



May I Kiss the Bride

Author: *Heather B. Moore*

Category: Historical

Description: Wyoming. A fresh start. An unexpected cowboy.

Viola Delany is not happy about being sent to the middle-of-nowhere, small town Wyoming. Yes, it will be good to let the gossips find something else to talk about other than her failed engagement. And yes, it will be nice to spend the summer with her Aunt Beth.

But as Viola sits on the train heading for Wyoming, wondering how she'll ever occupy her time in such a small town, none other than a real life cowboy sits across the way. She can't help but take peeks at him, noting that the condition of his unpolished black boots and scuffed rawhide jacket seem to be authentic . . .

All right, so he might be tall, dark-haired, and handsome if a woman doesn't mind green eyes and a dangerous-looking scar, but this man certainly has nothing to do with her. Besides she'll never see him again. What are the chances he's traveling to the same middle-of-nowhere small town?

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:10 am

VIOLA CONSTANCE DELANY GRIPPED THE handle of her hatbox as the train jerked into motion. The shrill whistle of the engine was almost deafening, but Viola's proper upbringing stopped her from covering her sensitive ears like a four-year-old child.

Steam roared past the window where Viola sat as she watched her beloved San Francisco fade away.

Not that she loved the train station or the industrial buildings close to it, but the green hills and weeping willows and scarlet flowers would all be missed.

Especially once she arrived at her destination: the desolate, arid, windy, hot, bleak, colorless—did she mention desolate ? —Wyoming.

“For the summer,” Father had told her.

Viola had known better than to argue. Her parents had wrung their hands of her.

She was frustrated. They were frustrated.

And the only solution to this frustration seemed to be sending Viola to work in a small bakery owned by her mother's sister, Beth Cannon, who, until this past week, had been deemed one of their “unfit relatives.”

Oh, Viola had argued. Begged. Even cried real tears.

Nothing had swayed her father. He was a banker, after all, and oversaw the fortunes

of the very wealthy. That took a certain stoicism and a hardy constitution.

So when Viola's engagement of the year had turned out to be the flop of the year, Father refused to let the high society on Nob Hill have the last word about his daughter. As a result, she was heading on a noble mission of mercy to aid her poor dear aunt who ailed with rheumatism.

All right, so the details were accurate, but the sentiment behind them ... None of this would have even been considered if Percy Johnson III hadn't been discovered visiting a brothel in Chinatown. The papers had been full of the incident. Cartoons had even been drawn.

Mother had written the letter to Percy, signed by Viola, formally breaking off the engagement.

Viola hadn't cried as much as she thought she might over her broken engagement.

Oh, she did cry. But after the first day, she decided she felt relieved.

She'd started courting Percy because his father was her father's boss.

They'd been a natural match. Sure, Percy was handsome and charming, dressed at the height of fashion, had impeccable manners ...

but Viola couldn't say she was head over heels with him.

"Sir! You cannot go into first class!"

The door at the end of the train car thumped open, and Viola snapped her gaze up to see a man stride into the first-class car. A cowboy.

Viola blinked, then blinked again. Was she seeing a mirage? The man looked like he'd stepped off the Cowboy Wear page of a Sears catalog.

“Sir!”

The cowboy kept walking, his gaze shifting from one bench to another.

His eyes skimmed over Viola. She tried to make herself small—invisible if possible.

The only problem was, she was the single occupant on her bench, and the bench across from her was empty.

Every bench throughout the rest of the car had at least two occupants on them.

The cowboy's gaze landed on her again.

Despite the shadow of his brim, his hazel eyes seemed to penetrate right through her.

Viola tried not to stare at the cowboy, who was clearly out of place in a refined first-class compartment. Meals would be served on real chinaware, for heaven's sake.

She turned her chin sharply toward the window, but she saw his reflection there anyway. Tall man wearing a cowboy hat, woven shirt fraying at the collar beneath a rawhide jacket that had seen better days—or years—black trousers, and black boots that needed a good polishing.

Viola wrinkled her nose as he plopped down on the bench across from her.

She waited for the unpleasant scent of dirt, hay, or cattle, or all three, to reach her.

But she only caught the faint whiff of green grass and fresh air.

Not so bad. His long legs would have bumped hers if he'd sat directly across, but he'd at least sat at the far end of the bench, closest to the aisle.

"Sir!" The shouting attendant finally came into view, and Viola took a peek at the blustering man with his twitching mustache and strawberry-red face. "You ... cannot ... sit ... here." His breath heaved. "First-class passengers only, sir."

The entire car had gone silent; even the sounds of the train's wheels chugging upon the tracks seemed to dim.

"You'll thank me later." The cowboy tugged something silver and metal out of his breast pocket. "Sheriff of Mayfair."

Viola stopped breathing for two reasons. First, Mayfair was where her aunt's bakery was, and second, the cowboy took off his hat and looked directly at her.

The man had been imposing with his hat on, striding through first class like he owned the place, but with it off ...

The eyes she thought were hazel were, in fact, green.

A deep green that reminded her of pine trees on a rainy day.

And his dark brown hair fell over his forehead like it had just been waiting to escape.

But what caught her attention the most was a scar that traveled from the edge of his eyebrow all the way to his ear.

Instead of a disturbing disfigurement of his face, it only made him look stronger, more dangerous, and if possible, more confident.

“Now,” the cowboy said in his deep, slow tone, “if this fine lady is all right with me sharing her space until we reach Cheyenne, then I’ll stay right here.”

The cowboy’s eyes remained on her, apparently waiting for her answer. Viola wondered if her throat could open enough to speak at all.

“I, u-uh, y-yes, you may sit there.” Her voice stuttered, but at least she got the words out.

The attendant opened his mouth, then closed it again. His gaze locked on the cowboy’s impressive scar. “I need to speak with the conductor.”

The cowboy set his hat upon his head. “You do that, sir.”

The attendant nodded, then took a step back, his throat bobbing up and down. Another step back, then the attendant turned, hands fisted, as he strode off.

People went back to their conversations after the attendant left. Weren’t they bothered that this huge cowboy had sat himself down among them without paying for first-class passage?

A moment passed, then two, and Viola kept her gaze on the passing scenery outside the widow.

They were moving through a valley, and the green hills were bright and green in the sunlight beneath the wispy, clouded sky.

Oh, how she would miss California. She could only hope that the summer in Wyoming would speed by, and when she returned home, all the gossip pages would have moved on.

“Ma’am?”

She turned her head at the cowboy’s low rumble.

“Might I store that hatbox for you? It’s a long ways to Wyoming.”

Viola drew it closer. “No, thank you. I don’t want it jostled or stepped on.”

The cowboy’s expression didn’t change, but something shifted in his eyes. Almost imperceptible. Amusement? If he was laughing at her, or thought she was too protective of her hat, then he was an impertinent man.

She rerouted her gaze. She didn’t need to worry. From the reflection in the window, he’d tugged down the brim of his hat, stretched his long legs forward, folded his arms, and promptly fell asleep.

Viola waited a good five minutes before she looked over at him again. How could he fall asleep like a fly knocked out of the air and instantly dropped? His breathing deepened and he might have even been snoring softly. It was hard to make out above the noise of the train.

She released a sigh and returned to her window-watching.

As each mile passed, she wondered if it was possible to die of boredom working at a bakery in middle of nowhere-Mayfair.

Starting to bake cakes and pies, and mixing bread dough from before sunup sounded like a slow death.

Didn’t her mother, or Aunt Beth, for that matter, know that Viola couldn’t cook, or bake, a lick?

She could, she supposed, do things with a lot of instruction. Hopefully, she and Aunt Beth wouldn't butt heads too much, although one small spark of interest flickered in her mind. What had taken Aunt Beth to Wyoming in the first place? And why was it such a family secret?

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:10 am

REYNOLD CHRISTENSEN WENT BY REY. Sheriff Rey.

Or just Rey. Didn't matter to him. But never by Mr. Christensen, which now interrupted a rather sweet dream he was having about a certain blonde woman who'd just baked him a pie and presented it to him at the town social.

He'd been hungry when he boarded the train to Cheyenne, but now he was ravenous.

He was just about to slice himself a piece of the still-warm dream pie when someone blurted in his ear "Mr. Christensen!"

This was no dream.

He shoved his hat back and opened his eyes to see not one, but two men in uniform glaring at him. One of them was probably the conductor. The other was the red-faced attendant he hadn't the pleasure of formally meeting yet.

Rey gave up on his dream of pie and pulled his legs in, straightening to face his visitors.

"If you've paid first-class passage, then you can stay here," the conductor said, his steely gaze quite impressive. "If not, the attendant will escort you to a different car."

Rey should have known it would come to this; he was just hoping to get a nap in first. He reached into his shirt pocket and drew out a folded and partially crumpled telegram from the governor of Wyoming, then handed it over.

Rey had only had to read it once to know that he must answer the call, even though it meant cutting his visit short with his mother.

He didn't love leaving his eight-year-old daughter behind in San Francisco, but she'd never forgive him if he ended their vacation so soon.

So, here he was, hopping on this train at the request of the governor.

The conductor's face had gone chalk white at reading the telegram. "Is this true? And how does the governor know?"

Rey lifted a shoulder. "Received threats, I guess. Might not be this exact train though. Other lawmen are jumping on all trains headed to Cheyenne this week. Your luck is getting me." He took the paper back, folded it, and tucked it into his pocket.

"Now, if you don't mind, I have sleep to catch up on. "

He thought that tugging down the brim of his hat and closing his eyes would be hint enough, but apparently, the conductor had more questions.

"There's only one of you?" the conductor said in a near whisper. "If what's in that telegram is true, we need more than just one lawman to defend—"

Rey snapped his eyes open. "Hush. You want panic from your passengers? Believe me, I can get the job done. Now, you do your job, and if— if the time comes, I'll do mine."

Still, the conductor and the attendant didn't move.

"Off with you," Rey muttered. "There's nothing to worry about until we cross into Wyoming territory. I'll be wide awake and keeping watch by then." He motioned

toward the windows. “First class has the best view. We might not even have to stop the train.”

Rey kept his voice low so the other passengers wouldn’t overhear—but he knew the woman on the bench across from him clutching that infernal hatbox could hear every word. To her credit, she kept her gaze averted, focused on the passing landscape.

The conductor’s eyes were wide, but the attendant’s eyes were even wider.

Rey again tugged his brim down and closed his eyes. After a hushed debate, the men left. The sound of their retreating footsteps was a welcome sound—almost like a lullaby melody.

Now, back to his pie dream. But his mind wouldn’t settle.

He could truly smell food somewhere—likely in the adjacent dining car—so mealtime must be close.

He wasn’t exactly interested in mingling with any other passengers and engaging in small talk over a meal, so he’d wait until the last possible moment before entering the dining car.

Sure enough, a bell jangled and the passengers in the first-class car began to file into the dining car.

If Rey’s stomach would just be quiet, he could get a decent nap in, but it wasn’t to be.

Because it seemed that everyone in the first-class car, except for the woman with the hatbox, had left. Rey’s eyes might have been closed, but it wasn’t hard to sense these things. First of all, she’d have to move past his legs and possibly step over them. She did neither.

In fact, she cleared her throat and spoke.

“Mr. Christensen?”

He opened his eyes. He might try to ignore a conductor and an attendant, but he’d never ignore a woman. “Rey.”

“Rey?”

“Short for Reynold. I don’t stand on ceremony, ma’am, and I don’t expect others to.”

She blinked. Slow. Her gray eyes reminded him of the stormy Pacific. Bits of her blonde hair had escaped the confines of the hat she wore atop her head, and he wondered what she’d look like with those locks unpinned.

“My name is Viola Delany.” She extended her gloved hand across the space between them.

Rey could have been knocked over by a gust of wind. This was no wilting flower of a woman. He shook her hand. Her fingers were delicate, but her grip was firm—something the hatbox was a witness to.

When they released hands, Viola continued, “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but it was quite impossible not to overhear your conversation with the conductor.

” She drew in a breath that fluttered the ruffles of her blouse about her neck.

“I couldn’t help overhearing you mention that something is going to happen when our train crosses into Wyoming territory? ”

Her accent was prim. Her voice soft yet forceful as if she were a woman who was

used to giving orders and having them carried out. She had to be in her mid-twenties, he guessed, yet she had the directness of a matron much older.

“You heard right, ma’am.”

Viola folded her gloved hands atop her hatbox, her gray eyes not leaving his. “What is going to happen?”

Well, her question was direct, he’d give her that. But the question he had was whether he’d answer it as directly. He didn’t take this woman for someone who’d get hysterical—but no one really knew until one was put into a dire situation. Was her backbone as strong as she acted it was?

“I can’t predict the future, ma’am, I’m only here at the request of someone, just in case there is an incident.”

Viola’s dark brow raised. It was a bit of juxtaposition with her face—to have such light-colored hair along with dark eyebrows. He found it quite pleasing, he decided. She was pretty, yes, but not in the conventional sense.

“I’m not asking you to predict the future,” she said in her prim voice. “If that someone is the governor of Wyoming, like you indicated to the conductor, then I’d like to know the contents of your telegram.”

Something stuck in Rey’s throat, and he coughed. “It’s confidential.”

Viola’s eyes widened slightly, but she said in a completely calm voice, “It wasn’t confidential when you handed it to the conductor.”

“He’s ...” Rey paused.

“A man?”

“A man in authority,” Rey corrected quickly.

Viola’s brow raised a titch higher. Then, with precise movements, she set her beloved hatbox onto the bench at her side and gathered her skirts about her. She rose and walked two steps, turned, and sat right next to him.

So close that he caught her scent of something fancy. Perfume, likely. It wasn’t displeasing.

Her hand appeared in front of him, palm upturned, fingers extended. “May I read the telegram, Rey?”

Perhaps it was the way his name sounded in her prim tone, but he found himself drawing out the telegram once again and unfolding it.

She took the paper and read through the few short lines. When she raised her gaze to meet his, he saw the expected wariness mixed with surprise in her eyes.

“We’re going to be robbed?” she whispered.

“We don’t know for sure,” Rey said. “The governor received threats and has ordered lawmen on all trains heading into Wyoming this week. We might be lucky. Seems that the governor refused to let one of their friends out of jail, so this group of thieves have threatened revenge.”

Viola drew in a slow breath, neatly folded the telegram, and handed it over.

She didn’t move, didn’t speak for a long moment.

It was a strange thing for this woman to be sitting so close to him.

They somehow breathed in tandem, or maybe Rey was just aware of her every inhale, exhale, and the way her fingers interlocked as they sat upon her lap.

“What’s your prediction, Rey?”

“Truth?”

“Truth.”

“This train has a first-class car, which means more wealth packed into suitcases.” He paused and glanced down at her. Viola kept her gaze straightforward. “There’s a high chance this train will be robbed tomorrow morning by dawn.”

Her intake of breath was sharp, but still, she didn’t move. “And you’re going to stop it how?”

“By shooting first.”

She turned to look at him then, her chin lifting, her gray eyes flickering to his. “You think you can hold off a posse of train robbers by yourself?”

“I don’t have a choice. Unless you want to take over one of my pistols. Would you shoot a man, Viola?”

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VIOLA HADN'T PLANNED ON SLEEPING; in fact, she'd highly doubted she'd be able to manage it, but somehow she opened her eyes in the middle of the night.

The sleeping cabin was pitch-black—save for the swath of stars through the window.

She'd purposely kept the curtains open since she wanted to see the train robbers if they happened to be riding horses alongside the train.

She had to know when to duck.

Which is what the sheriff had told her to do.

When she'd confirmed that, no, she didn't know how to shoot a pistol, and, no, she wasn't willing to kill a man, he'd told her that she should plan on hiding beneath her sleeping bunk if the train was forced to stop.

At the very least, stay below all windows if shooting started.

Well. It was quite a wonder that she fell asleep at all.

The train hadn't slowed, and the steady chugging of the wheels upon steel rails hadn't changed. So what had awakened her?

Pulling her robe about her dress, she climbed off the sleeping bunk and stepped up to the window. She had decided not to change into her night clothes. If she were going to be robbed, it wouldn't be in her nightgown.

The stars raced by and the moon seemed to bobble a bit.

Were they in Wyoming territory yet?

She looked toward her closed door and wondered about the sheriff.

Was he awake, watching and waiting like he said he'd be?

What if he'd fallen asleep and didn't see the train robbers until it was too late?

What was his plan? To stick his arm out a window and start shooting?

Again her mind returned to the possibility of him falling asleep and then all havoc breaking loose.

There was only one thing to do.

Find him and make sure he was ready for his job.

Viola tied her sash about her robe, securing it closed, then she opened the compartment door. All of the other doors in the sleeping car were closed, and everything seemed quiet and peaceful.

She moved along the corridor, the floor rumbling beneath her.

Once she reached the dining car, she scanned the place, only to find it empty.

She headed toward the lounge with the benches where she'd first met Rey.

The gaslights had been turned off, so it took her a minute to adjust to the darkened interior.

Rey sat in the same location she'd left him.

