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BRIDES

Blessing

a novel

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LYN COTE

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Blessing

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Designed by Stephen Vosloo

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Chapter 1

SENECA FALLS, NEW YORK
JULY 19, 1848

On the high bench of the farmer's open wagon, Gerard Ramsay tried to take a deep breath, but the heaviness of life, a constant pressure over his heart, made it difficult—not to mention the July heat. Under the cloudless royal-blue sky, the New York countryside blazed green with healthy crops and full-leafed trees.

From the corner of his eye, Gerard observed with increasing chagrin his lifelong friend Kennan Buckley, who was sitting next to him. The man's expression radiated a kind of unholy glee.

Kennan's devilish sense of humor had lightened their boarding school and university years, but now that they were nearing thirty . . . Gerard almost asked, "*This isn't one of your foolhardy pranks, is it?*"

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The rough wagon lurched over a deep rut, and Gerard had to hold on to both his seat and his silk top hat. "I can't believe you talked me into this," he growled into Kennan's ear. "I left Boston for Saratoga for some horse racing and light flirtation at the springs—" another deep rut jarred them—"not this."

"Do you want to let your own cousin down?" Kennan retorted. "And of course, I had nothing better to do than bump along a country road in this heat."

Gerard sucked in hot July air and felt the starch in his shirt wilting in the blazing sun. "All right," he said under his breath. "The whole idea seems inconceivable."

"Well, conceive it. Stoddard Henry is in danger of becoming ensnared by a female—and a female who would lure him to a women's rights meeting. Have you ever?"

"I—"

"Whoa!" the driver announced. "Here we are, gents. The Wesleyan Chapel." The wagon rolled to a halt. The two horses flicked their tails high, swishing away irritating flies.

After Kennan, Gerard scrambled down from the bench, resisting the urge to rub his bruised posterior. He glanced around at the small town of Seneca Falls. He immediately recognized the chapel, a large brick building on the corner surrounded by tall leafy oaks and maples, with a few hundred people gathered around the door. So many standing outside in this heat and in this out-of-the-way village—the sight was startling. How had they heard about the meeting? "Look. Would you believe it—a crowd?"

"What did I tell you?" Kennan said, striding toward the building.

Gerard turned to pay the farmer. Kennan hadn't bothered.

But they'd been lucky to find this man and his wagon. When they'd arrived this morning on the early train from Saratoga, all the carriages at the station had already been taken. They'd persuaded this farmer, who'd been picking up a package, to bring them the few miles here.

"Gent, I'll be coming back this way in a few days." The farmer mopped his face with a large, frayed kerchief. "Should I stop and pick you up?"

Gerard hesitated. "Is there an inn here?"

"A few. The best is the Seneca Farmers' Inn—best food, clean sheets."

"When you come through, check for me—Gerard Ramsay—there, then. I'll leave word whether to find me or forget me." Gerard added an extra two bits.

The farmer beamed at him. "You can count on me, gent. I'm Jim Patterson. Everybody around here knows me." The man tugged the brim of his straw hat, pocketed the money, and slapped the reins.

Gerard hurried into the shade of the tall trees near the Wesleyan Chapel. He too took out his handkerchief and wiped the grime and perspiration from his face and hands. This crisis would have to land right at the very height and heat of summer.

The large crowd of women and, unbelievably, some men still waited outside the double doors of the chapel. Something odd was going on there. Two men were lifting a boy up to a window near the door. The lad opened the latch and slipped inside. Soon, to everyone's loud approval, he opened the chapel doors from within. No one had a key to open the chapel? What kind of ill-prepared meeting was this?

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Gerard already knew the answer to that. A bunch of lunatics and radicals. He hurried forward, craning to see above the crowd, looking for his tall cousin.

“There!” Kennan shouted across the people now surging inside and gestured toward the door.

Gerard glimpsed his cousin—who, at the sound of Kennan’s voice, turned just as the building swallowed him from sight.

Kennan jogged back to Gerard. “So did you see her?”

“No.” Gerard felt irritation, hot and unpleasant like the summer air, roll through him.

“She’s a very pretty blonde and she was right beside him.”

Gerard chewed on this information. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“Believe it.”

Gerard started forward.

Kennan grabbed his arm. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going after Stoddard.”

“Into that *women’s* meeting?” Kennan’s voice rose. “Are you out of your senses too?”

“Maybe he’ll come to his senses when he sees me.” Gerard pulled away.

“Suit yourself. And I’ll do the same. I’m going to find a tavern and some cool, wet ale. Isn’t that better than charging into bedlam? Stoddard will come out at luncheon.”

