



A
LADY
in
ATTENDANCE

RACHEL FORDHAM

Praise for *A Lady in Attendance*

“Rachel Fordham’s *A Lady in Attendance* draws you in from the first page and leaves you captivated until the oh-so-romantic conclusion. A poignant and beautifully written story of faith, forgiveness, and the healing power of love.”

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Praise for *A Life Once Dreamed*

“Fordham delivers another winning inspirational romance in this lavishly detailed tale set in the Wild West. . . . This sweet tale of frontier romance will appeal to fans of Tracie Peterson.”

Publishers Weekly

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“Rachel Fordham has crafted a tender tale of compassion and grace that authentically depicts a mother’s heart and touches on questions of family and identity and the nature of real love.”

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The Hope of Azure Springs

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A Life Once Dreamed

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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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For everyone who made our time
in Buffalo, New York,
four years we'll never forget
and
for our friends at the PFD
who are now family.

To love at all is to be vulnerable.

C. S. Lewis



PROLOGUE

HOUSE OF REFUGE, HUDSON, NEW YORK, 1893

The coarse gray fabric of Hazel's newly donned uniform felt uncomfortable and foreign against her skin. She scratched her neck, trying in vain to force the itch away, but it was no use. These drab clothes would likely never feel comfortable, nor would these dark walls and tall fences ever feel like home.

"You'll get used to it," said the girl on her right. She looked to be fifteen, maybe sixteen, and despite the dreary location wore a cheerful smile on her pale face. "It ain't so bad here."

The girl on Hazel's left snickered but nodded. Both girls had been assigned to scrub the dining hall's floor with her and had readily begun answering her questions.

"It ain't no castle with a moat, but they feed us three times a day, and that's more than I ate before bein' sent to the reformatory," the girl on her right said.

"It's prison," Hazel whispered, unsure why they were keeping their voices so low. "It won't get better. Not until we get out."

“Won’t be all better when you get out. People don’t trust no one that’s lived behind bars. Once a convict, always a convict. Even if they talk about us being trained and tutored for a better life, you’ll still be stained. Your five-year sentence might as well be a lifetime one. Enjoy the food and roof over your head while you got it.” The younger inmate pushed her stringy hair from her face with her wet hand and stared at her with large doe-like eyes. “It’s better here’n where I came from. Better’n where most of us come from.”

Hazel wanted to argue, to tell these girls that life outside the reformatory’s walls *was* better. That freedom of any kind was better than iron fences. But she held back, knowing the world she had come from differed from their world. She’d had money and a family name. She cringed, remembering how her world had rejected her, the pain of her sentencing, and the stoop of her parents’ shoulders. The truth was, she wasn’t sure where she’d be at this very moment if she were not here as a committed prisoner of the House of Refuge.

With her eyes on the dirty water and a heaviness in her heart, she spoke. “Tell me what it’s like living here.” She had been in such a daze when she arrived, she hardly heard the matron’s instructions. “I do wish to get through this time unscathed if I can—and perhaps somehow to have a future.”

“There’s a lady who comes by often. She runs a club or somethin’, and she’s changed it around here,” the inmate on her left said. She was older and less enthusiastic than her counterpart. “She’s helping us learn skills so we can leave changed. They’s teaching us to sew and cook, and they preach. But you gotta work hard too. You gotta listen and follow directions. If you do, you’ll get by.”

Hazel forced a smile despite the nausea assaulting her

stomach. Menial labor held no appeal, yet these women spoke as though it were a gift. She chided her ungrateful heart and forced herself to listen despite her innate desire to argue and fight against her lot.

“What you gotta know is that this building’s got three floors, and you move up or down dependin’ on if you work hard and learn or if you don’t. They even got cottages inside the gates for those who are doin’ the best.”

Hazel managed to weakly say, “I hope you get to live there soon.”

