

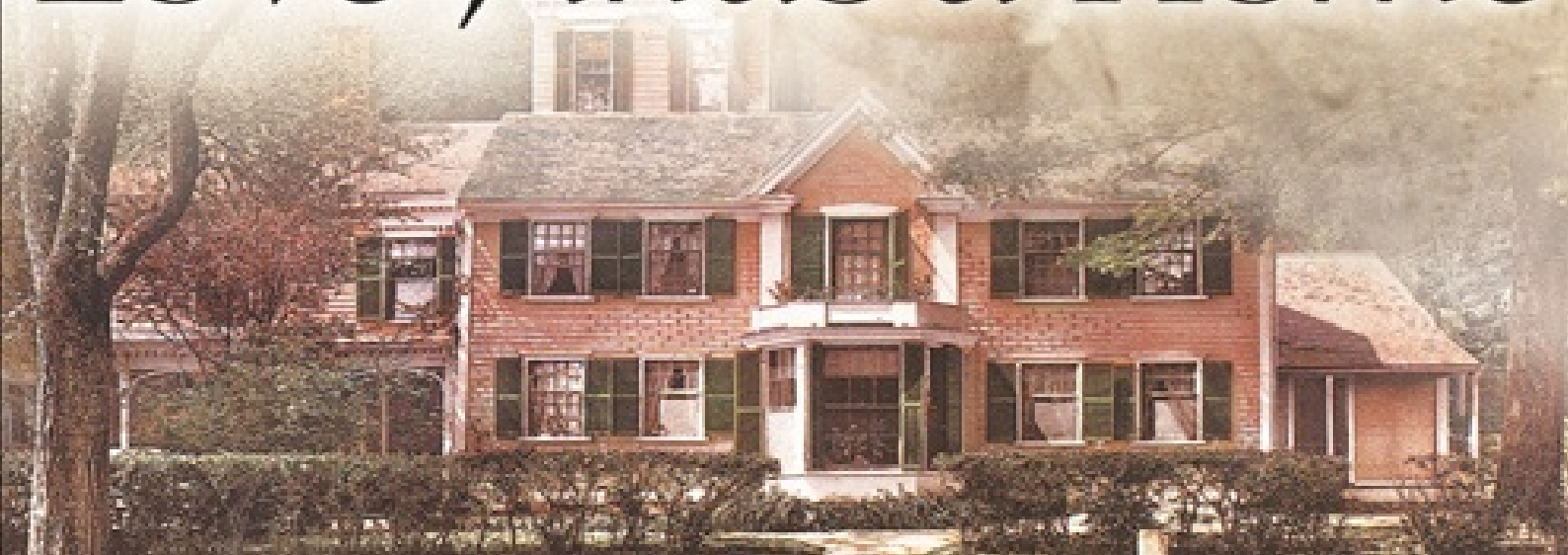
LOVE COMES SOFTLY • BOOK 8

JANETTE OKE

*Compelled to leave—
obliged to stay.*

*Should she follow her head
or her heart?*

Love Finds a Home



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Love Finds a Home

Books by Janette Oke

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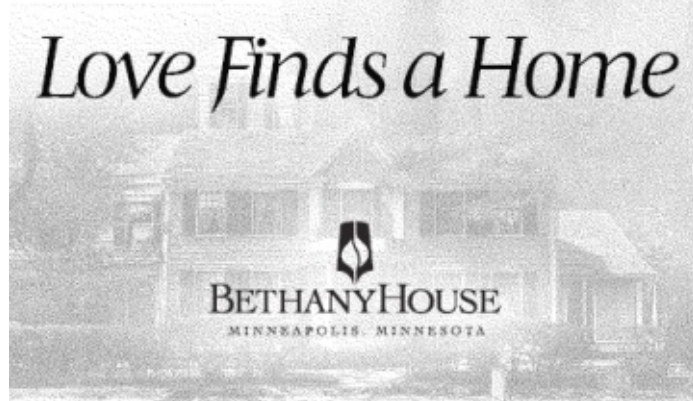
They Called Her Mrs. Doc *A Gown of Spanish Lace*

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* with Davis Bunn

JANETTE OKE

Love Finds a Home



BETHANYHOUSE
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

Love Finds a Home

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Janette Oke

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To Ingolf Arnesen,
my Christian brother,
prayer partner, and cheering section—
friend of the Davises, Joneses, and Delaneys.
Thank you for your friendship, support, and prayers.
God bless!

JANETTE OKE was born in Champion, Alberta, to a Canadian prairie farmer and his wife, and she grew up in a large family full of laughter and love. She is a graduate of Mountain View Bible College in Alberta, where she met her husband, Edward, and they were married in May of 1957. After pastoring churches in Indiana and Canada, the Okes spent some years in Didsbury and Calgary, where Edward served in several positions on college faculties while Janette continued her writing. She has written over five dozen novels for adults and children, and her book sales total over twenty-two million copies.

The Okes have three sons and one daughter, all married, and are enjoying their dozen grandchildren. Edward and Janette are active in their local church and make their home near Didsbury, Alberta.

Visit Janette Oke's Web site at: www.janetteoke.com.

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Some of the Characters in the

LOVE COMES SOFTLY *series*

Clark and Marty Davis—partners in a marriage in which each had lost a previous spouse.

Missie—Clark's daughter from his first marriage, married Willie LaHaye and moved west to ranch.

Clare—Marty's son born after her first husband's death, married Kate. They live in the same farmyard as Clark and Marty. Their children—Amy Jo, Dan, David, and Dack.

