

*The*  
*Christmas*  
*Bargain*



A  
VICTORIAN  
HOLIDAY  
ROMANCE

by  
SHANNA  
HATFIELD

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*The* Christmas  
Bargain

*By*

SHANNA HATFIELD

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The Christmas Bargain  
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by Shanna Hatfield

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**FICTION**

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*The Christmas Bargain*

*The Coffee Girl*

*Learnin' the Ropes*

*QR Code Killer*

**Grass Valley Cowboys Series**

*The Cowboy's Christmas Plan*

*The Cowboy's Spring Romance*

*The Cowboy's Summer Love*

*The Cowboy's Autumn Fall*

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**The Women of Tenacity Series**

*The Women of Tenacity - A Prelude*

*Heart of Clay*

*Country Boy vs. City Girl*

*Not His Type*

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**NON-FICTION**

**Savvy Entertaining Series**

*Savvy Holiday Entertaining*

*Savvy Spring Entertaining*

*Savvy Summer Entertaining*

*Savvy Autumn Entertaining*

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*To those who come to the rescue,  
offer hope,  
and keep the true meaning of the season  
in their hearts every day of the year.*



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## Chapter One

*Eastern Oregon, 1893*

“I done told ya already, Luke, I ain’t got the money,” Alford Booth whined in a nasally tone that made Luke Granger tightly clamp his square jaw while a vein pulsed in his neck.

Slowly removing his hat and running a hand through his thick golden hair, Luke tried to keep his irritation with the man from showing. If Alford spent a little less time drinking and a lot more time working his land, they wouldn’t be having this discussion. Luke rued the day Alford stepped foot on his bank and asked for a loan.

“I’ve extended all the time I can, Alford. You know the loan is already ten months past due,” Luke said, trying to hold on to the edges of his quickly fraying temper.

Alford stared at him a moment through glazed eyes before spewing a stream of tobacco juice that barely missed Luke’s boot.

“Well, ya know I planned to pay ya off after harvest. Weren’t my fault we had a drought this year and the crop failed. Weren’t my fault at all.”

Releasing a sigh, Luke leveled his icy blue stare on Alford. He was somewhat gratified to see the man grow uncomfortable and uneasy. “It’s never your fault, is it Alford? Always someone else’s fault but you aren’t the only one who’s had a hard year. I’m sorry about that but you’ve got to make some form of payment.”

“Some form?” Alford asked with an odd glint in his eye that made Luke wary. “Ya mean ya’d take somethin’ other than cash?”

Luke thought carefully about his response. Alford would weasel his way out of the loan if Luke gave him an inch of finagling room. “It would greatly depend on what that something was.”

Alford smiled, revealing several missing spaces in his rotten teeth. “I’ll give ya my daughter. Will that settle the debt?”

“What?” Luke’s head jerked up, sure he misheard the drunken old coot. “What did you say?”

“Take my daughter. She ain’t much to look at, but she can cook and clean. She’s strong and can work all the day long. The girl ain’t too bright, though. Sometimes ya got to show her who’s boss, but a firm hand straightens her out in no time. Ya need a cook and housekeeper, don’t ya?”

Seething with disgust that the man would try to barter his daughter to settle his debts, Luke clenched the brim of his hat in his hands to keep from popping Alford with his fist. “That is not an acceptable payment, Alford. Not at all.”

“Then I guess I’ll give her to Cecil to settle my bill. He said he’d give me some cash besides. I can haul her in this evenin’ after she cleans up the supper dishes and get ya yer money tomorra,” Alford said, scratching his rotund belly with a dirt-encrusted hand.

Luke was seeing red. He didn’t care how homely the girl was or how desperate Alford might be for cash, he couldn’t rationalize that a father would trade his daughter to Cecil Montague, the local saloon owner and keeper of the town’s “soiled doves,” to pay off his bills.

“I’ll take the girl,” Luke said, surprised when the words rushed out, wishing he could reel them back.

Alford smiled again and nodded his filthy head. “I’ll send her over to yer place tomorra.”

“No,” Luke said, not trusting Alford to keep his word. “I’ll take her with me now.”

“But what about my supper?” Alford whined, suddenly realizing he’d be losing his own cook and housekeeper.

Luke stood to his full height of six-foot, three-inches, and towered over the sniveling man before him. “What about it?”

“I...well...” Alford said, fear filling his face as he backed away from Luke and the menacing look that was turning ice blue eyes hard and cold. “I reckon I can make do.”

“I reckon you will,” Luke said, walking toward the house with Alford following along behind. When they got to the door, Luke waited for Alford to open it and go inside. Expecting filth and foul smells, Luke was taken aback by the clean, albeit shabby interior. Everything was neat and tidy and the delicious smell of stew filled the room, making his mouth water.

A tall figure, clad in a dress the color of dirt, leaned over a scarred table, setting down bowls and spoons. Her hair was covered with a kerchief, and a large white apron hid the rest of her.

“Philamena, ya remember Mr. Granger. He owns the bank in town,” Alford said, pointing to Luke as he ambled to the table and pulled up a chair.

The woman, who was painfully thin, cast a quick glance Luke’s direction, but never raised her eyes to his. She quietly nodded her head as she stood clasping her work-reddened hands primly in front of her.

Luke tried to think of the last time he had seen Philamena Booth. He vaguely recalled her as a happy, smiling child from school days, but being a few grades behind him, he hadn’t paid her any attention. She didn’t come to church, shop in town or, as far as he knew, ever leave the farm.

He remembered seeing her once when he rode out trying to collect on a loan Alford made a few years ago. She was out at the barn and ran to the house while he was dismounting. If memory served him correctly, she was garbed in an ugly dirt-colored dress then, too.

Luke tipped his head her direction, trying to reconcile himself to his decision. The last thing he wanted or needed was a timid scrawny woman on his hands. But he couldn’t exactly ride off and leave her, knowing her father was willing to turn her over to Cecil. No woman deserved that kind of fate.

“Ma’am,” Luke said, softly. “Pleasure to see you again.”

She barely nodded her head, then turned and got another chipped bowl from a cupboard and set it on the table. Alford motioned for Luke to sit down, which he did.

Pouring them both a cup of cold water, Philamena dished up heaping bowls of vegetable stew for the two men. Her bowl hardly had enough in it to feed a bird, causing Luke to study her. She ate with fine manners, her back straight as a rod, while her father shoveled in his meal like it was the last one he’d have.

When his bowl was empty, Alford banged it once in Philamena’s direction then burped loudly. She got up from the table and filled his bowl with the remains in the stew pot before quietly returning to her seat.

Finished eating, Alford scratched at his scraggly beard then glanced Luke’s direction. Luke offered a cool glare that seemed to loosen Alford’s tongue.

“Daughter, Mr. Granger has come to collect on his loan and seein’ as how we can’t pay, he agreed to settle for somethin’ else. Get yer stuff, yer leavin’ with him.”

Philamena’s head shot up and she stared at her father, unmoving. From his seat at the table, Luke could only see her profile, but imagined the look of shock that settled on her face.

