



Brian and Cora (The Bachelors of Three Bend Lake #2)

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Category: Romance

Description: BOOK TWO OF THE BACHELORS OF THREE BEND LAKE TRILOGY, PART OF THE BESTSELLING MONTANA SKY SERIES BY Debra Holland, New York Times and USA Today bestselling author

Curmudgeonly Brian Bly's hermit life is just the way he likes it—his own snug cabin isolated in the mountains by Montana's Three Bend Lake—with two good neighbors, who always have his back, one raising a sweet little girl to dote on, and no other people, especially women, around to interact with. His dime novels sell well, and his eastern publisher eagerly awaits the next one.

The only problem... Brian's once-vivid imagination has dried up, becoming more parched than a desiccated bone in an arid desert.

His solution... Join the sheriff's posse riding out after the McCurdy gang who robbed the bank, killing one deputy, injuring the bank clerk, and terrorizing the citizens of Sweetwater Springs.

But... Brian is shot playing the noble hero—not the plot development he'd envisioned.

After accomplishing the first part of her plan to convince her aunt Rose to move from New York to Sweetwater Springs and live with Rose's former beau, Cora Collier needs to work on part two—following her dream of becoming a nurse.

The only problem... No one will take the lovely, vivacious young woman's career choice seriously.

Her solution... nurse Brian Bly, the hero of the shootout at the outlaws' hideout, back to health.

But... Brian, even grumpier from pain and disability, doesn't want anything to do with being cared for by a nurse. He just wants to retreat, sort through his experiences to craft his next book, while, somehow, magically, healing on his own.

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Sweetwater Springs

With an exasperated growl, Bryan Bly swiped a heavy hand over the paper, crumpling the sheet in his fist, not caring if the inked words stained his palm.

He threw the lopsided ball at the plank wall opposite his desk, where it bounced off to land on the wooden floor, tumbling to rest in the midst of a widespread paper pile.

The only reason the inkwell didn't follow was because three days ago, his frustration had gotten the better of him.

The wall now sported a black sunburst stain and his pork pie inkwell a chip on the lip.

With another growl, he glanced out the window to view his slice of Three Bend Lake, peaceful, tree-shaded, and beautiful.

He'd removed the trees between his house and the lake, making room for a small, pebble-strewn beach.

At this time of day, a breeze kicked up, ruffling the mirrored surface so it no longer reflected the sky.

His canoe lay under canvas on wooden perches. He hadn't taken it out on the lake since last week.

Through the partially opened front window, he heard a high voice call, "Bry-in, Bry-in!" Wiping the scowl from his face, he shoved back his chair, stood, and stretched

before walking over to open the door.

Jewel, the eleven-year-old daughter of his neighbor and friend, Torin Rees, stood on his porch, clutching a handful of ragged wildflowers against her chest. Seeing him, her almond-shaped blue eyes lit up, and she smiled wide, the tip of her tongue protruding slightly.

She was clad in a pink outfit made by the dressmaker, Constance Taylor, a contrast to the tubelike garments she'd previously worn—the best Torin could fashion with his fumbling sewing skills.

Until recently, the man kept Jewel a secret from everyone but Brian and Hank Canfield, their other neighbor living along the lake, fearing she'd be ridiculed and repudiated, as his former wife and both their families had done.

Hank's three new friends—Elsie Bailey, whom he was courting, as well as Dr. Angus Cameron and Constance, his fiancée—had thawed some of Torin's rigid reserve. But he wasn't ready to trust anyone else with the secret of his precious Jewel's existence.

"Fla-ers, Bry-in." The child gazed up at him, her grin making the skin around her eyes crinkle.

Sweet Jewel was the only one who could coax a smile from Brian when he was in a grumpy mood, or, for that matter, most any mood.

He trod on the stone step outside his doorway, bent his knees, and slipped his hands around her waist. With considerable effort, he lifted her high above his head. She squealed with joy, making him chuckle. He twirled her around before setting her down.

Soon, please God, she'll be too heavy. Although he'd miss being able to hold her

high, he'd feel grateful for her growth.

At the baby's birth, Torin's doctor had told him Mongoloid children had a short lifespan, which Jewel had already exceeded by six or seven years.

So, the three bachelors counted every day with the girl as a blessing.

"Where's your pa, Sugar?" Talking to Jewel was the only time he slipped into his long-suppressed Southern accent.

The child half-turned and pointed down the dirt path.

Torin stood about twenty feet away, one booted foot propped on a log.

He leaned forward, forearms resting on his thigh.

A breeze off the lake ruffled the mink-brown hair he wore to his shoulders, making him appear the very picture of a dashing, romantic hero from the pages of a novel.

Although not, of course, one of Brian's, since he wrote adventure dime novels—no hint of love allowed, unless that of a man for his horse or dog.

Torin's a contrast to the curmudgeonly, dwarf-like character that is Brian Bly. Well, a troll, for I'm too tall to be taken for a dwarf.

"Fla-ers, Bry-in." With an imperious gesture, Jewel thrust the bouquet upward.

He took the flowers. "Want me to put them in water?"

With an emphatic nod, she pointed into the house.

He swept her a bow, with his free hand. “At your service, Sugar Princess.”

Her giggles made her cheeks pink and her eyes scrunch.

His battered-shut heart creaked open a sliver—a response only Jewel could bring about.

Jewel’s innocent happiness made the three bachelors living near Three Bend Lake her willing servants, always striving to do her bidding to earn that expressive smile.

“Be right back, Sugar.” Hurrying into his one-room cabin, he veered to the dry sink to pick up the chipped, white pitcher resting inside the basin next to several unwashed mugs and glasses.

He squinted into the depths of the pitcher, grateful to see a few inches of water.

When he was deep into writing, or lately, failing to write, he neglected everyday necessities like bringing in water, keeping a fire going, and feeding himself.

He dipped his head to sniff an armpit. Bathing, too.

Well, it’s not as if I’m going anywhere, and Hank and Torin often exude their own manly odors. Still, he made a mental note to take a cold plunge into the lake on the next sunny day.

He grabbed a mason jar from a shelf, poured in the remaining water, and thrust the flowers inside, fluffing them out.

Jewel and Torin stepped through the open door and into the house.

Torin took in the crumpled sheets of paper and the ink stain on the wall. Although he

raised his brows, wisely, he didn't say anything.

In the past, his friends sometimes helped Brian plot a story. But since he hadn't come up with a shred of a viable idea in weeks, he'd shut them out from any discussion of his writing. The two knew of Brian's dry spell but had learned not to comment.

"We came to borrow your canoe. Who knows how much longer before the weather's too cold to go out on the lake?"

"Fine with me." On the surface of the tiny round table he used for eating, Brian moved a food-crustied plate and empty enamel mug to the seat of a chair to make room on the tabletop for the jar of flowers.

Jewel wandered over and picked up the mug with both hands. "Wash dis, Bry-in?" She gazed up in bright-eyed appeal.

The girl loved to busy herself with washing and drying dishes. From a young age, she'd 'helped' her father with the chore and now had proudly taken on the task by herself.

He briefly touched the tip of her nose with a gentle finger. "Only you would look excited about washing a pile of my dishes."

"Pease?"

With fresh eyes, Brian glanced around the small cabin, taking in the mess accumulated over these past frustrating weeks.

He didn't have that many dishes, pots, and pans, but what he possessed overflowed the dry sink and tabletop, and the rest sat on the floor near his desk.

The rumpled linen on the bed in the corner hadn't been made or washed for who knew how long.

Books were scattered around, instead of neatly stacked within the bookcase.

Empty cans, the tops still partially attached, lined a shelf in the kitchen area.

Dirty clothing lay crumpled on the plank floors.

The windows overlooking the lake appeared dusty and fly-specked, and, as he took a breath, Brian became aware of a stale smell that even the cracked-open window couldn't banish.

Shame balled his stomach into a knot. How could I not have noticed my surroundings?

He was used to times of focusing only on his writing and ignoring everything else.

But I'm not currently in the creative flow or on a deadline.

And if I can't come up with a plot, I might never be issued a deadline again.

And there goes my source of income. He thrust aside the unbearable thought.

Without his writing, life would be bleak, indeed.

Torin stood in the doorway. "You're in desperate need of a wife.

" He fisted his hands on his hips, mock frowned, and looked haughtily down his nose.

"Although, I don't know if you could find one who'd put up with you.

Maybe we should send away for a mail-order bride, and state in the letter,” he ticked off a list on his fingers, “One. Must be an expert housekeeper. Two. Willing to put up with a curmudgeon for a husband. Three. Must remain quiet for weeks when grumpy husband is in the throes of writing a book. Four. A good cook, even when the grouch she’s married has his mind so on his story that he doesn’t notice what he’s eating. ”

Brian scowled and made a slashing motion to stop Torin’s babble before the man added more pointed truths. “Enough, already.” His friend was just teasing, but his comments cut too close to the bone.

Ignoring Torin, he turned to Jewel, who was patiently awaiting an answer. “You sure, Sugar? That’s a mighty big pile of dishes. Don’t you want to go out in the canoe?”

Sticking out the tip of her tongue, she nodded emphatically and patted a plate.

With a lifted eyebrow, he glanced at Torin. “This will make her happy?”

“Extremely,” Torin said wryly.

“Well, then.” Brian swept Jewel a bow. “Your wish, Sugar Princess, is my command.”

The girl giggled, walked with the mug to the dry sink, and set it down among the others.

From experience, Brian knew she’d take five times longer to wash and dry dishes as he would. Also from experience, he knew better than to offer to help. Lately, the girl had developed an independent streak.

In his small two-burner stove, he stirred the banked fire and added some kindling, followed by some larger pieces of wood. He checked the kettle to make sure it still

contained water, while Torin collected the pitcher and went outside to the well.

Picking up the tin pail he used for rinsing, Brian moved it to the tabletop.

The water-stained and heat-scarred wooden surface showed the effects of his method: fill the basin in the dry sink with soapy water to wash each individual dish, turn to the table to dunk it in the pail of hot water, and, when rinsed, set it on the table to air dry.

The kettle hissed. He moved to grab the ragged towel scorched with stains from a hook near the stove and picked up the handle, carrying the water to the dry sink. “Stand back, Sugar.” He poured some into the basin, careful not to splash Jewel.

Torin returned with the pitcher, tipping some of the cold well water into the basin and testing the temperature with a finger before pouring the rest into the kettle Brian held out. Then he left to get more.

Jewel picked up the sea sponge and soap, dunked them into the water, placed in a mug, and started to scrub and hum.

With a smile, Brian let her be, carrying the kettle to the stove.

Back from his second round, Torin glanced around for a place to put the pitcher, but apparently he saw no open surface, and he set it at his feet.

Jewel turned to deposit the mug in the pail, and then fished it out again, holding it aloft by the handle and dripping on the table. “Towl, pease.”

Hoping he had a clean one, he opened the drawer in the kitchen cabinet and, to his relief, saw one left. And by Jove, it’s even folded. He waved the towel in triumph and stretched to hand it to Jewel.

While Jewel worked, Torin crossed his arms over his chest and propped a shoulder against the wall near the window, keeping a close eye on his daughter.

He flicked an ironic glance at Brian and then made a circling gesture to indicate the shambolic room.

“Pry yourself away from your desk, old man. Get outside of these four walls.”

Brian wanted to fire up in his own defense, but he was too drained to muster much of an argument. “I helped the Smithsons and Baileys bring in their harvests.”

“I think you could do better than temporarily hiring on as an unpaid farm hand,” Torin said in a dry tone. He did a backward thumb jab toward the window. “Get out there and live. Let real life be your muse.” His smirk was a challenge. “Start by going to the Harvest Festival.”

“Do you know how many people will be in town for that? The sheriff estimates five hundred.” Brian gave a dramatic shudder. “Nope.”

“It’s for a good cause—the building fund for the new church.”

“I barely attend the current church,” Brian growled. “And you never do. So why do you care?”

A wistful look briefly crossed Torin’s face. “I miss going to church.”

Brian fell silent. Torin never voiced the sacrifices he made to protect Jewel. Brian had assumed that his friend liked the isolated life he’d chosen. The idea that Torin had things he regretted and missed....

Brian couldn’t even let himself feel sympathy, lest that feeling spread to encompass

anything he might miss. When he'd left Georgia, he'd firmly shut the door on any such thoughts and bolted it behind him.

Torin pushed off from the wall and sauntered across the room, avoiding the scattered clothing and books until he reached the crumpled paper strewn around the desk.

Scooping one up, he tossed the ball into the air and then caught it.

He quirked an eyebrow at Brian and tossed the paper high again. And then a third time.

Brian must have been suffering some vestiges of sentimentality, knowing that Torin would probably appreciate hearing about the Harvest Festival and Jewel would love any treat he could bring back.

He held up his hands in defeat. "All right. All right. To the Harvest Festival I'll go.

" He glowered at his so-called friend. "Just know the time will come when I'll challenge you to do likewise. "

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New York

A nger burning in her chest, Cora Collier marched up the stairs to her attic bedroom and childishly slammed the door, not caring that at almost twenty-one, she wasn't a young girl to behave in such a shockingly dramatic way.

Soon, on top of the bitter argument she'd just had with her father about him avoiding of his dying father, she'd likely be summoned to her stepmother's side to receive a scolding for disturbing the woman's rest.

Glancing around the room, she stomped her way toward the worn, tufted chair in the corner near the low window and sat.

Too angry to be still, Cora sprang to her feet and paced several steps.

The hem of her skirt caught on her hated embroidery basket, and she kicked it out of her path.

Pacing back, she plopped onto the chair.

Her throat tightened, thinking of her grandfather's impending death, and tears—ones of grief—welled up in her eyes.

When he died, she'd lose the dearly beloved man who'd always been the person she could escape to, who always loved and supported her.

His home was her refuge away from this house of strife—a quiet place of peace and

learning.

I don't know what I'm going to do.

Her great-aunt, Rose, would be equally cast adrift. She'd retired from her job as a librarian and moved out of lodgings to care for her brother.

Cora worried more about Auntie Great—her childhood nickname for Rose—than about herself. If worse comes to worst, I can always marry.

She thought back to last night's formal dinner, which her stepmother had seemingly, miraculously, arisen from her sickbed to organize.

Strange how the woman could summon the energy to marry off her disliked stepdaughter, but the rest of the time felt so ill with her sixth pregnancy that she retired to her bed, demanding to be waited on hand and foot.

While the guest of honor, Richard Frishman, having a comfortable fortune and a big house, might be perfectly eligible in the eyes of the world, he had a pointed sniff, a mouth like a fish, and clammy hands.

She shuddered at the idea of him intimately touching her.

A husband like Mr. Frishman would be horrible.

I won't let myself stay here to be married off to some fish-mouthed man.

More than anything, she dreamed of being a nurse, an occupation her parents strenuously objected to. As often as possible, she slipped away from the house to volunteer at the hospital and studied every medical text she could get her hands on.

Knocking sounded on the door. “Cora!” called her oldest half-sister. “Mama wants to see you now.”

“Coming.” With a sigh, Cora stood, resigned.

She waited until she heard Matilda’s footsteps recede before walking to the door.

She was in no mood to deal with her sister.

For a brief moment, she remembered the darling baby and toddler she’d enjoyed playing with.

Unfortunately, alternately indulged and neglected by their mother and mostly ignored by their father, she and the two other surviving children had grown tiresome.

She glanced toward her bed, thinking of her grandpa’s gift of Grey’s Anatomy, hidden in a box underneath and pushed all the way against the wall, lest her stepmother find the book and burn it as an “abomination, absolutely unsuitable for the eyes of a proper young lady.”

With a wry twist of her mouth, Cora smoothed her skirt and prepared to go downstairs and face the woman’s wrath for arguing with her papa and not having been more accommodating to Mr. Fishmouth.

While letting her stepmother’s diatribe break over her head, she’d mentally list all two hundred and six bones in the human body and dream of the day she could leave New York behind.

Two days later, having been released from the penal colony of her father’s house, Cora sat by the bedside of her dying grandfather with his writing desk on her lap.

Grandpa slept, something he did more and more of as his time neared. The days both stretched with agonizing slowness and rushed by too fast.

She fingered the pages of the thick letter she'd been reading him and pondered implementing her plan, a sneaky plan—one that would get her out from under her stepmother's thumb and far enough away to be free of the silly conventional constraints that kept her from becoming a nurse.

Even better would be to involve her great-aunt in her adventure.

Rose, Cora decided, needed to be reunited with an old sweetheart.

Resolved, she picked up her pen, dipped it into the inkwell, and began to write.

Dear Mr. Bellaire,

While Grandpapa sleeps, I decided to pour out my troubles in a letter to a dear family friend, whom I'm sure will understand and make excuses for my sad state of mind.

But first, I must tell you how much your letters mean to us.

I read them to Grandpapa, and he takes great pleasure in hearing of your doings in the Wild West. Because he forgets easily now, I can read a letter to him several times, and each time the contents remain fresh.

I wish I could write you with better news, but, as you know, Grandpapa's health continues to deteriorate, and the doctor frowns and mutters about only having a few more weeks.

As Grandpapa informed you, Great-Aunt Rose has quit her job at the library and moved in to care for him.

I visit often. Grandpa says my chatter lifts his spirits.

Now and again, my father dutifully pays a call.

Indeed, I think my father allows me to stay here so often because my presence at Grandpapa's bedside must relieve his guilt (if he feels any) about his neglect of his dying father.

Even when he does visit, he barely stays a half hour, with the excuse that my wicked stepmother, who's enceinte with yet another baby, claims she's ill and needs all of his attention.

Perhaps I should not call the woman wicked.

She's not precisely evil. Just slothful and greedy and always demanding Papa dance to her tune.

And he does! I don't mind how he neglects me and even my half-siblings.

But I am incensed with how he treats Grandpapa.

I've told him so, and we had a dreadful quarrel.

Even though I hoped Papa would heed my admonitions, I didn't really think he'd listen and change.

I hate to admit this to anyone; however, you know our family's situation and, thus, I think I can write what's on my mind.

My papa is a weak man. There. I've written and underlined the truth, as much as it pains me to do so.

How my dear grandparents produced such a mewling coward is beyond me.

Am I the sinful one to think such unfilial thoughts about my father?

Am I breaking the Fifth Commandment in my inability to honor him?

Or do you think God takes into account when a parent isn't behaving honorably to his own father?

Since you now have a son-in-law who's a minister, perhaps you could ask his opinion and let me know.

It's not my intention to make you feel guilty, my dear Mr. Bellaire, when I say that you are greatly missed by your friends.

Grandpapa and I have spoken about how we must console ourselves in your absence with knowing you are happy with your life in Sweetwater Springs, living in the bosom of your new family, and, to use Grandpapa's words, meddling in all your town projects.

I'd dearly love to take you up on your kind invitation to stay with you and your family, but convincing Aunt Rose to come with me will take all of my ingenuity.

Please keep Grandpapa, Great-Aunt Rose, and me in your prayers. We are in need of them!

Sincerely,

Cora Collier

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A month later, at the entrance to her grandfather's home, Cora paused and clutched the gold locket she always wore. With a pit of grief in her stomach, she glanced through the door's window, bordered in stained glass, nerving herself to go inside.

Even after two weeks, Cora failed to become accustomed to the knowledge Grandpapa wouldn't be inside.

Away from the house, even though she knew better, she could pretend he was still alive.

Now his house held emptiness, even though Rose still resided there—for a few more weeks, anyway—until Papa would callously sell the place where he'd grown up.

When he does, I'm leaving New York.

A deep breath had her unlocking the door with her key and stepping inside, her foot almost sliding on the letter that the postman had shoved through the mail slot.

She stooped to pick up the envelope, glanced at the address, recognized Andre Bellaire's handwriting, and had to hold in a whoop of excitement.

Time to call upon all my acting ability. Aunt Rose must not suspect I'm complicit in Mr. Bellaire's scheme.

Cora moved into the entryway, her footsteps echoing on the patterned tile, no longer cushioned by a faded Turkish rug. "Aunt Rose," she called. "Where are you?"

“In the library.”

Figures. After her father and stepmother had descended like locusts on her grandfather's possessions, every room but the library was stripped of anything of value.

But the books, aside from those willed to Mr. Bellaire, belonged to Rose.

The process of sorting, cataloguing, and separating the books kept her great-aunt busy.

Cora bounded through the doorway to throw her arms around Rose, giving her an extra hard squeeze and, with concern, feeling the slenderness of her body. Her great-aunt had lost weight these past weeks, and only her seemingly indomitable spirit kept her from appearing frail.

In Cora's opinion, Rose was the loveliest woman she knew.

Her great-aunt was not conventionally pretty.

But even in her forties, she possessed a reserved beauty and looked much younger than her age.

When comfortable, most usually while discussing literary topics, she glowed with an inner light.

Due to her shyness, most people, especially potential suitors, didn't notice.

Tonight, though, her great-aunt looked pale and tired. Behind her spectacles, sad shadows lurked in her gray eyes. Still, the smile she gave Cora was the same warm one as always.

To hide her dismay, Cora flung her arms out wide. She took in a breath of the familiar, musty-book-smelling air. “It’s so dreary here without Grandpa. How can you stand it?”

“I know, darling, but I do because I must.” Rose’s lips seemed to tremble, and her smile appeared forced. “These books won’t sort and pack themselves.”

“I hate that Papa is selling this house.” Cora stepped around Rose and gazed at the partially empty shelves and the stacks on the floor, her stomach squeezing. Sunlight beamed through the large windows, topped with lead glass panels, scattering prisms of light around the room.

She touched her locket. “You’ll be at this for days.” The longer, the better, as far as she was concerned, before her grandfather’s house was gone forever, and Rose moved to rooms in some dreary lodging house.

“Now that you’re here, can you make yourself useful and help me locate these two?” Rose extended a paper. “Or is there another reason you’ve dropped by, oh niece of mine?”

“Another reason.” Cora held up the letter, and, from long practice, did her best to appear innocent.

“I saw the mail arrived, so I picked this up rather than allowing the envelope to stay on the floor and be stepped on. It’s for you.

Why don’t you read it while I look for these books?

Then we’ll talk.” She reached out, deftly swapping the envelope for the list, and, hiding a surge of sneaky glee, she moved toward the shelves.

After selecting a spot where she could keep an eye on her great-aunt, she grabbed a volume at random and pretended to peruse the pages.

“Absolutely not!” Rose dropped the letter into her lap, her lips pressing together.

Cora looked up from the book she was ‘reading.’ “Absolutely not, what?”

Her aunt’s pale face flushed with anger. “I have no intention of moving to Sweetwater Springs, living with that man, being beholden, dependent on him. To?—”

Pasting an innocent expression on her face, Cora crinkled her forehead. “What man?” She put down the book and lifted both hands, palms out, fingers wide. “Wait, Sweetwater Springs. Mr. Bellaire lives there.”

“Yes, and he has...has....” Rose took a breath of obvious outrage. “The affronty to invite me to live with him.”

Erudite librarian Rose losing her words? She must still feel something for Mr. Bellaire.

Cora suppressed a laugh. “I don’t think affronty is a word,” she stated in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Well, it feels like it should be,” Rose muttered, looking uncommonly young and flustered. Then, as if trying to seem calm, she repeated the word, sounding out every syllable. “Ef-fron-te-ry.”

Cora moved to the nearest stack of books and used them as a seat.

With a tug of grief, she remembered all the times she’d sat this way by her grandfather’s chair, starting from when she was tiny.

Once, a visiting bibliophile scolded her for not treating the volumes with respect.

But Grandpapa had come to her rescue and chided him.

Wrenching her thoughts to the present—to this important discussion—Cora prepared to tiptoe over the rough patch of Rose's long-ago broken heart.

"Mr. Bellaire is a nice man. I write him from time to time. His letters are always so interesting." All true.

She waited with bated breath for her great-aunt's reaction.

Eyebrows high with shock, Rose stared blankly at Cora.

"When I was little, he'd always slip me pennies. He gave me this necklace for my sixteenth birthday." She touched her locket. "And sent pearl earrings for my eighteenth."

"I didn't know about those gifts."

From the prune face Rose made, one Cora had rarely seen from her, Rose would have preferred not to know now, either.

Cora frowned. "You haven't seen them because Step-mama won't allow me to get my ears pierced. Also, Grandpapa warned me not to talk to you about Mr. Bellaire. He said that you'd taken him in dislike." And you've always avoided anything to do with him.

"I gather pierced ears is a more popular fashion in New Orleans than in New York. Perhaps you can change the backs of yours to screw on." Rose paused and took a careful breath. "Has Mr. Bellaire given you any other presents?"

“I saw him before he moved back to New Orleans, and he gifted me with several silver dollars and told me to buy something pretty.” Cora didn’t say that she’d added them to her escape fund.

“Then, there’s this.” She removed her necklace, opened the two halves to expose the miniature photographs of her grandfather and grandmother on one side and Cora’s parents on the other, and handed the locket to Rose. “He made sure I had them.”

Rose gazed at the photographs in silence, her throat moving, and the corners of her mouth turning down.

The sadness back in her eyes, she gave Cora the locket.

“I mean... I saw you wearing the locket, but I assumed it was from your grandfather. I’d told my brother that I thought a necklace would be a suitable sixteenth birthday gift...” Her voice trailed off.

“You know Grandpapa always gave me books.” Sneakily, Cora plucked the letter from Rose’s hand and began to read. Thank goodness! “He’s invited me, too.” With a deep feeling of relief, she realized her escape was at hand. “Oh, this arrangement is perfect.”

“What?” With dismayed expression, Rose grabbed for the letter. “What do you mean, perfect?”

“I came here today to tell you that I’m leaving New York.

” Foreseeing Rose’s objections, Cora raised her chin.

“Step-mama is insistent I marry that dismal Richard Frishman—he of the clammy hands and fish mouth. Ick. All she cares about is his fortune. With my inheritance

from Grandpapa, I'm free to leave. ”

“Your paltry inheritance will not get you far,” Rose warned with a shake of her head.

Cora dug in her heels. “I'm not afraid to work hard.”

“I don't doubt that, but I'm concerned for you.”

I'm concerned for me, too. But I can't let Rose see my doubts.

Cora continued reading and, when finished, clutched the letter to her chest. “Oh, Aunt Rose, this is perfect! I'd love to live with Mr. Bellaire's family.

Grandpapa shared many of his letters with me, and I feel I know his daughter, Delia, and Reverend Joshua, and dear little Micah as well as if I'd met them in person. ”

Grief showed on Rose's face. All of a sudden, she appeared her age.

Moved by compassion, Cora leaned forward to take Rose's hand. “Oh, Auntie Great, I will miss you.” But even for you, dearest Rose, I can't stay and be badgered into marrying Mr. Cold Fish.

Rose squeezed Cora's hand and released. “I'm sure you'll miss more than me.”

“I'll miss Papa and the children.” A bit. “Not Step-mama, of course.” The idea made her giggle.

How sad that, aside from missing Aunt Rose, the only other person I'll really miss is my best friend. “Ivy, also.” Her throat tightened, and she forced herself to go on. “I don't know how I'll manage with my best friend living half a continent away.”

“I suspect you two will spend a lot of money on stationery and stamps,” Rose said in a dry tone.

“Ivy wants to be a teacher. We’re hoping wherever I end up, she can join me there, finding employment as a schoolmarm or governess.”

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Cora looked down at her shabby gray skirt and wrinkled her nose.

“I’ll have to get a new wardrobe.” She plucked at the dreary fabric of her skirt.

“I’m never wearing brown or gray again. I’ll commission a new Sunday dress and a new everyday dress right away.

Do you mind if I leave them here? I don’t want Step-mama discovering them.

Good thing she’s expecting and keeping to her room.

Otherwise, I wouldn’t put it past her to take my dresses for herself. ”

“You’re not yet twenty-one. Your parents can forbid you to leave.”

They’d better not even try. “I’m not telling them until I’m gone.” They’d lock me in my room with just bread and water, if that. She shot Rose a determined look. “You are not to, either. Besides, I’ll be twenty-one in six months.”

Rose made an impatient sound. “I cannot, in good conscience, keep such important information a secret. If something happened to you, I’d never forgive myself.”

Guilt squeezed Cora’s chest. She hated causing pain to her beloved great-aunt. But even more, she hated what her life would be if she stayed. “Well, then, I won’t confide in you, so you’ll have nothing to tell them.” She airily waved a hand. “This is just a conversation of wishful thinking.”

Rose bit her lip, apparently considering, and then sighed. “Very well. As much as I dislike the idea, I’ll say nothing to your father.” She held up a hand. “But you must keep me apprised of all your plans.”

Relieved, Cora clapped her hands together and brought them to her chest. “Oh, Auntie Great, you’re the best!”

“Furthermore,” Rose narrowed her eyes in an uncharacteristic expression of sternness. “I do not like the idea of you traveling to Montana unchaperoned.”

Cora seized the opportunity. “Then you’ll have to come with me,” she quipped, not daring to show the seriousness of her suggestion.

“Oh, no!”

“Why not?”

“Why...because my life is here.”

How can I make her see what I see? “Is it really, Auntie Rose? Really? Grandpapa is gone. You’re no longer working at the library. You’re not close with Papa or the children. What kind of life will you have here?” She didn’t wait for Rose to answer.

“No life, that’s what.”

She’s so close. Just another push.

Rose opened her mouth as if to disagree and then clenched her jaw.

Abruptly, Cora stood and strode to the desk in the corner, avoiding stepping on the books scattered on the floor.

She pulled open the side door where Grandpapa kept the correspondence he'd received from friends and took out the fat one on top of the stack, glancing at the front to make sure the letter was the one she wanted.

She handed the envelope to Rose, who took it, looking as if Cora had given her a viper.

"This letter came on one of the days when Grandpapa insisted you go outside for fresh air and exercise and let me stay to nurse him. Remember? The day it rained, and you came home wet because of not having an umbrella."

Rose shuddered. "Drenched to my petticoats."

"Grandpapa wasn't strong enough to sit up, so I read the letter to him.

"Cora smiled at the memory. "What Mr. Bellaire wrote made him laugh. I did, too." One of his last good days.

She didn't let her smile dip. "Those two were quite the dashing young blades in their day. Well, not so young. I believe Grandpapa was twenty-nine when they met. Isn't Mr. Bellaire a similar age?

She tapped a finger on her chin, thinking.

"No, I remember his last birthday here in New York. He's three years older. "

"He's fifty-four." Rose tried to give the letter back, but the shaking of her hands betrayed her agitation.

Interesting that she remembers. Cora pushed Rose's hand. "Read it, Auntie. Please?"

Raising the letter ever so slowly, Rose began to read.

Cora eagerly watched her every expression—from stiffness, to softness, to smiling, to a laugh.

“I’d forgotten that.”

“What?”

Rose merely shook her head.

Frustrated, Cora made herself remain patient until Rose sighed, folded the letter, and tucked the pages into the envelope. “Mr. Bellaire is such a wonderful man. I wonder why he never married.” She slanted a look at Rose. “He’ll make some lucky lady a fine husband.”

“He’s far too old for you.” Rose said sharply.

Cora hadn’t considered Rose would think she was interested in Mr. Bellaire.

But was that a spark of possessiveness she saw in her aunt’s eyes before she glanced away?

She decided to press a little harder. “Some qualities in a man are ageless,” she said airily, giving an artless toss of her head.

“Mr. Bellaire is attractive, kind, educated, a good friend, and generous. Oh, and rich.”

“Cora! Put such thoughts out of your mind!”

She wanted to giggle but didn’t allow her glee to show. A bit more of a push. “Oh, I

forgot. A loving father and grandfather. And he's fun, too."

"Cora," Rose warned.

"A good sense of humor. Remember his laugh? And his Southern accent. How that man pours on the charm." She grinned. "Such a flirt."

"Yes, a flirt." Rose used her lecturing tone. "Such men are not to be trusted. You'll give them your heart and then find they were toying with you."

Cora doubted Mr. Bellaire had ever toyed with her aunt. But what had gone wrong between them?

"You must keep that in mind. When men come to court you, make sure they aren't flirtatious."

"That doesn't sound fun." Cora held out a hand, palm up, and pretended to write a list. "Boring men only." She glanced up innocently. "What other qualities am I to look for in a husband?"

"Steadfast." Rose's answer came a little too quickly. "He must be worthy. Someone you can trust."

As Cora pretended to write, she couldn't help but think Mr. Bellaire possessed all of those qualities. What had he done to shatter her trust?

"Must have a good job, or other source of reliable income."

"What about love?"

"Love, of course. Dependable love. A man who's a good companion."

“A good kisser.” Cora gave Rose a sly glance.

Rose made a prissy face. “You’re not supposed to be kissing men.”

“Then how am I to know if I like kissing him? Imagine being married to someone whose kisses you didn’t like. What if he has bad breath? Or a fish mouth?” Like Frishman. Ugh. “You’re stuck with him.”

Rose’s cheeks reddened.

Ohhh, she’s kissed a man before. Mr. Bellaire? “What about handsome?

“Handsome is as handsome does,” Rose misquoted in a prim tone. “Appearances can fade. He loses his hair, grows a paunch.”

“Well, then, Mr. Bellaire is a good bet.” Cora lowered her hand. “I already know he didn’t lose his hair or grow a paunch.”

“You haven’t seen him for two years. He could be as fat as a...a balloon.”

Cora giggled and rolled her eyes. “Not Mr. Bellaire.”

“His hair is probably completely white.”

“Probably makes him look distinguished,” Cora retorted, unable to hide her delight in misleading her aunt. For her own good. “Come to Montana with me, Auntie Great. We’ll both make a new life. Just think of the excitement!”

“I doubt a primitive, rural town will offer you much in excitement.”

“You did say I’d need a chaperone. Surely, you don’t want me to start a new life in

the West without your guidance. What if I'm intrigued by a man who flirts? A distinguished man who flirts."

Her aunt looked torn.

"You always dreamed of traveling. Now's your chance."

Rose shook her head.

Time to try another tack. Cora leaned over and kissed Rose's cheek.

"Besides, I don't want you to grow old alone.

" Without me here, who will take care of you?

But she didn't say the question aloud. She didn't want to hurt Rose's feelings by pointing out the lack of care she received from their family.

Rose looked around the room. "Well, there's a new library in that town. Presumably, they'll be in need of books."

"And a librarian." Cora reached to tap Rose's knee. "You."

"Operating a new library would be a challenge."

For the first time in ages, Cora saw excitement spark in Rose's eyes. Now for the push. "Sweetwater Springs needs you, Aunt Rose. You cannot forsake that community."

Rose gave her a small smile. "Oh, very well." She held up a hand, palm out. "But only if we procure lodgings. Or if we must stay for a bit in the Bellaires' home, we

move out as soon as we find our own place.”

Cora carefully avoided agreeing, but she knew better than to argue about future living arrangements. No sense in giving my aunt second thoughts.

“I knew you’d come with me,” she said smugly, bouncing to her feet and leaning to kiss Rose’s cheek again.

“I must be off. There’s so much to be done before we can leave.

” With a blithe wave, she escaped before Rose could change her mind.

She practically dance-stepped down the hall. Freedom, here I come!

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 1:52 am

Brian arrived early at the Harvest Festival, a small notebook and the stub of a pencil in his pocket. He intended to soak up every sensory experience in hopes that some detail would spark a story.

After leaving his Appaloosa gelding, Marshal—named for a white star shape on his rump—at the livery, he threaded his way through the tightly packed wagons and surrey.

Once he stopped to watch, with not a little awe, how the livery owner, Mack Taylor, his stableman, Pepe Sanchez, and a few other young men helped owners unhitch their horses and push the vehicles into closely stacked positions.

He moved on, sketching a salute in passing when Pepe beamed his characteristic wide smile in his direction before the stableman turned to calm a donkey, who, from the brays and sidestepping, was not at all pleased to be in the midst of the chaos.

People flooded the main street, flowing toward the festival area.

As he drifted with the crowd, Brian tried to catalogue this experience with all his senses.

Overhead, a few downy clouds drifted across the vivid blue sky.

The golden sunlight of Indian summer illuminated the town with balmy warmth.

Everyone displayed an air of excitement and sported happy smiles.

Sheriff K.C. Granger crossed his path, her brows slightly pulled together, and the hint of a frown on her face.

Her cool, gray gaze swept over the people, her body alert.

