

AT LOVE'S
BIDDING



REGINA
JENNINGS



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For KWA
who was a great auctioneer
and an even better grandpa





CHAPTER I



Boston, Massachusetts
May 1873

Behind the massive marble building where even in May the crisp sea air never chased away the odors ground into the cobblestones, the newsboys and shoe-shiners gathered, waiting on her. They didn't have much time. Every moment away from their posts meant missed customers, but Miranda Wimplegate was under similar constraints. The auction only paused briefly at noon, just enough time for her to snatch a tray of apricot tarts and French meringues and sneak out before Grandfather took the platform and the bidding resumed. The silver platter dug into Miranda's side as she made her way down the narrow steps of the servants' entrance. She wished for something more substantial to feed them, but the dirty scamps of Boston—unlike the French *citoyens*—preferred cake, so her head was safe, at least until her mother learned of her largesse.

Little Ralphie sat at the foot of the steps, but he hopped up quick enough when she opened the door. He was nearly trampled as the boys wrestled for the sweets on the tray, but she held back a choice few for him. After they settled down,

Miranda took her perch on the top step, Ralphie sitting next to her French kid boots. They weren't really kid leather, probably just cow, but Ralphie didn't know the difference. He was content nibbling the edge of the tart, holding it in hands as grubby as the bottom of the trash bin beside him.

"Well, are you gonna tell one of your stories or not?" That was Connor. Quick to express his impatience but always listening, always thinking. He wouldn't work the corner in front of the Wimplegate Auction House much longer. Already his shoulders were broadening. Soon he'd catch the eye of one of the dock foremen and would give up hawking papers for a better paying job—a job that would begin to bow his back before it ever had a chance to reach its full height.

Miranda balanced the empty silver tray on her lap, careful to keep it from getting scratched against the rough ground. "We'll continue the story about Joseph. You remember what I told you yesterday?"

"Aye."

"Sure."

Two boys tussled as boys do when one wants to savor a treat and the other has already consumed his. With a quick thump to their heads, Connor quieted them.

He was trying to help, but Miranda saw an opportunity for improvement. "Connor, I'd rather be interrupted than have you inflict pain on someone. Remember that, please. Turn the other cheek . . . and our story today is a perfect example." She tried to smooth Ralphie's stiff red hair as she began. "Joseph was sold as a slave by his brothers, but God didn't forget him. . . ."

How she wished they still had the neat classroom leased across the alley, but since Grandmother died, Grandfather had let his work with the street children wane. He was all business

now, but she couldn't give it up, even if Mother didn't approve of her feeding their expensive sweets to the urchins. As she talked, Miranda glanced between the buildings for a glimpse of the church clock on Park Street. She was running out of time.

But someone else was in a hurry, too. The sound of hooves clacking on the cobblestone street preceded the jet black buggy careening around the corner. What was this? No one made their arrival in this alley, especially not someone riding in a conveyance like that. The horses expelled a burst of moisture as the buggy rolled to a stop at the corner. Was this another buyer, rushing in from some gilded minor palace of Europe? If he was in search of a particular piece of art, he should have taken an earlier boat.

Ralphie shifted to get a better look as the door opened and a modestly dressed man emerged. Clothes nicer than a clerk's, but only just. Black suit, nondescript features. He closed the door of the carriage and leaned back into the window. A velvet curtain was pushed aside. Nodding, he seemed to accept some secret commission with the intensity of a matador. A lady's gloved hand emerged to grip the door frame. Longing crossed his plain face as he took the final instructions, transforming his features into more noble lines. Finally, with a gallant tip of his hat to the woman inside the carriage, he sprang from the step and strolled determinedly around the corner to the front of the building.

A mission. There was no other way to describe his attitude. His chances would've been better had he arrived promptly, but why walk through the rotting potato skins of the alley when he could have been delivered directly to the impressive double doors in front?

But had he bothered to look Miranda's direction, he'd probably wonder why a lady decked out in silk was kneeling among

the street kids in a back alley. If only she had the courage to insist that Father lease a place for their lessons to continue. . . .

Before Miranda could get back to the lesson, shouts were heard from the opposite direction. Another of her newspaper boys skidded around the corner with two big youths at his heels. It was Franklin, and judging by the bullies chasing after him, he was in trouble. Catching him by the collar of his threadbare shirt, one of the thugs threw him against the wall.

