

# The Return of Lucy Grace

*The Strasburg Chronicles Book Four*

By

Pippa Greathouse

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# Prologue

*Friday, December 7, 1849*

The woods seemed menacing, as seven-year-old Lucy Grace Kennedy made her way through them. She had waved goodbye to her new friends and gotten off the school bus early with the Johnsons, before trying to walk home. Sheila Johnson had offered her a new slate, since hers had gotten broken that morning at school. She had been lost all day without it.

"Stay on the path," Sheila had said, as she waved goodbye. "It will lead right to your house."

Lucy Grace looked around her now. Where had she gotten off the path? She wasn't sure anymore. Gleason, driving the wagon, had been concerned about leaving her there. But the Johnson property was right next door to Papa's; she had been confident she could find her way home.

Now, she was not so sure. She clutched the new slate tightly in one hand and her basket in the other, as she picked her way around broken and fallen branches; some hung low from the trees and seemed to grab at the long, thick, reddish gold braid that hung down her back.

She gazed at the twisted vines and shadows surrounding her and looked upward. The woods seemed to have a thick canopy above her that shielded the sun; it was impossible to know what time it was. These were the woods Papa had been hired to clear. She tried to comfort herself with that thought. Maybe Papa was here close by somewhere.

"Papa!" she called out. "Papa?" But all she heard was the sound of her own voice as it echoed through the woods, weak and fearful. She sat down on a fallen log and reached into her basket. As always, a good lunch had been packed for her, and she had not eaten it all.

"Oh, be quiet." She scowled down at her stomach, which had been growling at her for the past few moments. She took a bite of bread and cheese and looked back into her basket. There was another cookie in there, too, but she had promised herself to save it for the babies at home.

An answering growl from her stomach caused her to giggle as she put the rest of the bread back into the basket. But the smile quickly faded. Would Papa find her? How late was it? She wished, so much, that she had waited and picked up the tablet tomorrow, in the safety and familiarity of the wagon, with all the other children.

"Papa!" She could feel tears forming behind her eyes, and despite her effort to ignore them, they began to creep down her cheeks.

It was when she heard the crackle in the woods behind her that she turned, her little face alight. "Pap—"

She stopped. It was not Papa who was standing behind her, in the shadows. Her eyes moved up—up—upward, at the huge man, and she gasped. He was very nice looking, but his face held a scowl.

They stood there, staring at each other. Lucy Grace was sure she was going to faint dead away.

"You should not be out here..." His voice sounded like a growl to her. "Are you lost?"

Lucy Grace summoned all the courage she possessed, staring back at him. She jutted out her chin. "Who wants to know?" she said, trying to sound brave. But the telltale tears were still coming.

A smile crept across his face. He took a step toward her, and she began to quake.

"No! Do not come closer!" she cried, trying to look fierce. "I-I shall hit you with my slate!"

He laughed and reached down, taking it from her in one swift movement. Lucy Grace stared at him in dismay.

"Now, what?" he said. He was eyeing her basket now. Lucy Grace hugged her basket to her, unwilling to have him take that, too. She was sure her heart was pounding loudly enough to be heard all the way to Strasburg. She looked around her.

Suddenly, she spied a fallen log and jumped up. "I shall use that log!" Her basket went tumbling as she reached down and began to tug on it.

But it did not move. The other end seemed to be trapped under something. With all her might, she pulled at it. Still, it stayed fast.

Before she realized what had happened, the man was in front of her. He was tugging at the log, too. Lucy Grace looked up incredulously, as he easily freed the other end of it and held it out to her. She took it, but could barely hold it, now that it was in her grasp. It was terribly heavy.

"There," he said, standing up straight.

"Thank you..." Lucy Grace stared at him blankly with wide blue eyes, realizing the absurdity of her situation. But when their eyes met, she realized he was amused.

Suddenly, she began to giggle, and the man threw back his head, laughing. Still, she eyed him suspiciously as he sat down on the log next to her and picked up her basket, handing it to her. Listening to him speak now, she realized he was not a man, but a very large boy. His voice gave him away. Somehow, that was not as frightening.

"What is your name?" he said, looking down.

"Lucy Grace Kennedy."

"Well, Lucy Grace Kennedy, you look more like a 'Gracie' to me."

"Gracie... She frowned, thinking it over. "Your name?"

"Billy Becker," he said in a gruff voice. "They call me 'Billy the Bully'." He watched to see what kind of effect that had on her.

