



A Sleigh Ride for Millie (Sleigh Ride)

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Category: Historical

Description: What's a man supposed to do when he can't get past the dog house?

Millie Burnett was happy with her life. She helped her father train hunting dogs. She was a natural, but her father was pushing her to get married. She was twenty-two and not engaged or with any prospects. So far, the men she'd met weren't as reliable as her dog, Champion Bob's Treasure. Until she found a man she liked, she'd stick to the dogs.

Preston Chadwick had one woman in mind. Millie Burnett. But so far, he didn't rate above her dog. He'd tried to get her to look at him, but she wasn't interested. What was wrong with her? Or him?

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Millie Burnett shoved her arms into the fur coat and readied to go out into the cold. She hugged the warm jacket around her. She chuckled. It wasn't the fancy fur she'd wear to the Hightower's Ball this weekend. This was her work coat of wolf trimmed in rabbit. She was going to run Bob through his paces.

Father had bought her the champion German pointer from Germany. A champion of champions, he'd told her, and she and the dog worked as if they were one mind. Millie loved the dog. He was faithful, loyal, eager to please, and beautiful with dark, warm eyes.

Why couldn't she find a man like that? So far, all the men she'd met in Denver, Colorado, were born rich, spoiled, and players, loyal only to themselves. Then there were newly rich from the gold and silver and wily as wolves and just as dangerous. Last was the poor with gold in their eyes. As one of the wealthy families of Denver, she was warned to be wary of those looking to mine her for gold.

Her father, Raul Burnett, was getting impatient for her to marry and supply him with grandsons. Poor man, didn't he understand grandchildren came in two forms? Grandsons and granddaughters. What if she had a bundle of little girls? After all, Father never had a son, and she was his only child.

Though he'd tried his best to mold her like a son. He taught her how to hunt and train his dogs, and she was good at it. Better than the man he'd brought back from Germany. Fritz Schwartz thought he was God's gift to women and the best dog trainer in the world.

She thought he was a bore and unpleasant to animals and women alike. Bob hated

him. Oh, the dog came with a twenty-dollar name she couldn't pronounce, much less say when training. So, to Fritz's dismay and utter disgust, she'd shortened the dog's name to Bob.

If she could make Fritz miserable, her day was a success. Millie grinned as she put on her gloves lined with rabbit fur. The day promised to be beyond cold. For all of Fritz's bragging about the mountains in Germany, he hated the cold and Colorado. More than once, she'd yelled at him to just leave and go home.

Father met her at the kennels. "You taking Bob out in this cold? He's a champion. You don't want to do him any harm." He smiled at her. "I heard Herald Brinks will be at the big event this weekend. You used to like him."

Millie snugged the rabbit-lined hat over her head, flipping up one of the ear flaps so she could hear her father. "I used to like Herald when he was human. Now, it's as if he were made of gold. He has no time for flesh and blood people. Money is the only thing on his mind."

Besides, she'd heard that Preston Chadwick was coming back to Denver. Millie sighed. They'd always had feelings for one another. After her mother died, Preston had taken her under his wing and promised to take care of her. After the feud started, Father forbade them from meeting each other. At least, he thought he did. She still sneaked out to be with Preston. Together, they breached their father's bellowing rules and planned to marry. Millie's shoulder's drooped as she wondered if Preston had forgotten their pledge. She hadn't heard from him since he went to Boston.

Father cleared his throat and brought her back to the present. "Well, if you married Harold, he'd make sure you were provided for."

She huffed. "I don't need a keeper. I want a man who will love me and one I can fall in love with. So far, I've not met a man that comes up to my standards." She smiled a

sly smile as she thought of Preston and hoped he was coming home.

“You live in your fairy tale world of books. Real men don’t act that way. Especially those in Colorado. It’s still an uncivilized world of outlaws, drifters, and prospectors. I will send you to Germany if you want.”

Millie looked at him kindly and patted his cheek. “I don’t want to go to Germany. If the men are anything like Fritz, they can keep their boorish men. You’d think he believed I was one of the dogs he trains. I’m glad you gave Bob to me, and I didn’t have to let that oaf ruin my dog.”

Father threw up his hands. “You are impossible. But it is time you thought seriously about finding a husband. You don’t want to become old, frumpy, and gray like Aunt Sonda.”

Millie had heard that story since she was five. Poor Aunt Sonda. The woman never had a husband. But the thing was, Aunt Sonda was a happy soul. She lived in a small shack out in the foothills of the mountains and tended to her neighbors. She had to be close to seventy now.

Not that Millie wanted to follow in her footsteps. She just believed that there had to be a man just for her. A man she could look up to and fall in love with, just like in the books she read. There would be no settling for a man like Fritz. He’d make her miserable.

After a sigh loud enough for her father to hear, she went to unlock Bob’s kennel. If it was up to her, she would let the dog stay with her in the house, but, as Father pointed out, the dog would get used to the warmer temperature and suffer when he was outside hunting.

Bob greeted her with a bark. Once free, he gave her a brisk wag of his short tail and a

welcoming lick in the face. She snapped the leash to him and grabbed her rifle from the rack by the kennel room. She had been taught never to leave the house without a rifle.

Bears, mountain lions, and wolves shared the land with them, and they considered humans as prey. She wasn't afraid, though. Father had raised her to be brave and a sure shot. She might be all-girl, but she wasn't a defenseless damsel.

Preston Chadwick stepped off the train and was welcomed by an icy blast from the mountains. He was home. Denver, Colorado, had nothing in common with Boston, Massachusetts, and Preston couldn't be happier.

He'd found the east to be stuffy, spoiled, and not at all the place he'd want to set up practice. Preston had studied medicine. He loved caring for people and helping them recover from injuries and diseases. Not to mention bringing new lives into the world.

His parents had hoped he'd find that special girl in Boston and stay in the east. But he wanted to walk in the Rocky Mountains and see God's wonder and beauty spread before him. While Boston had its history and modern marvels, it wasn't home.

The girls of Boston left him reeling with inane conversations about flowers and architecture, the latest in fashions, the suffragette movement, and the evils of liquor and demon rum as told by the Temperance and Prohibition Sisters. Preston sighed. He'd been only too happy to escape and come back to his idea of civilization.

Preston wanted to be where men were men and women were women. Boston was a land turned upside down. True, Colorado was wild, and most of the men and women were not from civilized families, but he loved it.

He'd rather bump shoulders with people who told the truth to your face rather than knife you in the back with gossip and rumor. Not that the people of Colorado were perfect any more than those in Boston, but he fit in with his Colorado brethren. Knew them. Besides, Millie Burnett was in Denver. He prayed she wasn't married or engaged.

Preston loved Millie and Colorado. The land, the wildness, and the freedom. Boston was too crowded. He liked to find a ledge overlooking a mountain lake and sit quietly, thinking or listening, praying to an Almighty God who loved to display His amazing greatness and awe to anyone who could see.

A shout diverted his attention, and Preston waved as he saw Father's driver and buggy. He grabbed his trunk, hefted it onto his shoulder, and walked to the line of waiting carriages.

The driver stepped down from the carriage. "Good to see you, Preston."

"Good to see you, too, Alfred. I missed everyone."

The driver grinned. "Your mother and father will be pleased to see you." He looked around. "I see you didn't bring a young woman home with you. Your mother was hoping."

Preston laughed. "I don't think any of the girls I met would want to live in Colorado, and I wouldn't trade this for all the tea in the Boston Harbor."

"Good to have you home, sir. Will you be setting up your practice here?"

"Planning on it. Denver is short on doctors, real ones anyway."

"True. But it is not a place that's going to make you rich. Your father might have

something to say about your choice.” Alfred struggled to get the trunk in the back of the carriage.

Preston stepped around the back and helped him. “Money isn’t everything.”

“No, sir. But it sure helps a lot of things go easier.” Alfred grinned as he secured the trunk, climbed into the driver’s seat, and gathered the reins.

Preston settled into the carriage. “I suppose you’re right. I’m ready for some of Mother’s famous stew.”

Alfred frowned. “She’s been a little poorly for some time. Mr. Chadwick hired a cook.” He glanced at Preston and grinned. “The cook is excellent and likes to make desserts too.”

Preston’s mind had stopped on his mother feeling poorly. Why hadn’t he been told? “What’s wrong with my mother?”

Alfred kept his face sheltered by examining the shoes of the nearest horse. Then he shrugged. “They say little to me. She’s lost weight and doesn’t have much of an appetite.” He finally turned to look at Preston. “I’m glad she has a doctor in the family.”

His heart stumbled. The symptoms suggested it could be any number of terrible diagnoses or nothing. His joy at being home melted away. Suddenly, he didn’t care about the beautiful mountains and freedom. Preston prayed he could help his mother.

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Preston's mind stayed on the news about his mother while Alfred kept quiet. The man had a sixth sense when it came to other people's feelings. The news had shaken Preston's joy at being home. Why hadn't they told him?

All the way from Boston, Preston had thought about Millie Burnett and wondered if she was still unmarried and not engaged. He hadn't heard of her getting married. Mother would have told him, but now, he wondered if she would have thought about it. What was wrong with her? Father was a bear to deal with on a good day. Preston couldn't imagine what he'd be like if Mother was seriously ill.

Although Preston was eager to get his practice underway, having Mother as his first patient was not what he'd expected. She'd always been the healthiest one in their household. While he or one of his four siblings might get sick, Mother never did. She was the rock her family clung to in hard times.

Annabelle Lee Chadwick was the stock that pioneers came from. Nothing got her down. Not blizzard or drought. Heat or floods. Claim jumpers, Indians, and outlaws all felt the sting of her rifle. Then there was Father. Jeremiah Chadwick. He was carved out of the mountains he loved so much. Unfortunately, his love was never openly extended to his family.

Mother bore the brunt of his granite-like personality, softening him before he dealt with his three sons and two daughters. Father was hardest on Ernst, the first-born son. Preston was the second-born. Next came Lila and Corinthia. Last, and in this case least, came Frank.

Ernst worked with Father in their mining venture. They didn't dig in the mines

anymore but owned and managed them. The mines were one reason Preston became interested in medicine. After several cave-ins and accidents, he saw the need to take care of the miners. Lila was married to a man who worked in Father's office. Corinthia was not married yet but worked in her dress shop in Denver.

Frank was the baby and the black sheep of the family. Preston would be surprised to see if Frank was any different after four years. None of the letters mentioned that his younger brother had a change of heart or a steady job.

Finally, Alfred pulled up to the big house on the hill. The rose bushes were a little larger. The flower garden wasn't as well-kept as when he'd left. There was a patch that looked almost dead. Then again, the roses were Mother's domain. Their poor condition was evidence his mother wasn't well.

The carriage pulled up around the drive to the front door. Alfred jumped down and opened the carriage door for him. Preston thanked him and ran to the front door and inside the house. "I'm home!"

Preston had thought someone would be there to welcome him. Still, it was only two in the afternoon. Father and his brother would be at work. Who knows where Frank would be? Then he heard her come shuffling down the stairs.

He whirled and, with arms wide, rushed to grab his mother in a hug. "I missed you."

"Preston, I'm so glad you're home. We missed you so." Mother kissed his cheek.

He stared into her green eyes and noticed the spark had dimmed. Her cheeks were gaunt, and her face pale. "Mother, I got a report that you're not feeling well."

"Oh, Preston. Really. That is not how I want to start your visit." She chuckled and waved him off while going to sit in the comfy chair in the parlor. This was not the

mother he was used to.

A bit perplexed, he followed her. “Visit? I’m home for good. I couldn’t get to Denver quick enough. I’m going to set up my practice here in the city.” He gave her his expert doctor smile. “You will be my first patient.”

She smiled wanly. “I am glad to hear that. I was afraid some girl had captured your heart, and you were going to stay in the East. Although, I would like you to find a girl to marry.”

“Now, Mother. Isn’t it enough you have Ernst and Lila married. I would think you would have some grandchildren by now.”

“You would think so.” She grinned. “In fact, Lila and Ernst’s wife, Gianna, are with child. You haven’t met Gianna yet. You’ll like her. If I can just hang on long enough, I’ll be a grandmother.”

“Whoa, what’s with this hang-on language? I’ll have you know I was the best in my class. Your son, the wonder doctor, is home and will fix you right up.”

Mother stared into his eyes. “The Lord has our days numbered in his hand. I’m not worried and don’t want you to be worried either.”

“You will let me help you, won’t you?” Preston took her hand in his and held it close to his heart. “I didn’t come home to lose my mother.”

Annabelle Lee smiled. “No, you didn’t. It is in God’s hands, Preston. I trust Him.”

“I do, too. Still, I can see what I can do to help you feel good and get that spark back in your eyes.” Preston believed in the Lord but didn’t have the faith his mother did. He hoped to get some free time to search the land and mountains he loved so much

and sit and talk with God.

He'd missed that while in Boston. Not that he couldn't have gone out to the beach or woods, but he never had the time. He was always knee-deep in papers and studying.

With a sly grin, he glanced at his mother. "Millie Burnett. Have you heard anything about her?"

Mother matched his grin. "You mean, is she married or seeing someone? I haven't heard a thing. Her father went to Germany and brought back a champion dog and a trainer. Her father was trying to get her interested in the man. Millie is a woman comfortable in her own skin even though she shies away from high society. If you have set your sights on her, you have got your work cut out for you. I told you that before you left for Boston."

Preston sighed. "Yes, so you have told me before. I just can't get her out of my mind." He'd thought of her all day. If his mother hadn't been sick, he would probably be on her porch asking to talk to her right now.

He sighed and kept his gaze on his mother. Right now, he'd have to concentrate on helping his mother. Then there was his father he was going to have to deal with. Jeremiah Chadwick was a force in his own right.

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Millie put the food bowl in the kennel and then went to get fresh water. After filling the container, she went back to her prized pup. "Eat up, Bob. We're going to be busy in a few days, and you'll need your strength." She smiled. The dog was something special. Yes, her father made fun of her attachment to the animal, but she didn't care.

Bob had an uncanny ability to know when she needed an extra lick or two. Not to mention, he had beaten every dog in the state when it came to pointing out birds. His one big downfall was his love for chickens. She'd been embarrassed on a couple of occasions when Bob had come home with somebody's laying hen in his mouth. Millie had yet to break him of the annoying habit.

"You baby that dog too much." Fritz startled her with his gruff statement. "You'll ruin him." He walked by Bob's kennel and scowled. Bob growled at him.

"Get away from me, Fritz, and stay away from Bob. He doesn't like you, which proves to me he can also point out people of ill character." She glared at him. Father had brought him home to entice her to marry the man. Yet from the beginning, she'd disliked Fritz.

Not that he wasn't handsome and rugged. But Fritz annoyed her with his love of Germany and the mountains of his hometown. He had nothing good to say about Colorado, the United States, or anything she liked. The Fatherland, as he called it, was perfect.

Fritz sneered. "I know dogs, and I know how to make them work. You do not. Our ways in Germany are the best." He huffed at her with little intent on hiding his contempt.

“Why don’t you go back to your beloved Germany? I, for one, am sick of hearing about it.” She turned away from him and started for the house.

Fritz caught her arm and whirled her around to face him. “I’m sorry. Actually, I came out here to ask you to the Hightower’s Ball this weekend. I am an excellent dancer.”

She stared into his blue eyes. They were glacial blue, and she thought them chilling even though she had to admit they were pretty to look at. She turned away. “I am going to the dance, but I will go alone. You can ask to check my card, and I may share a dance with you.” Millie had to admit that Fritz was a handsome man. Tall, he had an attractive face, although he usually fixed it in such a stern manner.

Fritz smiled at her. Although there was no pleasantness in his expression. It was more of a look of possession, as if she were one of his dogs in the kennel.

Millie shook her head. She needed to find a man she liked, and then she looked down at her attire and had to laugh. No wonder there wasn’t a man around who took her seriously. It was a wonder Fritz even gave her a second look.

She wore her father’s fur-lined trousers, her big buffalo coat, and the hunter’s cap. Millie decided to go shopping tomorrow to buy herself some new clothes. Like it or not, she was getting older, and it was time to find a good man to settle down with. She’d not do it looking like a mountain girl.

She threw a backward glance over her shoulder. Fritz was not the man she would consider marrying. How Father could think he might be was beyond her. She wanted a man who would respect her and value her. Fritz seemed to be under the impression that women were little better than livestock.

She muttered to herself as she walked into the house.

Father looked at her. "Is something wrong?"

She hadn't seen him and jumped. "Sorry, I was just wondering how you would ever think Fritz was someone I would be interested in."

"Well, he likes dogs and enjoys hunting."

She rolled her eyes. "That's it?" Apparently, Father knew less about women than Fritz did. Although he had made Mother happy. Preston. He was the one that could make her happy. If only. Yet, how many years could she dream about a life before she began living it?

Father frowned. "You love the dogs and working with them. Fritz is a nice, honest man. I'm happy with the work he's done for us."

"He is not a man I would consider marrying." She frowned and sat down. "I really can't believe you would think he is good for me. He never treats me with respect or compassion." Millie shook her head. "With the Hightower Ball coming up, I need to buy some new clothes."

Father puffed on his pipe and looked at her with concern. "I am surprised about your thoughts on Fritz. Perhaps it is a difference of cultures." Then he smiled at her. "I was wondering when you'd get the idea men might not want a wife dressed like a mountain man."

Millie had to laugh. "You're right. Time for me to grow up."

