

A HOME *for*
MY HEART

Anne Mateer



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2013 by D'Ann Mateer

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mateer, Anne.

A home for my heart / Anne Mateer.

pages cm

Summary: "It is the early 1900s when an unexpected opportunity arises at the orphanage where Sadie works; will she have to choose between marrying her beau and a job she loves?"—Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-7642-1064-8 (pbk.)

1. Single women—Fiction. 2. Orphanages—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3613.A824H66 2013

813'.6—dc23

2013016856

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Dan Thornberg, Design Source Creative Services

13 14 15 16 17 18 19 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Anne Mateer, *A Home for My Heart*
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2013. Used by permission.

To Elizabeth, Aaron, and Nathan

My greatest joy is watching you walk in the truth.
(3 John 1:4 paraphrase)

Chapter 1

I barreled through the large kitchen of the orphanage, skirts billowing out from my ankles. “Where’s Cynthia?” I called. “We have to go over her recitation again.”

Mrs. Fore’s gray head turned toward me, but she never quit stirring whatever bubbled in the pot on top of the steel Wehrle range. The pungent aroma of onions and garlic mingling with the smell of meat stopped me.

“Stew?” I moved in for a closer whiff.

A giggle caught my attention. I swooped eight-year-old Cynthia into my arms. “Got you! Now it’s time to say your poem.”

Her head shook, but her eyes laughed. I smacked a kiss on her cheek and set her on the floor. “After supper. No excuses.” I tapped her freckled nose with my finger.

She turned to help the other girls gather tin plates, cups, and utensils to set on the dining table. Overhead, footsteps thumped. Other children’s voices drifted from various parts of the large house.

The yeasty smell of two fresh-baked loaves of bread resting on the counter curled beneath my nose and caused my stomach to rumble. I pressed a hand to my middle. Hunger

pangs still brought memories to the surface. I glanced out the window, past my pot of drooping daffodils, looking for a distraction. Brown grass covered the backyard, and gray clouds skittered across the late-afternoon sky, obscuring any light from the sun. I shivered, then rubbed my hands up and down my arms.

From the corner of my eye, I spied a horse dancing to a stop at the corner of the house. My heart skipped a beat as I smoothed my skirt and licked moisture into my lips. I glanced back at Mrs. Fore. Her wrinkles rearranged themselves into a smile.

I flung open the door. Frigid air sent the little girls shrieking and huddling together. Then Blaine Wellsmith filled the doorway, a red knitted scarf half obscuring his face, a wooden crate perched on his arms. He strode inside, kicking the door shut with his heel.

He placed the box on the kitchen worktable before unwinding the scarf. His grin flashed in my direction, warming me through in spite of the sudden chill. A sprinkle of dirt littered Mrs. Fore's pristine floor when he removed his gloves.

"Cold out there." He peeled off his coat and draped it on the back of a chair before straddling the seat. "I'm ready for spring, but looks like we'll have more snow by morning."

Mrs. Fore set a cup of hot coffee on the table. Blaine cradled the warmth between his hands.

"The children will be happy about that, I imagine." I joined him at the table, my eyes feasting on his strong features. Dark hair combed back from a high forehead. Dark brows hovering low over eyes black as midnight. Not a lean face, but not one with extra flesh, either. And though some might not deem

him handsome in the usual sense, I'd recognized the beauty inside him when we were but children.

"The kids haven't mangled the sleds I made for them, have they?" He sipped the steaming blackness.

I shook my head, making note to have the boys locate the sleds before morning.

Mrs. Fore shooed giggling girls into the dining room and wiped her hands on her apron. Then she pulled the crate closer to her and sorted the produce—food Blaine had generously donated from his cellar to the Raystown Home for Orphan and Friendless Children, in spite of his need to sell the extra in order to save enough money to buy farmland of his own.

Our own.

"Sadie's got her posies in a bad way, Blaine." Mrs. Fore set the empty crate beside the back door. "You'll have to see to them if they'll be fit to go in the ground come summer."

One of his eyebrows rose in my direction. "Have you been neglecting your flowers?"

I flinched. Blaine had coaxed the daffodils to life in the middle of winter. He'd stood stiff and uncomfortable in his only suit, his large hands cradling the oblong clay pot as gingerly as if it were made of crystal when he arrived on Christmas Day. "*A bit of color,*" he said, "*to cheer you until spring.*" I rewarded him with the press of my lips to his wind-chapped cheek—and a red knitted scarf. The devotion that had shone from his eyes in that moment made the flowers more precious than if they'd been fashioned of real gold.

