



Love Inspired HISTORICAL

*Family of
Her Dreams*

KELI GWYN

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Серия «Mills & Boon
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Аннотация

A Family to Cherish Headstrong Tess Grimsby loves her new job caring for the children of a recently widowed man. But she never imagined that she'd fall for her handsome employer. Yet Spencer Abbott is as caring as he is attractive, and Tess can't help but feel for him and his family. Though, for the sake of her job, she'll keep any emotions about her boss to herself. Between his stationmaster responsibilities in a gold-rush town and trying to put his family back together, Spencer has his hands full. He soon finds his new hire's kind personality warming his frosty exterior. But could he ever admit to seeing her as more than just an employee?

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"Your most recent employer said you have a tendency to speak your mind. Is that true?"

That was a more tactful description of her supposed failings than the domineering man had used when he dismissed her. "I have opinions, but doesn't everyone?"

His blond brows rose, and he pressed a fist to his mouth. She thought she saw his lips twitch for an instant, and it gave her hope, but when he pulled his hand away, the frown was there as before. "Can you cook?"

"I assume you mean can I cook well, and the answer is yes. I can keep house, do laundry, sew, garden and care for animals, too. But the most important thing is that I'll do all I can to help your children through this difficult time."

He folded his arms and took his time studying her, as though

she was a horse or a milk cow. Well, two could play that game. Tess tilted her chin and let her gaze rove over his fine features, drinking her fill.

At length he nodded. “I’ll give you one week.”

In her experience, overbearing men like Spencer Abbott responded to a show of force. “How generous—but entirely unnecessary. I’ll prove my worth to you in a day.”

Award-winning author **KELI GWYN**, a native Californian, transports readers to the early days of the Golden State. She and her husband live in the heart of California’s Gold Country. Her favorite places to visit are her fictional worlds, historical museums and other Gold Rush–era towns. Keli loves hearing from readers and invites you to visit her Victorian-style cyberhome at keligwyn.com, where you’ll find her contact information.

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A man's heart deviseth his way:
but the Lord directeth his steps.

— Proverbs 16:9



For my mother, Patricia Lannon, who instilled a love of reading in me at an early age, introduced me to Mills & Boon romances when I was a teen and rejoiced with me when my dream of writing for their Love Inspired Historical line came true.

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[Chapter One](#)

July 1866 Shingle Springs, California

“Look out, ma’am!”

Tess Grimsby jumped back to avoid a fellow about fifteen pulling a baggage cart with far too much speed for the bustling rail station. She collided with a mother herding her four youngsters, causing the weary-looking woman to drop her wicker basket. Several children’s books slid across the wooden platform.

“My apologies. I didn’t mean to bump into you.” Tess stooped to pick up the books that had landed at her feet.

The woman made sure her children were all right, dropped to her knees and reached for a copy of *Little Bo-Peep*. “It wasn’t your fault.” She scowled at the baggage handler. “He needs to watch where he’s going.”

The young man parked his cart beside the baggage car and

sprinted over to them. “Sorry ’bout that. It’s my first day on the job, and my boss said to hurry. I’ve got to make a good impression.” He grinned, reminding Tess of one of the many boys she’d befriended when she lived at the orphanage.

She smiled. “No harm was done.”

A man with a voice as rich as Belgian chocolate addressed the teen. “Be more careful next time. Getting the baggage moved quickly is important, but Mr. Flynn wouldn’t want you to endanger our passengers, nor would I.”

“Right, sir.” The lad left.

“Come, children. We need to get home.” The mother took the books Tess had gathered, muttered something about troublesome teens and hustled her children across the crowded platform.

Tess slid her satchel back on her shoulder, straightened and found herself face-to-face with a broad-shouldered, golden-haired gentleman. He was younger than any of the men she’d worked for—and far more handsome with his strong chin and arresting sky-blue eyes, currently clouded with sadness. If he was Mr. Abbott—the widower she’d come to see—she could understand.

He held out her journal and said nothing for several seconds as he gazed at her, his expression unreadable. No doubt the tall man wasn’t used to looking a woman in the eye.

“Sir?”

The frown he’d worn faded, giving way to a hint of a smile that caused her breath to hitch. “I believe this is yours. It fell out

of your bag during the commotion.”

“Thank you.” She took the diary from him, its pages so full of her hopes and dreams—as well as the mementos she’d tucked between the pages—that she had to grip it tightly to keep items from falling out. She would add her train ticket to the collection of memorabilia, a symbol of the new chapter in her life she was eager to embrace. “You must be Mr. Abbott, the stationmaster.”

His forehead furrowed. “I am, but I don’t believe we’ve met.”

She shoved the bulging book into her satchel. “Not in person, although we’ve corresponded. I’m Tess Grimsby, Polly’s friend. I’ve come about the housekeeper position.”

“Ah, yes. She told me you’d arrive today.” He clutched a notebook with sun-bronzed hands that obviously did more than complete paperwork, and scanned the platform, where several passengers lingered. “I need to see to a few things. Could you come to my office in ten minutes?”

“That would be fine.” She could use the time to compose herself.

“Actually, let’s make that twenty. I need to see if anyone requires my assistance, and then we can take care of the interview.”

He certainly didn’t sound eager to meet with her. Not that she could blame him. Hiring someone to care for his motherless children could be difficult. “Very well. I’ll see to my trunks and meet you there.” She should have time to rent a room at the hotel.

Tess set off for the baggage area, weaving her way through

those waiting to board the train for its return trip down the hill. As the end station of the Placerville and Sacramento Valley Railroad, the depot was one of the busiest in the state. While it handled a great deal of freight, a number of travelers passed through Shingle Springs, too. However, few remained there, which she hoped to do.

People watched as she swept past them. Some even craned their heads to follow her progress. As much as she'd like to fade into the bustling throng, she couldn't. Everywhere she went she encountered the thinly veiled surprise and outright stares of strangers. You would think they'd never seen a tall woman before.

Peter Flynn, Polly's russet-haired husband who worked at the station, saw her and hustled over, a smile on his tanned face. They made quick work of their introductions.

"Polly said you were tall, but..." He tilted his head to look at her. "You could dust the ceiling at our place with the feathers on that hat of yours. Just how tall are you?"

Most people didn't come right out and mention her height, although she would prefer that to whispers behind fans. Polly had warned Tess that Peter spoke his mind. Since she tended to do the same, she didn't take offense. "Six foot."

He whistled a note of surprise, drawing the attention of several freight men, who viewed her with curiosity and made some less than flattering remarks. Indignation straightened her spine. She wasn't *that* much taller than other women. Why must everyone

make such a fuss about a few inches?

She lifted her chin and gave the workers the impassive look she'd practiced in the mirror until she'd perfected it. Once she had, she'd pasted it on whenever the sharp-tongued orphanage director maligned her, unwilling to let him see her pain. Nearly nine years had passed, but the recollection of Mr. Grimsby's cutting remarks left a bitter taste in her mouth. Thank the Lord she'd been able to leave the orphanage the day she turned sixteen, having secured a position caring for the children of a family heading West.

"At least you and Spencer will see eye to eye." Peter chuckled at his play on words but quickly sobered. "And speaking of him, I'd better get back to work. I'll have one of the boys deliver your trunks to the hotel." He doffed his hat and returned to his duties.

Standing on the platform in front of the depot, Tess surveyed the small town. Shingle Springs sat at the foot of the majestic Sierra Nevada mountain range, which rose up to meet the cloudless sky. The steady stream of wagons headed east had dug deep ruts in the wide main street. Most of the businesses and houses lining it were made of wood, but an impressive stone building on the south side stood out.

She crossed the street and made her way to the Planter's House hotel, a two-story white clapboard building with a balcony that shaded the porch below. With the temperature approaching triple digits, she would welcome getting out of the early afternoon sun.

A glance at the watch pinned to her bodice caused her to move

quickly. She'd have just enough time to change and dab on some rosewater to mask the lingering smell of the ashes and soot that had rained on her. Not that a railroad man like Mr. Abbott would notice the smoky scent.

From what Polly had written, he'd become so preoccupied since his wife's passing he could barely get himself to the depot on time. Once there, all he had time for was work—to the exclusion of everything and everyone else. Tess understood. Grief could immobilize a person. How many times had she seen newly orphaned children go through their days as though encased in a fog?

If all went well, she'd soon be caring for Mr. Abbott's two little ones and helping them deal with the loss of their mother. She looked forward to easing their father's burden and helping him cope with his grief, too.

* * *

“If you'll step inside, Mr. Drake would be happy to send a telegram for you.” Spencer Abbott directed the elderly couple to his ticket agent's cage and resumed his perusal of the platform.

Other than the new baggage handler's mishap, things had gone smoothly that morning. Spencer had been able to eat the meager pickings in his dinner pail in peace while rereading the letters Tess Grimsby had sent.

Although she had glowing recommendations from two of the families she'd served, her most recent employer had dismissed her. From what Spencer could tell, the banker had no complaints

about her work but had taken issue with her personality. Such things happened. Spencer knew that from experience. But a trait one employer disliked another might value. He believed in giving a person the opportunity to prove what he—or *she*—could do. Most people showed their true colors fairly quickly.

What troubled him more than Miss Grimsby's employment history was his reaction to her. When she'd stood and he'd looked into her eyes, speech had eluded him. Rarely had he encountered a woman that tall. She must be at least six foot, although with her hat the size of Texas, she appeared even taller.

While her height had come as a surprise, what had captivated him was the compassion in her warm brown eyes. Clearly she was a caring person. Rather than rail about the young man who'd almost barreled into her, she'd defended him and shown him kindness, which spoke well of her character. A woman like her should be able to take Luke's antics in stride.

What had kept Spencer riveted to her had nothing to do with her personality, though. He hated to admit it, but the reason he'd gawked at her like some smitten schoolboy had everything to do with her lovely features, from her delicately arched brows and high cheekbones to her rosy lips lifted in that mesmerizing smile. She was the first woman to capture his attention since he'd lost—

Focus, Abbott. He had no business thinking about another woman. Trudy had only been gone three short months. He was a widower in mourning who'd loved his wife, not a man in search of someone to take her place. Not that anyone could. She'd held

a special place in his heart and always would. It must have been loneliness that led his eyes to stray, that's all.

Well, he was master of his emotions. When Tess Grimsby returned, she'd see a man in control of himself. If he chose to hire her as his housekeeper, he would keep things strictly professional.

* * *

Tess emerged from the hotel wearing her favorite dress, a cobalt-blue calico that matched the three peacock feathers atop her hat. She tugged on her gloves, crossed the busy street and strolled alongside the tracks until she came to the railway station.

The depot was a hive of activity as men prepared for a freight train's arrival. Drivers seated on sturdy wagons waited for their cargo in front of three warehouses east of the station. Horses whickered and shook their heads to rid themselves of the ever-present flies.

