



Des Moines, Iowa
August, 1917

Conrad Van Drunen's chest filled with warmth as he listened to the kind words coming from Mr. Gresham. He pushed away from the table and stood up to receive the other man's handshake. "Thank you for negotiating a new contract with me this afternoon. The items you asked for will be delivered by the end of the month."

"Fine. I'll be watching for them. The furniture and household goods from your woodworking shop are selling well. Our department store is happy to work with talented young men like yourself." Mr. Gresham poked his cigar into his mouth.

"We'll be in touch. Thanks for coming in today." Mr. Blaine, the other partner in Gresham, Blaine, and Company, shook Conrad's hand as well.

Conrad offered the men a smile and tipped his hat to them as he left the building. He stepped onto the street and walked to his car. Dropping his briefcase onto the seat, Conrad blew out a breath. He'd actually secured another contract with one

of the largest department stores in the country. His skills at building furniture and items of household décor were becoming known.

If the terms of the negotiation he'd signed today developed the way he expected, Conrad would become a very wealthy man. Several moments of silence passed as he leaned against the car hood absorbing the facts. He'd never been in want of funds, thanks to his handyman job, but now he could offer his children, Markus and Betje, luxuries belonging to a whole new standard of living.

Thoughts of his son and daughter spurred him to action. He must drive home tonight and resume care for them as soon as possible. His sister-in-law had agreed to take the children home with her after school and to feed them their supper, but Conrad missed Markus and Betje. He wanted to be on hand to hear the stories from their school day and tuck them into bed.

He gave his car a crank, slid behind the driver's seat, and started the engine. Then he pulled into the street and guided his Ford through the busy intersections of downtown Des Moines. Smells of meat cooking wafted on the summer air. His stomach rumbled as he scanned signs on the restaurants lining the street. He should stop for something to eat before heading out into the countryside for his trip home.

But staying in town for a meal would delay his arrival in Oswell City by at least another hour. He didn't want to wait that long to see his family. Maybe his brother's wife would take pity on him and heat some leftovers when he came to pick up his children.

Conrad kept driving and turned onto the street that ran along the back of the train station. Porters scurried in all directions. Carts and wagons occupied the parking spaces near the depot. People milled around the vehicles carrying satchels and pieces of luggage. A train must have recently arrived. If only his meeting had lasted fifteen more minutes. Then he could have

avoided this congestion. But then the extra time would've put him even farther behind in getting home to his children.

He shifted his attention to the scene through his windshield. Two young women stepped off the curb, and one of them tripped and fell into the street—right in his lane.

Conrad's eyes bugged. A jerk of the steering wheel swerved him into the other lane. Oncoming cars honked. A man shouted.

A turn of the wheel brought him back into the right lane. He slowed and glanced behind him as his car drove over an uneven patch in the street. The young lady still lay face down. Her companion knelt beside her. Conrad parked and looked out his back window. He'd better get out and see if he could help.

All kinds of fears assaulted him. What if she was injured? Maybe she'd need to go to the hospital. He'd never called an ambulance in the city before. What should he do if she had broken bones or was knocked unconscious? A policeman would know what to do. He scanned the sidewalk in search of one, but he approached the two women before spotting any police.

"Are you all right?" Conrad knelt next to the companion. "May I help you?"

"Lacy tripped on the curb. I don't think she's hurt too bad. She's been talking to me." The friend looked at him. Her brow smoothed and her eyes lit up with an emotion Conrad couldn't quite name. Was it admiration? Interest?

He shifted his attention off her face as relief flowed over him. At least the girl in the street hadn't been knocked unconscious. Talking was a good sign. He settled a hand on her shoulder as she rolled onto her side. But he'd need to stay alert where her friend was concerned. She continued to watch him as though he was someone she'd like to know better.

"Rose? Where are you?" Lacy's voice trembled.

“Right here. Do you think you can get up?” Rose tore her gaze from Conrad and spoke to her friend.

“I’ll try.” Lacy closed her eyes as if concentrating on how to accomplish the effort. Then she pushed away from the asphalt. Her skirts twisted around her legs. She wouldn’t be able to return to a standing position without assistance.

“Let me help you.” Conrad wrapped his arm around her waist and lifted her to her feet. She leaned on him, blinking and shaking her head.

