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## Chapter 1

Mr. Steven Chamberlin, please,” Megan Wescott told the lanky hotel clerk. She had a pleasant, poised voice. It didn’t give away the secret that her stomach was full of flying butterflies.

The young clerk gave her a friendly smile as his eyes approved of her large, brown eyes and creamy complexion. “One moment, please,” he replied and held up his hand to summon a bellboy. “You can wait inside if you like.”

Glancing around, Megan entered the hotel lobby to wait. The grandeur of the hotel snatched away her breath for an instant. She hesitated inside the door, feeling out of place and alone. She wished she could slip her hand into the warm shelter of her father’s coat pocket, her habit as a child whenever she was troubled or frightened. If only he were here to help her now.

But she was no longer a child. Daddy was gone, and she would have to look after herself. And Jeremy.

“A-hem.”

She realized a woman in a stylish black hat was standing close by with an impatient grimace on her painted lips.

“Pardon me,” Megan murmured and hastily stepped aside. The woman sailed past without another glance, the swish of silk skirts and the heady scent of French perfume lingering after her. Megan drew a quivering breath. She fought down the desire to turn around and escape to the anonymity of the street. Instead, she crossed the thick carpet to a chair.

Resolutely, she drew the newspaper ad from her handbag and read it for what must have been the hundredth time.

*Industrious young woman needed to cook and clean on a ranch in the Colorado Territory. Between twenty and twenty-five years old. Orphan preferred. Top wages. Inquire for Mr. Steven Chamberlin at the Olympus Hotel.*

The mended edge of her glove slipped from its hiding place beneath the sleeve of her jacket. Carefully, she tucked it back in.

Maybe Mr. Chamberlin has already found someone, she thought, mingling hope and fear. The ad had been published that morning, but she hadn’t been able to get away from the shop until quite awhile after lunch. Mrs. Peabody had

grudgingly given her the last part of the afternoon off.

She noticed a distinguished gentleman who was sitting on a gold sofa reading a newspaper. Discreetly observing his features, she wondered again what Steven Chamberlin was like. Her mind drew a picture of a short man with a middle-aged paunch who smoked smelly, black cigars and had a booming voice. His wife, no doubt, was the kind who would be constantly peering over her shoulder and making clucking noises. She cringed inwardly and again stifled the urge to run away.

It was unthinkable that she, the daughter of a Virginia plantation owner, should be applying for a housekeeper's position. Her family had suffered many forms of humiliation through the last ten years, but nonetheless she was thankful her mother could not see her now.

*It's a waste of time worrying about family pride*, she reminded herself again. Jeremy, her little brother, was desperately ill, and the sanitarium was far beyond her means. If Jeremy was to get well, she had to have more money than she could earn at the dressmaker's shop.

The years since the War Between the States had been a nightmare for Megan. The loss of her father and brother in the war, living in poverty in Baltimore, and her dear mother's death would have been enough to break the spirit of most girls.

How could they have survived without Em? Dear Em, who had been with the family for more than twenty years. Em, who had stayed when the other freed slaves were sent away to find livings elsewhere. Thankfully, Em could watch over Jeremy if Megan had to leave.

Blinking, Megan held back the worried tears that blurred her vision. She drew the scrap of newsprint between two fingers, and the words "top wages" caught her eye. She had to get this position.

A tall, dark-haired man slowly descending the wide staircase drew her attention. He scanned the lobby, pausing a moment at the foot of the stairs. Megan noticed his tailored black broadcloth suit, white silk shirt with tiny red pinstripes, and black string tie. He had broad shoulders and a square, purposeful chin.

Was that Steven Chamberlin? Her throat tightened when she realized he was striding in her direction.

"You were asking for Steven Chamberlin, ma'am?" he asked, bowing slightly. He spoke pleasantly enough, but his faint, polite smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Yes." Megan's tongue felt thick and uncooperative. "I came to apply for this position." She handed him the ad. Her hand was icy and shaking.

