

CHAPTER ONE

Justin was tired. The kind of tired that makes a person's bones creak, which surely wasn't normal for a strapping man of twenty-five. After another long day tending to the many chores needed to keep the family's stud farm going, he was willing to forgo a scrub in a hot bath and, instead, climb straight into bed. Ginny, their laundry maid, wouldn't be too happy about having to wash his dirty linens again, but he'd treat her to some of her favorite lemon drops from the Gregory's mercantile to make up for it.

Would he ever cease being this exhausted? It wasn't that his work was harder or had changed much, save for the few hours he spent here and there helping his brother Isaac build a permanent house for him and Grace, but because of the illness he was still recovering from. Some nasty bug had hit him and a few of the farmhands two weeks ago, laying them flat for days. Meg had fussed over them all, using her arsenal of tinctures and chest wraps infused with herbs and oils in her battle plans. They'd done the job, but Justin was still readjusting to his usual routine. It was maddening.

Other than that minor setback, life on the farm for the past eight months had been fairly normal, if a bit dull. He had no right or reason to complain. The horses were thriving. He'd overseen the sale of ten well-bred geldings and ten mares—five each from their stock of Quarters, Mustangs, Pintos, and Saddlebreds—earning them a hefty profit. Their horses were the best in Texas, thanks to their business with the Hansen family in Tremont, whose studs would continue to sire more magnificent offspring for years to come.

But something was missing. He felt stuck. It was all the same old thing, day in, day out. Maybe that's why he was still out of sorts after his illness.

That was only part of the issue, which he had a hard time admitting to himself.

He was lonely.

A silly notion, since he was constantly with family, as well as all the farmhands who worked for him. It was a different sort of loneliness. One that had him watching Isaac and Grace with a bit of envy. Not that he begrudged their relationship. His happiness for them was only eclipsed by their own remarkable joy. Their first child would be born in early spring. No two people could be more excited to be parents. Theirs was a love so rare, like catching a falling star on the night of a blue moon, Justin dared not dream of expecting anything like it for himself.

The rest of the family was doing just fine as well, for which he was glad.

Ma was busy with her endeavors in the community, always helping or organizing or creating something to benefit others, all while taking the time to read her Bible and pray in earnest for the well-being of her family.

Even Meg, along with her growing skills at doctoring, had her mysterious pen pal from somewhere back east. She was cryptic about her friend and nearly had a fit the one time Justin had started opening one of her letters by mistake.

It seemed only *he* was in a rut, one deep and wide with no clear way to climb out.

Sighing, he slumped onto his bed, freeing both a lengthy yawn and his feet from their boots, his toes cracking in relief. His gaze strayed to the new nightstand beside his bed—one of Lucas Johnston's creations—and the piece of paper resting on top. It'd been there for over three months, just waiting for him to decide what to do with it. Toss it in the trash? Or send it out to be included in an upcoming addition of *The Matrimonial Times*?

If he picked the latter of the two options, it would be his second foray into the world of mail-order brides.

If he was completely honest, he sometimes wondered if he and Grace could have made something work between them. They'd gotten along well, and still did. Even if their friendship never evolved into something beyond familial affection, they might have been happy regardless. But the moment

he realized his stoic, taciturn brother had fallen for her, any thoughts of a future with Grace had ceased. Instead, Justin had thrown himself into secretly, and maybe not so secretly, conspiring to make sure the two ended up together. He grunted out a laugh. How many things had he done for them behind their backs?

He'd convinced Isaac to stay in the main barn during the foaling, certain Grace would be the one sent there with a plate of dinner, since she wouldn't have known how to get the second barn.

Then his conveniently planned trip to Grantsville, when he could've sent any of the farmhands, giving the two would-be lovebirds a chance to spend time together.

How about making sure the two of them danced with each other during Ma's birthday celebration? Justin still remembered the dreamy looks on their faces as they swayed to Ma's piano tune. That had been the clincher, leaving no room for doubt the two were meant to be.

His most clever tactic by far had been asking Isaac to sit with Grace after she'd gotten injured, though Justin hadn't meant to overhear his brother's heartfelt confession. Well, maybe he *sort of* meant to. Just a bit.

