

"*O Little Town* serves up three dynamic novellas by three authors who have perfected the art of crafting page-turning stories. You'll want to grab a mug of hot cocoa and soak in these unique tales of healing, budding romance, and even an alleged government cover-up, all set in the picturesque, wintry backdrop of small-town Mapleview, Michigan. The endearing characters found within these pages will leave you savoring each story to the last drop."

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"In this heartwarming compilation, three talented authors bring us the perfect blend of small-town nostalgia and holiday warmth. Spanning over a century, these stories capture the hopes and heartaches of three couples as they approach the holidays and remind us of the deeper meanings found within the Christmas season. As timeless as the notes of a favorite carol and as softly luminous as lights twinkling on an evergreen tree, this anthology is destined to become a much-beloved addition to your festive reading list."

AMANDA BARRATT, Christy Award-winning author of
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"I'm in love with Mapleview, Michigan, and the people who call it home—past and present. With heartwarming journeys and characters that grab hold of your heart, *O Little Town* is a perfect holiday read—that can be read anytime!"

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"Recipe: Take one charming schoolhouse in a small town in Michigan, blend in novellas from three different decades, add a teaspoon of history, a pinch of mystery, a tablespoon of faith, and a heaping cup of swoon-worthy romance. Result: *O Little Town* is the perfect book to savor this December, hot chocolate in hand."

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“A charming tale of love and joy. Raney’s voice shines in this sweet romance.”

RACHEL HAUCK, *New York Times* best-selling author of
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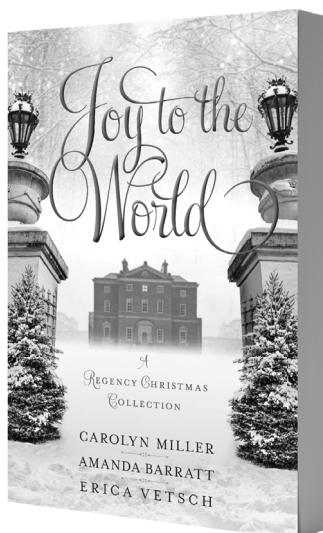
“*O Little Town* is an absolutely delightful collection of three charming stories from three talented authors. This book is filled with tender romance, hope, redemption, and even a little mystery that is sure to warm the hearts of readers on the coldest of winter nights. A lovely read!”

NEIDI CHIAVAROLI, Carol Award-winning author of
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“At turns charming and thrilling! Mapleview at Christmas brings out the best in all these characters, especially those reluctant to be there! This collection brims with a sense of community and family. Heart-warming romances set across the decades, all leading to Home.”


ERICA VETSCH, author of the Thorndike & Swann
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Find more Christmas cheer in



A
ROMANCE CHRISTMAS
COLLECTION

*O Little
Town*

AMANDA WEN
——
JANYRE TROMP
——
DEBORAH RANEY



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Hopes and Fears



AMANDA WEN

CHAPTER ONE



Mapleview, Michigan
November 1912

“HAVE A WONDERFUL weekend,” Emma Trowbridge called to the last of her departing students as they clambered down the steps of the redbrick schoolhouse into a crisp, cloudy afternoon. “Make wise choices and honor the Lord. I love each and every one of you.”

Her pupils—twenty in all, plus the older ones from the upstairs classroom—responded with murmurs of “Thank you, Miss Trowbridge,” as they headed toward the stable out back to retrieve their horses or traipsed down Twenty-Fifth Avenue, lunch pails in hand.

“I love you, too, Miss Trowbridge.” This from Janie Seiler, a precocious, freckle-faced blond. At six, she was Emma’s youngest student.

Emma pulled the little girl close for a quick embrace. “Off with you, now. Best get home before it really starts coming down.” Snowflakes had drifted from the sky since lunchtime, highlighting barren branches. They swirled thicker now, brilliant white accumulating between the street’s deep maroon bricks.

“Don’t worry, Miss Trowbridge! I’m fast like a horse. See?” Janie scampered down the lane, braids bouncing behind her.

Emma watched until the little girl disappeared around the corner, then turned back to her classroom, where she began cleaning the blackboard. As usual at the end of the day, her brain was full of both evaluation of today’s lessons and preparation for tomorrow’s.

At the top of her list? The Christmas pageant.

Though the school's traditional holiday offering was a series of short recitations and songs, this year a new play tugged at her heart-strings. She'd seen a performance of *Met in Thee Tonight* two years prior and was instantly inspired by its fresh approach to the familiar story. Her previous school had been too small to make it practical, but here at Visser School, the students were numerous enough—and talented enough—that it just might work.

In past years, she'd have simply purchased the script herself, since, in a one-room school, there was no one else with whom to coordinate. No supervisor to ask. But her recent move to the larger town of Mapleview meant a two-room schoolhouse, complete with a principal, Mr. Rudolf de Haven, who also taught the upper grades in the upstairs classroom. Working closely with another teacher had taken some getting used to, but there was no denying the superiority of the two-room approach when it came to individual attention and age-appropriate instruction. And since he valued ability over credentials, Mr. de Haven certainly didn't mind that her certification came from County Normal rather than some fancy four-year teacher's college.

Emma brushed chalk from her hands, smoothed her skirt, and headed upstairs for her daily check-in with Mr. de Haven. She'd grown fond of these afternoon meetings with a colleague and mentor who'd also become a close friend.