"I said, give me your money. I'm hungry and you already had something to eat."

"It's my money. I have to take it home."

Not wanting her youngsters to get involved, it was up to Miranda to intervene. She only wished the two bullies weren't quite so big. Then again, who wasn't taller than she?

"Stay here," she ordered the boys. Forgetting the silver tray in her hand, she picked her way over her seated audience.

"Excuse me?" She gripped her wrist with her empty hand to hide its trembling and approached in her most winsome manner. "Excuse me? Is there something I can help you with?" But she might as well have been invisible.

Miranda winced at Franklin's whimper as he was lifted from the ground. The sound of ripping cloth sped her approach. "Now, gentlemen, there's no need to tear his clothing. What good does that do?"

"It's not in his pocket," one youth growled. "He's hiding it."

Franklin's feet dangled in midair. His face bloomed tomato red as the boy's clutch on his twisted collar tightened. Miranda looked behind her to the back door of the auction house. Could she run inside and find help?

Before she could decide, Franklin's head hit the brick wall.

Thud. "If you don't hand the money over, I'll beat it out of

you.” *Thud*. “You won’t be able to eat anything tonight.” *Thud*. “Tell your mother—”

Franklin’s little skull ricocheted off the wall with each thrust. The only fighting he was doing was fighting for air.

Miranda felt her own face warming. Her jaw clenched and then somehow the heavy tray was making a huge arc through the air and slamming the thug upside the head. The handle dug into her soft palm as she continued to swing her silver weapon and land some impressive blows that rattled her teeth.

“What’s wrong with you, lady?” the bully yelled, his arms shielding his face.

“She’s crazy!” the other shouted.

“You will not mistreat this child!” Miranda swung with every word, most of her strikes landing on the solid young men. One missed swing connected with the brick wall and made her see stars, but it didn’t slow her down. “Depart, and don’t let me catch you or . . .”

They dropped Franklin and took off. The holey soles of their boots flashed as they ran away. Miranda blinked. She hadn’t even finished her threat, which was good because she really didn’t know what she was planning. The roaring in her ears subsided until she could hear the street sounds again. She lowered the tray, afraid to turn around and face her young friends. She’d always congratulated herself on the example of refined womanhood, genteel manners, and Christian love that she displayed for the disadvantaged youth. How much damage had she done in an instant?

Judging by the boys’ cheers and laughter, she’d just reinforced the very behavior she was trying to eradicate. Lovely.

Surrounded by his peers, Franklin was on his feet and enjoying the attention as the boys gathered their wares and prepared

to return to their stations. Their eyes shined as they waved good-bye to her, not the least bit embarrassed for her unlady-like display. Living in the slums, they probably witnessed such behavior regularly. Miranda shuddered. Deep down was she no better than a common washerwoman?

The clock struck the half hour. She smoothed her hair, then looked at the tray. It would never again lie flat on the buffet. Maybe Cornelius was right. Better for her to remain silent than to make a fool of herself.

The last to depart, Connor ambled over with his hands in his pockets. Could she repair the damage she'd done?

"I must apologize," she said. "I comported myself very poorly just then. Turn the other cheek, I told you."

"Naw." The raw skin of his face flushed. "You shoulda seen your grand-mamma when I was little. She rescued me once just like that, but I think she used a broom."

Grandmother? But before Miranda could question him further, he hurried away, bawling an Irish ballad at the top of his lungs.

She was late, but she could hardly go inside looking like a brawler. Miranda paused at the door to compose herself as she transitioned between the two very different worlds. On the other side of that door were no hungry boys, only well-fed, well-heeled buyers looking to amass a menagerie of art for their homes, or to find an undervalued item that could be sold for a profit elsewhere. Not that making a profit was wrong—some buyers were extremely charitable—but while their money might reach across the divide, those boys never would.

And Miranda and her family were stuck somewhere in the middle, catering to the elite but working for a living.

Better put the incident behind her. Miranda tugged her short

jacket into place and turned for the door. Already skipping through the sales order and preparing to answer questions about the next offering, she'd forgotten the black buggy. Only then did she realize that she was still being observed. Beneath a stylish hat, a veiled woman peered out of the buggy window. Her scarf draped from her bonnet and across her mouth and nose, leaving only a pair of startling green eyes visible, eyes that pinned Miranda with curiosity.

Miranda halted with the dented tray dangling from her hand. The lady had seen Miranda's unladylike display and most definitely did not approve.