Dressed in men's clothing similar to what Brian wore—pants, long-sleeved shirt, leather vest, Stetson—no one besides the denizens of Sweetwater Springs would know the sheriff was female.

He noted the Colt .45s in the double holsters at her hips and touched his own Colt .

45, which had once belonged to his soldier uncle, riding in a weathered holster worn thin from use.

He'd donned the gun belt today, not because he anticipated a need to use his pistol, but because he wanted to get into the character of his heroes.

Not that I have a character to get into.

But he'd hoped for the glimmers of one. Even better if a hero sprang full force from his head like the birth of the Greek goddess Athena from her father, Zeus.

He knew the sheriff had some volunteer deputies helping patrol, as well as Taylor Temogen, the sheriff of Morgan's Crossing—the nearby mining town—and Rand Mather, the retired sheriff of Sweetwater Springs. But the burden of today's safety for the crowd rode primarily on her shoulders.

Brian hadn't known about the opportunity to volunteer until Hank had recently mentioned it.

For once, he regretted cutting himself off from town gossip.

Being deputy for the day might have been just the catalyst he needed to come up with a plot.

Maybe at another time, I can interview the sheriff, see if anything she tells me will spark a story.

For a moment, Brian toyed with the idea of putting a female sheriff named Athena into his book.

Maybe he could use some of Sheriff Granger's real life, which he knew from Hank—how, while a deputy in Grant Hills, Wyoming, how a shootout with an outlaw gang robbing the bank had killed her father, the town's sheriff, and her fiancé, the bank's owner.

She'd tracked the remaining bandit to the environs of Sweetwater Springs, capturing him before he could hurt a young Kayleigh Gentry.

Should I add the girl's goose to the story?

As Brian speculated on weaving reality into fiction, excitement stirred in him.

But almost as quickly, with disappointment, he squashed the rise of creativity.

My editor wouldn't stand for a female sheriff, even if the character was based on a real lawwoman.

Nor did the idea sit right—to steal Sheriff Granger's story—with all its attendant pain and grief, and change her into a man.

The majority of the festivities took place farther down Main Street toward the outskirts of town where there was room to spread out.

In no hurry, Brian sauntered along, stopping near a blockage of people to observe what he could tell was a shyster hawking miracle soap.

He watched a few fools toss away their money before he continued down the road until arriving at rows of booths—tables sheltered by canvas awnings and decorated with red, white, and blue bunting—and headed down the first aisle.

The smell of baking potatoes from the booth of Irish sisters, twins whose names he didn't know, pulled him from his thoughts and tempted him to go over. But he wasn't quite ready to eat yet and kept walking.

Since Brian wasn't too interested in the booths of food and goods, he moved along, passing by and giving them only cursory glances.

He decided to mosey along to the dressmaker's booth, where he was sure to find Hank, probably flirting with Elsie, and distracting her from the serious business of selling clothing and notions to fund the new church.

His friend rented lodgings in town in the Gordon Building to be near his beloved, with whom he slowly conducted a long courtship.

For propriety's sake, his room was on the third floor, while Elsie and Constance Taylor had an apartment on the second floor.

Sometimes, Hank would stay in town for a night or two, but the rest of the time he rode home to Three Bend Lake.

Only Brian, Hank, and Torin and Jewel lived on the lake, each about a twenty minutes' walk apart.

Yet the area didn't feel right when one of them was gone.

Eventually, I might have to get used to the feeling.

Hopefully, Hank and Elsie will continue their courtship at a tortoise's pace.

From somewhere—he couldn't see the smoker in the crowd—came a whiff of tobacco.

The breeze also brought the scent of nutmeg and cinnamon from the bakery booth.

The combination of smells swept him up and dropped him into the past—to his granddaddy sitting on the porch and rocking in his chair, a pipe in his mouth, while young Brian ate a generous helping of spiced custard pie.

He slowed and twisted to avoid bumping into two boys, about ten years old, racing down the aisle, which made him remember running and playing and making mischief with his friends at the Harvest Festivals of his youth.

How rich he felt with three pennies weighing down his pocket.

The air of early autumn in Georgia, still hot and humid, but more comfortable than the cloying heat of summer.

The familiar sound of honey-thick Southern accents all around him.

An unexpected ache of loneliness bloomed in his chest. Taken by surprise, he almost let out a mournful howl of pain. What the heck?

Clamping his jaw tight, Brian paused, looking around with almost desperate eyes, as if spotting familiar Montana faces to bring him into the present.

But all he saw were strangers—lots and lots of strangers.

How is it that I can live isolated, rarely seeing anyone aside from my neighbors, and be perfectly content? But I feel alone in a crowd?

At a booth on the right, a tooled-leather gun belt draped over the counter caught his eye. Grateful for the distraction, Brian veered over to check it out. His gun belt was so worn that it threatened to break.

Nodding at the heavy-set, grizzled proprietor behind the counter, he picked up the belt to examine the details, noting the stylized floral tooling and ammunition loops across the back.

The proprietor leaned over the counter. “That beauty is stitched from two one-eighth-inch thick leather sections that form a full one-quarter inch finished belt.” With one scarred finger, the man reached out to touch the area. “Will stand up well to the rigors of daily use.”

Brian let out a wry chuckle. “My pen is what must stand up to the rigors of daily use.” Then he remembered that his pen hadn’t gotten daily rigorous use for months, and his smile fell away.

The man eyed Brian’s gun belt with a questioning look. “Clerk, are you?”

“God forbid!” The very idea horrified him. “Writer.”

“You don’t say,” the man said in a marveling tone. “What all do you write?”

“Dime novels.” He braced himself for the usual scoffing reaction to his choice to write lowly novels for common consumption—his father’s exact words.

The man’s eyes lit up. “You don’t say,” he repeated. “Which ones?”

“The Robber and the Robber Baron is my best seller.” Brian reeled off the other nine titles.

“Ho!” Light leaping into his faded-blue eyes, the man smacked his leg.

“Well, gosh darn. You’re Brian Bly! Howard Hoover here.

” He reached to shake Brian’s hand, vigorously pumping his arm up and down.

“The Robber and the Robber Baron is my favorite. My copy’s so worn from reading it over and over that some of the pages are falling out.

Wish I’d known to bring that book, so you could scratch your John Hancock on it. ”

He released Brian’s hand and shoved the belt and holster across the counter toward him. “I’ll trade. Just send me a new copy of The Robber and the Robber Baron signed to me.” He pointed to his chest. “Howard Hoover.”

Brian couldn’t help but grin. “I remembered your name the first time.”

Hoover practically vibrated with excitement. “Whadya think?”

Brian reached out and clasped the man’s hand again. “Deal.”

His eyes glowing, he gave a boyish bounce that caused his stomach to wobble. “I’ll write out my address for you.” He looked around as if trying to conjure up paper, pen, and ink.

Suppressing a wry laugh, Brian pulled out his notebook and pencil. Not what I’d planned these for, but at least they’re coming in handy. He handed them over and waited while the man laboriously wrote his details in block letters.

With an expression as lighthearted as a child's, Hoover gave back the notebook and pencil.

Oddly touched by the man's enthusiasm for his novels, Brian made a mental note to include some of his other books in the package.

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Hoover's gaze swept the field of booths, and he made a circling gesture to indicate their surroundings. "You should have one of your own here. Sell your books. Sign 'em. I'd buy a copy of each title. Bet lots of people would."

Not in a million years. Brian smiled politely, shook his head, and unclasped his worn gun belt, carefully setting it on the table.

He reached to slide the matching holster onto the new belt.

Then he took the bullets from the old one, ten in all, enough for two extra rounds—for a wise man left the first chamber of his pistol empty lest he accidentally shoot himself in the leg—and slipped them into loops on the back.

A bullet pouch with similar tooling to the belt caught his eye. While he wouldn't need to carry extra ammunition, he could see it being handy to stash other items in. He reached over to pick it up. "How 'bout this, I trade you a copy of my newest book when it comes out? Signed, of course."

By George, I'd better keep my promise to him!

Hoover's face turned red as if he was going to cry from happiness. All he could seem to do was nod.

Brian threaded the pouch onto the belt, and buckled the whole thing around his hips, fumbling a bit with the stiff leather. He slid the holster and pouch into place, and then removed his Colt and stuck it into the holster, giving it a pat of satisfaction.

In an unusual burst of playfulness, he struck the exaggerated pose of gunslinger.

Careful to keep his finger off the trigger, Brian pulled out the gun but didn't raise it as if to point and shoot.

No sense frightening those around me. He grinned at Howard and tilted his head in the direction of the potato booth. "Can I stand you a spud?"

After having finished his potato and chat with Hoover, Brian continued meandering down the aisle. More folks crowded around the booths, the murmur of voices louder in the air. He frequently had to stop or weave around people.

Somehow, wearing the new gun belt, pouch, and holster made him walk with a taller, more confident gait. A kick to his gallop, as his granddaddy would have said. That thought made him falter, and slow, old sadness tightened his throat.

What is it with these memories today?

In a booth to the left, an older woman called out, "Taffy here, sweet as can be."

He'd had saltwater taffy as a boy. Figuring Jewel would love the candy, heck he would love the treat, Brian headed for the booth. A few children crowded around, and he waited until each concluded their purchase, shoved a piece in their mouths, and ran off, their cheeks plump as chipmunks.

Stepping up, he surveyed the big bowl of whitish squares.

The woman tapped the side of the bowl. "Five for a penny. If you buy ten or more, I'll throw in one of these to keep them clean." She laid a hand on the stack of small muslin bags.

He fingered the bullet pouch, thinking he could probably fit in fifteen pieces, and then fished three pennies from his pocket and tossed them onto the table.

“Big family, eh?” The woman grinned, showing a broken front tooth. One by one, she counted out the first fourteen, dropping each into the bag. She held up the final piece. “One for the road?”

He chuckled and took the candy, popping it into his mouth, chewing hard and enjoying the sugary taste.

Pulling the drawstring closed, the woman tied a bow and handed it over with a flourish. “Enjoy!”

His mouth too full of sticky candy to get words out, all he could do was tip his hat to her.

Then, he opened the pouch and placed the bag inside. The fit was tight. But the taffy squished enough to fill the whole space, and he could still close and fasten the flap. I knew this pouch would come in handy.

Still chewing, he walked on a bit, stopping at a water barrel to use the dipper to scoop up a drink, before continuing his explorations. More people crowded the aisles, making his progress slow.

Soon, Brian came to the dressmaker Constance Taylor’s booth, where she and her assistant, Elsie Bailey, waited on their customers.

Female patrons pawed through stacks of fabric and ready-made clothing and cackled like chickens over a pile of feed.

With no Hank in sight, he stopped ten feet away, not about to go anywhere near the

patrons.

He'd come back later, at their agreed-upon time, to watch the horse race.

But apparently, he hadn't kept enough distance, for Elsie, pretty in pink instead of the working clothes he'd always seen her in before, looked up and spotted him.

"Brian, hello!" Elsie called out with a smile and bounce, not unlike Howard's just a while ago, her big brown eyes alight and delight in her voice. She acted as if she hadn't seen him for months, instead of last week, when he and Hank lent a hand to bring in her family's harvest.

He couldn't help feeling some warmth in his chest at her welcome, thinking of how Elsie possessed all the happy energy of an endearing puppy.

I suppose after helping her family, I could consider us friends.

He sketched her a salute and made a I-won't-disturb-them motion in the direction of the women to indicate he wouldn't approach.

Then he quickly moved on lest he be drawn into conversation.

At the end of the row, a stocky, big-bellied man with thinning reddish-blond hair and a white-streaked beard sat on a low stool and played with a loose litter of brown-and-tan puppies.

They had big, longish heads, floppy ears, and whippy tails.

Beside him sat their dam. By her size, Brian judged the pups to be about half grown.

Brian hadn't seen puppies in...he didn't want to think how long. Growing up, he

always had a dog at his heels and in his bed, to the oft expressed consternation of his mama. He'd put his memories of their warm companionship into the box along with everything else in his old life.

The man fondled the dam's ears. "Moose dogs. Great trackers. Got some Bloodhound and Alsatian in 'em," he said with a German accent. "Deputy Redwolf just bought two—one for him and one for the sheriff."

Brian crouched and held out a hand.

The puppies gamboled over, making high-pitched grunts and licking his hand. One tried to climb onto his legs, forcing him to sit back on the dirt.

The man chuckled. "She's a sassy girl, ja."

Thus motivated, the pup scrambled into his lap, placed her two front paws on his chest, and swiped his chin with a wet doggy kiss.

Laughing, Brian gently pushed her face away from his and stroked her back with one hand while simultaneously trying to pet her four sisters and brothers with his other. Sassy Girl wagged her hindquarters so hard that he fancifully thought her tail might fly off. Why don't I take her home?

Even as he thought the suggestion, Brian realized he'd been a fool for denying himself the companionship of a dog. He had no excuse, really, just that he'd never allowed himself to long for anything beloved from his past. Jewel will love her. "Are they good with children?"

"The best. Playful and protective. Why, Birdie here—" he stroked the dam's head "—plays nursemaid to all my kinder when they're babes. Sits or lies by their cradle, even pulls up their blanket if it happens to slide off."

Brian held out a hand, palm down, knuckles out.

She stayed seated but regally dipped her head to sniff, and then gave a little nod as if she approved.

“Around four or so, each kinder gets a dog.” The man gestured toward the puppies.

“So, you can see, we have more than enough. And all my neighbors also have ones from my earlier litters, too. I brought them here to find them homes. Thought to ask fifty cents.” He slanted Brian a sly look.

“But the deputy gave me a dollar each. Said he was contributing to the church fund.”

“Guess I can afford a dollar,” Brian drawled, amused by the man’s salesmanship.

“They’ve been fed and watered. Brought some rope with me to make leads.”

A second pup rolled over the others to tug on Sassy Girl’s ear.

Brian was tempted to buy another one for Jewel, but he figured Torin should have a say in the matter. Besides, seemed as though there’d be more puppies where these came from. “Might have a friend interested in acquiring one for his daughter—a gentle one. He’s not here today, though.”

“Won’t be a problem. Have him come on by. Name’s Helmut Junger. Live out on the prairie.” He waved in the general direction.

“Lot of prairie out there,” Brian said in a wry tone. “Last week, I helped the Smiths and Baileys bring in their harvest. You live near them?”

“About the same distance, but I’m closer to Morgan’s Crossing. Go into the mining

camp 'bout once a month for supplies and to pick up the mail. Your friend could meet me there.”

“My friend’s rather reclusive.”

“He can post a letter when he’s ready. I’ll send the pup to Sweetwater Springs with El Davis, the teamster.”

“That should work.” Tucking Sassy Girl under his arm, Brian carefully stood and tiptoed around the others who tried to paw his legs. With his free hand, he pulled a dollar from his pocket and handed over the money.

Junger tied the rope around the puppy’s neck, careful not to tighten the makeshift collar too much and ensuring that the knot wouldn’t slip, before giving Brian a stern look.

He could almost read the man’s mind. “I’ll take good care of your Sassy Girl. You have my word on it.” He reached out a hand to shake.

A smile broke out over Junger’s face, and he almost lunged to take Brian’s hand, pumping it up and down. “I knew I had a good feeling about you.”

Brian crouched to lower Sassy Girl to the ground, giving her head and ears a fondle. “Ready for your next adventure?”

Wagging her tail, she looked up at him with an expression that seemed to say, “What are we waiting for?”

With a nod goodbye to Junger, Brian and Sassy Girl plunged into the stream of meandering people. Deciding to skip the other aisles of booths, Brian headed toward the animal pens.

The puppy trotted beside him, sometimes stopping, and once winding around his legs, the rope almost tripping him. The breeze brought the smell of pigs. She pulled ahead, trying to make a beeline for them, and wouldn't be deterred by him pulling on the rope.

“Whoa, Sass! Someone needs to learn manners.” Best avoid the pigs.

Instead, he half guided, half gently pulled Sassy Girl toward the temporary corral, holding the miniature horses with the fancy-sounding Spanish name of Falabellas.

Argentine miniature horses. Now that sounds like a good story. Unfortunately, not one he could put in a book. That idea would go over 'bout as well as a female sheriff. He could just see the scathing letter from his editor cutting any mention of midget horses.

Children lined up at the gate to pay a penny to enter and spend time with the endearing creatures. They practically vibrated with eagerness to go inside, where they'd be carefully supervised by older children from the families who owned the Falabellas.

He saw the youth guarding the gate talking with the Blackfoot blacksmith, Chogan Redwolf, the Indian no doubt deputized for today. The sheriff tended to call on him for support whenever she had need of an extra lawman.

Brian moved closer, letting Sassy Girl sniff the ground around them.

He'd seen the Falabellas pulling small buggies once before but from a distance.

He found himself just as fascinated as the children by the miniature horses and wished he could go inside.

Wouldn't that be a sight? A grown man amid the children.

This close, he could see the obvious love the young owners felt for their minis and how patiently they interacted with each child, answering questions, giving gentle directions, and allowing them to pet and hug the Falabellas.

If he was a child, he'd want one of the little horses. Heck, he was twenty-eight, and he still wanted one.

Jewel would love a Falabella. He stood there observing, capturing what he saw in a description that would appeal to Torin. Of course, the man wouldn't descend from the mountain to do his negotiating. But Brian would be willing to stand in his stead.

There were other parents watching their offspring, and from their expressions and some excited talk, he could tell he wasn't the only one interested in purchasing a little horse.

"There's a waiting list," he heard one man say. "And you have to put half the money up front."

He wondered how long the list was and how many years it might take for Jewel to have her foal.

He thought of Torin's fears of his daughter's early death—something Brian refused to think about.

He dearly hoped life wouldn't be so cruel for Jewel to die before having time to play with a puppy and a little horse.

He'd learned not to dwell on the past or think much about the future. Don't take any minute with her for granted.

He brought his attention back to these children—to the joy on all their faces. Some, thinner and more shabbily dressed than the others, probably had harder lives. But all of them had this magical time to play with horses straight out of a fairy tale. This is an experience they'll always cherish.

I think I could belong here.

Like a blow, the certainty punched into his gut. He'd been in a drunken brawl once when he was young and foolish and took a strike to his stomach. Broke some ribs. Only this time, the hit came from his insides, and he quickly repudiated the thought.

I don't belong anywhere. I've chosen not to belong anywhere.

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Despite the heavily falling rain, Cora set out for one last visit with Ivy before she and Rose left for Montana tomorrow. Her friend only lived four blocks away—a nice stroll on a fine autumn day.

But this morning, the wind slanted rain under her umbrella, and gusts threatened to jerk the handle from her hands.

Her reticule dangled from her wrist, the bag sometimes hitting her chest as she moved.

Her sodden shoes squelched with every step, and the heavy, wet hem of her skirt threatened to tangle around her feet and trip her.

A team of horses pulling a laden wagon veered too close to the sidewalk, splashing through a mucky puddle.

Too late, she jumped sideways but couldn't avoid the dirty water sluicing over her.

She gasped and hurried forward, mentally hurling some unladylike swear words at the careless driver.

On the streets of New York, one could hardly avoid picking up colorful curses in different languages, even if Cora didn't know the actual meaning of the words.

At a corner, she stopped to catch her breath and eyed the traffic until a break occurred between a carriage and a dray. If it wasn't Cora's last chance to see her best friend, she'd have turned back after twenty steps. Actually, I wouldn't have set out at all.

By the time she reached the Jackson brownstone, her mood was as dismal as the weather.

Before mounting the steps, she flicked a glance up at the window of Mr. Jackson's study, checking to make sure no light showed.

She only visited Ivy during the late morning or early afternoon, when she knew her friend's father was away at his law office.

The rare times he came home when Cora was present, his expression made his disapproval known, as did his pointed hints about her taking up Ivy's time when she had better things to do than entertain.

In her opinion, the ghastly man kept his wife and two daughters on a short leash—one that Ivy's meek mother and sister, Katie, seemed resigned to, but which chafed Ivy's spirits.

As if his domineering ways weren't bad enough, Mr. Jackson was a miser, using his daughters as unpaid servants, when he could certainly afford to hire help.

Their mother struggled with weak lungs, usually remaining in her room, and leaving most of the housework and errand running to her girls.

Cora trotted up the steps, past the cheerful pots of marigolds, the only spot of color in the dreary, gray day.

After sounding the knocker, she leaned to pinch off a flower, bringing it to her nose to inhale the spicy scent.

Tucking it into the buttonhole of her coat, she thought how, later, she'd press the bloom between the pages of a book to bring along.

Do marigolds grow in Montana?

Surely, they do. If not, she'd write to Ivy and ask her to send some seeds. Her friend was an avid gardener, faithfully attending to the pots in front of the house, the tiny plot in the back, and the three lush ferns inside.

Cora banged the knocker, knowing if all three women were upstairs, they might not hear a softer sound. She waited and tapped sharply again.

Ivy swung open the door. She had a thick green shawl knotted tight around her shoulders. "Cora, look at you! Did you swim over?"

With her free hand, Cora made a sweeping gesture down her front. "Don't you know looking like a drowned rat is the latest fashion?"

"At least, it is on my doorstep," Ivy said wryly, reaching out to grip Cora's arm and pull her inside. "With this horrible weather, I'd quite given you up."

"Oh, ye of little faith," Cora teasingly quoted. "I'm about to become a pioneer woman, so I must practice."

"Practice suffering?" Ivy shut the door. "From what you've told me about Mr. Bellaire's house, you'll be living in the lap of luxury."

"That is if Aunt Rose allows." Cora dripped water on the patterned tile of the entry. "She's determined on lodgings. But Mr. Bellaire and I have a plan."

"I brought a towel and some rags just in case you arrived." Ivy took the folded towel from the long entry table and tossed it to Cora. Then, scooping up a large cleaning rag, she knelt and wiped up the trail of water from the doorway.

Ivy's home wasn't shabby in the way Cora's was from too many children and the woman of the house not caring.

Her stepmother only kept the parlor, dining room, and her bedroom nice and up to date.

The rest of the rooms were worn from hard usage, not, like the Jackson's house, from long yet little usage.

Ivy plucked the umbrella from Cora's hand and, leaving it open, set it on the tile to dry. With a give-me motion, she indicated Cora remove her sodden coat.

"Careful, it's covered in mud." She handed over the garment.

Wrinkling her nose, Ivy pretended to almost drop the coat before spreading it on the hall radiator.

Cora crooked an eyebrow, sending a pointed glance at the radiator. "You have heat?"

"Hoping you'd wade your way here, I dared to turn on the radiators here and also in the parlor, and I lit the fire. I'll clean out the ashes when they've cooled, and Papa will never know. Come, warm up." She led the way into the parlor.

"Are you sure your father doesn't count each stick of wood or piece of coal?" Cora pulled the hatpins from her drooping hat and dropped it onto the hearth. She'd worn her oldest one today, knowing it would probably be ruined. She yanked off her gloves and tossed them next to the hat.

"He doesn't need to." Ivy wrinkled her nose.

"Every month, Papa only orders enough coal for what he anticipates our usage will

be, no matter if we unexpectedly end up with the worst blizzard in one hundred years. Luckily, we had some warm days lately and didn't need fires, so I can spare the coal today. ”

“I knew he was a dreadful penny-pincher. But I didn't realize how bad.”

Ivy's smile held no humor. “You're leaving and there's no sense in saving my family's pride.”

“Our families are both dreadful in completely different ways.” Cora ran a hand over her hair; the back, at least, was mostly dry.

She tucked the wet tendrils behind her ears, and, knowing Ivy wouldn't mind, took the seat nearest the hearth.

Placing her feet on the metal warmer, she leaned forward to hold out her hands to the flames.

“What do you do if there's a blizzard or two and you run out of coal? ”

Ivy took a seat across from her. “Papa will squawk about having to order more, and at an increased price, and lecture us about being reckless with his money. Katie and I will look appropriately chastised. Inwardly, I, at least, will not pay him any mind.”

“You never try to reason with him?”

Ivy sent her a wry glance. “How well does that work with your father?”

Cora rolled her eyes.

“One time, I pointed out that we need warmth during the day when he's at the office.

He merely said that if we attended our housekeeping as we should, we'd be too busy to feel cold, and, if need be, we could wear gloves and shawls indoors.

"She scoffed and pulled at the knot on her shawl.

"As if we don't already." She held up her bare hands and wiggled her fingers closer to the fire.

"At least, now, my hands are warm enough."

"Your father is endangering the health of his family."

Ivy shrugged. "Are you all packed?" She pointedly changed the subject.

"Everything I'm bringing is with Aunt Rose, and I'm sleeping over there tonight."

"You said you and Mr. Bellaire have a plan...?"

"He wants us to live with him. And we certainly will have to stay there a few days. He's been knee-deep in organizing a Harvest Festival to raise funds for a new and bigger church.

Of course, he's already bought the land and had the plans drawn up.

"Cora wrinkled her nose. "Too bad we won't be there in time to attend.

But he's pretty sure that the hotel and rooming houses will still be full when we arrive, thus forcing us to stay at his house. "

"House? I doubt he has a mere house. More likely a mansion."

“True.” Cora leaned forward. “Ivy, the funniest thing. The day I persuaded Aunt Rose to go with me to Sweetwater Springs, I extolled the charms of Mr. Bellaire a bit too much. Although she didn’t say so, I could tell she thought I would set my cap for him.”

Ivy let out a peal of laughter. “No! She didn’t.”

“And she didn’t like the idea one iota.

“Of course not. He’s entirely too old for you.”

“Not just that. I had a sense Aunt Rose felt...territorial, even if she didn’t quite realize her reaction. So, I played along. I’m hoping she’ll let down her guard with Mr. Bellaire if she thinks I’m romantically interested in him rather than trying to push the two of them together.”

“The couple of times I met Mr. Bellaire, he was so kind. And funny,” Ivy commented wistfully. “You’ll have a wonderful and luxurious, time with his family.”

The two fell silent, the very air between them charged with sadness.

The fire popped and flickered. In Ivy’s eyes, Cora saw the quiet desperation she, too, felt.

Although they could write, it wouldn’t be the same as confiding in and supporting each other in person.

I’m so close to escaping, but I’m leaving her behind. She’ll still be trapped here.

Cora eyed Ivy, as if to fix every detail into her memory, knowing, in spite of their dreams of living near each other, this was likely the last time she’d ever see her

friend.

They could no longer laugh with each other or sneak out on little adventures.

The two sometimes complained to each other about what they disliked about themselves and envied in each other.

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The despised freckles on Cora's nose were, to Ivy, were 'a sprinkling of angel kisses.' Cora admired Ivy's tall figure and narrow waist, several inches smaller than her own, while Ivy bemoaned her lack of bosoms. No matter how hard she tried, which, to be truthful, wasn't often, Cora couldn't imitate Ivy's instinctive grace.

Unlike her own ordinary gray eyes, Ivy's dark- brown-and green-eyes appeared more unique than the mere hazel she decried.

Cora marveled at their long friendship. As young girls attending the same school, they'd been assigned to share a desk and had quickly become fast friends.

As adults, the two had differing interests—Cora with her nursing, and Ivy's love of music and her secret harp lessons.

Her friend adored children and yearned to teach, assuaging some of that longing and earning a little money tutoring some neighbor children after school.

From caring for her siblings, Cora had more than enough to do with children and wasn't entirely sure she wanted any of her own.

After all, Florence Nightingale never married or had children.

She did, sometimes, volunteer at a foundling home where she used her nursing skills to help the small children.

Ivy was sometimes better dressed than Cora, for her father wanted his daughters to appear in public to his benefit. But her nice outfits were few and saved for church and

social occasions. At home, she usually wore a voluminous apron to protect her well-worn clothing.

Pulling her shawl tighter around her shoulders, Ivy, too, watched Cora as if she wanted to engrave every detail into her mind.

Sadness welled. If they sat any longer in silence she'd start crying. Cora picked up her reticule, loosened the strings, and pulled out a small packet, wrapped in waxed paper to keep the contents dry. "I've brought you a parting gift."

Ivy hurriedly unwrapped the parcel, exposing a long length of tatted lace in forest green. "Oh, this is lovely." She stretched out the lace, studying the rings and chains of the design.

Cora learned basic tatting from her mother and continued her lessons with one of her mother's friends who lived down the street.

Her mother had possessed a huge amount of thread, which, after she died, Cora kept at her grandfather's house lest the whole basket be ruined or disappear.

She wasn't nearly as competent as her neighbor, whose fingers flew, entwining the thread and the shuttle, so her inches of lace grew slowly.

Ivy looked up. "You should keep this for yourself."

"I have but in pink. My new best dress has store-bought ribbon and lace trim. But I have enough tatted lace for the next dress I make. I bought some lovely fabric yesterday, pink flowers sprigged on a blue-gray background."

Ivy raised her eyebrows, amusement pulling up the corners of her mouth. "Blue-gray?"

“Not like this ugly color, which I’ve foresworn.” Cora plucked at the skirt of her dress.

“I have something for you, too.” Ivy twisted to pick up a brown paper packet tied with a pink ribbon from the table behind. “To remember me by.”

“As if I could forget you,” Cora scoffed, taking the gift.

With a lump in her throat, she untied the bow.

“This will go nicely with the new fabric.” She unwrapped the paper to see a small photograph of Ivy in a polished wooden frame.

Even in black and white, her friend looked beautiful, and, unlike most portraits of stern-faced people, she’d even managed a hint of a smile.

Tears blurred her vision, and Cora held the picture to her chest. “I’ll miss you so,” she whispered.

Ivy pressed her palms to her face. “Don’t make me cry!” She lowered her arms and clasped her hands tightly in her lap. “You must write me often.”

“Silly, you know I will.”

A tear ran down Ivy’s cheek, but she lifted her chin high. “Your letters will be full of your interesting adventures.” Her voice trembled. “Mine will be same old, same old. Housework, errands, practicing my harp, tutoring the boys, repeat, repeat, repeat.”

“I will pray that there’s a teaching position available for you to join me.” Even as she rose to hug her friend goodbye, Cora feared her encouraging words wouldn’t come true.

Before the time came for the horse race, Brian had eaten from the fine feast of food contributed by the good womenfolk of Sweetwater Springs set out on the tables under the oak tree by the school, watched the shooting contests from far enough away to not distress Sassy Girl, and chuckled over the children's sack and foot races, even while having to restrain the puppy from not chasing after them.

He'd even wound his way through the rest of the booths without buying anything.

Throughout the whole day, there'd been a part of him—the author part, or so he told himself—that held aloof, observing and noting details. He'd mentally collected enough character descriptions for his next five books. But he still had no glimmers of a story.

A secret fear that his author career might be over niggled. What will I do if I can't write? The fear chilled him.

The day's not over. Inspiration might be around the next corner. He pulled his silver watch from his vest pocket to check the time and saw he was almost due to meet his friends at the dressmaker's booth.

Brian ambled down the aisle, relieved to see the counter was empty, and no women flocked around.

Hank lounged nearby. Inside the booth, Constance packed away her tools—scissors, a jar of pins, measuring tape, ledger, a pencil—into a wooden crate, while Elsie neatly wound the lengths of ribbon and lace floating across the counter.

Hank caught sight of Brian and straightened, his gaze sweeping over the new belt, and then down to the puppy.

“What have we here?” He sauntered around Brian, giving his new accoutrements an

exaggerated leer.

“Quite a gunslinger you look.” He crouched to pet Sassy Girl, who vigorously wagged her tail.

Brian shot a pointed glance at Hank’s gun belt. Neither man usually wore them.

Hank’s expression sobered, and he stood. “An odd gut feeling made me wear my gun to town,” he said in a low voice. “I anticipated a lot of woman-starved strangers pouring into Sweetwater Springs.

“They pack the saloons, too. Turn into drunken fools.”

“I wanted to protect Elsie and Constance, if need be.”

Brian touched his Colt. “God forbid I’ll ever have to draw this. But I agree about the need to have a gun just in case.”

Hank glanced at the puppy. “Best take her to my room to wait out the races and the fireworks.”

“You sure?”

“Don’t have a rug and nothing’s on the ground for her to chew.” Hank fished a key from his pocket.

Elsie dropped a ball of trim into the crate. She hurried around the back of the booth and over to them. “I’ll run her over, Brian. I have to use the facilities anyway. I’ll be back faster than you can say ‘Bob’s your uncle.’”

Behind Elsie’s back, Brian saw Constance grimace, and he held in a smile. Her

assistant's earthy sayings and lack of awareness of the proper behavior for ladies often dismayed her.

Elsie swooped down on the puppy, picked her up, and kissed her head. She wiggled some fingers, for Hank to drop the key into her palm, and then she tightened her hand around the dog.

"Give her some water," Brian instructed.

"Will do." She rushed off.

Hank watched his beloved, a silly smile on his face.

While they waited, something about an old woman, hobbling with a cane, caught Brian's attention—her wrinkled-apple, brown face, perhaps, and the wisdom in her eyes. He took out his notebook and pencil, jotting down a description.

Elsie hurried back, bobbing as she walked. She flashed her customary happy smile before heading behind the booth to help Constance finish up.

Dr. Angus joined them. His gaze swept the empty counter. "Looks like ye made out, then," he said to his fiancée.

"The church made out," Constance corrected, reaching up to straighten her flowered hat. The pride in her green eyes belied the playfully prim tone.

"Everyone did." Elsie swept an arm out and twirled, her pink dress bellling, to indicate the booths around them. "Looks like the bare prairie after a cloud of grasshoppers descended."

Constance gave a slight headshake and wry smile at Elsie's analogy. She jiggled a

heavy reticule, the strings tied to her sash. “We’ve made thirty-seven dollars and sixty-three cents!”

An impressive amount. “Well done, ladies.” Brian got in his congratulations before the other men, who quickly echoed him.

Picking up the crate, Constance tucked it beneath the counter. “We need to stop by the bank and drop off the money. After that, we can find places to watch the horse race.”

“Well, then,” Dr. Angus glanced at his watch, “we’d best be going. As soon as the race is over, I’ll need to rush back to the office and let Fergus and Alice loose. Ye coming, Hen?” He crooked an elbow to his fiancée.

Hen? Surely, he didn’t just call her a chicken.

Constance caught Brian’s mystified look and chuckled. “A Gaelic endearment. I had a similar reaction the first time I heard it. Took some getting used to.” She smiled up at Dr. Angus and slipped her hand around his arm. “I’ll take the box we left at the booth and drop it off at the shop.”

“I’ll go with you, Constance,” Elsie offered.

“There’s no need. While Angus mans the doctors’ office, I’ll go up to the apartment, take the time to brew a cup of tea, and put my feet up.

If you want, I’ll check on the puppy. But I’ll join you for the fireworks.

I’ll meet everyone at the gazebo.” She lifted her chin in an order for Dr. Angus to start walking.

Hank held out an elbow for Elsie.

The two couples stepped into the flow of people heading toward Main Street, where the race was to take place. Brian sauntered along in their wake. Even as they threaded through the crowd, both Hank and Elsie and Dr. Angus and Constance had their heads tilted toward each other, chatting.

I'm surrounded by courting couples. Seeing the loving smiles exchanged by each pair and hearing their teasing banter made Brian starkly aware of his own loneliness and he didn't like the feeling.

I'll be fine once I'm home and writing again.

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Sweetwater Springs had never held a horse race before, and the winning purse of one hundred dollars was large enough to justify the stiff ten-dollar entry fee for each of the ten competitors. The size of the purse also ratcheted up the spectators' excitement.

The street was cordoned off with ropes tied from hitching rail to hitching rail down both sides. People had already started lining up along the makeshift course, while the deputy sheriffs ushered lingerers out of the way.

Not too far from the bank, Brian saw an empty spot behind a hitching rail that looked big enough for all of them. He pointed and gestured and chivied them all into place, with Constance and Elsie in front and the men behind. Luckily, they were tall enough to see over the ladies' hats.

Spectators packed around them, craning to get a good view of the "racetrack." The press of people so closely around them made Brian's skin itch. I haven't been this close, inches away from so many people since.... He couldn't remember how long and didn't want to figure out how long.

They watched as the horses and riders started moving into place behind a thick line of chalk stretching across the street to mark the starting "gate."

Sheriff Granger zigzagged back and forth, heading toward her place where she'd supervise the finish. She eyed the people on each side and stopped at family groups to warn them to keep ahold of their children before moving on.