But just days into March in the new year of 1910, the but-tery yellow flowers had paled to the color of chicken stock.

The leaves had curled. The petals sagged. I couldn't seem to make them thrive the way Blaine did. My gaze grabbed the table as my fingers skimmed across the smooth wooden surface. I bit my lip. They were only flowers, yet they'd been his gift to me. It was my job to keep them alive.

Blaine crossed the room and lifted the pot from the windowsill. "I can take them home with me and . . ."

I hopped up as quick as if I'd sat on a pin. "No, I'll take care of them." I snatched the container from him and mashed one finger into the soil. It seemed soft enough. The flowers just missed the sun.

Bustling toward the parlor, I listened for Blaine's heavy steps to follow through the short hall. They did, along with his chuckle. My lips pressed into a firm line. I would find a way to make these flowers grow. I would.

I set the plant in a side window, praying for a break in the clouds. Any sunlight would be better than the solid mass of gray. I primped the sagging leaves to no avail.

Blaine stood close behind me. "Let it alone, Sadie. Light and water, that's all they need. Simple things."

I relaxed, then turned to him with a genuine smile on my face. "Like the children. A little love and a little discipline. The simple things."

"And don't forget food to fill their bellies."

"Thanks to you." I let my fingers brush his.

"I'd bring more if I could. When I own a farm instead of working someone else's land, I will." He winked.

Heat radiated from my cheeks. Would my daffodils think they had found the sun? I ducked my head, seeking a less intimate subject. "Any word from Carter lately?"

Blaine's broad chest heaved with a sigh. "No. I wish those 'simple things' worked with my little brother."

Shyness fled as I covered Blaine's hand with mine and peered into his worried eyes. "I wouldn't be too concerned. He's still a boy."

He shook his head. "Sixteen is nearer a man than a boy. I wish I knew what he was thinking sometimes."

"Remember, you had a much longer time with your mother than he did."

"I know. But when I think of that man—" His fingers curled into fists.

Many years ago, Blaine had taken Carter and run from his stepfather, Carter's father. After wandering about on their own, they'd arrived at the doorstep of the Raystown Home, cold and hungry. Carter a little tyke of three; Blaine a gangly boy of eleven. Both had stolen my ten-year-old heart.

I stroked his hand flat again. "Let's not think of that man now."

Blaine's tension eased. He slipped his fingers between mine. "Sounds good to me. I only want to think about us."

My face blazed again, and a fist seemed to close around my heart, squeezing all the breath from my body. I wasn't sure when our friendship had turned into love, but it had. No one knew my heart like Blaine did.

He brought my hand to his lips. "Walk me out?"

The tightness in my chest released. "Of course."

My hand clasped in his, we returned to the kitchen and bundled up against the Pennsylvania winter. Outside, the cold stole our voices until we rounded the corner of the house, out of the stabbing ferocity of the wind.

He pulled me close. I buried my nose in his wool coat, drinking in the smell of woodsmoke and pine. One glove-clad finger lifted my chin. “You’d better get back inside before you freeze.”

I nodded, teeth clamped to keep them from chattering. His arms still circled their warmth around me. I couldn’t make myself pull away.

“Don’t fret over your flowers. I’ll plant you rows and rows of them when we have our own—” His gaze traveled to my lips. I swallowed hard, my hands stealing around his neck as his face lowered toward mine. Just as I could taste his breath, the creak of the back door cut through the frigid bluster.

“Sadie? There’s someone here to see you.” Mrs. Fore let the back door bang shut again.

I pressed my forehead into Blaine’s chest and groaned. I couldn’t wait for the day when we’d enjoy kisses uninterrupted.



A pale-haired woman pulled a woolen shawl closer around her hunched shoulders as she stood in the foyer. Her tongue wet her lips as her eyes darted from the door to the staircase to my face, faster than a hummingbird in a flower garden.

“I’m Miss Sillsby,” I said. “The matron’s assistant. How may I help you?”

Before she could speak, a waif of a girl appeared from behind her skirts. I noted her threadbare clothing before my gaze fell on the little face. Perfect—except for eyes that focused on her nose instead of straight in front of her.

My mouth filled with the remembered taste of cod liver oil, and my hand covered my curdling stomach. No tonic would

cure this girl's ill. Nor would sunshine and good food. An awkward silence filled the space between us.

