

TROUBLE IN STORE



CAROL COX



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*To Wyatt:
Our family's newest native Arizonan*

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart
And do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He will make your paths straight.*

Proverbs 3:5–6 NASB

1



MARIETTA, OHIO

APRIL 1885

Are the children ready, Miss Ross?"
"Yes, ma'am." Melanie Ross bobbed her head, trying not to wince at her employer's clipped tone. She shot a quick glance at Mrs. Deaver's daughter and son to make sure nothing had happened to mar their appearance since her last inspection.

Five-year-old Olivia stood on Melanie's left, long golden curls framing her cherubic face and cascading over the wide collar of the pink dropped-waist dress so carefully ironed by Melanie the night before. The little girl's eyes glowed with anticipation, and the dimple in her round left cheek deepened when she offered her mother a bright smile.

Mrs. Deaver's features softened enough to give her daughter a fleeting smile in return.

On Melanie's right, Clarence Harrington Deaver Jr. dug the toe of his black patent-leather shoe into the Aubusson

carpet, his dark scowl indicating the nine-year-old's distaste for the blue velvet suit, complete with lace collar, designated as his attire for the afternoon.

His mother drew her lips apart in an unconvincing parody of a smile. "You look quite the little gentleman, Clarence. We're all going to have a lovely afternoon, aren't we."

The boy pushed his lower lip out farther, and she bent toward him, her voice carrying a hint of steel. "I want you to be on your best behavior today. You can do that for Mother, can't you?"

When young Clarence's demeanor didn't alter a whit, she changed tactics. "If you're a very good boy, I'll make sure you have a chance to ride your pony after the guests have gone."

The boy's scowl only darkened. "I want to ride Prince now."

Melanie decided to step in before she had an out-and-out mutiny on her hands. She spoke in a crisp tone. "I'm sure we can find plenty to do this afternoon, Clarence. In the meantime, you'll be a good boy and mind your mother, won't you." She held his gaze until she received a grudging nod and heard Mrs. Deaver's sigh of relief.

The moment his mother looked away, Clarence's features took on a thoughtful expression that put Melanie on immediate alert.

Mrs. Deaver regarded her son again and nodded approval. Turning to Melanie, she said, "You may take them down the main stairs now. Our guests will be arriving in just a few minutes, and I want the children to be on hand to greet them. And," she added with a wry smile, "for our guests to see them while they're still spotless, before they've spent the afternoon playing outside."

Melanie paused in the act of herding her young charges

toward the staircase. Surely she hadn't heard correctly. An afternoon outdoors—in those clothes? She could only imagine the effect hours of romping outside would have on Olivia's pink dress . . . let alone Clarence's velvet suit.

Turning back toward her employer, she injected all the tact she could summon into her question. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather have them stay inside so their playing doesn't interfere with your gathering? It's such an important event, after all."

The hint of steel returned, this time in Mrs. Deaver's eyes. "Nonsense. It's a perfect day to hold our get-together outside, and all the children playing on the lawn will make a charming picture, one our guests will remember when it comes time to endorse my husband's candidacy."

"*All* the children?" Melanie focused on the word that concerned her most.

"Didn't I mention that?" Mrs. Deaver trilled a rather forced laugh. "The Martins and Templetons are bringing their children along."

Melanie selected her words with care. "And you want them all to play outside? While your party is going on?"

Mrs. Deaver's tight smile showed no hint of budging. "It would surely be far more difficult trying to keep them all cooped up indoors on a beautiful spring day like this. Don't you agree?"

Melanie clamped her lips together, knowing full well that her opinion wasn't really being solicited. She made a mental head count, trying to keep her consternation from showing on her face. The Templetons had two children, and the Martins three, meaning she would be riding herd on seven youngsters instead of only two.

She fought back a sigh. Clarence was capable of creating enough trouble on his own. Add Johnny Martin to the mix, and no telling what could happen. The two boys had a long history of trying to outdo each other's escapades. The time they'd tried to see who could throw balls of mud higher onto the white plaster walls of the Deaver's home sprang to mind. Melanie flinched and banished the memory as quickly as it came. No doubt about it, she would have her hands full keeping the two of them out of trouble.