Although the platform was large, the wooden building at the heart of the action was small. Somewhere inside sat the man who would determine her future. Mr. Abbott must hire her. If he didn't, she'd be forced to return to Sacramento City and pray she found another position before the last of the money in her reticule was gone.

She shook the small handbag dangling from her wrist, the jingle of the few coins inside lacking the reassurance she sought. While Polly had said she and Peter would welcome Tess, she couldn't impose on them, not when they were expecting a second

child soon.

Given her recent dismissal, Tess hadn't been able to secure another governess position in the city, despite spending two weeks searching for one. Polly's letter with news of Mr. Abbott's need had been most fortuitous. If he hired her as his housekeeper and her work pleased him, she'd be able to restore her reputation and replenish her depleted savings.

A bell tinkled as she entered the depot. The man in the ticket cage peered at her through the wrought iron grate and smiled. "Good morning, ma'am. May I help you?"

"I'm Tess Grimsby here to see Mr. Abbott. He's expecting me."

The ticket agent nodded. "Welcome, Miss Grimsby. I'm Mr. Drake. I'll let you in."

She waited at the door he'd indicated. It opened, and he pointed out another on her right. She paused and said a silent prayer.

"Don't be scared. He doesn't bite...often."

She wasn't afraid of Mr. Abbott, but she was concerned about her reaction to the appealing gentleman. Despite his ruffled frock coat and limp collar, it could be all too easy to cast admiring glances his way, and that would never do. She must act like the professional she was and keep her goal of being hired first and foremost. "Me? Scared? He's the one who ought to be. Men have been known to run from me."

Mr. Drake chuckled, the curled ends of his heavily waxed

handlebar moustache dancing. “You’ve got spunk. That’s good. You’ll need it if you’re to work for him. He’s a fine boss, but he can be a mite intimidating on his best days. Lately...well, let’s just say losing his wife three months back changed him.” He inclined his head toward the door to Mr. Abbott’s office. “Give it a rap, and he’ll invite you in.”

Tess peered through the small window inset in the door. Mr. Abbott sat at a desk in a painfully clean office with a ledger spread before him and his head in hands. Like Mr. Drake, who had a shock of wiry gray hair, Mr. Abbott had a full head of hair, as well, although his was the color of ripe rye at sunset. Unlike his ticket clerk, who had a ready smile, Mr. Abbott sported a frown, as he had earlier. Not a promising sign.

She knocked.

“Enter.”

She stilled her trembling hand and opened the door. He jumped to his feet.

“Miss Grimsby. Please, have a seat.” He held out a hand toward the bentwood chair facing his desk.

“Thank you, sir.” She sat, folded her hands in her lap and drew a calming breath. “I trust you received all the documents I sent.”

“I did.” He remained standing, resting his hands on the windowsill with his back to her. Several seconds passed before he spoke. “You’re not what I expected.”

Her nervousness fled. She didn’t appreciate being challenged at the outset, but she wouldn’t let him fluster her. “Neither

are you, but I can do the job, I assure you.” She’d worked for some prominent families in Sacramento City, the last one having a name anybody in the state would recognize. The wife of the widely respected banker had written her a letter of recommendation, albeit reluctantly. Not that Tess could blame her. The woman’s husband had found Tess’s direct manner problematic.

Mr. Abbott sat on the corner of his desk with his long legs draped over the side, forcing her to look up. She caught a flicker of feeling in his eyes. Curiosity perhaps? Or was it concern?

“Why would you come to a small town when you’re used to living among the elite? I lead a simple life, and I don’t want my children exposed to any newfangled notions.”

His manner and tone rankled. If she were to work for him, she’d have to show him she wouldn’t tolerate his high-handedness. “I’m a simple person myself, eager to leave the bustle of the city behind. I was most recently employed by a family of means, true, but I hail from humble circumstances.”

Please, don’t let him ask me to explain. She had no intention of educating him about her past. Humble circumstances didn’t begin to describe her miserable childhood.

“Your circumstances don’t concern me. But your methods do. I contacted your most recent employer. He said you have a tendency to speak your mind. Is that true?”

That was a more tactful description of her supposed failings than the domineering man had used when he dismissed her. “I

have opinions, but doesn't everyone?"

His blond brows rose, and he pressed a fist to his mouth. She thought she saw his lips twitch, and it gave her hope, but when he pulled his hand away, the frown was there as before. "Can you cook?"

Mr. Abbott's abrupt change of subject took her aback. "I assume you mean can I cook well, and the answer is yes. I can keep house, do laundry, sew, garden and care for animals, too. But the most important thing is that I'll do all I can to help your children through this difficult time." The Lord had used her to minister to countless youngsters who'd lost their parents, and she could put that experience to good use—provided Mr. Abbott hired her.

He folded his arms and took his time studying her, as though she were a horse or a milk cow. Well, two could play that game. She tilted her chin and let her gaze rove over his fine features, drinking her fill.

At length he nodded. "I'll give you one week."

A week? Her previous employers had offered a one-month trial period. Torn between a desire to laugh or shout, Tess gave an unladylike snort, which she covered with a cough.

In her experience overbearing men like Spencer Abbott responded to a show of force. She couldn't resist the urge to slip in a hint of sarcasm, too. "How generous—but entirely unnecessary. I'll prove my worth to you in a day."

Chapter Two

Spencer wasn't one to refuse a challenge. If Miss Grimsby was bold enough to claim that she could impress him in a day rather than asking for a month as he'd expected, she deserved the opportunity to try. The sooner he found out if her assertion was valid, the sooner he'd know if his search for a housekeeper was over.

As much as he detested the thought of a woman he didn't know helping raise his children, Peter's wife had vouched for Miss Grimsby. Polly had never steered him wrong.

While Spencer was certain Miss Grimsby could fix better meals than those he'd eaten lately, how would she deal with Luke? The poor tyke had taken to misbehaving. Having a different woman watching him every few days didn't help matters.

Miss Grimsby seemed to have the strength of character necessary to tame his spirited offspring. Not that Lila would pose a problem. She'd not even begun to walk. Ever since Trudy's death — Ever since the service his little girl had been content to play quietly with her blocks.

"You may start now. I'll run you out to the house and return at suppertime. Mrs. Carter, an elderly widow from church, is with the children now. She'll show you around."

She gave a decisive nod. "That would suit me just fine."

Spencer stopped his wagon beside Miss Grimsby a few minutes later and hopped down to help her onto the seat. She climbed aboard before he reached her. Her independent

streak didn't surprise him, but her agility did. He wouldn't have expected a woman that tall wearing boots with three-inch heels to move as quickly or gracefully. But there she sat looking as composed as any woman of leisure, the smooth plane of her neck exposed as she peered over her shoulder at the shops across the street from the depot.

"I noticed a general store earlier. Would you mind if I run inside for a moment before we get underway?"

Spencer groaned inwardly. "No, but make it quick. I've got work to do."

"I'll be back in a trice."

He slipped his gold watch out of his waistcoat pocket. He'd give her five minutes. If she wasn't back by then, he'd hitch his team to the post and tend to some paperwork. Waiting on a woman wasn't something he had time for. He closed his eyes to block the bright summer sun and made a mental list of all he had to accomplish that afternoon.

The wagon rocked as Miss Grimsby climbed aboard. "I'm sorry I took so long, but someone was ahead of me."

Three minutes wasn't long. Three minutes was astonishing. Unsure what to say, he grunted an acknowledgment. He pocketed his watch, took the reins and started the one-mile trek to his spread.

With each clop of the horses' hooves, the stabbing pain he experienced every time he saw the place intensified. Memories abounded, as sour as they were sweet. He and Trudy had worked

hard to make the house a home. Although she was gone, he could see her everywhere. Why, he fancied he could even smell the rosewater she'd favored.

"What was she like?"

"Huh?"

"Your wife. You looked sad. Were you thinking about her?"

An inquisitive housekeeper was not what he needed. "That's not something I care to talk about, especially with a stranger."

"I'm sorry. I thought—"

"You thought wrong. I need a job done. Nothing more." That had come out harsher than he'd intended. She was only trying to help. Even so, he didn't trust himself to talk about Trudy without choking up. Silence was safer.

"I'll pray for you. I know what it's like to lose a loved one and feel that vacant ache."

He bit back a retort. How could she possibly understand what he was going through? She'd never been married and left with two children to raise alone. "Pray if you like but no more questions please."

She bowed her head.

For some reason her gesture comforted him. He'd reached the point where he no longer knew what to pray and trusted the Spirit to intercede for him "with groanings which could not be uttered," as it said in Romans. If Miss Grimsby's prayers could help, he wouldn't turn them down.

When she opened her eyes, they held unasked questions, but

the compassion he'd seen before was there, too. She smiled, and the future didn't seem quite as bleak as it had. Perhaps she was as capable as she'd said and would solve his immediate problems. He'd know soon enough.

* * *

Tess remained silent the rest of the way to Mr. Abbott's place. He'd made it clear her attempts to offer sympathy were unwelcome. She could understand. Each child who'd come to the orphanage handled grief differently. Some wept. Some talked about their losses, while others kept their own counsel. Some blamed themselves and suffered guilt, while others lashed out in anger. And there were those like her soon-to-be employer who did their best to go on with their lives despite the near-crippling pain.

As she'd prayed, a sense of peace had descended on her—along with a sense of purpose. She wasn't here to get what she wanted. She was here to give of herself to this hurting family. All those years comforting others had prepared her for this. She would offer the care and comfort Mr. Abbott's motherless children needed, and she would lift some of the burden their grieving father carried.

Above all she would guard her heart. Even though she was drawn to him, she mustn't let herself care too much. This was a job like any other, and she would do well to remember that.

They approached a two-story ranch house painted bright red with white trim. All the windows were open, curtains peeking

from beneath the raised frames. A wraparound porch beckoned her to slip into one of the ladder-backed rocking chairs gracing it and spend time sipping lemonade with a friend. She'd often dreamed of having such a house, although the one in her dreams was blue—a lovely slate blue with burgundy trim.

Mr. Abbott parked the wagon, and she was on the ground in a heartbeat. He held out a hand toward the stairs. "After you."

She passed through the open front door and nearly gagged. What was that horrid stench? It smelled worse than the rotten eggs some of the more daring boys at the orphanage had hurled at Mr. Grimsby's carriage once—before he'd meted out the swift punishment he was known for.

"Luke!" Mr. Abbott bellowed and charged inside.

That didn't bode well. Tess followed on his heels. They reached the kitchen where a full-figured woman with white hair attempted to wipe a squirming baby girl's jam-spattered face. Mr. Abbott's four-year-old son ran circles around the dining table in the adjoining room, whooping like an Indian on the warpath.