To earn the trust of the wealthy, the Wimplegates had to mimic the careful manners of their clientele. But occasionally Miranda came face-to-face with someone who saw through her ruse. Someone who reminded her that while she might wear velvet and silk, she was working for her living just the same as the fishmongers at Quincy Market—minus the odor. The lady daintily tugged her veil higher—with a real kid glove, no doubt—then with a smart rap of a parasol on the roof of her carriage, the horses sprang to life, and the driver spirited her away.

Feeling chastened, Miranda ducked inside. She eased the tray onto the buffet unnoticed, although there'd be questions aplenty later. Perhaps the lady was bidding against a competitor and wanted her identity hidden. That wasn't unusual, but in the same way Miranda could spot the hand of a master craftsman, she suspected there was more to the story. Cornelius might know who they were, but she hated to ask him. Lately, every conversation with him involved some plea to answer his proposal.

"Miranda." Her father's diamond cravat pin flashed in the light as he motioned her to him. "Mr. Wakefield has some questions about the Hepplewhite desk. Are you free?"

“Of course.” As far as customers went, Mr. Wakefield was bearable. He asked intelligent questions and didn’t expect her to stand around while he calculated how much he was willing to spend. “Follow me, please.”

She retrieved a copy of her catalog from a brass stand as they passed along the silk Oriental rug. Today’s offering of fine furniture and unappreciated heirlooms came courtesy of the once mighty LeBlanc family. Perhaps they were mighty still, but if the liquidation of their valuables was any indication, the new heir would burn through the carefully hoarded riches before his older brother settled into the family mausoleum. Thank heavens for dissolute younger sons. Without them, her family’s auction house would stand empty.

Miranda smoothed the sale catalog, her eyes darting down the list and descriptions she’d composed and taken to the printer herself. How she’d loved the Chippendale settee with its elegant lines and flawless upholstery. She’d miss the Revere tea service that was selling today, but with Paul’s silversmith mark clearly discernible, they’d make a nice commission on it. The priceless artifacts that passed through her hands amazed her. The beauty, the craftsmanship, the history—she sighed. If only she could spend more time alone with the treasures and less time with the pretentious buyers. But her descriptions clearly expressed her appreciation for the fine pieces, and that’s what made her valuable on sale day. That’s why Father wanted her to escort bidder after bidder down the endless aisles of their warehouse. That’s why Mother expected her to smile prettily and tell them what important piece was being offered. That’s why she wanted just a moment away from the suffocating masses crammed inside the salon—a moment she’d instead used to savagely assault a couple of young men.

What had come over her?

Her grandfather's voice echoed through the hall as he called for the next offering. What were they selling now? As she led Mr. Wakefield through the back of the salon, Miranda happened to glance at the easel on the stage as Grandfather read the catalog description. Her steps slowed. There must be some mistake.

Forgetting Mr. Wakefield, she stopped and flipped open her copy of the catalog. Page four . . . no, five. The card on the auction table read *Item #109*, but the large portrait on the easel wasn't the Copley that was listed. It was no painting she'd ever seen before. In a daze, Miranda walked closer but stopped at the last row of chairs. The bidders exchanged glances as her grandfather finished reading the catalog description she'd composed. True, it was a portrait of a man wearing a satin waistcoat and lace cravat of the late eighteenth century, but it appeared to be a family portrait, not a masterpiece. Even their clients realized the mistake, as their throat clearing and wagging beards attested.

Miranda's throat tightened. Someone should say something. She looked for her father, but he wasn't in the salon. With a nod of his head and the smack of his gavel, Grandfather opened the bidding. She squinted again at the painting. Could the family have submitted it after the catalog had been published? As much as she wanted to know what was happening, she wouldn't interrupt. Miranda had already humiliated herself enough for one day. The catalog crumpled in her fist. Hopefully there'd be no harm done, because she could not contradict Grandfather before a room full of clients

The gavel fell and her grandfather called out the winning bidder's number. She released a painful breath. This time she

hadn't made a spectacle of herself. She'd passed the test. Mr. Wakefield waited at her heels. She had a job to do. With a quick smile thrown over her shoulder by way of apology, Miranda passed to the other gallery where the Hepplewhite waited.

With her last view of the salon, she spotted the mysterious man from the carriage tucking his number into his waistcoat pocket and departing with a satisfied smile.