

*Cincinnati*     *April, 1838*

The hired carriage climbed over the break of the hill and rolled to a stop. Sarah Randolph grabbed for the hold strap as the rig leaned to one side then quickly righted itself when the driver stepped off onto the ground. A moment later the door opened and the driver peered inside. "This is it, miss. This is Stony Point."

Every nerve in her stomach fluttered to life. For one panicked moment Sarah wished she were back at the hotel with Ellen to tend her, but only for a moment. She needed something to do. Something to help her through the pain of Aaron's death. Somewhere to get away from the tormenting memories of him that haunted the streets of Philadelphia. And this position as a nanny answered those needs.

Sarah lifted her chin in renewed determination and climbed from the carriage. A worm of worry wriggled through her as she watched the driver walk around to the back and unbuckle the straps holding her trunk in place. She'd brought only the plainest, most serviceable of her day dresses, but none of her gowns were really appropriate for a nanny. If only there had been time to obtain more suitable attire.

Sarah let out a sigh and closed her mind to the concern. It was of no matter now—her gowns would simply have to do. She glanced down, shook out her long bottle-green velvet skirt, smoothed down the tab-cut leaves at the waist edge of her matching spencer, then lifted her head and appraised the house in front of her. It was well named. The rectangular stone house, with its set-back kitchen ell, sat square in the middle of the point of land that forced the road to curve.

It was an attractive house. Not large, compared to the homes of the elite of Philadelphia, but two stories of generous and pleasing proportion. And, though there was nothing ornate or fancy about the place, it had charm. Shutters, painted the dark green of the pines on the hillside, embraced the home's symmetrically placed multipaned windows and framed its solid wood-plank front door. Ivy spread clinging arms in profuse abandon on the front and climbed the gable end, stretching a few tentacles toward the wood shingles of the roof.

"Ready, miss." The driver, holding her large trunk balanced on one beefy shoulder, appeared beside her.

Sarah stepped back, giving him room to open the gate sandwiched between the two lamp-topped stone pillars that anchored the low stone walls enclosing the home's front yard. She ignored the *maaaa* of one of the sheep grazing on the lawn and followed him up the slate walk. Hope quickened her pulse. Her new life was starting.

Surely tending a toddler would keep her too busy to dwell on the past, to remember the loss of her dream of being Aaron's wife. Surely it would fill the emptiness and make the pain ease. *Oh, if only the pain would ease.*

The driver banged the brass knocker against the plate on the front door, and Sarah straightened her back and curved her lips into a smile. Everything would be better now. Soon, everything would be better.

The solid wood door opened. A stout woman stepped forward and stood centered in the frame. She looked at the driver, noted the trunk he carried and dipped her head toward the left. "Take that o'er t' the side door. Quincy'll let you in." She shifted her gaze. Surprise, then doubt swept over her face. "You *are* the new nanny?"

Sarah felt her smile slip away at the woman's tone. She pasted it firmly back in place and nodded. "Yes. I am—"

"Late! We expected you this morning." The woman stepped aside and waved a pudgy arm toward the interior of the house. "Don't stand there, come in, come in!"

Sarah hesitated a moment, debating the wisdom in pursuing her decision to accept the position. But the challenge was exactly what she needed. And she'd never had a problem getting along with her family's servants. Perhaps the housekeeper was simply feeling the need to establish her authority. She squared her shoulders, climbed the three stone steps and crossed the small stoop. A child's unhappy wails fell on her ears as she entered the small entry.

The woman closed the door and gave a brief nod toward the stairs. "'Tis that we've been sufferin'all day! The little miss is cryin' an' in no mood to be quieted. And Mr. Bainbridge is—" Her words came to an abrupt halt as a door on their left flew open.

"Eldora! Can Lucy not *stop* the child from cry—"

Sarah stiffened as the man in the doorway snapped off his words and swiveled his head her direction. He swept an assessing gaze over her, and his dark-brown brows lowered in a frown. "I was not aware we had a visitor." He made a small, polite bow in her direction. "Forgive me my outburst, Miss...er..."

"Randolph—Miss Sarah Randolph, of Philadelphia."

The man's brows shot skyward. "*You* are the new nanny?" He skimmed another gaze over her. Doubt flashed into his eyes. The frown deepened.