The woman huffed and set a fist on her hip. "I'm told you take in kids what we can't feed."

My hand fell away from my stomach as her words dissolved the old memories. Another mother in search of help for her child. I glanced at the closed office door and chewed my bottom lip. My job didn't include admitting children. That responsibility fell to Hazel Brighton, matron of the Raystown Home. But she'd gone to deliver a child to a foster home and wouldn't arrive back until late that evening.

"I'm so sorry, but our matron, Miss Brighton, is not available today. If you could return in the morning, I—"

"I'm here now. I can't come back later. Can you take her or not?"

I studied the mother's face, trying to discern her character, her motives. She seemed much older than my twenty-three years, yet something about the pull of skin around her eyes made me question that first impression. Maybe her life hadn't been longer, only harder. My heart pinched. I remembered other eyes older than their years, eyes that had peered darkly into mine, then turned away and let me go.

With a deep breath, I straightened to my full height and tried my best to mimic Hazel's quiet authority. "We do consider cases where there is great need, but as I said, I am not the one—"

The woman's scrutiny raked up and down the length of me, as if I were a beggar and she the queen. "I was told this was a place of Christian charity," she spat. "I guess they told me wrong." She snatched her little girl's hand and turned toward the door.

“Wait!”

The woman stiffened and stopped.

My gaze snuck down to the child. She looked as cold as winter snow, with her almost-translucent skin and puffs of nearly white hair standing out over her ears and forehead. I cupped her jaw in my palm as she stared up at me, unblinking. What did she see out of eyes that wandered toward each other instead of in my direction? My arms itched to pull the girl close, whisper assurances in her ear. I knew from experience she could find healing in this place, for both body and soul.

One small doubt niggled. Hazel had expressed concern over money in recent months. But this child needed us. I knew it deep inside. Hazel had placed out one child today. This little girl could take his spot at our table. And there were plenty of beds available in the girls’ room.

Hazel wouldn’t want me to turn her away.

“Please, Mrs.—?”

“Ashworth.” She hitched her shawl higher over one shoulder.

“Mrs. Ashworth. I think we can work something out.” I motioned them into the office and switched on the electric wall sconces. Mrs. Ashworth squinted into the bright room as the light illuminated the dinginess of her shawl, her dress. How long since they’d seen a washtub?

She sat, but her little girl remained standing, no touch passing between them. The woman’s focus zigzagged, never settling on anything.

In Hazel’s seat behind the desk, I folded my hands, remembering words I’d heard Hazel say so many times, praying I was doing right. “We do consider cases where parents need a bit of time to find work and catch up on their bills in order

to provide for their children. When we consider these cases of short-term care, we generally ask for a pledge of support to the Home to help cover the cost of caring for the child.”

Mrs. Ashworth’s face hardened. One fringed end of her shawl fluttered to the floor. “If I had money to care for her, I wouldn’t be here, would I?”

The sullenness of her tone grated on me. I sucked in a breath and bit my tongue until I could make my voice a perfect imitation of Hazel’s—all kindness and compassion. “I understand. But we’ve found that often there is a family member or a friend who can step in and give a small amount to help with the child’s keep. We’re not asking for the full cost of caring for her. Just a bit to help offset expenses. I’m sure you realize that we exist solely on freewill donations.”

Mrs. Ashworth snorted and grabbed up the end of her shawl that trailed on the floor. “If I had anyone else to appeal to, be assured I’d have gone there first.”

“As I said, it is not a requirement, but we always ask.”

Mrs. Ashworth hesitated, then leaned forward, a work-worn hand clutching the edge of the desk. “You’ll take my Lily Beth, then?”

I pulled a large ledger book from the top of the cabinet between the front windows and opened it to a blank page. “After you answer a few questions, I believe we can take your daughter into a temporary situation with us.”

I’d make sure we helped this girl, this Lily Beth.

In spite of her mother.

Or perhaps because of her.

Chapter 2

As soon as I'd handed Lily Beth into Mrs. Fore's care and closed the front door behind Mrs. Ashworth, I wrote *questionable* in the space reserved for comments on the mother's habits. After a moment's consideration, I added (*quite*) before shutting the volume. The space designated to record the name of the father read *not known*. If Mrs. Ashworth returned for her child after the stipulated three-month period, I'd repent of my uncharitable thoughts about her. But I doubted that would happen. I'd seen her type before. They seldom returned.

