A woman in a purple Edwardian dress and hat is looking up at a biplane flying over Highland Hall. The scene is set in a lush garden with a large, ornate stone building in the background.

A
REFUGE
at
HIGHLAND
HALL

EDWARDIAN BRIDES
BOOK THREE

✿ A NOVEL ✿

CARRIE TURANSKY
Author of *The Daughter of Highland Hall*

Praise for
A Refuge at Highland Hall

“The hardship and sacrifices of the First World War are illuminated in this poignant portrait of faith and family during 1915 Britain. In *A Refuge at Highland Hall*, third book in the Edwardian Brides series, author Carrie Turansky weaves an inspiring and beautiful tale about Love’s power amid adversity, and the miracle of redemption when we allow God to guide our hearts. Carrie’s keen eye for historical detail lends an atmosphere that will delight readers as they are swept back into a time of lush simplicity set against the backdrop of war, with a cast of engaging characters whose courage and strength promise to rise triumphant.”

—KATE BRESLIN, award-winning author of *Not By Sight*

“*A Refuge at Highland Hall* is a story of finding hope even when pain threatens our dreams, and of pursuing courage to see beyond the scars and boundaries to the heart. Carrie Turansky brings to life rich historical details of the Edwardian era, especially of aviation during its infancy in World War I. An endearing romance.”

—PEPPER D. BASHAM, author of *The Thorn Bearer*

“Fans of *Downton Abbey* will be surprised to find Turansky’s final installment of the Edwardian Brides series even more exciting, with characters so well developed, they jump from the pages into their hearts.”

—TERRI GILLESPIE, author of *Making Eye Contact with God*
and the Hair Mavens series

“In *A Refuge at Highland Hall*, master storyteller Carrie Turansky weaves together another beautifully written tale of courage, hope, and love. Her story swept me back to the streets of London and then on to France during the conflict of World War I. I love reading historical fiction, and it was a joy to learn so much about this era through the endearing Ramsey family.

A Refuge at Highland Hall is a powerful conclusion to the Edwardian Brides series!”

—MELANIE DOBSON, award-winning author of *Shadows of Ladenbrooke Manor* and *Chateau of Secrets*

“What do you get when you mix a sigh-worthy hero in a pilot’s uniform with a sweet yet independent heroine? Carrie Turansky’s latest release, *A Refuge at Highland Hall*. World War I aficionados will love this story, as will Anglophiles and pretty much anyone who enjoys a historical romance that tugs at a reader’s heartstrings. Looking for a great read? This one’s for you.”

—MICHELLE GRIEP, award-winning author of *Brentwood’s Ward*

A
REFUGE
at
HIGHLAND
HALL

BOOKS BY CARRIE TURANSKY

NOVELS

The Daughter of Highland Hall

The Governess of Highland Hall

Snowflake Sweethearts

A Man to Trust

Seeking His Love

Along Came Love

Surrendered Hearts

NOVELLAS

Where Two Hearts Meet

Christmas Mail-Order Brides

Kiss the Bride

A Blue and Gray Christmas

A Big Apple Christmas

Wedded Bliss?

A
REFUGE
at
HIGHLAND
HALL

EDWARDIAN BRIDES
BOOK THREE

CARRIE TURANSKY



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All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version.

The characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

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This book is dedicated to my dear friend and fellow author Cathy Gohlke, who has challenged and encouraged me on my writing journey, always shown me Christ-like love, and been a powerful example of placing her faith and hope in God.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Sir William Ramsey—master and baronet of Highland Hall; husband of Julia; father of Andrew and Millicent (Millie); brother of Sarah (Ramsey) Dalton

Julia (Foster) Ramsey—wife of Sir William and former governess at Highland Hall; stepmother to Andrew and Millie

Katherine (Kate Ramsey) Foster—cousin of William; wife of Jonathan Foster; sister of Penny; born and raised at Highland

Dr. Jonathan (Jon) Foster—husband of Kate; brother of Julia; doctor at St. George's Hospital, London

Penelope (Penny) Rose Ramsey—cousin of William; sister of Kate; born and raised at Highland

Alexander (Alex) Goodwin—childhood friend of Jonathan and Julia; Englishman born in India; RNAS pilot