The man's reaction rasped against her tense nerves. Was he going to judge her on appearance only? Did he deem that stylish clothes meant she could not care for a child? Sarah's back stiffened. She gave him a cool nod. "I am. And it sounds as if I am sorely needed." She lifted a meaningful glance toward the top of the stairs. The toddler's cries were gaining in volume.

"Indeed." The man gave her a piercing look. "You seem confident of your abilities."

"And you seem highly dubious of them." Sarah lifted her chin and looked right back. "I would not have written requesting to be considered for the position of nanny were I not competent to handle the child."

The man's eyes darkened. "It will take more than words to convince me of that, Miss Randolph. Competency is a thing that is proven, not—" he winced as a loud wail echoed down the stairs "—declared." His face tightened. "And the first test of yours will begin now. I shall postpone your interview until later this evening. Please see to the child immediately. It's impossible for me to work in this din." Her prospective employer shifted his gaze back to the stout woman. "Mrs. Quincy, show Miss Randolph to the nursery. Immediately!" He stepped back into the room behind him and closed the door.

"This way, Miss Randolph." The hem of the housekeeper's long, gray skirt swished back and forth as she turned and headed toward the stairs.

*Can Lucy not stop the child?* The man's words were still ringing a warning alarm in her head. Sarah shot a quick glance at the closed door beside her. What sort of man called his daughter *the child*? A tiny frisson of apprehension tingled through her. Perhaps this nanny position would not be as easy as she expected. But she could always go home. She hugged the comfort of that thought close, lifted her long skirts slightly and followed Mrs. Quincy up the stairs.

"Here we are." Mrs. Quincy opened a door at the end of a short hallway.

Sarah stepped forward into a well-furnished, sunny nursery. At least, that was her initial impression. She hadn't time for more with her attention centered on the squalling, squirming toddler trying to twist free of the grip of the young maid sitting in a rocking chair. The maid rocked furiously, jiggling the toddler up and down and making soothing noises.

Sarah froze. Mrs. Quincy stepped forward and looked at her in demand. The maid—Lucy was it?—looked at her in relief and stood to her feet. Oh, dear! They expected her to— What? Sarah's stomach flopped. Her first thought was to turn about, run down the stairs and not stop until she reached the hotel where Ellen awaited her instructions. Perhaps they would both be making the journey back to Philadelphia. But the unhappiness apparent in the toddler's cries held her frozen in place. Perhaps if she could get the child's attention... She moved closer and leaned down to place her hand on the toddler's back. "Hello, little one. I'm your new nanny."

The child didn't even look at her, only squalled louder and squirmed harder. What now? An idea popped into her head. An absolutely absurd idea—but she had nothing to lose. Sarah undid the satin ties of her bonnet and tossed it on the rocking chair, opened her mouth and let out a wail that made both Mrs. Quincy and Lucy jump. The toddler stopped squirming and crying and stared up at her out of big blue eyes. *It worked!*

"There now, that's better." Sarah spoke softly, but firmly. She lifted the startled toddler out of Lucy's arms and started toward the window in the wall on the opposite side of the room. She had no idea what next to do, but movement seemed a good idea. She glanced at the child in her arms and burst out laughing. The little girl was staring at her as if she didn't know what to think of her. That, too, seemed a good thing. "And do you have a name, little one?"

"Nora. Nora Blessing Bainbridge." Mrs. Quincy's answer was followed by the click of the door opening and closing.

Sarah glanced over her shoulder. The room was empty. She looked back at the toddler. "Well, Nora Blessing Bainbridge, it seems you and I are on our own." The child's lips quivered, pulled down at the corners. She placed her tiny hands against Sarah's chest and pushed. "Except for that squirrel. Look!"

Sarah quickly turned Nora so she faced outward, holding her so Nora's small back rested against her chest. "See?" She pointed at a large gray squirrel sitting on a branch of the tree outside the window, nibbling on some sort of bud. The distraction worked. The toddler's tensed muscles relaxed. She stared at the squirrel, caught a broken breath, then another, stuck her thumb in her mouth and began sucking. Her little legs, dangling over Sarah's supporting arm, stilled their kicking.

Thank goodness for the squirrel! Sarah swayed side to side, humming softly, ignoring the child except for an occasional downward glance. After a few minutes, Nora's eyelids drooped, opened, drooped again. A moment later her little head dropped forward until her chin rested on her chest.

Sarah looked down and smiled. Nora had lost her battle against sleep. The toddler's light-brown eyelashes rested on her round rosy cheeks and ...