And finally, sending for Grace's mother and brother and fixing up the creek cabin, all in preparation for the wedding he knew would be happening. Isaac had nearly ruined the whole thing with his hard-headed misunderstanding, but everything had worked out. Justin didn't regret a single moment. Grace and Isaac belonged together. He knew it deep down in his soul, but...

He wanted a wife for himself. There. He admitted it. He longed for the happiness, or at least a measure of the happiness, he witnessed between his brother and Grace. He wanted someone to confide in during the day and hold at night. Someone who might laugh at his silly jokes or smile at him when he needed a bit of cheering up. He wished for it all.

Wishing wasn't enough.

Again, being honest, he'd lost some of his confidence. He wasn't a vain man, but even he was aware his looks were considered attractive, gaining him a handful of admirers around town. Too bad most of the girls who cast their ogling eyes upon him were younger than Meg, or older than Ma.

He was also kind, going out of his way to help anyone he could. But such attributes were no guarantee for a happy union. What if his next attempt failed as well? Would he be forever searching for one woman who wouldn't end up picking someone else? Was there something he needed to change in himself? Something he lacked? He *was* a bit silly, after all. Meg was forever rolling her eyes at his antics. It helped him keep his focus on the brightness waiting on the horizon. At least until recently. The world seemed to have grown dull and difficult. Who would want to be around this type of pessimistic Justin Bailey? *He* didn't even like being around him. Maybe it would be better if he waited a bit longer before trying for another match.

Reaching for the advert, he stuck it in the drawer of the nightstand, then extinguished the lantern and toppled over onto his side. His weary body relaxed and blessed sleep claimed him.



He heard sobbing as he entered the house, having completed his morning chores. Justin paused, trying to puzzle out where the crying was coming from. The kitchen. Hastening his steps, he headed in that direction, only to skid to a halt. Meg and Cook—Mrs Maude Cook, the family's dear

cook for the past twenty years—were embracing, tears streaming down their faces.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, looking them up and down to see if one or both of them was injured.

Meg turned her blood-shot eyes to him. “Oh, Justin, Cook’s leavin’ us!”

Cook made a gentle shushing noise. “Now, now, little Meggy, I’m old and nearly blind. It’s time I retired and rested my weary bones.”

“I know you deserve a break,” Meg conceded begrudgingly, sniffing, “but I’ll miss you!”

Finally understanding the situation, Justin moved closer, taking hold of one of the elderly lady’s weathered hands. “Where will you go, Cook?” he asked.

“Not far,” she said, squeezing his hand in return. “My son and his family live just outside Grantsville. That’s where I’ll live out my final days and be buried, right beside my dear Hobert.”

“And we’ll all starve,” Meg muttered, wiping at her eyes and nose.

Cook pinched her cheek. “Will not, you silly thing. I’ve already got someone in mind, if you don’t object to me findin’ my own replacement.”

Justin shook his head. “You know best. When do you plan to hang up your apron?”

“Not ‘til the end of the month at the earliest,” said Cook, extracting herself from Meg’s arms. “And I’ll stay on ‘til I know everything’s settled. Now, I’ve got to see to lunch, and I’m sure the two of you have things to do besides weep and moan.” She shooed them out of the kitchen.

Meg continued to leak tears, standing forlornly in the dining room. “Why does everyone keep leavin’?” she said between shuddering breaths.

“Everyone?” Justin repeated, not sure what she meant. “Grace and Isaac are a ten minute walk away, at most. Cook’ll be only be a half-day’s train ride from here. You can visit both easily.”

His sister shot him a glare. “That’s not what I... Oh, never mind.” With a huff, she spun around and stomped away.

He stared after her, confused. Where was her usual level-headedness in the face of crisis? He’d seen her take charge in dire circumstances on numerous occasions without so much as a flinch. Yet, recently, he’d noticed a shift in his sister’s behavior, teetering towards melancholy at any given moment, but he couldn’t fathom why. The few times he’d mentioned it to her, she merely brushed it off or changed the subject. And now with Cook leaving...

Justin had no idea what to make of it. He would miss Cook, and her scrumptious meals and warm-hearted company, but she’d more than earned her retirement, not to mention a nice bonus he planned to give her as a parting gift. He’d talk to Ma and Isaac to make sure it happened. They’d throw her a grand farewell party as well, since most of the people in New Haven had had the pleasure of sampling at least one—more likely dozens—of her creations. Cook could see firsthand how many lives, and stomachs, she’d influenced over the past twenty years. Maybe taking part in planning the festivities would help Meg with the transition.