"Afternoon, Miss Trowbridge." Mr. de Haven's salt-and-pepper head was bent over a stack of papers, his pen dancing across a line of composition. "I trust your day was productive and inspiring as always?"

"Even more so." Enthusiasm bubbled within. "Jesse Meijer's recitation this morning was the finest he's given. He really seems to be turning a corner, that one. Which brings me to the annual Christmas pageant." She paced in front of his desk, woolen skirt swishing around her ankles. "Now, I know our current format is quite traditional, but two years back I saw a newer pageant—a play, really—one that would involve the whole school in various roles in a unique retelling of the biblical . . ." Her colleague's drawn expres-

sion put a stop to both her pacing and the babbling brook of ideas. “Mr. de Haven?”

“I’m afraid the Christmas play will be something you’ll need to discuss with my replacement, Miss Trowbridge.”

“Your replacement?” Emma’s heart lurched. “Sir, I don’t understand.”

His hazel eyes were sad and faraway. “I’ve had a letter from my mother.”

“Oh no. Is it your father?” The elder Mr. de Haven had been in poor health the last several months with an illness he couldn’t quite shake. Something similar to what had taken Emma’s mother several years ago.

Her colleague nodded. “Mother can no longer shoulder the burden of his care alone. I’ve informed the district I’ll be unable to fulfill my contract for the remainder of the term, effective immediately. Lord willing, I’ll return in the fall.”

The words that hung heavy between them—*after he’s passed*—filled Emma’s eyes with tears. “I’m so sorry, Mr. de Haven. I’ll be praying for your father. For all of you.”

He cleared his throat. “Much appreciated, my dear Miss Trowbridge.”

“You’ll keep in touch? When you can?”

“Of course.” A glint of amusement flickered amidst the sorrowful strain. “I’ll want detailed reports of how you and young Mr. Oberstein are getting along in my absence.”

Emma’s brows shot to her hairline. “Not . . . *Frederick* Oberstein, is it?”

“The same. He’s been in an administrative role for three years or so, but he has teaching experience in the upper grades and comes highly recommended. And he was one of the first four-year graduates from Michigan State Normal College.”

Emma stifled the urge to roll her eyes. “Of course he was.” Her childhood nemesis always had to have the best. To *be* the best. He came from furniture money, never once hesitating to point out the Oberstein Furnishings stamp on the bottom of their desks. Smart as

a whip—and fully aware of the fact—he frequently stood at the head of the class during their school days.

He rarely stood alone, though. Despite being two years his junior and bereft of many of the advantages into which he'd been born, Emma still frequently held the spot right beside Frederick. Most of the time, he ranked at the top, but on rare occasions, she bested him. Not once did he let her win, so her hard-earned victories remained among her most cherished memories.

But then, toward the end of their shared school days and to her infinite horror, her traitorous heart had softened toward him. Begun to want things she shouldn't want with someone so obnoxious, so merciless in his desire to win. He was arrogant. Domineering. Everything wrong with the male species, wrapped up into a single package . . . and yet, she'd fancied him. So much so that—her stomach lurched at the memory—she'd poured out her fevered, fourteen-year-old feelings in an impassioned letter, which she thrust into his hand at the train station moments before he left for Ypsilanti.

He never wrote back, thank the Lord in heaven. And she'd hoped and prayed her past would never come back to haunt her.

But the heavy tread on the stairs told her those prayers had been in vain.

“Do you know him, Miss Trowbridge?” Mr. de Haven's voice penetrated only the periphery of her awareness.

A second later, Frederick appeared. Coffee-brown hair sparkling with snowflakes. Warm dark eyes. Straight nose, square jaw, and that slight scar above his left eyebrow, the mark of a tumble from a tree at age ten. Lanky limbs had gained muscle, and his countenance held a bit more wisdom and experience than when she last saw him . . . but he was still the very same Frederick Jedediah Oberstein she remembered from childhood.

“Mr. de Haven, I . . .” The salutation died as his keen gaze swept over her. His brow furrowed. “Emma?”

And then the tilt of the head. The glint in the eyes.

That *smirk*—the one that had infuriated and infatuated her in equal measure.

“I did know him. Once. A long time ago.” Her gaze snapped from him to Mr. de Haven. “Please excuse me.” Then, cheeks aflame, she swept past him and clattered down the stairs to the safety of her own classroom.



For a single instant, the life his younger self had dreamed of lay before him.

Neat rows of desks. A bright American flag. The trademark smells of woodsmoke and wet wraps, chalk dust and musty books. The canvas upon which he, the young idealist armed with impressive credentials and undeniable passion, could change the world.

It would be hard to walk into a school to teach again. He’d braced himself from the moment the county board informed him he’d have to leave the cocoon of administration and return to the classroom.

But Emma Trowbridge standing at the front of that classroom? That he hadn’t prepared for.

Mr. de Haven looked up from the stack of papers on his desk. “Best get that ironed out, Mr. Oberstein.”

“Forgive me, sir, but I think it best if you and I start—”

“We will. But these essays won’t grade themselves. I can almost guarantee I’ll still be here when you’re finished with Miss Trowbridge.”

Wry amusement tugged Frederick’s lips. “You’ve clearly never tangled with Emma Trowbridge.”