"I am Mr. Chamberlin." He sat in the chair facing her. "May I ask your qualifications?"

To her dismay she felt her cheeks growing hot. The speech she had rehearsed all morning flew beyond her reach. Frantically, she groped for it.

"I can cook and clean," she managed at last, then added with spirit, "and I can work as hard as anyone."

The young man took stock of her clothes, which were carefully made but showed signs of wear; the sweet, anxious mouth; the quiet courage in her eyes, and his manner softened slightly.

"What is your name?"

"Megan Wescott. I need employment badly. You see, my little brother is ill, and the sanitarium is expensive."

*His wife would be about my own age*, she thought, not sure if that was good or bad.

"Your parents?"

"Father was killed in the war, and Mother died five months ago." She met his gaze openly, candidly, and realized for the first time that his thick black eyebrows almost came together. "I've been working in a dressmaker's shop doing fine needlework, but with Jeremy sick I'll have to earn more."

"I'd like to talk to you about some details." He glanced around. The man she had observed shifted position and turned a page of his newspaper. Two men engrossed in conversation walked past. "Would you mind stepping into the hotel restaurant where we can talk more privately? There are some things I need to explain about the position."

"Will your wife join us?" Megan asked, confused.

"That's one of the things I'll need to explain," he said, standing.

*Is his wife ill?* A vague doubt sprouted in her mind.

An aloof waiter showed them to a small table in a back corner of the dining room. Megan allowed Mr. Chamberlin to seat her. She removed her gloves, clasped them tightly in her lap, and waited. Alive to his every expression, she tried to determine what lay behind the handsome, self-assured face across from her.

"It's quite a long story," he began after ordering coffee for two. "Two years ago, my father bought a four-hundred-acre ranch near Juniper Junction—that's about fifty miles north of Denver in the Colorado Territory—from a man who went back East. It's deeded land. I guess my father was planning to go there sometime, but he never did. He died a month ago, leaving a small fortune to my sister and me. My mother died several years ago, you see.

"My half of the inheritance comes with a condition—my father's idea of giving me a test of character." His right eyebrow lifted slightly, giving him a vaguely cynical expression. He paused while the waiter set their coffee before them. "In order to inherit, my wife and I must live on the ranch for a full year and make it profitable."

"And you want a housekeeper for her?" Megan prompted. *Won't he ever come to the point?*

He added a spoonful of sugar to his coffee and stirred it thoughtfully. Megan watched the slow movement of his large, well-groomed hands. She looked up to find his measuring gaze upon her.

"I don't have a wife."

"I don't understand." *Maybe I ought to leave. This doesn't sound right.*

"I mean," he spoke slowly, distinctly, closely observing her reaction, "I'm looking for a housekeeper and cook who would be willing to become my legal wife for that year." He leaned forward, speaking softly. "I'll be frank. I could find a mail order bride if I wanted to. There are plenty of folks who are doing it these days. But I'm not ready to be saddled down with that responsibility. I wouldn't even go this far if it wasn't for losing a fortune in the process.

"After the terms of the will have been met, I'll have the marriage discreetly dissolved. No one in the East need ever know of the arrangement. I'm willing to pay one hundred dollars per month."

"But as your wife. . .," Megan faltered. She struggled between dismay at his scheme and the knowledge that she desperately needed the amount of money he had quoted.

"A legality only, I assure you," he said. "Call it a make-believe marriage if that eases your conscience. I turned down two women this morning, but I think you and I could be partners. Why not? You need a sizable income, and I need a wife for a year. We can work together to accomplish both."

"But why would your father put your wife in his will if you aren't married?" It didn't sound reasonable.

"He thought I was," Mr. Chamberlin said, ruefully. "The last time I saw him was before the war. I was engaged at the time. What a foolish boy I was." He shook his head. "She was a hostess on the *Mississippi Queen*. I thought she cared for me, but she was only after my winnings at the poker table. She dumped me when a brighter star came along." His lips tightened. "I won't be so foolish again." He shrugged, and his expression softened. "Anyway, I didn't have any contact with my father after that visit. I guess he naturally assumed I had married."