"Just be aware, when you dress the part, you might be surrounded by men wanting to marry you. I'd suggest you start praying for the man of your dreams."

"Do you think God cares who I marry?"

Father bent down and kissed the top of her head. “Yes, He does. Trust me and ask Him to show you.”

Millie grinned. “Nothing else has worked. I guess I can try asking the Lord. As long as He doesn’t point out Fritz.”

“Fritz is a good man, even if you two argue like cats and dogs.” He gave her a sly smile. “It could be a sign that you are just right for one another. He’s not done anything to harm you, has he?”

“No. He’s just rude. I hope he’s not the man for me.” She stood and kissed her father’s cheek. “I better get ready for dinner.”

“Carla is fixing her famous stroganoff. Fritz is dining with us tonight.” Father chuckled.

Millie rolled her eyes. It was bad enough to see Fritz working with the dogs during the day, but to have to endure dinner with the man was intolerable. She stopped at the doorway and turned toward her father. “Has Preston Chadwick returned from Boston?”

Father tensed. “I haven’t heard. Not that I would care for anyone from that family. I know Frank was in trouble with the law. I don’t know what he did, but that boy is headed for jail or a hangman’s noose.”

“I was asking about Preston.”

Father nodded. “I know. I just don’t want you involved with the Chadwicks. Jeremiah is a hard man, and I want you to be happy.”

“Yes, Father. I better get cleaned up, or Carla will be angry.” Millie ran up the stairs

to her room. The feud between her father and Jeremiah Chadwick was apparently ongoing. She'd played with Preston and his sisters as a girl. Ernst was too old and Frank too young, but she got along with the other three.

Until that day when everything exploded, and her father and Jeremiah declared war on one another. They'd been partners in their gold mine. Millie was never quite sure what happened, but from that day forward, she was not allowed to play with the Chadwicks.

She sighed. Even though Father forbade it, she would meet Preston when she'd take her dogs for walks in the forest. Then Preston went to Boston. She still thought about him fondly, but he'd abandoned her without a word and never sent her a letter.

She sighed and sat on her bed. "There is no reason to even think of that man." She struck Preston off her list of potential husbands. He could have written to her. She put on her skirt, secured the belt, and buttoned her blouse. If Preston did return, he would probably have his nose in the air and a Boston woman on his arm.

Millie brushed her hair, glanced at the mirror, and was happy with her results. Not that she wanted to impress Fritz. Or Preston. Why had she even thought about that man? A crooked grin caught her lips. Preston had always had her heart. She shook her head and admitted it. Soon would be the moment of truth. When she saw Preston, she would know.

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Preston sighed and went about straightening his room. He'd never thought to come back and live in the big house. He was a man on his own and should have a place of his own, but Mother's illness had changed his mind. At least for now, he'd stay home in the enormous mansion Father had built.

Mother needed him. What Father would say, Preston had no idea. He hadn't been too excited about Preston's choice of career. Perhaps he would change his mind since Mother needed help.

Preston took out his medical books and placed them on his bookshelf. He needed to figure out what was wrong with his mother. But first, he needed to unpack everything. Once he found a place for his practice, he'd look into moving out.

He'd just pulled the last of his shirts and put them in the drawer when a rapid series of knocks warned Frank was on the other side of the door. Preston braced himself. He'd not seen his little brother in four years.

The door flew open, and Frank walked in. His bright eyes were just as Preston remembered. Blue as the sky and full of life. "Hey, Big Brother. Am I glad you're home." He rushed and grabbed Preston into a bear hug.

Preston returned the hug. "Good to see you, Frank. You've grown up."

"I have. I'm sure Father still thinks of me as the bad boy of the family, but I've got plans of my own." Frank looked around and flicked his finger at the medical book. "A doctor, I hear. Proud of you, Preston."

“Thanks, Frank.” It was news to him that Frank had plans of his own. “So, what is it you’ve been doing?”

Frank grinned and stared at him. “There’s time for that later.” His smile waned. “What about Mother? Can you heal her?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t even aware she was sick. How long has she been like this?”

Frank shook his head. “Father doesn’t like to talk about it. He growls around, telling everyone she’ll be all right in time. But she’s been sick for at least six months. She barely eats. Doesn’t do much. Remember how she always liked to work in the garden? I guess you saw it when you came up the drive. She hasn’t touched her garden in months. She’s always tired. I’m worried, Pres.”

Preston could see tears in his younger brother’s eyes. Frank wasn’t known for caring about others, and it scared Preston to see the worry in his young brother. He pulled Frank into a hug. “I’m here now. I’ll see if I can help her.”

“Thanks, Preston. You came home at the right time.”

Not wanting to spoil their common interest, Preston had to ask. “What are you doing, Frank?”

With a sigh, Frank shook his head. “You’re not going to believe this, but I’m working for the Pinkerton Agency. I’m a detective, and I’m good at it.”

“Well, that is a surprise. We all figured you’d be in the legal profession. We just thought it would be as an outlaw.” Preston laughed.

Frank chuckled. “I deserve that. Father isn’t happy about it. Mother is petrified that I’ll get shot. Little did she know I was headed on the road to jail, but I had a change

of heart. Now, I'm a detective and taking others to jail."

"You are a man of surprises, Frank. Is there any special woman I should know about?"

"No, I decided I'd give the Pinkertons my full attention for now. I am not sure I want to settle down when working in a job where I could get hurt or killed. When I find a wife, I'll find another job."

"Frank, older and wiser. I'm impressed."

He grinned. "Of course, now that there is a doctor in the family, I know someone who can fix me up if I run into any bullets."

"You bet. Family discount." Preston was relieved to see that Frank had landed on the right side of the law. He nodded down the hall. "You still live here?"

"For now. I didn't want to leave while Mother felt so poorly. Lila and Corinthia come over and keep her company. Father is busy with the mine, as usual. Ernst and Gianna have a house over on Pine Hill."

Preston nodded. "Father doesn't like to face hard times. I'm sure he stays busy, so he doesn't have to worry about Mother."

"Well, she needs him." Frank scowled. "We get into it at least once a week, and I don't see him more than that. So, I'm glad you're here. Maybe it will take the edge off when Father comes home."

"Does Ernst visit? Mother said they're expecting a baby."

"I think he gets enough of Father at work and can't take much more of him. Even

Lila's husband steers clear of the old man. He's a bear, Preston. I know you think he always has been, but he's ten times worse since Mother's sickness. I'm sure if he ran into a grizzly, it would shriek and run the other way."

Preston patted Frank on the back. "I'm glad I'm home then. I hope I can help Mother and Father." He knew Mother would be the easier of the two. Father was loud and stubborn. "Alfred said we had a cook now, and dinner was about ready."

"Yes, you'll like Chen's dinners. He and his wife, Mei Lee, cook the best food. They're from China. Father found him in the mines and offered him more money to cook for us."

"What about the feud? Did Father ever give any idea what it's about?"

Frank blushed and looked down. "No. No one knows what the feud is about. The Burnetts are still off limits to see or talk about."

Preston shook his head. "I just can't imagine Raul doing anything to anger Father so much. Then again, he's just as mad at our father and us."

Frank had his back to him. "Odd how people so close can be driven apart over something so stupid."

Preston stared at his younger brother. "Whatever it is, it must have been something important. At least to our father and Mr. Burnett."

Frank grinned and clapped Preston on the shoulder. "We better get down there for supper. We don't want to make Father any angrier than he already is."

After they left Preston's room, Preston could smell an aroma that had his stomach growling. Soon, they were at the dining table. Mother sat at one end of the long table

and Father at the other. Frank and Preston sat on the same side together.

Father lifted a bushy eyebrow. "Preston, my boy. I didn't know you were home." He glanced at Mother. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Annabelle Lee sighed. "Oh, Jer, I was too tired to mention it. Sorry."

Jeremiah looked at her with worry on his brow. "Good thing you came home, Preston. Mother needs you."

Preston nodded. "No one told me she was sick. I found out when I came home." Of course, he'd hardly heard from his family at all. They were not known for writing letters. Not that he wrote many himself.

Annabelle Lee shook her head. "Please, let's not get into a fight over me. I'll be fine."

Preston sighed. She was pale. As she dished out the meal, he could see her hand shaking. He also saw the meager portion she put on her plate.

Father shook his head and then turned to Preston. "Are you here for good?"

"Yes, I intend to start my practice here in Denver. Tomorrow, I'll go out and look for a building to use as an office."

"Good. We need a good doctor here in Denver." Jeremiah's eyes glanced at his wife. "Some need you more than others."

Preston got the message. His mother needed him, but his father didn't. Putting aside the trouble in the family, Preston enjoyed the food and complimented Chen and Mei Lee. Still, seeing his mother in such poor health tore at his heart. Tonight, he would have to go through his books and see if he could find out what her problem might be.

He needed to find out if she'd been getting any treatment in Denver. Doc Cumber was a fair doctor.

Father ate a healthy portion and then pushed his chair from the table. "Well, Preston. How are you doing? Did you bring home a wife?"

"No, sir. I couldn't get along with the girls in the east. I wanted to come home." He smiled, hoping Father would stay in a good mood. So far, he hadn't yelled at him for choosing to be a doctor.

Jeremiah patted his stomach. "Good food. Eat up, Annabelle. You need your strength."

Mother forced another bite from the nearly full plate and then set her fork down. "That's all I can eat." She stood and weakly smiled. "I'm going to lie down."

Preston watched her walk up the stairs.

Father came around the table to stand behind him. "I'm worried about her. I sure hope you learned something that can help her."

"Did she go to Dr. Cumber?"

"Yes. He doesn't know how to help her." Father put a hand on Preston's shoulder. "I'm counting on you to heal your mother."

"Yes, sir." Preston felt a burden settle on his shoulders. His heart had already been heavy, but now he knew his father would demand more of him. Preston would do what he could, but there was only so much a doctor could do. That had been one of the hardest lessons he'd learned in medical school.

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Millie opened her eyes, smiled, and welcomed the new day. Her mother had always told her that once she opened her eyes in the morning, she should thank God for the blessing of a new day and then ask Him what she should do with it.

Her days went better when she obeyed her mother's words. She looked at the window and the streams of sunlight breaking inside her room. "Thank you, Lord, for this day. What would you have me do?"

She waited and listened. Not sensing any direction, she still grinned at the peace she felt. Millie would take that as an answer. She needed to get new clothes for the dance this weekend. Most of her clothes looked girlish. At twenty-two, she was no longer a child.

She wondered if Mother's sudden passing when Millie was ten had kept her in a childish stage. Here she was, playing with dogs, wearing the clothes of a mountain man, and unable to get a real man to take her to the ball.

She put her pillow over her head and screamed, "I can do better." Corinthia had a dress shop. They used to be friends. Of course, if Father found out she was seeking a Chadwick for help, he'd disown her. But she was desperate. She needed nice outfits to be seen around town and a gown for the Hightower Ball that would draw the attention of men to her. She would not go to another dance and leave with an empty dance card.

Millie needed help. Maybe that was what the Lord wanted her to figure out for this day. Father would be no help at all. He always thought she looked lovely. Shaking her head, she dressed and went down for breakfast.

As luck, mostly bad, would have it, Fritz was making breakfast. He glanced at her. “Want an omelet? My grandmother made the best.” He almost looked pleasant as he flipped the egg dish over and then onto a plate. “Eggs, onions, cheese. It’s good.”

She nodded. “Thank you. I didn’t know you could cook?”

“I can make a few things.” Fritz looked at her. “I thought about taking the dogs out today. Want me to take Bob?”

“No. I’ll take him out later.”

Fritz shook his head. “He needs to learn how to be around other dogs during a hunt. You take him out, and he’s by himself.”

“I have things to do today.” She savored a bite of the omelet and had to admit Fritz knew how to cook. She glanced at him. “Where is my father?”

“He’s checking the mine.” Fritz frowned. “I take it there are some problems.”

Millie’s head went up. “I haven’t heard of any trouble.”

“Maybe he wants to shelter you from the conflict.” Fritz shrugged and finished cooking his omelet. He put it on a plate and sat at the table across from her. “What are you doing today?”

This was probably the most civil discussion she and Fritz had had together. Still, he didn’t have any business asking her what she was doing. She stiffened. “I’m going shopping.”

“Shopping?”

Millie sat up straight and raised her head. “Yes, shopping. You know, it is what women do.”

Fritz set his fork down and studied her. “For clothes?”

She felt her cheeks grow hot and knew her body was betraying her and blushing. “Yes.”

“My family designs clothing. I can help.”

Millie nearly fell out of her chair. She wanted to say something witty and criticize Fritz for not knowing anything about clothing. Yet, she had to admit, he dressed in the latest, and he always looked nice.

She finished her omelet. “That was good. Thank you.”

He was looking at her with a measured eye. “With your hair color, you would look good in blue. Navy blue. I think one of the modern hats would set you off as a woman who meant business.”

Millie squirmed. She desperately needed help. In her heart, she kept hearing pride goeth before a fall. She knew how she did when shopping for clothes. When she came home, Father always looked at her and rolled his eyes. She couldn’t tell what colors went together, much less what looked good on her.

“You would help me pick out some clothes?” She hadn’t been nice to Fritz in the four months he’d been here. Not that he’d been sweet to her at all. But his offer was nice.

“Yes. I know of a few stores that have quality clothing. I bet some even have styles from my family’s house.” Fritz stood. “I can take the dogs out later or tomorrow.”

“Well, all right. I need the help.” Millie cringed at the truth of her statement. “I have money to get all I need.”

Fritz smiled. “Then I’ll pick you up in the carriage in an hour.” He looked at her. “You aren’t wearing that, are you?”

More blush assaulted her cheeks. She’d thought she looked pretty good. “Maybe you could find something appropriate for me to wear?”

Fritz nodded. “Not a problem. Shall we look now?”

“Yes. Follow me.” She put her plate in the sink and walked up the stairs to her room. Along the way, she wondered what she was doing. It was not proper to have a man in her bedroom. Yet, desperate times required desperate measures.

She took him to her wardrobe and opened the doors. “Here is what I have.”

Fritz looked at her clothes. “Hmm. What I can do is go to one of the shops I am familiar with and get you a few things. Then we can go shopping.”

Millie sighed. She’d hoped she wasn’t that bad, but seeing the look on Fritz’s face, she knew she was hopeless. “You would do that for me?”

He tilted his head and glanced at her. With a small smile, he nodded. “Your father has been kind to me, and I can see you need the help.”

That stung. Millie felt her temper rising. But she had to admit that her clothes looked more like those of a young girl than of a young woman. “All right. I’ll feed and water the dogs for you.” She sagged against the door. “You don’t have to shop for me if you don’t want to.”

Fritz grinned. "Consider it a truce between us. Besides being a dog trainer, I am a tailor and have designed clothes for my family's business. I know what looks good on a man and a woman."

That stopped her. Millie stared at him, wondering if she could trust him. Then again, her wardrobe could not get worse. She nodded at him and even offered a slight grin. "I know I haven't been as friendly as I should have, but please find clothes that make me look like a woman and not a mountain girl. I would like to look attractive to men." Millie was near tears. She didn't enjoy bearing her failures and soul to Fritz. A man she had not liked and still didn't trust.

"I'll get you a wardrobe that will make any man take a second look." Fritz grinned at her. "Maybe even me."

Millie thought she should shudder at his words, but as she looked at him, she realized he was handsome. She sighed. Why did life have to be so complicated?

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Fritz left the house, taking the buggy so he could bring back a wardrobe full of new clothes for Millie. She was a mess. Half the time, she was dressed as if she'd come down out of the mountains, and the other times, as if she were but a girl. It was time for Millie Burnett to grow up.

The Corinthian House of Clothes was the perfect place. He'd talked to Corinthia Chadwick before and noted that her store carried some of his family's designs. The woman was a delight here in this uncivilized land. Perhaps you couldn't expect more from a country that was less than a hundred years old, but Corinthia showed some of the old world-class he was used to.

He enjoyed Denver. The city hustled with excitement to see who made the next big claim. New buildings and houses were going up daily, testimonies to the new money in gold and silver dug out of the land.

Fritz loved the mountains he could see in the distance as they reminded him of Germany. Yes, he could live here. Banished from Germany six months ago, he had to bless the fact that Mr. Burnett had found him.

Fritz's father had other ideas, but fathers and sons often found themselves at odds. He wondered about Millie and Raul Burnett. Were they at odds? He didn't think so, but then Millie didn't seem to know much about what happened in the mines.

Just the other day, while working the dogs, Fritz had seen Frank Chadwick snooping around and asking him about the Burnett Mine. Fritz didn't tell Raul. But Millie had talked about the feud between the Chadwicks and Burnetts.

Fritz had heard the gossip and knew the town took sides who they believed was at fault. Fritz didn't know, but since Raul paid his wages, he'd stay with the Burnetts. Besides, he liked Millie. She had little use for him, but she could be a pretty woman.

He tapped the horse with the end of the whip. Once he got the proper clothes for Millie, she'd be the prettiest woman in Denver. He'd set his sights on her the first moment he stepped off the train with her father and saw her. She was nothing like the stern women he'd had to choose from in Germany.

That was why his father banished him from the family lands. Father had a woman and title picked out for him, but Fritz wanted his freedom to choose who he wanted to marry and what he wanted to do with his life as well.

But that wasn't the way his family did things. Through the ages, his ancestors obeyed or were exiled. Fritz had chosen the new world instead of the old ways. He wasn't sure about Millie. The girl had a temper and a mind of her own, but she could be a beauty, and her father had possession of a wealthy gold mine.