She shot another glance at Clarence and caught the look he sent her way, one that promised "I'll do whatever I want to, and you can't stop me" as clearly as if he had spoken the words aloud.

"Yes, ma'am." Shaking off her sense of foreboding, she shepherded the youngsters down the broad staircase and through the ornate entry hall to the front portico, where carriages had already begun to pull up and deliver their passengers.

Melanie stood back as Mrs. Deaver collected the children and walked over to join her husband, who stood on the portico greeting their guests.

A portly man paused to smile at the little group before he clapped Mr. Deaver on the shoulder. "That's a fine-looking family you have there, Deaver. Just the kind of image we want our next congressman to have."

Clarence Deaver Sr. swelled at the words. "Does this mean I have your endorsement, Judge Conners? Your support in the upcoming election would mean a great deal to me."

"That's a strong possibility. I'm hoping we can discuss some of the finer points of your stand on the issues this afternoon." The judge leaned over and pinched Olivia on the cheek, eliciting a spate of giggles from the little girl, then

turned to young Clarence and ruffled his hair. “Ah, yes. A chip off the old block.”

Melanie saw the way the boy narrowed his eyes and balled his hands into small fists. She stepped forward, ready to avert disaster, but Mrs. Deaver apparently recognized the signs, as well. Draping one arm around her son’s shoulders, she turned and beckoned Melanie forward with her free hand.

“Some of the other youngsters are arriving, Miss Ross. Why don’t you take the children to meet them.” She waited until Melanie drew nearer to add, “And make absolutely certain that none of them go near the stable. I won’t have this party ruined by having the children smelling of horses.”

Melanie dipped her head and took the children by the hand, tightening her fingers around Clarence’s to keep him from running off. She walked with them to the driveway, where Olivia greeted the Templetons’ daughters and Johnny Martin’s sisters with squeals of delight.

Clarence sauntered toward Johnny with a show of nonchalance intended to deny his mortification at his blue velvet attire. The boys ducked their heads and began talking in low tones, casting an occasional look toward Melanie and her other charges.

Recognizing the need to keep all seven children occupied, Melanie clapped her hands and pasted a bright smile on her face. “Let’s all go over in the shade and play a game of tag.” She waved her hand toward a grove of stately walnut trees midway between the stable and the Muskingum River. The area was clearly visible from the tables that had been set up on the expansive south lawn, but far enough away that childish voices wouldn’t disrupt the important gathering.

The five little girls scampered off, hand in hand, taking

care to skirt the end of the low fieldstone wall that separated the carriage house from the main lawn. Johnny and Clarence immediately clambered onto the wall and walked along the top, holding their arms out wide like tightrope walkers.

Melanie cringed. “Come down from there this minute,” she ordered. “If you fall and ruin those clothes, I’ll never hear the end of it.”

The boys grumbled but complied. Clarence stuck his tongue out at her as they ran off to join the rest of the group.

Melanie followed, wishing with all her heart that the hours would pass quickly. It was going to be a long afternoon.



Will this day ever end? Melanie tucked a stray piece of chestnut hair back into the coil on her neck, wondering if she could possibly look as bedraggled as she felt after an afternoon spent trying to keep all seven children occupied and out of trouble. After playing several rounds of tag, they had chased butterflies and watched ants carry bits of grain to their nests underground. Melanie let them walk near the river’s edge under her watchful eye to observe a mother duck teaching her babies how to dive for food. And every fifteen minutes or so, she squelched yet another request from Clarence to let him ride Prince. Herding cats would have been easier.

Up on the driveway, carriages were being summoned in preparation for the guests’ departure. Melanie drew a relieved breath, knowing the end was in sight. Johnny and Clarence had been watching an anthill for the past half hour, and the little girls were sitting in a circle—looking like a ring of flowers in their pastel dresses—telling stories.