He wasn't stretched out though, with his hat pulled low.

No, he was leaning forward, elbows on knees, as he studied the window.

Through the window, the sky had lightened from a deep black to a murky gray.

She guessed it would be some time before the sun rose, but the landscape was taking shape and form.

"You're safer in your sleeping cabin, Miss Delany," Rey's voice rumbled in the near darkness.

She shouldn't be surprised he'd heard her come in, but she flinched all the same at the sound of his voice. She walked to the bench and sat across from him. "See anything?"

He shifted his gaze to her, but she couldn't see much of his expression on his shadowed face.

"Nothing yet, but that doesn't mean nothing's out there."

His words sent a cool chill through her. He'd shed his rawhide jacket, and it sat on the bench next to him. This allowed her to see the two pistols in a holster strapped to his hips.

She turned to look out the same window he was watching.

She couldn't make out anything unusual, apart from fields of grass and groups of trees.

She couldn't even see roads or houses. Eventually, the gray gloom softened and pinked.

The sun moved closer to pushing over the western horizon, and Viola began to make out more details.

The pale green of sagebrush. The deeper green of summer leaves on trees.

The stretches of yellow-green grass blowing in the wind.

Suddenly Rey stood and swept off his hat.

Viola popped to her feet. "What is it? Did you see them?"

His eyes landed on her for an instant. "Saw something. Hold my hat."

She grasped his hat with both hands and stared as he slid not one, but two pistols from his holster belt. He didn't check to see if they were loaded, which meant he'd already loaded them.

"Rey," she said as he stepped away from the bench. "Can I ... help?"

A small grimace appeared on his face. "Keep my hat safe."

Was that all? Not that she could manage a pistol, but surely ... maybe she could alert the passengers? "What if—"

"Get back in your cabin," he cut in. "Stay hidden. And if you're a praying woman, I wouldn't mind a good word put in for me."

Viola opened her mouth to respond, but Rey strode toward the door that connected to

the next car. He tugged it open, stepped through, then closed it firmly behind him.

Something in her belly tugged and she had the sudden urge to hurry after him. Surely she could do more than pray. Instead, she rushed to the window. What had he seen? And was the train slowing?

Her heart hammered its way up her throat as her gaze moved across the landscape speeding past. Grass, sagebrush, trees, a river ... Then she saw it. Or more accurately, them .

Five riders atop horses. The beasts were charging ahead of the train as if in a race to the next train depot.

But there was no train depot coming up, and the horses were sprinting, their eyes wide, their mouths open as if in a scream.

The riders had whips and they were using them generously on the horses' flanks.

Viola hated all five men on the spot. First, they dared to rob this train and steal from hardworking folks, and second, they were terrorizing their horses.

Viola didn't know what she'd do if they boarded the train and demanded valuables, but she wouldn't be hiding underneath any bunk. She'd give them a piece of her mind.

Gripping Rey's hat in one hand, she scooped up his jacket with her other hand. Then she marched to the connecting door. Opening it, she found another corridor leading to another car. Rey must have gone through there. So she did too.

The next car was a storage car. Filled with crates and trunks.

The windows were high and let in very little light, but she continued through and opened the next door.

The engine was louder now, and she must be getting closer to the front of the train.

She entered the next car to find it was another storage car. Still, no Rey. How far had he gone?

She was about to open the next door when the train lurched, accompanied by a high-pitched screech. Viola lost her balance and fell next to one of the crates. Were they completely stopping? And did that mean Rey hadn't been able to stop the train robbery?

Were the robbers climbing aboard even now? Had they shot Rey?

Viola's stomach soured as panic raced through her.

She gripped the nearby crate to haul herself up, but before she could stand, the door burst open in front of her.

The tall figure coming through the door could have been anyone.

The morning sunlight behind the man obscured his features, but when he spoke, there was no doubt it was the cowboy. Alive.

"Ms. Delany?" he barked. "What are you doing here? I thought I told you to stay in your cabin."

Relief shot through her so swiftly, she had to keep ahold of the crate. "I wanted to check on you."

He didn't seem amused. In fact, his face was pale, and perspiration stood out on his forehead. That's when she noticed. Blood soaked his shirt. It seemed to be everywhere. One of his hands gripped his stomach while the other hand still held a pistol.

Viola's knees gave out and she again slid to the ground. This time, everything went black.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:10 am

“I’M FINE,” REY INSISTED AS the town doctor poked at the skin surrounding the stitches on the side of his torso. “But that cattle prod is cold.”

Doc Smithson chuckled. “If this was a cattle prod, you’d be on the other side of the room by now.” He held up the small, blunt metal instrument.

All right, so it was only about five inches long, but Rey was bruised and the skin was tender.

“If this really hurts,” the doc mused, “it might be infected.”

“It does hurt, but not a lot,” Rey said with a sigh. “I’m just complaining.”

Another grin from Doc Smithson. His red mustache was trimmed as thin as a pencil and his eyebrows as bushy as a runaway caterpillar. The man was a skilled physician, but he had a bit of an unsympathetic way about him.

Case in point, he slathered on some red medicine, slapped a bandage over Rey’s stitches, then used a large amount of tape to close every seam possible. Which would hurt like stepping on hot coals when Rey had to peel it off.

“That bandage isn’t going anywhere,” Rey said in a dry tone. “Even if I was a bull rider, I think it would stay in place.”

Doc’s hand came down on Rey’s shoulder, and he hid a wince.

Things were bruised on his body that had never been bruised before.

The shoot-out with the train robbers had thankfully been short and effective.

Rey had yet to hear if any of the five robbers had been fatally wounded.

He knew he'd gotten a good shot at three of them.

The riders had sped away before Rey could get a good look.

Besides, there was only so much time he wanted to spend on the roof of a speeding train.

He knew he'd been shot, but the pain didn't kick in until he was trying to climb down the car and land on the platform in one piece.

He'd ordered the open-mouthed engineer to speed up the train again.

Then Rey had been intent on heading back to the lounge car and seeking out a doctor when he'd opened the first compartment door to find Viola. On the ground.

Panic had nearly gutted him. Had she been shot by a stray bullet? It seemed impossible, yet ... why had she been on the ground? But before he could demand more answers, she'd gone whiter than a sheet blowing in the summer wind and fainted.

After that, he couldn't exactly account for events. Someone—likely the conductor because of the name “Mr. Christensen” repeated over and over—came into the train car. And that's when Rey had passed out. From lack of blood, it seemed.

When Rey had next opened his eyes, he was splayed out on a surgeon's table in Cheyenne, and Ms. Delany was nowhere to be seen.

He wondered what had happened to her. No one seemed to know.

Not the train station master he'd gone and questioned after he could walk more than a couple of feet.

Not the ladies at the women's auxiliary who knew everything that went on in Cheyenne.

And not Mr. Baxter, who owned the most reputable hotel in town.

So, today, with hope gone of finding out if Ms. Delany had recovered from her own malaise, he was headed back to Mayfair. They were missing a sheriff, after all.

Because the doc had ordered him not to ride a horse for another week, Rey hired a driver to take him back home in a carriage.

As he settled onto the bench, he was finally able to clear his mind and think about things that didn't have to do with shoot-outs, stitches, or the mysterious Ms. Delany.

She could be in another state for all he knew.

She'd never said what her final destination was.

From all accounts, she'd been traveling alone. What did that mean?

Rey shoved those questions away—questions he'd never get answered.

He redirected his thoughts to his small ranch and horses and whether Barb and Jeb were doing all right acting as caretakers in his absence.

He could at least report back to his daughter about how her favorite horse, Sky, was

doing when Rey returned to San Francisco in a couple of weeks.

He relaxed into the seat and enjoyed the small reprieve. He was sure to get an earful from Deputy Thatcher when he showed up at the office. Thatcher was never quiet on any matters, big or small.

“Whoa,” the driver of the carriage said, tugging on the horse’s reins to slow down the animal.

Rey stuck his head out of the carriage window to see that up ahead, there was a crowd on the boardwalk that ran along Mayfair’s Main Street. Other carts and riders had slowed down, and now there seemed to be traffic. In the tiny town of Mayfair.

“What’s going on up there?” Rey asked the driver.

“Don’t rightly know.” The driver pushed his hat back a few inches and mopped his brow with a seen-better-days handkerchief. “The line of people is going to the bakery.”

“Must be a two-for-one special?” Rey said, mostly to himself. He’d get out and walk if the carriage was going to be this slow. But his place was a half mile out on the other side of town, and the morning was only getting hotter.

As it was, the carriage practically crawled past the bakery, and Rey peered at the crowd.

Interesting that those in line were all men.

In this town, the women did the shopping while their fellas worked the ranches.

But then again, most women did their own baking.

So maybe that's why the men were filling up the line.

"Hello, Sheriff!" a voice called out.

Rey tipped his hat to Mr. Brunson.

"You're back already?" another voice called.

"How are you, Gerald?" Rey said to a hooked-nose man.

Other men in line turned and greeted Rey. He knew them all by name, as a matter-of-fact.

"Looks like y'all have a sweet tooth today?" Rey said to a young man named Wallace.

Wallace laughed, displaying his impressive buckteeth. "Sure do, Sheriff."

The carriage continued on, and Rey had a feeling in his gut that he was missing a vital bit of information. He ran through the men in the line—they were all single—so that made more sense. None of them had wives to bake for them. Must be one whoppin' pastry sale.

The line extended to the next corner, and Rey's eyes about popped out when he saw Thatcher wielding his pistol, confronting a man in a dingy white cowboy hat.

"Hold up," Rey called to the driver. "I'll be getting out here. Can you drop off my things at my house? I'll spot you a few more dollars."

The driver tugged on the reins, and soon the carriage pulled to a stop. The men in line watched with interest as Rey climbed out, adjusted his hat, and rested his hand on his

holster.

“Sheriff.” More than one man tipped his hat and nodded in greeting.

Rey kept his gaze on Thatcher. Was it possible that his deputy had gone rogue in his short absence? Was Rey about to witness a gunfight or—heaven forbid—be in the middle of one?

“Thatcher, what’s happening?” He strode to his friend and acting sheriff, an older man with a bit of a pot belly, graying handlebar mustache, and with arms as strong as an ox.

Thatcher swung on Rey, gun still pointed.

“Easy,” Rey said. “What’s going on?”

“Boy, am I glad to see you,” Thatcher huffed. His eyes were bloodshot, and Rey hoped the man wasn’t hitting the bottle during working hours again. It was tricky to keep law and order in a town where the lawmen themselves were being disorderly.

“This here line isn’t supposed to be added to after two p.m.,” Thatcher blustered. “I promised Beth I’d make sure there was a cutoff.”

Beth Cannon was the baker who ran Main Street Bakery. Been doing it before Rey moved into town. A sweet yet outspoken woman. Had been struggling with arthritis the past year, so she’d hired a couple of girls to help her with the baking in the mornings.

Rey wasn’t sure what exact time it was, but he assumed it was now after two, thus the struggle.

“Come on, Thatcher, I got here late on account of my horse going lame,” Billy Warner said. “Can’t blame me for that. Tell ’im, Sheriff Rey.”

“Did everyone run out of food the same day or something?” Rey asked to no one in particular.

“Oh, this man isn’t buying anything,” Thatcher said, pointing at Billy. “The likes of him are just taking a look.” He turned his full attention upon the man. “So, get out of line. No money, no line. After two, no lining up to peek.”

Billy scowled, but he shuffled away, hands in his grimy pockets.

“Thatcher,” Rey said, “put your gun away and tell me what all this fuss is. Looks like a parade, but I don’t see any silver marching band or dancing ponies.”

Thatcher grumbled something incoherent, but he holstered his pistol. “It’s Beth’s niece. Venice, or Vanna, or something. She’s a looker, and all the men want to get a look.”

Rey frowned. “I didn’t know Beth had a niece.”

“None of us did,” Thatcher said. “But she’s the talk of the town. Hair the color of summer wheat—”

“Eyes like a thundercloud,” Gerald said from somewhere down the line. “The kind of storm you want to get caught in.”

“Smile that lights up the whole darn sky,” Wallace added.

The men in the line all nodded, and that’s when Rey saw it. Each one of these unmarried men had that look in their eyes. Like they’d been dumbstruck. Some might

call it lovestruck.

“Well, I’ll be. Sounds like an angel,” Rey said through gritted teeth.

“Oh, she’s an angel, all right,” Mr. Brunson chimed in. “Sang in the church choir yesterday, and I could have sworn the birds stopped singing outside to listen.”

“My heart may never recover,” Jeffrey said, clutching said heart. Jeffrey was a reed-thin man who could normally be found at the saloon this time of day. He looked the most sober Rey had ever seen him, wearing a clean button-down shirt.

Rey couldn’t deny that his curiosity was piqued, but he also knew any single, unmarried, half-pretty woman in Mayfair would get plenty of attention.

He wasn’t a regular churchgoing man, so he’d just have to skip out on hearing angels sing.

He just hoped that Beth Cannon was getting the rest she needed, because from Rey’s viewpoint, standing on the crowded boardwalk, the bakery was busier than ever.

He turned to Thatcher. “How long has this been going on?”

Thatcher paused a moment and counted on his stumpy fingers. “This is day five. The niece arrived one day, and by the second day, the lines were forming. Beth had to take me aside, and we set up some ground rules.”

Rey nodded at this. Made sense. But as he scanned the men in line, bouncing in their cowboy boots, mopping their foreheads and necks in the heat, cracking a few nervous jokes, Rey decided that the line was indecent.

The bakery wasn’t a circus peep show. Beth Cannon was one of the most respectable

women in town—not respectable in the churchgoing sense—but respectable because she was one of the original homesteaders and was, as far as he knew, the oldest citizen of Mayfair.

“I’m the end of the line,” he announced. “Thatcher, you go ahead and get yourself a cold drink.”

“Thank you, sir,” Thatcher said with an eager nod and hurried off, giving out a couple of glares at loitering men for good measure.

Might as well see what all the fuss was about, Rey decided, and whether he needed to put more measures into place to keep Beth Cannon’s niece away from so many prying eyes and gossiping men.

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VIOLA DIDN'T MIND THE GAWKING, not exactly. She'd found it charming the first couple of days. The bakery had also sold clean out by lunchtime. And even though the morning gals whom Aunt Beth had hired were making almost double the breads and pastries, they were still selling out.

"Viola! Come here!"

Viola sighed and wiped her floured hands on her apron.

She'd been assigned pie duty, which she decided she liked over the kneading of bread dough or dipping donuts into hot fry oil.

She headed around the back counter where she worked with a view of the storefront and joined Aunt Beth at the register.

"This key is stuck."

Again.

Aunt Beth wasn't exactly a complainer, Viola had been quick to realize, but when she was having a bad day, she had zero patience.

Like today. Her white peppered hair resembled a bird's nest upon her head, and the rolls of her fleshy neck shone with perspiration.

Summer afternoon in Wyoming in the middle of a bakery was not for the infirm.

“Here.” Viola took ahold of the offending key and wriggled it to the left. The key popped back up. “Now try.”

Beth continued fanning her face with an apple-filling-splotched fan. With her free hand, she poked at the key. A number 8 typed out. “That’ll be eight cents, LeRoy.”

LeRoy, a man with more freckles than a spotted dog, grinned. “Thank ’ee, ma’am. Here’s a dime. Keep the change.” He winked directly at Viola.

“Move on over,” a man behind him demanded. The man clutched a crumpled hat in his hand, his clear blue eyes focused on Viola.

She smiled politely at him, then returned to the pie counter.

“Hey, why can’t the keys stick when I’m being helped?” the man complained when Beth rang up his order of one apple tart without any trouble.

Viola hid both a smile and a sigh. As amusing as all these male patrons were, who happened to be single, available men, at some point everyone needed to do something other than purchase baked goods. Didn’t they have cows to feed and horses to ride? This was the middle-of-nowhere Wyoming, after all.

“You’ll be the belle of the barn dance if you go.” Sidney sidled next to Viola.

The girl, a couple of years younger than Viola, had a gap-toothed smile and eyelashes that went on forever.

“Oh, I don’t think I’m going,” Viola said, picking up from their earlier conversation that felt like hours ago.

A barn dance? In the hay, with everyone stomping around in cowboy boots?

Sounded dreadful. Yes, Viola was helping out her aunt at her bakery, and she did enjoy singing in the church choir—mostly to please Mother though, who'd told Viola to get her aunt to church, "To save her soul."

Besides, Viola hadn't taken waltz lessons in order to dance with any of the men staring at her now with their moon eyes and tobacco-stained teeth.

Not every cowboy chewed and spit, that she knew, since the sheriff from the train hadn't.

At least not on the train ... but his teeth had been a nice, clean white too.

Yes, she'd noticed.

Not that she'd thought about him much. Only to wish him well and a full recovery in her private thoughts.

She'd heard the rumors of him recovering in Cheyenne after a surgery to remove the bullet.

Which must have been why he'd been bleeding so much and why she'd fainted ...

Who knew she fainted at the sight of blood?

It wasn't like she'd ever been witness to a train robbery before.