He stopped the buggy in front of Corinthia's shop. Enough of the past. He grinned as he gave the reins to the valet. "It should take an hour. Two at the most."

"Yes, sir."

Fritz opened the door and drew in the aroma of new clothing, leather, and some spice or herb. "Corinthia, are you ready to do some business?"

A beautiful, dark-haired woman of twenty-five came from the back room. "Fritz, I'm glad to see you. I really didn't expect to see you so soon. Is there a problem with your suits?"

"No, not at all. I came to buy a wardrobe for Millie Burnett."

“Millie? I have not seen her in years.” Corinthia smiled. “We used to be good friends.” She shrugged. “That was, of course, before our fathers went to war with one another.”

“I work for Raul, as you know. Millie learned I came from a family of tailors and those who know the latest fashion and design, and she asked me to help her.”

“As your luck would have it, I just got in a shipment from New York City. I haven’t even unpacked them yet. Come back here, and you can be the first to go through them.”

Fritz grinned. “Thank you, Corinthia. Do you know her size?”

“It’s been a while, but I think she is just under my size. I can send them home with you, and if they don’t fit, she can bring them back for a fitting.” Corinthia smiled at him. “I’m guessing you’ll want a gown for the big event.”

“Yes, of course. I’m taking her to the Hightower Ball.” Fritz stretched the truth a bit, but it wouldn’t hurt to get his name out in the upper segment of society.

Corinthia pointed to a table. “These are beautiful for everyday wear. I will be wearing one of them. For me, the golden color suits me and my dark hair. For Millie, I would suggest the navy blue with her auburn hair. A perfect contrast.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Fritz went through the piles of clothes and picked out seven outfits. He was sure he couldn’t get Millie out of her mountain girl wear every day, but he could hope to have her dress appropriately when going into town or entertaining guests.

Corinthia pulled out a few other outfits. “Are you interested in Millie?”

Fritz stared at her. "I was. Her father brought me here to Denver as a person of interest for his daughter." He smiled at the shop owner. "Millie is rather naïve in the ways of men. Plus, she has a wicked temper. I could be persuaded to look elsewhere."

Corinthia grinned. "I'm happy to hear that. I'll be at the big event this weekend. I expect you to seek me out and sign up for several dances."

"I will do just that." He was pleased. Corinthia was someone he would feel at home with. They spoke the same language as the upper class. He gathered his purchases and set them to the side.

He glanced at the clock. "I still have time. Would you like to have lunch with me?"

Corinthia looked around her. "Yes, I would." She turned the open-close sign to closed and gathered her coat. "There's a lovely restaurant just down the street. It's expensive, but that keeps out the lower class."

Fritz wondered if he had enough money in his pocket.

Corinthia put a hand on his shoulder. "Since you've given me so much business with Millie's wardrobe, lunch is on me."

Trying not to look too relieved, Fritz smiled and kissed her hand. "Raul Burnett doesn't pay as well as I had hoped."

A sly look crossed her face. "No, I wouldn't think so. Father and Raul do not get along, and for good reason. I know for a fact the Pinkertons have been brought into the case between them."

"The Pinkertons? That's news to me. Does Burnett know about it?"

She shook her head and then pointed. “The restaurant is across the street. I hate walking in the snow. It can be so slick.”

Fritz took her arm and cautiously helped her into the street. “I hope the snow lets up before the ball this weekend.”

“It should. If the sun comes out, the snow will melt.” She pulled him closer to her. “Thank you for the business.”

“I knew you took some of my family’s designs, and your store has always been a favorite of mine.”

They paused as a carriage passed and then stepped onto the boardwalk, and Fritz opened the door to the restaurant. “A table near the back?”

She nodded. “Perfect. The wind can blow into the building. Brrr. It is a chilly day.” Corinthia nodded to the waiter and ordered for them both.

Fritz winced, but he let her finish because the lady was paying for lunch.

After the waiter left them, Corinthia leaned close to Fritz. “Don’t tell your boss you got Millie’s clothes from my shop. He hates the Chadwicks and intends to put us all out of business. I hope the Pinkerton detective proves Burnett guilty and returns the entire wealth of the mine to my family.”

Nodding, Fritz agreed with her. He wondered if Raul’s sudden departure had anything to do with the Pinkerton detective. Fritz was sure Millie didn’t have any idea of what was going on. He would have to see whether the Chadwicks or the Burnetts were going to win the court case.

Either way, he’d enjoy being married to Corinthia or Millie.

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Preston finished examining his mother. He couldn't find anything that would cause her symptoms. He'd poured over his medical books, and nothing had come to light. For now, he would recommend she stay in bed and allow herself to be waited on.

The family had told her to rest, but Mother was stubborn. All this time, while not feeling well, she'd gone about her household duties. Other than the cook they'd hired, Mother had done the rest. Preston was putting his foot down and ordering her to stay in bed, and the rest of the family would have to take up the slack.

"Preston, really. There is no reason for me to stay in bed." Mother feebly tried to rise.

Gently pressing her shoulders, he eased her back to the pillows. Preston shook his head. "I'm serious. You stay in this bed. I'll take care of you. I went away to learn how to treat the sick."

"But you don't even know what is wrong." She brushed a hand through her graying hair. Usually, she had it put up in a neat French pleat, but this morning, she'd let it go.

"I will find out. This is where we'll start with you resting in bed." Preston smiled at her. He'd ruled out the food. Everyone ate the same thing, and no one else was sick. She had no fever and promised she wasn't taking any herbs or cure-all drinks from a snake-oil salesman.

He kissed the top of his mother's head and prepared to leave. "Can I get you anything?"

“Some water.” She smiled at him. “I feel better already. Thank you, son.”

Preston went to get her some water from the kitchen. He noticed some coloration in the sink, and when he filled a glass, a flake of metal floated in the water. He paused and wondered what it could be. Though it wasn't unnatural for things to get in the water lines, it made him consider getting the water tested.

If it was something in the water, why wouldn't it affect the rest of those living in the house? Preston took the glass to his mother and then told her he was going out to look for an office for his practice and to see the town.

He almost asked about Millie, but last night at dinner, Father had brought up the Burnetts and practically growled. Mother hadn't corrected him, so Preston didn't think Mother wanted to talk about Millie.

Preston wanted to ride a horse into town rather than have Alfred drive him. He needed some time to think, and if the possibility of running into Millie presented itself, Preston didn't want an audience, especially one that reported to Father.

He went to the barn and picked out one of his favorite horses. “Sable, old boy. So good to see you're still here.”

The big horse nickered at him.

Alfred came out of the tack room. “Sable has missed you, sir.”

“I missed him too. Never have I ridden a horse with a smoother gait than Sable. I was glad to find he was still here.”

“Mr. Chadwick had thought about selling him, but your mother stopped him. She knew you'd be back, sir.”

“Just Preston, to you, Alfred. Saddle him up for me. I’m going into town today.”

Alfred grinned. “You looking for anyone in particular?”

Glancing at the man, Preston wondered what he could be thinking. “I’m looking for an office for my practice.” Alfred had always been loyal to Father. Even when younger, Preston had kept things close to the chest and made sure not to let Alfred know.

Alfred had the suggestion of a grin on his lips. “Hmm. I thought you might be looking for a certain lady.”

Surprised, Preston wondered if the question was as a friend or foe. “Is that so? Well, I do plan on going to the dance on Saturday. Perhaps I’ll run into a lady to ask.”

“You just might. More and more respectable people are moving to Denver every day. Even doctors from Boston.”

Preston chuckled. “I never could get one over on you, Alfred.” He would not tell him he was thinking of Millie Burnett.

With a nod of his head, Alfred then tightened the cinch to the saddle. He gave Preston a sideways glance and a sly smile. “I hear she’s available, but there is a dog trainer that supposedly has an eye out for her. You might make your move while you can if you’re interested.” He cleared his throat and then handed the reins to Preston. “I wouldn’t mention her to your father, though.”

“No, I’ve already figured that out. The feud is still on, I take it?”

“Yes. More than ever. The Pinkertons have been called in to ferret out the truth of the matter, sir, er, Preston.”

With a sigh, Preston took the horse and led him out of the barn. “Check on my mother in an hour or two.” He mounted the tall horse and turned to look at Alfred. “Have you noticed anything different about the water?”

Alfred shrugged. “No. We had to dig a new well about nine months ago.”

“Anyone else get sick?”

“No. The cow miscarried a month after the new well, but everyone seems all right now.”

“Thanks, Alfred.” Preston tapped the sides of the black horse and ran him toward town. It felt so good to be on horseback. Four years in Boston had left him riding in carriages to get around. Not that he had much time to see the scenery. His schooling kept him too busy for much of anything.

He enjoyed seeing the sights from atop a horse. The freedom, the cold, fresh air, and the mountains to the west made him feel at home. This was where he belonged. Now, if he could get his father to go along with his plans.

Preston had enough money to get started. His grandfather on his mother’s side had left him a small inheritance. He had believed in Preston’s desire to become a doctor. Father, on the other hand, fought him every way he could. Nothing was more important than his mine and the gold they dug out of it.

Jeremiah Chadwick ruled his family as if he were a king and believed his children had better snap to it and do what he said. Only Preston and Frank denied Father his kingdom. Mother tried to keep peace. Ernst and Lila did as Father desired and made sure their families worked with Father.

Corinthia was a puzzle. She wouldn’t marry the men her father brought to her as

suitable husbands, but she didn't fight him about the mine either. Father had suggested she start the clothing store. She might not be involved in the mine, but she kept her head up and catered to the upper class.

And that was where Father was the biggest conundrum of all. He wanted to belong to the ruling class of Denver. Yet, he roared when things didn't go his way and looked and acted like a mountain man. He'd come to Denver years ago. Lived with the Indians, learned the way of the mountains, and discovered gold with his partner, Raul Burnett. They made a fortune together.

Preston sighed. Only Jeremiah and Raul knew why their partnership had come to blows and split. Neither man told anyone why. But each one demanded their families remain apart. Preston knew his mother and Millie's mother had been good friends until that day.

How long was he going to further his father's rage? Preston had liked Millie when they were children. Liked her even more as they grew up. Millie was one reason Preston had come back to Denver.

He hadn't seen her in four years. Chuckling, he wondered if she still dressed in mountain girl attire. Preston reined his horse to a stop and looked up and down the street. His eyes rested on his sister's clothing shop.

A woman who looked somewhat like Millie was just entering the shop. His heart rate increased with the joy of seeing his old friend. That she was in Corinthia's shop was even more interesting. Corinthia loved Father and had been his staunchest supporter.

Why would she allow Millie in her shop?

Preston dismounted and tied his horse to the post. After straightening his suit jacket, he gave a last look in the window to make sure he was presentable and opened the

door. It was time to see where he stood with Millie.

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Millie held the package with the gown and waited for Corinthia to finish with a customer. The new outfit she wore made her feel important. She would have to thank Corinthia for her help. Because of her and Fritz, Millie wouldn't be embarrassed to show up at the ball this weekend.

The gown was beautiful, just a little too big at the top. Millie blushed. While Corinthia was well-endowed, Millie was not. So, she needed to bring the gown in for adjustments. Fritz had encouraged her to wear her new clothes. She'd not wanted to but had to admit that once she put on her new outfit, she was pleased. The man had excellent taste.

It was nice to look like a young woman and not a scrappy girl. Millie sighed. Life was not easy. Now, she was at the shop of an old friend who belonged to the family that was her father's enemy. The ball this weekend should be interesting. Only the wealthy were invited, and it would be one of the few times when she would see the Chadwicks.

She wouldn't be at this shop if Fritz hadn't gotten the gown from Corinthia. Fortunately, the other clothes fit and didn't need any alterations.

"Millie, what a pleasant surprise. I haven't seen you since the last ball." Corinthia's smile looked genuine.

Putting on a smile of her own, Millie handed her the gown. "I need some alterations for the gown. Can you get it done before the ball?"

"Yes, I promised Fritz I would be sure to have it done in time. He has very good taste

in clothes.” She glanced at Millie. “He’s a handsome man too. Are you going to the ball with him?”

“No, I’m going by myself.” Millie met Corinthia’s gaze. That the woman had her hopes on Fritz was obvious. As far as Millie was concerned, Corinthia could have him.

“Who do you intend to dance with?”

Millie sighed. “I’ll see who is there.” She tried to sound confident. Yet, even as she spoke the few words, Millie could tell she sounded lost.

Corinthia gave her a sly grin. “Preston is home. He’s a doctor now and intends to stay in Denver. I remember how you used to like him.”

Millie turned her gaze away from Corinthia. While Preston did interest her, Corinthia was the last one she wanted to know how she felt about the woman’s brother. “I haven’t seen him in four years. That’s a long time. People can change a lot. Circumstances can change us even more.”

The shop owner chuckled. “That’s true.” Corinthia took the gown. “I’ll have this done by tomorrow. Step in the dressing room, and I’ll mark the gown.”

“Thank you. I’ll have Fritz pick it up.” Millie walked into the dressing room and put on the gown. She stepped out, heard the door open, and turned to see Preston.

“You’re just in time, brother. Look who is here.”

Millie knew she was blushing as her neck to her cheeks blazed hot. She held up the top of her gown and wished she could become invisible.

Preston walked toward her and held out his hand. "It's been a long time."

Millie glanced at Corinthia. The horror of it. Holding up the top of her gown, there was no way Millie could free one of her hands. "It's nice to see you, Preston." She turned her back to him. "Will you do the alterations in the other room?"

Corinthia suppressed a grin and nodded. "Preston, will you excuse us as we work on the gown? Then I'll turn Millie over to you so you can catch up with each other. I need to get this gown finished before the ball this weekend."

His face reddened as he turned away. "I'll look at your men's suits."

Once they were in the back room, Millie sighed. "I have never been so embarrassed. Of all people to catch me in such an inopportune time."

Corinthia chuckled. "Sorry, I thought it rather funny. You both blushed the same color of red. Now, let me get my pins." She ducked behind a curtain and came back with a small box of items. "Do you have feelings for Preston?"

Millie closed her eyes, reliving the embarrassment of seeing him and not being able to shake his hand. "We were good friends back when our families allowed it. Since the feud started, I have not seen him."

Corinthia shook her head. "I know you and Preston sneaked away and met outside town." She sighed. "Still, those two old men, our fathers, have surely made a mess out of things. I was never told of the offending deed. Were you?"

"No. My father quickly changes the subject if I ever bring it up." Millie turned as Corinthia had ordered. "I'm not even sure I want to know the answer."

"Nor do I." Corinthia placed a few more pins. "There, I have it. Change and talk with

my brother. I think he missed you.”

With trembling fingers, Millie buttoned her blouse and straightened her skirt. She hadn’t seen Preston in years. Why was she so nervous? Dressed, and after checking her hair and placing her hat on just so, she left the dressing room.

Letting her eyes adjust to the brighter light in the shop, she at first didn’t see Preston. Disappointment swallowed her. Then, movement to the left caught her attention, and he came from behind a rack of suits.

“Preston. It is a pleasure to see you after all these years.” Millie wanted to sound as if she was used to meeting others. Men even. She sure didn’t want to sound like a desperate young woman reaching out to the one boy she’d liked while growing up. She held out her hand.

Preston shook her hand and held onto hers longer than necessary. “How have you been?”

“Fine.” She stared into his blue-gray eyes. They reminded her of the color of a far-off storm. She should say more, but at the moment, her mind was blank, only concentrating on his eyes and face. A kind, handsome face.

“I was in Boston for four years getting my medical training. I’m setting up my practice here in Denver.”

Millie smiled. “We could use a good doctor in this town. I’m glad you’re staying.” Her heart beat faster. There was the question she wanted to ask but was afraid to. Had he come back with a wife or fiancé?

“Are you going to the ball?” He shrugged. “Silly question. I saw you were being fitted for a gown.” He smiled. “I’ll be there.”

“Yes, perhaps I’ll see you.” Millie wanted to roll her eyes but kept herself from acting like a silly girl. She hadn’t seen the man in over four years, and they had nothing of substance to say to one another. Had they grown apart?

Preston took her left hand in his and looked at her finger. “You’re not married?”

“No, not yet.” She pulled her hand from his.

“Is there someone you’re interested in?”

Millie wanted to say you, but instead, she shook her head. “Not at the moment. Are you married or engaged?”

“No, I have to say I didn’t find a woman in Boston who impressed me. I want to live here in Denver, anyway.” He looked reluctant to leave. “Are you still training dogs with your father?”

“Yes. I am. He bought me a champion from Germany. The dog has a twenty-letter foreign name, but I call him Bob.”

Laughing, Preston glanced at Corinthia. “I suppose the trainer might be the Fritz I hear my sister talk about.”

Millie nodded. “Fritz brought me here to pick out some clothes and the gown. His family is into fashion in Germany.”

“I see.” Preston glanced at Corinthia, who was watching them from the counter. “She told me about the man.” In a whisper, he smiled. “I think she likes him.”

Millie thought so, too, which was all fine with her. Corinthia could have Fritz and all his high and mighty arrogance.

She was about to leave when Candace Winters walked into the shop. She had always had her eye on Preston.

“Preston Chadwick. What a pleasure to see you.” Candace sashayed up to him and planted a measured kiss on his cheek. “I have missed you so.”

He glanced at Candace. “I missed you, too.”