“Did you hit your head?” Rose asked.

She raised her hand to her forehead. “No, I don’t think so. I have a bit of a headache, but it isn’t from a bump on the pavement.”

“You should sit down.” Conrad led the girls to a park bench near the entrance to the train station.

Lacy gasped. “Where is my satchel?”

Rose glanced at the street. “I’ll find it.”

Conrad settled Lacy on the bench and sat next to her. “I wish I had a cool drink to offer you.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine in a few minutes. I don’t feel pain anywhere. That means neither of my ankles are twisted for which I’m very relieved.” She glanced down at her ankles. A frown wrinkled her forehead. “Oh! I’m so ... dirty.” She looked at him with a hint of shame in her eyes.

Conrad swallowed and looked away. If he could offer her a quiet, private place to change her clothes, he would. But out here in the sun on a busy street gave her nowhere to hide.

Rose hastened in their direction. “Found it!” She handed the crumpled bag to her friend. “He ran over it. I had to tug it out from under his rear wheel. That’s why the handle is broken.”

Conrad raised his brows. So that was the uneven patch of street he’d hit as he came to a stop. Surely nothing valuable had been in that bag.

Lacy accepted it with a moan and looked inside. Tears filled her blue eyes. "Oh, no." She pulled out a portrait of a cluster of people in a frame that had come apart at the corner. The wood splintered where a crack ran the length of one side.

"That's the Angel Frame you got for your birthday. I'm so sorry. I know how much that frame means to you." Rose patted Lacy's shoulder.

"This is the picture I had you take of me with my family." She wiped her eyes and then glared at Conrad. "How could you?"

"I'll help you replace it." He looked into her eyes for a long moment. She had a softness and graciousness about her even if she was mad at him.

"No, you don't understand. This frame was a gift from my parents. I'd wanted one so badly. They bought it for me even though they can't afford it. That can never be replaced." She sat slumped over as if defeated.

"I'm sorry." Conrad laid his hand on top of hers, but she flinched away from him.

"Lacy, I know you're upset, but we have less than an hour before we must catch our next train. If we want to get to that café across the street for supper we need to hurry." Rose shifted her weight from one foot to the other and pointed across the street.

Lacy straightened. "Oh, yes. You're right. We won't have another chance to eat if we don't get something now."

"Can you stand?" Rose asked.

"I think so." Lacy pushed off the bench.

Conrad shot to his feet ready to offer her support.

She swayed a bit as she smoothed her skirts.

Conrad held his hand to her back, but she soon steadied. "Please allow me to buy you ladies your supper. It's the least I can do."

The girls looked at each other before Lacy turned to him.

“That’s very kind but not necessary. Rose and I were going to catch only a quick bite. You don’t need to stick around to take care of us.”

“I’d be happy to.” The faces of Betje and Markus came to mind. If one of them was in this situation, he’d want a kind stranger to look out for them too. Seeing these girls through the next hour until they were safely on their train was worth the delay. “Lead the way.” He gestured to Rose.

A smile tugged at her mouth and the glow of interest entered her eyes, but she cast a quick glance at her friend as if she didn’t dare accept Conrad’s invitation without Lacy’s approval. Taking Lacy’s hand, she guided her through the thinning crowd, leaving Conrad behind. He jogged to catch up. After they crossed the street, he held the door to the café open for them.

Lacy glared at him, but her friend’s smile peeked out. They passed in front of Conrad, met a waiter, and followed him to a table.

A second waiter came along. “May I help you, sir?” he asked Conrad.

“I’m with them.” He pointed to Rose and Lacy.

The man walked him to their table.

“I thought we told you we don’t need anyone to take care of us by paying for our meal.” Lacy’s eyes rolled as Conrad sat in the chair across from her.

“Consider it a gift.” Conrad removed his hat. He intended to stay right here at this table until the last bite had been eaten.

Lacy sighed as she shifted her attention to the menu.

“Where are you ladies headed?” He asked after making his choice from the list of sandwiches.

Rose slipped her gloves from her hands. “Oswell City.”

“You don’t say. That’s where I’m from.” A smile tugged at his mouth.

Rose glanced at Lacy but received no indication of her feel-

ings. She turned back to Conrad as if she'd decided to take the matter into her own hands. Elbows on the table and a smirk playing about her lips, she asked, "So, who do I have to thank for picking my friend up off the street?"