If she did see him again, and that was if ...

she'd ask politely after his well-being and hope that he'd forgotten how she was utterly useless in a dire situation.

Instead of running for help, she'd slid to the ground like a discarded rag doll.

Her heart still thundered when she thought about that morning.

Since arriving in Mayfair, she'd learned that not only was Rey the sheriff of this small place, but he was the man. The two shopgirls were half in love with him. She'd learned more about Sheriff Rey in five days than she knew about her ex-fiancé after over five months of courting.

Another reason she was anxious about their first encounter.

Rey was a widower. Had been married to the love of his life—according to the shopgirls Sidney and Della—and he had a daughter from the union.

“Looks just like her mama. Poor Sheriff. Every time he looks at his child, he grieves over his dead wife.”

That logic sounded a bit extreme, but what did Viola know about widowers, or cowboys, for that matter?

“I'll have one of those peach pies,” a male voice droned from the front counter. “And I'll pay an extra dollar if the miss can bring it to me herself.”

Viola snapped her gaze up.

The man in question was named Gerald—he'd introduced himself to her each day. And each day, his words became more brazen. Obnoxious, even. Did he know that the end of his rather large nose twitched when he spoke?

Usually, Aunt Beth chased off such comments, but she looked over at Viola expectantly .

“What?” she mouthed, but Beth’s painted-on brows only raised.

In fact, the entire shop of men in line waiting their turn were looking at her. If she did this for an extra dollar, what might tomorrow bring? What choice did she have though? A dollar was a dollar.

She pasted on a smile, then picked up the peach pie nearest to her. Holding it aloft, she walked around the counter and set it down in front of Gerald. “Have a nice day, sir.”

Without waiting for a reply, she turned and walked back to the pie counter.

“Thank you, miss,” Gerald said, his voice having an added squeak to it.

“I want that too,” the next man in line said.

His name started with a W, Viola remembered. She quickly averted her gaze. Making eye contact with him might only encourage him to be more brazen.

“I want the cherry pie, and I’ll pay two extra dollars if the miss brings me the pie and kisses me on the cheek.”

Laughter roared through the bakery, and Viola’s cheeks flamed. She kept her gaze on the crust she’d been rolling out. Anger churned in her stomach, spinning hot. Aunt Beth had better kick the man out, or she would.

Aunt Beth did no such thing because another voice boomed over the laughter. “That’s enough. No special favors. Wallace, you’re out of here, and don’t come back.”

Viola knew that voice. No. No. No. Not here—not like this.

When her hair probably matched the bird's nest of Aunt Beth's.

Not to mention being covered in flour and bits of dried pie crust. She dragged her gaze upward to see Wallace sputter.

Red-faced, he spun toward the man who'd dared issued the orders.

Viola already knew who'd walked into the bakery.

All laughter died, and only one set of boots walking forward could be heard.

She couldn't keep her gaze off the tall cowboy.

His size made the bakery shrink like a dollhouse.

His eyes were the same—green beneath the cowboy hat he'd asked her to hold.

He wasn't wearing his leather jacket, but his shoulders filled out the denim shirt he wore just as nicely.

Viola's gaze skated to his torso, seeing a bulk probably from bandaging, and she wondered how his injury was healing.

He could obviously walk and order people out of the bakery ... if that was any indication.

When she'd first seen him, he'd been shaved, and now dark whiskers outlined his jaw.

Coupled with his scar, he looked more like an outlaw than an honorable sheriff.

In this moment, Viola saw him as Sidney and Della must—the handsome, strong, tragic widower.

A man of authority and stoicism. Honorable to the bone. Respected by all.

“Sheriff?” Wallace blubbered. “I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

Rey’s hand clamped on to the smaller man’s shoulder. “ Out .”

Wallace nodded, his face even redder. He pushed through the other men, nearly stumbling in the process. When he made it out the door, Rey set a hand on his holstered gun.

“Any other knuckleheads want to be banned from Beth Cannon’s bakery?”

Heads shook, and no’s were mumbled.

Rey’s gaze swept those standing in the bakery line, lingering on a couple of the men. Then he turned to face Aunt Beth. “I hear you have a niece in town helping out.”

Beth’s smile curved wide. “That’s right. She’s all the way from San Francisco. Welcome back yourself, Sheriff. Heard you got shot saving a train full of people. Looks like you’re up and in fine form now.”

“Missed my heart by a mile,” Rey’s deep voice rumbled.

Something flipped in Viola’s stomach. Oh, who was she fooling? Everything inside her was flipping and flopping like a fish on the San Francisco wharf.

Because right then, Sheriff Reynold Christensen finally looked at her.

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IF SOMEONE HAD TOLD REY last week that looking at a woman could take a man's breath away, he would have laughed and said those were words of a fanciful poet.

Not that Rey was an expert in poetry, but he heard the way men talked about women.

He also knew the way men fought over women.

And he remembered what it felt like to love a woman with your whole being so that you'd do anything for her.

Even if it took mortgaging the ranch to send away for some fancy city doctor, only to have the miracle cure fail.

He also knew that his heart, which had been doing just fine—healing slowly and being content with his life as sheriff, dad to one little girl, and keeping law and order in Mayfair—had suddenly been jolted. Yet there was no lightning coming through the bakery roof that he knew of.

But that's what felt like had happened when he turned his gaze upon Beth Cannon's niece.

Who happened to be the woman from the train.

Miss Viola Delany herself. Risen from the train-car floor and restored to her senses.

Changed from her prim white blouse of ruffles.

Now she wore a sky-blue dress and light pink apron, dusted with flour.

Gone was her smart hat angled over her gray eyes.

The stormy Pacific was clear in her gaze now, her face framed by wisps of blonde hair that had escaped the bun tied at the nape of her neck.

Her dark brows and dark lashes were just as he remembered them though. Nothing had changed there. But her cheeks were flushed pink, likely with the heat of the ovens and certainly had nothing to do with seeing him—a jaded cowboy who'd been through a thing or two in life.

It was probably a good thing that Viola Delany spoke first, because for the first time in his life, Rey had no words. Maybe the proverbial cat had really stolen his tongue and buried it beneath a mound of hay in the farthest reaches of a barn somewhere.

“Sheriff Rey.” Viola’s cool gray eyes skated over his person as if she could see the outline of his tighter-than-a-lasso bandaging. “You have recovered. The whole town has been praying for you.”

Rey’s throat bobbed. Now, why didn’t this woman seem surprised to see him? And how did she know what the whole town was doing? This was his town. Wait ... He’d told her where he was from, and she hadn’t returned the favor, which meant she’d known all along they’d run into each other.

He took off his hat. First, because he felt like he was standing in front of a blacksmith’s kiln, and second, because it gave him another moment to collect his thoughts. But he reached up too fast for his hat—clean forgetting about his healing wound—and hissed out a wince.

“Sheriff, you should sit down,” Beth said at the same time Viola’s softer voice added,

“You don’t look so good, sir.”

Oh no. Don’t faint now. You’re the sheriff here. To protect and defend. Not to wilt and be coddled. These thoughts ran through his mind faster than the imaginary lightning that had struck him earlier, but thankfully, someone had the foresight to scoot a chair behind him and sit his rear down.

Rey didn’t faint after all.

“You all right, Sheriff?” Had Thatcher’s voice always been that loud?

Where’d he come from anyway? Sure enough, the man was leaning over him, his breath stinking of whisky. They were going to have a serious talk later.

“I’m fine,” Rey mustered, but his thoughts were spinning faster than a dust devil, and his throat felt like he’d swallowed his grandpa’s pipe smoke.

“Take him back to the nook under the stairs. There’s a bed there.”

Beth Cannon had spoken. Her voice was an octave too high, but that wasn’t as irritating as the several pair of hands forcing him to his feet, supporting him, and propelling him through the bakery, past the hotter-than-Hades ovens, and into a closet.

Well, it wasn’t a closet, but close enough.

He heard other voices. Women. Men. All fussing over him.

“I’m fine,” he repeated, but no one paid him attention.

Voices rose and fell, blended together, until blessedly, mercifully, there was only one.

Viola.

“Try this, Sheriff Rey.” Her voice was soft, still prim, yes, but he really didn’t mind that.

He dragged his eyes open. The light was dimmer in the nook under the stairs. And he was on a small bed that would better fit his daughter than his own six-foot-something frame. But he wasn’t in a position, or of the mind, to point that out right now.

Viola sat next to him, perched on a small slice of mattress, which meant that her hip was nestled against his hip. Well. He’d process that later.

Right now, she held out what looked like a cool glass of something, and his throat was practically screaming for it.

He reached for the glass and their fingers brushed. Her hand was warm and soft—just as a woman’s should be—so there was no surprise there. If he could command his pulse to calm down, he would have, but his pulse wasn’t listening.

He drained the cool glass of lemonade, then handed the empty glass back to Viola. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“You don’t need to be so formal with me, Sheriff. Ma’am is for someone who is older than you or a stranger.” She tilted her head. “You almost fainted.”

“No ... I was just hot. The bakery is an inferno.”

The edges of her mouth lifted, and the gray of her eyes lightened. He didn’t think he fully appreciated her smile on the train. Now he was making amends.

“Bakeries are generally warm, and it’s summer in Wyoming.”

“Both of those facts are true.” His heart did a double thump when her smile grew. “You seem to work fine in the heat. Rolling out pie dough and putting up with gawking men.”

Her dark lashes lowered, and her hands curled around the empty glass. “I don’t mind the heat. It doesn’t make me faint. Not like seeing a man covered in blood.”

Her cheeks were definitely pink, as was that mouth of hers.

“I’m sorry if I startled you.”

Viola’s gaze lifted again, her gray eyes steady. “When? In the bakery just now, or on the train?”

He had to think about that for a moment. “Both?”

Another smile stole across her pretty features, and he knew that a moment or two longer of this smiling back and forth might lead to something that he’d definitely regret later.

“Apology accepted, sir.”

“Rey.”

She blinked. “Rey.”

“That’s better.” He winked, and he had no idea how in high heaven he thought he could wink at her.

Too late to take it back now. “Now, if you don’t mind, I need to make sure all those men out there are on their way outside with their purchases.

Don't need the womenfolk harassed. This here is a business establishment. ”

Viola Delany's hand pressed against his chest. If he wasn't well and stuck before, now he truly was. “You're not moving an inch until the doctor comes and looks you over.”

This was a voice he hadn't heard before. A commanding voice with plenty of authority. A voice that maybe a mother would use on a child, or a woman would use on a husband.

“I didn't know you had a bossy side, Viola.”

Her brows lifted a fraction. “There's a lot you don't know about me, Rey.”

Was it possible to stare at a woman too long? What would the poets have to say about that?

“Now, let me see that bandage of yours,” Viola continued in her bossy voice. “Unless you have a hunchback on the side of your torso, it seems you have enough bandaging to outfit the Red Cross for a month. You only got shot once, right?”

Rey grinned. “Right.”

“And the scar on the side of your face? Is that from another fight with train robbers?”

He touched the scar on his face. “Nothing so impressive. Fell off a horse.”

“Ah.” When Viola took it upon herself to unbutton his shirt, he wasn't sure if perhaps he had fainted and was now dreaming a dream he probably shouldn't be dreaming.

Yet this was no dream, although it might be a slice of heaven. Her warm, delicate

fingers worked deftly, only brushing against his skin once or twice.

“Ah.” Viola’s gray eyes gave nothing away, unless he counted the purse of her lips. “Just as I thought. No wonder you almost fainted. Who bandaged you up?”

“Doc Smithson.”

“Whoever Smithson is, there’s no need to be a zealot about medical care and bring a man close to fainting.” She began to pick at the edge of the bandaging tape. “I think he’s rearranged your ribs in the process.”

Rey sucked in a breath as Viola peeled off one edge of the bandaging. It was both painful and relieving. The tightness loosened but left behind the burn of sore skin atop of deep bruising.

“Sorry, I’ll be quick,” Viola murmured.

He sucked in another breath and focused on her face, her hair, her eyelashes. Anything but the pain of the bandage tape being ripped off his skin. “Tell me,” he rasped. “Where’d you learn to administer medical care? You don’t seem to care for blood.”

Her gaze flicked to his, then back to her task. “Volunteered at the Red Cross a few times. Never treated a real patient though. Mostly cut bandage strips and rolled them up.”

She tugged a particularly tight section, and he winced, then locked down his jaw to keep from groaning.

“There.” She wadded up the discarded bandaging and set it aside. “Now, let’s take a look.”

He didn't know what he expected, but it wasn't her prodding the area around his stitches. Her touch was light, though, and although there was a bit of an ache, he didn't mind her soft fingers on his skin.

"The swelling is down," Viola pronounced. "And the bruising is changing color. All good signs." Her eyes lifted to his face. "You'll live, Sheriff Rey."

He shouldn't laugh because truthfully, it hurt, but he laughed anyway. "You did a lot more than cut bandage strips and roll them up. Are you a secret nurse-in-training? You fainted when I walked into the train car, yet you have no qualms now?"

When her cheeks bloomed pink, he knew he'd struck a chord somewhere, but he wasn't sure what it was.

"I guess I'm not in shock over your potential death anymore." She moved her hands to her lap as if something on his torso had burned her. "Besides, my father would never let me become a nurse. I've just read a few books about medicine and medical care, that's all."

Her words might be nonchalant, modest, even, but Rey sensed that behind this woman's prim demeanor was a dream of something beyond what her life was in San Francisco.

"What would your father think if you were professionally trained?"

Viola lifted a hand and tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

"That's not possible for a woman like me.

My parents will find me a husband, one who's properly rich.

I'll have two children, a boy and a girl.

The boy will go into law or banking. The girl will be beautiful and marry another rich man.

And when I'm in my rocking chair, tapping away my final days, wanting to be a nurse will seem like a faded dream of a girl I once knew. ”

Rey gazed at her for a long moment, and she gazed right back.

“Well, if you want my opinion, Viola Delany, you can have the husband and two children, plus follow your dream. It's 1905, ma'am.”

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:10 am

VIOLA HAD NO IDEA WHY she'd gone and told Sheriff Rey things that she hadn't even told her own mother.

When she once brought up nursing school to her father, he'd blustered and ranted, firmly putting her back into the place where she was expected to exist. And the months and years had passed.

Now she was twenty-seven and working in a tiny bakery for an aunt.

"You look like him, you know," Aunt Beth said as she perched on the wooden stool in front of the shop register.

Viola paused in peeling the bushel of peaches she'd been working on for the past hour. Sidney was peeling apples, and Della was sweeping the floor.

He merely tipped his hat at Viola, greeted her aunt and asked if there was anything she needed, then strode out.

Oh, she'd seen him about town. And if they made eye contact, he'd nod and tip his hat.

Viola was about ready to knock that hat off of his head, if only to get him to say more than a two-word greeting.

"Your father," Aunt Beth continued. "You remind me of him."

Viola couldn't have been more surprised. People always told her she looked like her

mother—same blonde hair, similar height, and curvy build.

“You have his eyes.” Aunt Beth looked toward the windows, her painted brows pinched.

Viola wouldn’t say her aunt looked exactly like her mother—but there were plenty of similarities between the two sisters.

Now Viola blinked. She supposed her eyes were the same color as her father’s, but no one else had really commented on that.

“You have his forthrightness and stubbornness,” Aunt Beth continued as if she were performing a monologue with an audience of three.

Della had stopped sweeping, and Sidney had stopped peeling apples.

“I’m not sure that’s a compliment,” Viola teased, because Aunt Beth sounded bleak, subdued, and something prickled at the back of Viola’s neck. What had brought all of this on?

Aunt Beth pushed herself up from the stool, then rubbed her hands as if they ached, which they probably did.

“Do you want me to put on that cream for you?” Viola offered.

“That would be nice, dear,” Aunt Beth said in a tone that sounded like she was thinking of something else entirely. “Do you think you girls can run the shop today? I’m quite tired.”

Viola’s mouth nearly dropped open, but she nodded anyway. “Of course.”

“Can I run the register?” Sidney asked in a hopeful tone.

“I don’t care who does it, but there must be a double count upon closing.”

“Yes, Miss Cannon.” Sidney gave Della a triumphant glance.

Della’s scowl lasted only a second, then she returned to sweeping.

“Come, Viola,” Aunt Beth said.

Viola followed her aunt up the stairs to the second floor, where she lived in a suite of rooms that included a tiny kitchenette, a sofa by the window, and two narrow beds in the bedroom.

When Aunt Beth settled on the sofa, she drew an afghan about her legs even though it was plenty warm.

Should Viola be worried even more now? She fetched the cream that the town doctor had said would ease the swelling and aching in her aunt’s hands. Sitting next to her, Viola began to rub the cream in.

“You have a nice touch,” Aunt Beth said in that faraway voice again. “You know, I wanted to go into nursing too.”

Viola’s mouth did drop open then. “You—you heard what I said to Sheriff Rey last week?”

Aunt Beth’s mouth curved into a smile. “Yes, of course. I couldn’t leave my niece alone with a virile and unmarried man. Doesn’t matter how ill he might be. Wouldn’t be proper.”

