



DOROTHY CLARK

"...riveting and fast-paced...a fabulous story."
—*Romantic Times on Beauty for Ashes*

Joy for Mourning

Dorothy Clark

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In a move that shocks nineteenth-century Philadelphia society, wealthy widow Laina Brighton turns her grand house into an orphanage for homeless children. Staid and stuffy teas quickly give way to peals of happy laughter echoing through the stately halls. With the support of handsome doctor Thaddeous Allen, Laina is determined to give these waifs a better life, despite the malicious gossip that surrounds them. As these two crusaders, bound by honor and courage, create a future for the forgotten, they change the course of their own futures in ways they never imagined. Along the way, they make a felicitous discovery: that sometimes people become a family in their hearts.

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PRAISE FOR DOROTHY CLARK AND HER NOVELS

“A dynamic story of two lonely people in a desperate search for love...riveting and fast-paced... a fabulous story. Top Pick. 4½ stars.”

—Romantic Times on *Beauty for Ashes*

“In *Hosea’s Bride*, Dorothy Clark skillfully lends a modern twist to the Biblical story of Hosea. A powerful faith message is deftly interwoven with a wrenching tale of a woman who doesn’t believe she is worthy of love. Top Pick. 4½ stars.”

—Romantic Times

“Dorothy Clark has woven a beautiful, compelling story of God’s mercy and healing.”

—ChristianBookPreviews.com on *Hosea’s Bride*

“This debut novel...is one that will keep you turning page after page until you all-too-soon reach the end. The forgiveness and love [the heroine] finds when she becomes a Christian is truly inspiring.”

—RomanceJunkies.com on *Hosea’s Bride*

Joy for Mourning

Dorothy Clark



www.millsandboon.co.uk

This book is dedicated with deep appreciation to my talented writing friends and critique partners, Debby Dill and Nancy Toback, who have been with me from the beginning on this book.

Thanks for your unfailing graciousness and encouragement.

You two are the best!

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Chapter One

New York, 1822

She couldn't stand it! Not for another minute! She had to go someplace where there were people, laughter, life. Laina Brighton swept her gaze around her beautiful, richly furnished drawing room, and the despair she now lived with on a daily basis gripped her anew. It was so elegant, so perfect, so empty. She missed Stanford. Oh, how she missed him! If only they could have had children, perhaps—

Laina wrenched her mind from her heartrending thoughts, blinked away the tears that sprang so readily to her eyes these days and walked swiftly to the doorway. Her reflection flashed in the gilt-framed mirror as she hurried past. Her steps faltered. She turned and went back to stare into the mirror. The sorrow was still there, but so was a look of determination she hadn't seen on her face since Stanford had died so unexpectedly nine months ago. She whirled and yanked open the door.

"Beaumont?"

The impeccably garbed butler materialized as if from thin air.

Laina frowned. And that was another thing—the servants hovered. They were so solicitous it was smothering her!

"Yes, madam?"

"I'm going to Philadelphia, Beaumont." She ignored the quickly stifled look of shocked disapproval in his eyes—Beaumont was a stickler for convention. "Tell Carlson to prepare the carriage immediately. I wish to leave within the hour."

"Within the hour? But madam, that's imposs—" He stopped short as Laina stiffened her spine. He gave her a small bow. "Yes, madam—within the hour. Will there be anything else?"

"Yes. Send Tilly to my room to help Annette with the packing." With a swish of her long black skirts, Laina spun about and headed for the ornately carved stairway that spiraled upward to the third floor. She glanced back over her shoulder at her butler as she began to climb. "And tell Hannah to prepare a food basket—enough for two days. And—" She cleared the sudden thickness from her throat. "And send Billy ahead to arrange for a change of horses. I'm not stopping until I reach Randolph Court!"

Philadelphia

"Laina! What a wonderful surprise. I'm so pleased you—" Elizabeth gasped and stopped her headlong rush into the drawing room.

"Do I look that disreputable?" Laina forced a smile and rose to her feet. The room spun. She put her hand on the arm of the chair to steady herself.

"Laina, dear, what's wrong?" Her sister-in-law rushed forward and clasped her arms around her. "You're so pale—and trembling enough to shake apart. Are you ill?"

"No. I'm simply incredibly weary." Laina bit down on her lip to stop the laughter that was pushing upward in her throat. She must be hysterical. There was certainly nothing amusing— Bother! She blinked the sudden film of moisture from her eyes and stepped back from Elizabeth's arms. It was too easy to give in to self-pity when others were sympathetic. "I came from home without stopping."

"Without stopping? Are you mad?"