“Apparently not in the same way you have.” With a mischievous gleam in his eyes, de Haven jerked his chin toward the staircase. “Go.”

Steeling himself for a return to their old rivalry, Frederick descended the wooden stairs and rounded the corner into the back of her classroom.

Emma had always dreamed of being a teacher, and she’d set up the downstairs classroom precisely the way he’d pictured she might. A large, scripted copy of the Golden Rule stretched across the wall above the blackboard. The Stars and Stripes stood at attention between

photos of Washington and Lincoln, and alongside them hung portraits of dignitaries ranging from Shakespeare to Clara Barton.

Emma stood with her back to him, broom swishing across the wood-planked floor with decisive strokes. Her chestnut hair—in braids the last time he'd seen her—was swept up into a more adult style, though a couple of wayward curls had escaped to dance around her cheek. Always on the small side, she'd added a few inches here and there—but what a womanly difference those inches made.

He shuffled his feet, the floor creaking beneath them.

Emma flicked a glance at him over her shoulder. "It's going to be rather awkward working together if you don't speak to me, Mr. Oberstein."

"Forgive me, Em—Miss Trow—Em—Miss Trowbridge." *Oh, good heavens.* "I simply didn't expect to see you here."

How could he, when he never expected to be here himself?

She turned, challenge sparking in brilliant blue eyes. "You're surprised I became a teacher?"

"Not in the least. You always managed to achieve anything you set your mind to."

"Unless you got in my way." At least, that's what it sounded like she muttered as she stashed the broom in the corner. But when she turned to face him, a no-nonsense, highly professional expression was firmly in place. "Now. Welcome. I realize I should give you a chance to settle in to your new post, but time is of the essence, and we really can't wait any longer."

"Longer for what?"

"The Christmas play. I tried to speak with Mr. de Haven earlier, but he says the decision falls to you."

Christmas. Frederick stiffened against the two-syllable blow.

"The students have been performing the same pageant since before I came to Visser, and they find it trite and uninspiring." She clasped her hands in front of her, lips flickering in a self-deprecating smile. "All right. *I* find it trite and uninspiring. Although when I broached the subject yesterday, the students also responded with a palpable lack of enthusiasm."

Hmm. Perhaps he and the students already had common ground.

“There’s a new play I’ve got my eye on that would be much better suited to our students’ abilities and interests, and more worthy of the momentous event of our Savior’s birth.”

His chest tightened. “A play?”

“Yes. *Met in Thee Tonight* by William Mueller. I saw it performed two years ago and found it deeply moving. I’ve located a bookshop in Grand Rapids that carries the necessary copies, but we’ll also need costumes, sets—perhaps see if one of the nearby farms can provide live animals, and—”

“No.” His voice sliced through Emma’s pink-cheeked enthusiasm. This time of year already threatened to undo him. A play like that would guarantee it.

“No?” The sparkles in her eyes turned to sparks.

“I’ve received instruction from the school board not to approve any unnecessary expenditures.” It was true, thank God. A providential excuse that nearly made him sink to his knees in gratitude.

She tilted her head. “It sounds as though the school board warned you about me.”

Oh, they had. But they hadn’t needed to. “The furniture workers’ strike has had ripple effects across the whole of West Michigan. Governor Osborn’s cut school funding to eliminate the deficit.”

“I’m not a child, Frederick.” Hurt flashed in her eyes. “I understand the straits we’re in. But this play, with its literary depth, scriptural accuracy, and sheer memorability, will have a ripple effect far beyond this generation. If you’d seen the look in the eyes of the girl who played the angel, or how tall the boy walked as the shepherd Malachi, or heard stories of the impact God made on the students through this play . . . How can you put a price tag on a connection between learning and life? One that may well change eternity? The Frederick Oberstein I remember would’ve jumped at this sort of chance. Especially for Christmas.”

The Frederick Oberstein you remember is dead and gone. Silenced in a savage instant by a spooked horse and a shattered sleigh.

He swallowed hard. “People grow up. They assume adult

responsibilities. And part of my responsibility as principal of Visser School—”

“—*Interim* principal—”

“—is to ensure the basics of education are achieved before any frippery.”

“*Frippery.*” She flung the word in his face like a snowball.

He gritted his teeth and met her gaze. “Were it up to me, I’d cancel the pageant altogether. But I fear the good citizens of Maplevew would come after me with torches and pitchforks.”

“Justifiably.”

“So the pageant may proceed as scheduled, using the present script and costumes and the like.” The words contained a bit more anger than he’d have wished, and he pulled in a breath. “Now, if there’s nothing further, I have some things to discuss with Mr. de Haven before he departs.”

Emma’s expression churned like the sky on a stormy day. She turned on her heel, crossed the room toward the door, then paused, hand on the knob. “We’re not schoolchildren anymore, Frederick. And this is no petty rivalry. You might have that fancy four-year degree, and you might have more experience than I do, but you don’t know this town. You don’t know these children, and you have no idea what’s best for them. I do. And I’ll fight for these students, no matter the cost.”

And then she was gone, slipping into the cloakroom like a mist, but the *creak-slam* moments later reassured him she was very much real.

No matter the cost. He might’ve said those words himself not long ago. He’d been so like her once, full of fire and drive, stopping at nothing to secure the best for his students. But she had no idea how steep the cost could be.