Conrad's brows rose. He wanted to form an acquaintance with these two girls since they were going the same direction he was, but he didn't want to give this young lady too much encouragement to become familiar with him.

"You may call me Mr. Van Drunen." He settled back in his chair since the waiter had come to take their orders. "Why are you going to Oswell City?" Conrad asked when the waiter left.

Lacy busied herself wiping the smudges on her skirt.

"I'll be starting classes at the college in Clear Book and staying with my aunt and uncle. Perhaps you know them, Helen and Lester Brinks." Rose sipped water from her glass.

"Your aunt Helen and I work together at the orchard. I'm the handyman." Conrad said.

"Oh!" Over the top of her glass, Rose gave him a look that would've encouraged a weaker man to acknowledge this unbreakable bond she believed her aunt had forged between them.

Conrad cleared his throat.

"You should tell him why you came along." Rose whispered as she nudged Lacy. "He probably knows Miss Millerson's husband."

The waiter came with their sandwiches. Rose may have met with success in getting Lacy to talk, or the delicious smell of food might have broken her silence. Whatever it was, Lacy heeded her friend's suggestion with a quick glance at Conrad.

"I came with Rose to see my teacher from country school. She lives in Oswell City now. Married to a preacher." She picked up her napkin and dabbed at the black smear on her jacket sleeve, but the strokes made little difference.

"She could be none other than Mrs. Karen De Witt."

Conrad smiled as he said the name of the woman who had been a close friend to his late wife. He didn't know what he would have done without the De Witts in those dark days following Angelien's death.

"Yes, I believe that's her name." Lacy gave up trying to clean her jacket and ate her sandwich.

"Lovely people." If another Karen De Witt existed somewhere in the world, Conrad would search for her and bring her home as a mother for his children.

He coughed, which led to a fit of choking. Reaching for his glass, he took a sip of water. Maybe it would help soothe his throat. A mother for Markus and Betje meant a wife for him. Not sure he was ready for that sort of thing. His son and daughter might benefit from the addition of a woman to their home, but Conrad would not. His heart lay in the grave with no prospect of a resurrection.

The first sip of water didn't make much difference, so he took a second one. Still choking, he pounded on his chest.

"Mr. Van Drunen, are you all right?" Lacy's brow wrinkled as she watched him.

"Fine." He croaked. The choking eventually died away, allowing him to settle in and enjoy his sandwich.

After several moments of silence while everyone ate, Rose shoved the last bite of food in her mouth. "We must go."

"I'll pay the waiter." Lacy reached for her rumpled satchel.

"Let me cover it. Please," Conrad said.

"No, Mr. Van Drunen." Lacy held up a hand. "You've already done enough."

"I'm sure two young women traveling alone have plenty of expenses. Let me help you with this one." Conrad flipped his billfold open and handed some cash to Rose.

"Rose, you shouldn't take his money." Lacy frowned at her friend.

"There's enough here to cover his meal too. We don't have

time to argue with him if we want to catch our train.” Rose slid out of her seat.

Lacy directed her frown at Conrad and followed her friend. Conrad replaced his hat and went to the door to wait for them. He followed the girls across the street to the depot. As soon as they went inside, Rose turned white.

“I can’t find my ticket.” She reached in the pockets of her skirt and checked her handbag. “It isn’t here anywhere.”

“But you had it when we got off the train. I saw it.” Lacy’s brow creased with concern.

“You don’t suppose I lost it in the street.” Rose glanced out the window.

“If you did, it’s long gone by now.” Lacy reached for Rose’s bag and conducted her own search.

“Our train arrives in five minutes. What do I do?” Fear froze Rose’s features.

“I don’t know. It’s too late to buy a ticket for tonight’s train. But they’ll never let you on without it.” Lacy handed Rose’s bag back to her.

“What if I have to stay behind in the city? Alone. Oh, Lacy!” Rose’s hand fluttered to her chest and rested there.

“I’ll give you a ride. I was on my way home when I stopped to help you.” Conrad pointed out the window to his car still parked along the curb.

“Mr. Van Drunen, we couldn’t possibly expect you to do that. You’ve already done so much for us.” Lacy shook her head.

