“Thank you, Abigail,” Holly said with as much dignity as she could muster, poor thing.

Joseph narrowed his eyes at his father. "I'll help you, Abigail."

Father gasped. "What? Help a lady to her room!"

"Calm yourself, Humphrey," Mrs. Pettigrew drawled. "It wouldn't be the first time he's carried her to her room."

Father sucked in a breath and tried to talk, but nothing came out.

Joseph arched an eyebrow at him before he left his chair, went around the table, and swept Holly into his arms. "Shall we?"

Her eyes went wide as he began to carry her from the dining room.

"Joseph!" His father bellowed. "Put her down at once!"

He turned to him from the hallway. "What's the matter Father, afraid I'll cause a scandal? It's too late for that. But know this. I will not see this woman brought to harm, either physically or emotionally because you're too stuck in your ways to see that I want to marry for love!" With that he turned and started down the hall for the grand foyer.

Holly wrapped her arms around his neck. "I can walk."

"I know, but since you're holding onto me, why would you?" He crossed the grand foyer to the staircase and started up.

"You... you want to marry for love?" she hedged.

"I do. My father wants me to marry for more money. He married my mother for love, but now that she's gone, his grief has blinded him. He just can't see why I wouldn't

want to marry for money and increase our holdings.”

She stared at him as he reached the top of the stairs, Abigail hurrying ahead to open Holly’s bedroom door. “It’s good to want to marry for love, Joseph.”

He reached the door and set her on her feet. “I agree.” He looked at her chest and gave her a sheepish grin. “I’m sorry I spit coffee on you.”

She giggled. “You were upset. After meeting Miss Harrington, I can see why.”

“Indeed.” He took her hands in his. “You’re alright? The coffee didn’t burn you, did it?”

“No, besides, it wasn’t that much. I was more worried about the dress.”

Abigail cleared her throat and made a show of fluffing the pillows on the bed.

Holly blushed a deep red. “I should go. I’m sorry your father doesn’t like me.”

Joseph let go a sigh. “Father doesn’t like a lot of people. He’s very set in his ways. But don’t worry. He’ll come around.” He took her hand and kissed it. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Holly blushed again and smiled. “Did you really mean what you said? About... me making someone a good wife?”

He looked into her eyes. “Every word.”

Her cheeks went pink as she slowly nodded, and he noticed a sadness filling her eyes. “I’ll say goodnight, then.” She pulled her hand from his and went into her room, closing the door.

Joseph was left with the unsettling feeling he needed to do something, and do something he would!

The next day Holly dressed, went downstairs and straight to the breakfast room. “Good morning,” she greeted Mrs. Pettigrew and went to the sideboard. She hardly slept a wink, her mind tossing back and forth the possibility Joseph might yet have some feelings for her. But no, the words he spoke last night were too generalized. Besides, if he had even an ounce of feelings toward her, wouldn’t he have said something by now?

His father was right. Joseph might want to marry for love, but how often did that happen among his class? She wasn’t the only one to hear that the rich married for advantage and not much else.

She brought her plate to the table, said a quick blessing, and began to eat.

“Something troubles you, this morning, ma petite ,” Mrs. Pettigrew observed.

“What makes you say that?” Holly blushed just thinking about last night.

“Mr. Bradshaw is only looking out for his son...”

She set down her fork. “He thinks I’m not good enough for the likes of his son.”

Mrs. Pettigrew gave her an innocent shrug. “And why should it matter? Unless...” she smiled. “Joseph is falling in love with you.”

“Ha! Don’t be ridiculous.” She got back to shoving scrambled eggs into her mouth when there came a commotion in the hall.

“Now what can... oh dear!” Mrs. Pettigrew exclaimed and got to her feet. “What’s

the meaning of this?!”

Holly turned and gasped. “Randall!”

Her brother gave her a slow smile as he held one of Abigail’s hands cruelly high behind her back, a knife to her throat. “Miss me, sister?”

A hand flew to Holly’s chest as all the color drained from her face. “Wh-what... how...”

He shrugged as another man entered the room and sneered at Mrs. Pettigrew. “Sit down.” He pulled a gun out and pointed it at her.