Andrew Ramsey—son of William and future heir of Highland Hall; fourteen years old

Millicent (Millie) Ramsey—daughter of William; ten years old

Sarah (Ramsey) Dalton—sister of William; wife of Clark

Agatha Dalton—Clark's aunt

Clark Dalton—head gardener at Highland; husband of Sarah

Mrs. Miranda Dalton—housekeeper at Highland; Clark Dalton's mother; grandmother of Abigail

Abigail Murray—Mrs. Dalton's granddaughter; Clark's niece; ten years old

Dr. Phillip Foster—husband of Mary; father of Jon and Julia; former missionary to India; Ramsey family physician

Mrs. Mary Foster—wife of Phillip; mother of Jon and Julia; former missionary to India

Lydia Chambers—lady's maid to Kate and Penny; sister of Helen; aunt of Emily

Helen Chambers—maid; sister of Lydia; mother of Emily

Mrs. Hester Murdock—cook from London who joins Highland staff

Mr. George Lawrence—butler at Highland; head of the male staff

Patrick Lambert—footman at Highland

Chef Lagarde—head chef at Highland; in charge of kitchen staff

Ann Norton—nursery maid at Highland

Gordon McTavish—steward at Highland

Donald Miller—age fifteen; boy taken in by Kate and Jon Foster

Jack Hartman—age fourteen; boy taken in by the Fosters; brother of Rose and Susan

Tom Perkins—age twelve; boy taken in by the Fosters

Lucy Wallingford—age fifteen; girl taken in by the Fosters

Edna Snook—age eleven; girl taken in by the Fosters

Rose Hartman—age ten; girl taken in by the Fosters; sister to Jack and Susan

Susan Hartman—age six; girl taken in by the Fosters; sister to Rose and Jack

Irene Jotham—age four; girl taken in by the Fosters

Emily Chambers—age three; Helen's daughter

Winifred Tremont—mother of Alex and Lindy; wife of Roger

Roger Tremont—stepfather of Alex and Lindy; husband of Winifred

Lindy Goodwin—sister of Alex

Marius Ritter—born in Germany; lived in London; prisoner in the internment camp; farm laborer

Siegfried Schultz—born in Germany; lived in London; prisoner in the internment camp; farm laborer

Randal Longmore—wing commander of Alex's squadron

George Meddis—RNAS mechanic

Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.

—ISAIAH 40:30–31

April 1915

Waves of khaki-clad British soldiers flowed across the south lawn of the London Zoological Gardens, slowly making their way toward the chairs and benches surrounding the bandstand. Some men leaned on canes or hobbled on crutches. Others wore bandages or sported slings, testifying to the wounds they had received fighting for King and country.

Penelope Ramsey scanned their faces, searching for Theo Anderson, but her fleeting hope quickly faded. She suppressed a groan and turned away.

She must stop being ridiculous. Theo wasn't here. He was in France. And at this very moment, he was probably performing surgery to save the life of some poor wounded soldier fresh from the battlefield.

She shook her head. These wandering thoughts would never do. She was nineteen now, and it was time to put away childish, romantic daydreams—especially those involving Theo.

Last week he'd written to tell her he was engaged to a Frenchwoman who volunteered at the hospital where he was stationed in Rouen, France.

After she read his letter, she fled to her room and cried until her eyes were red and swollen and her pillow was a soggy mess. How could he fall in love with someone else? She'd always imagined their friendship would grow and move toward romance. Though he'd never made that promise, she'd held on to that hope ever since she first danced with him at her sister Kate's debutante ball almost three years ago.

Was there still a chance she would find true and lasting love, or was she a fool to cling to that cherished dream?

Penny lifted her gaze to the sea of soldiers once more. So many men were caught up in the fight. Thousands from her generation had already

been lost. Heaven only knew how long this terrible war would last and how many more would perish.

“Penny, can you take this?” Kate Foster, Penny’s sister, held out the large wooden tray filled with sandwiches.

“Of course.” Penny tucked away her questions and accepted the tray from Kate. Her sister’s face was too pale. “Why don’t you sit down for a few minutes and rest?”

