
A man and a woman are embracing at night. The man is wearing a white shirt and the woman is wearing a blue dress. They are standing in front of a large, dark building with many windows. The scene is lit with warm, golden light.

AMANDA HARTE

With
**LAIR OF
THE
WOLF**

A red and white logo, possibly a publisher's mark, is located in the bottom left corner. It consists of a red border around a white square.

NORTH STAR



THE DOCTOR IS IN

It wasn't just Andrew Muller's medical skills that were legendary. So too were his wealth and almost glacial attitude toward both his patients and acquaintances alike. But when Beth Simmons showed up on his doorstep unexpectedly one night, young Doctor Muller's heart began to skip beats.

Beth Simmons was a newcomer to the thriving city of Buffalo. And with a desperately ill child in her care, she wasn't taking any chances. She was going straight for the best doctor in town. And when the handsome Doctor Muller opened his door to them, Beth realized the child might not be the only one who could benefit from his healing hands.

In a city where runaway slaves fled toward freedom, where the obscurity of night held secrets that could mean life or death, Andrew and Beth could neither explain nor ignore the attraction growing between them. They could only trust the north star of their love to guide them out of the dark past toward a bright, shining future.

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*For Catherine Lynn Bailey,
who shared my childhood and my dreams.
Happy Birthday, Cathie.
I'm so glad you're my sister.*

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Chapter One

March 1853

She couldn't run. Not now.

Beth Simmons crouched next to the little girl, putting her arms around the child and forcing herself to smile. How could she have forgotten even for an instant the reason they had come? Whatever else she was, Beth was not a coward. She would not run away, not when they were so close.

She rose and shook her long skirts, trying to brush off the worst of the dried mud. Though walking twenty miles and sleeping in barns had taken its toll on the black serge, she could not enter a mansion looking like an impoverished fugitive. She straightened her shoulders, trying not to wince at the pain that raced up her back. *I am not a fugitive*, she reminded herself. *I am a widow with a young child. I have every right to be here.*

Dora tugged on her hand again. Beth managed another smile for the little girl, who was so sensitive to her moods. "Upsie daisy," she said, gathering the child into her arms once more.

The weather was changing. The sky, which had been clear that morning, had turned hazy, dimming the afternoon sun. A bitterly cold wind, so laden with moisture from the nearby lake that it penetrated even the heavy woolen cloak Beth wore over three layers of clothing, mocked the calendar's claim that this was the first day of spring. Snow or sleet seemed imminent. Beth shuddered as she hugged the child, hoping her own body heat would warm Dora. Soon they would reach their destination, and there they would find something even more important than warmth. They would

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find the man who could work miracles, the only one who could help them.

There it was. Though the house at the southern side of Niagara Square seemed a mile from the street, light spilled onto the front porch, a welcoming beacon that told the world the doctor was home. "We're here," Beth said softly, more to herself than to the child, as she opened the front door. The foyer was magnificent, its walls and floor expanses of polished oak that directed the viewer's eyes up a curving staircase to a stained-glass window of incomparable beauty.

Beth took a deep breath, willing her hands to stop trembling. It would be all right. The house was not meant to intimidate. It was a positive sign, proof of the doctor's success. Everything would be fine. This man was not like the others. He would help them. But, try though she might, Beth was unable to convince herself. Dora, overly sensitive Dora, looked up, her brown eyes mirroring the fear Beth was battling.

"It's all right, honey," she said, and ushered the child into the surprisingly austere waiting room. Though the maroon carpet was thick and the furniture of good quality, no paintings or plants softened the angles. Beth led Dora to one of the four chairs along one wall. Made of unadorned wood, they were clearly designed for overflow seating, while the two stuffed chairs on the opposite side appeared more comfortable. A slender, dark-haired woman with one of the most beautiful faces Beth had ever seen sat in one of them, her fur-trimmed cloak draped over the other.

Though the young woman's expression was as chilling as the March air, Beth nodded a greeting to her before she settled Dora into one of the empty chairs.