Neither had he.

His feet like lead, Frederick trudged up the stairs to the second-floor classroom, his prison cell for the rest of the term.

Cost?

Ha.

It had cost him everything.

CHAPTER TWO



THE FRESHLY LIT fire reached tentative fingers of warmth into the chilled Monday morning classroom as Emma sat down at her desk to review her lesson plans for the day. Her first full day with Frederick Oberstein in the upstairs classroom, an unpleasantry upon which she refused to dwell.

Another unpleasantry sat at the corner of her desk, left of the globe: a stack of papers outlining the traditional Christmas pageant. With a sigh that puffed clouds of vapor up around her face, Emma retrieved the stack and leafed through it. Short, mediocre poems and simpler songs for the younger students. Brief, uninteresting sketches for the older ones. The same old thing, year after year. Nothing challenging. Nothing to inspire her students to give their very best. Nothing that would truly connect them to the Christmas story.

It just didn't feel right, especially this year. Jesse Meijer had finally overcome his struggles with reading aloud and needed something to sink his teeth into. The once-shy Viola Taylor had begun to display a flair for the dramatic. These two in particular needed more to do than stand in place and stare beatifically at the swaddled gourd that would play the infant Jesus. They needed a challenge.

And the reason they couldn't experience one? Frederick Oberstein.

Oh, Lord, quiet my spirit. Quench this bitterness, this rebellion. Frederick is my superior—for the moment anyway—and if he says no, then it needs to be no. If this pageant is your plan for yet another year, then please

provide the enthusiasm we need to do the old one to the best of our abilities. But, Lord, if there's any other way . . .

“Goedemorgen, Miss Trowbridge.” Though many of her students’ families spoke at least some Dutch, the full-throated, half-sung baritone greeting that accompanied the knock at her door could belong only to one person.

With a smile, Emma leaped to her feet and opened the door to the elderly yet still spry Jan Voorhees. “Goedemorgen to you too.” The once-surprising sight of the white-haired man with his wheelbarrow full of books had become most welcome over the last few years, especially for the area farmers and pastors who depended on Jan and his mobile bookshop to stock their own libraries.

“You’re on my circuit today. I knew I’d have to get here before those little troublemakers started flooding in.” Jan’s smile bloomed beneath his neatly trimmed white mustache as he stood at the bottom of the steps. “Got any good stories for me?”

“Always.” For the next few minutes, Emma regaled her bookseller friend with tales of her students’ latest escapades, delighting in his merry laughter.

“And how is your *vader*?” he asked.

“He has his ups and downs.” Emma rubbed her hands together to ward off the biting cold. “Christmas is always difficult since Mother passed, but each year gets easier.”

“Earth has no sorrow that heaven can’t heal, after all.” Jan adjusted his grip on the wheelbarrow. “I’d best be off, but I’d be derelict in my duty if I didn’t inquire as to your interest in a few new books for your classroom.”

“Not today, my friend.” Emma tamped down the rising bitterness at the knife-sharp swiftness of Frederick’s denial the day before. “I’ve been told we can’t afford any new purchases at the moment.”

“Then I’ll do my best not to tempt you, painful though it may be.” With a grin, Jan started the wheelbarrow in motion. The piles of books within shifted, and there, in a patch of pale morning sunlight—

Was that?

It was!

William Mueller's *Four New Plays for Churches or Schools*.

"One moment, Mr. Voorhees!" She skipped down the steps and slid the slender leather-bound volume from his wheelbarrow. Leafed through it. Breathed fresh ink and crisp paper.

And there it was. *Met in Thee Tonight*. The script bore a few scribbled notes, some modified staging instructions, but was otherwise pristine.

"Where did this come from?" she asked.

"A church over in Byron Township," Jan replied. "A bit of a surprise, since it's but a few years old. I suppose it wasn't to that congregation's taste. In any event, it's yours if you're interested."

She closed the book, chilled fingertips caressing the smooth cover. "I can't." Frederick was her principal. Interim principal . . . but still. He'd said no. So she couldn't just . . .

Unless . . .

"How much?" Frederick's objection had been to the expenditure of district funds. But perhaps, if it wasn't too dear, she could pay for it with her own pocket money.

Jan quoted a price, and she gulped. It would cost most of her meager savings, leaving little for the purchase of Christmas gifts for her family. Ah, well, she could always make the gifts. Surely her loved ones could use new knitted scarves or mittens.

However, Jan only had one copy. How would she distribute it to the students? Father had gifted her a typewriter when she began her teaching career, but how many late nights would she have to spend hunched over it to produce sufficient copies?

By the same token, though, how could she stand by and watch Jan Voorhees wheel a golden opportunity off into the snowy Michigan sunrise?

"I'll take it." She held the book out to Jan. "I'm afraid I don't have any money on me at the moment, but if you come back tomorrow, I'll—"

"Consider it a Christmas gift, Miss Trowbridge."

Emma froze. "Are you certain?"

Jan waved away any objections she was gathering. "I'm just happy

to see it find a new home and watch it take the next steps on God's path."

Her eyes stung. "Oh, thank you, Mr. Voorhees. Thank you. A thousand times, thank you."

The old bookseller touched the brim of his hat, then hefted the wheelbarrow and walked on, footsteps crunching through the freshly fallen snow.

