

Sneaking in a Kiss...

"I do need help with being romantic," Trevor said.

Adrienne hesitated.

He took off his hat and wrapped his arms around her, making sure he didn't hold her too tightly. "If you don't want to, that is fine. I hope you didn't find me offensive."

"There's nothing offensive about you, Trevor." Though she didn't hug him back, he did note that her hands rested on his arms. "You are pleasant to be with."

He winked at her. "You do find a way into a man's heart. If you would rather wait for the kiss, I'd understand."

As he was about to pull away from her, she stopped him. "I suppose one kiss wouldn't do any harm. I mean, it would be for your play, and you do have a deadline to meet."

"Yes, that is true."

"I haven't kissed a man yet, so I don't know how good I'll be at teaching you how to kiss."

"Then we'll have to learn together." He leaned toward her and gave her a light kiss. His heart raced with excitement. "What did you think? Did I do alright?"

She nodded. "You did just fine."

He was pleased that she seemed to enjoy it as much as he did. "Perhaps, it would be more romantic if the kiss lasted longer. Maybe, it should be like this..."

He kissed her again, but this time he tightened his hold on her and deepened the kiss. He felt her arms go around his neck as she leaned into him. When the kiss ended, he could hardly concentrate on anything but how wonderful she felt.

"Yes, that's the kiss to go with," she whispered.

Oh Adrienne, just wait until we're married. I'm going to kiss you like that all the time.

Romancing Adrienne

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V2.0 (Revised version of Winning the Heart of Adrienne)

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<http://www.ruthannnordin.com>

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For Janet Syas Nitsick, author of *Seasons of the Soul*.
You have been a wonderful source of inspiration to me,
and I'm glad to have a friend like you.

Ruth Ann Nordin's Other Books

An Unlikely Place for Love (nominated for the 15th Annual EVVY Award)

The Cold Wife

An Inconvenient Marriage

With This Ring, I Thee Dread

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This story begins in April 1902.

Chapter One

"I can't let you marry him, Adrienne," Mrs. Dayton whispered as she threw some clothes into her daughter's suitcase. "It's wrong and your father won't listen to reason. A young girl shouldn't be used to give a man children. I know your father is doing what he thinks is best for you, but he doesn't know a woman's heart."

Adrienne bolted out of her bed, excited and grateful her mother was saving her from a horrible fate. She quickly got dressed in a yellow dress while her mother continued to pack.

"You know Mrs. Crane," her mother continued in her quiet voice. "She married a man who has money but he just wanted someone to show off at his dinner parties. She's nothing more than a trophy wife. She spends all her time going to beauty parlors and shopping for the latest fashion so she can look beautiful to impress his friends, but she confided to me last night that she is lonely. Her husband doesn't pay any attention to her when they are alone. To the world, he is a devoted and loving husband but when people aren't looking, it's a different story. He would rather spend time with his hobbies than with her. He only spent enough time with her to have children. She didn't enjoy those experiences and was relieved when he said that three children were enough."

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Adrienne shivered in disgust. Did men enjoy using women to fulfill their selfish pleasures? Mr. Parker wanted children and Mr. Crane wanted a trophy wife. Her father wanted her to marry a rich man. She brushed her long wavy brown hair.

“Braid your hair, sweetheart,” her mother instructed. “You will be taking a train all the way to New York and it’s going to take you several days to get there. My sister knows a young mother who needs a nanny to care for her baby. She has made arrangements for you to get the job. I won’t speak a word of this to your father. He will have to think you ran away to some unknown place.”

She braided her hair while her mother gave her the details of her plan. She nodded while her mother spoke. Her heart raced with relief and expectation. She hoped that no one would find them and prevent her from leaving California.

Her mother threw her jewelry into a small handbag and gave it to her. “These jewels are worth a good amount of money. If you take them to a jewelry store, you should be able to sell them and get money for anything you need. I cannot go with you to the train station but I did buy your ticket.” She placed the ticket for New York in her daughter’s hand.

Adrienne suddenly realized that she wouldn’t be seeing her mother for a long time. “Father will be upset.”

“It’s better for him to be upset than for you to be miserable for the rest of your life. You are only eighteen. Eugene Parker is forty-eight. A man his age can’t make a young woman happy.”

She began to cry. “I’m going to miss you and Father but I am glad you’re doing this for me.”

Her mother hugged her. “I’ll miss you too, sweetheart.”

“Thank you.”

Her mother pulled away from her and handed her the small handbag with the jewelry in it. She picked up her suitcase and quietly led her to the front door of the house and walked out with her to the horse-drawn buggy whose rider was

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unfamiliar to Adrienne. "I didn't want to risk anyone we know finding out, so I ordered this driver to take you to the train station. I'm sorry, but I must stay here. I don't want to risk anyone seeing us together."

Adrienne nodded. The hour was early so no one else was awake to see them.

"I love you, Adrienne. Your father loves you too. May God watch over you and protect you on your journey. I will be praying for you."

The driver took her suitcase and put it in the buggy.

"I love you and Father."

"I know you do, sweetheart. I wish you could enjoy a good marriage but I suspect you will be confined to being a spinster. It's not what I wished for you."

"I'll be fine as long as I'm not with Mr. Parker."

"Wait for me to write to you before you write to me. I want your father to have time to cool down before we resume communication. He will be upset but he'll adjust in time."

She nodded.

Her mother gave her another hug and a kiss on the cheek before watching her leave in the buggy.

Adrienne tried to be brave and not cry but she couldn't help it. She felt a mixture of many emotions, but the biggest emotion she experienced was relief that she wouldn't have to marry Mr. Parker after all.

Adrienne was exhausted. It was almost impossible to sleep in a train seat. She took a deep breath to calm her anxiety. The train reached Virginia by mid-afternoon. It had been a long trip on her way to New York, but she would rather be here than married to Mr. Parker.

She closed her eyes, aware of the train swaying her gently back and forth. She continued to cry off and on as the miles between her and California increased.

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The afternoon dragged on and the tree-filled landscape in Virginia passed by outside the window. Though she was exhausted, she couldn't sleep. She had spent days on the rails. She needed a decent meal, a bath and a good night's sleep. By late afternoon, the train stopped again and some people got on while others got off. She wondered how much longer they would be in Virginia. Each state she passed seemed to take longer and longer to get through. She wanted to get to New York City so she could be done traveling. She seriously doubted that she would ever travel again after this trying experience.

"Bye, everyone!"

Everyone in the train car could hear the young man as he hopped onto the train. He couldn't have been older than twenty. He had short light blond hair, green eyes, and a slender frame. His brown hat matched his farm clothes which had seen better days. She turned her eyes to the window and saw a group of people waving to him. The women were crying and the men were grinning at him.

"I will write as soon as I get to New York," he yelled before the doors closed. He chuckled as a young boy held up a mouse and waved its paw. "That's my crazy brother," he told the conductor who checked his ticket. "He takes that mouse everywhere he goes."

The conductor smiled and showed him to his seat.

"Thank you, sir." He nodded as he plopped down in the seat across from her. He had a manila folder in one hand and a pencil in the other. He opened his folder and took out the papers in it and began writing as the train started up.

How could he write with all the movement from the train? She noted that he wrote with intensity. *Whatever he's working on, it must be good.* She turned her attention back to the window and stared at the trees until she got sleepy. She closed her eyes again, hoping she could take a nap.

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She managed to drift off to a light sleep when a male voice gruffly said, "Hold your hands up and give us all your money."

Her eyelids flew open and she saw two masked men holding guns and pointing them at the passengers. She gasped and immediately put her hands up.

"Take it easy and no one will get hurt," one man said as he passed a black bag around the train car so that people could drop their money into it.

She was briefly aware that a child was crying in the back as the person in front of her handed her the bag. She swallowed the lump in her throat. She had never been robbed before. She dumbly held the bag.

The man closest to her walked over to her and pointed to her handbag. "Put it in and move the bag to the person behind you," he said in a low grating voice that reminded her of nails scraping a chalkboard.

She trembled. She knew she had to move but couldn't seem to do so.

"Here, let me do it," the other man said as he threw her handbag into the black bag.

She noted the birthmark on his wrist that was in the shape of a boot. *It looks just like Italy.* That she should think such a thing at this horrible moment amazed her. She was relieved she couldn't see their faces through their black masks, for they would surely haunt her dreams if she knew what they looked like.

The man holding the gun at her threw the bag to the person behind her.

That's all the money I have. She covered her eyes as she began to cry.

"Hands up!" The man with the birthmark shoved his hand on her shoulder.

She quickly obeyed him.

"Don't get your underwear in a bunch," the young man across from her said.

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"Did anyone ask for your opinion?" the man hissed at him.

"She's scared and alone. Give her a break. Here's my wallet." He threw it at the man.

The man caught it and huffed as he walked to the person behind him.

She was too frightened to speak. *I am alone.* She wondered if leaving California had been a mistake. She didn't have anyone to help her. Would she make it to her destination?

After the two men left the train car, the young man across from her looked at her.

"Are you doing alright?" he asked.

What kind of question was that? She was all by herself, running from a man she didn't wish to marry and she just lost all of her money.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry. Of course, you're not alright. You were just robbed."

She wiped her tears away.

The person behind her told the other passengers that the robbers left the train car. Everyone on board breathed a sigh of relief.

The man who sat across from her looked over at her again. "Do you need anything? I could get you some water or something."

She shook her head.

He smiled. "My name is Trevor Lewis. If you need anything, just let me know. I don't mind helping you out. You look like you could use a friend."

She wondered what he meant by that. She decided not to ask. She didn't want to talk to strangers. She didn't know if she could trust anyone except for her aunt. She just nodded at him and turned back to the window.

He turned back to his writing.

How could he be so calm and just pick up where he left off with his work? She was shaken to the core. She wrapped

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her arms around herself to ease the sudden wave of vulnerability that washed over her. She didn't wish to cry again. Her eyes were sore and red from the crying she had been doing for the past few days. She took a deep breath to steady her emotions and turned her attention to the trees outside the window.

Chapter Two

The train stopped and she noticed the two masked men leave the train. She did feel better knowing they were gone. At least she knew they wouldn't be coming back for something else. While the train remained still so the robbers could get off, the young man across from her stood up with his folder and sauntered to the back of the train car. She wondered where he was going. She shook her head. What did it matter where he was going? It's not like she knew him or anything. Still, it was nice that he cared enough to ask how she was doing. She sighed. She didn't wish to dwell on how much she missed her home back in California. *It's not worth marrying Mr. Parker and being nothing more than a breeder for the sake of his precious legacy.*

"Adrienne! You must return home," someone called out to her.

She jerked up in her seat and gasped. How did her father find out that she was on this train? How did he manage to catch up with her? He approached her, apparently angry that she had run away. She bolted out of her seat and ran in the opposite direction. She refused to go back. She would

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rather be robbed again than return to the future her mother had just rescued her from.

“Adrienne! Come back!”

A man stood up in the aisle and stopped her father. “Excuse me, sir. Who are you and what do you want with that young lady?”

“I’m her father. Get out of my way! She has defied me.”

She continued to run. She ran from one train car to another. She had to get off the train! It was her only hope of avoiding a loveless marriage. She found the exit door which was right by the restrooms. She quickly glanced back and noticed that her father wasn’t behind her. Thankfully, the man had stopped him. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have been able to outrun him. Just as she was ready to hop off the train, she bumped into Trevor who was leaving the restroom. She tripped on the step. Without thinking, she reached up and grabbed him by the shirt in hopes of steadying herself but she only succeeded in pulling him down the steps with her. He released his folder in surprise and his papers went flying all over the place as they tumbled out of the train and onto the ground beside the train tracks.

Before they could stand up, the train was already pulling out of the station.

Trevor yelled for it to stop, but it picked up speed as it chugged down the tracks. “My play!” Trevor yelled as he watched the train run over half of his papers.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she realized her father was not able to get off the train.

“I can’t believe this! I spent three weeks on this play. I only had one more scene to go and I was going to be done!” He stared after the train that was quickly disappearing behind the trees. Once it was out of sight, he turned back to the train tracks and picked up a couple of ripped up papers.

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She stood up and brushed the grass and dirt from her dress. She had never been filthy before, so she cringed at her soiled hands.

To her surprise, Trevor sat on the train tracks, clutching the torn papers to his chest. "A month of my life has been destroyed in a matter of minutes," he wailed.

Hoping to comfort him, she said, "You can always write it again."

His head shot up. "You talk?"

"Of course, I talk."

"I thought you were mute."

She blinked. What gave him that idea?

He examined the scattered pieces of paper that covered the tracks and grass. "My work. My precious work."

"What's the big deal? You can always write it again," she repeated.

His jaw dropped, as if she had just offended him. "I can't just automatically replace my writing. Each time I write something, it is unique. It's like a child."

"Aren't you being melodramatic?"

"You don't understand a writer's attachment to his work. When I conceive an idea, I begin to put it on paper. As I'm writing, it's like a pregnancy. It slowly grows and develops into something that turns out beautiful and wonderful. Then when I'm done, I have given birth to a new story."

She rolled her eyes. *That is the dumbest analogy I've ever heard.*

"Don't you read?"

She was surprised by his question. "I can read." Couldn't he tell by looking at her clothes that she enjoyed a higher standard of living and education than he did?

"Do you enjoy reading?"

She shrugged. "It depends on the book."

"Imagine that your favorite book was completely destroyed. How would that make you feel?"

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"I wouldn't care. I still have the story in my head. I can recall it anytime I want. Just write the story out again. Thinking it up is the hard part."

"But it won't be the exact same story. Things always change when I do it over."

She sighed, quickly getting irritated. "Well, you can't collect all your papers and put them back together. What's the point in moaning over something that's gone?"

"You are one cold-hearted lady."

Now she was offended. "I'm realistic. Look around you. Do you think you can gather all the papers together? Some are probably stuck on the train."

"Would a little sympathy kill you?"

"It's just a story. You can rewrite it. Who knows? Maybe it'll be better the second time around."

He could only stare at her.

"Fine. Do whatever you want. I'm going to find out where we are." She turned and walked to the station so she could talk to the man at the ticket counter. As she walked on the platform, she wondered what she could possibly do about getting to New York.

"How may I help you, miss?" the skinny, elderly man asked her.

"I fell off the train," she explained. "Where am I and can I get on the next train bound for New York?"

"You are on the east side of Virginia. The towns here are all small and isolated. There aren't any towns nearby. You have to travel an hour by horse to get to any of them."

"Why is there a train station here?"

He shrugged. "We occasionally get visitors or people leaving. The train stopped just now so the thieves could escape."

"Isn't anyone going after them?"

"I can't leave the station, and the conductors tried to stop the men but they're long gone. We're just going to have to keep an eye out for any newcomers around here."

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She didn't like the sound of that.

Trevor lumbered over to them. He looked miserable. "When is the next train for New York City going to get here?"

"It will stop by tomorrow at the same time. Do you two have your tickets?" the man asked.

She gasped as she realized she left the train ticket on the train.

"No," Trevor bitterly answered. "It was in my folder, and everything that was in my folder was demolished when I fell out of the train."

"Unfortunately, I can't put you back on without a ticket. Do you have any money?"

"The robbers took all we had."

The man rubbed his stubbly jaw. "You are in a tight place alright. I don't know what to tell you. I can't just hand you a ticket. You have to purchase a new one."

"How are we supposed to afford one?"

"I can probably hook you up with a temporary job in the town. At least it will give you enough money for another train ticket."

"Well, considering the fact that there isn't any other choice, I'll take it."

The man nodded. "I was ready to head back home. I can take you two there. I can hook you up with lodging until you get a job."

She sighed. "But I need to get to New York. My aunt is expecting me."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. There's nothing I can do for you. My hands are tied by rules and regulations. You need a ticket to get on the train."

"How long do you think it will take to earn enough money to buy a ticket?"

"That all depends on how good you are at saving money. You'll be paying for food and lodging while you're in town."

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She hadn't ever considered the cost of living before so this news dismayed her. "How much will all of that be?"

"We can discuss prices later. Right now you two need to get some rest. If you don't mind me saying ma'am, you look like you're ready to drop from exhaustion."

"It has been a tiring few days."

"Where are you traveling from?"

"San Francisco."

"That's certainly a long way. You definitely need to rest. Come along. I have an old buggy in the back. I usually ride my horse but with you two here, I'll hook up the buggy. We can talk more in the morning. My name is Jeffrey Gallows. I own the inn in town. My wife runs it while I'm here. We'll get things arranged for you two."

She nodded and followed Mr. Gallows and Trevor to the buggy that had seen better days. She tried not to feel sorry for herself as she sat across from Trevor, but it was hard to be positive when things looked incredibly bleak. What was her aunt going to do when she didn't make it to the train station in New York? Would Mrs. Rochester find another nanny? What was her future going to be like now? She couldn't imagine returning home. As much as she missed California, she couldn't go back to Mr. Parker.

The man hopped on the seat outside the buggy and urged his horse forward. Despite the evening sky and many trees, the horse followed the well worn but overgrown path that would take them to the town where he lived.

Trevor glared at her. "This is all your fault."

She blinked, shocked by his tone of voice. "My fault?"

"You dragged me out of the train against my will."

"I tripped. I didn't mean to take you out with me," she snapped. She folded her arms across her chest and looked out the window though she knew she wouldn't see anything but dark trees.

"Then you insulted my life's work."

"You're sore about that?"

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"My writing is my life."

"Write another story." She couldn't believe he was making such a huge deal out of it.

"Write another story," he sarcastically replied. "It's not that easy."

"Well, excuse me for trying to get away from a miserable situation back home. I was about to be forced into a marriage with a disgusting forty-eight year old who wanted to use me to give him babies. I was getting off the train so I could evade my father who was ready to haul me back home. So you can see that my problem is a lot worse than you losing your stupid story."

He looked as if he had just been slapped in the face. "Stupid story?"

She rolled her eyes. "A loveless marriage is more of a catastrophe than losing some papers."

"I think you're exaggerating."

"I am not! That man was gross."

He obviously didn't believe her.

She decided not to say anything else. What was the point? He had a warped view of what was important. Her eyelids grew heavy after sitting in silence for a few minutes. She drifted off to sleep for the remainder of the ride.

By the time the buggy stopped, she woke up and realized that Trevor had drifted off to sleep as well. Mr. Gallows opened the buggy door and helped her out. Trevor woke up and followed her out of the buggy. Since it was night, she had to rely on the flickering candlelight from the lamp posts to show her the one street town. A small grocery store, an inn, a restaurant, a bank, and several other small businesses lined both sides of the street. It was nothing like San Francisco. Everything spoke of poverty in this sorry place. She didn't want to be there.

She slowly followed Mr. Gallows into the inn which was small but comfortable and clean. He motioned for her and

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Trevor to sit on the small couch in the parlor by the front door. Too tired to argue, she sat on the couch.

Trevor groaned but sat next to her, trying to keep as much distance from her as possible, though it wasn't possible to avoid touching altogether.

Her eyelids were still heavy and she almost dozed off by the time Mr. Gallows and his wife came over to them.

"We got a room set up for you both," Mrs. Gallows, a pudgy old woman with a kind face and warm smile, told them as soon as she walked into the room.

Adrienne sat straight up, accidentally bumping shoulders with Trevor who immediately recoiled from her. She was too tired to care that he was repulsed by her.

"My poor dear, you are ready to drop," Mrs. Gallows softly noted. She helped Adrienne stand up. "Come with me."

She nodded and followed the woman to a small room with two beds.

"Oh no," Trevor immediately protested. "I'm not sharing a room with her."

She was too worn out to do the arguing so she let him do it for her.

"Are you and your wife having problems?" Mr. Gallows wondered.

"She's not my wife. That's why I'm not sharing a room with her."

"Oh. Well, that is certainly a good reason. We'll send you to another room then."

She breathed a sigh of relief and fell on the bed.

The old woman put a blanket over her. "I'll bring you some clean clothes to wear tomorrow. Mrs. Peters' youngest girl is too tall for her clothes, so she gave them to me and they look like they could be your size."

Adrienne fell asleep so she didn't hear anything else the woman said.

Chapter Three

Trevor woke up the next morning in his small room, aware of the sunlight hitting his eyes. He squinted as he rolled over in the small but comfortable bed and faced the wall. Sighing in despair, he recalled his play that he had worked on night and day for the past month. He was almost finished with it when that crazy young woman dragged him off the train. His hard work was destroyed. Now he had nothing to show Mr. Adams when he got to New York. He groaned as he rolled onto his back. The sunlight hit his eyes again. He reluctantly got up and did his best to make himself look presentable before he left his room.

He walked down the unfamiliar light blue corridor until he reached the front desk. Mr. Gallows stood behind it, looking just as happy as he was the night before. Trevor was usually a happy person too, but with his irreplaceable work destroyed, he didn't feel like smiling.

"Good morning, son," the man greeted. "Did you sleep well?"

"I slept pretty well," he admitted. "How am I supposed to find work in this town so I can afford a ticket to New York?"

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"Oh well, we can always use some help in this town. We have lots of odd jobs available."

"What is this town called?"

"Farwell. It's named after the mayor. He founded this place thirty years ago. He's almost eighty. I suppose his son will be mayor once he dies."

Trevor nodded. "So what type of work do you need around here?"

"Well, we could use a cook, a farmhand, and a cleaner."

"I was born and raised on a farm. I'll take the farm work."

"I'll notify Mr. Howard that he can have a farmhand then."

"How long do you think it will take to pay for my lodging, food and ticket?"

"It depends on how good you are about saving your money and how hard you're willing to work. By the way you're talking, I'm guessing you have plenty of motivation to get out of here. You'll probably be ready to head out in a little under a month."

That long? Trevor hid his disappointment.

"You must be hungry. Mrs. Gallows has made a fine stack of pancakes, bacon, and biscuits. That meal will be free, as will last night's lodging. We don't want to make more of a burden on you than you already have to bear, considering the robbery and all."

"Thank you."

"I'll show you the way to the dining room."

Trevor simply nodded and followed the man to the dining room where Mrs. Gallows was setting the utensils and plates. "Do you need any help, ma'am?"

She looked pleased by his offer. "No thank you. I can handle it myself. Have yourself a seat and rest for a bit."

He sat down at the place she motioned to him before she went to the kitchen.

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Mr. Gallows sat beside him at the small square table. "We bring out more tables when we have a party."

Trevor looked around the large room with its red carpet and red drapes and white walls. "I see you like the color red."

"Yes. Mrs. Gallows loves that particular color. She says it encourages people to talk more. Apparently, there's something in red that makes people more alert, and when they're alert, they're more social."

"So the reason my room is blue is to foster relaxation and sleep?"

"Correct. It's nice to see you understand that."

"Well, when I do my writing, I try to pay attention to subtle cues. Sometimes a certain color or object in the story has a deeper meaning that demonstrates something the characters need or already possess. I'm not sure how many people get those subtleties."

"You're a writer?"

"Yes, sir."

"What do you write?"

"I mostly write plays. That's why I'm on my way to New York. I got a job as a playwright for Adams New York Theater."

"I'm guessing all those papers on the train tracks was your work, then?"

Trevor frowned at the memory. "Yes, sir. It was a play I had written to show Mr. Adams."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

After that woman's ridicule of his work, he was glad someone felt some sympathy for him.

"Did you carry any other pieces of your work in your suitcase?"

"I had a couple of ideas in it."

"I'd be interested in hearing them. It's not often we get anyone with creative ability through here. Most of our time is spent doing the necessities, though we do our best to entertain. We have some people who play instruments in their spare time, but it would be nice to read a good story."

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Trevor's ears perked up. "I have a book out. It's called *The Path to Christmas and Other Short Plays*. Do you have a bookstore here?"