“Ya heard me, gal. Clean up them dishes then get yer things.” Alford drained his water cup and set it on the table with a thunk.

“But, Pa...” she said. Luke was surprised by the soft, husky voice.

Leaning her direction, Alford sneered and raise his hand menacingly. “Don’t ya start that sass with me. Get to it.”

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Philamena ducked her head, gathered up the dishes and washed them without saying a word. She disappeared through an open door off the kitchen and was soon back with a small bundle tied up in burgundy and green quilt.

Luke stood from the table, pinning Alford in place with an irate glare. Turning toward Philamena he felt more pity for the woman than words could express. He couldn’t begin to imagine how awful would be to live with a man like Alford.

“May I help you with your coat, miss? The ride back to town might be chilly,” Luke said as he stepped next to Philamena. Although she was dressed in dowdy, shabby clothes, they were pressed and clean. That told Luke a lot about her sense of personal pride. Someone, at some point, had taught her well.

“She ain’t got a coat. No need for one since she don’t go nowhere. Too homely for any man to come courtin’. She’ll be fine. Wouldn’t be the first time out in the cold for her,” Alford said, picking his teeth with a straw he’d pulled out of his pocket.

Luke swallowed down the rage that was boiling inside him at a man who apparently didn’t treat his own flesh and blood any better than he did his starving, neglected animals.

“We best head for town, then,” Luke said, opening the door for Philamena, who hesitantly took a step through. She turned, for just a moment, to give her father one last glance, then walked out toward Luke’s horse that stood tied to the one section of the yard fence not tumbling down.

Before following her out the door, Luke stared meaningfully at Alford. Although he didn’t know much about Philamena, he’d seen enough to know she was being abused at her father’s hand. “Let me make one thing perfectly clear. I’ll consider your debt paid but only if you never, ever come near your daughter again. Understood?”

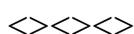
Alford gave him a surprised look before nodding his head. “I’m right glad to finally be rid of this troublesome snit. After twenty-seven years, she finally turned out to be worth somethin’.”

Luke stalked out the door and slammed it with enough force to break the windows that weren’t already cracked before he gave in to his urge to beat some sense into Alford.

Placing his hat on his head, Luke ate up the ground to his horse, Drake, in a few long-legged steps. Removing his coat, he draped it around Philamena’s thin shoulders. Untying the reins, Luke mounted in one smooth motion. He took the sorry little bundle of belongings from Philamena and hung it from his saddle horn before leaning down and offering her his hand. She took it without looking into his face and swung up behind him. He was somewhat taken aback by her agility and ease around a horse.

Riding back toward town, Luke tried to keep a conversation going but it was difficult when all he received was “yes” or “no” responses whispered against his back. He expected Philamena to hold on to his waist and sag against him in relief at being rescued. Instead, she held herself stiffly away from him, a firm grip on the back of his saddle keeping her seat on the horse.

Giving up on talking to her, he instead thought about the mess he’d gotten himself into as he tried to keep his teeth from chattering in the frosty chill of the November evening. What was he going to do with Miss Philamena Booth?



Philamena had been waiting thirteen years to be rescued from the prison her father called home. When her mother passed away giving birth to a stillborn boy, her father changed from a loving, caring

man into a drunken, dirty tyrant.

The last time he allowed Philamena to leave the farm was when she turned sixteen. She went in town for her birthday and bought a hair ribbon the same shade of green as her holly-colored eyes. Philamena saved up her meager pennies for months and hid the money from Pa. Begging and pleading to go to town, he finally relented.

When she came home with the ribbon tied in her thick mahogany curls, followed by one of the livery owner's boys who had taken a shine to her, her father ripped it from her head and ordered her to stay away from town. He took away not only her freedom, but also any color from her life, forbidding her to wear anything but the ugly, plain brown garments she now wore.

None of it made any sense to Philamena, but then again, nothing had after her mother died. Luke started drinking heavily after that with the years between becoming a blur of hard labor interrupted by his drunken rages and random beatings.

Philamena finally learned that being quiet and meek was the only thing that kept him somewhat mollified. It was difficult to see the disgusting man Alford Booth had become and remember what a gentle father and loving husband he had once been.

Back then, their farm had been prosperous, their home happy and life joyous. Now, their land was a desolate mess.

To be bartered to the local banker to pay her father's debt somehow didn't shock Philamena like she should. She knew Luke Granger was a kind, honest man. At least she assumed he was, recalling what she knew about him from her childhood years.

Attending the one-room school until she was fourteen, when her father imprisoned her at home, Philamena remembered Luke being a friendly, generous boy who was a few years her senior. He was the type who stood up against bullies, made sure the littlest children weren't left out of schoolyard games, and excelled in his school work.

Like most of the girls at school, she was sweet on Luke before he went back East to college. No wonder he grew up to be successful and own the town's bank.

As she sat behind him on his horse, Philamena wondered just what exactly he planned to do with her. Breathing deeply, she mentally shrugged and settled his coat more tightly around her. It smelled of leather, horses, and a warm, spicy scent she could only describe as uniquely Luke.

Of all the men in their small town of Hardman to come to her rescue, Philamena would have been less mortified, but not nearly as pleased, had it been anyone else. Luke was an extremely handsome and kind man that any woman would enjoy being around.

Nearly lulled to sleep by the steady rhythm of the horse's gait, Philamena struggled to stay alert. She felt her eyes sliding closed and jerked herself awake, noticing they were riding down the main street of town toward the parsonage at the Christian church, rather than toward Granger House at the far end of town.

Reining his horse to a stop outside the parsonage, Luke gave Philamena his hand and helped her dismount before stepping out of the saddle and handing the quilt-wrapped bundle to her. She dared not raise her gaze to his, and instead studied the ground as Luke took her elbow and propelled her toward the door.

She heard him rapping and felt the heat from the cozy inside of the cottage-style home flow around her when the pastor opened the door. Philamena knew from her father's ramblings that the pastor was one of her former classmates, Chauncy Dodd. He and Luke had been good friends in school.

"Luke," Chauncy said with a broad smile. "What brings you by this evening?"

"I'm hoping you can help me with a...um...situation," Luke said, turning his gaze to Philamena.

She clutched her little bundle tightly to her chest and studied the worn toe of her shoe.

~~“Who do we have here?”~~ Chauncy asked, kindness lacing his voice. He opened the door wider and Luke escorted Philamena inside the cheery home. The yeasty smell of bread nearly made Philamena fall to her knees. It had been so long since she'd had bread, she could barely remember the delicious taste of it.

“Philamena Booth,” Luke said pushing her forward a bit. She still refused to raise her gaze and make eye contact with anyone. “She needs a place to stay tonight and I was hoping you and Abby would take her in.”

“Absolutely,” Chauncy said as a petite woman, large with child, waddled into the front room.

“Hello, Luke,” Abby said, squeezing Luke's hand when he bent down to kiss her cheek. “I thought I heard you. Have you had supper?”

“Yes, ma'am. Miss Booth made a nice bowl of stew. Would you be able to make her comfortable tonight?”

