



Pearl

by Lauraine Snelling

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Chapter Twelve

Chicago, May 1883

Growing town in western Dakota Territory seeking teacher for all grades. Applicants must be of good moral character, preferably with teaching experience, without family encumbrances, able to relocate by the opening of school in September. Send letter of intent and list of qualifications and experience. Include return address and references.

The ad closed with the address to which applications should be sent.

Pearl Hossfuss read the advertisement for the third time. She had all the qualifications but one—family encumbrances. Would her father let her go? Would it be worth applying?

At a knock on her door, she laid the paper back on the table after folding it so the advertisement lay hidden.

“Come in.” With an unconscious movement, her right hand checked to be sure the high ruching-trimmed neckline of her fine lawn waist covered the wrinkled red scar on her neck.

“Supper is served, miss.” Erin, the newly hired Irish maid, bobbed her head, setting the curls that were supposed to be covered by the white mobcap to bouncing.

“I’ll be right there, thank you.” Pearl stopped at the mirror to make sure not a hair had escaped from the chignon bound firmly to the base of her head. Neither dimple in cheeks that once bloomed like the freshest of peaches had the temerity to show forth. Seeing herself as passable, Pearl adjusted her favorite piece of jewelry, her mother’s cameo.

She shook her head at the image in the mirror. She should be smiling, happy. After all, her father was out of town on business, and the family would eat in the nursery, no formal dining room tonight. No surprise guests. None of those looks she’d been receiving

since she had explained to her matchmaking father that the man he'd been bringing around was not acceptable.

Pearl made a face. As if what she thought and had expressed so gently—she still thought she had done well in not speaking the way she wanted to—was of any value in her father's eyes.

You've always done what he said, so why should he expect anything different this time? I have tried. I really have given it my all. Pearl Elaine Hossfuss has been a model daughter, on the outside at least. She repeated the words, this time aloud, then added, "I should be grateful for all the education, the freedom to teach, access to books and art and music, and a stepmother who cares deeply for me instead of treating me the way others have been known to do." Should be grateful. But wasn't. Lord, please help me feel grateful. I have so much to be grateful for. She waited, hoping to feel a rush of something. Dead and empty wasn't what she'd asked for.

Thank me anyway were the words that came.

Now that was an unusual thought. A sacrifice of praise. Where had she read that? In the Psalms? Mentally she flipped through the verses she'd memorized over the years. Memorizing had always come easy to her. "I will praise thee," King David sang and said often.

Lord, I will praise thee. I will come unto thee with singing. For thou are my God, and I am thy handmaiden. Thou, O Lord, art the keeper of my ways; thy thoughts to me art constant, thy ways—thy ways....

Is all this thy way, Lord?

What a question. Now, if only she had some answers.

She fingered the ruching again and turned to look at the advertisement. Should she show Amalia? Should she just go ahead and apply? Should she accept the attentions of Sidney Longstreet?

She shuddered at the last thought. No, that one was not even a possibility.

* * *

The next day Pearl and Amalia were taking tea in the library where a fire snapped and crackled in the fireplace to ward off the chill. "There are far worse problems in life than being married to a boring man," Amalia said. "I do not think Mr. Longstreet would ever be cruel to you."

Pearl sipped her tea, cupping her cold hands around the warm china. "No, I don't believe that about him. But would no conversation not be a cruelty also?"

“Perhaps he is merely shy around your father. After all, he is in Mr. Hossfuss’s employ.”

“Perhaps. Does Father know that you have been so candid with me?”

Amalia shook her head and gave a slight smile. “No. That is one thing you must learn. Women talk things over. Men just do and always assume they are right.”

Pearl pondered her stepmother’s words. “So now Father has invited Mr. Longstreet and his children to dinner after church. Why is he suddenly so interested in finding me a husband? He’s left me alone for years.”

Amalia laid a hand on Pearl’s arm. “Your father loves you and is concerned about your future, but I fear it is a comment of mine that prompted all this.”