"Sadly, we do not. What's your name, son?"

"Trevor Lewis."

"Well Trevor, I'll make it a point to stop by the next town when I go to the train station this afternoon. That place has a bookstore, and I'll look for your book there."

Mrs. Gallows walked into the dining room with the young woman. Instead of her fancy dress, she was wearing a faded light blue dress with faded pink flowers on it. Her long, wavy dark brown hair was pulled back with a headband. Though she was beautiful, she still looked tired and sad. She sat down and said hello to everyone.

Trevor didn't feel like greeting her but did to be polite.

Mr. Gallows turned his attention to his wife. "Trevor here has a book out. I'm going to pick it up from the next town over. He has some plays in it. I thought it would be nice to introduce the people in this town to one of his plays."

Mrs. Gallows' face lit up. "What a lovely idea! It is wonderful to have an author among us."

Trevor was pleased by their enthusiasm.

"You'll have to tell us all about those stories while we eat," she said with an interest that made him feel better about the previous night's events.

The woman across the table from him rolled her eyes.

He ignored her.

Mrs. Gallows went back to the kitchen.

He turned to the old man. "Can I contact my family and Mr. Adams to let them know where I am?"

"We have a post office here but we only send out and receive mail once a week. We won't be due for another postal run to the next town for another five days. Today is Thursday so that makes Tuesday for when the post office is open again. For the time being, you'll have to wait."

He sighed. "Alright."

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"I could stop by and send out a telegram for you when I'm in the next town if you would like."

"No, that's alright. I can wait five days."

The man turned to the young woman. "May I send a telegram on your behalf, Miss...?"

"My name is Adrienne Dayton. No, I don't want you to send a telegram. But I do need a job to make money."

"We have an opening for a cleaner and a cook. One of the two women who cooks at the restaurant just had a baby and the other woman needs help right away. As for the cleaning position, we need someone to clean this inn. Mrs. Gallows is getting too old to handle it all by herself."

Adrienne shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "I don't have experience with either of those things."

Trevor shook his head. *She's a spoiled rich girl alright. It's amazing she could find her way onto the train without any help.*

"Are you willing to learn?" Mr. Gallows asked.

She nodded.

"Which would you rather learn?"

"The cooking I suppose."

"Fine. Then Mrs. Gallows will take you over to the restaurant after breakfast and get you started there."

He had to hand it to Mr. Gallows who was respectful of all persons, no matter how annoying or spoiled they were. Most likely, Adrienne didn't want to clean because then she would get dirty.

Mrs. Gallows returned with the food. "Eat up. You'll need your energy."

"I can't wait to try it," he said. He hadn't realized he was hungry until he smelled the delicious aroma from the bacon.

"You'll be having lunch on the Howard farm. Adrienne, you'll have lunch at the restaurant. Then you'll both have dinner here around six," Mr. Gallows said.

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Trevor took a bite of bacon. "If dinner's going to be as good as breakfast, I can't wait. This stuff is really good, ma'am."

Mrs. Gallows beamed from the compliment before she drank some orange juice.

He ignored Adrienne who rolled her eyes again. *That's the thanks I get for trying to be nice to her on the train. Well, I won't be doing anything else for her.*

"Now, we'd love to hear about your plays," Mrs. Gallows stated.

He spent the breakfast explaining the plots and themes to his work as they ate their meals. He saw that Adrienne purposely stuck to herself as she concentrated on her own meal. He pushed aside his irritation and hurt by her obvious rejection of his work. *Not everyone is going to like my material. I better get used to criticism since critics will be hard on me in New York.* Still, it was much nicer to talk to the Gallows who seemed excited about his book.

After the meal was done, Mr. Gallows looked between him and Adrienne. "So, when is the wedding?"

"Excuse me?" Trevor asked.

Adrienne cringed.

"You two were on the train together going to New York. Obviously, you are planning to get married. You aren't related to each other since you have different last names."

"Oh no, sir." Trevor was going to put a stop to all of this right away. He would never marry someone as uptight, stuck-up and rude as Adrienne. "I don't even know-"

A man walked into the room. "Hi there, Pa and Ma. I got the buggy's wheel tightened."

Mr. Gallows stood up. "This is our son, Bronson. He's a repairman. It's handy to have him around."

Bronson looked to be around twenty-two. He had red hair and freckles and the same pudgy frame that his mother had.

"Good morning," Bronson greeted the two newcomers.

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"This is Adrienne Dayton and Trevor Lewis. They were two of the train passengers who got robbed before they accidentally fell off the train," his father explained.

"The cops haven't found the robbers yet but they got to be around somewhere." Bronson turned to Adrienne in interest. "So, where did you come from?"

She seemed startled that he talked to her. "Oh. I came from out west. It's a place that's far away."

Why was she being so vague? Trevor shook his head. Why did he care?

"I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance," Bronson said as he took her hand and kissed it.

Trevor didn't hide his amusement at the look of shock and unease on her face.

"Now son, she's engaged to Mr. Lewis over there," his father warned.

The boy frowned. "Oh. I'm sorry." He released her hand.

"We're not engaged," Trevor said. "She's free to marry whoever she wants. She prefers redheads."

She gasped. She must have understood that he was giving Bronson free reign to kiss her hand again.

It serves her right for mocking my writing. Trevor was very satisfied to watch Bronson drool over her as he welcomed her to the town. She struggled to be polite but he recognized the repulsion she felt in his presence. He made it a point to notice small details in people since it helped him become a better writer because he incorporated the same subtle actions and words into his work.

"Now, just because you two are having a lover's quarrel, it doesn't mean you have to call off the wedding," Mrs. Gallows inserted. "I'm sure that you can work things out. Marriage is like a rose. It has its beautiful scent and is pretty but it also has thorns."

Trevor thought that was a good analogy. *I'll have to incorporate that into one of my future writings.*

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"At least, their relationship doesn't seem serious," Bronson argued. "The ring isn't on her finger yet."

"You got that right. Why, Adrienne and I can hardly stand to look at one another. I don't mind letting another man court her. Shoot, I'll just make it all official right here and now. I call off the engagement. She's free to be with anyone she wants."

"As if I would ever consider marrying you," she spat.

Trevor blinked. *She's talking again.*

Bronson was grinning like a schoolboy.

Trevor chuckled to himself. It was funny to watch Bronson and Adrienne, but Trevor was eager to start working so he could make money and head out of town. "I'm ready to go out to the Howard farm," he told Mr. Gallows.

Mr. and Mrs. Gallows looked shocked but nodded.

"If you'll follow me," Mr. Gallows finally replied. "Do you ride a horse?"

"I sure do. I've been riding them since I was two."

"We'll have to get a welcoming party to introduce you two to the folk around here," Mrs. Gallows said. "I'll make arrangements for tomorrow. It looks like you two will be here for at least a month."

"Or maybe longer." Bronson smiled at Adrienne who grimaced.

Trevor laughed as he followed Mr. Gallows out of the inn.

"You should be careful," the man kindly warned him. "There are plenty of young men in this town who are eager for a young lady as beautiful as Adrienne."

What did he care? If some other man wanted to be miserable by confining himself to a marriage to a woman like that, then let him.

Trevor walked to the horse stable with Mr. Gallows who told him that he could have some of Tom Peters' old clothes. "That boy just turned sixteen. He shot up like a weed overnight and outgrew his clothes. You look like you could fit his old

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things. We'll send those clothes to your room by morning so you can change. Thankfully, what you're wearing now will be adequate for farming."

Trevor hadn't considered that he was smaller than the average man. He was slender and only 5'6" which made him shorter than his brother who was six feet tall. Most men around him were a little taller than him, and he hadn't minded it before, but realizing he fit into clothes of a sixteen year old boy suddenly bothered him. After all, he was twenty.

Mr. Gallows led him into the stable and showed him the horse he would ride.

Trevor smiled at the mare and petted her. "We're going to make a good team for the next month. I can tell you're a fine animal by the way you welcome someone new."

"This is the easiest horse to ride."

"I love horses. I used to work with horses back home."

"How did you find time to write?"

"When someone loves writing as much as I do, they make time. I sacrificed a lot of sleep to produce some of my best work."

"You certainly are dedicated to your chosen profession. It's a pity you lost your last manuscript."

The reminder made him more upset with Adrienne than he already was. It was her fault and she didn't even apologize. She acted like it was no big deal. *How could a woman watch a man's heart break and not care? She might be nice to look at but she's got a cold heart.*

"Try not to let it get to you too much," the old man said. "I know it's hard to lose something you worked hard on but perhaps God has something better in mind for you."

Trevor knew he was trying to make him feel better but it wasn't easy to let go of the pain.

Mr. Gallows seemed to understand his thoughts, for he patted him on the shoulder. "I realize it can't be replaced."

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That did make him feel better. “I suppose I shouldn’t mope when I can’t do anything about it.” He sighed. “I will just have to start over and make the best of it.”

“You have a good attitude. I will pick up some paper and pencils and leave them in your room with your new clothes.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“If there’s anything you need, let me know. I’ll do my best to help you.”

Trevor thanked him again and got the horse ready for the ride out to the Howard farm with Mr. Gallows.

Chapter Four

Mr. Howard, his employer, was a down-to-earth honest and caring man. His wife was a skinny tall woman who towered over him. Her husband was also tall, so their three sons and two daughters were taller than average as well. His sons were twenty-one, thirteen and seven. His two daughters were seventeen and nineteen and seemed especially delighted to welcome him to the farm. They were a little taller than him and had black straight hair and light blue eyes. They were just as skinny as their mother. They didn't have any obvious feminine curves and hardly had breasts. *What a contrast to Adrienne who has lots of curves and a full bosom.* He shook his head in disgust. *Why am I thinking such things? Because I'm a writer. That's what I do. I notice details.* He comforted himself with that reasoning.

The work was monotonous but gave him plenty of time to think of his play. The romantic comedy seemed to be going well, and it was flowing along nicely before it got destroyed. But he had to admit that it was missing something. The characters didn't seem as lively as they should have been. Usually when he wrote something, the characters came alive and took over the storyline in their words and actions. This

wasn't the case this time. They were stagnant and predictable. The plot and action were the strengths of the play though, which was why he kept writing it.

By lunch hour, he was famished so he eagerly followed the men into the house, cleaned up and sat at the large kitchen table where fresh bread, chili and salad waited for them. He looked around at the siblings and a wave of homesickness washed over him. He didn't like thinking of his empty room back at the inn. He didn't like being alone for a long period of time. At home, he always had the ability to find someone to mess with or talk to when he was done being alone working on his writing. He sat at the table and joined in the conversation, glad for the companionship of the brothers who had already made him feel like he was one of them. The sisters, however, were too interested in him.

"You do fine work on the farm," Mr. Howard told him as they started eating their lunch.

"Thank you, sir," he replied. "I grew up on the farm so it helps to have the experience."

"It's good to have an extra man around to help out," Trudy, the seventeen year old sister, said. "Planting and taking care of the chickens and sheep can be time consuming."

"Once the boys get older, it will be easier since they'll be able to take on more responsibilities," Mrs. Howard added.

"Mr. Gallows said he and his wife will be hosting a dance and a dinner party tomorrow night to welcome you and the young woman you came with," Mr. Howard said. "We're looking forward to going. We haven't had a good social event for a couple of months. We enjoy getting together with the other people in this community whenever we can."

"I'm sure it will be a fun evening," Trevor replied. He was looking forward to it since it would give him an excuse to be surrounded by people.

"You came with someone?" Bonnie, the nineteen year old sister, frowned.

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"Yes. Her name is Adrienne Dayton," their father answered for Trevor who had his mouth full of food.

"So you're not married?" Bonnie and Trudy perked up at this announcement.

Trevor slowly swallowed his food. He didn't like the way this conversation was going.

"Now, let's not make Trevor feel uncomfortable," their mother quickly inserted. "He just got here last night. He needs time to adjust to being here."

"I'll be going to New York as soon as I can afford a train ticket," he announced. *That should get Trudy and Bonnie off my back.*

Clark, the twenty-one year old son, glanced up from his bowl. "New York? What are you going there for?"

"I'm going to be a playwright at a theater company."

"How exciting!" Bonnie exclaimed.

"A writer!" Trudy added.

Uh oh. Trevor cleared his throat nervously.

"I wouldn't mind going to New York," Trudy said.

"Me neither," Bonnie agreed.

"That was a great meal," Trevor quickly stated as he wiped his mouth with the cloth napkin. "I admit that I'm anxious to get back to work. I enjoy being outside on a day as nice as this." The truth was, he would rather be inside writing but there was no way he would tell them that since they might offer him a paper and a pencil to keep him nearby.

"We do have a lot of work to do," their father agreed.

Trevor breathed a sigh of relief as he joined the men back out into the fields. It suddenly occurred to him that throwing Adrienne at Bronson was unusually cruel, even if he couldn't stand her.

Adrienne was surprised that cooking wasn't as daunting a task as she originally feared. Mrs. Harper was helping her

learn, and she found the thirty year old woman to be a patient teacher with a kind heart. *There are a lot of good people in this town.* If she had to pick anywhere to get stranded, she would pick this place. She especially liked the fact that the town was isolated from the rest of the world. It made her feel safe from her father who was, no doubt, still searching for her. Why would her father place such importance on her marrying Mr. Parker because he was rich? How did her father find out she was on her way to New York? *He must have ridden his horse hard to catch up with me on the train.* She was relieved she got off the train when she did.

However, she did regret she brought that crude man named Trevor with her. He was sure stuck on himself. He thought he was important because he was a writer who already had a book published. She saw his face when he found out she didn't know how to clean or cook. He thought she was a rich, snobby person who didn't know how to do anything but entertain at parties. Just because she grew up surrounded by wealth and privilege, it didn't mean she was useless. What she didn't know, she could learn. *He's jealous because he didn't have the same opportunity to be rich like I did.* She found that many people lower than her on the economic ladder hated the fact that money came so easily to her. They wanted everyone to struggle with their finances. *Well, they should all be happy now since I am officially poor.*

She cut up potatoes and carrots and added them to the pot roast that Mrs. Harper had taught her to make. She put the dish into the oven and turned her attention to the boiling pot of potatoes that needed to be mashed. With the recipe book in front of her, she was able to answer a lot of her questions on her own.

She still couldn't believe the nerve Trevor had to practically hand her over to Bronson. Not that she and Trevor knew each other but with the way he talked, one would assume they did know each other and that he insisted on giving her away to the first available bachelor who showed an interest in

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her. She left California to avoid marriage, not to find it. She had no desire to be with any man romantically. Men were only concerned with what they wanted from her. They didn't care about who she was or what she wanted. She didn't wish to confine herself to a fate where she was an object.

Mr. Owen, the owner of the restaurant, came into the kitchen. He looked pleased. "The customers are happy with the food. Adrienne, are you sure you've never cooked before?"

She shook her head. "No, sir. This is my first attempt at it."

The fat middle-aged man smiled at her. "You certainly have a talent for it."

"She picks up on it very fast," Mrs. Harper agreed, smiling at her. "She's a natural in the kitchen."

He nodded. "The single men will be flocking in here to taste her cooking and to get a good look at her. It's not often that we get a single woman in this town who is pretty and cooks as well as she does. Adrienne, you're going to do my business some good. I'm sorry for the situation that put you here, but I am glad to have you here anyway."

"I do like it here," Adrienne confessed. "I was only heading to New York to work as a nanny, but I don't have to go there."

"That's even better. You'll have your pick of any bachelor you want in this town. I suspect you'll be married before the year is up."

She winced at the thought. "I don't know, Mr. Owen. I left California to get out of marrying someone."

"Really?" Mrs. Harper asked. "What happened?"

"My father arranged a marriage between me and a forty-eight year old bachelor who wanted to marry me so I could give him children."

"Oh. So you didn't love him."

"No. Nor did he love me."

"Well, there are single men closer to your age who will be more than happy to love you," Mr. Owen said. "You

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shouldn't let a bad experience rob you of the joy of marriage. I love my wife and we've been married for twenty-five years now."

"And I love my husband of eleven years," Mrs. Harper added. "There are some wonderful things about marriage, even if there are some difficulties with living with another person. It certainly is nice to come home to someone who cares about you."

"For now, I would rather focus on learning to cook and getting familiar with the town," she replied, hoping to end the conversation.

Mr. Owens grinned. "You'll have a good chance to do that tomorrow night when Mr. and Mrs. Gallows give you and that young man you came with a welcoming party."

"Speaking of which, are you involved with that young man?" Mrs. Harper asked.

"No, I'm not," she quickly responded. *Nor do I care to be.*

"I heard he's a writer. Mr. Gallows is going to pick up some copies of his book to hand out at the dance tomorrow."

Adrienne hid her disgust. Why was everyone thrilled that Trevor wrote a book? He wasn't that impressive. She met authors who were full of themselves. They figured they knew everything there was to know on any subject they wrote about. And they were too sentimental about their work. She had never seen a grown man agonize over a story. He could always write another one but seemed to find that option too distressing. He said he couldn't replace his work, as if everything he wrote was as important as a person. *What a baby. It might be a good experience for him to lose his work for once. Maybe it will give him proper perspective on what really matters.*

She finished mashing the potatoes and handed the bowl to Mrs. Harper who put the food on the plates resting on the counter. To her surprise, the older woman told her to take

the plates of steak, mashed potatoes and corn to table number five. "I'll bring the coffee," she added.

She nodded and did as instructed. Leaving the kitchen with the three plates, she frowned when she realized that table number five was filled with three single young men. *No doubt, I am being fixed up already and I just got here last night.* She sighed and took the plates to the men who smiled at her. She forced herself to smile in return and set the plates down.

"Are you going to be at the pot luck and dance tomorrow night?" the one with curly blond hair and a creepy mustache asked her.

"Yes," she quietly replied.

"I hope you save me a dance," the husky brunette with a beard told her.

"It seems that a lot of people will be coming," she said, intentionally ignoring his offer. *Hopefully, there will be married people.*

"The whole town will be there," the third man, who was already balding despite his young age, reported. "There will be lots of children there too. Do you like children?"

"They're fine," she reluctantly stated. He was obviously after a lineage just as Mr. Parker had been.

The brunette took a bite of her food and grinned at her. "You're a mighty fine cook, Miss Dayton. A man could get used to coming home to a meal this good."

And he's after a hot meal.

"Good looking and a great cook. That's an unbeatable combination," the blond added.

And he wants a trophy wife. She hadn't realized how easy it was to read men's intentions before.

"I must get back to work," she finally replied and left the table. She was glad that the kitchen was far away from the customers. She didn't feel like talking to anyone but Mrs. Harper and Mr. Owen.

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That evening at dinner, Adrienne offered to help Mrs. Gallows cook.

"You must be tired. You should rest," the woman told her.

"No. Surprisingly, I have a lot of energy," she insisted. "I suppose it's all the days I spent sitting on a train. Besides, I discovered that I actually enjoy cooking."

"I did hear many positive comments from people in town today. Your first day was a great success."

"I had no idea I could like it so much. It's nice to know I have a useful talent."

"I'm sure there are many things you do well."

She wasn't sure anymore. Her entire life had been wrapped up in dancing and dressing well and making small talk with important people so she could impress them for her father's sake. She knew those things well enough but they didn't have any use in this town. She was relieved to find she had an unexpected love for cooking.

"Tonight I was planning to make stuffed green peppers, green beans, fruit salad and rice," the woman said.

"Can I try the stuffed green peppers? I haven't had a chance to make those yet and I noticed they are on the menu at the restaurant for tomorrow."

"You are certainly welcome to make them. I must say I admire your eagerness to learn new things."

"When it's fun, I like a good challenge."

"Here's the recipe." She handed her the card from her stack of favorite recipes. "Will you be making something for the potluck tomorrow night?"

"Oh. I hadn't thought about it but I should. Do you recommend anything?"

She paused as she thought it over. "Would you like to try fried chicken? We can make it together. It's one of the more popular dishes and I usually run out of it before everyone gets a chance to try it. It would be nice to have an extra pair of hands for the task."

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"That sounds like fun." For the first time since she learned of Mr. Parker, she felt like smiling. "Thank you, Mrs. Gallows. You have been most kind to me."

The woman seemed pleased by her words but shooed the compliment aside with a wave of her hand. "It's nothing. You are an easy customer. Since you are helping me cook dinner, I don't feel right in charging you for the room."

"Oh, in that case, I will help you with breakfast too."

"You're a nice young woman. Trevor Lewis is lucky to have you."

Before she could protest, Mrs. Harper came into the kitchen. "I'm sorry to interrupt but I wanted to stop by and give you my recipe for brownies before I forgot."

"Great, Regina!" Mrs. Gallows added it to her stack of cards. "I don't know what your secret is but I'm anxious to find out."

"Let's make them for dessert," Adrienne said.

Mrs. Harper shook her head in amazement. "You're a real trooper. You spent all day in the kitchen and came home to do more cooking."

She shrugged. "I'm having more fun doing this than I've had in a long time. I have to be honest. I don't want to leave."

Mrs. Gallows gasped. "But what will Trevor think?"

"I don't care. It's not his decision."

"I know you're having relationship problems, but do you really think it's wise to not consult him about this?"

"We're not getting married."

Mrs. Gallows frowned. "I'm sorry it didn't work out for you. Perhaps it's best you found out before you said 'I do'."

Adrienne sighed. She decided to let people think whatever they wanted to. It was better than explaining her running from Mr. Parker.

"Will you be staying for dinner?" Mrs. Gallows asked Mrs. Harper.

"I suppose I could if you don't mind five children. Mr. Harper is working late at the lumber yard."

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"Bring the children. They are fun to have over."

"That means we'll have to make more food!" Adrienne looked forward to making another dish. *And I can easily ignore Trevor. The more people, the better.* She had been dreading the meal but now she didn't have to.

Mrs. Gallows chuckled. "You'll fit right in this town."

Adrienne turned back to the meat and mixed the rice and tomato sauce with it so she could stuff it into the peppers. Then she made meatloaf. Afterwards, she helped Mrs. Gallows with the brownies. Mrs. Gallows made the side dishes. Once they were done and Mrs. Harper, her five children and Trevor were ready to eat, they took the food out and everyone took as much as they wanted.

She noticed that the children were already gravitating to Trevor who seemed happy to be surrounded by all of them. *He likes a lot of people, especially children.*

"Adrienne made the meatloaf and stuffed green peppers. She also helped me with the brownies," Mrs. Gallows said in the middle of the meal.

"You're kidding?" Trevor spoke up. "I thought she couldn't cook."

"She learned how to do it today, and she's a quick learner," Mrs. Harper replied.

"Well, I'm blown away. I didn't think she could pull it off."

Adrienne glared at him.

He looked at her and shrugged. "Sorry but I'm really surprised you could make something this good."

"You are a horrible man," she snapped.

"Why? I just paid you a compliment."

"Your compliment was wrapped up in criticism."

"Oh dear," Mrs. Gallows sighed. "I had not wished to start a lover's quarrel."

"She's not my fiancée. I hardly even know her."

"Well, I don't wish to know you either. I can't wait until you buy your ticket and get out of here."

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"The feeling is mutual."

"Trevor, it's not nice to fight," a five year old girl interrupted.

He immediately cooled down. "I'm sorry, Fiona. You're right."

"You should apologize," the eight year old boy said.

He sighed and stiffly said he was sorry.

The kids looked over at her.

"Alright. I'm sorry too." She quickly said it so she could get back to her meal and get the ordeal over with. She quickly finished eating so she could start collecting the dirty plates to wash.