“Most definitely,” Abby said, reaching out a hand and capturing Philamena's. Tugging her toward the kitchen, Abby began a friendly conversation that elicited short, quiet responses from Philamena.

When the women were out of earshot, Chauncy motioned to two chairs in front of a crackling fire. “Suppose you tell me what trouble you've gotten yourself into now.”

Luke shot his friend a warning glance and settled into the comfortable chair, enjoying the warmth of the fire. “I went out to collect from Alford Booth and he refused to pay again. When I demanded payment he said either I could take his daughter to cancel his debt or he'd sell her to Cecil. I didn't feel I had a choice. I couldn't let him take her to the Red Lantern.”

“No, you couldn't, but what are you going to do with her?” Chauncy asked, studying his friend and former cohort in all sorts of boyish crimes. “You can't leave her here indefinitely and you certainly can't take her home with you. It wouldn't be proper.”

“I could move her into the hotel,” Luke said, thinking about his options. “I could get her a room at the boarding house. She could have the entire second floor of my monstrous house to herself.”

“You know tongues will wag. They'll be flapping as it is that she is finally off the farm. You don't want to make things worse for her, do you?” Chauncy had tried many times to convince Alford to change his ways, to let Philamena leave the farm. His suggestions fell on deaf ears. He knew the minister from the Presbyterian Church tried to talk to Alford as well.

Now that Philamena was off the farm, he intended to make sure she wouldn't have to go back. From what he knew, she would make someone a good, dutiful wife. And that someone would be Luke. Chauncy couldn't explain how he knew this with such certainty, but he did.

Luke raked his hands through his hair and leaned his elbows on his knees. Letting out his breath, he turned and stared into the dancing flames in the hearth. “You might as well tell me what you think I should do, instead of waiting for me to get around to your way of thinking.”

Chauncy grabbed his chest and feigned a look of pain. “You wound me, Luke. When have I ever tried to talk you into anything?”

“Nearly every time I see you,” Luke said, a small smile finally cracking his full lips. “I wouldn't have made nearly so many trips to the woodshed as a kid if it wasn't for your suggested ideas.”

“We did have a lot of fun, didn't we?”

“That's beside the point,” Luke said, leaning back and turning his icy blue gaze on his long-time friend. “Let's hear it. What do you think I should do?”

“Marry her.”

Luke bolted upright in the chair and glared at Chauncy like he'd grown a second head. “I'm sure

didn't hear you correctly. Would you mind repeating that?"

Chauncy grinned and leaned forward. "I said you should marry her. You've avoided matrimony long enough. You're pushing thirty and it is long past time for you to settle down. After all, the town banker should have a wife and a family."

"No," Luke grunted, annoyed at his friend. Chauncy knew the last thing he wanted was to be tied down to a woman and family. Luke's father was a perfect example of what happened to a good man when a woman got under his skin.

Never content with their life back East, his father insisted on moving West. They settled into the town of Hardman when Luke and his sister were both very young. His father established the bank and built his mother the huge Victorian house at the edge of town everyone called the Granger House.

It wasn't good enough.

His mother hated every day she spent in Hardman and finally talked his dad into moving back to New York, where the Granger family lived, before Luke's sister graduated from Hardman's school. All too glad to escape the "wilderness," as she called it, his mother declared she'd never again set foot in Hardman.

Although his father preferred the wide open spaces of Hardman, he'd do anything for Dora, his wife of thirty-three years.

Luke loved the rugged landscape and the community of Hardman. After he finished up his course at the snooty school his mother insisted he attend in the East, he returned home, took over the bank from his father and moved into the hulking house. Now, eight years later, he owned the bank and the house, having purchased both from his parents.

The house sat on a five acre lot with a huge barn and carriage house, as well as numerous outbuildings. With six bedrooms, indoor plumbing, gas lights, and every modern convenience available, most people thought the Grangers were a bit extravagant when they built the house.

Luke would have to agree. He hated rattling around in the big empty place and had closed off almost but a couple of rooms. Between the bank and his livestock, he tried to spend as little time inside as possible.

If he brought a woman home, that would all change. Luke didn't need a wife to complicate matters. He liked his life exactly the way it was.

Sitting back against the chair, Luke stretched out his long legs and studied Chauncy, who had fought against married bliss nearly as well as Luke. Right up until Miss Abigail Sommers moved to town and opened a dress shop down the street from the mercantile.

Chauncy was a goner the first Sunday she sat in the congregation and turned her big brown eyes his direction. Now, three years later, Chauncy and Abby were about to embark on the adventure of parenthood.

"You need to come up with a better plan," Luke said, steepling his tapered, callused fingers in front of him. "What else have you got?"

"Nothing," Chauncy said, still grinning. "You better take this payment and make the best of it. You might find out it's a blessing in disguise."

"You've got the disguised part right. Between that ugly dress and the rag on her hair, she could be covered in warts with not a tooth in her head," Luke said, shivering at the vision his words conjured.

Chauncy laughed. "Oh, you might be surprised, my friend."

Luke gave him a doubtful look. Chauncy sat forward and slapped Luke's leg.

"Come on, Luke," he said, trying to sound encouraging. "Think this through. You don't want a wife. I seriously doubt she wants a husband, but she can cook and clean. She can make your home

warm and welcoming and not quite so lonely in the evening. You, in turn, give her a comfortable, safe place to live and some sense of security. Seems like an ideal partnership to me. Just look at it as a business deal, a Christmas bargain. She is supposed to be payment for a loan. If you hired a full-time housekeeper and cook, like my lovely wife has been after you to do for more than two years, think about the wages you would pay for that position. I know you have Mrs. Kellogg do your laundry and dust, but you really do need someone to care for your home. Give this a try until Christmas. If you both despise the arrangement at the end of that time period, you could always have the marriage annulled."

"Well, it doesn't sound quite so crazy when you put it that way," Luke said, thinking about how nice it would be to go home to a hot meal instead of eating at the restaurant, mooching dinner from Chauncy and Abby, or making do with what he could rustle up. "But what makes you think she'll be willing to go along with it?"

"Gratitude."

"Gratitude?"

"Wouldn't you be grateful and feel indebted to the person who saved you from Alford Booth?"

"Possibly," Luke said, giving the idea of marriage consideration. "But those rags have got to go. Can Abby set her up with some new clothes? I'll pay for everything, of course."

"Of course," Chauncy said, trying to hide his grin. Talking Luke into getting married didn't take nearly as long as he anticipated. "Tell you what, today is Monday so why don't we plan the wedding for Saturday afternoon. Miss Booth can stay here this week and you two can get used to the idea of being married. By Saturday, if I know Abby, she'll have a new wardrobe ready for your bride-to-be and then you can move her in. It will look like a real courtship and should keep the gossips in town from having too much fodder."

Luke nodded his head. "That's a sound plan."

Standing up, Luke extended his hand to Chauncy and gave it a friendly shake before the two of them walked to the kitchen where Abby chattered away while Philamena quietly helped dry the dinner dishes.