“It’s almost four o’clock. The men will be expecting their tea.” Kate’s hand slid to her stomach, and she released a weary sigh. Morning sickness had plagued her for weeks. The poor dear could hardly eat anything more than toast and broth. No wonder she looked exhausted.

“Don’t worry. We’ll be ready on time.” Penny glanced toward the volunteers gathered with them in the large tea tent. At least twenty women and girls scurried around the serving tables, setting out sandwiches, scones, and other baked goods for the men to enjoy. “There’s plenty of help. You’ve done more than your share.”

“All right.” Kate lowered herself into the nearest chair and gently laid her hand over her rounded middle. She was only a little more than three months pregnant, but she looked much further along, causing them all to be curious and a bit concerned.

“Miss Penny is right.” Lydia Chambers, Kate’s lady’s maid, bustled past with two pitchers of lemonade. “There’s no need to wear yourself out. We’ll take care of things.”

“I hope we made enough food.” Kate looked toward the serving tables and back at Penny.

“I’m sure we’ll have plenty and Jon will be pleased.”

Kate smiled at the mention of her husband. “Yes, I believe he will be.”

Today’s outing for convalescing soldiers had been Jon’s idea. As a member of the staff in the military unit at St. George’s Hospital, he tended to the men’s battle wounds, but they needed more than medical attention to boost their morale.

Penny and Kate, along with several other volunteers, had pulled together

today's program and entertainment, collected donations to pay for the food, and then assembled a team of volunteers to serve.

They hoped to give the men a few hours to relax and enjoy themselves before they returned to the battlefield or traveled home to a very different life.

It was a good cause, and Penny was glad to take part, even if being with so many soldiers did remind her of Theo and make her heart ache a bit more.

She carried the tray across the tent and placed it with the others. Glancing down the serving table, she checked to see what else might be needed, but everything seemed ready for tea.

A strand of hair fluttered across her cheek. She brushed it away with a frustrated huff, then tucked it behind her ear. Her auburn curls were forever coming loose, no matter how many pins she and Lydia used to try to tame them.

She stepped out from under the tent and lifted her gaze to the clear blue sky. It was unusually warm for late April. A light breeze ruffled the scalloped edge of the tent's white canopy. The Union Jack flapped from the flagpole nearby, and red, white, and blue bunting swayed on the bandstand railing. Daffodils bobbed in the flower bed on the far side of the tent, their silver-sword leaves flickering in the breeze.

Across the lawn, the band struck up a lively march. The soldiers responded with applause and a few loud whistles.

Penny's spirits lifted as she listened to the music. They might be at war, facing a terrible enemy, but a huge wave of patriotism had swept through the kingdom, pulling everyone together. Men of all ranks and occupations had signed up to join the fight. And women bravely stepped forward to carry on the men's duties and keep their homes and businesses running.

Penny felt that patriotic stirring as well. She had considered training to become a nurse or Red Cross worker, but with Jon working long hours at St. George's Hospital and Kate pregnant and trying to oversee things at home, coming to London to help her sister seemed the most practical idea.

So she'd packed her trunks, said good-bye to everyone at Highland

Hall, and boarded the train for London, ready for a new adventure. Kate had been terribly relieved when Penny arrived, especially when she promised to stay and help as long as she was needed, even after the baby was born. As for it being an adventure . . . that was yet to be seen.

Music filled the air, and Penny hummed along as she strolled back and joined Kate.

“Well, there’s my favorite girl.” Kate’s husband, Dr. Jonathan Foster, stepped into the tent and leaned down to kiss his wife’s cheek. “How’s everything coming along?”

Kate smiled up at him. “Very well, thanks to Penny and Lydia. But I’m afraid I haven’t been much help.”

“Nonsense. Just having you here brightens my day.” Jon’s eyes glowed as he laid his hand on his wife’s shoulder.

A soldier with dark-brown hair stepped into the shady tent with Jon. He looked to be in his early twenties and wore a neatly pressed uniform. The sling around his neck cradled his left arm to his chest, but the injury didn’t seem to slow him down too much. He glanced at Penny and sent her a smile.

Her cheeks warmed, and she focused on Jon again.