"Couldn't you go to the solicitor and tell him you're not married?" Megan persisted, still puzzled.

"It would break the will." Again that hard look. "And Georgiana, my older sister, would dearly love to chisel me out of my half of the money." He leaned back in his chair and shook his head. "No. There's no other way."

Megan's slim fingers toyed with her china coffee cup. She stared at the painted yellow rose on the inside rim, weighing the possibilities. One hundred dollars a month was almost twice as much as she had hoped for. And what a relief not to have to please the tastes of another woman.

"What kind of work do you do?" She looked keenly at the man across from

her. He didn't look unscrupulous, but there must be some reason his father hadn't trusted him.

Chamberlin laughed mirthlessly, gesturing with his hand.

"That's a good question, ma'am," he said, sobering. "It's right prudent of you to ask. I left home at sixteen and found out I could be handy with the pasteboards. That's the cards, ma'am. I rode the Mississippi riverboats for a few years, fought for the Confed'rary under Bragg, and then wandered around New Orleans after the war, trying my hand at this and that, gambling enough to keep me from starving.

"To tell you the truth, I was at a loss until this will came up. I think I'd like to have a go at ranching. Put down some roots, maybe." He shrugged. "At least I'd like to have a chance to prove I can do it even if I decide to come back East later. I don't have a predilection for the idea of marriage, that's all. I've been a loner for too long."

The simple directness of his answer convinced Megan he was being honest with her. There was a lengthy silence while she thought it over.

What would a meaningless marriage matter? Wasn't marriage a commitment of the heart? All he asked was what the ad said: a housekeeper and cook. It would be pleasant on a ranch, too. A ranch and a plantation were practically the same, weren't they? She remembered the corrals, the riding stable, the spreading lawn, and columned plantation house she had known as a child. The ranch would be different, of course, but there were similarities.

What a relief it would be to go back to that life even if she was only a servant.

*But I won't be a servant*, she suddenly recalled. *I would be the mistress*. Some of the cloud lifted from her mind. *Yes*, she rolled the idea around on her tongue, *I would be the mistress*.

"When would we have to leave?" she asked, slowly.

"Three weeks." He peered at her with half-closed eyes. "Does that mean you accept?"

"I can't see that I have any choice," she said, steadily. "Yes, I accept."

"Good." His expression relaxed. He reached inside his coat. "Here's my card. I'd like you to go to the Hurlick's General Store on Market Street and purchase any household goods you feel will be necessary. I'm afraid I wouldn't know where to begin when it comes to housekeeping, and I think it would be better for you to make your own choices. Give Hurlick this card, and he'll put it on my account. Have everything packed and sent to my address."

"What should I get?" Megan asked, taking the card and glancing at it.

"Whatever you'll need to take care of the house and fix things up a mite. The house isn't large, I understand, but it has been empty for quite some time. Cooking utensils, curtains, and such like would be in order, I suppose."

Megan slid the card into her purse. Her hands were clammy, and she had the strange feeling she was somehow watching herself from far away.

"We can have the ceremony performed in a quiet corner of the city in about a week," he continued, "but I see no need to change our living quarters until we leave. If you need to contact me in the meantime, you can reach me here. How can I contact you?"

"I live at 148 High Street, Apartment 3B," she said. She pulled on her gloves and stood up. She wanted to have some time alone to adjust herself to the new circumstances.

"Thank you, Miss Wescott," he said, rising with her, the shadow of a smile on his lips.

"Megan," she said seriously. "It's foolish to continue formalities."

"Yes, Megan." He sobered. "I'm sure I don't need to tell you our arrangement shouldn't be known to anyone else. Will you meet me at the park near the big fountain with water spraying out a carp's mouth, say a week from today? At two o'clock?"

"I'll be there." She offered him her hand, and he clasped it briefly. His hand, though uncalledous, was surprisingly firm and strong. "Good day." With a nod, she left the hotel.