"Miss Booth," Luke said, trying to get her attention. She turned his way, but never raised her eyes up where he could see them. He wasn't sure he could spend the next fifty years with someone boring holes into his chest because they couldn't make eye contact. "I'm heading home but you'll stay here until Saturday. Pastor Dodd will marry us then and you'll come to my house at that time. Is that acceptable to you?"

His only answer was a brief nod of her head.

Abby, on the other hand, squealed with delight and gave him a big hug, or as big as she could get around her protruding tummy.

"Oh, Luke, that is wonderful news!" Abby said as she squeezed his arm. If she hadn't been expecting, Luke knew she'd be flitting around the room in excitement. "We'll have a nice little ceremony in the church, won't we Chauncy?"

"Absolutely," her husband chimed in, sending her a wink.

"Would you help Miss Booth with her clothes, Abby? She's going to need some warmer things for the winter and she might like a wedding dress," Luke said, picking his coat off the kitchen chair where Philamena had draped it earlier. Sliding it on, he buttoned the front and pulled warm gloves out of the pockets. A faint floral scent tickled his nose where it lingered around the collar of his coat and the welcome aroma annoyed him.

That is how it would begin. First an enticing smell, then a coy look, followed by a soft word, and

he'd be putty in the woman's long, beautiful hands. Luke couldn't help but notice Philamena's attractive hands, work-roughened as they were, as she stood nervously wringing them together.

He would have to proceed with caution to keep from getting his heart entangled in this ridiculous bargain that was, from what Luke could see, only going to cost him more money.

Turning toward his soon-to-be-bride, Luke tried to give her a once over but couldn't get past the hideous dress and equally ugly cloth covering her head. "Would you like a wedding dress, Miss Booth?"

"That would be nice," she said quietly, studying the floor. "But I don't want to be any more in debt to you."

"Don't worry about it," Luke said, leaning over and kissing Abby on the cheek. "Thanks, Abby. I'll see you all tomorrow."

Chauncy walked him to the door and waved as Luke mounted Drake and headed the horse toward the other end of town.

Whistling, Chauncy stuffed his hands in his pockets and walked back to the front room to sit by the fire and gloat. He knew Luke and Philamena being together was right. He didn't know what the future held for those two, but he was looking forward to finding out.

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## Chapter Two

Philamena slowly pulled herself from her dreams, stretching lazily in bed as she enjoyed the feel of the fluffy mattress beneath her and the soft sheets and blankets around her. A vision of Luke Granger flew into her head and his unique scent filled her senses.

She thought for a moment her dreams must be getting more vivid and realistic until she remembered she was in the guest room at the parsonage.

Exhaling a deep, satisfied breath, she let herself rest against the comfortable bedding for a few minutes before beginning her day. Popping open her eyes, she looked around the room. The pine floor boasted several rugs while the white walls made the room look large and clean. A set of ruffled curtains at the window showed daylight starting to peek around the shade.

Feeling guilty for sleeping in, Philamena jumped from the bed and settled her feet on a soft blue rug. Reaching for the water pitcher Pastor Dodd placed in the room for her last night, she splashed her face in the cold water and toweled dry. Yanking her threadbare nightgown over her head, she slipped on her one spare set of undergarments, biting back a sigh.

When she was a girl, her mother made her lovely clothes to wear. She remembered sitting together and making the tiny, perfect stitches on the deep flounced hem of an emerald green dress. Although the dress had long ago fallen to rags, Philamena remembered the rich color and dreamed of once again owning something pretty.

Dragging the hated dirt-colored dress over her head, she buttoned the bodice and adjusted the skirt. Combing her hair back into the severe bun her father insisted she wear, Philamena felt a little rebellious in leaving off the handkerchief. Fastening her worn-out shoes, she opened the door and walked to the kitchen where she could smell coffee brewing.

Quietly stepping into the room, she took in Abby at the stove frying ham while Chauncy sat with his Bible open on the table, sipping a cup of coffee. Looking up, he smiled and motioned her to come into the room. "Good morning, Miss Booth. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you," Philamena said quietly, not making eye contact with the pastor and wondering what she could do to help with breakfast.

Abby turned from the stove and waved a fork in Philamena's direction. "Just help yourself to a cup of coffee and have a seat. Breakfast will be ready in a minute and then we've got a busy day ahead of us."

Philamena poured a cup of coffee, inhaling the rich aroma. "I apologize for sleeping late. It won't happen again."

Abby looked at Chauncy who gave a slight nod of his head her direction. Abby smiled warmly at their guest. "That's perfectly fine, Philamena. You had a rather surprising day yesterday and needed your sleep. In fact, we don't mind if you sleep the day away. So don't you worry, okay?"

Philamena couldn't speak through her tears, so she nodded her head. These people were so good and charitable. They had no idea what kind of person she was, yet they opened their home to her and were doing their best to make her feel welcome. She felt more secure and safe here than she had since her mother passed away.

Clearing his throat, Chauncy took another sip of coffee while Abby set platters of ham, eggs and biscuits on the table. She made enough food to feed twice as many as were seated around the table. Just when Philamena wondered what they would do with all the extra food, the back door opened and Luke stepped inside.

“Morning,” he said, removing his hat and hanging it on a peg by the door before kissing Abby on the cheek and washing his hands.

“Well, Luke, what a surprise to have you join us,” Abby teased, pouring coffee into a cup at the table. Luke found his way to the parsonage table several times a week. He made up for it by often sending boxes of supplies from the general store. He also provided them with beef and pork.

Somehow missing the fact the table was set for four instead of just three, Philamena felt a nervous fluttering erupt in her stomach at the sight of her betrothed.

After the women were seated, Luke settled into his chair like having breakfast at the parsonage was a regular event. From the looks of how the Dodds and Luke interacted, Philamena assumed it must be.

“Miss Booth,” Luke said, looking at her intently. Philamena wondered if this was what a horse or the auction block must feel like as Luke studied her from the tip of her head right down to where her dress disappeared behind the table. “I trust you had a pleasant night.”

“Yes. Thank you,” Philamena whispered, keeping her eyes fastened on her plate.

Luke looked at Chauncy who shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

“Shall we give thanks for this new day?” Chauncy asked, extending a hand to both Philamena and Luke, who sat on either side of him. Philamena forced herself to take the pastor’s hand then extended her other hand to Abby, who grasped Luke’s free hand.

Chauncy gave thanks and asked for a special blessing on Philamena, making tears pool in her eyes again. Unable to fathom why these people seemed to care about her, she knew she was nothing to them except an inconvenience.

As Abby passed her a plate of hot biscuits, Philamena took one and broke it open. Steam puffed up in the early morning air and Philamena’s mouth watered. She carefully buttered it then took a small bite. It was delicious – airy and warm with rich butter melting into every little crevice. She closed her eyes to savor the experience.

Luke sat watching her, surprised by her obvious pleasure in something as simple as a hot biscuit. How deprived had her life been with Alford? Luke wasn’t all that sure he wanted to know.