“Tie her up and let’s go,” Randall said.

The man looked around the room, went to the sideboard and started stuffing bacon into his mouth.

Mrs. Pettigrew watched him. “At least use a plate, mon cher .”

He eyed Mrs. Pettigrew over his shoulder before stuffing biscuits and bacon into his pockets.

“I said tie the lady up!” Randall ordered. He shoved Abigail into the nearest chair, pulled some rope from his pocket and began to lash her wrists behind her.

“Stop it!” Holly cried.

The man with the gun, not to mention a mouth full of bacon, pointed the weapon at her. “Shut up or I’ll shoot you.”

“Not her, you idiot. Shoot one of the others,” Randall said. He finished tying Abigail to the chair, then began to do the same with Mrs. Pettigrew.

“I must warn you, my cook is exceptionally cranky, and my butler is a fine shot.” Mrs. Pettigrew gave the two men a stern look. “And really, I don’t see why you’re fussing over tying me up when I could bring you a fine ransom.”

“Mrs. Pettigrew!” Abigail wailed.

Randall gagged her.

Holly sat, paralyzed with fear. He’d found her! “How...?”

“One of my new partner’s men happened to hear your name called by a carriage driver outside a café not far from here. He saw you get in and followed the carriage to this house. We had to wait for the right moment to fetch you and this was it.”

Randall’s cohort was tying up Mrs. Pettigrew. “This lady’s rich. We should take what we can.”

“We have what we came for, Bill. Now tie up my sister.”

Bill pulled a piece of bacon out of his coat pocket and stuffed it in his mouth. “The food’s good.”

Randall rolled his eyes. “Shut up and tie her up!”

Holly cringed as Bill came around the table, a menacing look on his face. Before she could bolt for the door, he grabbed her by the wrists and proceeded to bind them. “Mrs. Frammmpphh!” Okay, so calling for help didn’t work. She was now gagged as well as bound.

Randall went to the sideboard, grabbed a muffin, and took a generous bite. “Hmmm, you’re right, the food is good.” He looked around the room. “If this Pettigrew woman wasn’t so rich, we’d take her. But the police would shoot us on sight. My sister, they won’t care if she’s gone. Let’s go.”

“But the rest of the food...” Bill groused.

“Forget it. Besides, Holly here will earn us enough to live on.” He yanked her to her feet by the arm and shoved her toward the door.

She screamed into the gag when two things happened at once. Mrs. Fraser entered the room from the direction of the kitchen with a platter of potatoes, and Joseph entered from the hallway. Both took one look at the scene before them and all chaos broke loose.

CHAPTER 22

Joseph spied a trussed-up Holly and took a swing at her captor. He had to be her brother. He could see the similarity between them as his fist connected with Randall Turtledove's jaw to send him sprawling. He heard a loud CLANG and saw another fellow teeter a bit before he crashed to the floor. Fried potatoes flew everywhere, a few hitting Joseph in the face as Randall sprang to his feet and rushed him.

Joseph was never more grateful for his boxing days in college as he was now. He dodged Randall's fist then delivered a wicked upper cut to the man's jaw.

CLANG, CLANG, CLANG...

Meanwhile, Randall's accomplice was getting his on the other side of the room as Mrs. Fraser continued to clobber him over the head with the silver platter she'd used for the potatoes.

Abigail sat, wide-eyed, as Mrs. Pettigrew struggled with her bonds. Poor Holly cringed near the wall watching the fray.

Randall went down again, and Joseph didn't give him a chance to get up. He straddled the man and began to use his face for a punching bag.

"Don't. Ever. Think. To. Harm. My. Betrothed. Again!"

Joseph was breathing hard at the end of his tantrum and noticed Tugs untying Mrs. Pettigrew.

“Mrs. Fraser, will you kindly stop beating the poor man?” she pleaded. “I do believe he’s been properly subdued.”

Mrs. Fraser stopped her clobbering, half her hair now loose from its pins, and grinned at her employer. “I got him!”

Mrs. Pettigrew stood regally. “Yes, you certainly did. By the way, he thought your breakfast was excellent. They both did.”