Arnie—Clark and Marty's first child. He married Anne and they have three sons—Silas, John, and Abe.

Daughter Ellie—married Lane Howard and moved west to join Missie and Willie. Their children are Brenda, William, and Willis.

Son Luke—trained to be a doctor and returned to the small town to practice medicine. He married Abbie. Their children are Thomas, Aaron, and Ruth.

Jackson Brown—the school friend who greatly impressed Melissa, Amy Jo, and Belinda when he first arrived at the country school. He later became a doctor.

Belinda—Clark and Marty's youngest daughter, who trained as a nurse and went to Boston.

Stirrings

Belinda slitted her eyes open against the rays of the morning sun, then quickly closed them and pulled the blanket up around her face for protection. It was early, too early to rise—but she wouldn't be able to sleep any longer with the sun shining in her eyes.

Even in her sleepy state, she knew something was atypical. Previous mornings she had not awakened with the sun shining directly into her face. *The drapes—why are the drapes not pulled?* she wondered groggily. And then things began to filter back into her foggy consciousness.

It was the moon that had kept her from pulling the drapes across her upstairs bedroom window the night before. *It's so full and golden and shining*, she had commented to herself when she went to shut it out. She had impulsively decided to watch it as she lay in her bed. She would get up later, she thought, when the moon had passed from view and properly close the heavy curtains for the night.

But sleep had claimed her before the moon moved out of sight, and now the sun was streaming in the tall, elegant window, refusing to allow her further sleep.

Belinda pushed back her covers and slowly crawled from bed. If she was to get any more sleep, she had to shut out the early morning sunshine. Still tired, she yawned as she reached for the pull, but she couldn't resist looking out over the lovely garden at the bright summer day.

Already the elderly gardener, Thomas, was bending over the flower beds, coaxing begonias to lift their bright summer faces to the sun. *What beautiful flower beds he's laid out*, Belinda thought. *Why, Aunt Virgie said just yesterday she doesn't know what in the world she will do should Thomas decide to retire.*

Belinda smiled affectionately as she watched the old man. She did not share her employer's fears. She could see his love for the flowers in his every careful move. One might as well ask Thomas to stop breathing as to stop nursing his beloved flower beds.

Sudden determination made Belinda drop the drapery pull. With such a beautiful day beckoning her she could no longer stay in bed. She would dress and slip out to join Thomas. Maybe he would even let her pull a few weeds.

Belinda hummed as she pulled a simple gown over her head and tied a bow at her waist. Aunt Virgie would not waken for some time yet, and Belinda would be free to enjoy the early morning hours.

She carried walking shoes in her hand so she would not make any noise and a hat to protect her face from the sun. She left her door slightly ajar so as not to disturb her employer in the next room with the sound of it closing. She slipped silently from the room and descended the steps.

Belinda left the house by the veranda door, pausing on the steps to breathe deeply. The heavy scent and beauty of summer blossoms filled her senses. *It truly is beautiful here at the Stafford-Smyth home*, Belinda decided for the umpteenth time. Her longings to be back in her small-town prairie setting were not because she did not appreciate her present surroundings. Her people, her family, were the reason her yearning thoughts so often turned toward home. And thinking of them, as lately she seemed to do almost constantly, her heart ached for a chance to be a part of their lives again.

But Belinda refused to dwell on her loneliness. As she had often done in the past, she firmly pushed it aside and thought instead of the things she had to be thankful for.

Mrs. Stafford-Smyth had been ill for almost two weeks with a serious bout of influenza, but now,

thankfully, she seemed to be gaining strength each day. Belinda was greatly relieved. It wasn't the constant nursing or the loss of sleep at nights that bothered her. It was the worry—the possibility that her friend might not be able to shake the disease.

Belinda loved the elderly woman almost as though she were truly kin. They even enjoyed their own little game of “belonging” to each other. Mrs. Stafford-Smyth had asked Belinda if she minded calling her Aunt Virgie, and Belinda had been pleased to comply. In turn, “Aunt Virgie” always referred to Belinda as “Belinda, deah,” with her intriguing eastern accent. The arrangement satisfied them both.

The lady seemed to have long ago concluded that neither grandson—Pierre and his Anne-Marie, nor Franz and his Yvette—would ever consent to share her Boston home with her. Indeed, Pierre and Anne-Marie had sent word from France that they were soon to be joined by a third family member. Aunt Virgie and Belinda, sharing joy over the great-grandchild to come, had even sat and knitted gifts to send to the new baby. But both had concluded without saying anything to the other that it was most unlikely Mrs. Stafford-Smyth would ever personally see or hold the child.

Belinda stopped to admire a climbing rose. The bright pink bloom filled the morning air with a sweet sunshine all its own. Mrs. Stafford-Smyth said that Thomas had developed the lovely flower in his own greenhouse. Belinda breathed deeply of its scent, then moved on into the garden.

McIntyre, Thomas's canine companion of many years, slipped alongside to sniff at Belinda's hand. “Good morning, Mac,” Belinda greeted him, running a hand over his graying head. “I see you're up early, too.” The old dog's eyesight was failing and his hearing was not as sharp as it had been, but he never missed an opportunity to be at his master's side.

Thomas heard the words and straightened slowly, blinking as though not sure he was seeing right. He put one hand to his creaking back, then grinned slowly, showing a few gaps where teeth were missing. “Miss Belinda,” he said, “how come ye not be abed?”

“It's too nice a morning to sleep,” Belinda answered goodnaturedly.

But Thomas responded with a twinkle in his eyes, “'Tis jest the same as any other mornin', 'tis.”