He motioned toward the soldier. “I’d like you to meet my friend, Lieutenant Alexander Goodwin. We met in India when we were boys. Alex, this is my wife, Katherine Foster.”

Kate held out her hand. “Were your parents also missionaries in Kanakapura, Lieutenant Goodwin?”

Alex took her hand and bowed slightly. “No. My father was a chief engineer in charge of constructing the railway between Bangalore and Madgaon.” Pride in his father’s accomplishments warmed his voice. “He oversaw the building of seven lines through some very rough territory.”

Kate nodded. “That sounds quite impressive. He must be a very skilled and diligent man.”

“He was, and I hope to honor his memory by being as dedicated to my own pursuits.”

Jon motioned toward Penny. “And this is my wife’s sister, Miss Penelope Ramsey.”

Penny extended her hand to Alex. He took it and bowed again. "Miss Ramsey. It's a pleasure to meet you." He looked at her with a confident smile and dark, glowing eyes that held a hint of amusement.

A delightful shiver traveled up her arm. "Thank you. I'm happy to make your acquaintance." *Good heavens.* Did she sound a bit breathless?

She slipped her hand away, trying to shake off her response. The charming officer was simply being courteous.

"It's wonderful to meet one of Jon's friends from India. You must call me Kate, and I'm sure my sister would be glad for you to call her Penny."

Alex glanced at Penny and lifted one eyebrow.

Penny nodded. "Of course."

"Very well." Alex grinned. "We shall consider ourselves friends on the best of terms, and you may call me Alex."

Jon chuckled. "You can imagine how happy I was to find Alex at St. George's. Not that I was glad he needed medical attention, but I was happy to see him after all these years."

Penny glanced at Alex's sling. "Were you injured on the battlefield in France?"

"No. I'm taking pilot training with the Royal Naval Air Service. And I had a bit of an accident in one of the airplanes."

"Oh, dear, what happened?"

Kate flashed a warning glance at Penny.

Alex tipped his head and pressed his lips together. "I'm afraid the ground came up a bit too fast on my last landing practice."

Penny pulled in a sharp breath. "You crashed your airplane?"

His face turned ruddy. "Yes . . . that would be correct."

"I'm sorry." Penny swallowed, wishing she hadn't put him in a position of having to admit he was at fault for the mishap.

"Not as sorry as my flight instructor or the men who had to put the airplane back together." His mellow voice and a twitch at the corner of his mouth let her know he wasn't offended.

Relief coursed through her. "I hope your injury is not too serious."

"Just a broken collarbone and dislocated shoulder—nothing that will

keep me down for long.” He lifted his dark eyebrows and turned to Jon. “Right, Doctor?”

“You should be able to return to training in four or five weeks, as long as you follow my orders and get some rest until then.”

Alex saluted Jon with his good arm, his teasing smile back in place. “Yes, sir.”

Penny studied Alex, her admiration growing. She’d never met a pilot before. “Flying sounds terribly exciting. How are airplanes used in the war effort?”

“We fly in cooperation with the Navy, providing defense for Britain and the area around the coast to prevent sea and air attack. Mainly observation and reconnaissance missions—spotting U-boats and enemy aircraft, that sort of thing. We also hope to keep the Zeppelins from doing any more harm.”

A chill traveled down Penny’s back. In the last few months, those monstrous German airships had dropped bombs on the eastern coast, killing innocent men, women, and children while they slept in their beds. Now blackouts were the rule across the land, and searchlights scanned the sky each night, but there seemed little they could do to protect themselves from the bombing raids. The Zeppelins hadn’t reached London yet, but they were coming closer with each attack, putting everyone on edge.

Kate glanced at her watch, then looked up at Jon. “It’s almost four. Would you and Alex like to help yourselves to some refreshments before the men come through? I imagine things will be very busy as soon as the concert ends and they announce it’s time for tea.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea.” Jon turned to Alex. “Shall we?”

“I hoped coming with you would put me at an advantage.” Alex grinned and winked at Penny.

Her cheeks grew warm, and she returned his smile. Alex’s sense of humor was a good balance to his confident personality.

Jon turned to Kate. “Will you ladies join us?”

“I suppose it would be all right. Our work is done.” Kate rose and

slipped her arm through Jon's, and they set off together. Penny stood, and she and Alex followed them across the tent.