Betting for money was frowned upon, given that today's funds were designated for

the new church and Reverend Norton and Reverend Joshua wouldn't approve. But Brian could see surreptitious betting taking place among some groups of men.

"I don't know any of the horses or the men riding, but we can guess at who will win." Brian gestured for the ladies to go first.

"Oh, yes!" Elsie clapped her hands together. "I'm rooting for the gold. He's beau-tee-ful!"

Constance nudged her assistant's shoulder. "No, that black one is magnificent."

"Yer both right," Dr. Angus chuckled. "Fine horseflesh, indeed."

Hank pushed back his Stetson. "I'm choosing based on the rider, not the mount. Nick Sanders is said to be magic with horses, and I've met him. He's a good man."

They all looked to Dr. Angus for his choice. "Since Hank's already chosen Nick, who, by the way, I bought my horse from, and the ladies also picked the potential winners, I'll go with the Appaloosa."

"Let's see...which one is left?" Brian drew out the pause. "I'll go with that bay."

"Which bay?" Hank raised his eyebrows. "There are two."

"The showy one on the end." Brian pointed.

To precede the race, down the street came a miniature buggy bedecked with red, white, and blue bunting and pulled by two Falabellas—one gray and one black—driven by a beautiful, auburn-haired woman in a tiny blue hat. Beside her, a blonde girl waved a small American flag.

Constance turned to the men. “That’s Samantha Thompson. Her stepdaughter, Christine, is showing her patriotic spirit. Samantha’s the one who originally transported the Falabellas from Argentina.”

Elsie vigorously waved back at Christine, almost overbalancing herself.

Before she tipped over the rail, Hank caught hold of her waist and, with an indulgent grin, righted her.

She giggled and twisted to face him. “Goodness, I almost was eating dust. But aren’t those tiny horses so adorable! The sweetest things I’ve ever seen. And that darling buggy.”

Hank didn’t answer, merely gazing down at Elsie as if she was the sweetest thing he’d ever seen.

Once again, Brian felt a stab of envy, which he quickly suppressed. The last thing he needed was a woman expecting him to woo her. To get his mind off women and courting, he looked to the starting line. “They’re getting ready to go.” Anticipation built in him.

They were too far away to see the starter but could hear the shot ring out and see the horses charge. The crowd roared.

The showy bay bolted toward one side, sending people jumping back. His rider quickly jerked him back into place to race after the others.

There goes my winner. A loser from the start.

Elsie squealed. She jumped up and down, screaming, “Go, Goldie, go!”

Constance, more restrained, clapped, before giving in to the excitement and yelling, “Go, Black!”

In a mass, the horses thundered by, as they passed kicking up a dust storm that drifted their way.

With gasps, the women turned their backs, and the men ducked their heads so their hats would shield their faces. By the time the dust settled, the race was over, and they didn’t see who placed first. But the shouts of “Nick!” and “Sanders!” audibly announced the results.

“You won! You won!” Delighted, Elsie threw herself at Hank for an exuberant hug and kiss on the cheek.

His friend beamed as broadly as if he’d won the race himself and now was one hundred dollars richer.

With the excitement over, Brian leaned toward the end of the hitching rail and untied the rope, letting the line drop to the ground so they could step over it and into the street.

Dr. Angus and Constance hastened off in different directions.

The crowd filtered into the road.

Some acquaintances came up to talk to Elsie and Hank, casting curious glances at Brian.

Although Hank properly introduced him, Brian didn’t bother to retain their names.

He’d probably never see them again. And, after today, he didn’t plan to come to town

until spring.

No more people. Only writing. With a pang, he repeated, only writing.

After a while, Brian realized Hank had become a known quantity in the town. Another sign of his friend growing apart from their little circle.

Elsie flapped a hand at them. “Go have fun.” The couple moved off down the street.

With a grim expression, Sheriff Granger hurriedly threaded through the crowd. She passed a few feet away from them, not making eye contact with anyone.

A woman on a mission.

Goosebumps prickled across the back of Brian’s neck, and he touched the butt of his gun. But scanning the area, he couldn’t see anything sign of disturbance. Everyone looked happy...well, except for some bet-losers—obvious from the jostling and joking of their companions.

But still, Brian couldn’t help the sense that something was terribly wrong.

Brian prided himself on his well-honed instincts, a lesson hard learned by not paying attention to them and suffering the consequences—starting with his former fiancée.

Yet, today, several hours after the robbery, he sat on the end of a church pew with Hank, Elsie, Constance, and Dr. Angus next to him, a sick feeling in his gut.

He would have given anything for his earlier concerns to have been wrong.

After learning of the bank robbery and murder of the deputy, Hank had protectively ushered the upset ladies back to the Gordon building, staying with them and the

puppy, while Brian remained behind, lingering near the bank.

He longed to be one of the deputies leaping into action at the sheriff's command, but, as a bystander, he could only observe, helpless to do anything to better the tragic situation.

Several hours later, worried townsfolk and some people from the outskirts of Sweetwater Springs packed the church, as subdued as if they attended a funeral service.

Brian noted their palpable fear—strained expressions, some women sniffing and holding their handkerchiefs to their noses and mouths—and here and there, men showed their anger in clenched jaws, red faces, and narrowed eyes.

Sheriff Granger stood in the front of the church, her expression stern.

Calm competence radiated from her. In stark contrast, the altar behind her was brightly decorated for the Harvest Festival, with several pumpkins of varying sizes, a pile of apples, and multiple vases of mums, goldenrod, and marigolds.

Sheriff Granger took them through what had occurred, adding details to the tragic robbery—a good man, one of the deputies, murdered, the bank clerk injured, and the money from the Harvest Festival stolen by a gang of outlaws.

When she told them the thieves hadn't left by train, which meant they were still around, a murmur of fear swept through the church.

Brian thought of the peaceful area around Three Bend Lake, of Torin and Jewel unknowingly vulnerable to the predators, and his gut tightened. Those outlaws have no reason to retreat up our mountain and every reason not to, he tried to reassure himself. They'd be trapped.

And all the more dangerous.

Still, if they did, he couldn't imagine where they'd hide out.

He, Torin, and Hank would have seen signs of a hideout and investigated.

He thought of the Swensen family living farther up the mountain.

Mr. Swensen ranged all over, hunting for the game to feed his family and the furs he could sell.

The man would have spotted anything amiss. The thought made Brian relax...slightly.

When the sheriff asked for suggestions about where the outlaws could hide out, the shopkeeper, Cobb, grew belligerent, his animosity obvious, as he used the occasion to challenge the lawwoman's authority.

The urge to go over and punch the man's red, bulbous nose was so strong that Brian had to tune out of the conversation. The sheriff didn't need him to defend her.

A lean, tough-looking man stood and shook his fist in the sheriff's direction. "You're a redskin lover. It's obvious the Indians done this theft."

At the unjust accusation, gasps and a few growls sounded. Brian's was one of them. Most everyone turned to glare.

He'd make a perfect villain. Brian tried to memorize details, but his thoughts seemed too scattered to hold a description, and he didn't want to take out his notebook and pencil and seem insensitive.

The man lowered his fist. “We’s wasting time with all this jawin’. We should head to the reservation and burn them all out.”

Another wave of gasps and growls and frowns were directed at the stranger, except from shopkeeper Cobb, who nodded in apparent agreement.

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Sheriff Granger slashed her hand for silence. “I’ve found no evidence at all that these are Indians,” he said firmly. “From all the descriptions I’ve gathered, the robbers are white men.”

Scowling, the man crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“Who are you?” The sheriff narrowed her eyes at him. When he didn’t respond, she prompted him. “What’s your name?”

“Jonathan Mercury Smith. But just call me J.M.” He smirked. “At your service.”

Frowning, the sheriff pointed at him. “Sit,” she ordered. “I’ll have no more of your attempts to stir up trouble.”

J.M. Smith grunted and flopped back into his seat.

Brian studied the man. Something about him didn’t ring true, and those instincts buzzed energy through his body.

For the first time, he wished he was more familiar with the community.

Although he knew standouts like Cobb—a known despiser of Indians—existed, Brian had the sense that most people held more benign views.

Over the summer, Dr. Angus had gone with the sheriff when she led a group of people taking donated supplies to the reservation, where the Blackfoot were starving.

As the sheriff began to lay out the type of men she needed in her posse, Brian's thoughts raced. He knew he needed to be one of them—not just to gather fodder to fuel his creative imagination—but because of the instinctive urge to protect his community.

A few hours ago, I never would have thought of Sweetwater Springs as my community.

Brian didn't engage in the debate on whether the fireworks scheduled for later tonight should go on. He was too engrossed in planning, figuring how he'd go about being chosen to be a posse member and listing what supplies he'd need to buy at the mercantile.

J.M. Smith stood and pointed out the door. "Can't trust a redskin," he stated in a harsh tone. "Your pet Indian deputy is sending you off on a wild goose chase."

With an angry expression, the sheriff took several steps in his direction.

"With your obvious hatred of Indians, Mr. Smith," she stated in ringing tones "you're the one trying to send us on a wild goose chase.

You are dismissed. Your participation is unwanted.

" She pointed toward the door. "Leave at once."

"Free country and this is a church," Smith drawled, sitting down. Insolently, he crossed his arms. "I have a right to be here. I'm not going anywhere."

Anger propelled Brian to his feet, his hands fisted. Hank rose with him, as did the other men around. Then, almost as one, they emptied from their pews and converged on Smith.

Nick Sanders reached the man first. “You heard the sheriff. Out you go.” He flung a rigid arm toward the door. “Either on your own two feet or flying. Makes no difference to me.”

Smith’s eyes shifted from Sanders to Brian to Hank to the other men, sizing them up.

Brian straightened his shoulders, puffed out his chest, and narrowed his eyes, giving Smith the firm message that he was not to be trifled with.

Smith hitched a shoulder in an insouciant shrug. “No skin off my nose if you’re planning wrong.” He wheeled about and stormed down the aisle.

The men stood in place, fists clenched, to watch him leave. Hearing the slamming door, they let out an almost collective breath, turned, nodded at each other, and returned to their places.

Once seated, Brian inhaled and exhaled a few slow breaths to calm his racing heart.

The sheriff glanced around the room. “This gang has killed.” She projected her voice. “They’ll be desperate now, and they will kill again.”

A woman sobbed.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Elsie clutch Hank’s arm and slide her hand down to clasp his.

The sheriff paced back and forth in front of the pews, then stopped. “It’s possible some of the men who set out on this posse will not return.” She glanced around, making eye contact with many.

Brian followed her gaze, seeing the uneasy, frightened, determined, and angry

expressions.

“What I’m about to say will sound heartless.

” Sheriff Granger squared her shoulders and waited a beat.

“Only those men whose families can spare them...in a financial way...will be allowed to come.” She didn’t stop for the intakes of breath but plowed on.

“I’m not talking about the pain involved if you died.

From the murder of my father, I know what such a loss is like.

I wouldn’t want to wish that grief on any family. However, we must be realistic.”

I don’t have a family. Precisely three people who will care if I die.

Elsie let out a little sniff.

Glancing over, he saw tears shining in her big, brown eyes. Well, maybe seven people.

Resolve built. Am I willing to kill?

No. Not just any man. But these men, yes. Unequivocally. If not killed or captured, they will continue to rob and murder innocent people.

Dr. Angus Cameron rose. “I’m nae willing tae kill a man,” he said, his Scottish brogue thick. “But I am going along. I think ye’ll be in need of my services.”

Brian had no doubt of that fact.

Next to the doctor, Constance made a small sound of distress before pressing a handkerchief to her mouth. But she didn't stop her fiancé from volunteering.

Dr. Angus sat and patted her knee.

Doc Rawlins from Morgan's Crossing also volunteered.

Brian placed a hand over his gun for courage, feeling the stiff leather of the new holster. Was it only this morning I bought these...when chasing outlaws was only imaginary? He leaned closer to Hank. "I'm riding along," he said in a low tone for his friend's ears only.

Hank stiffened. "Then I'm going, too."

"You can't. You have..." Brian gestured toward Elsie.

"I'm going to protect Elsie and everyone else from those murdering thieves."

Seeing the clench of Hank's jaw and knowing he felt the same resolve, Brian forewent further argument. His friend was an easygoing man. But when he stood on a rock of righteous conviction, nothing budged him.

Hank jabbed a friendly elbow into Brian's side. "'Sides, someone has to watch your back while you're busy creating stories in your head."

Feeling guilty about involving Hank, and yet also relieved to have his friend at his side in this dangerous adventure, Brian nodded, sending up a prayer for their safety. If something happens to Hank, I'll carry that remorse for the rest of my life.

He glanced over at Elsie to see tears trembling in her eyes.

She sniffed them back, obviously trying, but not quite succeeding, to look brave.

Hank raised their tightly clenched hands and pressed a kiss to the back of hers. He leaned down to say something into her ear.

Elsie nodded several times, before reluctantly releasing his hand. "I'm so proud of you," she whispered.

What would that kind of support feel like?

No matter what, I'll have to make sure to Hank comes home to her.

Elsie leaned forward to speak to Brian. "Constance and I will take good care of Sassy Girl."

Brian stood, Hank only a few seconds slower. He made eye contact with his friend, exchanging a thousand messages in a single glance. Then he took a deep breath into his tight lungs and faced Sheriff Granger. "We're going."

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One Week Later

With a mixture of terror and excitement, quite different from the calm, cool hero he was supposed to portray, at least in his own mind, Brian couldn't help cursing the stupidity that made him eagerly volunteer to join the posse heading out after the outlaws.

Then, because he was a fast runner, or so he'd been as a boy and hopefully still was, Brian volunteered again to race around the perimeter of the stockade and open the front gate to let in the rest of the posse, led by Sheriff Granger.

What do I know about being a real hero? I'm only an inkstain-fingered scribe.

Still, the writer in him couldn't help cataloguing everything around him.

The gray dawn sky showing hints of orange and pink.

Harsh breathing—his and the eight men behind him—the scuff of boot soles when someone shifted, how his heart thundered so loudly Brian thought the others could hear him, the silence on the other side of the stockade.

He reached up to touch the wide, white band around the crown of his Stetson. The last thing he needed was to be shot by one of his compadres. All the posse wore the bands to distinguish them from the bad guys.

Above them on a steep cliff overlooking the stockade, Chogan Redwolf began the assault, shooting silent fire arrows into the haystacks to cause confusion inside the

stockade and create a smokescreen for the attackers.

Brian glanced up to see several trails of smoke rising into the sky. He holstered his pistol, pulled up the neckerchief he'd wet earlier to cover his mouth and nose, and then cracked open the gate to see the stacks wildly burning. Smoke drifted toward him.

A hand clasped his shoulder, and he flinched.

Hank leaned close, worry in his brown eyes. "Run like the wind, Brother," he said in a harsh whisper before releasing his hold.

With a deep breath, Brian pushed wide the gate and sprinted along the log wall, keeping behind the outbuildings as much as possible. As he sprinted, he hunched enough to make a smaller target, but not so much the position would slow his pace.

Shots rang out, followed by shouts and screams. But he didn't stop. His job wasn't to fight, not until he had to. His job was to run.

Brian's legs began to burn, and his eyes stung from the smoke. His breath came in gasps. He cursed himself for spending too many hours bent over a desk and not enough being active.

Just as he cleared the chicken coop, a bullet thudded into his thigh like a hot stab. With a gasp, he clutched his leg and went down, hitting the ground hard. Fiery pain shot up his leg, and he groaned.

Still, he tried to crawl to his feet. The effort to move his leg almost made him pass out. Helpless, he sank down again and closed his eyes, fighting to muster the inner strength to fight the agony and move.

“Bly, it’s me.” Seth Flanigan’s voice sounded inches away.

The neighboring farmer to the McCurdys, a father of four, wasn’t supposed to participate in their battle. Brian opened his eyes, glared, and made a go-away motion.

Seth grabbed him under the armpits and pulled him behind the flimsy shelter of the chicken coop.

Brian couldn’t help guttural moans from escaping. He gasped for breath, and then he pulled down his neckerchief to be understood. “Go, go! Get the gate. I’ll cover you.” Somehow.

Seth took off in a crouched run.

God, keep him safe. Brian pulled the neckerchief to cover his nose from the smoke and rolled to his side, gritting his teeth until the dizzying pain ebbed enough for him to see.

He drew his Colt, used his good leg to push his body enough to see around the structure, and then, grimacing, had to ride out another wave of agony. He squinted through the smoke.

An outlaw clad only in long underwear and boots and carrying a pistol, staggered from the house. Foolishly, he stumbled across the porch and into the yard, searching for the attackers.

Even as his hands shook, Brian sent the last dregs of his energy into his arms to hold the Colt steady, braced his right wrist with his left hand, and shot.

The man screamed and clutched his side. But he managed to raise his gun and send two bullets smacking into the chicken coop...luckily, way too high.

Brian shot again, hitting the man's chest.

The outlaw jerked back a step, and then he crumpled to the ground, arms splayed. He lay unmoving. Blood stained his long underwear.

The sound of gunshots tapered off. But Brian stayed tense, even as his body shook with weakness, knowing he didn't have much left before he passed out. He heard a sharp whistle—the agreed-upon all-clear signal. Only then, with profound relief, did he roll onto his back and give in to the pain.

At the Bellaire mansion, after soaking in a luxurious bath and scrubbing from head to toe, Cora combed out her wet hair and donned the fresh outfit laid out upon the crimson-and gold-damask patterned bed.

The dress was old, of course, which normally would have bothered her, especially next to Delia's elegant splendor.

But Tilda or Milliana had thoughtfully ironed out the creases, and Cora was so grateful to feel tidy that she didn't mind her shabbiness too much.

Taking her grandfather's traveling desk from where she'd placed it on the bookcase, she moved a chair in front of the radiator so she could sit with her back to the heat, drying her loose hair while she wrote a letter to Ivy.

Settling the battered box on her lap, she hesitated, a lump rising in her throat, remembering the times in the last months when she'd sat next to his bedside writing letters for him because he was too weak to do more than dictate.

Aunt Rose had her own traveling desk, and neither her father nor her stepmother was interested.

So, Cora had gladly claimed it for her own.

Tears pricked her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. Instead, she opened the lid to make a writing surface, unscrewed the top of the glass inkwell, picked up her pen, and began to write.

Dearest Ivy,

I've finally arrived in Sweetwater Springs and have had a chance to rest and recover. As I promised you, I'm writing as detailed a letter as possible, so as you read my words, you can imagine me confiding in you.

So far, I love everything about Sweetwater Springs. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me write things in order.

On the trip west, I alternated between bouts of boredom and interest in the views out the windows and being concerned about Aunt Rose. While my aunt didn't complain, I knew Rose was unhappy. I felt guilty and mentally promised to make everything work out for her.

The best part of the trip was getting to know Aunt Rose better.

From her years of working at the library, Rose possesses a vast store of knowledge and would often tell me about the history of a place we passed.

Sometimes, we played a game of glimpsing a person or family and making up stories about who they were and what they were doing.

Mr. Bellaire gave us the warmest welcome and insisted I call him Uncle Andre.

He's thinner than before, with more white and little auburn left in his hair and some

additional lines around his hazel eyes.

But he's still the charming old dear he'd always been.

Not that his charm seems to penetrate Aunt Rose's reserve.

So far, she remains polite but distant with everyone.

Mr. Bellaire and the Nortons have enfolded us into their family.

I'm already idolizing Delia Bellaire Norton, not just for her beauty (really, her resemblance to her father is quite striking) but for her warmth and kindness.

She's every bit as welcoming as Uncle Andre.

Her skin is somewhat darker than his and her hair more brownish than red.

Her Southern accent is honey-smooth, which I imagine was how Mr. Bellaire also used to sound.

(He still does sometimes, when he's being playful.)

We haven't yet met Reverend Joshua or Micah, but they are expected soon.

The Negro servants are the same as in New York.

Sam, the coachman, Rufus the butler, Tilda the housekeeper, and their daughters, Milliana and Stephania, and Cook (I don't know her real name) are still devoted to Mr. Bellaire.

Seeing their familiar faces and being greeted so warmly by them added to our

welcome.

Tilda even elbowed Cook aside' to bake my favorite cookies!

Will you think me horribly unfilial that I don't miss my family? Of course, you won't. But I do find it sad that I don't miss them. Of course, I grieve Grandpapa. He'd so enjoy being here with us and his old friend.

We had a lovely dinner, with all Aunt Rose's favorite foods being served. How sweet (and sad) that Mr. Bellaire remembers her tastes after all these years.

At dinner, we heard the shocking news. Before we arrived, the most tragic thing happened in the town.

As you know, Mr. Bellaire organized a Harvest Festival to raise money to build a new church.

But a gang of thieves robbed the bank of all the money!

In the process, they killed one of the deputy sheriffs and harmed the bank clerk.

(Lest you fear for me living in the Wild West, Mr. Bellaire assures us that this is an isolated event. Normally, Sweetwater Springs is a peaceable place and not a plot in one of those horrid dime novels.)

The sheriff (a woman, can you believe it?) has led a posse out to chase the gang down. But

a miasma of fear lies over the whole town. People worry for the safety of the posse members. They fear the robbers returning. They hope those miscreants haven't hurt or killed anyone else in their attempts to hide out.

Although Mr. Bellaire tries to act his normal self, it's obvious he's worried and blames himself for what occurred. Delia assures me that having Aunt Rose and me here is the best possible medicine for his low spirits.

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I do think I'm right that he still cares for Aunt Rose. When she's not looking, he gazes at her with such tenderness. I don't know what happened between them, but I still intend to do what I can to bring them together. Wish me luck. I get my stubbornness from Aunt Rose!

After we ate, I went upstairs to unpack.

Oh, the joy of unpacking my possessions in my very own elegant room, done up in amber and gold!

What bliss to no longer be cramped in an attic bedroom and have to hide my possessions or store them at Grandpapa's.

The house even has two bathrooms, and I availed myself of a hot bath after I unpacked.

How wonderful to feel clean from head to toe and wear a fresh dress after a filthy journey.

(Although I'm saving my new outfits for a better occasion.) As I write this, my hair is still wet.

In spite of the house—mansion, really, as we suspected—being so big and richly furnished, there's an air of peace and coziness about the place.

Perhaps, it's because of all the books. There's a library for most of the books, but Reverend Joshua, Uncle Andre, and Delia also have their own bookcases.

Any house with books everywhere would make me feel right at home. (Not that Papa's house had many books.)

As nice as it's been to relax in luxury, underneath, I still am set upon becoming a nurse.

So far, thank goodness, no one seems scandalized by my choice of vocation.

But with the town still in an uproar, I've judged it best to wait to talk to Dr. Cameron about apprenticing. With his brother, Dr. Angus, accompanying the posse, the fear for his safety must be constantly on his mind. Still, I chafe at the delay.

There. I've caught you up.

She sat for a minute, her pen still poised to write. Then she sighed and wiped the ink off the nib.

A knock sounded on the door. "Miss Cora," a boy's voice called.

That must be Micah. Setting down her pen, she stood and hurried to open the door.

A boy with dark brown hair and crystal-blue eyes stood there practically vibrating with excitement.

"Miss Cora, the posse's returned."

"Oh!" Cora gasped and clapped her hands together.

"They caught the robbers. Papa says to come to the parlor so he can tell everyone the details all at once."

Goosebumps feathered over Cora's arms and legs. "Oh, how wonderful! What a relief for everyone."

He eyed her wet hair. "Can you come now?"

"Just a minute." She whirled to the dressing table and quickly twisted her hair up into a bun, stabbing in hairpins. Hurrying back to Micah, she held out a hand. "Lead the way, kind sir."

8:00 pm

Ivy,

My letter to you was interrupted with the most welcome news.

After being gone almost a week, the posse has returned, having captured the robbers!

The money is recovered. Two men were wounded and are recuperating at a farmhouse near the thieves' hideout.

You can imagine the town's relief and jubilation.

I did have a chance to meet Reverend Joshua Norton (addressed as Reverend Joshua to distinguish him from his father, Reverend Norton) as he gathered us to hear the details of the posse's capture of the robbers.

Reverend Joshua is unlike any minister I've ever met.

He has crystal blue eyes (as does his son) that are apt to twinkle.

I've already heard one of his interesting tales of Africa.

He doesn't hide his obvious love for his wife and son and father-in-law.

The bond between them all gives me an ache in my breastbone, and I can't help wishing my mother had lived so I could have grown up in a family this close.

Micah is an endearing little scamp. He's as different from my siblings as could be. I've already fallen in love with him. He's bright, adorable, mischievous, yet thoughtful and caring, especially with Mr. Bellaire. You'd think the man was his blood grandfather.

As for the story.... Turns out the gang was hiding on an isolated farm that belonged to the leader, Frank McCurdy. He'd left the area years earlier, eloping with a saloon girl, and no one knew they'd returned with their three children, some servants, and the other bad guys.

They converted the farm into a fort and settled in, committing crimes here and there, but mostly keeping to themselves.

The day of the Harvest Festival, one of the deputy sheriffs, Chogan Redwolf, befriended the youngest McCurdy son, Walter.

(As you can probably tell from his name, the deputy's an Indian from the Blackfoot tribe! I can't wait to meet him!)

While scouting around the fort, Deputy Redwolf ran into Walter and persuaded the boy to help them.

Walter put syrup of ipecac in their morning porridge to cause them vomiting and diarrhea and opened the back gate to sneak in some of the posse members.

Deputy Redwolf climbed a nearby cliff and shot burning arrows into the haystacks

and outbuildings to cause confusion, while one of the men ran around the outskirts of the fort to open the front gate for the sheriff and the rest of the posse, so they could attack from two sides.

Long story short, all except the leader and his wife were killed.

Two men from the posse were injured but should make a full recovery.

The happy surprise is Sheriff Granger and Deputy Redwolf returned engaged and were married today. They are adopting Walter. The poor child was repudiated by his family.

The elder Mrs. Norton brought over Walter to get acquainted with Micah.

The boy is solemn and reserved, no doubt from his background, which was quite abusive.

After a while, I started wanting them to be like normal little boys and make noise.

They played a game of checkers, but finally Walter seemed more comfortable, and they went outside.

Through the window, I watched Micah teach Walter to use his slingshot! His smiles melted my heart.

Since we're strangers, Rose and I didn't attend the sheriff's wedding. We're both worn out and looking forward to sleeping in comfortable beds that aren't moving.

So, all's well that ends well. How's that for putting a trite saying over such a traumatic situation?

I can barely keep my eyes open, so I'm stopping here. Good thing, for my pen is scraping the bottom of the inkwell.

I might not miss my family, my dear Ivy, but I certainly miss you!

Sincerely,

Cora

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The next day, Cora awoke with a sense of buoyancy that made her bounce out of bed.

The feeling stayed with her while she got dressed, all through breakfast, and driving in the coach with Delia to visit the Hatters to check on Horace's recovery.

The bank clerk was knocked unconscious by the robbers and had been slow to recover.

At the Hatters' they'd found Horace out of bed and holding court in a chair.

He was resplendent in a robe and slippers gifted by Andre and Delia, with only a small bandage around his head.

Several of the ladies of Sweetwater Springs, along with Margaret Temogen, wife of the sheriff of Morgan's Crossing, who'd dropped by for a final visit to before she returned home with her children, circled the man as if they were his courtiers.

The excited chatter of the women made them sound like twittering birds—joyful ones.

After they left the Hatters' and climbed into the carriage for the short trip to the Camerons' home, Delia let out a soft sigh.

"I declare, the difference between our visits this past week and today are night and day. To see Mr. Hatter up and around instead of being bedridden from his injury and remorse..."

Cora chuckled. “He was practically levitating out of his chair with relief that the stolen money was returned.”

Delia placed a hand on her chest. “My, it does my soul good to laugh. Her expression sobered. “This past week, as much as we tried, we couldn’t hide our fear. The very air in Sweetwater Springs was heavy with tension. And I’m sure the Good Lord felt bombarded by our prayers.

” Her Southern accent thickened to honey.

“To feel the relief and joy...” She patted her heart.

“I find it hard to put my feelings into words.”

“I can’t even imagine how terrified you all must have been. In the very short time I’ve been here, I can see the bonds of friendship you all share. Quite different from New York, where we only socialized with a few of our neighbors.”

“Papa revels in the close-knit community here and has all sorts of plans for the future of the town.” Tears welled in her eyes.

“I’ve been so worried for him. He took the robbery so hard, as if he were personally responsible.

You know Papa’s always so jovial. To see him with downtrodden spirits...

.” She fished in her reticule for a handkerchief and dabbed her eyes.

“He’s so dear to me, you see. We’ve had such a short time together. ”

Cora leaned forward to touch Delia’s knee. “He’s dear to us, too. And we’re so glad

he's found happiness with your family."

The coach pulled up in front of a two-story white house with a broad front porch, the yard surrounded by a white picket fence lined with rose bushes. Here and there a few red roses lingered. Autumn flowers bloomed in green window boxes.

Guess that answers my question of if marigolds grow in Montana. The thought sent a pang of missing Ivy, and Cora made a mental note to talk to Mr. Bellaire to see about possible teaching positions in the area.

Sam helped them out of the carriage.

Delia gestured toward the front door. "Since we're paying a social call, we won't go around to the back. The doctors' office has a separate entrance there."

They walked up the brick pathway and onto the porch, where Delia sounded the knocker and waited. Then she knocked again.

The woman who answered the door had red hair coming loose from a bun and faint dark circles under her tired blue eyes.

She looked to be about five months pregnant.

When she saw them, the warmth in her expression almost banished the fatigue from her face.

"Delia!" She looked at Cora, her smile widening.

"Don't tell me, let me guess. Miss Cora Collier. "

Cora chuckled. "One cannot stay a stranger in this town."

“True,” Delia said in a decisive tone.

“I’m Alice Cameron. Welcome to Sweetwater Springs.” She spoke with a faint Scottish accent.

Delia chuckled and turned to Cora. “You’ll have to get used to the way news spreads around a small town faster than a river runs. When I first lived here, I was quite astonished.”

Mrs. Cameron stepped back. “Do come in.”

The Cameron home was comfortable rather than elegant, done up in shades of brown and green.

Alice waved them to a green velvet settee, and then shifted as if to leave the room. “Let me get tea. You’ve arrived at a rare time of quiet. We have no patients, and my little boy, Craig, is napping. We’ll be able to chat, that is, until one or the other, or both, change.”

Delia placed a hand on Mrs. Cameron’s arm. “Don’t go to any bother, Alice. We had tea at the Hatters’, and, if you haven’t heard, Mr. Hatter is up and about and full of good cheer.”

“Excellent. Fergus plans to stop by the Hatters’ later after his last appointment.” She took a seat in the chair across from them.

Cora studied the woman, noting that her vivacity didn’t quite banish her air of fatigue, and wondered if she was taking care of herself.

There’s that saying about how the cobbler’s children don’t have shoes.

Hopefully, the doctor isn't neglecting his wife's health.

"Actually, Mrs. Cameron, if you don't mind, I'd like to speak with your husband regarding becoming a nurse."

"Oh, well then." She gave Cora an assessing glance and then nodded in apparent approval. "He's in the office, probably at his desk reading the latest medical journals."

Medical journals. Cora's ears pricked.

Alice sent Cora look of interest. "The journals arrived right before the Harvest Festival. But with everything that's happened, and Angus being gone with the posse, Fergus has been run off his feet.

Mostly from hysteria-related ailments." She pressed her lips into a firm line, and then sighed. "I sound so uncharitable."

"You sound worn-out," Cora said firmly. "You and the doctor both. And you must have struggled with your own fears about Dr. Angus."

"Fergus kept saying not to imagine the worst. He must have told me that over and over a hundred times. Still, one can't help but fret. Now the fear is over." She sighed and brushed a stray tendril of hair out of her face. "I still don't feel back on solid ground, though."

"Understandable," Cora murmured.

"Thank the Good Lord." Alice gestured toward a hallway. "You'll find the office, just down there to the left."

Her heart beating rapidly, Cora made herself walk calmly down a wide hallway, lined with chairs against the walls and stood in the doorway to the office.

At his desk on the far side of the room, Dr. Cameron was in his shirtsleeves, reading what looked like a medical journal.

He'd propped his elbow on the desk, resting the side of his head on his palm, and his fingers raked through his red hair, making him look rumpled.

He was so engrossed in his reading, he didn't appear to hear Cora's entrance.

Before disturbing him, Cora took the time to glance around—to the two beds, the wall-to-wall cupboard with books and medical supplies and jars of different ointments and elixirs.

With approval, she noted everything looked clean and neat, with only the faintest smell of herbs in the air. She cleared her throat.

His head jerked up, and he gave her a quick study with his penetrating blue eyes, before standing and reaching for his coat. He shrugged it on and started to come around the corner of the desk. "What ails ye, lass?"

She waved for him to stop. "No need for formality in my case, Dr. Cameron. I'm in perfectly fine health. I came to talk to you."

"Well, then..." He gestured toward one of the two wooden chairs in front of his desk and returned to his seat.

She took as calming a breath as her racing heart and tight corset would allow.

"In New York, I was training to be a nurse. Informally, that is. My father and

stepmother didn't approve.

I read medical books, volunteered at the local hospital, and sometimes at the foundling home.

Because the doctors and nurses trusted me and knew of my ambitions, when time permitted, they went out of their way to teach me procedures and treatments.

I didn't just mop floors and carry slop pails. ”

As she talked, the doctor sat back in his chair and rubbed his chin. Then he proceeded to ask her questions, quizzing her to ascertain her knowledge and proficiency.

Her stomach tight, Cora did her best to respond truthfully, detailing what she did know and had experience with, and also admitting when she lacked knowledge. He kept his expression bland, but interested, only nodding occasionally, so she had no idea what kind of impression she was making.

Finally, he lowered his hand and sat up. “I think ye might just have been sent by God to help me out, although I'm not quite sure how we'd do this.” Like his wife, the doctor had a faint Scottish accent. “I'll have to think on the idea.”

Relief spread through her.

“My Alice is expecting our second child. We're over the moon, of course.”

“Congratulations,” she murmured.

“Craig, our first, was a surprise after ten barren years when we'd long given up hope. We never dreamed to have another. We certainly never expected her to quicken so soon. Craig's not even two.”

“Sounds like two miracle babies.”

He grinned and nodded, showing crooked teeth, before sobering.

“This pregnancy is harder on her. This week in particular has been difficult. She’s tired.

She has morning sickness, which she didn’t have with our first. Our Craig is an active bairn, keeping her, and me when I’m not busy with patients, on our toes.

We have a housemaid, who helps out with our son and also cooks and such.

But Alice has always been my nurse and insists on continuing.

And frankly, there’s times when I have sore need of her.

I’ve been fretting about her not getting enough rest, having too much to do... .”

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Neither mentioned the specter of death that always hovered over a laboring mother. Dr. Cameron probably has seen too many of his patients die and must fear for his wife.

“I want to hire a nanny. But in Sweetwater Springs, available women are few and far between. I’ve written to my family in Scotland to send over a lass, who hopefully will arrive in the next month or so.”

Is he asking me to fill in until then? Cora’s hopes sank. She did not want to be a nanny.

“If I could have someone to relieve Alice of her nursing duties, that would be helpful, indeed. I don’t know how...

with you living at the Bellaires’, having to summon you if there’s a crisis...

. I don’t know if that will work. But give me a few days until things settle down, and our minds have recovered from all the worrying we’ve been doing. Then we’ll talk some more.”

“Thank you, doctor. I’ll look forward to that.” She sent a longing glance at the open journal on his desk and turned to leave.

“Come back tomorrow. I have some journals Angus and I have already read. I’ll dig them out, and you can borrow them.”

“Oh, how lovely! I’ll see you tomorrow, Dr. Cameron.” Cora walked back down the

hall with mixed feelings. While grateful the doctor hadn't dismissed her out of hand, he hadn't welcomed her with open arms like she'd hoped. But, at least he'll allow me to read his journals.

Right now, all I can do is wait while he thinks.

So far, Cora loved almost everything about her new life in Sweetwater Springs.

Residing in the elegant Bellaire-Norton mansion made the rest of the town seem quaint, rather than primitive.

She was excited for the tea party today held by Delia to introduce them, well, mainly Aunt Rose, their future librarian, and looked forward to meeting and conversing with some of the ladies of Sweetwater Springs.

What she hoped for was a friend near her age—not to replace Ivy, of course. But she could already tell that without a friend to confide in and share activities with, she'd feel like something was missing in her life.

