

State of Matrimony

CHAPTER ONE

St. Joseph, Missouri
April, 1858

Diantha Bowers dropped a wet rag next to a bucket of dirty water. After glancing around to be certain she was unobserved, she shifted her weight from her knees to her heels and dug her fingers into the small of her back to massage aching muscles. Fresh water, more lye soap, and she'd have the floor of the Litchfield & Golden Mercantile cleaned to Mr. Golden's satisfaction. She hoped so, anyway. His moods were as unpredictable as the spring rains that turned the streets to mud. Mud that customers tracked over the floors during the day. The same mud she spent her evenings scrubbing.

She tucked an errant lock of black hair behind her ear and headed for the alley to refill her bucket. Although the sun had begun its descent to the west, the street beyond the store remained busy. Echoes from boots clomping by on the boardwalk bounced from the narrow walls between the mercantile and saloon next door.

Craning her neck, she studied the horses hitched to a rail next to the walk. One day, she'd have a horse and buggy of her own. And a house. And a family. But not now. Not while she worked as a scrubwoman. The kind of man she dreamed of marrying would never notice a girl like her.

"Daydreaming again?"

Diantha jumped. For a big man, Mr. Golden moved as silently as a cat. She took several steps back to open a space between them. “You startled me, sir. I apologize. I’ll be done in a few minutes.”

He leaned against the doorway, one side of his mouth twisted in a frown. “I expect you will, but that’s not why I sought you out. There’s a matter I need to discuss with you.” His frown deepened. “I’d hoped to do it this evening, but my brother hasn’t arrived as planned.”

Heart hammering, she stared at him. Surely he wasn’t going to dismiss her for taking too long to clean floors. As for him having a sibling, this was the first she’d heard of a brother.

She fought to control the quiver in her voice. “Sir, if not this evening, when do you want to talk to me?”

“Tomorrow, soon as the store closes. If Michael’s not here by then, I wash my hands of him.” He spoke the last sentence under his breath, then glanced up as though surprised to see her still standing there. “Go on about your chores, Diantha. It’s time you finished.”

“Yes, sir.”

He entered his small office and closed the door. As soon as he was out of sight, she dropped to her knees beside the bucket, grabbed the rag, and splashed cleaning solution over the floorboards with quick strokes. Her mind tumbled between worry and prayer. *Lord, you know I need this job. Help my work please you and Mr. Golden.* The man could be a stern taskmaster. If he decided to dismiss her, she’d lose her small salary as well as the room and board he provided at Mrs. Wilkie’s.

She scrubbed her way to the rear entrance, telling herself the tears she wiped from her cheeks were due to the eye-stinging odor of lye soap. She'd learned long ago that crying helped nothing.

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As soon as Diantha entered Mrs. Wilkie's house, her landlady bustled through the cluttered sitting room and met her at the door. "You're just in time. Supper's ready."

"I don't think I could eat a bite, but I'll sit with you to keep you company."

"Not hungry?" She pressed her fingers against her plump cheeks. "Harold Golden works you too hard. I've told him time and again that you don't have a strong constitution. Your parents never dreamed you'd end up—"

"I'm grateful for my job." Diantha shook raindrops from her cloak and hung it on a peg behind the door. "I'm especially grateful to live here with you. If Mr. Golden hadn't known my father, I don't know where I'd be." She swallowed as her brief encounter with her employer filled her mind. "Now I don't know where I'll be tomorrow."

"Come to the kitchen with me this minute. A little food will put you right, and you can tell me why you think I'm going to turn you out on the street."

Diantha followed her to the snug room where the aroma of baked beans laced with molasses rose from a covered pot in the center of the table. A bowl of pickled beets and a plate of cornbread sat next to the beans. She settled into her usual place. "Maybe I'll just take a little bit."

The lines on Mrs. Wilkie's face fanned out in a smile. After blessing the food, she filled two plates, then pinned her sharp blue gaze on Diantha. "What happened today to worry you so?"

"Mr. Golden said he had something to discuss with me, then he couldn't do it because his brother wasn't there. I didn't know he had a brother, and I certainly don't know why he needs to be present when Mr. Golden talks to me." She paused, knowing she was speaking too fast. "I'm afraid. What will I do if I lose my job?"

"You'd stay here with me, of course."

"I couldn't do that. How would I pay you?"

Mrs. Wilkie reached across the table and patted Diantha's hand. "I was a lonely old woman until you came. Your home is here. If your worries are real, I'll manage somehow until you find another position."

"You're very kind. Thank you." Warmth heated her neck and she lowered her head to hide quick tears. Living with Mrs. Wilkie was part of her salary. To remain if Mr. Golden no longer paid her room and board would be accepting charity.

She'd do anything to avoid such a fate.

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The following evening, chores completed, Diantha waited at the back door for the summons to Mr. Golden's office. The few times she'd glimpsed him during the day he'd been preoccupied and took no notice of her. A tiny part of her mind hoped he'd forgotten about the matter he wished to discuss.

At the front of the alley, a rider dismounted from a broad-chested black gelding and wrapped the reins around the hitching rail. She watched, mesmerized, as he whipped off his hat and wiped his forehead with the back of his arm. Setting sun lit his wavy hair with streaks of gold. A handsome horse and a handsome rider. He had to be new to St. Joseph, otherwise she'd have remembered him.

Oblivious to her scrutiny, the rider strode south on the boardwalk and disappeared from view. She sighed. A man who could afford such a fine horse would never be interested in someone like her.

Floorboards creaked, warning her of Mr. Golden's approach. At least on this occasion he'd caught her daydreaming after work hours.

"I see you've finished for the day. Excellent. Please come with me." He walked a few steps ahead of her, opened his office door, and directed her to a chair inside.

Her gaze took in the desk beneath a small window and an additional two chairs pushed against a book shelf. She drew in a sharp breath. The rider she'd seen a moment ago occupied the seat nearest to Mr. Golden's desk. Up close, she noticed his hazel-brown eyes and a dimple in the center of his chin. Her heart gave a little flutter. Was he the brother Mr. Golden mentioned? No, it couldn't be possible. This man was only a few years beyond her own age. Mr. Golden must be near forty.

The stranger gave her a brief nod, then turned his attention to her employer. "Get on with your announcement, Harold. I cancelled my plans to be here this evening."

"Formalities first. This is Diantha Bowers, the girl I mentioned. Diantha, this is my brother, Michael."

Eyes wide, she dipped an abbreviated curtsy before taking her seat. “Pleased to meet you.” She cut a glance to her hands, hoping the men hadn’t noticed her surprise.

Harold Golden settled behind his desk. “You both need to know. I’ve made plans to travel to Dalles City in Oregon Territory to open a mercantile. There’s been talk in the legislature of statehood. I want to be there when the bill is approved. Michael, once we’re established, you’ll manage the store.”

Diantha gripped the arms of her chair as the room spun around her. Once Mr. Golden left, she’d have no job.