

1 THE CHRISTMAS CHILD

2  
3 By Darlene Franklin

4  
5 *Thus saith the LORD; A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel*  
6 *weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not. Thus*  
7 *saith the LORD; Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be*  
8 *rewarded, saith the LORD; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy.*

9 Jeremiah 31:15-16

10  
11 CHAPTER ONE

12  
13 Nanepaushat, Rhode Island (near Pawtucket)  
14 Saturday, November 30, 1878

15  
16 *Tap, tap, tap.* Eliza Lambert snapped to attention at the sound of hammer and nail, only faintly  
17 audible over the rhythm of the cotton machines.

18 All around her women, Adelaide Brewer and Samantha Cole among them, had heard the  
19 same noise. Mr. Orson Sr. wouldn't forgive them quitting their shift half a second early, so Eliza  
20 imagined the possibilities in her mind as she went through her final repetitions at the spinner.

21 What would the theme of the 1878 Nanepaushat Cotton Mills Christmas Masquerade be?  
22 The festivities had started before the War as a sales gimmick to get people to buy more cotton in  
23 the winter. Now it had become a highlight of the Christmas season.

24 When the final bell sounded and the machines ceased, bells jingled throughout the hall.  
25 Preston Marshall, the shift supervisor, stood on the mezzanine. Even at this distance, Eliza could  
26 see the merriment in his face.

27 Adelaide and Samantha joined Eliza. Last year, they'd done everything together. Walked  
28 to the mill together, worked together, work together, eaten together and celebrated together.  
29 There'd four of them, Eliza, Adelaide, Samantha, and Eliza's cousin, Marina Dowd.

30 When scandal had struck not quite a year ago, Marina had dropped from sight. The  
31 remaining three friends now worked in separate departments. They headed to a spot below the  
32 mezzanine.

33 God willing, no cloud would darken this year's celebration.

34 Misters Orson, Junior and Senior, had joined Preston on the mezzanine. Mr. Orson Sr.  
35 began the announcements. "It is time to announce the twenty-fifth annual Nanepaushat Cotton  
36 Mill Christmas Masquerade. We've had some wonderfully memorable masquerades in the past.  
37 I will never forget the year we saw three ships come sailing in..."

38 Chuckles and nods swept through the room at the mention of the nautical-themed  
39 masquerade based on the ancient Christmas carol five years ago.

40 "Although some of you liked to deck the halls as the English do." Another memorable  
41 masquerade. Eliza noticed Mr. Orson had avoided any mention of the previous year.

42 "Each year, we announce the theme to our employees first. Without you, we would have  
43 no cotton to sell to people who want to make costumes." Mr. Orson's chest swelled with pride as  
44 he made the familiar speech. "When you spread word about the masquerade, you spread  
45 goodwill during the Christmas season. When you encourage people to buy our cotton, you not

46 only oil the wheels of progress in Nanepaushat but bring the light of the Christ child to the  
47 world.”

48 Eliza pinched herself to keep from laughing. Mr. Orson made it sound as if it were  
49 people’s Christian duty to buy cotton and attend the masquerade, not just goo`d, old fashioned  
50 fun.

51 “Mr. Marshall will explain the rules and regulations.”

52 Preston Marshall stepped forward. “I’ll keep these short, I promise. I know you all have  
53 homes to return to.” Preston flashed his beautiful white teeth while he explained the rules. They  
54 boiled down to the fact that employees could attend—in fact, were encouraged to—but they  
55 couldn’t enter the costume contest. “Strict adherence to the rules should assure a smooth and  
56 pleasurable masquerade.”

57 After Preston presented the rules, Mr. Orson Jr. came forward. Discontented silence fell  
58 across the room. The employees might not be fond of the young owner, but they showed him  
59 respect. It fell to him to announce the theme.

60 The junior Mr. Orson stepped forward and paused, letting the anticipation swell. “This  
61 year we decided simplest is best. We want you to draw your inspiration from the Bible itself.  
62 Choose characters who are mentioned by name or occupation, or choose anyone your  
63 imagination places on the scene in Bethlehem.”

64 Eliza wondered if the Bible theme was meant to put a spiritual spin on an event which  
65 had fallen into disrepute in recent years. She liked the idea, though. She knew one thing for  
66 certain: She didn’t want to be young Mary, aged Anna, or any of the women mentioned by name.

67 The senior Mr. Orson wrapped up the presentation and the workers filtered out. Samantha  
68 and Adelaide buzzed about shepherdess costumes. “There were shepherdesses in the Bible,”  
69 Adelaide said.

70 “Look at Rachel,” Samantha added.

71 In a sing-songy voice, Eliza said, “Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep and doesn’t know  
72 where to find them.”

73 “Leave them alone, and they’ll come home, wagging their tails behind them.” A deep  
74 masculine voice thundered.

75 Eliza turned to find Preston behind them.

76 “Are you planning to dress as shepherdesses, then, ladies?” Though he’d addressed  
77 them, his focus was on Eliza. “My friends are. I’m not sure. I’ll think of something.”

78 “I’m sure It’ll be intriguing, as long as you use Nanepaushat cotton.” Preston winked,  
79 then cleared his throat. “May I escort you ladies home?”

80 Samantha and Adelaide exchanged looks. Samantha said, “We were going shopping  
81 tonight, but I’m sure Eliza would welcome an escort.”

82 Eliza’s cheeks flamed. She didn’t want her friends playing matchmaker between her, a  
83 spinner, and their supervisor. Preston was a man of sterling character, but last Christmas had  
84 proved how dangerous factory romances could be.

85 “Is that acceptable with you, Miss Lambert?” Preston asked, brown eyes dancing.

86 All her good intentions fell aside when he looked at her like that. “I would welcome your  
87 company.” Eliza winced at her enthusiastic acceptance.

88 A smile passed across Preston’s face. Had he read her mind? He was charming, generous,  
89 fair—and single. Half the women of Nanepaushat had set their caps for the young manager. But  
90 he’d singled out Eliza.

91 And that was the problem. That way lay danger.

92

~

93 Delight and debate, joy and fear sped across Eliza's face. Why was he drawn to the one woman  
94 who had refused to pay him attention? Because he liked a challenge? Because it was safe?

95 "What do you think about this year's masquerade theme?" he asked.

96 This time her smile gained sincerity. "Delightful. Challenging. Safe." She snuck a glance  
97 at him, laughter in her eyes.

98 "Challenging?" He walked with Eliza to the door. "The characters are familiar to all of  
99 us."

100 Eliza waited until they left'd the factory floor to put on her coat. The machines kept the  
101 rooms oven-hot even in cold December. Preston held the red serge coat as she slipped her arms  
102 into the sleeves.

103 "That is the challenge." Eliza wrapped a scarf around her neck. "I don't want to be  
104 immediately recognized."

105 "Of course not." Eliza's independent spirit was part of her attraction. "I am sure you will  
106 come up with a unique and intriguing costume." He led her along the compact dirt road to town.  
107 "One to keep our minds on the true meaning of Christmas and put the ugliness from last year  
108 behind us."

109 Eliza made a scoffing noise.

110 "Don't be so quick to laugh." At times, Preston felt a struggle between his responsibility  
111 to his employer and his own opinions. "I want the theme to glorify God and turn the minds of  
112 employees and townsfolk alike toward Him."

113 Eliza glanced up at him. Her small stature was misleading. She'd be strong to manage  
114 the Mule Spinner, and her smaller fingers did fine work better than his pudgy digits.

115 She tucked her brunette braid under her hat. She kept her thick dark hair in a sensible  
116 braid during work hours. He much preferred the style she'd worn at last year's masquerade,  
117 when she'd dressed in a plain black dress like Queen Victoria with mother of pearl combs  
118 holding the sides, and the braid wrapped in a bun at the back of her head.

119 He'd noticed the elaborate loops when he'd enjoyed a single dance with Eliza. Woody,  
120 the younger Mr. Orson, had danced away the night with young Marina Dowd. Preston flinched at  
121 the memory. "Mr. Orson desires an uneventful masquerade this year."

122 "I'm sure you have the best of intentions, Mr. Marshall. I only wish Mr. Orson would  
123 remember charity begins at home." Her eyes widened and she clamped her lips shut.

124 He wasn't offended. "As in caring for widows and orphans and the other needy among  
125 us?"

126 Red flamed her cheeks. "Yes."

127 They walked a block in silence. Most of the homes in this part of town belonged to  
128 people who worked for the factory. They enjoyed a moderate income, even if it took several  
129 family members to accumulate it. As for the widows and orphans in the community, those left  
130 destitute by accident or by death—many were not as fortunate. He paused in front of an empty  
131 lot. "Mr. Orson provides for workers' families when there is a need."

132 Eliza sighed. Preston counted down how long it would take before she spoke her mind.  
133 Ten, nine, eight—

134 "The fund doesn't provide for everyone, sir."

135 He could guess whom she referred to—the orphan who wasn't an orphan. He turned a  
136 sideways glance in her direction. "You were good friends with Marina Dowd. Cousins, in fact, if

137 I remember correctly.” He spoke aloud the name which had only been whispered in secret over  
138 the past year.

139 She tensed briefly, then relaxed. “Yes, Marina is both my cousin and my friend.” Her  
140 chin went up. “As far as I’m concerned, she has handled the situation with grace and courage.  
141 Her greatest sin was having too big a heart. She didn’t see him as the boss’s son but as a hurting  
142 man in need of comfort.”

143 Preston could only nod. “There is another side. The mill’s reputation is important. If the  
144 mill closes, a lot of people in Nanepaushat will lose their jobs. Also, as long as the mill remains  
145 open, I’m concerned about the safety and the reputation of the woman who work there now. We  
146 have to adhere to strict rules.” He scowled as a thought struck him. “In fact, the next time I walk  
147 you home, your friends should accompany us. I’m almost surprised you allowed me to escort  
148 you home alone.”

149 She glanced up at him. A smidgeon of dissatisfaction appeared on her face. “That’s not a  
150 bad idea. I was going to say I believe I can trust you. But—”

151 “Miss Dowd thought she could trust the owner’s son.” Preston slowed his pace, in no  
152 hurry to end this conversation. “I will admit I had hoped to have a few minutes with you alone. I  
153 wanted to inquire as to the situation Miss Dowd—and the babe—find themselves in. Are they  
154 provided for?”

155 Tears sprang to Eliza’s eyes. “They have food and shelter and love, but outside of her  
156 home, she might as well wear a Scarlet A. I’m afraid the child will have a hard life.”

157 Preston couldn’t disagree.

158 “Marina adores the baby, in spite of everything, and her family is wonderful. But others  
159 aren’t so forgiving.”

160 Eliza stopped speaking long enough that Preston wondered if she regretted her honesty.  
161 Eventually she spoke again. “Are you asking out of your sense of Christian charity? Or on behalf  
162 of someone else?”

163 Preston shuffled uneasily. “Both. Mr. Orson Sr. asked me to check into the  
164 circumstances. I believe he wants to help.”

165 “I don’t know if my cousin would accept help from anyone named Orson.” Eliza  
166 harrumphed. “Shall we continue our walk? If we tarry much longer, as you said, people might  
167 talk.” She tilted her chin upward and took a few steps.

168 Preston caught up with her and returned to more pleasant topics. “We’re having a fine  
169 winter so far, don’t you think?”

170 She looked at him with laughter in her eyes. “A very fine winter, Mr. Marshall. The  
171 weather is just cold enough to frost the windows but not cold enough to freeze fingers and toes.  
172 Although for myself, I would love snow for Christmas.”

173 “As long as it doesn’t fall on the night of the masquerade,” Preston said.

174 “True.” They exchanged pleasantries on their way back to the boardinghouse. After  
175 Preston left Eliza, he walked thoughtfully on his return to the mill. It was always a pleasure to  
176 spend time with Miss Lambert, even if he was acting on his boss’s behalf.

177

178  
179  
180

## CHAPTER TWO

181  
182 “Eliza, how did things go with your young man?” Mrs. Chapman, the owner of the  
183 boardinghouse where Eliza lived, was wearing her usual sparkling white apron with frills around  
184 the straps and waistband which looked at odds with dusty brown cloth underneath it.

185 Eliza hurried up the stairs, tossing words behind her. “He’s not my young man.” Not after  
186 the way she’d blabbered to him today. She only hoped she hadn’t done harm to Marina or the  
187 baby by her idle chatter. In his heart Preston meant well, but he reported to the Orsons. And she  
188 didn’t trust the Orsons farther than she could toss a rope.

189 “Supper’s in ten minutes,” Mrs. Chapman called after her.

190 “I’ll be down.” Eliza charged into the room she shared with Samantha and Adelaide. Oh,  
191 how important they’d felt, when the four friends had moved into the boardinghouse together  
192 after they’d started working at the cotton mill. They’d rented two adjoining rooms, but since  
193 Marina’s departure, Eliza had moved in with their friends.

194 Two heads popped up when she walked through the door. “That took a little longer than I  
195 expected.” Adelaide sat by the window, her feet on a footstool and a pillow at her back to ease  
196 the pain of the day’s work.

197 “Tell us all about it.” Samantha’s eyes sparkled. “He’s taking quite an interest in you.”

198 “Best be careful, is what I say,” Adelaide said.

199 “I know.” Eliza changed her sweaty, cotton-dust coated dress for a more comfortable one  
200 for the remainder of the evening. “He asked about Marina. I don’t know if he wants to help, or if  
201 he’s nosing around for Mr. Orson.”

202 “Mr. Orson.” Adelaide scoffed. “He doesn’t want to even acknowledge his grandchild.”

203 Eliza wasn’t so sure. Family feeling could be a powerful thing.

204 “Do you think we should tell Marina about it, when we see her on Saturday?” Samantha  
205 had made a habit of visiting Marina at least once a month, which gladdened Eliza’s heart. The  
206 two-three hour walk consumed a lot of their free work time from early closing on Saturday to  
207 Sunday evening, but Eliza had dedicated herself to helping her cousin.

208 “I’m not sure if that’s a good idea,” Adelaide said.

209 Eliza had no idea what they should do.

210 “Supper’s ready.” Mrs. Chapman’s voice called up the stairs.

211 “Coming.” The three girls headed down. Any who came late for supper wouldn’t repeat  
212 that mistake.

213 The upcoming masquerade dominated the supper conversation.

214 “The first Christmas.” Mr. Norris was an Englishman staying at the boardinghouse until  
215 his family joined him in Rhode Island. “How very quaint.”

216 “Anything’s an improvement over last year,” said Mrs. West, the boardinghouse’s  
217 busybody who squeaked by on mostly on Mrs. Chapman’s charity. Her lack of wealth didn’t stop  
218 her from acting superior.

219 Mrs. Chapman tsk-tsked. “There’ll be none of that here, Mrs. West, as I’ve said before.  
220 We aim to speak the truth in love in this house.”

221 How Eliza loved her landlady.

222 “Tell me more about the Masquerade,” Mrs. Chapman said. “Have you girls decided  
223 what your costumes will be?”