As I transcribed the details of the arrangement into our admittance registry book, my mind raced with other possibilities. Like getting Lily Beth's eyes fixed. Feeding her a good meal. Introducing her to Jesus. Finding her a stable home. I knew she needed those things, for I'd needed them at her age, as well.

Shoving aside memories best kept packed away, I joined the others already in the dining room. Eleven boys squirmed with life while conversation teemed among the half-dozen girls.

Mrs. Fore looked frazzled. I patted her shoulder and sent her back to the kitchen with my whispered thanks.

Then I noticed Miranda Jennings, the housemaid, in my usual seat. She leaned across the table to help Timmy wipe a dribble of broth from his chin. She saw me watching. Her body tensed. She pulled back from Timmy and lumbered to her feet as her expression turned hard and cold.

“Thank you, Miranda.” I sat as she lifted her bowl and plate from in front of me. I expected her to leave. But she didn’t.

She alighted on the empty seat at the head of the table. The one reserved for the matron. For Hazel.

I could have taken that place, but I hadn’t. I didn’t dare presume, even in Hazel’s absence. And yet Miranda did. Miranda, the middle-aged woman who scrubbed our floors, our clothing, our windows.

Mrs. Fore set a bowl of stew in front of me, but my eyes remained on Miranda, steam gathering in my chest until I feared it would burst into the room. Her steely gaze pivoted to mine. My eyebrows rose. She looked away. I couldn’t chastise her in front of the children. In fact, it wasn’t my place to confront her at all, even if I wanted to.

I needed a distraction.

Beside me, Lily Beth’s spoon clattered against the side of her bowl. I rested my arm around the back of her chair, my ire subsiding. This child needed my attention now. I hoped my presence would soothe the pain I knew she felt, in spite of her outward lack of emotion. Her mother hadn’t even told her good-bye.

Stew languished in her bowl, but I noticed crumbs littering

her plate. I reached for a slice of bread and spread it with a generous amount of butter. Her mouth gaped when I set it before her. Then it disappeared down her slim throat in almost one bite. I smiled and fixed her another as she slurped at her stew. Content, I turned my attention to the other children.

“Are you ready to recite for me, Cynthia?”

The girl’s corkscrew curls shook with a fury as tears welled in her hazel eyes.

Janet stuck her arm in the air and waved her hand as if she were still in the classroom. “And me. I need help with my math homework.”

My stomach flopped. I’d much rather try to coax stubborn words out of Cynthia’s mouth than try to make sense of arithmetic.

Spoons clanging against the bottoms of empty bowls signaled the end of mealtime. I dismissed the children from the table, and Miranda began clearing dishes, her demeanor returned to its usual dreariness.

Lily Beth tugged at my sleeve.

“Yes, love bug?”

Her left eye seemed to find mine, but her right eye wandered off somewhere else. My heart squeezed.

“Do I have to go home now?”

I hugged her to my side. “No, sweetheart. You’re going to stay here for a while. A little later, we’ll tuck you under warm quilts in a bedroom upstairs with the other girls. You’ll like that, won’t you?”

She hesitated only a moment before she nodded, her white hair dancing around her delicate face. A perfect face marred only by eyes that refused to sit straight.



After our evening prayers, the children—including Lily Beth—quieted without protest. I breathed the usual relief of another day finished. And a good day, at that. Joseph placed with a family in Centre County, and Lily Beth enveloped in our safe and loving environment. Exactly the kinds of things we existed to do.

I stopped in my bedroom to pick up a book. A downstairs door closed with a solid thud. Had Miranda left—or had Hazel returned? Best to check, and to lock up if Miranda had gone for the day. I hurried downstairs, keeping to my toes in hopes of not waking those who already slumbered.

In the foyer, Hazel unwound a snow-cruled wool scarf from her head and hung it on the hall tree. Wisps of brown hair frizzed out about her head as she pulled gloves from slim fingers before shrugging out of her overcoat. “It’s starting to snow.”

“Did you get Joseph situated?”

“What?” Hazel seemed as startled as if I’d asked after the health of Mr. Granville’s dead cat. “Oh, Joseph. Yes, he’s fine.” Her cold fingers curled around my hand, and her eyes shone with excitement. “But, oh, Sadie. I have so much more to tell you.”

She pulled me into the parlor, to the worn velvet sofa opposite the coal stove. I’d never seen calm, unflustered Hazel quite so . . . alive. Her right hand held my left one. Then she laid her left hand atop mine. A milky white pearl winked bright in the dim light. My head jerked up. Our eyes met and held.