Getting a new cook didn’t seem all that groundbreaking, but maybe it was just what he needed to get *unstuck*. He chuckled, hoping the new cook, whoever it might be, knew how to make toffee or he might have to join Meg’s revolt.

CHAPTER TWO

Lilah wasn't sure if she wanted to scream or cry, both out of frustration, as she looked down at the hall floor she had scrubbed not more than an hour ago. Muddy paw prints were everywhere, and she would dare venture a wager more of them were decorating other parts of the house. The little beast responsible would laugh if he were able, since he hated Lilah just as much as his owner did.

She wouldn't be surprised if Mrs Stanley had purposely walked her spiteful dog, Muffin, along a muddy path and coaxed him through the house, not bothering to hide her gleeful sneer as she orchestrated the mess left for Lilah to take care of. It wasn't a stretch to suspect such a nefarious deed because it wouldn't be the first time something like it had happened.

She heard footsteps approaching, making her whole body tense in preparation for whatever outrage and blame was about to be leveled at her.

"Oh, dear," said a soft female voice behind her.

Lilah relaxed a fraction. It was not Mrs Stanley after all, but her daughter Daisy. She didn't think Daisy hated her, though the young lady never did much to make the opposite seem true either. Daisy usually stood back while her mother exploded in temper tantrums and vicious insults, looking the other way as to not be involved.

Having no response to the young lady's '*oh, dear*', Lilah chose to ignore it, and instead moved toward the kitchen to retrieve a mop from the supply closet and a bucket of soapy water. Again.

Being employed as a maid in the Stanley household wasn't always ideal—the muddy hallway being a prime example—but there were ample moments she was truly grateful for. Like her days off on Sundays so she could attend church services and half-days on Wednesdays, the latter of which still earned her a full day's pay, thanks to Mr Stanley's generosity. He

was probably the nicest man in Findlay, Ohio, always greeting her and the other servants with a smile and a kind word, never making them feel they were beneath him. He regularly donated to charities and involved himself in community projects. He let Lilah borrow books from his library and, on occasion, would even seek out books from shops he thought she might like.

It often boggled her mind how he and Mrs Stanley ended up together. She'd heard of opposites attracting in a relationship, but there was nothing likable about the vindictive woman. Sure, she at least attempted to don a façade of goodness whenever she was among peers or if her husband was around, so perhaps he wasn't aware of just how malicious his wife could be. Perhaps her tirades were saved for Lilah alone. Lilah shook her head. No, Mrs Stanley wasn't kind to any of the servants, yet she seemed to take great pleasure in singling Lilah out.

It didn't really matter in the end. Lilah was paid well, had a roof over her head and food in her belly. It would be selfish of her to complain when there were so many others in the world with much less.

She should know. She used to be one of them.

Such was the life of an orphan.

With cleaning tools in hand, Lilah returned to the mess in the hall and began tackling it with her usual dedication, despite the dastardly way it had come about.

It took two hours, and numerous back and forths to replenish the bucket with clean water, to erase the muddy prints, which meant two hours of missed chores she'd have to somehow make up. Her arms hung at her sides like overcooked noodles, her back aching with each step. Leaving the rest of her duties for tomorrow was oh-so-tempting, and might even be conceivable if not for Mrs Stanley. Though the horrid woman didn't need an excuse to berate her, neglected duties, even if only perceived as neglected,

would be just the ammunition she'd need to make Lilah miserable. Correction. *More* miserable.

As she moved on to tend to her next chore, Lilah quickly discovered it had already been accomplished. The same could be said for the one after that. Confused, she headed down to the servants' floor to find out if Mrs Douglas, the housekeeper, had changed her schedule. The door to the small study was ajar. Seeing the stout woman seated at the desk, Lilah knocked lightly, bringing Mrs Douglas' attention up to her.

"Yes, Miss Foster?" the older woman asked, looking back down at the papers stacked in front of her.

"I just...well, I went to tend to my last chores," Lilah stammered anxiously, "but they've already been done. Did I get the wrong assignments by mistake?"