Belinda smiled. “I suppose so,” she admitted slowly. “I really wouldn't know, I must confess. But once I saw the day, I couldn't resist getting out into it. It will be hot and stifling later on, I'm thinking.” And Belinda cast a glance at the bright sky with the sun already streaming down rays of warmth.

“Aye,” spoke Thomas. “'Twill be a hot one today, I'm afraid.”

“I noticed your rosebush is covered with flowers,” Belinda went on. “It smells most wonderful.”

Thomas grinned widely at her comment. “Aye” was all he said.

He bent back to his work again, and Belinda ventured closer and knelt down beside him.

“Could I . . . would you mind if . . . if I pulled a few weeds?” she asked timidly.

“Weedin' ye be wishin' for?” His eyes widened, no doubt picturing milk-white hands in such an endeavor. “Ye pulled weeds afore?”

“Oh yes,” quickly responded Belinda. “Back home I always helped with the garden.”

“Ye had ye some flowers?”

“Oh, not like here,” Belinda was quick to explain. “Nothing nearly as grand as this. But Mama's always had her flowers. Roses and violets and early spring tulips. She loves flowers, Mama does. But she spends most of her time in the big garden—vegetables, grown for family use. Mama has fed her family almost all year round from the fruits of her garden.” Belinda's voice had grown nostalgic just thinking about it. She could see Marty's form bent over the hoe or lifting hot canning jars from the steaming kettle.

“Aye,” said old Thomas, nodding his head in understanding. “My mither, she did, too.” Belinda

thought his eyes looked a little misty.

“Be at it, then,” Thomas gave her permission. “Mind ye pick careful. An’ don’t prick a finger on a thorn.” Then Thomas handed her his own little hand trowel, and Belinda leaned forward and let her fingers feel the warmth of the sunheated soil.

They worked in silence side by side for some time before Thomas spoke again. “ ’Tis a new rose I have now. In the greenhouse. It has its first blossom just about to open. Ye wish to see it?”

Belinda straightened her back, smiling her pleasure at the invitation. “Oh, could I?” she asked eagerly.

“Aye,” the old man said with a slight nod. He lifted himself slowly to his feet, moving his hunched shoulders carefully up and down to ease the ache. Then he cast his eyes around the yard to find old Mac. The gardener never took a step without checking on his dog. With Mac’s senses no longer what they had been, he had told Belinda he feared the dog might not notice his departure.

“McIntyre,” he spoke loudly now, “we be movin’ on.”

Belinda loved to hear him speak the dog’s name. He rolled the “r” off his tongue so effectively.

The dog lifted his head, then slowly pulled himself to his feet. He moved to Thomas’s side, and as one, the figures moved toward the greenhouse.

Belinda fell into step beside them. She stopped only once— by the side of the climbing rose.

“It’s so pretty,” she murmured, touching a leaf gently.

“Aye,” acknowledged old Thomas with a twinkle, reaching out a hand to stroke a velvety petal. “ ’Tis Pink Rosanna I call ’er.”

“You gave it a name?” asked Belinda in surprise.

“Aye. I always name me new ladies.”

Belinda smiled at his description of his new rose hybrids.

At the greenhouse, Belinda waited while old Thomas carefully opened the creaking door. McIntyre found his own gunnysack bed by the entrance and flopped down. Even Old McIntyre was not allowed any farther into Thomas’s sanctuary.

Belinda followed slowly, moved to exclaim over and over as her eyes swept the massive foliage and glorious blooms, but she held her tongue.

At last they were standing before a small rosebush. With obvious skill and affection, it had been grafted onto another shoot. Belinda could see the slight enlargement where the grafting had taken place. But her eye passed swiftly from the stem to the delicate bud that was just beginning to unfurl. On the same stem, another bud had formed, and a third one was slowly breaking from curled greenery.

“Oh,” murmured Belinda, no longer able to restrain herself. “It’s . . . it’s so beautiful. I’ve never seen such a pretty rose—such a combination of lovely colors.”

Thomas could not repress his smile or the shine in his eyes. “Aye,” he nodded, and his gnarled old hand reached forward to caress the flower.

Then, before Belinda could catch her breath, he lifted his sharp pruning scissors, snipped the flower from the stem, and extended it to her.

Belinda reached out her hand and then just as quickly withdrew it. “But . . . but . . .” she stammered.

“Go on wit’ ye, now,” the old gardener said, easing the bloom into her hand. “ ’Tis only fitting ye be the one to have the first bloom.” He lowered his eyes to his worn-out gardener’s shoes. When he lifted them again, Belinda thought she could see a flush on his weathered cheeks. “I named her Belinda,” he confessed. “Princess Belinda.”

For a long moment Belinda could say nothing. Her hand slowly curled around the flower and she raised it to her face. Breathing deeply of the fragrance, she brushed her lips against the soft petals. She

felt her eyes filling with unbidden tears. "It's beautiful," she whispered. "Thank you, Thomas."

"Aye," the old man nodded. "'Tis my thanks to ye fer bein' so kind to m'lady."

Belinda understood his simple explanation. She nodded in return, then smiled and carefully found her way outside.

As she walked back toward the veranda, Belinda studied the flower in her hands. The soft cream of each petal slowly blended into a deeper yellow, which in turn changed into an apricot. Belinda was sure she had never seen such a pretty rose. *To think Thomas named it after me!* she marveled. She felt at once exalted and deeply humbled.

Belinda lifted her face to the sun, now higher in the eastern sky. The summer day was well on its way. Aunt Virgie would soon be awakening. Belinda knew she must hurry to bathe and change from her soiled gardening gown. No longer tired, there was a spring to her step and a light in her eyes. She was ready to face this new day. She smiled to herself.