Hugging the volume to her chest, Emma retreated to the warmth of the schoolroom. *Met in Thee Tonight* was hers. *Hers*. Whatever long hours, whatever late nights lay ahead would be worth the students' sparkling eyes and eager enthusiasm.

And she'd pulled it off without spending a penny of district money.

Take that, Frederick Oberstein. She allowed a small, triumphant smile as she stood at the head of the class. Of all her victories over her old rival, this one had the potential to be the sweetest.



Frederick trudged through the snow, stomach twisting, palms damp inside his mittens. A man pushing a wheelbarrow full of books bade him a cheerful good morning, a greeting Frederick returned with only the most economical of waves.

And now here he stood, taking in the two-story schoolhouse, its red bricks interwoven with cheerful yellow ones in the Dutch style typical of the area. A festive green wreath hung on the snow-capped entrance, and greenery was draped around the windows. Emma must've been industrious over the weekend.

Once upon a time, he'd have been just as devoted to sharing the joy of the season. Christmas used to be his favorite time of year.

Now he hated it.

Because everything, everywhere, reminded him of Maria.

Especially this schoolhouse. Guilt and grief battled for supremacy as he stared up at the stately brick structure.

How ironic that a school building would be so tied up with Maria, given that it was the last place his little sister ever wanted to be. She

tolerated the hours of learning only because school was where her countless numbers of friends could be found.

But as a teacher, he'd practically lived there. With their parents away on extended holiday that year and Maria in his care, she'd spent nearly as much time at the school as he did.

And in his care was the last place she should have been.

After pulling in a breath of frigid air, he forced one foot in front of the other and climbed the small staircase to the entrance. Perseverance. Wasn't that part of the scriptural progression? Suffering to perseverance to character to hope? By now he was well-versed in suffering. Perhaps perseverance was next.

Character and hope? Those felt a long way off.

He stomped snow from his boots on the threshold, then pulled the door open, doffed his hat, and hung it on the rack. A gentle lilt-ing hum from Emma's classroom signaled she was already there and hard at work.

The tune stopped at his heavy tread on the floor by her doorway. Emma turned from the board, chalk still in hand, a chestnut curl springing free from its neatly pinned style. "Mr. Oberstein. Good morning." Her brow furrowed. "Are you all right?"

He fixed his attention on a bit of snow clinging to the toe of his right boot. Doubtless she'd seen evidence of his nearly sleepless night. She never did miss a detail. "First day nerves, I suppose."

"You? Nerves?" With a quiet laugh, she turned back to the board. "Never thought I'd see the day when the great Frederick Oberstein admitted to a case of the jitters."

Her comment drew a small grin. "The great Frederick Oberstein hasn't been in the classroom for quite a while."

"Climbing the administrative ladder, no doubt." The swish of chalk on the board underpinned her remark.

"Something like that."

"Well, you're tremendously talented and you've worked hard. That combination should bring it all right back to you."

His head snapped up. That sounded dangerously close to a compliment. From *Emma*.

“We’re stuck together, Mr. Oberstein.” She set the chalk in the tray and turned to face him, pink lips curved in a bright, if slightly forced, smile. “It’s in everyone’s interest for us to make the best of it.”

If she kept talking, the words bounced off his awareness, thanks to the little leather book on her desk. *Four New Plays for Churches or Schools*.

“What’s the meaning of this?” He crossed the room and picked up the offending book. She called this making the best of it? “I thought I made myself clear on Friday.”

“You did.” Emma folded her arms across her chest. “But before you get all grumpy about it, you should know it didn’t cost the district a penny.”

“The cost to the district was only part of my objection, Emma.” He tossed the book back onto her desk. It landed with a slap, but she didn’t so much as flinch. “And my position as interim principal—and therefore your superior—does give me the authority to make a unilateral decision.”

“If you’re my superior, then you can’t call me Emma.”

She had him there. “Very well, Miss Trowbridge.”

Her eyes lit. “What if we let the students decide? We live in a democracy, after all—”

“Technically a constitutional republic, not a true democracy.”

“A representative democracy, then, at the very least.”

“Which is essentially the same, thus proving my point.”

“Semantics.” She rolled her eyes. “Nonetheless, voting is still an important right and responsibility that the boys—and God willing, the girls too—will need to take seriously.”

“So you want them to practice on a Christmas play?”

She lifted her chin. “Why not?”

Why not indeed. As her principal, he could shut down the play in a heartbeat. And as a desperately wounded man, he should shut it down for so many reasons. His own sanity most of all.

But making a dictatorial decision would doubtless start his tenure off poorly, and for the sake of his time here—and his career as a whole—he needed to maintain a decent working relationship with Emma.

Ahem. Miss Trowbridge.

“Fine. I’ll allow for an election in the day’s schedule.”

She gave a half-hearted curtsy. “How very magnanimous of you, Mr. Oberstein.”

The door at his back opened before he could reply. A trio of boys, stair-stepped in height and bundled in winterwear, spilled into the cloakroom, laughing and carrying on with the boundless energy of youth. A pair of girls followed at their heels, lunch pails in hand, hair in braids.