“Where’s Clarence, Miss Ross?” Olivia’s voice broke into

Melanie's thoughts. "I want him to tell us one of the stories about King Arthur and his knights."

Melanie turned to point toward the anthill at the base of the tallest walnut tree. "Why, he's right . . ." And the glib response died in her throat. Johnny lay on his stomach, tormenting the worker ants by blocking their way back to the anthill with bits of gravel. But Clarence . . .

Where was he? Melanie knew at least part of the answer. He'd sneaked off again, the little wretch.

Tamping down the urge to stamp her foot, she did another quick head count to reassure herself she only had one truant to deal with. One, two, three, four, five, six . . .

No one but young Clarence among the missing. Melanie pressed her lips together and scanned the area. Where had he gone?

Her annoyance mounted as she pivoted in a slow circle. He'd been easy enough to spot before. What could he be up to now?

Up near the house, attentive servants hovered by the tables while the Deavers circulated among their guests. Melanie's gaze followed the gently sloping lawns, sweeping across the grassy expanse that stretched from the house to the riverbank.

Sudden fear clenched at her stomach. *Not the river.* Visions of Clarence falling in and being swept away to a watery grave filled her mind. Panic lent wings to her feet, and she raced toward the water's edge.

"There he is!" Olivia's shrill voice pierced the afternoon stillness.

Caught up in her dark imaginings, Melanie craned her neck, straining for any sight of a small dark head bobbing above the swirling current.

“No, Miss Ross! Over there!”

Other voices took up the cry, and Melanie whirled around to see all six children jumping up and down, pointing toward a spot on the other side of the grove, beyond her range of vision. She moved past the trees to see a dappled gray pony charging across the lawn, with Clarence clinging to his back like a burr.

The spirited animal’s hooves threw up clods of dirt as he galloped across the grass toward the walnut grove. Clarence held fast, his hands twisted in the pony’s creamy mane. He lifted his head, and his eyes lit up when he spotted Melanie.

“Yah! Yah! Look at me!”

Melanie’s hand flew to her throat. He was going to break his fool little neck. “Clarence Deaver, you stop that pony now!”

The boy’s only response was an insolent smirk as the pony turned away from her and headed straight toward the tables where his parents were chatting with their guests, oblivious to the scene being played out on the lawn below them.

“No, come back!” Catching up her skirts, Melanie sprinted after him, knowing she could never catch up with the fleet-footed animal, but hoping she could somehow divert its path and avoid certain disaster.

Even as she ran, she watched events unfold as if living out a bad dream. She recognized the exact moment the adults of the party became aware of what was going on. Their mouths dropped open—first in shock, then in horror—as the pony and its rider bore down on them like a cavalry charge. Shrieks from several women rent the air, joining the cries of the excited children behind her.

The low fieldstone wall lay directly in Clarence’s path.

Melanie redoubled her speed and called his name again, knowing as she did so that he couldn't possibly hear her over the pounding of the creature's hoofbeats and the mingled screams.

Melanie continued moving forward, although something seemed to be dragging at her limbs, as if she were trying to run through the waters of the Muskingum. For one moment, she felt sure Clarence was going to guide the pony away at the last second. Instead he kicked the animal's ribs and leaned forward, urging it to jump the low wall. But rather than jumping, the pony shied away and slid to the right.

As in a haze, she watched Clarence part company with the pony and tumble through the air over the wall. The pony skidded to a stop, allowing Melanie to hear the thump when Clarence landed on the turf. His body bounced slightly upon impact; then he lay still.

On the other side of the wall, Mr. Deaver ran toward his son, his wife only steps behind him. A handful of servants brought up the rear.

The Deavers reached the boy a few seconds ahead of Melanie, who had to slow down to climb over the wall. Clarence's mother took one look at her son's still form, let out a shriek, and fainted dead away. Her husband caught her before she hit the ground and scooped her up in his arms.

"Arthur," he barked at one of the footmen, "carry Master Clarence inside, and then send for the doctor. Bertram, go get smelling salts for Mrs. Deaver."