Everywhere Tess looked, chaos reigned. Soiled shirts had been draped over chair backs, newspapers and toys were strewn about and a path had been worn through the dust coating the floorboards. Although she'd only been there two minutes, she itched to get to work restoring order and a sense of harmony.

Mr. Abbott addressed the older woman, raising his voice to be heard over the din. "What happened?"

"That boy of yours snuck up behind me when I was checkin'

the fire and chucked some salve in the stove.”

“What next?” He raked a hand through his thick blond hair, causing a swatch of his long locks to stand on end. Tess suppressed the urge to smooth it for him.

The older woman lugged the baby upstairs, and Mr. Abbott strode to the cookstove. Tess tore her gaze from him, entered the dining room and stepped in his son’s path. She caught the little fellow’s raised arm as he passed. “Whoa there, young man.”

He came to an abrupt stop and stared at her with eyes as big and round as washtubs. “Who are you?”

“I’m Tess, and you must be Luke.”

“What’re you doing here?”

“Your papa is going to see if I’m the right person to look after you and your sister.”

He shook his head wildly. “No! I don’t want you here. Go away.” He flew out of the house.

She took off after him, hitching up her skirts with one hand, holding on to her hat with the other and running as fast as her high boot heels would allow. He dashed into the barn. She found him crouched in the corner of an empty stall, tears flowing over his flushed cheeks, and her heart went out to him. She approached slowly on tiptoes, but she bumped into a shovel leaning against the wall and sent it crashing to the floor.

Luke prepared to bolt, but she caught him by the shoulders and held him tightly as he twisted and turned. She squatted so she wouldn’t tower over him. “I’m not going to hurt you, but I

won't let go until you settle down. You can't run off like that. A ranch is a big place. You could get hurt."

"No, I couldn't!"

The little fellow showed no signs of giving up his struggle. He flailed his arms as he attempted to break free. "You're coming with me, Master Luke." She planted him on her hip and headed to the house. His fists flew, coming uncomfortably close to her face. Her ears rang from his shrieked protests.

She reached the kitchen, where Mr. Abbott knelt in front of the stove filling two metal pails with glowing embers. He'd shed his coat and rolled up his shirtsleeves, revealing muscular arms. She had little time to take in the unexpected—albeit pleasing—sight because he turned toward her, exasperation etched in every line of his attractive face.

"Quiet down, Luke," he said in a firm voice. "Do something, Miss Grimsby. *Please.*"

The mischievous boy ceased shouting long enough to send her a triumphant smirk.

She'd had enough of his antics. No four-year-old, however unruly, would keep her from securing the position. She'd dealt with his kind before and knew just what to do. "I guess you don't want to see what kind of candy I brought. I won't give it to a boy who's pitching a fit. I'll set you down—if you agree to stay put. Will you do that?"

He crossed his arms over his chest in such an adult manner Tess hid a smile. She rummaged in her reticule with her free hand

and withdrew a small package. He followed her every move, his eyes glued to the peppermint stick she unwrapped.

“Here. Why don’t you smell it?” She placed the striped sweet under his nose, pulling back when he attempted to snatch it. “You may have it if you’ll sit quietly while your papa cleans up the mess you made.” She indicated a chair at the kitchen table.

The boy’s gaze was riveted on the red-and-white stick. He licked his lips. “I don’t like you, and you can’t make me.”

“You don’t have to like me, and I won’t make you. You just have to do as I ask.” She set him down but kept a firm grip on his shoulder.

His face scrunched in puzzlement. “You’re not mad?”

Tess shook her head. “I understand. You want your mama, but she’s gone now. I know you don’t want me here, but you need someone to cook your food, wash your clothes and buy you candy, don’t you?”

“You’ll buy me candy?”

“I will.” Provided Mr. Abbott hired her.

Luke studied her with the same intensity his father had. “Whenever I want?”

“No. Candy is a treat, but you’d get it sometimes.” She released her hold on him.

He sidled over to the chair and stood beside it a moment before sitting down. Tess handed him the sweet, which he promptly stuck in his mouth.

Mr. Abbott hefted a pail in each hand and headed to the back

door. She beat him there and held it open for him. His bright blue eyes held a hint of amusement—and something else. Attraction perhaps? Of course not. She must be seeing things.

“I didn’t expect you to stoop to bribery.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t classify it as bribery. I prefer to think of it as a reward for making a good choice.”

“Whatever you call it, it worked.” She warmed at his approval and smiled at his retreating form.

When Mr. Abbott and Mrs. Carter returned, he got the story out of her.

“I kept my eyes peeled, Mr. Abbott, but you know how troublesome your young’un can be. Luke got into a scuffle with the baby. Both of ’em wanted to play with that canvas ball you brung ’em last week. Lila wouldn’t let him have it, so he smacked her. I told him to stand in the corner, but he don’t mind any better than I cook.”

Judging by the deplorable state of the kitchen, cleaning wasn’t one of Mrs. Carter’s strengths, either. Dirty dishes were piled everywhere, chunks of dried food clinging to them. If the house hadn’t been filled with the overpowering stench that had greeted her, Tess would have been able to follow her nose to the kitchen.

Mrs. Carter set Lila on a blanket with a pile of blocks. The little girl seemed content to play with them. “Sorry ’bout the trouble with the salve. I opened all the windows, but I don’t think it done much good.”

Tess wrinkled her nose. “What kind of salve would make it

smell like some poor creature died in here?”

Mr. Abbott explained. “My dog has mange. I mixed lard and powdered sulfur, which I’ve been rubbing on him. It doesn’t have much of an odor normally, but it stinks something fierce if it’s burned.”

She laughed. “I’ll say. So, what do we do?”

“I got the stove cleared out. Now we wait for the smell to go away.”

“And the dog?” she asked. “What about him?”

“I’m keeping him in the barn until I get the mange under control. Could be a week or more.”

Mrs. Carter patted Tess’s arm. “I’m awful glad you’re here, young lady. You got a big job ahead of you. The place needs a bit of sprucin’ up, but I done my best. Those young’uns need a firm hand. I spent most of my time chasin’ after Luke. He’s a real handful, that one. Mind you, don’t let him out of your sight.”

Mr. Abbott washed up and donned his frock coat with its row of shiny brass buttons and a black armband to show he was in mourning. How sad that such a handsome man wore a perpetual frown. Perhaps one day she’d be able to make him smile.

“Might I have a word, Miss Grimsby?”

“Yes, sir.” She followed him onto the porch, doing her best to quell the queasiness his request had caused. Had she failed to please him already?

He cleared his throat and ran a finger under his collar. If she didn’t know better, she’d say he was as uneasy as she. Surely, in

his position, he was practiced in dismissing people.

“I understand you were governess to a number of girls before but only one boy—all of them considerably older than my children. Do you think you’re up to dealing with my son? He can be a challenge at times.”

Luke couldn’t begin to compare with some of the boys at the orphanage. “I am. Does this mean...?”

“What it means is that I’m considering things. Show me what you can accomplish before I get home tonight, and we’ll talk.” He descended two steps, paused and inclined his head toward the house. “You might want to go back inside before Luke springs a surprise on you.”

Tess maintained her composure until she was in the foyer. She lifted her hands to the heavens. *Thank You, Lord.*

She would set the place to rights, prepare a delicious meal and prove to Mr. Abbott she was the woman for the job. If all went well, she’d have a family to care for at last. It might not be her own, but it was the next best thing.

Chapter Three

A shrill whistle signaled the departure of an outbound freight train, relieved of its load and ready for the return trip to Sacramento City. Spencer checked his pocket watch. Right on time, just the way he liked it.

He crossed the platform and went in search of his freight traffic manager, notebook in hand. The sooner he got the statistics on the latest shipments from Peter, the sooner he could

update his records and find out how the station was doing.

Processing the cargo quickly and keeping their customers happy would improve their chances of gaining more business and ensure that he could keep his position as long as possible. He'd known ever since taking the newly created Shingle Springs stationmaster position the summer before that the Transcontinental Route to the north would bring about the end of his company's monopoly, which was why he had a plan that didn't depend on the railroad.

He located Peter talking with one of his workers. He finished the conversation and ambled over. "Come for the numbers, have you?"

"Are they any good?"

Peter consulted a sheaf of papers. "You'll be happy with them. But not as happy as when the Sutro Tunnel Act passes. Should be soon from what I hear."

Handling the many supply shipments needed to construct the six-mile tunnel connecting Nevada's Comstock's silver mines would give them plenty of work—for the time being. "Let's hope we get a fair amount of the business before it's siphoned off by the CP."

"Don't be such a killjoy. They haven't even reached the summit yet. It'll take some doing to blast through all that rock. We got us a few good years before our dreams of being rich railroaders die."

Peter didn't want to accept the bitter truth. Since Congress

had granted the Central Pacific the right to lay track east of California, it wouldn't be long before they reached Reno. Word was the CP aimed to make it to Cisco high in the Sierras by year's end and bore tunnels in the mountain passes through the winter. When that happened and the CP met up with the Union Pacific, the Placerville & Sacramento Valley Railroad, now enjoying its heyday, would become a sleepy passenger line.

Unlike his father, who'd counted on selling cattle to the army indefinitely, despite the fact that the war wouldn't last forever, Spencer had a contingency plan. That's why he'd turned down the offer of a company house in town and invested in a place of his own instead. Some thought him crazy, but once his bull arrived and he could begin building a herd of cattle—

“Spence?”

“Yes?” What had he missed?

“I asked if you wanted to take a break and see what kind of pie Miss Minnie fixed today. Based on the mouth-watering smells coming from the café, I'm guessing it's peach.”

“As tempting as that sounds, I have too much to do.”

“When are you going to relax and have some fun, Cap'n? You can spare ten minutes, can't ya?”

Spencer fought the urge to grimace. He never knew whether the nickname had been bestowed on him out of respect or if his workers were poking fun at him. Sure, he checked up on the various departments, but he trusted his men. He just wanted to assure himself things were running smoothly. His father had

spent his time holed up in his office oblivious to his ranch manager's shenanigans, and look where it had gotten him. He'd come close to losing everything.

"Take a whiff. If that hint of cinnamon in the air doesn't win you over, I don't know what will. Then again, perhaps you're saving your appetite for Mrs. Carter's latest culinary catastrophe." Peter gave Spencer a playful punch in the arm.

"She's done her best." The well-intentioned widow had ruined a perfectly good pot roast last night and made chicken as dry and tasteless as paper the night before that.

"Polly tells me Tess knows her way around a kitchen, so your troubles could be over."

"Perhaps." If the food on his table that evening wasn't scorched beyond recognition and he could swallow it without gulping water after each bite, he'd be happy.

"How about joining me, then? That way you know you won't starve."