224 “We’re not supposed to tell,” Samantha said.  
225 “Baa, baa.” Eliza teased.  
226 “Shepherdesses?” Mrs. Chapman’s smile was wide. “What a lovely idea.”  
227 Mr. Norris looked puzzled. “I thought the shepherds who came to the stable were men.”  
228 “Maybe so, maybe not,” Adelaide said. “But the Bible does talk about women taking care  
229 of sheep. Rachel was tending sheep when Jacob met her, and it was love at first sight.” She  
230 blushed a pretty shade of pink.  
231 “Will you be going as a shepherdess as well, Miss Lampert?” Mrs. West asked.  
232 “I don’t think so.” Eliza’s sliver of an idea was too new to mention.  
233 Adelaide helped herself to more mashed potatoes. “You’d best decide soon, or else you’ll  
234 end up concocting something out of the leftovers and scrap pieces,” Adelaide warned.  
235 After dinner, Eliza opened her Bible to the New Testament and asked God to direct her  
236 reading. She wanted to wear something unique, fun, maybe even—thought provoking. Female  
237 shepherds weren’t expected, of course, but she wanted something no one else would think of  
238 doing. A costume that would allow her imagination to run free with the mask. Maybe even a  
239 costume that would allow her to hide her identity?  
240 Eliza gave passing thought to the women mentioned by name in Jesus’ genealogy. But  
241 she didn’t want to identify with Tamar, Rahab, or even Bathsheba. She’d rather avoid their  
242 mistakes. Ruth, perhaps? She tucked the idea away.  
243 Women had played an integral role in God’s work from the beginning, but so many went  
244 unnamed. And in the Gospels, it seemed like half the women were named Mary.  
245 After devoting her evening to reading the material in Matthew and Luke, the familiar  
246 names swam before her eyes. In addition to Jesus’ ancestors, there were Mary, Elizabeth, Anna,  
247 and somewhere she’d heard that the name of Mary’s mother was Anne.  
248 If Eliza wanted to do something unexpected, she’d have to dig beyond the obvious. It was  
249 hard to concentrate with Samantha and Adelaide planning their shepherdess costumes.  
250 “Maybe we can buy enough material on sale to make an entire layette for Marina’s  
251 baby,” Samantha said.  
252 “Be careful.” Adelaide looked up from her costume sketch. “If we buy too much, Mr.  
253 Orson will comment on it.”  
254 “If we all buy a little extra, no one will notice. I like it.” Eliza set aside her Bible, still  
255 undecided. “Tomorrow will come bright and early.” She shared her bed with Adelaide, who fell  
256 asleep as soon as they blew the light out.  
257 Now that the time had come to sleep, Preston snuck back into Eliza’s thoughts. If only he  
258 weren’t so handsome. So tall. So merry. If only he didn’t seem so interested in her. A year ago,  
259 the four friends had been all atwitter about the owner’s son’s interest in Marina—and look what  
260 happened.  
261 Eliza liked to think she would never follow in her cousin’s footsteps. But she suspected  
262 many women might in the right circumstances. That’s why society set so many hedges around  
263 proper behavior between men and women.  
264 Yes, ma’am, any future dealings with Preston Marshall must be chaperoned.  
265 Because Eliza liked the young foreman entirely too much.  
266 ~  
267 Preston entered the mill well before the first shift. He liked to walk among the silent looms, to  
268 watch the dust motes float in whatever light was available. The white cotton lay folded like a  
269 blank canvas, awaiting the palette of the dying vats.

270 As Preston climbed the stairs, he noticed one step was loose. A red thread had been  
271 wrapped around the handrail to alert people of of the danger. He made a mental note to make the  
272 repair before the end of the shift. Not that anyone ever came up those stairs except himself and  
273 the Orsons.

274 He would take advantage of the quiet to work on designs for the new year. Few besides  
275 the Orsons knew he designed many of the patterns that showed up on the bolts that went for sale  
276 on store shelves, and he liked it that way. A week had passed since they'd announced their plans  
277 for this year's masquerade. He'd finished his Christmas design, miniature nativities with a star  
278 and stable against different base colors--royal blue, red, brown, and green. Mr. Orson constantly  
279 reminded him to keep the designs simple. The more intricate the design, the higher the  
280 production cost. There was a fine line between cost and price.

281 When he reached the office, Preston studied the design, picturing Eliza wearing it in dark  
282 red. She would shine like the star of Bethlehem. To his eyes, she sparkled more brightly than  
283 anyone around her.

284 If only she returned his affection. The problem was, she didn't entirely trust him, and he  
285 couldn't blame her. If only she didn't work at the mill. If only he weren't the foreman.

286 Someone knocked on his door. Who could be here this early? "Come in."

287 "It's only me." Woodrow Orson, Jr., known as Woody to Preston and a few others,  
288 crossed his threshold. "You're here bright and early. Haven't you every heard that all work and  
289 no play makes Jack a dull boy?"

290 "Never heard a boss complain his employees work too hard."

291 "Right, then." Woody sat in a chair backwards. "I am paying for my crimes, but you  
292 have no reason to be here so early."

293 Preston hadn't decided whether Woody'd had a true change of heart, or if all this good  
294 behavior were only a façade to get back into his father's good graces. He prayed it was the  
295 former and feared it was the latter.

296 "I saw you walking home with Miss Lambert the other night." Woody focused on the  
297 floor, careful not to meet Preston's eyes. "Did she say anything about—her?" There was no need  
298 to say the name. *Marina*.

299 Preston closed his eyes. Mr. Orson Sr. had given Preston two basic directions concerning  
300 Marina Dowdy: find out all he could, and don't say a word of it to Woody. "You know I can't  
301 tell you."

302 "Can't—or won't?" Woody asked. "I recognize my father's interference."

303 Mr. Orson Sr. had nothing to do with Preston's interest in Eliza, but he could easily snap  
304 the fragile thread that connected them. After a pause, he said, "It all comes to the same thing."

305 Woody huffed and pulled a flask from his side pocket.

306 "If your father finds you drunk—"

307 "Not to worry. No one will smell anything on my breath, and I'm not drunk. Not yet."

308 Woody's speech thickened as if that might change. He stood and walked carefully to the door.

309 Preston held back the warning about the loose stair. Woody had tied the red thread  
310 around the railing himself. After Woody walked out, Preston tapped his pencil against his desk.  
311 Would the friendship between them would ever return to the ease of a year ago? He'd begun to  
312 doubt it.

313 The morning shift would arrive in a few minutes. Preston grabbed a hammer and nail to  
314 fix the step.

315 A scream filled the silence.

316           “Woody!” Preston dashed to the stairs and saw the body lying on the floor where he had  
317 fallen. He went down the stairs two at a time, hammer still in hand.

318           Woody’s eyes focused on Preston, and his mouth opened and shut. He lifted his head.

319           “Lie still,” Preston said. “Can you move at all?” *God, help.*

320           “I don’t know.” Woody stared at his feet, as if willing them to move. T and herhey didn’t.  
321 Arms, the same thing. “Give me a few minutes.”

322           The mill door opened. Preston glanced up to see if someone had arrived who could go for  
323 the doctor. Eliza and her friends stepped in as if in response to his prayer. “Miss Lambert, come  
324 here please.”

325           Her head snapped up and she headed across the factory floor in his direction. Her stance  
326 stiffened as she took in the prone body on the floor. She looked at Woody, who was groaning,  
327 then at Preston. Color drained from her face.

328           “Miss Lambert, please fetch the doctor. Tell him”—he looked at Woody, who was  
329 breathing heavily, and gauged his words—“there’s been a serious fall.”

330           “Right away, sir.” Eliza left without saying another word.

331           Eliza’s friends headed in his direction, but he waved them away. It was best to keep quiet  
332 until they decided what to do.

333           Preston wasn’t sure what to do next. A part of him wanted to move Woody out of sight  
334 from arriving mill workers, but who knew what kind of injuries the man had sustained from the  
335 fall?

336           One of the machine operators arrived, and Preston sent him for Mr. Orson Sr. Most  
337 Saturdays, the owner didn’t come into the mill until later. While they waited, Preston discussed  
338 the situation with the machine supervisors. They decided to postpone the start of work. Mr.  
339 Orson shouldn’t object to the delay when his son’s health was at risk.

340           While they waited, Preston stayed at Woody’s side. When he tried to speak, Preston said,  
341 “Save your energy. The doctor’s coming.”

342           “Get Marina. Must speak with Marina.” Woody’s voice was weak. He stopped speaking  
343 and closed his eyes.

344           Alarmed, Preston leaned in close and was relieved to see his friend’s chest rising and  
345 falling.

346           Eliza arrived with the doctor at the same time as Mr. Orson. The owner dropped to his  
347 knees and took his son’s hand in his. “You’ll be all right, son.”

348           At the sound of his father’s voice, Woody’s eyes opened. “I’m sorry, Father. For  
349 everything.”

350           Mr. Orson leaned closer and took his son’s hand. “Don’t talk.” His voice shook. “Just be  
351 still and let the doctor look at you.”

352           An almost imperceptible shake of the doctor’s head suggested it wouldn’t make a  
353 difference whether Woody spoke or not. Preston pushed his own emotion away and tried to think  
354 clearly. Woody should have a chance to speak his last words. Preston rested a hand on Mr.  
355 Orson’s back and focused on Woody. “What can I do?”

356           Woody’s eyes swung around wildly, unfocused. “Where is she?”

357           Instinctively Preston looked at Eliza, who was standing behind the huddled men. He  
358 gestured her closer.

359           “How can I help?” she whispered.

360           “Talk to him.”

361           “I’ll try.” She knelt by Woody. “It’s Eliza Lambert, Mr. Orson. Marina’s cousin.”



362           “Tell her I’m sorry.” His eyes glazed over and he sobbed. “Tell my son his father loved  
363 him.”  
364           After spending that final effort, Woody closed his eyes and died.

365  
366  
367  
368  
369  
370  
371  
372  
373  
374  
375  
376  
377  
378  
379  
380  
381  
382  
383  
384  
385  
386  
387  
388  
389  
390  
391  
392  
393  
394  
395  
396  
397  
398  
399  
400  
401  
402  
403  
404  
405  
406  
407  
408  
409

### CHAPTER THREE

Eliza had rarely heard a grown man cry. Now she'd shed tears beside three men as they watched a young man died, and she knew she'd changed.

Strange that she, the lone female who'd witnessed Woody's death, hadn't broken down when he'd drawn his final breath. The doctor placed a light hand on his forehead. "It's always a shame to lose one so young."

Mr. Orson's tears—sincere if brief—slowed. "I'll expect a full accounting of this accident, Mr. Marshall."

Preston brought his tears under control. "Yes, sir." He paused. "Shall we close the mill for the day, sir?"

Mr. Orson hesitated just a beat. "Yes. Tell everyone to come to work an hour early on Monday."

Preston directed the workers to leave by the back door. Eliza exited with them. Since she'd witnessed the accident, the other workers who'd arrived after herself and her roommates, barraged her with questions. What had happened? Was Mr. Orson Jr. dead? Was it true he spoke to her before he died?

Whispers circled around and came back to her distorted. About a mile away from the mill, at the deserted stretch of road where she and Preston had spoken the other day, she halted and whistled—a handy skill she'd acquired from her brother.

Using the voice she'd perfected in taking care of five younger siblings, she said, "Mr. Orson died from an accident. No, I don't know what kind of accident. And I have nothing else to say, so don't ask."

They might not ask, but they would speculate, and that might be about as bad. But she didn't want to spread rumors. Besides, Woody's words were meant for Marina alone.

Today Eliza would have welcomed Preston's company. No would have pestered her if he were around. But he would have his hands full today without worrying about her.

Eliza pondered the day's events. What would Marina say when she learned Woody's last thoughts had been of her? More importantly, what would she think when she found out he was dead? As soon as Eliza arrived at the boardinghouse, she packed a valise. "I'm leaving right away. Marina should hear about what happened from me, not from someone else."

"Give me a minute, and I'll come with you," Samantha said.

Eliza shook her head. "It's best if I go alone. Maybe I can get away without someone guessing where I'm headed."

Their families lived in about five miles away, a walk that took about an hour and a half. The straightest route ran past the mill. After an internal debate, she settled on that route. Going the long way around would add an extra half-hour of travel time.

Eliza had hoped to pass by the mill unobserved, but before she reached the mill, she ran into Preston. He saw her valise and traveling cloak. "You're going to Newton."

She didn't deny it.

He pulled off his hat and twisted it in his hands. "May I accompany you? If we go by carriage, we'll arrive much more quickly."

She didn't need to think long. "That's not a good idea, Mr. Marshall."

410 "I might have expected you'd feel that way." He shook his head. "Would you be willing  
411 to travel with me if we had a chaperone? I'm sure the preacher's wife would come."

412 "That won't be necessary." Eliza couldn't stop the smile from forming on her lips." I am  
413 eager to be on my way. My cousin should hear the news from me."

414 Preston relaxed. "Why don't you wait by the trees? The sunshine should keep you warm.  
415 I'll be back in fifteen minutes."

416 She watched him rush away, and thought about walking ahead on her own. But he would  
417 catch up with her, and it would be churlish to ignore his request. She headed for the towering  
418 pines, grateful no snow weighted down the branches. It felt strange to be still. She spent all day,  
419 every day, bent over a machine. When she visited home, she walked without stopping, eager to  
420 see her family. Even when she'd a chance to relax, she always had something in her hands to  
421 keep her busy.

422 Eliza wasn't a standing- still kind of person. It gave her too much time to think. To dream  
423 about Preston Marshall, to debate his interest in her. Yes, he'd offered her a ride today, but Mr.  
424 Orson had probably sent him to speak with Marina.

425 Preston returned within fifteen minutes. His black brougham was fancier than anything  
426 her family had ever owned. He helped her onto the seat. She'dn't realized how it would feel for  
427 those strong arms to lift her. She couldn't help but think about ow delightful it would be to feel  
428 those arms around her again at this year's Masquerade.

429 She jerked her thoughts away from that train of thought. She almost wished someone  
430 else, anyone else, were travelling with her. he wouldn't be tempted to thoughts of intemperance  
431 beside them.

432 The well-padded seats softened the worst bumps. A body accustomed to riding in this  
433 kind of comfort might forget about uncomfortable inconveniences like morality.

434 Preston might intend the joint journey only as a matter of convenience, perhaps even as  
435 an opportunity to be introduced to Marina's family, to convey his sympathy. But as certainly as  
436 they traveled side by side in a brougham, neighbors would start to picture the two of them as a  
437 couple.

438 The thought both excited and frightened Eliza.

439

~

440 Every few minutes, Preston allowed his attention to wander from the road long enough to glance  
441 at Eliza. He'd been looking for an excuse ride with her for a long time. He'd never imagined nor  
442 hoped for the circumstances that had led to this.

443 It was hard to believe so much strength lay in such a tiny body. He recalled the fit of her  
444 waist when he lifted her into the carriage, how light she'd felt in his arms, the pretty pink on her  
445 cheeks that told her she'd enjoyed the contact as well.

446 Perhaps the sad news they carried would draw attention away from the fact Eliza had  
447 ridden from Nanepaushat in his company. With the open sides, everything they did was in full  
448 view. No one could accuse them of hiding. "Tell me about your family."

449 "I'm the eldest of six children. The only boy is next to the youngest. His name is  
450 Horace." She smiled fondly.

451 All those brothers and sisters. Did she realize how lucky she was to have such a large  
452 family? "They sound like quite a family," he said.

453 "I love them all. I don't know little Debbie as well as the others. She was only a few  
454 months old when I started at the mill."

455 Preston imagined many tears had accompanied that farewell. “Did they need to move out  
456 one bunny to make room for more?” he asked softly.

457 “Something like that.” Eliza smiled ruefully. “I count myself fortunate that I attended  
458 school until I turned sixteen. So many children have to go to work at a younger age.”

459 The Orsons didn’t hire as many children that other mills did, and none under the age of  
460 twelve, but even so Preston wished the children’s employment wasn’t necessary either for the  
461 mill, or for their families. “What about Marina’s family, the Dowds?” He left the question  
462 dangling.

463 Eliza paused before answering. “They have five children. Six including the baby. Right  
464 now, only her father is working, but they are talking about sending their only son to the mill.”  
465 She paused. “He’s only thirteen.”

466 They probably didn’t want any more of their daughters working at the mill.

467 “Turn right at the next road,” Eliza said before dropping back into silence.

468 A rambling farmhouse came into view. The trip had taken less time than he’d expected  
469 “Does the farm belong to your family?”

470 “It’s the Dowd house. I thought you would want to see Marina first.”

471 “Yes.” Preston’s mouth dried as the prospect of the news he bore. “Do you have any  
472 advice?”

473 “Don’t judge the Dowds. They don’t have a lot that money can buy, but they have more  
474 than enough love to go around with a pride to match. They’ll be offended if you offer them  
475 charity.”

476 His back stiffened. “It’s not charity if the money comes from the child’s father.”

477 Woody’s last request sat heavy on his heart.

478 Her look could have withered strawberries on the vine in the middle of June. “It’s a little  
479 late for that. It’s sad news you bear.”

480 Preston nodded. He stopped the team at the entrance to the farm. Now that he’d arrived,  
481 he was uncertain how to proceed. “Give me a signal if I speak amiss.”

482 Eliza shrugged, as if uncertain herself. “It can’t possibly be worse than the day Marina  
483 told them about her situation.”

484 Preston circled the carriage to lift Eliza down. He reached up toward her, and she placed  
485 her hands on his shoulders and smiled at him as he swung her to the ground. Joy rippled through  
486 his heart and wanted to burst onto his face, but he squashed the untimely merriment.

487 Is it too late to pray about the situation?” he whispered, as if the air would carry his  
488 words inside the walls.

489 “I have been, and I expect you have too,” she said. “Come. They’ll be wondering why we  
490 linger out here.”