Penny scanned the serving tables with a pleased smile, then placed a lemon square and a small berry tart on her plate.

Alex chose two sandwiches and added a tart to his plate. He leaned toward her with a smile. "I haven't seen treats like these in quite a while."

She met his gaze, taking in his handsome features. "We've been baking nonstop for two days."

He took a lemon scone. "It all looks delicious."

"Thank you." She picked up a cup of tea and followed Jon and Kate to a round table in the center of the tent. Alex sat down across from her.

While the band music continued in the background, the men discussed the latest news from France. Penny sipped her tea and listened to their conversation. Alex seemed well informed and showed an impressive ability to assess the situation and suggest what might happen next.

Kate looked over at Alex. "I hope you'll come to dinner one evening before you return to your training."

His eyes lit up, but then he gave his head a slight shake. "That's very kind, but I wouldn't want to trouble you."

"It wouldn't be any trouble at all." She darted a glance at her husband, then looked back at Alex. "We'd love to have you join us, wouldn't we, Jon?"

"Yes, that's a splendid idea." Jon set his teacup on the table. "I'm sorry I didn't extend the invitation myself."

Penny leaned forward. "Oh, I do hope you'll come. I'd love to hear more about your life in India. It must have been thrilling to grow up in such an exotic place."

Kate sent her a surprised look.

Cheeks warming, Penny added, "I know the children would be delighted to meet a real pilot." She paused for a moment, thinking of the lively conversations they had around their busy dinner table. "I'm afraid the children will ask you so many questions you may not have time to eat your meal."

Alex turned to Kate. "How many children do you have?"

“Eight,” Kate said with a slight smile.

Alex blinked, and his mouth dropped open. “Eight?”

“Yes, five girls and three boys. Their ages are four to fifteen.” Kate’s eyes twinkled with a merry light as she reported those facts.

Penny ducked her head to hide her smile.

“Come on, now.” Jon lifted his hand. “We shouldn’t tease Alex with only half the story.”

“And why not?” Kate’s dimples danced. “He seems to enjoy it.”

Alex laughed, and they all joined in. “I do like a good joke or a challenging riddle, but I must confess this one has me stumped. You two seem much too young to be the parents of eight children.”

“The truth is, Kate and I are expecting our first child in early October, but for the last two years we’ve opened our home to children who have no family to care for them.”

“So the children are orphans?”

Jon nodded. “Most are, but some were abandoned by their parents and ended up living on the street.”

Alex’s dark brows dipped, his shadowed gaze fixed on Jon.

“We’re connected with a ministry in the East End called Daystar Clinic and Children’s Center. I started working at the clinic during my last year of medical school. We took in our first child just a few months after we were married.” Jon nodded toward a girl standing behind the serving table. “Lucy is fifteen now, and she’s growing into a fine young woman. After Lucy, we took in three orphaned siblings we met through our work at the clinic. Jack is fourteen, Rose is ten, and Susan is six. The other children came over the next year, and now we have eight.”

Alex sent Kate an appreciative look. “That sounds like quite an undertaking, managing eight children and running your household.”

Kate laid her napkin on the table, her smile revealing her pleasure with his compliment. “I don’t do it alone. We have two women who live in, as well as a very competent cook. But with Jon working such long hours at the hospital, I needed more help.” She reached over and laid her hand on Penny’s. “So I wrote to my sister and asked her to come to London. She’s

wonderful with the children. I don't know how I ever managed without her."

Penny glanced down, a bit embarrassed by her sister's praise. "You and Jon have done a remarkable job. I've been very glad to help."

Alex shifted his focus to Penny. "Where is your home?"

"Highland Hall, near Fulton, in Berkshire." Her throat tightened as memories of her family's country estate flashed through her mind. Both her parents had passed away, and her cousin William and his wife, Julia, oversaw Highland now, but she would always consider it home.

"I've never been to Berkshire, but I hear it's quite nice."

"Oh, it is. Rolling hills, quaint villages, lovely countryside." She sighed and glanced across the lawn, the vision of Highland Hall fading.

"It sounds like you're missing home." His voice softened.

