MAID to MAICE

DEEANNE GIST

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Biltmore Estate Near Asheville, North Carolina August 1898

L ike a butterfly breaking free from its confining cocoon, Tillie Reese emerged from the barren, tan-colored servants' hall into the opulence of Biltmore's main level. These predawn hours were her favorite. All was dark, no one stirred, and she had the entire floor—easily a half acre in size—all to herself.

She'd walked this path many times and could navigate it without candle or lamp. For just a moment, she imagined herself mistress of the chateau. Elegantly dressed, gliding across the parquet and trying to decide whether to have Chef prepare *petites bouchées* or *puits d'amour*. Whether to spend the morning reading Yeats, Browning, or Dickens. Whether to call the carriage round for a drive through the country or ride one of the thoroughbreds waiting in the stable.

Tightening her grip on her housemaid's box, she inhaled deeply. The polish she'd made of linseed oil, vinegar, turpentine, and wine tickled her nose. She allowed herself a sneeze something strictly forbidden were anyone about.

The click of her heels echoed throughout the vast, wideopen area as she skirted the sunken atrium filled with palms, exotic plants, blooming shrubs, and a large fountain sculpture yet to be turned on. She finally reached the tapestry gallery and paused, listening to the silence, enjoying the anonymity of the dark.

Let there be light.

She pushed the familiar white button. Electric lights flared, illuminating a room so long it could hold two modest houses. Several groupings of sage brocade sofas and chairs filled the area. Huge tapestries lined one wall. Opposite them stood a wall of windows and French doors.

The soft hum of the Edison bulbs bid her good morning. The thrill and miracle of the electric lights never failed to stir her. But this morning something else warred for her attention, and suddenly, the light made her feel exposed, vulnerable, naked.

She touched the black button. Darkness slammed back down like a closing trunk lid. All was quiet again. Not a whisper of sound.

She held her breath. Felt her heart hammering in her breast. And allowed the thought she'd been hiding since last night to fully form in her head.

Bénédicte was leaving. Returning to France. Leaving the new Mrs. Vanderbilt without a lady's maid.

A lady's maid. Next to housekeeper, the highest-ranking

position for a woman. The servant who had morning tea brought to her by the first housemaid while the second housemaid made up a fire in her room.

The servant who was free to take a bath as often as she liked. Who traveled with Mrs. Vanderbilt. Who read books *books!*—aloud to Mrs. Vanderbilt. Who was required to dress in the same fashions as Mrs. Vanderbilt. Best of all, a lady's maid earned quite a bit more money, so she could help her family and others in the community who were in need.

Tillie, as head parlormaid, would surely be considered for the position. The housekeeper had requested a private audience with her before breakfast. Lord willing, it was to discuss just that.

After hugging the thought one last time, she carefully returned it to the recesses of her mind. Dawdling in fantasies when she should be setting the gallery to rights was no way to put her best foot forward.

Pushing the white button, she again flooded the room with light. If the entire first floor was to be in complete readiness before the master and his bride descended for the day, she'd best get busy.

Chatter, laughter, and the clinking of plated ware filled the servants' dining hall, but Tillie participated in none of it. She avoided eye contact with the long row of liveried men sitting opposite her and the equal number of uniformed women beside her. She took particular care not to glance her brother's way. One look at Allan and he'd know something was up.

The dining hall servant, a young girl of sixteen, refilled Tillie's glass of milk. "Is everythin' to your liking, Miss Tillie? You've barely touched your liver and bacon." "It's fine, Nell. Delicious, actually."

Nell glanced at the clock but said nothing as its minute hand jumped a step closer to the half-hour mark.

Tillie took a large bite of potatoes. She'd have to eat quickly if she was going to finish before eight-thirty. But after her meeting with the housekeeper, her stomach had lost its ability to digest.

"May I have your attention, please?" From the head of the table, Mrs. Winter made her request only once, and just that quickly, a hush fell over the room of servants. As housekeeper, she was second only to the Vanderbilts, outranking even the butler.

Her gaze briefly touched the butler's at the opposite end of the table; then she surveyed the long rows of men and women between them. "As you know, Bénédicte has decided to return to France as soon as a replacement for her can be found."