Turning to leave with his wife in arms, he caught sight of Melanie. His anxious features froze into an icy mask. "Miss Ross, see that the other children are dealt with. As soon as you've done that, report to Clarence's room."

2



By the time Melanie calmed her frightened charges, returned them to their equally distraught parents, and gave Olivia into the care of one of the housemaids, the doctor had arrived and been ushered upstairs to Clarence's bedroom.

She ascended the back stairs and made her way along the third-floor hallway, feeling her feet drag more with every step. What would she find when she reached the boy's room? She shuddered, remembering Clarence's landing on the unforgiving ground, the thump, the bounce . . . and the awful stillness that followed.

Dark thoughts tumbled through her mind. Was Clarence still alive? Alive, but crippled? Dread gripped her, and she stumbled. Young Clarence was a mischief-maker—no doubt about it—never happier than when stirring up trouble for the servants, for his sister, and for Melanie herself. But he was still a child, a much-loved son.

And he had been in her charge.

She reached the end of the hallway and paused outside the open door, taking a moment to gather her courage. Low tones filtered from the bedroom into the hall.

“Will he live?” Distress sharpened Mrs. Deaver’s voice.

“Of course he’ll live, Eleanor.” Melanie recognized the doctor’s gruff tone. “A sprained shoulder never killed anyone, at least not in my experience. As far as I can tell, a few bumps and bruises are the only other injuries he has. Your son is a very lucky young man.”

Mrs. Deaver’s grateful sobs echoed the relief in Melanie’s heart. Feeling somewhat reassured, she took a deep breath and stepped through the doorway.

Clarence lay on his bed, his face nearly as pale as the starched white sheets. Strips of bandage wrapped around his body, binding his right arm to his side. His mother knelt at the far side of the bed, clutching his free hand and weeping. The doctor stood with his back to Melanie, returning his instruments to his black leather bag.

At the foot of the bed, Clarence Sr. loomed like a bird of prey, his features taut with anger. “How did this happen, son? That’s what I want to know.”

“Don’t be too hard on him, dear,” Mrs. Deaver pleaded. “He needs to rest.”

Her husband ignored her, never taking his eyes off the boy. “What were you thinking? How could you be so foolish as to get on that pony, especially after your mother gave you strict instructions not to?”

Clarence’s lips trembled as he met his father’s stony glare, and he spoke in a piteous tone. “Miss Ross told me I could.”

Melanie’s gasp announced her presence. All three adults in the room swiveled their heads in her direction, awaiting

an explanation. Robbed of speech, Melanie could only stand rooted to the spot, shaking her head.

On the opposite side of the bed, Mrs. Deaver caught her breath in a loud sob. “After we placed such confidence in you? How could you?”

Trying to shake off the sense of unreality, Melanie tore her gaze from their accusing faces and looked down at Clarence, who stared up at her with guileless blue eyes.

His shameless duplicity loosened her tongue. “Mr. Deaver, that is not the way it happened. Tell them the truth, Clarence.”

With a quick glance to make sure the adults were not looking at him, Clarence met Melanie’s gaze straight on and gave her an insolent grin, the same kind she’d seen the time he denied putting spiders down the neck of his sister’s dress.

He’d gotten away with that misdeed, but she wasn’t going to let it happen again.

Mr. Deaver’s harsh tone cut across her musings. “And what exactly is the truth, Miss Ross?”

Melanie felt a rush of heat flood her cheeks. “I was tending the children—all seven of them—as directed, making sure I kept the boys away from the stable. I turned around, and Clarence was gone. The next thing I knew, he was on the pony, heading straight for you and your guests. I tried to stop him, but he kicked Prince in the sides and made him run even faster.” She spread her hands. “You saw what happened next.”

A little of the starch went out of Mr. Deaver, and he turned his attention back to the bed. “Is this true, son?”

Clarence twisted his face into a grimace and manufactured a plaintive moan, which elicited another sob from his mother.

“Is it true?” Mr. Deaver repeated. “Did you take your pony out without Miss Ross’s knowledge?”