“The sheriff would never—” Viola cleared her throat. “He’s an honorable man, but I’m sure I don’t need to tell you that.” She was still trying to remember their conversation exactly and what Aunt Beth might have overheard.

“He’s been keeping an eye on you, you know,” Aunt Beth said.

“On me ?” Viola rubbed her aunt’s wrist a little harder than she’d intended to. When she realized it, she softened her touch. “He’s looking out for all of us in the shop. It’s his job.”

Aunt Beth chuckled at this, then she drew her hands back. “Viola, you’re a grown woman, but sometimes I think you only see what you want to see—and ignore what’s right in front of you.”

Heat climbed up Viola’s neck. “I see what’s in front of me—”

But Aunt Beth held up her hand. “Now, sometimes it’s better to listen, especially to a woman who has years more experience than you in matters between men and women.”

Viola could only stare at her aunt. Beth had never been married or engaged, never had children ...

Had she a string of lovers in the past no one in the family knew about?

It was hard to imagine her wild-haired aunt, in her plain cotton dresses and perpetual flour underneath her fingernails, with extensive experience with men.

“I’m listening,” Viola said, because what else could she say? She was more curious and eager than a mouse searching for crumbs in winter.

“When your mother and I were young women, she was always considered the pretty one. The bright, sparkly, outgoing Cannon sister. I was the studious one. Always reading. Always dreaming of far-off places. I read everything. Medical books in which I imagined myself as a nurse. Legal books in which I wondered if I could follow in Clara Foltz’s shoes and become a female lawyer in California.

Science books in which I dreamed of joining a safari trip to the African continent. ”

Viola had read books about all those subjects, but she’d always known she was meant to follow in her mother’s footsteps and become a society miss. “So nursing was one of the things you considered?”

“Yes,” Aunt Beth said. “I wasn’t like you—invested in it—because I loved to dream so much.

I used to go on long walks with a book tucked under my arm.

I’d slip into one of the San Francisco hotels and sit in the lobby.

Not to read, but to listen to the conversations of those around me.

Travelers intrigued me. And that’s when I met your father. ”

Viola moved to the edge of the sofa and turned more fully toward her aunt. “I thought you and my mother met Father at the governor’s ball.”

“Oh, that’s when your mother met him.” Beth released a sigh accompanied by a smile.

“I fell in love with him first, you know. I still remember the moment your father walked into that hotel lobby. He was dressed like a gentleman, and his eastern accent

only added to his intrigue. He spoke rapidly to the hotel concierge, then swept his gaze about the lobby, stopping on me.”

Aunt Beth touched a hand to her throat as she continued.

“He asked me for restaurant recommendations, and we fell into a conversation after that. For over an hour we talked of everything, and he told me he was interviewing for a job at the bank. That he’d be in town for a week or two, sightseeing.

I had planned to show up in the lobby the next day, and maybe the next, if only to speak with him more.

But that night, he arrived at the governor’s ball. ”

Viola had heard stories about the governor’s ball—from her parents, never from Aunt Beth.

“That night at the ball, your father only had eyes for your mother. It was like someone had snuffed out the candle burning inside of me, forever plunging me into the dark.” She gave a sad laugh. “At least that’s what it felt like at the time. Nineteen-year-olds can be dramatic.”

But Viola didn’t smile or laugh. How had she not known Aunt Beth had loved her father? She felt both repelled and fascinated. “Did Mother know? Did my father ... ?”

“No one knew,” Aunt Beth continued. “At least not directly. I think they both suspected. I left the morning after they’d announced their engagement at Christmas dinner. Packed my things, jumped on a train heading east, and got off at Cheyenne.”

Viola had no words. She hadn’t known any of this.

“I refused to go to the wedding,” Aunt Beth said. “I made up an excuse of being ill.” She shrugged. “Never had the desire to see the two of them together. Thought that maybe I’d find another man, or I’d follow one of my dreams after all. But none of that happened.”

Viola released a breath. “I’m sorry. I had no idea.”

Another shrug from Aunt Beth. “How could you?” She reached out and patted Viola’s hand. “Now, run along. The shop will be opening soon, and you have a lot of admirers coming to see you.”

“None I could ever take seriously,” Viola said. “My parents would have a fit.”

Aunt Beth chuckled. “That’s what makes it so entertaining.

I know you’ve been smarting over your broken engagement, but it’s quite comical that your parents would make you hide out here.

The one place they’d never stoop to visit.

And the one place where you are at the most threat of having your heart stolen. ”

“What do you mean?” Although Viola knew what her aunt meant. Her racing heart was proof enough.

“You’re not one of those stuffy city folks,” Beth said.

“You might look like your parents, and you might have finer manners than most people in Wyoming, but you’re a dreamer.

You want to look beyond the trappings of wealth and privilege.

You want to make a difference in the world, and how will you do that living under the weight of someone else's expectations?

If there's one thing I could tell you to do—based on all my experience and all my regrets—it's to take a chance on your dream.

If you don't, you'll never know if it would have worked out. ”

Viola's thoughts spun with all that Aunt Beth had told her. She rose to her feet and moved to the door leading to the stairs. “Thank you for telling me your story. I didn't know, and I'm sorry that you went through such heartache.”

“Oh.” Aunt Beth waved a hand. “It was all for the best. I see that now. Your father was on the fast track of elite society, and your mother happily went along with him. I'm content in my small-town bakery.

It might not have been an original dream, but it suits me just fine.

The quiet life, the nonjudgmental life, a life of feeding people delicious food—what could be better? ”

Viola smiled as she paused at the door. “Wyoming isn't so bad?”

Aunt Beth grinned. “Not so bad at all.”

Viola's thoughts felt weighed down as she descended the steps.

Aunt Beth's secret was out, it seemed. All these years—she'd been living her second choice in life.

Alone, but not alone at all. Every person in the town admired Aunt Beth, greeted her,

visited with her—she was surrounded by a different kind of family.

Viola had never had that in San Francisco.

No, her days were filled with social visits or joining her mother on committees for one thing or another.

Her close friends she'd grown up with were all married, and some had children of their own.

Her only independent time was when she volunteered for the Red Cross.

She walked into the kitchen and settled into making the first round of pies.

The routine had become a comfort in a way.

She could let her mind wander yet keep her hands busy.

The morning passed quickly as Viola got pies into the oven, then rolled out more crust. Sidney chatted merrily with the men who had lined up to make their purchases.

Even without Sheriff Rey directly in the shop, the men were much better behaved. They didn't add on extra dollars and make demands. They paid for their orders, tipped their hats at Viola and the other girls, then shuffled out.

Viola hadn't realized how much she was watching the door when Deputy Thatcher walked in—instead of Sheriff Rey.

"How y'all doing?" he asked, nodding to Sidney. "Any trouble today?"

Sidney flashed the older man a smile. "Everyone's been well-mannered."

“We have,” Phil said, a stout man with intelligent eyes. “In fact, I was just about to ask if these pretty ladies will be at the barn dance tomorrow night.”

Sidney blushed quite fiercely, which Viola found intriguing. Did she have an interest in the cowboy named Phil?

“I’ll be there,” Sidney declared. “How about you, sir?”

Phil’s gaze cut to Viola, then returned to Sidney’s, where it should be. “I’ll certainly be there. Maybe you can save a dance for me? I’d be right pleased.”

Sidney’s coloring deepened. “I’ll consider it.”

Viola wanted to laugh. Sidney was way past considering.

“What about you, Miss Delany? Will you be at the barn dance?” another man called out.

Viola looked over to see a man named Billy, who was a regular at the bakery.

Someone had mentioned he was a cattleman, which probably explained why his clothing looked like he’d just climbed off a horse.

He was usually quiet, as far as his words went, but his gaze was always on her as if he were trying to read her very thoughts.

“I haven’t decided yet,” Viola said, which was true, but even if she went to the barn dance, it wouldn’t be to dance with any of these men.

She’d already told Aunt Beth that she’d help at the pie table.

Stay behind the scenes. The way things were looking, Aunt Beth might not be going to the barn dance.

Billy shuffled forward in line, not responding, but not looking away either.

The stares and comments were still a bit of a novelty.

They didn't bother her too much, although Billy was a bit brazen with his staring.

There were other single women in town—Viola had met them, along with Sidney and Della.

They might be a few years younger than Viola, but they were definitely interested in courting and getting married.

“She'll go,” Sidney said brightly. “It can't be a barn dance without our newest friend there.”

Viola wanted to know why not when Deputy Thatcher slapped a hand on his thigh. “Oh, geez Louise, I forgot about that. Sheriff better be back by then. I can't throw out all the drunks on my own.”

Back? Where was Sheriff Rey? Out of town?

Should he be traveling after being so recently recovered from his surgery?

Curiosity burned inside of her, but she didn't dare ask any questions with so many listening ears about.

And were drunkards a main part of the barn dance? Maybe she'd stay clear after all.

“Oh, that’s right.” Sidney rang up Phil’s purchase while they both blushed. “Sheriff went to fetch his daughter back home.”

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:10 am

“IT’S TOO SMALL,” ELSIE DECLARED, setting her small hands on her tiny hips, reminding Rey of his wife for the umpteenth time.

Seeing his daughter after being gone a couple of weeks had been surreal, since when he picked her up at her grandmother’s home in San Francisco, he could have sworn Elsie had grown another foot and an even bigger attitude. Her opinions were certainly more decided than he remembered them ever being.

“The dress is the biggest size in a party dress that you have.” Rey eyed both their reflections in the brass-framed mirror.

Elsie’s strawberry-blonde hair, so much like her mother’s, had been braided into two rows, courtesy of Barb.

Her green-and-white-checkered dress with a ruffled collar might be a little tight around the torso, and the sleeves a little short, but as long as the dress buttoned and the girl could breathe all right ...

Elsie biting her lip was never a good sign though. Usually, it was the precursor to tears. He had to think of something fast.

Leaning down, he said, “Tell you what, darlin’. On Monday we’ll head into Cheyenne, and you can pick out a new dress or two.”

Elsie’s blue eyes lit up. “Ready-made?”

“Ready-made.” Buying fabric and having Barb sew something up would be less

money, but indulging his daughter wouldn't harm anything if done once in a while.

Elsie grinned, and Rey knew it would all be worth it because she pranced away. "I need to find ribbons to match this dress. Can you help tie them, Papa?"

"Of course." He followed after her as she crossed the room and opened a small drawer at the top of her bureau. It had been his wife's bureau, and although he'd packed many things away, Barb had helped him select items that Elsie could use now.

One of those was a box of various colored ribbons. Now Elsie opened the box and pulled out two green ribbons. She handed them over to Rey, and with a bit of fumbling at first, he managed to tie bows at the ends of her braids.

When Elsie next looked in the mirror, there was no pouting, only smiles.

As they headed out into the early evening light, Rey breathed in the fresh air.

Much better than that of San Francisco. He understood why his mother wanted to live in a city with so much convenience, but for Rey, he planned on living out the rest of his life in Mayfair.

He knew that the day might come when his daughter might make another choice, but for now, he'd be grateful for their time together.

"Are you going to dance with the ladies?" Elsie asked as she perched next to him in the driver's seat of the wagon.

"Hi-yah," Rey called to his trusty horse as he snapped the reins. The horse plodded forward. "I'm going to dance with you, Elsie. And you're a lady."

Elsie wrinkled her freckled nose at this. "I'm just a little girl, Papa. And you're too

tall for me to dance with.”

Rey chuckled. “How about you stand on my boots like we’ve done at home?”

“Maybe.” Elsie lifted one of her small shoulders. “Barb says that a man gets lonely when he doesn’t have a wife.”

Rey’s laughter died at that, and he peered at his daughter. “Barb said that, huh? Maybe Barb should mind her manners.”

“One of my friends in San Francisco has a new mama.” Elsie linked her arm through his. “Her mama died too, and her papa married another woman. She’s very nice and let us try on makeup.”

Rey didn’t know what to focus on. The fact that his eight-year-old daughter had put on makeup or that she had a friend he didn’t know about. His mother hadn’t mentioned anything about new friends with new mothers. He’d definitely be writing a letter when he returned home tonight.

“I’m happy for your friend, and her, uh, step-mother sounds like a nice woman.”

“She’s very nice,” Elsie said in a wistful tone.

Rey supposed he should have known this day would come sooner than later. Elsie didn’t remember her mother, since she’d been only three when she died, but she still missed having a mother all the same.

It was just that ... well, Rey didn’t know if his heart could take another loss.

Either for him or for his daughter. Besides, if he was set on staying in Mayfair, that narrowed any marrying options significantly.

Women from Cheyenne might not want to move to such a tiny spot.

Certainly no woman from San Francisco would ever consider moving into the wilds.

Now, why had he gone and connected that city of all places to himself? Surely it was because he'd just returned there to pick up Elsie. No other reason.

"I'll tell you what, darlin'," Rey said. "If there's a woman you think I should ask to dance with tonight, then I will. Otherwise, I'm happy with just the two of us, all right?"

Her head bobbed in a brisk nod. "All right, Papa. I'll keep my eyes open."

Rey chuckled. "Don't make it too obvious though. I don't want anyone matchmaking for me."

"What does matchmaking mean?"

"Ah." Maybe he'd put his foot in his mouth. "Sometimes people think they know who a fella should marry, so they make introductions and so on."

"Like Barb?"

"What about Barb?"

"I heard her telling you about Miss Cannon's niece and how she's a pretty lady. Smart too."

Rey's throat felt like he'd swallowed a cup of dirt. "Uh ... I didn't know you'd overheard that conversation."

“Oh, I did.”

Rey might have laughed, but the last thing he needed was Elsie latching her sights onto Viola Delany.

Out of all the women in all of Wyoming, she'd be the last one he'd ever court.

Not because he didn't agree with Barb—Viola was a pretty lady and very smart ...

and other things like intriguing, easy to talk to, prim and proper, yet caring, even when she was being bossy ...

But Viola Delany belonged in another place. San Francisco. Her checkered cotton dresses and flour-dusted aprons didn't fool him. The woman had dreams, and she should follow them. Even if it went against her parents' wishes.

“Miss Delany is a fine woman,” Rey said, because he had to say something to get Elsie's mind turned around. “She's only here for the summer though, to help out her aunt. She has a whole other life in San Francisco, and I'm afraid that even if I did ask her to dance, it wouldn't make her like me.”

“She doesn't like you?”

All right, so he was mixing up all his words. “She likes me as anyone in town might like the sheriff who helps out. But she doesn't like me like a woman likes a man she might consider, uh, marrying.”

He felt his daughter's penetrating gaze on him. “Did you ask her if she likes you?”

He looked down at her. “Hey, I thought you were eight. Not seventeen.”

Elsie's cheeks dimpled—just like her mother's had. "You're funny, Papa."

Nudging her, he said, "I'll dance with a lady who is from town. You pick. Just don't choose someone who's going to disappear in a couple of months."

"All right, Papa."

So, it was that simple. Rey should be relieved, but he was far from relieved. He was thinking about Viola Delany at the barn dance. She'd be asked dozens of times, he was sure. All those men lined up at the bakery each day would be vying for her attention. She might not even notice him.

He tried to think of the other women in town. There were a couple of dozen women in their twenties and thirties, unmarried, or widowed ... women his daughter could choose from. But none of them he was looking forward to seeing.

They joined other wagons and carts on the road leading to the Riley barn. It was the newest one in town, so it had been unofficially elected for the dance. Light spilled from the wide-open double doors, and it sounded like Old Jennings was already fiddlin' up a storm.

"There's Lucy and her brother!" Elsie suddenly said, pointing toward the family who was walking into the barn. "Can I go in with them?"

"Of course." Rey's heart stung a little. They hadn't even stopped their cart, yet Elsie was already wanting to spend the time with her friends. Not that he blamed her. She'd been gone for three weeks, and he'd become boring old dad.

And it wasn't like he was going to remind her that she'd been intent on matching him with a dance partner. No, he'd be happy if she clean forgot that part of their conversation.

“Hello, Sheriff!” Jana Hixon called out just as they climbed out of their cart. Jana was a woman in her sixties who rode horses more than she walked. Her swagger tonight was hidden by a wide-hemmed skirt that she probably only broke out once a year.

“Jana, a fine evening to you.”

“Good to see you up and about,” Jana continued as they walked toward the barn doors. Elsie skipped on ahead and joined her friends without even a glance back at him. “All healed up?”

“All healed up.”

“Oh goodness.” Jana stopped in her tracks. “What a spread. I’ll be by the pie table if anyone needs me.”

Rey looked over at the long tables set up on the far side of the barn.

Tradition held that families brought their favorite pie, and everyone could try various kinds.

Beth Cannon always brought a dozen or so from her bakery.

She’d made it a habit of presiding over the pie table and serving up slices.

He scanned for signs of Beth but didn’t see her. Another woman seemed to be arranging the pies this year. A blonde woman whom Rey recognized, even though her back was to him. His pulse did a strange sort of leap just knowing that Viola Delany had come to the barn dance after all.