All eyes turned to Mrs. Vanderbilt's lady's maid. She sat immediately to the right of Mrs. Winter and across from the hallboy, underbutlers, and footmen. The dark green fabric of her gown strewn with pink and yellow blossoms caused her olive skin to glow.

From what Tillie had been told, between the language barrier and the isolation of Biltmore, Bénédicte could not adjust. She wanted to go home.

Next to Bénédicte was Tillie. On Tillie's right, the head chambermaid, then the first housemaid and so forth all the way down the table to the laundresses and scullery maids.

"Rather than importing someone from France or England, or even from Newport," Mrs. Winter continued, "Mrs. Vanderbilt has decided to award Bénédicte's position to one of our current staff members." The attention immediately shifted to Tillie and the three girls to her right—the leaders of the domestic corps.

"After much consideration, she has narrowed the choice to either Tillie or Lucy."

Dixie Brown bent over her plate, capturing Tillie's attention. The excitement and delight on her friend's face was unmistakable.

Tillie offered her a slight smile, then glanced at her brother. Allan's brows had converged. His thoughts unreadable.

Mrs. Winter took a sip of coffee. "While Mrs. Vanderbilt is deciding, Tillie and Lucy will be called upon to take on a few of Bénédicte's duties. As a result, some of you will be required to take care of whatever chores they leave behind."

To Tillie's immediate right, Lucy Lewers sat tall and confident, her caramel-colored hair coiled neatly beneath a snowy cap, which was nothing more than a piece of frilly cloth resting on the crown of her head. Long lashes framed eyes the same caramel color as her hair. Her skin held no blemish, her profile no flaw. With the slightest lifting of her chin, she looked down the table at all the underlings, as if her appointment to the position was imminent.

"Finish up," Mrs. Winter admonished. "The day is calling."

Allan cornered Tillie on the way to morning prayers.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Grabbing her by the arm, he propelled her into the canning pantry and closed the door. He stood a half foot taller than she, with wide shoulders and hair every bit as thick and black as her own.

"I only found out myself just before we sat down to breakfast." She rubbed the place he'd squeezed. "What are you going to do?"

She cocked her head. "Do? I'm going to work my fingers to the bone and beg God for His favor. What do you think I'm going to do?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "It'll change everything. You'll be one of *them*, the swell set."

She smiled at the term referring to the butler, chef, lady's maid, and valet. "But I want to be one of them. Can you imagine all the opportunities I'll have? The pay? The clothes? The privileges? The travel?"

"Travel? You can't so much as look at a carriage without getting sick. How, exactly, do you plan to manage that?"

She stiffened. "I'm older now. I'm sure the motion won't affect me like it did when I was little. Besides, think of the freedom I'll have every single day. I'll be able to—"

"Freedom?" he scoffed. "There's no such thing as freedom with that job. You'll be at her ladyship's beck and call all hours of the day and night."

"But that's just it. I'll be confidante to *Edith Stuyvesant* Dresser Vanderbilt!"

"You won't be on the fourth floor with Dixie and all the other girls. You'll be stuck on the second floor with *her* and the high-and-mighty Mrs. Winter. You won't be able to have dessert, or tea, or gossip with the rest of us. You'll have to retire to Mrs. Winter's room with the swell set."

"And partake of the same desserts the Vanderbilts are having!" Tillie shook her head in mock sorrow. "That will certainly be a burden."

He tightened his mouth. "You won't be able to get married."

She frowned. "None of us can get married. Not unless we want to lose our jobs."

"You could get married. It would just mean you couldn't work in the house. You'd have to work on one of Mr. Vanderbilt's farms or in the dairy or something like that."

"Why would I want to do that when I can work here? Are you crazy?" She reached for the door.

He pressed his hand against it. "A lady's maid position will eat up the best years of your life, Tillie. Then the minute a gray hair pops up or a tiny wrinkle forms, out you go. Only the young and beautiful can be ladies' maids."

"Gray hairs? You're talking to me about gray hairs? I'm *eighteen*."

"I know how old you are."

