

## *Chapter Two*

Well after dark, with the clatter of the rails and the screech of the whistle dying down, they arrived at the train depot. Two men greeted them and carried their trunks and bags. Thomas stayed back, waiting to take the next train to Bentonsport, their chaperone not allowing him even to kiss Sarah's cheek. Cold and alone, Sarah fingered the train ticket in her clutch and followed her hostess to an awaiting carriage.

Glass globes, each containing two candles, lit the carriage's dark-wood exterior. One of the men helped her climb inside the traveling chariot, but her step wavered as she suppressed a gasp. Plush royal-blue velvet upholstered a couch-like bench. She perched on it and let her fingers glide over the silvery gray brocade padding the walls. Such a magnificent carriage must be rented, but Matilda Ross yawned as if long accustomed to its grandeur.

Almost too soon, they arrived at the Ross estate, ending the dreamlike experience, and the same gentleman helped them out.

In the dim light, Sarah swallowed hard as she stood in front of this stately home like standing in front of an immense wedding cake, two stories high and Italianate in style. Almost holding her breath, she entered a magnificent foyer that opened to high

ceilings, heavily carved woodwork, and a staircase fit for a queen. A growing awe replaced the dread hiding in her chest.

Matilda shed her gloves and hat, discarding them on a cherrywood pedestal table by the door. “Emma.” She didn’t face the young maid as she spoke. “Please escort my guest to her room. I trust the Ochre Room is ready?”

“Yes, ma’am.” The housekeeper curtsied as Matilda said good night, passed Sarah, and ascended the grand staircase, leaving no time to explore.

Once the maid left her, she didn’t inspect the dimly lit room. A white cotton nightgown lay on the bed. She changed into it and crawled under the covers. Expecting a sleepless night, she turned down the flame on the bedside lamp. But despite her head full of thoughts, her eyes soon grew heavy.

Sarah awakened in a pool of golden light. Today, she’d investigate all this incredible home held. She snuggled under the blankets. If she had to leave Thomas and hole up somewhere for three weeks, she’d landed well.

She flattened her nightgown collar. The lace tickled her neck, and she tried folding it over as she studied her room with its cream walls, ochre curtains, and shiny walnut floors. She’d just slid her feet over the bedside, letting her toes touch one of the colorful Axminster area rugs when someone knocked.

“Ah, you’re up! Good.” Wearing a white cap and apron similar to the ones she’d worn last night, the young maid drew the heavy curtains back, and the sun peeking around them spilled onto the walls and floor, highlighting her vibrant red hair and lively green eyes. She bustled around the room. “I am Emma. Emma Adams. Mrs. Ross said you will stay with us for a few weeks.”

Drawing her feet back up, Sarah propped up the pillows and smoothed the paisley shawl that draped the bed.

“Well, it is nice to meet you, Miss ...?”

“Peterson ... but please call me Sarah.”

“Oh no. I couldn’t, Miss Peterson.” The girl scuttled two

steps back. “Mrs. Ross would like you to join her in the dining room for breakfast at nine. She asked me to tidy up your room and extend her invitation.”

“Thank you.” Sarah straightened her back and folded her hands in her lap. This was all so formal. “Will anyone else join us?”

“I don’t know if Mr. Ross—that is, her son, Teddy Ross—will be joining you. Just the two of them in this big house since her Nellie left for college. Mr. Ross Sr. passed about eight years ago.”

“How long have you worked for the family, Emma?”

“Nearly three years, now.” Emma smoothed the linen doily and wound the clock. “This is my first employment. Grateful for it, yes. My brother and I stepped off the boat up the Mississippi not knowing where we would end up or what to do. Mrs. Ross saw us walking down the road, carpetbags in hand.” She flicked a rag from her apron pocket and swiped the table lamp.

“She invited us up to the house.” She stopped, her eyes widening and smile spreading. “I could not believe my eyes. Never seen a house like this. Never imagined it existed. Mrs. Ross offered us each a room in the servants’ quarters and a nice wage. My brother tends the grounds and is responsible for the house upkeep. I clean. For certain, I’d say the Good Lord had His hand on us. Our rooms back home don’t compare to what we have here.”

Sarah scooped up against the headboard. “Where’s home, Emma?”

“Oh, sorry. Ireland. Ennis. County Clare. I had better leave you to get dressed. Nice to make your acquaintance, miss.”

“Yours as well. I hope we have more time to chat.”

“That would be nice. Thank you.” The door closed, and Emma’s quick patter receded down the hall.