491 Eliza took the lead and knocked on the door, twice. It opened to a smiling-faced woman  
492 whose dark hair was streaked with gray. She bore a certain look about the eyes suggesting her  
493 kinship with Eliza. “Eliza, what are you doing here on a Saturdays? And whom do you have with  
494 you?” Brown eyes studied Preston from head to toe, measuring his heart as well as the fit of his  
495 clothes.

496 “Aunt Dowd, this is Preston Marshall. He’s the shift supervisor at the mill.”

497 A sharp intake of breath greeted her words, and the smile on Mrs. Dowd’s face dimmed.

498 “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Dowd.” Preston removed his hat. “May we  
499 come in? We come with news.”

500 Her eyes narrowed, but she opened the door and led them to the sparsely furnished living  
501 room.

502 “Eliza, do I hear your voice?”

503 Marina rounded the corner and came to an abrupt stop. She stared at him for a moment.  
504 She’d changed subtly, motherhood having rounded her girlish figure.

505 “Mr. Marshall.” Her voice was stripped of life.

506 Eliza stepped forward and kissed her cousin on the cheek. “He came with me, Marina.  
507 May we take a seat?” Eliza led Preston to a faded settee.

508 Their hosts didn’t comment, obviously uncomfortable with his presence but unwilling to  
509 say anything against it. Preston was doubly glad Eliza had accompanied him. If he’d come alone,  
510 as he had been considering, he doubted he would have made it through the door.

511 Marina escaped in the direction of the kitchen. He, Eliza, and Mrs. Dowd exchanged  
512 small talk about the beautiful winter weather and the endless tasks on a farm until Marina  
513 returned with a tea tray loaded with Christmas cookies.

514 Marina served everyone and sat down. “What brings you so early today? Did something  
515 happen at the mill?”

516 Preston glanced at Eliza. Her cup was trembling where cupped it in his hand, and she set  
517 it back on the table. She looked at him, begging for his help.

518 He cleared his throat. “Unfortunately, there was an accident this morning. I’m afraid it  
519 was fatal.”

520 Marina clutched her hands over her chest. “I know many people who work at the mill.”  
521 She kept her voice steady and focused on him. “But Mr. Marshall, you didn’t come here to tell  
522 me about an accident.” Steady gray eyes so like Eliza’s refused to drop their lock on Preston’s  
523 eyes.

524 “No.” Preston swallowed but held her gaze. “Mr. Orson Jr. died from a fall down the  
525 stairs.” He didn’t mention his drunken state. “His last thoughts were of you.”

526 Marina’s laughter pealed through the room, shocking Preston in its wake.

527

528  
529  
530  
531  
532  
533  
534  
535  
536  
537  
538  
539  
540  
541  
542  
543  
544  
545  
546  
547  
548  
549  
550  
551  
552  
553  
554  
555  
556  
557  
558  
559  
560  
561  
562  
563  
564  
565  
566  
567  
568  
569  
570  
571  
572  
573

#### CHAPTER FOUR

Eliza didn't know what surprised her more, Marina's laughter or the tears that followed. A quarter of an hour had passed since Preston had announced his news. Eliza had moved next to her cousin, placing a comforting arm around her.

When Marina stopped crying, Eliza said, "I was there when Mr. Orson died. Mr. Marshall is right. He was eager to speak to you about the baby."

Marina wiped the tears from her face, but her eyes were clear. "That is hard to believe, considering I haven't heard from him since little Johnny was born" Her questioning eyes contradicted her harsh words.

Mr. Orson's had been garbled, but Eliza believed she knew what he'd said, and she'd tucked the exact words in her memory. "He said he was sorry. He also said to tell his son that he loved him."

Preston nodded, agreeing with her account.

A sheen of tears glazed over Marina's eyes, but she held herself together. "Thank you for telling me."

Preston shifted uneasily in his seat. "I won't pretend I understand what you've gone through, but Woody Orson was my friend. He didn't treat you right, but he didn't have it easy either."

Eliza's heart softened at Preston's words. He was in a difficult situation, stuck between two sides. He'd done well to make the effort to inform Marina in person. Another man might not have thought of her at all.

"May I see the baby?" Preston asked.

His request shocked Eliza. By the looks on the faces of Aunt Dowd and Marina, they were as well.

A soft wail arose in the background. "It sounds like he wants to meet you, too." Marina stood. "Can you wait a few minutes?"

Preston nodded. When Marina left the room, he turned to Eliza, "When are your parents expecting you?"

"Later this afternoon. Any other Saturday, we would both still be at work." Eliza glanced at the clock where the two hands met at the noon hour. She picked up her cup of tea. "Aunt Dowd, would you mind bringing in fresh tea? Mine has grown lukewarm."

As soon as her aunt left the room, Eliza turned to Preston. "Because it is the noon hour, my aunt might feel beholden to offer us a meal, but they ordinarily don't eat at mid-day. It would be best if we leave fairly soon."

Preston nodded. Before he could speak, Aunt Dowd returned with a steaming tea kettle. "Perhaps you would prefer a cup of coffee? Milk? We have beans and cornbread if you're hungry."

Preston glanced at Eliza, a smile filling his gaze as he shook his head. "That's not necessary, Mrs. Dowd. I wanted to pay my respects and meet the sweet young fellow before I take my leave." He glanced at Eliza. "Would you like to visit with your cousin awhile longer, or would you like a ride to your parents' house?"

She'd already considered the possibility and had decided she would rather return when Samantha and Adelaide could visit. "I'll be back later."

574 Marina entered carrying a bundle of baby, Little John's face peering at them from the  
575 blanket that covered him from head to foot. Eliza reached for him eagerly. "You sweet boy. How  
576 can you have grown so much since I saw you last week?"

577 The baby rewarded her with a broad smile.

578 "He must remember you," Preston said.

579 "I think he just likes to smile." Eliza clutched the baby tightly for a moment and then  
580 turned to Preston. "Would you like to hold him, Mr. Marshall?"

581 "Me?" The eagerness in Preston's eyes spoke more loudly than his words. Eliza showed  
582 him how to support the baby's head. Before they knew it, the baby was in his arms. For a  
583 moment little John scrunched up his face as if to cry. Preston offered a finger, which the baby  
584 grabbed. "Aren't you a fine-looking boy."

585 At the sound of Preston's deep voice, the baby smiled again. Preston responded with an  
586 answering grin. He was a natural with children. A pity a man like that didn't have a youngster of  
587 his own.

588 An image sprang to her and refused to budge. Preston, standing in a room much like this  
589 one, holding a baby. She was the only other person in the room, mending clothes while she  
590 rocked in a chair. Warmth spread into her cheeks and she returned her thoughts to the scene  
591 before her.

592 He handed the baby back to Marina. "I'm sure Mr. Orson would be agreeable to  
593 providing for the child's support."

594 The chill that descended on the room with his remark dampened the heat in Eliza's  
595 cheeks as well.

596 "We don't want his charity." The expression on Aunt Dowd's face could have stopped a  
597 thief in his tracks. "Since he was unwilling to admit his responsibility while his son was alive,  
598 why should we accept help now that he's dead?"

599 Out of the corner of her eye, Eliza saw Marina hugging her baby tightly, her expression  
600 unreadable. She might not be so quick to reject her child's rightful inheritance.

601 Eliza stood. "Mr. Marshall, I believe I am ready to go, if you don't mind. My cousin will  
602 need time to recover from the shock. Aunt Dowd, Marina, I'll be back later."

603 Preston followed her to the carriage. She could feel the eyes of the people in the Dowd  
604 household watching as he lifted her into the carriage. No one had breathed a word of suspicion  
605 while they were visiting, but the rumors would fly as soon as they left. *Eliza better watch out.*  
606 *That Mr. Marshall is cut from the same cloth as Mr. Orson Jr.*

607 "Where to now?" All business, Preston seemed unaffected by the visit.

608 She struggled to respond in kind. "Go back to the main road and head to town. My father  
609 owns a mercantile. He might not be wealthy, but he worked for himself and had a business to  
610 pass on to his son.

611 Eliza snuck short glances at Preston during the ride. Did he have any idea of the  
612 impression he'd made on the Dowd family? Had he spoken for himself, or for the company, or  
613 for both? If he were the man she thought he was, he would have to take a stand.

614

~

615 An uncomfortable silence fell between them, and Preston guessed Krystal had taken his words to  
616 Marina poorly. He would start again. "Your cousin looks well, as does the child."

617 Eliza relaxed. "God has blessed them with good health. The child entered the world with  
618 a lusty set of lungs and a full head of hair."

619           “Perhaps because it’s dark.” Preston chuckled. “Most infants I have seen have little more  
620 hair than a snowman.”

621           Eliza cocked her head at him. “You speak as though you have seen many infants, but I  
622 thought you were an only child.”

623           He shifted uncomfortably on the seat. He didn’t like to talk about his background. The  
624 Orsons knew. They’d taken in a twelve-year-old runaway and given him a job at the mill and  
625 told people he had been orphaned.

626           The truth was much sadder. He’d never known his parents. His mother had left him on  
627 the doorsteps of an orphanage as an infant. Over the years, he’d seen a steady stream of  
628 abandoned infants.

629           Marina’s son was fortunate his mother had chosen to keep him. He would know his  
630 mother’s love, and perhaps even know a few kind things about his father. Preston never told  
631 people he was a foundling, his mother likely someone much like Marina.

632           “I remember christenings at church.” A partial truth. “All those parents, promising to  
633 raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” Every time he saw the ceremony,  
634 it hurt. He cleared his throat. “We’re coming up on the town. Where are we headed?”

635           “Lambert’s Mercantile. Our family lives on the second floor,” she said. “You can pull up  
636 in front of the store.” She straightened her shoulders with pride. “People will be right pleased to  
637 see such a fancy rig. You’ll draw in business.” She giggled. “I hope you don’t mind.”

638           “Why should I? I understand the need to increase business.” Interesting, that Eliza’s  
639 father owned a store. No wonder she held her head a higher than some of the others.

640           Houses lined the street that led to the town’s center. These homes were in better condition  
641 than those near the mill. They were larger, made with sturdier material and bright with new  
642 paint. “Does your father carry material from the mill?”

643           “Of course he does. That’s why he suggested I work there. He knew they always needed  
644 new workers. He was proud when I got a job there.” A wry smile formed on her face. “I believe  
645 he hoped he might receive a discounted price because of my employment.”

646           “In that case, he was disappointed.” Preston grinned at her.

647           “Turn here,” Eliza said. “It looks as if there’s just enough space for the carriage.”

648           Preston slowed the horses to a walk. “Is there anything I should know before we go in?”

649           Eliza face tightened in concentration. “There’s no need to mention Mr. Orson’s death,  
650 unless you object to people assuming you were just driving me home.”

651           That drew a deep laugh from Preston. “Why, no, Eliza. I’ve been looking for an excuse to  
652 drive you home for some time.” He sobered quickly. “I only wish it had happened under happier  
653 circumstances.”

654           She looked like a lightning bolt had struck her. After she cleared her throat, she said, “I  
655 am honored, sir.”

656           He cupped her hand and released it just as quickly, in case anyone in the houses anyone  
657 saw the gesture.

658           She said, “Let’s go up to my family’s apartment. People at the store will spread rumors  
659 too quickly.”

660           He nodded. He had to handle the horses and carriage just so to maneuver into the empty  
661 spot. He watched Eliza from the corners of his eyes.

662           “Well done.” She brought her hands together.

663           “Thanks.” He climbed from the carriage and came to Eliza’s side. “Let me help you  
664 down, Miss Lambert.”



665           “Why, thank you, sir.” She fluttered her eyelashes.  
666           He imagined them those eyelashes in a few weeks’ time and dreamed of escorting her to  
667 the masquerade. He’d to find out her costume plans so he could plan something that coordinated  
668 with hers. He hadn’t asked yet, knowing how skittish she was about his position. He hoped  
669 against hope today would help smooth the way.  
670           He felt the eyes of Eliza’s five younger siblings fixed on him. They must be mighty  
671 curious about this stranger escorting their sister her in a carriage. He’d be careful not to give  
672 them any cause for concern.  
673           She hesitated a moment before turning around. Was she uncertain about the reception she  
674 would receive? She looked over her shoulder with a smile. “Come on in. They won’t bite. At  
675 least not hard.”  
676           He laughed and followed her inside the house. The place was on the small side, as Eliza  
677 had indicated, made doubly so by the children crowding around her. “Did you bring us candy,  
678 ‘Liza?” The littlest one asked.  
679           “Not today, Debbie.” Eliza glanced at Preston.  
680           “And who’s he?” a boy of about ten asked.  
681           “I’m a friend of your sister. My name is Preston Marshall. And you are?”  
682           The lad drew himself up to every inch of his four-feet-eight inches. “I’m Horace  
683 Lambert.”  
684           “Very glad to meet you, sir.” Preston proffered his hand. “I bet your father depends on  
685 you to keep your family safe while he’s at work.”  
686           “Yes, sir.” Horace’s chest seemed to puff to twice its size and he leaned forward. “I’d  
687 appreciate it if you’d take care of Eliza for me, since she’s over at the cotton mill with those  
688 mean people.”  
689           He fought to keep his facial muscles straight. “I’ll do my best. But I hope you don’t think  
690 I’m mean. I’m one of the bosses at the mill.”  
691           “I didn’t mean any disrespect, sir.” Horace withdrew behind Eliza’s back. She offered a  
692 smile in apology.  
693

694  
695  
696  
697

## CHAPTER FIVE

698 “Mr. Marshall is the kind man I’ve told you about,” Eliza rushed to say. “He showed me how to  
699 do my job and he always helps me when I have a problem.”

700 Mother stepped into the room. She’d been lurking in the kitchen, where she could hear  
701 every word of the conversation. She hugged Eliza. “Welcome home, dear. What a surprise.”

702 After she fussed over her daughter, she acknowledged their guest. “And you are Mr.  
703 Marshall, the supervisor at the mill? Eliza has told us how kind you were to her when she first  
704 began work.”

705 Eliza had revealed a little bit more than she meant to about her feelings for the young  
706 supervisor, how helpful he’d been, how handsome and kind. Mother had the good sense not to  
707 say anything more. “What brings you to our home today?”

708 Preston took her mother’s hand and brought it to his lips, creating a gaggle of giggles  
709 among the children. “I had hoped to meet you under better circumstances, Mrs. Lampert. I can’t  
710 begin to tell you what a tremendous asset your daughter is to the mill and how much I enjoy her  
711 company.”

712 Eliza blinked twice, eyelids flapping against her irises. What was he saying? She’d asked  
713 him not to talk about the accident. She’d wanted to break the news herself.

714 “But unfortunate news brings me to your town today.” He lowered his voice. “Mr. Orson  
715 Jr. had a fatal accident this morning.”

716 Understanding dawned on her mother’s face.

717 Eliza spoke before Preston could. “We stopped by the Dowd’s home first, to tell Marina  
718 in person.”

719 Mother looked at her sharply, as if challenging her for saying her name aloud. Eliza  
720 refused to be intimidated. “I was there when Mr. Orson died. He spoke kindly of Marina at the  
721 end.”

722 Mother looked Preston up and down. “And what say you of his behavior at last year’s  
723 masquerade?”

724 “Mother, please,” Eliza said.

725 “It was a shameful act on the part of all concerned.” Preston seemed unruffled by the  
726 question. “Even though Woody was a friend of mine, and they say it’s wrong to speak ill of the  
727 dead, I believe it was unfair that Miss Dowd was forced to bear the weight of their sins by  
728 herself. I like to think Woody meant well. He let his heart speak before his head.”

729 *They were alike that way.* Eliza didn’t say so aloud.

730 Satisfied, Mother steered the conversation away from that uncomfortable topic. The noon  
731 hour came and went, which brought up a question. When did he plan to return to Nanepausht?  
732 Eliza hoped he would be gone before Samantha and Adelaide arrived. She’d rather not witness  
733 the looks her friends would exchange upon seeing him sitting in her family’s living room.

734 Preston seemed perfectly content, listening to Horace’s jokes and admiring the doo-dads  
735 her sisters brought for his admiration. He listened to Debbie’s tale of her missing tooth and the  
736 penny she’d found under her pillow as if he’d never heard tell of the tooth fairy or the fantasies a  
737 six-year-old could imagine before. Eliza had never seen him so relaxed.

738           The longer he stayed, the more gossip would spread. When Horace invited him to play a  
739 game of marbles, Eliza interrupted. “Mr. Marshall has other responsibilities, Horace. He can’t  
740 stay.”

741           “Aw, Sis.” But Horace pocketed his marbles and backed away.

