## Excerpt from A Bargain to Keep

Chapter 1

Columbus, Nebraska July 31, 1878

The nice saying that time made everything better was a lie.

Jeanne dunked a plate into her rinse water, then piled it to dry with about twenty others. And the stack of used plates still towered. She hadn't known an establishment could own so many plates until she had come to work at the Columbus Hotel, but she now stood corrected. She could wash dishes all morning and still not be caught up by lunchtime.

Jeanne heaved a sigh and plunged her hands into the dishwater again, fingers seeking the next plate. One week working for the hotel and already she felt trapped, smothered by the effort of trying to fit in with the staff and keep up with the work. They needed more help—everyone knew it—but Mr. Greason seemed uninclined to do anything to remedy the situation. He probably figured hiring Jeanne had been enough.

The others seemed to think it would have been—if Jeanne would run a little faster, cut her words with customers to a bare minimum, and above all, learn to keep her stomach from rebelling at inconvenient moments.

No, time didn't make everything better. Just three weeks ago, her biggest concern had been getting Irving's supper on the table at six o'clock sharp, and now she was praying for the strength just to make it through one more miserable day—one more day of enduring the blistering heat of the kitchen, one more day of keeping Mr. Greason happy with her efficiency, one more day of tolerating all the hotel's nasty smells that only heightened her morning sickness. And the worst thing was that she could see no end to this misery.

"Jeanne!" Effie Harding flew through the door that separated the kitchen from the dining room. "Would you get out here and help? I've got crowds of diners waiting for their orders to be filled, and you're working on the *dishes*? Can't you use your head to see what needs to be done?"

Use your head. Jeanne's face heated, and wiping her hands on her apron, she hurried toward Effie. "I'm sorry."

She nearly collided with Cook, and as Cook began spluttering, Jeanne mumbled another apology and ducked around her.

Everything would have been simple if Irving hadn't up and died. Actually, everything would have been simple if she had never married Irving in the first place. If Papa hadn't been so certain that women's minds were too weak to grasp the concept of money, he wouldn't have forced her and Irving to marry over his deathbed, and if she hadn't married Irving, Papa's inheritance would still be safely in the bank, not lost at the gaming tables.

That wasn't to say that Irving hadn't been a good man. He did his duty and made sure the larder was full, and he was smart enough that he never gambled them into debt—just the next thing to it.

But that didn't mean she had loved him.

Jeanne pushed the dining room door open, shaking her head to dispel the thought of Irving. She had been thinking of him more in the past couple days, trying to remember what color his eyes had been and wondering what color his hair had been before he lost it, which had been long before she was introduced to him. She had never found the right moment to tell him about the baby on the way.

Jeanne scanned the dining room, searching for the most impatient-looking customer, and saw the Columbus sheriff seated by the window. There. He was the one she would target. It would never do to make the sheriff impatient.

Even Effie can't fault that logic.

Sheriff Calaman and his friend were busy looking at a bunch of paper spread on the table before them, and Jeanne stopped beside their table, clearing her throat. Neither of the men looked up.

Jeanne shifted from one foot to the other, and since the sheriff's friend was seated closer to her, she tapped him on the shoulder. "Excuse me!"

He spun around so fast that the brim of his hat hit her arm and sent his hat tumbling. "Do you have to scare a man like that?"

Oh, dear—now she had made him mad. Why was she always sticking her wrong foot forward?

"I'm sorry." Jeanne smiled, trying to smooth the situation over, but he didn't smile back. Jeanne bit her lip. Well, she would just have to show him that she meant no harm. Jeanne bent to pick up his hat, and too late, saw that the man had the same idea. Their heads connected with a crack. He yelped, and she staggered back, a blur of colors swirling in her vision. That definitely had not been the way to win herself into his good graces.

Shaking her head to clear it, Jeanne fumbled for the notebook in her pocket and turned to Sheriff Calaman. She had no hope of getting anywhere with his friend. "Your order?"

The sheriff didn't seem impressed with her performance. "Roast dinner and potatoes and gravy, if you will. And apple cobbler for dessert."

She nodded and scribbled the note down, then made herself face the sheriff's friend again.

He didn't look particularly impressed either. "Same as Calaman," he said, lifting a hand to rub his forehead. Jeanne's eye caught on a metallic glint on his shirt. Oh, dear. So he was a lawman too.

"I'll bring your order shortly," she said, spinning away on her heel. Jeanne McAllister, if you don't get this job straightened out, Mr. Greason is going to fire you, and then you'll be in a real mess.

Jeanne shoved through the door to the kitchen, a blast of heat hitting her in the face. Would getting fired really be so bad? On a July day like this when the mercury was in the nineties, working in the kitchen was brutal.

But she needed this job. The position had come as a direct answer to prayer, and with that being the case, she really had no right to complain.