Clarence pushed out his lower lip and blinked his eyes until tears appeared along the lower lids. “I know I wasn’t supposed to, Father. I just wanted to show you how well I could ride so you’d be proud of me.” He whimpered again. “I was doing fine until she came running after me, waving her arms and shouting. That’s what made Prince shy like that. That’s what made me fall off. It never would have happened if she hadn’t scared us both.”

Melanie stared openmouthed at the little prevaricator, her mind in a whirl. She cast her thoughts back to the moment she’d spotted Clarence on his pony. In her mind’s eye, she could see it all clearly—the way she’d run across the grass at top speed, skirts bunched up in her hands, calling the boy’s name and demanding he stop.

A sick feeling washed over her, and her assurance wavered. *Had* she been responsible for the accident?

Mr. Deaver seemed to read the uncertainty on her face, and his lips tightened. “We entrusted our children to your care because we believed we could rely on you. Obviously, that confidence was misplaced. This afternoon’s debacle is an example of a deplorable lack of judgment at best . . . and extreme negligence at worst.”

“But . . . but . . .” Melanie struggled to find her voice. She stretched out her hand to Mrs. Deaver. They had always been on cordial enough terms. Surely she could count on her as an ally now.

The look she received in return showed Melanie she had miscalculated. This was no longer the face of a woman who wanted someone to mind her children while she flitted from

party to party, focused on bolstering her husband's political aspirations. This was the face of a mother tigress whose favorite cub had been injured. Mrs. Deaver gathered Clarence to her bosom and fixed Melanie with an icy stare. "I can never trust you with my children again. Ever. You obviously have no idea what you're doing."

Melanie reeled as though she had received a physical blow.

Mr. Deaver pointed toward the door. "Pack your things, Miss Ross. I want you out of this house today."

Melanie fumbled for the doorframe and gripped it hard. Her vision went gray, but she heard his voice clearly enough through the fog that seemed to have settled into the room. "I'll see to it that you never again find employment as a governess in Marietta—or anywhere in the state of Ohio."

Melanie pushed away from the doorjamb and blinked back the fog. The mist cleared in time to see a triumphant gleam in young Clarence's eyes as she turned to leave.



Thirty minutes later, Melanie set the last of her neatly folded blouses atop the other clothing in her small trunk and fastened the latches. Retrieving her crumpled handkerchief from the dressing table, she dabbed at her eyes, but the sodden linen square did little to wipe the moisture away. She reached into her open carpetbag to pull out a fresh handkerchief and swiped at her face again.

Catching sight of herself in the oval mirror, she took in her red-rimmed eyes and swollen cheeks and shook herself. Tears wouldn't remedy her situation. If they could, the number she had shed since leaving Clarence's bedroom ought to have made a drastic change in her circumstances. But nothing

had altered since Mr. Deaver gave the order to leave. Her fate had been sealed.

From the reactions of the other servants she'd encountered on her way back to her room, she suspected one of the maids had been listening outside the door and wasted no time in spreading the word of her dismissal. A sympathetic smile from any of the staff would have been a welcome balm, but their stoic expressions and downcast eyes, averted as if she were some sort of pariah, denied her even that small comfort. Once again, she was reminded of the distinction between a governess and the rest of the household staff—not ranking high enough to be considered part of the family but too high to have any friends among the other servants.

Melanie cast a glance around the small room that had been her home for the past year, wondering if she had forgotten anything in her haste to pack. She had no way of leaving a forwarding address, so if she left anything behind it would be gone forever. Her abrupt sacking left her with no time to make plans, and she hadn't the slightest idea where she would spend that night, let alone what place she would call home in the future.

Mr. Deaver had made his position clear enough: Her days as a governess were over. He prided himself on being a man of influence, and his vow to blacklist her had been no idle threat. He had the clout to do exactly as he promised, and Melanie had no doubt he would follow through on his threat. Any hope of employment in Marietta was closed to her.

But where would she go? She clamped her hands against her mouth and caught her breath in a ragged sob. How she longed to pour her heart out to her beloved grandparents,

whose wise counsel had never failed to bring relief during her growing-up years. But if her grandparents were still living, she wouldn't have been in this situation in the first place.