742           Preston looked at Eliza with something unreadable in his eyes before he spoke. “If I  
743 didn’t know better, I would think you were trying to get rid of me. Will you be coming back to  
744 Nanepaushat with me?”

745           Surely she had imagined the hope in his voice. He couldn’t want her company on the  
746 return trip—could he? She’d enjoyed the day with him. He’d spoken with sensitivity in a  
747 difficult situation and played with children naturally, unlike many bachelors. But no matter how  
748 she’d enjoyed the day, getting closer to him was a bad idea. Management didn’t mix with  
749 employees. When they did, one of the parties was hurt, sometimes both. And that hurt didn’t have  
750 to be anything as obvious as it had been with Mr. Orson Jr. and Marina.

751           Not that Eliza would allow herself to follow her cousin’s example, with Preston Marshall  
752 or any other man. She’d rather run away from potential entanglements than to fall into  
753 temptation.

754           Of course, her caution might land her as an old maid, and she didn’t want that either.  
755 Preston was a fine man. She made a snap decision. “I will stay and spend the night with my  
756 family, but I did have something to discuss with you.”

757           Green flecks fired in his brown eyes. “And what is that, Miss Lambert?”

758           Six pairs of eyes watched her in fascination. Eliza wished she’d chosen a less public  
759 place to bring up her idea. Heat toasted her cheeks, but she stumbled ahead. “A few days ago,  
760 you asked me about my plans for the masquerade.”

761           He settled back against the chair, his arms crossed, a smile sneaking onto his face. “I am  
762 indeed curious. You have a well-earned reputation for original and imaginative costumes. Who  
763 or what will you be this year?”

764           Then and there she made her decision about her costume. “It’ll be simple, really. The  
765 poorest white cotton will be perfect for my dress.”

766           Preston lifted an eyebrow. “Mary wasn’t that poor, was she?” He shook his head. “No.  
767 You would never come as Mary. She’s too obvious.”

768           She curled a finger under her chin. “Keep guessing.”

769           “Angel white would be as sparkling as bleach can make it. Certainly not simple. A  
770 shepherdess? No, you already said you weren’t doing that.” He drummed his fingers on the arm  
771 of the chair. “Give me a hint, please.”

772           Eliza kept her gaze on the floor while she considered her answer. “She’s not named in  
773 Scripture, neither by name nor by occupation. But she probably met the wise men.”

774           “She’s got you there, mister,” Horace said. “Eliza’s the best at making puzzles no one can  
775 guess.”

776           Preston acknowledged that with a half-smile. “Someone not mentioned in scripture. The  
777 innkeeper’s wife, perhaps?”

778           She started to shake her head, but he was already shaking his. “No. She was the wife of a  
779 prosperous merchant. Besides, she probably didn’t meet the wise men. Let me think some more.”

780           He ventured a few more guesses. She especially liked his guess about a shepherd’s wife.  
781 At length, he said, “I give up. Who is it?”

782

783 When Preston admitted defeat, Eliza grinned a saucy grin that made him want to reciprocate.  
784 “I’m going as a servant girl in King Herod’s palace. I can see her bringing news about Herod’s  
785 decree to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem.” She glanced sideways at him. “She could use the  
786 help of one of Herod’s soldiers.”

787 “I never.” Mrs. Lambert interjected.

788 Preston almost jumped out of his chair in delighted surprise. “A soldier?” He straightened  
789 his shoulders, lifted his chin, and placed his right hand under the lapel of his jacket, an imitation  
790 Napoleon. Make that George Washington. “I’d love to be a soldier in your defense, and that of  
791 the other helpless infants Herod planned to have killed.” He raised his eyebrows. “Maybe we can  
792 tell the story we wish had happened. That God rescued all the little boys of Bethlehem after  
793 Joseph took Mary and Jesus to Egypt.”

794 Mrs. Lambert cleared her throat. Preston turned to address her. “If that is acceptable to  
795 you, Mrs. Lambert. You may wish to speak with your husband, of course.” He used every ounce  
796 of charm and persuasion he’d acquired under the Orsons’ tutelage.

797 Mrs. Lambert’s reserve melted away. “Very well, provided Eliza agrees.”

798 Preston turned his attention back to Eliza. “Miss Eliza, may I have the pleasure of  
799 escorting you to the masquerade?” He held his breath while she made up her mind.

800 “Go with him, ‘Liza,” Debbie said. He’s oh so nice.”

801 The little girl was a doll. Preston bet Eliza had looked a lot like her when she was that  
802 age, missing teeth and all.

803 Mrs. Lambert nodded ever so slightly but Eliza didn’t speak. An agony of eternity passed  
804 while she tapped her fingers on her cheek. Had he somehow misinterpreted her intentions?

805 When he thought he couldn’t wait a moment longer, she relented and said, “That would  
806 be acceptable, Mr. Marshall.”

807 All the penned-in worry broke into a hundred pieces of joy, and Preston grinned. “That’s  
808 wonderful. I am looking forward to spending the evening in your company.”

809 Eliza’s laughter tickled Preston’s ears long after he left their house a few minutes later.  
810 He couldn’t sit still, and the horses reacted to his uneven handling of the reins. He’d have to get  
811 himself under control before he went to work in the morning, or else the cotton wouldn’t dye  
812 evenly. Until then, he’d allow himself to daydream about his upcoming date with Eliza

813 His conscience wouldn’t leave him be. *Put God first.* Sunday’s sermon echoed through  
814 Preston’s brain, and behind that, the still, quiet voice of the Lord. Eliza or not, masquerade or  
815 every day, he’d to keep his priorities straight.

816 And to consider the loss of the friend who had been the closest thing he’d known to a  
817 brother. Oh, Woody.

818 As soon as he put away the horses, he went to the study of the tidy little house he called  
819 home. It was a cottage, just the right size for a man on his own. The mother of one of the  
820 millworkers cleaned for him. He ate simply. The house had come on a piece of land, large  
821 enough to build additions if God gave him a family.

822 His thoughts flew to Eliza joining him in the small house, but he tried to think of other  
823 things. Instead he fixed a sandwich and headed for his study. He should report to Mr. Orson  
824 about his visit to Marina, but he felt too unsettled to discuss it.

825 At least not yet. In a short period time, Preston had run the gamut of emotions, grief at  
826 Woody’s death to joy about the promise of things with Eliza. He couldn’t bear Mr. Orson’s pain,  
827 at least not right that minute. Later, he’d go see his employer. Hopefully tonight.

828 Joy and sorrow. Did life always have to be that way, the two emotions walking hand in  
829 hand through the years? Like when a new baby was born at the cost of its mother's life. When he  
830 was a child, he'd made up a story that his mother had died in giving birth to him. He preferred  
831 his dream to the ugly truth, that she'd abandoned him on the steps of the orphanage.

832 He allowed himself to bask in the joys of the day. Eliza wanted to go to the masquerade  
833 with him. He sketched a Roman uniform but realized he didn't know enough about it. He  
834 decided to read the passage about Herod and the wise men for inspiration.

835 He turned in his Bible to the gospel of Matthew. A lot of information had been packed  
836 into the short passage. Herod didn't start out planning to kill all the baby boys. He just wanted to  
837 kill the one who might be a rival someday—the boy the wise men had said was "King of the  
838 Jews." It made a kind of twisted sense, especially for a man who killed his own sons. God  
839 warned Joseph to get them out of Bethlehem as soon as possible.

840 Preston had the impression Herod's scheme had been meant to catch Jesus in a trap, one  
841 baby among many. But as he reread the passage, he realized Herod knew, or at least suspected,  
842 Jesus had escaped. They had mocked him, fooling him, and the pretender had slipped through his  
843 fingers. Angry and spiteful, he still ordered the death of all the boys under the age of two.

844 That was downright evil, like the time Pharaoh had ordered all the Hebrew boys be killed  
845 at birth.

846 Preston shut his Bible. Learning about Herod was downright disturbing, especially today  
847 after Woody's death, after meeting the fatherless baby. Where had Eliza come up with the fool  
848 idea?

849 What had Eliza said about their characters looking for a way to prevent the massacre? It  
850 didn't matter that it hadn't happened that way. He liked to think that's what he would have done.

851 The thought fell away like the last fall lead before a storm. Would he have acted to save  
852 those Bethlehem babies? Right. Like he'd done for Marina's baby? Sure, he'd urged Woody to  
853 take responsibility, but he hadn't taken any risks or done anything publicly to help the woman or  
854 the child.

855 He stared at his empty hands, as if he might see blood splatter on them.

856

857  
858  
859  
860  
861  
862  
863  
864  
865  
866  
867  
868  
869  
870  
871  
872  
873  
874  
875  
876  
877  
878  
879  
880  
881  
882  
883  
884  
885  
886  
887  
888  
889  
890  
891  
892  
893  
894  
895  
896  
897  
898  
899  
900  
901

## CHAPTER SIX

The entire mill closed for two hours the following Tuesday so that everyone could attend Mr. Orson Jr.'s funeral. The place had plunged into mourning after the death, the mezzanine swathed in black gabardine. Eliza hoped the funeral would help break the mourning that had brought the machines to a virtual halt.

In fact, Mr. Orson had postponed production of the Christmas print. If they didn't start production soon, they wouldn't be able to sell it this season. Eliza wondered what would win out, his grief or his business sense. She almost hoped he didn't order its production. It would prove he'd a heart.

*Shame on you.* Still, Eliza wondered why Mr. Orson hadn't said a single word about Marina or asked about the visit. Maybe he'd discussed it with Preston.

That was the other thing that was bothering her. Preston hadn't said one word to her beyond hello and goodbye all week. Did he regret his invitation to the masquerade?

The bell sounded, the machines stopped, and Eliza filed out with the other employees. How she wished she could go to see Marina instead. She wouldn't attend the funeral, which was sad, because he'd meant more to her than to anyone else except his father. His mother had died during his childhood.

Samantha and Adelaide joined Eliza as they made their way to the church at the center of town. "You've been quiet lately," Samantha said.

"I'm thinking about Marina. No matter how you look at it, Mr. Orson's death was a pity. He never had a chance to change."

Adelaide harrumphed.

"You have a kind heart, Eliza," Samantha said. "I'll make note of everything the preacher says so I can tell Marina about it. You do the same, so we won't miss anything."

"What a wonderful idea." Eliza was grateful for Samantha's sweet spirit.

Mandatory attendance made certain the church was packed for the funeral. Eliza, Samantha, and Adelaide found places in the second row from the back. Eliza scanned the crowd. Preston had a seat in a side pew at the front. It was probably where the pallbearers were sitting.

The melody of a hymn rang through the church, loud enough to reach to heaven.

The preacher spoke of Woodrow Orson Jr. in glowing terms, making him sound like a saint in the making.

Marina should take comfort from his confession of faith at the age of twelve. Of course later they both had sinned, and the results of that had become quite public, but as John pointed out in his epistle, a Christian who claimed to have no sin was a liar.

The preacher bragged about Mr. Orson's generosity and his faithfulness to his father. Eliza looked at the back of Mr. Orson's bowed head. She didn't know the secrets of their home, but the young man had always deferred to his father at the mill. He'd worked hard, too, harder than he cavorted about. Marina had seen that quality in him, seen it and known he would choose his father and the mill over her and the baby. And had cried bitter tears when her worst fears proved true.

Again Eliza's eyes sought out Preston. He and the owner's son had been so close. Was she making a mistake in trusting him?

902 She was glad she'd heard Mr. Orson's final words, and been able to share them with  
903 Marina. It was she who had been last in his thoughts, and not his father.

904 After a long eulogy worthy of the only child of the wealthiest man in town, the preacher  
905 got down to business—hellfire and brimstone. Gloves off, he railed against Mr. Orson Jr.'s  
906 faults, thundering against immorality and debauchery, lest anyone present follow him to an early  
907 death.

908 Every time he pounded the pulpit with the Bible, Eliza winced. Mr. Orson's death wasn't  
909 God's punishment—was it? She glanced around uneasily. Several people were nodding in  
910 agreement.

911 Poor Mr. Orson. Word by word, the preacher tore down the kindly picture he'd painted of  
912 his son, replacing it with a portrait of a sinner God had singled out for an early death. The oration  
913 might have confirmed the man's worst fears. Perhaps he felt guilty for failing his son, and his  
914 grandson. She said a prayer for the mill owner.

915 When she next searched for Preston, he'd disappeared. He must feel terrible to hear his  
916 friend so vilified.

917 On most occasions, the preacher would have ended the service with an altar call. Because  
918 of the sad occasion, he simply reminded everyone of Sunday services.

919 While the organist played "Amazing Grace," Preston reappeared with five other men and  
920 walked to the casket. Preston grabbed the front right corner. When everyone was in place, they  
921 lifted it to their shoulders. Thin strips of tears were evident on his face when he walked by  
922 Eliza's row, and she sent up another prayer for him.

923 Because of the length of the service, the workers had no time to stay for the funeral meal.  
924 Eliza and her friends walked back to the mill with the other workers. Despite the full crew, the  
925 mill felt empty and dark and sad, as if even the machines sensed their loss.

926 The mill started humming again. Several hours later, a shaft of light appeared at the door,  
927 and Eliza glanced from her work to see who'd entered. *Preston*. His name was whispered from to  
928 person until the sound reached her. He'd returned, and he looked miserable.

929 Eliza wanted to run upstairs to his office, to offer comfort, to learn the details of Mr.  
930 Orson's internment, what his tombstone looked like, and where he lay, in case Marina wanted to  
931 visit.

932 Her prayers didn't satisfy her desire for information. Perhaps he would seek to walk her  
933 home. She wondered if she should ask him. She thought she spotted cheers on his cheeks.

934 Whenever she glanced up, Preston paced the mezzanine far above the floor. *God, comfort*  
935 *him* became her constant prayer.

936 ~  
937 The day had stretched endlessly from the early gathering of the pallbearers through the lengthy  
938 service and now to a shortened shift that felt longer than a double. Although the temperature  
939 outside had dropped to the twenties, the mill felt hotter than ever, as if hell were trying to  
940 swallow them whole.

941 Preston shook away the awful thought. Woody had known the Lord, and God was  
942 merciful. Eliza's radiant face reminded him of that every time he'd seen her today. He'd looked  
943 for her several times throughout the service. She might not like it if she knew how easily he  
944 could read her thoughts from her expressions. As a motherless child, he'd acquired that skill at  
945 the same time he'd learned how to hide his inmost feelings. Then and now, he wielded humor as  
946 a weapon, covering his uneasiness in social situations.

947           That's what had drawn him to Woody. With him, Preston hadn't needed to pretend to be  
948 someone other than who he was.

949           Watching Eliza's response to the funeral sermon, passing over her face like the shadow  
950 on a sun dial, had kept him from worrying about his friend. A few times, she'd scanned the side  
951 pews. Did he dare to hope she was thinking about him? More likely, she was thinking about Mr.  
952 Orson. She was that kind of a woman.

953           The owner had roused from his grief enough to order the production of the Christmas  
954 textile. *It's what Woody would have wanted*, he'd said.

955           Preston wasn't so sure. Woody hadn't been very impressed with the design. *A little*  
956 *predictable, friend*. Woody made fun of it when he'd first seen it. *You're losing your touch*.

957           But what would Eliza think of his design? He hoped she'd like it. He might stop by the  
958 boardinghouse tonight to show it to her before production started tomorrow. At last, an excuse to  
959 visit her.

960           Even when she bent over the machine, her dress wrinkled and dirty, her face sweaty from  
961 the steamy air, he enjoyed looking at her. Dressed in her somber black dress at the funeral, her  
962 hair caught up in a simple bun, she had looked elegant and graceful.

963           *Face it, Preston. Eliza could wear a burlap sack and you would still think she was*  
964 *beautiful*.

965           He sat at his desk, deciding what to say to the employees today. They wouldn't like his  
966 decision to open the mill forty-five minutes early tomorrow, in order to begin production of the  
967 new fabric, but he would let them go early today.

968           Exactly forty-five minutes before the end of the shift, he rang the buzzer. His view from  
969 the mezzanine allowed him to watch the effect ripple across the room. The bubble of excited  
970 voices rose until it could have burst.

971           He rang the bell a second time to signal silence. The chatter came to an immediate stop,  
972 and power surged through him.

973           At the orphanage, he'd always enjoyed being the center of attention, even when his antics  
974 got him into trouble.

975           The orphanage was also the place where he'd learned to project his voice to be heard over  
976 the crowd. God had blessed him with a deep bass voice, which could be heard even by the hard  
977 of hearing.

978           He grabbed the railing and swept the crowd with his gaze, capturing their attention. "We  
979 are closing early."