Donning her new seafoam-green day dress felt so indulgent.

She ran a finger over the lace and green ribbon trim before picking up a matching length to thread through her chignon.

After fluffing the fringe of bangs across her forehead and fastening on her locket, she couldn't help twirling in front of the mirror to admire her appearance.

How marvelous to wear a new outfit instead of shabby clothes in ugly colors!

With one final glance in the mirror, Cora almost dance-stepped out the door and down the hallway to the staircase. At the bottom in the entryway, she saw Rose and

Delia talking while waiting for her to join them in greeting their guests.

Delia shone in a basque and skirt of molten gold with jewelry to match, and she looked up and beamed approval at Cora.

Such a kind and elegant lady's regard made Cora's heart warm and gave her more confidence.

Rose, too, wore a new gown in a smoky-blue color, which brightened her gray eyes, and a pearl necklace.

Watching Cora descend, for the first time since her brother's death, her aunt displayed a genuine smile, one which lit up her expression and made her appear much younger. "Oh, my, how pretty you look."

Cora grinned back at Rose and Delia. "I think we all do Sweetwater Springs proud."

The clink of china made Cora turn to look through the square opening into the parlor. Tilda and her daughters set out platters of fancy sandwiches, cookies, and tiny cakes on the buffet and also on small tables scattered throughout the large room.

A knock sounded on the door, and Cora's stomach jumped.

Rufus went to answer, bowing in a flow of women, starting with the owner of the mercantile, Hortense Cobb.

Delia had warned Rose and Cora that the woman could be unpleasant, and Mrs. Cobb proved the warning to be true, when she immediately complained to Rose that a library and reading was a waste of time and promoted idleness.

Not at all inclined to talk to the shopkeeper for fear of losing her temper, Cora sidled

out of the conversation and glanced down the line to a pretty girl near her age, younger, perhaps, with big brown eyes, a snub nose, and a guileless smile.

Thinking this must be the dressmaker's assistant, she slid around the crowd waiting to greet Delia and her aunt and pounced on the young woman. "Are you Elsie Bailey?"

Looking startled, the girl nodded, running her hands nervously down the skirt of her pink dress.

"I'm Cora Collier, and I'm desperately in need of a new friend. I left my best friend behind in New York." She gestured toward their hostess. "Delia is lovely, and I'm sure we'll become close. It's just that she's so busy being a minister's wife, as well as managing the household and her family."

Widening her eyes, Elsie giggled and took Cora's hand in greeting.

"I've never had a best friend, or any friend, really.

I grew up on the prairie, and there were no girls near my age for miles.

Well, a neighbor girl a few years younger.

But the Smiths barely condescended to acknowledge our family unless it was harvest time or they needed something from us. "

Cora couldn't imagine such an isolated life, as different from hers as could be.

"Here in town, I have Miss Taylor, of course..." Elsie nodded at the attractive blonde in a fashionable silk gown of forest green, who spoke with an older lady, and let out a happy sigh. "She's wonderful. Sort of like a friend, but not quite. We live together in the Gordon Building."

“Luckily, here I am,” Cora teased. “Your new friend. Let’s go sit over there.” She tilted her head to indicate one of the wide couches.

“But shouldn’t you stay and greet everyone?”

“This tea party is really for Aunt Rose. She’s to be the new librarian. At some point soon, she and Mr. Bellaire will be soliciting donations and books. I’ll move around later and introduce myself to the ladies.”

“I’m so looking forward to the library. I can’t even imagine rooms full of books.” Elsie tilted her head toward a bookshelf against a wall. “There are more books here than I’ve ever seen.”

“You should have seen my grandfather’s library. Even Mr. Bellaire’s can’t match it. Maybe later I can show you his. But first, food and drink.”

Cora waved toward a buffet that held trays of small, triangular sandwiches made with white bread, the crusts removed.

More trays held tiny tarts and scones next to petite bowls of different jams and clotted cream and, Cora’s favorite, petit fours.

On a marble-topped oval table rested teacups and saucers, a teapot, a stack of plates, and small pots of cream and sugar.

Elsie glanced around, an uncertain look on her face. “Shouldn’t we wait for the other ladies to go first? I don’t want to be impolite or appear greedy.”

“I peeked into the kitchen earlier. You wouldn’t believe how much food was prepared. There’s no need to worry about running out, and I’m sure Delia and Rose will be standing to greet everyone for a while.”

Even as she spoke, Mrs. Cobb bustled over to the buffet, picked up a plate, and proceeded to crowd as much of the dainties onto the surface as would fit.

“See!” Cora whispered. She locked elbows with Elsie and towed her away from the crowd toward the buffet, where she turned her loose so they could fill their plates, but not, of course, to the extent Mrs. Cobb had. Then they moved to one of the wide velvet sofas and settled in the corner.

By this time, the parlor became crowded with guests, helping themselves to food and drinks, and taking a seat on one of the balloon-backed chairs scattered around the room, the wingchairs in front of the fire, or the sofas.

Cora and Elsie drank their tea, ate the scrumptious food, and began a tentative question and answer, which increased to chattering away as they became more comfortable with each other.

In the background, the grandfather clock ticked. The sound of soft ladies’ voices filled the air.

Pausing with the teacup, Elsie half closed her eyes and inhaled. “Smells so exotic. We had tea a few times at the Smiths’, but Miss Taylor drinks some every day. Sometimes, just holding a beautiful, fragile cup and smelling the fragrance brings me such a feeling of gratitude.” She sipped.

The more Elsie revealed about her life, the more Cora liked her.

“I guess I’ve always taken tea for granted.” She nodded at Elsie’s cup. “Although, Mr. Bellaire imports far more expensive leaves than my family used.”

“How lucky you are to live with Mr. Bellaire.” Elsie gazed around in obvious admiration. “Isn’t he a darling man? Such a charmer.”

Cora looked up in time to see her aunt's disapproving expression.

She must have overheard us. Perfect. She tossed her head and looked back at Elsie.

"He's so much fun. I adore him." She didn't dare look at Rose again but hoped she'd stirred in her aunt another proprietary feeling about Mr. Bellaire.

Elsie sipped her tea. "How did you come to move to Sweetwater Springs?"

"Mr. Bellaire was a dear friend of my grandfather." Although Cora made her story short and matter of fact, she couldn't help tears pricking her eyes in recounting her grandfather's death. But the sympathy in her new friend's big brown eyes made her forge on, recounting the rest.

"I envy that you were able to see your grandfather anytime you wanted." Elsie sent a wistful glance at Rose before looking at Cora.

"And being close to an aunt. We never had grandparents and aunts and uncles. Well, we did. But out here, it was just my parents, brother and sister, and me. Why, we'd go for weeks without seeing another human soul. "

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“I guess I took for granted the time I spent with Grandpapa and Grandmama, too, before she died.” Cora felt a shift in her grief.

She still mourned her grandfather. But now she could feel a profound sense of gratitude for their relationship.

Thank you, Elsie. In that moment, she vowed to be a good friend to the younger woman, who displayed such innocent wisdom.

Not being willing to share her newfound thoughts without pondering them further, Cora turned the conversation back to Elsie.

Her new friend confided how, at the beginning of the summer, she'd left her family's isolated farm on the prairie to move to town and become an assistant to the dressmaker.

Blushing, the words coming slower, Elsie revealed she had a beau and shyly told her about Hank Canfield, who lived in the most beautiful place—Three Bend Lake.

Tears forming in her eyes, she told of Hank and his neighbor, Brian Bly, having been part of the posse and how she'd endured the most frightful week until her beloved returned safely. She still felt unsettled by the ordeal.

“Brian Bly,” Cora murmured. “Isn't he the one who was wounded?”

“Shot in the thigh. Hank says he's being the most dreadful patient.”

“Most men don’t make good patients,” Cora said knowledgeably.

“Dr. Angus and Hank wanted Brian to stay with the Flanigans for another week. But he insisted on leaving when Buck Skold does. Buck was shot in the shoulder, but he’s mobile. They return to town the day after tomorrow.”

An idea started to form in Cora’s mind. “Is either man married? Do they have someone to take care of them?”

“Brian doesn’t. Mr. Skold works as a cowboy on the Thompson ranch. I don’t think he’s married.”

“Wonderful! They’ll need a nurse.”

Elsie’s eyes grew big. “Perfect for you! But...but Brian’s not the most...

.” She hesitated, scrunching up her forehead.

“Well, he’s not very friendly. Keeps to himself.

But he’s really quite personable when you get to know him.

He and Hank helped the Smiths and my family bring in the harvest. They made such a big difference. ”

“I have plenty of experience in dealing with difficult patients.” Cora set her plate and teacup on the table and stood. “Come on.”

When Elsie moved too slowly, Cora grabbed her hand and towed her over to Aunt Rose, who conversed with three ladies, all well-dressed and coiffed.

“Aunt Rose, Elsie and I were just talking about the men wounded by the robbers. She says they’re returning to Sweetwater Springs the day after tomorrow.

Neither one of them is married or has relatives, so they must be alone with no one to take care of them. ”

Rose’s expression pinched.

The auburn-haired woman smiled kindly at Cora.

“Buck Skold is one of our ranch hands. I promise we’ll take very good care of him.

She nodded toward the twins chatting with the doctor’s wife.

“Alana is the one in the blue. She and her husband, Patrick, came to Sweetwater Springs for the Harvest Festival. She’s a nurse who’s studying to become a doctor.

They’ve stayed on at our place in case her services were needed and will depart after Buck is well. ”

At first, Cora was disappointed. But then she realized she wouldn’t be able to be two places at once anyway. She swept them all a triumphant smile. “Then if Buck Skold is in good hands, that leaves Brian Bly to me. I will nurse him. After all, that’s what I’ve been studying for.”

Elsie frowned, and her hands fluttered. “I don’t know.” She glanced around at the circle of five women. “I haven’t been to Mr. Bly’s house. But Hank Canfield, who’s his neighbor?—”

“And Elsie’s beau,” Cora interrupted with a smirk and knowing glance at her new friend.

Elsie blushed and elbowed Cora. “As I was saying, Hank told me Mr. Bly lives in a small, one-room cabin, and the interior is rather sparse. I don’t think you’ll be comfortable.”

Cora wasn’t about to let anyone discourage her. “I’ll manage,” she said breezily, with an airy wave of her hand. Somehow. She braced for the uproar.

Rose gave Cora a disapproving frown. “Absolutely not. You will not go live with a man in a one-room cabin—” she ticked off one finger “—in the middle of nowhere—” a second tick “—without any chaperone.” She held up a third finger before closing her hand and lowering her arm.

Mrs. Cobb, who’d left her group to linger close by with her teacup and saucer, her ear so near she almost overbalanced, sidled up to them.

“Miss Cora, I must agree with your aunt. Mr. Bly’s leg was injured.

To nurse him, you’ll have to see his bare limbs, touching him unclothed. Quite out of the question.”

“That’s what nurses do.” Cora bristled, raising her chin. “If anyone is so evil-minded as to say otherwise—” she glared at Mrs. Cobb “—I don’t care about their malicious opinions.”

Delia touched Rose’s arm and leaned to speak softly into her ear.

Cora strained to hear but couldn’t quite make out their conversation. But Aunt Rose’s agitated state seemed to somewhat subside.

Delia turned toward the others and raised her voice. “We can certainly send a brigade to Three Bend Lake to clean up Mr. Bly’s place and stock the pantry with food. If we

build another room onto the cabin, then, at least, Cora would have separate sleeping quarters.”

Rose wagged a finger at Delia. “You’re sounding like your father. Taking charge of everything and, in the process, flinging around a great deal of money.”

A slow smile bloomed on Delia’s face. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Of course, you would,” Rose murmured, not hiding her sarcasm.

“Just a minute,” Elsie said softly. “I need to speak with Mrs. Swensen.” She left their group and hurried over to a thin, shabbily dressed woman, perched on the sofa, whose blond braid coiled around her head, European fashion.

She held a plate with a sandwich in her lap and was chatting with Mary Norton, Delia’s mother-in-law, who sat next to her. In front of them, the laden dishes almost obscured the flowers painted on the top of the butler’s tray table.

Elsie paused, apparently waiting for a lull in the conversation to interrupt. She pinched a few inches of her skirt and moved the fabric to and fro.

When the two ladies stopped talking to allow Mrs. Swensen to eat a petite four, Elsie took a seat next to her, saying something in her ear that made the woman stop eating, frown, and shake her head.

With concerned expressions, the two put their foreheads together, talking fast and casting anxious glances at Mrs. Norton and then at Cora and Rose.

What are all these secret conversations about?

By their nods, the two women seemed to come to an agreement. They pulled apart,

said something to Mrs. Norton, and the three stood and came over to their group.

The minister's wife introduced Anna Swensen to Rose and Cora, mentioning that the Swensens were neighbors of Brian Bly and Hank Canfield, although they lived higher on the mountain than the bachelors of Three Bend Lake.

While Mrs. Swensen chatted with the ladies about her family, Cora stopped listening, mentally planning everything she'd need to pack. Surely, Dr. Cameron will provide medical supplies.

Mrs. Swensen shifted her plate to one hand and gave Rose a shy look. "Elsie told me about your niece wanting to nurse Brian Bly, and that you have some concerns."

Her attention pulled back into the conversation, Cora listened anxiously, almost afraid to take a breath.

Looking at Rose, Mrs. Swensen tilted her head. "Would it ease your mind if I checked on Cora every day?"

Not being entirely alone would certainly ease my mind. But Cora didn't say so, not wanting the women to know she had any doubts.

"That would be kind," Rose said stiffly. "But we wouldn't want to impose."

With a sniff, Mrs. Cobb inserted herself into their midst. "A daily visit doesn't settle the proprieties, though, Miss Collier.

Who knows what mischief a young man and woman alone could get into?

"She gave Rose a steely look. "The niece of our librarian must be respectable. After all, her actions reflect on you."

Rose bristled. “Then I will appear in a most favorable light, considering Cora’s good-hearted willingness to be of service to a hero in misfortune.”

Mrs. Cobb scowled. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it. I predict no good will come of her doing this.”

Mary Norton drew herself up as far as her petite stature allowed.

“Why, Hortense Cobb,” she scolded, her fierceness at odds with her gentle demeanor.

“Those uncharitable sentiments are exactly what we hope to allay, and I expect you to do everything in your power to express support for Miss Cora’s dedication to what she sees as her duty to our injured warrior.”

“I am concerned about Mr. Bly,” Mrs. Cobb said stiffly. “We must find someone else—someone more mature—to take care of him.”

“Who?” Delia asked bluntly. “Mrs. Murphy might normally be willing. But her boardinghouse is full of guests. You know what a busy time of year this is. Everyone who lives nearby and could possibly help out already has responsibilities and is also working hard to stock their larders for the winter.”

Mrs. Cobb looked taken aback. “Well!”

“That’s settled, then,” Delia said briskly, brushing her palms together. “Cora will nurse Brian.”

Cora wanted to squeal and dance for joy.

But she didn’t dare appear childish and forced herself to remain composed.

Yet even as she felt elation at finally achieving her dream, doubts started to float into her head.

She'd imagined working in town under the auspices of a doctor and near her aunt.

Now she'd be all alone with her first patient—and a difficult one at that.

Can I really do this?

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After being away with the posse for so long, Hank Canfield needed to stock up on supplies, both for his room in the Gordon Building and for his home in Three Bend Lake.

He had Elsie to consider now. If she and Constance and Dr. Angus visited, he needed to feed them more than just opening up a can of beans.

Thus, his excursion to the mercantile took longer than he'd ever shopped before, as well as three trips back and forth to haul everything back to his room.

He was just about to step into the Gordon Building with a sack of flour slung over one shoulder and his arms holding smaller bags of rice, white sugar, beans, and cornmeal, when a fancy surrey pulled to a stop. He recognized Sam, the Bellaire-Norton coachman, and gave him a nod.

Sam leaned over. "With Mr. Bellaire's compliments, he requests your presence at his home. You are urgently needed for some advice."

"Is Elsie Bailey all right?" he demanded.

"All is well with Miss Bailey and the other ladies."

Hank shrugged the shoulder holding the bag.

"Give me a minute to store these upstairs." Without waiting for an answer, he hurried through the large double doors he'd purposefully left unlocked and took the stairs two at a time until reaching the third floor, where his door stood open, the other supplies

stacked on a small table.

Glancing down, he made a face at the flour impressions left behind and went over to the shaving mirror over the sink, where he had to contort himself at various angles to make sure he'd brushed himself clean. Good thing I'm still in my Sunday clothes.

Grabbing the keys from a hook at the door, he quickly shut and locked the door, trotted down the stairs and outside, locking the double doors behind him.

As Hank got in beside him, Sam shot Hank a grin and an approving lift of his chin.

"What's all this about?"

"Don't rightly know. Although Milliana did mention your friend Mr. Bly's name. 'Spect Mr. Bellaire wants to do something special for him. You know how he is."

While Hank didn't know Mr. Bellaire, except for an introduction after church a few months ago, he'd have to be blind and deaf not to know of Mr. Bellaire.

The man was known for his good nature and generosity.

He gave a thought to what Brian would accept.

Some home-cooked food, maybe. And that was a maybe, probably depending on his mood.

Sam dropped him off in front, and then pulled up the drive to head to the stables.

Hank took a moment to admire the mansion, which he'd never seen before.

The honey-colored Indian summer sunshine made the pinkish-brown, rough-cut

Sioux quartzite bricks gleam.

The house looked to be three stories with a cone-topped round tower on the left.

He would have stared longer, noting more details, but conscious of the urgency of the summons, he strode up the walkway.

At the double doors, he tapped a lion's head knocker.

The tall, Negro butler, his curly hair completely white, opened the door with a smile. "Mr. Canfield."

"I'm sorry." Hank inclined his head. "I don't know your name." I really should make a better attempt to get to know everyone who lives in town.

"Rufus, sir." He stepped back to allow Hank inside and then shut the door. "Please follow me, sir." Rufus turned and began a stately walk down the entryway.

Trying not to gape like a hayseed, Hank followed the butler to the right and into a long parlor full of ladies like a bouquet of colorful flowers that only on closer examination became familiar faces.

With a slight bow, Rufus announced Hank to the bevy of ladies and Mr. Bellaire.

Hank sent an uneasy look around at the women watching him. His gaze paused briefly on his pretty, blushing Elsie, relieved to see her looking more herself after being subdued and a bit teary since he'd returned. With relief, he fastened on his host. "Mr. Bellaire, what's this about?"

"Andre, my dear boy. We are all friends here." He waved toward the other wingchair. "Come join us."

“I’m fine, thank you.” Hank remained standing.

“Very well.” With broad strokes, Andre summed up their plan to send a nurse to take care of Brian.

As he listened, Hank became more and more annoyed. He planted both hands on his hips. “Mr. Bellaire, um, Andre, with all due respect, I can tell you that Brian Bly won’t like this arrangement. He’s stubborn and a loner. The last thing he’ll want is some female fussing over him.”

“Dr. Cameron says your friend will need constant nursing,” the man pointed out in a calm tone. “Will you provide that?”

Hank clenched his jaw but lowered his arms. “I’m willing to stay the first night or two, and then look in on him once a day.” I know he won’t allow more than that.

“That won’t be enough, Hank,” a pretty girl said hotly. In her righteous indignation, she disregarded proper manners and addressed him informally.

His eyes narrowed. “And you are?”

“Cora Collier. I’m studying nursing. If Mr. Bly’s injury is as bad as I’ve heard described, he should not be moving around at all, not if he wants to recover the use of his leg.”

“Look.” Hank sighed and rubbed a hand over his head.

“Bly’s not sociable at the best of times.

I’ll bet being incapacitated and in pain, then having a strange female around him, why, he’ll be downright cantankerous.

” He cut her a sharp glance. “I tell you true, Miss Cora, nursing Brian Bly will be no picnic, so get any Florence Nightingale notions out of your head.”

The young woman bristled. “I’ve volunteered at a hospital in New York. I know what I’m getting into.” She dipped her chin, sliding a sideways guilty look in the direction of a woman he didn’t recognize before turning back to her opponent. “Not that what I do is anyone’s business.”

“I’m Bly’s friend and neighbor,” Hank retorted. “He’s not here to speak for himself, so I need to.”

Andre raised a hand in appeasement. “We all have Mr. Bly’s best interests at heart.”

“Do have some tea, Mr. Canfield,” Delia said, Southern sweet. She gave Hank a teacup and saucer.

The flowered teacup looked incongruously dainty in his rough hands.

“I hope you like cream and sugar.” When he nodded, she reached for a teapot on a nearby marble topped table and poured, adding cream and a spoonful of sugar.

Hank turned to Cora Collier. “Are you prepared to use an outhouse and haul water from a well?” he challenged.

“Because that’s what awaits you.” He flipped a hand toward the ceiling and walls.

“Nothing like this place.” Even without knowing her, the way she tilted her chin to a stubborn level told him the answer. “I’ll manage.”

“Well, Miss Cora,” Hank rubbed the back of his neck and glared at her. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He lowered himself into the other wing chair, jittering his teacup

and then hastily held the saucer still.

“Can you describe the cabin?” Andre asked, his drawl soothing. “What’s inside?”

“The cabin is snug, made of clapboard,” Hank said, his tone softening. “Bed. Small table. One chair. Rudimentary kitchen. Heated by a two-burner stove.”

Delia handed Hank a plate with sandwiches and cookies. “Now, you eat up, you hear, Mr. Canfield,” she said with a charming smile.

“Yes, ma’am.” They’ve got me rightly pinned down. He set the plate on his lap and took a sip of his tea, surprised by liking the flavor. It had been many years since he’d enjoyed tea this delicate.

“You’re right, Rose.” Andre frowned. “As is, this cabin is a totally inappropriate place for our Cora.”

“Uncle Andre!” The young woman wailed, sounding like a six-year-old.

“Delia is also right.” He nodded at his daughter in approval.

“We must make changes to the cabin to ensure the comfort of our girl, as well as welcome home our wounded hero so he can recuperate in comfort and have the best of care.” He slanted a wide-eyed glance of innocence at Mr. Canfield. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

With his mouth full of sandwich, Hank could only nod, trapped by the genteel persuasions of father and daughter.

“Andre!” An older woman ground out. “You can hardly go around building onto and furnishing the homes of everyone who wants to employ Cora.”

“My dear Rose, I hardly think that will be necessary,” he chided, although his eyes twinkled. “For all we know, Cora will change her mind after her first real experience of having the sole responsibility for a tetchy patient.”

“One can only hope,” she said, sotto voce.

With a scowl, Cora crossed her arms. “I won’t, Aunt Rose.”

Andre looked from Rose to Hank. “Remember, though, this is really for Brian Bly, who selflessly sacrificed himself to help bring the murdering culprits to justice. He’s a hero, and he deserves all the comforts and succor we can provide.”

The memory of Dr. Angus pulling him aside after operating on Brian’s leg gave him an inner shudder. “Another inch, the bullet hitting the artery, and we would have lost him. He would have bled out before I could do the surgery.”

“I don’t think Bly will see things in the same light,” Hank muttered. “He won’t let Miss Cora go home with him.”

Cora’s smile was sharp enough to cut. “Then when everyone leaves to drive back to town, I’ll stay. Since I’m already there, he can hardly kick me out of his house.”

“He’ll probably try,” Hank mumbled, shaking his head.

She stuck her nose in the air. “Well, he won’t succeed.”

Andre beamed benevolently and settled back in his chair. “Shall we figure out exactly what’s needed for our jaunt to Three-Bend Lake tomorrow?”

“I’ll approach Dr. Cameron for medical supplies,” Miss Cora volunteered.

“Windows for light and air.” Andre clapped his hands. “And since we’re heading into winter, velvet curtains to screen out the drafts. Do you think he’d prefer blue or forest green?”

Constance clapped her hands. “I can sew them.” Her eyes danced with obvious mischief. “I’ll just need the measurements.”

“I’ll help,” his Elsie volunteered.

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Oh, no. Time to put my foot down on Brian's behalf. "No velvet curtains." But Hank saw a glance pass between Miss Cora and Delia and suspected that, like them or not, Brian would end up with velvet curtains.

Hank made an inner eyeroll. Trying to hold back Andre Bellaire from his good-hearted, lavish spending was like reining a wild, runaway steed—impossible.

Since Hank had been back, he'd heard how hard Andre had taken the theft and the deaths.

The man looked more drawn than he had the last time he'd seen him after church.

Like Elsie, he'd appeared deflated, had lost his jovial air, and probably worried all the many people who loved him.

To see the town's philanthropist come alive again, to take charge, to seem more like his old self, well, then, Hank wouldn't object to velvet curtains or anything else the man wanted to bestow on Brian.

Andre gestured for Hank to lean closer. "Let's leave our good ladies to come up with a list of what is needed, while you and I draw up plans for the addition to Mr. Bly's house."

"Andre, you cannot do this. You cannot be this extravagant."

"I must. I must assuage my conscience. I will also provide a sum of money for Mr. Skold matching approximately what we are spending on Mr. Bly."

“The robbery and what followed wasn’t your fault.”

Andre tapped his forehead. “I know that here.” He put his hand over his heart.

“But I feel different here. This whole week has been full of horror and guilt and shame. And the relief that everyone’s safe, and the outlaws are captured and the money is returned is...

indescribable. Yet when I think of Mr. Skold and Mr. Bly...

their situation causes a pain.” He pressed his chest again.

When put that way, Hank couldn’t really protest.

The truth be told, as much as Hank knew Brian would hate, absolutely hate, what he’d see as an assault on his independence and solitude, perhaps even feeling betrayed by his collusion, he was so relieved and grateful his friend had survived that he felt just fine going along with Andre Bellaire.

Dressed in a new divided riding skirt made by Constance, buoyed by an emotional wave of enthusiasm, and accompanied by what seemed like half the town, Cora rode Ole Miss, a placid mare, up the trail to Three Bend Lake.

In front and behind her, about twenty people rode or drove, with additional tools and building materials to add to those already brought yesterday by the men who started the building, as well as all the comforts the ladies of Sweetwater Springs deemed necessary.

Even the puppy Brian had purchased at the Harvest Festival rode in one of the wagons.

Sassy Girl would stay with Hank tonight, and he'd bring her over in the morning.

But first, he'd take her on a long walk to tire her out.

Hopefully, then she'd be less likely to jump on Brian's wounded leg in her excitement at being reunited with her new owner.

Brian—so she thought of him because Hank, Elsie, and Constance spoke of him by his first name—was her patient, not her friend.

I really should get in the habit of addressing him as Mr. Bly, even in my thoughts.

But everyone is so informal that not using his first name might be more offensive.

Ugh! I'll start with Brian and see if he objects.

He seems the type to flat-out protest if he disagrees.

Unfortunately, or perhaps, fortunately, Cora couldn't be sure, Aunt Rose and Uncle Andre were the two important people missing from the expedition.

Worried about her father's health, Delia conspired with Rose to keep Andre home by her aunt pretending a headache and suffering from exhaustion.

Right now, she'd bet those two dear bookworms were probably comfortably discussing their favorite volumes.

While she missed them, she also knew settling in would probably be easier without them.

In one of the wagons, a trunk from Dr. Cameron held medications, bandages, and the

other items he deemed necessary for Brian's recovery, as well as the medical journals he'd promised her.

He'd gone over everything she needed to do, warning her that being on her own with a patient—an irascible one at that—was different from working with many professionals to oversee her in a well-supplied hospital.

While a trip to town wasn't out of the question, he preferred that she had what was needed.

From time to time, the narrow dirt road wound around the side of the mountain, opening up the view to Sweetwater Springs, looking like a toy village below.

With aching inner thighs, she enviously eyed Delia and Reverend Joshua as they rode in the surrey, wishing for the comfort of seats instead of a saddle.

But Uncle Andre insisted she have her own horse to stay with her, so she could go to town, if need be.

Riding the mare, no matter how gentle, wasn't the same as those pony rides she'd taken as a child.

The aches grew worse, and she tried to breathe into the pain, thinking longingly of rubbing the liniment from her medicine chest into her muscles and then sitting in the comfortable armchair—one of two—lashed on top of the wagon carrying lumber. She'd sip a cup of tea and read a novel.

Far ahead, Cora saw the line of vehicles and horses veer to the right. "Not long now," called people from up ahead, passing down the information. She partly turned and tossed the news to the rider behind her.

Ole Miss followed the one in front under a canopy of trees, until the trees opened up to a breathtaking view of a narrow body of water, reflecting the cerulean sky. A small, sandy beach edged by rocks and trees blocked the next bend of the lake.

The road took them past a log cabin, with a broad front porch and blue shutters flanking the windows—Hank’s home, as charming as Elsie described it. The road ran some thirty feet from the water, following the contours of the lake.

About twenty minutes later, they reached a second, bigger log cabin, brown shutters closed against the windows.

Without mentioning a name, Hank had warned everyone that the inhabitant was a good person, but he lived like a hermit.

He requested that the man’s reclusive nature be honored, even though he privately told Cora that he hoped his friend would venture out to meet her. He didn’t think it likely, though.

She imagined the reclusive neighbor to be like a turtle, pulled tightly into his shell. The boys Ivy tutored had a box turtle brought back from one of their vacations, and the little creature had fascinated Cora when she’d been invited to visit to make its acquaintance.

Still, as they slowly moved past, Cora couldn’t help casting curious glances at the home, wondering if the owner was elderly or disfigured or broken by the world.

Each possibility called upon the part of her that wanted to help people heal.

I’ll have to be careful if I accidentally come across him in the woods to not act dismayed by his appearance, lest he think my reaction is about how he looks rather than my being startled by encountering a stranger.

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Brian and Buck Skold sat propped up in Seth Flanigan's wagon, resting on a thick bed of blanket-covered straw.

Their geldings were tied to the back corners, and from time to time, when Brian glanced to check, Marshal gave him a look and head shake that said this whole rigmarole was beneath his horsely dignity.

Dr. Angus had insisted his two patients take some laudanum for the journey and, in spite of all Brian's protestations that he didn't want a foggy head, refused to back down, saying he wouldn't authorize the trip to town and from there to their homes unless they took the pain medication.

Buck had given in first, and after a grunt of frustration, so had Brian.

At first, the ride hadn't been so bad. But then one hour passed. And the next. The interminable drive was made longer by Seth keeping his team to the pace of an earthworm, so as to avoid the worst of the ruts.

The closer they came to town and the effects of the medicine wore off, the more Brian's leg ached.

Sometimes, he had to hold in a groan or moan or gasp when the wagon wheels hit a rut and the jolt spiked pain across his wound.

Any outward indication of discomfort would have the wretched doctor, riding next to the wagon and casting frequent assessing glances their way, forcing more laudanum down his throat.

Even when his wound wasn't stabbing him, the denim of his trousers rubbed against the heavy bandage around his thigh. He'd spent the last week wearing one of Seth Flanigan's borrowed nightshirts, and he'd mulishly refused to travel to town unless dressed in his own clothing.

With a shake of his head and a look that told Brian he'd pay the price for his stubbornness, Dr. Angus had allowed him his way.

He suspected, from the way Buck sometimes clenched his hands, that he had similar struggles. The man wasn't quite as stubborn as Brian, but then again, he didn't need to be, seeming content to let Brian take the contrary lead and then fall into place behind him.

Just a few more hours until home. I can endure that much.

Before the corner where the road turned onto the main street of town, Hank and Elsie waited along with Constance Taylor.

Beside them stood a group he didn't know until a "whoop" from Buck told him they must be from the Thompson ranch—Samantha and Wyatt Thompson, their six children, and Buck's fellow cowboys.

He'd certainly heard enough about the ranch's inhabitants from Buck during their recovery.

"Whoa." Seth stopped the wagon.

Seemingly all talking at once, the Thompson bunch swarmed to Buck's side of the wagon.

Dr. Angus pulled up his horse, Zeus, swung down from the saddle, thrust the reins

into Brian's hand, and held out his arms to his fiancée.

With a cry of joy, Constance picked up her skirts and ran to him, throwing herself into his embrace. She started to cry.

"Now, now, Hen." Dr. Angus gently patted her back. "Dinnae fash yerself. I'm fine, Mo ghràdh. I promise." He held her tight.

She raised her tearstained face, and they kissed.

Brian knew from Hank's acquaintance with the man that the doctor tended to be a kind, although reserved, Scot. So, to see him melt into public demonstrativeness made a lump form in his throat.

Uncomfortable with the feeling, he swallowed and made himself mentally step back to catalogue the scene, wishing he could pull out the notebook and pencil, safely tucked in the saddlebags in the foot of the wagon bed.

Elsie left Hank's side to rush over to Brian. She went on tiptoe to lean over the side of the wagon and bussed a kiss on his cheek. "You have no idea how good it is to see you! We've worried and prayed and prayed and worried!"

Years had passed since anyone outside of Hank, Torin, and Jewel had cared about him, and the hard shell around his heart softened a bit. "I'm fine," he told her with a genuine smile. "Thank you for caring."

Hank walked over to join her, clasping a hand on Brian's shoulder and squeezing, before studying him with solemn eyes.

"I'm fine," Brian repeated, this time a little more testily to hide any hint of the tenderness in his chest.

“Better than when last I saw you. Same bad temper, though.” Hank winked, took back Zeus’s reins, and held out his hand to Elsie.

She grasped Hank’s hand, looking up at him with an expression of adoration on her face.

He smiled tenderly down at her.

Their exchange gave Brian a pinch of envy, which he quickly repressed. He’d tried love once before, learned his lesson, and wasn’t about to take the risk again.

Dr. Angus loosened his embrace of Constance enough to glance over at his two patients. Apparently satisfied, he nodded for Seth to go ahead and reached out a hand for Zeus’s reins. He crooked his arm for Constance, and the two set out, the horse trailing them.

A safe distance behind, Hank walked hand-in-hand with Elsie, bouncing along beside him.

The various people from the Thompson ranch flowed around the other side of the wagon.

The plan was for them to stop at Dr. Cameron’s office for a final check of their wounds before Buck would travel on to the Thompsons’ ranch and Brian to Three Bend Lake.

As they reached the corner for the turn into town, everyone moved farther from the wagon to allow Seth to draw ahead and navigate.

The chatter of his friends, as well as that of the Thompson party, kept Brian from realizing anything unusual was happening until he heard happy shouts and an uproar

of voices. What the...?

With a clear view down Main Street, he sucked in a sharp breath. Once again, Seth drew in the horses, probably just as stunned as Brian. Sweetwater Springs looked like a parade on the Fourth of July. Seemed as if everyone for miles around came to line each side of the roadway.

“Well, I’ll be a naked monkey,” Buck said with a moon-faced grin. “Are they here for us?”

“Naked monkey is right,” Brian drawled in astonishment.

Hank, backtracking with Elsie to stand by Brian, caught the exchange. He chuckled. “You two are the whole dang circus.”

Brian groaned from a different kind of pain this time.

Seth flicked the reins, and the wagon ambled along the street.

People yelled out greetings, best wishes, and their thanks. Men waved their hats and women fluttered handkerchiefs. A few were even crying. The townsfolk threw flowers before them into the street and tossed bouquets into the wagon.

There weren’t a lot of blooms to be had this time of year. But Brian recognized marigolds and chrysanthemums, often surrounded by colorful autumn leaves. The spicy-sweet scent wafted around them.

Thank goodness, palm trees don’t grow in Montana, or they’d be laying down palm branches like with Jesus riding the donkey into Jerusalem.

As much as Brian wanted to sink down into the straw, pull the blanket over his head,

and hide, he couldn't help feeling some part of his curmudgeonly heart be moved by the expressions of both joy and relief.

Next to him, Buck lapped up the attention like a starving dog given a bowl of milk. He smiled and waved his good arm, playing to the crowd, saying, "Thank you, darling," to any female from a young girl to a tottering old lady who called out, smiled through their tears, or blew him kisses.

During their convalescence at the Flannigan homestead, he and Buck once observed an intimate moment between Seth and Trudy—more of loving energy between them, how their bodies inclined toward each other, a look in their eyes—than any outwardly physical gesture.

"I want that." Buck's tone had held longing. "Not just a wife, but one I will tenderly adore until my bones are too old and brittle to hug her without breaking her in half and my arms falling off."

"What a romantic image," he'd growled in response.