Sarah slid out of bed and opened the trunk Mrs. Lockhardt had lent her and filled with three sets of undergarments unlike any Sarah’d ever worn, even when dressing in period costumes back

home. She slipped on the sleeveless chemise and cotton drawers, which looked like ill-fitting, lacy, wide-legged capris. She wouldn't wear the corset, though Mrs. Lockhardt had packed *three* of the torture contraptions. Her only outfit was the long emerald-green skirt and loose-fitting white blouse. She topped it off with a black belt.

She removed the fake hairpiece borrowed from Mrs. Lockhardt's daughter's items, then pinned the gathered tendrils to the back of her head.

Good thing she'd dressed in the period for the Bentonsport events. At least she had some idea of how these many garments pieced together.

She eased open the concealed pocket in the trunk's right-hand liner.

"Make note of this." Mrs. Lockhardt had told her as she tucked in the items. "I am going to place the money we're giving you and a few pieces of jewelry here. You never know who might be in your trunk, and it is nice to have a secret spot."

Sarah tugged at the black velvet ribbon tucked inside, removed the suspended pearl, then replaced it in the compartment. She tied the ribbon around her neck and faced the mirror in the corner. "Deep breath, now. You can do this."

Taking one, she closed her door, then stopped in the hallway on the inlaid flooring. Great. She should've asked where the dining room was. Slowly, she descended the staircase and headed to the room to her right.

The tall, three-panel white door stood ajar. Sarah knocked.

"Yes, yes. Come in."

Matilda, exquisitely adorned in a tan, high-necked morning dress with indigo detailing on the bodice and narrow sleeves flared at the wrist, sat at the head of the lace-covered table. Two brass candlesticks towered like sentries over its middle, flanking a circular silver stand holding various condiment bottles.

"Do join me, Sarah."

She must have been staring at the opulence. Blushing, Sarah

nodded to her hostess in an attempt at decorum and sat to Matilda's left.

"Did you sleep well?" Matilda took a short sip of tea. Despite her casual, almost friendly, approach, she narrowed her eyes as if weighing Sarah and finding her lacking.

"I did. Thank you very much. The bed is comfortable, and I was tired."

Emma entered with two plates, each with an omelet, a slice of brown bread, and a dollop of jam, and placed one before Sarah before serving Matilda.

"It looks delicious, Emma." Sarah spread her napkin in her lap.

Emma poured tea for two. "Thank you, miss, but I didn't cook the breakfast. I only serve it."

"Yes, of course." Sarah nodded.

After Emma left the room, Matilda said, "Now, having established that, would you say grace, Sarah?"

After grace, Matilda allowed Sarah to sample her food. "We have a busy day ahead. First, my sister provided you funds for several dresses. Mary's not a woman of means, but her heart knows no scarcity. Now, I'd advise you go upstairs to Nellie's dressing room and purloin any suitable dresses. Nellie, my daughter, is at college. We can also have them altered, and they'll give you a sense of what women your age are wearing—now." She cleared her throat.

Sarah shifted in her seat. Was the lady's pointed throat clear directed at her history or the result of her lengthy statement? Or a prompt for a response? Perhaps she'd better comply. "Mrs. Ross, what a thoughtful idea. I do need a chance to learn what's in style."

"Excellent." Matilda's nod jostled a tendril of hair, which now rested against her ear. "Since you agree, we will begin there." She paused to sip her tea. "Select three or four dresses, and if they need to be altered, I'll send for the seamstress. If they are too small or don't please you, we will take the carriage to the dressmaker."

“That sounds wonderful.”

“Now, Mary has told me your ...” She gave Sarah a stern look, then opened and closed her mouth twice. “She told me your ... ‘story,’ and I don’t know what to think. You don’t seem confused or ill.”

Matilda frowned at the teacup she held before her, then let out a put-upon sigh. “So, I will do what Mary asked in, as she stated, response to my overwhelming respect for her. But I ask that we not discuss your history. Let’s forge ahead. Is that agreeable?”

“Yes!” The word rushed out with audible relief.

“Then we’ll develop a brief life for you here and review customs, events, manners, appropriate discussion points, etcetera. Tomorrow, we’ll visit Harriet Lemp, a dear woman and a friend of my mother’s. Being lonely, she asks many questions, making the most of her few guests. This will give you a sense of the knowledge and experiences you lack to better firm up your past—here. And any mistakes you might make won’t be spread far, thus protecting my reputation.”

Matilda spoke her mind in a refreshing way few women, even in Sarah’s world, would feel comfortable.