A low moan escaped her lips. With no family or close friends to call upon, her options weren't just limited, they were nonexistent. What was she to do with her life now? Melanie felt another spate of tears coming on and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes.

The thought of family reminded her of the few treasured keepsakes she had tucked away in the bottom of her carpet-bag. Rummaging under her toiletry items and a lawn nightgown, she pulled out the slim box and spread its contents on her dressing table. Her throat constricted when she looked at the meager collection: her mother's cameo brooch, a pair of blue hair ribbons, a packet of envelopes—reminders of a hope-filled girlhood and happier times.

Melanie slipped the top envelope loose from the ribbon holding it in place and smiled despite her misery when she looked at the familiar handwriting. The last letter from her cousin George, written a year ago, just after she had come to work for the Deavers. Her last living relative at the time, George had gone to his reward only eight months after writing the letter, making this final missive doubly precious.

Though knowing she ought to finish packing her carpetbag instead of reminiscing, Melanie slid the thin sheet of paper from the envelope, filled with a longing to relive her last connection with someone who loved her.

Dear Melanie,

It has been far too long since I wrote. I have no excuse for ignoring you, other than things have been busy here

in Cedar Ridge. Staying on top of business at the mercantile keeps both Alvin and me hopping like a couple of old bullfrogs.

You sounded a mite lonely in your last letter, Melly-girl. I know life has handed you some hard knocks, but remember that as long as I'm around, there's someone in this world who loves you. What's mine is yours. Anytime you want to shake free of Ohio and come out here to Arizona, there's a job and a place to stay waiting for you. Your pretty face would do a lot to brighten up the store, and we could always use your help.

Next time I see you, I'll have some new ribbons for your hair, unless you're too grown up to use those any longer. If that's the case, you can have your pick of anything the store has to offer. Nothing is too good for my Melly-girl.

*Your loving cousin,
George*

Melanie pressed the letter to her chest and stifled a sob. The son of her father's oldest brother, George had been closer to her parents' age, more of an uncle than a cousin to her. How she had treasured his infrequent visits while she was growing up, when he would hold her spellbound for hours with tales of his travels and adventures in mining camps around the West. Even after he settled down to run a mercantile with his longtime mining partner, Alvin Nelson, his letters had been a bright spot in her life.

If only he were still alive! Shortly after her grandparents passed away, she had considered going out to live with George.

Instead, she decided to seek employment as a governess—one of the few occupations available to genteel young women of straitened means—thinking that by staying in the area where she grew up, she could maintain a sense of security among familiar surroundings. Melanie looked at her packed trunk and felt her throat swell. So much for security.

She dropped her hands into her lap and looked out the window. “Lord, why did you have to take him away?” If George were alive, she’d head west in a heartbeat.

A wistful sigh escaped her lips. She bent her head again and skimmed the letter once more, smiling at the way her cousin’s love for her showed in every line. Her lips curved even more at the mention of the hair ribbons. And the promise of work and a roof over her head—wouldn’t that be lovely?

Even though she’d never expected to take George up on his suggestion to join him, just knowing a home was there if she ever needed it had been a comfort on the days when her duties as a governess had become almost unbearable. In her present circumstances, it would be far more than mere comfort—it would be a lifesaver.

Sliding the letter inside the envelope, she pushed it back into the packet with the rest. Its edge caught on another envelope, forcing it out the other end of the stack. Melanie pulled the letter free and smoothed it flat on the desktop, her heart hammering when she recognized the return address.

Dated just after last Christmas, this one had been written by Alvin Nelson, George’s partner in the Ross-Nelson Mercantile, telling her of George’s passing and effectively severing her last tie to a living relation.