Peter had a point. The simple dinner of bread and cheese Spencer had eaten at his desk left much to be desired. Supper was hours away, after all. This would give him an opportunity to show his men he wasn't as regimented as they seemed to think. "I'll drop this off—" he held up his notebook "—let Drake know where to find me and meet you there."

Fifteen minutes later Spencer chewed his last bite of pie, savoring the sweetness of the peach filling. "This was a good idea."

“At least you won’t waste away if Tess’s cooking doesn’t pan out.” Peter grinned at his pun. “And speaking of Tess, what do you think of her?”

“It’s too soon to tell.”

“She’s tall. At least as tall as you, isn’t she?”

Not quite, if his estimate was correct. “It’s the hat.”

Peter chuckled. “Quite something, isn’t it? She could provide shade for half the town under that thing. Although her taste in bonnets might be questionable, she’s easy on the eyes. Or didn’t you notice?”

He’d noticed all right. Because of her, he’d had a hard time concentrating ever since he returned from running her to the ranch. Memories of her captivating smile kept resurfacing. “My mind was on the interview.”

“Do you think you’ll hire her?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I offered to give her a one-week trial period, but she countered, claiming she could convince me of her suitability in a day. I accepted her challenge.” Spencer stood, and Peter followed suit.

“Polly said she’s got pluck.”

She did indeed. Would her plucky ways keep his headstrong son in line? Or would she resort to mollycoddling to get Luke’s cooperation, as several of the church women had? One stick of candy to win him over initially couldn’t hurt, but a lack of consistent discipline could ruin him.

Since his son was almost guaranteed to act out at supper, he’d

have Miss Grimsby handle the situation. If she didn't exert a firm hand, he'd have no choice but to give her a day's wages and put her on a train back to Sacramento City. He hoped it didn't come to that.

* * *

Tess surveyed the parlor. Mrs. Abbott had certainly loved red. At least she'd chosen burgundy furnishings rather than the cherry red on the house itself. The plush chairs and settee in the rich color coordinated with the blue flowers sprinkled amid sprays of wine-colored roses on the wallpaper's white background. Some slate-blue accents would bring out the secondary color and add a soothing element. Curtains, pillows and a rug, too.

She could imagine Mr. Abbott in the wingback armchair by the fireplace, a child on each knee. A sewing basket sat on the table beside the settee. His wife's favorite place to sit had likely been the end of it nearest him. The picture of domestic bliss.

A wistful sigh escaped, and Tess chided herself. Giving way to the longing for a family of her own would do no good. She mustn't fuel futile dreams. How many times had Mr. Grimsby told her she'd best prepare for a lifetime of service?

His words uttered on her tenth birthday came back as sharp and piercing as ever. *No man will look twice at you, Tess. You're going to tower over most of them. And those who are tall won't be interested in a woman who can look them in the eye. A man wants to feel superior in all respects. Take my word for it, and apply yourself to your studies, so you can earn a decent living.*

And then came the nickname. Of course Charlie had been the one who'd overheard that dreadful conversation. Charlie, who taunted anyone and everyone, from the youngest children all the way to the orphanage director himself.

Too-Tall Tess.

That's what Charlie had dubbed her, and nothing she could say or do would silence him. So, she'd done the only thing she could—pretended it didn't matter.

From that day on she'd vowed never to let anyone see how much she detested being different. She'd stood tall, proud and unflinching as the other children singsonged the ditty Charlie had coined.

Oh, what a pity! Oh, what a mess!

When God said height, she shoulda asked for less.

She's Too-Tall, Too-Tall, Too-Tall Tess.

It didn't help that Tess wasn't her real name. Mr. Grimsby had given it to her when her father left her at the orphanage, despite the fact that she'd told the domineering director her name was Faith. Although Tess was a fine name, his insistence on using it and offering no reason why had rankled.

After shaking herself from her reverie, Tess smoothed the crisp white cloth covering the pedestal table in the center of the room, repositioned the antimacassar on the back of Spencer's armchair and pronounced the parlor ready for inspection.

Restoring the dining room to rights would take no time at all. The layer of dust coating everything gave evidence no one

had eaten there since Mrs. Abbott's passing. Perhaps Mr. Abbott felt her absence in that room more deeply than other places. Replacing old memories with new would help.

Tess gathered the soiled shirts draped over the chairs and picked up the toys. She removed the petrified bouquet serving as the centerpiece. She'd send Mrs. Carter and the children in search of fresh flowers, thus gaining the time needed to scour the kitchen and plan her supper menu.

Discovering the whereabouts of the widow and the little ones was easy. Mrs. Carter must have asked Luke to do something he didn't want to do. His complaints coming from the backyard could be heard throughout the house. That boisterous boy would require a firm hand—and a full measure of compassion. He must miss his mama terribly.

Tess stepped through the back door onto the wraparound porch. She called to the older woman, who had the baby propped on one hip. They stood beneath a sprawling oak with a rope swing suspended from one of its sturdy branches. "I'd like a fresh bouquet on the table tonight, Mrs. Carter. Might I ask you to pick some flowers? I saw a nice selection in the beds out front."

The widow appeared relieved by the request. Luke even ceased his whining. "The children and me would be happy to do that, wouldn't we, Luke?" She gave him an over-bright smile.

"I don't wanna, and I'm not gonna. I want her to push me on the swing. Right now!" He jabbed a stubby finger at Mrs. Carter. Tess feigned indifference. "That's all right. I don't want your

help, after all.”

He eyed her with suspicion. “You don’t?”

“No. This is a special job, and you’re still quite young. I don’t think you could pick flowers without breaking their stems or crushing their petals.”

He rammed his fists against his sides and scrunched his face in a sour-pickle expression. “I could, too.”

“What do you think, Mrs. Carter? Should we let him try or have him sit with Lila and watch while you pick the flowers?”

Luke snorted. “I’m not a baby. I’m a big boy. Papa says so, and he knows everything.”

The snowy-headed woman looked from him to Tess and back again, understanding dawning. “I reckon we could let him try...if he promises to be careful.”

“I won’t hurt them. I’ll show you.” He raced around the corner of the house. Lila bounced on Mrs. Carter’s ample hip as she hurried after him.

With the children occupied, Tess had the house to herself once again. She donned her apron and plunged her hands into a tub of hot water. Determined to get the mountain of dirty dishes washed quickly, she attacked an encrusted dinner plate with such fervor that soap bubbles formed on the water’s surface. Normally she didn’t relish the scent of lye soap, but today she welcomed anything strong enough to cut the lingering stench of the sulfur.

What could she prepare for supper that would overpower the horrid smell and fill the air with tantalizing aromas? When she

was out back, she'd noticed a garden with a healthy crop of weeds mounting a takeover. Perhaps she could find some ripe vegetables among those that had rotted on the vines. That would be a start.

“Lord, You know how much I need this position, so please show me what You'd like me to prepare.” If He'd led her here, as she believed He had, surely He could provide her with inspiration.

She was eager to impress Mr. Abbott, so he'd hire her. Although he was a bit on the dour side, he struck her as a fair man. Working for the handsome stationmaster could prove to be a distraction, but she was more than willing to deal with that.

Twenty minutes later Tess dried the last bowl, put it in the cupboard and hung the damp dishtowel on its peg. She delivered lemonade to Mrs. Carter and Luke, who'd picked enough flowers to fill two vases.

He leaned back against the porch railing, his ankles and arms crossed, looking adorable despite his dirt-streaked face. “We picked whole bunches of flowers, and I didn't hurt none of them.”

Tess smiled. “You did a fine job, Luke. I'll have to tell your papa what a big help you've been.”

The little boy beamed, seemed to think better of it and assumed a stoic manner so like his father's it was all she could do not to laugh. She shifted her attention to Mrs. Carter, who sat in a rocking chair with Lila in her lap. “If you're content to enjoy the shade and the cool drink, I'll get to work on the meal.”

“We’re fine, dearie. Chasin’ after these young’uns the past week plumb wore me out, so I’m happy to sit here and keep ’em out from under your petticoats.”

Normally Tess would welcome the children’s help. She had wonderful memories of working alongside Josette, the cook at the orphanage, when she was a girl. However, since this meal had to be exemplary in order for her to secure the position, she would leave Luke and Lila in Mrs. Carter’s care.

Wending her way between the rows of the garden with basket in hand, Tess found what she needed to prepare a light but tasty soup to start the meal.

Luke raced around the house and hollered. “A wagon’s coming, and it’s not Papa.”

She set her bounty by the back door and followed Luke to the front of the house. A wagon rumbled down the rutted road toward them. The young man beside the driver waved. “I wonder who they could be.”

The rhythmic creaking of Mrs. Carter’s rocking chair ceased. She joined Tess at the porch railing. “Looks like that German man and his son from over yonder.” The widow waved her free hand toward the parcel of land to the east. “The young fellow speaks right fine English, but his father ain’t learned it so good.”

The wagon approached the house with a jangle of harnesses. The driver parked beside the porch. “*Guten Nachmittag. Ve haf Lachs.*” The stocky older man reached in a pail and pulled out a fish large enough to feed Mr. Abbott, his children, Mrs. Carter

and Tess with some left over. “Ve haf much. You must some take.”

“See what I mean?” Mrs. Carter muttered.

Tess smiled. “I believe he said ‘good afternoon.’ It appears he’s sharing his catch with us.” She knew just what to make for supper. The Lord had evidently heard her prayers.

The driver’s son, a young man about eighteen, jumped to the ground. He took the fish from his father, wrapped it in a cloth and held it out to her. “We didn’t catch them. They came up on the train. When Vati saw them, he got this one for Mr. Abbott. A gift. Vati knows how difficult it is for a man to lose his wife and be left with children to raise on his own. He wanted to do something to help.”

Tess took the fish and nodded at the older man. “That’s kind of you, Herr...”

“Mueller,” the young man offered. “He’s Wolfgang—” he jabbed a thumb at his father “—and I’m Frank.”

“Well, thank you both. This is a godsend.”

“I’ve met Mrs. Carter—” Frank nodded in the widow’s direction and shifted his attention to Tess “—and you must be Miss Grimsby.”

“Yes, I am. I hope to become Mr. Abbott’s housekeeper. How did you hear about me?”

“Mr. Flynn over at the railway station told us about you. It seems you stood out. There aren’t too many women in Shingle Springs as tall as a *Hopfenpfosten*—a hop pole.” He grinned.

“I wish you well. I know from helping Vati build the large pen beyond Mr. Abbott’s barn that he can be an exacting boss, but he’s a fair one.”

Mrs. Carter huffed. “If he’s to be her boss, she’d best not spend her day yammerin’ with the likes of you. She’s got a supper to fix.”

Tess chuckled. “As much as I’ve enjoyed meeting you, Mrs. Carter has a point.” She bid the Muellers farewell and headed for the kitchen, eager to fillet the fish.

Some time later Mrs. Carter and the children joined Tess.