Truth be told, Brian had wanted that too, once. But betrayal made him ice over those wishes, turning the longing as brittle as the bones Buck described. He didn't say anything to Buck, though, not wanting to discourage the man. Seth and Trudy proved such love and trust was possible.

But not for me. Brian pulled his attention back to the present.

Boys ran alongside the wagon, pelting them with questions. Between flirting with the womenfolk, since Brian wasn't inclined to do more than grunt "no" or "yes," Buck gave quick answers of actual words.

Not part of the parade, K.C. Granger perched on Big Red, observing the spectacle, a

hint of amusement softening her normally cool expression. Next to her, the blacksmith and her frequent deputy, Chogan Redwolf, watched from atop his Appaloosa. Between them, Walter McCurdy sat on a pony.

She leaned down with her forearm across the horn of her saddle, a wry grin crossing her face.

He'd bet his next book advance that she was grateful not to be part of the circus parade.

But even she hadn't quite escaped floral attention.

A wreath was draped around the gelding's neck and his mane and tail braided with colorful ribbons.

Brian wondered what the sheriff said when she discovered her bedecked horse. Probably not something repeatable in polite company.

The sheriff nodded at Brian and Buck, giving them a quick salute.

Brian sat up straighter, ignoring the pain in his leg. Earning the respect of the sheriff, a lawwoman to the bone, meant more than any medal of honor.

A girl ran up to the sheriff, handing her a bouquet of marigolds.

To his surprise, the sheriff's expression softened, and she smiled at the child, taking the flowers. Then she leaned and gestured toward Walter, obviously introducing them.

Brian gaped. He'd never seen the lawwoman looking so relaxed and friendly.

Buck, apparently, also noticed the sheriff talking to the girl. “That’s Kayleigh Gentry, the goose girl.”

After waving at an admirer, Buck leaned back with a wince. “Sheriff Granger saved Kaylee, when she ran away from home to keep her goose from becoming Christmas dinner.”

“Heard something about that.”

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“Kaylee was almost captured by a murderous outlaw. Holmes was the survivor of a gang who robbed the bank back in Grant Hills, Wyoming, murdering K.C.’s father and fiancé.

Her father, the sheriff, killed the other two before he went down, and our sheriff tracked him to Sweetwater Springs and captured him.

Then, after taking him back for a trial and hanging, she returned, us being in need of a sheriff. ”

He couldn’t help staring at the lawwoman, smiling and chatting with the children, while also noting that Chogan Redwolf’s normally stoic expression sported a wide grin.

Hank leaned closer. “After they hit town—” he said, amusement in his tone “—our sheriff and our blacksmith tied the knot.”

Didn’t see that coming.

“Well, I’ll be a monkey’s uncle.”

“What’s with you and monkeys, Buck?”

The man ignored him, too busy blowing kisses at the saloon girls clustered in front of Hardy’s.

In retrospect, when Brian reviewed what he’d witnessed between the two, he realized

there was more depth to their relationship than he'd considered at the time. Chogan's a married man now, still on his honeymoon. Of course, he's grinning.

Brian had no doubt the two would make a good match. Not like... He cut off the thought.

A buxom woman in burgundy velvet blew a kiss to them. He wanted to sink down out of sight and pretend he didn't see her. But since his buddy-in-heroic-injury blew a kiss back, Brian spared the lady enough energy for a partial smile and a nod.

Hank chuckled. "The heroes of Sweetwater Springs will have their pick of the ladies—what few available ones we have."

Traitor. He's enjoying my discomfiture all too much. "I'm not a damn hero," he snapped. "I got shot. I didn't open the gate."

His friend raised an eyebrow. "You're a damn hero because you put yourself—" he emphasized each word "—in a position to be shot."

"Well," Brian grumbled, fed up with the whole spectacle, "that makes you a damn hero, too."

The wheels hit a rut, and agony stabbed his leg. He grunted, tightening his hand on the side of the wagon, breathing through the pain.

"Get me out of here," he begged Hank. "I need me some peace and quiet." And a bed that's not moving.

"I want to be home, away from people. Although, I might tolerate you and Torin and Jewel." He glanced at Elsie, so patently full of joy he could imagine her filling up like a balloon and floating away. "Elsie, too," he added.

Hank quirked an eyebrow. “Constance? Doc Angus?”

“When did my social circle get so big?” he grumbled. “But I draw the line after those two. No more people! We’ll build a fortress around the lake like McCurdy had around his hideout.”

With a rueful grimace, Hank shook his head. “Brace yourself, Brother. There’s worse to come.”

The last of the helpers had left Three Bend Lake several hours ago, so they could get down to town and not risk meeting Brian traveling up the mountain and giving away the secret of Cora’s presence and the changes to his home.

The sudden quiet after she’d waved goodbye to the last of the people who’d worked so hard to build onto Brian’s cabin was unlike anything Cora had ever experienced before, and she’d quickly gone back inside.

She spent the intervening time unpacking and ironing her wrinkled clothing. Then she heated water for a sponge bath and donned a fresh dress—nothing fancy, just one that was cut almost like a nurse’s uniform—no balloon sleeves in sight. A white bibbed apron protected the outfit.

Afterward, she entered the main room and stood for a moment, surveying her domain for the next month or so.

Brown velvet curtains flanked the sparkling clean windows.

Two comfortable wing chairs, lacy doilies draped over their tops, practically dwarfed the small-two burner stove, a tiny marble-topped square table between them.

In front of one chair sat a three-legged wooden stool topped with a damask cushion in

brown, blue, and silver made by Elsie from a leftover scrap of fabric.

A hutch with brown transferware dishes by Spode stood next to a battered kitchen cabinet. On the other side of the hutch, a door led into a lean-to that contained a larder and also covered the previously boarded-over hole in the ground used as an outdoor cellar.

Remembering how Uncle Andre dramatically bewailed the need for a lean-to, rather than a properly dug and squared-off cellar and substantial pantry above it, made her chuckle.

Hank had sternly told him they didn't have enough time, building supplies, and men to construct the bedroom for Cora, refurbish the inside and outside of the original structure, and completely expand on the other side.

They could only tack on the lean-to, and even that was cutting their timing close.

Uncle Andre gave in when Hank pointed out that having people still working and the sound of saws and hammers would impact Brian's much needed rest. He had to content himself with purchasing an icebox to store in the lean-to, and then made sure the icebox was filled with food prepared by his cook for Mr. Bly's supper.

Hank had roared with laughter when Cora told him what she'd ordered from Cook to tempt the invalid to take some nourishment—jars of calf's-foot jelly, gruel, and chicken broth.

Annoyed by his response, she'd swatted his arm, as if he were one of her brothers.

Luckily, he seemed to take her attack in the same spirit, informing her that Brian had regained a man's hearty appetite and if she tried to feed him calf's-foot jelly or gruel, he'd probably throw the bowl at her.

Luckily, the cook also sent along chicken, potato salad, and brown sugar glazed carrots if her patient arrived home and was famished.

That didn't count the loaves of bread, white and dark, cookies of all kinds, and a blueberry cobbler set out on the lean-to's shelves or the two hams now hanging from the lean-to ceiling, which she had to carefully maneuver around lest she bump one with her head.

Donations of food stuffed the rest of the larder, adding to Mr. Bly's meager supplies.

She still couldn't believe Uncle Andre had persuaded the Cobbs to part with their wingchairs, icebox, hutch, guest room bed, wardrobe, nightstands and dishes from their home.

The main room now was rather crowded, given a bed was tucked into the corner.

But it possessed all the needed comforts.

Except indoor plumbing, which will take getting used to.

Delia didn't seem the least bit fazed by her father's bargaining triumph, only whispering to Cora that she had no doubt Mrs. Cobb would probably catch the next train to Crenshaw for a replacement buying spree.

The bookshelf once positioned next to his desk was moved against the wall and next to the bedroom door to make room for the hutch.

A little space remained on the shelves, and Cora added the books she'd brought along for her own reading and those sent for Brian's pleasure.

A stack of narrow volumes caught her eye, and she pulled one out to see the lurid

cover depicting a cowboy on a bucking horse.

A dime novel. Wrinkling her nose in distaste, she hastily shoved it back with the others.

The sun started to descend in the sky, trailing streams of gold and pink and orange, and the air grew chill.

Her stomach grumbled, and Cora realized she'd worked steadily since her arrival without taking the time to eat.

Not interested in setting out a meal, she spread some butter over a slice of bread, folding it around a narrow wedge of cheese.

Taking her coat from the coatrack, she donned the garment, before going outside to the new front porch and sinking into one of the two rocking chairs, which came from O'Reilly's carpenter shop.

There were another four sat on the back porch that faced the lake.

She glanced at the pretty blue ceiling, which Mr. Bellaire insisted be painted 'haunt blue' in the Southern tradition for good luck and to keep away evil spirits, a nice contrast to the freshly painted brown wood of the rest of the house.

She ate her sandwich and studied her surroundings. From this position, she had sight of the dirt road, more of a wide path, really, before it curved out past a stand of trees, and the side of the mountain, rising about five hundred yards away.

Gradually, Cora became aware of sounds. The breeze rustled the tree leaves. The tweets and chirps of birds, seeming to call to each other. I've never been alone before. Not this alone, where I couldn't walk out of my room or out of the house and be in

the midst of people.

She peered through the trees, nervously wondering what creatures might lurk out there. Bears? I should have asked Hank while I had the chance.

Cora wondered if she'd made a mistake letting Hank keep Brian's puppy before reuniting Sassy Girl with her owner. The dog would have provided a distraction. And protection. Stubbornly, she refused to retreat inside. I have to get used to temporarily living here.

By the time Cora heard the sounds of horses and wagons approaching, she was on tenterhooks, what with keeping an eye out for bears and other wildlife, worrying about her patient's condition after his journey, what Brian would think of his expanded house, and if he'd strenuously object to her presence—no, not if, how he'll strenuously object to my presence.

He can object until the cows come home. I'm not leaving.

Apprehension seized her, and Cora stood and stepped back into the shadows, instead of forward as she'd intended. She sent up a prayer that Brian's homecoming would go smoothly, and he'd quickly realize the need for a competent nurse.

Hidden, she had a chance to watch the driver expertly pull the team to a stop parallel to the house.

The man sitting in the back twisted his torso to take in the house.

By the widening of his eyes and mouth falling open, he was obviously shocked.

Then his jaw clenched, his brown eyes glaring.

“Canfield! What have you done to my house?”

Nothing about him looked pale and wan. Only some shadows under his eyes hinted at his physical state.

“Wasn’t my doing.” Hank swung down from the saddle, flicked Chipper’s reins around the porch rail, and sauntered over to the wagon. “Your nurse needed her own bedroom.”

“Nurse? I don’t need a nurse. I can take care of myself.”

Nerving herself up, Cora moved forward across the porch and down the step to the ground.

His glower made the strong lines of his face look granite hard.

Instinctively, Cora knew she couldn’t show how he intimidated her, so she stood straight shouldered, chin up, and with a calm expression.

His reaction’s just what I expected.

But what Cora hadn’t expected was her reaction—for Brian Bly to be so ruggedly handsome—in a smoldering, broody way. Nor how the zing of attraction thrummed through her body and the solid ground under her feet seemed to ripple, unbalancing her.

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On the way up the mountain, with Hank riding behind the wagon that Seth drove and with no one else to observe, Brian sank into the straw, scooting down inch by inch in an attempt to become prone.

The new dose of laudanum he'd taken at the doctor's office moderated the stabs of pain to a dull ache—until he endured another jolt or unexpectedly tried to shift positions.

Still, he moved gingerly, lest he jar his leg.

Finally, he rested on his back, using his coat as a pillow, and panting at the effort.

I'm as weak as a babe. Having a robust constitution, he rarely suffered any illness, and, God be thanked, had avoided all but minor injuries. So, he didn't have any practice being an invalid.

Sassy Girl lay curled into the straw near his shoulder, quiet after her ecstatic greeting to him and then loping alongside the wagon until she tired. She opened her eyes to check on him getting into position. Apparently satisfied, she returned to snoozing.

Brian gazed up at the stark azure sky, clear of any clouds. Indian summer had descended on Sweetwater Springs, the sun casting benevolent warmth and coating the surroundings in golden beauty. The deciduous trees lurking among the evergreens waved leaves of burgundy, yellow, purple, and orange.

He'd never before lain and gazed at his habitat from this direction—up, instead of outward—and he enjoyed the oddity. Unless a wagon wheel hit a rut or stone, which

it did all too often, he could lull his mind into a kaleidoscope daze.

Too bad I'm not a poet. Surely, I could compose an ode to Montana's natural beauty.

The thought soured his mood. He'd returned from the adventure of a lifetime with plenty of material, almost overwhelmingly so.

But no actual story. Hopefully, finally having solitude and time alone to gather his thoughts in peace, he could come up with a plot as exciting as his experiences.

The wheels hit a bump, jolting his leg. He had to clench his jaw not to groan at the pain.

How will I manage by myself? Up until this point, he'd refused to think of anything but home and solitude.

But now that home was almost a reality, other problems loomed and doubts started creeping into his hardheaded determination to shut the door on the world—or at least all of the world except two other bachelors and one little girl.

Since he had nothing better to do than look at the sky fading toward evening, Brian started thinking through what he needed to do to survive the next few weeks.

While at the doctor's office, O'Reilly, the carpenter, had measured him for crutches.

But they wouldn't be finished and delivered for a few days.

Somehow, he'd have to find a way to hobble around.

Brian hadn't really provisioned his larder for the winter, intending to do so before he left the Harvest Festival. Even if he had, he couldn't stand at the stove and cook.

I could go without meals for a few days. Won't starve. I'll just tighten my belt. From time to time, Hank and Torin will probably toss some food to me.

What about getting dressed and undressed? I suppose I could wear my nightshirt all day like a lazy slugabed. Hank can help me tonight.

What about getting in and out of bed and out of chairs? Going outside to use the privy was out of the question. But he did keep a chamber pot under the bed for use in the worst of the winter or during storms. Maybe if I don't eat or drink much, I won't need the pot too often.

Life would definitely be difficult for the next few weeks. Somehow, he'd have to fight the pain and do what he must to get through the days until he healed.

Brian felt the horses make the turn from the mountain road onto the path branching to Three Bend Lake. The tightness in his chest eased a bit.

He struggled into a sitting position, the movements hurting far more than when lying down. Guess Doc was right about the need for medication.

Sassy Girl inched forward and put her head on his good leg.

Absentmindedly, he scratched her head and stroked her back.

Eagerly, he absorbed the sight of the lake, the surface looking more purple than green, reflecting the shading sky. "Your swans are still here," he called to Hank.

Hank urged Chipper to the side of the wagon. "Aside from that drenching rainstorm the posse had on the ride to Morgan's Crossing, we've had almost balmy weather. Maybe they're telling us to expect this Indian summer to last a while longer than usual."

They passed Hank's log cabin. Some fallen leaves sprinkled the yard and the porch.

"Almost there." Although his friend didn't repeat the warning uttered hours ago, his tense expression said, Brace yourself, Brother.

Earlier, Brian tried to pry information from Hank about what he needed to brace himself for. But the man stayed more mum than a rock. Now he thought to try again. "Gonna tell me what the secret is?"

"I've been sworn to secrecy."

"By whom?"

"Not saying."

Brian scowled at Hank. "You better not have let Elsie and Constance deck out my house with flowers or some such folderol."

Hank nodded toward the flowers and leaves scattered about the wagon bed. "Seems you already have plenty."

Brian brushed at the stray petals on his shirt. "Some brother you are," he grouched.

Hank smirked. "You'll see soon enough."

They passed Torin's house, the shutters drawn over the windows.

Hiding like a gopher in a hole. Hopefully, when Seth left tomorrow after staying overnight at Hank's, his friend would emerge with Jewel.

He'd managed to save the child one piece of taffy, having given out the rest to Seth's

family and the posse members.

When the path curved around the third lake bend, Brian couldn't help a spurt of expectancy. Home. As the wagon drove through the last stand of trees, he anticipated the first view of his snug cabin set on a stretch of sand before the lake.

But instead, the house had almost doubled in size, the formerly-weathered gray boards painted a fresh brown, and a wide porch running the length of the original cabin.

His mouth dropped open. "What the dev—" he caught himself "—dickens!" He blinked, and then blinked again.

Has the laudanum affected my brain? Am I seeing things?

He rubbed his eyes and, when the view remained the same, clenched his fists on a wave of anger.

"Wasn't my doing." Hank swung down from the saddle, flicked Chipper's reins around the porch rail, and sauntered over to the wagon. "Your nurse needed her own bedroom."

"Nurse? I don't need a nurse. I can take care of myself." Brian didn't need some old besom, he mentally spat out a disparaging description he'd heard his Scottish grandfather use, intimately touching him, ordering him around.

A woman stepped out from the porch shadows, her carriage proud. Contrary to his image of a pinch-faced, narrow-eyed older woman with white hair pulled back in a tight bun, she was young. And not just young, pretty. She coolly gazed at him with intelligent gray eyes.

Something about her shook him to his bones.

I'm in trouble now.

Brian cast the young woman a glance of loathing before turning to glare at his so-called friend.

Hank held up his hands in an I'm innocent move. "Andre Bellaire wanted to make sure you were comfortable."

"Bellaire? Don't know the man. I've heard of him, of course. I would have been quite comfortable without this...." He jerked his thumb to indicate the porch and back addition. "And why build onto my house?"

"Because your nurse needs her own room." Hank beckoned the woman forward. "This is Miss Cora Collier. She'll take care of you until you're up and about."

"I'm up and about now."

Hank raised an eyebrow, directing a pointed look at Brian's definitely not up and about body. "Not like you to tell a lie."

Seth tied off the reins, set the brake, and climbed off the wagon seat, stopping to stretch out his legs and open and close his hands several times. He glanced over at the house and back to Brian, a glint in his silvery eyes. "Not what you expected, eh?"

Brian grunted, not bothering to dignify the question with an answer.

With friendly aplomb, Seth ambled over and unhitched the back gate of the wagon. "You ready for this?"

Up until five minutes ago, Brian had been so ready to reach his house and shut the door on the world. But now, he wished he could run away. Heck, he'd settle for limping away. Somewhere far away.

"You!" He jabbed a finger toward where the woman stood. "Stay there. Don't move." He didn't need an interfering female trying to involve herself in what would be a painful transition from wagon to the ground to the house.

Her eyebrows drew together in apparent concern. But at least she didn't move. Yet.

Right then and there, Brian determined he wouldn't use the young woman's name, wouldn't even think her name. He'd pretend she wasn't here. Hopefully, she'd quickly tire of being shunned and beat a retreat down the mountain.

Catching Hank and Seth's attention, Brian nodded his readiness, braced himself for the pain, and scooted slowly toward the back of the wagon, trying to put as much weight on his hands as possible.

Seth and Hank positioned themselves on either side of his legs, leaning in to grab his upper arms and slide him the rest of the way, carefully setting him on one foot.

Throughout the excruciating process, Brian wanted to let out a string of curses against the agony. Hank and Seth, being men, would have understood. But Hank and Seth, being gentlemen, would have boxed his ears for cussing in front of a lady. As Brian would have done if the situation were reversed.

The next pain-filled moments he endured in gritted-teeth, stiff-necked silence, feeling queasy and lightheaded. He only muttered the minimum words when need be, like when Hank asked if he wanted to use the privy.

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He didn't particularly but knew he should. Better use the outhouse while they can help me hobble there. Once I'm down, I probably won't be able to get back up. "Yes."

Brian suffered through the pain and indignity of what came next. Then, as the faint streaks of pink and gold and violet slowly darkened against the purpling sky, the two helped him hobble-hop back to the house and up the step to the porch.

Stepping inside his home, he saw the woman had lit the lamps, far more lights than the lantern that hung on a hook near the door and the writing lamp he kept on his desk.

A third one, brass, with a translucent glass ball around each of the two flames, perched on top of the bookshelf.

A small night candle burned inside a glass chimney on a tiny table next to his bed.

The air smelled of beeswax and vinegar. No doubt every inch was scrubbed and polished.

In the crowded space, the light reflected off the shiny surfaces of the wooden furniture and played over the texture of the curtains, he squinted to be sure, velvet, no less, flanking the windows. Who hangs velvet curtains in a log cabin?

Apparently, Andre Bellaire, that's who.

Even the ink spot was gone. Sanded off, he suspected, for he doubted any amount of

elbow grease, soap, and water would have removed the stain.

“A nightshirt and robe are on the bed,” the woman told him. “Do you want my help to get into them?”

“No! Turn your back.” He grudgingly accepted Hank and Seth’s help in removing his clothing. Only after they’d pulled the nightshirt over his head, and he’d shrugged the garment into place, did he realize it was made of the finest cotton and certainly didn’t belong to him.

Hank picked up the robe, a quilted black silk number with black embroidery on the gold lapels, cuffs, and sash.

Brian eyed the garment, half in dismay, half in admiration. “Let me guess. One of Andre Bellaire’s.”

Humor glinted in Hank’s eyes. “Something a maharaja would wear, I imagine.”

Brian rolled his eyes but held out his arms for them to slide on the robe. He inhaled the slight scent of bay rum, which hopefully would serve to mask his own odor, and tied the sash around his waist.

They helped him to one of the armchairs, which he gingerly settled onto, grateful for the comfort cradling his aching body. But he didn’t allow his relieved reaction to show.

The woman pushed forward a wooden three-legged stool with a fancy cushion on top, and Hank gently lifted Brian’s throbbing leg, so she could slide it underneath.

Propped up in this position, unmoving, the pain eased to mere discomfort, which he definitely appreciated. Still, he refused to let the three people anxiously watching him

know. Stubbornly, he refused to speak at all.

The others pretended not to notice his cold silence. But having gotten to know Seth Flanigan well this past week, Brian could tell his bitter attitude toward the woman bothered him, although the man didn't say so.

"I'll go see to the horses." Seth beat a hasty retreat.

Shame trickled into his awareness. As much as Brian wanted to send them all away, he owed Seth more than he could every repay, both for playing a part to bring down the robbers and in his and Trudy's faithful care for him over the several days he recuperated in their home.

Then, too, Seth had made the long drive from his farm to town and from town to here and was spending the night at Hank's away from his family. Nor had he played any part in Andre Bellaire's manipulative scheme. I should summon up some manners while the man remains my guest.

In the kitchen area, the woman opened a door he hadn't noticed to what looked like a pantry. Brian craned his neck to see more.

She crouched to pull food from an icebox.

I now possess an icebox. Brian wanted to smack his hand to his forehead.

If I wanted an icebox, I could have bought one for myself, he mentally grumbled, refusing to admit to the times he'd thought of purchasing one.

But the effort to go into town, order one from the mercantile, return home, go back to town when the icebox arrived, rent a wagon to haul the thing up the mountain, return the wagon to town, and then ride home was just too much of an effort.

“I have a cold supper waiting,” the woman practically chirped.

“I’m not hungry.” He didn’t care to explain he still felt queasy.

His gruff response didn’t seem to faze her at all, for she tilted her head as if to see inside his body.

“Hungry or not—” she said firmly “—you need nourishment for your body to heal. I’ll heat you some broth.

” She slid a sideways mischievous glance at Hank, before looking at Brian.

“Or would you prefer some gruel or calves foot jelly?”

Horrified by the suggestion, he stared daggers at her.

Hank smothered a laugh.

Brian shifted his attention to glare at him.

Ignoring them both, she went into the icebox and took out a jar of broth, carrying it to the stove, where she poured the contents into a pan that she placed on the stove.

“For you other two gentlemen, there’s chicken, potato salad, and brown sugar glazed carrots.

I have reason to know Mr. Bellaire’s cook is second to none.

Plus, there’s a peach cobbler donated by Mrs. Pendell, housekeeper at Green Valley Ranch.

I'm told she's legendary for this dessert.

And to drink, milk, water, or apple juice. ”

“Sounds wonderful. Milk is fine for me. Goes good with cobbler.” Hank rubbed his hands together. “If I could wash up?” He walked over to the coatrack by the door, removed his Stetson, and hung it up.

The woman lifted the kettle from the stovetop and moved to the dry sink to tip the water into the ewer. “There's soap and a hand towel already there.” She went to the icebox for a jar of milk.

While Hank washed up, she poured Brian's broth into one of the new mugs and handed it to him.

Carefully, he took a sip, expecting something bland but instead received a mouthful of flavor.

His surprise must have shown on his face, for she chuckled. “Good isn't it? Mr. Bellaire's cook added ginger and garlic and a dash of Cajun spice. The ginger should help if your stomach is upset.”

Before he lowered his gaze, he caught a glimpse of knowingness in her gray eyes. Annoyed, he kept drinking. The warmth hitting his stomach seemed to help ease the nausea.

“More?”

Avoiding eye contact, he handed back his mug for a refill.

Seth entered, carrying Brian's Stetson, coat, and gun belt from the wagon and the

saddlebags and bedroll from Marshal. “My wife laundered everything of Brian’s.”

The woman flashed him a smile. “So helpful of her.”

He set the bags and bedroll near the door, hung their hats and his coat on the rack, and held up the gun belt, asking Brian where he wanted it placed.

Brian pointed to the shelf above the front door where he kept his Winchester. “But if you could open the pouch, I saved one piece of candy.”

“My children sure did like that taffy.” He coiled the belt, wrapping the length around the pouch and holster with his Colt .45 and reaching up to place it next to the butt of the rifle. He walked to hand Brian the rather battered piece of candy, before going over to the sink.

While Seth washed his hands, the woman dished up two plates of food and handed one to each man. “I’ve already eaten. Good thing, because I don’t think there’s room for three at that table.”

As they took seats and bowed their heads for silent prayers, she rummaged in one of the drawers of the hutch and pulled out silverware and brown napkins.

Brian knew he didn’t have napkins. Almost never needed them.

The men ate hungrily.

Seth finished first, laid his fork and knife across the plate, folded his napkin, and pushed back his chair a few inches. “Mighty enjoyable meal. My Trudy is as fine a cook as can be?—”

“—I can vouch for that,” Hank agreed.

“But sometimes, it’s nice to eat food flavored a bit differently.”

The woman held up her hands. “Not my doing. Mr. Bellaire’s cook is originally from New Orleans, and sometimes prefers to use Cajun spices.”

“Mr. Bellaire seems like a character,” Seth commented.

“A generous one!” She sprang to her mentor’s defense.

“There’s no reining in that man.” Hank glanced at her. “Only by your aunt conspiring with his daughter to keep him at home—” he looked toward Brian “—who knows what he would have done while up here.”

She giggled, an infectious sound.

Infectious like a disease, he hastily told himself. Not like enticing.

“Mr. Bellaire’s quite the director.” Hank pointed in three directions.

“This, this, this. The idea of helping you, Brian, happened at a tea party, where many of the good ladies of Sweetwater Springs were all too eager to express their ideas. The list got longer and longer and longer. You’re lucky you’re not living in a mansion.

If the man had another week, you would be. ”

Her eyes lit with glee. “And immediate access to more shops and merchandise.”

Brian glowered. Enough of this chit chat.

Hank pushed back his chair and stood. “Thank you, Miss Collier, for your

hospitality.”

“Call me Cora.” She swept a luminous smile at all of them. “The people of Sweetwater Springs are so delightfully informal.”

Seth rose to his feet. “When you have a chance, Cora, come pay us a visit. My Trudy complains when she goes too long without visiting with other ladies. Since our last babe, her energy hasn’t been as robust, and thus, we haven’t gone into town as often as we used to.”

Under the fringe of her bangs, the woman’s forehead wrinkled. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“She’s better now,” Seth hastened to say. “I’m just a mite protective of her health.”

The woman beamed. “I’d love to visit.”

Brian leaned forward and held out a hand for Seth to take. “Can’t thank you enough for everything.” The statement felt so inadequate to convey his feelings. I’m a writer. I should have more words to express the depth of my appreciation.

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Instead of quickly letting go, Seth held on for just a few extra seconds before releasing Brian's hand and glancing from him to Hank. "What we went through that day at the McCurdy hideout forged..."

"Friendships like no other," Hank finished the thought for him.

For a moment, Brian forced himself to put aside his bad humor. He was still irked with his friend but had come to realize that Andre Bellaire was a force of nature even his friend couldn't completely stand against.

Hank strode to the coatrack, took his hat, and placed it on his head. "I'll be back in the morning and bringing Sassy Girl." He shot the nurse a charming grin. I hope you won't mind looking after Brian's puppy. Probably be far easier than looking after Brian."

The woman suppressed a smile. But her eyes danced. "I had a dog as a child. Adored him. A puppy will bring positive energy into this house."

Positive energy. Bah! What kind of nonsensical metaphysical talk was that? With the door shut behind them, Brian scowled at the woman—the expression he used in the past to send any other delicate young lady fleeing his presence. Just for annoyance's sake, he added a growl. That should do it.

Her concerned expression didn't change. "I know the pain is making you cranky."

"Cranky!" Brian fired back. "I'm no child in need of a nap."

She smiled and patted his shoulder in a there, there movement. “A nap is exactly what you need,” she soothed. “Rest will help you heal.”

“Being left alone without any officious nursemaids is what will let me heal.”

Seeming undeterred, she touched his arm. “I know it’s early. But let’s tuck you into bed for the night. Let’s get you clean and comfortable first.”

‘Let’s,’ he harrumphed. How is she staying so calm?

“Soon, you’ll feel better and not be so crotchety.”

“Crotchety!” he ground out. “First you make me into a petulant child. Now, you make me sound like an old woman.”

She flashed him a sunny smile. “Well, if the shoe fits.”

He bared his teeth and growled, louder and longer, which should have done the trick of frightening her all the way down the mountain. But before she turned away and bustled toward the stove, he glimpsed a smirk, which only aggravated him more.

He narrowed his eyes at a small hutch and the brown transferware dishes on the rack.

He imagined picking them up one by one and hurling them at her.

That would break her complacency. She’s lucky I can’t get to them.

The thought gave him some satisfaction, before a niggle of shame made his imagination back off.

He wouldn’t really hurt a woman or throw things at her.

He just wanted this one to be fed up with his piss-poor attitude and march the heck off.

She poured the dirty water from the basin into the bucket under the dry sink and added some warm water. Carrying the basin, a bar of white soap, a small towel, and a washcloth, she returned, setting the bowl on the table and dipping the cloth into the water.

Oh, no! She's not going to bathe me like a babe. If she tries, I'll toss the whole thing at her, and she'll be soaking wet.

Don't be childish, Brian. His mother's voice in his head chided. He hadn't sensed Mama's presence in a very long time, and he swiftly banished the thought of her. He had enough problems with the real woman in front of him without having to also deal with a dead one.

Wisely, his nursemaid seemed to read his mind, handing him the washcloth and soap before moving the bowl closer. "Just your face and hands tonight. We'll do a more complete sponge bath and I can shave you tomorrow after you've rested."

"I can shave myself," he snapped. "Bathe myself."

"Suit yourself." Although she stressed the last syllable, she did so in a calm tone, giving no hint of irritation.

Relieved she wasn't going to wash his face, Brian fingered the cloth, thicker than he expected, and composed of tiny loops.

"It's called terry cloth. I'd never seen that material before living here. Only the best for Mr. Bellaire, though. I think you'll like the feel." She turned and gathered up the dishes, taking them to the dry sink.

He ran the cloth over his face. The moist heat felt good on his dusty skin.

Although he'd slit his throat before admitting it to the woman, he did like the soft feel—at least the part of his face that wasn't covered with the stubble of his beard, which interfered with a smooth glide over his chin, cheeks, and neck.

He didn't look at her, deliberately putting his full attention into soaping the cloth, cleaning his face, and then rinsing both. Next, he thoroughly soaped his hands, before dipping them into the water for a rinse and drying them on the towel.

Brian knew he should thank her. Under normal circumstances, he would thank her. But since these weren't normal circumstances and he didn't want to thank her, he clenched his jaw on the words. The worse he behaved, the sooner he could drive her away.

He laid his head back and closed his eyes, listening to the domestic bustle of a female doing the dishes and putting everything away. He should be bothered by her presence, and he was. Really he was. But there was also a certain comfort in following her movements.

Hearing her footsteps coming toward him and moving past, he opened his eyes.

She crossed over to the bed and flung back the coverings—a white sheet and snowy feather tick.

Where are my blankets? He looked around but didn't see them. Perhaps on the bed in the other room. Cringing, he hoped they didn't smell bad. Then he caught himself. I hope they reek, so she can't stand to sleep here.

She fluffed up the pillows.

Pillows? I didn't have three pillows. Brian narrowed his eyes at the crisp bedding, which seemed suspiciously white, and he couldn't help the stab of shame that someone had washed his dirty linen.

Or they're new. He didn't like either option.

In fact, neither of those pillows looked like his own, which was much flatter.

"Where are my blankets? My pillow?" he demanded.

She ran her hand over the bottom sheet, smoothing out what seemed to be imaginary wrinkles. "Taken back to town. Mrs. Murphy will launder them and add goose down to your pillow to plump it up."

Brian opened his mouth to bark something childish about not wanting a fatter pillow, when suddenly fatigue hit so hard, he lost the impetus to be disagreeable. The bed looked too inviting, and he needed to melt into the beckoning comfort. I'll scare her off tomorrow.

He gazed longingly at the cozy surface. The only obstacle, the distance between his chair and the bed—a matter of about eight feet.

He might as well try to cross a desert. There wasn't a way to get from the chair to the bed without the woman's help.

Your own fool fault. Should have done this when Hank and Seth were here.

"Do you need a bedpan before you lie down?" she asked in a matter-of-fact tone.

He didn't, thank heavens. He didn't want to even consider what he'd need to do when the time came. Trudy Flanigan had left the bathing and toileting of Brian to Dr.

Angus or Seth or their hired man. Buck Skold, the lucky son-of-a-gun, had managed his own one-handed ablutions.

Brian couldn't bring himself to reply, only managing a head shake. Bracing himself for the pain, he placed a palm on the table to push himself up.

He rose a few inches, unable to contain the grunt that escaped. As much as he'd chafed at needing their help, having the men heave him around had sure been easier on his body and on his pride.

"Wait." She rushed to his side and crouched to fit her shoulder under his other arm.

He wanted to snarl for her to leave him be, but as they slowly unfolded in unison to stand, he was pathetically grateful for the support. Once balancing on one leg, he panted, feeling a bit dizzy.

He half hopped, half shuffled in tandem with her all the way to the side of the bed. He wanted to gasp at each spasm of pain. But he clenched his jaw and reined-in the sounds.

They stopped at the bedside for her to remove his robe, while he awkwardly balanced by holding onto her shoulder.

Even with avoiding looking into her face, the intimacy of their bodies so close together, with him in only a nightshirt, made heat flush through him.

He turned his head slightly and thought he saw pink flush into her face.

But the light was too uncertain to be sure.

By the time he was prone and she'd lifted his legs to straighten them on the bed, he

felt like he'd run a mile carrying a fifty-pound sack of grain.

As much as I hate to admit it, I just might need her.

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The heavenly smell of frying bacon lured Brian from a deep sleep, enveloping him in love and comfort.

Then he moved his leg, and the pain spiking into his thigh jerked him into full awareness, a betrayal of both his body and elusive memories of a time long past. “What the—” He chomped off the curse at the sight of the woman cooking at the stove.

She turned, holding the spatula, and grinned. “Good morning. Seems you slept well.”

Brian had slept well, but only as long as he didn’t move. Pain would wake him, and then he’d lie perfectly still until exhaustion swept him under. But since he wasn’t inclined to explain, he only grunted.

“Bacon, scrambled eggs, hash browns, and toast,” she said gaily, flourishing the spatula over the frying pan as she pointed out each part of the meal. “What jam would you like on your toast? Huckleberry, saskatoon, or blackberry? Or there’s apple butter if you’d prefer that.”

“I’d prefer for you to be gone.” His voice sounded gravelly from sleep, and he waited for the pout or the guilt or the dismay or whatever pitiful reaction she’d conjure up.

“If you don’t pick a jam, I’ll pick one for you. Hmmm.” She touched the tip of the spatula to her chin in a thinking pose and studied him. “I think you’re a blackberry man.”

The chit hit the nail on the head with her guess. So, to be contrary, he spat out,

“Huckleberry,” which to his ears ended up sounding more childish than surly.

“Huckleberry it is. I’ll take blackberry for myself.”