The woman raised one eyebrow. "Are you lost?" Were it not for her petulant expression, Beth would have said that the doctor's other patient was perfection personified. She wore an emerald-green gown of a fabric so lustrous that Beth thought it might be silk. The perfect fit announced that it had been made for her, unlike Beth's own black serge, which had had two previous owners. The other woman's hair was perfectly coifed, and her hands were smooth and white, the

hands of a woman who had never washed clothes, chopped wood, or carried a child for twenty miles.

Beth raised her chin ever so slightly. She would not let this woman cow her. "No, ma'am, we're not lost." She and Dora were exactly where they needed to be. As Dora started to whimper, Beth pulled her onto her lap, stroked her dark curls, and murmured reassuring words.

When she looked up, Beth saw the woman frowning as she stared at Beth's left hand. The wedding ring. For some reason, that simple gold band appeared to disturb the woman, for she flushed as she looked down at her own bare finger. A faint smile touched Beth's lips. How ironic that this beautiful, obviously wealthy woman was impressed with a piece of jewelry that Beth would have given almost anything not to be wearing.

"Look, Mrs. . . ." The woman paused.

"Simmons."

"Mrs. Simmons." She repeated the name, her voice haughty with disdain. "The clinic is on Swan Street."

Beth shook her head, dismissing the idea of a clinic. "I am here to see Dr. Muller."

The brunette's smile was little more than a sneer. "The doctor doesn't see the likes of you."

As Dora squirmed, Beth shook her head again. He had to. A child's welfare depended on him.

The inner door opened.

"Doctor." For the first time the other woman's smile was genuine.

Beth looked at the man she had traveled so far and taken such risks to consult. Unbidden, disappointment rose in her throat. He was too young to have done all the things with which he was credited. The doctor should have been as old as her father, yet he appeared less than thirty, with blond hair unstreaked by gray and a face devoid of lines. It was a strong face, its wide forehead and square chin evidence of his Germanic heritage. It was a handsome face, its classic features enlivened by a cleft in his chin. And yet the face seemed at odds with the doctor's reputation. He should have looked experienced and compassionate, not callow and cold. Though

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his was a handsome face, when he smiled at the dark-haired woman, no joy touched his eyes. Indeed, as he turned his gaze toward Beth, she felt more chilled than she had battling Lake Erie's brutal wind.

The doctor took a step toward her, and Beth had the feeling that he was comparing her undeniably disheveled appearance with the other woman's perfection. "Are you lost, madam?"

"No, Dr. Muller, I'm not lost. I'm Elizabeth Anne Simmons and . . ."

Before Beth could complete her sentence, the brunette rose gracefully. "I told her to go to the clinic," she announced with another warm smile for the doctor.

Nodding, he gestured toward the inner room. "I'll be with you in a moment, Miss Fields." When the door had closed, he turned to Beth again. "Now, madam, what can I do for you?"

Beth stood and placed her hand on Dora's shoulder as the girl looked up, her wary expression telling Beth she sensed her tension. "I haven't come for myself," she said. "It's my child." Somehow she managed to speak calmly, as though those were words she said every day. "Dora cannot hear." She stroked the girl's head, smoothing the unruly brown curls that were so different from Beth's own straight reddish gold hair.

For the briefest of moments, the man's face softened, and he smiled at Dora as though to reassure her. Then he turned back to Beth, his blue eyes once again cold and assessing. "You expect me to cure her deafness." It was a statement, tinged with more than a little irony.

The room was so quiet Beth could hear the fire crackle in the stove and the windowpanes rattle behind the heavy velvet draperies. Ordinary sounds, sounds she and the doctor would barely notice, but ones Dora might never again hear.

"I heard," Beth said, emphasizing the verb, "that you were the best physician in Buffalo and that you had more success treating hearing problems than anyone in New York State."

There was another moment of silence, and though it was one of the most difficult things she had done, Beth refused

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to drop her gaze. If he was a bully, he would take advantage of any hint of weakness. She could not afford that.

"What you have heard is true." The man nodded, accepting the accolades as his due. "I must tell you, though, that my fees are commensurate with my skills." When Beth did not reply, he continued. "Let me be blunt, madam. How do you propose to pay for my treatments?"