Millie could see how this was going. Candace was one of those girls who always looked neat and clean. She always said the perfect thing, no matter the circumstance, and always drew the attention of men near her.

Millie felt her confidence melting. She rarely felt all put together. Even now, she was sure there was something misplaced on her person. Not to mention, she’d stumbled over her words and had been afraid to meet his gaze. With a frown, she saw she’d lost it now as he was staring at Candace.

Then a hatpin fell out of Millie’s hair. She hoped nobody noticed, but by the wry grins on both Preston and Candace’s faces, they had seen the deed. Holding her wayward curl and not wanting to stand there and make herself look more the fool, Millie moved toward the door. “I better go. I have work to do at home.”

Candace smiled. “Dogs to feed, I suppose?”

Looking back at her, Millie nodded. “Yes, that’s right. I’ll see you at the ball.” She hurried out the door, praying nothing else came loose or fell off. She shuddered from the embarrassment. Why did her mother have to leave her when she was so young?

Father did his best, but he didn’t know the first thing about braiding hair or the clothes a young woman should wear. She had to admit she was thankful for Fritz’s help.

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Preston finally convinced Candace that he had to leave and check on his mother. The girl was all over him. Even before Millie left the shop, Candace had attached herself to his arm. He had to send his sister a look to get Corinthia's help to pull Candace from him.

Once outside, he left Corinthia's dress shop with a definite joyful step. Not only was he free of Candace, but Millie wasn't married and didn't sound like she was engaged. It was so good to see her again, much like a breath of fresh air. Though she looked nervous, he could see she'd been happy to see him.

How his father would deal with Millie was yet to be known. From what Preston could tell, the feud was still in full effect. However, he hadn't seen his father yet. The man worked hard, long hours, and always had.

Preston walked back to his horse and mounted. He had intended to look for a place to open his doctor's office, but he needed to check on his mother. An old doctor in Boston had taken him in and taught him how to care for patients, telling him to listen to the still, small voice in his gut when someone needed to be looked at. He'd heard that voice about his mother in Corinthia's shop.

"Let's go home, Sable." He patted the horse's neck and tapped his sides to get the animal moving. The urgency increased, pushing him harder, making him spur Sable on. Preston's mind ran through the symptoms and possible diseases. His heart sank after each one. None of them had a good outcome.

The frosty air freshened him. Then, closer to home, he noticed a foul aroma from the tannery by the hard end north of town. The wind was blowing from the northwest.

Colder and raw, it chilled him.

He hoped Alfred had warmed up the iron stove in Mother's room. She didn't need to catch a cold on top of her infirmity. He sighed. "Lord, help me find out what is causing her problems. Please, Lord."

Preston reined Sable up the family drive and was concerned when he saw several buggies and a wagon from the mine. Fearing for his mother, he dismounted, threw the reins over the hitching post, and made a run for the house.

Bursting through the door, he stopped at the crowd in the foyer and heard Father's loud bellow in the parlor.

"Get away from me! I'm fine." Father's voice had more than one person shaking.

Preston stepped into the parlor and saw his father sitting with his left leg elevated. "What happened?"

Doctor Cumbers finished wrapping Father's ankle. "Just a sprain. Stay off it for a week, and then you'll be good to go. How is Annabelle Lee?"

Father growled. "Still sickly. You haven't helped her at all. Preston is home now. He can see to her care."

Doctor Cumbers glanced up at Preston. "Glad to see you, Preston. I heard you were going to stay and find an office here in Denver. It's a good thing. There are too many people for me to care for."

Preston gave a slight bow. "Thank you, Doc. I was looking for an office today, but felt I needed to get home to see Mother. And I guess, now, see about Father."

“You don’t need to worry about me, boy. I’ll be up by the time Doc Cumber gets out the gate.” Father roared and then chuckled. There was nothing quiet about the man, and Preston doubted his father could whisper if he wanted to.

Preston walked outside with Doc Cumber. “I noticed on the way here that the air was foul. From the tannery, I think.”

“Yes, it is. Not sure what they can do about it. They changed their process about six months ago, and that’s when the odor started.” The doc sniffed the air. “It is strong today. Your house is right in line for the northwest wind.”

“Doctor, do you think that could be affecting my mother?”

Pausing before getting into his buggy, the doc nodded. “Perhaps. Haven’t heard of anyone being bothered by it, but it could be something to consider.”

“Thanks, Doctor. I better go in and make sure Father isn’t terrorizing the others.”

Doc laughed. “He’s a bear, for sure.” He tapped the whip on his horse and left, looking happy to escape the loud man inside the house.

Preston entered the house and heard Mother’s weak voice trying to calm his father. Preston went to her and guided her to sit in one of the chairs. “Mother, you need to be resting. Father, how can I help you?”

Father glared at him. “Too bad you weren’t here. I could have had you look at my ankle instead of that old horse doctor.”

“Doctor Cumber is a good man.” Preston resisted the anger rising up his spine. Now he remembered why he needed to move away from this house. “I’m glad it was nothing worse. What happened?”

“I just stepped where I wasn’t looking. Twisted, that is all. I don’t know why all the fuss.”

Preston suppressed a chuckle. He could guess why. How about a roar like a grizzly and yelling at anyone and everything near him? Jeremiah Chadwick was not a quiet man.

Jeremiah cornered Preston with a look. “I need someone to go down to the mine and bring back my paperwork. Ernst is busy with other things. You’re chosen to go.”

Preston stepped back. “I came home to see about Mother.”

“See about her and then go. If it’s dark by the time you get there, stay the night and get back tomorrow morning.”

Father said it as if it was a finished deal. “Father. I’m a doctor now. I need to take care of Mother.”

“She’s fine. Aren’t you Annabelle?”

Mother coughed but nodded. “I’m fine. Go ahead, Preston.” She looked at him with tears in her eyes. “Please.”

“Let me change clothes. It’s going to be cold tonight. I’ll need another horse, too.”

Father growled at Alfred. “Saddle Frazer for him. That horse can run all night and day if he had, too.”

“Yes, sir.” Alfred put on his coat and went outside.

Preston shook his head and ran up the stairs to his room. Why did he let Father run

things even now? While in Boston, Preston had vowed to keep out of his father's reach. Well, this would be the last time Jeremiah Chadwick told him what to do. He'd get back tomorrow at the latest. There was no way he was going to miss the Hightower Ball and his chance to see Millie again.

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Preston went out the back door. He didn't want to give his father the satisfaction of seeing him jump at the old man's bark. But jumping, Preston was. He couldn't get out of this house fast enough.

Father hadn't always been a tyrant, but even before Preston left for Boston, the man had become louder and meaner. He feared for his mother. Father wasn't the caring man he remembered as a young boy.

It had all changed with the feud. What had destroyed the Chadwick-Burnett partnership? As far as Preston knew, his sisters and brothers didn't know the cause either. From what he could tell, Millie didn't know.

Preston went to the barn and saw the men fighting with Frazer. The horse was a tall, rank thoroughbred that Father loved and everyone else hated. The blood-red animal was as obnoxious as Jeremiah Chadwick himself. No wonder his father loved the horse.

"Got him saddled?" Preston called out.

Alfred shook his head. "It will be a minute. I would suggest taking Midnight Song instead of Frazer."

"Let's do it. I don't want to fight that beast all the way to the mine and back. I'd feel safer with Midnight." He pulled a lead rope from the side of the barn and went in to get the mare. He didn't doubt he could have her saddled before they returned Frazer to his stall.

Preston helped saddle Midnight and pondered on Father's insistence that he ride Frazer. Before he left for Boston, Father had pushed him to ride the horse. The animal had gone into a wild run and nearly cost Preston his life.

"You need to be a man." Father had yelled at him. Ernst stayed away from the horse, and Mother wouldn't allow the girls or Frank to get near him. Father mastered the wild stallion. For Father, the horse was spirited but controlled.

Midnight Song was Mother's horse. She was as calm and proper as Mother. Preston was sure Father would rail at him for choosing a woman's horse. Father wanted his sons to be forceful men like himself. Of his three sons, Preston would have to say that Frank resembled Father the most.

Ernst lived under Father's shadow, so it was hard to see where he started and where Father ended. But he had a kinder heart and was a good husband to Gianna. He would never go against Father's wishes. Ernst had mother's light brown hair, green eyes, and gentle disposition.

Preston had to admit he looked like a mixture of his parents. He had his mother's light brown hair and his father's blue eyes. Preston felt as if he was more like their mother. She was wise and strong but quiet. He never fought with Father. Neither did Ernst. Frank, from little on, was the one to challenge Jeremiah Chadwick.

Frank was a copy of Father. He was tall and muscular, with Father's black hair and blue-gray eyes, but he was his own man. It didn't matter if it was to refuse to eat the peas on his plate, do his schoolwork, or what horse he would ride. Frank stood his ground and usually ended up in the woodshed with Father. Preston laughed as he remembered Frank returning to the house, rubbing his tail end but with a satisfied grin. Frank was twenty now. A man in his own right.

As Preston rode toward the mine, he wondered if Frank had even told Father what he

was doing. Mother said Frank stayed on the hard side of town with some friends, and they rarely saw him.

The air grew colder. Looking into the sky, Preston saw clouds that promised more snow. He was going to have to make sure he left the mine by early morning at the latest. If he hurried, he could make it back tonight. He patted the horse and sighed. Father had been right. He should have ridden Frazer.

Preston disliked that side of himself. The part that opted for the safe outcome instead of the adventure. Maybe that was what Father saw in him that was missing. The inability to take a risk. Even going to Boston had been a soft decision. He'd stayed with a friend of his mother's family until school had started.

He had to admit that when Father wanted something, he went after it and let nothing get in his way. Even Mother had the quality. Maybe his life had been too soft. He could hardly remember a time when they didn't have money.

Father and Raul Burnett had struck it rich when Preston was ten. Before the strike, they'd lived in a cabin in the mountains. Funny, as Preston thought back, those were some of the best times.

Father was home in the evenings and would play with them. When he could, he took the boys out to hunt. Frank was born after they'd struck it rich and knew only the mansion. Maybe that was where his rebellion came from. He only knew easy times. No frosty nights huddled together to fight back the vicious winter chill. No days when they had little to eat, and Father had to use pebbles in his shotgun to get food. Frank never had to fish in the stream to catch dinner.

He ushered Midnight up the trail. She was a good horse, but Preston could see climbing the mountain trail was wearing her out. There was no way he could ask the mare to go home today. What a fool he'd been. Frazer would have been halfway up

the mountain by now and not even breathing hard.

The wind grew stronger. Preston drew the coat tight around him and adjusted his scarf to cover his mouth. It was going to snow. He wasn't sure if he would make it home tomorrow or not. He wanted to see Millie and had promised to take her to the ball.

"A man of action, I am not. That is going to have to change. Hear me, Midnight?" If he wanted to marry Millie, he was going to have to become a man like his father and go after what he wanted. For any woman that he wanted to marry, she deserved a man who went after her and wouldn't be stopped.

He could have told his father no. He could have ridden Frazer. But to weakly say yes to something he didn't want to do and then choose the horse that was safe but not strong enough to make it home today was not how he should have gone about it.

Father wouldn't have. Frank wouldn't have. Ernst, he wasn't sure. But Preston was now determined to be a man. If he was man enough to claim a wife, he better be man enough to take care of her and strong enough to put her above everyone else.

He groaned. He'd spent half his life complaining about his father's rough ways, only to realize that Father was often right about the matters Preston had fought with him about. Preston stopped Midnight and let her rest. Looking back down the mountain, he saw that darkness was settling in over the valley below. Turning his gaze to the heavens, he saw the pink glow in the clouds that told him they were in for snow. A lot, if he was any judge of the weather.

Having given up on getting back tonight, Preston got down and led Midnight part of the way up the roughest part of the trail. With the mine in sight, he mounted the horse and rode down to the mine office.

The first flakes fell as he walked inside the Chadwick Mine Office. On the other side of the street was the Burnett Mine Office. Preston had to shake his head. What those two old goats were fighting about remained a mystery, but how odd they had to look at each other when they went to work.

He took care of Midnight and put her up for the night in the barn. Then he walked into the office.

Mr. Mullins smiled at him and handed him the papers. “The old man left these on purpose, I think. He wanted you to see the mine office.”

“How are things at the mine? Still digging out gold?”

“Yes, we are. I would have thought it would be gone by now, but just as we finish one vein, another shows itself.”

Preston sat down at the desk and looked at the papers. “Any idea what caused those two men to come to blows and start the feud?”

“No, sir. Neither one of them will tell either. We’ve all asked them.”

“Has Frank been around?”

“Yes, funny you should ask. He’s the last of the Chadwicks I thought I’d see, but he’s been here and over at the Burnett Mine several times. I don’t know what he’s looking for. He hasn’t said.”

Mullins had been working with his father since Preston could remember. “Do the books add up?”

“Yes, sir. I check on them once a week, and I have to say no one is skimming off the

top.” Mullins sat down across from Preston. “Frank asks some pretty tough questions. Rumor has it that he’s working for the Pinkertons.”

“I heard that too.” Preston looked around the office. It was the original building that the partners used. After the feud, Burnett built his own office on his side of the mine. “Burnett still mining a good portion of gold?”

“As far as I can tell, yes.” Mullins scratched his beard. “You think those two old buffaloes even know what the feud is about?”

With a chuckle, Preston shook his head. “I doubt it. Father never talks about it. That might change. I just got back from Boston, and the first person I thought of was Millie. In fact, I want to hurry and leave tomorrow so I can take her to the dance tomorrow night.”

Mullins sat back. “I can see some problems there. Like Romeo and Juliet. Hope you two don’t get any ideas.”

Preston grinned. “I wouldn’t go that far. I’m not even sure Millie will want to dance with me. But I told her I’d pick her up.”

“Well, that’s a start. Maybe that is just what those old bears need to end this crazy feud. I always liked Millie. She’s a fine woman.”

Picking the papers up, Preston stood. “I’m going to put these in my saddlebag and get some dinner. I want to get up early tomorrow.”

Mullins looked outside. “Snow is coming down. You might be snowed in for a few days.”

“I hope not.” Preston wanted to kick himself. Here he’d had a chance to take Millie to

the ball, and he'd let his father distract him and, to make things worse, took a weaker horse that forced him to wait until morning.

It was his fault. He could have told his father no, or he could have ridden Frazer. Either way, Preston had failed himself and Millie. He walked to the cabin he'd stay in and kicked at a clod of dirt. The snow was falling hard now. He'd not risk Midnight or his own life sliding down the mountain trail.

Preston looked at the falling snowflakes and hoped Millie would forgive him. After four years of not writing to her, he couldn't expect her to care if she saw him again or not.

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Millie glanced outside. Huge snowflakes floated from the sky, covering tree limbs and the road. Father said the carriage would have no problem getting to the Hightower Ball tonight. She looked at him. "Someone might pick me up."

He raised an eyebrow. "Who might that be?"

"Oh, just someone I ran into the other day." Suddenly, she didn't relish a fight with him. And if she'd said Preston Chadwick, she'd have a whopper of an argument.

Father let it pass. "If he doesn't show up, you can go with me and Fritz. We'll be getting there early. I have someone I am meeting."

That caught her attention. Father never mentioned an interest in another woman. He'd been alone for many years. Millie didn't begrudge him a life, but his statement came as such a shock. He was young at heart and had many years left. She hoped so, anyway.

She wanted to ask him who that might be, but he had already left the room and gone upstairs to get ready. After a quick look at the clock, she saw she needed to hurry and get dressed. Millie wasn't going to disappoint Preston if he came by to get her.

If he came down the drive to her house, it would be a surprise. She wondered what her father would say. Well, she had always liked Preston. Father should understand. That he was a Chadwick shouldn't prevent her from being friends with him.

Millie went upstairs to her bedroom and pulled out her new gown. She held it to her and waltzed around her room. It was going to be such a special night. Sighing, she

fell on her bed and thought about Preston.

She had dreamed about him for years. Even as a child, she had always thought that someday they would be married. Now, as a grown woman, she wondered if he felt the same way. Meeting him at the dress shop had given her hope.

His eyes had lit up when they saw one another, how she had missed him. He'd been gone for four years in Boston to become a doctor, but he'd come back with no wife or fiancé and was staying in Denver.

Millie sighed again and smiled. This was her chance. Finally, she had an opportunity to show Preston who she was. Before, she'd been Lila and Corinthia's friend. Now she could show him she'd grown up and was no longer a little girl. She just hoped he felt the same way.

Her hair was done up in a pretty braid. The maid had helped her. Her gown was on and fit perfectly. All she had to do was go downstairs, put on the warm fur coat that Father had gotten for her, and wait.

She looked out the window and saw the snow still falling, early darkness approaching, and wondered if Preston was going to make it to her house. If he wasn't there before Father left, she'd go with him and Fritz.

Once downstairs, Millie paced across the parlor, stopping to peek out the windows. No Preston. The clock chimed the hour.

Father came from his study. "We're about to leave. Are you going with us?"

"Yes. I am." Though disappointed, Millie hung onto the idea that Preston would dance with her at the ball. She wasn't going to let him go so easily.

Father smiled. "I'm glad. Fritz said he thought Preston might come by to escort you to the dance. You know he is not welcome here."

"I welcome him. What is it that has you so hateful to the Chadwicks?"

"That's my business. You don't need to concern yourself with it." Father adjusted his coat and reached for the door.