He wasn’t the only man who’d noticed her, of course. In fact, one was approaching her now.

Wallace.

Rey didn't know if he should be concerned or not. Certainly Wallace had learned his lesson from being kicked out of the bakery. To Rey's knowledge, the man hadn't been back since. So what was going through Wallace's mind now?

Rey began to thread his way to the other side of the barn, greeting others as he moved. Elsie was busy chattering and running around with her friends. When he was about halfway across the space, Wallace reached Viola, and she turned to face him.

Her smile was bright, but Rey didn't miss the way she gripped her hands tightly in front of her.

Wallace said something, and Viola pointed to the rows of pies.

Wallace stepped closer, sweeping off his hat.

Viola stepped back. Wallace said something, and Viola shook her head.

Then she moved around the table, putting the pies between her and Wallace.

Wallace frowned and gestured about something.

Viola's smile remained in place, but she shook her head again and folded her arms.

"Good evenin', Wallace," Rey said, arriving at his side. "Tried any of the pies yet?"

Wallace spun to face Rey, his expression going slack. "You sure seem to like pies as well, Sheriff."

"I don't think there's a soul in Mayfair who doesn't like a fine piece of pie," Rey

said.

Wallace blinked, then nodded, as if he were trying to figure out if this was just a friendly conversation or something more.

Rey looked over at Viola. “Hello, Miss Delany. Fine evening.”

Her mouth quirked, but she responded with a polite, “Hello, Sheriff. It is a fine evening.”

Wallace seemed to hover. Rey remained by the table, scanning the pies as if each and every one was fascinating.

Finally, with an exaggerated huff, Wallace walked off, placing his hat firmly upon his head.

“Would you like to try a piece?” Viola asked, picking up the pie spatula.

“I would,” Rey said. “But maybe in a few moments.”

She set down the spatula. “Any excitement on your recent journey?”

“You mean like stopping a train robbery?”

Her smile was soft. And there went Rey’s pulse leaping about again. “Something like that.”

“Nothing so exciting.” He nodded toward his daughter and her friends. “Unless you count Elsie spilling her ice cream on my hat.”

“Oh goodness.” Viola sounded like she was about to laugh. “That’s quite the

disaster.”

“Quite.”

She did laugh then, and Rey found himself grinning. He really should move on. Speak to other townsfolk. Make sure that any rabble-rousing was kept at minimum.

“Tell me about your daughter. Her name is Elsie, right?”

“Right. She’s eight years old, going on about sixteen.”

“Ah.” Viola’s smile was back. “I heard that quite a lot from my parents. But look at me now. Twenty-seven and perfectly respectable.”

“You’re twenty-seven?” Rey couldn’t hide his surprise.

“Yep, I’m a spinster. A jaded spinster at that.”

“Jaded? Did a man do you wrong?”

“You could say that, Sheriff Rey.” Her gaze moved away from him. “Hello, Billy. Are you needing a slice of pie?”

Rey hid his scowl as he looked over at the man who’d interrupted.

Billy twisted a ratty hat in his hand as he held it against his heart. “I’d like to ask you to dance, miss.”

“Oh, you are sweet for asking,” Viola said. “I’m working the pie table this evening. Won’t be dancing at all. Now, I’m sure there’s several other ladies who’d be happy to dance with you. Bring her back here for a piece of pie after.”

Rey wanted to shout in triumph. Apparently, Viola was quite smooth at turning away the fellas.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:10 am

SHERIFF REY WAS DEFINITELY LINGERING, or was it loitering?

Whatever it was, Viola felt vastly amused.

Butterflies were also making themselves busy in her stomach.

Aunt Beth's words about the sheriff being "interested" in her wouldn't leave her mind.

Still, she wondered if Rey was hanging around the pie table to watch over her because it was his civic duty, or because he wanted to get to know her better, or because he was bored?

It was honestly hard to tell. She really had nothing to lose by just asking him.

"Are you going to stand here all night and chase off every man who approaches me?" she said after his scowl and disapproving look sent away another cowboy.

Rey's green eyes landed on her. "I don't think you need my help in that corner, ma'am. Although I'm happy to oblige if necessary."

"You're calling me ma'am again."

"We're in a more formal setting."

He was teasing, she knew it. She made a studious assessment of the man.

His height made him imposing to the average-sized man, she supposed.

His profession added to that as well. But his kindness and frank-speaking made him appealing to women, not to mention those deep green eyes of his and his rugged features.

Viola hadn't missed the stares of several women in the barn, including Della.

At least Sidney had changed her focus to Phil, whom she currently danced with.

"I'll be fine, sir," Viola pronounced, returning his ma'am with her sir. "Now, you go find yourself a dance partner. The sheriff of the town can't always be on duty."

Interestingly enough, Rey hesitated, then murmured, "Just not looking forward to being cornered by my daughter again."

"Elsie? What hold does a child have on you?" Viola wasn't what she'd call a natural with children. But she'd been watching the eight-year-old Elsie off and on, and she seemed like a go-getter, and Viola liked that.

He chuckled at this and folded his arms. "Ah. Well. Elsie came home from San Francisco talking about her friend's new mother."

Viola did a quick scan of his sinewy forearms, then she averted her gaze before he noticed. "And?"

Rey took a step closer and lowered his voice, which wasn't too hard to hear over the energetic fiddler. "She doesn't remember her mother, and I knew it would only be a matter of time before she realizes what she's been missing."

Viola blinked. This was much more personal than she thought he might share with

her, especially in a public setting. “And she’s missing that now?”

Rey set his hands on his hips and looked down at the ground.

“It seems that way, ma’am. On the drive over, she was determined to find me a woman to dance with.

” He raised his gaze to meet Viola’s. “She’s distracted now by her friends, but how long will that last?

And even if I satisfy her and dance with someone tonight, then what about tomorrow, or next week?

I just don’t think I can abide living with a precocious matchmaker. ”

Against her will, Viola felt the edges of her mouth tug upward.

“Do you find that amusing, Miss Delany?”

“I might.” Her smile grew.

Rey’s eyes glimmered with humor. “It’s not every day that a man confesses his life is secretly ruled by a child, whether he’s a sheriff or not.”

Viola laughed. “I’m impressed that you’re at least willing to admit it. But don’t worry, your secret is safe. I mean, who would I tell?”

Rey pushed up the brim of his hat and rubbed at his forehead. “Beth Cannon?”

“Oh, she’d be the last person I’d tell,” Viola said. “She’s already after me to give another man a chance. Says that one failed engagement isn’t excuse enough to remain

a spinster.”

“You were engaged?” He looked quite surprised, which surprised her—it seemed that the town gossip hadn’t reached him.

“I was, but he was caught in an indiscretion, and before marriage, that’s unacceptable.”

Rey frowned. “And it’s acceptable during marriage?”

Viola shrugged a shoulder. “The unbreakable knot is already tied.”

“That’s hogwash,” Rey said. “I know divorces can be tricky to get, but sometimes they’re warranted.”

Viola stared at him, then had to look away because her eyes were filling with tears.

“I’m sorry, Viola, for speaking of things not of my concern. But a man’s got no business stepping out on his wife.”

She nodded, swallowing hard as if it would hold back the threatening tears.

“I hope I didn’t upset you.”

“I’m fine.” Viola exhaled slowly, then met his gaze.

Could he tell her eyes were wet? “It’s all in the past now anyway, and by the end of the summer, San Francisco will have forgotten about my troubles.

I can return in peace and live happily ever after.

” She didn’t mean for bitterness to seep through her voice.

Rey opened his mouth to reply, but they were interrupted by a slurred greeting.

“Well ... hello there, pretty lady.” Billy shoved his hands in his front pockets and rocked back on his heels. He wasn’t wearing his usual hat. Instead, his hair hung in greasy strands about his face.

Even from across the pie table, Viola could smell the alcohol seeping from his pores.

“Hello, Billy,” she said as primly as possible, pushing back all the emotions that had just been brewing. “What kind of pie slice can I get you?”

Billy shuffled closer, a slow grin spreading across his face. “I don’t need any pie, pretty lady. I came to ask you to dance with me.”

“That’s kind of you,” Viola began. “But I’m working the pie table tonight and not dancing with anyone.”

Billy’s palms thumped onto the table as he leaned toward her. “You gave that excuse to all the other fellas in here. But I’m different.” He grabbed Viola’s hand in a steel-trap grip. “I can make an honest woman of you and—”

Rey’s fingers clamped around Billy’s collar, and he tugged the man away from Viola. Next he drew Billy up to his face until they were nose-to-nose.

“I’m going to ask you once, Billy,” the sheriff growled. “Leave the barn and don’t come back tonight.” Rey held Billy in place for another several seconds, staring him down, then he let go of the man’s collar.

Billy took a stumbling step back. He looked as if he were about to turn and walk

away when suddenly he lunged at the sheriff.

Rey barely dodged the man's fist as the music around them faded, and people turned to watch what was happening.

"Settle down, Billy," Rey commanded, one hand held up and the other gripping his gun holster. "Nothing you're about to do right now will be worth it. Think before you act and before you sentence yourself to a night in jail."

"I'm tired of you thinking you're the boss of everyone in this town," Billy ground out, spittle flying from his mouth. "If I want to ask this lady to dance, then that's my business, not yours."

"She turned you down, Billy."

Billy sneered. "That's because you've been hovering over her all night. Someone needs to teach you a lesson."

Billy lunged again, and Rey simply sidestepped to avoid collision. Which was a good move on Rey's part, but a bad move for the pie table. Billy plowed into the table headfirst.

Viola leapt back as gasps and cries echoed about the room.

"He ruined the pies!"

"Get the man out of here!"

Men moved forward to pick up Billy, probably to finish throwing him out, but he wasn't moving.

“Wait,” Viola cried. “He might need medical attention.” She knelt next to the man who was lying face down and pressed two fingers against the side of his neck. His pulse beat steady and strong. “He has a pulse!”

Billy moaned and shifted as if he was going to try to turn over.

Viola scooted back, and Billy turned on his side, blinking at her like he wasn’t sure how he’d ended up on the floor. Blood dripped from his nose, and he raised a trembling hand to gingerly touch his face.

“You’ve broken your nose, Billy.” Viola’s stomach lurched, but she refused to let the sight of blood do her in like it had with the sheriff. She swallowed and looked up at the gathering crowd. “Can someone hand me the ice bowl?”

She snatched a nearby cloth—most of the pies had been delivered with a pie cloth. A young girl knelt next to her. “Here’s the ice. What are you going to do?”

Viola found herself staring into the eyes of Elsie. “I’m going to put the ice in this cloth, then hold it against this man’s face.”

All fire had faded from Billy’s eyes, and now that he was dealing with a broken nose, the pain kept him mellow.

Viola worked quickly, and as she set the ice bundle on Billy’s face, Rey knelt next to her.

“Here, I can hold this in place,” he said. “I still don’t trust this man.”

Viola nodded and let him take over. She wasn’t going to argue with the sheriff in front of all these people. They’d made enough of a spectacle as it was. Besides, Billy’s temper had been disturbing to see—drunk or not.

“Well, let’s get this mess cleaned up and see how many pies we can save,” Viola ordered to the onlookers. She wasn’t quite sure how she was feeling comfortable enough to boss everyone around, but she saw a need and wanted to do something about that.

“Help me out, Phil,” Rey said. “Let’s get this man to his feet.”

“I got ’im.” Deputy Thatcher appeared. He wasn’t wearing any sort of uniform but was spruced up for the dance.

Between Phil and Thatcher and Rey, Billy was helped to his feet. His legs looked a bit wobbly, but he’d survive.

“I need a doctor,” Billy complained.

“The doc will come visit you in jail,” Thatcher said. “You’re a fool for going after the sheriff. What were you thinking?”

Billy heaved a sigh and allowed the men to shuffle him forward.

“Elsie, stay with your friends,” Rey barked at his daughter.

“Can I help the baker woman clean up the pies?” Elsie said.

Rey hesitated, his gaze shifting to Viola.

“I’d appreciate the help.”

Rey nodded. “All right, then. I won’t be long. Stay close to Viola. She’s in charge of you until I return.”

“Thank you, Papa.”

Viola didn't know why she was smiling. Billy had nearly clobbered Rey, and now there was a massive mess to clean up, but a smile pushed through anyway.

“Set the pies that didn't turn upside down on the far table,” Viola continued her orders. “The pies that are ruined can be put into this crate. The pigs won't be hungry for two days after tonight.”

A few people chuckled. Several townspeople pitched in to help, and it wasn't long before the mess was cleaned up. The music began again and the dancing continued.

“You're really pretty,” a little voice said next to Viola as she spaced out the remaining pies on the table.

Viola looked down at Elsie. Her bright blue eyes were curious. “Well, thank you. You're a pretty girl too.”

Elsie grinned. She had a couple of teeth missing, but it only made her more adorable. “I'm going to tell Papa when he returns that you're the lady he should dance with tonight.”

“Oh, uh ...” Viola knew her cheeks were heating up. “He might be too busy with all that's gone on.”

“They'll put Billy in jail and figure out what to do with him tomorrow,” Elsie pronounced as if this was all a regular night of events.

She'd probably seen a thing or two as the sheriff's daughter.

“But Papa will be back here soon, and he promised that I could pick out a lady for

him to dance with.”

Viola didn’t want to get in the middle of a father-daughter agreement, yet ... “You know, Elsie, your father and I are friends. I’m only in Mayfair for a short while though. Maybe he should ask someone else to dance.”

“No.” Elsie gave her a huge smile. “I’ve made up my mind.”

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:10 am

IF SOMEONE HAD TOLD REY a couple of hours ago that he'd be dodging a fistfight with Billy, then hauling him to jail, then dancing with Viola Delany, he would have laughed until his gut hurt.

But holding the real live, breathing Viola in his arms while they danced was no laughing matter.

It might be a smiling matter, but it was also a nerve-racking event.

Mostly because she was a much better dancer than he was, and also because she smelled like the peach pies she'd baked for the barn dance.

Oh, and her cheeks were definitely flushed, which only made her gray eyes sparkle and the color of her lips seem redder.

Viola was a beautiful, vivacious, and commanding woman. He'd seen that in her actions after Billy stumbled into the pie table. But Rey had to tell his brain that the woman was not a permanent resident of Mayfair. She'd be leaving at the end of the summer, and that would be that.

Still, dancing with her was something he couldn't very well turn down since Elsie had insisted on it.

"I know she's only a visitor, Papa," Elsie had said when he'd returned to the barn that night. "But I chose Viola for you to dance with. I already told her too."

This had certainly caught his attention. "Oh, and what did she say when you told

her?”

“She said you and she were friends, but I don’t think that means you can’t dance.”

“It sure doesn’t,” Rey had answered.

So here he was. Taking a turn about the room with Viola as the fiddler played a slow melody. Rey could practically feel every single person’s eyes upon him, but he decided not to care. He could dance with a woman and not make front-page headlines in the weekly Mayfair Chronicle , right?

“You seem to be deep in thought,” Viola commented. “Did everything go well with Billy, or did he take another swing at you?”

Rey gazed into Viola’s upturned face. “Oh, he was quite repentant. Most men get that way when they’re facing jail time.”

“Hmm.” Viola looked away for a moment. “Well, thank you for attempting to throw him out, even though things went awry.”

Rey chuckled. “You’re welcome.” He paused. “Did you think I was hovering over you like Billy accused?”

“Hmm,” Viola said again.

Rey was beginning to think that maybe she was trying to torture him with all those mysterious hmms . “You can be honest with me, Viola. I’ll take it like a man.”

Her brows arched. “I’ve always been honest with you, but that doesn’t mean I have to tell you all my thoughts and opinions.

But if you really want to know, I can understand how Billy, or others, might have viewed their sheriff as hovering over the new lady in town.

Or maybe it was just the pie table—I assume you're fond of pies like most people. ”

“I am fond of pies, but I was also enjoying my chat with you.” Rey pulled her a half inch closer. “Is there something wrong with a little conversation?”

She lifted her chin a bit higher. “Nothing wrong with it at all. I just find it funny that we were both determined not to dance tonight, yet here we are.”

“Here we are ...” He knew he was smiling like a fool, but he found he didn't care. His little matchmaker daughter was probably going to read into this dance far more than she should, but again, Rey didn't care at the moment.

He thought about how wonderful it would be if everyone could leave the barn dance so that he could be alone with Viola. Why? He wasn't ready to put that into words, but there were too many potential interruptions. He felt like a giant clock was counting down, one tick at a time.

Viola's smaller hand was encased in his while her other hand rested on his shoulder. This brought him a measure of comfort that he'd forgotten about. How a woman's touch could bring him so much contentment.

“I'll bet word of this will reach my aunt before I return to her place,” she said, “and then I'll never hear the end of it.”

“Which will be?”

When her brow creased, he added, “What will your aunt pester you about?”

“Oh, she’ll tell me what a fine man you are.

She’ll bemoan her arthritis and how she can’t trust the other shopgirls as much as me.