Lucy Grace, however, was determined not to let him see her fear. She had indeed heard of him, and what she had heard was frightening. But some of the children at her first school had talked of him as if he were a hero. She swallowed, hard.

"Why..." she said, her mouth dry. "Do they call you that?"

He seemed to consider it for a while and finally shrugged. "I beat up a teacher, once, because he was picking on a boy in school." He shook his head. "The teacher deserved it. He expelled me from school, though." Again, he shrugged. "I would do it again. He was mean. But it doesn't matter. No one believed me."

Lucy Grace looked up at him, her young face entirely serious. "I believe you, Billy." She shook her head. "But it is terrible that he expelled you from school," she said. "I would feel awful if I got expelled."

"You like school?" His voice was filled with disbelief.

"Yes. You do not?"

"No." His glance flickered over her. "Why are you here?" He eyed her as she looked at him blankly, and he continued, "In the woods? You lost?"

Lucy Grace faltered. Should she tell him?" Deciding to, she said, uncertainly, "Yes."

He stared at her a moment before answering. "You live in the house they just fixed up," he said, frowning.

"Yes. You..." She licked her lips nervously. "Know where it is?"

He nodded. "Want me to take you home?"

She frowned. "Yes. Please?"

"I will show you the way," he said, rising. "Keep up."

She smiled. "Thank you, Billy."

He began to walk, but slowed when he realized she was having trouble keeping up. "I figured you were lost," he said abruptly. "Watch out for snakes."

"Snakes?" she squeaked, trying to keep the tremor out of her voice and failing miserably. Then she added. "I am not afraid of snakes."

Billy turned around, stopping. "Guess you are not afraid of anything. Are you?"

Her chin lifted, defiantly, "No."

He chuckled and turned back, picking his way through the trees. "Watch that," he said, stepping over a huge log that had fallen. Lucy Grace tried stepping over it, but nearly lost her balance. Arms reached out to grab her, steadying her and lifting her completely over it. Then, he let go and began walking, once again.

"Thank you."

His only response was to nod.

Eventually, the shadows began to grow lighter, and Lucy Grace thought the forest looked much less frightening. She smelled smoke, and her eyes grew wide, as she looked up. Billy turned to glance down at her.

"The smoke is coming from your chimney. Someone is cooking."

"Oh." She looked down. "I knew that," she said, trying to sound as if it was true. Billy just nodded. He did not speak, but the corners of his mouth had turned up.

It was amazing how quickly the woods had lightened up, now. Lucy Grace stopped when she heard a man shouting.

"Papa!" she said, excitedly. "He is looking for me!"

Billy stopped and turned to face her. "See that big rock up there?"

Her big blue eyes followed the direction he was pointing. "Yes."

"Keep straight on, after you get there. Straight. Hear? You can see your house from there. And Gracie?"

She paused, looking up.

"I don't want to see you out in these woods again. It is not safe. You hear me?" His voice sounded suddenly stern.

Lucy Grace nodded, running now. "I hear!" She was nearly at the rock when she turned back.

"Thank you, Billy, for—" she stopped,  
Billy the Bully was nowhere to be seen.

\* \* \*

Lucy Grace turned back as she began to approach the edge of the clearing, wondering if she had indeed dreamed him up. Billy the Bully had been right; she could see her house. The woods were much lighter now, and the pungent smell of dinner was stronger, coming from the chimney. She heard Papa's voice once again, calling her name.

"Papa!" she called out.

"Lucy Grace!"

She could see him now and began running as hard as she could. "Papa!" She flew into her father's arms, hugging him as tightly as she could. "Oh, Papa! I was so scared!"

"Lucy Grace!" He held her out, frowning down at her. "I have been looking for you for an hour. What were you doing in the woods, young lady?"

She ignored the scolding tone in his voice. "Oh, Papa! I got lost in the woods on the way home—and this—"

"Lucy Grace, those woods are dangerous. You are never—ever—to go into them again, do you hear me?"

"I hear you, Papa. I got off the wagon at Sheila Johnson's house and she gave me a new..." She remembered the slate, suddenly, and a wail escaped. "My new slate! Oh, Papa—I left it in the woods! I will never be able to find it again."

He frowned. "I will come across it, Lucy Grace, when I clear. But it may take a long time. What happened to yours?"

"It got broken at school today, Papa. But Sheila gave me an extra one that she had. But the man in the woods took it—"

Her father turned, alarmed. "Man? What man, Lucy Grace?"