“Thank you, Mrs. Ross. I am grateful. Truly grateful.”

Before Sarah finished eating, Matilda had rung the bell for Emma. “Emma, do show Miss Peterson to Nellie’s room and remove several dresses to see if they suit Miss Peterson. She made a rather sudden trip, and I want her to feel comfortable during her stay.”

Emma curtsied, and Sarah took her cue, accompanying Emma up the stairs. On her way, she trailed a hand along the paneled walls, a low-hanging chandelier glinting off their high polish to reflect the lavishness of it all. *Almost like being a princess. I could adjust to this.*

“Mrs. Ross’s room is here, to the right,” Emma paused in the second-floor hallway. “Miss Ross’s—that is, Nellie’s—room is to the left. And Mr. Ross’s, Mr. Teddy Ross’s room, is straight

ahead.” Emma opened the door to the left, and the light poured through.

Sarah entered behind her and stopped. “Oh my. This is ... splendid.”

A double-sized bed, swaddled in a flowing white canopy as gossamery as an angel’s robe, graced center stage. Floor-to-ceiling windows to either side cast it in an ethereal glow, their folding indoor shutters drawn back from it like wings in repose.

As if waiting in attendance, a lady’s desk lingered to one side, a table and rocking chair to the other. A wardrobe spanned nearly the entire far wall.

Emma opened one of the wardrobe’s carved doors and motioned Sarah over.

Silk, lace, and embroidery shimmered within, their side views a display in extravagance. If Nellie left those behind, what were the ones she’d chosen to take like?

Sarah cleared her throat. “Emma ...” Her voice squeaked in an unfamiliarly high pitch. “I must confide in you.”

Emma smiled, lips closed, and nodded, head cocked.

“I am from a tiny town. This is how we dress.” Sarah held up a fold in her emerald skirt. “I don’t want to look out of place here or there, but I also don’t have a lot of, um, resources. So I’d appreciate it if the dresses were appropriate for both.”

Emma bobbed a quick nod. Then, with her usual efficiency, rummaged through the dresses, moving them back and forth before placing four on the bed, side by side, for Sarah’s examination.

Two simpler outfits and two evening or formal attire. A white blouse with a rounded neckline and a royal-blue skirt composed the first ensemble. She nodded her approval. “This one can be dressed up or down and looks comfortable.” Plus, she could mix and match the top and skirt.

“This jacket bodice is quite nice for an outdoor dress, don’t you think, miss?” Emma scooped up the jacket and skirt of the second, more of a suit, bright purple striped with thin black lines,

leaving behind its coordinating white high-collar blouse. “These are made of such fine cotton.”

Nodding, Sarah moved on to one of the formal dresses, a rich black satin with a bit of a gathered bustle in the back and an embroidered tambour lace bustle over the skirt. Dark green accentuated the bodice with delicate lace around the collar. Then she stopped at the final dress, her favorite. A white dress with gray stripes trimmed in dark blue with a matching satin waist sash.

“Oh, Emma ...” Sarah sighed. “They are perfect. Lovely. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me, Miss Peterson. Thank Nellie and Mrs. Ross.”

“Well, you’ve been a tremendous help.”

“Happy to help.” Then the girl left the room.

Sarah tried each outfit on, relieved to find they fit, no tailoring needed. A bell rang downstairs as she slipped the final outfit onto its hangers.

Then Emma knocked and peered around the door. “We’d better head downstairs.”

Mrs. Ross sat at the table, sipping tea. “What did you think, Sarah dear?”

Taken aback by the endearment, Sarah stilled in the doorway. Mrs. Ross didn’t seem the type to make such statements lightly.

“We found four perfect ensembles. You’ve been so generous, and they are beautiful.”

“Good! That saves us a trip to town now. Please shut the door. Let us talk privately.”

Sarah closed the door, then sat as Matilda poured her a cup of tea and placed it to her left.

“I promised my sister I’d ‘give you a past’ and help you, well, ‘enter this world.’” She lifted the delicate teacup to her lips, tested two sips, and lowered it.

She focused on the cup and saucer, then aligned the handle just so. “I don’t understand what type of world you left and how it is different from the one I live in—and I feel compelled to say



this—if this whole matter is remotely true.” At last, she raised her gaze, meeting Sarah’s. “You do understand why I have to add that.”

“Yes, of course.”

“So, it might be better if we begin with your questions. What would you like to learn while you are here?”

