



*Portland, Maine*

**A**bigail Benson clung to the railing of the widow's walk atop her grandmother's three-story home and looked out across Casco Bay. The sharp wind told her that Maine, as usual, would let go of winter grudgingly. No doubt they'd see more snow before nightfall.

How many times over her fifty years of marriage had Grandmother climbed up here to the rooftop? Probably she'd stayed up here for hours at a time when she was younger, watching the horizon for a speck that might be her husband's ship. Now, he and the ship were gone from this world.

Abby had a different watch to keep. She gazed down into the front garden, but no one stirred there. She looked farther afield, down the hill toward Fore Street and the harbor. Ships' masts studded the waterfront, dozens of them. At least five large vessels were docked, and countless smaller ones.

The bustle of the waterfront fascinated her. She raised her grandfather's spyglass to her eye and turned it toward the observatory tower on Munjoy Hill. Captain Moody was flying

two pennants just now—more ships were on their way to the wharves. Turning seaward, she made out a vessel just rounding the cape, scudding before the fresh breeze. The sight of it thrilled her. She had never ventured outside Maine. It must be splendid to travel to far-off places.

After a couple of minutes, Abby lowered the brass telescope with a sigh and flicked another glance downward. She caught her breath. Striding up the carriage drive was a man in a black overcoat and a beaver hat. He carried himself jauntily, and he didn't use a walking stick. A young man.

She whirled about and hurried through the slender door that led to the stairs. This flight was narrower than the ones between floors of the house, and each tread was only about four inches wide. Abby grasped the railing tightly. She respected the twelve treacherous stairs, having tumbled down them once as a youngster. Only last summer, she'd prevented her grandmother from having a nasty fall down them. That was the last time the old woman had climbed to the widow's walk.

When she reached the hall on the third floor, she dashed along to the landing and followed the broader staircase down to the second story. Her grandmother now lived in rooms on the ground floor, and Abby took the final flight—carpeted stairs that curved gracefully down into the front hall—at an unladylike gallop.

The thud of the brass knocker, wielded by the young man's gloved hand, no doubt, resounded throughout Rosemont as she gained the main hall. Patsy, the maid who came in days, strode from the kitchen at the back of the house. She glanced at Abby and headed for the door. Abby waved and hurried on toward the elderly woman's sitting room.

Grandmother was seated in her comfortably upholstered Louis XV chair. In her black taffeta dress and periwinkle shawl, she looked like a small, bright-eyed grackle.

"What is it, dear? You mustn't dash about so."

"He's here."

"Who is here?" Grandmother peered up at her through her spectacles, though only one possible *who* had been discussed that morning.

"The young man from the lawyer's. At least, I assume it is he. Who else could it be?"

"Ah. Collect yourself." Her grandmother held out a painted fan from the liberal supply Grandfather had brought from the Orient. "Sit, child. You mustn't receive our guest all gasping and red-faced. Has Patsy let him in?"

"She was going to the door when I came down the stairs."

"Then calm yourself while we await him."

Abby tried to breathe slowly and fluttered the fan with what she hoped was a graceful turn of the wrist. Grandmother had spent a great deal of time instructing her on how to properly fan oneself and in the intricacies of the language of the fan, but all Abby could think of now was that the meager breeze her motion provided would be inadequate for the task. Her cheeks were certainly scarlet.

A moment later, Patsy appeared in the doorway, sober-faced in her gray dress and white apron. Poor Patsy. They really should keep a footman, and Grandmother sometimes spoke of replacing Will Tardiff, who'd gone off to fight the South. Until she did, Patsy must answer the door as well as keep up the fires and tend to several other chores Will used to do.

"Mr. Atkins," Patsy said. She dropped a slight curtsy and stepped back against the white six-paneled door, allowing the visitor to enter. Abby stood, as young people should when elders entered, but Grandmother remained seated.

The man, it turned out, was not much older than Abby. Without his heavy coat and brimmed hat, he looked quite slender and fit, and really quite handsome, if a bit wind-whipped.

"How do you do, madam." He stepped forward as he

addressed Grandmother, who held out a hand sheathed in black crocheted gloves.

“How do you do. I am Edith Rose, and this is my granddaughter, Abigail Benson.”

Atkins took the old woman’s hand for a moment and dipped his head. He then turned to Abby. She extended her hand and met his gaze.

“Hello, Miss Benson.” He smiled as though he’d encountered an unexpected treat. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Abby’s cheeks would have turned crimson had they not already been flushed. She made herself break their gaze. “How do you do, sir.”

“I am Ryland Atkins, from Mr. Turner’s office.” He turned to include her grandmother as he spoke.

“Thank you for coming,” Grandmother said, waving a hand toward a wing chair.

Abby resumed her seat on the settee, smoothing her lavender skirt. Grandmother stuck with her mourning dresses, but she allowed Abby to wear colors now—not too bright. Two years had passed since Captain Rose’s death, and even Grandmother used a few colorful accessories now. She looked so much prettier with the soft periwinkle shawl about her shoulders than she had in unrelieved black.

“You are Mr. Turner’s detective, then?” The eagerness and longing showed in Grandmother’s eyes as she studied the young man.

“I’m an investigator. Mr. Turner hires me occasionally to find people for him.”

“Ah, yes. I believe that’s what’s needed. You see, I’ve sent letters and telegrams and done all within my power to find my dear grandchildren, but to no avail. I’ve appealed to Governor Cony and Mr. Blaine, hoping they could exert some political influence for me, but alas!”

“The result was not favorable, I take it?”

She shook her head. "They both counsel me to wait until this war is over. But I can't wait, Mr. Atkins. The war has dragged on for more than two years now. My health is not good. If I wait, it may be too late."

"I understand." Atkins reached inside his jacket and brought out a small notepad. Glancing at it, he said, "Mr. Turner showed me the documents you had accumulated concerning your grandchildren—your correspondence with the authorities in New York and the copies of their birth certificates."

"And the letters from the director of the orphanage in White Plains?"

"Yes. Mrs. Rose, it's my hope that we'll be able to find them. Could you please tell me a little more about the children? Anything at all that you remember?"

Abby's heart sped up. Her cousins were the objects of discussion. She barely remembered the oldest, and she'd never met the youngest, but all her life, she'd heard about these phantom cousins of hers. Poor Aunt Catherine's lost children. Grandmother had grieved over them for nearly twenty years.

With Mr. Turner's help, Grandmother had written a will, bequeathing a share of her estate equal to Abby's to any of her missing grandchildren who came to visit her before her death. The possibility that they would be reunited seemed like an incredible dream. But Mr. Atkins sounded confident. Could this dashing young man really find them?

Patsy entered with the tea tray and set it before Grandmother. Once they were all settled with a steaming cup, and the maid had withdrawn, Grandmother cleared her throat.

"The eldest is named Zephaniah, after my husband, the captain. Of course, I realize his name may have been changed. But he would be six-and-twenty now, and he had his mother's fair hair ..."