Emma—*Miss Trowbridge*—greeted each of them with a warm smile. She brushed their shoulders with caring fingertips, stooped to look the smaller students in the eyes, asked a girl named Janie about her weekend and a little boy—Sammy, if he’d caught the name right—about a new cow named Norma Jean.

Her obvious love and care for the students both warmed and pricked his heart. He’d been that way once. Like Emma, he’d thought nothing of coming in early and staying late. Giving his very best for the students—for the season—at any cost. But he’d let his passion for his job eclipse his responsibilities to his family.

In the end, it had cost him both.

Setting his jaw, he started for the stairs.

“Mr. Oberstein?” Emma again.

No. *Not* Emma. Miss Trowbri—

Acb. He gave up with an inward sigh. She seemed to have no problem with the formality of their new roles, but he’d known her since she was a precocious little snip of a thing, with hair in braids and a freckled, slightly upturned nose. Clearly he was never going to think of her as Miss Trowbridge.

He turned to find her behind him in the stairwell, leaning in, voice low and close to his ear. “Do you think perhaps we should address the students regarding Mr. de Haven’s extended absence? Some of them have grown quite close to him, and it may be best to allow them time to process the change.”

“The best thing for the students is business as usual.”

Challenge sparked in her eyes. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because I have a four-year degree. Two additional years in the classroom. I know students, Miss Trowbridge.” *Aha*. Finally, he’d gotten it right.

“But I know *these* students.” She punctuated her declaration with emphatic gestures. “I know who’s closest to Mr. de Haven. Who’ll struggle the most with him gone. I may not have read the same textbooks you did, and I may not have the same degree. But I know these children, and many of them will need time to adjust before *business as usual*.”

She was correct, of course.

But time to adjust meant emotions. And student emotions—even for a dramatically different reason—might well peel the flimsy cover from his own.

“Has it occurred to you that some wounds are too deep to discuss, much less in a public setting surrounded by peers who might mock any sign of weakness? Perhaps the message we need to send is when difficult times strike, each of us must keep putting one foot in front of the other.” He bit off the last word, breathing suddenly difficult, and balled trembling hands into fists. *No. Not now.*

Instead of a fiery retort, Emma remained silent. She tilted her head and studied him, eyes slightly narrowed, as though pondering a difficult equation or sussing out the meaning of a Shakespearean sonnet.

He resisted the urge to tug his jacket around himself. To hide from Emma’s penetrating blue gaze. To turn and run and never look back.

“I stand corrected, Mr. Oberstein,” she said softly. “I hadn’t thought through that side of it, but you’re absolutely right. In fact, some of the students may benefit more from business as usual.”

As total a surrender as he’d ever received from Emma, but the victory seemed hollow.

“Perhaps a compromise is in order.” She tapped her chin with a fingertip. “Take the first few moments of the day as a unified school, then we split into our assigned classes and go about the day like normal, with the caveat that anyone who has questions or wants to talk with me—or you”—she tossed in as an obvious afterthought—“can do so over the lunch hour.”

He swallowed hard. Feet. His feet were on the floor. The blackboard was in front of him. The cloakrooms to his back. He smelled wet wool and woodsmoke. He was at work. Grief, mourning, self-flagellation, regret . . . he ordered them all into silence and rebuilt the walls around his heart that a single glance from Emma had so easily breached.

“That’s very sensible, Miss Trowbridge,” he said.

She nodded. “Thank you.” A brief hesitation, where it appeared she wanted to say something else, but a young student approached, and Emma turned, the moment lost.

That was just as well. He couldn’t let himself feel anything. Not for the students. Not for Emma. Definitely not about Maria. He had to freeze his heart. Feel nothing.

It was his only hope of surviving this assignment.

CHAPTER THREE



EMMA PICKED UP the handheld bell from the corner of her desk and rang it, the metallic *clang* piercing the din of student arrivals. “My class, take your seats, please. And if you’re in Mr. de Haven’s class . . . try to find a space along the back wall.”

This would prove easier said than done. Visser School had once been small enough that all grades fit in this room. Even with the recently added second story for the upper grades, Vanderburgh County’s rapid growth meant the school would likely burst at the seams before too many years passed.

She returned the bell to her desk as the younger students scrambled to their desks and the older ones lined the back and sides of the classroom. After the Pledge of Allegiance and the prayer, Emma fixed her charges with a bright smile. “Good morning, everyone. By now I’m sure you’re all aware that Mr. de Haven has taken leave to care for his ailing father, and we will, of course, remember them both in our prayers for the rest of the term. This”—she motioned to Frederick—“is Mr. Oberstein. He’ll be filling in until Mr. de Haven can return to us.”

Dozens of skeptical eyes turned toward her new colleague, who himself looked as though he’d just drunk a cup of vinegar.

“It’s an honor to be entrusted with all of you.” He greeted the students with a half-hearted wave.

“Change is never easy, so I wanted to take a few minutes to open

the floor and address any questions you may have, either for me or for Mr. Oberstein.”

Viola Taylor, standing near the cloakrooms, raised her hand. “Will Mr. de Haven be back next term?”

Emma regarded the thirteen-year-old with a kind smile. “That’s his plan, but only the Lord knows for sure.”

Ten-year-old Michael McCormack raised his hand next, and Emma’s heart went out to him. Still reeling from his own father’s death the previous summer, he’d grown close to Mr. de Haven this fall. He was one of the pupils she’d been most concerned about.

