



The ladle in Rose's hand dribbled creamy soup over the edge of the bowl when Kendra bumped her. A squeal escaped Kendra's mouth as she entered the kitchen and leaned against the back of the door.

"He's so handsome!" Her eyes fluttered closed. "That uniform! And he's so tall, with dark hair and gentle eyes."

Rose frowned at her friend. "Gentle eyes? What are those?"

Kendra straightened. "Eyes just like his, full of care and ... and love. Oh!"

Rose glanced at Kendra to make sure she didn't swoon. "You make him sound perfect. No one is perfect." She reached for the dishcloth to clean up the spilled soup.

"Well, he is. You just see for yourself when you go out there." Kendra pointed in the direction of the dining room.

Rose would really like to catch a glimpse of the young man Mrs. Ellenbroek had made such a fuss about. But she doubted he deserved the praise Kendra heaped on him. Men were usually more interested in their whiskey bottles than in living up to anyone's standards of perfection. At least, that was what her father taught her. The young men among her friends behaved that way too. And during his time in the Army, Timothy

Ellenbroek would have had plenty of chances to develop a habit of drinking. Rose shook her head. The son come home again was no one special.

“Get the salads!” Mavis snapped at Kendra.

With a clatter, the maid picked up the tray of waiting dishes and hurried out the door.

“How are you coming with that soup?” Mavis scowled at Rose.

“I just finished.” Rose put the ladle back in the pot.

“Don’t waste time. As soon as the salads are gone, you hustle out there.” Mavis settled a hand on her hip.

“Hustle. Right.” Rose cracked the door and looked past Kendra. She angled for a glimpse of the head of the table, but the crack wasn’t wide enough. Mavis watched her, so she’d better not open the door any wider. Even when Kendra breezed back in, Rose still didn’t get a view of the newcomer.

“Take these rolls.” Mavis pushed a heaping basket over to Kendra.

“Get ready.” Mavis came over to Rose and inspected the bowls. “They look all right. Got the same amount in each one.”

Kendra came back and picked up a pitcher of water. “After you.” She nodded to Rose.

With slow, careful motions, Rose lifted the tray of soup bowls from the counter.

“Got it?” Mavis held out her hand, ready to steady the load.

“Yes, if someone opens the door for me.” Rose took her first step.

“Start with Mr. Ellenbroek and his side of the table. Their salads are gone already,” Kendra instructed.

Rose nodded and pushed through to the dining room. Phrases of pleasant conversation swirled around her as she worked. How she’d love to get a glimpse of Kendra’s so-called perfect man, but she dared not take her concentration away from her task. One wrong move, and the rug beneath her feet

would require a serious cleaning, even more than it already did, thanks to Mitch's accident.

First, she served Mr. Ellenbroek. Then his wife, and then Frances. Then she moved to the other side of the table and served Brandt. Mitch chose that moment to scoot his chair back. The sudden motion threw Rose off balance. Mitch would have been the next person to receive a bowl of soup, but Rose had no way to make that happen.

"Whoa!" She stumbled forward. The tray of soup preceded her, and she landed squarely in Timothy Ellenbroek's lap.

For a dazed moment, Rose did nothing but blink at the creamy trickles down the front of his uniform. The soup ran onto her dress, down her apron, and over the young man's arm. She didn't have any soup on her arms or on her face, she discovered when she touched her cheek. But maybe soup had splattered onto his face.

She ventured a glance up at him, but instead of a messy face, she found a clean-shaven one with those gentle eyes Kendra had told her about. As soon as his smile broke out, Rose had no more questions about what gentle eyes were. She understood at this moment exactly what her friend meant.

"You appear to be in a bit of trouble. How can I help you?" He smiled down at her with sincerity mixed into his good humor.

Her cheeks caught fire. "I ..." she croaked.

"Oh, Rose! Oh, my goodness." Kendra set her pitcher down and grasped both of Rose's hands. With one firm tug, she pulled Rose to her feet.

Leaving Timothy Ellenbroek's lap only made a bigger mess. Rose's body had held one of the soup bowls at an odd angle on the table, but now that she moved, the bowl tumbled into the space she'd occupied and spilled the rest of its contents on his pants.

He stood up and handed the bowl to her. She snatched his

cloth napkin from the floor where it had fallen and bent to soak up the largest stain.