Brian became aware of an urgent need to use the pot. But he was certainly not about to ask for help. He didn’t even want her in the room when he suffered through the debacle.

“I think you’re going to need this.” She picked up an object resting on a chair and held it up.

“What. Is. That?” Even as Brian asked the question, he was sorely afraid he knew the answer.

“It’s a Eureka bedpan.” She patted the wedge. “The latest design in bedpans. So much lighter and easier to use and clean. Not like those cumbersome ones we had to deal with at the hospital where I volunteered.”

“You sound like a bedpan saleswoman.”

She chuckled and held up the bedpan with both hands, her expression changing to mock solemnity.

She turned it several ways, as if for him to admire the entirety of the object.

“Step right up and buy the one and only Eureka bedpan!” she said in the pattering cadence of a street huckster.

“Astound all your family and friends recuperating at your home with the latest bedpan design.”

Brian wanted to bark out a laugh at her clever rendition. Yet he held back, not willing to encourage her.

Undeterred by his lack of response, she continued acting.

“Of equal capacity yet far lighter than those old-fashioned earthenware versions. Save your wife or your servants the pain of carrying a heavy basin, instead of this light, yet durable container. In fact, it’s so light and convenient, that the patient may handle it without assistance.” She sent him a pointed look.

That possibility piqued his interest. If he could manage on his own—still awkward, painful, and embarrassing—but without, thank the Good Lord, the possibility of exposing any of his private body parts to her. Or even worse, her touching those parts.

She set down the bedpan and turned back to the stove. “Let me plate the food, and then I’ll go into the bedroom and give you some privacy.”

Grateful for her consideration, he nodded. “Appreciate that.”

The woman wasn’t anything like he expected.

In Brian’s experience with his former fiancé, the minute he turned grumpy, she became lachrymose.

She accused him of being insensitive, being unkind, of not being chivalrous, not being a gentleman.

It got to the point where he felt like tiptoeing around her on uncertain ground where he inevitably was going to flounder and end up in the mud. I ended up in a crater.

He tilted his head, studying her slim form.

Maybe I will use her name. Cora.

After breakfast, of which her patient had eaten every bite, Cora heated water for washing the dishes.

While her hands moved to do the tasks, her thoughts lingered on last night when helping Brian into bed.

Afterward, she tried to ignore that moment of heightened awareness between them and, blessedly, fatigue certainly helped, sending her into sleep.

But this morning, seeing him all rumpled and grumpy and growly, which should be a repelling sight for a right-thinking woman, instead she found him endearing, a feeling she tried without complete success to squash.

From the front door, she heard a knock, followed by a little voice calling out, “Bryan!”

Who? Cora glanced at Brian to see his familiar glower directed at the door. But, despite the scowl, his eyes looked concerned.

“Bryan!”

“A child?”

He didn’t respond, only shifted, and then grimaced.

With a roll of her eyes, Cora went to open the front door.

There stood a girl wearing a pink dress and clutching a handful of colorful fall leaves. Her dark brown hair was mussed, as if not combed today, and, seeing Cora, her almond-shaped blue eyes looked frightened. She made as if to skitter away.

“Why, hello, there.”

The girl froze. “Hel-lo.”

“It’s all right, sweetheart.” Cora crouched to be more level with the child.

“I’m Brian’s friend. There’s no need to be scared of me.

” Up close, she could tell by the child’s features that she was a mongoloid.

But she looked clean and healthy, even if her hair did need combing.

Someone’s taking good care of her. “Do you want to come in and see Brian?”

“Bry-an hurt leg.”

“Yes, he did. But he’s getting better. Do you want to see him?” She straightened and held out a hand.

The girl hesitated.

“Jewel,” Brian called. “I’m here. Come to me.”

The girl slipped her hand into Cora’s.

With a warm glow in her heart, Cora led her inside and over to Brian. “You must be very careful of his leg.”

“Come here, Sugar Princess,” Brian coaxed, his Southern accent thickening. He shifted, almost hiding a wince, and leaned to the side, sliding his arm around Jewel’s waist and drawing her to him.

She held up the leaves.

“Are those for me?”

She nodded.

He took them in his free hand. “Thank you, Sugar.” Then he glared at Cora. “Jewel is very precious to me,” he said fiercely.

Taken aback by his protectiveness toward the child, Cora merely said, “I see.”

Brian picked up the candy from the square table next to his chair. “You’ve had taffy before. Remember how chewy it tastes?”

Her eyes lit up. “Taf-ee good.”

“But you need to wait to eat it until your papa says you can. I’ll put it right here until he comes.” He set the candy back on the table.

Jewel looked from his bandage-wrapped leg to his face and then back to his leg. She pointed one stubby finger. “Ow.” She started to cry. “Ow, Bry-an. Hurt.”

“I’ll be all right, Sugar.”

“Hurt.” She looked at him pitifully, her blue eyes drenched.

“I know, Brian, ow, leg. But Miss Cora is taking good care of me. She’s helping

make me feel better.” He gestured to her with his free hand. “Can you say hello to Miss Cora?”

“Hello, Jewel.” Cora came over to kneel down in front of her. “I’m so happy to meet you. I’m a friend of Elsie.”

The child’s eyes lost their fear. “El-see.”

“Do you live by the lake?”

Jewel twisted to wave in a vague direction.

“Ah, you do.” Cora had never seen a mongoloid child of this age, somewhere around ten or eleven, she guessed. There’d always been a few of these babies and toddlers at the foundling home. The children were so sweet but couldn’t talk or do much, and they died heartbreakingly young.

She’d often suspected a lack of attention contributed to their short time on earth.

The small staff at the foundling home focused on the other babies and children—the ones more likely to live and who were able to interact and hopefully become adopted.

When she volunteered, she always made it a point to spend some time with the neglected ones.

But since she devoted so much of her free time to the hospital, instead of the foundling home, she’d always doubted she made a difference in their bleak lives.

Jewel tentatively touched Cora’s locket.

“Would you like to see inside?” Cora pried apart the two halves and pointed to one

miniature photograph. “Look, Jewel. This is my mama and papa.” She held the open locket up for the girl to see, and then tapped the other side. “And this is my grandmama and grandpapa.”

Jewel looked puzzled. “Papa?”

“Yes.” She pointed to her father in the photograph, and then tapped her chest. “This is my papa.”

“I don’t think she knows about mamas and grandmamas and grandpapas,” Brian said in a low tone. “She doesn’t have any. Or know of any other papas, either.”

Cora glanced at him in disbelief. “But surely her father talks about their relatives?”

With a sigh, Brian leaned back against his pillows. “The situation is...complicated. And painful. And a secret that’s not mine to tell. I’ll just say Torin, her father, is very protective of Jewel—with good reason. And so am I.”

“Hank knows?”

“For a long time, it was just Hank, Torin, and I. Then, relatively recently, we expanded our little circle when Hank wanted a wife, decided to go courting, and met Elsie. And Elsie came attached with Constance and Constance to Dr. Angus. So, all of a sudden, our foursome became a circle of seven. Constance persuaded Torin to meet Mrs. Swensen, who lives up the mountain from us.”

“I’ve met Mrs. Swensen. She has a lot of children,” Cora murmured, recalling how at the tea party, Elsie needed to confer with the woman, probably about Jewel.

“But so far, Torin’s balked about Jewel meeting the rest of her family.”

“Is it...?” Cora debated how to tactfully ask.

“Because she’s not quite right?” Brian’s scowl was back and his tone sharp.

“The medical term is Mongoloid. Jewel has Mongolism,” Cora said tartly. “And, in my admittedly little experience from volunteering at the foundling home, in comparison to the children I’ve interacted with who have Mongolism, Jewel seems to be doing quite all right.”

Cora’s matter-of-fact acceptance of Jewel seemed to stun Brian into silence, although he didn’t appear sullen this time.

Jewel pointed to the dishes on the table. “Jewel wash?”

Cora looked at him, wide-eyed in obvious astonishment. “Should I let her?” she whispered.

“Jewel’s a bang-up dish washer. Lately, whenever she comes over, she’s taken on this task.

Just set her up with soapy hot water in the dry sink, rinse water in a tin bucket—” he pointed to underneath the dry sink “—and towels.” Brian hesitated, looking toward where he stored them. “Who knows where they are? Hopefully, still there.” He pointed to the drawer.

Following his finger, Cora moved to the kitchen cabinet and opened the drawer, lifting out a snowy white towel.

“That’s not mine,” he grumbled.

She laughed. “When Delia saw the condition yours were in, she relegated them to the

rag bin.” She pointed to a square tin underneath the dry sink next to the bucket. “So, you’ll still be able to use them as pen wipers.”

“Can never have too many pen wipers.” He gestured to the front door. “Before you heat more hot water, crack that open. Her father will be here any minute, petrified out of his mind.”

“Should I go find him?”

“A foreign woman trying to talk to him will make the situation worse.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Foreign?”

“You know what I mean,” he said gruffly.

With a laugh and a pat on Jewel’s head, Cora moved to the door and cracked it open a few inches, and then got everything ready for Jewel to wash the dishes.

The child picked up the sea sponge and held it up. “New.”

“You’re right.”

With a smile and look of concentration, Jewel dipped the sponge into the dish water and squeezed, seeming to enjoy the act, for she repeated it several more times.

Intrigued by the child, Cora stood close and supervised for a few minutes, as the girl painstakingly washed a plate, scrubbing far more than needed.

When the plate apparently was clean to her satisfaction, Jewel held it up to Cora. “Pretty dish. New.”

“Would you like me to dry that?”

“No.” Jewel lowered her head and didn’t stop, keeping her focus on her task, her mouth slightly open, tongue slightly out.

So earnest. Utterly adorable. Cora chuckled. “You are such a big helper.”

Jewel looked up and beamed, her eyes almost scrunching up. “Jewel good wash-er.”

“You are indeed.”

Whirling back to Brian, Cora assessed his condition. He’d eaten every bit of his breakfast, a gratifying sight.

Irritated, he waved her away. “Stop fretting over me.”

“It’s my job to fret over you.” Even though she had experience with difficult patients, there was something exhilarating in her back and forth with her curmudgeonly patient—almost like they played a game of badminton. He bats the shuttlecock to me, I bat it back. So far, I feel like I’m winning.

Barely.

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Pounding footsteps sounded outside. Brian pointed toward the door. “Here he comes.”

Jewel’s father burst through the door, seeming not to see Cora, his only focus his daughter. He immediately calmed, bending to place his hands on his legs and panting for breath. “This child’s going to be the death of me,” he gasped out.

What an astonishingly handsome man. Hardly the misshapen oldster she’d originally imagined.

“Your daughter is growing up,” Cora said in a gentle tone. “Becoming independent.”

Torin jolted erect, shock contorting his face. “Jewel, come to Papa,” he ordered.

Jewel set down the dishcloth and pointed to Brian. “Papa, Bry-an ow.”

His shoulders were high and tight. After a brief glance, Torin didn’t make eye contact with Cora, instead, keeping his focus on Brian. “I overslept, and Jewel snuck away. She was worried about you. But I told her we couldn’t visit.” He slid a sidelong glance at Cora. “No disrespect meant, ma’am.”

“Torin, I think everything will be just fine.” But Brian’s underlying message to his friend seemed to be, I think she’s safe for Jewel.

Cora sent him a startled glance, surprised by the reassurance in his voice. Strange how he’s done nothing but bark at me since he arrived home. I’d never have thought he’d put in a favorable word about me.

Of course, having me safe with Jewel doesn't mean he wants me nursing him.

Cora made sure her smile at the reclusive man was as warm and friendly as she felt.

"Mr. Rees, I'm Cora Collier."

He didn't quite meet her eyes. "Call me Torin. Haven't been called Mr. Rees since I moved here. Brings back bad memories."

"And I'm Cora. I've been delighted to make your daughter's acquaintance. I can tell Jewel's a very special and a much-loved little girl. I look forward to her feeling comfortable with me." And you, too.

Mr. Rees's shoulders relaxed, and he met her gaze more directly. "I couldn't agree more. But most people won't see Jewel's sweetness. Just that she's not right."

"I think—" Cora spoke in her firm nurse's tone "—you both need to stop referring to Jewel as 'not right.' As the medical term for Jewel's condition is Mongolism, that's a more pertinent label than 'not right.'"

Torin gaped at her, his blue eyes wide with shock.

"Jewel is the way God created her," Cora continued her lecture.

"She's meant to be her own very special self.

And—" she sent Brian a pointed look "—as I've told Brian, in my eyes, Jewel is quite right. She's verbal.

" She gestured to the girl still engrossed in her dishwashing.

"She's helpful. She's empathetic. You've done a very good job raising her. "

As she'd lectured him, Torin's expression changed from shocked to astonished. He shot Brian a sheepish smile. "I've had some help with the raising of her. I consider Hank and Brian to be my daughter's honorary uncles."

"We're brothers," Brian said simply. "We fiercely love her."

Knock me over with a feather. She never would have pegged Mr. Grumpy as a lover of children, especially one whom most people would label an idiot. But after observing his obvious care for Jewel, his friendship with Torin.... Something inside her shifted, softened. Something too dangerous to consider.

Torin relaxed enough to wave for Cora to take the other armchair. Then he scooted out a wooden chair from the table and sat, leaning forward toward Brian. "I've been so concerned about you and Hank since Elsie and Constance brought the news of the robbery and how you two fools joined the posse."

"Hey!" Brian protested.

"The day after the Harvest Festival, the ladies made the trip up here, so we would know why Hank and Brian hadn't returned and wouldn't worry."

Brian made a gruff scoffing sound.

"Right. And, thus, giving me the far more intense worry of if you two would survive a showdown with the outlaw gang. Went through some long days of waiting." His eyes clouded, his expression holding a lost look.

"I tried not to let my imagination run wild, tried not to wonder what Jewel and I would do without you two, not to think of how lonely I'd be, or how she'd miss her uncles... ."

Cora's healer's heart ached, and she wished to move close, take Torin's hand or touch his shoulder, something physical and gentle to reassure him.

But she needed to tiptoe very carefully around this wounded man.

She sensed something or someone had deeply hurt him, and he wouldn't trust easily.

She cast a surreptitious glance at Brian. Neither of them will.

"When he returned to town, Hank hastened up the mountain to tell me you were injured, but alive, and expected to make a full recovery. Best news of my life." Torin choked up.

"Did he also warn you about—" Brian's voice sounded light as if he wanted to spare Torin any sign of emotion.

"—about the havoc poised to descend on our peaceful hamlet?" For the first time, the hint of a smile broke through the gravity of Torin's expression. But the shadows lingered in his eyes.

Cora couldn't help but chuckle at the apt description.

"Havoc, eh?" Brian sent Cora a baleful look. "I have a more forceful description, but I wouldn't want you to cover Jewel's ears."

The diversion seemed to work, for Torin's eyes lost their haunted look.

"Then, of course, Hank came out again to help out and direct all this." He circled a hand to indicate the modified house and new furnishings.

"Warned me to sit tight. With this fine weather, Jewel has not been pleased to remain

cooped up in the house. Probably one reason she escaped this morning.”

“Traitor,” Brian grumbled. “You should have put a stop to this foolishness.”

“Hank said he did his best to rein in Andre Bellaire. But since at the time, he was also laughing his fool head off, I didn’t give his protestations much weight.”

“To give him his due,” Cora defended their absent friend, “Hank did manage to check some of the more...ah, idealistic ideas. But someone still slipped in the doilies.”

“Doilies!” Brian looked around for them.

“They’re draped over the back of the wing chairs.” Cora spoke with exaggerated helpfulness, reaching up and back to pat the top of her wing chair. “One’s also behind your head.”

“So...” Brian glanced over to check on Jewel, happily engrossed in drying one dish at a time, before she stumped over to carefully place them on the rack. “Hank’s responsible for the brown velvet curtains?”

Cora couldn’t help a spurt of mischief. She put on her most innocent expression and metaphorically pushed Hank under the wagon wheels. “He is,” she simpered.

“Velvet,” he said in a tone of disbelief.

“There was some talk of gold tassels.” She suppressed the giggle that wanted to bubble up. “Blue or green velvet.” Unable to resist, she fibbed. “Red or Coral.”

“Red?” His eyes practically bulged out. “Did they think I live in a bordello?”

Cora lowered her eyelashes in a sign of mock demureness. “I wouldn’t know the

color of curtains in a bordello.” She made herself sound shocked. “The ladies settled on brown, Hank telling them that being the color of your eyes. Although, personally, I prefer blue.” All true.

Brian shot her a suspicious look.

“I also recall a mention of how warm they’d be over the windows in the winter.”

He made a face, as if he’d bitten into something sour, glanced at Jewel, and clenched his jaw.

Cora had never bantered with a man before, and the laughter bubbling inside her made her feel effervescent. Who would have thought nursing could be such fun? She’d always thought of nursing as a serious vocation, shouldering the burden of caring for the injured, ill, and dying.

She refused to acknowledge it might not be nursing in general that was such fun, so much as nursing this man that made her feel this way.

Letting out an audible sigh, Brian cast his gaze heavenward, before looking back at Cora. “Guess I should feel grateful to be spared gold tassels.”

She let out a gurgle of laughter. “And lace edging your pillowcases and sheets. And a dozen handkerchiefs with ‘Hero’ embroidered on them.”

“Oh, my—” He bit off the curse. A gentleman, no matter how provoked, didn’t swear in front of a lady. Still this one certainly tried his patience.

As if amused by his inner dilemma, laughter danced in her eyes, although her expression remained innocent.

Pretty gray eyes. Cheeks pink with humor.

He growled at his wayward thoughts. I'm not supposed to notice the eyes and cheeks of my unwanted nursemaid. I'm supposed to be driving her away, not amusing her.

"A few ladies managed to embroider some handkerchiefs with your initials. Let me know when you're in need of one."

He was about to bark out that he didn't need any monogrammed handkerchiefs, until he remembered the state of his old ones.

More often than not, he used them to wipe the ink off the nibs of his pen rather than wiping his nose.

He didn't suppose his nursemaid would believe the excuse that the original linen had a pattern of black splotches.

Best ignore her. He turned to Torin. "Now that you're out of your shell, oh tortoise, we can discuss this one's unnecessary presence." He poked an index finger Cora's direction.

Jewel, having neatly hung her damp towel on a peg, wandered over and, with a trusting air, bottom first, maneuvered to sit on Cora's lap.

Torin lunged forward, hand shooting out as if to stop her.

Both females ignored him. The woman leaned over, helping Jewel scoot deeper on her lap. Her skirt and petticoats rucked up, exposing her high buttoned shoes.

Brian couldn't help eyeing where the leather encased her slender ankles and had a flash of his fingers unbuttoning the boot, pulling it off and unrolling her stocking,

before caressing her bare skin and watching her pink toes curl.

“Bry-an, ow?”

Jewel saying his name jerked him back to the present.

Horried by where his wayward thoughts had led him, he wrenched his attention back to the conversation, avoiding Cora’s gaze and focusing on the child. “I’ll be all right, Sugar Princess.” He handed her the candy, and then looked at Torin. “Taffy for breakfast?”

With a look of parental resignation, he nodded.

Happily chewing, Jewel leaned against Cora’s chest, her relaxed body showing her total trust.

With a Madonna smile, she dropped a kiss on the child’s head, before turning to Torin. “She’s so precious.”

She’s doing everything right. Torin and Jewel are certainly starting to trust her.

So am I for that matter.

But that realization only ratcheted up his suspicions. He’d trusted before. Trusted that smiles and coos at orphaned children and words about the importance of charity were genuine.

His fiancé had been all sweetness and charm until she got his ring on her finger.

Then Persephone started criticizing him and trying to change him.

She turned away in horror from any infirm or disfigured child or adult, not allowing any near her.

And she surely would have sent Jewel away instead of kindly inviting her inside and allowing the girl to sit on her lap.

Cora could just be a good actress, playing the role of Florence Nightingale. But her kindness might not be the real woman.

Don't soften. Don't trust.

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The sound of barking preceded Hank's arrival, and Brian couldn't help the anticipation rising in his stomach and the smile that spread across his face.

Even with Jewel still perched contentedly on Cora's lap and Torin watching with bemused tolerance, the prospect of reuniting with Sassy Girl lifted his spirits in a way that surprised him, and he didn't try to hide his response.

The door burst open, and Hank stumbled inside, barely managing to keep hold of the leather lead as the brown-and-tan puppy, wearing a new leather collar, dragged him forward. "Whoa there, Sassy Girl"

The dog's entire body wiggled with excitement, her tail wagging so hard Brian half expected it to fly off—just as he remembered from the Harvest Festival.

"Just a minute, Sass!" Hank laughed. "I told her we were coming to see you, and she seemed to understand. She pulled like a sled dog all the way here."

If not for the leash restraining her, Sassy Girl would have bounded straight for Brian.

"Stop her, Hank," Cora commanded, lifting Jewel off her lap and angling her toward Torin. "She's going to need to be gentle near Brian." She hurried to the side of the chair, as if to use her body to shield his wounded leg.

A few feet away from Brian, Hank knelt down, holding the puppy.

Her tail smacked his head, knocking off his hat.

Laughing, he ran his arm across the front of her chest to hold her in place, and, with his other hand, pressed her hindquarters down. "Sit, Sassy Girl."

She obeyed but kept trying to bounce up.

Grinning, Brian held out a hand for her to sniff. "It's me, girl. Remember me?"

She seemed to calm, licking his hand.

"Let her go, Hank." Brian widened his legs as far as possible in the chair, making larger lap space. It hurt to move, but not quite as much as in the previous days.

Cora crouched at the corner of the chair, as if to block the dog. "Not a good idea, Brian."

Hank loosened the rope, but Sassy Girl pulled away from him.

Brian barely had time to brace himself before she launched into his lap, avoiding landing on his injury only by dint of Cora leaning over to shield his leg.

Her pink tongue swiped his face with enthusiastic kisses while her paws scrambled for purchase on his chest.

Cora started giggling, trying to keep Sassy Girl's tail from hitting her face and her paws away from Brian's bad leg.

"Easy, girl," Brian said through his laughter, inhaling puppy breath and gently pushing her face away while scratching behind her ears. "I missed you too." He wrapped his arms around her, enduring some more tongue swipes.

Cora, seeming to feel his leg was safe, rocked back and stood, moving to her chair to

sit. "Whew!"

Jewel squealed with delight from Torin's lap, clapping her hands together. "Pup-ee! Pup-ee!"

"That's right, Sugar Princess." Brian fondled the puppy's ears. "This is Sassy Girl. Let's give her a few minutes to settle down, and then you can meet her." He continued stroking the dog and murmuring softly what a good girl she was.

The child waited patiently, practically vibrating with excitement.

Torin ran a hand over his daughter's tousled hair. "Jewel's never seen a dog before. I tried to prepare her for what to expect last night after Hank stopped by to tell me about Sassy Girl. Pointed out a drawing of a dog in one of her picture books. But I don't think she grasped the reality."

Cora looked at the three men. "No dogs? Among any of you? That's a crime against men and animals." She smiled at Jewel. "And children. My childhood dog was the love of my life."

Brian's ears pricked. Sounds like she doesn't have a suitor waiting for her. He caught himself and squashed his curiosity. Why should I care?

When Sassy Girl calmed, Brian placed her on the floor and continued to lean and hold her in place. The movements stretched at his healing wound. But the pain couldn't compare to the joy of reuniting with his puppy.

Torin let Jewel slide off his lap and approach. But the stiffness of his body showed the effort it cost him to let her go alone.

The girl moved forward slowly, one hand extended, her expression serious with

concentration.

"Gently, sweetheart," Torin instructed, shifting his chair closer to supervise.

Brian caught Sassy Girl's collar. "Sit," he commanded, pressing gently on her hindquarters. The puppy's bottom touched the floor for exactly one second before she bounced up again, tail still wagging furiously.

"She needs work on that command," Hank observed dryly, swiping his hat off the floor and rising to his feet. He went over to the hat rack and deposited his Stetson next to Brian's.

"You think?" Brian tried again. "Sit, Sass."

This time she managed three seconds before wiggling free to sniff Jewel, who giggled when the wet nose tickled her hands.

Brian rubbed the collar with his thumb. "Who's responsible for this?"

"Constance," Hank said, holding up a hand to stop Brian in case he protested. "She said it was her pleasure. Apparently, the dog kept her and Elsie busy, which was good for keeping up the ladies' spirits while we were gone." He smiled at the puppy. "Didn't you, good girl? Made the ladies laugh."

"Speaking of puppies," Brian said, glancing at Torin while still keeping one hand on Sassy Girl, "the man I bought her from—Helmut Junger—has more from the litter. Said he'd save a gentle one for Jewel if you're interested."

Torin's face transformed, the wariness he'd displayed around Cora lifting. With an indulgent expression, he watched his daughter carefully pet the puppy. "Jewel would love one."

Cora bent over to let Sassy Girl sniff her hand, before petting the puppy's head. "I think the responsibility of looking after her own dog will be good for Jewel."

Torin's smile said he agreed.

While his nurse's attention was on the dog, Brian leaned back and secretly massaged the muscles around his injury. "Junger lives close to Morgan's Crossing. But he said he'd send the pup with El Davis, the teamster, once you let him know."

"How much?"

Brian waved his hand dismissively. "Deputy Redwolf paid a dollar each for his two, setting the going rate. Junger suggested the same amount for me."

"A dollar?" Torin's eyebrows rose. "For a puppy that could grow into a fine tracker? With Jewel escaping me twice in these last few months, that price sounds like a bargain."

"The man has more dogs than he knows what to do with," Brian said. "All his neighbors already have one from previous litters."

"I'll have to pay El Davis, too." Torin looked at Hank. "That is if you're willing to meet the teamster in town and transport a puppy up the mountain."

"No problem." Hank turned one of the chairs at the table around and straddled it. "I'll just prevail on Dr. Angus to organize another visit in his surrey. He'll probably jump at the invitation to check on you, Brian, and bring the ladies to visit."

Brian made an exaggerated mock grimace, and the others laughed.

Jewel settled cross-legged on the floor, coaxing Sassy Girl into her lap.

The dog sprawled across her legs, finally calm, while the child stroked her back with careful, reverent touches, whispering something Brian couldn't quite hear.

"Well, that settles it," Torin said, his voice rough with emotion. "How do I reach this Junger?"

"Post a letter to Morgan's Crossing," Hank said. "He picks up mail there monthly."

"I'll write today. You can take it when next you ride down to town." Torin's smile was genuine now, the shadows seemingly banished from his eyes. "Though I suspect I'll have a mutiny on my hands when we have to leave this one behind."

"Jewel can visit Sassy Girl any time," Brian said. "In fact, I insist on it. Someone needs to teach this beast some manners."

"Beast?" Cora laughed. "She's adorable. Hardly a beast."

"Adorably destructive," Hank corrected, stretching out one foot. "I had to rescue this boot from her this morning."

"Already developing expensive tastes," Brian said. "Next she'll be demanding velvet curtains."

Cora's eyes danced with mischief. "Brown velvet, to match her eyes and yours." She leaned to scratch the dog's back. "What do you think about doilies, Sassy Girl? Does the house need a few more?"

"Don't encourage her," Brian growled, but without real heat.

"Too late," Torin said. "I can already see Jewel decorating a dog bed with tassels and lace."

"Heaven help us all," Brian muttered. He kept a straight face, lest he appear cheerful. He hadn't quite forgotten how irked he felt about the changes to his house and having a pretty nurse foisted on him.

Cora's laugh drew his gaze to her. Her face was alive, her expressive eyes sparkling. He quickly looked away. You're only drawn to her because you haven't spent time with a lovely woman in years.

They spent the next while attempting to teach Sassy Girl to sit on command, with varying degrees of success. The puppy would sit for Jewel longer than anyone else. Even then her bottom barely touched the floor before bouncing up again.

"Papa," Jewel said, looking up with pleading eyes. "Pup-ee come home?"

"Not this puppy, sweetheart. But we'll get you your very own. Would you like that?"

Her face lit up. "Yes! Yes! Jewel's pup-ee!"

"That's right. Now, give Sassy Girl one more pet. We need to go home to eat. We skipped breakfast, remember?"

"Nooo," Jewel wailed, clutching the puppy tighter.

Sassy Girl licked her cheek.

"Yes," her father said in a rare moment of firmness.

Reluctance written all over her face, Jewel gave Sassy Girl one last hug. She whispered something in the puppy's ear that made the dog's tail wag harder and reluctantly stood.

"Bye-bye, Sas-ee," she said solemnly, waving. "Bye-bye, Bry-an. Bye-bye, Cor-a."

Torin, smiling, held out a hand for Jewel to take.

"Goodbye, sweetheart," Cora said warmly. "Come back soon." She trailed them to the door and stood in the doorway to wave them off.

After they left, the cabin seemed suddenly quiet except for Sassy Girl's panting as she plopped down to curl up at Brian's feet.

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Cora brushed some dog hairs off her skirt. "Time for your laudanum."

Brian's warm, comfortable mood evaporated like morning mist on the lake. "No."

Ignoring him, she walked to the hutch and removed a blue glass bottle hidden behind a mug. "Dr. Cameron wants you to take the laudanum twice a day for a week."

"I don't care what the good doctor wants," he bit out. "I don't want to be muddleheaded." Especially around you.

Cora paused, the bottle in her hand. "No one likes that. But being in pain won't help you heal faster."

"It makes me tired," Brian argued. "At the Flanigans', I spent most of my time asleep."

"Sleep helps you recover. Rest is the best thing you could do for your body."

"I don't want to become dependent on it." The words came out harsher than he intended, driven by a sudden vision of himself hollow-eyed and shaking, begging for more laudanum like an opium addict.

Cora set the bottle on the table and took a seat in the chair beside him, her gray eyes serious. "I promise won't let that happen."

"How can you promise that?"

"Because I'm going to make you a deal." She held his gaze steadily.

"Take the laudanum for two more days—just two—and then you can stop.

I won't give you any more after that, no matter how much pain you're in." A mischievous light glinted in her eyes, although her expression remained solemn. "Even if you beg."

Beg. Never. Brian studied her face, searching for any sign of deception. But all he saw was earnest concern and, underneath, a steely determination that reminded him, oddly, of Sheriff Granger.

"Two days," he repeated.

"Two days. My word on it."

He shouldn't agree. He should maintain his stubborn refusal and deal with the pain on his own terms. But the throbbing in his leg had been steadily building, and the thought of two more days of the laudanum easing the worst of the pain tempted him to set his stubborn refusal aside.

It's just about the pain, he told himself. Nothing to do with starting to trust her.

But even as Cora measured out the dose, and he swallowed the bitter medicine, Brian suspected he was lying to himself. Somewhere between her gentle handling of Jewel and her understanding of his fears, his defenses had begun to crack.

And that terrified him more than any amount of pain.

For two days, Brian slept.

Cora had expected him to fight the effects of the laudanum, to struggle against the drowsiness with his characteristic stubbornness. Instead, something within him seemed to have loosened, allowing his body the rest it desperately needed.

While he napped, she moved quietly around the cabin, keeping herself busy with reading or with doing small tasks—mending a tear in one of the new towels caused by Sassy Girl's teeth, organizing the medical supplies, preparing simple meals that could be easily reheated when he woke.

The domesticity of it all should have felt strange.

But instead, Cora found a certain peace in the routine and the beauty of nature surrounding her.

When Brian did wake, he was still grumpy, though the edge of animosity had dulled. With gruff determination, he rejected her offers to help him bathe or manage the bedpan or even comb his hair. But she noticed he no longer glared at her as if she were personally responsible for all his misfortunes.

"Thank you," he said curtly the first time she brought him a bowl of beef stew, the words seeming to surprise him as much as her.

"You're welcome," she replied, hiding her smile as she turned away.

From then on, he exhibited better manners, saying 'please' and 'thank you,' and sometimes, almost, but not quite, managing a smile.

By the second day, Cora found herself growing restless.

After the flurry of activity—the trip west, settling into the Bellaire household, the excitement of planning the trip to Three Bend Lake, the work cleaning and organizing

Brian's cabin—the quiet time dragged.

She was used to the bustle of the hospital, the constant demands of patients, the camaraderie of other volunteers, interacting with her family, even if much of those encounters were unpleasant, and spending time with Ivy, Grandpapa, and Aunt Rose.

Thank goodness for Sassy Girl. The dog rotated between curling up next to Brian's bedside and following Cora around, keeping her company. When her patient needed privacy for his ablutions, Cora took the dog on short walks, not wanting to be too far away if he needed her.

She tried, really tried, not to become too attached to Sassy Girl. But a puppy being a puppy pretty much made any emotional distance impossible.

Finally, with nothing left to clean or mend, while Brian dozed, Cora pulled out her lap desk and settled in the armchair. She took out the ink bottle, paper, and the pen and began to write an overdue letter to her best friend.

Dearest Ivy,

I find myself in the strangest situation—one I could never have imagined when I left New York. I'm essentially alone in a cabin with a man who alternates between growling at me like a wounded bear and surprising me with glimpses of unexpected softness and humor.

Mr. Bly—Brian, as everyone calls him—is not at all what I expected.

First of all, he's about thirty, and not conventionally handsome but has rugged good looks that I must admit to finding attractive.

Right now, he's scruffy, having refused to allow me to shave him, (although he's

promising to do so by himself soon.) His brown hair is shoulder-length and often tangled, again refusing to let me comb it.

His brown eyes can shoot hard looks when he's disapproving of me (almost all the time.) Yet they brighten at his puppy's antics.

Yes, there's a puppy. Her name is Sassy Girl, or Sassy, or Sass. Oh, the joys (and frustrations) of having a puppy. You remember how heartbroken I was over Buddy's death. Then came Stepmother's refusal to allow me another dog.

But I digress.

When I first arrived, Brian tried his best to frighten me away with scowls and snarls. But yesterday, I watched him with a little girl who has Mongolism, and Ivy, the tenderness in his voice, the protective way he held her—it made my heart do the most alarming things.

The isolation here is unlike anything I've experienced.

When Brian is sleeping (which is most of the time thanks to the laudanum), the silence in the house is so complete I can hear my own heartbeat.

Sometimes I take short walks along the lake with Sassy Girl.

But I don't dare go far in case he needs me.

The water is beautiful, reflecting the heavenly blue sky like a mirror, and I've seen the swans glide by.

They're as elegant as you might imagine.

I'm embarrassed to admit I'm a bit lonely. After always being surrounded by people—even if they were usually tiresome family members—this solitude feels strange. I find myself looking forward to Brian's waking moments, even when he's being difficult, just for the human interaction.

Is it terrible that I'm starting to enjoy our verbal sparring? There's something invigorating about matching wits with the man, like a game where we're both trying not to admit we're having fun.

Now, I must describe our nearest neighbors. Torin Rees and his daughter Jewel. If Brian is the rugged cowboy-like hero, Torin is the classical handsome hero from the fairy tales.

Brian stirred. “Privacy please,” he mumbled.

“Just a minute.” I’ll finish writing this later. Wiping off the tip of her pen and capping the ink bottle, Cora returned them to their places. Folding her letter, she tucked it under the desk flap.

Brian lay with his eyes closed as if not wanting to engage.

She hurried past and put her lap desk into the bottom of the wardrobe, before catching up the blue knitted shawl lying across her bed, and gratefully escaping outside.

The autumn air was crisp but not unpleasant. As she walked along the shoreline, she wrapped her shawl around her shoulders. Sassy Girl bounded alongside her, chasing the colorful leaves and splashing in the shallows.

She didn't go far—just enough to stretch her legs and fill her lungs with fresh air and the scent of nature. The isolation that had felt oppressive inside seemed peaceful out here, with the gentle lap of water against the shore, the birds calling, and the rustle of

leaves overhead.

For a moment, she wished never to leave.

Astonished by the thought, the antithesis of what she'd striven for these last few years, Cora called to the dog. With Sassy Girl gamboling beside her, she went inside, closing the door firmly on any fanciful imaginings.

On the morning of the third day, after her breakfast and coming in from using the privy carrying a bucket of well water, she found Brian already awake, his jaw set with determination.

"No more laudanum," he said before she could even greet him.

"I promised, didn't I?" She set the bucket on the floor, washed and dried her hands, and then moved to the stove, pulling the kettle to the warmer burner. "I'll brew you some willow bark tea instead. It won't be as effective, but it should take the edge off your pain."