Gerard shook his head as he hurried to the chapel door. At seven years of age, all three of them—Kennan, Stoddard, and Gerard—had been sent away to boarding school. Stoddard and Kennan had been unwanted stepsons and Gerard had felt like one. The three had learned to count only on each

other, and the bond still held. He must find his cousin and stop him from making a fool of himself.

Inside the chapel, Gerard tried to glimpse Stoddard, but it was so crowded that he couldn't. And since the seats were all taken, he found himself obliged to stand in the back. When a woman stepped to the pulpit to address the congregation, Gerard felt his jaw drop. A woman speaking to a group of females and males—in public?

Astounded, Gerard stumbled back outside toward a bench in the shade under an old oak. What had Stoddard gotten himself into?

“Hey! Ramsay!”

The vaguely familiar Boston-accented voice stopped Gerard in his tracks. He turned to see who had called.

“It’s been a long time,” a stranger said, holding out his hand.

Suddenly recognizing him, Gerard felt a wave of disgust. Ambushed. Conklin had been a scholarship student at Harvard—the same university Gerard, Stoddard, and Kennan had attended. He forced himself to shake the man’s hand. “Conklin, what brings you here?”

“Working.” Conklin waved a notebook. “I’m covering this women’s rights convention. Have you ever heard of anything so outlandish?” The man chuckled, mocking. “What is the scion of one of Boston’s most swank—uh, I mean, most prestigious families doing here?”

Gerard stared at him, trying to hide his discomfort at being recognized by a journalist. This meant Stoddard’s folly might be written up in the Boston papers. Worse and worse. “Just happened to stop here,” Gerard said, attempting to

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smooth matters over. "I'm trying to find someplace cooler. Thought of the Finger Lakes."

"Really?" Conklin rocked on his heels, his expression amused.

"Really. Now if it's not against the law, I'm going to sit in the shade and relax."

Conklin studied Gerard for a moment. "Wish I could. But I have work to do."

Fuming, Gerard watched the journalist hurry into the chapel. He could only hope that Conklin wouldn't see Stoddard and would find more to write about than the fact that a Boston Ramsay had come to Seneca Falls on the same day that fanatics and lunatics had gathered for a big meeting, promoting the rights of women. *Unbelievable.*

Within him bloomed the urge to strangle Kennan for leaving him to deal with Stoddard alone. And a second urge: to throw a bucket of ice-cold water into Stoddard's face, shock him back to his good judgment. Gerard would have been happier staying in Boston, and he hated Boston.



In a few hours, after Gerard had walked around the small town and settled back on the bench outside, people began to exit the chapel at the time for luncheon, and he rose to watch for his cousin. Finally he saw Stoddard's head above all the others. Gerard rushed forward. "Stoddard!"

Stoddard turned with a startled look, then pushed his way from the throng and hurried toward Gerard.

"Cousin, what are you doing here?" Stoddard gripped his shoulder, grinning but appearing puzzled.

“I met Kennan in Saratoga, expecting to see you, too, but he said you were here, so we came to find you.”

Stoddard’s grin tightened. “Came to save me from my own folly?”

What could he say here in this crowd? “Yes,” Gerard admitted, leaning close. “How could you ever think coming to a meeting like this was a good idea?”

Stoddard chuckled in reply.

Gerard glimpsed Conklin, the reporter, dodging in and out of the crowd, heading straight for them. “Cousin, there’s a Boston reporter here. Remember Conklin—?”

“Stoddard,” a soft, feminine voice from behind his cousin interrupted Gerard.

A truly lovely blonde, dressed in the height of fashion and almost as tall as Stoddard, claimed his cousin’s arm.

Beside her walked a petite Quakeress dressed in simple gray and white, her prettier-than-average face framed by a plain white bonnet. The ladies were arm in arm, but in total contrast. They looked to be from two different worlds.

Gerard snapped his mouth shut so he wouldn’t blurt out any ill-considered words. Over the heads of the crowd, he noted that Conklin had been snagged and buttonholed by another attendee. Saved.

Stoddard chuckled, shaking his head at Gerard. “Ladies, may I introduce you to my cousin? This is Gerard Ramsay of Boston. Gerard, this is Miss Xantippe Foster—known as Tippy—and her friend, Mrs. Blessing Brightman, both of Cincinnati.”

Blessing—an unusual name even for a Quakeress. And since Stoddard presented her by her given name and not her

husband's, she must be a widow. Gerard commanded himself enough to accept the blonde's curtsy and both women's gloved hands in turn. "Ladies, a pleasure I'm sure," he recited the social lie.