“That supper of yours is smellin’ mighty good, young lady. What’re you fixin’?”

“We’ll start with julienne soup. Then we’ll have the salmon sprinkled with black butter, served with herbed potatoes and tomato slices. I found fresh peaches in the pantry, so I was able to whip up a pie for dessert.”

Lila, who sat on a blanket in the corner, squealed.

Mrs. Carter smiled, proving she had a kind heart beneath her brusque manner. “Sounds like she’s happy. Let’s hope her papa is, too. I’m more’n ready to leave this place in your hands and get back to mine.”

Tess stirred the soup. If Mr. Abbott didn’t arrive soon, the vegetables would be mush.

As if on cue, a wagon pulled in.

“Papa!” Luke took off.

Mrs. Carter lifted Lila into her arms. “We’ll go meet him,

wash up and give you time to get the last of your supper rustled up. You'll find us waitin' in the dinin' room."

The next ten minutes flew by in a blur as Tess grilled the salmon and browned the butter. She removed her apron and said a silent prayer of thanks. Everything had turned out fine, after all. Savoring the sense of accomplishment, she poured the soup into the tureen, grabbed a ladle and headed to the dining room.

Mr. Abbott's deep voice carried, sending a shiver of excitement shimmying up her spine. "It certainly smells better in here. Do you know what we're having, son?"

Luke made a horrid sound like a cat trying to rid itself of a hairball. "I don't want any of it 'cept for the pie. She ruined the soup and burned the fish."

Tess came to an abrupt stop in the doorway, the soup she carried sloshing precariously. Luke's uncomplimentary proclamation was to be expected, but the welcome hint of merriment in Mr. Abbott's eyes had faded all too rapidly, leaving him looking as formidable as ever.

Well, he could frown all he liked. She was an excellent cook and would impress him with her culinary skills, or her name wasn't Tess Grimsby.

She marched into the room with her head held high.

Chapter Four

Spencer didn't know which amused him more, Luke's antics or Miss Grimsby's show of pique. He hid his twitching lips behind his napkin. "Luke, that's unkind. We must be grateful for

what we're served."

She set a large bowl of soup on the table, performed an about-face and left the room without a word.

He cast a glance at Mrs. Carter, seated to his left on the other side of Luke with Lila in her lap. The widow appeared to be concealing a smile, too. "You got nothin' to fear, Mr. Abbott. I slurped a spoonful of the soup earlier, and it's delicious."

"I look forward to tasting it myself."

"But she said the soup was ruined, Papa. I heard her."

"I said no such thing." Miss Grimsby placed a platter of fish in front of Spencer that smelled so good his mouth watered. "It's julienne soup. Not *ruined* soup. I gather you've never had it before."

Luke shook his head so soundly his long hair flapped from side to side. "Mama didn't fix things with funny names. She made what Papa likes. Steak and baked potatoes. Not smelly old burned fish."

"I didn't burn the fish, Luke. What makes you think that?" Miss Grimsby gazed at the ceiling for several moments.

All of a sudden she nodded. "I understand. You heard me tell Mrs. Carter I was going to make black butter to drizzle over the fish. The butter's not really black, though. It's just browned, and it tastes good. I'll bring in the rest of the food, and you can see for yourself."

She returned with a dish of small potatoes cut into chunks and sprinkled with herbs, along with a plate of artistically arranged

tomato slices. Rather fancy fare for a family supper. Not that Spencer was complaining. Steak and baked potatoes were fine, but a man could do with a change on occasion.

And fresh fish? How had she managed that? This looked to be salmon. His favorite. Trudy couldn't stomach seafood, so he'd not had any in years.

His gut tightened. Trudy. He'd eat steak and potatoes every day for the rest of his life if that would give him one more hour with her. One more opportunity to take her in his arms, pull her to his chest and feel the silkiness of her hair against his chin. One more chance to tell her how sorry he was for—

“Mr. Abbott?”

“Hmm?”

Miss Grimsby sat at the opposite end of the rectangular table with Lila in her lap. “Did you want to say grace?”

“Yes. Of course.”

She took Lila's hands in hers, pressed the baby's palms together and covered them with her own.

Spencer swallowed the boulder that lodged in his throat at the site of his little girl in another woman's arms, a capable and caring woman as different from Trudy as California was from Texas. A comely woman who'd filled his thoughts far too often since their trackside meeting. “Thank You, Father, for the meal and for...the h-hands that prepared it.”

He cast a furtive glance around the table to see if anyone had noticed his hesitation. Mrs. Carter and Luke's heads were

bowed. Miss Grimsby, on the other hand, had something akin to sympathy on her face. When she realized he'd seen her, she blushed a pretty shade of pink and squeezed her eyes shut. He hastened to cover his halting start. "Thank You that we can gather around the table to enjoy this unexpected treat. Be with us as we partake. In Christ's name. Amen."

Miss Grimsby plopped some potatoes on her plate and averted her gaze, for which he was grateful. The only sound was the clink of silverware on porcelain as they filled their plates.

Spencer dipped his spoon into the soup. Despite the strange name, the little strips of vegetables swimming in broth were tastier than he'd expected. Crisp, not mushy—just the way he liked them.

How strange it was to be in the dining room. They hadn't eaten there since Trudy's death—in months. The shirts he'd slung over the chairs were gone, the tabletop gleamed and his wife's cherished vase overflowed with a massive bouquet. "Those flowers. Where did they come from?"

"We picked them, Papa. Me and her." Luke pointed to Mrs. Carter.

"They're from the beds out front, aren't they?" He hadn't meant for his question to come out with such force, but—

"They are." Miss Grimsby eyed him warily. "I thought they would brighten the table and fill the air with a pleasant aroma. Is there a problem?"

"My wife planted them. They were her pride and joy."

“I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t know.”

There was no way she could have. The vase was so full of colorful blooms that there couldn’t be many left out front. But there would be more. In time. “It’s all right.”

Miss Grimsby’s fine features relaxed, although he detected pity in the glance she sent him. Sympathy was bad enough, but he wanted no part of pity.

Conversation had ceased following his heated question. Not that he could blame the others for being quiet. The same thing often happened at the rail station when his feelings got the better of him, which happened far too often these days. He must regain control.

His normally unobtrusive daughter wriggled and whimpered. His prospective housekeeper had her hands full holding Lila while trying to eat. The baby’s flailing fist sent Miss Grimsby’s spoon sailing. Then his little girl flung her arms open wide and said “Papa” as clear as you please. Her first word ever, and she’d said it for him.

“It would appear she wants you, sir.”

“So it does. Would you mind bringing her to me?”

Miss Grimsby did so and promptly returned to her seat. He caressed Lila’s cheek. She gave him a dimple-producing smile, showing off her first four teeth. It was hard to believe she was already ten months old and had been without a mother three of them.

It soon became clear he wouldn’t be able to get much eating

done with his squirming daughter in his lap. Trudy had always been the one to hold Lila during meals. A woman seemed to have a knack for juggling a baby while eating that he lacked.

“Would you mind bringing your plate down here, Miss Grimsby, and sitting beside me so you can help with Lila?” He inclined his head toward the chair on his right.

“Certainly.” She quickly obliged.

“No!” Luke shrieked. “She can’t sit there. That’s Mama’s chair.”

“What do you think you’re doing, son? You know better than to yell at the supper table.”

“Make her get up.”

“She’s sitting there, and that’s that.” Spencer could understand how difficult it must be for Luke to see another woman in Trudy’s place, but the sooner he accepted the new order of things, the better. Miss Grimsby had already managed to lift the gloom that had settled in on that dark April day when he’d lost Trudy after her unfortunate accident in the garden. The house wasn’t just clean. It felt welcoming for the first time in months.

Lila fussed again, and Spencer turned to comfort her. Something cool and wet hit his cheek and fell to the floor. He hadn’t even figured out what it was when another of the sticky projectiles pelted him in the chest, leaving a round, red spot on his white shirt before sliding beneath his waistcoat. Luke must be lobbing tomato slices at him.

Sure enough, a third slab sailed across the table and landed in

his lap. “Lucas Mark Abbott, you stop that this minute, or I’ll—”

“I can handle this, sir. Here.” Miss Grimsby handed Lila to him once again, grabbed Luke by the hand and forced him to follow her. “You’re coming with me, young man.”

Taken unaware, Luke didn’t have time to protest. He shot a pleading look at Spencer, who inclined his head toward Miss Grimsby. “Go.”

Because the attack had taken him by surprise, he’d forgotten his plan to have Miss Grimsby handle any needed discipline and had been ready to take his son to task. She’d taken charge of the situation before Spencer had time to act—a bold but admirable choice. He was curious to see what she’d do.

As much as he detested the thought of leaving the care of his children to a virtual stranger, he had no choice. He’d know soon what type of disciplinarian she was and if she could be trusted with his children.

Mrs. Carter paused with her fork halfway to her mouth. “That young woman is just what you been needin’, Mr. Abbott. You’d be a fool to let her get away.” She went right on eating, which suited Spencer, since he couldn’t think of a suitable response.

Lila poked his cheek with a pudgy finger. “Papa.” That one word meant more to him than he’d thought possible. It seemed like only yesterday Luke had said it for the first time.

“Yes, my sweet. I’m your papa. And you’re my little princess.” He kissed her forehead, letting his lips linger a moment. Trudy used to say nothing was as soft or sweet as a baby’s skin, and she

was right.

But she was gone, and this precious girl would have no memories of her mother. The all-too-familiar ache squeezed his chest.

Spencer strained to hear what was taking place in the parlor, but other than the murmur of voices, he couldn't make out anything. No screaming. No crying. No spanking. The higher pitch indicated Miss Grimsby was doing most of the talking. He'd like to be privy to that conversation.

A good two minutes went by with Lila gnawing on a potato chunk, Mrs. Carter shoveling in her salmon and Spencer doing his best to clean up the aftermath of Luke's assault while balancing Lila on one knee. If Miss Grimsby and Luke didn't return soon, Spencer would have no choice but to intervene.

Moments later Miss Grimsby and Luke appeared in the dining room doorway. Rather than the defiant stance Spencer expected, Luke's shoulders slumped. He scuffed the toe of his shoe over the wooden floor, his eyes downcast, and mumbled something.

Miss Grimsby leaned over and spoke softly beside Luke's ear. "Remember what I said. Look at your papa and say it loudly enough for him to hear."

"She said I gotta tell you I'm sorry. So, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you sad."

"I'm not sad, son. I'm disappointed. Throwing things is not the way a gentleman deals with his anger. You must be punished for this."

“He will be, sir.” Miss Grimsby picked up Luke’s plate. “Right now he’s going to finish his meal at the kitchen table. Alone. And tomorrow he’s going to scrub your shirt until the tomato stain is gone.”