Penny glanced back at Alex. "I do miss my family and friends there, but I'm glad to be in London to help Jon and Kate."

The distant church bell chimed the four o'clock hour.

Kate sent a hesitant glance toward the serving tables. "I should go see if there's anything else I can do to help."

Penny rose and reached for her plate. "There's no need. I'll go."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Stay and enjoy your tea." She glanced at Alex, and his twinkling eyes made her feel a bit daring. "And perhaps you can convince Lieutenant Goodwin to accept our invitation to dinner."

Alex's smile spread wider. "It's Alex, remember?"

"Yes, of course."

"And I'd be very happy to join you." His gaze remained on Penny as he replied.

Penny's stomach fluttered, and she shifted her gaze to his empty plate. "Can I get you anything else? More lemonade or sandwiches?"

"Thank you, but I think I've had more than my share."

"All right, then. It was very nice to meet you." Penny turned and started across the tent. Was he watching her? Had she made a good impression?

The memory of her disappointment with Theo came flooding back,

sending a warning to her heart. It wouldn't be wise to let her imagination run away with her, to make too much of her encounter with Alex. He was a handsome, charming man who might join the family for dinner one night, but he was on his way to war—and she might never see him after that.

Still, she couldn't help looking over her shoulder and sending him one last smile.



Alex's gaze followed Penny as she crossed the tent and joined the other women preparing to serve the soldiers. He couldn't help admiring her shining blue eyes, wavy auburn hair, and warm smile. Those faint freckles dusting her nose reminded him of cinnamon sprinkled over an apple tart—sweet and delicious.

He looked away. *Hang on, old man. Best take charge of your thoughts.* It was all right to appreciate Penny's beauty and sweetness, but that was as far as he should let it go. A pilot in training with the RNAS had to stay focused. His life depended on it. Getting involved with a woman at this point in his career, even one as appealing as Penny Ramsey, could be a dangerous distraction.

Besides, he had other reasons to put off romance. His jaw tensed and he looked away, trying to banish thoughts of his parents' failed marriage and the painful path their choices had forced him to walk.

He would not make those same mistakes.

But as the soldiers filed past the serving tables, filling their plates, he glanced at Penny again. She stood behind the table, offering each man a smile as she handed him a glass of lemonade or a cup of tea.

Some day he would think about winning a young woman's heart and finding a place to call home. He gave his head a bit of a shake, then he shifted his gaze away from Penny. A sweetheart, a home, and a family . . . such dreams had to wait. First he must earn his wings and do his part to win this war.

Jon finished his last sandwich and pushed his plate aside. "So, Alex, what happens after you finish your training?"

“I may be stationed on the coast, but I hope they’ll send me to France. That’s where I’d see the most action.”

Kate rubbed her arms as though trying to banish a chill. “You’re certainly brave to want to fly in France.”

Alex grinned again. “Brave or foolish.”

Jon’s expression sobered, and he leaned back in his chair. “I’ve treated a few pilots and heard their stories. Flying with the RNAS sounds like a rather risky assignment.”

“It can be, but the country that rules the air will be the one that wins the war. I want to do all I can to see Britain come out on top.”

A shadow seemed to touch Kate’s eyes.

Alex laid his napkin on the table and considered his words. He didn’t want to upset Kate, especially in her condition. This was not the time to tell Jon the gruesome stories relayed by his flight instructor or that the life expectancy of pilots on active duty with the RNAS was only three to six weeks.

But his flight instructor said he was a natural aviator. With a few more weeks’ practice, he would be a skilled pilot, ready to use everything he’d learned in his training at Upavon, and in India at his father’s side, to beat the Germans and keep Britain safe and secure. Then he’d come home and carve out a life for himself—one that would honor his father’s memory.

Jon’s tone grew more serious. “I know you’ll do your duty, but I hope you’ll be sensible and not take any unnecessary risks.”

Stories Alex had read in the newspaper and heard from the officers at Upavon flashed through his mind. “If we’re going to win this war, it will take brave men who are willing to go above and beyond their duty to defeat the Germans.”

“Of course, and I’ve no doubt you are one of the bravest . . . Just don’t do anything foolhardy. You have your whole life ahead of you.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine. I intend to beat the odds and come home in one piece.” He picked up his glass of lemonade as a slight tremor reached his fingers.