“What do we do in the meantime, Miss Trowbridge?” he asked, brown eyes large and overlaid with tears.

“Well, Michael . . . we simply do the next thing God has put before us, even when it doesn’t make sense. And then we do the next thing he shows us, and the next thing, and the next. And with each moment, with each step we take, we trust that God will give us the strength and courage to do what he’s prepared for us.”

Michael swiped his sleeve under his nose and fixed his attention on the wooden surface of his desk.

Behind him, Jesse Meijer’s hand shot into the air. “What about the Christmas pageant?” the energetic twelve-year-old inquired.

“Excellent question, Jesse, and one that segues nicely into the next item on my agenda.”

“Are we going to do the same pageant as last year, Miss Trowbridge?” Janie Seiler asked.

“It’s been . . . highly recommended to me”—Emma glanced toward Frederick, whose gaze was fastened on the wood-planked floor—“that we produce the usual pageant this year rather than stage anything new.”

The students seemed to be making an attempt at stoicism, but a couple of groans slipped out anyway, and with that, all the air was sucked from the room.

“However,” she said, and the sea of faces before her brightened. “There’s a new piece, recently published, that I think would present a suitable challenge for us all. Rather than a series of short vignettes,

Met in Thee Tonight is a full play, a retelling of the Christmas story from the perspective of the Angel of the Lord and a shepherd boy named Malachi.” She tried to stay neutral, to simply describe the play rather than betray her enthusiasm, but oh, it was difficult.

Viola’s eyes brightened. “Would there be costumes?”

“Yes,” Emma replied.

“Scenery?” Sammy piped up from the back row.

“We’ll do as much as we can with the space we have.”

Excitement buzzed around the room, seeming to touch everyone but Frederick, who stepped forward and cleared his throat. “What Miss Trowbridge hasn’t told you is that this pageant will cost significantly more than the traditional one in terms of time, effort, and resources.”

“And producing a familiar pageant might be more comfortable for some of you,” Emma forced herself to admit. “For those reasons, I—*we’ve*—decided to put it to a vote.”

A smile spread across Viola’s face. “Even the girls?”

Emma met her gaze. “Even the girls.”

The room buzzed again, louder than before, and Emma quickly clapped her hands to regain control. “If we’re to have an election, it must proceed in an orderly fashion, yes?”

The students quieted, eyes toward the front.

“That’s much better. Now. All who want to do the new play, *Met in Thee Tonight*, please raise your hands.”

The vast majority of the students raised their hands, most with great enthusiasm.

“Thank you, you may lower your hands.” Excitement surged, as the next vote wasn’t necessary for anything but protocol. “All in favor of the traditional pageant?”

A few students raised tentative hands, but it was clear from the skeptical expressions on their faces that they wouldn’t be too heartbroken by the result.

“Very well.” She glanced toward Frederick, trying to keep the triumph out of her smile. “It seems the majority has spoken, Mr. Oberstein.”

“Indeed they have,” he allowed.

When she’d bested Frederick before, especially as they’d grown older, respect had always shone in his eyes. But this time, as they stood together at the head of the class, he looked genuinely distraught. The eager flame of optimism had been snuffed, the old shine replaced by a dull hardness. A granite set of the jaw, a stony flatness of the eyes.

What had happened to change him so? What had extinguished his spark?

“If there’s nothing else?” he asked in a tone that suggested there’d better not be.

“No. Nothing else.” *For now.*

“Then, my class, if you’ll follow me, please.” Frederick started up the stairs, and the older students left their spots at the back wall and followed him.

“And if anyone needs to speak further with me about Mr. de Haven, or the pageant, or anything at all,” Emma said over the din of scraping chairs and shuffling feet, “I’ll make myself available at lunchtime.”

As the older students traipsed upstairs and the room quieted, Emma proceeded to her desk to retrieve Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, the novel she’d just begun reading to her students.

She’d gotten her way. The students had voted and *Met in Thee Tonight* had won by a landslide. She’d beaten Frederick. She had won.

So why did it feel instead as though she’d lost?



The stairs creaked beneath the shoes of the last of the students, and Frederick plopped into his wooden desk chair with a weary sigh. His first day back in the classroom in nearly three years had been even more exhausting than he’d anticipated. But, as Emma had advised that morning, he’d done the next thing God had put before him. And then the next thing. And the next. He’d made it through the day one hour, one minute, at a time. Now the students were gone, and he was alone and finally—*finally*—he could take a deep breath.

Perhaps, in time, he could focus on doing his job well. On revisiting his training and giving the students his utmost efforts.

For today, it was enough to have simply made it through.

The stairs creaked again, with footsteps approaching rather than retreating, and Frederick suppressed a groan. He didn't want to see anyone until tomorrow morning at the absolute earliest. And definitely not Emma Trowbridge, rosy-cheeked and peeking around the corner into his classroom, still looking as fresh as a morning daisy.

"Well? How was it?" She stepped into the room, a grin tugging at her lips.

"Tolerable" was the best he could come up with.

"Tolerable?" Laughter bubbled in her voice. "I dare say it went better than that. How did Viola Taylor do with her recitation?"

Viola Taylor . . . Viola Taylor . . . The name drew a blank.