Laina jerked at the roar of words from the doorway. "No, dearheart—only desperate." Her lower lip quivered as she watched her younger brother hurry across the room toward her. The tears she'd been fighting welled into her eyes as his strong arms pulled her into a bone-crushing hug. Oh, how wonderful it felt to be held again! She rested her head against his hard chest. "Don't scold, Justin. I simply could not stay in that dreary, lonely house any longer. I had to come."

"I'm not scolding you for coming, Laina. Only for doing so in such a foolhardy manner." Justin slid his hands to the top of her arms and held her a short distance away, frowning down at her. "Why

didn't you send word? I would have come for you. There was no need for you to make the journey alone, without care or rest. Look at you! You're all but done in from fatigue."

"I know." Laina lifted her watery gaze to her brother's handsome, scowling face. "I know it was foolish of me, Justin, but it would have meant days of waiting if— Oh!" She began to sway as the full force of her exhaustion swept over her. "I think I'd better sit down."

"You don't need to sit down, Laina. You need to sleep. Bring her along, Justin." Elizabeth spun about and started across the room.

Laina was too weary to protest as her brother scooped her into his arms and followed.

"I don't believe we need send for Dr. Allen, Justin. Laina isn't fevered." Elizabeth glanced up at her worried husband. "I think sleep is the only medicine she needs."

Laina sagged with relief as Elizabeth lifted her hand from her forehead, then gathered the last of her strength and pushed herself into a sitting position against the headboard. The bed felt too good after her long journey. She fought the desire to close her eyes, and smiled at Justin. "Elizabeth is right, dearheart. Please don't make a fuss. All I need is sleep."

"And food." Justin scowled down at her. "Haven't you been eating? Look at yourself, Laina—you're thin as a stick!"

Her heart warmed at sight of the worried frown lines creasing her brother's forehead. "You're such a loving, caring man, Justin." She wrinkled her nose at him. "Even if not a very complimentary one." She shifted her gaze to Elizabeth and forced a tired smile. "How could you ever have thought him cold and aloof?"

Elizabeth laughed. "Because he acted that way. How was I to know it was all a sham?" She stepped to her husband's side and rested her hand on his arm. "Laina will be fine, Justin, but we need to get the travel dust off her so she can go to bed. And that means you need to go downstairs. I'll join you as soon as Trudy and I have made her comfortable for the night."

Justin shifted his gaze to his wife, and Laina's chest tightened. Stanford had admired her, but he'd never looked at her the way Justin was looking at Elizabeth—especially after she'd failed to produce an heir for him. And now—

Laina broke off the depressing thought and watched as her brother cupped his wife's face in his hands, kissed her soundly, then lifted his head and grinned. "There! Now I've finally satisfied a desire I've had since the first night we spent together in this room—at least in part."

"Justin!" Elizabeth's cheeks flamed. "Your sister—"

"Knows I love you. Look, I've made her smile." Justin chuckled and kissed the tip of Elizabeth's finely formed nose. "I like it when you blush."

Laina sighed. She couldn't help it. Justin and Elizabeth were so much in love, so happy together. Justin glanced at her over his wife's soft golden curls. "I wish there was something we could do to ease your sorrow, Laina."

"There is. We can let her know how much we love her." Elizabeth lifted her head and smiled. "We can share our happiness with her and we can pray for her, because the rest—the easing of her grief and the healing of her sorrow—is in God's hands."

The words were meant as comfort, but they only made her feel worse. Laina clamped her jaw together to hold back the bitter retort that sprang to her lips. She had never been on close terms with God the way Elizabeth was, and since Stanford's death she ignored Him completely. Why not? What had God ever done for her? She was barren in spite of years of prayers, and now she was widowed and without hope of ever having a child. She looked away lest they read her anger on her face.

"You speak truth. You're a very wise woman, Elizabeth."

Laina stiffened and snapped her gaze back to her brother. Surely he didn't believe in God again? What had happened to the disbelief and bitterness he'd felt after his disastrous marriage to Margaret?

"Thank you, sir. But I am also a busy one. Now go!" Elizabeth pushed against Justin's chest. He grinned and tightened his grip.

The door opened.

“Oh! Excuse me, mum! I didn’t... I mean... you rang and... I’ll come back.”

Laina glanced at the awkward, blushing maid tripping all over herself as she hurriedly backed out the door, and her anger dissolved. She burst into laughter at the comical sight. It felt wonderful to laugh again.

Justin winked at her, then motioned to the maid. “Come in, Trudy. I was only saying goodbye. I have been ordered from the room.” He gave a mock scowl and leaned down to Elizabeth’s ear. “Sometimes servants are most inconvenient!” His whisper was loud enough for all to hear.

Trudy giggled.