Conflicting emotions swept over her as she stepped, blinking, into the bright afternoon sunlight. A flash of exhilaration tingled through her as she mouthed the wage he had offered her. *A hundred dollars a month!* Her brightest hopes had never been audacious enough to rise up that high. The marriage contract was a little disturbing, but livable for a few months. However, now that she knew the problem of the sanitarium fee was solved, she had to face the dark side: leaving behind all she loved to brave the unknown. Many who ventured into the wild new territories were never heard from again.

A whole year. She was heartsick at the thought. *Can I do it? Can I say good-bye to Jeremy and Em?* She pushed back the walls that crowded in on her. She would not succumb to her fears and heartaches. If she caved in, Jeremy would sense it and be afraid, too. She must be strong for him.

She walked blindly along the cobblestone streets, unaware of the chilly May breeze that tickled her burning cheeks. Her feet beat a steady cadence on the sidewalk while she reminisced about the past and wondered about the future.

## Chapter 2

The years since the war were a series of murky shadows in Megan's memory. When the Southern cause was lost, her family left Virginia and traveled north to Baltimore to stay with Mother's Aunt Alice. Daddy had fallen with a Yankee bullet in his chest. Silverleigh, their home, was a blackened heap of ash and rubble. Friends were scattered, never to be seen again. Gone forever was the world they had loved. They hoped to find rest and build a new life, but those hopes were shattered when Aunt Alice had a stroke and died. Debt swallowed her estate, and again the Wescotts were homeless.

Mother was left without friend or advisor. It was up to her to provide a roof to cover their despairing heads and food to ease their gnawing stomachs. She walked the streets of the poorest, dirtiest section of Baltimore until she found an apartment, a dark, wretched cubbyhole, for a dollar a week. Intended for one or at the most two people, it had two closet-sized bedrooms barely big enough for a cot and a chair, a kitchen that was about the size of their dining room table at Silverleigh, and a sitting room that could be crossed in four strides from either direction.

The landlady, Mrs. Niles, looked Mother up and down as though mentally pricing every piece of clothing Mother wore before she grudgingly admitted she had a vacancy. She was a thin-lipped woman who had been middle-aged all her life. Her gown was a cheap imitation of the morning dresses that had filled two of Mother's closets at Silverleigh. However, the cut of the cloth was as far as the resemblance went; because the collar and cuffs were smudged, and there was a small tear under the arm, something Mother would never have permitted even in a servant. Though disgusted, Mother pretended not to notice and handed over the first week's rent, her last dollar but one, and in her mind playfully nicknamed the landlady Nilly-Willy. She made a joke of it to the children later that evening.

What it must have cost Mother's aristocratic pride to knock on door after door asking women if she could do their washing and ironing. The family lived on bread and tea the first few weeks they lived at Mrs. Nile's tenement house. Finally, the news of Mother's and Em's excellent work with soapsuds, starch, and hot iron traveled across the grapevine of Baltimore's housewives, and the amount of work grew until they had money to buy enough food to satisfy a growing boy and, of course, pay their rent.

Mother insisted that Megan, scarcely more than a child, continue her schooling. She found a church with a mission that taught slum children and made Megan attend the classes. Mother filled the gaps in their meager program by teaching Megan by lamplight after a twelve-hour day of bending over a washboard or iron.

Megan watched her mother's soft, white hands become red and coarse from hours in hot, soapy water. She knew Mother would never allow a word of complaint to pass her lips, and she would not allow anyone else to grumble, either. She never let it be spoken, but she could not hide her suffering, worry-filled eyes.

How could they have made it without Em? Always near with a strong back and willing, loving hands, Em comforted them and offered her earthy wisdom to chase away discouragement.

Years of brutal work and the lack of fresh air broke down Mother's health. She grew weaker and weaker until she had a fainting spell over the washtub. Unable to hide their tears, Megan and Em lifted Mother to her tiny cot, brought her hot broth, and tried to make her comfortable. There was no money for a doctor.