He wiggled to a sitting position, arranging his pillows behind him to prop him up against the wall.

Cora didn't offer to help, knowing from experience he'd refuse.

He watched suspiciously as she prepared the tea, adding a generous amount of honey to mask the bitter taste. When she handed him the mug and a buttered roll to sop up the liquid, he sniffed the tea cautiously before taking a sip. "Not as vile as I expected," he admitted grudgingly.

"High praise indeed," she said dryly, earning what might have been the ghost of a smile. "Do you want some breakfast?"

He slightly raised the roll. “This is fine for now.”

Nodding, she went to refill the kettle and ewer with fresh water, setting one back on the stove and the other next to the basin.

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Then she returned to aid Brian in getting out of bed and to the wing chair—one of the few tasks he'd allowed her to help him with.

The sound of an approaching surrey broke the morning quiet. Sassy Girl yelped and ran to the door, continuing to bark.

Brian called her over to him, and, astonishingly, the dog obeyed. He leaned sideways to curl his hand over her shoulder.

Cora moved to the window to see Dr. Angus at the reins of a surrey, with Constance beside him and Elsie and Hank in the back.

"Brace yourself," she warned Brian. "The invasion has arrived."

He groaned but sat up, straightening the lapels of his exotic robe and running a hand through his disheveled hair, trying to smooth it back.

After a knock, Dr. Angus entered first, carrying a pair of wooden crutches that he maneuvered through the door. Even if Cora hadn't known he was Dr. Cameron's brother, the resemblance was unmistakable—the same red hair and penetrating blue eyes, though Dr. Angus was younger and leaner.

Constance, in a fashionable green outfit and matching hat, followed, carrying a picnic basket.

Elsie came behind her, holding a large jar of what looked like tea. She shifted the jar, tucking it against her side with one hand and hugging Cora with the other arm. "How

have you been managing?"

"Managing is the word," Brian grumbled.

Cora sent Brian a pointed glance. "Perhaps not managing a certain stubborn patient as well as I should." She gave Dr. Angus an apologetic look. "He only agreed to take the laudanum for two days. So today, he's only had willow bark tea."

"Ah, aye." Dr. Angus's blue eyes twinkled. "Y'er the lass who managed to get this stubborn fool to take his medicine." His Scottish brogue was thicker than his brother's. "Well done."

The unexpected praise warmed her.

"Two days' worth," Brian reiterated defensively. "And I'm done now."

"Two more than I expected," the doctor replied cheerfully. He set the crutches against the wall and moved to examine Brian's leg. "Let's see how ye're healing."

Brian pointed an impervious finger at the women and then the back door.

Cora would have liked to stay and observe, for Brian had refused to let her examine his injury. But since Dr. Cameron had told her unless the wound seeped, or the bandages became dirty or wet, that she could wait to change them until Dr. Angus checked him over.

Feeling grateful for female company, she led the women to the back porch, pointing out the haunt blue ceiling, same as on the front, and the new rocking chairs.

"Four of these." Constance patted the top of one rocker. "I noticed two on the front porch. So thoughtful of Mr. Bellaire to provide enough for company."

When Dr. Angus called them inside, Constance and Elsie bustled about the room, exclaiming over the improvements to the cabin, which they'd heard about but not seen, and fussing over Sassy Girl, who lapped up the attention.

"These are beautiful curtains," Elsie said, fingering the brown velvet. "They'll be so warm this winter."

"Don't remind him," Hank said with a grin. "Brian's still coming to terms with them."

Brian rolled his eyes, and they all laughed.

After Dr. Angus pronounced himself satisfied with Brian's progress, he demonstrated the proper use of the crutches.

"The key is to let your arms take the weight, not your armpits," he instructed.

"Like this." He handed the crutches to Cora to hold while he helped Brian to his feet to practice, and the others moved back the furniture to create a longer corridor.

Elsie scooped up Sassy Girl and sat on one of the wooden chairs with the dog on her lap, holding the puppy tightly.

Brian positioned the crutches under his arms and stood carefully, his face tight with concentration. His first attempts were awkward, his movements jerky, uncertain, and, from the tight cast of his countenance, painful. But gradually, he found a rhythm, moving slowly across the cabin floor.

"Look at you," Constance said warmly. "You'll be racing Sassy Girl around the lake in no time."

"More like hobbling after her while she runs circles around me," Brian muttered.

But in spite of his depreciative words, Cora could see the satisfaction in his eyes at being mobile again.

"Careful," Hank called out as Brian nearly clipped the table leg. "Those aren't wings, you know."

"Could've fooled me," Elsie giggled. "Brian looks like he's trying to take flight."

Even Brian's lips twitched. "Better than hopping around on one leg like a wounded crow."

"Crows are very intelligent birds," Cora said with mock innocence, directing a playful dart at Brian. "Though perhaps not known for their grace."

"See?" Brian turned to the others, gesturing with one crutch and, in the process, nearly losing his balance. "She never stops."

But there was no real heat in his complaint, and the others laughed.

After Brian had demonstrated reasonable proficiency, he lowered himself back into his chair with obvious relief and swiped a hand across his brow. "There." He leaned back. "I can manage on my own now. My nursemaid can return to town."

Taken aback by the abrupt change in topic, Cora couldn't help an unprofessional feeling of hurt and disappointment that he wanted to send her away. She chided herself for the unprofessional reaction. I'm supposed to be pleased when a patient heals enough to not need my services.

"Absolutely not," Dr. Angus said firmly. "Ye need care for at least another two weeks. That leg is healing well. But one wrong move could set ye back weeks."

"Hank and Torin can look after me," Brian argued, though with less vehemence than Cora expected.

Hank shifted uncomfortably and avoided Brian's eyes. "About that... I'm planning to spend the next few days in town. Maybe longer." He glanced at Elsie with such naked longing that Cora's heart squeezed. "I've been away too long already."

"You were helping catch outlaws," Brian pointed out.

"And then helping you," Elsie added softly. "I've been understanding, truly I have, Brian. But last week was so scary. Now..." She reached for Hank's hand. "Now, I'd like my beau back for a while. Please."

Brian opened his mouth, clearly ready to argue.

But, apparently yielding to the entreaty in Elsie's eyes, he shut it again.

His gaze moved from Hank and Elsie's joined hands to Dr. Angus's firm expression to Constance's sympathetic smile, finally landing on Cora, who did her best to remain impassive.

She held her breath, not sure what she was hoping for—to remain or to leave.

"Ten days," he said finally. "You can stay for ten days. But not a minute longer."

Everyone turned to stare at him in astonishment.

"What?" He scowled at their shocked expressions. "I'm not completely unreasonable. I'm compromising at ten days. But if you all would prefer—" he said in an irascible tone "—I'll narrow that timeline to one week."

"Ten days is all I need," Cora said, trying not to show her relief. Although, she couldn't help wondering if she'd just told a lie. Something told her that ten days might not be nearly enough—though for what, she didn't dare examine too closely.

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Brian shifted in his chair, trying to find a position that didn't send spikes of pain through his leg.

He'd overdone it with the crutches yesterday, showing off like some fool peacock, and now he was paying the price.

Through the open door, he could see Cora on the back porch, bent over her lap desk, the morning sun glinting on her hair as she wrote.

In a patch of sunlight, Sassy Girl was curled up next to her.

The sight of her industriously writing stirred something in him—an itch he hadn't felt since he'd been shot.

During the posse's adventures, he'd managed to jot down notes despite fatigue, rain, and then the pain and laudanum fog.

Now those notes called to him, begging to be transformed into a more coherent narrative.

Leaning over, he picked up his crutches from the floor and maneuvered himself to his feet.

He shifted the crutches into place, and hobbled to the door, carefully navigating around the furniture.

He'd been outside a few times to practice walking with crutches across the porch and

had learned to manage with speed.

But, inside, the crowded room presented too many obstacles. He stopped just outside the doorway.

She looked up, holding her pen still, and watching him come through the door.

“Cora?” He hated how his voice came out begrudgingly when he needed a favor and strove for a more friendly tone. “Might I borrow your lap desk when you're finished?”

Her eyebrows rose in surprise. “You can use it now.

I writing to my friend Ivy and I can do that at the table.

” She tilted her head, studying him with those perceptive gray eyes.

“Are you planning to write? Sketch?” She waved the letter to dry, wiped off the ink and capped off the pen, fitting them into place inside the desk, and closing the top.

“Write.”

“Do you want to sit out here while you do so?” She patted the arm of the rocker next to her. “The sunshine is lovely. I’m trying to savor every day.”

He cast a reluctant glance at the rocking chair. “Maybe in a few days if the weather is good. For now, the wing chair is more comfortable.”

She stood and walked around him to go inside and waited next to the wing chair.

He hobbled over, and then did the complicated shuffle that turned him about. After handing her the crutches, he sank into the chair, holding in a groan.

She gave him the lap desk. "Do you need stationery?"

After placing the boxy shape on his lap, Brian pointed to the bookshelf. "Could you please bring me that blue leather-covered book? The one on the right with no title? I'll write in that. And also bring me that little brown notebook. The one you tucked away when you emptied my saddle bags."

She searched the crowded shelves until she found the journal and the battered notebook and handed both to him.

"Thank you." He held up the notebook, opening it to a random page to show the cramped, penciled writing.

"This looks worse for wear because I brought it along and took notes during the posse's expedition. Now, I intend to write out a more ordered account while my memory's still fresh and I'm no longer muddleheaded. "

Her face lit up with interest. "How fascinating! I'd love to read it when you're finished." She lowered herself into the other wing chair.

"No." The refusal came out sharper than Brian intended. At her hurt expression, he forced himself to explain. "It's not just facts. There are... private thoughts. Feelings." The admission made him want to squirm worse than his aching leg.

"I understand," she said stiffly.

"I plan to use some of the material for an adventure book," he rushed out, trying to make amends. "You can read that when it's published."

"Oh." She glanced toward his bookshelf and wrinkled her nose. "Like those dime novels?"

Something in her tone—a subtle disdain that painfully reminded him of his father—made his jaw clench. He inhaled and exhaled, striving for patience. "Exactly like those 'lowly' books that entertain thousands of readers who can't afford or aren't interested in leather-bound volumes of poetry."

Pink stained her cheeks. "I didn't say they were lowly."

"You didn't have to."

She pressed her lips together, apparently unable to disagree.

He gestured toward the shelf. "I challenge you to read one before you judge the genre. Start with *The Robber and the Robber Baron*. Or read any of them."

Her chin lifted in that stubborn way he was beginning to recognize. "Fine. I accept your challenge."

"Fine," he ground out.

They glared at each other, before Cora stood abruptly and marched the few steps to the bookshelf. She pulled out the nearest one of his books and glanced at the cover. With a little gasp, she looked up and narrowed her eyes at him. "You wrote this?"

"And nine others," he said coldly. "That one's my best seller."

She gave him a stilted nod. "I'll be in my room if you need anything."

"I won't."

The stiff-backed march continued into the bedroom. She closed the door behind her with a firm click that wasn't quite a slam.

Brian stared at the closed door, irritation and something that might have been disappointment warring in his chest. He'd hoped she'd be different from the literary snobs who looked down their noses at popular fiction or, at least, his brand of popular fiction. Apparently, he'd been wrong.

With effort, he forced himself to put the annoying woman out of his head. Instead, he opened the lap desk for ink and the pen, and then closed the top, positioning his journal for the most comfortable writing position.

He picked up the pen, thought back to the morning of the Harvest Festival, dipped the pen into the inkwell, and began to write. For the first time in months, the words flowed.

Hours later, Cora turned the final page of *The Robber and the Robber Baron*. She carefully closed the book, her mind reeling. She'd been wrong. Completely, utterly, embarrassingly wrong.

She'd started reading with the intention of skimming through quickly, just enough to satisfy Brian's challenge.

But from the first page, Jack Stone's adventure gripped her, pulling her into the story.

The vivid descriptions of the Montana landscape, the complex villain who wasn't entirely evil, the hero who wasn't entirely good, the relationship between Jack and his horse that brought tears to her eyes when the animal was injured, was nothing like what she'd expected.

Glancing at the window, she was shocked to see the sun low in the sky.

She'd been reading almost all day, only emerging to prepare meals and clean up after them.

Even then, she'd eaten mechanically, her mind still lost in Jack's world. Back in her room, lying on the bed, the waning sunlight hadn't been enough to make her stop.

She should have lit her bedside lamp. Good way to ruin my vision.

Unexpected tears pricked her eyes, a complex roiling of multiple emotions.

How moved she was by the story. So much so, that she hadn't wanted it to end.

How dismissive she'd been to Brian about his novels.

How ashamed she felt for criticizing his work and his dream, when she knew all too well how horrible it felt for people to do the same to hers.

On the other side of the door, Cora imagined she could hear the steady scratch of Brian's pen.

He'd been writing with the same focused intensity she'd shown while reading, referring frequently to the notebook. They hadn't spoken a word to each other in the intervening time, preserving a cold silence.

I need to apologize. The thought made her stomach knot. He'd crow over her, no doubt. Make some cutting remark about literary snobs getting their comeuppance. She deserved his censure, but that didn't make the prospect of saying so any more pleasant.

Taking a deep breath, Cora rose from the bed and straightened her skirts.

Somewhere, along the way, she'd removed her boots.

Looking down at her stocking feet, she debated about donning them again.

Ladies didn't go about in stocking feet, especially around gentlemen who weren't their relatives.

But this lady can't muster up the energy.

Holding the book to her chest, Cora opened her door and stepped into the main room.

Brian looked up from his writing, his expression guarded.

Sassy Girl rose and ambled over to sniff her skirt.

Without shifting her gaze from Brian, Cora bent her knees for a quick pat, before straightening.

"I owe you an apology," she said without preamble.

"I was wrong to judge your work without reading it.

Your book is..." She searched for words that wouldn't sound condescending.

"Wonderful. Truly. I couldn't put it down. "

His pen stopped moving. Something flickered across his face—vulnerability?—before his usual mask slipped back into place. "You don't have to say that."

"I'm not." She moved closer, still clutching the book, and perched on the edge of the other wing chair.

"Jack Stone feels real. His friendship with Samuel has depth.

The way you showed the railroad baron's corruption without making him a caricature.

That scene where Jack has to choose between revenge and justice.

.." She shook her head. "I expected mindless adventure. Lots of gore. No emotions except for the hero's love of his dog or his horse."

"Jack Stone loved his horse."

"He also loved his sister and his niece and the preacher's daughter, even if he thought he wasn't good enough for her."

Brian's expression softened, but the look in his eyes remained wary.

"You wrote about loyalty and moral choices and what makes a man honorable. I didn't want it to end."

Brian cleared his throat roughly. "Well. That's... Thank you."

"How did you come up with the idea?" Now that the worst was over, Cora relaxed and settled deeper into the chair, lowering the book to her lap.

"I read about railroad corruption in the newspapers.

Started thinking about what would happen if an ordinary man got caught up in it.

Someone who just wanted to do right but kept getting pulled deeper into the conflict.

" As he talked, his eyes lit up, the guarded expression falling away.

"Jack's based partly on a ranch hand I met here and partly on stories my grandfather

told about honor and choices. "

"Your grandfather sounds like he was important to you."

The light in his eyes dimmed. "He was. A long time ago." Before she could probe that painful-sounding past, he gestured to the bookshelf. "The others are there if you're interested. No more Jack Stone, though. Each adventure is different."

"I'd love to read them." Cora put her sincerity into her tone. She gestured at the journal. "Are you writing just about your own experience, or about everyone's?"

"Well, I don't quite know about everyone's unless they talked about what happened. After missing the robbers in Morgan's Crossing, we split off and headed different directions, trying to track where they went, before all meeting up at the Flanigans' farmhouse."

He hesitated, then seemed to make a decision. "Want to hear some of it?"

"I'd like nothing better."

For the next hour, Brian read from his journal, his voice bringing the events to vivid life. Cora found herself holding her breath as he described racing around the stockade's perimeter, gasping when he was shot, feeling the chaos and fear and determination of that terrible morning.

"How are you planning to use this for your next adventure?"

"Not sure yet. Obviously, I need to change the details to protect the innocent—and the guilty.

" He tapped the journal. "Can't have my hero racing to open a gate with a bullet in his

leg. Wouldn't be realistic. But he can't collapse on the ground and let everyone else do what needs doing.

Readers expect him to be more heroic than that. "

"But that's exactly what makes it heroic," Cora protested. "You kept going despite the pain. You did what needed to be done."

He looked at her strangely. "You really think so?"

"I know so." She leaned forward, enthusiasm carrying her past their earlier awkwardness. "Brian, this could be your best book yet. The authenticity of it, the real danger."

"You understand," he said softly, wonder in his voice. "You actually understand what I'm trying to do."

"Of course I do. Now." She felt her cheeks heat. "I'm sorry I was such a snob earlier. My grandfather loved books—all books. He would have scolded me for judging without reading."

"Your grandfather sounds like a wise man."

"He was." The familiar ache of loss rose in her chest. "He died recently. That's part of why I came west with my great-aunt Rose."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

The simple sincerity in his voice brought tears to her eyes.

She blinked them back. "When he was so ill, Aunt Rose and I took turns reading to

him. I wish I had known about your books then. I'll bet one of your rousing adventure stories would have occupied his mind better than some of the boring scientific treatises he chose. ”

“I’m not sure that’s much of a compliment,” he drawled.

She laughed. “You know what I mean.”

They fell silent, the air between them seeming to thicken, charged with unspoken possibilities. Then Sassy Girl barked outside, breaking the spell, and they both looked away.

"I should start dinner," Cora said, standing quickly.

"I should rest this leg," Brian agreed.

But as she moved to the kitchen area, Cora couldn't help glancing back to find him watching her with an expression she couldn't quite decipher. Something had shifted between them in the last hour, something that had nothing to do with books and everything to do with a deepening understanding.

As she prepared their meal, she wondered about that look and, again, later as she lay in bed. Whatever was happening between them, Cora had a feeling it could become more complicated than any adventure Jack Stone had ever faced.

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Brian set down his pen and flexed his cramped fingers, surveying the completed journal with satisfaction.

One week of steady writing had transformed his scattered notes into a coherent account of the robbery and the posse's adventures.

The leather-bound book was nearly full, his handwriting covering page after page with the events that still sometimes jolted him awake at night.

Through the window, he could see Cora on the back porch, bundled in her coat, the chair twisted sideways to catch the sun's rays, completely absorbed in *Mitch Blanco and the Canyon of Death*—the seventh of his novels she'd devoured this week.

As she read, her expressive face showed every emotion, from worry to excitement to satisfaction when Mitch inevitably triumphed.

Early on in the week, Brian braced for interruptions, for demands on his time and attention.

Persephone had never understood his need to write, constantly complaining when he spent "too much time with those silly stories" instead of escorting her to yet another social event.

She'd hover and sigh dramatically, manufacture small crises that required his immediate attention, until he'd give up in frustration and attend to her.

But Cora... Cora simply let him be. She moved quietly around the cabin, brought him

meals without being asked, and found her own occupations.

When he emerged from his writing cave, she was ready to engage.

When he needed to work, she gave him space to do so.

She was the most remarkably restful woman he'd ever experienced.

Well, most of the time. We had some tense moments, mostly caused by me.

With a feeling of accomplishment, he put the journal on the small square table next to him.

Now that he'd finished the project he needed to start plotting his next adventure.

He had material aplenty—enough for ten books.

Character sketches from his observations at the Harvest Festival filled the notebook.

He had enough descriptions of oldsters, children, and everyone in between, for the next five books.

But so far, no story. No plot that would weave these elements together into the kind of tale his readers expected. His mind felt as blank as the paper before him.

Picking up the pen again, he touched the nib to the paper, watching an ink blot form. Realizing what he was doing, he snatched up the paper, looking underneath to make sure the ink hadn't soaked through. Seeing no stain on the surface of the lap desk, he blew out a breath of relief.

Perhaps the problem is Cora's presence, after all.

Brian stared out the window. How could he concentrate with her sitting out there, the autumn sun catching the rich brown of her hair, her face animated as she delved into the story?

Even when she was indoors and quiet, he was aware of her—the soft rustle of turning pages, the way she tucked escaped tendrils of hair behind her ears, her little gasps when a character faced danger.

Be honest with yourself, at least. He'd struggled for months to develop a story.

No, the problem with his lack of ability to write wasn't that Cora disturbed his peace. The latest problem was that she didn't. She fit into his life like she'd always been there, and that unnerved him far more than any blank page.

When did I start looking forward to our evening discussions about my books? When had her insights begun to matter more than any review in the papers? When?—

"Afternoon, Brian!" Torin's voice carried from the front of the house, followed by Jewel's excited chatter.

From outside on the back porch, Sassy Girl started barking.

Setting aside the lap desk onto the other chair, Brian picked up his crutches and lurched to his feet, keeping his weight on his good leg. Up until now, he'd called for Cora rather than get up himself. But he needed wean himself off from needing her.

"Bry-an!" Jewel rushed forward but stopped just short of throwing herself at him, remembering his injury. "Sas-ee good girl today?"

"Mostly good," Brian admitted, thinking of the sock the puppy had stolen and shredded that morning. "She's waiting for you out back."

The child stumped through the cabin, and soon they heard her delighted squeals as she reunited with the dog.

"She starts asking to come here as soon as she wakes up," Torin said as they made their way to stand at the back window. "Sure will be glad when her puppy gets here, at least so I'll be spared her constant questions."

"Well, you won't be spared it piddling on the floor, waking you at night to go out, or chewing on whatever you've mistakenly left on the floor."

"Good point. I'll start training Jewel to keep her toys up high. Having a puppy eat them might be the right incentive."

Through the window, they watched Cora look up from her book with a warm smile and slide her arm around Jewel's waist, cuddling her close.

"You comfortable with Cora now?" He knew Torin had been over every day. But he'd been too engrossed with his writing to pay him much heed. His friend was familiar with Brian's distant behavior when in the writing cave.

"I still keep a careful distance. But not as much, though. We talk some." He tilted his head toward the open door. "Maybe I'll do so now." He sauntered outside.

Brian remained at the partially-open window, grateful to stretch his legs after sitting for so long. The autumn air held a crisp edge that warned of winter's approach. But the sunshine made it pleasant enough outside.

He observed as the two settled into what had become their routine—Torin and Cora in the two rocking chairs and Jewel on the beach playing with Sassy Girl, squeals and yippy barks accompanying their antics.

Cora had taught Jewel and Sassy Girl a new game that involved Jewel throwing a stick into the shallow water and watching the puppy splash after it, then gambol in circles around her, before bringing it back for more throws.

Both child and dog ended up tired, soaking wet, and delighted with themselves.

They weren't allowed to play the game for long, before both were bundled into towels and then, for Jewel, dry clothing.

"I've been trying to teach her letters," Torin said abruptly to Cora, his gaze never leaving his daughter. "Dr. Angus gave me a primer months ago. But I'm not having much success. She knows 'A' for Apple and 'F' for flower, but that's about all."

"That's a wonderful start," Cora said encouragingly. "Allow Jewel to learn at her own pace."

"Will she, though?" Torin's voice held a wealth of worry. "Or am I fooling myself?"

"You're not fooling yourself," Cora said firmly. "What Jewel has going for her is her own determination. She just needs the right approach—a way to catch her attention so she's motivated to learn."

Brian listened to the exchange, noting how Cora's matter-of-fact confidence eased the tension in Torin's shoulders. She had a gift for that—making the impossible seem merely challenging. She has a gift for a lot of things, including softening up a curmudgeonly bachelor.

"I have a friend in New York who loves teaching children. I'll write to her for advice."

Torin remained silent, perhaps thinking. "Guess it can't hurt."

An hour later, after Torin and a protesting Jewel left, Cora carried a towel-wrapped puppy inside.

“This one’s soon going to be too heavy for me.

” She set down the dog and vigorously rubbed her as dry as possible, before holding her nose to nose and looking into her eyes.

“No rolling over on the rug. No rubbing against your Papa’s pants. Hear?”

Once released, Sassy Girl promptly skittered to the rug and rolled on her back.

Brian chuckled.

Cora stood, arms akimbo, and mock glared at the dog. “You listen just as well as your papa.”

“I’d say she listens better,” he drawled.

“Humph.”

He could tell by the way the corners of her mouth curved that she wasn’t really perturbed.

“You going to write to Ivy?” he asked, having heard snippets about their friendship throughout the week.

"Ivy tutors several young children and might have ideas for helping Jewel."

Brian held in a smile. Cora couldn't see a problem without trying to fix it. The trait should have annoyed him. Well, in the beginning, she did annoy him. But she

possessed the ability to back off, which he appreciated, and he found himself oddly touched by her determination to help his friends.

He looked down at the crumpled paper. "I'm moving to my desk," he announced. "I need proper writing space if I'm going to figure out this blasted plot." He unfurled the paper to show her the blot. "I can't risk ruining your lap desk."

"Brian, no. Your leg?—"

"My leg is fine."

"Sitting sideways will strain?—"

Did I not just think to myself she knows how to back off? Apparently, I was mistaken. "I know my own limits." He didn't mean to snap, but frustration at his tangled feelings for her, at his ongoing inability to craft a story made him sound shorter than intended.

Her lips compressed into a thin line. "Fine. Don't blame me when you're in agony later." She gathered up her writing materials and her book. "I'll be outside where I can't witness your foolishness." She stormed out of the house, slamming the door behind her.

Half feeling guilty, half irked, Brian maneuvered himself to his desk, a process that took longer than he'd care to admit. The familiar space should have been comforting. But sitting with his leg awkwardly extended to the side sent twinges up his hip. He wished for the footstool but wouldn't be able to fit it and his legs under the desk.

He shifted, trying to find a bearable position.

After opening the top drawer, he removed some sheets of paper and set them on the

surface. At some point, he'd ruined his desk blotter by spilling a bowl of hot soup over it and had never bought a new one.

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Consequently, the wood surface was riddled with dark blotches. Someone had attempted, with little success, to rid the desk of the various blots. He could tell because the black wasn't as vivid.

He was rather glad the woman valiantly scrubbing away hadn't succeeded.

He'd spent a lot of time staring at those small patches of ink, his thoughts in search of a word, or concept, or to remember what color eyes he'd given a minor character in the front of the book.

And in trying to come up with a new story.

He shifted his porkpie ink bottle closer and pulled out the cork plug. Then he took up his pen. In the process he realized that he'd probably should refill both his and Cora's inkwells. He dipped in his pen and then made a line at the top of the page, making sure enough ink remained.

With no other tiny tasks to delay his start, the blank page mocked him.

All around lay evidence of his previous productivity—finished novels on the shelf.

Rejection letters he'd kept as motivation and acceptance letters he'd treasured residing in the bottom desk drawer.

Vivid images that haunted his dreams in his head.

Now, when he had the best material of his life, the words wouldn't come.

He picked up his pen, determined to write something, anything. First a character name. Or... he glanced out the window at Cora. She didn't seem to be reading, just staring out at the lake.

Maybe I should bring back Jack Stone. Give him a different romance this time. In retrospect, that preacher's daughter had been rather dull.

Maybe the new woman would be a vivid redhead with a lush body? No, that would make her too much a caricature of a saloon girl or the madam of a brothel.

"Move it along, Brian," he said under his breath, and began to write.

Jack Stone rode into Willow Creek on a Tuesday?—

Bah. Too ordinary. He scratched out the line.

The sound of gunfire jerked Jack from an uneasy sleep. Springing to his feet?—

Brian sighed. Too melodramatic.

Some might say Jack Stone went looking for trouble. But the truth was?—

Brian crossed out the line with an angry slash.

The truth was he couldn't write about Jack when his mind kept wandering to the woman outside, probably at this moment mentally lecturing him about stubborn men who didn't know when to rest and contorted their bodies into positions that would cause them pain.

His leg throbbed. His back ached from the awkward position. And his creative well remained as dry as Montana dirt in August.

From time to time, Cora glanced back through the window, watching Brian struggle with his positioning at the desk.

She fought the urge to march inside and bodily drag him back to his wing chair.

Stubborn, impossible man. He'd pay for this foolishness later, and I'll rub it in his nose that I told him so.

She tried to return to her book—Oscar Hancock was about to confront the villainous mine owner. But worry kept breaking her concentration. Every few minutes, she'd glance through the window to see Brian still hunched awkwardly over his desk, his face tight with discomfort and frustration.

The Indian summer that had blessed them with unusual warmth was fading. Even bundled in her coat, she felt the chill of approaching winter in the air. Soon, these pleasant afternoons on the porch would be only a memory.

As would my time here. Dr. Angus had said ten more days, and seven had already passed.

Three more days, and she'd return to town, to the Bellaire mansion, to her planned life as the town's nurse.

The thought should have pleased her. That was what she'd wanted, what she'd traveled across the country to achieve.

So why did the prospect of leaving make her chest tight with something that felt suspiciously like loss?

Through the window, she saw Brian throw down his pen in disgust. He attempted to stand, wobbled, and grabbed the desk for support. Without thinking, she was on her

feet, almost tripping over the dog, and racing through the door.

"Don't say it," he growled as she reached his side.

"I wasn't going to say anything," she lied, slipping her shoulder under his arm to take some of his weight.

He allowed her to help him limp to the wing chair, his jaw clenched. Once settled, he leaned back and closed his eyes.

"Let me brew you some willow bark tea."

He held up a hand to forestall her. "I can't write," he said quietly. "I have everything I need—experiences, characters, settings. But no story. It's like trying to build a house with no blueprint."

"Maybe you're trying too hard," she suggested, lifting his leg and adjusting the footstool underneath. "Maybe the story needs time to percolate."

"I don't have time." His eyes opened, dark with frustration. "My editor expects a new manuscript soon. Readers are waiting for the next adventure. And I have nothing. Seven months of nothing."

"You've been through trauma," she said gently. "Being shot, the recovery, the adjustments. Perhaps your mind needs to heal just as much as your body."

"Trauma," he scoffed, but without real heat. "Jack Stone would shake it off and ride into his next adventure."

"You're not Jack Stone." She settled into the other chair and leaned to touch his knee. "You're Brian Bly, and you're human. Humans need time to process difficult

experiences."

He studied her with those intense brown eyes. "Is that your professional medical opinion?"

"It's my opinion as someone who's come to—" She caught herself before saying something revealing. "As your friend."

"Are we friends?" The question seemed to surprise him as much as her.

"I'd like to think so. We've shared books and stories, conversations and comfortable silences. We've watched Jewel and Sassy Girl play until we're all exhausted from laughing. If that's not friendship, I don't know what is."

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "I suppose when you put it that way..."

"Besides," Cora added, trying to lighten the moment, "only a friend would put up with your growling and stubbornness without throwing something at you." She stood and crossed back to the desk for his crutches, taking them to lay next to his chair. Once again, she sat down.

"I believe you've threatened that once or twice."

"Only with pillows. And I was teasing. And you deserved it."

"‘Spose I did."

They lapsed into companionable silence. Through the windows, they watched the setting sun turn molten, painting the sky and the reflections on the lake in shades of gold and amber.

"Thank you," Brian said suddenly.

"For what?"

"For understanding. For not pushing. For—" He gestured vaguely to his leg. "For everything."

Warmth bloomed in her chest. "You're welcome."

"My leg is better, really it is. After sitting at that desk, though—" his tone lightened "—the rest of my body might be a bit twisted."

"Why don't you try writing at the table? There'd be space for your leg and the footstool underneath."

"Good thinking." He eased back in his chair and sent her an unexpectedly charming smile. "Worth a try."

Three more days. The thought whispered through Cora's mind like an unwelcome guest. Three more days of this easy companionship, these quiet moments, a sense of belonging she'd never expected to find in a cabin by a mountain lake.

Cora pushed the melancholy thoughts away. Three days was three days. She'd make the most of them and deal with the leaving when it came. For now, she had a patient to tend, a friend to support, and supper to prepare.

And if her heart ached a little at the thought of returning to town, well, that was something she'd examine later. Much later. Perhaps never.

"I should start supper," she said, not moving.

"In a minute," Brian said softly. "The sunset's not quite finished."

So they sat and watched the light fade over the water.

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Two days later, a knock at the door interrupted Cora's attempt to coax Brian into eating, rather than picking at, lunch. He'd been surly all morning, snapping at her suggestions and glowering at his empty pages as if they'd personally offended him.

"I'll see who it is," she said, not bothering to hide her relief at the interruption.

Anna Swensen stood on the porch, her thin face pink from the walk, a brown paper package in her hands. "Good afternoon, Cora. My Inga picked this up at the depot yesterday. She's been checking after school like you asked."

"Oh, how wonderful!" Cora accepted the package eagerly. "Won't you come in?"

Anna glanced over her shoulder. "Just for a moment. I left the younger ones with Inga, but she'll need help with dinner soon."

They stepped inside, where Brian nodded at Mrs. Swensen, and then pointedly ignored them, hunching over the blank paper on the table and making the atmosphere uncomfortable.

"Would you like some tea?" Cora offered, her tone determinedly cheerful. "It'll only take a moment to heat."

"That's kind, but no." Anna's gaze swept the tidy cabin with approval. "You've done wonders here."

"Most of the credit goes to Mr. Bellaire and the ladies of Sweetwater Springs for their suggestions and whirlwind cleaning," Cora said with a laugh.

"I've just maintained it. Why don't we go out on the porch and sit for a bit?"

The lake view is so beautiful." She grabbed her coat off the rack, shrugged into the garment, and led Anna outside.

They sat and chatted for a few minutes about domestic matters—how to keep the stove drawing properly, how Anna's youngest was teething and making them all miserable with his crying, how to prepare for the mountain winters.

It was such a relief to have female conversation that Cora found herself reluctant to let her guest leave.

"I really must go," Anna said, standing. "But it's been lovely talking with you. Next spring, if you return to Three Bend Lake, you must come visit. The children would love to meet you."

"And I them. I've heard they're adorable."

Anna blushed and lowered her eyes. "From where the road forks, I'm about a twenty-minute walk higher. Although," she said wryly, "longer if you're accompanied by children."

On a wave of laughter, they walked through the house, and Cora waved her goodbye. With a sigh, she turned to take off her coat and saw Brian staring at her.

As if to pretend he hadn't been watching, he gazed intensely at the paper, and then scribbled something across the top.

Cora went to her room, sat on her bed, and eagerly opened Ivy's package. Inside, cushioned in tissue paper, lay a pink felt capital J, about four inches high. The letter was stitched with care and stuffed to give it dimension.

She unfolded the letter. As always, the sight of Ivy's familiar handwriting pinched at her heart.

Dearest Cora,

Your letter about Jewel touched my heart. What a blessed child to have such devoted caretakers! I've been thinking about your request for teaching suggestions, and I remembered something that worked well with one of my young pupils when he struggled with traditional methods.

Children like Jewel often learn better through touch and play.

I've made this felt letter for her to hold and explore.

If it helps, I'd be happy to make more—perhaps her whole name to start?

The tactile experience of tracing the letter's shape while saying its sound can create stronger connections than simply looking at marks on a page.

Please give Jewel's father my compliments on raising such a beloved child. In my experience tutoring, I've seen too many children whose differences make them targets of cruelty or neglect. How wonderful that Jewel has a papa who cherishes her exactly as she is.

I miss you dreadfully and live for your letters. The house feels even drearier without your visits. Yesterday, Papa complained about the coal bill again, and I couldn't help but think of your adventures in the Wild West with longing...

Cora pressed the letter to her chest, her mind racing. Ivy longing for adventure. Jewel needing a teacher. Torin needing help.

The solution seemed so obvious she wanted to laugh with delight.

Jumping to her feet, she hurried out of the bedroom. "Brian! I've had the most wonderful idea?—"

"Not now, Cora." He didn't look up from the page, still with only a single line written across the top. "I'm working."

"You're staring at the paper," she pointed out.

"I'm imagining a scene." His voice was cold, distant. "A process that you're interrupting."

"But this is important?—"

"Nothing is more important than my looming deadline." He finally looked at her, his brown eyes hard. "Which I'll miss if you keep chattering at me."

Cora recoiled as if slapped. After days of pleasant conversation and growing friendship, his harsh dismissal stung more than she cared to admit. "Fine," she said stiffly. "I'll take my 'chattering' elsewhere."

She took down her coat from the rack, donning it with jerky motions, and marched to her room.