Chapter Five

The next night, Adrienne helped Mrs. Gallows and Mrs. Harper set up the dining room in the inn for the potluck dinner while Mr. Gallows helped Trevor and a couple of other men get things ready for the entertainment. After the dinner, they would enjoy music and dancing. She had taken a bath and washed her hair so that she could be presentable at the social function. If she was going to meet the people in town, she wanted to look her best. She decided to wear the soft pink dress with a dark pink ribbon that she tied around her waist. Then she pulled hair back with a pink bow. Her hair fell softly over her shoulders. It was nice to be dressed up with somewhere fun to go.

She was looking forward to having a good time and watching people's reaction to the fried chicken. More than cooking food, she enjoyed watching people as they ate it. She never realized that making a meal could make people happy. She glanced around the large room which was filled with adults and children. She was surprised that so many people showed up for the evening, but it was nice they did.

During the meal, people complimented her and Mrs. Gallows on the fried chicken. She was pleased that they liked

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it so much. The more she cooked, the more she wanted to try new recipes and revise the recipes she already knew. Mrs. Gallows introduced her to Bonnie and Trudy Howard and twenty year old Mrs. Camilla Dundee who was six months pregnant.

"Is it true that you and Trevor Lewis aren't serious?" Bonnie asked.

Adrienne inwardly groaned. "We aren't even together."

"Oh good," Trudy replied, obviously relieved. "We think he's wonderful."

She could think of a few words to describe him and "wonderful" wasn't on that list. She shook her head in wonder that any woman could find him appealing. Sure, he was good looking but his personality killed the initial attraction she felt for him.

"I'm going to get him," Bonnie said.

"No. I will," Trudy argued.

While the sisters bickered, Adrienne turned to Camilla. "What does your husband do in town?"

"He works at the lumber yard. It's a big business in this town."

"Considering the number of trees in Virginia, I'm not surprised."

"Where did you come from?"

"San Francisco, California."

"Oh how lovely. I hear you have the Pacific Ocean out there."

"Yes. It was fun going to the beach."

Bonnie and Trudy turned their attention back to Adrienne. "What does Trevor like?" Bonnie asked.

Adrienne shrugged. "I don't know and I don't care."

"Mr. Gallows said he wrote a book," Camilla told them. "Mr. Gallows even brought several copies here tonight. I think he plans to ask Trevor to read one of his plays while everyone is here."

"That sounds lovely," Trudy gushed.

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"I can't wait to hear it," Bonnie agreed.

"It also seems like he's good with children," Camilla noted.

Despite her better judgment, Adrienne looked across the crowded room at Trevor who was surrounded by ten children. He was giving them piggyback rides.

"He is wonderful," Bonnie swooned. "He writes, he works hard on the farm, he's good looking and he likes children."

Adrienne noticed that other single young women were checking him out too. She grunted. "Most likely, he will expect his wife to have a lot of kids and make her read his stories."

"What's wrong with that?" Trudy wondered. "It's refreshing to find a man who wants a large family. At least you know when you tell him you're pregnant, he'll be happy about it. Some men don't want a lot of children."

"I guess it's fine as long as you don't mind being used."

The three women looked at Adrienne in shock.

"Wow. Whatever happened between you two really left you bitter," Bonnie commented.

"Maybe she was sour to begin with," Trudy told her sister.

The sisters left her and Camilla.

Adrienne rolled her eyes.

Camilla smiled at her. "Don't mind them. They're eager to get married."

"Apparently."

"I suppose I can't blame them. Trevor is new and exciting. It's a nice change from the young men they grew up with."

Adrienne shrugged. She had no intention of marrying, so it wasn't her concern.

Mr. Gallows stood up in the center of the room and asked for everyone to sit down so Trevor read to them.

Adrienne decided to start cleaning up while he read one of his plays. She briefly noted that he really got involved with

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his material. His enthusiasm was infectious for he held his audience captive for the next thirty minutes. She intentionally blocked his words out so that she didn't have to hear him. She was aware that he changed his voice depending on which character was talking and he acted out part of the story. By the time he was done, she had most of the tables cleared off. The audience loudly applauded. She sighed. What was so great about him or his work?

Mrs. Gallows ran over to her. "Oh, you should have waited for me to help you clean up."

"I didn't mind doing most of it alone."

"I suppose since you've already read his book, you didn't have to hear it again."

Adrienne decided not to respond. *Let them think what they want. Soon enough, he'll be gone and it won't matter anyway.* As she and Mrs. Gallows and a few other women cleaned up the rest of the tables, the men put the tables away. Afterwards, five men, two women, and two children played some instruments so that people could dance.

When everything was done, she stood along the side of the room. She watched Trevor with a mixture of awe and disbelief. He was taking turns teaching a group of girls and boys how to dance. Some people stood around clapping along with the fast music as they watched him with the children. She shook her head. Apparently, no one else had any trouble getting along with him.

When the music ended, a man got up on the stage with a fiddle. "Who wants to do a square dance?"

The people cheered.

"Will you be my partner?" Bronson asked her.

"Oh, I don't know. I've never done a square dance before," she replied. She didn't want to dance with anyone but dancing something unfamiliar was worse.

"I'll help you along."

She hesitated. She didn't want to lead him on. She had no desire to be in a romantic relationship with him.

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"We'll dance as friends," he added, as if he understood her uncertainty.

"Alright," she consented, relieved.

Five groups of squares were formed, with four couples to each square. She was glad to see Trevor in a different square. He was with a girl who was as tall as him but she looked like she was fifteen. Adrienne tried not to roll her eyes. Did every man out there want to be with someone who was obnoxiously younger than him?

The man playing the fiddle started the music while another man called out the instructions. Adrienne focused on Bronson's leads and found that switching partners, promenading, and spinning around were fun. She messed up on a few moves but everyone was helpful and easily overlooked her errors. Despite her irritation at having watched Trevor become popular, she did enjoy herself.

"Now all the ladies go to the square on your left," the caller instructed. "It's time to give another man a chance to dance with you."

Her next partner was a black haired twenty-one year old male named Clark Howard. He towered over her 5'2" frame. *He must be 6'2" or taller.* She felt awkward dancing next to him but he was in good spirits and had a friendly smile. After Clark, she danced with Mr. Gallows. Then her partner was sixteen year old Tom Peters. Finally, she found herself being partnered, against her will, with Trevor.

He shrugged. "Might as well make the best of it."

She frowned. He liked everyone but her and it annoyed her. "Great idea," she sarcastically replied. She was determined that she wouldn't like touching him. It was insane that she would enjoy his closeness. She couldn't stand him and he couldn't stand her. She was relieved when the dance ended because it meant she could get away from him.

Finally, the night came to an end and she went back to her room, feeling more alone than she had in her entire life. She wondered if she would ever talk to her mother again. Her

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mother took a big risk in rescuing her from a marriage to Mr. Parker. *Why didn't my father love me enough to let me make my own decision about my future?* Depressed, she cried herself to sleep.

Chapter Six

That night, Trevor fell into bed with a mixture of feelings. He had thoroughly enjoyed himself at the potluck dinner and dance. He was flattered and thrilled that everyone seemed to like his play called *Mistaken Identity* about two reindeer that mistook a regular deer for the missing reindeer that was to go along with Santa Claus on the Christmas run. The only person who wasn't even remotely interested in his work was Adrienne. She made it a point to ignore him as she cleaned up the tables. He continued to read the comedy, but it stung that she dismissed his work so easily. Ever since she made light of his ruined work, it seemed that she was determined to show him how little she thought of him.

He hated to admit that she impressed him with her cooking. She was willing to help out Mrs. Gallows around the inn and do most of the cleaning after the potluck was over too. She wasn't as spoiled as he originally thought. In fact, she seemed to like helping others. She had won the hearts of the people in town despite her quiet and shy nature. And she was beautiful.

What could turn a woman so attractive and talented from men? He noticed all the available men who sought her

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out, but she was either oblivious to them or ignored the intent they came to her with. Though she was polite, she had a wall safely built around her that no man could penetrate. This should have turned him off completely from her, but he was intrigued by it. She was an interesting character that was multidimensional. She was exactly the kind of character who should be in his play. If he could figure her out, then he could make the woman in his romantic comedy come alive.

He recalled her words in the buggy on the night when Mr. Gallows took them from the train station to the town. She said that she was running from her father who wanted to drag her back to California so she would have to marry a man she didn't love.

Trevor sighed and rolled over in his bed. She didn't want to be with a man who wanted to use her. That was understandable. She was eager to escape her past and start a new future where she was in control of her destiny. That was her character. Her strength was her determination to do whatever it took to fit into this new world despite how different it was from her rich background. And though he initially saw someone who was selfish and spoiled, she didn't turn out to be that way after all. Her weakness was that she was scared of marriage. She wanted to control her own destiny, and in so doing, she would rob herself of the joys of having a loving husband and children of her own.

Everyone wants to love and be loved. Perhaps, that was the very essence of romance. It gave him something to consider as he contemplated rewriting the romantic comedy he was working on...for the third time.

His first attempt was a total flop. After talking to his mother, he wrote his second version of the play. Since that version was all torn up, he had begun his third draft. He sighed. He knew he would have to start a fourth draft. Adrienne was the perfect female lead role for his play. He would start her out as a snooty rich young who really wasn't what she first appeared to be. There was some humor to be

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had in the set up. Any audience would sympathize with her predicament.

But how would she fall in love? That was the purpose of a romantic comedy. It wasn't enough to bring humor into the play. He had to introduce the man who would break through her wall and make her fall in love with him. Obviously, someone like him would never win her heart. She had shut him out. Bronson was too eager, so she wouldn't ever consider him. Maybe Clark would work. He was sincere and likeable. He wouldn't come on too strong and he was patient.

Maybe Trevor could arrange it so that the two would be forced to meet. She did dance with him at the square dance. She even seemed to have a good time. *She had a good time with everyone but me.* He told himself the only reason the realization hurt him was because he never had any problems getting along with people before. It was better than the truth.

So how am I going to get Adrienne and Clark together? he wondered, forcing his thoughts back to his play. He didn't have long to make his plan work. He would be gone in a month. He wondered if he could talk her into going out to the Howard farm. It would be nice if she could get Bonnie and Trudy off his back for a day. They were unbearable with their constant attention and hinting with him that he should marry one of them and take her with him to New York. He gagged. *Like that will ever happen.*

He went to sleep before he came up with an idea to get Adrienne to go to the Howard farm with him. When he woke up, an idea occurred to him. Bonnie and Trudy wanted to impress him. If he took Adrienne out there to teach them how to cook, perhaps she would spend some time with Clark during lunch. Trevor wasn't sure how he was going to talk her into it, so he decided he would go with the conversation at the breakfast table and work his way into the topic.

He dressed in typical farm clothes: a plaid dark blue and green shirt, brown slacks, and brown boots. He would wear his

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hat once he was outside. Entering the dining room, he greeted Mr. Gallows.

"The women will be bringing breakfast out in a minute," the old man informed him. "Adrienne wanted to learn how to make waffles. She's quite amazing. It's like she can't learn how to cook recipes fast enough. I don't know how she keeps all the foods straight in her mind. She must have an excellent memory."

"She is an outstanding cook," he admitted. He didn't particularly enjoy complimenting someone who intentionally put down his work but he had to give credit where credit was due.

"Mrs. Gallows and I just learned that our oldest daughter is expecting her first child in a couple of weeks."

"Congratulations. I bet you're excited."

"We can't wait. This will be our first grandchild."

Mrs. Gallows and Adrienne came out of the kitchen carrying a plate full of fresh waffles and sausage. He noted that Adrienne looked especially nice in the purple dress with small white polka dots on it and her hair pulled back into a ponytail. *Clark will be pleased.*

"Adrienne, we're going to miss your fine cooking when you leave," Mr. Gallows told her.

Adrienne blushed. "Thank you," she smiled as she sat down. "You and your wife have been most kind to me."

He marveled that she could be pleasant to other people. *As long as they're not me, she's nice.*

"Will you be working at the restaurant today?" Mrs. Gallows asked her.

"No," she replied. "Mr. Owen only wants me there during the weekdays when the customers come into town to work."

Perfect. Trevor sat up straight and cleared his throat. "Do you remember Bonnie and Trudy Howard?"

Adrienne's eyes grew wide in surprise. Apparently, she hadn't expected him to speak to her.

"I introduced her to them," Mrs. Gallows inserted.

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"Well, they want to learn how to cook, and I can't think of a better person to teach them than Adrienne. What do you think, Adrienne? Are you up for the challenge?"

She looked uneasy. "I don't know. They don't seem like the kind of women I naturally get along with."

"But you're a great cook. They need a lot of help."

"What a wonderful compliment," Mrs. Gallows said. "I do believe you two may work through your lover's quarrel after all."

He sighed. No matter how many times he tried to make it clear to the Gallows that he and Adrienne were never romantically involved, they refused to listen. "What do you say? Will you join me for a day at the Howard farm so you can help those poor women out?"

"Why are you so interested in me all of the sudden?"

He couldn't tell her that he was interested in her because he was basing one of his characters on her, so he had to come up with another reason. "Bonnie and Trudy can't cook well. I have to eat what they make when I go out there six days a week. I'm not interested in you. I'm interested in my taste buds."

"Oh go ahead," Mrs. Gallows urged. "I've tasted their cooking and he's right. It's decent enough but not as good as your cooking."

Again, she seemed pleased by the compliment. "I suppose I could. Are they expecting me?"

"No, but that won't be a problem. I'll explain things to them when we get out there." He knew they were eager to make a good impression for him so they would do whatever he asked them to do. He should have been pleased by such knowledge but he only found it annoying. They only wanted a husband. They weren't necessarily interested in him.

"You sure do a lot of good around here," Mrs. Gallows told her.

He noticed her smile widen. *Every woman likes to be complimented, but it has to be a sincere compliment. Ma was*

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right. Women want to be appreciated. That made perfect sense. Didn't everyone like to be appreciated? It would be nice if she showed some interest in his writing. Women apparently weren't the only ones who wanted to be appreciated.

Chapter Seven

After breakfast, Mr. Gallows led Trevor and Adrienne to the stable to get their horses.

“Oh, a horse.” She halted in her tracks.

They turned to look at her.

“I never rode a horse before,” she softly explained. “I thought we would walk.”

“It’s too far of a trip to walk,” Mr. Gallows said.

“Can we take a buggy?”

“I’m sorry but the path is too rough. You have to cut through a lot of trees and a hill. The Howard farm is far out of town.”

“It’s no problem. She can ride with me,” he said. He wasn’t going to let something as unpleasant as riding with her deter him from his work. Sometimes a writer had to suffer for his art.

She cringed. “I don’t know. Maybe Bonnie and Trudy can come to the inn.”

He forced himself not to roll his eyes. Was the thought of touching him disturbing to her? It wasn’t enough that she ridiculed his writing but she was also critical of him as a man?

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"They don't get a chance to come into town much," Mr. Gallows told her. "That's why they haven't found a husband yet. Men don't go out there."

No wonder they're on me like bees on flowers. Trevor felt a little better knowing this. He really wanted to get them away from him for the day and he wanted to watch her with Clark, so he decided to compliment her, though it pained him to do so after she showed such blatant repulsion of him. "You are the best cook I've ever met. I have to endure those women's cooking for the next month. A month can be a long time to a man's stomach."

She eyed him warily.

He sighed. "I'm being honest, alright? I wouldn't tell you I liked something about you if I didn't mean it."

Her expression softened. "I'm sorry. I guess I didn't expect it coming from you."

He felt better. It was the first civil word she spoke to him. He nodded and put the saddle on the horse. "Willow is a good mare," he told her. "She's gentle and calm. You don't have to worry about her bucking you off."

"What do you mean by 'bucking'?" she asked.

"She won't throw you off."

She hesitated as she stared at the horse. "I didn't know horses did such things."

Despite himself, he grinned at her apprehension. "Don't worry. She's a good animal."

"I see you two are beginning to get over whatever argument you had." Mr. Gallows smiled. "It's nice to see you two getting along again. Perhaps that wedding will happen after all." He left before they could say anything.

"Are you telling people that we are courting?" she asked him.

He couldn't tell if she was curious or mad. "Of course not. They assume we're together because you dragged me off the train."

"That was an accident."

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"I know. If you were going to intentionally drag someone with you, you would have picked someone you liked." He finished getting the horse ready and hopped up on the animal. "Take my hand, put your foot in the stirrup and hop on. You can sit sideways in front of me. I'll hold you."

She took a deep breath and did as instructed.

He was surprised that she got up on her first try. He tried to ignore how good she felt in his arms. *I'm doing this for the play. I have no interest in her at all.* He cleared his throat as he urged the horse forward.

She gasped and wrapped her arms around his waist.

He hid his irritation at the thought that it felt even better with her pressing as close against him as she was. He was aware of how nice her body felt against him. *Maybe this is a bad idea.*

Before he could talk her into staying behind, she spoke. "I didn't expect the ride to be so bumpy. Am I hurting you?"

He smiled at her concern. "No. You're fine."

"I am sorry about knocking you off the train, and I'm sorry about destroying your play."

His jaw dropped. He hadn't expected this.

"I was trying to get off the train by myself."

He suddenly realized that she needed someone to talk to about what happened. Feeling much better now that she had apologized, he was willing to listen to her. "What happened to make you want to run off the train in the middle of nowhere?"

Willow trotted out of the town and onto the path in the forest that would take them to the Howard farm.

"Well, almost two weeks ago my father arranged for me to marry a forty-eight year old bachelor who wanted someone to bear his children. I begged my father to let me work, even if it meant I would be a spinster. I didn't want to marry Mr. Parker, but my father wouldn't change his mind so my mother arranged for me to leave for New York on the train. I was supposed to meet my aunt who would introduce me to Mrs.

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Rochester who needs a nanny. After the thieves took our money, I saw my father on the train coming for me, so I ran from him. I didn't see you in front of the train door. I bumped into you by accident and tripped on the step. I reached out for something to steady my balance, and it turned out that I grabbed you. So when I fell off the train, you went with me."

"I hope you don't mind my saying that the way we ended up falling out of the train was funny, if you think about it."

She softly giggled. "I'm sure the image of your papers flying everywhere was just as humorous."

"Most likely, it was." He did see how it might appeal to an audience. Turning serious, he said, "For what it's worth, I don't think what your father did was right. No woman should have to marry someone she doesn't want to be with. I know I wouldn't want to be stuck with a woman who only wanted me so she could have kids. What kind of life would that be?"

He felt her relax against him. "I hadn't considered that neither men nor women want to be used."

"Perhaps men and women aren't so different after all. Sure, we have some things that are different but if you think about it, all people want to love and be loved for who they are."

"You're right."

She tightened her grip and gasped as Willow leapt over the stream in the path.

"Don't worry. You're safe with me."

"This is a whole new world to me. I must admit that I like it here. For the first time in my life, people are being kind to me because they want to be kind. In San Francisco, people were nice to me to get something from me since I was wealthy. I notice that a lot of men are after a wife for various reasons. Some want to leave behind children to carry on their name, some want someone to cook and clean for them and some want money."

"You forgot the other kind."

"What's that?"

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"There are men who want a companion who will walk with them through life, to share the good and bad times. Remember what God said about Adam in the Garden of Eden: He said it wasn't good for man to be alone so He made Eve to be his friend and lover." He would have to incorporate that into his romantic comedy. Turning his attention back to her, he asked, "Is that why you're opposed to marriage, because you think every man around you wants something from you?"

"I would rather be alone than be in a loveless marriage."

"I can see your point." He paused to express what was deep in his heart but decided to, even if she laughed at him. "I hope I get married. I don't want to live my life alone. I'm glad God made woman. I've seen two of my siblings get happily married and want the same for myself. It gets lonely in the room at the inn. I grew up surrounded by siblings. There was always something fun to do with someone. I want a companion I can share everything in my life with."

"You shouldn't have any trouble with that. You have plenty of admirers in this town already. I'm sure you'll win a lot of women over in New York too."

"She can't be just anyone. I have to be selective, just like you have to be selective, if you ever decide to give marriage a try."

"Oh, I'm not interested in marriage. I'm happy to be where I'm at."

"I didn't think a woman wouldn't want marriage to the right kind of man. Don't you want to marry a good man and have children?"

"I could live without those things just fine as long as I'm the one making those decisions for myself."

"I don't think I could be happy unless I did marry and have children."

"So you're one of those men who want children to leave behind a legacy."

He frowned. He thought they were having a good conversation but he didn't like the direction her thoughts were

going. "Children aren't just a legacy. They are a blessing from the Lord. I love my nephew and niece. I hope to have more of them. But sometimes I get jealous when I hear them call out 'Pa' to my brother or brother-in-law. I want a whole bunch of kids to run up to me and call me 'Pa'."

"Just how many is a 'bunch'?"

Was she offended? He stiffened. "I always thought a large household is a happy household. The more kids, the better. If my wife and I can't have kids, then that's God's will, but I do hope that God intends for me and her to have about eight or so kids."

"Eight?"

"Well sure. Then we can play lots of games together. I would like them to be closer in age than my siblings were so they can actually grow up together."

"Is your wife going to be a baby producer?"

"Of course not," he snapped. "I don't know where you're getting your ideas from. Didn't you hear me tell you I want a companion?"

"Whose sole purpose is to pop out your babies."

He shook his head, greatly annoyed. "You're amazing, you know that. Most women would be thrilled to have a man who wants a woman to be his friend and lover, whom he will be very happy every time she announces she's pregnant again. There are men out there that consider children to be a burden. Would you rather have one of those?"

"I wouldn't want either. I don't intend to marry. But Trudy and Bonnie told me that they will be very happy to give you lots of children."

He gagged. They were nice enough but he had no such attraction for them. "They're just eager to get married to anyone."

"It sounds like you are too."

"Give me a break. Didn't you hear me say that I plan to be selective?"

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"Are we at the farm yet?" She struggled to move away from him, but considering the saddle and horse's pace, she couldn't.

"Almost. We'll have to bear with one another for the time being," he grumbled. He was usually a good-natured person, but with her around, he wasn't pleasant at all.

They rode the rest of the way in silence. By the time they got off the horse, he breathed a sigh of relief. How could she be so insensitive? He poured his heart out to her and she rejected him. It was worse than when she rejected his writing because now she was rejecting him. He couldn't stand her. He hoped she would end up with some miserable old coot who would use her.

He reluctantly helped Adrienne down from the mare, refusing to make eye contact with her. He groaned when Bonnie and Trudy ran out of the house to greet him.

"Oh, good morning, Adrienne," Trudy slowly said. "I thought you said that you and Trevor weren't together."

"We're not," he quickly replied. "Where's Clark?"

Adrienne shot him a startled look.

"I work with him in the barn," he snapped at her.

"You'd better mean that," she hissed back. "I don't need anyone fixing me up with anyone."

"You and Clark?" Bonnie asked, laughing.

"What's so funny?" she demanded.

"It's hard to imagine you with any man. You clearly don't like them."

"If you went through what I did, you would understand. But no one knows what it's like to be wanted for what I can provide instead of who I am."

"You're not exactly a peach to be with, sweetheart," he retorted.

"I hate you," she spat. "You constantly criticize me and make me out to be a horrible person."

He shrugged.

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"I am here to teach you two how to cook," she told Trudy and Bonnie. "He said that your meals are mediocre."

They looked shocked.

"That was just a ploy to get you out here," he quickly covered his tracks. "I want them to teach you how to be a nice woman for a change."

They snickered at her.

"You are a sorry excuse for a man," she huffed before she stormed into the house.

"No wonder you ended your engagement with her," Bonnie replied. "She is absolutely dreadful."

"And did you see the way she walks? She's completely unfeminine," Trudy added. "We'll see what we can do, Trevor."

They followed her into the house. He could hear her banging pots and pans on the counter in the kitchen as he walked past the open window so he could take Willow to the barn.