It was a question that had plagued her, part of the endless nightmare of the past three weeks. "I have some money," she replied, "and I'm willing to work. I assure you that I will pay you eventually."

"I see." As he frowned, the cleft in his chin deepened. "You expect me to spend my time—my very valuable time—on the chance that one day you might repay me." He looked at Dora again, and Beth saw the firm line of his lips begin to curve upward as if Dora's natural warmth had somehow thawed his ice-encased heart. When he spoke, Beth knew that she was mistaken. "I am sorry, but I do not take charity cases."

She recoiled as if she had been slapped. This man was her last hope, Dora's final chance to live a normal life, and he was going to refuse them the treatment the child needed so desperately. How could he?

Beth thought that she had outgrown the quick temper that had been the bane of her childhood, the temper that had gotten her into more than one scrape and earned her more than one beating. For years she had worked on controlling it, yet with only a few sentences this man's arrogant manner had destroyed all the progress she had made.

Clenching her fists in an effort to keep from shouting, she enunciated her words carefully. "I am not a charity case," she said. "I have already told you that I am willing to pay." Surely he could see that she would do anything—anything within her power—to help Dora. The one thing she would not do was to beg. She would pay for Dora's treatments. Beth opened her reticule and drew out two precious coins. "Here. Take this as your first payment." She extended her hand toward him. "I shall trust you to perform the treatment," she said, her voice low but trembling with anger.

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Seemingly oblivious to her insult, the man kept his hands at his sides. "Madam, the answer is still no."

"Dora needs you."

He shook his head. His hair was golden blond, his eyes as blue as the summer sun. Were it not for the stern line of his lips, he could have been one of the angels she had seen pictured in the big church Bible. Unfortunately, his words were anything but heavenly. "She may need me, but so do my other patients, and they pay me well. Now I advise you to leave before I'm forced to call a policeman."

Beth stared at him, unwilling to believe he could be so cold, so cruel. When his expression remained as hard as his marble porch columns, she grabbed Dora's hand and pulled her into the vestibule. The child began to cry. "Hush, sweetheart," she said. "The nasty man will not hurt you." *But he also will not help you*, she added silently.

Sleet was falling and the pale afternoon sun had set, making the streets treacherous as Beth picked her way along holding Dora in her arms.

She had thought the nightmare would end when they reached the doctor, for his skill was legendary. Andrew Muller, miracle worker, people called him. What the legends had not revealed was that the good doctor worked miracles only for the wealthy. Why had no one mentioned that very important detail? She could have saved herself and Dora a difficult journey. Beth shook her head and cradled the girl closer. She still would have come to Buffalo, even facing likely rejection, for this precious child in her arms deserved a better life than her mother had had.

Beth shivered. She and Dora needed shelter for the night. Though it meant walking into the wind, Beth continued south. She had heard there were rooming houses near the canal where a woman could find safe, inexpensive lodging. They would stay there tonight. Then tomorrow she would find a way to earn the money for Dora's treatments. The doctor was mistaken if he thought he had seen the last of Elizabeth Anne Simmons.

The genteel neighborhood changed as she rounded another corner. This street boasted none of the expansive lawns and

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large houses that were common near the doctor's home. Here the buildings encroached on the street, and a woman sang bawdy lyrics accompanied by a poorly tuned piano. Two men smoked in a doorway, while across the street a trio placed bets on how long it would take a fourth to drink a flagon of beer.

Even wrapped in Beth's cloak, Dora began to shiver. "I know, honey. I'm cold, too." Beth looked around. There was no sign of a rooming house. Dora started to cry. Beth tightened her grip on the child and pressed her head close to her breast. Instinct honed by years of experience told Beth to attract as little attention as possible.

It was too late.

"Hey, Lou. The skirts is out." One of the men who had been smoking tossed his cheroot into the street.

His companion slapped his thighs. "Waddya say? It's our lucky night."

Beth continued walking. Perhaps if she ignored them, they would lose interest.

"Hey, doll, you're going the wrong way." The first man's voice echoed off the buildings. "Business is back here."

"First one to grab the skirt gets her." The second man shouted the challenge.

Beth started to run.