"A man showed up and wanted to know if I was lost. He said his name was Billy the—" She halted, before the word 'bully' escaped. "I think his last name was Becker, but when I told him mine, he said he knew where we lived. He showed me the way home. And when I turned to thank him—he was gone. Just—gone!"

Her father frowned, digesting the information she had shared. "Lucy Grace, do not ever go into those woods again. Do you hear? If you do, I shall paddle you."

"Yes, Papa, I hear you. That is what he said, too—that they were not safe," she said sadly. She was unsure whether she was sadder that her father was upset with her or at the loss of her beloved slate. It was the only thing she had to do drawings on.

She followed her father up the steps and into the house, frowning. Carrie, from the Pembroke Estate, was standing in the kitchen and met them with relief, when they entered.

"You found her!" she said, rushing over to Lucy Grace and hugging her. "I was so worried—"

"She said someone named Billy found her in the woods and showed her the way home," Mr. Kennedy said, sounding ill-at-ease.

But Carrie's eyes flew to Lucy Grace. "Billy the—" She caught herself. "Billy Becker?" She tried to calm her voice, as she searched the little girl's face. "Did he have a big yellow dog with him?"

Only a shake of Lucy Grace's head answered. Carrie was glad Mr. Kennedy could not see the expression on her face. She rose suddenly. "The babies are all asleep, Mr. Kennedy. They have eaten and I put them to bed, while you were out looking for Lucy Grace. Give me a moment and I shall have dinner on the table for you while it is hot."

"No, Carrie. Thank you, but I need to escort you home before you are too late for your own dinner." But he sounded surprised. "And how did you manage to get them all down and asleep? I have never been able to do that."

Carrie smiled back. "I have six little brothers and sisters at home, and my parents both work at Pembroke. I have learned to care for the children. Let me get Lucy Grace's dinner out for her, then. Yours should still be hot when you get home."

"All right, then. I shall bring the horses to the front." He disappeared out the front door as she set out a plateful of food onto the table.

"Here you go, Lucy Grace." She grinned. When she saw Mr. Kennedy descend the front porch for the horses, she leaned down and kissed the child on the forehead. "Did Billy the Bully actually show you the way home?" she whispered. At the answering nod, she smiled and gave a slight nod.

"I always thought that boy had a heart in there, somewhere."

Lucy Grace grinned back. "He does," she whispered back. "A big one."

Carrie hugged her again quickly and grabbed her shawl. "I shall see you in the morning, sweet girl." She grinned, hurrying toward the front door. "And Lucy—do not go into the woods anymore, all right? They are dangerous."

"All right. That is what Billy—and Papa said, too. Only Papa sounded more threatening."

Carrie grinned. "That is what papas are supposed to do. It means they care about you." She giggled and disappeared out the front door.

Lucy Grace was giggling as well, as Carrie left, thinking that she liked Carrie.

A lot.

\* \* \*

Lucy Grace finished her dinner and went to the sink. She washed her plate, cup and fork, and rinsed and dried them, then went to check on the babies. They were all asleep, so she tiptoed back into the other part of the house.

As she walked back into the living room, she heard footsteps on the front porch. Papa must be home. She went to the front door and opened it, looking out.

No papa.

But as she stood there, looking out into the shadows, something small, leaned up on the banister in front of the porch caught her eye.

It was her new slate.

"Oh!" she cried, in disbelief. She threw the door open the rest of the way and ran to pick it up, clutching it to her chest, and looked around for Billy the Bully. Peeking around the side of the porch, she looked up and down into the woods. But there was no one there. She leaned over the banister and shouted, as loudly as she could, "Thank you, Billy!"

Carrie was right, she thought. He did, after all, have a heart in there, somewhere. And Lucy Grace knew she would always consider him her friend.

She leaned over the banister once more, shouting at the top of her lungs, "I believe in you, Billy Becker."



# Chapter One

*Eleven years later, Strasburg, Virginia, Monday, September 3, 1860*

Lucy Grace Kennedy stepped off the train as the conductor helped her down. The smell of autumn was in the air, and she immediately found herself feeling as if she were seven years old again. It brought back memories of the year her mother had died, on October 15<sup>th</sup> of 1849, and her father's search for a school for her to go to. That was what had led them to Strasburg.

