

THE MATCHING OF SARAH
COLLINS



NATALIE HOLLY

BLUSHING BOOKS

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Natalie Holly
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CHAPTER 1



“*P*a says that it is time for Bradford to move past the outbreak. He says that Bradford needs to start having babies.” Since starting work at the Bradford Mercantile four months ago, if I had learned one thing, it was that the only place that rivaled the Bradford Congregational Church for gossip was the Bradford Mercantile. And while I truly found no real interest in hearing the local gossip, as a salesclerk, it was part of my job to listen to the juicy bits of gossip that my customers wanted to get off their chests.

The sincerity in young Justine’s voice kept me from giggling at the notion of our town somehow producing babies. 1885 was a year of many wonders, but even Jules Verne, one of my favorite authors, had not imagined a world with a baby making machine.

“Pa says that since so many died in the outbreak, there aren’t many married couples left.” This was true. Nearly two thirds of Bradford, Pennsylvania’s population had died over the course of just three months. And due to fear over reigniting the outbreak, travel was largely forbidden.

“That’s sadly true.” My own husband had been one of the first to pass away, but he had been bedridden for nearly five years before

that, so it wasn't surprising. "I'm not sure what can be done about it," I added.

"Well, Pa has a plan, Sarah. He has talked to the town council about it, and they agree. There is going to be a matching." Now, I wouldn't have taken the word of most eighteen-year-old girls, but as Justine was the pastor's daughter, I knew her information would be largely accurate.

"What is a matching?"

"Well, I am not a hundred percent sure, as I was eavesdropping from the other room," she said with a sheepish grin on her face. "But I think the eligible girls are going to be matched up with the eligible gentlemen for marriage."

"Really?" was all the response that I was able to make before our conversation was brought to a close by the arrival of Justine's mother, Helen, one of my least favorite people in town.

"Really, what?" Helen asked with her usual bluntness when it came to joining in other people's conversations.

"I was just asking Justine if it was really true that she is making her special pecan pie for the Harvest potluck. I love her pie so much."

"Yes, she is very talented. She will make a fine wife someday soon," Helen said.

And as Justine was a homely girl with a serious overbite and no beau, this was all the confirmation I needed, to believe that indeed there was a matching in the works. I was never so glad to be a thirty-four-year-old, childless widow. Surely, I would not be considered 'eligible'. I would definitely not be considered a good bet for repopulating Bradford. And most importantly I had no interest in marriage.

"But be sure not to eat too much pie, Sarah dear. You don't want to lose your waistline." This was her parting jab as she escorted Justine from the store. Now, I knew I was not what many people considered to be a quintessential beauty. I had a pretty face with large green eyes and long brown hair, but my

large breasts and ample backside had a tendency to make me look fat.

Ah well, no sense letting Helen get under my skin. Luckily, another customer needed my attention giving me no more time to waste thinking about my figure or arranged marriages.



I DIDN'T NEED to wait long for confirmation of Justine's information as Pastor Johnson announced the matching the following day during the church service. "Ladies and gentlemen, I think we are all aware of how blessed we are to be here today. We are the remnant, those left behind to carry on God's work here in Bradford. We have a responsibility to see that our town will not only live on but thrive. And as such, the town council and I have come to an important decision. We will be conducting a matching. Young ladies between the ages sixteen and thirty will be matched with our single gentlemen. Next Sunday, we will be having a joint marriage ceremony for our matched couples."

It seemed to me that despite the murmuring and hushed conversation that resulted from this announcement, most people already knew that the matching was in the works. Very few had surprised looks on their faces or expressed the kind of genuine outbursts that normally would have accompanied such a dramatic announcement. However, it appeared that everyone was very interested in watching the reactions of their fellow parishioners. But who was I to judge? I found myself scanning the congregation as well.

Mrs. McCreedy, one of the few elderly ladies to survive the outbreak, was shaking her head in disgust. Helen Johnson, the pastor's wife, had a self-satisfied look on her face, as if she had come up with the whole idea herself, which may not have been far from the truth. The young ladies were looking around as if sizing up the prospects.

Many of said young ladies had their eyes on two very handsome brothers-in-law who had lost their wives and some of their children to the dreadful outbreak. I had no doubt they would be considered highly desirable matches. I didn't know them very well and had never met their wives, as I had been busy taking care of my late husband, Mr. Collins, even before the outbreak. The only challenge for their future brides would be that they shared a home. They had been married to two sisters, and if gossip could be believed, they hadn't gotten a chance to build a second home after moving into the area a couple of years ago.