"I am concerned because I like Preston. I bought my clothes from Corinthia. I like them, Father." She pulled his arm to face her. "I hope you won't disown me."

"Don't be silly. There's Fritz with the carriage." He held the door open for Millie and followed her outside.

She stared at him and then followed. His answer hadn't matched the stiffness she'd felt in his arm. Courting Preston would bring trouble between her and her father. Stupid feud. She doubted the men could remember why they were even fighting.

Millie had to admit Fritz was handsome in his suit and hat. She could get used to looking at him. He had taken the time to help her pick out her clothes. At least he was here and willing to help. Preston was nowhere in sight.

Fritz smiled at her and held the door for her. "You look lovely, Miss Burnett."

"Thank you, Fritz." Millie hated the fact that she couldn't stop blushing, but the warmth creeping up her neck and face told her she'd failed. Fritz was so in control. She doubted he ever blushed. It wasn't like she cared what he thought. She turned from him and wanted to disappear.

Father spent the brief trip to the Hightower's grand mansion looking out the window. What was he thinking, and who was he meeting at the ball? Millie would watch and

see. There were too many secrets between her and her father.

Edward drove the carriage up the drive and then stopped by the grand entrance to the mansion. The valet opened the door and helped her down. Millie waited for Father to come to her side, but he passed by her and let Fritz escort her into the grand room.

As always, the decorations and splendor of the Hightower ballroom took her breath away. They were the oldest and richest family in Denver, and it showed. Once a year, they opened their home to the dance.

She curtsied to the hosts. "Thank you for this wonderful ball and the use of your beautiful home."

Mrs. Hightower nodded. "I hope you have a lovely time, dear."

Fritz bowed and kissed Mrs. Hightower's hand. "Thank you."

"You are a welcome addition to Denver, Fritz Schwartz."

Fritz escorted Millie into the room. "Want to sit at the ladies' table?"

"Yes, thank you." Millie hoped somebody would sign her dance card. She sat down but noticed Corinthia walking around the room and talking with people. Her dance card was in her hand, and she'd hand it to a gentleman. Maybe Corinthia knew what she was doing.

So far, Millie hadn't had one gentleman come to her at the table. By the look of the other ladies, they weren't doing much better. She gazed around the room, hoping to see Preston yet dreading if she did. After all, he'd all but promised to take her to the dance.

Her decision made. Millie got up from her chair and started going around the room. Her first stop was Fritz. She smiled and fanned her card in front of her face. "If you want a dance, now is the time to secure it."

Fritz grinned.

At first, she was afraid he was going to pass and send her on her way. After all, he was talking to Sylvia Owens.

He took her card. "Only one?"

Millie smiled. "Two if you like."

Fritz nodded and put his name down for one in the middle and the last. "There. Now, make sure you get someone for the first dance." He turned and took up his conversation with Sylvia.

Millie looked around the room. She saw Phil Carstairs standing alone. She dodged through the crowded room and stopped. "Phil, it's good to see you?"

Phil stood back and eyed her. "This can't be Millie Burnett?"

She laughed. "It is. All grown up."

"I'll say." Phil recovered his forward manner and bowed. "May I write my name down for a dance?"

"Yes, please do." She looked around. "You don't have a fiancé, do you?"

"No, not yet." He wrote his name down for the second dance. "I'm looking forward to our dance."

Happy with her efforts, Millie walked around the room looking for any other men not attached to or attached by a woman. Candace had a group of men around her. With a grin, Millie decided Candace was just who she needed to talk to. Or at least the surrounding men.

Finally, she had all but a couple of her dances claimed. She sighed. No one had put down for the first one.

A tap on her shoulder had her turn in anticipation. Preston? She whirled, only to see her father standing before her.

“Millie, can I have the first dance?”

He must have looked over her shoulder and saw it was blank. But then, a father is a daughter’s first love. “Yes, I was saving it for someone special.”

He grinned. “You look so lovely and remind me of your dear mother.”

“Father, who did you come to see tonight?”

“I was hoping to talk to you earlier, but time got away from me. I’ve been seeing Ann Green at the general store. We’ve talked and had lunch and dinner a few times. I invited her to come tonight.” He looked around. “So far, she hasn’t made an appearance.”

Millie wanted to tell him she knew exactly how he felt. Preston wasn’t here yet, either. Millie liked Ann and hoped her father would pursue time with the woman. She had just turned around when she saw Frank Chadwick walk into the ballroom.

Wanting to find out about Preston, she went to him. “Frank, how are you doing?”

He turned and smiled at her. “Just fine. Preston said he was going to see you tonight, but I don’t see him here. He went to the mine yesterday and was probably snowed in.”

“I was wondering what happened to him.” She studied Frank. He’d grown up since the last time she’d seen him. Gone was the wild look he used to have. He was a handsome man. He smiled at her but was looking around the crowd as if he were searching for someone.

As if suddenly remembering he was talking to her, Frank faced her. “I was wondering if you’ve seen Mr. Vander?”

“Not here.” Millie wondered why he’d be asking about the man who ran the mine for Father. “He doesn’t usually come to town for such events.”

“I just thought he might be here tonight.” Frank smiled and then nodded. “You have a dance left?”

She chuckled. “A Chadwick and a Burnett dancing would cause quite the stir.”

“It would have happened if Preston was here. My brother has good taste. Besides, I owe my brother a favor. I don’t think he’d mind if I danced with you.”

Millie shrugged. “I have one left.” She handed him her dance card.

Father came up to her. “I don’t want you dancing with a Chadwick.”

Frank shook his head. “You and my father need to settle this crazy feud you have with each other.”

Father stuck a finger in Frank’s face. “Stay away from my daughter. You can tell

Preston the same thing.”

Millie grabbed her father’s finger and pulled him away from Frank. “You’re embarrassing me.”

His face was red. For a minute, she thought he was going to yell at her or, even worse, slap her. “You mind me, Millie. Stay away from the Chadwicks.” He shook her hand from his and stormed away from her.

Millie watched him go and prayed that he’d calm down. She glanced at Frank. “It’s the third dance. I’ll be waiting for you.”

Frank grinned. “I’ll be there.”

With a hand to her forehead, Millie went to the table to get a drink to slow down her raging heart. What was wrong with her father? Sometimes, she hated the stupid mine. It had caused them so much trouble.

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Preston went to the barn to check on Midnight Song. He was still kicking himself for taking the mare instead of his father's powerful stallion. Of all the Chadwick sons, he was the one who always fell short when courage and strength were needed. A disappointment to his father.

He inherited his mother's merciful, tender heart, but in the West, that was considered a weakness. So, he'd gone with learning to heal rather than harm others. Mother was pleased, and Father was disappointed.

He patted Midnight's velvety muzzle. "I'm glad you're up to a ride today. Snow or not, we're going home."

The horse nickered.

With a sigh, he led the horse out of the stall and saddled her. He was still in the barn when he heard hushed words just outside the door. Preston pulled Midnight into the stall and hid in the shadows.

He recognized the gravelly voice of Mr. Mullins, the man who ran the mine for Father. Preston wasn't sure of the other voice, but the two men weren't happy with one another.

"Stupid kid is snooping around and asking questions. We need to do something about him, or he'll ruin everything."

"We can't let the old men find out." Mr. Mullins's words came out in a gush of anger.

Preston was surprised. He'd never heard Mullins talk about his father with such contempt. He put his hand over Midnight's muzzle to keep her quiet and listened.

"All I know is Frank won't stop. He might need an accident. The rest of the family members don't come down here anymore. Once we got those two old men mad at each other, we had it made, but Frank is going to cause trouble for us."

Mr. Mullins grunted. "At least neither of the families pay Frank any mind. The boy spent too much time getting into trouble."

Hard chuckles answered him, followed by footsteps indicating the men had moved away.

Preston would have stepped out, but he didn't have a gun with him. Another silly oversight on his part. He knew better than to leave home without a rifle in the saddle scabbard. He shook his head as he imagined the berating his father was going to give him when he got home.

Preston knew he'd be questioned about why he hadn't confronted the two men. The answer? He wasn't sure. Maybe he should go to the two mine directors right now and demand an answer. Then again, he'd been gone for four years and wasn't sure of what was going on with the mines or anything else. Besides, it wasn't his nature to rush in and start trouble.

If he didn't straighten up, Father would send him back to Boston. Maybe that was where Preston belonged. It was a land of civilized people where strength and bravery weren't valued as highly as intelligence and culture. Though he didn't think he was a coward, Preston was bothered about his reluctance to rush headlong into trouble. Frank would. Father certainly did. Ernst? He was a puzzle and stuck mostly on the business side of things. Just because he wasn't one to act brashly didn't mean he couldn't solve a problem. In medical situations, he took his time to assess the

situation, but then he acted on it. He wasn't afraid.

Father thought the East was full of weak, cowardly men, but Preston knew it wasn't true. Just because you didn't have to fight for survival didn't mean there weren't brave and strong men and women in the state. Still, Preston had to admit that he felt weak and ineffective here in Denver.

He rubbed the horse's neck and decided he'd go back to the mine office and have a talk with Mr. Mullins. He'd seen the man last night, and he'd assured Preston all was running smoothly.

Now, after hearing the two directors talk, Preston knew all wasn't as it seemed. They'd threatened Frank. What was his brother up to? He said he worked with the Pinkertons. What was going on? Father had shared nothing about the mines or the money coming in. Of course, he'd made so much money, Preston doubted if he needed the mines to bring in any more.

Through a crack in the barn door, he saw Mr. Vander ride away. Was he going to Denver? Feeling it was safe to exit the barn, Preston led Midnight outside, and instead of riding away, he went to the Chadwick office.

Without knocking, Preston shoved open the door and surprised Mr. Mullins. The man had been working on a ledger and looked as guilty as a fox with hen feathers sticking out of his mouth. "How are things going?"

Slamming the ledger shut, Mr. Mullins sat up straight in his chair. "Fine, sir. It's good to see you again. I thought you left earlier this morning."

"There's no rush. I wanted to give the mare a good rest before heading down the mountain in the snow. Has Father audited the books lately?" Preston eyed the books on the shelf behind Mr. Mullins. There was an identical ledger journal behind him but

with a large B on the binding that was missing on the one Mullins guarded.

“He does that once a year, sir.” Mullins put his elbows on the ledger and leaned across the desk. “Have you talked to your father about the last audit?”

“No, I was just curious.” Preston looked around the office. It had been some time since he’d been here. As children, they’d regularly come to the office and had been fascinated with the process of digging gold out of the earth. Although they were not allowed to go deep into the mines.

Preston remembered his family crowded in the room. He glanced at the glass box. It was still empty. Years ago, it had held a ten-pound gold nugget that they’d found in the mine. It had disappeared years ago, about the time the feud started.

His father and Mr. Burnett had accused each other of stealing it, but the nugget had never been found. Was that the start of the feud? Father had never said. He just came home one day and said the partnership with Raul Burnett was over.

“Is there anything else you need?” Mullins stood as if he were dismissing Preston.

The hair on the back of Preston’s neck rose. He would not be turned away. This man worked for his family. “Not at the moment. I assume you’re supplied for the winter?”

“Of course. I send a list to your father, and he sends the wagons as needed.” Mullins edged toward the door.

Preston couldn’t think of any more questions. He really needed to talk to Father before he made any rash accusations. “I’ll be leaving. Let us know if the miners need anything.”

Walking to the door, Mullins held it open for him. “I will. Have a good trip back to

town.”

As he reached the door, Preston stopped. “Are there any medical needs? I am a doctor, you know.”

Mullins shook his head. “No, everyone is healthy.”

“If anything arises, let me know. I’ll have my office in Denver. I am staying and building my practice here.” Preston could see that the man was uneasy about something. The next time he saw Frank, they were going to have a talk.

He mounted Midnight and rode her out of the camp. A quick glance to the right showed Mr. Mullins watching him from his office window. Preston almost expected a gunshot to the back. Those two were up to something. Somehow, he’d have to end the feud and get the two owners to come to terms. Preston hoped Frank could help, but as the two managers had said, Frank’s reckless past might keep anyone from listening.

For now, he had an apology to make to Millie. She was one of the reasons he had come back to Denver. Before he left, they would meet on the outskirts of town on a trail leading to the mountains.

He’d never promised her anything, but he had enjoyed her company. Though with the feuding fathers, they’d never talked about a future together. After all, he knew he was leaving for Denver.

Millie had talked about the dogs she trained, her devotion to her father, and her sadness at losing her mother. Despite their feuding fathers, they enjoyed one another’s company. He’d kissed her a few times. They were just children having fun, he’d thought.

Until the last time they'd met before he went to Boston. Leaving her was his only regret. Her tears surprised him. There were no words of his return or her waiting, only a tearful goodbye followed by a long kiss. A lover's kiss.

Their brief meeting the other day had not disclosed anything. She seemed happy to see him. But he truly didn't know if she had found a man to marry or be engaged to. His mother's illness had taken most of his attention from thinking about Millie.

In Boston, Preston had, on occasion, taken a woman to the opera or theater, but he'd not been comfortable with any of them. With Millie, he'd always felt at home. Was it because they'd grown up together? Before the feud, the two families had been close because of the mine.

He looked at the heavy snow and knew he'd never get to Denver in time to pick Millie up. He prayed Millie would talk with him and forgive him for not showing up to take her to the ball.

He thought about his shortcomings and failures and realized he would have to forgive himself. It was time for him to claim the courage he knew resided in him.

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Millie woke early, smiled at the sunlight coming through her window, and then lost her joy as she remembered last night's disappointment. Oh, she had danced with nice, eligible men but not with Preston. The man never showed up. She sighed. At least that was better than if he had shown up and danced with other women. Candace had asked about him, not even trying to hide her interest.

So where was he? Yes, it had snowed, and there was still a foot of snow on the ground. But that was no excuse. She knew his family had sleighs, as hers did. Throwing her pillow at the wall, she got up and went down for breakfast.

Father was sitting at the table and raised an eyebrow at her. She could tell he wanted to ask her questions, but he must have sensed her mood and kept his nose in the newspaper.

Not one to enjoy being at odds with her father, Millie piled some pancakes onto her plate. "I saw you dancing the night away with Ann Green." She bit her tongue. That had sounded so harsh. Though she'd meant it to be. Still, Father had every right to enjoy his life.

"I enjoy the woman's company." He put down the paper. "I hope you don't mind."

"No, not at all. You deserve happiness." She sighed again. Why was she against him enjoying the company of a woman his age and one who clearly enjoyed his company? "I'm going to take Bob out today. It should be nice with the sun out and fresh snow."

"Just be careful. I've heard the wolves close to town. Not to mention, the old cougar has been roaming the area. Baker lost a cow to him the other day."

“I always take my rifle. Old Yellow doesn’t scare me. He’s got to be over a dozen years old.” She stared at her father and questioned if she should tell him or not, and then she admitted her disappointment. “Preston never showed up.”

He glanced at her. “Can’t say I am sorry about that. I told you. His family is not welcome here. I don’t want you to see him.”

“What if I said that about Ann?”

Lowering the newspaper, her father frowned. “That is not for you to say or question. I would hope you could be civil to her.”

“As I hope you’ll be civil to Preston.” She matched her father’s stern gaze.

“Hmmpf.” Father picked up the paper and held it up between them.

She shook her head. “The man didn’t even show up last night. You don’t need to worry.” As she said the words, the hollow place in her heart widened. Had she been placing her hopes on Preston’s return? They’d never made plans for the future. They were just friends.

Millie finished her breakfast, thanked Sadie for the always tasty meal, and went to her room to dress. As she put on her warm-weather clothes, she had to laugh. What a contrast with the lovely young woman she’d been last night. It reminded her of the Cinderella story. The only thing missing was a Prince Charming.

She didn’t even have a pauper interested in her. Looking down at her clothes, she shook her head. This was not the attire to catch a husband. Well, she wanted to work with Bob today. The weather was perfect for pointing out pheasants with bright sunshine, snowy fields, and brisk fresh air. It just didn’t get better than that.

Millie rushed outside to the barn. She could walk the dog around the fields, but she wanted to take him to the foothills below the mountain trails. She called to the stableman to saddle her favorite horse, Sunny. The gelding was used to working with the dogs and was a sturdy animal.

She put the rifle in the scabbard, the canteen on the saddle horn, and then tied a blanket to the back of the horse. It was always good to be prepared. Millie went to the kennels and greeted Bob. The dog barked and could barely contain himself as he wagged his tail so hard.

“You ready to work, buddy?”

A couple of barks answered her. She put his collar on and let him run with her to the horse. Soon, they were riding out of Denver to the foothills beneath the mountains. She delighted in the snow-white blanket covering the land.

She called out commands to Bob, and he ran on alert. She watched the dog and enjoyed seeing him work. Millie hadn't planned on shooting any pheasant today, so left the rifle in the scabbard.

She dismounted and waited for Bob to signal a find. It wasn't long before he pointed his quarry. After tying the horse to a stout tree, she walked to where the dog stood. “Good boy. Go.”

The dog ran and flushed out the pheasant he'd spotted. “Perfect, Bob. Come.” Millie grinned as the dog trotted obediently to her and sat. She'd just finished petting the dog when she saw a rider coming down the trail from the mountains. Not sure who it was, she went to her horse and put her hand on the rifle.

Galloping toward her, she heard the man call out. “Millie!”