No, she's not completely unfeminine. He had watched her enter the house and hated the fact that he was intrigued by such a simple action. The Howard sisters were nowhere as attractive as she was, and that greatly irritated him.

Chapter Eight

Adrienne spent the morning trying to teach Bonnie and Trudy how to make fried chicken. Their mother was actually interested and paid close attention but her daughters only half-listened. They actually took Trevor seriously and figured they needed to make her appear more feminine. As if she hadn't spent a good portion of her schooling learning how to act all dainty and gentle.

Finally, she had enough of their continual snickering when their mother wasn't in hearing range. She decided it was time to show them exactly who they were messing with, so she set up the fine china for the meal. She was shocked that they even owned such a nice dish set but Mrs. Howard told her it was a wedding gift and hadn't been used yet. This made sense since the girls were obviously brutish. Then she put on her "I'm at an important dinner and must be a lady" act. She set the utensils out in proper order, prepared a salad, a soup, the main course and dessert. She took out a beautiful tablecloth that had been stored in the closet for years and set it out. Next, she put out four candles and lit them.

She pulled the drapes closed so the lighting was dim but relaxing. She even took the time to lightly spray some

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perfume throughout the kitchen to set the mood for a romantic lunch.

"We may call in the gentlemen for their meal," she instructed.

Bonnie and Trudy were too shocked by her sudden actions to protest. Mrs. Howard looked delighted to see the kitchen looking so wonderful. "I'm finally going to use my china set!" she exclaimed as she went to call the men in.

Adrienne was satisfied. *Just wait, Trevor. You don't know who you're messing with.* She forced herself not to laugh when she saw the stunned expressions on the men's faces. Trevor's eyes widened, as if not believing what he was seeing.

"Gentlemen, thank you for attending this lunch," she demurely smiled. "Please have a seat. We will start with the salad."

"Why is it so dark?" seven year old Alex asked.

She lowered her eyelashes and kept her voice soft. "Trevor wanted Bonnie and Trudy to teach me how to be a proper young lady, so this lunch is the result of my morning studies."

"I know my girls didn't do this but it's nice for you to give them credit," Mr. Howard replied.

"You did a fantastic job," Clark stated, obviously impressed. "I hardly recognize this place."

"Thank you, Clark," Adrienne replied. "Will you gentlemen please have a seat? As you can see, we have everything set out and ready to eat."

She noticed that no one sat down, so she took the first seat. Clark quickly sat next to her. Trevor glared at her and sat across from her. Bonnie and Trudy sat on either side of him. As soon as he noticed it, he rolled his eyes. She hid her laughter. *Serves you right, you buffoon.* Alex sat on her other side and thirteen year old Max sat on Clark's left. Mr. and Mrs. Howard sat at the opposite ends of the long table.

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"Who will lead us in saying grace?" she asked and looked around. "It would be appropriate to have a handsome, strong man lead the prayer."

"I'll be happy to volunteer," Clark eagerly stated.

She smiled at him. "That would be lovely. Thank you." She was pleased to note Trevor's huff.

Clark prayed over the meal. "Thank you, Lord, for this fine food that Adrienne and my sisters and mother worked so hard to prepare. We are very glad Adrienne could come out today and hope she will bless us with her presence again."

"That was a lovely prayer," she replied. Turning to the others, she instructed, "We start with the salad, so we need to take this fork." She lifted the fork sitting furthest away from the plate. "It is proper at lunch parties to start with the utensil furthest out and work your way in."

Trevor shifted in his chair. "Really? In my house, we eat whatever we feel like, with whatever we feel like, in whatever order we feel like. I'm a man who's been working outdoors, and I'm hungry. I'm starting with the chicken."

She lightly gasped and quickly reached for a neatly folded napkin so she could wipe the fake tears from her eyes. "I am sorry to have displeased you so."

Clark frowned. "Trevor Lewis, I insist that you remember whose house you're in. We will eat this meal the way Adrienne prepared it."

She smiled at Clark. "You are very kind."

He blushed and shrugged. "You worked hard to fix this meal."

"We should go along with her order," Mr. Howard agreed. "She put a lot of time and effort into this meal."

"I must say, this is a wonderful change of pace," Mrs. Howard added. "I feel beautiful in the candlelight."

"You are beautiful, my dear," her husband smiled at her.

She giggled. "You haven't called me 'dear' in years."

He shrugged. "Something about this room suddenly makes me feel romantic."

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Trevor picked up his fork and ate the salad.

"We helped," Bonnie said. "We wanted to make the lunch nice for everyone too." She looked over at Trevor as she spoke.

Adrienne chuckled to herself as she realized that Trevor didn't like the attention Bonnie and Trudy were giving him. They disgusted him just as Mr. Parker disgusted her. At least no one was forcing him to marry either one of them.

She turned her attention back to the meal. "After we finish the salad, we eat the soup. We use this spoon for that."

Trevor rolled his eyes as he followed along with everyone else.

By the time they were eating the fried chicken and mashed potatoes, everyone was complimenting her on her cooking and the romantic atmosphere.

Trevor spoke up. "While we are discussing romantic atmospheres, I would like to know what everyone here thinks romance is. I am writing a romantic comedy and I need help knowing what is romantic, especially since I didn't get any experience in that area." He pointedly looked at Adrienne.

"I can help you with that," Trudy immediately offered.

"I could too," Bonnie gushed.

"I hardly believe Adrienne has a problem with romance," Clark said. He turned to her and smiled. "She did arrange this beautiful meal."

Realizing that smiling at Clark bothered Trevor, she returned Clark's smile. "It is nice to finally be appreciated."

"Bonnie and Trudy, I look forward to your opinions," Trevor told the sisters. "What do you consider romantic?"

"I like dancing," Bonnie said. "Last night was lovely."

"Dancing is a lot of fun," he agreed.

"I like flowers," Trudy added.

"Flowers are typical of romance," Mr. Howard nodded. "I think all women like flowers."

"I enjoy them," his wife supported. "Candy is a nice addition to flowers."

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"What about music?" Clark asked. "I play the fiddle and it doesn't always have to be used for square dancing. It can play something like Mozart or Bach."

"You play classical music?" Adrienne wondered, impressed a farmer would engage in such pursuits.

"I practice once in awhile."

"I would love to hear you play something. I miss listening to Bach."

"So you find music romantic?" Trevor interrupted before Clark could respond.

"I like to listen to it. True romance is being appreciated for who one is. None of the other things, like flowers or dancing, matter if love doesn't factor into the equation."

"I seriously doubt you have the capacity for love since you can't even appreciate it when someone is being honest with you."

"When honesty is coated in manipulation, then it's hardly worth noting."

"Manipulation?"

"All you want is someone to give you children."

"What's wrong with that? Children are delightful," Bonnie interrupted.

"We would like grandchildren," Mrs. Howard said. "Is that wrong?"

"There's nothing wrong with having children," Adrienne clarified. "But it should not be the only reason someone gets married."

"Who said that was my intention?" Trevor snapped. "Just because you had that experience with one man, it doesn't mean that all men are like that. Let's take Clark here. He's a hard working, honest man. Clark, do you want to marry a woman for the sole purpose of having babies?"

Clark looked startled. "No. Children are a natural result of marital relations, but there's more to marriage than sex. There is companionship. It certainly is nice for a man to come home after a long day in the field to a warm smile and a big hug

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from a caring woman who he can talk to and share his life with."

"That's beautiful," Adrienne whispered.

Trevor grunted. "I told her the same thing earlier today but she accused me of manipulation."

"You did not say it the way he did," she told Trevor.

He rolled his eyes. "You're impossible." Turning to everyone else, he asked, "So does anyone else have thoughts on what's romantic?"

"I think kissing and hugging are romantic," thirteen year old Max said.

"What about just smiling at the girl?" Alex added.

"Those are great points," Trevor told the kids. "I always appreciate the views of younger peoples. I think adults tend to overlook their importance. It's amazing how little some women value them."

"I value children," Adrienne said.

"So do I," Bonnie and Trudy added in perfect unison.

"I would like to have a wife that cooks as well as you do, Miss Adrienne," Max interrupted. "This is the best fried chicken I ever had. I wish I had tried it last night but I got sidetracked with Melissa Peters' turkey."

"Melissa Peters is Tom's sister," Trevor recalled. "She's about your age, isn't she Clark?"

"I believe so," Clark responded.

"She would be your age too. You and Clark are only one year apart in age," Adrienne stated.

"And here I didn't think you cared to notice any detail about my life," Trevor remarked.

"If I recall, the Peters are some pretty good folk," Mr. Howard thoughtfully stated. "They have a twenty-five year old son who is looking for a wife. He just came back from college. I believe he got a degree in agriculture. Do you girls remember Hank?"

"Hank Peters was at the dance last night," Mrs. Howard nodded. "He was the tall blond with a goatee."

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Adrienne nodded. "He's a lousy dancer but a good poet. He has a romantic side to him. He might be your type, Bonnie. You mentioned how you enjoy poetry. I heard one of his poems and have to admit that I was impressed."

"You take time for literature after all then?" Trevor threw his napkin on the table and stood up. "I can't stomach this fancy meal anymore. I'll be out in the fields working." He stomped out of the room and slammed the door.

"What's his problem?" Clark wondered.

Adrienne shook her head. "Who knows? He's so unpredictable. One minute he's nice and the next thing I know, he flies off the handle."

"Is that why you two aren't engaged anymore?"

"We were never engaged. I don't know why everyone thinks we were."

"Then you must have almost been engaged," Mrs. Howard remarked. "He was probably ready to propose when you had your falling out."

"I seriously doubt that."

She shrugged. "You got him all riled up. A man doesn't act the way he does unless he finds something interesting in a woman."

"Well, I don't find anything interesting in him. I only came out here today to help with lunch. I didn't have to work at the restaurant and it was nice to have a diversion from sitting around by myself at the inn."

"We're glad you came," Clark said.

"Thank you. It's nice someone appreciates me." She turned her attention back to the meal. "Who wants dessert? I made Mrs. Harper's famous brownies. She gave the recipe to Mrs. Gallows and we tried them out with great success."

"You remember all those recipes in your head?" Mrs. Howard asked.

"Yes. I just need to see it one time on paper and it's stored up here." She pointed to her right temple.

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"How fortunate for you." Trudy sighed. "I struggle with recalling how many ounces are in a cup and I've been helping make meals for a couple years now."

"Oh Trudy, you did just fine. You don't have to have anything memorized if you know where to find the information you need. Besides, I heard you singing under your breath and you have the voice of a songbird. You should sing at one of the dances."

Trudy's eyes lit up. "You really think I have a good voice?"

"I've been telling you we should do a duet sometime," Clark confirmed. "If I play the fiddle and you sing the words, we'd make a good pair."

"That's a wonderful idea!" Adrienne clapped her hands, forgetting her demure act. "Bonnie, you mentioned that you play the flute. Do you all ever do a song as a trio?"

Bonnie blushed. "No, we haven't. But it would be fun to try sometime, wouldn't it?"

Mrs. Howard grinned. "Adrienne, you have such a lovely thought. We should entertain a few people here. We'll do it next Saturday."

"I'd love to do some more cooking," Adrienne offered.

"Don't you ever take a break from your hard work?" Clark asked.

"Actually, I don't consider cooking to be work. I have a lot of fun with it."

"You are an exceptional woman. I wonder why Trevor let you go."

She chose not to respond. Instead, she finished up her dessert and helped the other women clean up after the men went back to the fields. Now that the awkwardness between her, Bonnie and Trudy had been eliminated during the lunch, she found that she was having a good time with them. She spent the rest of the day listening to Bonnie play the flute and Trudy singing her favorite songs.

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"Clark was right," Trudy told her. "You are exceptional. It would be nice if you became our sister-in-law. Don't say anything but I think Clark is sweet on you."

"He did look smitten during lunch," Bonnie agreed. "You really aren't as stuck up as Trevor said you were."

She stopped herself from rolling her eyes. Trevor would be saying all kinds of mean things about her to anyone who'd listen. "I would rather not talk about him, if that is alright with you."

"Oh, we understand. Do you mind if he courts one of us?"

"Why should I mind? He doesn't belong to me."

They breathed a sigh of relief. "We didn't want our newfound friendship to be ruined because of him," Trudy said. "We like you now that we got a chance to know you. We also like him. We've already decided that whoever he picks, the other will gracefully back out."

"Good luck to you both then. I don't think he's worth the time or effort, but that's just my opinion."

"I think he's good looking and fun to be around. He loves being surrounded by people. I like the way he took turns teaching all the kids how to dance. It's refreshing to see a man have such a tender heart for children," Trudy recalled.

"I love his writings," Bonnie said. "I have his book and read it last night. He has a great sense of humor, but he is right about not knowing how to be romantic. He had a great chance to make a romantic part in his Christmas play but he missed it. The male and female deer should have fallen in love."

Adrienne didn't understand their fascination with Trevor. Not that it mattered. In a month, she wouldn't have to see him ever again. And as far as she was concerned, that couldn't happen soon enough.

Chapter Nine

When it was time for her to go back to the inn, Adrienne found Trevor leaving without her.

"What are you doing?" she yelled at him as Willow was walking toward the path in the forest. She ran up to the horse and stopped in front of it.

He pulled back the reins, glaring at her. "Get out of my way."

"No. You promised me that you would take me back after I taught Bonnie and Trudy how to cook. I fulfilled my part of the deal."

"You spent the whole lunch hour mocking me."

"And you were a perfect gentleman," she sarcastically retorted.

He shook his head and pulled the reins to the left so that Willow walked around her.

"Oh no, you don't, Trevor Elewis! I need a ride home!" She grabbed the horse's bridle. When the horse neighed at her, she quickly released it.

"What did you call me?" His tone was sharp.

"I just said your name."

"Did you call me Elewis?"

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"That's your last name."

"No, it's not. It's Lewis. L-E-W-I-S. Do you know Clark's last name?"

"Sure. It's Howard."

His face was red. "I am constantly amazed at your ability to nicely recall things about anyone who is not me. I can't believe you. I stood up for you in front of a robber but you show absolutely no gratitude."

"Gratitude? You go around telling other people how stuck up I am and you act like I'm beneath you just because I've enjoyed a life of comfort while growing up."

"I'm out of here," he coldly stated.

She stomped the ground with her foot. "You can't just leave me here!"

"Can't I?"

She picked up a rock and threw it at him. Her aim was off so she hit the horse on the rear end. The horse bucked back but Trevor regained control of the animal. She snatched up another rock.

"Adrienne?" Clark called out. He rode his horse over to her. "Is he giving you trouble?"

"Yes," she replied. "He promised to take me back to the inn but he won't do it."

"Trevor, I really don't appreciate the way you've been treating her today. I'm sure that whatever happened between you two is still bothering you, but why did you bring her out here if you had no intention of taking her back?"

"She's constantly putting me down."

Clark sighed. "I don't wish to get caught in the middle of this fight. I'll tell you what, Adrienne. I'll take you home."

"Thank you, Clark," she gratefully replied. She accepted his hand and got up into the saddle and sat sideways in front of him.

He put an arm around her waist to hold her steady on the stallion.

"Fine. I'll take her back," Trevor griped.

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"I got it," Clark replied. "I'm letting you off the hook."

"I haven't ridden a horse before today," she told Clark. "So forgive me if I hold on to you a little tight." She wound her arms around his waist to brace herself for the bumpy ride home.

"Oh, I don't mind that at all, Adrienne. You hold on as tightly as you need to."

"Wonderful," Trevor loudly said. "I wanted to be rid of a woman who's opposed to marriage anyway. Good luck, Clark. She's made it perfectly clear that she thinks all men are evil." He urged Willow forward and let the horse gallop into the forest.

"Is that true? Do you think that?" Clark asked her.

"Of course not," she said. "I don't think all men are evil. Some are just better than others."

Clark relaxed. "Try not to let him get to you. I'll do what I can to protect you."

She suddenly realized that Clark might be getting the wrong idea about her. She wasn't interested in marrying him. She wanted to enjoy her life of spinsterhood. She held onto him as he urged his horse forward. Clark was a nice man, but she had no attraction for him. He was too tall, and he wasn't her type. *No man is my type. I'm not interested in romance. All it leads to is a life of being used and unappreciated.*

On the way back, Clark talked about farming and his fiddle. She tried to pay attention but her thoughts drifted back to Trevor's book. Was his writing as good as everyone claimed? *Perhaps I was hasty in judging it. I shouldn't let my opinion of the author get in the way of his work.* Mr. Gallows kept a few copies of the book at the inn. She decided she would borrow it and read it. She was interested to see what Bonnie meant when she said he missed the possible romance between the two reindeer in one of his plays. It would soothe her ego to find out he wasn't as good as others said he was. Then she could be justified for not reading or listening to his work in the future.

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Why do I even care? It was ridiculous that thoughts of him consumed her. He was as egotistical as any other man she had met. All men were after something. Weren't they? But Clark actually seemed sincere. Maybe she was being too hard on men. Surely, they couldn't all be bad.

By the time she and Clark arrived at the inn, Trevor was talking to Melissa Peters by the entrance. She narrowed her eyes. *What is he up to?* If he thought she was going to get jealous of him and Melissa, he had another thing coming.

Clark led the horse over to the front door and helped her get off the stallion after he hopped to the ground.

"Thank you for the ride back, Clark," she said. Turning to Melissa, she continued, "Clark was kind enough to take me home after Trevor stranded me at the Howard farm."

"You did what?" Melissa gasped.

Trevor's cheeks turned red. "It wasn't like that at all. Clark insisted on bringing her back."

"Don't mind them, Miss Peters," Clark politely greeted her. "He used to court her, things didn't work out, and now they bicker all the time."

"So you really did plan to leave her behind?"

"Oh, I was not. I just wanted to mess with her a bit. After she insulted my writing, I thought I would teach her a lesson. It was no big deal. Shoot, she even threw a rock at me."

"You did that?" Clark asked her.

"To stop the horse," Adrienne defended herself. "He made it clear that he was leaving me behind. I seriously doubt he would have brought me home."

"Everything I do is wrong," Trevor complained. "There's no pleasing her."

"I hope you will not let his rude behavior scare you away from other men," Clark told her. "I assure you that there are some men around who will treat you right."

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She realized what he was telling her, and it was bothering Trevor to no end. She smiled. "Thank you, Clark. I will consider it."

"I should go home," Melissa stiffly told Trevor. "Good day." She nodded to Adrienne and Clark as she walked away.

Trevor crossed his arms and watched them.

"Don't you have somewhere to go?" she asked him.

"No."

She rolled her eyes. "I better help Mrs. Gallows with supper," she told Clark.

"I look forward to seeing you again next week. I'd be willing to come by and pick you up."

"Oh, that's alright," Trevor interrupted. "I can take her out with me. I promise."

Why was Trevor insistent on taking her everywhere all of the sudden? She had heard that women were moody but she wasn't as unpredictable as he was. *Maybe that's the way writers are.*

"If you need anything, I'll do what I can to help," Clark told her. "I have to head back so I can help with the evening chores. Good evening, Adrienne. Trevor." He got back on his horse and rode out of town.

"You just ruined a perfectly good match," Trevor told her.

"I don't think so. I kind of like him. He's sincere."

"You have got to be kidding me! I said the same things he did."

"Maybe, but you don't like me."

"That is not true. I was trying to be nice to you on the way to the farm."

"Oh right. You said it was wrong for me to want to be single for the rest of my life."

"I didn't say that."

"Really? I recall you saying that there was something wrong with me since I didn't want to marry a man who wanted a dozen kids."

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"I never said that. You're putting words in my mouth."

"Who cares anyway? All of this arguing is pointless. I have no intention of marrying you and you have no intention of marrying me so it really doesn't matter what the other person thinks." She walked into the inn. She was irritated that he followed her.

"So now you are considering marriage?"

She shrugged. "I don't know," she lied. "Clark is actually a nice man."

He jumped in front of her, startling her so she stopped. "I don't understand you at all. I can usually figure people out but you are impossible."

"It doesn't matter what we think of each other." She tried to walk around him but he blocked her. "What do you want?"

"You are nice to everyone but me. Why is that? Am I really that bad?"

"What do you care?"

Mrs. Gallows rounded the corner, wringing her hands. A worried expression clouded her usual sunny disposition. "I thought I heard someone talking."

Adrienne immediately cooled down.

Trevor frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"Last night we had that terrible thunderstorm, and there was a leak in the roof of the Harper cabin, so they have to repair it. I'm getting things ready for her family to stay here until their roof is fixed."

Adrienne sighed. "That's terrible. I'll help you prepare the rooms."

"I should run over there and see if they need someone to help them with the roof," Trevor said, his anger gone. "I helped someone fix the roof on my family's barn a couple of years ago."

He raced out of the inn.

Adrienne turned to help Mrs. Gallows get ready for the Harpers, glad Trevor was gone.

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She didn't want to think about Trevor Lewis anymore but as she passed by the table in the lobby after supper, she saw two copies of his book. She reluctantly picked one up and went to her room before anyone saw her with it. She sat on her bed and flipped open the cover. There were three plays and five short stories. Did she really want to read what he wrote when he obviously detested her? She took a deep breath and proceeded to read it.

To her surprise, the book was a quick read. She hadn't expected to finish it in one night. She grudgingly admitted that he had talent. He mostly wrote about things he knew but he could do fiction too. He was excellent with drama, action and comedy. *But Bonnie is right. He doesn't know anything about romance.* How did he expect to write a romantic comedy if he couldn't grasp the essence of romance? *I bet he never fell in love before.* He had great potential for love but had been so wrapped up in his own world of writing that he never actually pursued a courtship. She wondered about his current play. She wondered if he would let her read what he rewrote up to that point. *Probably not. He can't stand me.* He didn't even like Bonnie or Trudy.

Did he ever take the time to seriously consider marriage? He talked about it as if it was something he anticipated but she didn't see him doing anything to make it happen. *Does he think his future wife is going to land in his lap?* Then it occurred to her that he might have taken an interest in Melissa Peters. After all, he had been talking to her when she and Clark showed up at the inn. Perhaps, Melissa had caught his attention.

So I destroyed his play when we fell off the train. Now I'll make up for it by helping him discover what romance is. It wasn't good enough for him to ask questions about it. He had to experience it. And who better to teach him than Melissa Peters? She felt much better as she began forming a plan in

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her mind. It wasn't her style to play matchmaker, but she would do what she could to get him and Melissa together.

Chapter Ten

Exhausted, Trevor fell into bed that night. Working on the roof was hard work, especially after a full day at the farm, but it took his mind off of Adrienne, so he didn't mind it. Once he took a bath, he went to bed and closed his eyes. Why did he care what Adrienne thought of him? She made it perfectly clear that he wasn't worth her time or effort. *I'm only interested in her for the sake of the play I'm writing. She's a character and that's it.* His plan had worked, hadn't it? He wanted to see what would make someone like Adrienne consider love, and he was trying to fix her up with Clark. It seemed that Clark had warmed her icy exterior by simply paying her compliments and being sincere.

He rolled over in aggravation. He never met anyone who didn't immediately like him. He got along great with everyone, so the fact that she couldn't stand him had no bearing on him as a person. *Something is seriously wrong with her.* How did Clark change her mind so quickly about marriage? *What is his secret? Why do I care?*

He finally fell asleep and woke up in a better mood. He loved the feel of the cool spring morning air as it blew into his small room. He put on Tom Peters' old dark blue suit, which

was practically brand new since Tom grew so fast he had only worn it for a month.

He looked at his reflection. *What is so repulsive about me? Sure, I'm not tall with dark hair and bulging muscles like Clark, but I'm handsome too. It's just a different kind of handsome.* He sighed and went to eat breakfast.