But as soon as she touched the napkin to his knee, her cheeks flamed again. She straightened and gave him the napkin. "Maybe ... uh ... you'd rather ..."

"Oh, Timothy! Your uniform," Mrs. Ellenbroek said in dismay.

"I'm so sorry," Rose murmured.

"I'll get the dishcloth." Kendra raced from the room.

"How will you get it clean?" Mrs. Ellenbroek asked.

"It's been through worse messes." Timothy wiped the napkin down his pantleg. "I've gotten it clean before. It'll get clean again."

Kendra returned and set to work mopping the rug. "When I finish this, I'll work on the tablecloth." She glanced at Timothy's place at the table. "We'll need to wash it later, but I'll get the worst spots so you may finish your meal."

Mrs. Ellenbroek gave the stained tablecloth a disapproving glare.

"Excuse me while I go change." Timothy glanced up a moment and then left the room.

Rose needed a change of clothes too. She picked up the two bowls and the tray. "I'll be right back with more soup," she said as she left.

Horror widened Mavis's eyes when Rose came to the kitchen. "What happened to you?"

"I spilled soup all over the guest of honor." Rose dropped her dishes in the sink.

"You sloppy girl! Mrs. Ellenbroek wanted this dinner to be a special occasion," Mavis snapped.

"I know." Rose swallowed back the tears.

"You might as well come over here and fill new bowls. But hurry up. I need you ready to serve dessert." Mavis sighed and pointed to the stove.

That was exactly what Rose intended to do. She'd fill those

bowls and deliver them to the dining room before Timothy returned. Then she'd disappear so fast everyone would forget who she was and what she'd done.

"Kendra has another dress and apron hanging in the laundry. You can change into that," Mavis said as she stirred a pot. Then she bent to open the oven door.

Rose nodded. If only wearing the other girl's dress could erase Rose's presence from the house. She couldn't face him again. In just that one brief meeting, she'd disgraced herself beyond any shame she'd ever known. Fighting a slump, she faced the family and finished her job.

The fresh soup was delivered before Timothy returned to the dining room. Mitch started in right away, slurping his. After setting a bowl next to Timothy's plate, Rose ran to the laundry and took as much time as she dared changing her dress.

Unable to dally any longer buttoning buttons or tying apron strings, Rose ventured into the kitchen. Kendra was there filling a serving bowl with mashed potatoes. Rose hastened to the ice box for the cheesecake, sliced it, and put it on plates.

When the time came to serve it, Rose held her breath. She had to go in the dining room. Timothy would see her. His parents would see her. Everyone would remember how she spilled two bowls of soup all over him at his homecoming dinner. So unfair. Maybe she should quit this job right now and run back to her aunt at the hotel.

"It's time." Kendra motioned to her and then picked up the glass bowl of fruit sauce.

Rose squared her shoulders, picked up the tray of dessert plates, and followed the maid.

Timothy had returned. He'd traded the soiled uniform for a white shirt and tie. No one would ever know that only a short while earlier, she'd sat in a soupy puddle on his lap. The thought burned her face. Timothy caught her eye, but she quickly glanced away and fled to the kitchen. Interaction with Timothy

and his family was over. She wouldn't be needed now until the time came to wash dishes.

Rose set down her tray and turned to Kendra. "I'm taking a break. I'll be back to help wash up."

The temperature was too cold to go outside, so Rose climbed the stairs and looked in on the baby. He gurgled and cooed as he reached for his toes. He was perfectly content, and Rose hated to disturb him, but she wanted something to do.

"Hey, Rudy. How about lying on a blanket? Will you let me take you out of your crib?" Rose reached for the baby, but he didn't fuss. She laid him down on the floor and sat beside him, dangling a rattle above him. He reached for it and waved it around.

A soft tap came on the open door.

Rose looked up to find Timothy standing there, along with Mitch and Frances. Her breath caught.

"Mind if I join you?" He slipped the door closed behind him. "Mother and Lorraine encouraged me to get acquainted with my niece and nephews."

She'd lost her voice, so she shook her head.

The children left his side and ran to the toys while Timothy ventured into the room and sat on the blanket. "This must be my little nephew, Rudy."

"Right." Rose croaked out.

Timothy chuckled. "That's been the best part, meeting Lorraine's children."

She wanted to ask him what the worst had been, but he'd probably mention her spill, so she stayed silent.

"Don't you want to know why that's the best part of coming home?" he asked with raised brows.