Mrs. Fraser smiled and shoved hair out of her face. “Of course they did! Best breakfast in town is right here!”

Joseph got up, went to Holly, and pulled her into his arms. “Darling! Are you alright?” He quickly removed the gag and untied her hands. As soon as they were free, she fell against him.

“Holly, you’re safe now,” he said against her hair. Joseph drew back to look at her, saw the fear in her eyes, and did the only thing he could think of to assure her all was well. He held her close, lowered his face to hers, and kissed her.

He was vaguely aware of Mr. Tugs saying something to Mrs. Pettigrew but didn’t care. Holly’s lips were soft, supple, and he’d be a fool not to tell her how he felt now. But would she accept the fact that he’d fallen in love with her? Joseph had no idea. Kissing her was all consuming, and if he didn’t stop, he’d definitely cause a scandal!

A resounding CLANG drew his attention, and he broke the kiss in time to see Randall’s cohort slump to the floor once more, a triumphant Mrs. Fraser standing over him with her trusty silver platter. He smiled, then gave his attention back to Holly, who was staring at him with wide eyes.

He’d kissed her! But there was more than his kiss, but Holly was so flummoxed, she didn’t remember what it was.

“Holly, darling?” Joseph said in a tender voice. “You needn’t worry, you’re quite safe now.” He steered her to a chair as Mr. Tugs proceeded to tie up their prisoners before either came around again and tried to escape.

“R-R-Randall found me!”

“But he didn’t take you, and now he’ll get what’s coming to him.” He sat in the chair and pulled her onto his lap, not caring what anyone thought. He held her close and whispered words of comfort against her hair. “You’re safe, no one is going to hurt you...”

“You fought Randall.”

“Yes, love. And I’d do it again in a heartbeat.” He drew back to look at her. “No one will hurt you; do you hear me?”

“Wh-what was that you told Randall when you were hitting him?” she asked in a small voice.

“Oh, yes,” he said and smiled. “I wanted to speak to you this morning and tell you a few things about me.”

“What sort of things?” She chanced a peek at a now trussed up Randall and his accomplice Bill.

“Well, let me see.” He adjusted her in his lap and smiled again. “I’m rich, but nothing like Mrs. Pettigrew. Dalton Simpson is closer, but we don’t own as many factories as his family...”

“I don’t understand, what are you trying to say?” Holly asked. It was hard for her to take anything in after that kiss of his.

“What I’m trying to say is, you’ll be well provided for. You’ll want for nothing.”

She gave him a blank stare.

Mrs. Pettigrew smiled. “Tugs, you’re going to have to put another advertisement in the paper for an assistant.”

Holly gasped. “Mrs. Pettigrew,” she said, a hand to her chest. “I’m so sorry!” She tried to squirm out of Joseph’s arms, but he wouldn’t let her go. “Please, my job!”

“But you don’t need one, darling,” he said with a smile.

Holly wasn’t sure she heard him right. “What?”

“As my wife you won’t need to work. Follow some pursuits by all means, but work? Heavens no.”

She gaped at him. “J-Joseph?”

“I distinctly recall telling your brother not to touch my betrothed again.” He let go of her and she escaped his lap, only to watch him go down on one knee. He took one of her hands in his. “Holly Turtledove, you’d make me the happiest man in Denver if you’d consent to be my wife. Will you marry me?”

Holly didn’t think it possible, but her jaw dropped further. “What?”

He laughed. “Marry me, darling. Please say you will.”

“Marriage!” Randall squeaked a few feet away.

Holly narrowed her eyes at him then looked at Joseph. “You... you love me?”

“Of course I do! Why else would I have spent all this time with you? After all that, how could any man not fall in love with you?” He got to his feet, drew her into his arms, and kissed her again!

“Oh, for the love of Pete!” Randall grouched. “Someone make them stop!”

Mrs. Pettigrew drew in a deep breath. “Mrs. Fraser, your platter please.”

Joseph broke the kiss in time for Holly to see Mrs. Fraser hand Mrs. Pettigrew the silver platter. She promptly went to Randall, and CLANG! he dropped like a sack of potatoes.