“Professor Stapleton?” Her long-time beau had driven her

and Joseph over the mountain in his new automobile, but I hadn't thought it anything unusual. I pressed my hand to my chest as tears sprang into my eyes. Years of proposals, of refusals. "And you finally said yes."

Hazel nodded, her face as bright as the first star on a moonless night.

I shrieked in delight, then covered my mouth as we both dissolved into girlish giggles. Laughing. Crying. Hugging. Finally, we calmed. I turned serious and studied her face. "You're sure this time?"

Hazel twisted the new ring on her finger. "Ten years ago, God called me to be a missionary to needy children. I've gladly done as He asked. Now I believe He's asked me to take a different path. To become administrator of a different home. My own." A blush stole across her heart-shaped face.

"I'm so happy for you." And I was, though my throat felt strangely tight. Hazel deserved a husband. Children. She'd been preparing to serve on the mission field in South America when one of her professors at the Brethren college in town approached her. Would she consider being a home missionary? A missionary to children? To orphaned and friendless children? She'd answered yes all those years ago, forgone the pleasure of a life of her own for a decade. She deserved this happiness now. As did faithful Professor Stapleton.

"When?" I managed to squeak out the question that both fascinated and terrified me.

"The end of April, though we won't take our wedding trip until after the college term is over for the summer." Hazel blew out a long breath as she rested her head on the back of the sofa. Then it popped back up again. "You'll be my

bridesmaid, won't you? There's no one else I'd want to stand up with me."

"Oh, Hazel!" I hugged her again. "Of course I will!"

But even as I spoke, my mind whirled. The calendar had turned to March. The end of April would come quickly. A few short weeks for Hazel to plan a wedding and a life outside the orphanage. A few short weeks for the rest of us to transition to a new matron.

My stomach churned faster than Henry's eight-year-old legs running downhill. I swallowed down the rising fear. "Do you have any idea . . . who . . . ?"

Hazel's eyes danced in time to the chuckle deep in her throat. She clutched both of my hands and leaned in close to my face. "That's my other news, dear Sadie. I want *you* to be the new matron."

Breath seemed to disappear from my body. I didn't know where to find it again.

"You're pleased, aren't you?"

I wasn't sure my heart was still beating.

"I told John I couldn't put his ring on my finger until I had things resolved here, so we stopped at Mr. Riley's on our way back into town and told him the news. He telephoned all the board members. Once they agreed to extend you the offer, I knew what your answer would be, so I took the ring!"

Mr. Riley. The president of the Raystown Home's board of trustees and a longtime friend of my foster family, the Ramseys.

Hazel's exuberance gave way to her usual seriousness. "I couldn't think of anyone I'd trust more than you."

I pulled in a long breath, trying to calm the squirm in my

middle as the past tore through my mind. A child drawn out of dire circumstances, like Moses from the basket in the river. Mama Ramsey had always told me it meant my life had purpose. Great purpose. Until this moment, I'd never actually believed that.

Few knew the dark words hidden in the 1892 admittance ledger, though some still remembered that I'd resided at the Home until the Ramseys took me into their family six years later, after my body had grown strong and well. Since then, I'd worked hard to erase the shame that followed me like a shadow. Would achieving the position of matron eradicate it forever?

Yes, yes, yes, said the silent scream in my head. I wanted this. Needed this. Was made for this. My heart swelled with unexpected joy, though ecstasy and fear danced cheek-to-cheek.

"Oh, Hazel. I'm honored. I'm . . . thrilled beyond belief. Of course I will step into your place as matron."

Hazel leaned forward and kissed my cheek. "I knew I could count on you, Sadie."

Then the yellow daffodils winked against the dark window. I drew a quick breath. The board of trustees would not employ a married woman.

"*When I own my own land*," Blaine had said the year he'd turned sixteen. "*Then I will ask you to be my wife.*"

Since then he'd worked other men's farms, scrimping and saving toward purchasing his own. And still we waited. Would this be my way to contribute?

As matron, Hazel's salary was substantially higher than mine. I'd get a raise on top of the continued opportunity to

work in and for the place I loved. I could help Blaine save toward our land. By the time we amassed the amount needed, I felt sure I'd have accomplished enough to follow Hazel's example and set up a home of my own.

A perfect situation. The answer to so many years of prayers.