"A pleasure? Truly?" Miss Foster laughed merrily as if he'd made a jest.

Gerard stiffened.

"Gerard Ramsay, won't thee join us for luncheon?" the Quakeress invited, speaking in the Quaker way and dispensing with any title, even *mister*. "Expecting that we might meet a friend, we reserved a table for four at our inn." Without waiting for his answer, the woman started walking briskly toward the main street, lined with shops and inns.

Stoddard offered his arm to Miss Foster and nodded Gerard toward Mrs. Brightman.

Gerard could not disobey years of training in proper manners. He edged forward as efficiently as he could through the crush of the surrounding crowd.

The Quaker lady paused, letting Stoddard and the blonde precede her. Then she gazed up at Gerard with a look that he might have used when trying to decide without tasting whether a glass of milk had soured. It unnerved him. He tried to step back but bumped against a stranger. He swallowed an unkind word.

She cocked her head, still studying him.

He'd had enough. He offered her his arm. "May I escort you, ma'am?" he said as if issuing a challenge.

She touched his arm and then began to walk on. "Yes, but I do not need to cling to thy arm. I am quite capable of walking unaided."

More startled than insulted, Gerard held back a sharp reply. As audacious as she might be, a gentleman did not contradict a lady. Peering ahead, he observed the possessive way the tall blonde clung to Stoddard's arm. He wanted to snatch up his cousin and run.

"I did not mean to be rude or uncivil," the Quakeress continued, walking beside him. "I'm sure thee offered thy arm simply from courtesy. But after this morning's meeting, I am afraid I see more clearly the prescribed manners between gentlemen and ladies as a form of bondage."

The equation of courtesy with bondage sent prickly disbelief rippling through him. "I beg your pardon." And with the press of the crowd threatening to bowl him over, he was forced to walk faster. What would this woman say next?

She looked up at him. A mischievous smile lightened her face, and he saw now that it was not just pretty but beautiful—big blue eyes, a pert nose, generous pink lips, and thick chestnut hair peeping out around her close bonnet.

Her smile did something to him, something unexpected yet welcome. The heaviness he always carried relented and he could draw breath freely. What was going on here?

"What is thy stand on abolition?" she asked, completely ignoring what should be the standard polite conversation between a man and a woman upon first meeting. They should discuss the weather and then move on to discreetly find out about each other's family connections.

He stared at her. Ahead, Stoddard was chuckling at something his lady had said. The sound wrapped Gerard's nerves tighter.

The Quakeress shook her head at him, still grinning.

“Very well. I don’t mean to be impolite. I will follow propriety.” She cleared her throat. “Gerard Ramsay, what brings thee to Seneca Falls this July day?”

He swallowed and tried to come up with a palatable conventional reply. He failed. “I’m against slavery,” he said instead.

“I am happy to hear that, but I asked what thy stand on abolition is.”

He was not accustomed to women who put forth opinions, and her tone, though cheerful, was almost cavalier, as if she was making fun of him. Usually, with him, people did that to their own peril. But this Quakeress had pushed him off balance. “You are in favor of abolition?” he ventured, trying to find his feet in this discussion.

She laughed softly, the sound reminding him of children playing. “Yes, I am in favor of abolition. Has thee ever heard Frederick Douglass speak?”

“No,” he said, trying to keep up with her unexpected questions and her brisk pace without bumping into anyone.

“Would thee like to hear Frederick Douglass?”

“Who is that?” He looked down at her again, her face attracting him in spite of himself.

“Thee hasn’t read his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*? It was published three years ago and has sold over five thousand copies.”

Distracted, he wished he could overhear what the other lady was saying to his cousin. “I’ve not had the pleasure.”

“Indeed thee hasn’t read it, then. It is not a pleasure to read. It is as harsh as the slavery that bound him.”

Gerard felt as if he were back on the wagon, only riding

over an even bumpier road. Though primarily concerned with Stoddard's flirtation, he scrambled to keep up with the Quakeress's odd conversation. "He's a fugitive slave, you say?"

"He is a free man of color who left the state and master that enslaved him."

Gerard gaped at her. Ladies didn't discuss slavery. No woman had ever spoken so frankly to him in his life. All his usual sangfroid evaporated.

"I see my direct manner has disconcerted thee. I apologize." She smiled and said in a sweetly conversational tone, "When does thee think this hot weather will ebb?"

His mind whirled, but he wouldn't bow in defeat. "Is this Frederick Douglass attending your . . . convention?"