“Preston?” She advanced toward him. Her joy at seeing him was quickly replaced with anger. How dare he come so happily toward her after putting her off the night before. Millie gripped Sunny’s reins and held onto Bob’s collar as the dog had been known to chase horses.

Preston stopped in front of her and dismounted. “Sorry, I couldn’t get to the ball last night. I had to go to the mine office. Father had an errand for me to do, and I didn’t think it wise to push Midnight Song to get back in the snow.”

Millie stared at him. So, he rated her below his horse. “I’m glad to see your horse is fine.” She tightened her grip on Bob, wondering if she should turn him loose so he could bite Preston.

Preston kneeled and whistled. Bob broke from her grip and ran to him, wagging his tail as if they were old friends.

Angry that her dog liked Preston, Millie stepped back. “Bob, heel.”

The dog ignored her.

“Animals like me.” Preston smiled up at her as he continued to rub the dog’s ears.

“Apparently.” Millie was beyond irritated. Sunny knickered and edged toward Preston, making things more unbearable.

“I would like to take you to dinner at the French Slice. Tomorrow, if you have the time.”

“You don’t owe me anything.” She glanced at him but soon turned her gaze to Bob, the traitor dog. Millie wanted to call the animal back, but she didn’t want to give Preston the satisfaction of having stolen her dog’s attention. Plus, there was the fact

the dog might not come to her.

Preston tied his horse to a tree next to Sunny and then walked closer to her. “I apologize for not taking you to the dance. It was all I thought about yesterday.”

The nearness of him made her heart race. Angry as her own feelings betrayed her, Millie huffed. If what he said was true, why wasn’t he there? “I went with my father and had a wonderful time.” She tried to sound like she meant it. The truth was she spent more time eating cake and drinking punch than dancing. Yes, she’d had several men take her around the ballroom, and Fritz turned out to be a wonderful dancer.

With a glint in his eye that said he might not believe her, Preston nodded. “I am sorry.” He took her hand in his. “Let’s dance now.” He pulled her to him and waltzed a few steps.

She almost fell for it. For him. Then her anger returned, and Millie pulled away. “Really! Now is not the time or place. You missed it.” She turned away from him and went to her horse.

“Don’t go,” Preston pleaded with hurt in his voice.

If she had any sense, she’d get on Sunny and ride away. Instead, she turned to face him. Her palms were sweaty, and her heart was beating hard. She hoped he cared. “What time tomorrow?”

He grinned and looked at her with the same handsome face she remembered. “Four o’clock.”

“I’ll be ready.” She looked down and pointed at her clothes. “And dressed properly.”

Laughing, Preston nodded. “I know you will. Thank you for giving me another

chance.”

“Don’t forget, Preston. There are only so many chances to be had.” She leveled a glare, hoping he understood as a warning. Yes, she’d dreamed about him. But she had her limits. There were other men. The dance last night had shown her that.

“I’ll be there.” Preston smiled. Not exactly looking as if he’d realized her warning.

“Come, Bob.” She mounted Sunny and rode toward home. Bob lingered with Preston for a minute and then followed, wagging his tail and barking. Traitor dog, she thought and then glanced back at the happy pup. “So, you like him, too. Well, as long as he shows up tomorrow, I will, too.”

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Preston slammed his hand on the desk. "I know what I heard. I'm sure you don't want to believe it, but it's the truth. Those two managers are up to something together, and I'm sure it isn't good for you or Mr. Burnett. Maybe it's time you two got over your feud and found out what they are doing. And while you're at it, ask Frank what he knows."

Jeremiah glared at him. "I will not set foot on Burnett land. Not in Denver or down at the mines. What does Frank have to do with it?"

"I'm not sure, other than the managers want to do away with him, and he is your son."

"Humph. The boy has been nothing but trouble for as long as I can remember." Father shoved his chair back and stared. "What about your mother? Have you cured her yet?"

"Cured her? I don't even know what is wrong. I did have an idea to take her somewhere to rest and see if that didn't help. I have my eye on a house downtown for my practice. It has several rooms I can use for patients and examination rooms. She could stay with me, and I could watch her to see if I can figure out what is wrong."

Father considered his proposal. "If you think it will help her. Is this the house on Front Street and Center?"

"Yes. I'm going to see about getting it today."

"I'll go with you. Just so you know, I intend to help you buy the place."

Preston shook his head. "I don't need your help. I've got the money for a down payment."

"Alright, have it your way. You've always been one to go your own way." He shoved some folders around. "You say they threatened Frank?"

Glad his father hadn't forgotten about Frank, Preston nodded. "At least warn him to stay away from them."

"I'll do more than that." Father stood. "Where is your little brother?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen him in a couple of days." Preston checked the clock on his father's desk. He did not want to miss his appointment with Millie. "He told me he works for the Pinkerton Detective Agency."

"Yes, I know that well. He's tried to question me several times about the feud with Burnett. That is nobody's business." Father pursed his lips and then looked up. "Just so you remember, I don't want you to have anything to do with that girl."

"That girl's name is Millie, and I like her. So does Corinthia. I ran into Millie at the clothing shop the other day." Father rarely subjected his sister to the rules he had for his sons.

Father glared at him. "Stay away from her. Take care of your mother."

Preston stared at his father, but the man had dismissed him and was looking at the ledgers. Preston made his way to his mother's room. He wanted to tell her his idea.

She was sleeping, and he didn't want to wake her. Preston sighed. It was too late to check out the house for his practice. It was a little early, but he didn't want Millie to wait for him and went to get ready for dinner. He prayed Millie would forgive him

for missing the Hightower Ball. After dressing, he made his way to the stables, dodging past the office so his father wouldn't stop him.

Alfred made sure the horses were hitched to the sleigh and looked up. "There's going to be even more snow."

"Yes, I think so. Be sure to add some blankets in the sleigh."

"Will you want me to drive?"

"No, Alfred. I'll drive today. If it gets too bad, I'll stay in town."

"All right." He handed the reins to Preston. "If Mr. Chadwick asks, where should I tell him you have gone?"

"Out, and I'll be back tomorrow." Preston considered that the safest answer. Besides, he was going to buy the house for his medical practice tomorrow.

Alfred nodded and stepped back.

Preston flicked the whip over the horses' heads. "Go, boys. Take me to Millie." With a grin, he started out to Millie's house. He'd gone about halfway when a rider called out to him to stop.

Preston halted the horses and turned to see Frank riding up to him. "What do you want?"

"Father said the managers threatened me."

"Yes, they did. If I was you, I'd stay away from them."

Holding his prancing horse to a standstill, Frank shook his head. “They’re up to something and probably have been for some time. I suspect they’ve kept the feud going and are skimming from the profits of both families.”

Preston shook his head. “What is Ernst doing? Doesn’t he go to the mines to check on Mullins?”

“You would think. Ernst isn’t a good manager. He’d rather use his law degree, but Father made him take over the mines instead. He’s not like us, Preston. He does whatever Father tells him to do.”

Preston looked around. They were beside the field that led to the road to the mine. No one was around as far as he could see. “Frank, you be careful. Don’t go to the mines alone.”

Just as he finished talking, a bullet caught Frank in the side. His brother fell from the horse and scooted under the sleigh. “Get down, Preston.”

Preston was no fool and didn’t need to be told. He’d already grabbed his pistol and jumped from the sleigh. He crawled to Frank. “Are you hurt badly?”

“I don’t think so. Just a nick in the side. But I would guess the managers are responsible. Do you see anyone?”

“No. The shot came from over by those trees.” Preston reached up to set the brake and then remembered the carriage was a sled now. He reached up and grabbed the reins. He went to Frank. “Let me see.”

Frank rolled onto his back and pulled his jacket from his side. “Just a nick. I don’t think it went in me.”

Preston moved Frank's shirt away from his side and grimaced. "You're wrong. Relax as best you can and let me see if it went out your back." Gently, he pulled Frank up and looked. "No hole. The bullet is still in you. Lie still, and when it's safe, I'll get you on the sleigh and take you home. I'll have to get the bullet out."

Frank groaned. "I guess it's a good thing to have a doctor in the family." He held his gun and looked around. "No one. I'm sure it was either Mullins or Vander." He leaned his head back against the snow-covered ground and chuckled.

"I hardly think this is a laughing matter." Preston took his handkerchief, placed it on the wound, and pressed down, making Frank groan again.

After a couple of minutes, Frank looked at him and smiled. "You know the big nugget that went missing years ago?"

Preston nodded. "You know who took it?"

Frank grimaced and then grinned. "I did. It's safe under the house in my secret place. I meant to return it, but Father and Burnett were so angry with each other that I didn't want to admit I took it. I've kept quiet all these years."

"Whoa, you mean you might have caused the whole mess between them?"

Frank gazed at him with that little brother face, looking so innocent. "There was more trouble. I would skip school and go to the mines. Before I took the nugget, I heard them both yelling at one another. Something to do with faulty books. Maybe Mullins was stealing from them back then and they were blaming each other."

"After I get you healed from this wound, you're going to replace that nugget. If I remember correctly, they found it together."

“Whatever you say, big brother.” He groaned again, his face paling. “I don’t feel so good.”

Preston reached an arm around Frank, pulled him up, and helped him inside the sleigh. Once he had Frank settled and laying down in the back, he took the blanket and covered him. “We’ll be home in no time. Hang on, Frank.”

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Millie glanced at the clock. Did it already say five? Angry, she paced the room, glad that her father was in town and not here to see her humiliation. That's twice Preston failed to show up. Could she trust him? "Stupid thought. Of course, I can't trust him. He's not here."

Hungry, she made her way to the kitchen and grabbed a piece of bread and a glass of water. Prisoner rations. "Ugh! Preston is off my list. I was dreaming about him. He never promised to come back for me, and now, he can't even show up when he says." She munched on her bread as she made her way up the stairs.

Finished with her piece of bread, she stopped before she reached her room. There was no reason for her to go to bed this early and still be hungry. She had on one of her new outfits and thought she looked nice. Pretty even. Maybe Fritz would take her out to dinner.

She went to the kennels and saw him giving the last of the dogs their evening meal. "Have you eaten?"

Fritz looked up and smiled. "I have to say that light pink looks lovely on you. I made a good choice if I don't say so myself."

Even though she was irritated at his high opinion of himself, she had to agree with him. The skirt and ruffled blouse were flattering on her. "Yes, thank you again. I wondered if you'd like to go to town and have dinner?"

Fritz dusted off his hands. "All right. Let me get dressed, and then I'll drive the carriage around the front." He started to ask a question but grinned instead and went

to his room on the side of the house near the dogs.

Millie felt herself blush. The man knew Preston was supposed to take her to dinner. How, she wasn't sure, but he had known. At least Fritz hadn't rubbed it in. She was embarrassed enough. She never wanted to see Preston again.

In record time, Fritz had the carriage in front and was waiting for her. Millie came outside, and Fritz helped her in and draped a blanket over her lap. "There could be more snow coming. If it gets too bad, we'll have to stay at the hotel." He smiled and took his place to drive the carriage.

Millie didn't answer. She prayed they could get home after dinner. She didn't even tell Fritz where to go but sat back and let him choose a restaurant. After a thirty-minute drive, she saw they were at the Denver Hotel. They had a wonderful restaurant, and if needed, they could get a room. She straightened her skirt, glanced at Fritz, and said to herself, "Make that two rooms."

Fritz gave the valet the reins and jumped down. "I know the hotel has good food. With the weather the way it is, I thought the other restaurants might close early." He put his hand on her elbow and guided her toward the door.

Millie went along with his gentlemanly manners, but it riled her. She did not want a man who thought he could order her around and expect her to obey like a dog. She had her own way of doing things.

But for now, she'd let him take her to the table of his choosing. Then she'd order what she wanted to eat. She was hungry.

"I thought we'd sit in the back where it is warmer." He pulled a chair out for her to sit down with her back to the windows.

“I’d prefer to sit where I can look outside. I love watching the snow come down. It’s so peaceful and quiet, don’t you think?” She moved to the chair on the other side of the table.

Fritz frowned but pulled the chair out for her. “I suppose. Being from Germany, I am used to seeing snow.”

Millie grinned at him. “Do you ever have fun? Look at things with wonder and enjoy just being?”

Ignoring her question, he picked up the menu. “We’ll have the roast beef plate.” He handed the waiter his menu.

Millie put a hand on the waiter’s arm to stop him. “I’ll have steak and potato. I love your steaks.” She smiled and caught a sly grin from the waiter. “Yes, ma’am.”

Clearing his throat, Fritz sat up straight in his chair. “Really, Millie, do you have to make everything hard? What could possibly be wrong with having the roast beef?”

“I wanted steak.” She met his stare, intent on not wavering her gaze.

“I suppose if I had ordered steaks, you would have wanted roast beef?” He finally smiled at her.

She had to give in with a smile of her own. “I suppose you might be right. Sorry. I was off balance.”

Fritz shook his head. “Because Preston didn’t come by again?”

“How did you know?”

“I heard you talking to your father. Shouting really. It would have been hard not to hear since my room is next to the kitchen.”

“I am sorry you heard that. Father and his feud with the Chadwicks. Have you ever heard of two more stubborn men?”

“They are set in their ways. Do you even know what it is about?”

She shook her head. “I once thought it was because the big nugget disappeared. A ten-pound nugget of gold they both found when they made the claim. But they had trouble with one another before it went missing. No one knows what happened to it.”

“It’s hard to know what is going on between people.” He shrugged and then grinned. “The dogs are all doing well. Your Bob has the makings of a great pointer. You need to work with him or let me.” Fritz took a drink of water.

“He’s my dog. I’ll work with him when I have time.” She resisted his attempts to take the animal from her.

“Bob has the potential to be great, but only if someone works with him regularly. Your father brought me back with him to do just that.”

Millie sighed. “Well, I wasn’t part of the bargain. Bob is my dog, and I’ll see to his training.” Why had she asked Fritz to take her to dinner? What a mistake. She glanced out the window and realized her mistake was even greater. It was near blizzard conditions. It was a good thing that she’d left her father a note where she was. Then she wondered where he was. He’d not told her what he was doing.

Her dinner came, and she enjoyed eating her steak and potato. The roast looked good, too, but she’d wanted to establish her right to order what she wanted. She smiled at Fritz and then noticed Candace coming inside the restaurant.

Millie scowled, then spun it into a smile as Candace waved and approached her table.

“How nice to see you again. The snow is really coming down.” Candace smiled at Fritz. “So good to see you, too.” Her buttery voice dripped with flattery. She turned her attention back to Millie. “Where is Preston? I thought maybe you two had hit it off, but I know he missed the Hightower Ball.”

Staring at the woman, Millie concentrated on keeping her smile on. “I don’t know where Preston is. I’m not his keeper.” There. She’d said it, so maybe the fawning woman would take a hint and go away.

Instead, Candace pulled out a chair, sat next to Fritz, and let her hand rest on his arm. “I hope you don’t mind, but there aren’t any open tables left. We’re all friends.”

Millie hadn’t been aware that friends could be uttered in two syllables. What did she care? Let her have Fritz. She didn’t want him. She pouted. Hated that she was, but it wouldn’t leave her face. Right now, she didn’t want Preston either.

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Preston wiped his hands on a towel. He'd taken the bullet out of Frank and was sure his brother would recover. After seeing his brother's torso, he saw that this wasn't the first time the man had been shot. Seems his little brother had been up to no good. Then again, maybe he had been shot in the line of duty.

There was a knock on the door. He opened it to see his mother leaning against the wall. "Preston, how is Frank?"

"You shouldn't be up."

"That's my baby in there. Is he going to be all right?"

"Yes, I think so. He's a strong young man." Preston took his mother's arm and led her back to her room. "I want you to rest." He settled her in bed and pulled up a blanket. "I'm going to buy the property for my practice. I want to move you there to see if that helps. I can't find anything wrong with you and thought maybe it's the water or air. Anyway, it's worth a try."

"Oh, Preston. I don't want to leave my home. If that were true, why wouldn't everyone be sick?"

"Nobody else stays here all day and night. You rarely leave the house." He patted her hand.

"Then why wouldn't I have been sick years ago? This started maybe six months ago."

He sighed. "I'm not sure. It's just something I want to try to see if I can get you

well.”

She smiled. “You’re the doctor. I’m so glad you’re home. I wish you and your father could make amends. He’s so angry all the time. Ernst is about ready to leave and go to California.”

Preston thought about Millie and frowned.

“Something wrong, Son?”

“I was going to take Millie to dinner but ran into Frank, and you know how that ended. That’s twice I’ve let her down.”

Mother sighed. “Father won’t be pleased that you’re seeing a Burnett.”

“I have thought about her for four years, Mother. It’s time I took care of my personal life. When we were children, Millie was always the girl I was going to marry.”

His mother smiled at him. “Dear Preston. You’re going to have to talk to the girl. There’s a lot of difference between a girl in childhood and a young woman. For what it is worth, you have my blessing. Father, well, he is another story.”

“Right now, I don’t know if Millie will speak to me after running out on her twice. But I had to take care of Frank.” Preston rubbed a hand through his hair. “I need to make things right with her tomorrow.”

“I hope you will try to make things right with your father as well.”

“I’ll talk with him, but I’m not a child any longer. I have my own ideas and thoughts.” Preston had no desire to lock horns with his father tonight.

“Preston!” His father’s loud voice echoed in the hallway.

“Well, I guess I’ll have a talk with him.” He left his mother’s room and looked down the hall. He gave his father a frown. “Frank is sleeping.”