“How could that be?”

“I mentioned not too long ago that I thought a certain young man would be a good match for you. I had no idea your father was even listening. It was just one of those musing things, you understand? I want you to be happy, and I don’t believe for a minute that you were created to be an old-maid schoolteacher.” She said the last words emphatically, as though she’d been thinking them long enough to truly believe them.

“I had no idea.”

“I know. I have not mentioned my dreams for you because I did not want to influence yours. Ah, Pearl, I could not love you more if you had indeed been part of my body. You are the daughter of my heart, and I only want the best for you.”

Pearl could feel tears burning the backs of her eyes. “Thank you.” She laid her cheek against Amalia’s hand. “But I thought I was most happy. I love my teaching, I love my children.”

“Perhaps you could learn to love this man too. Loving his children would be easy for you. They need a mother.”

“Like we needed a mother?”

“True, but I also fell in love with your father before the wedding.”

“I find it hard to think of anyone falling in love with Father.”

“He is an interesting man, no?”

“True.”

“He is interested in many things, and his enthusiasm carries others along. He is generous, he believes in God, and he can be very amusing.”

“He is also bossy, didactic, and always thinks he is right.”

Amalia chuckled. “True, but there are ways to get around him if one sets her mind to that.” She poured herself more tea. She glanced at Pearl out of the side of her eye.

“And I always meet him head on, don’t I?”

“You have a tendency that way. You are much like him, you know.”

“I see.” And she did. Was Amalia using the same tactics of finesse on her that she used on Father?

“I believe Sidney Longstreet would be malleable and could become more alive in the hands of the right woman.”

Pearl thought for a few moments. “Be that as it may, I do not believe I am the right woman.”

“But you could become so.”

Why did that hurt? Pearl closed her eyes and inhaled the scent of the few lavender seeds that Amalia always had Cook add to the steeping teapot.

Pearl did not doubt that Amalia did love her and wanted the best for her. Perhaps it was time that she started treating her like a mother, trusting her like a mother. She took a deep breath. “I have seen an ad for a teacher in the newspaper. I am thinking of writing an application.” There, she’d brought it out in the open.

“I see. And where would this be?”

“A small town somewhere in Dakotah Territory.”

“But that is so far away.”

“I know.” Far enough that I will be out of sight, out of mind. Mr. Longstreet will find himself another wife, and Father will let me live my life as my own.

“Would you have run off without telling us where you were going?”

“If that is what it took, yes, but here I am telling you in the confidence that you will not tell Father. I must do that myself.” She slightly lifted one shoulder. “If they were to employ me, which is most doubtful, I would want to give Father a fait accompli.”

“I could perhaps soften the way for you.”

“You would do that?”

“Ah, my dearest Pearl, I do not want you to leave Chicago, but if you must, I will do all I can to make the parting amicable. A family can remain close even across the miles of that prairie I’ve heard about. At least I pray to God that is so.”

That night before retiring, Pearl wrote her letter of application, sealed the envelope, and dropped it off at the post office on her way to school. The die was cast.

* * *

Proper children they were, their manners correct, but their clothing was in need of a woman’s hand. The youngest clung to his eldest sister’s hand as if fearful of being out of her sight.

Pearl greeted them each by name, Henrietta, Oswald, Betsy, Irvin, and Benjamin, pretending as if she were greeting a new class in the fall. But her smiles elicited nothing but polite nods as the five clung together. Were they as bland as their father or shy or still sad beyond measure at the loss of their mother? How long had she been gone?

Pearl remembered the ache she’d lived with for so long after her mother died. But at least she had not been forced to leave home and move to a strange city. Who has been caring for you all? Is there an aunt or grandmother? Or only housekeepers? Nursemaids? Nannies? If only someone would talk with her!