"Gerard Ramsay, thee must make up thy mind whether thee wishes me to be conventional or not. I own fault. I started by speaking frankly as I do among people with whom I'm acquainted, not strangers like thee. But this morning's discussion of the Declaration of Sentiments has made me overbold with thee—one who is not at all acquainted with me."

She tilted her head like an inquisitive robin. "I apologize. Should we try to follow convention or proceed with frankness?" She looked at him expectantly as she continued walking. "Please choose. I do not wish to be rude."

He inhaled the hot, humid air. Her candor irritated him, and he would be cursed if he let this woman best him. He girded his defenses. "Mrs. Brightman," he drawled, "I must confess your conversational style is completely unparalleled in my experience."

She laughed once more, sounding almost musical.

Was this woman being artless or artful? He glanced at

Stoddard's companion again. The two women differed in costume, but did they both share this originality?

The foursome arrived at the besieged Seneca Farmers' Inn. Telling them to wait, Stoddard threaded his way through the crowd to the harassed-looking, aproned proprietress and then turned at the door to the rear arbor. "They saved us our table outside!" He waved them forward. "Come."

They followed a flustered-looking hostess to a table at the rear of the inn, just outside under a shade tree. She pointed out the bill of fare posted on the outside wall near the door, then left them, promising to bring glasses of cold springwater.

"Oh, this is so much cooler," Miss Foster commented as Stoddard helped seat her.

Gerard was at a loss. He was a gentleman and had duties as such. He never broke any of society's rules around ladies, no matter what he thought of them. Should he offer to help the unpredictable Mrs. Brightman sit or not?

The Quakeress peered up at him. "Which does thee choose?"

"What?"

"Should I sit with or without thy assistance?"

Her perspicacity nicked him. He swallowed his discomfort, his tight collar constricting his throat. He could not let her get the better of him. "I would feel unmannerly if I didn't assist you."

"Then please help me." She beamed at him as if this were all a game. Maybe to her it was, but Stoddard's being here with the blonde was serious to him.

He seated the Quakeress, then took his place and sent a tart, questioning look at Stoddard.

The waitress delivered the sweating glasses of springwater

and took their orders. They all chose cold sandwiches of ham and cheese. Then the four of them were left alone.

Gerard could not think of a word to say, an unusual occurrence. And each moment he watched Stoddard and Miss Foster interact with little glances and intimate smiles upset him more and more. This did not appear to be a mere holiday flirtation with which Stoddard was diverting himself. It was different because the woman was too. Had her sense of novelty ensnared his cousin?



Blessing took her time sizing up Gerard Ramsay as he turned his attention to his cousin. Ramsay was of medium height, a good build, very expensively dressed yet without any dandyism. His dark-brown hair curled slightly, which gave him a boyish appeal, but his guarded brown eyes and cynical mouth warned her that he was not merely the proper Boston gentleman he seemed.

She tried to detect a family resemblance between the cousins but saw none. Fairer and taller, Stoddard Henry had red hair and striking green eyes. He was well dressed, but not as expensively as his cousin.

She'd ruffled Gerard Ramsay with her frankness. She hadn't meant to be rude, but the stirring phrases discussed this morning, regarding man's treatment of woman over the years, had tilted something inside her. *"He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life."*

That's what Richard had done to her. The old hurt twisted inside her, a physical pain. She drew in air and

then sipped her cold springwater, quieting herself. The past had been buried with Richard. She was free now, forgiven. But the deep scars remained and could never be sponged away by anyone.

“So, Cousin, what did you think of this morning’s meeting?” Stoddard asked.

“Sitting outside, I heard only snatches,” Ramsay replied with a sour twist.

Both men spoke with Boston accents. She noted that, just like Stoddard, Gerard dropped *r*’s in most words and the *g* in words ending with *-ing*. She had heard this accent in other Eastern abolitionists and wondered why they didn’t like *r*’s or *-ing*’s. Those living west of the Alleghenies certainly enjoyed the sounds.

“No doubt Mr. Ramsay questions your sanity, Stoddard,” Tippy said lightly. “Whatever are you thinking, man,” she asked, mimicking a deep voice, “going to a women’s rights convention?”

Blessing hid her smile behind her glass. “Tippy, don’t tease Gerard Ramsay. It’s not fair. As a gentleman, he can’t contradict thee.”

Ramsay glanced at her but revealed nothing of what he was thinking.

But Blessing could guess. Did he suspect that she, too, had reservations about this new romance between his cousin and her friend?