Laina whisked back in time to when she and Justin were small. They were in the kitchen watching the cook baking and Justin leaned over and whispered, “The smell’s making my tummy hurt. I wish we could have a biscuit.” His wish was granted. Cook overheard his whisper and slid them each a biscuit. They looked at the cookies, looked at each other and a conspiracy was born. From that time on they’d used the whisper ploy to manipulate servants into giving them their way.

Laina chuckled at the memory. Justin grinned at her and she knew he was remembering, too. Suddenly she didn’t feel so lost and alone. The tightness in her chest eased. She reached for her brother’s hand. “Bless you, Justin.”

He gave her hand a squeeze, then bent and kissed her cheek just in front of her ear. “It’s going to be all right, Laina—heart’s promise.”

This time the whisper was for her alone. It was the solemn oath they’d made to each other when one of them had been sad or unhappy after their mother’s death. Laina’s breath caught on a sob. Justin gave her a fierce hug, then turned abruptly and strode from the room.

“Do you feel better?”

“Much better, Elizabeth. Thank you for loaning me Trudy. The hot bath took away much of the soreness from being tossed around in the carriage.” Laina adjusted the black tie at the neck of her white nightgown and sank onto the edge of the bed. She was too shaky and weak from fatigue to stand.

“Are you hungry?” Elizabeth swept her gaze over her. “I had cook make you a tray. There’s chicken stew, an apple dumpling, some cheese and warm milk.”

Laina made an effort. She ate a few bites of the stew, popped a bit of cheese in her mouth, then sighed and pulled her damp braid forward over her shoulder. “The food is wonderful, Elizabeth, but I’m simply too weary to eat. I’ll have the dumpling in the morning.” She slid under the covers and sank back against the feather pillow.

“Of course. Sleep is what you need now.” Elizabeth put a few bite-size pieces of cheese on the plate with the dumpling, covered it with the napkin and placed it on the nightstand beside a glass of water. She motioned Trudy to take the tray away. “Is there anything more I can do to make you comfortable?” She pulled the red-and-cream-patterned coverlet over Laina’s exposed shoulders. “Perhaps another blanket?”

“No. Nothing.” Laina glanced up at the red tester above her and smiled. “Thank you for putting me in this room, Elizabeth. It will be so lovely to wake up to color. Everything in my house is shrouded in black.” Her eyelids drifted closed. She forced them open again. “I love...color...especially...red.” She frowned. Her voice sounded thick and far away. Her eyelids drifted closed again.

“Yes, I know.” Elizabeth leaned down and hugged her. “Good night, Laina. It’s so lovely having you here. Sleep well.”

“Umm.” She couldn’t form a word. Couldn’t open her eyes. The light against her eyelids dimmed, flickered. She heard the rustle of Elizabeth’s skirts, the soft pat of her shoes against the carpet. The door opened and closed. Silence descended.

Laina gave a long sigh. At home the silence grated against her nerves. This silence was different—there was life behind it. And tomorrow she would see the children. A smile curved her lips. She cuddled the thought to her and yielded to her exhaustion.

Justin stopped pacing and pivoted to face his wife as she entered the salon. “I think you’re wrong, Elizabeth. I think we should send for Dr. Allen. Laina looks ill.” He frowned. “She’s thin as a fence rail and weak as a kitten. And those dark circles under her eyes...” He shook his head. “One would think she’d been punched.” He scowled. “We need Dr. Allen.”

“Justin, I know it’s hard for you to see your sister looking so frail, but I promise you, a good night’s sleep will do away with those dark circles and cook’s good food will take care of Laina’s thinness and help her regain her strength.” Elizabeth crossed to the settee and seated herself. “As for the rest, as I said earlier, that is in God’s hands. All we can do is love her and pray for her.” She smiled and patted the cushion beside her. “Why don’t you come sit down and relax in front of the fire?”

“Sit?” Justin shook his head. “I can’t simply sit here—I’m too agitated.” He bent and threw another log on the already blazing fire, then grabbed the poker and jabbed it into place. “I wish there was something I could do for Laina.” He gave the log another jab and shot her a look. “Besides pray.”

“I know, dear. But at the moment all she needs is rest.” Elizabeth rose and walked over to put her arms around Justin’s waist. He pulled her close. She went on tiptoe and kissed his chin. “Why don’t you walk to the Merchant’s Coffee House, dear? You can stride off some of that frustration on the way, and talking business and politics with your friends will get your mind off Laina.”

He gave her a mock scowl. “Are you trying to get rid of me, madam?”

Elizabeth laughed. “Only until you calm down a bit.”

Justin’s mouth twisted into a rueful smile. “I’m sorry if I’m being a bear about this, Elizabeth. I think I’ll take your advice. A brisk walk is exactly what I need.” He dropped a kiss on the tip of her nose, then planted one on her mouth and left the room. When she could no longer hear his footsteps, she sighed and bowed her head.