Christopher Bingley, by all appearances, was an affable, tall, blond-haired farmer, whose bulging muscles made him look more like a lumberjack. I had spoken to him briefly at the mercantile recently. And despite his quick smiles, I could see a sadness in his eyes that his good humor couldn't disguise. His young daughter, who appeared to be five or six, sat on his lap in a pew on the other side of the sanctuary. His affection for her warmed my heart and made me feel even more disposed to like him.

His brother-in-law, Jackson Darcy, was a stark contrast to good-natured Chris. It was rare to see him smile except at his little girl. I knew him to be well spoken, as I had heard him speaking to Mr. Olson, the owner of the mercantile. And despite his somber demeanor, I always found myself compelled to seek him out with my eyes in a crowd. Of course, he was easy to pick out in a crowd as he stood nearly a head taller than most of the men in the room and half a head taller than Chris. His hair was dark with a little curl at the neck line. He was just as muscular as Chris but because it was stretched over a taller frame, his muscular physique appeared to be less prominent.

While Chris seemed to be aware of the attention that he and Jackson were attracting, Jackson appeared to be oblivious to it. And that was when it happened; Jackson turned and looked me straight in the eye. At first, my inclination was to look away, but I held his gaze curiously trying to discern its meaning. However, I found it

hard to sit in my seat without squirming, as if I were a naughty girl caught with my hand in the cookie jar. So, I returned my attention to the front of the sanctuary and hoped that Pastor would call the service back to order. Luckily, he did.

He continued, "I will be available in my office through Thursday to meet with any of the eligible girls and men who would like to have some input in the matches. Helen, my beloved, will be setting up appointments. You can see her after church. Now, please join me in singing our closing hymn, number forty-three in your pew hymnal."

After service I was besieged by young ladies seeking my counsel and reaction to the news. Being in my middle thirties, I had become like an older sister to many of them since the outbreak. So many had lost their real sisters and their mothers. I was happy to step in to offer comfort or an encouraging word. Some were worried about who they would be matched with and whether they would like them. Others were afraid of the idea of marriage. While others were excited at the prospect of marriage and having their own homes. For my part, I was thrilled that I did not fit the criteria. I had had enough of marriage. I had already lived through one arranged marriage. I was grateful I would not have to live through another. Mr. Collins hadn't left me in great shape financially, but I wasn't destitute. With my job and room at the mercantile, I was living in reasonable comfort. I didn't need much to make me happy, just a warm bed, three meals a day, and my independence.



THE MERCANTILE WAS VERY busy that week with men coming in to buy supplies for their kitchens, no doubt looking forward to the meals their new brides would be making. The young ladies were in to buy cloth to make dresses for their weddings or trousseaus. And as expected, I spent a lot of time soothing the nerves of the future

brides. Whether excited or reluctant, most weren't sleeping well and had frayed nerves.

A highlight of my week was when Chris Bingley came in for supplies. Not only did I get to admire his beautiful physique, but he even sought out my opinion on what type of supplies a bride would like to find in her kitchen. I provided him with a basic list, but he encouraged me to go beyond the essentials. He obviously wanted to make a good first impression on his match. Despite my best intentions, I found myself blushing as he spoke to me. Being so close to him filled my body with a heat to which I was unaccustomed. I knew that whoever was chosen as his match would be all smiles. I would be sure to mention to her the great care that he took in planning for her arrival... whoever she was.

Finally, Sunday arrived. I had brought dozens of chocolate chip cookies as well as two other side dishes that Helen had requested for what had been dubbed the Harvest Wedding Potluck. History had taught me that it was easier to just do what she said than get on her bad side. I had been sure to arrive early for service, so I could get a good seat. It was bound to be packed as everyone in the surrounding area would be attending. And I was looking forward to the drama. It would no doubt be very entertaining. Gratefully, Pastor Johnson had a much-abbreviated service. His sermon was focused on sacrificial love, what each of us owed God because we had survived the outbreak, and how we each needed to do our part. Yeah, no guilt or anything. But I liked to think that he meant well.

Soon enough Pastor was ready to start the matching. As he read the names of the pairings, each couple was instructed to stand in the aisle together until all the names and matches had been announced. The pairings were met with gasps, tears, cheers, and giggles. Two couples who had been matched decided to swap brides much to the surprise and amusement of the congregation and the Pastor. Several young girls were matched with much older men, including my boss, Mr. Olson. I hoped it didn't mean I would

lose my position at the mercantile. One of the young ladies burst into tears but held her ground and finally seemed to accept her fate.