Megan stopped going to school. Instead, she took Mother's place in the soapsuds until Mother, broken in spirit and body, called Megan to her side a few months before she died. Mother's smooth, clear face now had deep creases around the eyes and mouth. In two months' time her hair had turned the color of moonlight reflected on new-fallen snow.

"I want you to get a position in the city, Megan," she wheezed, stopping often to take a breath. Her translucent hand reached out to touch Megan's cheek. "You'll ruin yourself with this backbreaking work. It's not fittin' for a pretty young thing like you to spend her life with her hands in wash water."

How courageous Mother had been through all their struggle, never thinking of herself, always thinking of Megan and Jeremy.



Cold hard emptiness had filled the apartment when Mother was taken from them. The burning ache was still fresh in Megan's bosom.

Following Mother's advice, Megan took samples of her work and applied at a shop close to the center of town. She had learned to weave lace and sew fine embroidery from her governess, who had considered it a necessity for a young lady destined to join the higher ranks of society. Megan was an artist with her needle, and she loved her work. At her first stop, Mrs. Peabody, the owner of the dress-maker's shop, had hired her instantly when Megan had spread out her handiwork.

It had been enjoyable to sit in the back room of the shop and handle the beautiful threads. However, the sense of enjoyment lasted only a few months. Mother's death squeezed the last ounce of joy out of Megan's life, and when Jeremy contracted rheumatic fever a few months later, Megan felt desperation grip her. The responsibility weighed her down until she felt she would smother.



The light was beginning to fade when Megan at last set a course for home. She reached her neighborhood with her thoughts still far off. Habitually stepping around bits of broken glass and refuse, she walked on. She didn't notice the thin children huddled together in doorways and on the front steps of their homes or the starving mongrel dogs sniffing the gutters for a morsel of decaying food. When she reached High Street, she stepped off the crumbling sidewalk to pass a group of ragged boys playing marbles on the corner.

"'Lo, Megan," one urchin called.

"Hello, Joe." She smiled absently in response and walked on. Suddenly, the chance to leave the city gave her a new awareness of her neighborhood. She awoke from her sleepwalking and looked around at the soot-covered buildings and trash-laden street. The acrid smell of unwashed bodies and rotting garbage pricked her nose. In the depths of the building nearby, a man and woman raised their voices in a heated argument, while a baby wailed relentlessly. High Street had never seemed so dismal as today, the tenement houses never so dirty and depressing.

How wonderful it would be to get away from the city. To breathe fresh air, to feel free-blowing breezes in her hair, the sun on her face. To see wide, unbounded country crowned with a clear, sapphire sky.

The soothing smell of Em's thick stew welcomed Megan when she opened the apartment door. She was pulling off her gloves, adjusting her eyes to the dimness, when a tall, lean black woman came to stand in the kitchen doorway. She wore a faded gingham dress with a white apron. Her gray hair was pulled back from her face, seamed by years of hard work and sorrow. She held a dish towel in her hands.

"How is Jeremy, Em?"

"Sleepin'. I gave him some supper 'bout an hour ago." Em peered at Megan, her narrow face creased with worry. "Did you find you a new job, Miss Megan?"

"Yes, I did." Megan removed her bonnet and laid it on the shelf near the door. Hanging her jacket on a peg, she followed Em into the tiny kitchen wondering how to tell her the rest of the news. Saying it aloud made their separation seem more real. "It pays almost twice as much as I had hoped for, Em," she said, slowly, "but there is something I didn't tell you about."

"What do you have to do?" Em asked anxiously.

"I'm keeping house and cooking like I told you. . . ." Megan paused, avoiding Em's eyes. "But I have to go out to the Colorado Territory."

"The Colorado Territory! Lord have mercy, child, whatever for?" She stared at Megan, her lips slightly parted. The dimple in her right cheek, the one Megan called her worry mark, deepened as Megan continued.

“The gentleman has a ranch out there, and he needs a housekeeper. I’ve agreed to go for a year,” Megan said softly.