“Father God, please guide Justin and me with Your wisdom to know what is best to do for Laina. Please give us understanding of her hurt and grief, and compassion and wisdom to help her through it. And dear Lord, I pray You will lead Laina in the path of Your choosing for her that she might know peace and fulfillment. Please touch her heart with Your healing hand and make her truly happy. I ask it in Your holy name. Amen.”

Elizabeth released another long sigh and blinked away the tears pooled in her eyes. She had a sudden urgent need to see her children—to look on their dear, sleeping faces. She hurried from the room, down the hall to the staircase and began to climb. How blessed she was to have a loving husband and three healthy, happy children! Her heart overflowed with thanksgiving. “Dear Lord, may You bless Laina as richly as You have blessed me!”

Laina whimpered and turned onto her side, her fingers flexing against the feather pillow, drawing it closer. It bunched beneath her hand. Her fingers flexed again.

There were children floating at her out of the darkness. Children of all ages and sizes, from babies to adolescents. Angry, crying, frightened children. She caught each child as they neared, pulling them out of the darkness and tucking them into her heart where they would be loved and protected. Her heart grew larger and larger. She was afraid it would burst, but still she gathered the children in. Her arms grew weary as she worked until at last they fell useless to her sides. No. No! She couldn’t stop. She had to help the children!

A man came and stood beside her. She could feel his strength. He began pulling the children out of the darkness, and her distress eased. She tried to see who the man was, but whenever she looked, he was turned away reaching for another child. Her heart became engorged with them. How could it hold more? What would she do with them all?

Justin appeared, smiling and placing his hand on her swollen, enlarged heart. “It’s going to be all right, Laina—heart’s promise.” His hand turned into a purse that burst open, raining money down over the children in her heart. They began to laugh. The sound filled her with joy. She began to laugh with them.

The man took hold of her hand and suddenly they were alone. His touch made her forget how to breathe. She looked up. She couldn't see his face! Who was he?

Justin laughed.

He knew! She spun toward her brother, but he was floating away. "Don't go, Justin! Tell me! Who is he?"

"Heart's promise, Lainy, heart's promise..."

"Justin, wait!"

Laina bolted upright, startled awake by her own cry. Her heart was pounding. She clasped her hand to her chest and darted her gaze about the room searching for her brother. The dim, flickering light of the fire highlighted the objects in the room. There was no one there. She was alone. It was only a dream.

Laina shook her head and sank back onto the pillow. She could understand dreaming about Justin and children, because she'd been thinking of them when she drifted off to sleep. But who was the stranger? And what about the money? It made no sense. No sense at all. She yawned and closed her eyes. It was probably because she was so tired....

Chapter Two

It was hunger that woke her.

Laina opened her eyes, and the first thing she saw was the red tester overhead. She stared at it in confusion for a moment, then smiled as her sleep-befuddled mind cleared. She'd made it! She was at Randolph Court. Oh, glory, glory, glory!

Laina sat up and swept her gaze around the large bedroom, drinking in the sights. Someone had been in and built up the fire. It was blazing merrily, its flickering light warming the red-and-cream-patterned silk on the walls, the red, blue and green paisley fabric on the chair that sat at the side of the hearth. Oh, how wonderful to see bright colors again!

Her stomach rumbled. Laina slid from the bed, lifted the napkin-covered plate from the nightstand and carried it to the chair. The fire warmed her bare feet and the swirling colors in the paisley fabric cheered her soul as she curled into the chair's padded comfort. For the first time since Stanford's passing she felt truly hungry. She lifted the napkin, placed it on her lap and picked up the fork. The first bite of baked apple tasted delicious. She took another, then another with a bite of cheese.

Wonderful! If she hadn't had good manners drilled into her as a child, she would have smacked her lips. Laina smiled, finished the apple, then popped the last bite of cheese into her mouth.

"You're awake."

Laina gasped and almost dropped the plate as she jerked around toward the door.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I was being quiet in case you were still asleep." Elizabeth smiled and closed the door. "How are you feeling?"

"Much better." Laina held up the empty plate. "My compliments to your cook."

Elizabeth's laughter washed over her like healing balm. "I hope you haven't spoiled your appetite. It's almost time for dinner."

"Dinner?" Laina stared up at Elizabeth. "No wonder I feel better. I haven't slept the night through since—" She swallowed and looked down at her hands. It was still hard to speak the words aloud.

Elizabeth bent and gave her a quick hug. "You were truly exhausted, Laina. I'm so pleased you rested well and are feeling stronger." She smiled and took the empty plate. "Do you feel up to coming down to the dining room, or would you prefer a tray here in your room?"