"No," said Mrs Douglas as she wrote something in a ledger. "Mr Stanley made a request, so I had Jane take care of them."

"A request?" Lilah repeated. "He wanted someone else to do my chores?" A ripple of alarm swept through her. Was he unhappy with her work or conduct? Had his wife finally convinced him to get rid of her?

"He noticed you were cleaning the same area twice and wanted to make sure you weren't overwhelmed." Mrs Douglas looked up again, her round face shaded with concern. "I would've had Jane help you even if Mr Stanley had said nothing."

The woman's kindness was not given lightly. She was never mean, but tended to be strict to maintain authority and order. So to hear the housekeeper say such a thing warmed Lilah's heart. Mr Stanley's kindness, however, was *not* unexpected. "I see. Thank you, Mrs Douglas."

Her mouth twitched into an almost-smile. "One more thing," she said, reaching for two books on the corner of her desk. "Mr Stanley brought these for you to borrow." She held them up for Lilah to take, which she did, glancing at the titles.

Jane Eyre, by Charlotte Brontë

A Guide to Medicinal Flora, by Ralph Newsom

“He thought you might enjoy them,” the housekeeper said, then with a wave, she added, “I believe you’re done for the day. Goodnight, Miss Foster.”

Though it wasn’t late enough for sleep just yet, Lilah said goodnight as she backed out of the room and shut the door, but remained in the corridor, wondering if she dare seek out Mr Stanley and thank him for his kind gestures. She hastily shook her head. The risk of running into his wife was too great. And if the woman found out what Mr Stanley had done—both the assistance with her chores and the lending of the books—she’d make it her goal to exact some kind of punishment. Maybe Lilah could write him a note? Or perhaps she’d see him in the morning before he headed off to work.

For now, she would head to her room and delve into *A Guide to Medicinal Flora*, eager to soak in its illustrations and descriptions before turning in for the night.



Something was off. Lilah shivered, which was not normal, since her room was next to the furnace and was sometimes *too* warm, especially during the winter. So why was the air around her so cold? Yet even that didn’t seem to be the cause of the strange flittering in her stomach, like she’d eaten something that didn’t agree with her. She glanced up at the window to the right of her narrow bed. There wasn’t much light coming

through. What time was it? Early? Or was the sky masked with thick clouds to hide the sun?

Not sure what to make of her ominous state of mind, she arose and got ready for the day.

Entering the kitchen, she paused, confused by the lack of personnel, and lack of fires heating the large stove and brick oven. She'd never witnessed such emptiness in that room before; there was always someone doing something. Where was the cook, Mrs Blake, and her kitchen assistants? Lilah rubbed her arms, feeling another chill run through her.

And what was that muffled wailing noise?

It was coming from somewhere above. Lilah had a sudden inkling she did not want to find out what it was or what was causing it. But it could hardly be ignored, just like the strange lack of people where people should be.

Movement to her right made her spin around just as Evie, one of the other maids, dashed by, heading for the stairs. Lilah opened her mouth to call out to her, but the girl was already gone. Her own feet started to move and soon she was climbing the steps. The wailing sound was getting louder and more clear.

Someone was inconsolably distraught.

She continued in the direction of the harrowing sound all the way to the parlor. The door was ajar. Swallowing the lump in her throat, Lilah peered through the slim opening. Mrs Stanley was seated on one of the sofas, bent over the plush armrest, her body wracked with unrestrained sobs. Daisy sat beside her mother, looking ahead at nothing, her pretty face pale as porcelain. A man dressed in the gray uniform of the local police force stood nearby, his expression torn between concern and embarrassment to be witnessing a grown lady's distress.

"Psst, Lilah!" a voice whispered.

Lilah turned to see Evie beckoning to her from the library across the hall. Going to her, Lilah slipped into the room.

“What’s going on?” she asked her fellow maid.

Evie seemed on the verge of tears herself. “Oh, it’s terrible. Mr Stanley...He’s dead.”

Shock wasn’t a strong enough word to describe the sensation that rammed into Lilah, full impact to the chest. She could hardly breathe. “What...?”

Shaking her head sadly, Evie went on. “He left home last evening to retrieve something from his office. When the Missus found out early this morning he hadn’t returned, she sent Gerry to fetch him. He found him out on the street just a few blocks from home.” She sniffled, wiping her nose with a handkerchief. “He’d been hit by a carriage.”