“A year!” Two tears slid slowly down Em’s anguished face, and Megan felt her resolve bubbling away.

“Please don’t cry, Em,” she begged, putting arms around Em, her face on Em’s shoulder. “I don’t want to go. You know I don’t.” The tears she had been battling all afternoon finally won out. In a moment she drew back, wiping her eyes. “I have no choice. You see that, don’t you?”

“Yes, child.” Em’s seamed, careworn face was wet also. “I know.” She sank into a chair with a heavy sigh, her face a picture of misery. “It’s the lonesome days ahead I’m a-thinkin’ on.”

“I’ll make enough money so you won’t have to work so hard.”

Megan knelt by Em’s side and clasped her bony, work-hardened hands between her own. “If we can find you a place in a rooming house near the sanitarium, you can visit Jeremy every day. And you can get away from this dark, crowded tenement house. It will be better for us all.” She searched Em’s face for a sign of comfort.

“When you leavin’?”

“In three weeks. We have so much to do before then. I’ll have to keep my job with Mrs. Peabody for another week or so. We’ll have to make arrangements with the sanitarium and find you a place to stay.” She looked around the kitchen. “We’ll have to pack all our things, too.”

“Em!” A faint call came from the bedroom.

“I’ll go to Jeremy,” Megan said, rising. She gave Em’s hand a squeeze and ran to wash away the traces of tears.

The coal oil lamp Megan carried into Jeremy’s bedroom cast a golden light over the child’s hollow cheeks. His skin was almost transparent, his lips tinged a faint blue. His large nightshirt made him seem smaller than his ten years. Tousled, straw-colored hair came down to his eyes, now sunken and dulled by weeks of illness. His languid expression faded a little when he realized who it was that carried the lamp.

“How is my little soldier?” Megan asked, smiling tenderly. She set the lamp on the small table beside a chipped enamel basin. The splash of lamplight touched both walls in the narrow room.

“Megan,” Jeremy murmured, a drowsy smile on his lips. “I’m glad you’re home. Can you stay with me for a little while?”

“I’ll stay with you as long as you like.” She plumped his pillow and straightened the counterpane. “I have some grown-up business to talk over with you tonight.”

“What is it?” His tired eyes showed a spark of curiosity.

"Well, part of it is good, and part of it is kind of hard." She eased into the straight wooden chair by his bed. "You know what the doctor said about having to take special care of you to protect your heart?"

"Sure," he said impatiently. "That's why I have to stay in this old bed all day long."

"Today I found work that will make it possible for you to get the treatments you need to get better."

"You did?"

"Yes. I'm going next week to make the arrangements with the doctor." She hesitated, dreading the rest of her news.

"What's the hard part?" He tried to sit up by supporting himself on his elbows. "Don't worry, Meg. I can take it. I'm no baby. Did the doctor tell you something bad about me?"

"Oh, no, Jeremy," she assured him quickly. "Don't even think such a thing. He said with proper care he has good hopes you'll soon be well." She pressed her bottom lip between her teeth. "It's that the job I found is far away in Colorado. I'm going to be a housekeeper on a ranch."

"Is Em going, too?" His voice had a touch of anxiety.

"Of course not. Em will stay near you and come to visit you every day. We wouldn't leave you all alone."

"Long as Em's with me, I won't mind." He lay back against the pillow, his restless hands feeling the texture of the nubby counterpane. He lay still a moment, absorbing the news until a new idea struck him. "Out West?" He raised himself on one arm again and looked more boyish than before. "Will there be Injuns and rustlers and everything?"

"I don't think so," Megan said, smiling gently. "There will be horses, though, like we had in Virginia. But what I wanted to tell you," she went on, "is that I'll have to stay there a year."

"Do you think I could go, too, when I get better?" he pleaded.

"I don't know, dear. We'll have to see." Dismayed by his flushed face and his quick, shallow breathing, she warned, "Don't get too wrought up. You must stay quiet."