Justine Johnson looked thrilled to be matched to the best looking younger man in town. And there was no doubt that she was well aware of her match before it was announced. Her intended, however, looked a little shocked. I hoped that her sweet personality would win him over despite her unfortunate looks and mother.

At this point most of the young ladies had been matched. Pastor called for silence and said he had an unusual and important announcement. "Due to the shortage of brides, we have been forced to make a difficult decision. We have decided that two of our young ladies will each be matched with two husbands." The church broke out into pandemonium. All I could do was laugh. It seemed like such an outlandish idea. My eyes surveyed the room watching all the different reactions. It really was a most engaging play... well, except perhaps to the young ladies who would be saddled with two husbands.

I knew that my unhappy years of marriage had left me jaded towards the institution as a whole. But even the most idealistic female among us, would have to be overwhelmed by the prospect of this type of marriage. I found myself smiling and shaking my head thinking about the crazy notion when I noticed Jackson Darcy and Chris Bingley looking at me again. This quickly sobered me. While I was enjoying the spectacle, I didn't want to appear heartless to the plight of my fellow women. I folded my hands on my lap and did my best to appear composed.

Pastor Johnson finally quieted the crowd. "Jenna Carpenter will marry John and Samuel Miller." Well, perhaps this matching showed some wisdom. Jenna was known for having a lot of beaux. Having two husbands might be desirable for her. By the look on her face, she really didn't seem to mind as she met the brothers in the aisle.

“And our final match is Sarah Collins to Chris Bingley and Jackson Darcy.”

It took a few moments for the words to sink in, long enough that the congregation had all turned to look at me and some were urging me to stand to take my place at the back of the line in the aisle. I finally started to comprehend when Chris reached out and took my hand to lead me to our place. As we approached Jackson, Chris was patting my hand in comfort and wore an encouraging smile. I turned to Chris, opening my mouth to object when I felt a small swat on my bottom. Abruptly I turned towards the source of the swat. It was Jackson.

I prepared to give him my most indignant look when I saw the look on his face. It was the look my father would give me when I was being given no option other than to obey. But still I couldn't help myself. “I don't think you understand,” I began. I received another small swat, and Jackson lifted his eyebrows, as if to say, “You are going to obey.” I gave him a small nod and looked down at my shoes. I was at least grateful that given where we were standing, I was pretty sure that no one else could have seen his hand making contact with my posterior, but it didn't stop me from blushing.

The mass wedding service was over very quickly. One by one the newly married were ushered into the rear alcove to sign the marriage documents. As such we were the last to enter the church hall for the reception. All eyes were on us as two little girls descended upon us.

“Papa, Papa, is this our new mama?” asked a curly, blonde-haired girl, who quickly grabbed Chris' hand.

“Yes, my darling. Her name is Sarah.”

“What is your name?” I squatted down and asked.

“Lydia. I am six years old. I like dolls and cookies and kittens and cows.” Her words came out in such a tumble that I had difficulty keeping up.

“Cows?” I asked.

“I like the way they moo,” she responded with enthusiasm.

“Do you have lots of cows on your farm?”

“A couple. And Papa says that when I am older, I can milk one. Do you know how to milk cows?”

“I do indeed. My papa taught me when I was a girl. And I used to have a cow named Gertie who I liked very much.” This seemed to please Lydia.

Turning to the other young girl holding Jackson’s hand and hiding behind his leg, I asked, “And who is this beautiful young lady?” She had dark hair just like her father.

After a moment Jackson responded for her. “This is Kitty.”

“What a lovely name. Are you six too?”

When Kitty didn’t respond, Lydia chimed in, “She’s five and likes cows too.”

“Well, I am so glad to meet you, Kitty. I am sure we will have a ton of fun together. I’ve always wished to have two beautiful little girls to make cookies with and now that I know there will be milk from the cows to have with the cookies, I am even more excited.”

Quietly, Kitty responded, “Do you know how to make sugar cookies? My mama always made Papa sugar cookies.”

I could see the pain that the mention of his late wife gave Jackson. So, I chose my words carefully. “I know how to make lots of kinds of different kinds of cookies. I am so happy to have some helpers. Maybe we can make some together tomorrow. How does that sound?”

Kitty nodded and smiled shyly.

“Can I help too, Sarah?” Lydia asked, not wanting to be left out.

“Of course, you can. It will be great fun.”

“We’d better find a table. It looks like Pastor Johnson is ready to say grace,” Chris suggested. We found our way to a table in the corner of the hall. The girls chose chairs on either side of me. This was fine with me. I was definitely more comfortable in my role as mama to these two precious girls than I was as the wife of these two ridiculously handsome men.