She vividly remembered the thrashings Mr. Moreton, the schoolteacher, had given her in front of the class, and her cheeks reddened. She would always be thankful for the day Sir Francis and Lady Merrie had burst into the room and stopped it. Things had turned around for Gracie that day. A change of cottages, a new job for her papa, offered by Lord Wellington, at Pembroke, and a new school, with a teacher named Mr. Styles, had opened up her world. That was the year her new teacher had discovered she knew how to sketch. And that had led to Sir Francis and Lord Wellington being willing, when she graduated, to send her east, to study art.

She looked around Strasburg as the man handed out her trunks. Then he helped her with several long rolls of paper, which she eagerly gathered, until her arms were full.

"I can take them into the office," she said with a grin, as he handed her the last three.

"Okay, missy. Here you go. Want me to put your trunk in there, too?"

"Yes, thank you!" She turned, her arms full now, and looked up and down the street. She had now been away at school in Philadelphia for five years. Things had changed in Strasburg during the time she had been gone.

A lot.

There were new businesses open, up and down the walkway. The sheriff's office was still just down the street, on the left. The General Store, a block past that, and St. Mary's, just past that. Across the street, was Lady Angelica's Home Away from Home for Ladies.

A wide grin made its way across her face. She turned quickly and went inside the office.

The elderly man behind the counter looked up. Immediately, he smiled. "Gracie Kennedy! You have come back? To visit?"

"No, Mr. Wilson, to live here."

"Is your papa coming to pick you up?"

She laughed. "No, sir." She leaned forward, her dark blue eyes twinkling. "I wanted to surprise him. I wondered if I could leave my trunks here until I can have them taken down to the dormitory. I shall be staying there, I hope. May I leave a few rolls of paper here, for a few moments, too?"

"Surely." Mr. Wilson nodded. "I can get Zeke, from the sheriff's office, to take it all down for you, if you need. Welcome back, Gracie."

"If you would do that, sir, I would be so grateful. Thank you."

She began the walk back toward the direction of the dormitory, smiling at his use of her middle name. Billy the Bully Becker had dubbed her that, when she was seven, and somehow, over the years, it had stuck.

She stepped off the walkway and crossed the street, cautiously. She had written to Louisa Graham, who ran it, to tell her she would be coming. Papa had remarried now, to Carrie Johnson, from the Pembroke Estate's staff. They had five more babies to love on, now, in addition to Gracie's four little brothers and sisters. She was eager to see Carrie, too. Carrie had stepped in and loved the children as if they were her own and completed their family, after Gracie's mother had passed away. But their little cottage, even with a new room added, now, was bursting at the seams.

Carrying as many of the rolls as she could, she stepped up on the porch of the dormitory and pulled the bell. She heard it chime deep inside.

Louisa Graham answered. "Gracie!" She ran out and threw her arms around the girl standing outside. "Look at you! You were not supposed to grow up, you know. Oh, my, and what is this?"

"End rolls from the newspaper office in Philadelphia," she replied. "I sweet-talked them into giving them to me. There are more at the stage office."

"Come in, Gracie. I am so excited to have you here."

"Do you have room for me, Louisa?" Gracie asked, hugging her back.

"Oh, yes. We just had two girls get married, recently. You have the bed just outside my room; I saved it for you, after getting your letter. Does your papa and Carrie know you are back yet? And where are your things?"

Gracie took the rolls of paper and carefully put them down on the bed. "No—I plan to walk out tomorrow and surprise them. I brought gifts for all the babies."

"Most of the babies, Lucy Grace, are now taller than you are. And take the horse; Lord Wellington has supplied us with a horse and wagon, whenever we need it. Henson Andrews keeps it stabled for us behind his house, so we just walk down and get it when we need to. And take someone with you. There is so much unrest in the country, right now, and we have heard there has been a mountain lion seen lately, east of town."

"Yes, Miss Louisa, I shall do that. The unrest is growing everywhere. They are speaking of war. It is worrisome." She looked at the curtains and the matching bed linens and prints. "This is so lovely. But to answer your last question, Zeke is supposed to bring my trunks down from the stage office. Ooh!" She ran her hand over the coverlet on the bed gently. "Everything is so nice. My room at school was quite bare—but then, I spent my funds on art supplies."

"Well, it has certainly been home to me, for the past ten years. I do hope you are happy here, Gracie. And what do you hope to do, once you are settled?"