"Wow, cowboys and everything!" he whispered. Reluctantly, he relaxed against the pillow. His eyes closed for a moment, then flew open to seek Megan's face in the dim light. "I'll try hard to get better, Meg, so I can come out and be with you."

She turned the lamp lower and whispered the platitudes she hoped would calm him, thankful he couldn't see her tears through the shadows. When he was dozing, she padded softly back to Em in the kitchen.

"He took it like my soldier boy," she told Em who was dishing up two bowls

of stew. "He wants to come out to see the Indians and the rustlers when he gets well." She filled a thick, white mug from the metal water pitcher on the table and sipped it.

"That boy's a reg'lar angel." Em shook her head, smiling sadly. "I'll take care o' him, Miss Megan. Don't you grieve yourself 'bout that."

The next week was emotionally exhausting for Megan. Like a saber-wielding duelist, she beat back her fears. Her head knew that going away with Steve Chamberlin was the only answer to her predicament, but her heart moaned in torment. Each evening as she sat with Jeremy, white-hot daggers pierced her through.

*I can't do it, she'd despair. You must, she'd argue back. You must. You must.*

She spent the nights tossing fitfully on her hard, narrow cot. The days found her working her usual ten hours at the dressmaker's shop, making lists of things to do and take, and sorting their few possessions. The night before the wedding she didn't close her eyes until the faint gray light of dawn crept wearily through her tiny window.

## Chapter 3

The next morning was as tedious and long as the morning at Silverleigh when Megan broke Mother's favorite china figurine while her parents were away. She had spent four dreadful, restless hours waiting for them to return and discover her guilt. Like then, Megan couldn't concentrate on anything else except the dreaded event. This time it was her appointment with Steve Chamberlin that overshadowed all else.

She had asked Mrs. Peabody for the day off, but when the day arrived, she wished she had asked for only the afternoon, because her job would have filled the empty morning hours. Instead, she had to pass the time wandering from room to room, looking out windows, sitting down with a book only to put it aside five minutes later with barely a line read. She absently straightened pillows and ran errands for Jeremy. At ten thirty she lay on her cot, feeling tired after her sleepless night, and hopped up in two minutes to continue pacing. Her taut muscles must keep moving. She could not think of closing her eyes.

After forcing down three bites of lunch, she took her time changing into her best dress, a pale lavender cotton with a faint ivory swirl woven into it. She parted her waist-length hair slightly right of center and pulled it back into a wide, brown bun at the nape of the neck. Putting on her navy bonnet and coat, she left the house early to walk off some of her nervous energy.

There was a chill in the air when she reached the street. The sky over the city was dotted with small, puffy clouds, and a warm, fitful breeze toyed with the strings of her bonnet. Without any haste, she headed in the general direction of the park Steve had mentioned. She still had an hour to wait, and the walk would normally take only twenty minutes.

The park, carpeted with a freshly grown crop of young grass and trees tinged with waxy, yellow-green new leaves, was almost deserted when she arrived. Mothers had their tiny charges at home for naps while older children were still in school. Megan wandered aimlessly on the path near a duck pond until she found a perch on a bench near the fish fountain Steve had told her about. With a detached attitude, she watched three mallard ducks dive for breadcrumbs thrown by a grizzled old man in a tattered felt hat. Across the path a clump of daffodils swayed in the occasional breeze, bobbing their heads toward Megan.

*Can I really go through with it?* The question that had been battering her mind

for the past week reverberated again in full force. She suddenly realized she was clenching her teeth, and she tried to force herself to relax.

Sunshine spilled over her back, slowly warming and loosening her tense muscles. Her lack of sleep from the night before took its toll, and little by little she began to feel drowsy. Her eyes were drooping when the old man with the breadcrumbs carefully folded his empty sack and put it into the pocket of his faded, blue overcoat. He lingered a few moments longer before stomping down the path out of the park. Megan's gaze idly followed him until she saw something that roused her from her lethargy.