"No, no tray." Laina shook her head and rose to her feet. "I've had enough of being alone." She squared her shoulders, trying not to look as pitiful as she felt. "Is there time enough to see the children before dinner? I've so been looking forward to making my new nephew's acquaintance."

Elizabeth laughed and nodded. "How could I refuse such a request? We shall make time. Cook can set dinner back an hour. Now, I'll ring for Trudy while you have a wash, then she will help you dress and do your hair." Elizabeth smiled at her over her shoulder as she headed for the bellpull. "She's already set out your things in the dressing room."

"Thank you, Trudy, my hair has never looked lovelier." Laina stepped out of the dressing room and immediately spotted her newly pressed gown on the bed. It looked like a crow among a flock of cardinals. Gloom settled over her like a cloak. She walked to the bed, took the dress into her hands and sighed. "Oh, how I hate to put this dress on. I'm so tired of wearing black!"

"Then why wear it?"

"Why?" Laina shot Elizabeth a puzzled look. "Because I'm a widow, and a widow is expected to wear black."

"I know the convention, Laina." Elizabeth moved to stand beside her. "I'm only questioning your reasons for continuing to follow it when it makes you so unhappy. Stanford has been gone nine

months—and this is Philadelphia, not New York. No one here will know if you take off your widow's garb a little early."

"Justin—?" Laina stopped as Elizabeth gave a firm shake of her head.

"Justin hates the custom. He says it's barbaric. He has written in his will that I am not to wear black if he departs this earth before me." She smiled. "He likes me in soft colors."

"Truly?" Laina heard the surprise in her own voice. She smiled. "Well, I can only say my brother is a very considerate and wise man." She looked down at the hated black garment in her hands. Her smile faded and she released another sigh. "Nothing would give me more pleasure at this moment than to rip this dress to shreds! But it would do no good. I have nothing but black gowns with me."

"I know...but I have others." Elizabeth laughed and hurried to the door. "Bring them in, Annie."

"Ohhh!" Laina all but swooned at sight of the different-colored gowns draped over the young maid's arms. "Bless you, Elizabeth!" She gave her sister-in-law a fierce hug, then clasped her hands in ecstasy at the array of beautiful gowns being spread out on the bed. "Oh, my! They look like a rainbow."

"God's promise of better days ahead." Elizabeth patted Laina's clasped hands, then gave a rueful glance at the gowns. "I'm afraid there's nothing red."

Laina ignored the remark about God's promise. "I know—Justin hates red." She reached out and fingered the soft satin of a periwinkle-blue gown with an overdress of cream-colored, lace-edged net. "Perhaps this one?" She shot a questioning look at Elizabeth. "Or do you think it's too—"

"I think it's perfect. It will look lovely with your dark hair and blue eyes." Elizabeth cleared her throat and turned to her maids. "Annie, go to my room and bring back my cream-colored satin slippers and my paisley stole. They look well with the dress. And Trudy, remove that black crape from around the bottom of Mrs. Brighton's petticoat, then help her into the blue gown."

She swept her gaze to Laina as the maids rushed to do her bidding. "It's fortunate we're much of a size. These gowns will do for now, if Trudy takes a tuck here and there. But you need dresses of deeper, more vibrant colors to truly enhance your beauty. And I know the very modiste who can create them for you." Her lips twitched and she looked away.

"What is it?"

Her query drew Elizabeth's gaze back to meet hers. "I can't pretend any longer, Laina. I'm so glad you agreed to cast aside your mourning attire, because your brother has already arranged for Madame Duval to wait on you tomorrow."

"He has?" Excitement coursed through her as Elizabeth nodded affirmation. "Well, bless his heart!"

Laina rapped softly, then rushed through the door into her brother's study before he had a chance to answer. "Justin, I'm sorry to interrupt whatever it is you're doing, but I simply had to come thank you!"

Justin dropped the bill of lading he'd been comparing against the profit statement on his desk and braced himself as Laina hurled herself into his arms. "Thank me for what?"

"For setting me free!" Laina stepped back, held her arms out to the sides and did a quick pirouette. "Do I not look lovely?"

"Beautiful." Justin's grin changed into a frown. "But much too thin." Concern darkened his eyes. "Are you certain you're not ill?"

"I'm fine, dearheart." He looked doubtful. Laina sighed. "Truly I am, Justin. It's only that I've had no appetite. Sitting alone at a dining table staring at empty chairs does not encourage one to eat well."

His face tightened. "Yes...I remember."

"Oh, Justin, I'm sorry." Laina put her arms around his waist and squeezed. "I didn't mean to bring back bad memories."

“It’s all right, Laina. Thanks to the Lord’s blessings, the past no longer has the power to hurt me.” He kissed the top of her head, then held her a short distance away. His gaze fastened on hers. “I was remembering in regard to your circumstances. I intend to do something about them.”