“We all hope for that. The hardened women move to the first floor, and there are rooms that women have to go to all by themselves. I never wanna go there.” She was old enough that there were creases near her eyes and lines on her forehead that didn’t leave, even when her face relaxed. She picked up her brush and began scrubbing the floor again. With her head bent, she talked faster. “They have us pray every day, and preachers come and talk to us. I been hearin’ their words since coming. They talk of picking a direction to run in and stayin’ on a path. I don’t understand it all, but I figure if I listen to them, I’ll avoid the first floor, and maybe I could have a life that’s better’n what I’ve known. I gotta hope.” Her cheeks turned red. “I ain’t touched the bottle in months now. What you in for?”

“I’m sure she’s here for running about with some married man,” the young inmate said with a giggle. “It’s always men or drink.”

“Nah, it’s always being desperate that brings us here,” the more seasoned inmate said.

“I don’t know desperation—not like you’ve known it.” Hazel took a slow breath as she wrestled with what to tell

these women about her past. She had so much regret, heart-ache, and hurt she could share, but instead, she simply said, “I was accused of burglary.”

“Burglary?” The younger woman’s voice jumped up an octave. “What did you steal?”

The words assaulted her, and she opened her mouth, ready to defend herself, then shut it. They assumed her guilty. Like everyone else, they believed she’d stolen and brought this fate on herself. She swallowed the pain, knowing that she was not completely innocent, nor was she guilty. But saying as much would do no good. “It matters little,” she said. “I’m here now, and I suppose all that matters is if I move upstairs or down.”

CHAPTER
ONE



AMHERST, NEW YORK, 1898

“Have you worked as a lady in attendance before?”

Hazel forced her eyes to remain on the man opposite her and made herself appear confident and at ease. It was no easy task, considering how long it had been since she’d been in such close proximity to a man who wasn’t a guard. Nothing about Doctor Watts was overly intimidating, yet her heart raced as she searched for an adequate response.

Her eyes betrayed her and darted away, landing on a painting above his head. A lush, green landscape. Peaceful, serene, calm. Something her life hadn’t been in a long time, not since before—

“I wish I could tell you I had years of experience, but the truth is that I’ve never spent one day, not even one moment, as a lady in attendance. From what I understand, not many women have.” She sighed, worried her chances at a dignified

job were over with the confession. Since leaving the reformatory, she'd already faced a slew of rejections and disappointments. Leaning forward, she said, "I have spent time in the medical field and know how to care for patients."

She winced, knowing she was stretching the truth—a habit she'd fought to leave behind. Her uncle *was* a doctor, and she had spent a summer in his home. That counted toward medical exposure, did it not?

"You're correct. It's quite new." His soft but steady voice interrupted her thoughts. "I try to keep up on what's working in dentistry, and there has been much success found in hiring help. It will not be long before it is the normal way of doing things." His words came slowly, as though speaking to her made him uneasy. Even his posture screamed of nervousness—his long fingers wringing together in his lap and the way he shifted about in his seat. "You say you've been involved in the medical community. That will help." He nodded his head, a small smile pulling at the corners of his mouth, and with it her hope grew. "I don't see the need to interview anyone else. Nursing experience is better than nothing at all. You may begin tomorrow."

Thrilled by his words, she grinned. A real, legitimate job—her first!

"Thank you," she said, rising from her seat so quickly the chair nearly overturned. "You won't be sorry. I can learn quickly, and I'll work hard. I'll work so hard. Oh, thank you. To work here is more than I could have hoped for."

"Just one more thing." His cheeks took on a slight pink hue similar to the shade of dress she'd often worn as a girl. The uneasiness she'd sensed in him multiplied tenfold.

"Yes?"

He shook his head and turned away. “Never mind. It’s nothing. I look forward to having your help.”

“Do you have a concern?”

“Well, yes. I suppose I do.” He stood on his long legs and paced behind his desk. “I’ve never worked with anyone other than my father before he died. Since then, it’s just been me and my patients. I . . . well, I’m not sure how exactly to go about it. We’ll be in close proximity and . . .”