980           Cheers greeted his announcement.

981           "I hope you will join me in contemplating the impact of Woodrow Orson, Jr. on this mill  
982 and this town. He was good friend, a good businessman, and a good boss." Preston meant every  
983 word. Woody had been a born leader. If only he hadn't given in to his weaknesses—for liquor,  
984 for Marina.

985           "We also wanted to give you a break, because tomorrow we will start work forty-five  
986 minutes early."

987           A groan, more felt than heard, passed across the room below. A rustling of skirts,  
988 whispered voices, shifting feet, backs half turning from him—they'd communicated their  
989 disappointment without saying a word.

990           "We will start early because tomorrow we start production of our Christmas material!"  
991 Pride thrilled through Preston. If he didn't stop acting so proud, God might strike him on the spot  
992 one of these days.



993 Cheers rang through the crowd below. The Christmas Calicos excited the workers almost  
994 as much as the masquerade.

995 “We will manufacture our Christmas calico through the end of the week. After that, we  
996 will return to our normal production schedule. As you all know: don’t say a word to anyone.”

997 Nods greeted his warning, excitement replacing the disappointment about “Gather your  
998 things and head home. Get a good night’s rest and come back at six forty-five. And please join  
999 me in remembering Mr. Orson in your prayers tonight.”

1000 Respectful silence settled across the crowd. The mill employees neither loved the owner  
1001 not hated him. They respected him, which was part of the reason Woody’s behavior a year ago  
1002 had created so much distress for his father. The mill had barely recovered from the scandal, and  
1003 now tragedy had struck. Preston figured the best way to help was to keep the mill operating at  
1004 maximum efficiency.

1005 With regret, Preston watched Eliza leave the mill with her friends. He’d decided he  
1006 should visit Mr. Orson tonight, not give in to his impulse to see her. The Bible said to mourn  
1007 with those who mourn. As a mill employee and as Woody’s friend, he certainly should offer  
1008 comfort to Mr. Orson.

1009 If he left now, he could reach the Orson mansion by half-past seven, a good time to visit.  
1010 He would go before the hour grew too late. He grabbed his coat and hat and headed out. To his  
1011 surprise, he spotted Eliza and Samantha on the street where Mr. Orson lived.

1012 “Well, hello, ladies,” Preston called.

1013 Eliza stopped in mid-stride before slowly turning. “Mr. Marshall. What a pleasant  
1014 surprise

1015 “I am delighted to meet you here.” He bowed towards the lady. “Are you going to see  
1016 Mr. Orson?”

1017 Eliza and Samantha exchanged glances. “We feel terrible about his son’s death.”  
1018 Samantha said. “We want to tell him people of the mill are thinking about him and praying for  
1019 him.”

1020 Eliza turned to Preston. “Shall we go together?”

1021 Why not? The task would be more easily accomplished in company—especially when it  
1022 was Eliza. “Let’s go.”

1023  
1024  
1025  
1026  
1027  
1028  
1029  
1030  
1031  
1032  
1033  
1034  
1035  
1036  
1037  
1038  
1039  
1040  
1041  
1042  
1043  
1044  
1045  
1046  
1047  
1048  
1049  
1050  
1051  
1052  
1053  
1054  
1055  
1056  
1057  
1058  
1059  
1060  
1061  
1062  
1063  
1064  
1065  
1066  
1067  
1068

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Eliza hadn't planned on visiting Mr. Orson when she'd left the mill that afternoon. He was the boss, a man of a different station, who had plenty of peers to come to his aid.

God wouldn't accept her excuses. He'd whispered in her heart, telling her to offer comfort. When she'd invited her friends to join her, Adelaide had demurred, but Samantha had agreed immediately.

Why God had chosen to send Eliza puzzled her. Mr. Orson might not be happy to see Marina's cousin, the woman who had heard his son's final words to his lover and his son. But God had sent her, and Eliza chose to obey.

Initially, Preston's presence had surprised her. But when she thought about it, she realized that course he wanted to offer his condolences to his friend's father. Perhaps he even needed to discuss some matters of businesses.

What would they do if other members of the Nanepaushat elite were visiting Mr. Orson? It would make things easier. She could offer words of sympathy, then leave when Mr. Orson failed to invite her in.

However, when they arrived at the house, no carriages lined the street. Only a few lights glowed from within. If he'd a lot of company, it wasn't evident. Still, she held back. She'd heard tell the house had been designed by William Walker & Sons, famous for designing homes for Rhode Island's most well-to-do citizens. It was made of gray brick with a hint of the house of seven gables about it.

Preston glanced at her. "There's no need to fear."

She smiled weakly. "Am I that transparent?"

Preston nodded at Samantha. Her clenched hands dangled by her side, and her face was pale as ice. She managed brave words. "Don't worry about me. I get skittish when I'm trying something new, but we're doing the right thing."

Her words settled Eliza's nerves. "Let's pray before we go inside."

The three of them bowed their heads and offered a quick silent prayer. After Preston's "amen," they walked to the door and knocked. Eliza had counted to a hundred before the door creaked open. A stately butler peered at them, a smile appearing on his face when he spotted Preston. "Mr. Marshall, ladies, please come in."

He took their coats and hats. "I am very glad to see you, Mr. Marshall. Mr. Orson has taken things badly."

Preston asked the question that she assumed was on all their minds. "Is anyone staying with Mr. Orson—his sister? His friends? The pastor?"

"They were here." The butler shook his head. "But Mr. Orson sent them home and shut himself up in the library. Perhaps he will speak with you."

Eliza looked to Preston. She felt more strongly than ever that she was supposed to be there, but would Mr. Orson welcome her company?

Preston straightened his shoulders. "Very well. Tell Mr. Orson that I am here on urgent business matters. If he refuses, tell him I will stay until he is ready to see me. Tell him that Miss Eliza Lampert and Miss Samantha Cole are with me."

When the butler stepped into the study, Eliza tried to catalogue the numerous knickknacks and fancy furniture in the room, but all she could think about was the mill owner

1069 and the sorrow he felt. "If you need to discuss business with Mr. Orson, perhaps you should see  
1070 him alone."

1071 Preston frowned. "Why did you come, if not to see him?"

1072 She glanced aside, a trifle embarrassed. "I felt a nudge in my spirit."

1073 His face relaxed into a smile. "Then by all means, you must accompany into the office."

1074 He turned to Samantha. "You too, of course. You're here to offer comfort, and comfort  
1075 he needs."

1076 Ten minutes passed before the butler returned. "Mr. Orson will see you now." Eliza's  
1077 heart beat loudly in her chest as they followed the butler down the hall to the library.

1078 The man who owned the mill was strong. His posture commanded attention. He was a  
1079 man of action, used to people doing as directed, a benevolent dictator.

1080 She wouldn't have recognized him as the man sitting alone in the parlor if she hadn't  
1081 known it was him. His shoulders sagged where he bent over, his elbows on his knees, his head  
1082 resting on his clasped hands. A quiet sobbing filled the silence.

1083 "Here are your guests, sir, from the mill: Mr. Marshall, Miss Lampert, and Miss Cole. I  
1084 will bring refreshments." The butler left the room.

1085 Eliza fancied she saw Mr. Orson's hand flutter.

1086 Preston tilted his head. "Mr. Orson, hello. I've brought friends. Why don't I pull chairs  
1087 up by the fireplace, where we can be close to you." He acted on his idea and led Eliza and  
1088 Samantha to the waiting chairs.

1089 A minute ticked by while they sat without speaking. Who would break the silence?  
1090 Preston cleared his throat.

1091 At the sound, Mr. Orson spoke. "Homer said you had urgent business."

1092 "Yes, sir. We will start production of this year's Christmas calico tomorrow."

1093 That didn't sound like urgent business to Eliza. Perhaps Preston had been seeking an  
1094 excuse to see his employer.

1095 A sound rumbled deep in Mr. Orson's chest.

1096 "I was thinking of holding a contest in Woody's honor."

1097 Mr. Orson showed some interest. "A contest to honor my son? Do you think people  
1098 would want to participate?"

1099 Eliza decided to be bold. "Your son was well-liked, sir. We would be happy to honor  
1100 him." She'd been fond of the young man, at least before he'd gotten her pregnant and deserted  
1101 her.

1102 "That's very true, Mr. Orson," Samantha said.

1103 He looked at them as if seeing them for the first time. "Do you speak on behalf of all the  
1104 employees?"

1105 Eliza didn't know how to respond. However, Samantha had no problem speaking her  
1106 mind. "I believe so, sir."

1107 Some color had returned to Mr. Orson's face. "What is your idea, exactly?"

1108 Preston leaned forward in his chair. "We can invite the ladies of Nanepaushat to create a  
1109 gown out of the Christmas fabric. We can invite the president of the ladies' society to judge  
1110 which one is the best design. The winner will receive a bolt of the fabric of her choice. If we  
1111 charge an entry fee, any money raised to go to our widows and orphans fund."

1112 A smile passed across Mr. Orson's face. "I like it. You have a good head for business,  
1113 Preston. You know how to drum up business and create goodwill at the same time."

1114 What did that say about his character? Eliza wasn't sure that a head for business was a  
1115 good thing, although she liked his idea for a contest.

1116

~

1117 Preston noticed the shifting expressions on Eliza's face, but Mr. Orson's library wasn't the place  
1118 to discuss her concerns. "I'm certain Woody would have approved of the idea, if he were still  
1119 with us." He'd almost said "alive." But Woody was still alive in the most important sense.  
1120 Preston clung to that truth. His friend lived in heaven, free from pain and death and all of the  
1121 miseries of human existence.

1122 Eliza glanced at him as if asking permission. He smiled to encourage her. She turned to  
1123 Mr. Orson. "I hope so, sir. I like to believe God has called me to be the best mill worker I can be,  
1124 and that includes loving my neighbor as well as I love myself."

1125 Mr. Orson's face twisted in a wry grin. "You both sound like the preacher. But you have  
1126 a point. You may proceed with your plans."

1127 They fell back into silence. Mr. Orson tapped the floor with his walking stick. "So, Miss  
1128 Lampert and Miss Cole. Mr. Marshall has explained his purpose in coming to my home. But  
1129 what was your purpose?"

1130 Eliza straightened her back. *Good.* She'd no reason to be afraid. "I feel terrible about  
1131 what happened."

1132 "No one blames you."

1133 "Thank you, sir." She clasped and unclasped her hands once, then stopped. "I appreciated  
1134 hearing what the pastor said about your son, how he came to know Jesus when he was a boy.  
1135 That increases my affection for him."

1136 When she hesitated, Preston wondered if Mr. Orson would think she meant she hadn't  
1137 liked him before? "I mean, I liked learning more about him. All those things that he did when he  
1138 was younger. The stories reminded me of my brother Horace. He must have been a lot of fun."

1139 "He'd a lot of spirit." Mr. Orson's face relaxed, and his mouth softened in a smile. "I  
1140 would have liked a household of boys, but God only saw fit to bless the missus and me with only  
1141 the one. And then after she died, it was just the two of us. I..."

1142 His voice cracked. "Perhaps I indulged him more than was good for him, but it was hard  
1143 to say no to my motherless boy. And then you came along, Preston. You knew him. He was a  
1144 good boy. Everyone said so. Didn't they?"

1145 He looked at Preston with such agony and beseeching that Preston almost felt guilty to be  
1146 in the presence of such naked emotion.

1147 "He was a fine boy," Preston said quietly. "But boys grow up. He didn't always make the  
1148 best choices. But none of us do, not all the time. Woody had a good heart, and I was proud to call  
1149 him my friend."

1150 At Preston's bold statement, Mr. Orson arched his eyebrows. "What do you say, ladies?  
1151 Do you feel my son's good qualities outweighed his faults?"

1152 Preston drew in a sharp breath. How would Eliza respond? Even Samantha, who thought  
1153 the best of everybody, didn't seem to know what to say.

1154 Eliza delayed in answering, and Mr. Orson's pleasant features flattened, then twisted with  
1155 sorrow. "That's what I thought."

1156 "That's not it, sir." Eliza glanced at Preston. "We truly liked Mr. Orson Jr., everyone in  
1157 my circle." She looked at the floor, her shoulders heaving as if she were taking a deep breath,  
1158 before she looked back up. "Especially my cousin Marina. He treated her kindly. He didn't make

1159 her feel inferior just because she worked in the mill that he owned. I might even say he treated  
1160 her with respect. At least until. . .”

1161 Her speech faltered. “Until he took advantage of her,” Preston said.

1162 Mr. Orson’s shoulders sagged.

1163 Eliza’s eyes said thank you. “I believe both parties bear responsibility.”

1164 Pride gave steel to Mr. Orson’s slumped figure. At least he was listening, truly listening,  
1165 to the opinions of the people who had proved their support for him through the days following  
1166 the scandal.

1167 “Regarding that, sir. Both Woodrow and Miss Dowd were headstrong, foolish, and in  
1168 love. But”—Preston hesitated, then decided to hurry before courage failed him—“when it ended,  
1169 Woodrow still held his position within the company and the community.” Where had that come  
1170 from? He had come to the mansion to offer comfort.

1171 “He was my son,” Mr. Orson interjected.

1172 Something inside Preston forced him to continue. God? “While Miss Dowd lost her job  
1173 and became a pariah. People were reminded of her sin every time they saw her growing belly,  
1174 and then the child.” He’d often wondered how hard things had been for his mother, if she’d  
1175 abandoned him to the orphanage because of her shame. “Also, Miss Dowd depends on her  
1176 parents for the upkeep of herself and the boy.”

1177 “Boy?” Mr. Orson’s head lifted. “I have a grandson?” He straightened in his chair.

1178 Eliza and Samantha looked at each other surprise. Few people knew that Mr. Orson had  
1179 refused to hear the details of the child’s birth. Preston had insisted Woody know the facts, hoping  
1180 his friend would accept responsibility for the child.

1181 “Yes, a fine boy,” Preston repeated. “His name is John. He was born on September  
1182 sixteenth, as healthy as can be.”

1183 “You speak as though you’ve seen the child,” Mr. Orson said.

1184 “Yes.” Out of the corner of his eye, Preston saw Eliza frantically shaking her head. But  
1185 Mr. Orson deserved to hear the truth. “I went to see Miss Dowd on Saturday to deliver the news  
1186 of Woody’s death in person.”

1187 Mr. Orson sprang to his feet. “I must see him. Perhaps God has given me a second  
1188 chance. I will raise the boy as my own.”

1189 Surprised, Preston sat back. He hadn’t known what he’d expected, but not this.

1190 Eliza’s head hung low.

1191 What had he done?

1192  
1193  
1194  
1195

## CHAPTER EIGHT

1196 Eliza couldn't believe what Preston had just done. Didn't he understand that little John was the  
1197 light of Marina's life, the one good thing that had come of the whole sordid affair?

1198 "That is kindly thought, sir," Preston said. "If the boy could enjoy both the comfort of his  
1199 mother's love and the advantages and love you can offer him, he will be blessed beyond many in  
1200 his position."

1201 Eliza stifled a groan.

1202 "His mother?" Mr. Orson's nose wrinkled. "She was a sweet lass, as I remember, but I  
1203 can't allow her around my grandson." He crossed his arms. "If she fell into sin once, she may do  
1204 so again."

1205 The laugh lines on Preston's face fell flat and tightened. "Not allow him to see his  
1206 mother? That isn't kind, not at all."

1207 "Nonsense." Mr. Orson stood, looking and sounding more like his old self. "We'll have  
1208 to spruce things up around here. Get things ready for a small tyke. Preston, I'm trusting you to  
1209 bring the child here on the day of the masquerade. Introduce him to everyone. Engage the  
1210 services of a wet nurse and whatever else he might need." He went to the desk and began  
1211 writing, ignoring their presence. He paused, lifted his pen from the paper, and shook his head.  
1212 "My grandson." A smile lit his face.

1213 Eliza didn't have strength left to protest what was happening. Even if she Oh, she could  
1214 scream, but it wouldn't help. She didn't know how she could stop what Mr. Orson had planned,  
1215 but God help her, stop him she would.

1216 "Mr. Orson, you're not thinking straight. It's wrong to separate a child from his mother."  
1217 Preston managed to keep a reasonable tone.

1218 "Nonsense. It was your idea," Mr. Orson said.

1219 Preston stood and took a hesitant step forward, then paused.

1220 *Lord, help him.* Eliza didn't know why he'd made such foolish statements to Mr. Orson,  
1221 but what were they going to do about now?