Jeanne grabbed two plates and set to work dishing them up with man-sized helpings. Effie stuck her head through the door and yelled for three more plates, so Jeanne dished up those as well, then arranged the dishes on two serving trays. Hoisting one on each hand, she shoved the door open with her hip and made her way into the dining room.

"Over here, Jeanne!" A blond at a nearby table waved her down, then began inspecting her immaculate hand as Jeanne shifted directions and walked toward her.

"Miss Maynard, I hope you're doing well." Jeanne knew her voice sounded strained, but Allison Maynard could ruin a day just by showing her face.

"Oh, Jeanne, it's just Allison." Allison smoothed down her full skirts, the little smile on her facing telling Jeanne plainly that she knew she was stepping on her nerves. "You've been working here for six days, haven't you?"

Jeanne jerked her head in a nod. And Allison had made sure to make an appearance every one of those days.

"And twenty-one days since your husband died." Allison clucked her tongue. "Such a shame. You were the belle of the ball when you and your father arrived here in Columbus. Guess you should have had the sense to choose a young man before your father married you off to a man not a day younger than himself."

"I'm still glad I turned down your brother's proposal, if that's what you're digging for. And Irving wasn't such a bad man."

Allison's eyebrows rose delicately. "But he gambled you out of your home. How can you call that good?"

"I didn't say that." Jeanne's voice rose a bit higher, and realizing that heads were turning her way, she lowered her voice. "He provided well enough for me while he was alive."

"But now that he's gone, look at where you are. So tragic that you should fall so low!" Allison twisted the ring on her finger, watching Jeanne's face. "Oh, did I forget to mention that I'm engaged? The wedding will be in two months. Not that you'll be there, of course. I'm only inviting the elite, and since you've fallen to this level—well, I'm sure you understand."

Jeanne's face heated. "Allison, why are you rubbing Irving's death in? I know you're angry that I turned down your brother, but it wasn't my fault that he decided to join up with the navy. I'd appreciate if you just left me alone."

Allison pasted on a smile. "Oh, but you shouldn't be alone during this time. Besides, I don't come here to see you. I come for lunch, and if I happen to see you—well, it would be impolite to ignore you."

"I wish you would."

"I have to keep checking on you. I would hate to lose track of you if you were to suddenly lose your job or some such crazy Thing."

"Lose my job?" Jeanne stepped closer to her. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, it must be hard for you to be thrust into such a demanding position. And if you're struggling to keep customers happy, why should Mr. Greason keep you on?" Allison waved her hand toward Effie, and Jeanne caught the glare the maid sent her. "I mean, here you are wasting even more time talking to me."

Heat flooded Jeanne's face. "Are you trying to see me fail? Is that what you want?" Her voice pitched high again, but Jeanne felt too upset to care. "Maybe this is some kind of a game for you, but I'll have you know that I need this job, and if you try to interfere, you'll be very sorry, Miss Maynard."

Allison pressed a hand to her throat. "Is that a threat?"

"Yes, it is a threat!" Jeanne leaned closer. "And I will act upon it if I need to."

She turned to storm away but stopped short at the sight of a man with a badge blocking her path.

"Now, now—what's the trouble, ladies?" Sheriff Calaman asked, hands on his hips.

The sudden stop shifted all the plates on the trays in Jeanne's hands, and she spread her fingers, desperately trying to regain control. The tray in her right hand began to tip, and Jeanne lunged a step forward in an effort to keep it from spilling. She was too late. The tray full of three plates of roast dinner and potatoes and gravy flipped out of her hands and smacked right into Sheriff Calaman's chest.

Sheriff Calaman uttered the strangest noise Jeanne had ever heard, and Jeanne sucked in her breath. "Sheriff Calaman, I— I'm so sorry!"

His mouth opened and closed, but when no words came out, Jeanne decided it might be best if she fetched a towel for the mess instead. Clutching the remaining tray with both hands, she spun around and crashed right into the second lawman. The tray hit his chest, and before Jeanne had time to blink, his shirt was covered in dinner as well.

"Oh, my! I'm so-"

He grabbed her arms and had them behind her back before

the apology was off her tongue.

"Assaulting a law officer is a crime worthy of jail time, you know." His voice was low, but it sent shivers down Jeanne's spine.

"But I didn't mean—it was an accident." Jeanne looked at Sheriff Calaman, willing him to step in and tell his friend to let her go. But the sheriff was looking at Allison instead.

"Was it true that this young woman was threatening you?" Allison lifted tear-filled eyes. "Yes, Sheriff. She was."

The man holding her arms tightened his grip just a bit, and Sheriff Calaman turned to her, his gaze heavy enough that Jeanne felt the weight straight through her middle. "You, young lady, are in trouble."