With a gray derby pulled low over his forehead, Steve Chamberlin strode past the old man, looking left then right as he came. He was dressed all in gray from overcoat to leather shoes. His face cleared when he spotted Megan, and he closed the gap between them in seconds.

"You came!" He settled down beside her. "I had almost convinced myself you would change your mind." The indecision on Megan's face stopped him. He looked at her carefully. "You're still going to do it, aren't you?"

"I can't afford to change my mind," she answered hesitantly. Seeing him again had brought a rush of panic over her.

"How is your brother?" he asked politely.

"He's about the same, thank you." She studied the tiny stitches on the back of her gloved hand lying in her lap. Her own words echoed in her mind. Jeremy was the same, and he wouldn't get better unless she fulfilled her duty to him. When the full impact of that realization came to her, her pulse quieted. The confused, troubled thoughts fell into order.

"Did you find a sanitarium?"

"Yes. There's one on the western edge of town on Oak Street called Pinefield Nursing Home. They have an open bed and can take Jeremy as soon as I bring the first month's fee."

"We'll take care of that today. After the wedding, we'll visit my solicitor and make all the arrangements."

She rose, and they strolled to a closed carriage waiting nearby. Steve curtly called out an address to the driver, handed Megan up, and they set off at a brisk trot. Megan clasped her purse in her lap and kept her attention on the scene passing before the side window of the carriage. She felt too wrought up inside to take part in small talk. Evidently, Chamberlin either sensed or shared her mood, because he was silent for the entire journey.

The wedding was cold and mechanical. Without raising his head, a white-haired preacher read the solemn words from a small black book, his stout, red-cheeked wife looking on. Steve slid a plain gold band on her finger, and it was over. Megan's hands trembled, and she felt chilled clear through, yet she felt a bit

lighter, a trifle less burdened. She breathed a deep, silent sigh. There was no turning back now. Her future was sealed.

The wedding was followed by an uncomfortable trip to Cyrus Tump's, the solicitor's office, where Steve introduced Megan and notified the ancient, spectacled gentleman of their plan to move to Colorado. Megan was afraid the steely, gray eyes of the lawyer would bore right through her, but she resolutely met his gaze and even managed a smile and nod in response to his greeting. Steve made arrangements for Jeremy's sanitarium fee and a monthly allowance for Em to be paid from Mr. Tump's office.

Back in the waiting carriage, Steve handed her a white envelope. "This is your first two months' pay."

"Thank you." She put the envelope in her handbag, then slid the gold band from her finger and placed it carefully into an inside pocket of the handbag for safekeeping.

"Is there any way I can help you?" he offered kindly when she pulled the drawstring tight.

"Em needs a small place to stay near the sanitarium so she can be near Jeremy. We haven't been able to find anything yet."

"I'll see to it," he said easily, and wrote it down in a small notebook he withdrew from his pocket.

"When exactly are we leaving?"

"That would be May twenty-fifth at six thirty in the morning. We travel to Chicago, then change trains and go on to Denver. It'll take about a week."

"Only a week to go so far?" She had expected him to say twice as long.

"I want to get there in time to plant some corn, so it's none too fast. We'd leave this week if I could have gotten tickets." He returned the pad to his pocket. "Can I see you home?"

"Well, I was going to make the arrangements at the sanitarium for Jeremy. . . ."

"I'll take you there, then." He gave the order to the driver. "I don't have anything pressing this afternoon," he said, settling back on the black leather seat.

Megan was buoyed up with relief when Steve left her on High Street later that afternoon. A place in the sanitarium had been secured and a carriage engaged for Jeremy's transfer there. It was beyond marvelous to know that skilled hands would be caring for him tomorrow.



The next two weeks were a blur of activity. Megan and Em packed their few belongings and scrubbed the apartment. They were leaving it far cleaner than they had found it. It was heartbreaking to go through Mother's things, a task Megan had shied away from thus far. Mourning was momentarily replaced by excitement when she found some forgotten treasures in an old trunk. There was the forest