"Then what are you so worried about? I'll be careful with my earnings. And when the time comes, leaving my job won't be a concern because I'll have enough to live on for the rest of my life."

"Alone. With no one to keep you company. And not at all in the style you'll have become accustomed to."

Rolling her eyes, she crossed her arms. "I thought you'd be happy for me. If I get this position, Mama will think she's died and gone to heaven."

"Conrad's in love with you."

She stilled, then slowly lowered her arms. "Conrad? The footman?"

She pictured the gangly young man who was so skinny he stuffed his stockings in order to give himself shapely calves.

"You know any other Conrads?" Allan asked.

Anger surged through her. "Well, he'd better put me right out of his mind. I'm not caring which nor whether about him nor anybody else, and if he jeopardizes this for me, I'll have his head on a platter." She hammered a finger against her brother's chest. "You understand me?" "You don't even like him a little? All the girls flirt with him."

"They'd better not let Mrs. Winter catch them or they'll be the ones sacked, not him." She took a deep breath. "I want this job, Bubby. I want it more than anything I've ever wanted in my life. You tell Conrad to stay clear of me. You hear?"

Sighing, he released the door. "I hear."



I will not cast up my accounts. I will not cast up my accounts.

No matter how many times Tillie recited the mantra, the nausea would not go away. The carriage hit a rut, jostling her inside and out. Gritting her teeth, she looked out the window, but watching the trees and foliage roll past like ocean waves made it worse.

Oh, why couldn't we have ridden with the top down?

She had much more control in an open carriage. It was the enclosed ones which gave her the most trouble. Her palms began to sweat. *Think of something else*.

Edith Vanderbilt sat across from her, reading *The Prince and the Pauper*, her body swaying in rhythm with the carriage. She had brown hair and hazel eyes, was twenty-five years old, nearly six feet tall, and commanded such presence Tillie felt small by comparison—even though she herself was five foot eight.

The stale air inside the carriage thickened. Tillie's nostrils pinched together in an effort to draw in oxygen. *Think of something else*.

Mrs. Vanderbilt had met and married Mr. Vanderbilt in Paris, though she was originally from New York. So the gowns she'd brought with her were the very latest in European fashions.

Tillie's nausea crept up to chest level. She slipped a finger between her neck and collar.

You're not a child. You're a grown woman. Think of something else.

The blue serge Mrs. Vanderbilt wore was different from anything Tillie had ever seen. The skirt fastened at the side and was elaborately trimmed with graduated braids of different shades and styles. The epaulettes covering slightly puffed sleeves were pointed and trimmed in the same style.

A prickling sensation began behind Tillie's eyes. The nausea now sat at the back of her throat. Beads of moisture formed on her upper lip. *Don't do this, Tillie. Don't.*

She concentrated harder on the gown. If she were to earn the lady's maid position, would the outfit one day be hers when it was tossed aside?

Moisture collected on her neck, back, and under her arms. She opened her mouth, quietly drawing in deep breaths, then blowing them out. *Think of something else*.

She eyed her mistress more closely. Hers wasn't the lush hourglass figure so popular nowadays, but more willowy. Tillie was somewhere in between. But if she needed more fabric in the bodice, she'd be able to take a few inches from the length of the skirt.

The carriage hit another bump. Gagging, Tillie slammed her eyes shut and pressed gloved fingers to her mouth.

"Are you all right, Tillie?"

Please, Lord. Make it go away. I cannot cast up my accounts on my first assignment!

She swallowed, forcing the bile back down. "I'm fine, ma'am. Thank you."

Placing a ribbon between the pages of her book, Mrs. Vanderbilt set it to the side, then tapped on the roof of the carriage. It immediately slowed, then pulled to a stop. The vehicle rocked as the driver bounced off. The door opened.

"Is anything amiss, ma'am?"

"I think I'd like to ride the rest of the way with the top down, Earl. Would you mind?"

He held out his hand. "Not at all, ma'am."

She placed her hand in his, allowing him to guide her through the door. "Come, Tillie. Let's stretch our legs, shall we?"

The tall young coachman offered her a hand.