Her eyes turned back to the exquisite rose.

What a difference one bright flower can make in a person's life, she mused. But then she corrected herself. *No, she told herself, it isn't the flower—pretty as it is. It is a person who has brought joy to my heart. Thomas. A dear old man—just a gardener in some folks' thinking—but a beautiful person. One I have learned to love.*

The thought did not surprise Belinda. There were many older people in this household whom she had learned to love. Aunt Virgie, old Thomas, the straightlaced Windsor, Cook— even the stern-faced Potter. Belinda smiled to herself. She loved them all, actually. They were part of her life. Her Boston family.

Oh, she knew others her own age might pity her, being "stuck in a houseful of the elderly," but Belinda didn't feel shut in, restless, and forgotten. Not since she had given God the proper recognition in her life. She felt loved and protected— and needed. *If only . . . if only I didn't feel so lonesome for those back home, I could be quite satisfied and fulfilled living and working for Mrs. Stafford-Smyth at Marshall Manor,* she thought.

Aunt Virgie

“Good morning, Aunt Virgie,” Belinda said softly, proceeding into the room when she had determined that Mrs. Stafford-Smyth was awake.

The frail woman managed a smile. “Mawnin’, Belinda, deah,” she answered.

“Did you sleep?” asked Belinda as she went to open the drapes, knowing that it was some time since the older woman had enjoyed a good night’s rest.

“I did. Scarce can believe it myself, but I did. Oh, and it felt—it felt delicious, too,” she said with emphasis. “But you know what else? I feel that now I remembah *how* to sleep, I could just sleep on and on.”

“Then perhaps you should. You haven’t slept decently for days—or rather nights,” Belinda corrected herself with a sly smile.

Mrs. Stafford-Smyth chuckled weakly at Belinda’s little joke. “You need sleep every bit as much as I,” she informed Belinda. “You’ve been up night aftah night. I declayah, I don’t know how you do it.”

Belinda leaned over the bed and laid a hand on the silvery head. “I’m fine,” she smiled. “In fact, I feel just great this morning. I’ve even been out weeding with Thomas.”

Mrs. Stafford-Smyth showed her surprise. “You have—at this hou-ah?”

Belinda nodded. “And you should just see the new rosebush!” she exclaimed, “It’s covered with the most exquisite roses. And they smell absolutely wonderful.”

Belinda thought of her other bit of news. She hardly knew how to tell it so it wouldn’t sound boastful, yet she had to share her delight with the older woman.

“And something else, too,” she said, and she couldn’t help smiling. “Thomas took me to his greenhouse.”

The building was always referred to as “Thomas’s greenhouse,” and no one else would have dreamed of trespassing. The truth was, the greenhouse, like every other building on the grounds, belonged to Mrs. Stafford-Smyth.

“He did?” said Mrs. Stafford-Smyth, sounding duly impressed.

“He did—and more than that. He showed me a brand-new rose he has developed. He hasn’t even set it outside in the gardens yet. It had its first flower—though others are coming quickly.”

“I declayah!” said Mrs. Stafford-Smyth, seeming to enjoy the telling of the tale as much as the story itself. “It must be something very special to put that shine in you-ah eyes,” she noted.

“You will never guess what he has named the new rose,” Belinda said, feeling shy.

“Aftah some lovely lady, I suppose,” mused Mrs. Stafford-Smyth. “They always do, it seems.”

Belinda could feel her cheeks grow warm.

“Well, I hardly expect he named it Old Prune Face, aftah me,” joked the elderly lady.

“Oh, Aunt Virgie,” protested Belinda, “no one would ever say that about you.”

Mrs. Stafford-Smyth just smiled. “Well, they should,” she said matter-of-factly. “I declayah, I looked in my hand mirrah befoah I went to bed last night, and I’ve lost some more weight. I do look like a prune, foah sure.”

She has lost weight, Belinda acknowledged silently as she looked at the pinched face against the pillow.

“Well, now that you are able to eat again,” Belinda assured the lady, stroking her hair back from the dear face once more, “Cook’ll have you fattened up in no time.” She smiled as she fluffed up a pillow and made the woman more comfortable.

“But you were telling me about that new rose,” encouraged Mrs. Stafford-Smyth. “What did Thomas name it?”

“Let me show you the rose,” said Belinda quickly.

“You mean he picked one—already? He nevah does that.”

“Well, he picked this one—the very first blossom,” beamed Belinda. “Let me run get it. I have it in a bud vase in my room.”

“I declayah!” exclaimed the woman again.

Belinda soon returned with her cherished flower.

“Oh my,” Mrs. Stafford-Smyth said, her voice properly respectful, “it is a lovely one, isn’t it? I hope he chose an equally pretty name.”

Belinda felt her face flushing once more. “Well, he . . .” she began. “He . . . honored me by naming the rose Belinda.” Her cheeks flamed, and she wished she had never brought up the subject. Mrs. Stafford-Smyth would think her dreadfully selfcentered.

But the older lady beamed. “How very apt.” She smiled her appreciation. “Thomas is an astute old gentleman. He named a beautiful rose aftah a beautiful young lady.”

Belinda blushed further as she accepted the compliment.

“*Just* Belinda?” asked the woman further. “Often Thomas has added a descriptive word—something else to go with the lady’s name.”

“Princess Belinda,” admitted Belinda, dropping her face to hide her embarrassment.

“Princess Belinda—that is nice. That’s quite an honah, you know, to have one feel so about you,” said the elderly lady.