“That will teach you!” Mrs. Pettigrew handed the platter back to Mrs. Fraser. “I’m going to send word to Mr. Forsythe to come at once.” She disappeared from the room, Abigail trailing behind her.

“Holly,” Joseph whispered. “Is it a yes?”

She smiled at him. “I... I love you too.”

He grinned. “I know. Why else would you put up with me all this time?”

Her eyes darted to his lips. “Why else indeed?”

He lowered his lips to hers once more as another resounding CLANG echoed through the breakfast room.

“I don’t care how much they liked my cooking!” Mrs. Fraser cried. “They’ll not leave the floor until the police get here!”

Holly laughed against Joseph’s lips, and he laughed against hers. It was a warm, wonderful sensation that sent tingles up her spine. “So, you were going to ask me to

marry you this morning?"

"Right after breakfast." He pulled a small box out of his coat pocket and opened it. Inside was a beautiful diamond ring. "This was my mother's." He took the ring from the box and slipped it onto the ring finger of her left hand. "I want you to become Mrs. Joseph Bradshaw. We'll live across the street from Chastity and Dalton, and our children can play with their children, and we'll have loads of fun watching them drive their poor old grandfather round the bend."

She gasped. "You father..."

He held up a hand. "Not to worry, love. Father and I had a long talk last night, and I reminded him how much he and mother were in love. Poor man misses her something terrible. Since he's miserable, he figures everyone else should be too."

"That's awful," she said.

"Yes, and it took me half the night to convince Father of the same thing, but he finally listened." He cupped her face with both hands. "I love you, and that's all that matters to me. Not your station, not your lack of wealth or anything else. I just want you."

Holly stared at him a moment, before she threw her arms around his neck and held him tight. "I love you!"

Joseph pulled her against him and hung onto her as if she were his only lifeline. She knew she'd fallen in love, and last night only proved it. This morning, she thought she'd be faced with a broken heart and almost had to face something far worse at her brother's hand. Thank goodness Joseph and Mrs. Fraser came into the breakfast room when they did!

It wasn't long before the police came and carted Randall and Bill off to jail. Mr.

Bradshaw, out for a morning walk and seeing the police enter Mrs. Pettigrew's home, followed, and was shocked by the news.

"You'll marry right away," he told them. "You're better protected by Joseph if you're in our home." Mr. Bradshaw ran a hand through his hair. "To think we almost lost you to that blackguard before you even had a chance to be part of the family!"

"Spoken like a man who's been in love," Mrs. Pettigrew said. "I commend you, Humphrey."

He blushed. "Joseph made me realize last night that one, I can't make a choice for him when it comes to a bride, and two, that he should marry for love. My grief had such a grip on me, I..."

"There's no need to explain," Mrs. Pettigrew said. "All is well, Joseph has proposed, Holly said yes, and her brother is now behind bars."

"Yes, indeed," Mr. Bradshaw said. "We have much to be thankful for." He went to Holly and took her hands in his. "I hope that in time, you'll call me Father?"

Her lower lip shook. "I will."

He pulled her into his arms and patted her on the back. "You'll have to learn to run the household, but Mrs. Pettigrew assures me you're a fast learner."

Holly drew back. "I am, sir."

"Father," he corrected.

"Father." She straightened, turned to Joseph, and stepped into his arms. "I'm so glad you rescued me that day."

“So am I. And now we get to spend the rest of our lives together...”

CLANG!

“Great Scott, what was that?!” Mr. Bradshaw cried.

Mrs. Fraser entered the room. “I heard another voice and thought I’d sound off a warning!”

Mrs. Pettigrew shook her head. “It’s only Mr. Bradshaw. Please put your new weapon of choice away.”

Mrs. Fraser gave everyone a sheepish look then hustled back to the kitchen, her trusty silver platter in hand.

“I might have to get one of those,” Mr. Bradshaw said.

Holly laughed, along with everyone else. She was safe. She was loved. And had a family again. Who knew something so wonderful could happen to her?

She caught Mrs. Pettigrew’s knowing smile and had her answer.

THE END