"Red hair? A bit on the shy side? When I arrived, she struggled so, but she was so good to stay in during lunch or after school occasionally, and toward the end of last year it all seemed to click." Emma wove between the desks, drawing ever closer, and Frederick shrank back.

He couldn't deal with her and her sunshine. Not when his soul was nothing but shadows.

"Which is why I'm so delighted we're doing *Met in Thee Tonight*." She chatted on, seemingly oblivious to his discomfort. ". . . Because she'll simply shine. Oh, and Patrick McGowan. How did he do with—?"

"He was fine." Frederick tried to keep the sharpness out of his voice but failed miserably. "The day was fine."

Black pointy-toed shoes paused before his desk. The right one tapped quietly, back and forth, as it always did when Emma was pondering something. Funny how some things remained the same, even from childhood.

"Of course," she declared, with a snap of her fingers. "You're tired. Who wouldn't be when it's this close to the end of the term? To Christmas?"

You, apparently. He managed to keep that comment from slipping

out, though not without supreme effort. “Yes. Tired.” He hoped the words didn’t ring as false to Emma’s ears as they did to his own.

She smiled, merry and bright. “A few days under your belt, and you’ll be right as rain.”

“If only it were that simple.” That comment, he couldn’t suppress. He focused his attention on shoving a pile of half-finished lesson plans into his satchel, a project for the evening whilst seated before a roaring fire and nursing a hot drink of some sort.

“What happened to you?” she asked quietly. “The Frederick Oberstein I remember would’ve loved nothing more than to sit back and discuss how the day went. To laugh and share stories and make plans and start working on the play and decorating the school and—”

“The Frederick you remember is dead, Emma.”

Wounded blue eyes blinked, and he looked away.

“What killed him?” she asked at length.

“Maria.” It was one of the few times he’d allowed himself to speak her name aloud.

“Your sister?” Emma’s hand flew to her mouth. “Oh, that’s right. I heard she passed. An accident of some sort, was it?”

“Yes.” He willed away the lump that always formed in his throat when this topic of conversation came up.

“I’m so very sorry, Frederick.”

He nodded his thanks. “The accident was right before Christmas, and ever since, it’s been . . . difficult to get in the spirit of the season.”

“Of course it would be difficult.” Emma’s hands fluttered through the air. “The first Christmas without my mother was terribly painful.”

But your mother had been ill for two years, he wanted to argue. For her, death was sweet relief. She wasn’t in the bloom of youth, with her whole life in front of her.

And you didn’t as good as kill her.

But then Emma placed her hand on top of his, quieting his thoughts and stopping his breath. She hadn’t touched him since she thrust a letter into his hand at the train station the day he left for Ypsilanti. The day he was full of life and energy and enthusiasm, blissfully unaware of how ascending that platform and taking his seat

would set in motion a chain of events that couldn't be undone, that would irreversibly and irredeemably alter who he was.

I think—despite everything—that I've fallen in love with you, Frederick Oberstein.

He still had that letter at home in a drawer. He'd read it and reread it so many times the folds in the paper were worn almost to the point of falling apart. Though she'd dominated his thoughts for as long as he could remember, he'd had no inkling she felt the same. And the timing couldn't have been worse. On the cusp of starting his brand-new life, his old one had popped up to say *that*?

And though he'd felt the same, he'd never written back. He wanted to present himself to her whole and complete, degree in hand and career firmly established. He'd wanted to be perfect for her. That was what she deserved.

What a fool he'd been. Because now even his old, imperfect self was an unattainable goal.

For at least the thousandth time, he wished to go back to that fateful December night. An hour. Only an hour.

If he could just have that single hour back, everything about his life would be different.

Sliding his fingers from beneath Emma's, he cleared his throat and studied the scarred oaken surface of Rudolf de Haven's desk. "Anyhow. If I'm less enthusiastic about the Christmas pageant than you remember, that's why."

"We don't have to do *Met in Thee Tonight*, Frederick," she offered quietly. "If it's too painful for you, then—"

"No." His voice was gruffer than he meant it to be. "Produce the new play. Please."

"But—"

"Emma." At last he dared look into those clear blue eyes. "You yourself said we needed to put one foot in front of the other. Do what God has put before us, even when it doesn't make sense. He put me here, back in the classroom, in this school, doing this play, with you, and . . . and I can't help but think there must be some kind of reason

for it.” At this moment, punishment was the only purpose he could think of.

If he served his sentence, though, perhaps God would have mercy on him.

“But you’re the principal,” she said. “You truly could have put your foot down. Said no. It would’ve been well within your rights. Why didn’t you?”

“Because I know you,” he replied, with a smile that came far more easily than he’d expected. “And I know that whatever objections I might raise are no match for your determination.”

Amusement sparkled in her eyes.

“Am I wrong?” he asked.

“Frequently, yes. But on this occasion, no.”

“All right then.” He stood and retrieved his satchel from the desk.

Emma started toward the classroom door, then turned back, delicate brow furrowed. “You’ll let me know if it gets to be too much for you?”

Oh, sweet Emma. Teaching again. Christmas. The play. Being in her presence, tantalized and tortured by the one thing he’d always wanted but had never been good enough for.

It was already too much, and then some.

He forced assurance into his voice. “I’m confident it will all be just fine.”

It wouldn’t. Not for him.

But for Emma? For the students?

He could only hope.