1222 Mr. Orson turned in his chair. "What are you still doing here?" He frowned at their  
1223 unwelcome presence. "I appreciate your concern. You've brought me much hope. Oh, yes—I  
1224 hope the production of the new pattern goes well tomorrow." He smiled as if that settled the  
1225 matter. "Expect me at the mill tomorrow afternoon." He rang the bell for the butler.

1226 Preston's mouth pulled in a straight line, and he shook his head when Eliza stood in the  
1227 doorway. He took her arm and escorted her down the hall.

1228 She whispered her protest. "I will have *no* part in what he has planned. Martina loves the  
1229 boy, as does the family, and it would be great cruelty to remove him from the home."

1230 Preston hesitated long enough to make Eliza question his motives. Did he intend to go  
1231 through with this, this...kidnapping?

1232 He shook his head. "Not here." He kept his voice low and steady. "Let's get home to  
1233 supper, shall we?"

1234 Eliza's stomach rumbled, reminding her that she hadn't eaten more than an apple than at  
1235 breakfast early that morning. Preston held her coat for her. "Thank you," Eliza said.

1236 Samantha shrugged on her coat by herself, and Eliza felt mildly guilty. Did Preston  
1237 realize how much attention he was showering on her? In any other circumstances, her insides

1238 would be dancing with delight. As it was, she still couldn't hold back a thrill of anticipation.  
1239 They headed outside.

1240 "You're right," Samantha said practically. "We'll all be able to think better after we eat."  
1241 She turned to Preston. "I only wish you could join us at the boardinghouse, so we could plan  
1242 together." She glanced at Eliza. "Or perhaps you and Eliza could handle it between the two of  
1243 you."

1244 What if Preston took immediate action to get the baby for Mr. Orson. Surely not. "Please  
1245 promise me." She stopped short of voicing her deepest fear.

1246 Warmth shone from his eyes when he glanced her way. Eyes that said what he'd never  
1247 said with his mouth, both a longing and a promise. Eyes that gave her hope. "Promise you  
1248 what?" he asked.

1249 As long as Preston threatened someone so precious to her, offering his charm and skill to  
1250 Mr. Orson, they could never be more than supervisor and employee. She waited, uncertain,  
1251 hoping against hope he would think better of Mr. Orson's plans. She spoke the words that might  
1252 destroy their future together. "Promise me you won't act on Mr. Orson's request any time soon.  
1253 In fact," she hurried on, "please promise me you won't do anything at all. What he's asking is as  
1254 wrong as what his son did."

1255 A strange mixture of emotions played across Preston's face. Indecision, regret—  
1256 determination? "Don't you think the child should have the opportunities Mr. Orson could  
1257 provide?"

1258 Heat pushed the cold December air away from her. She forced one foot in front of the  
1259 other. "The child would be better off with a loving family than in that cold, lonely mausoleum.  
1260 It's a house, not a home."

1261 Indecision played across Preston's face. "Mr. Orson will lavish all the love he has on the  
1262 boy, and you can't deny the advantages that money and education can offer."

1263 She stepped in front of him, forcing him to stop. "Should the baby be raised by a man  
1264 who might die before he reaches his twenty-first birthday?"

1265 Red blotches formed on Preston's cheeks. "What if your cousin decides she can't take  
1266 care of the child and gives him away? What then? Which is better, that he be raised by a loving  
1267 grandfather or in an impersonal orphanage?"

1268 Oh, yes. Preston was an orphan. His viewpoint suddenly made sense. She placed her  
1269 gloved hand on his arm. "Is that what happened to you?"

1270 Samantha hung back, as if unwilling to get involved in their discussion.  
1271 ~

1272 Preston remained rooted in place. Eliza had asked an honest question, but... "I don't want to  
1273 discuss this in the middle of the street."

1274 Her eyes widened and she stepped back. Her perfectly innocent gesture might suggest  
1275 intimacy to the sinful minded. Although it was evening, they were standing under a streetlamp  
1276 on a public street. Concern for public perfection had caused him to overreact, and he regretted  
1277 his brisk tone. They began walking again.

1278 As the boardinghouse drew near, he questioned the way he'd handled the evening. He'd  
1279 made the trip to Mr. Orson's house, both out of duty as the mill supervisor and as his son's  
1280 friend.

1281 Running into Eliza had seemed like a blessing from God. But her presence had struck a  
1282 nerve in Mr. Orson that until now had been quiet, and only the Lord above knew how it all  
1283 would turn out. Preston's reaction, straight from the pain of his past, had brought down a shutter

1284 between him and Eliza. *God, you've promised work all thing together for good. Help me trust*  
1285 *You to will bring beauty and order from tonight's mess.*

1286 He didn't feel any better, but he trusted God would take of things. The Lord had always  
1287 come through for him in the past, from his unhappy childhood and through Woody's escapade  
1288 last year.

1289 Unfortunately, Preston's response today had made his clay feet vsible to Eliza, when he  
1290 wanted to shine like gold. Not what he'd hoped for this night.

1291 They were quiet for the rest of their walk. At the boardinghouse, Eliza turned around one  
1292 last time. Preston addressed Samantha. "Miss Cole, would you mind giving us a minute? I'd like  
1293 a few minutes to speak to Miss Lambert in private."

1294 Samantha looked at Eliza.

1295 "I'll be fine," Eliza said. "I'll follow you shortly." All traces of her earlier irritation had  
1296 disappeared when she turned her eyes on Preston. "Mrs. West would be happy to give us a cup of  
1297 tea or coffee to warm us on this cold night."

1298 Preston considered it. "Is there any place inside where we can speak without being  
1299 overheard? Neither of us wants to spread gossip."

1300 "Perhaps Mrs. West will allow us the use of her study. Let me ask her."

1301 Within fifteen minutes, they were inside, steaming cups of milk with a touch of coffee  
1302 and sugar, along with a bowl of baked beans and cornbread, in front of them. Preston's stomach  
1303 rumbled.

1304 "Let me know if you want more," Mrs. West said. "I have plenty left over tonight."

1305 "Thank you," Preston said.

1306 "Thanks," Eliza echoed.

1307 Preston didn't know whether it was hunger or a desire to postpone their discussion that  
1308 drove their appetite, but they ate until their spoons scraped the bottoms of the bowls. Preston  
1309 rediscovered a hunger he'd lost in the days since Woody's death.

1310 Eliza refused a second helping. As soon as the landlady left the room, Eliza wrapped her  
1311 hands around the coffee mug.

1312 Preston took a moment to examine the study. A single bookcase held several well-worn  
1313 volumes, from nursery rhymes for children to *Pilgrim's Progress*, Charles Dickens and even  
1314 more contemporary authors such as Mark Twain. It held a mending basket and a knitting bag.  
1315 Various stitched verses provided inspiration from where they hung on the walls.

1316 Eliza took a seat behind at the table. "What should we do about Mr. Orson's request? Of  
1317 course little John should know his grandfather, but he shouldn't be separated from his mother.  
1318 You must see that."

1319 Preston considered his words carefully. "There are people who would disagree with you,  
1320 people who would suggest his existence is proof that she is an unfit mother."

1321 Anger flashed in Eliza's eyes. "In that case, Mr. Orson, Jr. was an unfit father and Mr.  
1322 Orson, Sr. has no right to the boy." Her anger dissipated, replaced by a contemplative look. "It  
1323 seems to me that you have something—personal—at stake in the question. I know you grew up  
1324 in an orphanage."

1325 She leaned forward, compassion evident in her dark brown eyes, the soft pink of her  
1326 cheeks. "No one takes any mind of your being an orphan. We admire you that much more. You  
1327 had fewer advantages than most of us, but you've come so far and kept your head and heart  
1328 upright."



1329           She chuckled. “My little brother couldn’t stop talking about you after you our house.  
1330 You’re his new hero.” Red jumped to her cheeks as she realized what she’d just said.  
1331           He laughed softly. “So you’ve talking about me, have you?” He dropped the matter of his  
1332 orphan status in favor of this new and nteresting development. “Explain yourself, Miss Lambert.  
1333 Or should I say, Eliza?”  
1334           “I, uh.” The normally unflappable Eliza floundered. She made a fluttering motion with  
1335 her hands. “You know.”  
1336           “I know it’s time we stopped being so formal. I know I’m fonder of you each day, more  
1337 than you know. And now I dare to hope you’re also fond of me.” He feared he wore the grin  
1338 Woody had always called cocky, but he couldn’t seem to make his face behave. “Am I right?”  
1339           She whispered, “Maybe.” She couldn’t turn her face away fast enough to hide the red  
1340 flood her face and neck or the smile forming on her lips. She straightened her shoulders and  
1341 lifted her head, bright red spots still evident on her cheeks. “Yes. A definite yes.”  
1342           He brought his face within inches of hers, close enough to kiss. “I accept your yes.” He  
1343 pulled back. Instead of kissing those soft lips, he reached for her hand. “How much time do we  
1344 have before they chase me out?”  
1345           She fixed her eyes on him, without speaking. When he fell silent, she shook herself. “Oh.  
1346 Maybe twenty minutes.”  
1347           That wasn’t nearly enough time to talk about everything on their hearts, let alone resolve  
1348 the issue about Marina and her baby.  
1349           But looking into her deep eyes, he decided maybe they would have a lifetime to figure  
1350 things out.

1351  
1352  
1353  
1354

## CHAPTER NINE

1355 Eliza hardly slept that night. That half hour alone with Preston had transformed into the stuff  
1356 fairy tales were made of, as if some kind fairy had sprinkled her dust in the air and set their  
1357 heartbeats atwitter in rhythm to Cupid's harp.

1358 The following morning, Eliza felt like Cinderella had returned to her lonely corner of  
1359 someone else's world. She donned her ordinary work boots to walk to work in the chill, a hint of  
1360 snow in the air. She hoped against hope to catch Preston's eye at work, to see some sign that last  
1361 evening hadn't been a figment of her imagination.

1362 Unfortunately, by the time she, Adelaide and Samantha arrived at work in the morning,  
1363 the mill was already humming. Production of the Christmas calico would keep Preston busy until  
1364 the end of shift and possibly beyond. He had never made any promises about not sending for the  
1365 baby, and that concerned her.

1366 Ordinary life didn't make anything they shared yesterday less true. But it did tarnish the  
1367 shine. A long fourteen hours later at the close of the shift, she hesitated a bit at the door. In spite  
1368 of the business of the day, she hoped Preston would join her and her friends for their walk home  
1369 them that night.

1370 "Let's hurry home." Adelaide said. "Eliza, why are you tarrying?"

1371 Eliza pulled her gaze away from the mezzanine where Preston often made an appearance.

1372 "She wants to see Mr. Marshall," Samantha said under her breath.

1373 "Shh." Eliza looked about them to ensure nobody had overheard.

1374 Samantha grinned.

1375 In order to avoid further comments, Eliza shrugged on her coat and opened the door.

1376 Cold slapped her face, and a solitary snow flake landed on the woolen sleeve of her coat. She  
1377 tilted back her head and opened her mouth to accept the gift of new snow. One, two cold drops  
1378 hit her tongue. They melted before she could say *Jack Frost*.

1379 "Sometimes you act like you're still a child." Adelaide's smile took away the sting of her  
1380 words.

1381 Eliza laughed. "You should join me sometime."

1382 All the way home, the three friends chatted about the new Christmas calico. It captured  
1383 the awe of the nativity with the whimsy of the calico, with Preston's usual flare. All through their  
1384 conversation, Eliza kept listening for booted footsteps. The snow fell steadily harder, and Eliza  
1385 took hope that Preston was following, even though she couldn't hear him, from the way the snow  
1386 muffled the sound of their footsteps.

1387 When they turned the corner to the street where the boardinghouse stood, Eliza gave up  
1388 wishing. Then, a familiar carriage rounded the corner headed in their direction. Eliza stopped  
1389 walking and clasped her hands under her chin, but the carriage passed her by.

1390 Where was Preston? They had serious matters to discuss. With all the sweet talk last  
1391 night, they hadn't talked about Marina's problem. The more time passed, the harder it would be  
1392 to change Mr. Orson's plans. The harder that was, the more she feared for Marina and little John.

1393 Maybe she should Preston out. The masquerade was a week from Saturday. Perhaps she  
1394 could skip a trip home and visit Preston on the weekend. That seemed wiser than approaching  
1395 him at work.

1396 After a quick supper, she went to her room. Her appetite had diminished with the events  
1397 of the past week. No more than five minutes passed before Samantha waltzed in, all excitement.  
1398 “Come down, come down. Mr. Marshall has come calling.”

1399 Relieved, Eliza descended the stairs. In the open dining room, Preston and Mrs. West  
1400 stood over the table. A bolt of the Christmas calico was spread out on the table. Bright red spots  
1401 appeared on Mrs. West’s cheeks and soon she was laughing. “I accept your challenge. The day I  
1402 can’t sew better than half the ladies in the parish is the day I’ll take my place in the grave.”

1403 “And she cooks better than every one of them,” Eliza chimed in.

1404 Preston was grinning when he turned to greet her. Mrs. West shook her head.

1405 “I was just telling Mrs. West about the contest to design a lady’s dress before the  
1406 masquerade. She has offered to participate and to advertise the campaign.” He turned back to the  
1407 landlady. “You have your work cut out for you. The masquerade is only a week away.”

1408 “A week from Saturday,” Mrs. West said. “Every day counts in a project like this. It’s a  
1409 good thing that Mr. Orson is doing, raising money for the poor among us. Everyone will want to  
1410 take part.”

1411 Preston’s lips relaxed into a lazy smile. “If it is acceptable with you, Mrs. West, I would  
1412 like to take Miss Lambert for a ride.” He put all the force of his personality behind his smile, and  
1413 Eliza had to smother a giggle.

1414 “That is acceptable with me, if Miss Lambert is willing, of course. I must also insist you  
1415 return before nine o’clock. That’s when I lock the doors.”

1416 Preston looked at Eliza, and she smiled. “I’ll fetch my coat.”

1417 Upon her return, Adelaide met her at the bottom of the stairs. “Are you sure this is a good  
1418 idea? Remember last year—”

1419 “I’m not my cousin.” Eliza cut her off. “And Mr. Marshall isn’t Mr. Orson Jr.”

1420 Unfortunately, her friend’s words had resurrected Eliza’s worries. She’d asked God for  
1421 guidance more than once, but she wasn’t sure if she was hearing clearly.

1422 She would go—and trust God first and Preston second.

1423

~

1424 How right it felt to walk down the steps with Eliza on his arm. He helped her into the carriage  
1425 and took up the reins. By going down Main Street, which offered the most street lamps, no one  
1426 could accuse them of sneaking away to be alone.

1427 Eliza fiddled with the buttons of her coat.

1428 “Are you cold?”

1429 She shook her head but continued pulling at the sleeves.

1430 “Is something wrong?” He stared at her hands.

1431 She set them in her lap. “I wish I’d changed into something different, but I was in a rush  
1432 to leave so we could spend more time together.” While she was speaking, her face had turned a  
1433 pretty pink.

1434 “What can I say?” He smiled affectionately. “That you look fetching in that coat. And  
1435 that I’m glad you chose my company over primping.”

1436 She giggled and relaxed, as he’d hoped she would. She opened her mouth, then closed it.

1437 Preston decided to bring up the topic that was probably at the forefront of her mind. “Do  
1438 you want to talk about the situation with Mr. Orson and little John?”

1439 She had to relax her clenched jaws. “You first.”

1440 “I have thought of little else.” He’d decided that for them to have a future, she should  
1441 know more about his past. “You know I was an orphan. My mother left me at the doorstep of the

1442 orphanage with a ribbon and a note that read, 'Please take care of Preston because I can't.' The  
1443 headmistress never said it in so many words, but it was clear she thought I was born out of  
1444 wedlock. Most of the children were. Needless to say, I don't broadcast that."

1445 He fell silent. Would she think less of him because of the circumstances of his birth?  
1446 Instead she said softly, "You bear the name she gave you. And it's a lovely, strong  
1447 name."

1448 He let out a soft chortle. "I never thought of it that way." He loosened the reins of the  
1449 horses, and they slowed. "I was two years old when she left me at the orphanage. I have vague  
1450 memories of a young woman with dark hair and a sad smile. I guess it's my mother." He took a  
1451 painful breath. "I think that's why I'm afraid for the boy. Right now, he's well and provided for  
1452 in the bosom of his mother's family. But what if Marina dies? Or if she marries, and her husband  
1453 doesn't want anything to do with another man's child?"