Despite his better judgment, Luke found himself caring about Philamena. He spent most of the night awake wondering about how her father had treated her and what he could do to make her life a little easier. Sure, he planned to have her cook and clean, but he would treat her kindly, respectfully, and honorably. Even if she would be a wife in name only, he would handle her with care.

He had no delusion that he would fall in love with her. She was plain, malnourished and quite clearly frightened of men. That was fine with Luke. He had no intention of ever falling in love and most certainly no plans of marrying because he was besotted with some woman who would eventually make his life miserable.

Gazing at the Booth girl across the table, he was glad to see she left the rag off her head. Her hair was peeled back into such a tight bun, she might as well have been bald. Despite the unbecoming style, some part of Luke was grateful to see her hair was a beautiful shade of mahogany. It reminded him of the curving mahogany staircase at his home. Picturing Philamena’s hair down and gleaming in the firelight, Luke would have bet his best pair of boots it would spark with gold and red highlights.

Suddenly his hands itched to pull out the pins from her hair and see what it looked like down. Yanking those notions to an abrupt halt, he was annoyed he let his thoughts wander so far off course. Turning his attention back to his breakfast, Luke carried on a conversation with Chauncy about the bank, the church, some of the neighbors, and the weather.

Abby encouraged Philamena to help herself to more than the meager serving on her plate. She

finally accepted a second biscuit and another helping of eggs.

Finishing his breakfast, Chauncy and Luke walked out together, leaving Abby and Philamena alone in the cozy kitchen.

“Once we wash the dishes and start lunch, we can head over to my shop and see about getting you a new wardrobe,” Abby said, hefting herself to her feet.

“Please, Mrs. Dodd, sit while I do the dishes. It’s the least I can do,” Philamena said, springing into action. Before Abby could protest, Philamena had soap shaved into the dishpan and the dishes soaking.

“If you insist, but only because I feel like I’ve got a barrel strapped to my waist and clubs for my feet,” Abby said with a chuckle. “And you must call me Abby.”

“Thank you...Abby,” Philamena said, offering the barest hint of a smile. She looked up and made eye contact with Abby, who gave her a huge grin.

“Why, I declare,” Abby gasped in surprise. “You’ve got the prettiest green eyes I’ve ever seen in my life.”

Philamena blushed and went back to washing dishes. Finally, she said, “My mother had green eyes.”

“She must have been a very beautiful woman,” Abby said, drinking the last sip of her coffee.

“She was,” Philamena said, scrubbing a skillet without looking up.

“You know, I’m going to have my tongue tied in knots calling you Miss Philamena Booth. Since we feel like we’re already friends, may I call you Philamena? Would you mind?”

“I don’t mind,” Philamena said, drying the dishes. She kept her head down as she spoke and her cheeks turned pink. “I’d like being friends.”

Abby lumbered up from the table and gave Philamena a hug around her thin shoulders. “Let’s put on a pot of stew for lunch. It’s going to be chilly today and that will taste good with a pan of cornbread, don’t you think? We can leave it on the back of the stove while we go over to my dress shop.”

“You have your own store?” Philamena asked as she helped put vegetables into a pot of broth with chunks of rich smelling beef.

“I sure do. I’ve been a seamstress since I was old enough to hold a needle. I had a store in Kansas where I grew up and when my folks died, my cousin and I decided to head out West. She fell in love on the train ride out here and ended up staying in Idaho with her new husband, but I decided to come on to Hardman and see what was available. I not only found the perfect store, but the perfect man for me,” Abby said, looking around the kitchen, surprised at how quickly Philamena set everything right. “Let me get a couple of my shawls and we’ll run over to the store.”

While Philamena wiped off the table, Abby disappeared and came back with an extra shawl, handing it to Philamena. Wrapping it around her narrow shoulders, Philamena reveled in both the softness and warmth it offered.

Opening the door, Abby waited for Philamena to step outside before joining her. As they walked past the church, Abby waved at the building, then grinned at Philamena.

“I never know if he’s looking out the windows or not, but at least Chauncy knows I waved if he was,” Abby said, tipping her head toward Philamena conspiratorially.

Philamena couldn’t help but smile at Abby.

They walked down the street and stopped two doors down from the mercantile where a window display featured a rich brown and cream striped gown with a beautiful cream-colored shawl, fancy brown shoes and a hat bedecked with peacock feathers. Philamena let out a sigh as she looked

dreamily in the window.

“Like it?” Abby asked, observing Philamena’s perusal of the items in the window as she took a key from her reticule and unlocked the door. “I can’t wait for you to try on a few things.”

The few things Abby wanted Philamena to try on turned out to be more like two dozen different dresses in a variety of styles.

It didn’t take long for Abby to decide what styles and colors looked best on her new friend. As Philamena tried clothes on, Abby either shook her head or clapped her hands in delight and started making notes and pinning in alterations. The entire time, Abby kept Philamena away from the beautiful cheval mirror in the corner. When she was finished with Philamena, she could look, but not until the makeover was complete.

“I don’t know what Mr. Granger has planned,” Philamena finally said, “but I’m sure one dress would suffice.”

Abby laughed and continued fitting a beautiful burgundy silk gown to Philamena’s tall figure. Hoping that Philamena would fill out once she began eating better, Abby was leaving wide seams that could be let out later.

“Luke will want you to have everything you need to be a banker’s wife. I intend to see you properly outfitted.”

“Oh,” was all Philamena could manage to say, as her thoughts tumbled through her head. She had no business being a banker’s wife. Her skills when it came to being a gracious hostess or socializing were practically nonexistent.

Other than at harvest time when the threshing crew came to help cut their wheat, the only person she’d been around in the last dozen years was her pa. He drank, ate, yelled at her, and slept. On the rare occasions when he was somewhat sober, he attempted to farm. If they had any money, he went to town and spent it all at the saloon.

She grew all their vegetables, canning and preserving what she could during the summer and fall months. Their once robust herd of cattle was now a handful of spindly cows. Pa butchered one a year and that beef had to last them for a good long time. Philamena learned to stay out of his way, be quiet, and keep the house as neat and clean as possible.

A good cook and efficient housekeeper, Philamena was hopeful she wouldn’t be an overwhelming burden to Mr. Granger as she worked to pay off her father’s debt. Failing to grasp why she had to marry him for the bargain to be carried through, Philamena decided to worry about that another day.

Abby could see the doubts flitting across Philamena’s face and patted her hand. “Now, don’t you worry. Luke is a wonderful man and he’ll take good care of you. I don’t know much about your situation, Philamena, but I know you have new friends in me, Chauncy, and Luke, so don’t be fearful. As my husband would say, trust in the Lord and leave it at that.”

Philamena nodded her head, considering what Abby said.

Glancing at the clock, Abby gasped. “My gracious, we’ll have to hurry home for lunch. After my required afternoon nap, we’ll work on altering these gowns. Tomorrow, my new friend, we’ll really be busy.”

In the whirlwind she was coming to think of as Abby, Philamena soon found herself back in her plain dirt-colored dress, bundled up and walking down the sidewalk to the parsonage, carrying a huge basket filled with dresses that needed altered.

