“Essie, that man is here again.”

Estella Banfield looked up from the box of buttons and sewing notions she’d been working on to find her friend, Maggie hurrying toward her. “Who?”

“You know, the one who you’ve been talking about.” She must have noticed Essie’s confusion and continued. “The one who buys six of everything.”

“Oh.” Essie’s stomach did a little flutter, not that she knew why. She and Mr. Warner had only exchanged pleasantries the few times she’d rung up his order. Still, she found herself looking forward to his weekly visits and possibly uncovering the reason behind his unusual purchases.

“So?” Maggie asked, her expression expectant. “Are you going to go and talk to him?”

Her ears burned at the thought. “I don’t know. Doesn’t that seem a bit forward?”

“Not if it comes with the offer to help.” She leaned closer so only Essie could hear her. “He’s studying those toothbrushes as if they were the Declaration of Independence.”

Her lips twitched at her friend’s ridiculous comparison. Still, Essie had a job to do, and happy customers meant returning customers. Putting the box behind the counter, she slipped through the gate and joined Maggie on the sales floor. “Personal care section, correct?”

A playful smile lighting her face, Maggie nodded. “He was there the last time I checked.”

“All right.” Essie took a few measured steps down the aisle, giving her leg time to adjust. Since the accident, the brace she’d worn helped steady her, but she had to walk slowly or risk tripping over her lame foot. She glanced back to find Maggie watching her. “Don’t you need to go back to work?”

“I just wanted to make sure you spoke to him this time,” she replied with an impish gleam in her eyes.

“I will.”

“Promise?”

Essie gave a little huff. “I promise. Now, go before Mr. Sum discovers that you’re not at the lunch counter.”

"He's the one who sent me over here." Maggie couldn't contain the laughter in her voice.

Essie frozen. Mr. Sum Woolworth was a kind boss, but he held high standards for his employees. "He's not angry with me. I mean, I don't want to lose this job."

"Calm down," her friend replied as she hurried toward her. Taking her hands, Maggie met her gaze. "He didn't say it in a mean way. Only that he thought you two would make a handsome couple if only one of you would get up the nerve to speak to the other." She leaned in closer. "Who would have thought Mr. Sum was such a romantic?"

Not Essie, but then she hadn't been working there very long. Besides, she didn't even know the man, only that he had the particular habit of buying six of everything.

"You will tell me everything that happens, won’t you?”

Essie couldn’t see any harm in Maggie’s request, not that there would be that much to tell. “I didn't know you were fascinated by oral hygiene?"

Maggie squeezed her hands, then let her go. As she walked back up the aisle, she called out over her shoulder. “I’m sure a fascinating woman like you can come up with something better than that.”

Essie laughed. Such a description of herself would amuse her family and friends. Since the carriage accident that left her right leg lame, ‘poor girl’ and ‘unmarriageable’ had been the only words whispered at suppers and in ballrooms to describe her. If only she could be more like the woman she'd befriended here at the store. They had a confidence that came from providing for themselves, something she'd never had to do, and if her mother had a say in it, never would.

Her foot slipped and she had to grab hold of the nearby counter to keep from falling. Mother's latest campaign to get her married off had been a disaster. Most of the men in their social circle knew of her physical defect and had taken a wide berth. But her mother wouldn't be deterred. Papa's contacts in Washington and New York were invited to dinner where they suffered through awkward conversation during which Mother expounded upon Essie's attributes. 'She sings like a bird and plays the piano as if she were born to it.' 'She's been educated in the arts of running a large household and can hold a conversation with the best of them.' To be fair, some showed interest--until she walked, and they discovered what everyone else already knew.

Poor girl.

Essie righted herself and kept moving forward. Wasn't there more to life than playing a song correctly or making a menu for Cook? What about helping the poor or teaching others how to read and write? She wanted a purposeful life, but what did that look like? How could she find meaning in her life if she didn't know where to look?

She turned down the personal care aisle and stopped, her heart skipping a beat. There, studying the toothbrushes as if his life depended on it was Pastor Max Warner. He picked up one, glanced at it for a moment, then returned it to the shelf where he picked up another one. She'd caught him doing this kind of thing several times before, his dark head bent over the soap packaging as he read it or weighing a hairbrush in his strong, very capable hands. A spendthrift, the other girls had called him, yet he bought six of each product he sought.

And if she didn't help him, he might never buy a toothbrush. Essie moved toward him. "Pastor Warner, how are you today?"

"Miss Banfield, I didn't see you there." His lips parted into a wide smile as if he was truly glad to see her. Her heart did another little hiccup. "How has your day been thus far? Good, I hope."

"Lovely, thank you. May I help you with something?"

"Toothbrushes!" His outburst surprised not only her but him by the look on his face. He took a deep breath and then began again. "I'm looking for toothbrushes. Six of them in all."

She kind of liked this befuddled look on him. It made him more human instead of a man of God. Essie nodded to the shelf. "This is all we have in the way of toothbrushes. Maybe if you could tell me who they are for, I could show you different sizes."

He shows her the one he's been holding. "I was trying to figure out why some were larger than others. Why is that?"

The way he watched her, as if she was the most important thing in the room caught her off-guard. She swallowed and when she spoke, the words came out breathy. "Some are for children while the rest of them are for adults."

"A child would need a smaller brush." His blue eyes gazed into hers. "That makes all the sense in the world. Thank you, Miss Banfield. I'll take six children-sized toothbrushes then."

The tiny bubble of happiness popped. Good heaven's she was making cow eyes at a married man! She turned and counted out six of their finest toothbrushes, then grabbed a large container of tooth powder and handed it to him. "This should be everything you need. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Well," he paused as he pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. "To be truthful, I have quite a few things I need to pick up and not a lot of time." His gaze snagged hers again and for the briefest of moments, she forgot to breathe. "I could really use your help if you have time."

He's married, remember. Essie gave herself a mental shake and straightened. "Of course. What's next on your list?" She glanced over it. "You didn't like the soap you bought last time?"

The pastor blushed at the question. "Well, yes but the boys complained it smelled too much like a girl for them. Maybe we could look for something with a little more lye and a little less perfume."

"You have boys?" She wasn't asking for her own sake. She was just doing her job. Mr. Sum himself said build a relationship with the customer and they'd keep coming back. She glanced down at the toothbrushes in his basket. "How many girls do you have?"

"None, thank the Lord." He chuckled as they walked up the aisle. "I wouldn't know what to do with them. No, it's better I stick with boys."

That was a strange comment, almost as if he thought he had a say in the matter. "Wouldn't your wife like a little girl to dress up and pet over?"

The man stopped in the middle of the aisle, a look of amused bewilderment on his face. "I'm not married."

Why did the news make Essie so happy? "You're not? I just presumed when you talked about the boys, that you were married."

"That's understandable." He hesitated for a moment as if collecting his thoughts. She wagered he was a wonderful pastor, not like the stuffy old Pastor Henderson who preached where her family attended. "The boys are children I found living on the streets. They have no family, and no way to keep warm or be fed so I opened my home to them. I know what it's like to never know where your next meal is come from and don't want others to have to suffer like that."

"That's so kind of you," Essie replied. "How old are they?"

"John is the oldest, he's almost twelve. Then there's Jacob, Noah, Neil, and Billy. Tommy is my youngest at six."

Six years old and out of the street. What had the poor boy gone through to be fending for himself at that age? If only she'd know. She who had so much with her Paris-designed gowns and elaborate dinners while others prayed for a scrap of bread or to be warm. Without realizing what she was doing, Essie reached out and touched the man's arm. "What can I do to help?"