Then she’ll finally add that you’re the type of man who’d let me pursue my dreams. The type of man I could marry, have a family with, but still enjoy things outside the home. ”

“Am I that type of man?”

“Are you going to go back on your word, Reynold Christensen?”

“I’ve never gone back on my word, and I don’t aim to now.”

They weren’t dancing anymore. They were simply standing in the middle of the floor, in each other’s embrace, their words whispered between them.

“I’ve decided to do it,” Viola suddenly said. “I don’t know how my parents will react, but when I return home, I’m going to visit the nursing school in San Francisco and inquire about enrolling. If they won’t have me, I’ll look around at other cities.”

Something twisted in Rey’s heart, but he grinned. “Excellent. You’re a natural, you know. Even tonight, with Billy being as rotten as he was, you still took care of his broken nose. And you didn’t faint at all that blood.”

“First of all, he wasn’t you with a gunshot wound. Second, he deserved the broken nose for the way he acted. I guess seeing him face down on the ground showed that he was human after all.”

Rey was very satisfied with her answer. Without a word, they both began to move again to the melody of the dance music.

“I’m proud of you, Viola,” Rey murmured, ignoring his aching heart. “Making such a decision about nursing school must be hard. Especially when your parents might not support you.”

Viola’s hand seemed to tighten in his. “Knowing that not everyone believes as my parents do has made me see things differently and given me hope. Thank you, Rey. Between you and my aunt, I feel like I can follow my dream.”

Rey had to ignore his own feelings about Viola’s potential schooling three states away.

“You’ll be an excellent nurse, and maybe one day you’ll want a family,” he said, not knowing exactly where all of this advice was coming from.

“In a small town like Mayfair, you could do both. Doc could use someone to help out once in a while. Especially during times when he has to go on calls at one of the farms.”

Viola tilted her head and studied him. He certainly hoped she couldn’t read minds.

“Next thing you’ll tell me is that there’s a nursing school in Cheyenne.”

“I think there is,” Rey said with a wink. “But don’t let me talk you into anything.”

He was teasing, sort of, but what Viola did next would have leveled him if he hadn’t been standing on firm ground.

“The dance is over, Sheriff.” She rose up on her toes and kissed him on the cheek. “Thanks for asking me despite it being Elsie’s idea.”

Then Viola released him and walked away before he could tell her that even if Elsie

hadn't been the instigator, he would have asked her to dance.

But Viola was a half dozen feet away by the time his head stopped spinning.

Now, why had she gone and kissed him on the cheek?

Was that how things were done in the Delany family, or did it mean something more?

Something that he didn't dare let his mind indulge in.

Because every single person in the whole town would be talking about this before the hour was up.

Rey didn't speak directly to Viola the rest of the night.

It was quite impossible since everyone seemed to want their dessert at the same time.

The pie table remained populated while Viola cheerfully served up slice after slice.

Rey guessed she'd been asked a few more times to dance, gauging by the men standing before her, hat in hand.

But she never did dance again, and Rey took a bit of pride in that.

"Papa," Elsie said, appearing at his side while he was talking himself out of approaching the pie table and doing some of that "hovering." "Can I spend the night at Lucy's house?"

Rey looked down at his daughter. "How about another night? I've missed you too much to let you out of my sight."

Elsie giggled at this, and miraculously, she leaned against him. “All right, Papa. When you don’t miss me so much, then can I spend the night?”

Rey bent and kissed the top of her head. “I think that can be negotiated.”

“Sheriff, there’s a couple of boys joyriding in one of the wagons outside. Folks are afraid someone will get hurt.”

Rey turned to look at Phil. “Thanks for letting me know.” Thatcher had remained at the jail, so Rey headed outside. It didn’t take long to put the fear of the good Lord into the two teen boys.

When he returned to the barn, Old Jennings was packing up his fiddle, several townsfolk were putting away tables and chairs, and there was some negotiating over who was taking home the leftover pies.

Rey wondered if Viola would accept a ride home in his cart, but she was walking arm in arm with Della toward the entrance. He received a smile and a nod and then she was gone.

“Papa, are we staying here all night?” Elsie said, tugging at his arm, right before she gave a giant yawn.

“Nope. Heading out now.” He grasped her hand. By the time they exited the barn, Viola Delany was nowhere in sight.

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HER SUMMER SPENT IN WYOMING turned out to be only three weeks, but Viola wasn't returning home to become mired in avoiding gossip about her broken engagement.

She was returning home to have a frank conversation with her parents.

Aunt Beth had hated to see her leave so soon, but she'd also encouraged it and promised that she'd let Della and Sidney take on more responsibilities at the bakery.

Which was why Viola was now walking up the steps to her family's large home and ringing the bell like she was a visitor. She didn't want to burst into the house and shock everyone.

She glanced back at the carriage she'd hired and left her luggage on. The driver had agreed to wait on the side of the road until she let him know if she'd be staying here or going someplace else.

The housekeeper, Macy, answered the door, and her eyes rounded to the size of saucers. "Miss Delany ... you're back?"

"Yes." She gave a wide smile, but her stomach had cinched into knots. "Are Mother and Father home?"

"Of course, it's early yet. Come in. Let me help you with your luggage."

Viola had divvied up several of her nicer dresses and hats to Sidney and Della, who were both delighted with the gifts. So Viola only had one trunk and one carpetbag.

“The driver can keep an eye on it until I speak to my parents.”

She followed Macy into the house and looked about as if seeing it for the first time.

Her three weeks’ absence had made everything seem so different and foreign.

The noise and traffic of downtown San Francisco.

The boats upon the water, dotting the bay.

The steep hills that her hired carriage had traversed.

And now the polished floors and pillars of her home.

The click of heels came along the corridor leading to the library, and her mother walked into view.

She stopped abruptly with a gasp. Her blonde hair was done up in an elegant twist, and diamonds graced her earlobes and neck.

Her makeup was carefully and impeccably applied, and she wore a cream blouse and pale pink skirt.

“Viola ... what in heaven’s name? Has something happened? Why didn’t you tell us you were returning so soon?”

The rush of words was like standing beneath a cold waterfall, because Viola knew her mother wouldn’t like her answers.

“I have an urgent matter to discuss with you and Father, and I thought it would be better in person.”

Her mother's brows dipped. "Has something happened to Beth? Or to you? Did my sister mistreat you?" Her voice went up an octave.

"Nothing like that. I'm perfectly well, and Aunt Beth is managing just fine in my absence. She was managing fine before—we all know why I really went to Wyoming."

"Well." Her mother crossed to her and kissed her on the cheek—a kiss that Viola barely felt.

"You're just in time to attend the art gala tonight.

It's black-tie, and your ex-fiancé is still not attending events, so you should be safe from seeing him.

It might be good to show your proud face in public, after all. "

"I won't be attending any galas, Mother."

"Why not?" Mother's eyes narrowed. "What is it that must be discussed so urgently? Is there a man in this story? Have you been ... compromised?"

The look of horror and fear in her mother's eyes almost made Viola laugh. The lengths that Sheriff Rey had gone to stop even the mildest of flirting men had quite prevented any "compromising," as her mother might refer to it.

"No one has been compromised, Mother." Viola heaved a sigh. "Now, where is Father?"

"In the library." Mother's eyes narrowed once again. "I was just about to speak with him. He will certainly be surprised to see you."

Viola began to walk toward the library, and her mother's clicking heels caught up.

"What is this all about, Viola? You know your father doesn't like to be bothered with—"

Viola knocked on the closed library door, then, without waiting for any sort of inquiry, she opened the door and walked in.

The next few moments were filled with surprise on her father's part and fussing on her mother's part.

Father rose from his chair behind a large desk and walked around it to clasp both of Viola's arms. He wore a light gray suit and his shoes were shined to a high polish.

His mustache twitched as he looked her over.

"You've had too much sun, Viola. Sit and drink something.

I knew sending you to your mother's sister's place was a mistake.

We should have sent you to Philadelphia to spend the summer with my brother's family.

It's farther away, but it's at least civilized and modern—"

"No, that's not what this is about," Viola cut in before her father's tangent could continue. She stepped away from both of her parents. "I've made a decision about my future, and I've returned to San Francisco to begin the inquiries."

"Inquiries into what?" Father asked, lines creasing his forehead.

“Nursing school.” Viola paused as both of her parents frowned.

“I’m twenty-seven and the survivor of a failed engagement.

I’ve done things your way my entire life.

I don’t want another five or ten years to go by and not find out what I can really accomplish in life.

Sitting around and hoping for another man to propose isn’t my idea of fulfillment. ”

“You wouldn’t be sitting around,” Mother cut in. “Besides, the wait will be worth it. Marriage is wonderful, and you’ll become a mother with beautiful children.”

“Maybe,” Viola said. “Maybe that will happen, but I’m not going to force it.

I’m not going to court a man just because his father is a friend of our family’s.

I don’t want a man who looks at me for an inheritance to pad his own pockets.

I want to do something that matters. To me and to other people. ”

Father folded his arms. “And nursing school is going to bring you such fulfillment?”

Mother covered her mouth and sat on a chair.

“You’ve been reading too many articles written by feminists.

You’re educated, Viola, and now it’s time you use that education toward creating a marriage and raising a family.

Nursing work is for spinsters who have no other options in life.

You're beautiful and still young, and you come from a family of privilege and impeccable reputation. ”

“I don't have anything against the right marriage, and I'll be happy to have children if the situation presents itself,” Viola said.

Her father's face was reddening, and she knew his outburst was coming soon.

“But I'm finished with high society. Whether or not you support me in nursing school won't change my mind.

There are scholarships I can apply for, and most of these schools provide boarding. ”

Her father's mouth opened, then closed.

“Viola, you've had a long journey,” her mother said. “Why don't you rest and then we can all discuss your time in Wyoming when you're feeling refreshed.”

“That won't be necessary,” Father cut in, his tone measured.

“I don't need time to think this over, and it's clear that our daughter has done nothing but make plans without our consent.

” His gaze cut to his wife's, then back to Viola.

“If you choose this course of action, Viola, after all we've done and provided for you ...

after all the protection we've offered you from this scandal, then you had better pray

for a scholarship.

Because no daughter of mine whom I'd ever claim will reduce herself to the job market. ”

When his fist slammed down onto the desk, Viola jumped.

Her father's anger was no surprise, yet to be standing here, after so many weeks away, and to hear his decisive words still cut deeply.

“All right, then,” Viola said, her voice a scratch inside her throat.

“I won't trouble you with this anymore. I will write to you of my progress, but don't feel obligated to write back.

” She recited the words she had practiced in her head during the long trip home.

Otherwise, she would have melted like a puddle and broken into tears. She'd do that later.

Her eyes stung, and her neck muscles felt strained as she walked out of the library.

“Viola dear, stay and think this over. You've given us quite the shock. We have some time to work through things and maybe—”

Her mother's voice sounded like it was about to break, and Viola knew if she didn't keep moving, she'd give in and stay longer. But her father's words had been plain and final.

“Genevieve,” Father's voice rumbled. “We aren't groveling to make her stay. She has made up her mind.”

We can both be stubborn , Viola thought as a tear escaped anyway. She'd reached the door. With jerky movements, she tugged the door open. She was grateful she'd told the carriage driver to wait for her, even if that knowledge didn't make her happy.

What did she expect? This. Yet the ache was deep and painful.

"If they don't support your plan, you come back here," Aunt Beth had told her. "We'll send out applications to every nursing school you're interested in. There's no rush on anything, but there's no harm in getting started."

Viola swiped at the tears on her cheeks and approached the driver of the carriage. "Thanks for waiting. Can you take me to back to the hotel?"

The hotel was close to the nursing school on California Street and Maple. Viola didn't have unlimited funds, just what she'd earned at the bakery, plus the money she'd traveled with—which she'd spent on the return ticket.

"Sure thing, ma'am," the driver said.

Riding through the streets this time was a different feeling.

Gone were the hope and anticipation of the hour before.

Now those feelings were replaced by dejection ...

so she'd allow herself a few tears right now.

Once she reached the nursing school, she'd need to push forward with the next part of her plan.

She was an independent woman now, no longer under the umbrella of her parents'

control. This was what she wanted, right?

After the carriage pulled up to the hotel and Viola had checked into her room, she paused in front of the bedroom mirror. Her eyes were red-rimmed and her cheeks blotchy. But she didn't want to delay her visit to the nursing school. If they didn't have an opening, she'd have to make other plans.

The nursing school was a short walk from the hotel, and when Viola entered the front door of the building, she was surprised to see the place empty save for one woman sitting at a reception desk.

"Oh, hello," Viola said.

The woman rose to her feet and adjusted her spectacles. Viola guessed her to be in her mid-thirties. The nameplate on her desk said Miss Barnwell. "Did you have an appointment? I'm afraid that today is a field day, so the director isn't here."

Viola wasn't sure what a field day was. "I don't have an appointment. My name is Viola Delany, and I'm here to inquire about an application and possible availability to the school."

"Ah." Miss Barnwell's brown eyes narrowed. "Who sent you? We don't open enrollment until the beginning of next year."

"January?" It was the end of July, so that wasn't helpful at all. "I didn't realize. I ..."
Her voice quivered. That would not do at all. She drew in a steadying breath. "I should have done my research better."

Viola should have spent more time in her hotel room, working through her emotions, because to her horror, she began to cry. She tried to snuffle back the tears and keep her body from trembling, but it was no use.

“Oh, you poor woman, have a seat.” Miss Barnwell came around her desk and offered Viola a chair.

She sank into it gratefully and pulled out a handkerchief to wipe at her face “I’m sorry. It’s been a difficult couple of days. I guess I’m at the end of my rope.”

“Where are you from?” Miss Barnwell asked, her voice gentle, as she sat across from Viola.

The entire story spilled out. From Viola’s broken engagement to working at the bakery in Mayfair to the row with her parents.

Miss Barnwell listened to every word, offering sympathy as Viola talked.

“I’m so sorry to dump my life story on you,” Viola said, wiping at her face again although it did little good. The tears kept coming.

“I knew there was a reason I stayed in the office today,” Miss Barnwell said. “If you’d like, I can speak to the director tomorrow. Maybe there will be an exception. Once in a while a student has to drop out for one reason or another.”

Viola felt a spark of hope ignite. “Are you sure? I don’t want to be a burden to anyone.”

“Oh, my dear, you won’t be. In fact, you can take the assessment if you have time right now. It’s about an hour-long test, and it would be good to have that in hand when I speak to the director.”

Viola stared at Miss Barnwell. “I could do that right now?”

“If you have time?”

Viola gave a half laugh. “I have all the time in the world.”

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:10 am

REY STOOD IN LINE AT the bakery. Not because he was monitoring the crowds again—those had dwindled by half—but because he was purchasing a pie. Elsie's birthday was tomorrow, and he told Barb he'd provide the dessert. Not that Barb would expect him to bake a cake or anything.

Besides, Rey hoped to chat a moment or two with Beth Cannon. Find out how Miss Delany was doing back in San Francisco. Find out if she'd enrolled in nursing school. Find out what her parents had said.

It wasn't that he was expecting a letter—although he'd hoped she might write to him. Yet she didn't owe him any sort of chronicling of her life.

Rey moved up another few steps in line.

He missed seeing Viola at the pie counter. He missed the half smile on her face when their eyes connected. He missed her directness. He missed the gray of her eyes and contrast of her dark eyebrows to her golden hair.

And, of course, he'd had to field questions about Viola from his daughter. All these reminders of the woman were making her impossible to put out of his mind.

"Hello, Sheriff," Phil said.

"Hey there."

They shuffled forward another two steps.

The conversations around him were general “how-are-you’s” and “sure-hot-today.” It was August now, the hottest part of the year, and Viola Delany had been gone for longer than she’d been in Wyoming. Yet Rey remembered everything about her as if he’d seen her an hour ago.

“Next, please,” Sidney said, manning the register today.

Rey glanced around for Beth but didn’t see her.

“I’ll have a peach pie,” Rey said. “How are you doing, Sidney?”

“Fine as always.” She cast a smile to Phil, who stood behind Rey, waiting his turn.

“And Miss Cannon? Is she up and about today?”

“Oh, she’s next door at the mercantile picking up a few things.” Sidney boxed up the pie and handed it over.

He paid, then tipped his hat. “Have a nice day.” He’d turned to leave when Sidney’s voice stopped him.

“Did you hear the latest about Viola?”

Rey froze, then slowly turned, calming his jumping pulse to say in a steady tone, “I did not. What’s the latest?”

“She’s going to school in Cheyenne. Wants to be a nurse, I guess.” Sidney shrugged like she hadn’t just turned Rey’s world upside down. “Should be arriving any day now. Miss Cannon is hoping she’ll stay here and commute, but there’s boarding there too, so we don’t know what she’ll decide.”

Rey swallowed once. Then twice. “Is that so? Well, good for her. She’ll be a fine nurse.”

Sidney flashed a smile, then turned her full attention on Phil. “What can I get you, Phil?”