Stepping inside the Dodd’s cozy home, the delicious beefy smell of the stew greeted them. The kitchen was warm and homey and inviting. Philamena could see why Luke found it so appealing. Chauncy was setting down three place settings at the table as they came in the door.

“Have a fun morning, girls?” he asked, helping Abby off with her shawl and kissing her cheek.

~~“We certainly did,” Abby said, washing her hands. She took a pan of cornbread from the cupboard and put it in the oven to warm. “How was your morning?”~~

“Fine,” Chauncy said, pouring three cups of steaming coffee. “I saw two lovely ladies outside the church window and one was good enough to wave at me.”

Abby grinned and gave Philamena a look that said, “I told you so.”

Philamena carried the stew pot to the table and Chauncy stuck in a ladle. “We keep things pretty simple around here. Hope you don’t mind,” he said with a smile.

“Not at all,” Philamena said, almost daring herself to look into the pastor’s face, but not yet ready.

They were soon seated at the table and Chauncy again gave thanks for the meal. Abby continued to encourage Philamena to eat, which she did reluctantly. Finally, Abby couldn’t hold her tongue.

“Philamena, honey, we’ve got an abundance of food and I want you to enjoy it. If you want a second, or even a third helping of anything, you go right ahead and take it. You eat your fill. There’s no need for you to go hungry or take such small helpings.”

Keeping her head down, Philamena slowly nodded in agreement. When Chauncy passed the plate of cornbread, she took another slice and buttered it. Then, surprising herself with her boldness, she added a large dollop of berry jam. Chauncy grinned and Abby smiled, but neither said anything. They were making progress with their guest.

After lunch, Philamena insisted on doing the dishes while Abby took a nap. Chauncy returned to his office at the church, leaving Philamena alone in the kitchen.

Drying the last dish and putting it away, Philamena decided to save Abby some work later and prepared a roast for dinner. Abby mentioned it was what she had planned for the evening meal. Adding carrots and potatoes to the pan and placing it in the oven to bake throughout the afternoon, Philamena found a container of yeast and had bread rising on the warming shelf of the oven in no time. It felt so good to knead the bread and inhale the rich, yeasty scent. She could hardly wait to eat a piece, hot from the oven, slathered with butter.

Taking the basket of dresses in the front room, Philamena sat by the fire Chauncy stoked before he went back to the church and threaded a needle. Warmed by the fire and full of good food, she felt herself growing drowsy, but she kept on stitching.

Her mind could hardly grasp the notion that she was no longer imprisoned by her father and treated like a slave. In less than twenty-four hours, she found herself among kind, loving people who had made her feel welcome. They didn’t look down their nose at her shabby clothes and tattered state. Instead, they offered her food, shelter and friendship. Tears clogged her throat and stung the backs of her eyes.

There was nothing she could ever do to repay the Dodds, or Luke Granger, for what they had given her. Freedom was beyond a price. As was friendship.

Finishing the alterations on the first dress out of the basket, Philamena looked up when Abby waddled out of the bedroom, looking rested and tired at the same time. Abby studied Philamena’s handiwork and nodded her approval.

“You’re very good with a needle,” Abby said, surprised by Philamena’s skill. She was a skilled seamstress if the work she’d just finished was any indication. “You did a fine job on this dress.”

Philamena blushed, unaccustomed to any praise. “My mama taught me to sew. We used to spend many hours sitting by the fire, sewing and talking.”

Abby placed a warm hand on Philamena’s shoulder. “She sounds like she was a wonderful mother.”

“She was,” Philamena whispered, biting the inside of her cheek to keep the tears from falling from her eyes. ~~Forced to bottle up her emotions for so long, she felt like they now might spill over at any moment.~~

“I hope I’ll be a good mama,” Abby said, lowering herself to a chair with a sigh. She picked up a soft green wool gown and threaded a needle.

“I’m sure you will be,” Philamena said, smiling at her new friend.

Abby beamed at her, then set to work on the gown. She could smell the roast in the oven and the bread rising. Maybe letting Luke have Philamena wasn’t such a good idea, after all. She could certainly use her help here with the baby coming soon.

Smiling to herself, she knew that for whatever reason Chauncy was all for this marriage, so she would do everything she could to encourage it.

“When is your little one due to arrive?” Philamena finally asked, not sure her question was proper or not, but curious when Abby would welcome the baby.

“Middle of December, as close as we can guess,” Abby said, stopping her sewing for a moment. “Maybe we’ll have a Christmas baby.”

“Maybe,” Philamena said, thinking that babies born close to the holiday had to be extra-special.

The afternoon passed as quickly as the morning. Abby had a way of drawing her out of her shell and into conversation. It was soon time to get supper on the table. Between the two of them, food altered dressed were now hanging in the wardrobe in Philamena’s room.

When Chauncy opened the door, it was to the sound of women’s laughter as Abby buttered her rolls and Philamena sliced the roast.

“Well, now, if that isn’t a welcome sound, I don’t know what is,” he said cheerfully as he came in the back door, hanging his coat and hat on pegs put there for just that purpose.

When Philamena turned and saw Chauncy, she quickly ducked her head and grew silent. Abby patted her on the back and they continued with the meal preparations.

Pouring three tall glasses of milk, Chauncy set the glasses on the table while Philamena helped carry over platters of food. Chauncy asked a blessing on the food that again had Philamena’s eyes filling with tears.

Once the food was passed around, Chauncy asked about their day and how the wardrobe was progressing. He talked about his plans to visit some of the folks on ranches south of town the next day and asked Abby if she’d mind packing a lunch for him to take along.

The evening was spent by the cozy fire in the front room. Chauncy read a book while the two women worked on more gown alterations.

Cuddling down into the soft comfort of her bed in the guest room later that evening, Philamena felt blessed for the first time in many, many years.

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## Chapter Three

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Luke breathed in deeply of the crisp morning air and held it in his lungs before releasing it. Straightening his shoulders, he pushed open the door to the town's only restaurant and walked to his usual table.

He didn't have long to wait before the waitress, Melanie LaRoux, came to his table. As she sidled up next to him, her eyes glittered with familiarity.

"Mornin' Luke, honey," she said, giving him a warm smile. "I missed you yesterday mornin'. Heard you had breakfast with the pastor."

"Yes, I did," Luke said in a clipped tone, wondering best how to break Melanie's heart.

"Somethin' the matter, sugar?" Melanie asked, a hurt look crossing her features as her full, rosy lips formed into a becoming pout. Luke absently wondered if she perfected the placement of her lips by practicing in front of a mirror.

Courting Melanie on and off for several years, Luke was never willing to make a commitment, even though she was definitely hunting a husband. She'd get mad and tell him to never speak to her again, then after a few weeks, she'd beg him to take her on a picnic or to the skating rink or for a ride in his carriage. He never considered marrying her, but Melanie was determined to change his mind.