Belinda was able to face her then.

“It really isn’t me he is honoring,” she explained. “The name shows his feelings about you. You see he named the flower after me because—” Belinda struggled to find the appropriate words—“because he wished . . . he wished to express his appreciation to me for . . . for caring for you. You are the one who is special to him.”

Mrs. Stafford-Smyth stared wide-eyed at Belinda. “Me? Why, whatevah do you mean? What did he say?” she probed.

“He said something like ‘for carin’ for m’lady,’ ” Belinda said evenly.

“How sweet,” murmured Mrs. Stafford-Smyth, reaching up to brush at tears forming in her eyes. She was silent for several minutes as Belinda busied herself about the room. Finally she spoke again, softly. “You know, one gets to thinking sometimes that one is really of no worth at all. Life could just go right on without you, and no one would scarcely notice.” She sighed, then went on. “Heah I lie day aftah day, no good to anyone. And then . . . then a deah old friend, a gardenah, shows you he cares. Makes one wish to get bettah again.”

“Oh, Aunt Virgie,” Belinda cried, moving swiftly to the side of the elderly woman and touching her cheek gently. “The whole household has been tiptoeing about, hardly daring to breathe. We’ve all been worried half sick that you might . . . might not get better. We all need you . . . love you. Do you really have any doubt about that?”

The lady stirred almost restlessly and smiled back at Belinda.

“I’m a foolish old woman,” she answered softly. “I have so much to live foah, so many deah friends. I don’t deserve them, but I’m so thankful foah them.” She sighed again and stirred in her bed.

shoving a pillow away with a pale hand.

~~“Belinda, deah,” she said with determination, “bring me my robe and slippahs.”~~

At Belinda’s little attempt at a mild protest, Mrs. Stafford-Smyth hurried on, saying, “One nevah gains strength by lying abed. I’ve got a lot of convalescing to do if I want to enjoy this summah before it’s gone. I’d best get at it. The blue robe, please.”

Belinda did not argue further. Once Mrs. Stafford-Smyth had made up her mind, it was useless to argue.

Belinda went for the blue robe, glad that the woman had requested the warmest robe in her closet. As she lifted the garment from the hook, Belinda felt an enormous weight of worry fall from her. It had been some time since she had seen a sparkle in her employer’s eyes. Truly she was on the road to recovery. Belinda could hardly wait to rush out to the kitchen to share the news with the rest of the household. They all had been very concerned.

“The first thing you need is a good breakfast,” Belinda stated as she helped the older woman into the robe and slippers. About to ring for Windsor and a breakfast tray, she responded to a light tapping on the door. Belinda opened it on its silent hinges. She could see the distress in Windsor’s eyes. “Is m’lady awake?” he asked in a raspy whisper.

“Yes. Yes,” Belinda assured him. “Come in. She’s much better this morning. In fact, I was about to ring to have a breakfast tray prepared.”

Windsor could not hide his relief, as practiced as the good butler could be at concealing his emotions.

“Come in, Windsah,” called Mrs. Stafford-Smyth.

He stepped cautiously into the room, his hands fidgeting nervously. “Thomas wished to know if you’d like a bouquet, madam,” he announced with proper dignity.

“Oh yes,” agreed Mrs. Stafford-Smyth, a smile lifting the weariness from her face.

Windsor turned on his heels with a sharp click. “I shall be right back, m’lady,” he assured her and left the room with a great deal more briskness than he had arrived.

While Windsor was gone, Belinda hurried about, helping Mrs. Stafford-Smyth with her grooming and settling her in the comfortable chair by the open window.

Sarah came with two trays of nourishing food. For the first time in weeks, Mrs. Stafford-Smyth looked with some interest at the meal. Belinda smiled with relief and set a tray in front of the woman, accepting the other tray of food for herself.

They had just said grace together when there was another tap on the door. Windsor was back again with a bowl of fragrant, freshly cut pink roses. Belinda recognized them immediately.

“That’s the new climbing rosebush on the back walk,” she commented. “The one I told you about earlier. That’s Thomas’s new Pink Rosanna.”

“Pink Rosanna,” mused Mrs. Stafford-Smyth. “What a lovely name.” She buried her face in the bowl of flowers. “And what beautiful flowers,” she added.

Mrs. Stafford-Smyth stroked a soft petal, then breathed again the sweet smell of the flowers.

“Tell Thomas thank you for the flowers,” she said, her voice husky. “I . . . I am deeply, deeply appreciative.”

Windsor nodded and departed as Mrs. Stafford-Smyth lifted her head and smiled.

Belinda took the rose bowl gently and set it on the small table close beside the woman.

“We’d best eat our breakfast before it gets cold,” she said softly, and Mrs. Stafford-Smyth nodded in agreement and lifted her spoon with some eagerness.

From then on, Belinda noted that Mrs. Stafford-Smyth grew a bit stronger each day. It wasn't long before she was able to be up and about for short periods of time, and then she could walk the upstairs halls. At last she was able to make her way down to the rooms below. She enjoyed the summer sunshine as she sat with her needlework in the north parlor. She spent hours out on the veranda absorbing the smell and beauty of the garden. She presided once again over meals in the dining room. Belinda felt they had all been given a new lease on life. The whole household took on a new atmosphere—of thanksgiving and relief.