He wasn’t afraid to go into battle. He’d always been known for his

nerve and daring. But he would be a fool not to realize the danger that awaited him.

Soft, feminine laughter rang out from the other side of the tent. Alex looked up and spotted Penny as she engaged one of the soldiers in conversation. Her dancing eyes and carefree smile stirred a longing in his heart.

He swallowed hard and looked away. He had a duty to perform and a promise to keep. And he wouldn't let anything stand in his way . . . even his own traitorous heart.



Lydia Chambers released a weary sigh and carried two heavy bags of soiled tablecloths up the front walk of the Fosters' home in Kensington. Dr. Jon walked ahead of her with his wife, Mrs. Kate. Miss Penny lifted her skirt a few inches and followed them up the front steps.

It had been a long day at the zoo. Lydia's shoulders ached and her feet were sore, but that was a small price to pay to show those wounded soldiers how grateful everyone was for their brave sacrifices.

Fifteen-year-old Lucy Wallingford walked beside Lydia, lugging a similar load of tablecloths. "I didn't think we'd be out this late."

Lydia glanced up at the fading sunset. "Cleaning up the tea tent took longer than we expected."

Lucy climbed the front steps. "I hope Mrs. Murdock saved us some dinner."

"Oh, I'm sure she did."

Jon opened the front door and stood back. "After you, ladies." He smiled, but even he looked a bit weary from their outing. And it was no wonder. He kept long hours at the hospital, doing rounds, performing surgeries—trying to put wounded men back together. Then he had to watch over his wife, who was expecting their first baby, and keep an eye on all the children they'd taken into their home. It was a good thing he was a God-fearing man, or she wasn't sure how he'd find the strength to do it all.

They stepped into the cool entry hall, and Kate turned to Lydia.

“Would you let Mrs. Murdock know we’re home and tell her we’ll be ready for dinner in twenty minutes.”

Lydia shifted the weight of the bags. “Yes, ma’am.”

Jon frowned slightly and glanced at the bags. “Would you like me to take those down to the laundry room for you?”

“No, sir. It’s fine.” Lydia tightened her grip on the handles and glanced at Lucy.

Lucy nodded. “I can manage. I’ll just take these down and be back up in a jiffy.”

Kate sent them a tired smile. “Thank you, both. I appreciate your help so much.” She turned and slipped her arm through Penny’s. “It’s been quite a day, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, it has.” Penny patted Kate’s arm. “The men enjoyed themselves, and I think all the volunteers did as well.”

The sisters’ conversation faded as Lydia made her way down the stone stairs to the servants’ quarters. She and Lucy dropped off the bags in the laundry room. Thank goodness Mable came in twice a week to help them tackle that job.

“See you later.” Lucy hurried back upstairs.

Lydia walked into the servants’ hall and found her sister, Helen, seated at the long wooden table with her daughter, three-year-old Emily, and little Irene, who was four and the youngest of the orphan children at the house. The other seven children would have dinner upstairs with the Fosters.

When she and Helen came to work here, the doctor and Kate had invited them to eat upstairs, but it didn’t seem right. Kate might call them her assistants, but they were still servants. And servants did *not* eat with the family. Lydia and Helen took their meals downstairs with Mrs. Murdock, the cook, and Henry, the gardener-chauffeur.

“How did it go?” Helen asked as she wiped Emily’s face with a damp cloth.

“Very well.” Lydia shifted her gaze to Irene and gently touched the girl’s shoulder. “How are you, little miss?”

Irene looked up. "Very well, thank you." She took another bite of potatoes, looking pleased with herself. Irene's curly blond hair, blue eyes, and plump cheeks made her look like a little cherub. Lydia smiled. She shouldn't have favorites, but she couldn't help loving this sweet little one a bit more than the others.

Helen untied Emily's bib. "Did the soldiers enjoy their day at the zoo?"

"Oh, yes. You could tell they were glad for the outing."

"And did you have enough food for everyone?"

Lydia nodded as she sank down on the bench beside Helen. "You should have seen them. They swarmed that tea tent like ants at a picnic and ate every last bite."