“I’m uncomfortable with the thought of a young woman staying in the city overnight alone. There is no reason why your friend shouldn’t come with me. I have plenty of room.”

Rose sent Lacy a helpless, questioning gaze.

“I want to take the train. Grandma helped me buy my ticket and I don’t want to waste it.” Lacy held the valuable slip of paper in the air.

“Well then. Your friend can come with me, and we will meet

you and all of the luggage in Oswell City.” Conrad held his hands out with the palms up. He’d do what he could to improve the situation, but a great deal of it was out of the control of any of them.

A whistle pierced the air as the faint chug of an engine grew nearer.

“There’s the train.” Lacy gave her friend a hug and whispered in her ear. “Be careful. He’s a stranger. I wish there was another way.”

“I’ll be fine.” When she pulled away, Rose gave Lacy a shaky smile.

“Watch for me in Oswell City. I’ll meet you there.” Lacy called as she walked away.

Conrad turned to Rose and took her bag. “You might as well come with me.”

Rose still looked frantic as she followed him to his car. As he drove out of the city and into open country, she stayed quiet. The sun hovered on the horizon casting orange rays across the lush fields. Puffy clouds glowed with a golden light as they reflected the sunset. A warm breeze blew in the open window.

Straight along the unbending highway they cruised. When they stopped for fuel at the first little town on their route, Rose got out and stretched. The activity must have loosened her tongue because she dove into a one-sided conversation while Conrad drove. An outgoing and lively girl, that’s all she was. He didn’t need to worry about her wanting something from him he couldn’t give. He leaned back in his seat and set a relaxed pace for the rest of the drive home.

“You’ll like Lacy, and she’ll like you once she gets to know you. She’s not very outgoing so it takes her a while to warm up to people, especially strangers. It’s probably the broken picture frame that has her upset.” Rose hung her arm out the open window.

“You know I couldn’t have avoided running over her bag. I

was more concerned that I didn't run over her." Conrad spoke while keeping his eyes on the road.

"Oh, sure, I understand," Rose said with a wave of her hand. "Lacy will, too, after a good night's sleep. She's not one to hold grudges. We're good friends, her and me. We got to know each other in high school. We'd gone to two different country schools near our homes but attended the same high school. We both graduated in May."

"Interesting. You're both older than I thought." Conrad slowed as he came up behind a truck and then took advantage of the open road to go around it.

"I'm eighteen. So is Lacy. That's not so young." Rose's voice carried an air of offense. "I'll be going to college."

"Oh, I see." A woman out on her own and ready to experience the world. That's who she wanted to be. Conrad stood corrected.

"Lacy just came along for fun. She wants to see Miss Millerson again. Well, Mrs. De Witt she is now." Rose lifted the arm that had been hanging out the window and waved to the young men in the truck he passed.

Rose shifted in her seat so that her one leg was tucked under the other and her arm was slung over the back. "You know what I'd like to see for Lacy?"

Conrad shook his head.

"I want her to get a job. Have lots of good friends besides me. Make her own way. We're both poor girls, you see. This trip to Oswell City is our one big chance. I want Lacy to make the most of it. Have fun and start out on her own life. Do you think she could do that in Oswell City? I've never been there before, you know. That's why I'm asking you." Rose stared at him much like the citizens of Oswell City stared at the mayor ready to make an important speech.

"Well ... I ... I couldn't say." Conrad shrugged. "I came to

Oswell City from Holland with my family. My situation is a little different from that of your friend.”

Rose sucked in a breath and shifted back to a normal seated position, facing forward. “I figured you’d say something like that.”

“But that doesn’t mean your friend couldn’t be quite happy in our small town.” He risked taking his eyes off the road for a moment to glance at her.

“Yeah. I’m going to do the best I can to get her to stay instead of going back home. There’s nothing for her on the farm in Silver Grove. But maybe there is in Oswell City.” Her thoughts faded away.

Conrad didn’t try to follow them. The trip continued in silence for a while. Then Rose turned to him again.

“Hey, thanks for helping Lacy and for supper and this ride in your car. I really appreciate it.” She gave him a look full of admiration.

Conrad nodded. He’d enjoyed himself. He had to admit how nice it felt to be a young lady’s hero again. Too many years had passed since he’d last had the pleasure.