She shoved Ivy's letter and the felt J into her coat pocket.

The photograph of her friend sat on her nightstand, and she grabbed that too, sliding the frame into the opposite pocket.

If Brian wanted to wallow in his foul mood alone, she'd leave him to it.

The front door slammed behind her with satisfying force.

The walk to Torin's house helped cool her temper, though hurt still simmered beneath the surface. How could Brian switch so quickly from friend to hostile stranger? Yesterday they'd had an in-depth discussion of his books. Today she was an unwanted interruption.

Three more days, she reminded herself. Then you'll be back in town, working with Dr. Cameron, and Brian Bly can stew in his own grumpiness.

The thought should have been comforting. Instead, her chest tightened from the impending loss.

Cora knocked softly on Torin's door, mindful that Jewel might be napping. The house was far larger than Brian's original cabin but had the same rustic charm, with green shutters framing the windows and a wide porch overlooking the lake. The building sat farther back than Hank's or Brian's, on the opposite side of the road.

When building, he'd probably wanted the scenic view, but not the close proximity of his vulnerable daughter to the water.

Torin opened the door, surprise flickering across his handsome face. "Cora? Is everything all right?"

"Yes, I...." She hesitated, suddenly aware she'd arrived unannounced and uninvited to the home of a man she made uncomfortable. "I have something for Jewel. About her reading lessons. But if this is a bad time?—"

"No, please, come in." He stepped back, gesturing her inside. "Jewel's napping, but she'll wake soon."

The entryway was surprisingly tidy for a bachelor raising a child alone, with touches that spoke of attempts at homemaking—a braided rug, Jewel's drawings tacked to one wall, a stately mirrored coatrack, holding various coats, hats, and scarves, placed neatly rather than tossed. The scent of baking surprised her. I suppose Torin had to learn to cook and bake for Jewel's sake.

Torin led her into a parlor, the fine furnishings—a leather settee, several round-backed chairs with embroidered cushions, shelves overflowing with books, and a grandfather clock—unexpected in a house built of logs.

"Would you like tea?" Torin offered, seeming uncertain about the social protocols of an unexpected female visitor. "I've made oatmeal cookies."

"Perhaps later." Cora pulled out the felt J and gave the letter to him. "First, look at this."

Torin glanced down at the J, and a smile dawned across his face. "What a clever idea. Thank you."

"Don't thank me. My friend, Ivy, the one I told you I'd ask for advice..." She waited for his nod of remembrance before going on. "All her idea and handiwork."

He turned over the J, squeezing the curve as if testing its softness.

"This is brilliant," he said softly. "Jewel loves to hold things, carry them around. She might actually remember this."

"Ivy tutors young children and has experience with different learning methods." Cora handed him the letter. "See how kindly she writes about Jewel?"

As Torin read, his expression softened. "Please thank Ivy for me. This is...." He

cleared his throat. "It's more kindness than I expected from a stranger."

"Actually," Cora said, seizing her opening, "I have a better idea than just thanking her."

His guard went up immediately, wariness replacing warmth. "Oh?"

"Ivy wants to be a teacher. But her father is rather controlling, and she wouldn't be able to leave home without a position. She's wonderful with children, patient and creative. What if she came to Sweetwater Springs, to here, as a governess for Jewel?"

"No." The refusal was immediate and absolute. "I won't have a stranger living in my house, judging Jewel, possibly hurting her with careless words or?"

"Ivy would never do that." Cora pulled out the photograph. "Look at her. See the kindness in her face? She's my dearest friend, and I promise you, she would be nothing but good to Jewel."

Torin barely glanced at the image. "Why would she come here? Leave everything she knows for this isolated life?"

Cora met his gaze steadily. "She doesn't have to live an isolated life. Neither do you."

He flinched at the pointed observation.

When he didn't respond, she continued, trying to obliquely persuade him. "Why does anyone choose isolation? Perhaps because what they're leaving behind is worse than solitude."

He didn't meet her eyes.

"Besides," she continued more gently, "your life doesn't have to be isolated. Not anymore. You have friends here—Brian, Hank, Elsie, Constance, Dr. Angus, the Swensens up the mountain. Sweetwater Springs is only an hour's ride away. Your isolation is a choice."

Torin sank into the sofa, still holding the felt letter in one hand and Ivy's photograph in the other.

"Logically, I know you're right. Jewel needs more than I can give her.

But my heart..." He looked up, his blue eyes filled with old pain.

"I'm afraid, Cora. Jewel's so vulnerable.

What if people are cruel? What if they hurt her? "

She sat, placing a hand gently on his arm. "You've done such a wonderful job protecting Jewel. No one could love her more. But Jewel's growing up. She needs to experience more of the world—in a safe, controlled way."

"With your friend as her guide?"

"Ivy would be perfect. She's gentle but not weak, educated but not condescending. And—" Cora smiled "—she desperately needs a fresh start somewhere far from New York."

"What happened to her?"

"Nothing dramatic. Just a father who treats his daughters like unpaid servants and refuses to let them have lives of their own. She's withering there, Torin. Here, she could bloom. And she could help Jewel bloom too."

He was quiet for a long moment, absently rubbing his thumb over the soft felt. From down the hall came the sound of Jewel stirring from her nap, humming tunelessly to herself.

“I just want to protect her.”

“So does every loving father of daughters. But the truth is...life is full of tribulations and sorrow. Every girl, every woman, has to learn to cope with suffering. That must be part of Jewel’s journey, too.”

He shook his head. “Children who are Mongoloid die young.”

“I know.” Cora couldn’t bear the thought. The pain this man must carry on a daily basis....

“Jewel’s already lived years beyond what’s expected. She won’t mature to the age of a normal woman. In the course of her short life, I can keep Jewel from ever being hurt by others.”

She placed a hand on his arm. “But is that truly living?”

Silence lingered. He studied Ivy’s photograph.

"I need to think about it," he said in a weary tone, finally looking directly at her. "It's not just my life that would change."

"I've known Ivy since we were younger than Jewel. I promise from my whole heart that she's a kind woman. She'll fall in love with Jewel, just like we all have. Please, Torin, promise you'll really consider having her teach Jewel."

"I will." He stood as Jewel's humming grew louder. "She's awake. Would you like to

give her the J yourself?"

"I would love to."

Jewel emerged from her room, her hair adorably mussed from sleep, dragging a worn rag doll. Her face lit up when she saw Cora. "Cor-a! See Sas-ee now?"

"Soon, sweetheart. But first, I have something special for you."

Cora knelt and held out the pink felt J.

Jewel set her doll on the sofa and reached for the letter with both hands, her eyes wide with wonder.

"J," Cora said clearly. "A pink J for Jewel."

"Jay," Jewel repeated, hugging the letter to her chest. "Jewel's Jay!"

Tears clouded her vision. How I love this child. "That's right. Your very own letter."

Jewel clumsily danced in a circle, clutching her treasure. Then she stopped and looked at her father with sudden worry. "Papa have letter?"

"P for Papa," Torin said, his voice thick. "Maybe Miss Cora's friend Ivy can make me one too."

"If you decide you'd like that," Cora said carefully, standing.

Their eyes met over Jewel's head. In his gaze, she saw fear warring with hope, protection with possibility. I've planted seeds. Now I have to wait and see if they will sprout.

"Thank you," Torin said quietly. "For everything."

"Sas-ee now?" Jewel entreated, still clutching her J.

"Yes, sweetheart. Let's go see Sassy Girl and show her your new letter."

As they walked back toward Brian's cabin, Jewel between them chattering about her "Jay," Cora felt a mixture of hope and trepidation.

She'd potentially changed several lives with her suggestion—Jewel's, Torin's, and, hopefully, Ivy's. No matter what else came of her time at Three Bend Lake, she'd always have the satisfaction of making a difference here.

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The silence pressed against Brian's ears like cotton wool. Not the peaceful quiet of solitary writing but an emptiness that echoed with absence. Cora had been gone less than an hour, and already the cabin felt wrong without her presence.

He'd grown accustomed to the small sounds of her living in his space—the whisper of turning pages, the soft humming when she thought he wasn't listening, the gentle clink of dishes being washed.

Even when she sat perfectly still, absorbed in one of his books, the air itself seemed brighter, lighter somehow.

Stop being melodramatic. You've lived alone for years. You prefer solitude.

But the lecture rang hollow.

Guilt gnawed at him for his harsh dismissal when she'd tried to share her excitement. She'd been nothing but patient with his foul moods, growing to trust him with her friendship, and he'd repaid her with cold rudeness.

Looking out the window, his gaze caught on the canvas-covered canoe.

The sight sparked an idea—a way to show his remorse without having to stumble through getting out the actual words.

He glanced at the sky, noting the stark blue that promised continued fair weather.

For today, at least, Indian summer held on.

Better make use of it while I can. Hobbling to the stove, Brian set water to boil for willow bark tea.

He steeped the concoction without honey.

As soon as the liquid cooled enough, he drank it down, making a face at the bitter taste.

Then he made his way outside to stand on the porch, Sassy Girl bouncing at his heels.

Overhead, a V of geese flew south, their mournful calls a reminder of the changing season. Soon, perhaps as early as tomorrow, the warm spell will break. Cora's departure will usher in winter—both the season and within me.

The thought sent an unexpected pang through his chest. He'd kept his heart walled off for so long, allowing only Torin, Hank, and Jewel past his defenses. But somehow Cora had found the cracks in his barriers, widening them day by day until?—

"Bry-an!" Jewel's delighted cry interrupted his brooding. She raced toward him, clutching something pink in her hand.

Sassy Girl leapt to greet her.

Behind the child, Cora and Torin walked more sedately.

Cora's expression remained impassive. Her gaze swept over him in that assessing way he'd come to recognize—checking his color, his posture, whether he showed signs of pain.

Apparently satisfied with her medical evaluation, she turned toward the house without a word.

"Cora, wait," Brian called.

She paused and glanced over her shoulder.

"I want to take the canoe out. Watch the sunset from the water." He looked to Torin.
"Would you help me?"

She whirled. "Absolutely not. You could reinjure your leg?—"

"The canoe's specially made," Brian interrupted gently. "Wide and long so Jewel can ride safely."

"True," Torin agreed. "Canoeing is one of her favorite things. Though you wouldn't know it lately, what with Sassy Girl taking precedence."

Her eyes grew stormy. "I won't partake in this foolishness."

Brian met her eyes steadily and pointed toward the lake. "I'm going out there regardless. But I'd rather have my nurse along to ensure I don't do anything foolish."

He watched her internal struggle play across her expressive face—duty warring with irritation, concern battling stubbornness. Finally, her shoulders sagged in defeat.

"Fine. But Torin and I drag the canoe to the water. You don't lift a finger."

He gave her a two-fingered salute. "Yes, ma'am."

Together, Cora and Torin dragged the canoe to the water's edge until the front floated, but the back rested on the beach.

Brian handed Cora his crutches. "Lay them there." He pointed to a spot on the sand.

The process of getting him settled in the canoe, legs stretched before him, was painful and awkward but manageable with Torin's help.

"I'll keep the wild ones entertained," Torin said, gesturing to where Jewel and Sassy Girl were already digging in the sand. "Take your time. We'll be here when you return." He gave the canoe a strong shove into the deeper water.

The canoe floated to where some flat stones were placed to form a tiny jetty, just big enough for riders to walk from stone to stone and climb in without getting their feet wet. Cora insisted on facing him. "So I can monitor your condition," she said primly, though he caught the hint of a smile.

Brian dug the paddle into the sandy bottom to steady the canoe while Torin helped Cora aboard, keeping her hand to steady her, until the rocking calmed, and then balancing her while she sat.

Once Torin released Cora, Brian pushed off with gentle strokes, finding a rhythm that didn't strain his leg too much. By the time they reached the middle of the lake, twilight had softened the sun's rays to lavender and rose, and the waning moon hung like a ghost against the darkening blue.

The pungent scent of lake water filled his nostrils—algae and fish and something indefinably wild.

The gentle splash of his paddle and their quiet breathing were the only sounds, until here and there a fish jumped, chasing a fly or mosquito or some other insect.

Luckily, in spite of the nice weather, the night temperatures had cooled the air enough to kill off the majority of the mosquitoes, so they weren't plagued by the tiny critters.

Cutting through the stillness came an eerie call—part cry, part laugh.

Cora straightened, looking around with wide eyes. "What was that?"

"Loon." Brian turned the canoe sideways and stilled his paddle, providing a better view for them to observe. "We'd be lucky to spot it. They're fairly elusive. Clumsy on land but sleek and powerful in the water. I'm surprised any are still here. They've usually headed south by now."

As if summoned by his words, the bird's dark shape glided across the surface, the webbed feet smack-smack-smacking against the water, clumsily building speed to propel its ungainly body into the air.

The loon circled once, and then arched beneath the surface, before bursting up again, a silver fish glinting in its beak, as noisy emerging from the water as it had been silent diving in. The bird winged away into the gathering dusk.

"Beautiful," Cora breathed.

Somewhere while they'd watched the loon, the tension from their earlier conflict melted away, leaving only peace. The sky purpled. A single star winked into existence, and the air chilled.

"I'm sorry," Brian said quietly. "About earlier. My surliness when you wanted to talk." He sighed, the sound seeming to carry across the water. "Living alone so long, without anyone else to please, I've forgotten how to moderate my reactions. I don't mean to be hurtful."

"Is it just the writing troubles?"

He managed a rueful grimace, though the gathering darkness probably hid the expression.

"Embarrassing as it is to admit, considering how I railed against your presence.

.." He paused, searching for words that wouldn't reveal too much.

"I've grown accustomed to having you around.

The thought of being alone again isn't as appealing as it once was. "

"I've grown accustomed to you too," she said softly. "Your grumpy moments and all." She was quiet for a moment. "I suppose this is what home nursing entails—becoming part of someone's life and then leaving. I'll have to get used to this experience."

It's more than that. At least for me.

The unsaid words lingered between them like the evening mist beginning to rise from the water. Still, Brian felt more peaceful having put his apology into actions and words.

That will have to be enough.

He turned the canoe toward shore. Torin must have lit the lamps, and the golden squares of windows promised warmth against the coming night.

The next morning, even as she donned her riding habit with the divided skirt, Cora tried to maintain a normal facade.

But every familiar task felt weighted with finality.

Last time making Brian's coffee just the way he liked it—strong, with a touch of sugar.

Last time frying bacon—his slices chewy, hers crisp.

Last time watching him eat with a good appetite, a far cry from the invalid who'd arrived three weeks ago.

Cora finished eating and laid her fork across the plate. “I didn’t have a chance to tell you about what came in the mail yesterday.”

He chuckled. “You mean what I didn’t give you a chance to tell me.”

She half lowered her eyes, giving him a flirtatious look from under her eyelashes. “I was being tactful.”

Brian raised an eyebrow and lifted his coffee mug in a salute. “I’m all ears.”

Aware of the time ticking by before she needed to leave, Cora poured out the story of Jewel’s J and her proposition to Torin about Ivy becoming his daughter’s governess.

When she finished, Brian sat back in his chair with a big exhale and incredulous shake of his head.

“Didn’t expect that. It's inspired, actually.

Torin needs help, though he'd never admit it. And Jewel needs a good woman around on a more permanent basis.” He drank some coffee.

“And from what you've told me about your friend, she sounds perfect.

" He studied Cora over his cup. "You did well yesterday, planting that seed.” He glanced in the direction of Torin’s house.

The warmth of Brian's praise filled her chest. Unexpected tears threatened. She fought to hold them back.

He shifted his attention back to her. "Give Torin time. I have a feeling he'll come around."

"I hope so. For both their sakes."

Brian shifted in his chair, wincing slightly. "I don't like the idea of you riding alone down the mountain."

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I don't either. "I'll have to get used to such journeys," she said with forced brightness.

"Sometimes, I'll be nursing people in isolated areas where horseback is the only option.

" She attempted a laugh. "I'll need to learn to live with whatever fits in my saddlebags." She glanced at the bedroom.

"Though for now, I'll leave most of my things for Dr. Angus to bring back on his next visit. "

"You could stay." The words seemed to surprise him as much as her. "Until Hank returns or the doc makes his next trip up. It would be safer."

For a moment, Cora let herself imagine staying—a few more days of this comfortable routine, these moments of unexpected connection. But she was expected home today. If she didn't show, Rose and the Bellaire-Norton family would worry.

And staying longer would only make leaving harder.

"I'll be fine," she said with a smile that felt brittle. "I need to get back. Dr. Cameron has patients waiting for my services." Or so I hope.

They let the conversation lapse, neither willing to voice what remained unspoken.

After doing the dishes, Cora escaped to pack, folding her few garments with precision to fit as much as possible into her saddlebags.

She tried not to think how—in spite of the wonderful people who dwelt therein—the Bellaire mansion would feel too big and ornate after these weeks of cozy simplicity. And empty.

As she returned Brian's last dime novel to the bookshelf, a vague idea that had been nagging at her crystallized.

She practically ran to where Brian sat at the table, glaring at another empty page, and dropped into the chair across from him, patting the blank paper in her excitement.

"Brian, what if you didn't write a dime novel? "

He looked up, eyebrows raised.

"What if you wrote the true story? A factual account of what really happened with the McCurdy gang rather than trying to create something fictional?"

His eyes went wide, then blazed with creative fire. "Brilliant!" He grabbed her hand, squeezing it in his enthusiasm. "Why didn't I think of that? I'd need to interview the sheriff, the others who were there. That is, if they'll agree..."

"Sheriff Granger didn't strike me as the self-aggrandizing type," she said dryly, trying to ignore the warmth of his hand covering hers. "But you can certainly ask. I'm sure—" she teased "—you'll discover previously unplumbed depths of persuasion."

"'Unplumbed' is a tactful way to describe my nonexistent persuasive abilities." His thumb brushed across her knuckles before he lifted her hand and pressed a kiss to the back.

Goosebumps raced up Cora's arms, and she was grateful for her long sleeves. Before she could respond, before she could even process the gesture, a knock sounded.

Jewel called from outside. "Cor-a! Cor-a!"

The moment shattered. Brian released her hand. "Come in," he called and rose, clutching the edge of the table for balance.

Once she was sure Brian was stable, Cora stood.

Torin and Jewel entered, the child clutching a piece of paper, which she thrust at Cora. "For you!"

Cora looked down to see a colorful scribble that might have been a dog or possibly a horse, maybe an elephant. But what was clear was the pink J floating at the top of the page.

With one finger, she traced the letter, her heart swelling with joy. "Oh, Jewel, darling!"

She glanced at Torin and saw the same emotions reflected on his face. Silently, her eyes misting, she handed the drawing to Brian. From his sharp exhale, she knew he understood, and their threesome all experienced the same emotions for the child—love and hope and pride.

She took back the drawing and held it to her chest. "It's beautiful, sweetheart. I'll treasure it."

"Sas-ee now?" Jewel asked hopefully.

"Yes, but stay on the porch," Torin said firmly. "I'll saddle Cora's horse." He picked up the saddlebags leaning next to the front door and carried them out.

As Jewel raced outside with the puppy in pursuit, Brian on his crutches followed

more slowly. Once outside, he propped them against the side of the house and used the porch rail to steady himself.

From the doorway, Cora watched with narrowed eyes to make sure he didn't overdo it.

He looked back and laughed. "I'm fine, Oh Nurse. In no time, I'll be able to ride."

She glided toward him. "You'll have a chance for your interviews."

"At least I won't have to head out to Thompson's ranch.

I heard enough talking from Buck Skold that I can easily recreate his experiences.

Might have to travel to Crenshaw, though, to interview retired Sheriff Rand.

He took over while Sheriff Granger was gone leading us, the posse, I mean.

Rand can tell me what happened in town during that time. His nephew, well, he?—"

Torin leading Ole Miss to the porch interrupted Brian's spate of words. "Ready?"

No. She nodded.

Brian's excitement about the book idea must have overridden his usual reserve, and before Cora quite knew what was happening, he'd pulled her into a brief, fierce hug.

They sprang apart, both flustered. Brian's ears turned red, and Cora knew her own cheeks must be flaming.

"I should," she began.

"Yes, of course," he said at the same time.

They stood frozen for a moment before Cora, much like Jewel earlier, thrust the drawing at him. "Will you please put this in my lap desk?"

Still looking unsettled, he took the paper.

Cora turned to mount her horse. Standing on the step made it easy for her to place her foot in the stirrup.

Ever the gentleman, Torin kept a hand on her elbow to help her up.

As Torin arranged the reins, she settled in the saddle, checked to see her skirts decently covered her limbs, and took the reins from Torin.

From the porch, Jewel waved so enthusiastically she nearly toppled over, saved only by her father's quick reflexes. "Bye-bye, Cor-a! Bye-bye!"

"Goodbye, sweetheart. Take good care of Sassy Girl for me."

With a last wave for everyone, Cora turned Ole Miss toward the path and kneed the mare forward. At the bend before the stand of forest, she couldn't help one last look back.

Brian stood at the corner of the porch, weight shifted onto his good leg, one hand braced high over his head against the porch's support post, looking as handsome and vigorous as any dime novel hero.

She froze the moment into her memory.

Then the trees closed around her, and he was gone.

Brian listened until the sound of Ole Miss's hoofbeats faded completely. Even Jewel and Sassy Girl stood quietly. The silence rushed back, no longer the longed-for peace but an aching absence that seemed to echo in his chest.

Torin pointed his index finger and flicked his wrist in the direction of his house. "How 'bout I take the wild ones with me for the night? Unless you need the pup to keep you company...."

Brian nodded several times. "Sounds good."

He rested the side of his head against the support post and watched until they walked out of sight—two of the three people who, for the past eleven years, had constituted his whole world—and felt a rush of gratitude for the steadfast support he and Hank and Torin provided each other.

Brian had the solitude, now, which he'd craved the whole time he'd been away from home. However, he'd learned that solitude with a person of compatible habits, no, a friend with compatible habits, provided him with more...more... He couldn't name the more.

Enough moping, he told himself firmly. You have a book to write.

Going inside, he settled at the table, pulled a fresh sheet of paper toward him, and began making a list of people to interview.

Sheriff Granger, Deputy Redwolf, Sheriff Temogen, Dr. Angus...

. He listed every member of the posse, plus Sheriff Rand.

Each name sparked a dozen questions, a hundred details he needed to capture.

For the first time in months, the words came easily, flowing from his mind to his pen so fast he almost couldn't keep up.

Not fiction this time, but truth—messier and more complex than any adventure he could invent.

His imagination skipped ahead to the end of the book—an epilogue, maybe—of a weary, wounded hero returning home to lick his wounds in solitude, only to find... .

Brian paused, as if struck by lightning, the knowingness sizzling heat through his body, and tightening his chest until he almost couldn't breathe.

His inner walls exploded. Growing dizzy, he took deep breaths until the realization settled within him.

Then, he dipped his pen in the inkpot and wrote down a single word.

Love.

Four months later

The February wind rattled the windows of the doctors' office as Cora finished cleaning the surgical instruments. Her hands moved automatically through the familiar task while her mind wandered—as it too often did—to a rustic cabin by a mountain lake and the taciturn man who lived inside.

She was happy, really she was, living the life she'd dreamed of and worked so hard for.

A real nurse, trusted by both Cameron doctors, and sought after by families throughout the area.

In the past four months, she'd delivered her first baby entirely on her own, sat by the bedside of a dying child, found ways to manage and calm a senile elder, and learned more about medicine than in all her years of volunteering at the hospital.

Her vocation fulfilled her. But not enough to mend her broken heart.

"Ye look tired, lass," Dr. Cameron said from the doorway. "When did ye last have a full night's sleep?"

"The Hendersons' baby had croup three nights ago," she reminded him. "Then Mrs. Mueller's labor yesterday."

"Aye, and the week before that ye were at the Kowalskis' place for five days." He studied her with those penetrating blue eyes. "Ye can't keep this pace forever."

Yes, I can, she thought stubbornly. As long as it keeps me too busy to think.

But that was a lie. Dozens of times a day, she thought of Brian—when she encountered a difficult patient and wondered what sharp retort he'd make, when she read medical journals and imagined discussing them with him, when she saw the first crocuses pushing through the snow and remembered his unexpected gentleness with Jewel, the girl who loved flowers and leaves.

According to Hank, Brian was writing like a man possessed. "Positively feral," he'd said with a laugh during one of his visits to Elsie. "Won't even answer the door half the time. Just shouts to leave the supplies on the porch."

Cora had smiled and nodded and pretended the news didn't cut her to the quick. Brian discovered his story. He didn't need her anymore....didn't wish to include her.

"Go home," Dr. Cameron ordered. "Alice and I can manage for one evening."

"But the baby?—"

"Is thriving, thanks in part to yer help during the delivery." His expression softened. "Ye saved my sanity that night, Cora. When I saw how long the labor was lasting, how much pain she was in..." He cleared his throat. "Having ye there, calm and competent, made all the difference."

The memory of that night a month ago—Alice's courage, the doctor's naked fear transforming to joy, the perfect tiny girl who'd entered the world with a lustful cry—brought tears to Cora's eyes. The way the man had wept when he beheld his miracle baby before kissing her forehead and handing the infant to her mother. How the couple had touched their foreheads to each other's, murmuring words of love before Cora tiptoed out of the room.

Throughout the celebration afterward, she'd held herself together.

Used her joy for the safe birth of mother and child to keep a smile on her face.

Only when she'd reached the privacy of her room had she allowed herself to weep from her own loneliness and fear that she'd never experience the adoration of a husband and the birth of her child.

She pulled herself back into the present. "I suppose I could use an early evening."

"Good. And Cora?" Dr. Cameron paused at the door. "Spring's coming. A time of renewal. Don't give up hope."

Before she could form a question, he'd left.

The walk to the Bellaire mansion—she still couldn't think of it as simply home—was bitterly cold. But at least the weather matched her mood. She'd thought by now the ache would have faded. That Brian would have become just another patient and another chapter in her nursing career.

Instead, the pain sharpened with each passing week. Every time she heard he'd been in town—interviewing Sheriff Granger or Deputy Redwolf, consulting old newspapers with Ant Gordon—she'd inconveniently been needed elsewhere.

She was good at being needed. She just wasn't sure if being needed was enough anymore.

"Oh, you're here!" Aunt Rose—now Rose Bellaire—met her at the door, glowing with a happiness that made her look years younger. "You're home early for once."

"Dr. Cameron ordered me to rest."

"Good man. You've been working yourself to exhaustion." Rose helped her off with her coat, studying her with concern. "Have you eaten? Cook made gumbo—Andre's mother's recipe."

"Maybe later."

She escaped to her room before Rose could probe further. Her aunt's happiness at being married to Uncle Andre was wonderful to see. Cora was genuinely thrilled for them both. But sometimes, like with the Camerons, their joy was too bright a contrast to her own dismal spirits.

She'd been so certain something special developed between her and Brian.

Those conversations about books, the growing ease between them, that moment in the canoe when the world had shrunk to just the two of them, and, most important, that last hug.

Had she imagined everything? Built a romance out of proximity, caretaking, and loneliness?

Through her window, Cora could see snow beginning to fall again. Somewhere in the mountain valley, Brian was probably hunched over his desk, lost in his story. She hoped he was happy. She hoped the words flowed easily. She hoped?—

No. She pressed her palms against her eyes. No more hoping. Tomorrow she'd rise early, report to the office and lose herself in the needs of others—keep moving on the way she'd been.

Because the alternative—admitting that she'd lost her heart to a grumpy writer who'd apparently forgotten she existed—why, there was no way on God's green earth would Cora Collier allow herself to wallow in her misery.

Brian burst through the double doors of the Gordon Building office like a man possessed.

He probably looked like one too—unshaven, under his hat, his hair wild from the wind, clothes rumpled from not being laundered in who knows how long, his face reddened from the bitterly cold ride.

He pulled the doors closed on the cold wind that followed him inside and took a jubilant breath.

His book was finally, finally finished.

The manuscript, wrapped in oilcloth against the weather and clutched against his chest beneath his coat, felt like a living being.

Four months of frenzied writing, of eighteen-hour days and cramped hands, of reliving the trauma so he woke up sweating at night.

Diving so deep into his memory, the posse's memories, that sometimes he'd forgotten to eat or sleep. But he'd birthed the book into the world.

Now, finally, he could put his plan into motion. He unbuttoned his coat, unwound the oilskin, and looked at the cover page for a final moment before relinquishing the heavy stack of pages into the capable hands of Ant's new secretary:

Lawwoman's Justice:

A True Account of Robbery, Murder, and the Capture of the McCurdy Gang

by

Brian Bly

He shuffled to the next page, to the dedication, and had second thoughts about keeping something so vulnerable in this draft. It can go in the final draft. He stuffed the paper into his pocket.

"Brian!" Ant Gordon emerged from the Sweetwater Springs Herald office. His large frame would have filled the doorway, if the man hadn't designed the doors to be higher than usual. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Three hundred and forty-seven pages of blood, sweat, and honesty," Brian confirmed.

The editor's eyes lit up. "Hot dang! Pardon my language. Delores!" He called to his secretary. "Clear your schedule. We've got Bly's book!"

Brian had met Delores Knickerbocker on a previous visit—a thin, efficient woman with steel-gray hair and fingers that flew over the typewriter keys like a pianist performing a concerto, although in a more staccato beat. She appeared now, spectacles perched on her nose.

"How soon do you need it typed?" she asked without preamble.

"As soon as possible. I'll pay extra for rush work."

"No need," Ant interjected. "I'm paying her. This is the story of the decade! And you arranged the contract with your publisher for us to serialize the book—the only newspaper in the country to do so."

The door across the hall opened, and Cora stepped out of the dressmaker's shop, winding a blue scarf around her neck. At the sight of him, she gasped and stopped.

She looked exactly as he'd pictured her a thousand times while writing—intelligent gray eyes, wisps of brown hair escaping from her practical bun, a determined chin he'd dreamed of kissing. But shadows that hadn't been there before smudged the skin under her eyes, and she seemed thinner, honed, perhaps.

"Brian?" Her gaze dropped to the manuscript in his hands. "Is that your book?"

He nodded, words deserting him. This wasn't how their meeting was supposed to happen.

He had planned to have the manuscript typed and bound, for himself to be clean-shaven and well-dressed.

He wanted to present the book to her when it contained the flowery dedication that currently burned a hole in his pocket.

"You finished your book and didn't even tell me?" Hurt flashed across her face. "I thought I was part of... of..." She spun and fled.

"You are!" he called, but the door had already slammed behind her.

Fool. You absolute fool.

In that moment, Brian realized not only had his romantic plan just gone up in smoke, but that he had the wrong plan in the first place.

He'd been so focused striving toward a perfect moment that he'd forgotten the most important thing: including Cora in the journey.

He thrust the manuscript at Ant and raced after Cora.

The street was empty in both directions, with snow beginning to fall more heavily. She must have gone home. He started down the street, then stopped. He had no idea where Andre Bellaire lived.

Cursing his stupidity, he rushed back inside.

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In the inner office, Ant and Delores were bent over his manuscript on the large desk, already absorbed in the first pages.

"I need to know where the Bellaire house is located," he said desperately. "Now."

Ant looked up, took in Brian's wild expression, and quickly rattled off directions. "Two blocks north, three west. Go left. Big pinkish-brown stone house with the tower. Can't miss it."

Brian dashed out the door before the man finished speaking.

Marshal, patient despite the cold, stood tied to the hitching rail. He swung into the saddle and urged the horse through the snowy streets, his mind racing faster than the gelding's hooves.

What should I say? How should I explain? All those months of silence when he could have written, could have sent word through Hank, or could have done something to let her know she haunted his every thought.

The Bellaire mansion rose before him like something from a fairy tale—all pink-brown rough-cut stone, copper trim and elegant windows. Brian tied Marshal to the post and took the steps two at a time. "Cora Collier!" He pounded on one of the double doors. "I'm not leaving until you hear me out!"

The door opened to reveal a dignified Negro butler with white hair and an impassive expression. "Miss Cora is unwell and not accepting visitors," he intoned.

Brian's heart sank, but he refused to slink away.

Before he could plead his case, from within, a man called. "Now, Rufus," he said in a Southern drawl, "let's hear what the man has to say."

The man appeared, who with his flowing white-and-amber streaked hair and elegant clothing, could only be Andre Bellaire.

He surveyed Brian with shrewd hazel eyes.

Even in his desperate state, Brian was aware of how much he owed this man—the cabin improvements, the furnishings, and Cora's presence in his life.

He stepped forward, palm up in entreaty.

"Mr. Bellaire, Cora is operating under a misunderstanding—one that's causing her distress.

" The words tumbled out. "Please, let me talk to her.

Let me try to fix the hurt I've caused. I thought I was doing the right thing by planning the perfect moment, but I see now?—"

"You see now that grand gestures mean nothing if the lady isn't included in the planning." Mr. Bellaire said with a knowing expression.

"I was about your age when I made the same mistake about not talking to Rose before I made plans.

Cost us twenty years of happiness." He pointed to the stairs.

"First door on the right. A window alcove is down the hall—perfectly appropriate for

courtship.” His eyes twinkled.

“I charge you with doing better than I did. ”

"Thank you," Brian breathed, already moving toward the staircase rising from the entry. "Thank you."

He took the steps three at a time, his heart hammering. At Cora’s door, he knocked softly, not announcing himself for fear she'd refuse to see him.

The door opened and she peeked around—handkerchief in hand, eyes red from crying. She looked so woebegone he wanted to gather her into his arms.

"Brian?" She shifted, as if to step back. “What are you?—”

"I can do better," he said quickly, gently taking her hand and tugging. "Please, Cora. Just listen."

She sniffled but nodded, allowing him to lead her to the cushioned window seat Andre had mentioned. Snow fell steadily outside, blanketing the world in white.

Cora sat but kept her face turned away. "I thought we were friends. I thought you'd visit, talk about the book, and maybe even let me read parts." Her voice broke. "Silly me."

"I did come to town," he said urgently. "Every time I interviewed someone. I stopped by the doctors' office, but you were never there. Dr. Cameron always seemed distracted and couldn't tell me where you were. Patient confidentiality, he said."

She turned slightly toward him, wariness replacing hurt.

"I had this grand plan." He swept out an arm.

"Write the book, polish every word until it gleamed.

Then polish myself—new clothes, proper grooming, and manners that you've never seen from me.

Only then would I place the perfect book and, hopefully, more-perfect-than-before me in your hands.

" He managed a rueful smile. "You were to be my first reader. The only one whose opinion mattered."

"I didn't need a polished book or a polished you," she said in a low voice. "I thought I'd already proved that."

"You did. Cora, you did." Brian squeezed her hand. "My editor calls authors' books 'works in progress.' Well, I'm definitely—" he made quotation marks with his fingers "—a work in progress. But I promise to learn from my mistakes. To do better. To love you as you deserve to be loved."

At the word love, her eyes widened. But she shook her head. "A relationship between isn't possible." Her shoulders slumped. "As much as I love Three Bend Lake, my work is here. I won't give up being a nurse."

"Then I'll move to town," he said simply. "I can write anywhere. We'll keep the cabin and buy a house in town. I'll stay in Three Bend Lake when you're away on a case. Or we can go together when you're between cases. There's Torin and Jewel to consider. But home will be wherever you are."

Hope dawned in her eyes.

"Here." He pulled the crumpled dedication page from his pocket. "Proof that you were always meant to be my first reader."

With trembling fingers, she smoothed out the paper. Her lips moved as she read silently. Then she looked up with misty eyes and read aloud: "To Cora Collier, my nursemaid and my salvation. With everlasting thanks for healing my leg and my heart, so I can love you for the rest of our lives."

She drew a shaky breath. "I might just love you too, Brian Bly."

Her proclamation came in that tart tone he'd missed so desperately. With a laugh of pure relief, he cupped her face and kissed her—once, twice, then longer and deeper, pouring all his longing into their sweet contact.

Voices rose from downstairs, and they broke apart, breathless.

"I believe the entire household is awaiting your news." Cora smiled, her cheeks a becoming pink.

"Then let's not keep them in suspense." He stood and offered his hand. "But first—one more kiss. I have four months to make up for."

"Just one more?" An eyebrow winged up.

"Well..." He pulled her close again. "Maybe we'll start with one and see where it leads us. After all, we're a work in progress. We, my darling Cora, have our entire future to get the book of our lives just right."