“Sleeping! That boy. He needs a whip put to him.” Father came from the stairs. “I come home, and no one is there to greet me.”

“Mother is resting, and Frank is recovering from surgery. I had to take a bullet out of his side just an hour ago.”

“A bullet! What did he do now?”

“Father, did it ever occur to you that Frank is innocent? The man works for the Pinkertons and, as a matter of fact, is looking into the mine and some shady dealings that concern your welfare.”

“Shot?” Trouble lines marked Father’s forehead. “Who shot him?”

“We couldn’t see. I was out with the sleigh, and Frank stopped me. We were talking, and someone shot him. I got him home and took the bullet out. He should be all right.” Preston was relieved to see the care that Father was showing for Frank.

“I’ll get some men on it right away.” Father tilted his head. “Looking into the mines, you say?”

“Yes, sir. It might be time to check on the manager. Even when I was there, I got the feeling he was keeping the books away from me. The mine has made so much money that even if he took money off the top, you wouldn’t know. In fact, you and Mr. Burnett would be wise to make a united effort when dealing with the two managers. I heard them arguing together, and they threatened Frank.”

Father walked down the stairs, gesturing for him to follow. "I've been thinking about that since you told me. The amount of money coming into my bank has decreased over the years. It's still much more than we need to live on, but it's enough to become disturbing."

Preston nodded. "When you talk to Frank, you might ask him about the nugget. I think he knows where it is."

Surprise flooded Father's face. "That boy. I should have guessed. I questioned him at the time, but he was full of mischief." Father slapped the desk. "I'll talk to him and then send an apology to Raul Burnett. I accused him of taking it."

Preston walked to his father and patted his shoulder. "Great. I would like to see you end the feud. I told you the other night I still want to ask Millie to court her. Probably marry her if she'll have me."

"That seems abrupt. You haven't seen her in years."

"She was the main reason I came back to Denver." Preston was surprised at the wellspring of feelings that rose inside him as he said the words. He cared for Millie more than he realized. Now, after not being there for her twice in a week, he wondered if she'd have anything to do with him.

Father was marking on a sheet of paper. "The more I think about it, the more I believe I need to talk to Mullins."

"Don't go alone. Take some strong men with you. Armed too. I'm sure if they didn't shoot Frank, they at least hired someone to do it."

Slamming his fist against his desk, Father nodded. "I don't let anyone do my own fighting. I expect you to go with me."

Preston stared at his father. “Tomorrow, I want to see Millie and buy the house for my practice. The following day, I will go with you.”

“I need to go tomorrow.” Father stared at him, daring him to deny his family duty.

With a sigh, Preston gave in. “All right. We’ll talk with Mullins tomorrow, but I think we need to talk to Burnett, too.”

Father growled. “I don’t want to talk to him.”

“What if the managers count on you and Raul never talking to one another? I’ll go with you if we stop at Burnett’s and take him with us. Bring your ledgers so you can compare them with Raul’s.”

With a heavy sigh, Father nodded. “I know this day has been coming. That they shot Frank is proof I need to do something. It can’t get more drastic than talking to Raul. We’ll leave early in the morning.”

Preston was relieved his father agreed. At the same time, he had his own Burnett to mend differences with. He prayed Millie would let him apologize.

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Millie dressed in one of her new outfits. She wasn't sure why, but she wanted to look nice. Not for Fritz, that was for sure. The man had been insufferable since dinner yesterday. He'd wanted to stay at the hotel, but luckily, the snow had stopped, and the streets were not that bad. So, she convinced him to drive her.

Father was home when she arrived, but she hadn't been able to get out of him where he'd been. He wasn't happy about it, though. For the longest time, he stewed in his office. Finally, he came out carrying a ledger.

"Have you heard anything about the mine?" His tone was gruff.

"No. Who would I even talk to?" Millie was shocked he'd even ask her. He never discussed business with her.

"Preston?" Father stared at her. "I know you care for him. I also know that even if I forbid you to see him, you'll go on seeing him, anyway."

Millie walked to him and sat beside him on the settee. "You know I will always love you, Father, but I have always loved Preston. I didn't even realize it until I saw him again."

"I hoped you might like Fritz, but you two don't get along."

"He's a good man but not the man for me." That was the end of their conversation. Father didn't let on what bothered him about the mine, and Millie had gone to bed wondering about the trouble Father had found out about. She stayed awake, questioning why Preston stayed away from her at the ball and yesterday. Did he even

care about her?

Millie sighed. It had been a long night. She just hoped today was better. However, she doubted she'd believe Preston again if he asked her out for dinner. She heard pots rattle and knew Father was already up and in the kitchen. He liked to make breakfast, and French toast was his favorite.

She opened the door and entered. "Good morning. It smells wonderful."

Father turned to her and grinned. "Want some?"

"You know I do." She saw that he was dressed in his business attire. "Are you going somewhere today?"

Nodding, he flipped the toast. "I'm going to the mine. Something is not right."

"Do you think you should talk to the Chadwicks?"

Father shook his head. "I doubt they would talk to me, but you might be right." He put the pieces of toast on plates and walked to the kitchen table. "I've put off looking into the mine business and talking to the Chadwicks long enough."

She hugged him and then sat down to enjoy breakfast. They'd just finished when there was a knock on the door. Millie and her father stared at one another.

Father stood. "Who could that be?"

Glancing at her father, she went to the door. About to open it, she stopped. If it was Preston, she needed to make him sorry he had let her down. Pouting, she opened the door.

Mr. Chadwick and Preston stood before her.

Seeing Preston, her pout turned to a smile. “Won’t you both come in? Father, it’s Mr. Chadwick and Preston.”

Father strode into the foyer and, by the scowl on his face, Millie cringed at the coming battle. Mr. Chadwick didn’t look any friendlier. Caught in the middle, she stepped aside. “Why don’t you both go into the study and I’ll bring in some coffee.”

“No need.” Jeremiah Chadwick bellowed. “It’s not a friendly visit.” He sent a withering glance her way. “If you would leave us. You too, Preston. This is between me and Raul.” His face was dark with anger, but he softened when he looked at his son and then at her. “Please.”

Preston took Millie by the arm and walked her back into the kitchen. “I’d like a cup of coffee if you don’t mind.”

Reluctantly, she went with him and made them coffee. “What do you think they are saying?”

Preston shook his head. “I don’t know, but it is between them.” He took her hand in his, holding it warmly. “I’m sorry I didn’t show up yesterday. I was on my way over when Frank stopped me. We talked for a few minutes and someone shot him. He’s going to be all right, but I had to get him home and take care of him. I hope you can understand and forgive me.”

“Frank was shot! Oh, my. Yes, I understand, and there is no need to ask for my forgiveness.” While worried about Frank, Millie sighed in relief that Preston had a reason not to meet her yesterday. He still liked her. She knew it. Her heart rate sped up, and her palms became sweaty. She hoped he hadn’t noticed.

Preston smiled at her. "I'm sorry I didn't write to you while in Boston. I guess I was leaving things free in case I met someone, but I didn't meet anyone I cared about or who could take your place."

She stared at him. Was he that dumb? So, he didn't find anyone and thought he'd come back and pick her up as an afterthought? What was he thinking? Did he think she was so undesirable that no one else would want her? Anger stormed through her until she looked at him. He was the one she'd dreamed about.

Preston sat down. "We're not children any longer. I know Ernst is thinking of leaving for California. I love my father, but I will live my life as I see fit. He doesn't rule over me."

Millie frowned. For all his brave words, he'd ignored her for four years. "But the Bible does say to honor your mother and father that it may go well with you. I don't see how a marriage without their blessing would be a good thing."

"If that's how you feel." Anger flashed in his eyes. He was mad at her.

Millie felt her anger rise, too. "One thing I want in a husband is a man with strong convictions and the courage to live by them. I always thought that man was you, Preston. But after the last few days, I have been wondering. You chose to do your father's bidding instead of meeting me. While you had to take care of Frank, you could have sent word to me. And I heard nothing from you for four years while you were looking for a Boston woman to marry."

Preston folded his arms. "What I want in a wife is a woman who will believe in and trust me. I know we haven't seen one another in years, but I thought we had a genuine feeling for one another. You should have known I would have come to pick you up if I could have. Things happened that were beyond my control."

“It sounds like we need to learn to trust one another.” Millie tamped down her anger toward him. He did have reasons for not showing up.

Preston nodded. “I’m willing if you are?”

Millie bit her lip and then sighed. “I am.”

Loud words rattled the wall. Preston jumped up. “We aren’t the only ones who need to learn to trust one another. I better go in there and make sure my father isn’t causing war.”

Millie laughed. “I’m sure if yours isn’t, mine has his shields and spear raised. What are we going to do with those two?”

After another loud bellow and something hitting the wall, Preston bolted into the foyer. “What are you two doing?”

Burnett was on top of Chadwick. They both had bloody noses and red faces. Jeremiah roared. “Preston, get out of here.”

Raul yelled at Millie to leave. “We’re going to finish this thing and get it settled.”

Preston pulled Millie out of the room and back to the kitchen. “Let’s finish our coffee. I don’t think they’ll seriously hurt one another. Neither had a gun or knife.”

Millie shook her head. “I guess boys will be boys even if they are in their forties.”

Preston snorted. “They are too much alike. Although my father is the louder one, and to think, they used to be the best of friends.”

She went to him and took his hand. “Perhaps we can show them a united front. Do

you know why they need to talk to the managers?”

“I am sure they have been set up, and the two office managers fed their feud. I do know that Frank confessed to taking the gold nugget and hiding it in his safe place under the house.” Preston shook his head. “Frank was always in trouble.”

Millie smiled to herself. Preston was here, and together, they would straighten out their fathers.

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Millie had hoped she and Preston could spend time together. It wasn't long, and the men came out and said they were going to the mine to see what they could find out and wanted Preston to go with them. Father took Fritz with him to even out the Chadwicks and Burnetts. That was the end of her time with Preston.

She was ordered to go to the sheriff's office and tell him he might be needed at the mine, along with the Pinkerton agents. She thought about riding her horse, but looking at the snow that had fallen, she took the sled instead and let Edward drive her. That way, she could dress in her new clothes, stop and see Corinthia, and have dinner in town.

Edward stopped outside the sheriff's office. Millie knocked on the door and went inside, only to catch the man sitting behind his desk, snoring.

She cleared her throat as loudly as she dared. "Sheriff."

Coming to attention, he jolted out of his chair and stared at her. "Millie Burnett. What's wrong? You're all right, aren't you?"

"Yes, Sheriff. My father sent me to tell you he and Mr. Chadwick went to the mine to straighten things out. They wanted you to tell the Pinkertons in case they need some help."

"I see." He suddenly looked startled. "Those two big buffaloes weren't fighting, were they?"

"No. They took Preston and Fritz with them. Do you know what has been going on

with the mine?”

The sheriff shook his head. “No, but Frank has been by and told me a few things that he was checking into.”

“Someone shot Frank yesterday. Preston was with him, took care of him, and said he’d be all right. They didn’t see anyone.”

“I wish they’d come and got me. That is something I can work on. Maybe I’ll take a ride to the mine and see if anyone knows who shot Frank.” He yawned, stretched, and grabbed his hat. “You take care, Millie. I don’t like the idea of someone shooting Frank.”

“Edward is driving me around today. I’ll be fine.” She waved to the sheriff and instructed Edward to take her to Corinthia’s shop. Who knows, she might find some more outfits to buy. The sleigh bells rang as the horses trotted down the snowy street. Millie closed her eyes and dreamed that Preston was sitting next to her.

But he wasn’t. She was sitting alone, wrapping a blanket around her for warmth instead of being in the arms of the man she loved. Whoever that might be. She wanted Preston, but right now, she was lonely enough to consider anyone. Almost.

Stopped outside Corinthia’s, Millie waited for Edward to help her exit the sleigh. “I’ll be a little while. You can enjoy yourself for a couple of hours.”

Edward nodded and left.

She entered the shop. “Corinthia, it’s me, Millie?”

Coming from the backroom, Corinthia smiled. “Don’t you look lovely? I thought you’d be busy with Preston. I know he was going to your house with Father. I do

hope those two old bears didn't fight."

Millie laughed. "A bit of a wrestle, but they left in your father's sleigh for the mine. They took Preston and Fritz with them."

"Oh, what a pity. You and Preston need time together. He does seem interested in you, and I believe your eyes sparkle when he's in the room."

Millie blushed. "I would like to talk with him. It appears we may have to sneak away like we did before he went to Boston."

"Do you find him changed much?"

Millie shrugged. "We haven't been alone enough together to see if we could have a life together. He was always the man of my dreams, but we were young. Now, I don't know."

Corinthia sighed. "Give him time. He's starting his new practice here. Mother is sick. And now there is a problem with the mine."

Millie looked at a nice olive-colored outfit. "This is pretty. Do you think this color would look good on me?"

Shaking her head, Corinthia joined her and pulled one out that was a light blue. "This is a better color for you." She glanced at the backroom. "I have some alterations to make. I'll be back out in a few minutes." Corinthia ran and disappeared behind the curtains.

Millie looked at a few more items and turned as Candace came from the curtained backroom.

“Millie, what a surprise. I was being fitted for a new gown. I was surprised to hear your voice.” Candace looked at her selection. “More clothes. Before long, you’ll be the best-dressed woman in Denver.”

Even though it sounded like a compliment, Millie suspected Candace meant to put her down. “A woman can never have enough proper attire. You’re getting a new gown? Is there another ball in Denver?”

Candace grinned slyly. “Might be. My family is thinking of having one for New Year’s. Don’t worry, I’ll invite you. Now that I know you won’t come as a mountain girl.” She chuckled.

Funny, funny, Millie thought. “Please let me know.”

“I’ll ask Preston, too.” Candace sighed. “Do you think Fritz would like to come too?”

Millie stared at the woman. That she would make a play for Preston was all too clear. Fritz’s name had been thrown in as a ploy. Millie could read the woman’s motives as plain as if they were in a novel by Jane Austen.

Corinthia cleared her throat in a very lady-like manner. “I can close up for lunch. Would you like to join me?”

Millie nodded. “Yes, I would.”

Candace answered the same. She smiled at Millie. “It will give us all a chance to catch up.”

“We can go to Daisy’s Diner. It is just a block away. I’ll get my things and meet you at the door.”

Millie looked at Candace. “After you.” Then she followed the woman to the door. The day was not turning out how she thought. She only hoped that the men were having a better time and not getting into trouble.

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Preston could have kicked himself for not bringing his doctor bag. Already, his father and Mr. Burnett sported bloodied lips, and that was just from a wrestling match with each other. They were now close to the gold mine, and Preston could only wonder what would meet them. Someone had shot Frank, and he thought it was one of the managers.

Fritz sat away from him with a puzzled look on his face. Preston had to wonder who his allegiance would be to. He worked for Burnett but didn't seem loyal to the man. Had he been brought from Germany as a match for Millie?

Millie hadn't appeared fond of Fritz, but then she was a hard one to figure out. She was still angry with him for missing his appointments with her. Not that he could blame her. Still, she was the girl he'd dreamed about while growing up. Even when returning to Denver, she was the woman he looked forward to meeting.

The two older men sat in the front and drove the sleigh. They had been talking for some time. At first, they were quiet. Then, one of them opened a ledger he'd brought along. They began comparing notes. For two old mountain men at odds with one another, they suddenly seemed to have joined forces.

Jeremiah Chadwick stopped the sleigh before entering the valley where the gold mine originated. He looked back. "Load your rifles. Check they are ready to fire. We don't know what to expect once we get down there."

Preston shook his head. "Father, shouldn't we talk with them first?"

"We will, son. But if they want to talk with bullets, we need to be ready." Jeremiah

elbowed Raul in the ribs.

Preston glanced at Fritz. "Sorry you got dragged into this."

Fritz shrugged. "I'm here for the boss. I hope there is no bloodshed, but the way those two are acting, they are up for a fight."

Taking in a deep breath, Preston braced himself. He wasn't one prone to violence, but he would stand up for his father. His heart rate sped up as he handled the rifle. I'm more of a healer than a fighter, he reminded himself.

His father turned around. "I'm stopping the sleigh right here. We'll walk down and see if we can't surprise them. With the snow on the ground and the coming storm, we should be able to sneak up on them."

Preston looked at the skies and saw that there were dark blue clouds to the north. Were they just crazy to be caught up here with what looked like a blizzard coming? Not that Father or Mr. Burnett seemed to care.

Jeremiah Chadwick motioned for Preston to follow him. "We're going to our mine office and see if we can catch Mullins fixing the books. Burnett and Fritz are going to their office. Be quiet and follow my lead. I can trust you to fire that thing if you need to, can't I?"

"Yes, Father. You think I'm weak, but I never enjoyed killing things. I'm a doctor. My life is geared around healing. Why can't you understand that?"

Jeremiah stared at him and put a hand on his son's shoulder. "I do understand that, son, but I need to know if it comes down to it. Can you be counted on to help me when we confront Mullins?"

Preston nodded. “Yes, I’ll be ready.” He’d never been in a situation where he needed to prove his courage. Is that why Father had brought him along? In Boston, there’d been no reason to have to prove himself. Once, he’d protected his sisters from a wolf. He’d yelled and chased it away. He’d never fired a gun at a man before. He’d never had to.

Frank probably had and at an even younger age. But he was different. He was more like Father. Preston had always had a tender heart and brought back injured animals to try and heal. Millie would help him.