“Um, everything?” Sarah lifted her teacup, the pattern almost staid—a large green band with thin gold bands on either side. “I have a basic understanding. I’ve studied this time—so strange to say that. But I’d like to learn of it from you. What you and your friends eat, what you do during your days, and how it differs from what women in Bentonsport do. How you—well, um, bathe, toilet, shop, cook. Just everything.”

“I shall do my best.” Matilda leaned forward, casting her sapphire earrings into view, and the sunlight probing the room lent a glow to her upswept graying auburn hair. “You are correct in distinguishing between women in my circle, here, and those in Bentonsport, including Mary.”

She straightened her back. “And perhaps that is why Mary and John sent you here. If you seem somewhat awkward or out of place, the Bentonsport women will attribute it to our different lifestyles. Again, I can’t say I believe any of this. Mary does. John does. And you appear to. So, with that caveat ...” She waved a hand. “Let’s see, in terms of bathing—”

The door swung open, and a man entered—a man large enough to block the doorway. Perhaps thirty, with unruly dark-brown hair, an untucked shirt, and ... Was that a chocolate bar hanging out of his mouth?

“Teddy!” Mrs. Ross almost clapped.

And Sarah clamped her mouth shut. Why wouldn’t her pristine hostess tell him to take that ridiculous chocolate bar out of his mouth and tuck in his shirt?

“Come sit, Teddy. I have a guest I’d like you to meet.”

Teddy looked Sarah up and down, expressionless, and sat to his mother’s right. Once seated, he nodded at Sarah, eyes cast

downward, removed the chocolate bar, said hello, and returned the chocolate bar to his mouth as his mother poured tea.

As Matilda offered him the sugar, she grazed her cup, causing the tea to slosh onto her saucer. “Have you told Emma you are up so she can bring you breakfast?”

“She said she had it plated and would bring it in.” Despite his apparent indifference to manners, he pulled his napkin into his lap, or was that just to get it out of his way?

Leaning back against her chair, Matilda folded her hands on the table. Sarah smoothed her napkin, trying not to stare. Or giggle. After all, the contrast *was* delightful.

Emma carried in a plate with a silver topper and set it before Teddy, who seemed to brush her hand with his fingertips as she removed the silver top.

Dabbing the tea off her saucer, Matilda didn’t seem to notice the brief flirtation.

As Emma exited the room, Teddy placed the chocolate bar on his plate and scooped the scrambled egg with his toast, forgoing his fork.

“What are your plans for the day, Teddy?” Mrs. Ross traced a well-manicured finger around her teacup’s delicate rim, diverting her gaze from the shoveling taking place to her right.

“Um,” Teddy began, his cheeks full of breakfast. Thankfully, he swallowed before continuing. “I thought I’d walk over to Peter’s house. He’s written a new play, and he and his friends are going to do a reading of it before he starts to stage it next week. Then we’ll have supper somewhere and head to play billiards.” He resumed his shoveling.

Matilda’s brows knit in obvious disapproval. But Teddy didn’t seem to notice, or if he did, he didn’t care.

“Well, it might be good to spend even a bit of time at the agency. Your uncle Louie has to wonder if you are even interested in the business anymore.”

Tightening his lips, he glanced at Sarah and back to his mother, which silenced her.

Matilda took another sip of tea.

Sarah took the cue and stood. “I should tidy up my things. Nice to meet you, Teddy.”

Of course, he didn’t stand as she rose, but he did nod at the table, likely an outward gesture that, well certainly, it was wonderful to meet him.

She closed the door behind her and moved toward the stairs but paused as the volume of the conversation rose.

“Teddy, my love, you must accept you are a man now, and—”

“I think I know that, Mother.”

“—and, as the man of the house—”

“I am not the man of *this* house!”

“You are the head of this family.”

“I am the head of nothing.”

*Crrick*. Emma opened the door at the end of the hall.

Sarah headed to the stairs. As she ascended the stairs, Emma stood outside the dining room door, knotting the dishcloth in her hands as she leaned in closer, oblivious to Sarah’s observation.

Tiptoeing up the stairs, Sarah reached the landing, now out of sight yet able to hear bits and pieces of the conversation below. Apparently, Matilda expected Teddy to assume his father’s role as cohead and co-owner of the family insurance agency, and he wanted nothing to do with it.

Sarah entered Nellie’s room. “Not my concern,” she said under her breath. She’d return to the dining room when the conflict subsided. Until then, she could bask in the pure loveliness here.

Was Nellie like Matilda? Like Teddy? Her father? Or was she her own person?

None of this mattered. Thomas was her reason for being here. Her time here was only a pathway. A pathway back to him. To his world. A world for which she was better suited.

At least, she hoped.