Adrienne was dressed in a well worn but pretty light pink dress with white lace trim. She had her hair pulled back in another pink bow. He pushed aside his pleasure at the sight of her and got ready to sit down in his usual spot.

"Trevor, can I talk to you about your book?" she asked.

He couldn't believe she was being civil to him, and of all things, she wanted to discuss his book. He hesitated. Did he really want her to tell him how poorly she thought of his work?

"Breakfast won't be ready for another half hour," Mr. Gallows said.

Trevor shrugged. "Alright." She probably wouldn't be harsh with him if Mr. Gallows was listening.

"Actually, I was wondering if we could talk in the parlor?"

He frowned. Was her review going to be that bad?

"It's a nice morning. Maybe you'd prefer to talk on the porch swing and enjoy the cool breeze," the old man recommended. "Besides, those Harper kids will be running through here at any moment and might interrupt your conversation."

"That's a good idea. What do you think?" she asked him.

Is this the same person I talked to yesterday? Why was she so cordial this morning? Was it because they were in front of Mr. Gallows or because it was before church and she didn't want to attend the service with a guilty conscience?

He sighed. "Alright. We'll sit on the porch swing."

Maybe if someone walked by, she would have to be nice to him. He followed her to the porch, trying not to enjoy the way she walked. She was so uniquely feminine. He sat as

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close to the edge of the swing as possible. He didn't feel like touching her.

She sat on the other side of the swing. "I know you don't like me but I thought I should take the time to read your book since other people seem to like it so much."

He crossed his arms and stared straight ahead at the businesses that were closed for the day. Only the church and inn were open. A few people walked around, and two boys kicked a ball back and forth in the street.

She cleared her throat. She had her legs crossed and her hands in her lap. She nervously tapped her right foot on the ground. "So, I read it last night after dinner. Usually, I don't finish a book in one night but I did enjoy it and had a hard time putting it down."

He immediately relaxed and looked over at her.

"I hate to admit it but you do have a real talent. I can see why you published a book at such a young age, and I understand why Mr. Adams is interested in hiring you as a playwright at his theater."

Considering her outward dislike for him, he knew that it was hard for her to tell him this, and he appreciated the fact that she was willing to overlook her personal opinion of him in order to give an honest critique of his work. *She really is beautiful. Her wavy hair falls gently around her shoulders and her light blue eyes are large and trusting, like the eyes of a young doe. I bet her lips are soft. Has she ever been kissed?* He shook his head. What was he doing? She gave him one good word and he was ready to kiss her?

She cleared her throat again before she continued. "Are most of your plays based on actual events?"

He nodded. "It's easiest to write about things that I know."

"I thought that was the case." She sighed. "I'm sorry that I was hard on you yesterday. I had no idea you lost your sister or that your brother and his wife went through pregnancy losses. I assumed that anytime a man talked about having lots

of children, it was simply to carry on his genes. I suppose you and Clark aren't like that."

He frowned. Did she really have to put Clark in that sentence?

"Anyway, you have a lot of depth to you," she continued. "It's a wonder that going through as many difficulties as you have, you haven't let it affect your view on life. Though some of your plays were sad, there was always an underlying ray of optimism in them."

"Long ago, I figured that I could either let my experiences make me bitter or better. Besides, there's no sense in being miserable about stuff I can't do anything about."

"That's why you're able to joke around and laugh as much as you do around here." She chuckled. "I did get a good laugh out of some of the plays. I had no idea Rocky Mountain oysters were bull testicles. I'm glad I know in case someone tries to give me one in the future."

He grinned at the memory of messing with his brother-in-law. "Oh, my brothers and I would never put a woman through that. Well, unless she was our sister. Sue always knew how to take care of us though. She would either cook us one of her bad meals or tie us up in the barn. She doesn't mess around when she's angry."

"So what was your sister Emma like?"

"She was the opposite of Sue. She was a peacemaker. She went out of her way to make people feel special and didn't like to make a fuss about anything. She seemed more fragile so we were always a little more protective of her. We never would have pulled the stunts on her that we pulled on Sue. Sue has a good heart and is nice too, but she can hold her own so we don't worry about her. It's amazing how sisters can be so different. Both of them are equally wonderful but for different reasons."

"I'm sorry you had to go through losing Emma. I never had any brothers or sisters so I can't understand what you went through, but anyone can tell how much she meant to you."

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"You're a lot like her, though when you threw that rock at me, you had a touch of Sue in you."

She laughed. "You made me so mad." She looked at him. "Would you really have taken me home?"

"Yes," he softly confessed. "I guess it wasn't right to pretend I was going to leave you. I apologize for that. It's just that I felt like you were criticizing me for wanting to have kids."

"I understand why you did it, and I'm sorry I made you feel that way. I suppose I let my experiences with Mr. Parker and Eddie blind me to the fact that a man could be sincere about wanting a companion for a wife."

"What happened with Eddie?" He didn't recall her mentioning him before.

"Eddie Lyon was ready to court me when my father announced my engagement to Mr. Parker. I barely knew Eddie but knew he would make a better husband than Mr. Parker so I went to him and asked him if he would consider marrying me. He said that he couldn't because he didn't want to lose his inheritance. He then told me he was going to court one of my rich friends."

He winced. *No wonder she thinks so little of men.* He took a deep breath and reached out to touch her hand. "I wouldn't have done that. My family nearly went bankrupt two years ago, but one thing we do know is that there are things that money can't buy and love is one of them."

She squeezed his hand. "I'm going to help you discover what romance is. It's the only thing that you haven't experienced. I think once you experience it, you'll make that romantic comedy you're working on a big hit. You already have the comedy part down."

His cheeks grew hot. *Maybe I should go ahead and kiss her. She does care about me after all.* Just as he was about to act on his impulse, she let go of his hand and stood up.

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"I promised Mrs. Gallows I wouldn't be too long from the kitchen," she said. "She's teaching me how to make cheese and tomato omelets."

He stood up. "You really are a good cook. I can't think of anyone who does a better job than you."

She blushed. "Thank you. Coming from you, that's a big compliment."

He happily followed her back into the inn.

Chapter Eleven

Once Trevor understood that Adrienne did appreciate him and his work, he allowed himself to admit what he had been holding back since the moment he saw her on the train. He had thought she was pretty and was trying to think of a way to introduce himself to her when the thieves appeared. When she didn't say anything to him after the robbery, that didn't bother him. He figured she was mute but reasoned that if she could navigate her way through train stations, she could read and they could communicate through writing. But as soon as she ridiculed his work, he lost complete interest in her.

Now that she had taken time to read his book and showed enthusiasm for it, he was thrilled to pursue her romantically. At least, she was no longer adamantly opposed to marriage, so he could thank Clark for that. From the way she squeezed his hand on the porch swing and told him that she was going to show him what romance was, he knew that she preferred him over Clark. After all, she made no such intimate moves toward Clark.

He felt much better about being stranded in the town since he knew what she thought of him. He did wonder if she would be willing to go to New York with him. She was

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beginning to grow attached to the people in town, but he figured it was because she was hiding from her father who had tried to force her into the marriage she dreaded. Surely if she was married to him, she wouldn't have a need to hide from her father anymore and could continue on her way to New York.

He sat next to her at church and invited the youngest Peters' boy, five year old Jack, to sit on his other side so that he had to sit close to her. He wanted to hold her hand but settled for their arms touching during the service. He looked over at her a couple of times and smiled when she looked back. She seemed startled. *You'd better get used to a lot of affection and praise, sweetheart, because I intend to shower you with both.*

After the service ended, she excused herself so she could mingle with some of the other people. He watched her walk over to Melissa Peters. He frowned when he noticed Hank Peters smile at her. She was like a magnet to men. Maybe it was easier when she was resisting marriage. As soon as he saw her focus her attention specifically on Melissa, he felt much better.

Before he knew it, a group of children surrounded him and asked him if he would give them piggy back rides. He couldn't say no to them, so they went outside. The people grinned at the sight of him and the kids who were laughing and yelling for their turn to ride on his back.

"He's really good with children," he heard Adrienne tell Melissa as they walked out of the church.

He was pleased by her comment. He wanted her to be glad that he would be the father of her children.

When it was time to go home, Mrs. Gallows, at Adrienne's request, invited the Peters family to join them and the Harpers for supper. He wondered why Adrienne would want them over but figured that she wanted to talk to Melissa since they were close in age. She probably missed her friends from back home. He could understand her feelings. He missed his family. He decided it was time to write them a letter

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that day, even though it wouldn't be picked up until Tuesday. He was glad he could assure them that he was alright, even if he wasn't in New York yet. More importantly however, he was anxious to tell them about Adrienne. He hadn't realized how much she meant to him so soon. He saw her with other people and knew she had a good heart. She would make a wonderful wife and mother.

He considered it might be too soon to ask her to marry him. He knew that a long courtship wasn't necessary for a good marriage. *It's not like I have a lot of time to waste. I have to make it to New York in a little under two months, and I don't want to leave without her, nor do I want to leave without being married to her.* It wouldn't be appropriate to travel unaccompanied with a single young lady. *I just hope I don't scare her off.* She might be open to the idea of marriage and a romance with him, but those decisions were very recent.

Once the kids went home with their parents, he walked over to Adrienne who was still talking to Melissa. "Can I walk you back to the inn?" he asked her.

Adrienne looked startled by his question.

She's easily spooked. I better take it easy in how I approach her.

"Oh, Melissa just invited me to her house to visit until I help Mrs. Gallows get supper ready," Adrienne replied. "In fact, Melissa offered to help make the supper, so you can try her cooking."

"I'm not sure it will be as good as yours," Melissa said. "You have a gift for it."

Adrienne blushed. "I tasted your potato salad on Friday. You do a fine job of cooking too."

Trevor smiled. *She knows how to build people up. No wonder she is winning so many friends in this town.* It was nice to finally be included in that list of people she chose to be cordial with.

"I'm looking forward to learning some new cooking tips from you," Melissa told her.

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Adrienne looked over at Trevor. "I hope you don't think I'm too forward but I was telling Melissa that you write some very entertaining plays. I was hoping to show her *The Path to Christmas*. It was my favorite one."

His heart flipped at her confession. "You are welcome to show her any of the plays that you want to."

"He's writing a romantic comedy for a theater owner in New York," Adrienne continued to tell Melissa. "Have you ever been to New York?"

"No, I haven't," Melissa said. "I haven't been outside this town but Hank has been to Richmond for college."

"Would you like to go to New York?"

She shrugged. "I hadn't thought of it. I like life here but I suppose it would be a nice place to visit at least once."

Adrienne frowned. "Oh. Well, I grew up in San Francisco and can assure you that a big city is filled with a lot of fun and excitement. You won't get bored."

He wondered why she felt it necessary to highlight the benefits of being in a big city to Melissa.

"I kind of like the farm life," Melissa said. "I grew up on a farm and hoped to marry a farmer."

He knew that she and Clark were a good match. He would have to pair them up. "Did you know that Clark plays the fiddle?" he asked.

"No, I didn't. I don't get a chance to see the Howards very much. They live out of town and rarely come in."

"I am the temporary farmhand out there. They're having a little party out there on Saturday. We should all go."

"What a great idea, Trevor!" Adrienne agreed.

She was smiling but he suspected it wasn't because she thought Melissa would be a good match for Clark. He was used to picking out details and she seemed a little too eager for the trip, didn't she?

"Adrienne, will you be coming?" Melissa wondered.

"Oh, I plan to."

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"That sounds like fun. We should arrange something then," Melissa agreed. "Will you be coming with me to my house now, Adrienne?"

"Trevor, would you like to join us?" Adrienne asked him.

"Actually, I was hoping to make girl talk," Melissa interrupted. "With so many brothers, I don't get much of a chance to talk to another woman."

He noticed how disappointed Adrienne was and felt pleased that she was eager to spend more time with him. *She does care about me.* "It's alright, Adrienne. I should work on my play. I have some new ideas I can incorporate into it and I'm anxious to develop the plot and characters. You were right that this version is better than the one that got destroyed."

Adrienne nodded. "Alright. We'll get to see you at supper, correct?"

"Of course. I wouldn't miss one of your homemade meals for anything."

She smiled. "And you can try out Melissa's pudding."

He shrugged. "That sounds fun too."

"We'll see you then."

As he watched them leave, he smiled at how wonderful Adrienne looked when she walked. It was nice to enjoy the view instead of resisting how great she looked for a change.

Supper that night was good but he hardly noticed any of the dishes except what Adrienne made and even then he had a hard time keeping his eyes off of her. She and Melissa seemed to get along very well, for they were talking as if no one else was in the room. He, in turn, spent time talking to Jack Peters and the Harper kids. Jack reminded him of his nephew. Several times, he talked with Hank and Tom as well. Tom, though four years his junior, was taller and built stronger than him. He hadn't noticed how slender his frame was before he came to this town. He was able to do his chores on the

farm, but he wasn't built for the stronger tasks. He was much better off holding a pencil. He wondered if women were more attracted to the stronger type.

Hank and Tom were a lot alike. And it seemed that both of them were attracted to Adrienne, though Tom understood she would not consider someone as young as him. Hank kept asking him questions about Adrienne, which bothered him more and more as the meal progressed.

"Is it true that she just learned to cook?" he asked between bites of the meatloaf Adrienne made. "This is the best meatloaf I ever had."

Anything Adrienne made tasted like a gourmet meal. "Yes, she didn't cook anything before she came here," Trevor answered.

"It's amazing how quickly she picks stuff up."

"She's a quick learner, alright."

"Now, you two aren't together, are you? I heard you were going to be engaged but broke it off due to some personal issues."

Word gets around fast. He should be used to it since he had lived in a small town, but it annoyed him that so many people knew his business. "Actually, we got back together."

Hank frowned. "Oh." He quickly smiled again. "My apologies. I had entertained the possibility of courting her but now that I know the situation, I won't interfere."

He was relieved to hear this. "I plan to propose to her soon but wish to court her a little while first." He sat up. "You know, Bonnie Howard enjoys poetry. She's looking for someone to settle down with. Why don't you join us out there when Melissa, Adrienne and I go out for the party that the Howards are going to host on Saturday? Bonnie plays the flute."

"Bonnie Howard, huh? I hadn't considered her. I rarely see the Howard girls. How old is she?"

"Nineteen."

"She's of marrying age. You say, she likes poetry?"

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"Yes."

"I will come out to their farm."

He breathed a sigh of relief. Adrienne was naturally attracting single men. The sooner they knew she belonged to him, the sooner they would leave her alone. He had every intention of letting them know she was going to be his wife.

He grinned at Adrienne when she glanced over at him. She seemed confused that he would smile at her.

After the supper, Adrienne brought Melissa over to him. "I thought you two might like a chance to talk. Melissa grew up on a farm and so did you. She likes to read. You like to write. She makes good food. You like to eat good food. Anyway, those are just a couple of things you have in common. I'm sure you'll discover more as you talk. Oh, let me get a copy of your book so you can read *The Path to Christmas* to her. Melissa, it truly is a beautiful Christmas play. Just imagine what it will be like if you two have children and they acted it out."

He stared dumbly after her as she left the room to go to the lobby where his books were on display. He slowly turned to Melissa, his eyes wide. *Oh no. Adrienne isn't trying to do what I think she is.* The stunned look in Melissa's eyes assured him that Adrienne was indeed trying to fix them up together. All that talk earlier about showing him romance was really about her pairing him up with Melissa so she could show him what romance was like.

Adrienne doesn't care for me. Well, she does in a way but not the way I want her to.

"I thought you wanted me to talk to Clark Howard," Melissa whispered as her shock wore off.

"I do."

"So what is Adrienne doing?"

"Trying to show me what romance is and, apparently, she thinks we make a good match."

"Oh."

"'Oh' is right."

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Adrienne returned with his book. She looked pleased with herself as she gave it to Melissa. "The parlor would be a good place to read it. It's nice and quiet in there. I'm going to help the women clean up."

He watched in disbelief as she ran off.

"I suppose she means well," Melissa said. "When she saw us talking yesterday, she must have assumed you were interested in me."

He looked back at Melissa who was a couple inches taller than him. Couldn't Adrienne tell just by looking at them that they would make a horrible match? Melissa was perfect for Clark. "Well, we might as well make the best of it," he replied. "You will come out to the Howard farm when they have their party, won't you?"

"Certainly. I did find Clark to be quite agreeable when I saw him yesterday. I hadn't realized he grew into such a fine, handsome man. He really fills out a shirt well."

"Yes, all that heavy lifting made him strong." Did Adrienne prefer that type of man too? Strong, tall and dark?

"I do feel better knowing we agree that we are bad idea. Not that you're not a good catch."

"I understand. New York isn't for everyone." That was his nice way of putting it.

"I suppose we should read the story. I did enjoy the one you read Friday night."

That made him feel better. He would rather read it to Adrienne though. He shrugged and went to the parlor with Melissa. *There has to be a way to win Adrienne over.* If there was one thing he learned from losing his play during the train fiasco, it was that there was more than one way to write a play. *As soon as the guests go home, I'm going to make a list of ways to pursue Adrienne.* She was right about one thing. She told him she was going to show him what romance was, and he was going to let her. *Well, sweetheart, let the lessons in romance begin.*

Chapter Twelve

When Adrienne woke up the next morning, she got dressed and opened the door. She gasped when she saw Trevor leaning against the wall across from her door, wearing a plaid brown, white and black shirt with black pants. He had on a pair of brown boots and he was wearing a brown hat. His blond hair was neatly combed and he was clean shaven. His green eyes sparkled and his smile lit up the hallway. She was struck by the fact that he was so good looking.

"Howdy, ma'am. You are looking especially beautiful this morning," he greeted in a low voice that made her pulse quicken. "Can I walk you to the kitchen?"

She didn't know what to say, so she remained quiet.

"Now, don't be shy, sweetheart." He took her hand and led her down the hall. "I like the feel of your hand. Your skin is so soft."

Her feet were unsteady as she followed him. "Trevor, I don't understand."

"You said you were going to show me what I need to know about romance, right?"

"Well, yes," she admitted. She could hardly concentrate on anything but how good his hand felt around hers.

"What is your first lesson?"

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"Pardon me?"

He stopped and turned to her. "What do you have planned for me? What would be best for my play?"

She didn't know what to say. She thought he and Melissa seemed to get along well the night before, so it wasn't appropriate for her to think of him in such romantic terms. *But it's not like he's courting her. All he did was read to her.*

Two of the Harper kids saw them and giggled as they hurried to the dining room.

Trevor turned back to her. "Well, when you come up with your first lesson, just let me know. I'd like to get the most out of it. I try to be a studious observer so I can write more effectively."

He took a step toward her.

She subconsciously took a step back. *He smells clean and masculine.* A memory of summer days on the beach, watching the waves crashing along the shores, came to her mind. He was as thrilling as the ocean.

His voice brought her mind back to the present. "I do notice small details. Take your eyes as an example. When the sunlight reflects off of them just right, you have specks of gold throughout their hazel tint. A man could get used to a woman with such a lovely eye color."

Her cheeks warmed. "You do have a way with words. I guess it's because you write so much."

"Thank you for the compliment. So, what are you making for breakfast this morning?"

"I don't know. I let Mrs. Gallows decide."

"Are you going to the restaurant today?"

She nodded.

"Can I walk you there? I like to be in the presence of beauty and grace."

She shook her head. "Shouldn't you be saying this to Melissa?"

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"Why? All I did was read a play to her." He paused. "Oh, you weren't trying to get something going between me and her, were you?"

"I..." How did he figure that out? Was she that obvious?

"I hadn't considered her for a romantic lesson. Perhaps I should. That wouldn't bother you, would it?"

She shrugged. "Of course not," she lied. Why did it suddenly bother her? "You can be with whoever you want."

"Great! I'll be sure to keep that in mind. So, can I walk you to the restaurant?"

"That would be nice."

He kissed her hand.

No one had ever spoken to her or treated her in such an intimate way, and she found that she liked it coming from him. She enjoyed his touch.

"Someday, I would like to kiss you on the lips. I never kissed a woman before and could use the experience," he whispered. "But I'll settle for holding your hand for now."

Her heart skipped a beat at the promise. He gently led her to the dining room and told her he would think of her while she made another delicious meal. She slowly entered the kitchen.

"Good morning, Adrienne," Mrs. Gallows greeted. "I thought we would try making blueberry muffins with blueberry pancakes. I have lots of blueberries."

She nodded and put the apron around her waist.

The old woman stopped mixing the pancake batter and stared at her. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Yes. I feel fine." Her heart was still beating fast in her chest.

"Are you and Trevor getting along?"

She nodded again. *What am I doing? Am I really lightheaded over Trevor Lewis?* She never lost her head over any man before.

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"How wonderful!" Mrs. Gallows cheered. "I like you two together. I was hoping that you would work things out. Perhaps that wedding will happen after all."

She didn't plan to marry anyone, at least not yet. *Trevor's only practicing on me so he knows what to write in his romantic comedy. There's nothing more to it than that.*

During the morning, she thought about Trevor. She tried not to but it was hard. When he walked her to the restaurant, he walked unusually close to her. He leaned toward her and told her he would think of her while he was at the farm, and the way his breath caressed her ear made her knees weak. How silly was it for her to think of him! So they didn't hate each other anymore. That didn't mean they suddenly became romantic. They might be friends, but that was all there was to it. She offered to help him learn romance and he was taking her up on that offer. *He's doing a surprisingly good job of it. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was being sincere.*

When it came time for lunch, she and Mrs. Harper got ready for the busy time of the day.

Mrs. Harper smiled at her. "Trevor did a good job with the roof. My husband was having trouble getting it fixed, but Trevor's slender so he was able to move around the roof without falling in. Anyone bigger than him would have caused more damage. My husband is a husky, tall man, so he isn't cut out for that job."

Trevor's built just right. He's not too tall. He's slender with broad shoulders and narrow hips. She shook her head. She really needed to get her head out of the clouds. She didn't want to settle down with anyone at the moment.

"Anyway," Mrs. Harper continued, "as nice as it's been at the inn, I'm looking forward to moving back home today."

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"It's good that there wasn't too much repair work," Adrienne agreed, her mind still on Trevor. She hardly even noticed anyone else at breakfast since Trevor sat next to her.

"Will you take these plates out to table five for me?" Mrs. Harper asked, motioning to the plate of ham and potatoes. "I have my hands covered with meat."

She nodded and collected the plates. She groaned as soon as she realized the dishes were for the same three men who had stopped by last week. She wasn't looking forward to seeing them again. She would rather be at the inn handing Trevor a meal she made, even if he was just a friend. At least he was interested in *her*.

"Good afternoon, Miss Dayton," the brunette with the beard greeted her. "Do you remember my name?"

"Sure. You're Tristan Donaldson. You told me so at the dance on Friday." She handed him his plate.

"Good memory."

"Do you recall who the rest of us are?" the blond with the mustache wondered.

"You are Bob Anderson, and your friend," she motioned to the balding twenty-six year old as she handed Bob his plate, "is Dan Martin."

Dan whistled. "That is impressive. You danced with so many men, I'm surprised you remember a couple of fellows like us."

"I don't know how impressive it is. I was born with a good memory." She handed him his plate.

"You are creating quite a buzz around town. Word is that you are not only a good cook but also a nice person. You're winning people over left and right."

"He's right. You made an impact on this place," Bob agreed. "A good woman's reputation can do wonders for a man."

There he goes again with wanting his trophy wife. "You really concern yourself with what others think of you, don't you, Mr. Anderson?"

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He shrugged. "I suppose I do. I hadn't thought of it before but a good name is important. A man's reputation precedes him."