“Yes?” she said when he paused, unsure what it was he was afraid of. She’d given him no reason to suspect she had a shameful past, had she? “What is it?”

“It’s just . . . I don’t want things to get uncomfortable. That’s all.” From the looks of it, he was already distressed over the matter. He cleared his throat. “I see the advantages of hiring help, but I’ve heard stories. I need not go into what I’ve heard, but . . . there are potential problems with having a woman in the office.”

“Problems?”

Sweat beaded on his forehead. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped it. “There will be no . . . no extra affection given to patients . . . you know what I’m saying, what I mean?”

“I understand, and I assure you it won’t be a problem.”

“And . . . and, well, my father told me that . . . he said I ought to always be honest from the start.” The pink in his cheeks deepened. “I feel it important to say that I have every intention of remaining unattached. We will be professional in our relationship, keeping firm boundaries. Never overstepping the lines of propriety.” He wiped again at his perspiring forehead. “I apologize for my bluntness.”

Hazel bit hard on her bottom lip so she wouldn’t laugh.

She needed this job and couldn't lose it on account of one ill-timed guffaw. Little did he know she was the last person he needed to worry about. All the romantic ambitions she'd held long ago had been put to rest and replaced by much simpler dreams. Now she craved a future unblemished by the past, enough bread to eat, and to be reconciled with her family. Beyond that, she dared not hope.

She politely put her hand out to him. It dangled in the air only a moment before he took it, his large hand enveloping her much smaller one. "You needn't worry on that account. I have no motives other than working."

He seemed to relax. "I'm sorry, it's just I've had a whole slew of ladies stopping in about the position, and most of them are young. The way they spoke and giggled unnerved me. Some even had mothers with them asking after my personal affairs. It has left me with my guard up."

"Please, be at ease." Hazel smiled, still delighted with the prospect of real work. "I'm twenty-five, well past my youthful years." She swallowed, knowing she ought to say so much more about her past, but voicing it was not an option. Her past, her identity, and especially her years behind those iron gates could not be mentioned, not if she wanted to remain employed and off the streets. "I assure you, ours will be a most proper arrangement."

"I believe we'll work well together," he said in his soft way. "Let me show you around the office."

"What shall I call you?" she asked before they'd gotten very far. "Should I call you Doctor Watts at all times?"

He ran a hand through his dark hair. "I suppose you could call me Gilbert when it's just the two of us. First names wouldn't be crossing any lines, considering we will be col-

leagues in a sense. But *Doctor Watts* would be more appropriate when we are working around patients. Does that suit you?”

“Any name will do. I simply wondered what you would prefer.” *Gilbert*, she said in her mind. They were hardly acquainted, yet she already felt that his name fit him. It seemed like a gentle, friendly name.

“And I will introduce you as my lady in attendance, Miss McDowell.”

She flinched at the pseudonym, looked toward the door, and for a moment thought of running away from the shame she felt, hating herself for the lie. Regret once again swept over her, churning inside until she feared she would be sick. Life outside the reformatory walls was supposed to be fresh and new, but already she’d soiled it with a falsehood. She blinked quickly, trying to still the rush of emotion. She’d lied, it was true, but what options did she have? In two other towns she’d asked after work and been swiftly rejected when she told them her story. “Call me Hazel whenever you’d like. I prefer it.”

“Very well, Hazel. Here is where our patients come in and wait if we are busy.” He motioned around the small front room that consisted of four wooden chairs set against a scuffed cream-colored wall. In truth, the room would have been forgettable if not for the vibrant paintings that added luscious colors, warm and rich, to the small space.

Without intending to, Hazel sighed. “I was so nervous waiting to meet with you that I didn’t notice the paintings before. They’re exquisite.”