Working in her parents' restaurant as a waitress along with her two sisters, all three girls were beautiful blonds with big blue eyes. As the eldest, Melanie was the one who had caught Luke's eye, even if she never managed to capture his heart.

Petite and buxom, Melanie was a flirt of immense proportions. She knew she was pretty, turning the heads of many young men in town. Using that knowledge to her advantage every opportunity she could, she was a skilled manipulator. She was also high-strung with a wicked temper.

It was one thing to be seen with the prettiest girl in town on his arm and something altogether different to make her his wife. Luke had never felt Melanie was suitable wife material. Between her temper and coy behavior, something always held him back whenever he considered offering her his promise of commitment. She reminded him all too well of his own mother.

Now he was going to have to tell her about his upcoming nuptials and he had a feeling that conversation was not going to go well. That was why his stomach hurt and his jaw was beginning to ache from being clenched tightly.

"Nothing's the matter," Luke said, deciding to wait until the restaurant cleared out after breakfast before talking to Melanie. "I'm just hungry."

Placing a small hand on his arm, she beamed at Luke. "You came to the right place to fix that problem, honey. You want your usual for breakfast?"

"Yes, please," Luke said, swallowing back a sigh, watching Melanie sashay back to the kitchen with his order. She was easy on the eyes, for certain, and completely unlike his wife-to-be.

Philamena looked like a strong wind would blow her down and that hideous dress did nothing but bring to mind a big burlap sack.

After breakfast yesterday at the parsonage, he had purposely stayed away. Knowing he intimidated Philamena, Luke didn't want to frighten her entirely with his presence. He supposed it would take time and gentleness to overcome her fears and help her realize not all men were drunken louts.

Luke prided himself on being able to break any horse with a gentle hand. He decided Philamena couldn't be much different. It was a challenge he was preparing himself to take on and Luke didn't sweat his hand to anything unless he knew the outcome would be successful.

Melanie soon returned with his breakfast, placing it before him with a beguiling smile. Luke ate without even tasting the smoky bacon or crisply fried potatoes. After a second cup of steaming coffee, he knew he had to tell her the truth. If he didn't, she'd likely hear a rumor before the day was over, since Abby mentioned she was planning to take Philamena to the mercantile to purchase necessities today.

Giving George Bruner, the store owner, instructions to put whatever the women wanted on his table before he came to the restaurant for breakfast, Luke hoped Philamena was enjoying her time with the bubbly Abby. If anyone could draw her out of her shell, Abby was the woman for the job.

When Melanie returned to his table to refill his coffee cup a third time, Luke shook his head and motioned for her to sit down. The restaurant was mostly empty except for a couple of old-timers who spent the better part of each morning near the stove playing checkers.

"What is it, Luke?" Melanie asked, batting her eyelashes at him. Luke suddenly found it annoying instead of endearing. Had she always been so...flirtatious?

"You know I've enjoyed our time together and had a lot of fun with you in the past," Luke said, trying his best to soften the blow. Glancing at Melanie, Luke wasn't surprised to find her sitting smugly with an expectant look on her face. Luke decided it was best to leave off the sugar-coating and come right to the point.

"Melanie, I'm getting married," he said, not quite looking her in the eye.

"Lover, I know that. It's about time you figured it out," she said, leaning across the table and putting her hand on his. Not seeing the look of dismay on his face, Melanie gushed with plans. "Let's have a Christmas wedding. I can be ready by then. I'll have Mrs. Dodd make my dress and Mama will want..."

Luke removed his hand from beneath hers and placed it under the table. "I said I'm getting married. Not we. I'm sorry, Melanie, but I wanted to tell you myself. I didn't want you to hear it around town."

Melanie's mouth hung open like a fish waiting for bait. Her face flushed a shade of red similar to an overripe tomato before cold rage settled in her eyes and her entire countenance shouted with bare, restrained hostility. At that moment, Luke had never seen a woman look less attractive. He thought she might stamp her foot or start screaming. When she finally snapped her mouth shut, Luke let out the breath he'd been holding.

"Well, I've never," she said, jumping up from the table and slapping him across the face. "Who's she? What kind of woman would steal someone else's beau? You're mine, Luke Granger. Mine! I'm not giving up this easily. What's her name?"

"You don't need to know her name," Luke said, feeling oddly protective of Philamena. Standing up, he decided if he was going to get slapped again, he'd make it a little harder for Melanie to reach his face, since she was barely five feet tall. "All you need to know is that I'm getting married. I apologize for any distress this has caused you."

"Distress? I'm not distressed. I'm mad, Luke. You tell me her name and the only wedding that will be taking place is the one between me and you!"

"Melanie, I'm sorry, but you need to understand that regardless of my relationship status, I wouldn't be marrying you. Not now, not ever."

"Oh, you..." Since Melanie couldn't reach his face for another slap, she instead kicked him in the shin. "Don't plan on eating here again, Mr. Granger. You are no longer welcome."

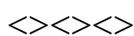
Running into the kitchen, she set the swinging door between the dining room and kitchen flapping back and forth so rapidly Luke thought it might fly right off its hinges.

Leaving money on the table to more than cover his breakfast, Luke put on his hat, nodded to the old gents at their checkerboard and left. Walking down the sidewalk to the bank, Luke felt bad for hurting Melanie's feelings, but he hadn't known what else to do.

As much as he'd enjoyed courting and kissing Melanie, not once had thoughts of marriage entered his head when he was with her. Luke never intended to settle down and now that he was, it was more like a business arrangement than a real marriage. A bargain made to pay a debt. Nothing less, nothing more.

Sucking in the cold air, Luke decided things didn't go as badly as they possibly could have, but he somehow doubted this would be the end of his problems with Melanie. It appeared she wasn't quite the sweet and demure female she wanted him to believe she could be. Instead, he envisioned her with long, lethal claws, lashing out at Philamena, who would obviously not stand a chance.

Unlocking the bank door, Luke vowed to keep his future wife as sheltered and protected as possible. She appeared to have endured enough hurt and pain for many lifetimes.



Philamena couldn't believe she needed all the things Abby had insisted were necessities. Between several gowns, a warm shawl, a new coat, corsets and underpinnings, Philamena couldn't imagine needing anything else for a good long time to come.

Abby insisted she needed hats, gloves, shoes and boots, a reticule, stockings, nightgowns, a warm robe, scented soap and all manner of items Philamena would never think of as necessities, but luxuries.

Keeping a few things back for Philamena to use before Saturday, Abby had the rest of the items sent to Granger House.

She and Abby were spending the afternoon at the dress shop, finishing the final touches on her wedding gown.

Abby used her Singer sewing machine to create one of the most beautiful gowns Philamena had ever seen, not that she'd seen many. The gown Abby fashioned was something a princess would be proud to wear with smooth white satin and thick lace.

Tomorrow, Philamena would stand in the church and vow her life to a man who was practically a stranger. When she voiced her concern that Luke was taking his end of the bargain to an extreme, Abby just smiled and said everything would work out for the best.

Luke had been noticeably absent since he came for breakfast Tuesday. Philamena got the distinct feeling he was staying away from the parsonage and her for some unknown reason. Catching her reflection in the window, she let out a sigh.