Helen laughed. "I'd have liked to have seen that." Emily joined in, though Lydia didn't think she knew why she was laughing.

"It made for a very busy afternoon." Lydia's smile faded as the images of the wounded men rose in her mind. "But it wasn't easy seeing so many soldiers with frightful scars and missing arms and legs." She shook her head. "Those poor men . . . Their lives will never be the same."

Helen sighed. "So many have given so much."

"Yes, they have, and it was good to give a little back today." Lydia rubbed her shoulder, trying to ease her sore muscles. "How was your day?"

Helen clicked her tongue. "Those boys are going to give me gray hair before I turn thirty!"

"Oh, no, what happened this time?"

"I sent Donald and Jack out to the front garden to work off some steam, and they ended up throwing rocks at each other and breaking one of the library windows."

Lydia gasped. They'd been in tussles before, but they'd never broken a window.

"You'd think that would make them settle down and behave themselves, but not a half hour later, Donald got into a fight with Tom. And they nearly knocked me down when I tried to separate them."

"Oh, those dreadful boys!" Lydia shook her head. "Shame on them."

Helen rubbed her forehead. "I hate to think what Dr. Jon will say

when he sees that window. I must go up and tell him before he finds it himself.”

“He’s a good man. It’ll be all right.” Still, how long would his patience last if the boys continued to stir up mischief every day?

“I don’t want him to think I can’t manage the children on my own.”

“Oh, I’m sure he won’t think that.”

“What if he does and sends me packing?”

“He won’t. He knows the boys are a handful.” Lydia shook her head and stared toward the fireplace. “We should’ve taken the boys with us today. Maybe seeing those wounded men would’ve sobered them up and made them think about doing what they should, instead of breaking windows and getting into fights.”

The Fosters were good people. They took children off the streets and gave them a home and an education. But most of these children had never received the love and discipline every child needed. Getting them on the right path and teaching them how to behave wasn’t easy, especially when it came to the older ones.

Mrs. Murdock entered the room. “I thought I heard your voice, Lydia.”

Lydia gasped and darted a glance at the clock on the wall. “Dr. Jon and Mrs. Kate want dinner served in”—she calculated the time—“ten minutes.”

Mrs. Murdock planted her hands on her hips. “Well now, I wondered when they’d be coming home. I’ve been keeping dinner warm for over an hour, but it will take me more than ten minutes to get it all upstairs.”

Lydia rose from the bench. “I’ll wash up and lend a hand.” Dr. Jon was a stickler about cleanliness, especially when serving food.

“I’d help you, but I have to put these two to bed.” Helen pushed back from the table. “Then I have to tell Dr. Jon about the window.”

Mrs. Murdock pursed her lips. “I wouldn’t like to be the one to give him that news. But don’t worry about dinner. Lydia and I can serve.” The cook bustled down the hall toward the kitchen. Lydia followed.

Thoughts swirled through Lydia’s mind as she soaped her hands and rinsed them under warm water. When she first came to London three years ago, as Miss Kate’s lady’s maid, all she did was dress Miss Kate, fix her hair,

and care for all her clothing. There'd been a bit of sewing and repairing hats and undergarments, but that was the extent of her duties.

But now that Mrs. Kate and the doctor had turned their home into a refuge for orphans, Lydia's days were full. She tended the children from sunup until every last one was tucked in bed and fast asleep. Even then there were often tasks she needed to finish.

She loved children, even the unruly ones who had come right off the street. Seeing how a little kindness and a good home could help them change made her happy . . . but it also made her long for a family of her own.

Last month she'd turned twenty-three. The days were slipping away. With the war and all she had to do, how would she ever find a husband?

Would she ever have children of her own to care for and love?

"If your hands aren't clean by now, then there's no hope for them," Mrs. Murdock called.

Lydia turned and grabbed a towel. "Sorry. I'm coming."

"Bring the peas and potatoes." Mrs. Murdock lifted the platter of ham and started toward the door.

Lydia sighed. "I'm right behind you."



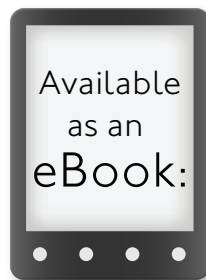
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