The words went into Lilah’s ears, but her brain wasn’t grasping them completely. Gerry, the household butler, had been hit by a carriage? How awful! So where was Mr Stanley? No, that wasn’t what Evie had said. The carriage hit-

“You!” came a shriek from the doorway.

Startled, Lilah and Evie both whirled around, facing Mrs Stanley, the woman’s tear-streaked face blazing with crimson fury, one hand raised, pointing a shaky finger at Lilah.

“I want you out!” the woman screamed. “You would’ve been gone long ago if not for Joseph’s obsession with charity cases. But he’s gone now.” She moved forward, grabbing Lilah by the sleeve and dragging her out of the library. “Pack your things and leave my house this instant.” With a burst of strength, she flung Lilah towards the stairs to the servants’ floor.

Stumbling, Lilah managed to catch herself before she could fall. She turned to stare, utterly shocked, at her employer, grappling to piece together each bit of horrible information dumped upon her during the past five minutes.

Mr Stanley, dead.

Mrs Stanley, raging like a lunatic.

Lilah, jobless and homeless.

With a look of satisfaction, Mrs Stanley went back into the parlor, slamming the door.

Lilah was frozen where she stood, until Gerry gently grasped one of her shoulders and turned her to the stairs.

“I’m sorry, Miss Foster,” he muttered, eyes averted, “but I’m to escort you out. Let’s go get your things.”

Her legs moved, somehow transporting her to the small room where she’d lived for the past four years. Her hands plucked clothing and other personal items—there weren’t many—from the drawers and placed them in a threadbare carpetbag. Meanwhile she was numb to it all, her movements automatic. Her eyes strayed to the two books on the nightstand. Without really thinking, she added them to her bag, then snapped it closed and walked out of the room.

She heard a familiar voice or two behind her, uttering soft farewells and other such parting words, but barely any of them registered. Lilah put on her coat and slipped the handle of the bag over her arm, up to her shoulder where it sat heavily, nearly pulling her down.

Gerry once again placed a hand on her and steered her to the door leading to the rear of the property. Mrs Douglas was there, eyes shining, but she said nothing as Lilah left the house. The door shut behind her with a finality that made her flinch.

She was alone.

However, she was not destitute. Inside her bag was a pouch filled with four years worth of saved wages, minus the bills she’d used now and then for sundry items. The remaining money wouldn’t last forever, of course, but she’d be able to afford a decent place to stay for several months while she looked for a new job. A new job that would be difficult to come by without a

reference from her former employer. She almost laughed, though without a speck of humor. What employer? One was dead, the other loathed her.

Tears gathered in her eyes. Mr Stanley was truly dead, wasn't he? She never got to thank him, and not just for his consideration from yesterday. For everything.

He had changed her life.

She had seen him at the orphanage several times over the years when he stopped by to leave a donation or bring clothing or food. The two of them had even spoken to each other on occasion. There was a vague memory mixed in there—something about peppermint sticks. Then four years ago, when Lilah turned sixteen, Mr Stanley had offered her a job as a maid in his home. She figured the housemothers must have made the recommendation, given Lilah's good work ethic and attention to detail. Though she'd had no real complaints about her life at the orphanage, she'd welcomed the opportunity to start providing for herself. Did Mr Stanley ever know how truly grateful she was? The chance to convey the words was now gone.

Wiping at her eyes, she slowly made her way across the property to the street, glancing only once at the house that had been her home, not stopping even when she noticed Daisy at one of the windows, watching Lilah with sadness in her eyes. Lilah felt a pang of sympathy for the young lady, losing her father in such a tragic way. She almost raised a hand to wave, but thought better of it and moved on.

At the curb, Lilah hesitated. She had money. But she had no idea where to go. There was only one other place she'd ever called home. Maybe the ladies at the orphanage could point her in the right direction.

CHAPTER THREE

“Do you remember Christina Phelps?”

Lilah nodded. “She was one of my dearest friends while I was here,” she replied, sitting in Mrs Evra’s office at the Gilded Sun Orphanage in downtown Findlay, Ohio. The headmistress, whom Lilah had known since her earliest memories, gave her a smile.