Belinda was thankful she could once again leave the house occasionally. She had especially missed the Sunday services at church. She was very glad to immerse herself in the stirring hymns, the Sunday Scriptures, and, yes, even the pastor's message. She could hardly wait for the time when Mrs. Stafford-Smyth would be able to rejoin her in the worship. *But I mustn't rush her*, Belinda reminded herself. *She has been very ill. It wouldn't do for her to have a relapse.*

Belinda was determined she would be patient. But, oh, it was so good to feel the burden of worry slip away from her, from the house and its staff. The summer days seemed brighter, the flowers fairer, the food tastier—everything seemed better to Belinda now that Mrs. Stafford-Smyth was well on her way to full health.

THREE

Plans

As the summer progressed, Mrs. Stafford-Smyth again took over the running of Marshall Manor, giving her daily instructions to Windsor, Potter, and Cook. Belinda was able to catch up on her sleep, her mending, her letter writing, and her shopping. She gave a relieved sigh every time she thought of those trying weeks of early summer. She hadn't realized just how deeply she had worried, how frightened she had been, how wearing were the days and nights when Mrs. Stafford-Smyth had needed her constant care.

Each morning Belinda met Mrs. Stafford-Smyth in the well-lit north parlor, where they breakfasted together and planned their day. Then Belinda read a Scripture portion and led them in a daily prayer. Belinda kept hoping for the day when Mrs. Stafford-Smyth would want to pray aloud, too.

Mrs. Stafford-Smyth did attend church services regularly and gave the staff Sunday morning off so they might do likewise. And though lately she seemed more interested in matters of faith, she never expressed to Belinda her true thoughts on the subject.

Belinda longed to have someone she could discuss spiritual things with, but she was sure the senior pastor of the congregation was much too busy to be bothered by a young woman who just wanted to talk. The associate pastor was a single man, not much older than Belinda herself. Though Belinda knew she might appreciate discussing issues of faith with a seminary graduate, she also knew better than to suggest such a thing. Everyone, including the young minister himself, would surely think Belinda had no other intentions than to snare an eligible young man. Belinda had no desire to provide the opportunity for such gossip.

So Belinda continued on each day, enjoying the time spent in Bible reading and prayer but longing for spiritual fellowship. *If only . . . if only Aunt Virgie could understand and share my feelings about faith*, she kept thinking.

But another thought concerned her. *If Aunt Virgie were to die now, would she be ready for heaven?* The idea troubled Belinda. She loved the woman dearly, and the thought of her not being prepared for eternity made Belinda spend even more time in prayer for her friend.

Toward the end of summer Mrs. Stafford-Smyth decided to host another dinner party. Belinda by now was used to socializing with her employer's wealthy and influential friends. She didn't dread the prospect of another such dinner as Pierre had done during his last visit to the household. *In fact*, Belinda concluded, *it is much better to have elderly company than no company at all*. She and Aunt Virgie needed some kind of diversion.

"What should we serve for dinnah, deah?" asked Mrs. Stafford-Smyth as they sat together in the downstairs parlor.

Belinda looked up from her needlepoint. She really cared little what was served for dinner, but she thought that would be an inappropriate response.

Instead she said mildly, "Perhaps Cook would have some suggestions."

Mrs. Stafford-Smyth considered that possibility. "Yes," she agreed at length. "I'm sure she would—but since this is my first dinnah party in such a long time, I'd rathah like to plan it myself."

Belinda smiled. "If you'd like to, then by all means you must."

"I was thinking of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding," the woman went on. "With asparagus tips and spiced carrots."

"That sounds good," agreed Belinda.

"We'll have a vegetable salad, with Cook's special dressing."

"And her poppy-seed rolls," suggested Belinda.

Mrs. Stafford-Smyth smiled, looking pleased that she had coaxed Belinda into sharing the planning.

"What about dessert?" asked the older woman.

"Oh my," said Belinda with a sigh. "I shouldn't even *think* about dessert. I'm sure I've put on some pounds the last few weeks."

"And well you needed to," Mrs. Stafford-Smyth stated firmly. "You spoke of fattening me up. I declayah, you must have lost about as much weight during my sickness as I did."

Belinda was sure it hadn't been all that much. She wanted to protest but let the matter drop.

"Cheesecake would be nice," Mrs. Stafford-Smyth mused aloud.

"Or fresh strawberry shortcake," responded Belinda.

"Does Thomas still have strawberries?"

"He says he has a second crop," answered Belinda. "He is really proud of them."

"Fresh strawberry shortcake it will be, then. I nevah tire of strawberries, and we might as well enjoy them as long as they last," reasoned Mrs. Stafford-Smyth. "Ring for Cook, deah," she said to Belinda's nod. "I'd like to get this settled now."

Cook arrived with a fresh apron neatly covering her plump form. Seeming to be a bit anxious, as she often was when being summoned to the sitting room, her face soon relaxed as her employer began to talk of dinner plans.

"And Miss Belinda would like some of your tasty poppyseed rolls," Mrs. Stafford-Smyth went on, bringing a smile to Cook's face. "And for dessert, I understand Thomas has another crop of strawberries. We'll have your strawberry shortcake. With cream. Everyone loves that."

Cook openly beamed in spite of herself. She loved compliments on her cuisine—especially when the recognition came from her revered employer.

"We will serve dinnah promptly at seven," went on Mrs. Stafford-Smyth.

Belinda smiled at the "promptly." She knew that Mrs. Celia Prescott would be invited and, as Pier had remarked so long ago, "Aunt Celia's never on time."

But on the night of the first dinner party in ages at Marshall Manor, Celia Prescott was *almost* on time. She breathlessly fluttered in and greeted her hostess. "Virgie, deah, I am so glad you are up and about again! I was worried to *death* about you. You had that dreadful old flu for such a long, long time, I feahed you'd *nevah* recovah!"