Hazel yawned, covering her wide mouth with her palm. "I'll call Mr. Riley in the morning and let him know you've agreed. We have so much to do, starting tomorrow. Morning will come far too early—for both of us."

I nodded. But I wouldn't be sleeping tonight. How could I, when the unspoken dreams of my heart had suddenly come true?

Chapter 3

I waved to the children through the front office window as they made tracks through the new dusting of snow the next morning. Ten-year-old Janet held Lily Beth's tiny hand, promising to deliver the little girl to the right classroom. Contentment pushed out a sigh.

I turned from my view of the empty street and surveyed our office. An enormous old desk placed toward the back wall, two straight-backed chairs angled in front of it. A small round table off to one side. A tall cabinet between the two windows that looked out over the street, and a fireplace now fitted with a coal heater along the opposite wall.

Cozy yet professional, a room that would soon become my primary domain.

"I met our new girl this morning." Something about the tightness around Hazel's lips worried me.

I gripped the back of one of the chairs. "Lily Beth."

Hazel rubbed a finger above her eyebrow. "I guess with all the excitement last night, you forgot to tell me."

I cringed. "Sorry. I know I overstepped my bounds, but you weren't here and her mother—" I shook my head.

With a half smile on her lips, Hazel flipped open the admittance ledger and read over my notes on Lily Beth Ashworth. “I can’t exactly scold you, seeing as how you’ll be doing this kind of thing on your own very soon. But I had hoped to gain a little ground after placing Joseph out.”

“Gain ground?”

“You know we exist on freewill offerings. That presents problems on occasion.”

My heart thumped as I swiped my tongue over dry lips. “What kind of problems?”

“Money problems. We anticipate generous donations of food, such as Blaine and others give. We can even expect clothing, though we never know if the gift will fit our needs. Holidays are rarely a problem. But cash for bills and other expenses sometimes runs short. Like now. We’ve been low on funding for the past few months. Or high on expenses. Or both.”

This was nothing new. Mama Ramsey often lamented when donations to the Home lagged. She seemed to take it as a personal affront, though her only connection to the orphanage was in a voluntary capacity. Hazel, of course, had more reason for concern. As did I. “How many times have I heard you say, ‘The Lord will provide for His work?’”

“I know. And I still believe that.” Hazel twisted the ring on her finger. “But I also see what it says in my ledger. One less mouth to feed, one less body to clothe always gives us a little space.”

I stiffened. “Lily Beth won’t eat enough to make a difference. She can have my portion if need be.”

Hazel’s bowl-like lips lifted in a smile. “I know. It’s just—”

She waved her hand. “Never mind. We’ll—you’ll get through this crunch, just like we have all the others.” She pushed back from the desk and stood. “I’d best telephone Mr. Riley and tell him you’ve agreed to the post. We’d like to finalize things as soon as possible.”

As Hazel’s footsteps faded away, I leaned back in my chair and considered her revelation. But I couldn’t make myself adopt her dire outlook on the situation. The finances would right themselves, as they always had before, because the Lord wouldn’t let these children suffer on account of something as trifling as money.



“Miss Sadie!” Janet threw her arms around my waist and buried her head in my shirt after school that afternoon. I stroked the thick braid that dangled down her back. She lifted her face. “You’ll help me with my math, won’t you?”

I tweaked her nose. “Of course, you silly goose. Have I ever left you alone with your numbers?” But I breathed relief that soon I would no longer be the one helping with arithmetic homework. That would be one of my assistant’s duties.

“Say, Miss Sadie . . .” Twelve-year-old George sauntered in my direction, reaching for a slice of buttered bread on his way.

Mrs. Fore slapped his hand. “Not until you’ve hung up your coat and hat. Then you’ll sit at the table like the civilized hooligan you are.” She winked as she poured milk into tin cups.

George whipped off his hat, then peeled off his coat and hung both on a peg near the back door. Then he renewed his quest. “Miss Sadie, do you have any good books I could read? Teacher says we have to read one and write up a paper

saying what we think of it.” He looked me straight in the eye. Another few months and he’d tower over me. I swallowed past the lump in my throat and prayed again for a family to take him in, love him, guide him, maybe even school him in a trade.

“If we can’t find a book that suits your fancy on the shelves here, I’ll take you to the library in town on Saturday.”

“Aw, Saturday? We’ve got a baseball game scheduled then.”

I pushed up on my toes just a tiny bit, needing to be bigger than he was for a little while longer. “After your chores, of course.”