“Well, she left just a few months ago when she turned eighteen,” said Mrs Evra. “We gave her ideas for jobs and housing in various places, and she picked Chicago. There are plenty of opportunities there.”

“You think I should go there as well?” Lilah asked, leaning forward. “Can you tell me where Christina settled?”

“Yes, and yes,” Mrs Evra said, shifting in her chair so she could access a filing cabinet to her right. She rummaged through numerous papers and folders. “Here it is.” She pulled out a card, hastily rewrote the address, and then handed the copy to Lilah.

“Thank you, Mrs Evra,” Lilah said, a bit of emotional weight easing off her back, weight she’d been carrying around since leaving the Stanley’s. “I’m glad I came by.”

The headmistress’ brows pulled together. “I wish it were for different circumstances. Poor Mr Stanley. He was a good man.”

Lilah could only nod for fear of breaking down. But she was used to pushing unwanted feelings aside in order to accomplish what needed to be done—something she had Mrs Stanley, of all people, to thank for—and right now, she needed to concentrate on getting to Chicago.

She lingered at the orphanage just long enough to say hello to a few other people before heading to the train station to arrange the necessary passage for her journey to see her old friend again. Luckily, a train was about to depart for Chicago. Grateful for the small mercy from heaven, she bought her ticket and raced across the platform to board.

The journey took just over nine hours, with a half dozen stops along the way, getting her to her destination before nightfall. With some helpful, and not so helpful, directions, Lilah found the apartment building matching the address given to her by Mrs Evra.

It was an old building, if the stained brick exterior, dingy windows, and precarious porch steps were anything to judge by. The main door was locked, which suggested the proprietor was keen on security, or perhaps the neighborhood environment required it. She hoped for the former. With some trepidation, Lilah knocked, saying a quick prayer that someone would answer before night descended completely, lest she be confronted with any number of unsavory situations in an unfamiliar place.

A click sounded and the door swung open, revealing a large woman with dull eyes and a hairy chin. She looked Lilah up and down with a critical sniff.

“We got no vacancies,” she said, “unless you’re sharin’. I gotta see money up front, though. One dollar every two weeks, dollar fifty if you want a meal each day. Except Sundays.”

Lilah blinked at her, struggling to ignore the mole above the woman’s eyebrow that seemed to have a life of its own. “I’m looking for Christina Phelps,” she said in a small voice.

The woman’s eyes narrowed. “You’re just visitin’?”

“For now, yes,” Lilah said.

With a huff, muttering something about it being rather late for visitors, the woman stepped back and let Lilah enter. “Third floor, hall to the right. You got her door number?”

“Yes. Thank you.” Lilah squinted into the dim foyer, finding the stairs in one corner. Feeling the woman’s critical gaze on her back, Lilah hastened up the steps to the third floor and turned to the right, her eyes scanning doors until she found the right one. At least she hoped it was the right one.

She rapped her knuckles on the worn wood, its white paint faded and peeling, much like the rest of the walls and floors of the shabby building.

The door opened a few inches and a young lady with frizzy black hair and green eyes peered out, her head tilting to one side. “Yes?”

She wasn’t Christina. “I beg your pardon,” Lilah started, nerves tickling her stomach in an unpleasant way, “my name is Lilah Foster. I’m looking for Christina Phel-”

The door opened wider and another young lady—her blonde curls, round spectacles, and rosy cheeks just as Lilah remembered—appeared in the doorway, nudging her companion to the side. “Lilah?” With a squeal, she grabbed Lilah and hugged her tightly.

“Hello, Christina,” Lilah said, laughing as she was dragged into the apartment. The other young lady merely shrugged and pushed the door shut.

“I can’t believe you’re here!” Christina exclaimed, breaking away. “It’s been so long.”

Lilah’s smile faded as her pent-up grief finally climbed its way to the surface. “I...I didn’t know where else...” Before she could even try to stop herself, she bowed her head and buried her face in her hands. The sobs came in great waves of shudders and hiccups, burning her throat and eyes. She felt herself being pulled and was soon sitting on a sofa. She heard Christina ask her companion to fetch a glass of water. Christina put an arm around her, quietly consoling despite not knowing the reason.