He sounded so certain! Hope locked the air in Laina’s lungs. “What do you intend to do?”

Justin shook his head. “I don’t know. I only know the first step is to pray for guidance.”

The air rushed from Laina’s lungs in a disgusted, disappointed snort. She stepped back. “Then I’ll not hold my brea—” His finger on her lips stopped the angry words.

“Don’t speak words of unbelief, Laina. They only block your own blessing.” He lowered his hand to his side. “I know how you feel, and I understand. I felt the same way not very long ago. But I was wrong.”

She drew breath to speak.

He shook his head. “Trust me, Laina. I’m not asking you to believe—only to be still and wait.”

It was too much. She couldn’t hold the anger any longer. “Wait? I’ve waited for ten years! Do you really think things will change now? Look at me! I’m barren, Justin. I’m a widow whose husband lost interest when I couldn’t produce an heir. Do you think another man will marry me? Things would only end the same way.”

The words spurted from Laina’s mouth as fast as the tears flowed down her cheeks. She swiped the tears away and drew a deep breath. “You believe in a God who answers prayers and pours out blessings? Well, I do not! I prayed for children for ten years and I’ll not waste time praying again. You believe—very well, you pray! And if your Lord gives me children I will serve Him all of my remaining days! Now, if you will excuse me, I have an appointment to meet your son.”

With a whirl of her long skirts Laina stormed from the room. It took her several deep breaths and five minutes of pacing the hallway before she calmed down enough to join Elizabeth for their trip to the nursery.

“I’m afraid the girls are already napping, madam.” Anna Hammerfield glanced toward the open door a short distance from the rocker where she had been sitting doing needlework when Elizabeth and Laina entered the nursery. Soft, sleepy baby sounds emanated occasionally from the dimly lit interior of the adjoining bedroom. The nanny smiled. “But Master James is still awake.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Thank you, Anna.” She turned back to face Laina. “We’ll come back to see Sarah and Mary later, after dinner.” A soft, beautiful smile spread across her face. “For now, we’ll visit your new nephew.” She stepped through the open door and led the way across the small room to the crib against the far wall.

Laina caught her breath. “Oh, Elizabeth, he’s beautiful!” She smiled at the baby staring up at her and reached down to touch one small, perfect hand. “How do you do, James Justin Randolph? I’m your aunt Laina. And I’m very happy to meet you at last.”

The baby gurgled, gave her a toothless smile and waved his hands in the air. Laina’s heart hurt. So many emotions assailed her she couldn’t begin to sort them out—except two. Hunger and anger. Those two she recognized. She knew them well. They appeared every time she saw a mother and child. She took a deep breath and forced them back into the dark, empty place inside her.

“Would you like to hold him?”

“May I?” She couldn’t keep the longing out of her voice.

“Of course you may.” Elizabeth lifted her son, kissed his soft cheek, then tucked a blanket about him and placed him in Laina’s arms. “He likes to be rocked. The chair’s over there.” She nodded toward the corner. “I’ll be back in a few minutes. I have to speak with Anna.” She turned and walked out of the room.

Laina stared after her. What a thoughtful, caring, unselfish person Elizabeth was. How could she ever have thought her interested only in Justin’s money? She shook her head at the sudden flood of memories, then looked down at the baby in her arms. “You have a wonderful, wonderful mama and papa, James Justin. And a very foolish aunt.”

The baby gurgled an answer. Laina laughed, hugged him close and walked to the chair. The silky feel of his cheek against hers was more precious than anything she'd ever known. The sweet baby smell of him was priceless. She brushed her fingers through his soft, downy, dark curls and began to rock.

I was remembering in regard to your circumstances. I intend to do something about them.... The first step is to pray for guidance.

Laina tried, unsuccessfully, to close out Justin's words, but the baby's warm breath on her neck brought hope fluttering to life in her heart at thought of them. It drowned a moment later in an onrush of bitterness. Why shouldn't Justin believe in prayer? He had his miracle.

Thaddeous Allen glanced at the youngster on the buggy seat beside him. The too-small, tattered clothes the boy wore provided little protection against the cold March air and not even the carriage robe was sufficient to warm him. He was shivering so hard it was a wonder his bones were still connected one to the other. "You might be warmer if you crouch down on the floor in front of the seat, Sam. You'll be out of the wind down there."

The boy shot him a look full of fear and distrust. "I'm not cold."

The blatant lie wrenched at Thad's heart. "You have my word, Sam—I won't hand you over to the law."