When they were younger, she’d found a rabbit with a broken leg. They spent hours caring for it until the day came for them to turn it loose. Frank had laughed and said it probably got eaten by a bobcat, but they believed it hopped away and lived a happy life.

They neared the office and swept around to the back. Despite the cold, Preston wiped sweat from his eyes but was sure to watch his father. After Jeremiah waved to Raul and Fritz at the other mine office, they broke through the back door, rifles at the ready, and Father yelling.

Mullins jumped, closed one ledger, and threw another on the floor. “What is the meaning of this?”

Preston aimed the rifle at Mullins. “Get your hands up.”

Father went to the desk and grabbed the ledgers. “I think we have the evidence we need.”

In one quick move, Mullins shoved Jeremiah to the floor and pulled a pistol, aiming it at Preston. “Drop the rifle, and neither you nor your father will get hurt.”

A shot was heard from the other mine office.

Mullins turned his head, and Preston swung his rifle at Mullin's hand, dislodging the pistol. Then he pulled the rifle back and jabbed it into Mullin's stomach. "Get on your knees and keep your hands up. Father, can you find something to tie his hands?"

Jeremiah found some rope, tied Mullin's hands behind his back, and pushed him toward the door. A crowd of men came from the mine at the same time Burnett and Fritz shoved Vander ahead of them.

Jeremiah grabbed his rifle and held it in the air. "These men have been stealing from us, and we're taking them to the sheriff."

One of the miners who had been there since the beginning came forward. "There are others who have joined to steal from you. They threatened us to keep quiet. It's been some time since either of you came into the mines to see what is going on."

Another miner nodded. "I think we better get to the mine now. There's a bad storm coming." He took Jeremiah's arm. "My father helped you and Mr. Burnett dig out that big nugget."

Jeremiah glanced at Burnett. "Have we been fools for so long?"

Raul nodded. "It would seem the easy way of life put a blinder on our eyes." A gust of biting wind swirled down from the mountain, bringing the first of the stinging sleet. "Fritz, Preston, get the horses and sleigh and put them in the barn. We'll be in the mine. Won't be the first time we survived a blizzard in the deep parts of the earth." He laughed and shoved Vander ahead of him.

Preston raced to the horses. He was already shivering from the cold. He remembered the killer cold and blizzards from the past. If left outside, many died. He prayed for

his family and Millie. Once again, he couldn't be with her and show her how he cared for her. Once again, he was kept from her. He'd been so sure they belonged together.

Fritz caught up to him. "Looks like a bit of a storm. We have them in Germany, too. I guess the mine will keep us safe."

"We used to keep firewood and food in one of the rooms. Our two families had some good times together. Those were the early days before we were rich, and our fathers got along. Then came the big strike and the big vein of gold. We found the ten-pound nugget and, within months, moved to Denver into big houses fit for kings. The feud started later that year."

Preston grabbed the reins and led the horses into the camp. The animals knew what was coming and bolted in fear. He hung onto the reins and, with Fritz's help, got them into the barn and shut the door. It didn't take long to unhitch them and get them in a stall.

"We'll have to bring them water. I hope the storm won't last too long." Preston wanted to take one of the horses and ride for Denver to warn Millie. But it was already too late to risk the icy temperatures.

Fritz threw hay into their stalls and then ran to the door. "Snow is starting to come down. The wind is blowing it sideways. Before it's a whiteout, we better get to the mine."

Preston nodded. "Let's go."

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Millie had just finished her bowl of stew when a gust of wind blew open the door to the little diner. Icy air invaded the restaurant, chilling all who were inside.

The man nearest the door stood and shut the door. He looked outside and shook his head.

“We might be stuck in here. Snow is blowing sideways and doesn’t look like it’s going to stop anytime soon.”

Shocked, Millie glanced at Corinthia. “Do you think we can make it back to your store?”

Candace shook her head. “Not by the sound of that wind. Besides, we have a stove and food in here. We’d be wise to stay.”

“I think you’re right, Candace.” Corinthia shivered. “I remember that time years ago when we had to stay in the mine for a week.”

Millie smiled. “I was just thinking about that. We had some good times together, didn’t we?”

Corinthia nodded. “Brrr. It’s getting colder in here already. I hope they have a lot of wood gathered.”

The door opened, and a few people entered the small restaurant. “I hope you have room for us. The temperature is already deadly.”

Daisy Owens came out from behind the counter. “Everyone scoot in closer together. We have plenty of wood out back and food in our pantry. We might not be comfortable, but we will stay warm and fed. Everyone away from the door. Let’s give others room to come in.”

Millie felt a hollow pit in her stomach. She worried about Father and Preston out on the road. She hoped they stayed at the mine and hadn’t attempted to return. As the hours passed, the empty space inside her grew. She couldn’t bear to think about losing her father or Preston.

Corinthia took her hand. “Are you all right? You look chilled. Do you need my coat?”

Millie shook her head and looked at Corinthia. “Our fathers, along with Fritz and Preston, went to the mine this morning. I hope they are still at the mine and not on the road to Denver.”

“I see.” Now, the fear was on Corinthia’s face.

Candace tapped the table with her finger. “They know the signs of the weather. I am sure they would have stayed at the mine. Jeremiah and Raul are both mountain men from long ago. They know the clouds and wind and feel the dropping temperatures. I’m sure they’re safe.”

Millie pressed her hand on Candace’s. “Thank you. I’m sure you’re right. It was a good thing we came to eat lunch.” A glance outside showed it was dark and only a little after noon. The wind rattled the windows, blowing the snow sideways.

Corinthia sighed. “Let’s make the best of our time. Here we are, three lovely ladies with no man to call our own. At least, I don’t. How about you, Candace, Millie?”

Candace groaned. “No one for me. I have a passing interest in Preston and Fritz, but no man has looked at me with interest. I don’t know why. I’m pretty or as nice-looking as most women.”

Millie shrugged. “Preston and I were always friends growing up. Even after the feud between our families, we’d sneak away to meet each other. Then, he went to Boston to become a doctor, and I didn’t hear from him until he returned. He has twice promised to pick me up and take me somewhere but has not shown up. Although he had good excuses, it has made me wonder about where I stand with him.”

Corinthia shook her head. “I think he does care about you, but I haven’t talked to him. I don’t have anyone, either. Sometimes, I think my father and wealth keep good men from talking to me.”

Candace looked at them. “So, what are we to do? We’re getting to the age of spinsterhood. I want a good husband and a family.”

Millie nodded. “Me too. I held out for Preston. Now, I am wondering if that was a mistake. Does he care for me? Or should I be looking for someone else?”

Candace put a hand on Millie’s. “Now that you’re wearing the proper attire, I would think there will be more men paying attention to you.”

Corinthia tapped her fork on the table to get attention. “Maybe we need to decide what we want in a man and start there.”

Candace smiled. “I want a handsome man. He should be strong and of good courage.”

Millie nodded. “And smart. A good provider. No one wants a man who can’t keep a job.” She sighed. “What difference does it make if we don’t have any men interested

in us?”

Candace sighed. “You’re right. We’re putting the train before the horse.”

“You mean the cart before the horse.” Millie laughed.

Candace rolled her eyes. “You knew what I meant. Before we worry about which man is right for us, we have to have at least one who wants us.”

Corinthia broke in. “Why? Can’t we be the one who is interested in a man and go after him? Why do we have to wait around for them to act?”

“Good point.” Millie pondered her words. “So, I am interested in Preston. I’m going after him.” She looked at Candace. “That means he is mine until it looks like I am getting him or not. We should have some kind of truce that the man we pick is not to be sought after by the other two.”

Corinthia nodded. “Sounds reasonable. The blizzard truce.”

Candace agreed. “I was interested in Preston, but you can have him. I’ll take Fritz.”

Corinthia sighed. “I was thinking of him because he likes the clothing business. How about Pete Sims, the banker’s son? I’ve seen him look at you, Candace.”

“I did dance with him at the ball. All right. I like him.” Candace grinned. “Now we have that settled. We just have to get them to marry us.”

Millie frowned. “We are back to square one. I’m going to do what I have been doing and pray that the Lord directs my steps.”

“You think He will do that? I mean, we are running out of time. I’m twenty-five.”

Candace frowned.

“I don’t see we have anything else to trust but God. He knows us and knows what we need. I’m confident the Lord will see me through and bring the man He desires for me.”

“Good idea, Millie. I’ll do the same. We can pray for each other.” Corinthia smiled.
“I’m glad we had this talk.”

Candace nodded. “I wonder how long this blizzard will last?”

Millie glanced at Candace. By the sly look in her eyes, she would not sit idly by and let Preston go. So, the game was on. She was going to have to fight for Preston. Let him know she cared, or Candace would take him from her.

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Preston followed the others down into the mine. After fifty feet, they turned to the right to a room he remembered from years ago. When the mine started, the two families had carved out a room to stay in. There were bunk beds, chairs, a few tables, and divans.

Like old times, they settled in to wait out the storm. There was a stove and wood beside it, and some food in a nearby pantry. Preston thought back to good times. He, his brothers and sisters, and Millie had been happy. His parents and the Burnetts spent time laughing and playing games.

Millie. Thinking back to how close they'd been, he realized he'd let her down when he went to Boston. He should have at least written to her. Still, she wasn't married or engaged. There was hope that his dreams could come true.

Now, he couldn't wait for the blizzard to blow itself out. No one knew how long it would last. Some were gone in hours, others days. Preston sat and watched. Father and Burnett sat at one of the tables. They talked in low voices as they went over the opened ledgers. Occasionally, one of the men would laugh. Other times, one or both would bang a fist on the table.

The two managers sat in a corner, cringing whenever Jeremiah or Raul glared at them. Their feet were tied together, and they'd been warned not to move.

Bored, Preston got up and went into the mine. Farther down the mine, there were two tunnels. Over one, The Chadwick. Burnett over the other one. Going down the Chadwick, Preston came to another tunnel with no name above it.

He grabbed a torch and went down the tunnel. He didn't remember it being here before. Some of the cutting looked fresh. It ran between the two tunnels. Maybe the two managers had carved it out for themselves.

After looking at the names of the men working the mines, Father remarked about how many names he didn't know and how many he had hired were no longer on the books. Mullins and Vander had taken over the mine for their own purposes and profit.

Preston made his way back to the room and sat down at the table beside his father. "Did either of you know of a third tunnel between the Chadwick and Burnett?"

Father stared at him and shook his head. "No, you're sure?"

"Yes. It goes between our two tunnels."

Burnett growled. "We've been fools. There is no telling how long they have been mining their tunnel for gain. Well, it stops now." He looked at Jeremiah. "Our feud stops too. I can see how they used our differences to keep us apart and prevent us from coming to the mine. I'm sorry, Jeremiah. I know I was stubborn and ornery."

Jeremiah nodded. "I'm sorry, too. I can't believe we allowed this. We've got a lot of work to do." Father glanced at Preston. "I'll expect you to go back as soon as the blizzard allows. Take the prisoners to the sheriff. We can get them on claim jumping and take out their bank accounts. I want you to do all you can for your mother. I will hire new workers and let go of those I can't trust."

Preston clapped a hand on his father's shoulder. "You can count on me. I'm sure Frank will come down and help. He was the one looking into things."

Burnett cleared his throat. "Would you look in on Millie for me? Fritz is going to stay and help me with things here."

“Sure, I’d be happy to. Millie and I have some things to talk about.” Now, he just needed the blizzard to stop.

Millie sat with her elbows on the table and her head resting on her hands, staring out the window. “I think the snow has stopped.”

Always prim and proper, Candace woke up with half her hair sticking up. “You sure?”

Millie held back a laugh, stood up, and walked to the door. There was blue sky to the west. She opened the door and stepped outside. It was cold, and snow was piled up on the other side of the street. “I think we can go home now.”

Corinthia ran to stand beside her and handed Millie her coat. “Yes, I think you’re right. That was a quick storm. Do you think your driver will come back to the clothing store?”

“I’m sure he would. Want to see if we can walk to your shop?”

Corinthia looked back. “Candace. We’re going to my clothing store.”

Stretching, Candace looked around and nodded. “I’m going to stay here for a little while.”

It didn’t take them long to get to Corinthia’s; in minutes, they were inside. Millie looked around. “Is it all right if I wait here for Edward?”

“Sure. Make yourself at home. I have a divan in the back if you want to lie down and rest.”

“No, I’m restless. All the talk about Preston and finding the right man has made me want to go to him. I feel like he is the one for me. I always felt that way growing up. I’d dream about when we were married. Does that seem silly to you?”

“No, I was there too, remember?” Corinthia went to her. “I’d love it if we were sisters-in-law.”

“I hope our fathers make peace so we can enjoy each other’s company.”

Corinthia grinned. “I do what I want, anyway. But it would be nice to have Father’s blessing.” She hugged Millie. “I’ll be praying that Preston has the sense to marry you. He’s a good man, Millie, and I think a good match for you.”

There was a knock on the door. It was Edward waving for her.

“There’s Edward. I’m going to get home before the weather turns on us again. Thank you, Corinthia.” Millie ran out the door. “Edward. I hope you were warm during the blizzard.”

“I was. I stayed in the livery with the horses and talked to Dave.” He helped her into the sleigh and drove them home.

Father was still gone. She worried about him and sent up a silent prayer. Being in the mountains, it would be harder for them to drive tonight. She hoped tomorrow he’d get home. And bring Preston with him.

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Preston drove the sleigh to Millie's house and stopped in front of the door. He hoped she was home. Jumping down, he went to the door and knocked.

The housekeeper answered and said she'd gone out for a while with her dog.

He had met her that day over by the road to the mines. Funny, he hadn't seen her while coming into town. Perhaps with all the snow, she'd gone somewhere else. He got back in the sleigh and went to the foothills to look for her.

The snow was thick in places and barely inches deep in others, making driving the sleigh difficult. He'd been gone maybe thirty minutes when he heard the dog barking. Praying that Millie was all right, he drove to where he heard the dog.

"Millie! Bob!" He called and listened. After a few minutes, he saw the brown and white dog bounding over the snow to reach him.

Preston laughed, stepped off the sleigh, and kneeled to welcome the dog.

Bob ran to him, barked, and wagged his tail.

"Good boy. Now, where is your owner?" He stood and scanned the field. The snow was bright, causing his eyes to squeeze shut. Then he saw her on the fringe by the trees. Preston scooped the dog up, set him in the sleigh, then gathered the reins, and set off to pick up Millie.

The closer he got, the more sure he was that she was fine. He stopped in front of her. "I've got Bob. Where's your horse?"

She pointed behind her. "In the trees."

"I'll get him, and we can tie him to the back of the sled. Get in and put the blanket around you." He smiled as he heard her talk to Bob and tell her he was a traitor dog.

Within minutes, the horse was tied to the sleigh, and they were ready to go. "I was hoping to find you at home."

She sat closer to him. "I was hoping you'd come home today. I guess things are all right at the mine?"

"They will be. Our fathers are getting along. That's a miracle."

He stopped the sleigh and turned to face her. "Now, about us. I've been thinking that we need to have a serious talk. I've done nothing but think about you. Even when I was in Boston, I would think about you. There never was a chance for another girl. You were always on my mind."

He took her hand in his. "I hope you felt the same."

She blushed. "Yes. I dreamed about you even as a girl. I always thought we'd get married and live happily ever after. Then you went to Boston, and I wasn't sure of anything."

"That was my mistake. I should have written to you. I should have told you how I felt about you before I left."

Millie smiled and kissed his hand. "I'm glad we feel the same way."

"Millie, will you marry me?"

Her heart warmed as she said yes. “Should we pick a date? I was thinking of a spring wedding. That will give us time to sort things out. You have a practice to start.”

Preston pulled her to him. “Six months from today. That will make our wedding in May.” He looked around, told Bob to sit, and kissed Millie. “That’s the down payment. We’ll look for a ring tomorrow.”

Millie sighed. All that worry and fuss for nothing. She glanced heavenward and thanked the Lord. He’d answered her prayer and directed her steps. Soon, they’d be married, just like she always dreamed.

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Six months later

“I do.” Millie said the words she’d been waiting to say for what felt like all of her life. She smiled at Preston.

The preacher faced the congregation and held out his arms. “Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Mr. and Mrs. Preston Chadwick. Congratulations, Preston and Millie.”

They greeted their guests and were overwhelmed by the show of support. Of course, Preston’s parents were happy for them, as was her father. Oh, and that was her father and his new bride, Ann Green.

Corinthia came by with Fritz. They had been seeing one another regularly now. Candace came on Peter Sims arm. They, too, were an item.

Preston’s clinic was doing well. So well, they would have to enlarge the house he’d bought. Fortunately, it had enough land that they could add to it. Preston’s mother was doing well. He’d decided it was the well water and had his father dig another well on a different part of their property.

Frank was probably the biggest surprise of all. He took over the mine for both families and straightened out all the mess the two managers had caused.

Millie leaned against her husband and sighed. Everything was working out better than she could have planned. She turned to Preston. “I love you. I am living my dream.”

He kissed her. “I’ll see that it stays that way. Let’s go. I don’t want to miss the train.

Paris is beautiful this time of the year.”

Again, she sighed with contentment. Then she looked at him, and excitement filled her. What an extraordinary adventure they were going to have!

I hope you enjoyed A Sleigh Ride for Millie. It’s only one of 17 books in the Sleigh Ride collection. All stand alone stories for your enjoyment.