When Lilah was able to speak, thanks to sips of cool water and the purging of many tears, she told her friend everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours. Part of her still found it hard to believe, but here she was in a new city, far from the only life she’d ever known, with only a single friend to help her navigate a new life. What that life might include, she had no idea, but she was grateful for the arm around her shoulders, occasionally giving her a squeeze.

“How tragic,” Christina said softly. “Mr Stanley is the one who suggested I come to Chicago, and even gave me a letter of recommendation to use when I got here. It was a lifesaver in securing my job at the department store downtown.”

Lilah blew her nose with a handkerchief offered to her by the black-haired young lady, whose name she learned was Bernadette. “I doubt there’s a single person in Findlay who wasn’t blessed by something he did,” Lilah said, shoulders sagging wearily as fatigue was quickly replacing her grief.

Christina suddenly frowned, eyes flashing, the same way they used to whenever she sensed the presence of injustice. “And that horrid Mrs Stanley! What a cruel thing to do, kicking you out like that. Do you have any idea why she fixed her hateful attentions on you?”

Though Lilah wasn’t sure, she had a suspicion. “The day I started working there, I accidentally broke her favorite gilded mirror. The next afternoon, I overheard her talking to a group of ladies over tea, lamenting the embarrassment of employing a clumsy orphan with no manners. Ever since then, she seemed to haunt my steps, just waiting for me to prove her right. Not that she actually waited for another mistake. Nothing I did was good enough.”

“Horrid woman,” Christina repeated, pushing her spectacles up to their proper place. “But now we must figure out what to do with you. I hope you’ll plan to stay here with us.” She glanced at Bernadette, who nodded. “We only have two rooms,” Christina continued, “but you can share with me. My bed is plenty big for two if we squeeze.”

“Oh, I don’t want to impose,” Lilah said, though remembering the landlady’s proclamation about no vacancies, sharing with someone would likely be her only option for now.

“Nonsense,” Christina said and, with a smile, added, “It will be like old times.”

Lilah matched her smile. "If I recall, we spent ample time telling stories and giggling rather than sleeping most nights. Mrs Evra used to scold us for falling asleep during classes the next day."

"And yet, we both received excellent marks," Christina said proudly. "Then it's settled. You'll stay with us for now. We can help you find a job, if you want-"

"Do you know how to cook?" Bernadette suddenly asked.

Both Lilah and Christina turned to her. "Well enough, I suppose," Lilah replied. "I learned a bit beyond the basics at the orphanage and helped Mrs Blake at the Stanley's once in a while. Why, do you know of a cooking job?"

Bernadette nodded. "My great-aunt lives in Texas. She's the cook for a family out there, but she's retiring. I got a letter from her two days ago, suggesting I come out and take over the position. If she'd asked a few weeks ago, I might have said yes, but..." She gave Christina a secret smile. "Harold proposed last week."

Christina leapt to her feet. "Last week? Why didn't you say something sooner?"

"Well, because I told him I had to think it over. But I've done my thinking and I'm going to say yes. Which means I won't be going to Texas." She looked at Lilah. "It also means there's a job available if you want it."

A job in Texas? As a cook? Lilah leaned back into the sofa cushion. Could she possibly do it? "But, surely, I can't just show up if they're expecting you."

"I'll write a letter to explain everything. You can take it with you." Bernadette reached over and patted her leg. "Think about it."

Thinking about it was all Lilah did throughout the night as she lay next to Christina, listening to her friend's familiar, steady breathing. Just how far away was Texas? A thousand miles? Closer to two thousand? She couldn't imagine it being anything like Ohio or Illinois. Hot, arid, wide open, more wild, and certainly more dangerous. It all seemed impossible. She could

never travel so far and just hope the family in question would hire her, despite Bernadette's promised letter. She could end up stuck in Texas with nothing. Her savings, which suddenly seemed so meager, would dry up in no time. It was impossible.

And yet...

One of the first books she'd borrowed from Mr Stanley had been an adventure story about a cowboy and his heroics protecting the girl he loved from bandits. For a few nights, her dreams had been filled with images of vast lands, horses and cattle, quaint towns, and a handsome cowboy of her very own. Though it was unlikely she'd encounter anyone like the hero from those pages, she remembered the quivers of excitement shooting through her when she'd finished the story. Even now, she felt a stirring of the same excitement, coupled with anxiety at the prospect of so many unknowns.

Impossible.