"I'm fine now," Mrs. Stafford-Smyth assured her calmly. "I've had good care." And she cast an appreciative glance toward Belinda.

"I have long since admired your foresight in having your own personal nurse," commented Mrs. Prescott with a hint of envy. "I don't know how you'd evah manage without her."

"Nor I," agreed Mrs. Stafford-Smyth with feeling.

Belinda flushed uneasily, which seemed to please Mrs. Allenby, one of the other guests. Belinda still could not warm to the woman. She seemed to take great pleasure in the discomfort of others.

Thankfully, all the guests were now present, and they were able to move to the dining room, where Windsor and Sarah were waiting to serve.

Chatting and laughing together, the evening passed sociably enough. Mrs. Celia Prescott humorously shared her adventures of the summer, to Mr. Walsh's great merriment. Mrs. Allenby gave an occasional imperious sniff as her contribution to the evening, while Mrs. Whitley smiled benignly on all. Her husband made up for her silence by firmly expressing himself on every subject. All in all, it was a lively evening, and Belinda concluded that it was good for Mrs. Stafford-Smyth to have someone besides her to talk to.

But when the evening ended, Belinda felt a strange emptiness. That nagging loneliness gnawed again within her.

You just feel some sort of letdown after all the planning and anticipation are done, she reproached herself. Aunt Virgie likely feels it, too.

Belinda quickly slipped out of her crimson party gown and into a cream-colored robe. She would help Mrs. Stafford-Smyth prepare for bed.

If she feels as I do, she murmured to herself, she'll need some company for a bit.

But Mrs. Stafford-Smyth was not feeling at all let down. She was still excited about the party as she welcomed Belinda into her room. "Didn't everything go just fine?" she enthused, and Belinda nodded quietly in response. Aunt Virgie had slipped from her violet gown and into a soft pink robe. Sitting at the vanity, her gray hair loosened from its pins, she was brushing her hair as she talked to Belinda's reflection in the mirror. Her cheeks were flushed and her voice filled with excitement. Belinda took the brush from her and gently stroked the wispy tresses.

"Celia had a wonderful idea," Aunt Virgie began at once. "Just as she was leaving she drew me aside and suggested I spend some time with her and her sister in New Yawk."

Belinda stopped her brushing in surprise at the sudden turn of events.

"What do you think of that?" asked the older woman, turning to face Belinda, who could already see what Mrs. Stafford-Smyth thought of it.

"Why, it . . . it sounds wonderful," Belinda answered.

"Yes," mused the older woman. "Yes, I think I'd like that. I haven't been to New Yawk for yeahs. Haven't been anyweah for such a long time. I think I'd like that just fine."

"It would be good for you," responded Belinda, feeling a strange turning in the pit of her stomach. *What am I to do in the meantime?* she wondered silently. *Stay in this big house all by myself?*

"I could do some shopping, take in a few plays, heah the orchestra again. Yes, I think I'll accept the invitation."

"And when will you go?" Belinda inquired.

"Next week. There isn't much time to prepa-ah, but any shopping that needs doing can be done in New Yawk. It would be exciting to look for a new gown someplace besides Le-Soud's."

"How long will—?"

"Six weeks," Mrs. Stafford-Smyth explained. "Six weeks. That should be just right. Long enough that one won't need to rush to get everything done, but not so long as to weah out one's welcome."

Belinda nodded. "You know Aunt Celia's sister well?" asked Belinda.

"Oh my, yes. We were deah, deah friends until she moved to New Yawk. The three of us were always togethah. She's different than Celia—more subdued, more dignified. A real lady in every sense of the word. Lost her husband five yeahs ago. Nevah has recovahed, Celia says. She loves to have company. Celia goes at least once a yeah, but this yeah she has asked for me, too."

"That's nice," smiled Belinda. "The trip will be good for you." She kissed the older woman on the

cheek and went to her own room.

But Belinda did not fall asleep very quickly. Her thoughts kept going round and round. What would she *do* all day while her employer was in New York? At times she had felt lonely and at loose ends even with Aunt Virgie at home. She wasn't worried now about the older woman's health. Mrs. Stafford-Smyth seemed to be perfectly well again. But Belinda did feel a sense of panic and loss at the thought of being on her own.

Suddenly Belinda sat straight up in bed, a smile spreading over her face in the darkness. *Of course* she said to herself. *Of course. Why didn't I think of it immediately? I've been aching to go home. This is the perfect opportunity! I won't need to worry about Aunt Virgie while I'm gone.*

Belinda should have lain down and gone directly to sleep then, but she didn't. On and on raced her mind, thinking of home, trying to envision how each person might have changed, thinking of the fun of surprising her friends, cherishing the thought of spending time with her beloved family. It was almost morning before her mind would let her slip off into much-needed sleep.

I'm going home. Home. It's been such a long, long time.

During the next few days the whole house was in a tizzy. Mrs. Stafford-Smyth had announced her intentions to her household staff, and everyone was busy with preparations for her departure.

Belinda was perhaps the busiest of all. There was the choosing of Mrs. Stafford-Smyth's wardrobe and the packing, the last-minute shopping for small items, the dusting of hat feathers, and the changing of ribbons. Through it all Belinda flitted back and forth with a smile on her face. Soon she, too, would be off on her own journey. "Oh, Ma, I can hardly wait!" she whispered joyfully to herself as she worked.

Windsor entered the sitting room with some garments over his arm. "Madam's cleaning has arrived," he informed Belinda in answer to her unasked question. "I shall take it to her at once."

"I'm going up. I'll take it if you wish," Belinda offered.