Rey didn’t hear one word between Phil and Sidney after that. He was trying to do the impossible. Walk while carrying a pie as his mind caught up to all that Sidney had packed into a few short sentences. He’d accepted the fact that Viola was in San Francisco. What had changed her mind?

Curiosity burned through him, and without even considering what he was doing, he headed to the mercantile.

With a little luck, Beth Cannon would still be there and he could ask her himself.

Maybe Sidney had some of her facts wrong?

Rey’s heart thumped a couple of extra beats.

He hoped she didn’t. He hoped to high heaven that Viola Delany was indeed returning to Wyoming.

That would be one step closer to ... to what?

Seeing her? Courting her? A lump pressed against his throat as his heart tried to escape his chest. Viola was coming back.

Maybe not to Mayfair, but Cheyenne was thirty minutes by horse.

And he couldn’t wait to see her again. Because Rey was done kidding himself.

He was halfway in love with the woman, if not all the way.

It was something he had to admit to himself. These past few weeks without her had made his life feel like the Sahara Desert—empty, vast, and uncomfortable.

His boots barely touched the ground as he strode into the mercantile. He never thought he'd feel this way about a woman again. Sure, he assumed he'd remarry someday ... in the distant future ... but to have all his thoughts and energy and desires once again center on a woman ... This was unexpected.

The moment he spotted Beth Cannon examining ready-made aprons, Rey's steps faltered.

Was he putting too much hope in the reasons for Viola's return?

It might just be coincidence on her part—or a rift with her parents, and Rey didn't want that for her.

Or it might be driven by the relationship between niece and aunt.

All of this had nothing to do with him .

He had to put himself firmly into place and not let his imagination get away with him.

“Hello, Miss Cannon.” Rey approached the woman.

Beth looked up. She carried a basket that contained spice bottles. “Well, hello there, Sheriff. Nice day.”

“If you like the heat of a thousand suns, it's a nice day.”

Beth chuckled and folded the apron, setting it back on the shelf.

“How’s your health?” Rey continued, apparently bent on making small talk before asking any of his dire questions.

“Today’s a good day,” Beth said. “I promised Viola that even on good days, I’d let one of the shopgirls run the register. We’re still getting brisk business, even with Viola gone.”

Rey nodded at this. “Your bakery has delicious food, so the good business is what you deserve.”

“Why, thank you.” She eyed the box in his hands. “I see you bought something?”

“A pie for Elsie,” he explained. “Her birthday is tomorrow.”

“Oh, what a sweet girl,” Beth said. “Turning nine?”

“That’s right.” He cleared his throat. “Sidney mentioned something about your niece attending school in Cheyenne?”

Beth’s eyes sparked, and her smile widened. “Sure is. Just received the letter today.”

“Oh?”

Beth was grinning now. “I guess there’s an opening.

” She lowered her voice as townspeople milled about the store.

“She’s been working in the nursing office at a school in San Francisco since there aren’t openings.

The school in Cheyenne is run by the sister of the director, and because Viola's parents are still against her decision, she decided there's no reason to stay in San Francisco for the time being.

I know her parents will come around eventually, when they see how serious and dedicated she is.

In fact, her mother paid her a visit the other day.

Offered her money, which Viola refused."

"I'm sorry to hear about her parents' disapproval." And he was sorry. But he was also elated at the thought of seeing Viola once again ...

Beth pursed her lips. "I'm not surprised, and that's all I'm going to say on the matter." She glanced down the aisle, then focused once again on Rey. "She asked about you."

Rey leaned against the nearby shelf, if only to have a bit of support. He mustered up a nonchalance that he didn't feel. "Oh?"

"I mean, not directly, but she asked me to catch her up on all the town's happenings."

Rey felt deflated. That was a far cry from mentioning him .

Beth gave him a wink. "Don't worry, Sheriff Rey. You'll have your Viola back soon." With that, she headed to the register, basket of spices in hand.

Beth Cannon was sure assuming a lot—on his part. Had he made his feelings obvious? Weren't his questions perfectly polite and conversational? As he headed out of the mercantile without buying a thing, he wondered, what had given him away?

And did the rest of the town suspect the same thing?

“Papa,” a young girl yelled from across the street.

Rey came to a stop. Oh no. Now Elsie would see what he’d bought. He’d wanted it to be a surprise.

She left Barb’s side and ran across the street.

“You shouldn’t run across the street,” Rey said, wishing he could hide the pie box behind his back. It would be quite obvious though.

“There weren’t any wagons or fast horses.” Elsie’s eyes zeroed in on the box. “You bought a cake?”

“A pie,” he said. “I mean ... it’s a surprise.”

“For my birthday?” Elsie practically squealed. She clapped her hands together.

“Sorry, Sheriff,” Barb said, finally catching up to them after crossing the street much more slowly.

Her gray hair was pulled into a tight bun beneath her straw hat, but perspiration gleamed on her face and neck despite the hat’s shade.

“I didn’t expect to run into you so early in the afternoon.

I thought we’d be safe doing a few errands now. ”

“It’s all right.” Rey tugged on his daughter’s braid. “You’ll find out soon enough, might as well be a day early.”

Elsie jumped up and down a couple of times. “Can we have it tonight—like a birthday eve treat?”

It didn’t take Rey long to decide. Peach pie on the day it was made was certainly better than the day after. “If it’s all right with Barb.”

Barb chuckled. “Oh, Sheriff, it’s all right with me.” She pulled out a fan from her shoulder bag and waved it vigorously in front of her face. “Now, who wants a cold lemonade from the mercantile before we head home?”

Elsie’s hand shot straight up. “I do!”

“I’ll have to meet you at home,” Rey said. “I need to check in with Thatcher first.”

As he strode to the sheriff’s office, he decided that it was indeed a nice day—the nicest of days.

He was very much looking forward to the peach pie tonight, as well as whenever Viola Delany swept back into town.

He had no idea what he might say to her, or what the future might bring between them, but for now, he was enjoying the humming of his heart.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:10 am

EVERYTHING ABOUT WYOMING REMINDED VIOLA of him .

Everywhere she looked, she thought she saw a tall cowboy, but each time it was someone else. It didn't help that so many men in Cheyenne wore cowboy hats and cowboy boots. Her heart had done more than one somersault, and her stomach wasn't in much better condition.

She should just take a carriage to Mayfair and see him, once and for all.

And then she'd know. She'd know if her constant thoughts about him had merit and if he returned those same thoughts.

"Excuse me, ma'am," a gentleman said as he moved past her toward the post office.

That's where Viola stood now, with three letters clutched in her hand.

One to Aunt Beth, explaining that she'd try to visit each weekend, but she thought that living in Cheyenne would help her focus more on her training.

The second letter was to Miss Barnwell and the director of the San Francisco nursing school, thanking them for the recommendation.

And the third letter was to Sheriff Rey.

She didn't know his address, but she assumed the title Sheriff would be directed to the right person.

His letter was very general, with a brief update on what had transpired the last several weeks. And at the end of it, she thanked him again for all of his help and protection in Mayfair. She'd been sure to add the return address to the envelope of the nursing school where she boarded.

That way he'd know where to find her, if he ever wanted to find her.

Sure, she'd most likely see Rey when she visited Aunt Beth next week.

But she didn't want the first time she saw him to be an awkward meeting—and she hoped that writing a letter explaining a few things would create a connection of friendship.

Was that really what she wanted? To have Sheriff Rey for a friend?

Yes, that's what she wanted. For now. Because she'd just committed to nursing school, and that needed to be her focus. She stepped into the post office and posted the letters. There. It was done.

Viola smiled to herself as she headed back to her rented room.

In exchange for doing the laundry for other boarders, her rent would be covered.

She needed to prepare for the church social tonight.

She wouldn't let herself become a recluse, and despite all that had transpired with her parents, she wanted to honor her mother's original plea that she keep up on her singing.

Surely the church in Cheyenne had a Sunday choir.

“There you are,” Donna Dickson said as Viola walked into the back entrance by the rented rooms. “Are you coming to the church social still?”

“Yes, I just need to get ready,” Viola told the brunette woman who had a ready smile and quick laugh. They’d become fast friends. “Give me ten minutes, maybe?”

“Of course.” Donna flashed a smile and headed down the corridor.

Viola turned into her room and shifted through the bureau drawer to find her gloves. It was much too hot to wear them during the day, but an evening social might require more formal attire. She removed her bonnet and refreshed her hair arrangement.

Someone knocked on the door, startling Viola. It had only been a handful of minutes. Was Donna really that impatient?

“Yes?” Viola called.

“Someone’s here to see you,” Donna said through the door. “I told him you’d be a few minutes.”

Him? Viola froze mid-motion adjusting her hair. Her heart began a slow pound. “Did he give his name?”

“Reynold Christensen.”

Viola was glad there was a door between her and her new friend because she had to rest her hand on the wall next to the mirror. She didn’t even know if she could get any words out to reply.

“Viola? Should I send him on his way?”

The curiosity in Donna's voice was plain.

"No, tell him I'll be out shortly." When she heard Donna's footsteps move away, Viola tried to resume fixing her hair, but her fingers were trembling.

Why was Rey here? In Cheyenne? At the nursing school? Maybe he had a message from Aunt Beth? Was everything all right with her? She gave up on her hair and sat on the edge of her bed.

She hadn't expected her pulse to jump around so much and for her stomach to erupt in anticipation. Donna was probably chatting with the sheriff—she was a friendly sort. And she'd be audience to their meeting.

It couldn't be helped. And she couldn't hide out in her room. Rey already knew she was here.

So she smoothed her hair over one shoulder and tied it with a ribbon.

The hat and gloves could wait. Opening her door, she heard the rumble of a man's voice coming from the reception room.

She headed down the corridor, following the sounds of conversation.

As she neared, Rey's deeper tones separated from Donna's low laughter.

Envy pinched inside, surprising Viola. Rey was a free man, just as she was a free woman. She'd heard plenty of swoony comments over the sheriff when she was living in Mayfair. So why did Donna's laughter strike deeper?

Viola rounded the corner to find Donna sitting across from the cowboy. Rey looked over at Viola immediately, and her heart skipped more than one beat as his smile

appeared. If he was smiling at her, he couldn't be delivering bad news, could he?

His cowboy hat rested on his knee, and he grabbed it, then rose to his full height so that she had to tilt her head upward to see him.

"Miss Delany."

"Mr. Christensen."

His green eyes flashed, and she knew he'd wanted her to call him Rey. But he'd been formal first, and they had an audience.

"Miss Dickson was just telling me all about the nursing program here. Sounds like you're in good hands."

"Oh, we're in good hands with Viola," Donna said. "She knows more than some of our current students."

Viola smiled politely because she was seriously resenting Donna's presence. Rey's gaze stayed on her, and she'd love to know what was going on inside his mind. "Is everything going well in Mayfair? How's Elsie doing?"

His smile reappeared. "Had a birthday this week, so I'm now living with a nine-year-old boss."

Viola couldn't hold back her laugh. "Well, tell her happy birthday for me."

Rey nodded. "Will do, ma'am."

Inwardly, Viola melted a little. He called her ma'am, no matter how many times she'd corrected him. It was his way of teasing her now.

“Who’s Elsie?” Donna asked, which Viola found very impertinent of the woman to insert herself.

“My daughter.”

“Ah, so you’re married.” Donna’s voice held a note of disappointment. “Are you old friends with Viola, then?”

Rey finally turned his gaze fully to Donna. “I’m a widower, Miss Dickson. And Viola and I are new friends.”

Donna’s face flushed, but her eyes sparkled. “Well, you are welcome to visit any time. After class hours, of course.”

“Thank you for the invitation,” Rey said, a hint of amusement in his tone. His gaze shifted to Viola. “Your aunt sends her regards.”

Not that Viola had forgotten about Aunt Beth, but seeing Rey so unexpectedly had made all commonsense questions flee from her mind. “How is she doing? I sent her a letter today.” And I sent one to you too .

“She’s doing very well,” Rey said. “She gave me the location of this place.”

“Who’s your aunt?” Donna asked. “Is she the one who runs the bakery?”

“Yes, that’s the one,” Viola said, hoping that she’d kept the irritation out of her tone.

“Well, Miss Delany, I wondered if you might oblige me with a walk around the block.”

“We were about to leave for the church social,” Donna said. “You should join us.

We'd look good arriving with a new member."

"I—uh, don't live in this town, so I wouldn't exactly be considered a new member." Rey stumbled over his words. "Thank you for the invitation though, Miss Dickson." His gaze found Viola's again. "Pleased to see that you're settled in, Miss Delany. I'll give your best to Elsie and Beth."

"Thank you," Viola murmured, although inside she was screaming for him not to leave yet.

But that's exactly what happened. Reynold Christensen walked out of the reception room and onto the street, replacing his hat and striding away.

Viola's stomach dropped to her feet. Donna set in with the comments immediately, but Viola hardly paid attention.

Ten minutes later, they headed to the church social, arm in arm, but Viola could only think about Rey walking out of the nursing school.

His cowboy hat atop his head, his long strides taking him farther and farther away.

He hadn't come for any specific reason, which meant he'd come to see her. Was he doing other errands in Cheyenne, or was he heading back tonight?

Every word that Donna spoke now felt like cat claws scraping Viola's skin.

The church social didn't settle her heart or her mind. People milled about, and Viola introduced herself over and over. Finally, she told Donna she had a headache and would walk back alone.

"It's dark out," Donna protested.

“I’ll keep to Main Street,” Viola said. “Besides, there are plenty of people out walking. It’s early yet.”

She hurried along Main Street, keeping her eyes peeled. Maybe Rey hadn’t left yet. Maybe he was loitering on the street, waiting for another chance to speak with her. But, of course, he wasn’t loitering. She reached the nursing school without seeing him at all. He was truly gone.

She walked through the darkened building, her thoughts mulling over every word of their conversation. But mostly she thought of the way he’d looked at her. If she wasn’t imagining things, the man was interested, just as Aunt Beth had stated.

Well, he’d get her letter tomorrow probably, and then maybe they could start some sort of correspondence.

Her step paused when she reached the reception room. In the light of the moon filtering through the windows, she saw an envelope on the floor by the door, as if someone had slipped something beneath it.

She crossed the room and picked it up. The envelope was sealed, and on the front, her name was scrawled across in bold penmanship.

Her breath shortened as she opened the envelope and tilted the letter toward the moon to read the words.

Dear Viola,

I should have expected our meeting to have an audience, but somehow I didn’t plan for that.

There are a few things I’d like to say to you, but they will have to wait until

tomorrow.

That is, if you can find time to get a way for a short walk?

I'll be waiting across the street at 7:00 a.m., if that's not too early.

I am happy to see you're doing well, and I'm sorry about the friction with your family. Your aunt told me a few things.

Take care,

Rey

She read the words more than once until she'd practically memorized them. He hadn't left after all. For some reason, she found that a very important detail. She'd find a way to meet him—a way that wouldn't be interrupted by Donna or anyone else.

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He knew he'd surprised her the day before, but she didn't seem put-off by it. No, she was very agreeable and friendly. She'd hardly taken her eyes off of him, and he'd found that most gratifying.

Seeing her again had confirmed what he'd been feeling and what he could no longer deny.

He wanted to court Viola Delany. Well, he wanted to do more than court her, but courting would be the first step.

She had just started nursing school, and that needed to run its course.

Maybe she'd want to work in a bigger city versus a small town like Mayfair anyway.

But should that prevent him from visiting her every so often?

Taking her on walks? Going on rides? Sharing a meal or two?

He had hoped that this morning would be the start of their future ... but if she didn't even show up, maybe he'd been mistaken. About everything.

The closer it grew to 8:00, the more his hopes seeped out. Finally, he turned from the nursing establishment and began walking to the corral where he'd boarded his horse. The ride back to Mayfair would seem twice as long, that he was sure of.

"Rey!" someone called after him.

He thought he was imagining it at first, but when he heard his name a second time, he whirled around.

Viola was hurrying across the street, one hand on her hat, the other gripping a narrow book.

He stared as she closed the distance between them.

“You’re still here.”

Her gray eyes could have leveled him, but somehow he remained upright. “I’m still here.”

And then she smiled, making her eyes sparkle.

“Thanks for waiting. Sorry I’m so late. I live with a lot of nosy people.

” She looped her arm through his, about knocking him over with surprise, and tugged him along the boardwalk.

“The sooner we’re out of sight, the better. Donna is likely spying out the window.”

“Donna?”

“Miss Dickson.”

Ah. “She’s a spy?”

Viola laughed, but it was a nervous laugh. “She’s bored, is what I think. And nosy. But let’s not talk about Donna Dickson.”

“Let’s not,” he wholeheartedly agreed. He rather liked Viola’s initiative to take his arm, and he rather liked the feel of her body pressing close to his, even if they were walking faster than he would have liked.

“I brought a pamphlet under the pretense of finding a quiet place to study.” She held up said book. *Nurturing the Sick and the Training of Nurses*.

“Looks interesting.”

Viola nudged him. “Now, tell me why you really came to see me yesterday, Mr. Sheriff.”