Tippy inhaled deeply and sat back in her chair. “I can’t tell you how invigorating this morning has been. I have never felt so liberated before, so free.”

Ramsay frowned.

“We are not being polite, Tippy,” Blessing said, not unsympathetic to the man from Boston who obviously disapproved of today’s convention. “Gerard Ramsay, please tell us about thyself. I confess I am curious.”

The man shrugged. “A mutual friend saw Stoddard near Saratoga Springs and asked me to come and enjoy the Finger Lakes region. Said it would be cooler.”

“It should be cooler here,” Stoddard replied, touching his upper lip with his folded handkerchief. “After this convention, I want to spend a few days relaxing by Cayuga Lake, near here. Mother has been taking the waters at Saratoga. That is how I met Miss Foster.”

Blessing was becoming familiar with the accent. It was different but held a certain appeal.

“Yes, my mother was there also, drinking the waters,” Tippy said, lifting her glass in a mock salute and taking a sip.

“When Tippy read about this meeting in the newspaper, she sent me a telegram,” Blessing spoke up. “I set off immediately from Cincinnati and arrived yesterday. I wish there had been more advance notice. I barely made it in time.”

“You’re both from Cincinnati?” Ramsay asked.

“Yes, we’re longtime friends,” Tippy replied, reaching for the Quakeress’s hand. “Blessing is a very exceptional and interesting woman. I know my life would be very flat without her.”

Blessing shook her head but accepted Tippy’s hand. “Tippy, my life would be flat without thee.” *And very lonely.* Tippy had been one of the few who’d persisted in being her friend during the dark years of her marriage. And there were not many others Blessing could trust with her secret missions.

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Their food was served, and luncheon ended up being brief. Soon the four of them rose to cede their table to other hungry convention attendees.

“Well, Gerard,” Stoddard said, looking mischievous, “I take it you won’t be joining us this afternoon?” Before Gerard could reply, Stoddard went on. “I have a room here at the inn, and you can bunk with me tonight if you wish. Kennan, too, if he doesn’t mind some crowding a bit.”

“Thanks. I will stay with you and tell Kennan.” Gerard turned to Blessing and Tippy. “It has been a pleasure to meet you, ladies.”

“Don’t you mean a surprise?” Tippy teased again.

“Mind thy manners, Tippy,” Blessing scolded gently. She offered her hand to Ramsay. “I enjoyed our conversation, Gerard Ramsay. I hope thee finds something interesting and cool to occupy thyself with today.”

Ramsay merely bowed over her hand.

The four walked through the noisy inn together and out the door, the women preceding the men. Blessing resisted the urge to turn around and glance once more at Ramsay. He had gained her attention, something few men did. Maybe it was the accent, maybe something more. But he had the same air of wealth and security that Richard had possessed. That alone was a warning to her.

She drew in the thick air and pushed him from her mind. Thinking of the afternoon of spirited discussion ahead, she took a quick step onto the dusty street and walked arm in arm with Tippy, who laughed out loud unexpectedly. Blessing suspected she knew the reason why.



“Stoddard, may I have a private word with you?” Gerard asked, realizing he sounded a bit desperate.

“Ladies, I’ll just be a moment,” Stoddard called after them. “I’ll catch up with you.” He drew Gerard into the greenery around the inn. “I’m going to the meeting. It’s the most interesting, most revolutionary event I’ve ever attended. And you don’t have to stay and chaperone me. I know what I’m doing.”

Gerard steamed. “Do you? That reporter is here. He might include our names as attending this farce.”

“You’re not concerned about his mentioning your name. Just think how you’d enjoy the unpleasant jolt that would give your father. A Ramsay at a radical meeting.” Stoddard paused. “And I don’t care one whit if all Boston—indeed, all Massachusetts—knows I’ve attended a women’s rights convention.”

Gerard nearly swallowed his tongue.

Stoddard laughed and shoved Gerard’s shoulder. “Go find Kennan. He’s probably somewhere getting drunk. Then stay here or go back to Saratoga Springs or Boston, whichever you choose. But be happy for me, Gerard. I’ve found a woman who defies our dismal concept of womanhood and the bondage we considered marriage.”

Gerard tried to interrupt, but Stoddard pressed on.

“And I’m not going to let Tippy or her exciting ideas slip from my grasp. I’m tired of my lonely bachelorhood and stifling Beacon Hill society. I’m moving to Cincinnati, Cousin. I’m going west!”

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Following the afternoon meeting and supper at the packed inn, Blessing mounted the narrow stairs toward the room she shared with Tippy. As Tippy's chaperone, Blessing did not think she needed to stand over the two while the younger woman said good night to Stoddard. They both were sensible. What did it matter if Stoddard stole a kiss in the gloaming?