The boy gave him a curt nod and continued to stare straight ahead, jaw set. Thad let it go. Sam was going to stay where he could watch every move and change of direction the buggy made. His fear of the law was greater than his physical discomfort. And who could blame him? Since the orphans' asylum had burned in January, the authorities had become harsh in their treatment of vagrant children, to deter them from stealing, now that they had no means of removing them from the streets.

A pang of concern shot through Thad. He'd given the boy his word he'd find a good home for him—it was the only way he could keep him from jumping out of Dan Pierson's haymow and likely breaking every undernourished bone in his body when he'd been caught stealing eggs. But who would take him in?

Thad watched as the boy shifted his thin body and buried his scratched, filthy hands deeper beneath the lap rug. The Bauers? No, Martha had developed that cough. Thad frowned. He didn't like the sound of that cough. And Martha had started losing weight. It was probably consumption. No, he couldn't take the boy there. Where, then?

Thad frowned and sifted through his patients in his mind as he tugged on the reins to turn the horse onto Arch Street. Arthur and Betsy Monroe? The names brought a shot of hope surging through him. Arthur had told him only last month that Betsy was unhappy with no one to do for since their last boy had left home. Yes! They would be perfect.

Thad slanted another look at the youngster and shook his head. The boy was so filthy you couldn't even tell the color of his hair, and Betsy was a stickler for cleanliness. Lord, let Betsy see this boy as You see him. Let her look on him with her heart, Lord, and not with her natural eyes. Let both Arthur and Betsy see right through the dirt and grime and downright surliness to the frightened child beneath and take him into their home and hearts. Amen.

"Look at you—skinny as a willow whip and covered with dirt and the good Lord alone knows what else! And those clothes—there's no savin' those clothes. Too small, anyway."

She was going to keep him! Thad bit back a smile as Betsy Monroe put her hands on her hips and studied the small boy standing like a lump of stone in the center of her kitchen.

"Still, I reckon there ain't nothin' wrong with you some good food, some of Ben's old clothes and a hot bath won't put to rights."

The boy jerked as if a whip had been laid to his flesh. "I heard about them bath things, an' I ain't gettin' in no water!" The words spit from Sam's mouth. He shot a panicked look at the outside door, and Thad casually stepped in front of it. The boy glared at him and swept his gaze the other

way—toward the home's interior. Arthur stood squarely in that doorway. Sam's hands clenched into small fists. His chin jutted forward. "I ain't gettin' in no water—an' you cain't make me!"

Betsy nodded. "I ain't figurin' to. That's your choice, Sam. Course, nobody sets to my table or sleeps in this house that ain't respectable clean." She stepped over to the woodstove and lifted the lid from a large iron pot. The rich, tantalizing aroma of a pot roast filled the kitchen. She picked up a long fork and poked around inside the pot. The smell increased. "Ah, nice and tender!" She smiled at her husband. "Lots of rich gravy for you to sop your bread in."

Sam's stomach growled. His Adam's apple slid up and down his skinny throat as he swallowed hard.

Thad didn't blame him. His own stomach was reminding him he hadn't had time to eat today. He bit back a grin and watched in open admiration as the plump woman continued her exquisite form of blackmail.

Betsy turned her back on the boy and opened the pierced tin door of a pine cupboard. The smell of freshly baked bread wafted out. She pulled out a loaf, sliced it into thick slabs, then carried it and a small brown crock to the table.

"We'd be pleased if you'd stay and take supper with us, Dr. Allen. It's been a space since you've visited. The boy can wait there by the door till you've eaten." Betsy's eyes twinkled as she looked up at him. "Do you like apple butter or plain cream butter?"

"I might could wash my hands."

The grumbled, reluctant words were fairly dripping with saliva. Thad choked back a chuckle. Poor Sam—Betsy didn't by so much as word or deed betray that she even heard him. She went right on as if he hadn't spoken. "No matter, Doctor, we'll have both." She put a second crock on the table, then moved back to the stove, folded the hem of her blue apron and used it to lift an oblong crockery dish from the oven.

Thad's stomach tightened at sight of the dark juices bubbling their way through a delicately browned crust. Blackberry cobbler! He took a long sniff of the heady aroma riding on the rising steam.

The cobbler proved too much for Sam. He jerked forward, staring at the dessert. "I 'low as how a bath—oncet—might be a good thing."

Betsy Monroe nodded and smoothed her apron back in place. "The tub is in there." She pointed to a small room that jutted out onto the back porch. "Go strip down to your altogether and climb in. Arthur will fetch you hot water and soap. I'll set by dinner till you've finished. And mind you clean your hair and scrub behind your ears."

She stared after Sam as he trudged to the little room. "Poor young'un, seems like he ain't never had a mite of love or lookin' after, but we'll soon take care of that." She looked up and gave him a radiant smile. "May the Lord bless you for the work you've done this day, Dr. Allen. Now, take your ease—I need to go fetch some of Ben's old clothes." She swiped at her eyes with her apron and hurried from the room.