"So that's her game. C'mon, Jed. Let's show her what real men are made of." To Beth's ears his chuckle was pure evil, for she knew exactly what real men were made of.

She ran, terror lending her weary feet strength. But it was to no avail. Hampered by her long skirts and the child she carried, she had no chance of outrunning the men.

"I've got her." The first man slid into her, his weight knocking her forward.

"Dora," she cried, twisting her body in an attempt to protect the girl as she fell. And then the world went black.

Andrew Muller frowned as he drew back the heavy draperies. The last of his patients had left. Now it was time to prepare for the evening. The sleet that was falling, turning the piles of snow into mounds of ice and the roads into

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treacherous pathways, announced that winter had no intention of abdicating its rule to spring. That gentle season, Andrew had long since learned, came late to the city by the lake.

Andrew turned and began inserting his onyx shirt studs. While many deplored the long, bitter winters, he found them invigorating and more than a little advantageous, for as the cold weather lingered, many of the city's wealthiest citizens found an increasing number of reasons to seek his professional services. And if the price he had to pay was occasional attendance at charity balls like tonight's gala, so be it.

By the time he and Helen Pratt arrived at the Pierce mansion, the ballroom was crowded with the elite of Buffalo society. The scents of forced flowers, melted candle wax, and women's perfumes were far more pleasant than the rancid odors of illness and fear that he normally encountered, and the strains of music mingling with men's voices and women's murmurs soothed the ear, a welcome counterpoint to the cries and groans that accompanied his life's work.

"What a wonderful turnout!" Helen said as she and Andrew entered the large room. Though no one would call Helen beautiful, the petite blonde's ready smile and sweet disposition made her a popular member of the highest social echelon. Tonight she wore a gown of pink taffeta that displayed her softly rounded shoulders to advantage. Andrew frowned. Though there was no doubt the latest fashions were designed to entice a man, bare shoulders in a Buffalo winter were foolhardy. No wonder he had so many female patients complaining of fevers.

"Mrs. Pierce will be pleased that she was able to raise so much money," Helen continued.

"And, of course, the fact that she will establish her position as the city's premier hostess is of no account." Andrew muttered the words, more to himself than Helen. He had few illusions about the motive behind the charity ball. Though the organizers would claim it was designed to raise money for a mission, Andrew suspected that the primary allure was providing an opportunity for the wealthy to see and be seen.

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In truth, he had no reason to be critical. It was not as though charity was why he himself had come.

"Shall we dance?" At least holding Helen in his arms would keep his more cynical thoughts at bay.

As their feet moved in the intricate steps of the quadrille, Andrew glanced around the room, his gaze moving from one woman to another. The color of their gowns varied, but their faces appeared to be poured from the same mold—round cheeks, full smiling lips—happy, well-fed faces, not like . . .

"Do you have any idea how annoying it is to be dancing with you and see you watching other women?" Helen's words were soft enough that they would not be overheard by others, but there was no mistaking their sharpness or the fact that her fingers, which appeared to rest lightly on his arm, dug in like a cat's claws.

"I wasn't doing that." Though he protested, it was a mere formality. Helen was right. He had been inexcusably rude to the one woman whose company he enjoyed, the one who made these obligatory social occasions bearable. When he should have been paying court to Helen—or at least listening to her—he had been wool-gathering, thinking of another woman. He had looked down at Helen and remembered how the redheaded woman had been taller than most and how proudly she had held herself despite her obvious poverty. For the first time he noticed Helen's nose. It was short and rounded, not slender with an intriguing tilt to its tip like the young widow's. Since Andrew could hardly tell Helen his thoughts, he shook his head again.

"Andrew, if you value our friendship at all, I beg you not to lie. You were staring at Lucinda Fields for a full thirty seconds."

Lucinda. He hadn't realized where his gaze had ended. At least now he had a plausible excuse. Andrew nodded, smiling at Helen as he twirled her around in time to the music. "If I was staring at her, it was simply because Miss Fields has made a most amazing recovery. She was in my office only this afternoon, complaining of a sore throat."

The steps of the dance separated them. When they were once again together, Helen continued speaking as though