A bittersweet memory of the first time Richard had kissed her spiked like a stitch in her side. He'd been so handsome, so charming, and she'd allowed that to sway her from all she believed. Trying to ignore the ache of guilt, she let herself into their room and immediately slipped off her shoes and stockings. Oh, to be free to run barefoot as a child again.

She shed her bonnet and gloves, moving to the open window and letting the soft evening breeze cool her. Fine linen tacked to the window kept out the mosquitoes and provided privacy.

Tippy came in and bolted the door behind her. "Oh, Blessing, isn't this wonderful?" Tippy danced in the middle of the room as if waltzing.

Blessing turned to enjoy her friend's happiness. "Is thee referring to the decision to include seeking the franchise for women in the declaration, or to a certain young gentleman of Boston?"

Tippy sank onto the bed with a gurgle of laughter. "Both!"

A crosscurrent of emotions kept Blessing by the window. She was happy for Tippy. She was frightened for her. Loving posed such a risk. Was Stoddard all that he appeared to be?

Or did his handsome face and quick smile conceal unforeseen heartache for Tippy?

“What did you think of Stoddard’s cousin?”

Gerard Ramsay’s handsome but world-weary face flashed in Blessing’s mind. “He is interesting.”

Tippy grinned. “How interesting?”

“Not as interesting as the day’s events. I can’t believe we got to hear Frederick Douglass speak.”

“Not to mention hearing Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott addressing a *promiscuous* gathering—men and women in the same audience! A shock the walls did not fall in.” Tippy gave a small laugh. “My mind is bursting with all manner of ideas,” she admitted. “I wish all men respected women as much as the men who attended the meeting today.”

The sound of Stoddard’s and Ramsay’s voices, as they no doubt walked the hall to their nearby room, came through the door. Blessing thought again of Gerard Ramsay. He clearly didn’t approve of the convention or of Tippy and Stoddard’s friendship or of Tippy’s radical ideas. Was it merely because Tippy was from Cincinnati, not from snobbish Boston?

“Blessing?” Tippy prompted.

She turned and smiled. “I’m sorry. I was remembering so many things from this day.” *And wondering if thee will love more wisely than I.*



BOSTON

JULY 24, 1848

“I cannot understand what you were thinking.” Gerard’s father, Saul Ramsay, slapped the folded and somewhat-mangled

newspaper from a few days ago in front of Gerard at the breakfast table in their pale-blue-and-white morning room. The open floor-to-ceiling windows allowed a scant breeze inside, barely stirring the white sheers.

“What possessed you to go to Seneca Falls and on those particular two days? You were seen outside that ridiculous women’s rights meeting. And I had to read about it in the newspaper and then field impertinent inquiries.” His father’s voice dripped with haughty censure.

Gerard stared at his father, his heavy-lidded, walnut-shaped eyes. Except for those, the two men looked so similar, but they had never liked each other. The heaviness over Gerard’s heart plagued him most here. He’d only returned home to see his mother before—

“Well?” His father filled his cup from the sterling-silver coffee urn and then opened the matching chafing dishes on the sideboard, releasing the fragrance of bacon.

“I went to see Stoddard. He was in the district and it was convenient to pay a visit.” In Seneca Falls, Gerard had stayed with Stoddard at the inn while Kennan had left the next day, going off with some friends to gamble at a horse race. Betting on horses was nothing a man given to drink should attempt. Kennan didn’t appear to realize this. Typical. Troubling.

“I knew, of course, that Stoddard had gone to Saratoga Springs with my sister,” his father replied.

Gerard nodded and tried to begin eating again. He had little appetite in this place, a house that had never felt like home.

“So what drew your cousin from Saratoga Springs to the Finger Lakes?”

A pretty blonde with advanced ideas. Gerard shrugged.

Long ago he had stopped trying to explain anything his father wouldn't like. It was easier on both of them.

His father began working his way through breakfast while Gerard nibbled his toast and sipped the good coffee.

"I'm glad you've come home, Son." The gravity of his voice did not bode well.

Gerard silently waited for him to continue. What was Father going to demand from him this time? Did he want another promise that Gerard would reform his way of life?

"I have been talking to the banker Briggs Mason. His daughter Cordelia has just come out this year. She is charming, sweet—the perfect candidate for your wife. Well connected, and she'll come with a generous portion. You've been the young bachelor around town long enough. It's time you settled down and came into the family shipping business."