Grace sat down on the end of the bed and smiled at its softness. "Do portraits; I know that bringing in money doing what I love is likely just a dream, but that is my desire. I shall probably have to look for a job to work at. I know I shall need to pay for living here—and I do have some saved back. I brought back a ton of paper with me but it will not last forever, and I do not have any canvas at all. We stopped in Philadelphia for a few days, and I visited the newspaper office there—they had some end-rolls saved and gave them to me." She giggled, making her blue eyes sparkle. Then, I spent the rest of the time trying to sandwich them under my feet so no one would trip over them."

Louisa was laughing now, too. "But Gracie—you shall not pay, until you have been here for two months. No—" She held up a hand, when Gracie opened her mouth to protest. "That is the way Lady Angelica and Lord Geoffrey set it up, in the beginning, and it will, hopefully, help you get on your feet."

"But, Louisa, I can pay. Sir Francis and Merrie and Lord and Lady Wellington covered my expenses at school, so I was able to save up a little. It is time for me to pay some of it back to help out. Why not let me?"

"Two months." Louisa was adamant. "And stop by and see Sir Francis and Merrie tomorrow, on your way. They will want to know you made it safely."

"I shall do that." Gracie looked over the room. "May I see it? I was only in here once or twice before leaving home."

Louisa grinned. "Let me give you the official tour. You came in through the parlor, of course. There is a list of rules just inside the front door, to help suitors to be reminded of the visiting hours."

Gracie read the print aloud. "No men anywhere in the dormitory, except the parlor, between 10:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m." She grinned at Louisa.

"We actually have had very little problems with men. I do break a rule occasionally and allow one to come through to the kitchen and eat with us. Usually, if one stays to eat, I bring meals in here."

Gracie laughed. "You shall not have to worry about me breaking one. I have decided I shall probably remain single until my dying day."

Louisa tilted her head and gave her an incredulous glance. "You are being ridiculous. I shall wager you'll be married within three months, once the single young men around here lay eyes on you. You need a serious glance in the mirror, Gracie."

"I *am* serious. I try never to have to look in the mirror, unless it is absolutely necessary. I end up with a face full of freckles by the end of every summer. I only start to look human by the time spring comes, and then it starts all over again."

"Then wear hats. You can barely even see them." She laughed as Gracie rolled her eyes. "Now, here is my room. It hasn't changed much since you left."

"I love your desk!" Lucy Grace said.

"Do you? You will be pleased, then, Gracie. I have asked Lord Wellington for a small desk to put out in the large room in front of the hearth so you can work there. Other girls could use it to study, as well, or write letters. It should be here, tomorrow." She motioned to the next bed. "Winifred—we call her Winnie—has the bed next to yours. She's very sweet. She has been here about four months, now, and she and I do most of the cooking, right now. Helena helps some. And Ruthie has the next bed. Now, Ruthie keeps the place decent—sweeps and cleans up after the rest of us. You will love her. Next to her, is Clara—the two of you could almost be twins, with your blue eyes and red-gold hair; She usually answers the doorbell for us and does the dishes for a month, then does the bath. She also wears her hair much like you do, braided."

"I have to braid it. If I don't, it is all over the place. A pain in the ever-loving ass—" She stopped, putting a hand to her mouth. "Oh, Louisa. My apologies."

Louisa was shocked. "Gracie!" Her voice held censorship, but her eyes twinkled with mirth. "Shall I add no swearing to the list of rules?"

Gracie looked up, surprised. "Miss Louisa, I am truly sorry. I have been so used to saying what I think the past few years and no one cared, that I have gotten too relaxed about it. I promise, I shall try to be really careful."

"All right—forgiven. We shall start again. Next to Clara, is Araminta Coats—we call her Mindy. She switches off with Clara and does bath duty one month, dish duty the next. She loves oil painting—you might have a lot in common."

"I am excited to meet her."

And on this side, next to the fireplace is Helena—or Helen. She's our little fire-keeper. Jason Gibbs, at the mill, keeps us in firewood, and Helena keeps us toasty in here. They never let us run out. And we all appreciate that, especially when the January snows hit."

"I remember those snows," Gracie answered. "White Christmases are nice, but on the twenty-sixth, I am ready for spring."

"Indeed. Oh—and Gracie, here is the kitchen. You can offer to go back and forth between the cleaning, dishes, and bathroom, to give the other girls a break. And, if you wish, you can always help me with the shopping and inventorying the pantry. There is a schedule up in the kitchen. And anytime you wish to help with the cooking, just let us know. Here's Helena, now. Helena, meet Gracie Kennedy."

Gracie found herself looking into the face of a tall girl, who was not the friendliest she had ever met. "Hello, Helena," she said, putting a hand out.