1454 Eliza's teeth bit her lips so hard he feared she might break the skin. "If only Mr. Orson  
1455 would understand how important it is for John to remain with Marina. What if you learned that  
1456 you mother hadn't abandoned you on purpose, but that someone had taken you from her against  
1457 her will? How would you feel about that person?"

1458 That stabbed the center of an old wound. "Of course. But he would at least have a loving  
1459 grandfather."

1460 "Who is elderly and could die before he reaches his majority." She blew out a long  
1461 breath. "We're repeating what we said yesterday. Perhaps she can make arrangements for him to  
1462 go to his grandfather if something happens to her? No, that's unfair to Mr. Orson,"

1463 She shook her head. "Pray for God's direction. Let's see how God directs." She clasped  
1464 her hands in her lap.

1465 He nodded reluctantly. Mr. Orson had set a deadline. Whenever Preston saw a mother or  
1466 a father doting on a small boy, something tugged at his heart. If he considered courting Eliza, he  
1467 must be honest with her. "I'm glad you're here to help me through this. I confess I don't see  
1468 clearly when it comes to the best care for orphans."

1469 She smiled lightly. "But you do care, which is more than many do."

1470 Oh, the relief of that statement. The freedom. "Thank you." He brightened. "Since we're  
1471 waiting on God to shows us what to do about the lad, perhaps we can take advantage of this  
1472 carriage ride to make plans for the masquerade." A happy warmth pushed at the uncertainty. "I  
1473 have looked forward to this opportunity for these past twelve months."

1474 Her mouth formed an O. "I had no idea you had any interest in me."

1475 "I would have asked you out much earlier, but I wanted to wait until after the worst of the  
1476 gossip about Woody and Marina had died down. I don't want people looking at us in the same  
1477 light." Warmth spread to his cheeks. "Of course, I am only a supervisor, and not an owner, so  
1478 perhaps there is nothing to fear."

1479 "Any relationship between a man and a woman, even the poorest, must be circumspect.  
1480 We are all subject to temptation. Speaking of which." She glanced at the clock tower as they  
1481 passed. "Mrs. West is expecting me home in fifteen minutes."

1482 Preston laughed, but he turned the horses in the direction of the boardinghouse. "Don't  
1483 you trust me?"

1484 "I trust you as much as I trust my father." Color slowly crept up her cheeks. "Can I  
1485 confess something to you?"

1486 What did this pure woman want to confess? "Maybe you should talk to God about  
1487 whatever is troubling you."

1488 She laughed, a light-hearted sound. “Oh, I’ve talked about it with God many times. But  
1489 you said you’ve been wanting to seek me out for some time.” The longer she continued speaking,  
1490 the more the red in her cheeks deepened. “You should know my thoughts have turned your way  
1491 many times over the past year as well.”

1492 Preston’s cheeks burned and his chest swelled. “Then would you be willing to accept me  
1493 as a suitor for your hand?” He held his breath.

1494 Her smile held no reservations. “You should finish what you’ve started.”

1495 He felt lighter than he’d for many days. “Then may I invite you to join me tomorrow  
1496 evening for dinner? I would consider it a tremendous honor.”

1497 “Gladly,” she said, smiling.

1498 With her promise, he felt strong enough to face all of life’s problems.

1499

1500  
1501  
1502  
1503  
1504  
1505  
1506  
1507  
1508  
1509  
1510  
1511  
1512  
1513  
1514  
1515  
1516  
1517  
1518  
1519  
1520  
1521  
1522  
1523  
1524  
1525  
1526  
1527  
1528  
1529  
1530  
1531  
1532  
1533  
1534  
1535  
1536  
1537  
1538  
1539  
1540  
1541  
1542  
1543  
1544

## CHAPTER TEN

The night before the masquerade, Eliza tossed and turned for hours after they'd extinguished the light. It had been the best week of her life. It had also been the hardest week of her life, as her concern about Marina and the baby's future had built.

Everything came down to what would happen at the masquerade. In the year of our Lord 1878, the soldier tasked with harming the boys of Bethlehem would fight the king's edict, and the serving girl had to play her part in rescuing the child.

As soon as it was a reasonable hour, she arose, although it was too early to put the idea had given to her and Preston into action. She turned on a kerosene lantern and opened her Bible to Jeremiah's account of Rachel weeping.

To her surprise the passage read like a hymn, full of promises. Verse thirteen of chapter thirty-one said it best: "I will turn their mourning into joy, and will comfort them, and make them rejoice from their sorrow." Earlier in the chapter, Jeremiah had written about Rachel weeping for her children "because they were not." God told them to stop weeping, because He heard them, and He would bring them back home again.

She closed her Bible and said a short prayer. "Thank you, Lord. If Marina, little John, and Mr. Orson are meant to be a family, make it happen."

Samantha and Adelaide wouldn't wake up for at least half an hour. Eliza took up the mask she'd created for the masquerade. She'd made it larger than usual, hoping it would cover more of her face. She and Marina would take turns wearing it, and it was important people didn't recognize the difference.

Eliza thought her hair was boring, but Preston said it drew his eye. In case other people agreed, she would pile it up in a snood and keep her eyes on the ground in the way of servants past and present to foster anonymity.

She turned the mask over and over, checking to make sure everything was fastened securely. She didn't want any unexpected jostling to cause it to tear away. It was a little too fancy for an ordinary servant girl, but it couldn't be helped. What had Preston done with his mask and costume? The possibilities for a soldier were a lot more interesting than for a servant girl. By the time she'd satisfied herself that she'd done everything humanly possible, Samantha stirred to wakefulness.

Her eyes sprung open. "You're awake early." Samantha turned on her side, then on her back, before swinging her legs over the side of the bed. "Every minute will feel like two today. It'll be hard to stay focused on work." She took a spot next to Eliza, and put her shepherdess dress next to Eliza's costume. Samantha had fashioned her gown out of the Christmas calico, as had Adelaide and Marina. Her cousin's masked presence at the party was central to their scheme.

"Do you think your plan will work?"

Preston and Eliza had decided to enlist the aid of Samantha and Adelaide in the stunt they'd planned.

"I hope." Marina would go to the masquerade with Prescott dressed in Eliza's servant girl dress. When Eliza arrived later, Marina would change the servant dress for the shepherdess's gown. When she rejoined the party, they all hoped no one would guess her identity.

"Your dress is so plain. If I were trying to capture the eye of the mill supervisor..."

1545 Eliza chuckled. “Perhaps I hope to woo him with the beauty of my mind and the purity of  
1546 my heart.”

1547 “Your humility as well.” Samantha giggled. “I’m only making fun.”

1548 Eliza shook her head. “I deserved every word. It’s time to get ready for work. We don’t  
1549 want to be late.”

1550 When the three friends descended to breakfast, they inquired after the progress of Mrs.  
1551 West’s dress for the competition.

1552 “You’ll have to wait for all to be revealed this evening. Besides”—she shook her finger  
1553 in their direction—“I haven’t seen your dresses for tonight either.”

1554 Eliza smiled noncommittedly. “We’ll have fun talking about everything tomorrow  
1555 morning.” She hoped.

1556 The mill was open for its normal shortened Saturday work day. When they were back at  
1557 the boarding house, the afternoon dragged by. Because Eliza’s costume was so simple, she only  
1558 needed for Adelaide to apply her precise hairdressing skills into arranging her hair. Hours ahead  
1559 of time, she was ready.

1560 Marina’s arrival mid-afternoon with little John and her older brother dulled the boredom.  
1561 Before long, the cousins sat side by side. They both had a white towel around their necks and  
1562 they handed the mask back and forth between them.

1563 Adelaide stood back with her hand on her hips. “What say you, Samantha?” Her smile  
1564 reflected her own satisfaction.

1565 Samantha nodded. “If I didn’t know the truth, I wouldn’t notice the difference.”

1566 Eliza and Marina exchanged a nervous smile. “God willing, all will go well tonight.”

1567 While her friends got ready, the cousins prayed for Preston and the plans they’d put in  
1568 place. Half an hour before the masquerade started, Adelaide and Samantha headed out. “Who  
1569 would have thought this year’s party would be even more exciting than last year’s?” Samantha  
1570 said.

1571 Adelaide shook her head. “I pray everything goes well. We will see you later.”

1572 Preston arrived at the boarding house looking positively magnificent in his costume.  
1573 Although he looked cold, his muscular legs were uncovered beneath the padded garment he wore  
1574 that hung to his knees. The glitter of his helmet and sword covered any problems with the toga.

1575 She suddenly realized she’d been staring at him, as he’d been staring at her. Demurely  
1576 she lifted her mask to her face. “What do you think? Will anyone recognize me?”

1577 He shook his head but couldn’t seem to find words. Finally, he said, “If every serving girl  
1578 in Herod’s palace looked as beautiful as you do, the king would be greatly pleased.”

1579 “And if every soldier looked as handsome and as strong as you do, the serving girls  
1580 would be equally as pleased.” Heat flooded her face at her rather daring words.

1581 “I’m not an ordinary soldier. I’m a centurion.” Preston held her gaze for a long moment  
1582 before turning to Marina. “Are you ready to go?”

1583 “Yes.”

1584 Eliza didn’t know how Marina could be so calm.

1585 Preston smiled. “Then let’s be on our way.” Marina would accompany him now, until the  
1586 time came for them to exchange places.

1587 Oh, the agony of waiting. Eliza began her prayers as soon as they left, leaving her behind  
1588 at the boardinghouse. She knew she wouldn’t stop until the evening had ended.

1589

1590 An hour later, Preston found an excuse to return to the boardinghouse. Marina hid in a nearby  
1591 storage shed. He handed her the valise they had prepared for the identity swap.

1592 A short time later, he returned to the hall with Eliza. Marina's brother had hidden in the  
1593 back with the baby.

1594 Preston said to Marina, "Are you ready to face the lions? Who knows what the rumor  
1595 mill will say about us tomorrow?"

1596 Eliza held her head high. "I will enjoy your company. Hopefully no one will realize that  
1597 you left with one lady and came back with a different one." She chuckled nervously.

1598 "Where will I find Marina, sir?" Her brother inquired.

1599 "In the wood shed, over there. Bring Marina and the baby in at the time we discussed."  
1600 "Yes sir."

1601 "Let's go." Loud music greeted them when they entered the old barn, which had been  
1602 decorated with a Christmas theme. The band was playing Greensleeves, the music to What Child  
1603 is This. The sight of all those people dancing made Preston smile. "More people arrived while I  
1604 was gone."

1605 "I see Mr. Orson is here." Eliza nodded in the direction of the refreshment table. The  
1606 owner of the mill hadn't worn a costume, his somber black a testimony to his sadness and loss.  
1607 She glanced up at Preston. "Have you spoken with him tonight?"

1608 Preston nodded. "I told him he would never forget tonight for as long as he lived."

1609 Eliza raised an eyebrow. "I hope he doesn't regret it," she said under her breath.

1610 "The action will start in another hour, Preston said. "Until, let's enjoy ourselves as at any  
1611 other party."

1612 They walked onto the floor, smiling and exchanging greetings with fellow party-goers.  
1613 "I'm a little afraid to comment on someone's costume, in case Marina already mentioned it,"  
1614 Eliza said sotto voce.

1615 "I wouldn't worry," Preston said. "She said as little as possible."

1616 The band began playing "The Rose of Kilarney."

1617 "Shall we dance?" Fulfilling a long-held dream, Preston slipped his left arm around  
1618 Eliza's back, took her right hand in his, and pulled her close. The smile on her face said it all. She  
1619 was as excited about tonight as he was. He leaned close and whispered in her ear. "I hope to be  
1620 dancing with you for the rest of our lives."

1621 He suspected her face was bright red beneath her mask.

1622 They danced off and on throughout the evening. Mr. Orson had declined to act as judge.  
1623 Instead of inviting their pastor, he had assigned the duty to Preston. "You can help me decide  
1624 who should win."

1625 "That sounds like fun!" she grinned.

1626 "Maybe." She might change her mind next week, when people complained about their  
1627 choices.

1628 For now, they promenaded among the dancers, taking note of one person's peacock  
1629 feather and another's crushed oyster shells. As Eliza had predicted, he'd counted five Josephs  
1630 and nine Marys.

1631 "Too bad about the costumes that aren't based on this year's theme at all," Eliza said.  
1632 "The elves, Father Christmas, Mrs. Snowman."

1633 "That happens every year," Preston said. They were ready to grab some refreshment  
1634 when a hush settled across the room.

1635 Eliza pressed her fingers into Preston's arm. "It's time."



1636           A couple dressed as Mary and Joseph—Marina and her brother--entered through the front  
1637 door, an infant in Mary’s arms. Light that Preston had arranged spotlighted their entrance and  
1638 followed their hesitant steps.

1639           Preston locked gazes with Eliza. Were they committed to continuing this charade to the  
1640 bitter end? She nodded. Yes, they were. Tomorrow they would either be praising God—or  
1641 unemployed.

1642           Eliza fell to her knees. “Please, centurion, you don’t have to do this.” She spoke in her  
1643 loudest voice, the kind she’d used with her younger siblings.

1644           The crowd hushed, and the couple at the front ceased their progress. Preston continued  
1645 with his dialogue. “I must obey the king.”

1646           “Not when it means harm—even death—to this precious baby and all the baby boys in  
1647 Bethlehem.” Eliza swept her arm wide, encompassing “Mary” and everyone near here.

1648           The couple at the door backed up as if ready to run away at the threat.

1649           Eliza snuck a glance at Mr. Orson. He’d risen to his feet. *Good.*

1650           “Come with me and meet the family,” Eliza said.

1651           “That isn’t wise,” Preston protested in a stage whisper. He allowed Eliza to lead him in  
1652 the direction of the young couple. The young mother silently held out her baby to Preston.

1653           A holy stillness filled the room at that moment, and Preston felt at peace.

1654

1655  
1656

1657  
1658

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

1659 Preston accepted the infant—young John, of course—from Mary’s waiting arms. Genuine  
1660 emotion gathered behind his eyes. “He is a comely child. He deserves his parents’ love, as well  
1661 as safety and a good home. I will lead you to safety.”

1662 Cheering greeted his promise. “Too bad there weren’t any centurions like you around  
1663 when Jesus was born,” one of the superintendents called out.

1664 “We could have fought them off together, right?” Preston pumped his fist. “Who’s ready  
1665 for judging?” He gestured for Eliza to join them amid the cheering.

1666 They’d agreed the couple dressed as the innkeeper and his wife should win. The pair had  
1667 chosen an interesting character, dressed in clothes appropriate to their occupation, and made  
1668 clever use of the Christmas calico. They did the town, the mill, and the Lord, proud.

1669 He and Eliza joined Mr. Orson by the table holding the dresses made in Woody’s  
1670 memory. A panel of judges from the community had picked the finalists, but Mr. Orson would  
1671 make the final decision by tomorrow. A choice determined by station and reputation as much as  
1672 by the quality of the work.

1673 Chatter rippled through the room as they anticipated the big event of the night, the  
1674 unmasking. As volunteers prepared for the event, Mr. Orson spoke with Preston and Eliza. “That  
1675 was a fine scene you created with Joseph and Mary. Who is the young couple?”

1676 Preston kept himself from looking at Eliza. “You’ll find out as soon as we do the  
1677 unmasking.”

1678 “Keeping it secret.” Mr. Orson nodded. “I’m surprised they brought their baby. Speaking  
1679 of which, you promised me my grandson would be here tonight for me to introduce to my  
1680 workers.”

1681 “I promise it will happen soon.” Preston’s heart dropped to his throat. *Lord, protect us.*  
1682 He poured out a tall glass of punch and drank it down, bit off a piece of candy cane, and  
1683 crunched on it. Satisfied that he’d moistened his mouth sufficiently, he called for everyone’s  
1684 attention.

1685 When the room fell silent, he stepped up to a podium. “The time has come for us to  
1686 reveal ourselves. Line up in pairs, please.” After everyone had done as he had asked, She spoke  
1687 again. “Who can guess my identity?”

1688 Laughter rippled across the room. A couple of brave souls at the back shouted,  
1689 “Marshall!”

1690 With a smile and a wave, Marshall removed his mask and bowed. When the applause  
1691 subsided, he drew Eliza forward. “My partner tonight is...?”

1692 Silence. Perhaps people didn’t want to offend anyone by guessing wrongly. Or perhaps  
1693 they’d sensed at the switch from Marina to Eliza.

1694 “May I present to you...” He bowed in Eliza’s direction.

1695 She curtsied and removed the mask.

1696 “Miss Eliza Lampert.”