Gerard hadn't expected this . . . yet his father had been making noises about Gerard's settling down over the last year or so. Did Father really think that he would go along with this plan, give up his independence and go into the bondage of a society marriage? "I see."

"The Masons have invited us to dine this Saturday evening. Your mother has agreed to make the effort to leave her chaise longue to go with us."

Gerard enjoyed saying his next sentence. "I'm very sorry, but I won't be in town this Saturday."

The vein in his father's right temple began to bulge, a sure sign of his irritation. "This is important. You can change your plans."

Gerard drained the rest of his coffee. Perhaps it was his

age, but he was tired of this fencing with his father over duties he never intended to assume. He decided not to use evasion again. He would tell his father the plain truth, go upstairs to spend an hour with his mother, and then leave Boston.

“Father, I’m leaving today for Ohio. I won’t be going to meet Miss Mason or courting her. I am not settling down—not here. I might settle in Cincinnati.” *Or not.*

“Cincinnati?” His father sounded more bewildered than angry. “It’s a provincial backwater. Why would you even think of leaving Boston?” He made Boston sound synonymous with heaven.

“I have been living my own life for many years now. I expect to continue to do so. I will, of course, let you know when I arrive safely and where I can be reached.” Gerard wiped his mouth with his impeccably white napkin and rose.

“I don’t understand you, Gerard. Why must you be so . . . independent?” The way his father said the final word made it a slur. “We are a family.”

Gerard gazed at his father. A family? When had they ever felt like a family? There were so many words he wanted to say, but he had no hope of their ever being heard. “I am the way I am, Father.” *And you are the way you are.* He turned away.

“You will change your plans,” his father snapped.

Gerard kept walking.

“If you leave Boston now, I will cut off your allowance.” His father paused, obviously to let this sink in. “I said it’s time you settle down and become active in the family business. If you don’t, you can’t expect to benefit from it.”

Gerard slowly turned back to his father. “I have never had

any intention of going into the family business. And I plan to never marry.”

His father gawked at him. Gerard bowed and left the morning room.

“You better reconsider this,” his father bellowed. “I’ll cut off your allowance. I will!”

The threat was serious, but Gerard would wait and see if it was legitimate or not. Upstairs, he knocked on his mother’s door and was admitted.

His mother, Regina, reclined on her chaise longue as his father had predicted. Blonde with silver threads in her lush hair, the fragile-looking woman wore an elegant blue lawn dressing gown and matching silk slippers. “Gerard,” she said in her breathy voice.

Gerard leaned over and kissed her soft cheek. His mother had been a beauty in her youth and still retained most of it even though she had been frail and ill since his birth. Affection for her stirred in him.

“You’re leaving again, aren’t you?” she said.

“You know me too well.” He sat on the upholstered hassock near her.

“Where?”

“Stoddard is in Cincinnati pursuing a very pretty young lady, and I think I need to see what’s going on.”

She nodded, glancing away momentarily. Then she dismissed her maid.

This was unusual. He waited for the reason.

When they were alone, she took his hands in hers. “Dear, I am aware your father is planning a society match for you.”

“I’m not going to marry to suit Father.”

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“I know that,” she said, sounding amused. “But I do wish you could find a young woman whom you could love and respect. That’s all I wanted to say. Sometimes I feel there is a hardness inside you.” She pressed her hand to his shirt-front, over his heart. “I simply want you to find someone who pleases you, loves you.”

Just under her touch, pain like a lancet cut deep into his chest. He drew her hand to his lips. “I hope the same thing,” he said falsely, knowing those were the words she wanted to hear.

“Gerard, I need a favor. I want to go to my family’s place in Connecticut for the remainder of the summer. Your father will not take me this year. And I . . . I need to go.”

Gerard wanted to say no, but something about the way his mother said the words caught his attention. Mother never asked him to wait on her. He paused, considering. Now he looked more closely. She appeared elegant as always but more feeble than the last time he saw her. And thinner. And her hair lacked its usual shine. “Of course, Mother.” He didn’t ask more. He didn’t want to know more.

After informing her of what he’d heard and seen at Saratoga Springs, Gerard kissed her good-bye, and soon he was in a carriage on his way to the train station to make arrangements for a private car to Connecticut for himself and his mother on the following day.

His stomach twisted as he considered the delay in joining his cousin in Cincinnati. Unexpectedly at risk, Stoddard needed to be reminded that marriages were insoluble and unwise. The three of them—Gerard, Stoddard, and Kennan—had always vowed to shun society’s prescribed bondage: wedlock. His father’s choice for Gerard, the banker’s

young daughter, came to mind. The institution only brought misery. Let weaker, foolish men stumble into it.