She considered his words. "I believe Miss Marianne Gold is a fine young lady. She has mastered her Scripture memorization verses and helps a lot of widows in town."

He thought for a moment. "You are right. Miss Gold does do a lot of good in this town. I should pay her a visit sometime."

"I think she would like that. It would be a shame for such a lovely woman to spend her life doing good deeds without an honorable man at her side."

"It sure would." He nodded thoughtfully. "It sure would."

She breathed a sigh of relief. *Now he won't be breathing down my neck every lunch hour.* Encouraged by the idea, she turned her attention to Dan who wanted children.

"You turned twenty-six last month, didn't you, Mr. Martin?"

"Yes, I did. You really do have an amazing memory."

"Thank you. I was just recalling Miss Pamela Harris who loves her nieces and nephews. She was bragging on them Friday night but I didn't see her dance with anyone. The poor thing is afraid she's getting up in years. She just had her twenty-second birthday and hasn't had a single offer at courtship. It would be a shame for a woman so in love with children to not be able to have any of her own."

He thought over her analysis. "You know what, Miss Dayton. You're right. Why didn't any of us ask that wonderful woman to dance? She does have the most beautiful button nose and the cutest smile. Perhaps I'll see how she's doing next time I see her."

"She would like that." Finally, it was Tristan's turn. "Tristan, you recently graduated from school, did you not?"

"I did. I began working at the lumber yard a few weeks ago but my passion is farming."

"Have you met Trudy Howard? She is seventeen. She sings with the voice of an angel, and I've been teaching her some of my cooking secrets. I think she would be happy with a man who would like to help out with her family's farm. Trevor won't be working there for long. He will go to New York, so the Howards could use an extra hand out there."

"Trudy Howard? I don't remember the face."

"Well, if you're interested, I could introduce you to her. Why don't you come out with me and some others this Saturday? They're having a small party out at the farm."

"I'll take you up on your offer. But if it doesn't work out with her, perhaps we might have an enjoyable trip out there and back."

It'd better work out between you and Trudy. "I better get back to the kitchen. I can't leave Mrs. Harper alone for the entire lunch hour. Please excuse me, gentlemen."

She felt much better. Tristan Donaldson might still be interested in her, but there was a good possibility that he might like Trudy. She walked toward the kitchen.

"Miss?" a familiar gruff voice called out to her.

She stopped, her heart hammering in her chest. She would never forget that voice for as long as she lived.

"Miss?" the man called out again. "I need some coffee!"

Steadying her feet, she managed to grab the coffee pot so she could pour the hot liquid into his cup. Approaching his table, she glanced at the hand of his companion. The birthmark in the shape of a boot confirmed her suspicions. The two men in front of her were the train robbers.

Taking a deep breath, she forced her face not to show emotion as she gave them more coffee.

"You feeling alright, Miss?" the man with the birthmark asked her.

Gulping the lump in her throat, she nodded. Both men looked as if they hadn't had a decent bath in weeks. She figured they were in their late thirties or early forties. The one with the gruff voice was as skinny as a rail and had a bald head

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with a new brown beard. His friend, the one with the birthmark, had uncombed light blond hair and a beard as well.

"Miss?" the blond repeated.

"Oh, yes. I'm just a bit tired from working in the hot kitchen." Her voice sounded far away.

The bald man frowned at her.

"I hope you two enjoy your lunch." She forced a merry tone as she turned to put the coffee pot back on the counter.

Once she returned to the safety of the kitchen, her hands shook. "Mrs. Harper, may I go to the sheriff?"

The woman didn't hide her surprise. "What's wrong?"

Wringing her hands, Adrienne went over to her so she could whisper. "The two men who robbed me and Trevor are at table number three. I need to tell the sheriff they're here before they leave town."

"Oh, go on ahead!" The woman's eyes widened and she motioned for her to leave through the back entrance.

Adrienne rushed out the backdoor and convinced the sheriff to come to the restaurant, but the men were gone by the time he got there. After she gave him a description of the men, she returned to work.

Mrs. Harper smiled sympathetically at her. "Maybe the wanted posters the sheriff promised to make will aid in their capture."

Adrienne sighed. "I hope so. I hate the thought that they're running around stealing from other people." Having gone through it herself, she knew how scary being robbed was.

"I'm sure they left town, and if they see their faces on the posters, they won't be coming back."

"I just hope they're put in jail."

The woman nodded her agreement before turning her attention to the customer orders.

Once the lunch rush was over, they had more time to talk.

"With the way things have improved between you and Trevor, I have a feeling there will be a wedding soon." Mrs.

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Harper dried a plate and put it on a shelf with the other clean plates. Before Adrienne could protest that she and Trevor weren't getting married, the woman continued, "I would like to spend Friday evening with Mr. Harper. I was wondering if you would watch my children for the evening? Trevor seems to get along with the children. Perhaps he would be willing to help you watch the five youngsters for four hours?"

"I think he likes to have any excuse to be around children. He says he wants a whole bunch of them."

"Mr. Harper is the same way. It's refreshing to have a man with a heart for children."

Maybe it is. "Even if Trevor doesn't want to watch the kids, I will."

"I think Trevor would like any excuse he can get to spend time with you. I saw the way he was looking at you when he walked you over here." Mrs. Harper patted her hand. "That boy is in love with you."

She sighed. Why did people keep assuming that about him? She shrugged. Perhaps he got into his research. She did promise to show him romance, and maybe this was proof that it was working. But she figured that it would be better if he was learning more from Melissa than from her. She would have to plan for him and Melissa to spend time together on Saturday, even if it meant she had to spend more time with Clark than she wanted to. Clark was nice, but she couldn't seem to connect with him. She shrugged again. *I can think of how to get Trevor and Melissa to spend time alone later on. Right now I need to cook.*

Chapter Thirteen

To Adrienne's surprise, Clark stopped by the inn with Trevor that evening. She was about to enter the building when they approached the front entrance.

"Good evening, Miss Dayton," Clark greeted.

"Good evening," she replied. "What brings you here?"

"You left your bow behind when you came out on Saturday, and I thought I would return it."

Trevor sighed. "I told him I could do it but he insisted." He didn't look pleased but remained polite.

"For all I know, you would have thrown it away," Clark said.

She noted the tension between the two men.

"Well, thank you," she told Clark as he handed it to her. "I forgot I took it off after lunch."

"A pretty woman like you doesn't need a bow in her hair to look nice."

She felt awkward as she looked up at Clark. She hadn't noted his height before. *He is too tall. I nearly break my neck looking at his face.* She cleared her throat. "That is nice of you to say."

He continued to smile at her.

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"I guess I'll see you tomorrow then," Trevor told Clark.

"Oh, that reminds me," she quickly said before she forgot Tristan. "I met a young man at the restaurant who is looking for a wife and thought he and Trudy might be a good match. I was hoping to bring him out to the farm on Saturday for the party. Are you familiar with Tristan Donaldson?"

Clark thought for a moment. "Yes, I've met him. He's agreeable. He is strong and would do well for lifting heavy things on the farm. Trevor seems to have trouble with some of the heavier items."

He huffed. "Sorry but my strength is in my fingers. I'm a writer, not a farmer."

"Yes, it is obvious."

She wondered if they had a bad day together. "Well, not all men are meant to be farmers. Everyone has their own talent. I suppose yours is farming. You are built for it. But Trevor does a fine job with entertaining. He's only helping with the farm until he can go to New York, so it doesn't matter how his farming is. Anyway, you both have your own strengths. You are both very kind and would treat a woman very well if you married her."

They seemed to relax.

She was glad. She didn't want to get in the middle of a squabble.

"I hope you don't mind if Melissa and Hank Peters come out as well," Trevor finally said. "I think they would enjoy a good time on the farm. Melissa is a true farmer's daughter and would make a wonderful wife. Hank might be good for Bonnie since she likes poetry and he writes it."

Adrienne breathed a sigh of relief. *So he does find Melissa interesting.* If anyone could show him romance, it was Melissa.

Mrs. Gallows came up to the entrance, carrying some groceries. "Greetings, everyone," she cheerfully stated.

"Can I help you with that bag, ma'am?" Clark asked her.

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"I would greatly appreciate the help. How thoughtful of you."

"I do what I can to assist charming women."

"Clark Howard, you have a way with words. You should be settling down soon."

"Perhaps." He glanced at Adrienne and smiled.

Adrienne forced a smile back.

"Tonight I thought we'd make Swedish meatballs," the woman told Adrienne.

"How delightful! I haven't had that dish in months. It's one of my favorites."

"Well, then it's a good thing I thought of it. Will you be staying for supper, Clark? The hour is late and by the time you return, you'll be starving if you don't get something to eat first."

"I'll be happy to. I can't wait to try more of Adrienne's cooking."

"Come along then," the woman told everyone.

Trevor stopped Adrienne before she followed Mrs. Gallows and Clark into the inn. "I missed you today," he said. "Did you miss me?"

She chuckled. "Aren't you taking this romance thing a little too far? You don't have to be so pleasant all the time. I know you don't care for me."

He frowned. "That's not true. Sure, we started off on the wrong foot, but I'm realizing that there's a good heart in you. Can't a man miss his friend?"

Her eyes widened. "You actually consider me to be a friend?"

"I certainly do. You took the time to read my book and told me what was good about it and what I need to improve on. I know I need help in the romance area. When I work on my romantic comedy, the comedy part is easy but it's harder to get to the romance. I need to know what a woman finds romantic, and you're the only one who seems to be sincere about showing me that. Don't tell anyone but a lot of single women in this town seem to think I'm going to take them with me to New

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York. So how do I know whether or not they are telling me what I really need to know? I could sneeze on them, get snot all over them and they'd probably say that was romantic just so they wouldn't hurt my feelings."

She cringed. "You have a way with imagery. And that's gross."

"Not romantic at all, is it?"

"No."

He smiled at her. "So you see? I can rely on you to tell me the truth." He moved closer to her and kissed her cheek. "I hope to be your friend."

"Friendship would be nice."

"But you will help me with my play, right?"

"Oh, of course."

"Good because I need all the help I can get."

"Well, Saturday should be a good day for romance. You'll get to spend some time with Melissa."

"A party is a fun place for love."

The way he smiled at her made her knees feel weak. *He's for Melissa. Don't interfere with their blossoming romance.* "Mrs. Harper asked me if I would watch all five of her children for four hours on Friday evening. You are good with kids. Will you help me watch them? I am not used to being around children."

He grinned. "I'll be tickled pink to watch them."

"Tickled pink?"

"You know what I say, 'the more, the merrier.' It will be nice to spend the evening surrounded by people."

"You really don't like to be alone, do you?"

"I grew up surrounded by people. I like to sneak off and grab an hour to do my writing but after that, I like to be around people again. The night can seem long when I'm trying to write in my room and there's no one to talk to."

"I suppose companionship is nice. I didn't realize men got lonely too."

"We're human, aren't we?"

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She nodded. "I'm learning a lot about you."

"Do you like what you're learning?"

"I do," she softly admitted.

He touched her hand. "I like what I'm learning about you too. You're not stuck up. You're just lonely and scared, and you hide behind your wall so you won't get hurt."

She didn't know if she liked being exposed like that. She instinctively wrapped her arms around herself. "You are a little scary with the way you figure people out."

"I didn't mean to scare you off. I'm sorry." He rubbed his hand up and down her back. "For what it's worth, I'm glad you had the courage to leave California. If you hadn't, we never would have met."

"Thank you, Trevor. You're probably the first man to pay me a sincere compliment."

He winked at her. "There's more you'll be receiving."

Mrs. Gallows appeared from the door. "I see that you two are working things out. How wonderful! I told Bronson to leave you alone, Adrienne. He had his eye out to court you but I had a feeling that you and Trevor would resolve your differences. You two are meant to be together."

She grew uneasy. Clearly, the woman was misunderstanding the situation.

"Yes, Mrs. Gallows. We've worked things out," Trevor quickly replied. "We're good friends."

She relaxed. At least he said it for her.

"Are you ready to make dinner?" the woman asked her.

"Yes, I am." As she followed her into the inn, she was aware that Trevor was close behind her. *It's hard to concentrate when he's near me.* She was grateful that she would be in the kitchen so she could cook with a clear head.

Chapter Fourteen

Trevor had been biting his tongue around Clark all day, and the knowledge that he was staying for supper only served to irritate him even more. Clark made it clear that he intended to court Adrienne, and Adrienne's comment that she was actually considering being with Clark and would see him again on Saturday didn't sit well with him. He didn't need Clark's smooth talking to interfere with what he was trying to do. Adrienne was going to be his wife, not Clark's.

Trevor went to the dining room and waited for the meal. Clark sat on the other side of the table. Trevor wasn't sure what to say to him. He took a deep breath and looked around the room. The problem was that Clark was actually a nice man who would treat Adrienne well. *But I would treat her well too.* So it was up to her.

Clark had picked up a copy of his book and was flipping through it.

"If you're in the mood for a comedy, I recommend the *Rocky Mountain Oysters* play," he said.

Clark glanced up at him. "I figured I should do some reading while we wait for supper."

Romancing Adrienne

He shrugged. "I don't mind." What he really wanted to do was join Adrienne in the kitchen and offer to help her, but he knew that she and Mrs. Gallows had everything under control. He remained quiet while Clark read through a couple stories.

Clark chuckled. "Your brother-in-law didn't realize what Rocky Mountain oysters were?"

Trevor grinned. "He had no clue. It was priceless to watch the expression on his face when Luke told him what it was. But to Jake's credit, he ate all of them without flinching."

"I guess rich people wouldn't know that."

"Did you know Adrienne came from a wealthy background? Her father arranged a marriage for her that she didn't want so she ran away. She's got nothing now."

"The poor girl must be scared. It was a good thing she had you to get her through it. Did you come from a wealthy family too?"

"Hardly. My family did alright but we were up to our eyeballs in debt until Jake came along and helped us out. Since then though, we've been careful with our money. I guess it was a bad move on my part when I took all my money on the train. I don't have a dime to my name anymore."

"I heard about the robbery. I wonder where the robbers are."

"They're probably long gone."

"What an ordeal to go through." He paused. "I hope you don't mind my asking what happened between you and Adrienne. I mean, you seem like a nice enough man."

Trevor appreciated the compliment. "We didn't really know each other. People seem to think we did, but we didn't. She bumped into me on her way off the train."

"Oh. I didn't realize that."

"Whenever we try to explain it, people just hear what they want to hear instead of what we're actually saying."

"So, do you two get along or not?"

"We did manage to get over our differences."

"I admit that I do like her. She's a good woman."

Romancing Adrienne

Trevor nodded. "Yes, she is."

Clark sighed. "I guess we are both trying to court her."

"That's clear to me too."

"Well, as they say, 'Let the best man win.'"

Trevor nodded. Once he threw Melissa into the mix, it would be easier to fend Clark off.

The women came out with the meal and Mr. Gallows entered the room.

Adrienne set the large plate of Swedish meatballs next to the rice and peas that Mrs. Gallows set down.

Adrienne looked at Clark and Trevor. There was an empty seat next to both of them.

"You may sit next to me," Clark offered.

She glanced at Trevor, shrugged and sat next to Clark.

Trevor hid his annoyance with a smile. *That's alright. She'll be sitting with me for the rest of our lives. She's only sitting next to him tonight.* He wasn't going to let one minor setback deter him from his goal.

For a moment, he thought of his family. His homesickness came and went but mealtime was hard since they always gathered together at the table to talk about their day and share some laughs. He didn't relish another night in his room, though it gave him time to write.

"Trevor, you look thoughtful tonight," Mrs. Gallows noticed.

"Oh, I was just thinking of my family," he replied. "I have to a letter to send out tomorrow so they'll know where I'm at."

"That's right," Mr. Gallows nodded. "The post office is open from ten to two. I will take your letter in since you'll be at the farm."

"Thank you, sir. I also got one for Mr. Adams."

"Do you miss your family, Adrienne?" Clark suddenly asked her.

"It's a long story but yes," she replied.

"I heard you come from California."

Romancing Adrienne

"Yes."

Mrs. Gallows gave a gasp. "That reminds me. Adrienne, I heard you saw the crooks who robbed the train while you were working today."

Trevor's ears perked up at this turn of events.

"I did," she replied. "But when I got the sheriff, the men were already gone. The sheriff said he'll make some wanted posters."

"I doubt that they would stick around," Clark commented. "If they're on the run, they'll want to be inconspicuous."

Trevor cleared his throat. "How did you recognize them? They wore masks."

"Oh, that was easy. One had the gruff voice and the other had a birthmark on his hand."

He frowned, feeling uneasy. "Did they realize you recognized them?"

"No, I don't think so."

"You should probably be around other people at all times, just to be on the safe side."

"I couldn't agree more," Clark added. "We don't want you to risk getting hurt."

Trevor grumbled under his breath. The only saving grace he had was residing in the inn with her. If Clark lived in town, Trevor might never get a chance to be alone with her.

"Well, let's hope the sheriff catches them soon," Mrs. Gallows said.

The group nodded.

After a couple of moments, Mr. Gallows spoke up. "Clark, I was wondering how things are going on your family's farm."

Clark looked up at the old man. "The farm is great."

As Clark rambled on, Trevor imagined what it would be like to come home every night and be alone with Adrienne. He caught himself smiling, looking off to nowhere in particular, when Mrs. Gallows asked him about the play he was working

Romancing Adrienne

on. He turned his attention back to the table and answered her question.

Trevor spent the rest of the week complimenting Adrienne and lightly touching her hand whenever he could. He was relieved when Clark didn't come into town. He really didn't need that kind of competition. The more he got to know Adrienne, the deeper he fell in love with her, and he didn't want Clark to come in between them. After all, he had his future kids to think about. They wouldn't exist if Clark got her.

On Friday evening after dinner, he went to the Harper house with Adrienne. The cool evening was clear so it would be a good night for viewing stars, which was something he figured the kids would enjoy.

"I must admit that you continue to amaze me," he told her on their way there.

"Really? How?" she wondered.

He took her hand and held it. He was happy when she didn't pull it away. She was getting use to his touch. "You have a big heart for people. I heard you made some pre-made dinners for Elijah and Patty Baker. It will be nice for them to be able to focus on their newborn."

"I like to cook. It wasn't a big deal to do that for them."

He grinned at her. "You're a humble and graceful woman. Any man would be lucky to be in your presence."

She blushed. "You really are doing well with romance, Trevor. I think Melissa will be glad to see you tomorrow. I tell her how wonderful you are."

He forced aside his annoyance. She had been hinting about how good he and Melissa were for each other, but now she was coming right out and saying it. He stopped and turned to her.

Surprised, she also stopped. "Is something wrong?"

Romancing Adrienne

It was time to take things to the next level before Clark got a hold of her the next day. "I am at the part of my play where the main characters kiss. I haven't kissed a woman before, so I was wondering if I could kiss you and see what the experience is like so I can best write about it."

She seemed startled, though she was shyly smiling. "Perhaps Melissa would be best suited for that."

"But I intend to write the scene tonight."

"Well, there are people walking around us."

"We're only a few feet from the Harper house. We're practically out of sight of everyone with all the trees surrounding us. I do need help with being romantic."

She hesitated.

He took off his hat and wrapped his arms around her, making sure he didn't hold her too tightly. "If you don't want to, that is fine. I hope you didn't find me offensive."

"There's nothing offensive about you, Trevor." Though she didn't hug him back, he did note that her hands rested on his arms. "You are pleasant to be with."

He winked at her. "You do find a way into a man's heart. If you would rather wait for the kiss, I'd understand."

As he was about to pull away from her, she stopped him. "I suppose one kiss wouldn't do any harm. I mean, it would be for your play, and you do have a deadline to meet."

"Yes, that is true."

"I haven't kissed a man yet, so I don't know how good I'll be at teaching you how to kiss."

"Then we'll have to learn together." He leaned toward her and gave her a light kiss. His heart raced with excitement. "What did you think? Did I do alright?"

She nodded. "You did just fine."

He was pleased that she seemed to enjoy it as much as he did. "Perhaps, it would be more romantic if the kiss lasted longer. Maybe, it should be like this..."

He kissed her again, but this time he tightened his hold on her and deepened the kiss. He felt her arms go around his

Romancing Adrienne

neck as she leaned into him. When the kiss ended, he could hardly concentrate on anything but how wonderful she felt.

"Yes, that's the kiss to go with," she whispered.

Oh Adrienne, just wait until we're married. I'm going to kiss you like that all the time. He forced himself to back away from her. Placing his hat back on his head, he smiled and took her hand so they could continue their walk to the Harper house. "Thank you," he said. "That was the perfect kiss."

She didn't say anything as he led her along with him.

I've startled her, but in a good way. He knew enough from watching people to know that she was in love with him, though she was determined not to admit it. Once she did admit it though, he had no doubt that she would be a passionate wife. He couldn't wait for them to get married.

When they reached the Harper house, the kids ran out to meet them. He let go of her hand so he could toss each kid in the air. She giggled at the scene. He winked at her. *You just wait, sweetheart. Someday, these will be our kids I'll be tossing around.*

The time passed by quickly for him. He was impressed with the way she handled the children. They made sure to behave with her. She didn't tolerate much fighting between the siblings. "We are here to have a nice and pleasant evening," she told three of the kids who had been hitting each other. "I grew up an only child and things got boring most of the time. Be glad you have one another. Someday, you'll grow up to be best friends."

"Yes, ma'am." The three children nodded.

He grinned at the troublemakers. "You listen to Adrienne now. She knows what she's talking about."

They nodded and played nicely after that.

He went over to her and kissed her on the cheek. "You do a wonderful job with children. Why do you insist on not having some of your own someday?"

She blinked. *I spooked her again. The poor thing needs to get over her fear of marriage.* "I never thought

children were a bad thing," she said. "I just want there to be more to marriage than having them, that's all."

"You're so great. A man would be foolish not to appreciate you for who you are. You have a lot more to offer than having children."

"Thank you for saying that, Trevor. I do like to think there's more to marriage than all of that. I was an only child because my mother got sick after I was born, and the illness left her barren. It's possible that I wouldn't be able to have children."

"Even if that happens, you and your husband can always adopt a whole bunch of youngsters."

"I didn't think a man would consider adopting kids. My father never did."

He shrugged. "Children are a blessing no matter how they come into the family."

"You are an incredible man. Melissa is lucky."

He frowned as she turned her attention back to the kids. *Alright. This has got to stop. I'm going to marry you, sweetheart, even if I have to drag you to the altar.*

Chapter Fifteen

The next day, Melissa and Hank showed up bright and early at the inn. Trevor noticed that she wore pants and a shirt. *She is a farm girl, alright. Clark will like her. I think she'll like Clark too.* Trevor saw that Adrienne wore another dress and had her hair pulled back in a bow. *She's so pretty, but she's a city girl. She's meant for New York.*

He tipped his hat to her as she came out of the inn. "Good morning, Adrienne."

"Good morning, Trevor," she replied.

She seemed to be happy to see him, which was a good sign.

"You are a pretty sight first thing in the morning," he said. "Will you be riding with me out to the farm?"

"Of course. But you will bring me back this time, won't you?" she teased.

"I promise."

She joined him on the horse.

He smiled. He liked being close to her and feeling her hold him around the waist.

Romancing Adrienne

"Don't worry, Melissa," she told her friend. "I'm only riding with him because I don't know how to ride a horse by myself."

He rolled his eyes.

Tristan came trotting up on his horse. He frowned. "I see you already found an escort," he told Adrienne.

"I told you I wanted to introduce you to Trudy," she responded.

He nodded. "That you did."

"Trudy is very enthusiastic about life," Trevor said. "I think she'll be a good wife."