Rose shifted her position on the blanket. "You seem eager to talk about it, so I'll listen."

"Lorraine has sent me letters telling me about her children. I'm grateful to come home and find that they are real, and not just some figment of my imagination I dreamed up to pull me

through dark times.” Timothy patted Rudy’s tummy and then sat with his knees bent and his elbows resting on them. “Have you ever felt that way about anyone?”

No, Rose couldn’t say that she had, unless tonight counted. Kendra’s perception of Timothy Ellenbroek had been a bit exaggerated. Rose was glad to find him understanding about the scene that unfolded in the dining room, and he seemed like a normal person as he sat with her on the nursery floor.

Her cheeks heated as she shook her head. All those thoughts required too much explanation. They were better left sealed away until a time when she might take them out and examine them.

“Tell me about you.” He pointed at her and grinned. “How does an energetic young woman like you end up working for my mother?”

Rose sat up a little straighter. “I’m Rose Harper. I work with my aunt Helen at the hotel. Mrs. Ellenbroek calls me in for help with special events like holiday parties and the homecoming meal for her son, who’s been away at war.”

He nodded. “Oh, I see. Tonight’s dinner was a special event.”

“It was supposed to be, until I ... spilled the soup and ruined your uniform.” Shame rolled over her in waves.

He chuckled under his breath. “That uniform isn’t ruined. It’s received worse treatment than spilled food. A good washing is all it needs.”

Rose couldn’t brush it off so easily. Washing might remove stains from his uniform, but nothing could cleanse away the memory of how they got there. His mother, sister, father, and brother-in-law would never forget her mistake.

“Uncle Tim, read this story to us.” Frances brought him a book.

He gathered her up and moved to the rocking chair. Mitch walked over and leaned on the chair’s arm, ready for a story.

“I must go to the kitchen now. It will soon be time to wash dishes.” Rose gave the baby a pat and left the room.

The clattering of pans reached Rose's ears before she hit the last stair. Kendra and Mavis had begun the cleanup, which meant that Rose was late.

Mrs. Ellenbroek met her in the hallway. "There you are. I'd like to talk with you."

Rose's stomach clenched. Whatever Mrs. Ellenbroek had to say was probably about the spill. Rose didn't wish to hear it. Neither did she want to bear Mavis's wrath for tardiness. But she couldn't brush past the mistress of the home and ignore her. She held her breath and faced the woman.

"Miss Harper, I'm disappointed in you. Carelessness as you exhibited during dinner is completely unacceptable." Mrs. Ellenbroek settled a hand on her hip.

"I realize that." Rose hung her head. "But Mitch, he ... he tripped me, and ..." She couldn't finish her thoughts. Mrs. Ellenbroek saw her as the one as clearly in the wrong. Any mention of the grandson would make Rose look like she was trying to pass blame onto someone else.

"You understand that the rug will have to get sent away for professional cleaning."

"Yes." Rose stared at the floor.

"And Tim's uniform will have to be cleaned and pressed as well."

"I know." Those waves of shame threatened to roll over her again.

"Not to mention the tablecloth." Mrs. Ellenbroek sighed. "Mavis will have her work cut out for her, I'm afraid." She paused and studied Rose for a moment. "I don't want to fire you. You are usually a dependable worker, and this did appear unusual for you. I haven't seen you trip and fall while serving in the past. But you've only been with us since Christmas. That's not very long for me to observe your work habits." She tapped her chin.

"Yes, ma'am. I follow Mavis's instructions and try to be as careful as I possibly can." Rose ventured a glance at the woman's face.



Kindness eased the lines around her mouth. “Here’s what I will do. You will not draw a wage for tonight. The money I would have otherwise paid you will have to go toward cleaning expenses. I will get an estimate on the rug. Depending on how much it costs, I may have to deduct it from your pay. Does this sound fair to you?”

“It does.” Rose hated to lose her income, but Mrs. Ellenbroek truly did have a problem.

She offered a faint smile. “That’s a good girl. Now go help Mavis with the dishes, and we won’t say another word about it.”

Rose nodded and continued down the hall, gathering in a deep breath and bracing herself for Mavis’s response. As soon as she opened the door, she walked into a conflict.

Above the clatter of pans, the clinking of dishes, and the closing of drawers, Mavis’s voice rang out. “Don’t you ever disappear like that again! Kendra and I would have been here until midnight.”