Windsor had become accustomed to Belinda lending a hand now and then. But she knew he still had rigid ideas of proper positions and activities for the staff. Belinda was the nurse-companion of his lady. She should not be running errands. But after a pause, he must have decided this was all right and passed the garments to Belinda without argument.

"Thank you, miss," he said stiffly, and Belinda was certain he had concluded it wasn't worth the argument with her. She started off with the clothing, a bit of a smile on her lips.

"Your garments from the cleaners have been returned," she said as she entered the room.

"Oh, good!" exclaimed the woman. "I was beginning to fear that they wouldn't come back in time since they were to have been here yesterday."

"Well, they're here now. Should I hang them in the closet or pack them?" Belinda asked.

"I've left room in that trunk for them," responded Mrs. Stafford-Smyth, pointing, and Belinda felt her eyebrows rise as she moved toward the chest.

My, she thought to herself, whatever will she do with all these clothes? And her planning to do more shopping, as well! I expect to be gone the same length of time, and I'm using one suitcase and a hatbox. Belinda smiled again.

"Do you have you-ah packing done?" Mrs. Stafford-Smyth asked.

Belinda was surprised at the question but shook her head. "It won't take me long," she assured her.

Mrs. Stafford-Smyth looked a bit alarmed. "Don't short you-ahself on time," she said anxiously.

“The train leaves at ten.”

“My train doesn’t leave until four,” Belinda responded. She had already made the arrangements and purchased her ticket, but at her answer Mrs. Stafford-Smyth stopped midstride, her head quickly coming around to stare at Belinda.

“Whatevah do you mean?” she asked sharply.

Belinda began to flush. It was true she hadn’t asked her employer’s permission. She had meant to talk to her about it, but they had just been so busy there had never seemed to be time. Surely the woman hadn’t expected her to stay and care for the house. There was Windsor and Potter and the maids. Mrs. Stafford-Smyth had never before left anyone else to oversee the staff when she had traveled. Belinda had just assumed she would not be needed. But she had been wrong to assume. She should have asked permission before getting her ticket. After all, she was in the employ—

“What do you mean?” Mrs. Stafford-Smyth asked again.

“Oh, Aunt Virgie,” began Belinda apologetically. “I’m sorry. I just wasn’t thinking. I guess I’ve been in such a dither.

I should have asked you. I didn’t realize you expected me to stay on here and—”

“Stay on *heah*? Well, of course not. I expect you to accompany me—to New Yawk.”

“Accompany you?” echoed Belinda dumbly.

Mrs. Stafford-Smyth looked shaken. “Of course.”

“But . . . but you didn’t say . . . say anything about me going with you,” Belinda reminded the older woman.

“I didn’t?” Mrs. Stafford-Smyth looked bewildered. “Maybe I didn’t. I guess . . . I guess I didn’t think that it . . . that anything else would be considered. I just expected you to know. Careless of me. Dreadfully careless.”

Belinda felt her heart pounding.

“Well, no mattah,” went on the woman. “There is still time for you to get ready. I’ll call Ella to help you pack,” and Mrs. Stafford-Smyth moved toward the bell.

“But . . .” stammered Belinda. “But I’ve . . . I’ve made other plans.”

Mrs. Stafford-Smyth stopped with her hand on the buzzer. “You . . . you . . . What plans?” she asked simply.

“I’ve . . . I’ve purchased a ticket . . . a train ticket for home,” Belinda managed.

Mrs. Stafford-Smyth lowered herself into a nearby chair. “I see,” she said slowly.

Belinda rushed to her and knelt beside her. “I really didn’t know you expected me to go with you. I thought . . . I thought it was just you and Aunt Celia. I didn’t know there was room for more guests than that. So I decided it was a good time for me to . . . to go home for a visit. I’m sorry. I didn’t think you’d mind.”

Mrs. Stafford-Smyth was pale. Her hand trembled as she reached out to smooth back Belinda’s wayward curls.

“You’ll . . . you won’t *stay* home, will you?” she asked shakily.

“Oh no,” promised Belinda quickly. “I just plan to be gone for as long as you’ll be away.”

Mrs. Stafford-Smyth took a deep breath. “My goodness, child,” she said with a nervous laugh. “You might scared the breath out of me.”

“You didn’t think. . . ?” began Belinda, but she realized that it was exactly what Mrs. Stafford-Smyth had thought. Seeing the color gradually return to the older woman’s face, Belinda realized just how much it meant to her to have Belinda’s company here in the big, lonely house.

And with that realization Belinda knew she could never, never just walk out and leave the woman

all alone. The thought sent a chill through her body. She loved Mrs. Stafford-Smyth dearly. The older woman was like the grandmother she had never had the chance to know. But to stay with her indefinitely at the expense of never being with the family she loved was a terrible commitment. Belinda didn't know if she could bear it, if she could really be that unselfish.

"You poor child," Mrs. Stafford-Smyth was crooning softly, her hands again smoothing back Belinda's hair. "How thoughtless I've been. Heah I've sat day after day, not even realizing how lonesome you must be foah those you love. And how lonesome they must be for you! Of course you should go home. I should have thought of it myself. It's a perfect opportunity for you. I'm glad you had sense enough to think of it, even if I didn't."

Her hand stopped, resting on Belinda's head. A shadow passed over her face as she looked into Belinda's blue eyes. "And I will not hold you to that promise," she said gently, though her eyes begged Belinda to return. "You know I love you. You know I want you heah, but I will not ask you fo such a promise."

"I'll be back, Aunt Virgie," Belinda said in a whisper, and she leaned forward to kiss the older woman on the cheek.

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