Helena took it limply. "Good afternoon. I hope you like it warm in here. We do."

"I am sure it will be perfect." She smiled warmly. Helena merely nodded and turned toward the fire. Gracie turned toward Louisa, with a questioning glance, but Louisa only smiled.

"You still have not seen the bath. Come with me. Lady Angelica had a big wardrobe put in it so the girls could hang their gowns up. And of course, here is the tub and the toilets."

Gracie leaned over, looking at the painting that hung over the wardrobe, of three little girls struggling to see over each other. The reflections of their innocent little faces were shown in the mirror.

"I love this painting."

"Yes, Lord Wellington's mother painted that one. All of the paintings here, in fact, were. Would you like some hot tea, Gracie?"

"Oh, I would love some." She followed Louisa back to the kitchen. Turning to Helena, she smiled. "Would you like to join us, Helena?"

The girl turned to her, surprised. Then, she turned her head, mumbling, "No, thank you."

Louisa was in the kitchen now. "We also have some tarts, with clotted cream, Gracie. This came from the recipe bin of Ruthie's grandmother, but Helena made them. The rest of the girls will start trickling in later, by the way. They all work different hours, but this time of day it is fairly quiet in here." She put out three tarts in the oven, to heat them up, and put a kettle of hot water on the top of the stove.

"Gracie, have a seat. In a moment, I shall give you a tart to take to Helena."

The bell rang, and Louisa went to answer it, while Gracie kept an eye on the tarts. When she came back in, she laughed. Gracie had put the tarts out on the table, on small saucers, and had the tea steeping.

"I shall keep you around, Gracie. Henson Andrews brought over your trunk, and the paper. He is our sheriff, now, did you know that?"

"Truly? What happened to Sheriff Kidd?"

"He is in Baltimore. Their sheriff retired. He moved there and Henson took over here. There are a couple of new deputies, as well. Can you help me get the trunk to your bed? He brought over the last few rolls of paper, too."

"Oh, good." She followed Louisa to the parlor and, together, they dragged in the trunk to her bedside. Then, she went into the kitchen and picked up one of the plates, that now contained a warm tart, and a cup of hot tea, and dropped it off to Helena, on her way back out to the parlor.

"I brought this for you, Helena." She smiled.

The girl looked up, surprised. "Thank you. You can set it there," she said quietly, nodding.

"All right." Gracie set the cup down on her little table by the bed. "Here you go."

She went to the parlor and brought back in the rolls. As she did, Helena looked up curiously.

"What are those for?"

Gracie grinned. "Sketching! Helena, would it be all right if I were to sketch you?"

Helena stared at her. "Me? Why would you want to sketch *me*?"

"Oh, Helena, you have a beautiful face. Please think about it. There is no need to sit still or anything. I just need your permission to do it. Your eyes are lovely."

Gracie thought Helena was stuck on 'freeze'. She continued to stare. Finally, she nodded and blinked.

"Thank you, Helena," Gracie said, grinning, and moved back into the kitchen.

A few moments later, the girl brought in her cup and saucer and plate, putting them into the sink. Turning toward Louisa, she spoke softly, "Miss Louisa, I think I shall run across the street and visit the General Store. Is there anything you need?"

"Yes, Helena, if you do not mind bringing back some cinnamon? I am nearly out. Mr. Green can just put it on the monthly tab."

Helena nodded and left.

Gracie turned to Louisa as the front door closed. "Have I said something to upset her?"

"No, Gracie, *no*. We have a situation here that we have never had before, and I need to tell you, while there is no one else here."

"Oh? What is happening?"

"There has been some petty theft within the dormitory, Gracie. If your rolls of paper are valuable to you, put them in my room, in my closet, and pull them out as you need them. You may have a drawer in my desk for your finished work, if you like. If you have valuable jewelry, take it home and leave it with your papa and Carrie. Money—the same. Different kinds of things have been taken, but we have no idea who is doing it and no proof. *Whoever* it is, is being very clever. I have spoken to Henson about it. But since he does not live in here, he is at a loss. He has spoken with each of them, at least once. But he keeps saying to just keep an eye on everything. And I would be the last person to point a finger at anyone."

Gracie's blue eyes were wide. "Ooh...I am so sorry, Miss Louisa."

"The only one for certain I can say is innocent, Gracie," she said softly. "Is *you*."

"Oh, dear," Gracie said softly. "This is terrible."