“Come, my brothers and sister are out in the yard. We have time to play before dinner.” She glanced to their father for permission, and at his nod the five rigid soldiers followed her without a word, just glances among themselves.

“Anna and Arnet, come meet our guests,” Pearl called to her siblings.

The twins bailed off the swings their father had had built for them and ran up. Jorge Jr., leaving his hoop, joined them also.

Pearl introduced them all, then suggested, “We could play goose, goose, gander if you like.”

“But we have our best clothes on,” Betsy, the middle child, said. “What if we get dirty?”

“Oh, I see.”

“We could play jump rope. You won’t get dirty that way.” Anna took hold of Pearl’s hand. “Unless you fall down, but I don’t ever fall.”

“Or we could play charades,” Jorge contributed.

“I don’t like charades. You always win.” Arnet turned his back on his brother.

“We could show them the baby bunnies.” Anna turned to Betsy. “You ever held a baby bunny?”

Betsy shook her head, eyes round. “No, never. Could we?” She looked to Henrietta, the oldest, who shrugged and picked up Benjamin, the two-year-old who had clung to her skirts after she set him down earlier.

“Why don’t we all sit here on the grass in a circle, and Anna and Arnet will bring the bunnies.” Pearl did as she suggested and smiled for the others to join her.

“Ooh, look,” Betsy squealed in delight as Anna set a tiny white bunny with pink eyes and nose in her lap.

“You pet him like this.” Anna showed proper bunny handling, cuddling one under her chin in gentle hands.

Pearl held one for little Benjamin to touch, his pudgy finger guided by his older sister’s hand.

Between Anna and Arnet, they had the children laughing and giggling over the tiny creatures.

“His nose. He wiggles his nose.”

“Look, she’s eating grass.”

“They like clover better, see?” Anna fed a clover leaf to another. The bunny nibbled it daintily, tiny nose twitching, front paws on Anna’s thumb.

“How many rabbits do you have?” Henrietta asked Jorge.

“Two does and a buck, plus these five little ones. The other doe will have her babies any day now.”

“The buck—we call him Homer—is the father to all the babies.” Arnet set his bunny down on the grass. “If your father would let you, you could have one of these when they are older. Rabbits make good house pets. They’re easier to house train than a dog or cat.”

Pearl smiled at the shock on Henrietta’s face.

“A rabbit in the house?”

“Sure, we kept Snowflake in the nursery until we got Homer.”

“I’ve taken Josephine to my classroom. She was a great delight.”

“Josephine?”

“She’s the other doe. We leave her alone now, so we won’t disturb her when her babies are due. Sometimes mother rabbits eat their young if they get upset.”

Pearl wished she could clap a hand over Arnet’s mouth at times like this. Horror drained Henrietta’s face of all color.

“You got to be careful, you know.” Arnet held a bunny up and rubbed noses with it.

“I think we better put these back with their mother. I saw the maid wave us in to dinner.”

Betsy kissed one of the babies on the head and handed it back to Anna. “I’ll ask Father if we can have one.”

“We can tell him how to build a cage and all.” Anna and Arnet walked off with their hands full of baby bunnies, and one rode in Anna’s apron pocket.

“Thank you,” called Oswald, the boy just older than Betsy who, up to that point, had not said a word.

Pearl stood and shook any loose grass off her skirt. “Come, let’s wash up.”

* * *

“Thank you, Miss Hossfuss, for entertaining my children,” Mr. Longstreet said as they were about to leave several hours later.

“You are most welcome.”

“I ...” He turned his hat in his hands. “I hope to see you again soon?”

If only he would look at me instead of his hat brim when he talks. Could one really make something of this man, as Amalia said?

“We are having a soiree here next Saturday, and we look forward to the pleasure of your company.” Amalia flicked Pearl a glance.

A glance of what? Apology? Question? Pearl stood in the doorway with her mother and father, wishing their guests good-night and Godspeed, but feeling that it might be one of the worst nights of her life.

Excerpted from:

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