1697 More cheers erupted. Pride surged through Preston’s body and his throat. Here, at last,  
1698 he’d linked their names as he’d wanted to do so often. A year from now, they might be wed, or at  
1699 least promised to each other.

1700 Mr. Orson stood to side, nodding politely, but his attention was elsewhere, focused on his  
1701 inner sorrow rather than the gaiety of the masquerade. Preston had hoped the party might bring  
1702 the man some comfort, but if so, he showed no signs of it.

1703 During the unmasking, they took their time with town luminaries before plunging into to  
1704 the line of guests. It was a true test to how well Mr. Orson knew his employees and the  
1705 townspeople. A few times he had to ask. Woody had been a great help in that regard.

1706 Mr. Orson's attention kept wandering to the door, as if looking for his grandson.

1707 *He's closer than you think.* Preston forced himself not to stare at the young people at the  
1708 back of the line. At last they stepped forward.

1709 Mr. Orson examined them curiously. Preston sent up an escape-clause prayer, asking God  
1710 to make everything work out as they hoped. Eliza smiled at him. He took courage from that and  
1711 called for Mary and Joseph.

1712 Preston stood between the man and a woman. "I believe this couple, representing those  
1713 frightened parents in ancient Bethlehem, deserve a special award. Do you agree?" He held his  
1714 breath, hoping this part of their plan would go smoothly.

1715 Enthusiastic clapping rose from the gathered crowd, and he relaxed.

1716 Eliza tugged on his arm. In a stage whisper, loud enough to be heard across the floor, she  
1717 said, "The king has ordered that this baby boy be taken away from his mother."

1718 Preston stood at attention. "Not as long as I have the means to fight it." He knelt in front  
1719 of the still-masked couple. "May I take you to safety?"

1720 Silence had fallen across the room as the scene unwound.

1721 "God is our defender," the man dressed as Joseph answered. "We ask nothing but the  
1722 blindness of your eyes when we pass."

1723 "Mary" stepped forward. "Before we leave, I have only one wish: that my son see his  
1724 grandfather." Marina removed her mask, revealing her identity. "Because they have never met."  
1725 She stood so still, so courageous, that Preston wanted to cheer.

1726 The party-goers responded with gasps and soft exclamations. Eliza's arm slipped around  
1727 Preston, her hand resting on his shoulder, lending her support.

1728 Mr. Orson stood and took a step forward. "Is that—?" He looked around in a daze.

1729 Eliza and Preston both nodded. They approached Mr. Orson, each taking one of his arms.  
1730 "Come meet your grandson," Eliza said. "And his mother."

1731 Marina matched Mr. Orson step for step until they met. He stared at the child, hunger  
1732 written on his face. He *needed* this grandson the way a starving man needed bread. "May I?" The  
1733 words came from a broken heart.

1734 Preston held his breath.

1735 Marina settled the baby in Mr. Orson's arms. "It's a little soon, but I think he will have  
1736 Woody's eyes. And he has his red hair."

1737 Mr. Orson didn't stop smiling. "He does look like Woody did as a newborn. What is he  
1738 called?"

1739 Preston was glad he was close enough to hear every word of this precious meeting.

1740 Marina brushed a red ringlet from his forehead. "Woodrow John, but I call him John."

1741 Satisfaction settled on Mr. Orson's face. "I'd be mighty proud if you would name him  
1742 Woodrow John—Orson."

1743 Marina looked him straight in the eye. "As long as you promise to acknowledge him and  
1744 love him as your grandson, you are welcome to visit him as often as you wish." She smiled. "He  
1745 will proudly bear the name Orson."

1746 Eliza clasped her hands together under her chin. Preston wanted to clap.  
1747 ~  
1748 Later—much later—Preston walked with Eliza to the boarding house. She stood with her back to  
1749 the front door. “I’d invite you in, but it’s late.  
1750 “Let’s have Mrs. West make the decision.” He rapped on the door, but she was too happy  
1751 after tonight to fuss.  
1752 Mrs. West opened the door seconds before Eliza found her key. “About time you brought  
1753 her home.”  
1754 “I’m sorry about that.” Preston said the right words, but she could tell his heart wasn’t in  
1755 them. “May I speak with you privately?”  
1756 Mrs. West looked at Eliza, then at Preston. “Eliza, you go on inside and wait while I  
1757 speak with Mr. Marshall.”  
1758 Eliza narrowed her eyes, puzzling out what he wanted to discuss. She looked over her  
1759 landlady’s shoulder. “I’ll see you later.” She mouthed the words.  
1760 Mrs. West gently pushed her inside and closed the door.  
1761 Eliza started upstairs, but she was too excited to sleep. Perhaps a cup of warm milk with  
1762 cinnamon and sugar would help. By the time she’d the ingredients together, Mrs. West had come  
1763 back inside, Preston following.  
1764 He waited at the kitchen door while Mrs. West came in and patted her on the back. “He  
1765 wanted to speak with you, asking for leniency since the hour was late.” She smiled  
1766 mischievously. “Since no one is up at this hour of the night, no one should interrupt you if you  
1767 sit in the kitchen. I’ll be in my room, if you need me.”  
1768 And listening like a hawk, but Eliza wouldn’t complain.  
1769 Eliza lifted the cup of warm milk. “I can fix you tea, if you prefer.”  
1770 Preston shook his head. “Neither, thank you.” The heat had removed the chill from the  
1771 milk, and she stirred in the cinnamon-sugar mixture.  
1772 “I could watch you all day and all night,” he said thoughtfully.  
1773 Warmth raced through her cheeks.  
1774 He noticed her distress and laughed. “Maybe not all night. Bring your cup of milk and  
1775 join me.” He patted the chair beside him.  
1776 Eliza suddenly wished she’d changed out of her costume. Perhaps it was better this way,  
1777 since Preston also wore his party clothes. She sat down as Preston had requested. “What is it?”  
1778 “Tonight was almost everything I hoped I’d hoped it would be,” he said.  
1779 *Almost everything?* She couldn’t imagine any better outcome. They hadn’t been privy to  
1780 the discussions between Mr. Orson and Marina, but they’d accomplished the goal of helping the  
1781 mourning grandfather see they both had the baby’s best interests at heart. “What was missing?”  
1782 His eyes sparkled, and he reached into his coat pocket. “I was hoping to dance with you  
1783 all night without another thought in mind. And I hoped to.” He pulled a handkerchief from his  
1784 pocket and unwrapped it. “Kiss you under the mistletoe.” He dangled a sprig over her head and  
1785 snatched a quick kiss on her lips.  
1786 She lifted her fingertrips to her lips reflexively, a smile rising to her lips that she couldn’t  
1787 deny.  
1788 “I want to make official what our outing tonight only hinted at. That I, Preston Marshall,  
1789 am officially courting you, Eliza Lampert. That it is my sincere hope and prayer that we will be  
1790 man and wife by next Christmas. Please say yes.”

1791 Eliza could have expected it. She should have expected it. But she'd been too excited  
1792 about the evening to think beyond the night. "I guess I've known all along. Yes, Preston. With  
1793 all my heart and mind, yes. And we'll do it the right way."

1794 He kissed her again, lingering ever so slightly on her lips, then withdrew. "Until next  
1795 Christmas."

1796 "And many more." Outside the kitchen window they saw snow falling on the empty  
1797 streets, making the world white for a new beginning.

1798  
1799  
1800  
1801  
1802  
1803  
1804  
1805  
1806  
1807  
1808  
1809  
1810  
1811  
1812  
1813  
1814  
1815  
1816  
1817  
1818  
1819  
1820  
1821  
1822  
1823  
1824  
1825  
1826  
1827  
1828  
1829  
1830  
1831  
1832  
1833  
1834  
1835  
1836  
1837  
1838  
1839  
1840  
1841  
1842  
1843  
1844

### AUTHOR’S NOTE

My editor, Cynthia Hickey, challenged my creativity when she chose the theme of *masquerade* for Christmas 2017.

Masquerades—masks and costumes. Does anyone remember the show-stopping number from *Phantom of the Opera*? But as beautiful and amazing as those productions and costumes are, I aimed for a simpler masquerade: a community event even children might attend, wearing costumes based on characters from the Christmas narrative.

In the past, I’ve written several stories based on different people and themes of the Christmas narrative. For this story I was drawn to King Herod’s court. The heroine dressed as a servant girl at the court, who overheard his plans to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem. The hero took the part of one of the soldiers dispatched on the mission.

The theme grew out of the characters: a child in peril. (I won’t say more to avoid spoilers.)

For this story, my beloved New England seemed like a better setting than the Old West. I settled on Rhode Island to add a title to Forget Me Not’s line of 50 State romances. I added the cotton mill when I discovered the first successful cotton mill was built in Pawtucket, RI.

Both Newton and Nanepaushat are fictional towns. Nanepaushat comes from the Narragansett language meaning moon.

I hope you enjoy this story of Christmas and calico, intrigue and romance.

### BOOKS BY DARLENE FRANKLIN PUBLISHED BY FORGET ME NOT

1. Acadian Hearts Also found in:
  - a. Maine
  - b. Wilderness Weddings
2. An Advent Journey through Matthew
3. Angel in Disguise
  - a. Also found in Romancing the Ranger
4. An Apple for Christmas Also found in:
  - a. Christmas Traditions
  - b. Courting Cortlands
  - c. Love's Turning Point
  - d. Gifts of Christmas
5. A Beach Christmas Includes my story Merry Christmas, With Love
6. Beginnings: 30 Days in Genesis-Exodus
7. A Bride's Rogue Also found in:
  - a. Hearts of the West
  - b. Brides of the Old West
8. Bridge to Love Also found in:
  - a. Courting Disaster
  - b. A Soldier's Rest
  - c. Maple Notch Brides Books 1-3

- 1845 9. Capturing the Rancher's Heart Includes my story Ranger's Trail
- 1846 10. Christmas Visitors is found in:
- 1847 a. Holidays of the Heart
- 1848 b. Gifts of Christmas
- 1849 11. Civil War Brides includes Love's Raid
- 1850 12. Colorado Columbine Also found in:
- 1851 a. Love's Turning Point
- 1852 b. Opposites Attract
- 1853 13. Cinderella's Boot Also found in:
- 1854 a. Runaway Brides
- 1855 14. Colorado: 2 contemporary romance novellas and 2 historical Includes my story Colorado
- 1856 Columbine
- 1857 15. Colorado Columbine Also found in:
- 1858 a. Colorado: 2 contemporary romance novellas and 2 historical
- 1859 16. Colorado Melodies Includes: *Romanian Rhapsody, Plainsong, Knight Music*
- 1860 17. Dressed for Death Includes: Gunfight at Grace Gulch, A String of Murders, Paint Me a Puzzle
- 1861 18. THE FACE OF MARY Also found in:
- 1862 a. Texas: 4 Novellas in 1
- 1863 19. First Christmas
- 1864 a. Also found in Open My Heart This Christmas
- 1865 20. First Step to Romance includes my story Hidden Dreams
- 1866 21. Gifts of Christmas Includes: An Apple for Christmas, Lucy Ames, Sharpshooter, Christmas
- 1867 Visitors
- 1868 22. Golden Dreams Also found in Maple Notch Brides Books 4-6
- 1869 23. GUNFIGHT AT GRACE GULCH Also found in:
- 1870 a. Love's a Stage
- 1871 b. Dressed for Death
- 1872 c. Spyglass Lane Mysteries
- 1873 24. Hearts of the West includes my story A Bride's Rogue
- 1874 25. Hidden Dreams Also found in:
- 1875 a. First Step to Romance
- 1876 b. Maple Notch Brides Books 4-6
- 1877 26. Homefront Dreams Also found in:
- 1878 a. A Soldier's Rest
- 1879 b. Maple Notch Brides Books 4-6
- 1880 c. War Dolls
- 1881 27. Infusion of Love
- 1882 a. Also found in: Teacup Courtships
- 1883 28. Jacob's Christmas Dream Also found in:
- 1884 a. Christmas Mail Order Angels
- 1885 b. Mail Order Brides
- 1886 29. Laws of Love in Texas Includes: *Angel in Disguise; Lucy Ames, Sharpshooter; The Face of Mary;*
- 1887 *Love's Glory; A Bride's Rogue*
- 1888 30. Knight Music Also found in:
- 1889 a. Colorado Melodies
- 1890 b. Lone Star Trail
- 1891 31. Love's a Stage Includes my story GUNFIGHT AT GRACE GULCH
- 1892 32. Love's Glory Also found in:

- 1893 a. Holidays of the Heart
- 1894 b. A Soldier's Rest
- 1895 c. Love's Turning Point
- 1896 33. Love's Turning Point includes: *An Apple for Christmas, Matchmaker Mixup, Colorado*
- 1897 *Columbine, My Candy Valentine, Love's Glory*
- 1898 34. Love's Raid
- 1899 Also found in: Civil War Brides
- 1900 35. LUCY AMES, SHARPSHOOTER Also found in
- 1901 a. Gifts of Christmas
- 1902 36. Maine includes Acadian Hearts
- 1903 37. Maple Notch Brides Books 1-3 Includes Prodigal Patriot, Bridge to Love, and Love's Raid
- 1904 38. Maple Notch Brides Books 4-6 Includes *Hidden Dreams, Golden Dreams, and Homefront*
- 1905 *Dreams*
- 1906 39. Maple Notch Brides books 7-8 Includes *Saving Felicity* and *Small Town Bachelor*
- 1907 40. Matchmaker Mixup Also found in:
- 1908 a. Courting Cortlands
- 1909 b. Merry Matchmakers
- 1910 41. Mermaid's Song also found in Love Everlasting
- 1911 42. Merry Christmas, With Love: Also found in \
- 1912 a. A Beach Christmas
- 1913 b. Open My Heart This Christmas
- 1914 43. Merry Matchmakers. Includes Matchmaker Mixup
- 1915 44. My Candy Valentine Also found in:
- 1916 a. Holidays of the Heart
- 1917 b. Love's Turning Point
- 1918 c. Oklahoma
- 1919 45. Oklahoma which includes My Candy Valentine
- 1920 46. Open My Heart This Christmas which includes First Christmas
- 1921 47. Opposites Attract which includes Colorado Columbine
- 1922 48. Paint Me a Murder Also found in
- 1923 a. Dressed for Death
- 1924 49. Plainsong
- 1925 a. Also found in: Colorado Melodies
- 1926 50. PRODIGAL PATRIOT Also found in:
- 1927 a. A Soldier's Rest
- 1928 b. Maple Notch Brides Books 1-3
- 1929 c. War Brides
- 1930 51. Ranger's Trail
- 1931 a. Also found in Capturing the Rancher's Heart
- 1932 52. A Reader's Journey through Matthew
- 1933 53. Ready, Set, Romance includes my story *Saving Felicity*
- 1934 54. Romanian Rhapsody
- 1935 a. Also found in: Colorado Melodies
- 1936 55. Romancing the Ranger includes my story *Angel in Disguise*
- 1937 56. Runaway Brides includes my story *Cinderella's Boot*
- 1938 57. Saving Felicity Also found in:
- 1939 a. Ready, Set, Romance
- 1940 b. Maple Notch Brides books 7-8



- 1941
- 1942
- 1943
- 1944
- 1945
- 1946
- 1947
- 1948
- 1949
- 1950
- 1951
- 1952
- 1953
- 1954
- 1955
- 1956
- 1957
- 1958
- 1959
- 1960
- 1961
- 1962
- 1963
- 1964
58. Small Town Bachelor Also found in
- a. Maple Notch Brides books 7-8
  - b. Small Town Romances
59. Small Town Romances includes my story *Small Town Bachelor*
60. A Soldier's Rest Includes: *Prodigal Patriot, Bridge to Love, Tobogganing for Two, Love's Glory, Homefront Dreams*
61. SPINSTER ORPHAN TRAIN Includes *To Riches Again*
62. Spyglass Lane Mysteries Includes GUNFIGHT AT GRACE GULCH
63. A STRING OF MURDERS
- a. Also found in: Dressed for Death
64. Teacup Courtships includes my story *Infusion of Love*
65. Texas: 4 Novellas in 1 includes my novella *The Face of Mary*
66. To Riches Again also found in
- a. Spinster Orphan Train
67. Tobogganing for Two Also found in:
- a. Holidays of the Heart
  - b. Love's Sporting Chance, Volume 2
  - c. A Soldier's Rest
68. War Brides includes my story *Prodigal Patriot*.
69. War Dolls includes my story *Homefront Dreams*
70. Wilderness Weddings includes my story *Acadian Hearts*