His whole body sagged as his chin dropped toward his chest. “Yes, ma’am.” Then he looked up with a grin. “Can I have—”

I held up one hand.

His nose scrunched as if he’d smelled a skunk. “*May* I have my bread and butter now?”

I looked at Mrs. Fore. She nodded.

“Take your food to the table, please,” I commanded those still lingering.

The back door opened again. A gangly youth loped inside.

“Carter!” I threw my arms around Blaine’s younger brother, then pulled back and looked up into his face. Carter didn’t have Blaine’s stature, but then the boys had different fathers, so I guessed that accounted for their opposite builds. And coloring. Carter’s hair and eyes were as light as Blaine’s were dark. “You’ve grown since I last saw you. And that was just a few weeks ago!”

Carter’s infectious grin appeared. The brothers were as different as peas and corn in personality, too. Blaine’s serious nature didn’t always appreciate Carter’s love of fun and laughter, especially when it landed the boy in trouble.

Carter slid the coat from his narrow shoulders as I led him to the table. “Is everyone feeling better at the Comstocks?”

He shrugged. “Mrs. Comstock still coughs a good bit. But we should make it back to church on Sunday.”

“Wonderful! I’m so glad things are working out well for you there.” It was his third foster home in the dozen years since he and Blaine had arrived on the Home’s doorstep.

Cynthia sidled closer to Carter, her eyes wide under his disarming grin, the one I felt sure sent the girls at the high school into a swoon. I studied the floor to hide my smile. But when I realized Mrs. Fore’s huff and bustle to prepare supper, I sobered.

Pulling at Carter’s arm, I lowered my voice. “Won’t the Comstocks expect you at home for chores and such before supper?”

Carter shrugged. “I could eat here instead.”

I thought of Hazel’s words this morning about mouths to feed. She wouldn’t be pleased to have another for supper. And Mrs. Fore didn’t take kindly to unannounced guests at mealtime, either. After Lily Beth last night . . .

I lowered my voice. “We’ve already tried Mrs. Fore’s patience this week. We’ll see if we can work out another time.”

He crushed his cloth cap between his hands and looked at the floor. Looping my arm around his, I led him to the door. “When we see you at church Sunday, I promise we’ll plan a visit.”

Carter’s quick grin fell into a frown. Grabbing his coat, he bounded out the door and into the frigid air without a glance back.



“Miss Sa-die!”

Janet’s crowing called me to the parlor. I left off slicing bread for supper and scurried through the narrow hall. Miranda and I nearly collided.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, pressing her back against the wall, mouth twisted into a scowl.

The shock of such a look held me in place.

Had she and Mrs. Fore quarreled? I couldn’t imagine it. Maybe one of the children had upset her. I certainly hoped not. In spite of the fact that she and I had never moved past tolerating each other, Miranda worked hard to keep the house in order. We couldn’t function as well as we did without her work. Maybe she needed something good to think about. Like Hazel’s engagement.

“It’s nice about Hazel and the professor, isn’t it?”

Hazel had announced her engagement, though she’d kept my appointment a secret for now, since I didn’t intend to tell Blaine until everything was official.

Miranda’s head jerked back and her eyes narrowed, regarding me as if I were a boy with muddy shoes come to tread across her freshly mopped floor. “And what will happen to all of us, I wonder, now that she’s off to play house?”

My jaw clenched. Then I softened. It had to be hard for a woman almost forty years old and never married to hear of Hazel’s good fortune. I kept my voice quiet, as I did with upset children. “She’ll be happy, and we’ll all be fine.”

“Some of us will,” she muttered as she turned her face away.

My spine went rigid. When I took over as matron, Miranda would answer to me. Best to let her see now that I couldn’t

be bullied. Yet Mama Ramsey's voice rang through my head. "*You'll catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.*"

I took a deep breath before pasting on a smile, determined to keep my comments as vague as possible. "I can't imagine much will change after Hazel leaves."

"Miss Sa-die!" Janet's shrill impatience.

My skirt swooshed past Miranda as I dashed into the parlor. She probably fretted as much about keeping her job as she did her lack of a husband. And who could blame her? This was about as good a place as she'd ever find with her sixth-grade education. Once I held the position of matron, I'd reassure her that I intended to keep her on. In spite of her occasional surliness, it would be easier to retain her. Hiring my own replacement would be challenge enough. No need to add a maid-of-all-work opening to that list.