Tristan looked happier though Trevor noted that Adrienne tensed.

Could she be jealous? Trevor grinned at the thought that she cared enough about him to worry that he might find Trudy attractive. *No one is as attractive as you, sweetheart.*

They rode out to the farm and Bonnie immediately ran up to him. He sighed. Bonnie was relentless in her pursuit of him.

"Good morning, Trevor," she gushed. "I've been practicing my flute playing. I hope you'll find it to your liking."

"I'm sure I will," he politely replied. He turned her to Hank who was dismounting from his horse. "Say, are you familiar with Hank Peters? He just returned from college."

Bonnie smiled at him. "Hank? I hardly recognized you. You really matured in college."

He grinned at her. "You've matured too, Bonnie. You're not a little girl anymore. In fact, you've grown into a beautiful young woman."

She looked very pleased by his comment.

Trevor breathed a sigh of relief. Now Bonnie could concentrate on Hank instead of him.

Trudy and Clark came out to meet them.

"I didn't realize so many people would be here today," Trudy said. "I hope I made enough pies for the party."

"You made pies?" Tristan asked.

Romancing Adrienne

She nodded. "I made apple, blueberry and rhubarb pies."

"She makes wonderful pies," Bonnie added. "They don't last long around here."

Trevor marveled that the family ate so much and remained skinny.

"I can't wait to try a slice," Tristan widely smiled. "I'm a sucker for a good pie."

"Oh, then I'll make sure to save you a slice of your favorite kind. What do you like best?" Trudy asked.

"I'm partial to rhubarb, but I like all kinds of them."

So far, it looked like everyone was pairing off nicely. Trevor got off the horse and helped Adrienne down so he could put his horse in the stable with the other horses for the day.

Adrienne looked excited. "I hope that they get together," she whispered to him. "They do go well together."

"Yes, they do." *And so do we, sweetheart.*

Clark walked over to Adrienne. "I'm glad you could make it out here today."

Trevor quickly motioned to Melissa. "Melissa Peters made the trip out here too," he introduced. "She's great on the farm. She knows all there is to know about farm life."

Melissa walked over to them and smiled at him.

Melissa looked much better with Clark than Adrienne did. Not only was Melissa taller but she went better with the farm too.

"I should get started on the lunch," Adrienne said.

"I hope you'll save a dance for me," Clark told her.

Trevor frowned. He shouldn't be ignoring Melissa like that.

"Oh, I suppose everyone will have a chance to dance with each other," Adrienne replied.

"Let me walk you back to the house," Clark said.

Trevor gritted his teeth as Adrienne accepted his offer. *She can't be seriously considering him!* He glanced at Melissa who looked forlorn. *This won't do at all. Just because*

Romancing Adrienne

Adrienne intends to fix me up with Melissa, it doesn't give her free reign to pursue Clark. Didn't her kiss with him the previous night mean anything to her?

"Come with me, Melissa," Trevor softly said. Turning to Hank and Tristan, he called out, "We'll take your horses to the barn." They were too busy talking to Bonnie and Trudy to care. At least that part of the plan was a success.

As he and Melissa walked to the barn, he noted that Adrienne was watching them. *Is she happy about this?* It was hard to tell from the distance between them. He had trouble reading people unless he was close to them.

"Clark prefers Adrienne," Melissa remarked.

"That's just because he doesn't know what he's giving up," he sourly stated. "You're much better for him than she is. What can a city girl offer a farm boy?"

"Well, you grew up on the farm. You're also in love with her."

"But I'm heading to New York to write plays. I'm going to be a city boy soon enough, and it's best for me to have a city girl."

She sighed. "I don't know. Maybe I'm not pretty enough."

He looked at her. She was a tomboy. As they put the horses in the stalls, he turned to her in interest. "You need to get into a dress and fix up your hair. Then he'll notice you're a woman."

She touched her ponytail self-consciously. "Do you think this is why no man has come by to court me?"

"Well, my oldest sister was thirty-three when she got married. She didn't wear pants all the time but she wore her hair up in a bun and never fixed herself up nice. Once she got married, she looked like a whole new person. I hardly recognized her. I wonder if Bonnie and Trudy would be willing to help the cause now that they have men interested in them."

"The cause." She chuckled. "It sounds funny when you put it that way."

Romancing Adrienne

He grinned. "You have a great sense of humor. Clark's got to see that once he spends some time with you. Let's go have a quick talk with Bonnie and Trudy."

Clark was sitting close to Adrienne on the porch swing when they returned to the house. *She looks uncomfortable, doesn't she?* He couldn't tell for sure. His jealousy was getting in the way of his usual clarity in reading people.

Bonnie and Trudy were still talking to Hank and Tristan.

It's like being on Noah's ark, except two couples are mixed up.

"Bonnie, Trudy, can I talk to you for a moment?" he asked the sisters.

They seemed reluctant to leave the men.

"I won't keep you long," he added.

They nodded and walked a couple meters from the porch so no one would hear them while they talked to him and Melissa. "Alright. I'm going to be honest with you two, but I need your promise to keep quiet about this plan of mine or it will blow up in all of our faces. Got it?"

Bonnie looked confused but nodded.

"How would you two like to have Melissa here for a sister-in-law?" he asked.

"It would be fine," Trudy said.

"She would be better out here on the farm than Adrienne would," Bonnie agreed. "Adrienne is nice and all but I don't think she could survive out here."

"Those are my thoughts on it too." He was relieved they thought that. "Melissa and I were talking and we think if Clark were to see her dressed up, then he would see what a prize he's overlooking."

"A makeover? How exciting!" Trudy exclaimed.

"You are the same height and size as us," Bonnie told Melissa. "You have such a lovely face. Yes, Clark would definitely notice you if you fixed up your hair and wore a dress."

"It would be fun to include Hank and Tristan in this, don't you think?" Trudy asked her sister.

Romancing Adrienne

"Have them focus on Adrienne so Clark has to spend time with Melissa?"

"You read my mind."

Trevor was impressed with their quick thinking. *This would be perfect in a play.* After they had a chance to talk to Hank and Tristan, who reluctantly agreed to the plan after Bonnie and Trudy promised to reserve a kiss for each of them, he joined Adrienne and Clark on the porch. *Love is in the air.* All they needed was Valentine's Day and the afternoon would be complete. He snapped his fingers. He would title his play *Valentine Follies*.

While Bonnie and Trudy took Melissa into their bedroom to make her a new woman, Tristan and Hank fought Clark for Adrienne's attention. She looked baffled by their attention.

"I must start making lunch," she finally said as she stood up from the porch swing.

"Let me help you, Adrienne," Tristan offered. "Delicate hands like yours shouldn't have to lift those heavy pots. I'll do that for you."

"I can reach for things that are high up on the shelf," Hank added.

"We don't want you to push yourself too hard in there."

"You're much too precious and sweet for that."

"What about Bonnie and Trudy?" she anxiously asked.

"Where are they anyway?" Clark, who looked irritated, demanded.

"Who cares?" Hank shrugged. "We only came out here to be with Adrienne."

"No. That's not supposed to happen," she protested.

"But we can't help how we feel about you."

"She's going to be mine, so back off, Hank," Tristan said.

"No, she'll be mine."

"I'll be cooking. I'm sure Mrs. Howard can help me." She quickly ran into the house and shut the door behind her.

Trevor chuckled.

Romancing Adrienne

"You both need to back off," Clark snapped. "She was warming up to me until you two butted in. Why aren't you with my sisters?"

"And they would be where?" Hank looked around.

Clark shook his head. "Fine. Hey, Trevor, why don't you show Hank and Tristan the farm? They might be interested to know what they can expect if they marry my sisters."

Trevor waved to them to follow him. He waited until they were out of Clark's hearing before speaking. "You're doing a great job. I almost believe you actually want her."

"As long as Bonnie and Trudy understand it's all an act, we can keep it up," Hank said. "But I am hoping I can dance with Bonnie today."

"I'll see what I can do about arranging something."

They mounted their horses and he gave them a tour of the farm. It took a good half hour and by the time they returned to the barn, he saw Clark talking to Adrienne by the bull pen. How did Clark get her outside? Clark leaned over and whispered something in her ear. She laughed.

He gritted his teeth. This wasn't something he figured would happen.

"Uh oh. Looks like he's going to steal her away," Tristan noted as his horse stood next to his.

Trevor shook his head. "She'll be my wife by this time tomorrow." An idea came to him. "Anybody got a slingshot?"

Hank grinned. "I sure do. It keeps unsavory animals away from our sheep at home. I even have a few pebbles. What are you going to do? Hit Clark in the head?" He handed him the slingshot and pebbles.

"I'm going to do better than that. Adrienne's never been dirty a day in her life, and I'm going to get her away from Clark and get you two to spend some time with your women all in the same shot."

"Now this, I have to see," Hank told Tristan.

Romancing Adrienne

They watched as Trevor took the slingshot and aimed the pebble at the bull's rear end. "Here we go."

He released the pebble, and it flew through the air and landed right on the bull's behind. The bull snorted and raced to the fence. Adrienne was safe on the other side but she wouldn't realize the bull couldn't harm her until it was too late. Sure enough, as soon as she saw the bull charging at her, she backed up, tripped over the tree branch behind her feet and fell into the muddy puddle the rainstorm from the night before had left. The three men laughed as Clark struggled to help her stand up. She was covered in mud.

She looked up and Trevor sobered. *Uh oh.*

"You did this on purpose!" she yelled at him.

He shrugged.

"Just when I thought you were a decent man, you go and pull this stunt! I hate you!" She ignored Clark's hand as she stormed back to the house.

"We should've hid," Hank reflected.

"I hope we didn't just ruin your chances," Tristan added.

"Nah. She'll still marry me. I got my plan in place. She might be sore with me, but she'll be more than happy to marry me in order to avoid being hounded by a gazillion suitors. You saw how anxious she was to get rid of you two. She'll have more men to fend off before the day is over." It had cost him a week's wages but he had paid a couple of men to stop by the inn later that day to talk to Adrienne.

"You seem awfully sure of yourself."

"I am. It's the only way the play can go if it's to keep its romantic appeal."

The two men looked at each other and shrugged.

As he handed Tristan the slingshot back, he thanked him and returned his horse to the stall. *Adrienne, you'll thank me for all of this when you're holding little Trevor or Adrienne in your arms.*

Chapter Sixteen

Adrienne was furious with Trevor for irritating the bull so that it nearly ran into her. She took a bath and cleaned off the mud as best as she could. Afterwards, Bonnie offered to let her borrow one of her dresses but the dress was too tight in the bosom and so long it reached past her ankles.

"I'm sorry, Adrienne," Bonnie said when she saw her. "I can see that the buttons in the bust line are ready to pop. Would you like to wear a sweater over the dress?"

"Yes." Though it was too hot for a sweater, she accepted the green sweater and threw it over to the orange dress. She felt frumpy.

When she went into the kitchen to serve lunch, the men all stared at her. She rolled her eyes. She knew she looked hideous.

"Sit next to me," Hank offered.

"No, sit next to me," Tristan argued.

She decided to sit between the Howard boys. At least Alex and Max were safe. Trevor sat across from her and smiled, but she refused to look at him. It was his fault that she looked so horrible. Clark finally had his attention on Melissa who looked stunning now that she was dressed as a woman

instead of a farmhand. *So much for Melissa showing Trevor what romance is. Melissa shouldn't be with Clark, but it's nice to have him leave me alone.* She shook her head. What did she care if Trevor missed his chance at love? He arranged it so that she fell in the mud.

After lunch, she sat on the couch next to Max and Alex while Clark, Bonnie and Trudy performed for them. They sounded good together as Clark played his fiddle, Bonnie played her flute and Trudy sang. Adrienne had to admit that they were talented.

Hank and Tristan asked her to dance but she refused. "I'll trip all over the place in this dress." They insisted on sitting at her feet and looked at her once in awhile and smiled adoringly at her.

This is ridiculous! When will all these men leave me alone? Surprisingly, only Trevor left her alone. She rolled her eyes. Why did she care? Hank and Tristan obviously weren't interested in the Howard sisters. *I shouldn't care if Trevor wants one of them.* She was mad at him anyway. He had no right to make her fall in the mud. She hadn't done anything to deserve such foul treatment.

Finally, Clark told Bonnie and Trudy to dance so he could continue playing the fiddle. They ran over to Trevor who said he didn't like dancing but finally gave in and took turns dancing with them. Tristan and Hank pulled away from Adrienne long enough for a dance with the sisters, only to quickly return to her when the song was over.

It shouldn't bother me that Trevor is ignoring me. I have no romantic interest in him at all. We've only been romantic because I'm trying to teach him what romance is.

She was relieved when it was time to leave. She didn't think she could take Tristan and Hank's constant attention much longer. Hank and Tristan offered to take her home on their horses. Clark was too busy talking to Melissa to notice that she was leaving, which was the only good thing that had happened that day.

Romancing Adrienne

"Trevor promised to take me back," she told them as she walked out the door, holding the long dress up so she wouldn't trip on it again.

"But you can go with one of us," Hank argued.

"Yeah. We won't bite," Tristan urged.

She shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other while Trevor rode his horse toward them. "I promised him I'd go back with him."

"Even after he made you land in the mud?"

"Well, we are staying at the inn. It's just easier this way."

Bonnie and Trudy came running up to Trevor and tugged at his pants until he slipped off the horse. Adrienne scowled at the scene.

"We were hoping we'd see you before you left," Trudy gushed. "I made this bag of candy especially for you."

"And I wrote a poem you might want to use for inspiration for a play," Bonnie said.

They shoved their gifts at him.

Was Trevor pleased by their attention? *Why do I care?*

"I'll take you home, Adrienne," he said when he noticed her looking at him. "Sorry, ladies. But we got to go back."

Adrienne rushed over to him. *I'm just glad to be going to the inn. I'm not happy to be with him.*

"We can't wait to see you tomorrow after church," Bonnie cooed.

"Yes," Trudy agreed. "We plan to spend the entire day with you."

"Well, I was hoping to work on my play," he replied.

"We can help!"

"We would love to see more of your work," Bonnie added.

"Oh..." He glanced at Adrienne. "We might as well tell them, sweetheart."

Her eyes grew wide. What was he talking about?

Romancing Adrienne

"Tell us what?" Bonnie asked, glancing from Trevor to Adrienne.

"Adrienne and I just worked things out. We're courting again."

"What? When did you work things out? We thought she hated you after the mud incident."

Trudy nodded. "And she told us that you were free to court one of us last time she was here."

Trevor shrugged. "Well, we talked it over and decided it would be romantic to court."

"I had no idea." Bonnie sadly sighed. She gave Adrienne a dirty look. "Some honesty in the future would be greatly appreciated."

"Don't lead us to believe a lie," Trudy hissed at her.

Adrienne gasped, appalled that they would act that way toward her.

The two sisters took back their gifts and stomped back to the house.

"We'd better comfort them," Hank told Tristan. He turned to Adrienne. "Really, if you had your eyes set on Trevor, why didn't you just tell us? We would have left you alone."

She watched, dumbfounded as they followed the Howard sisters into the house.

Trevor breathed an audible sigh of relief. "Thank goodness that is over."

Adrienne glared at him and crossed her arms.

"Whoa! There's no need to look like you're going to kill me. I just wanted those hounds off my back. I'll never get any work done with them stopping by the inn. As it is, I hardly get any farming done during the week."

"You had no right to say all of that. We're not courting." She refused to acknowledge that she was pleased he really wasn't interested in Bonnie or Trudy after all.

He studied her. "How many single men have been talking to you since you got here?"

Romancing Adrienne

Startled by his sudden question, she thought it over. "More than I care to admit."

"The same is happening with me and the women. Look, I haven't been able to write much since I got here because every time I sit down in the room, there's someone coming by for a visit, so I spend a lot of time in the parlor. I need to finish this play before I meet Mr. Adams. It took me a month to write the one that got ruined. I can't afford to lose any more time. So, do you want men to keep coming around to see you or would you really like to be left alone?"

"You know the answer to that. I want to be left alone."

"Then I have a deal for you. We both agree that we don't want to marry any of the people here. Let's pretend we're courting."

"That doesn't make any sense." *And I'm not as excited by the prospect as I seem.*

"It makes perfect sense. With the two of us together, the others will leave us alone."

She recalled all the men who made it clear that they would be willing to court her. If she went with Trevor's crazy scheme, she could survive the next month or two in peace, and it wouldn't be that bad to be with him. "Alright. You got yourself a deal."

"Good. I was really getting tired of fending those women off." He got up on the horse. "I'll take you home."

She accepted his hand and let him help pull her up. She got in front him and wrapped her arms around his waist. "I thought you were interested in Melissa," she said as he urged the horse forward. Her grip tightened. "Why are you pretending to court me instead of her?"

"To be honest, I think Clark will be better for Melissa. I'm heading for New York, and she wouldn't be happy there. It's best that they're together."

"You're probably right." She was secretly relieved he felt that way. "But is it right to lie to people about courting?"

Romancing Adrienne

"It's only for a short while. Then I'll go to New York and you can stay here if you want. That is, of course, unless you would like to marry me. Then we can go together."

"Oh, well, we're just pretending to be more than friends."

"Sometimes what starts as pretend can become the real thing."

She struggled to maintain her balance. She finally gave up and leaned against him so she wouldn't have to fight for control over the horse. *I'm not enjoying being this close to him. He's not that exciting.* "Why did you irritate the bull so he came after me?"

"The truth?"

She nodded.

"I thought if I could separate you from Clark, then he would pay attention to Melissa."

"Why didn't you just ask me to stay away from him? I think they go well together."

"You tried to get away but he wouldn't leave you alone. I knew there was no way he'd follow you into the bathroom."

She admitted that he had a point. Clark had been stuck to her like glue.

"Do you forgive me?" he asked, his breath warm against her hair.

"I guess so, but next time, just tell me what you want instead of getting me dirty."

"It's a deal."

They reached the stable and he helped her off the horse. Her body tingled as he held her for a moment before letting her go. She couldn't be sure, but it seemed as if he wanted to kiss her. Disappointed, she followed him to the inn. Suddenly, she giggled.

"What's so funny?" he wondered, looking at her. "Do I walk wrong?"

"No. It's just that watching Bonnie and Trudy fawn all over you was fun."

Romancing Adrienne

"You enjoyed that, did you?"

She shrugged. "A little." Since she knew he wasn't interested in them, she could see the humor in it.

To her surprise, Bronson came out of the entrance once they reached the inn. He smiled widely at Adrienne. "Good afternoon to you, my fair Miss Dayton. I hoped I would see you."

She glanced uneasily at him, unsure of how to handle the situation.

Three other single men came up to her.

"I was wondering if you would allow me the honor of courting you?" Bronson asked. "I think you might find staying here to your liking, and I sure do like a woman who knows her way around the kitchen."

"I want someone who can give me lots of children," another man told her. "You look like you have nice birthing hips."

"When you're not hideously dressed, you make a beautiful ornament," an older man said. "I can put you on display for all my friends to admire."

"No, no, no," the final one protested. "She'll make a perfect bed partner on all those cold, lonely nights."

"Wait a minute there, gentlemen," Trevor interrupted. "We've got something to settle. I'm courting her."

"But she's not married," Bronson stated. "Courtships aren't final."

"Yep," another man agreed. "Unless you're married, we fully intended to come by with tokens of our affections."

Adrienne stared at the four men in wonder. Were they serious? Perhaps it was time to move things up a notch.

"Aren't you going to tell them?" she asked Trevor.

Trevor raised his eyebrows. "Tell them what?"

"About your proposal?"

The men frowned.

"Does she mean a marriage proposal?" Bronson inquired.

Romancing Adrienne

Trevor adjusted his hat and grinned. "Sorry to break your hearts, men, but she's right. I did ask her to marry me. She didn't give me an answer though." Looking at her, he asked, "Should I take this as a yes?"

It's only pretend. She knew that he was helping her out, just as she was helping him, but the idea of an actual proposal thrilled her. Though why it did, she couldn't understand. She had no intention of marrying, did she?

Taking a deep breath, she nodded. "Yes." So it was a fake proposal and a fake yes, but her heart was beating furiously in her chest.

"I had no idea. I apologize to both of you," Bronson replied, looking glum.

After the grumbling men left so they could be alone, Trevor commented, "Marriage is romantic, don't you think?"

"It's not like we're really getting married."

He hesitated for a moment as he glanced at the sky. "Maybe we should get married. What do you think?"

"Are you serious or are we pretending?"

Taking her in his arms, he whispered, "Why do you find it hard to believe I honestly want to be with you?"

The question caught her off guard. Struggling to come up with a proper answer, she said, "Because no man has wanted to be with me unless they wanted something from me."

"You are someone worth being appreciated and loved. Don't I treat you better than the other men?" He gently kissed her.

She pulled him closer as he deepened the kiss. He felt so wonderful. Her pulse quickened.

He gently pulled away from her when the kiss ended. "After your history with men, it's understandable that you feel the way you do. I want you to know that I do care about you."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"You are a wonderful man, Trevor. I do enjoy being with you."

Romancing Adrienne

"I'm glad to hear that." He kissed her again.

She let him take her hand.

Before they entered the inn, Mrs. Gallows burst through the door, excitement written all over her face. "Is it true? Have you reconciled and plan on marrying?"

Adrienne didn't hide her surprise. When did Bronson have time to spread the news?

Trevor put his arm around Adrienne's shoulders and pulled her close to him. "It is. We realized that our petty differences shouldn't drive us from the love we share. After all, marriage is hard work, but it's worthwhile work."

"I'm so thrilled! I can tell when two people love each other. I'll arrange for the preacher to marry you after the church service. It won't be anything fancy."

Her eyes widened. Tomorrow?

"As long as I have the love of my life in my arms, I don't care what kind of ceremony it is." He grinned at her.

"Adrienne, since you're the bride, you're not allowed to cook," Mrs. Gallows said. "You have to enjoy being with the groom."

He squeezed her shoulders. "You heard it straight from Mrs. Gallows. You have to enjoy me."

Mrs. Gallows ran back into the inn.

"We're going to have a lot of fun together." He winked at her. "Stay here. I want to get you something."

Before she could ask him what he was getting, he ran into the inn. While she waited, wondering if they were still pretending or not, someone hit her on the head and she went unconscious.

Chapter Seventeen

Adrienne's head pounded as she became aware of her surroundings. She sat on a wooden chair, and her hands were tied behind her back and her legs were tied to the chair so she couldn't go anywhere. Opening her eyes, she noticed that she was in a small, dusty cabin. The only pieces of furniture in the place were a couple of wood chairs and a wobbly table. Two full sacks rested on the floor in the corner of the room. Most likely, they contained a sizable bounty.

"I can't believe you brought her here," a man with a gruff voice said. "We were supposed to be on our way west."

She recognized the speaker as one of the train robbers. They were talking outside the cabin.

"This is why she's here." The other man, most likely the one with the birthmark, replied. "Her father is rich, and he's posted a reward for anyone who brings her to him. I've already notified him that we found her. I'm sure he'll reply and then we'll go to San Francisco to drop her off. Then we continue to our destination."

"It's risky to stay in this area. We're wanted men."

"You saw those jewels she came with. Can you imagine how much her father is worth?"

The other man loudly sighed. "We have to stay hidden here. Don't go into town unless you're in disguise...and only go to check for a letter from her father."

"That's my plan."

She closed her eyes. Her father would want to get her back. She tested the ropes on her hands and legs that held her firmly in place. She wasn't going anywhere unless they wanted her to. Glancing at the table, she noticed the paper with a drawing of her on it. She shook her head to get her hair out of her eyes. Frowning, she remembered that she had pulled her hair back with one of Bonnie's barrettes. Apparently, it fell off when the men abducted her.