Although she was wearing a serviceable white blouse with a navy wool skirt, her hair was pulled tightly against her head and she felt plain and homely beside the vibrant and lovely Abby.

Abby glanced over at her and grinned. Philamena had made a lot of progress in the past few days. She was now able to look Chauncy in the eye, she ate her fill at each meal and was learning to laugh, smile and express her emotions. Today, she had even made a few witty comments that made Abby laugh until her sides hurt and the baby kick repeatedly.

Seeing the potential in Philamena, Abby wasn't about to let the opportunity pass by to help her blossom.

The next morning, Abby chased Chauncy out the door after breakfast, insisting Philamena take a bath with one of the bars of scented soap they'd purchased at the mercantile. Philamena, at first

hesitant, soon sank into the tub and inhaled of the rose scent. It made her feel pampered and womanly.

Finished with her bath and washing her hair, Philamena was just tugging her robe into place when Abby hurried into the room, declaring she was doing something with her hair.

Snipping a bit here and trimming a little there, Abby cut some wisps that layered around Philamena's face, turning the angles into curves, while the rest of her thick, curly hair fell to her waist.

"Philamena, you've been holding out on us. Your hair is absolutely divine. I'd love to have hair that thick and curly and altogether lovely. Let's see if we can come up with a new hairstyle for you."

As Abby began to twist her hair up into a loose jumble of curls on top of her head, Philamena turned and caught her friend's hand warmly in her own. "But you have such lovely hair and love everything Abby. You're beautiful from the inside out. No wonder Pastor Chauncy loves you so."

Abby smiled and squeezed Philamena's hand. "Thank you, honey. But I don't think you realize what a beauty you are in your own right. You are going to knock Luke senseless when he sees you."

At the mention of her groom, Philamena wanted to run into the guest room and lock the door. Although she had grown accustomed to being around Abby and Chauncy, it certainly didn't mean she was ready to wed a handsome stranger and move into his home.

Laughing, it appeared Abby could read her thoughts. "Don't worry, honey, everything will work out just fine with Luke. Chauncy says the Lord's hand is in this, which means your marriage will be blessed. You just focus on looking like a beautiful bride today and enjoy the party."

"What party?" Philamena asked, her eyes wide in surprise and fear. It had been years since she had been around a group of people and had no idea how to interact with everyone.

"Just a small reception after the ceremony at the church," Abby said, studying Philamena critically and nodding her head in approval at what she saw. "A few of the church ladies wanted to have a little luncheon and offer their congratulations, so Chauncy told them it would be fine. Luke agreed."

"Oh," Philamena said quietly. She wasn't ready to face a large number of people at one time. Even a small gathering seemed like a big crowd to her after being so accustomed to the solitude of the farm.

"You'll be fine. Remember Chauncy and I will be there the whole time," Abby said reassuringly. "Besides, there will only be a few good friends and church folk at the ceremony who will stay for the reception. It will be good for you to meet some people from the congregation. You've already met George and Aleta Bruner from the mercantile and their son Percy and daughter Alice. You made Mrs. Dawber's acquaintance when she came to pick up her dress and you met a few of the ladies at the quilting circle Wednesday. So they aren't strangers, after all."

Philamena mustered a small smile while trying to tamp down her growing sense of panic. She would get through this wedding because it meant so much to Chauncy and Abby not to mention the fact that she was grateful and beholden to Luke.

The only alternative to this wedding was going back to the farm and her pa, and that was an option Philamena was not willing to consider.

Two hours later, when Abby fastened the last button on the back of her gown, Philamena closed her eyes and waited for the moment of truth. The moment she would gaze into the big mirror in Abby's bedroom and see what the new Philamena looked like. She was afraid she would be sorely disappointed and kept her eyes tightly closed.

Abby nudged her gently and giggled. "Go on, take a peek."

Philamena let out a deep breath, or as deep a breath as she could in her new corset, and opened her eyes. Turning to look in the mirror she stood speechless at the lovely woman staring back at her.

Her green eyes grew even bigger as she admired the wonderful transformation Abby had wrought.

“Oh, my,” she finally whispered. “Is that really me?”

“Well, who else would it be, you goose,” Abby teased, adjusting a bit of lace and straightening pleat. “You look about as lovely as any bride has a right to look, and then some.”

Hearing the clomp of boots through the house, they both turned toward the bedroom door.

“Everyone decent?” Chauncy asked from the hallway.

“Yes, come on in,” Abby said, sending Philamena a wink.

“You ladies ready to go over to the church? Everyone is waiting and the groom is more than ready to get things under way. Say, I thought Philamena was getting married. Who is this lovely creature?” Chauncy teased as he gave her an approving nod and a warm smile.

Philamena blushed and the color added a beautiful pink hue to her cheeks. “Thank you,” she managed to say.

“You look stunning, Philamena,” Chauncy said as they walked to the door. He helped Abby into her coat then held a warm shawl for Philamena. Abby didn’t want her dress to get crushed by a coat on the few steps it took to reach the church. As they exited the house and started down the walk, Chauncy couldn’t stop his chuckles.

“Mind sharing what you find so funny, husband of mine?” Abby asked with a jaunty grin, her hands wrapped around Chauncy’s arm.

“Luke,” Chauncy said, continuing on toward the church laughing.

“What about Luke?” Abby questioned as they neared the door.

“His eyes are going to pop right out of his head,” Chauncy said, escorting the women into the foyer where he helped them remove their outerwear.

Chauncy agreed to walk Philamena down the aisle and then stand as Luke’s best man. The Presbyterian minister, who was a friend to both Luke and Chauncy, agreed to perform the ceremony. While Chauncy wanted to do the honors of the ceremony, he was even more pleased to give away the bride and stand with the groom.

Abby adjusted Philamena’s skirts then handed her a bouquet of fresh flowers. When Philamena looked at her in surprise, Abby smiled and whispered, “Luke ordered them. They came in on the stage last night.”

Looking down at the bouquet in her hand, warmth spread through Philamena at Luke’s thoughtfulness. Resigning herself to do her best for his sake, she nodded to Abby then placed her hand on Chauncy’s arm.

Abby stepped into the back of the church and started down the aisle since she was to be the matron of honor.

When she neared Luke, she raised one eyebrow and nodded her head toward the back of the sanctuary as one of the church ladies began to play the wedding march on the upright piano.

Luke stood waiting to catch a glimpse of his bride. Chauncy kept him updated on her progress during the week. Hoping his friend was not exaggerating, Luke felt it best to give Philamena plenty of space to adjust to being off the farm.

From what Abby and Chauncy said, she was able to relax around them both and that had happened in just a matter of days. With enough time and encouragement, he hoped they could eventually become friends. If they were stuck living under the same roof for goodness only knew how long, it would be nice if they could get along.

Watching the back of the church, Luke saw Chauncy step into the aisle followed by a vision in white satin. Luke caught his breath. The regal woman walking toward him could not possibly be Philamena Booth, his intended.

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