With Luke exiled and Lila back in Miss Grimsby’s lap, Spencer was free to enjoy the meal, one of the best he’d been served in a long time. The food rivaled that prepared at the restaurants in Sacramento City’s finest hotels.

Miss Grimsby chatted with Mrs. Carter about the town, the weather and numerous other topics. Spencer made no effort to join in. He was content to enjoy his supper and the fact that—should his conversation with Miss Grimsby afterward prove satisfactory—he’d be having many more like it in the days to come. The prospect of coming home and finding the good-looking woman in his kitchen lifted his spirits more than it should.

A glance at Luke proved that being forced to eat by himself was an effective punishment. The wistfulness in his eyes made Spencer consider overriding Miss Grimsby and allowing Luke to rejoin them. But only for the briefest moment.

If he did hire her, he couldn’t undermine her authority. One didn’t treat one’s employees that way. She deserved respect, and he’d give it to her. In return she would brighten his world and make his days a bit more bearable.

* * *

Tess stood on the porch and watched the wagon grow smaller.

With Luke accompanying his father on the trip to take Mrs. Carter home, she could clear the dining table quickly, make short work of the dishes and plan what she'd serve for breakfast.

"If there's time, lovely Lila, I'll give you a bath. It doesn't look like you've had one in ages." She kissed each of the baby's cheeks and held her close for a minute, savoring the incredible sweetness of having a little one to care for. At ten months, Lila was her youngest charge ever—and so pretty.

The baby had her father's striking eyes—the brilliant blue of an alpine lake—as well as his golden hair. Luke, on the other hand, must take after his mother, although the brown-haired, brown-eyed boy did have Mr. Abbott's broad forehead and strong jaw. If he ended up half as handsome as his father, he'd be a fine-looking man one day.

"What am I doing woolgathering when I have work to do?" She set Lila on a blanket in the corner of the kitchen. The little girl banged her blocks together while making sounds resembling speech. At this rate she'd be adding words to her vocabulary in no time.

Lila held out a block to Tess. "Papa."

"No, sweetheart. I'm not your papa, but he'll be home soon." She left the baby attempting to build a tower and attacked the dishes.

What would Mr. Abbott have to say when he talked with her after his return? Perhaps she'd been hasty in her handling of Luke, but if he was allowed to get away with bad behavior, he

could turn out like Charlie. Although the boy from her orphanage days was bright, he'd become a bully and a troublemaker. She wouldn't let that happen to her young charge.

By the time Mr. Abbott and Luke returned, the kitchen was clean, the next day's breakfast was planned, and Lila was bathed and ready for bed. Tess didn't relish the tug-of-war sure to take place if Mr. Abbott expected her to put Luke down for the night. Something told her the boy would raise a ruckus. After her travel and hard work, along with the pressure to please, her bed at the hotel was calling her name. By the time she walked the mile back to town, she'd have to force herself to stay awake long enough to complete her toilette.

She went out front with Lila resting against her chest. "I'm glad you're back. She's about to nod off."

"He has." Mr. Abbott pointed to Luke, asleep on the wagon seat next to him, his head in his father's lap. "I'll see if I can get him upstairs without waking him."

With slow, steady movements, Mr. Abbott extricated himself, gathered Luke in his arms and mounted the stairs. "Come with me please, Miss Grimsby."

She complied.

Luke didn't stir as his father carried him to his room and put him to bed. Mr. Abbott rummaged under the rumpled bedding, pulled out a crib-size quilt and laid it next to his sleeping son. "Good night, my boy. May God bless your slumber." He placed a kiss on Luke's brow, a gesture so tender that Tess's lips trembled.

She couldn't remember anyone ever tucking her in or praying a blessing over her like that. Mr. Abbott might have a serious mien, but he was a caring father.

"Come to Papa, princess." He took his daughter from Tess and, with a tilt of his head, beckoned her to follow him to Lila's room.

Mr. Abbott repeated the bedtime routine and launched into a lullaby, his beautiful baritone filling the room. Tess, who loved music but was about as melodic as a mule, marveled at the gift given him. If anyone had told her the stoic stationmaster sang to his children, she wouldn't have believed it. What a surprising man. She looked forward to learning more about him.

Lila was asleep before her father reached the last verse. He smoothed the sheet over her and placed a small quilt by her side, as he'd done with Luke.

"Your wife's handiwork I presume?"

"It was the last thing she made. She'd planned to make a quilt for us, too, but..." He released a ragged breath. Tess had a sudden urge to place a comforting hand on his shoulder as he gazed at his daughter but stopped herself just in time.

He cast a lingering look at the sleeping girl and turned to Tess, all business once again. "I'll see to the horses while you're still here to watch the children. Give me ten minutes, and meet me on the porch."

"Yes, sir." He left, and she sank into the cozy rocking chair where Mrs. Abbott had likely nursed the baby. Tess spent a good

five minutes listening to the rhythm of the rockers on the wooden floor and drinking in the sight of Lila's cherubic lips parted as she drew in measured breaths. *Lord, if it's Your plan for me to care for these children, I'd be grateful.*

Tess forced herself to leave the nursery. She paused in the doorway of Luke's room. The sheet Mr. Abbott had spread over his son had become tangled in the short time he'd been in bed. Even in slumber the boy was active.

Luke's room was strewn with toys, whereas Lila's was devoid of clutter. Tess would help him clean his, so it would be a pleasant place to play. Not that she could picture him spending much time indoors. He was a boy who needed to get outside and expend some of his abundant energy.

She heaved a wistful sigh, made her way downstairs and busied herself in the kitchen. The parlor clock chimed. A quarter to eight already.

The time had come. She must face Mr. Abbott and find out if her hard work had secured her the position. He'd appreciated the meal. That was clear. But was he willing to welcome another woman into his home and entrust his children to her care—even a competent one such as she?

Tess located him on the porch, his hands resting on the railing, his gaze fixed on some distant point. She'd seen that look on the face of every man she'd worked for, the look of a man surveying his territory, be it his business, his house or his land.

She stood beside him, got a glimpse of his face and fought

a wave of nausea. If Mr. Abbott's scowl was an indication of his thoughts, she'd be on her way back to Sacramento City tomorrow. She didn't know which would hurt worse—being denied the opportunity to care for adventurous Luke and his adorable baby sister or saying goodbye to their intriguing father.

Chapter Five

Mr. Abbott spun to face Tess. He caught her staring at his soiled front, where Luke had splatted him with a tomato. "It looks like I'll be hauling out the washtub after you leave."

"You're going to wash your shirt now? Tonight?"

His intention to see to the task himself surprised Tess, but not as much as her desire to tend to it for him. If she did, she'd have another half hour's work before she could leave and would have to arrive early enough the next day to iron the shirt before he headed to the railway station.

He leaned against the porch railing with his arms and ankles crossed, looking quite appealing—aside from the red splotch in the middle of his chest. She couldn't keep from smiling.

"Since this was my last clean shirt, I don't have a choice." He swept a hand toward the unsightly spot and gave a hollow laugh, but his attempt to lighten the mood couldn't mask the embarrassment that had left his neck flushed.

The admission hadn't been an easy one for him. Somehow she'd have to summon the strength needed, because she wasn't about to let him struggle with a chore sure to be foreign to him. Not when she could make short work of it. "I'll wash one of your

shirts, but not that one. Luke's going to help me with it."

Relief flooded his fine features. "I shouldn't accept your offer since it's getting late, but I can't stop myself. The past few weeks have been— Thank you."

Her heart swelled with sympathy. "You are in need of help, aren't you?"

"I've managed."

"Yes, but life would be easier if you had someone to see to such things." Not *someone*. Her.

"My wife...she made sure I had..." He pressed a fist to his mouth. "I never expected to be in this position."

"Things *will* be different, Mr. Abbott. There's no denying that, but I can ease your burden, provided you'll let me. You've seen that I can cook and clean—and that I won't let Luke drive the locomotive."

Her metaphor elicited a smile. A halfhearted one but a smile nonetheless. She'd pushed as hard as she dared. Now to wait for his response.

It came before she had time to take a breath. "You said you could prove your worth in a day, and you've done that. The job's yours—for now. We'll reevaluate in a month after we've had time to see if the situation is agreeable to both of us."

Relief washed over her. It took great restraint not to shout "Hallelujah!" She'd secured the position. Now to make a personal request. "I realize a housekeeper generally goes by her surname, but in the homes where I served as governess, I was called by my

Christian name. I'd prefer that."

He raised an eyebrow. "You want me to use your first name?"

"I was thinking of the children. Tess would be easier for them to say." And she wouldn't have to answer to Mr. Grimsby's last name on a daily basis. Every time she heard it she was reminded of the dictatorial orphanage director who'd given it to her when she'd shown up on his doorstep too young and too traumatized to recall hers.

"You make a valid point, so I'll allow it, provided you'll call me Spencer."

She hadn't expected him to agree so readily, but she was glad he had. Spencer was a fine name, and she would enjoy using it. "Really?" She adopted a playful tone. "I thought a man like you who's used to being in charge might prefer *master* or *your eminence*." She fought to keep a straight face but lost the battle and laughed.

His eyebrows shot all the way to the ceiling. Perhaps she'd gone too far. He was a grieving widower, after all.

"You certainly have some spice to you, Tess. I do believe you and Luke will get on just fine." He cast a glance to the west. "It'll be late before you get to town. I can't leave the children alone to drive you. Will you be all right walking by yourself?"

"Yes, sir. I mean Spencer." While she appreciated his concern, she wouldn't be alone. The Lord was always with her. She would spend the time in prayer. After all, she had much to thank Him for. She'd told Him the desire of her heart, and it seemed He'd

heard her. She had a family to care for and looked forward to delightful days ahead as she made a difference in their lives.

Spencer bid her farewell and headed inside, slowly shaking his head and sporting an amused smile.

Was the taciturn gentleman actually laughing? *Lord, let it be so. He could use some levity in his life.*

* * *

Tess hung the hoe on its pegs in the garden shed and rubbed her lower back. Running a household was harder than she'd thought. Even though she'd been working for Spencer two weeks, she had yet to grow accustomed to the constant juggling required.

The amount of work itself was a challenge, but the isolation made her want to scream. Some adult company would be nice. She saw Spencer at breakfast and again at supper, but their interactions were focused on household matters and the children, which was as it should be. She was his housekeeper, not his friend.

At least she'd get to see Polly while she was in town today. In the meantime she would have to keep Luke from soiling his clothing before she could get the team hitched to the wagon. That boy attracted dirt like a garden attracted critters. The latter problem had been solved by a chicken wire fence. The former seemed a hopeless cause.

She'd had to do some talking before Mr. Abbott agreed to have the fence built. For some reason, he seemed concerned about her working in the garden. She'd had to assure him three

times that she would be careful and never leave tools laying on the ground where someone could get hurt. As though she would.