Gerard would not allow his cousin to fall for a woman just because she had a pretty face and a clever mind.

Blessing Brightman's lively expression and pert questions flitted through his memory. He inhaled deeply and brushed her out of his thoughts. *Women.*

HISTORICAL NOTE

AS I RESEARCHED THIS BOOK, I found myself appalled by many nineteenth-century facts of life and events, primarily race riots and lack of women's rights. First of all, would a mayor really incite a riot?

Yes. In very real events, after an abolitionist press had been destroyed in downtown Cincinnati, Harriet Beecher Stowe, a resident of the city at the time, wrote, "The mayor was a silent spectator of these proceedings, and was heard to say, 'Well, lads, you have done well, so far; go home now before you disgrace yourselves'; but the 'lads' spent the rest of the night and a greater part of the next day (Sunday) in pulling down the houses of inoffensive and respectable blacks."

And in a quote from an 1888 biography of Stowe, she recalls: "During the riots in 1836, when . . . free negroes were hunted like wild beasts through the streets of Cincinnati . . ."

This was just one riot. Race riots took place in Cincinnati in 1829, 1836, and 1841. As a novelist, it's my job to dramatically portray events, not merely report them. So I transported what happened in 1836 to the year 1848.

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If the attitude in the city toward black residents had changed in the twelve years between 1836 and 1848, I would not have felt free to move the event. However, the prejudice against free blacks had remained unchanged and, in fact, might be said to have increased. Cincinnati wanted trade with the South. The South resented the city's being a pipeline in the Underground Railroad, and these kinds of tensions were among the factors that eventually led to the Civil War.

Also, I again point out (as I did in *Honor*, the first book in this series) the injustice of widows not automatically inheriting property. Blessing only inherited her husband's property because he unexpectedly made out a will in her favor.

Otherwise his wealth would have gone to his nearest male relative, which could be a woman's eldest son. If the son was still a child, a trustee would have been appointed to oversee the estate until the child came of age. These laws, which now seem medieval, only began to change in the US in the mid-1840s. Michigan and New York State were two of the early adopters, giving widows the right to inherit and control property.

When I quoted Frederick Douglass saying that a discussion of the rights of animals would be met with more complacency than a discussion of the rights of women, I did not make that up. I know that, as a twenty-first-century woman, this is hard to believe. But sadly it's true. The words attributed to James Bradley and Sojourner Truth are also historically authentic. You can readily find the full text of their respective speeches by searching for them online.

Wives in the nineteenth century were legally invisible. A

wife could not own property, keep her own wages, or complain if her husband beat her. Seen as less competent than men, women could even get away with certain crimes if their husbands were present—similar to our modern laws about juvenile crime.

If you've never read the articles of the Declaration of Sentiments, which discusses all these inequities and was passed at the Seneca Falls Convention, where the story of Blessing and Gerard begins, you should. Here's one address where you can find it: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Declaration_of_Sentiments. It's also available, I'm sure, at your local library.

I was especially struck by the sentiment that discusses a double standard:

[Man] has created a false public sentiment by giving to the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated, but deemed of little account in man.

To put it less formally, while a young man was expected to sow his wild oats, any similar indiscretion could banish a young woman for life from respectable society, "ruin" her. This is one of the injustices that Blessing chooses to work against.

She knows that the majority of women who work in the brothels and walk the streets at the riverfront did not go there from choice but often after being abused or abandoned by

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men—or because of a lack of opportunity for education or meaningful work that paid enough to live on, another point included in the Declaration of Sentiments.

And in light of her unhappy marriage, Blessing resents the fact that an abused woman has no legal recourse. At that time, if a woman sued for divorce, she could literally be put out on the street with no way to support herself and could lose all rights to her children. Chilling, isn't it?

I'm old enough to remember my own mother telling me that her mother was already a married woman with children when she gained the right to vote. Her point was that I should never miss voting in any election or I would be showing disrespect to those who had spent their lives working to raise the status of women.

Blessing, as many other women did, decided not to accept the status quo but to work to change the laws that not only bound slaves but also women of any color. I'm sure Christ, who loves us all, approved of work like hers.

In our modern world, it's hard at times for me to believe that women on many continents are still abused and live subordinate lives without education or rights. I hope that when you consider organizations to support financially, you will choose some missions that are committed to bettering the status of women. God doesn't love and respect one skin color over another any more than he loves men more than women.

To quote Galatians 3:28—"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."