After grace, the women rose to get food from the buffet for

their husbands and children. This was the custom of the congregation. Needless to say, I had my hands full. Not wanting to offend either of my new husbands by serving one or the other first, I got two heaping plates of food, one for each of them. After receiving their thanks, I invited the girls to join me at the buffet, so I could pick out what they liked. Finally, I got myself a plate of food.

Frankly, my nervous stomach was leaving me with little appetite... that and imagining myself naked with these two men. My chubby body, or fluffy as I preferred to think of it, was fine for my first husband who was old and quite portly. But not for these men who looked like Greek gods. I pushed my food around on my plate trying to make it look like I had eaten. Jackson wasn't fooled.

"Are you unwell?" he asked.

"Just not hungry."

"Well, it has been an eventful day. Perhaps dessert will be more to your liking." With this I realized that dessert was being served.

"I think we'd all love some of your famous chocolate chip cookies," Chris said.

"Famous?"

"Yes. We have heard that they are quite delicious," Chris added.

I took this as my cue to head to the dessert table. I returned with a plateful of my cookies and some of Justine's pecan pie for the men as well. I saw the look of surprise on Jackson's face as he ate his first bite of my 'famous' cookies. "Quite delicious. I think I could get used to having these around the house."

Although a mild compliment, I thought I had just received high praise from Mr. Darcy and had a feeling that compliments from him were rare treasures that needed to be savored. "I think I could arrange that," I replied, my smile brightening. I might be fluffy but at least I could bake.

Eventually the girls went off to play with the other children. We must have made an odd-looking trio—Chris sat smiling at me, I sat blushing and looking anywhere but at my two husbands, and Jackson sat with a scowl on his face as if he found the festivities

quite distasteful. I sat there hoping that he didn't find me distasteful. I was relieved when the band started to play, and Chris asked me to dance. I loved to dance, although I hadn't had a chance since my wedding day, my first wedding day. Chris was a good dancer and an easy conversationalist.

"Have you always lived in Bradford?" he asked.

"Yes. My parents owned a small ranch out near the Brubaker farm. I was an only child born to older parents. They both died in an accident shortly after my marriage."

"I am sorry to hear that. At least you had your husband. Was he your childhood sweetheart?"

I burst out laughing. "Oh dear, no. It was an arranged marriage. I think my father thought I was getting a little long in the tooth, so he married me off to one of his widowed school mates."

"He was as old as your father?" Chris asked incredulously.

"Almost. My dad was afraid that I would end up a destitute old maid if he and mom died. I guess he showed some wisdom, as it turned out."

"Was your husband kind to you?"

I looked at him for a few long moments trying to decide how to answer. "The best thing I can say about Mr. Collins is that he taught me patience and forbearance." Chris looked at me a bit sadly not quite sure what to say. Looking to lighten the mood, I commented, "Lydia is a little firecracker, isn't she? When she mentioned her fondness for cows, I wanted to burst out laughing."

"She has been the sole source of light in my life these last months."

"I have no wish to make you sad, but please know that I would love to hear all about your wife and children when you are ready to tell me."

"Thank you," he said quietly.

"You should never feel that you cannot mention them to me or in front of me. It is important for Lydia to remember her mother and brothers and sisters."

“That means more to me...” he stammered. After a minute or two of silence, Chris continued, “Enough of the sadness. Today is a new beginning for all of us. Let’s head back to the table. I want another one of your cookies.” And then he surprised me with a quick peck on the cheek. As I sat down, I wasn’t surprised that Jackson did not ask me to dance. Frankly, I would have been shocked if he had. But he did ask me where we would need to go to gather my things.

“I have a room over the mercantile. All my things are there. My husband’s nephew inherited the ranch when he died, so all my belongings, such as they are, are in my room.” Standing I continued, “Oh my, I guess I should let Mr. Olson know that I will be leaving my job at the mercantile.”

“He already knows,” Jackson said matter-of-factly.

“He already knows?”

“Yes. Pastor Johnson let him know when we picked you.”

“You picked me?” I said in a rather loud and incredulous voice.

“I think that this is a matter better discussed at home,” Jackson said with finality as he placed his hand discretely on my bottom. It was obviously a reminder to obey and hold my tongue. The message was clear. The subject was closed for the time being. The discussion was over. “Go gather up the girls,” he continued. “Then we can go over to your room to gather up your belongings.”

“Yes, of course,” I answered haltingly. And we headed off to my new life.