Gilbert looked from Hazel to the paintings. “Thank you. I’m glad you find them pleasing.” He motioned for her to

follow. “You’ll greet our patients, and when I am ready, you’ll bring them back.” They stepped past the front counter and walked to the back of the office. “I have one chair here that reclines, and it’s where we do our actual work. In this next room, I have a cot, so if someone needs time to recover before leaving, they may rest there. Your job will be seeing to patients before and after they come to me. I like to help everyone be comfortable, but I’ll work faster if you can help me with that. You’ll also hand me instruments as necessary.”

“I can do all that.” She pointed toward a door. “What’s down the hall?”

“That’s the room where I make bridges and dentures. I call it my art room.” His gaze stayed on the door at the end of the hall, giving her a moment to study him. He reminded her of someone, but she couldn’t peg down who. She’d guess he was thirty, give or take a year or two. He was tall, much taller than she was, with a lean build and long arms and legs. His rich dark hair was in need of a cut and his clothes were in need of ironing, but even with him being slightly disheveled, she still found him a handsome man who was shy and unsuspecting.

Why was he a dentist? Teeth and mouths were far from exciting. In her case, the work was a necessity, and being a woman, her options were limited, but he could have been anything. A commanding lawyer or a dashing doctor. She pushed the thought aside, realizing it was a tad early to judge his motives.

“Is there anything else I should know?” Hazel asked, breaking the silence.

“Most of it I’ll teach you as we go. But, well, I do want

you to know that my patients—ours, now—matter a great deal to me. I want them to have the best care.”

She stepped a little closer to him and with genuine conviction said, “Then that is what I will give them.”

He held her gaze and nodded. “I believe you will. We discussed the particulars when you first arrived. I’ll show you tomorrow where we clean the instruments and how to keep notes. If you have no questions, then I think it is settled. I appreciate your help.”

Glancing once more around the room, she admired other paintings that hung throughout the simple but comfortable building. Working with him did not seem daunting, and neither did filling her days attending to the patients’ needs. She could do this. There had been a time in her life when it would have been an ill fit, but now, she felt immense gratitude. The patients did not scare her, and the teeth, well, she’d manage. Perhaps Providence had led her down Front Street on the very day Gilbert Watts was interviewing for a reason. A pleasant warmth filled her heart, and for a moment she felt less alone and less afraid.

Grinning, she said, “I’m very thankful. I’ll be here tomorrow.”



Gilbert Watts watched Hazel leave. She’d said she was twenty-five, and he’d believed it when she walked in. She’d been so prim and proper, not a bit silly like the younger female interviewees had been. But now, seeing her skip away, he didn’t think she seemed all that different.

No matter her demeanor, he’d given her his word, so there’d be no changing his mind—at least not until after he

gave her a chance. Ladies in attendance, once a novel idea, were on course to become the norm. And he saw the benefits. With a lady in the office, his young female patients could come more freely rather than having to find a chaperone. With good help, he knew he could work faster. And with the demand for his services so high, he'd be able to help additional patients.

Despite the obvious rewards of having help, he worried. He'd mulled the decision over in his mind for many weeks before putting up the "Help Wanted" sign. Somehow he'd become a creature of habit, comfortable in his bachelor-dentist ways. Hazel may wish to prattle aimlessly about everything and nothing all at the same time. Or worse, she may cry at the sight of someone in pain or be too delicate to handle the bloodier side of dentistry, and he had no experience with tears or with prattle.

Looking out the front window again, he caught one more glimpse of Hazel before she turned the corner. He'd thought her hair was brown, but now with the sun shining on it, the color looked nearly red.

In dental school, the other men called redheads *spitfires*, and they swore they had tempers that matched the hue of their hair. The thought of a hot-tempered woman working for him made his palms sweat. He wiped his hands on his pants, turned away from the window, and retreated to the art room, where he threw his nervous energy into Rebecca Weidel's bridgework. He'd been working extra hard on this one and wanted it to be perfect. Poor Rebecca had lost both of her front teeth as a youth, and now she was about to marry her sweetheart. The teeth, the wedding. He knew it was all expensive and important. These teeth would be a work of art that Rebecca and her future husband would never regret spending their savings on.