Tess lifted Lila out of the tub she'd set at the side of the garden and headed to the house. Spencer's dog trotted across the yard. The poor creature was bare in spots, but the salve had done its job, arresting the mange. Once his coffee-colored fur grew back, he'd be a fine-looking fellow. He'd proven to be a good watchdog, alerting her when anything was amiss.

"I'm going to leave Luke in your care." She patted the dog's head. "You'll let me know if he starts to wander off again, won't you?" She went inside to get ready for the shopping trip.

An hour later Tess sat on the porch of Polly's small house in downtown Shingle Springs, a glass of lemonade in her hand. Luke darted around the yard in search of insects. Polly's two-year-old daughter, Abby, did her best to keep up. Lila slept on a blanket near Tess.

Polly rubbed her rounded belly. "I've never seen you looking more content. Being a housekeeper agrees with you."

Tess chuckled. "If you'd been privy to my thoughts earlier, you'd disagree. I've gained a whole new respect for mothers with no hired help. How *do* you fit everything into your days?"

"Caring for a house while keeping two little ones out of trouble is much different than supervising the cultured children of Sacramento City's elite as we did before, but it's what you've always wanted."

What she wanted was a family of her own—impossible dream

though it might be—not to step into one in the throes of grief, with a woebegone widower and a headstrong four-year-old. But that’s exactly what she’d done. Meeting their needs was proving more difficult than she’d anticipated. Despite her desire to help them heal, she’d made little progress. “I have the situation under control.”

“So I hear. Peter told me he caught Spencer smiling yesterday. When he asked him why, Spencer said he was looking forward to seeing what you’d fixed for supper. Apparently he’s a man who appreciates good food.”

“He does tuck in hearty portions of whatever I put in front of him. The only thing I’ve found that he doesn’t care for is cottage cheese. I asked him to let me know if there’s anything else he doesn’t like, but he just said ‘everything’s fine.’”

Polly shifted in the rocking chair, causing it to creak. “He’s not one for making long speeches, is he?”

Tess laughed. “When I give Spencer a review of the day, I usually get one or two words in reply. If I manage to get five sentences out of him in an evening, I feel like I’ve achieved quite a feat. I can understand his brooding silence, but he seldom interacts with the children, except when he tucks them in at night. That’s so sad. I know fathers have to deal with the demands of their jobs, but their children crave a connection with them.” She couldn’t keep the wistfulness out of her voice.

Polly patted her arm. “Oh, Tessie, I’m sorry. Whenever I think of your father leaving you at the orphanage, my blood boils. I’ll

never understand how a parent could walk away from a child like that, especially one as bright and beautiful as you. What *was* he thinking?”

“A man can’t raise a child alone.” How many times had she told herself that? But her father hadn’t even attempted it, giving her up the very day her mother had gone to be with the Lord. She’d never heard from him again.

“I know, but he could have found you a home with a family who would love you. Or gotten help like Spencer has.”

Her father didn’t want her. No man did. Not that she could blame them. Even if she wasn’t taller than most of them, she lacked the beauty or charm that attracted men. It seemed her height was the only thing people noticed. Granted, she had six to ten inches on most women, but she wasn’t a circus sideshow freak, although there were days she felt like one.

A sharp cry rang out. Luke had pinned his playmate’s arm behind her.

“Abby!” Polly struggled to stand, but her bulging middle made the task difficult.

Tess leaped to her feet, her long strides carrying her across the yard in no time. “Let go of her this minute, Luke.”

“It’s my ladybug. I saw it first.”

She pried his hands from Abby’s arm, spun him around and dropped to one knee in front of him. “That may be, but you can’t hold her like that. You could hurt her.”

“I didn’t.”

That was true. Abby had flitted away unharmed and was back on the hunt. “You’re right, but you could have. Since you’re older than she is, you can make good choices—like your papa does.”

“What kind of choices does he make?”

“Well, he chose where to live. Where to work. Who to have look after you.”

Luke’s eyes filled with tears, and he swiped a dirty sleeve across them. “I don’t want anyone to look after me. Just my mama. I want her to come back.”

“I know, sweetheart. But she’s gone. You do have your papa, and he loves you very much.” It took all her self-restraint not to pull the brokenhearted boy into her arms. She contented herself by caressing his cheek.

He swatted her hand away. “Don’t touch me!”

“It’s not polite to hit people. You need to sit on the top step until you calm down.”

He sat but bounced right back up and clomped down the stairs.

“Luke,” Tess called.

The rebellious boy spun around. “I’m calm. See?” He gave her a toothy grin.

She hid her answering smile behind her hand. “Very well.”

Polly waited until he was out of earshot. “He’s always been a strong-willed little fellow, but he began acting out after Trudy’s death. You’re good with him, though.”

Tess warmed at the compliment. “I want to show him I care, but he’s built a wall. It will take time to bring it down, but I’ve

thought of a way to remove a brick.”

She launched into an explanation of her plan, not stopping until she was done, despite the skepticism on Polly’s face. “What do you think?”

“I think you’re asking for trouble. Spencer isn’t one to embrace change on a good day.”

“I have a valid argument.”

Polly swirled her glass of lemonade. “That may be, but you’d better brace yourself for some resistance.”

She could deal with resistance. She’d overcome it a number of times when approaching her previous employers. They’d come to see things her way—eventually. Spencer was a reasonable man, so surely he’d be willing to consider her proposal.

Chapter Six

“Absolutely not.” Spencer couldn’t believe what Tess had suggested. She’d been here all of two weeks, and yet she had the audacity to barge into his office and stick that aristocratic nose of hers where it didn’t belong. He’d come to value her opinions, but she’d gone too far this time.

“If you would allow me to explain...”

He stood behind his desk. She faced him, unflinching. Because of the high heels on her boots, the thick brown braid wound around her crown and that monstrosity of a hat, she had several inches on him. It was too bad he couldn’t wear his top hat indoors.

Although he had no intention of changing his mind, he would

hear her out. “Kindly take a seat, and we can discuss this.”

She sat tall and proud. Spencer remained standing and tapped the toe of his boot. The sooner she got to the point, the sooner he could get back to work.

The forthright woman wasted no time stating her case. “I don’t want to leave the children with Polly any longer than necessary, so I’ll be direct. Parting with a loved one’s possessions can be difficult, but it’s a necessary step in the grieving process. I can’t begin to imagine how difficult it must be for you to see your late wife’s things every time you open your clothes cupboard.”

“I’m fine.”

“I felt sure you’d say that, but there’s another factor to take into consideration—Luke’s feelings.”

Feelings? Why did women put so much stock in them? He had no desire to discuss his or his son’s. “Leave him out of this.”

She forged ahead as though she hadn’t heard him. “I believe much of his misbehavior stems from the fact that he’s grieving the loss of his mother. If you were to allow him to help me pack up her things and face his loss head on, I feel certain you’d see a change.”

“I’ll have a talk with him and tell him he must regain control of himself.”

Tess had the audacity to laugh in his face, a musical sound he usually enjoyed. But not today. “This is Luke we’re taking about. A mere boy. He’s too young to master his emotions.” She sobered at his frown. “Oh, dear. I’ve angered you.”

“You presume to know my feelings now?” She had no idea what he was dealing with. How waking each morning alone in the room he and Trudy had shared brought back the stabbing pain that had pierced his heart when she’d drawn her last breath. How dragging himself to the railway station day after day required Herculean effort.

She persisted. “You’re clenching your hands.”

He unfurled the fists he hadn’t realized he’d formed. “I’m not angry. I’m...frustrated. You waltz in here with no warning, interrupt my work and expect me to make a decision on the spot.” He placed his palms on his desktop and leaned forward. “Let me make myself clear. I want things left as they are. I know what’s best for my family, and you will abide by my wishes.”

“I would if I could, but I can’t keep quiet, not when one of your children is hurting. Luke let it slip that he misses his mother. Please give me permission. If not for your sake, for his.” She lifted pleading eyes to him. Warm cocoa-brown eyes with the longest lashes he’d ever seen.

“He told *you* he’s missing her? He hasn’t said anything to me.”

“Boys don’t like to admit weakness—even sadness—to their fathers.”

She was right. He would never think of telling his father how much he missed his mother. “Fine. You’ve made your point. You may remove all her things.”

“What would you like me to do with them? Store them in the attic? Donate them to the missionary barrels? Or...?”

He spread the next day's train schedules on his desk. "Do whatever you'd like. I don't care. Just don't bring this up again. *Please.*" He had a job to do and didn't have time to think about such matters.

Tess stood. Her every word was clothed with compassion. "I'm sorry this is such a difficult time for you. I wish I could do more to help."

"Do your job. That's all I ask."

Sadness filled her eyes. She quickly blinked it away, sent him a polite smile and left, giving him the impression he'd disappointed her.

So be it. He didn't need her sympathy. All he wanted was to be left alone.

* * *

Red. Every one of Trudy Abbott's tiny dresses boasted a different shade. A petite woman, such as she'd been, could wear the vibrant color and look stunning. Tess preferred her understated blues. People made enough fuss about her height as it was without drawing more attention by looking like a red-hot poker.

The massive wardrobe in Spencer's room held few of his items but brimmed with his late wife's clothing. Tess pulled out a gown and laid the stunning creation on the four-poster bed. Luke sat cross-legged in the middle. He grabbed the dress and plunged his face into the folds. Was the dear boy crying?

He lowered the glossy fabric, his lips downturned in a

pronounced pout. “I can’t smell her anymore. She used to smell like roses.”

“She must have worn rosewater. I do sometimes, but the scent doesn’t last long.”

He shoved the dress aside, scooted up to the headboard and leaned against it, his arms folded. He narrowed his eyes and shot daggers at Tess. “I don’t wanna help.”

“Hush now. I don’t want you to wake your sister. You can just watch, but I would like your help with one thing. I don’t know which of these dresses were your mama’s favorites. Do you?”

He shook his head, but the telltale twitch around his mouth was a clear indication he wasn’t being truthful. She held up the crimson silk, a gown so exquisite she wondered where the woman would have worn it. “Do you remember her wearing this one?”

Luke’s expression didn’t change, so Tess set the dress aside. She worked her way through a burgundy brocade, a scarlet satin and a vermillion velvet. Not one of the ornately trimmed garments—none of which showed wear—evoked a response. She reached for a calico the color of cherries generously kissed by the sun that had obviously seen a season or two, and Luke jerked his head. Three more calicos, two lawns and a red-and-white checked gingham elicited similar responses. Tess added the dresses to the growing pile.

Trudy Abbott had owned far more clothing than a small-town housewife needed. If Tess were to venture a guess, she’d say the woman had come from a family of means. If that was the

case, how had she ended up married to Spencer and living in a remote community like Shingle Springs? Someone of her tastes generally gravitated to Sacramento City or San Francisco.