She scanned the first part of the letter quickly, remember-

ing its painful news all too well. Then her eyes fastened on a paragraph farther down the page:

George was the best pard a man could ever have, and I mean to be as true a friend to him as he was to me. I know how much you meant to him. Every time he showed me that tintype of you as a little tyke, I could hear the pride in his voice when he called you his Melly-girl. I want you to know I've kept everything he left behind, and it's all yours. I'll be sure to keep it safe, should you choose to come out and claim it—and I hope you do. I would be most pleased to make your acquaintance and get to know the young cousin he talked about so much.

*Your obedient servant,
Alvin Nelson*

In her initial grief at learning of her cousin's passing, Alvin's invitation hadn't even registered, but now Melanie's fingers tightened on the paper in her hand as she stared unseeing at the wall before her, phrases from the letter dancing through her mind.

"I've kept everything he left behind. . . . I'll keep it safe, should you choose to come out and claim it."

A seed of hope sent up a fragile tendril. Cousin George might have departed this mortal coil, but perhaps his promise could hold true after all. Alvin Nelson was a man George liked and trusted. A caring soul, from the sound of his missive. After all, he had extended an invitation for her to travel to Arizona to meet him and claim whatever George had left behind.

Melanie's breath quickened. Once they met, mightn't that invitation expand into an offer to stay on and work in the mercantile? George's letter indicated they would be glad for some additional help. Wouldn't that hold doubly true, now that Alvin Nelson was left to run the store on his own?

Her imagination soared, picturing her arrival at the mercantile and Mr. Nelson's warm greeting. She could almost hear him asking her to stay on, offering her a job and a place to live. Everything would work out. It had to. And wouldn't it be lovely? All she had to do was get to Arizona. . . .

The reminder of her circumstances punctured the happy scene she'd been imagining as effectively as a pin pricking a child's balloon. Alvin Nelson might be willing to take her under his wing and give her a home as she hoped, but the fact remained that she would have to travel to Arizona before that could happen. And she couldn't do that without money for train fare.

Tears filled her eyes once more. Her employment ran to room and board, plus a small monthly stipend for personal expenses. She didn't need to check her small purse to know the amount there wouldn't cover the cost of a train ticket. The purchase of a much-needed cloak in January had eaten up most of her savings, and the meager amount she'd managed to put by since then would barely cover a night's lodging, let alone train fare for a cross-country journey.

She clasped her hands, crinkling Alvin Nelson's letter between her fingers. "What am I supposed to do, Lord? I have no place to go, and no one to turn to but you. My grandpa always said you hear the prayers of your people, so please, *please* hear me now."

A sharp rap on the door jarred her from her prayer. Melanie

took a moment to blot her eyes again before she pushed away from the dressing table and opened the door. Jarvis, the butler, loomed in the hallway.

He held out a sealed envelope. “Mr. Deaver sends this message and wishes to know if you are ready to leave.”

From Jarvis’s careful tone and the stiffness of his features, Melanie suspected he was dreading the worst—fits of tears and desperate pleas for more time. Well, she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. Forcing a dignified nod, she took the envelope and turned away to open it before the butler could take note of the way her hands trembled.

What more could Mr. Deaver have to say to her? He had made it clear enough that she couldn’t expect a recommendation from him. Mystified, she tore open the flap and sucked in her breath when she saw a small packet of bank notes wrapped inside a folded paper. The note was brief and to the point:

Consider this your severance pay.

She stared from the written page to the bank notes and back again. Had a prayer ever been answered so quickly? The amount she held in her hand wouldn’t set her up to live in a lavish way, but it would pay her way to a new life in a new home . . . and that was all she needed.

Whispering a heartfelt thank-you, she turned back to Jarvis. “You may tell Mr. Deaver I am packed and ready to leave.”

She swept up the mementos and tucked them—along with the heaven-sent cash—into her carpetbag and snapped the latch shut. Looping the handle over her arm, she faced Jarvis with a calm smile. “Please see to it that my trunk is taken to the train station.”

The butler's eyebrows soared toward his hairline. "You're leaving Marietta? You couldn't possibly have found a new position so quickly."

Melanie's smile broadened as she pressed the carpetbag close to her side. "My days as a governess are over, Jarvis. I'm going to Arizona."