Thad pulled out one of the plank-bottom chairs surrounding the table, lowered his tall, lean body onto it and directed his attention toward the sound of wildly splashing water accompanied by grunts and groans of protest coming from the little room. A grin tugged at his lips. Sounds as if Arthur has his hands full.

"I ain't gettin' my hair wet! You can't make—"

Thad burst into laughter at the glubbing, choking sounds that followed Sam's pronouncement. That boy was learning about cleanliness the hard way. He rose to his feet as Betsy came rushing back into the kitchen, her arms full of clothes.

There was a flurry of splashing.

"Mercy! Sounds as if there's quite a struggle goin' on in there. I'm not sure my berry cobbler can overcome this." Betsy's cheeks dimpled as she smiled up at him.

Thad chuckled. “I think that cobbler can win out over anything. And I’m pretty sure Arthur will prove victorious in this particular battle.” He nodded toward the clothes. “Why don’t you give me those. I’ll take them in to Sam and—” He jerked his head around as a howl of sheer fury came from the other room.

“I ain’t usin’ no soap, you jolt-headed, da—!” There was more splashing, choking, coughing, followed by Arthur’s calm voice. “We don’t use them words in this house. Here’s the soap.”

Betsy grinned and handed him the clothes. “Sounds like Sam’s having a hard time—poor tyke.” Her grin turned into laughter. “I’d better give him a double serving.” She turned to the stove. Thad’s mouth watered as she picked up the long fork and poked around in the iron pot again. He pivoted on his heel and headed for the little room. He’d been so busy, he hadn’t eaten for twenty-four hours and he’d be horsewhipped if he wouldn’t scrub Sam himself for a plate of Betsy’s pot roast!

Chapter Three

“Why, Trudy, it’s lovely.”

Elizabeth’s maid smiled. “I’m pleased you like it, mum. Will there be anything else?”

“No. That’s all for now.”

“Very good, mum.” Trudy put the hairbrush down on the dressing table, bobbed an awkward curtsy and left the bedroom.

Laina turned her head from side to side, studying her new hairdo in the mirror. It looked wonderful. Whoever would have thought that clumsy young woman possessed such a talent? Annette could take instruction from Trudy. Laina laughed at the thought of her French maid’s reaction to that scenario and lifted her hand to touch the dark brown curls that tumbled from the knot of hair at the crown of her head to her shoulders. The style would take some getting used to, but it was definitely flattering.

Laina pursed her lips and leaned closer to the mirror. Without the fringe of bangs Annette had insisted were all the rage, her face looked more...more what? Dramatic? Yes, that was it. Her eyes seemed larger, more luminous, their dark blue color striking, their long, thick lashes arresting. And her high cheekbones appeared more pronounced. Her full lips more noticeable. Oh, dear, that wasn’t good!

Laina frowned and rose to her feet. Her mouth was too wide, and with the natural wine color of her lips it looked enormous! She sighed, snuffed the candles and headed for the door. At least she had good teeth. She was thankful for that. And for the borrowed dress. She smiled and brushed her hand over the pale green velvet fabric that whispered softly as she walked. Today she would choose the fabrics and patterns for her new gowns. After she visited with the children.

“And who is this?” Laina stared down at the huge black dog looking up at her. The monster’s white-tipped tail wagged back and forth like a metronome.

“My dog—Mr. Buffy.” Sarah wrapped her arms about the animal’s neck.

The wagging tail increased speed. Laina laughed. “How do you do, Mr. Buffy? I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

The dog gave one short bark and sat down. Sarah plopped down beside him, giggling as he licked her cheek. “Mr. Buffy loves me.”

“I can see that.”

“Doggy.” Mary toddled over and patted Mr. Buffy’s neck, then giggled and stuck her finger in his ear. The dog gave a shake of his great head, toppling her to the floor. She let out a startled cry and lifted her arms.

Laina scooped her up. “You’re all right, Mary.”

“Doggy.” Mary’s lower lip pouted out and she pointed an accusing, pudgy little finger at the big black brute looking up at them.

Laina laughed and squeezed her tight. “Mr. Buffy didn’t mean to knock you down, precious. You tickled his ear...like this.” She feathered her finger along the toddler’s tiny ear. Mary giggled and ducked her head, sliding her little arms around Laina’s neck as far as they could reach and holding on tight. Laina’s heart swelled with longing.

“Tory.”

“Tory?” Laina shot Elizabeth a wordless plea for help.

“She wants you to read her a story.” Elizabeth laughed and shook her head. “The little extortionist asks for one whenever she thinks someone feels sorry for her.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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