Luke inched forward, casting surreptitious glances at Tess. She averted her gaze but kept him in her peripheral vision. When he reached the pile of his mother's everyday dresses, he leaned over and sniffed one as he'd done earlier. He beamed. "I can smell her!"

Tess didn't have the heart to tell the dear boy she'd dabbed herself with rosewater before leaving her room at the boardinghouse and that some of the scent must have come off on the clothing. "How nice."

He clamored off the bed and darted out of the room, making little sound in his stocking-clad state, for which Tess was grateful. Moments later he returned clutching his crib-size quilt. He rubbed a corner of it against his mother's dress, put the fabric to his nose and drew in a deep breath. Seemingly satisfied, he lay on his side, silent but watchful. And still.

By the time Tess had folded the dresses and stowed them in some crates she'd found in the barn, Luke had fallen asleep with the quilt pressed to his cheek. She'd never seen him as relaxed, even in slumber. She leaned over and pressed a kiss to his brow.

An idea struck her. She located the bottle of rosewater that had belonged to Luke's mother and flicked several drops of the floral-scented liquid on Luke's quilt. The fragrance, although strong now, would fade quickly, but perhaps smelling it again

would help lock the scent in his memory.

Now to make good use of the unexpected hour while both children slept. She could spare them the pain of witnessing the removal of their mother's things from the house.

Working quickly, Tess stowed the items from the dressing table in a crate. She opened the bureau drawers Spencer's wife had used and removed an impressive selection of nightwear and unmentionables, including several pair of expensive silk stockings.

She picked up a stack of corsets, and a bundle of letters tied with a red ribbon fell at her feet. Letters exchanged between Mr. Spencer Abbott in California and Miss Trudy Endicott of Houston, Texas. Love letters most likely.

Unsure what to do, Tess added them to the crate. Spencer had said he didn't want to talk about his late wife's things, but she had no choice. Surely he'd want to save something so special. He might not be up to reading the letters now, but in time they could serve to bring him comforting reminders of his courtship.

Letters were important. Those she'd taken to writing to her someday fiancé on her birthday each year brought her solace in the midst of her loneliness. She used her real name, Faith, when she penned them. Somehow it seemed fitting that the man she hoped to marry would be the only person to know the name—along with the sensitive side of her that she kept hidden. She certainly wouldn't want to lose those letters.

She carted the crates downstairs and added Trudy's hats and

cloak from the foyer, her aprons from the kitchen and her sewing basket from the parlor. Tess didn't have the heart to remove anything more than the most obvious personal items. She stowed the crates in the attic, where they would be available should Spencer or the children want to see Trudy's things again someday.

Her task complete, she moved from room to room. Although the changes were subtle, the removal of the ever-present reminders of his late wife might lessen Spencer's pain. Would he notice the difference?

Chapter Seven

Spencer's steps slowed as he neared the house. Trudy used to have their son watch for him each evening and alert her when he approached so she could greet him, but Tess involved Luke in the supper preparations. Spencer missed the warm welcome.

He entered, reached up to set his top hat on the shelf above the coat hooks and froze. Trudy's cloak was gone, as was her profusion of fancy bonnets. His slouch hat and Tess's monstrosity were the only hats remaining. His hat rested on its crown to keep the brim from losing its shape, whereas hers, with its frothy fabric and feathers, sat right side up. It was a wonder the massive thing didn't fall off.

Apparently Tess had wasted no time clearing out Trudy's things. Considering her belief that doing so would help Luke, her haste made sense. Clearly she cared about his son.

Spencer marched upstairs to his room, threw open the wardrobe doors and stared at the empty space. True to her word,

Tess had removed every last one of Trudy's dresses. His few items looked lost in the large clothes cupboard. He yanked open the drawers on Trudy's side of the bureau and found gaping caverns. Tess was not only fast. She was thorough.

But why, if she'd whisked away all of Trudy's things, did the room smell so strongly of roses, as though his wife had been there moments before? He had to do something to clear his head. Now.

As quickly as he could, he changed from his work clothes to ranch wear. He shut the doors of the wardrobe with more force than he'd intended and stormed down the stairs, not stopping until he reached the barn. Inhaling deeply of the scents of his childhood—horses, straw and leather—his senses were restored.

Spying his ropes, he knew what to do. He grabbed his favorite one and entered the pen. With the coils of his lariat in his left hand, he spun the loop with his right and let it fly.

* * *

Tess wiped her hands on a kitchen towel and stepped out the back door. What was Spencer doing? She'd worked hard to have supper ready when he got home, but he'd raised a ruckus in his room overhead, with doors and drawers slamming, and stomped out of the house a good ten minutes ago. Evidently he was angry about the changes she'd made, even though he'd given her permission.

Regret settled in her stomach like a rock. In her desire to help Luke, she'd neglected to take Spencer's feelings into consideration. What was done was done, but perhaps she could

find a way to show that she understood his pain and assure him she was only trying to ease it.

She followed the wraparound porch to the north side of the house where she could see the barn and stopped, her chin dropping. Never had she seen a man work off his anger by lassoing things. She stood transfixed as Spencer spun his loop and threw it.

He roped fence post after fence post, not missing a single one. His form and prowess were awe-inspiring. She could watch him for hours. If only he hadn't started his roping before supper.

Supper! She dashed inside to rescue her meal, moving pots and pans to the side of the stove where the dishes would stay warm. "Please play with your sister, Luke, while I get your papa."

He grunted a reply.

Tess left the children rolling their canvas ball back and forth. She stepped off the back porch and rounded the corner. To her disappointment, Spencer stood outside the pen with one foot resting on the lowest slat of the fence, gazing into the distance.

Loath to disturb him and yet having no choice, she crossed the yard, her boots making little sound on the hard-packed earth. She reached him and rested a hand on his shoulder.

He started.

"Forgive me. I didn't mean to surprise you, but supper's ready."

His eyes widened, and he shook his head as though clearing it. "The smell. It's you. I wasn't imagining it. I thought..."

“Luke noticed it, too. I didn’t know your wife wore rosewater. My intention was to help, not to stir up memories.”

“It’s fine. The job needed to be done. I was just...surprised.”

“I know it’s hard. I’m sorry for that, truly I am, but you’ll be happy to know that Luke fell asleep on your bed with the quilt his mother made him, breathing in her scent. He rested peacefully. No tossing and turning. When he woke he was more amiable than I’ve ever seen him. Not that I’m expecting the change to last, but this was a start. He can begin his healing.”

Spencer stretched a section of the rope taut and snapped it. She resisted the urge to jump.

“He’s a strong boy. He’ll be fine.”

Eventually yes, but now wasn’t the time to delve into the merits of dealing with one’s grief instead of acting as though nothing was wrong. She had a more pressing matter to discuss. “I found some letters hidden among your wife’s things. I felt sure you’d want to keep them.”

Concern creased his brow. “Those are personal. You didn’t—”

“Read them? Of course not. I just wanted to know what you’d like me to do with them.”

The silence hung heavy until he broke it. “Hide them somewhere. I couldn’t bear to see them again.”

“I understand. I’ll do that.” She started for the house but turned when he called her name.

“I’m expecting a shipment soon. A bull. I thought you should know.”

“A bull?” She wouldn’t have expected Spencer to send for one, although she shouldn’t be surprised. He was a rugged, manly man who had quite a way with a rope, so it made sense he knew about raising cattle.

Without realizing it, he’d given her a way to gain a foothold as she attempted to scale the walls the Abbott males had erected—and have fun at the same time. “Would you teach me how to lasso something?”

“You were watching me?” His impassive expression gave no indication of his thoughts.

Heat sped to Tess’s cheeks. Since she’d already blurted her request, she might as well make it sound like a reasonable one. “I’d like you to teach me, so I can show Luke how. Or better yet, you could teach us both. He’d love it if you were to spend time with him.”

“Would he?”

Although they were talking about Luke, Tess got the distinct impression Spencer was challenging her. Well, she hadn’t backed down before, and she wouldn’t now. “Your son is much like you. He needs an active outlet for his emo—his energy. I’d love to see him use it for something as impressive as r-roping.”

If he’d stop staring at her with that quirked eyebrow, she might be able to complete a sentence without stumbling over her words and saying more than she’d intended. *Impressive* indeed! What would he think of her now? She sounded like a smitten schoolgirl instead of the levelheaded housekeeper she was. “If you’ll give

it some thought, I'd appreciate it. Now, I must go inside and get supper on the table. I do hope you'll be joining us soon."

She'd taken a total of ten steps when a rope encircled her, tightened around her waist and pinned her arms to her sides. The force jerked her back, causing her to stumble as if she'd run full tilt into a clothesline.

Before she could turn, a tug on the rope spun her to face him. A flash of anger sent a renewed rush of warmth to her face. She struggled to free her hands. "You *lassoed* me?"

The shocked look on his face showed he was as surprised by his out-of-character behavior as she. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I didn't want you to leave, and then—" he shrugged "—it just happened."

Although the leather rope was smooth and the binding not uncomfortably tight, she didn't cotton to the idea of being bound. "I'm not a cow. I'm a woman."

"You are. And a fine one, too. Here, let me take it off." He rushed to help her. His gaze locked with hers as he gently loosened the rope and slipped it over her head.

The warmth in his eyes melted much of her anger and ignited a different emotion. Her heart was racing so wildly she felt lightheaded. "I could have fallen."

"I wouldn't have let you. I had a solid grip on the rope." He gave her a sheepish smile. "I am sorry. Mostly." Mischief glinted in his brilliant blue eyes, and a corner of his mouth twitched.

"Is this what cattle ranchers do for sport?"

He shook his head, his earnest expression reminding her of Luke when he explained his actions following one of his antics. “I like roping. Always have. I’ve roped a lot of things, but never a pretty woman—until now.”

Pretty? Even if he was teasing, the possibility that he might mean it chased away the remnants of her anger. She smiled. “Thank you for the compliment. I’m flattered.”

“You’re different from any woman I’ve ever known. You have a ready laugh, and you don’t make a fuss when I—” He averted his gaze and kicked at the ground. “I don’t know why I’m rambling. It’s not important.”

It was to her, but she knew from experience Spencer wouldn’t say any more. Once he put the stopper in the bottle, she couldn’t get another word out of him.

He turned away and coiled the rope. “Thank you, Tess.”

For what? For packing up his late wife’s things so he didn’t have to? For making inroads with his son? For finding a way for father and son to spend some time together?

Once again he left her guessing what he’d meant. But one thing was clear. He’d reached out to her. Not in an ordinary way, but in his own extraordinary way.

A tingling sensation stole over her, unexpected but not unpleasant. Perhaps she could help this family travel the path from their pain-filled past to a promising future, after all.

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