Her chair scraped against the old wood floor as she moved it closer to the table to read the paper. She stilled as soon as she realized the men stopped talking. The door opened and the two robbers came into the cabin. She glimpsed the evening sky behind the filthy men.

"Hello, Miss Dayton," the one with the birthmark said. "It turns out you're worth a pretty penny. I bet you're hungry. I got some jerky. Want some?"

"Mark, don't talk to the prisoner," his companion warned.

"Oh come on, Lenny. It's going to take at least a week before we hear from her pa. We should feed her."

Her stomach grew queasy at the prospect of spending a week or more with these men.

"Now, don't worry, Miss," Mark told her. "We won't hurt you. We're only after your pa's reward. He misses you terribly."

She blinked back the tears from her eyes. Neither being with these men nor returning to Mr. Parker appealed to her.

"That's enough, Mark. Let her be." Lenny checked on her ropes to make sure she was secure. "Alright. Let's get some water for her. The river isn't far from here. I got a container on my horse."

Romancing Adrienne

After they left, she broke down and cried. The daylight faded into night. At least, they weren't going to hurt her. She should be grateful for that much. She would never see Trevor or Mr. and Mrs. Gallows or Mrs. Harper again. Her brief stay in Virginia would soon be a memory, and a life of a loveless marriage loomed before her.

Sometime after Mark and Lenny returned with food and jerky for her, they went back outside to their tent, leaving her with a single candle for light. The shadows spooked her, though she was determined not to show her fear and scream for someone to keep her company. She was better off alone with her imagination than with them.

It was in the middle of the night when she heard a loud disturbance from outside the cabin. Her senses alert, she listened for what the sounds might mean. Some shouting and a series of gunshots jerked her up in her seat. When someone threw open the door, she shrieked, first in fear and then in relief. It was the sheriff!

"Don't worry, Miss Dayton," he told her as he untied her hands and legs. "We got the crooks. They'll be safely behind bars."

Her body was stiff from hours of being bound to one place.

"Fortunately, that Lewis boy found the barrette you were wearing or else we wouldn't have tracked you down as soon as we did. Are you hurt?"

"No." She rubbed her wrists, grateful to be free. "Is Trevor here?" Her heart leapt in hopes of seeing him.

"He was but Jim had to ride him back to town. One of the crooks shot him."

"What? Is he...?" She couldn't say the word 'dead'. She couldn't even think it. Her heart pounded anxiously in her chest.

"He's still alive. The doctor will remove his bullet, but it's too soon to tell if he'll make it."

"I have to go see him."

Romancing Adrienne

"We don't have a doctor in town so Richie had to go to the next town over for one."

Would the fact that they had to wait for the doctor put Trevor's life in danger? Irritated that she wasted this much time talking to the sheriff, she insisted that he take her to the inn right away.

"Deputy Harvey will take you. I have to take the two men in once I find the money they stole."

"Over there, in the corner." She quickly pointed to the two sacks before she ran to find Harvey who had tied the two men to the horses so they couldn't escape. "Deputy, please take me back to the inn right away!"

He nodded and did as she requested.

When Adrienne entered Trevor's room at the inn, the middle-aged doctor was beside Trevor who lay on the bed, groaning and clutching his bleeding chest. The doctor set his medical bag on the nightstand.

"Is she alright? Did they get her out of the cabin?" Trevor weakly asked, sweat covering his body as he gasped for air.

She marveled that he could think of her at a time like this.

"Trevor, you need to conserve your energy," the doctor gently reprimanded him. "I was told that she's fine."

"I'm here," she spoke up.

The group of five people turned to her. She noted the look of relief on Trevor's face.

Mrs. Gallows shouted with glee and ran to hug her. "Thank goodness, you're safe! We feared the worst when Trevor said you were missing. You've got yourself a hero. He insisted on joining the sheriff and his men in finding you."

"There you go," the doctor told his groaning patient. "She's fine. Now, we have to get you well." He glanced at the

observers. "Mr. Gallows, get me some alcohol to help deaden the pain and sterile my instruments, and I'll need a couple of strong men to hold him down. He'll most likely fight me while I remove the bullet. Mrs. Gallows and Miss," he looked at Adrienne, "get me lots of fresh towels and several bowls of water. We're going to have to move quickly."

She numbly moved forward, her mind mechanically following the doctor's instructions. Was Trevor really that close to death? She hadn't seen anyone who'd been shot before. She and Mrs. Gallows grabbed clean towels and poured water into a couple of clean bowls. Returning to the room, they set them near the doctor who was using a washcloth to rub some alcohol on his scalp. She quickly left to get three more small bowls of water. She didn't know how much to get but when she returned and set them on the nightstand, she figured there were enough.

She cringed at the sight of Trevor squirming on the bed. She hadn't had such a clear view of him before. She couldn't tell exactly where the bullet was, but it looked dangerously close to his left lung. He groaned and gripped the sheets, his face contorted in pain. She backed to the side of the room. She was aware that three strong men were with Mr. Gallows by the bed, ready to hold Trevor to the bed.

Mrs. Gallows came over to her. "We should go to the parlor. There's no sense in being here."

Adrienne couldn't move. Though she wanted to look away, she couldn't.

The doctor nodded at the men. "Mr. Gallows, put this belt in his mouth so he can clamp down on it as I remove the bullet. The rest of you, hold him down. I need him to be as still as possible. I don't want to make a mistake."

The men grabbed Trevor who fought against them.

The doctor glanced at the women. "I need one of you to give me the bandages over there when I'm done. I'll need another one of you to tear off the tape."

Romancing Adrienne

Glad to be doing something, Adrienne hastened to grab the bandages.

"The doctor said the bullet missed his lungs and heart," Mrs. Gallows whispered. "It looks worse than it is."

She closed her eyes and said a brief prayer of thanks.

"Everyone ready?" the doctor asked.

The men nodded.

"Alright. Trevor, try to stay still. This is going to hurt."

She wasn't prepared for Trevor's screams when the doctor made the incision. Despite the fact that he tried to get away from the scalpel, the men held him firmly in place. She had to look away. It was hard to see him in that much pain. She heard the doctor throw the bullet in the bowl but she couldn't look at it. As long as she kept her focus on the clock in the corner of the room, she wouldn't feel faint.

Suddenly, Trevor stopped screaming and moving. She gasped and looked over at him.

"He's unconscious but alive," Mrs. Gallows gently assured her.

She breathed a sigh of relief. *Thank You, God. He's still alive.*

The doctor closed up his wound with stitches and she handed him the bandages when he asked for them. Then Mrs. Gallows gave him the tape. She helped Mrs. Gallows clean up the blood, which wasn't as much as she thought there would be.

The doctor handed Adrienne a bottle of pills. "Have him take two pills every four to six hours for the pain for the first two days. After that, he can go to every eight to twelve hours until the bottle is empty. He should feel fine in five to seven days, but he won't be carrying you over the threshold. Give him time to heal from his wound."

She nodded. It felt strange to be responsible for taking care of him. *I should expect it. People think we're engaged.* She glanced at him. He was still asleep. *When he wakes up,*

he'll be in a lot of pain. She made a mental note to get a glass of water to help him swallow the pills.

Mrs. Gallows patted her shoulder. "I'll bring in a cot for you to sleep on. I'm sure he'll want you here when he wakes up."

"Thank you, Mrs. Gallows." Her head was still spinning but she was certainly in better shape than Trevor was. She sat in the chair next to his bed as everyone left the room. Everything happened so fast. Earlier that day, Trevor was shooting a bull with a pebble to get Clark away from her, then she got abducted by the criminals, and now he was asleep on his bed after surgery. She didn't know what to think, but she realized she almost lost him and she didn't like that.

Chapter Eighteen

The first thought Trevor had when he woke up was that the sunlight was hitting his eyes again. The second thought was that he felt pain radiating from the lower left side of chest. He willed the pain away but it only intensified. When he opened his eyes, he squinted in the bright sunlight. What happened to him? He tried to sit up but the sharp stab of pain made him lay back down. He groaned and rubbed his eyes. *What happened last night?*

He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. It did little to ease the pain. The memories of the previous night filtered through his thoughts. A doctor had been in his room. One minute the doctor was cutting into him, and then everything went black and his pain went away. *Only, the pain is still here, though not nearly as bad.* Adrienne had been there in the room, so she was safe. He had never been as scared as he was when he realized she was missing. *But she made it. She was right here.*

He reached for the source of pain and felt a large bandage over it. He groaned and tried to sit up. He doubled over in pain and laid back down. *Why can't I move without hurting?* He was determined to sit up, so he held his hand over

his wound and took his time sitting up. When he was finally sitting up in his bed, he noticed a glass of water and two pills on his nightstand. He didn't bother to consider if it was for him. He assumed the doctor had left them there for him to take when he woke up. He gratefully took the pills and swallowed them. He almost gagged on the water. He didn't feel like eating or drinking anything. He put the glass back down and sat still for a few minutes. The pain was still intense but he didn't want to further aggravate it by moving.

I got shot. No wonder I'm in so much pain this morning. I went through surgery without any medication. But she was alright so it was worth it. *Adrienne. Where is she?* He took a moment to will his mild headache away before he opened his eyes and looked around his room. When he did, he almost wished he hadn't. Adrienne was sitting across the room by the dresser. Her hands were holding his play which was half done. He almost smiled but realized she was fuming. *Uh oh. This isn't going to be good.*

She tapped her feet on the floor and crossed her arms. Her eyes pierced him with enough intensity that he had to look away. "I read what you wrote so far in your play," she finally said in an irritated voice.

He winced. His headache suddenly seemed to get worse. He brought his hand up to his forehead and rubbed it where the pain shot through him. His chest felt better now that he was sitting still, but that was little consolation.

"It's interesting to see what you really think of me," she continued. "I had no idea I was so snobby and cold."

"Can we talk about this later?" he weakly asked. He wasn't in any shape to explain his comedy to her at the moment.

"I want to talk about it now." She uncrossed her arms and motioned to his unfinished play. "Let's start at the beginning. I notice my name has been changed, but there's no denying it's me. You called me Iris Frigid. As in 'I am frigid.' Apparently, your character is likeable, though a bit clumsy. But

there's nothing likeable about me at all. I dread contact with any man and need to be tamed. It's almost like getting me to think well of the opposite sex is a game to you."

"It's supposed to be a comedy," he replied despite the throbbing pain in his head. When was the pain medicine going to work?

"I don't find it very humorous. Here I am in the first act, laughing as your play got destroyed because I just ran away from a slobbering old fool I was supposed to marry. Then when we get to the remote village, you are forced to marry me against your will in order to avoid marrying the village spinster who looks atrocious. Of course, since I have vowed to never let a man near me, I am a hard woman to get along with. I even dress in your clothes in order to look unattractive."

"It's a work of fiction. You're not like that character."

"Oh really? She sure sounds a lot like me. She came from a wealthy family so she detests any thought of housework and she couldn't handle getting dirty when she had to wash the clothes."

He grinned. "She got all tangled up in the wash and fell into the river. It was funny."

"Funny for you maybe, but I don't find it particularly humorous."

"If you saw it on stage, it would be a riot."

She tensed. "And she's a lousy cook. She almost burns the house down, and the very smell of her food makes everyone gag."

"Now, you can clearly see that she's not you."

She flipped through the pages he had written. "She is impossible to get along with. There is no likeable quality in her character."

"I haven't written the turning point in her character yet. Give me time and you'll see where I'm going with it."

"I don't think that will happen. I have already decided that I won't read anything else you write."

Romancing Adrienne

He sighed. "Did you notice what my character is like? I'm a country bumpkin who can't speak proper English. I also bump into everything."

"Including her. They end up falling into a pile of leaves together."

"Where they kiss and she melts in his arms." He smiled. "I like that part. It's the first time she softens up."

She bolted to her feet. "I don't like any of this. You are going to present this to a theatre owner in New York with the hopes everyone will see this acted out on stage?"

He didn't know what to say. Whatever he said, she would take it the wrong way.

"I ought to tear this garbage up," she snapped.

"No!" He tried to stand up but the pain in his lower chest brought him back to his sitting position. "Please, don't destroy it again. I need to have something to hand in to Mr. Adams or I'll lose my job."

She yelled in aggravation as she threw the papers into the air so they fell at random all over the floor. "I knew it! You never cared about me. I was nothing but a subject for your play."

"Adrienne, that's not true. I want to marry you."

"So you can have a happy ending?"

"Sure. It's the only way a romantic comedy can end."

"Well, this is real life. I'm not Iris. I'm not going to follow your script. As far as I'm concerned, we have nothing else to say to one another."

His eyes grew wide. She couldn't be serious. He forced himself to stand up despite the pain. "Adrienne, I may use some reality in my work, but the play is a piece of fiction. I don't see you the way I see Iris. You're just scared and alone. Iris is bitter and resentful."

"Scared and alone? So I'm someone you need to feel sympathy for. I don't know what is worse: being a nag or pathetic."

Romancing Adrienne

"You're neither. I love you. I think you're wonderful. You've just had some bad experiences."

"Which I'm sure you'll incorporate into your precious play."

He tried to stop her as she walked to the door but he winced as the pain stabbed him. "Please don't go. Let's talk about this."

She angrily left the room and slammed the door.

He was too weak to follow her.

She quickly opened the door. "Take two pills every four to six hours. Don't lift anything heavy and don't eat anything that's hard on the digestive system. The bottle of pills is on the dresser." She slammed the door again.

He groaned. He wanted to run after her and stop her but he fell to the floor, exhausted and in pain. He should have been relieved that she didn't tear up his work, but he would rather have her in his arms. He leaned against the bed and closed his eyes. He was in no shape to do anything at the moment. *How am I going to get her back?*

Later that day after Trevor fell asleep due to the medication, someone knocked on his door. He had just finished dressing for the day, so he opened the door. He had hoped it was Adrienne but he hid his disappointment when he saw the kind, old woman.

"Good morning, Mrs. Gallows," he said.

"I thought you should know Adrienne's father came for her. She didn't want to go with him but he insisted so they went to the train station with Mr. Gallows."

Her father is going to take her to marry Mr. Parker. "What time did they leave?" he asked.

"Just a few minutes ago. Trevor, she looked so sad but she willingly went with him."

Romancing Adrienne

He closed his eyes so he wouldn't scream in aggravation. Even if she never spoke to him again, he couldn't let her marry someone who only valued her for her ability to have children. "Can I take a horse to the train station?"

"I hoped you would want to bring her back. You can take Willow."

He grabbed his pain pills and wallet and left the room. He didn't waste time. Though his chest was still tender, the medicine did help him feel better. He rode Willow hard to the train station. When he got there, the train had just pulled out. He gritted his teeth. There she was, the love of his life, heading back west to marry another man. He was in no shape to ride a horse to the next train station. As it was, his pain was growing intense due to being bounced around on the horse. He forced Willow to remain still while he waited for the pain to subside so it was only mild again. He took two more pills.

Mr. Gallows walked up to him. "I'll send a request for the next train to stop here. They went to San Francisco. I got their address. Come along. You are in no shape to stay on a horse right now."

He knew the man was right so he gingerly got off of Willow. He limped to the platform of the train station and sat down. Mr. Gallows took Willow and tied her up. Trevor took a deep breath and willed himself to calm down. He was angry. Why hadn't he ridden Willow faster? *Because it nearly killed me to ride her as hard as I did.* If he had gone faster, he would have doubled over in pain and fell off the animal. He never felt so helpless in his entire life. *Why did she have to read the play before I finished it?* If they had married, then her father wouldn't have been able to take her back. He didn't want to cry. He was in danger of losing her for good. He anxiously brushed the tears from his eyes. Being a writer made him more sensitive to emotions than he cared to admit.

Mr. Gallows handed him a small loaf of bread, a train ticket to San Francisco and some money. "I don't want to see her with Mr. Parker either. You'll catch the afternoon train."

Romancing Adrienne

Hopefully, a couple of hours won't make that much of a difference."

"Thank you, sir," he said.

Mr. Gallows nodded and went back to the platform.

He thanked the Lord for Mr. Gallows' generosity. *Even if she doesn't want to marry me, please let me stop her father from insisting on her marriage to Mr. Parker.*

When the train came at two, he got on it and sat down in his seat. He looked at the seat across from him which was vacant. He recalled how she looked when he first saw her. She reminded him so much of Emma, except Emma had blond hair and green eyes. *She's soft and delicate with a mixture of passion.* He tried not to imagine things that weren't likely to ever be, but the train ride was a long one. As he dozed off to sleep, he dreamt that they had married that day and he was sitting next to her on the train heading for New York. When he woke up, he looked over, expecting to see her sitting next to him. But the empty seat only reminded him of how things hadn't gone as planned.

Nothing went as planned from the moment he said good-bye to his family. He had fully anticipated arriving in New York with his finished play in hand. He would attend the writer's class and bide his time until he was due to hand in his play to Mr. Adams for review. Then he would begin his career as a playwright. Everything was in order and carefully planned out. But the robbers came on the train, stole his money, Adrienne threw him off the train in her efforts to avoid her father and he ended up staying in a small town and fell in love. *I won't let you marry Mr. Parker, Adrienne. I promise you that I will do everything I can to save you from what you fought so hard to avoid. Then I'll leave you alone if that's what you want.*

Chapter Nineteen

Adrienne decided she wouldn't fight her destiny anymore. She would follow along with her father's arrangement and marry Mr. Parker so she could have his children. She would just close her eyes and pray she would get pregnant right away. Maybe after she had a couple of children, he would leave her alone. She tried not to think of Trevor. She missed him, even though she didn't want to. The train ride back to California was long and exhausting. She refused to talk to her father who spent his entire time next to her so she couldn't escape again.

When she got off the train, her mother apologized to her and gave her a long hug. She cried and hugged her mother back. She had missed her mother. After her father went to arrange a wedding that evening between her and Mr. Parker, she and her mother had a long talk.

"I'm sorry, dear," her mother cried. "I didn't tell him what I did but he went to the train station and found out which train you went on, where you were headed and rode a horse until he caught up with you. He searched all the towns in the area where you jumped off the train until he found you. I pleaded

with him to let you go your own way, but he is convinced that his way is best.”

“It’s alright, Mother. I’ve been running all this time but I have to give up at some point. I can’t hide forever. I might as well accept my life with Mr. Parker.”

“I had wished it would be different for you. You should get the chance to marry for love or not marry at all.”

A new wave of tears fell from her eyes. Trevor didn’t love her. He was only interested in his stupid play. Everything he did and said was for the play. Wasn’t being with Mr. Parker and knowing he didn’t care for her and she didn’t care for him better than living under the hope that Trevor might find her interesting enough to keep for life?

“I won’t argue with Father anymore,” she finally told her mother.

“I wish it could be different.”

She nodded. She did too, but it wasn’t meant to be. She replayed her adventure in Virginia and the people she met. She recalled the way Trevor smiled at her, the conversations they had shared, and how he kissed her. Didn’t he care for her, even a little? Maybe if she pretended he had, then it would get her through the rest of her life to believe someone had valued her for who she was instead of what she could give him.

Mr. Parker didn’t come by for a visit, nor was she anxious for him to. They would be married that evening, and that was too soon to see him. She didn’t relish her role but numbly went along with it. She would have gladly traded all the money in the world to be in a marriage with a Trevor who honestly loved her.

She went through the motions as if in a dream. She bathed, put on perfume and makeup. She let Mr. Parker’s two female servants dress her in a beautiful gown and fix her hair so that it fell in gentle waves around her shoulders. Though they were laughing and marveling at how wonderful she looked, she stared at the wall in front of her. She forced all thoughts of anyone or anything from her mind. She stood up

when it was time to go to the church at eight. She followed her parents to the carriage but didn't listen to their conversation.

At one point, her father turned to her. "One day, you'll understand. You're only eighteen. You don't know what's best for you. Mr. Parker will be good to you."

Trevor would have been better. She forced the thought from her mind. Trevor was in Virginia, a long way from her. It didn't matter if he was sincere or not. She belonged to Mr. Parker. She closed her eyes, willing her tears to not fall from her eyes so she wouldn't ruin her make-up.

When they arrived at the church, she waited in the bridal chamber with her friends Annabelle and Bianca, but she didn't pay attention to what they were saying. Someone knocked on the door to announce that the groom was ready. She sighed. *Mr. Parker is ready. I better do what he wants. He's in control now.* She took a deep breath and followed Annabelle and Bianca out of the room. Bianca was her maid of honor. Annabelle was her bridesmaid.

She stood behind them and waited for her turn to walk down the aisle. When her father reached his arm out to her, she refused to look at him. The people rose from their pews as the wedding march started, and she dragged her feet in line with her father's footsteps. She was barely aware that people commented on how beautiful she looked. Instead, she allowed herself to imagine, just for the moment, that Trevor was waiting for her at the front of the church.

Her father handed her over to Mr. Parker. She couldn't look at him as she took his hand. She cringed at his touch. *I hope sex doesn't last long.* As the preacher began to speak, someone called out, "Stop the wedding! I love you, Adrienne!"

She blinked. Was she imagining things? When Mr. Parker let go of her hand and glanced over his shoulder, she allowed herself to imagine that Trevor was there to rescue her. She slowly turned and cried with relief when she saw that Trevor was indeed running down the aisle toward her. He was

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sorely out of place in his farm clothes that hadn't been changed for a few days, but she never saw a more handsome sight.

He was out of breath by the time he reached her. "Adrienne, you can't go through with this. Don't you know that I want to spend the rest of my life with you?"

Despite the murmurs around her and Mr. Parker's stunned expression, she hugged him tightly. "I love you too, Trevor. I don't want to marry Mr. Parker."

He hugged her back. "Then don't, sweetheart," he whispered. "Come to New York with me. I'll be a playwright and you can be my beautiful and wonderful wife."

"I'd go anywhere with you, Trevor."

"What do you think you're doing?" her father hissed.

She pulled away from Trevor so she could look at her father. "I can't marry Mr. Parker. I'm going to New York with Trevor. I want to be with him." *And he wants to be with me! He does love me after all!*

"Let her go with him," her mother softly told her father. "He loves her so much he came all the way to San Francisco to get her back. Don't you want her to be as happy as we've been?"

"I was only going to marry her as a favor to you," Mr. Parker confessed to her father. "I would rather be with Ashley." *Ashley?*

"I had no idea..." Her father looked bewildered. "I'm sorry to both of you," he told Adrienne and Mr. Parker. "Clearly, I was wrong."

She breathed a sigh of relief and hugged him. "Thank you, Father."

He hugged her back.

Trevor smiled widely at her. "Will you marry me, sweetheart?"

"Just try to stop me," she replied.

"I'll take that as a yes."

"Miss Constance, will you marry me?" Mr. Parker asked the woman from the back of the church.

Romancing Adrienne

Everyone turned to look at her. She stood up and nodded.

Mr. Parker turned to Adrienne and Trevor. "I'd be willing to make this a double wedding. It'd be a shame for a young man to come all this way and not get to marry the woman he loves."

"Thank you, Mr. Parker," Adrienne said.

He smiled at her. "I'm glad it worked out for everyone."

"What do you say, Trevor? Care to marry me here?"

"Sweetie, I'd marry you anywhere, and here is as good a place as any." He held her hand and winked. "And we got to think of our children. The sooner we get married, the sooner we can start having them."

She laughed. Having children with him seemed very pleasing to her.

Miss Constance and Mr. Parker looked thrilled to be marrying each other.

Trevor grinned at her and squeezed her hand while the preacher began to speak. "I'll love you every day for the rest of my life," he whispered.

"And I'll love you." She smiled, and for once, marriage seemed like the most lovely institution in the world.