Tillie covered her entire mouth. Tears sprung to her eyes. Her shoulders jerked in an effort to hold the sickness inside.

Earl leaned in to see what the delay was, his eyes widening. "Take the deuce."

Grabbing her around the waist, he hauled her out of the carriage and bodily carried her to the nearest tree. Too miserable to object, she waited for him to release her, then crumpled to her knees, unable to control the waves of nausea any longer.

"It's all right." Mrs. Vanderbilt smiled from across the open carriage. She'd insisted on Tillie facing forward while she rode backward. No amount of naysaying would persuade her otherwise.

And if that wasn't bad enough, after humiliating herself in front of Mrs. Vanderbilt and Earl, Tillie then succumbed to tears. Silent tears, but tears nonetheless. Tears which refused to stop. And it didn't matter anyway. Her chances of becoming a lady's maid were gone.

The thought brought a fresh bout. She made no pretense of delicately patting her eyes with her handkerchief. She wiped them, then blew her nose, knowing full well it was unladylike. But then, so were puffy eyes, a blotched face, and a red nose.

She rubbed her head. Her mother would be heartbroken. It would have been better if Tillie had never been in the running than to have been selected as a candidate only to be withdrawn before the contest had even begun.

And not just because of her mother, but because of Tillie's own aspirations. Becoming a lady's maid was her one chance to come up in the world and see beyond the borders of Asheville, North Carolina. But now that chance was gone. Trampled. All because she couldn't ride in a vehicle for any length of time without getting sick.

Mrs. Vanderbilt cocked her head to the side. "My sister used to be afflicted with your same ailment."

Tillie sniffled.

"For her, riding backward, being enclosed, or doing stitching while in motion was what usually brought it on."

Tillie nodded. "Me too. I'm so sorry, ma'am."

"Nonsense. Don't give it another thought." She held up her book. "I found this in my husband's library. It's by a man named Mark Twain. It's quite good."

Tillie crinkled the wet handkerchief in her hands. "I've never read him before."

"You like to read?"

"I love to." Looking off into the distance, she scanned the Blue Ridge Mountains, which framed the horizon. "When I was a girl, I collected my own library. Inside the cover of each book, I'd write 'Private Library,' along with a number and my name."

Mrs. Vanderbilt leaned back. "And what books did you have in your library?"

"Let's see . . . The Three Musketeers, Ben Hur, Macbeth, Oliver Twist."

"A rather adventurous list."

She dropped her gaze. "I had three older brothers and I desperately wanted to be one of them—one of the big toads, I used to say." She shrugged. "So I read books like *Pride and Prejudice* only under the cover of darkness."

Amusement played at the corners of Mrs. Vanderbilt's lips. "And did you become one of the big toads?"

"No, ma'am. They always saw me as a girl first and a pest second."

She nodded. "I only have sisters, but I can appreciate your wanting to be one of the big toads. I've felt the same way at times."

The chasm between Tillie's world and hers was insurmountable, yet the new Mrs. Vanderbilt was so approachable, so normal, it took Tillie aback. In previous wealthy homes her employers had been haughty at best, tyrannical at worst. She'd not been allowed to speak with the lady of the house unless it was to deliver a message, and then she had to do so in as few words as possible.

Yet here she sat having an actual *conversation* with Mrs. Vanderbilt. And though her mistress expressed a childhood yearning to be one of the big toads, not even her sisters would dare question her standing now.

"Where's your library?" Mrs. Vanderbilt asked. "I assume it isn't up in your room at the Estate?" "Oh no, ma'am. It's at my parents' house. They live on the property, though. My father is a painter. He paints Mr. Vanderbilt's insignia on, well, just about anything that needs it." She gestured to the right and left. "He painted it on the doors of this carriage, for instance."

Eyes bright, Mrs. Vanderbilt raised her brows. "Did he? I'll have to take a closer look when we stop." Picking up *The Prince and the Pauper*, she gave Tillie a rundown of what had happened in the story so far. "I'd ask you to read for me, but I'm afraid that wouldn't be a very good idea under the circumstances."

"I could try, ma'am."

She chuckled. "No, no. I insist. I'll read it to you instead."