They were near a garden that sat in front of a hotel. So Rey turned onto the garden path, which was a perfect place for some privacy and no prying eyes or ears of the likes of Donna Dickson.

“I wanted to see how you were faring,” Rey admitted as they strolled along a garden path lined with bushes and spots of blooming flowers.

The trees overhead offered enough shade that the flowers seemed to thrive.

“Your aunt told me of your strife with your parents and that the nursing school in San Francisco didn’t have any openings.

” He paused in his step and looked down at her. “Were your parents so very awful?”

Viola met his gaze, and in her eyes, he saw her distress. “My father was livid. My mother tried to give me money a few days ago, but I refused. I might be regretting that now.”

Rey took off his hat and reached into the slot of the lining where he kept money like

any cowboy did. “Here, I have some money. Can bring you more, too.”

Viola took a step back. “I’m not taking your money, Rey. That’s not what I intended when I told you about my parents. I want to do this on my own. It gives me a sense of accomplishment, more than I’ve ever had in my life.”

“Are you sure?” Rey asked, even though he heard the conviction in her tone.

“I’m sure,” she said in a soft voice. “Thank you for your offer. You’re a good-hearted man.”

“It’s not a hard thing with a woman like you, Viola.” He kept his hat in his hands. It was time for some serious talk. “I’m proud of all that you’re doing. You’ll be an excellent nurse.”

He didn’t expect her eyes to well with tears. No, that wasn’t his plan at all. “What is it? Did I say something wrong? Did you change your mind about the money?”

“No.” Her voice came out shaky. “I don’t want your money. I just ... It’s been a long few weeks. You and Aunt Beth have been my rock through everything. More than you can possibly know.”

Her words completely stole his breath. She considered him a rock in her life? His heart galloped miles ahead of his thoughts, and he took a few slow breaths, trying to get his pulse under control. “I’ll support you any way I can, Viola, I hope you know that.” His own voice had turned raspy.

He hoped her tears would abate, but he wasn’t sure of that fact because she suddenly closed the distance between them and wrapped her arms about his torso.

After he got over the initial shock, there was only one thing to do.

Hold the woman who needed his support right now.

Rey wrapped his arms about her and pulled her close.

She nestled her face against his neck, and he rested his chin atop her head.

She fit perfectly against him. He'd had a hint of that at the barn dance, but this ... this was heavenly perfection.

"Thank you, Rey," she whispered.

"Anytime, sweetheart." He didn't plan the endearment; it just slipped out. And it fit. Viola Delany was a sweetheart through and through.

She drew away from him—not out of his arms, but enough that she could look him in the eyes. Her tears had dried, but there were traces along her cheeks. He lifted a hand and wiped away the moisture.

She didn't move, and her breaths came as rapid as his. Could she hear his heart thundering louder than a Wyoming storm?

"I have a confession, Viola Delany." If he didn't get it off his chest, it might well burst and keel him over here and now.

She was still in his arms, holding him close. "Then out with it, Mr. Sheriff."

Normally, he'd laugh, but he was too nervous for that. He drew in a breath, one filled with the scent of her, which happened to be peaches, even if she hadn't been baking a peach pie. The scent seemed to be her essence.

"I'd like to court you, ma'am." Another breath. "If you'll have me."

Viola's gray eyes stared into his own. He'd have given a right arm and possibly one of his legs to know what was going on in that brain of hers. "This is unexpected, Rey."

"Is it? In a good way, or a bad way?"

She smiled then, and his heart soared with hope. "In a good way. I don't know what you see in me, sir, but there's no other man in the world I'd rather be courted by than you."

Rey moved his hand to her face and ran his thumb along her jaw. "I see my future in you, dearest Viola."

Her eyelashes fluttered as he moved his hand behind her neck. "It looks like we're in agreement." She ran her hands up his chest, then looped her arms behind his neck, pulling him down.

He obliged.

"I think we should shake on our agreement," she whispered.

Their faces were only inches apart, and he could barely think beyond the words coming from her lips. "Shake hands? I have a much better idea."

"What's your idea?"

"This."

Rey kissed her then, because how could he not? He was no greenhorn, and neither was Viola. He'd been married before, and she'd been engaged before. But none of that mattered now. The past slipped away, and only the present surrounded them.

Viola's mouth was soft, warm, and welcoming. Her fingers moved into his hair as she tugged him even closer. He smiled against her mouth, grateful for the privacy of this garden because he planned to give her a thorough kissing. None of that quick or furtive stuff.

Viola seemed in no hurry either. She smiled as well, then kissed him some more. He lifted her against him and wished they could skip the months of courting and go straight to the married part. But she needed time. He knew that.

"Put me down, Rey," she said with a laugh.

He chuckled and lowered her to the ground, then gathered her close, his mouth moving more slowly over hers this time. He settled his hands on her hips, the cotton of her dress warm and smooth beneath his fingers.

She sighed against his mouth, then drew back, her eyes a dreamy gray. "How long are you in Cheyenne?"

"I have to return this morning, but I can come back tonight or tomorrow. Whatever works for your schedule."

Her smile appeared. "You're going to wear your horse out."

"I have more than one horse, and besides, exercise is good for them."

Her fingers moved against his jaw, her thumb dragging against the stubble on his cheek. "Tomorrow morning, then. Same time, same place." She rose up on her feet and kissed the edge of his mouth.

Before he let Viola Delany get too carried away, he had to clarify something. "Wait. Does the same time mean seven o'clock or eight o'clock?"

She puffed out a breath. “Seven is a little too early, but maybe some days I can get out that early.”

“Noted.” He moved his hands behind her lower back and drew her flush with him. “I’ll be here at seven o’clock tomorrow morning, and if I have to wait, I’ll wait.”

He loved the light in her eyes, the pink of her cheeks, and how her lips were swollen because of him. He didn’t know how much time he had with Viola this morning—or in future mornings—so he decided to make the most of it. Slowly he lowered his mouth to hers again. He was in no hurry.

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Five Months Later

VIOLA DELANY, SOON TO BE Viola Christensen, stood in the small living room of Aunt Beth's apartment.

The upright mirror in the corner reflected a woman with blonde hair piled upon her head, wearing a white velvet dress.

The pearl earrings and pearl necklace had been sent to her by her mother as a wedding gift.

But her parents weren't coming to the January wedding.

The cold wind whipped the bare trees outside along Main Street, but even the mournful howling didn't deflate Viola's heart. Parents or not, she was marrying Reynold Christensen this afternoon.

"You look like a beautiful winter rose," Aunt Beth said, coming into the front room. She wore her best dark blue dress with lace at the collar and cuffs. She beamed a smile and joined Viola in front of the mirror.

There were similarities between aunt and niece, but they only made Viola miss her mother more. This unexpected feeling had persisted all week—maybe it was because she and her mother had planned her last wedding together.

"I can't believe I'm really getting married." Viola gave a small laugh. "To a cowboy. And I'm going to be a stepmother, too."

Aunt Beth slipped an arm about her waist. “You’ll find happiness every day of your life, dear. It’s not every man who would agree with his wife about working as a nurse.”

“Rey isn’t every man.” Viola tilted her head. “Besides, Elsie is excited to help me out after school. So it’s two against one.”

Aunt Beth chuckled. “You both have that man wrapped around your fingers. Now, let’s get you hitched.”

Viola turned away from the mirror and embraced her aunt. “Thank you for everything and for believing in me.”

“None of the sappy talk. You’ll make me cry off my makeup.”

The two women headed downstairs where Deputy Thatcher waited for them with a carriage that would take them to the church.

Even though the wind was cold and blustery, and the sky hung with low, gray clouds, most of the town had turned up. Carriages and wagons lined the front of the church while horses stamped to keep warm.

“Here we are, ladies.” Thatcher slowed the carriage in front of the church where someone had made sure there was room for the bride to arrive.

He handed both Viola and Aunt Beth down, then escorted them into the church. The organ music floated sweetly through the space, and everyone seated in the pews turned to look at Viola.

She grasped Thatcher’s arm and forced a smile even though her heart was hammering in her throat. At the front of the chapel, Rey stood, wearing a full suit. She almost

didn't recognize him with his slicked back hair and shaved face, but his smile was the same and those green eyes were the same.

The organ music changed to the wedding march, and Aunt Beth whispered, "It's your turn, dear. I'll see you after."

Suddenly Elsie appeared, wearing a white velvet dress, matching Viola's. Elsie held a basket of flower petals, and after grinning at Viola, she skipped down the aisle as she tossed petals. Most of them landed on the audience versus the floor, but no one seemed to mind.

Viola refocused on the man at the front of the church who watched her. She met his gaze, and even from a distance, she felt the warmth that was him.

"I'm ready," she told Thatcher, and the pair of them began to walk down the aisle.

The music soared around them, and Viola tried to smile at those in attendance, but her throat was so tight that it was hard to turn her head.

A gust of wind brushed the back of her head. Someone had arrived late, and Viola didn't think much of it until the music completely stopped. A man spoke in a rather loud voice behind her. "Is this the wedding of Viola Delany?"

"Are we too late?" a woman said.

Viola gripped Thatcher's arm and turned slowly around. She knew both of those voices.

Her parents had walked into the chapel, wearing long coats, heavy hats, their eyes bright, and their cheeks flushed red.

“Are you married yet?” her mother asked, her voice hitching. “Are we too late?”

Viola’s mouth fell open. She couldn’t have spoken if she wanted to.

The rest of the audience stared as if stunned. Not even Thatcher could form a word.

“We’re not married yet, but if you’ll take a seat, then you can watch the ceremony.” Rey walked up the aisle. Tall and confident. He paused by Viola and bent to kiss her cheek. “You look beautiful, sweetheart.”

“Rey ...” she whispered.

“Yes?” He merely gazed at her, his green eyes calm, like an interrupted wedding was an everyday occurrence.

“My parents are here.”

His gaze didn’t leave hers, but his eyes sparked. “I can see that.”

“Might I introduce you?”

“Of course.”

Viola swallowed, then turned her head. Her parents were still standing just inside the entrance, although someone had mercifully shut the doors. “Mother, Father, I’d like you to meet Reynold Christensen. My fiancé.”

Her mother moved forward. “Mr. Christensen, it’s lovely to meet you.” Her eyes brimmed with tears, and her lips trembled, but she was all smiles.

“Call me Rey.” He extended his hand and shook Mother’s hand. “Nice to meet you,

Mrs. Delany.”

Mother pulled a handkerchief from one of her pockets and dabbed her eyes.

“I’m Mr. Delany,” a deeper voice said. “Viola’s father.”

Her father stepped up, his hand outstretched to Rey. The men shook hands, then Father’s gaze was upon her.

“Viola, there’s so much to say.” A lump moved in his throat. “So much to apologize for.” He looked around at the audience who was soaking up every word. “Might you do me the honor of allowing me to escort you up the aisle so you can marry this gentleman?”

“Oh, Father.” Viola flew into his arms even though her dress was crushed and who knew what the result to her hairdo might be. When Father’s arms hugged her tight, tears coursed down her cheeks. “Of course you can.”

Next she stepped into her mother’s arms. When they moved apart, Aunt Beth came forward, and the two sisters embraced for a long moment. Then Aunt Beth shook hands with Father and welcomed him to Mayfair.

“Beth, thank you for watching over our little girl,” Father said, emotion edging his voice.

The confused audience, watching and avidly listening, began to clap as murmurs arose. Viola knew she owed many explanations, but for now the wedding must go on. She linked arms with her father.

“Now I’m truly ready.”

Thatcher chuckled. “Everyone to their places. Let the wedding march begin again.”

Viola’s heart zoomed up and down with each step she and her father took toward Rey. He stood, hands behind his back, his gaze once again focused on her. The edges of his mouth lifted in an amused smile, and she could only guess at the thoughts behind his dancing eyes.

When her father released her arm, she took her place across from Rey, waiting for the reverend to begin the service. As he spoke, Viola’s heart swelled at least another size or two. Her mother quietly sniffled in the front row, leaning her head on Father’s shoulder, whose eyes were just as red.

“I love you,” Rey whispered in the middle of the service.

“I love you too,” Viola whispered back.

Her entire world had become this man and his daughter, but she was more than happy to add her own parents to the mix. She knew there was likely a lot of things to work out, a lot of things to understand, but they’d come to Mayfair. And that was the first and most important step.

After the reverend concluded, and after they exchanged their vows, Viola decided that the single gold band upon her ring finger was the most beautiful piece of jewelry she could ever wear. It was straight from Rey’s heart, after all.

“May I kiss the bride?” Rey said as if they weren’t being watched by a hundred people.

“You may,” she whispered.

And then her cowboy leaned close, taking one of her hands in his. Before she closed

her eyes, she saw him smile. Her eyes fluttered shut just as Rey made good on his promise and kissed his bride.

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ONE

“HARRIET, YOU MUST COME AT once,” Vivian said.

Nearly two months ago. And she’d been healthy.

“You’re going to miss it,” Vivian said.

Harriet rose from the rough-hewn deck chair, then made her way to where Vivian was leaning a bit too far over the railing of the Tarrant, the sailing vessel they were now on to make the final leg of the journey to Seattle.

Because of a delay in the Panama Canal, they’d missed their steamer connection at San Francisco.

So Mr. Mercer had booked this smaller lumber bark that was on its way to Puget Sound in the Washington Territory.

“There,” Vivian said, pointing with a proud finger.

Harriet leaned over the rail, tamping down the increased nausea, and peered into the dark, churning water below.

“Do you see it?” Vivian asked.

At first, Harriet only saw the endless water that she’d been seeing for weeks now. And then . . . a dorsal fin crested from one of the waves. She gasped. “A dolphin!”

“Yes,” Vivian said in a triumphant voice. “Mr. Mercer told us we might see dolphins, but you were skeptical.”

Harriet wasn't listening. She was utterly fascinated with the creature moving in and out of the water. The dark tumult of the water must be freezing. It was a true wonder of nature anything could actually live in the ocean. Beneath all that cold water.

The dolphin seemed to be following their vessel.

“What is it doing?” Harriet asked.

“I don't know,” Vivian said. “I'm going to fetch the others. They'll be fascinated.”

It wasn't long before they were surrounded by other spectators, exclaiming over the single dolphin. Harriet glanced over at Mr. Mercer, who was explaining in detail about the patterns and habits of sea life. He really was an impressive man, full of knowledge on all sorts of topics.

When Harriet had read an article about Mr. Mercer in the newspaper back home in Philadelphia, she'd been immediately intrigued.

The wild West was no longer wild but in desperate need of teachers for its schoolhouses.

Another sentence in the article had caught her attention: “The West, especially Seattle, is filled with young, hardworking men who are on the brink of settling down and starting families.”

Mercer had made no secret of the fact that he was interested in aiding the young women joining the voyage in finding a suitable husband in Seattle.

But, he'd also given the caveat that the women were perfectly free to determine their

own future.

This opportunity was not one of the mail-order bride ventures.

Harriet was twenty-six, past the typical age for marrying, and all of her friends had done just that.

Married with babies, some with more than one.

It didn't bother Harriet, not really. There were plenty of women who married later in life.

Not that she knew any, but she'd read many books of older heroines .

. . though she couldn't remember a single one at the moment.

The crowd that had gathered to watch the dolphin was now exclaiming about something else. Harriet looked toward the shoreline they'd been skimming for several hours. "We'll stop over in Teekalet," Mr. Mercer said to the women. "Then tomorrow we'll arrive in Seattle."

A place to settle down at last, and it couldn't be a moment too soon for Harriet.

She would not miss a thing about Philadelphia.

Not the dances, where only the men over fifty asked her to dance, not Mrs. Raphael, who asked her every time she came into the bakery if she was engaged yet.

Not her twin brother Harry, who spent more time drinking than working nowadays.

Yes, the deaths of their parents five years ago had been impossibly hard.

But Harry had inherited the house and property and their father's accounting business.

She had inherited dependency. And she was tired of being dependent.

She wanted to make her own way in the world, live her own life, make her own decisions.

They were nearly to the harbor now, and the women of the Mercer's Belles group had all left to finish packing their belongings.

Harriet was already packed, so she remained on deck, watching the bustle of the approaching harbor. Dock workers milled about, and several of them were unloading carts behind impatient horses. When the vessel docked, Harriet joined the others and walked down the gang plank.

A couple of men were at the end of the plank, giving a gentlemanly hand to the ladies stepping onto land.

A nice gesture, especially since the women's skirts were long and heavy.

Harriet took her turn behind Vivian, who was prattling on about something or other.

It was hard to keep up with the woman's conversation.

The seagulls soared in the air about them, their screeches an odd, welcoming cadence. A child started to cry ahead of her. One of the passengers. He'd dropped the red ball he always carried around on deck, and now it bounced on the gangplank right before Harriet.

If it weren't for her long skirts and rather fitted shirtwaist, she might have been able to bend more gracefully and snatch the ball before it fell into the water. But that

wasn't the case, and as Harriet attempted to rescue the ball, she missed.

And lost her balance.

Then fell.

Into the cold, dark water.