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Sulfur Falls, Colorado Territory *July 26, 1876*

Molly Ellen Whitcomb stepped from the train onto the station platform in Sulfur Falls and paused, unsure of where to go and what to do next—in so many ways. The train whistle sounded, its shrill blast echoing off the station walls and bouncing down the crowded open-air corridor. The engine belched a steady stream of smoke and soot, and from somewhere behind her, the distinct clearing of a throat urged her forward. Each step was heavy, coerced, a reminder of what had brought her to this place. And of just how far she'd fallen.

Holding tight to the worn periodical tucked under her arm, she followed the flow of disembarking passengers and allowed herself to be swept along with the tide. Her arrival to Sulfur Falls was premature, four days earlier than planned. She'd wired the mayor of Timber Ridge to let him know of the change, but the clerk informed her the telegraph lines were down due to heavy rains.

Peering up into steely skies, she rubbed the ache in her lower back, doubting that status had changed.

To the west, still streaked with vestiges of winter, the lofty peaks of the Rocky Mountains reigned high above the rustic cattle town. She'd seen pictures of the mountains before, and while the gray-toned images were impressive, renderings on paper paled when standing in the shadow of their truer splendor. She almost felt as though she should curtsy out of respect—until a breeze stirred. Then she grimaced.

Her stomach reacted to the smell, and she put a hand to her nose. The stench of manure hung heavy, and trash scuttled along the station platform and edges of the street. When the steward in Denver had told her yesterday that Sulfur Falls marked the end of the line, he hadn't been exaggerating. The train track literally came to an abrupt stop a hundred yards past the depot before looping back to join the main line.

"Trunks can be fetched down line, ma'am! At the end, to your left."

With sparing breaths, Molly looked up to see a steward motioning her forward.

He eyed the periodical under her arm. "Want me to dispose of that for you, ma'am?"

She tightened her grip. "No, I'll keep it, tha—" The gratitude died on her lips. The man had already looked away.

She moved in the direction he'd pointed—until a storefront across the street caught her eye. The wooden shingle hanging above the shop door swayed in the breeze, as though beckoning. And with the soft flutter of a moth's wing, a possibility brushed the edge of her thoughts.

She hesitated, then stepped to one side of the platform to let others pass.

The idea forming in her mind went against every scruple she held, and against the integrity she'd sought so earnestly to pass along to her former students at Franklin College in Athens, Georgia.

Scruples. Integrity. Honesty.

"Two wrongs don't make a right, Miss Cassidy," she'd lectured a female student last fall who'd been caught cheating and tried to lie her way out of it.

Molly stared at the wooden shingle, knowing that was what she would be attempting to do if she acted on her impulse—trying to make two wrongs equal a right.

Her body flushed hot and cold as she recalled being ushered into the college president's office early one morning only three short weeks ago, before first-hour classes convened. Her dismissal from Franklin College had been swift and humiliating, on so many levels. What she'd done was wrong. She knew that. That was never in question. Yet the punishment seemed so severe, and she'd protested—at first.

But when President Northrop conveyed his intentions should she refuse to resign her position and leave the college, she'd acquiesced. Immediately. He'd found the one weakness in her armor and had quashed her with it.

His "strong suggestion" that she take this particular teaching position and start over again had only been made more so by his refusal to provide a letter of recommendation for any other, including any school she'd suggested back east. And without a letter of recommendation, no reputable college or school would give her a second glance.

Taking a steadying breath, she smoothed a lace-gloved hand over her blue jacquard vest. She'd worked hard to earn her doctorate, to garner the revered title of *Professor*, same as her father, and to make a forward stride for women in academia. And had lost it all in a single act.

In the end, President Northrop had won—as men in authority always did. Because here she was, a world away from civilization and proper society, with everything she'd worked to achieve . . . stripped bare.

Her decision made, Molly made a beeline for the storefront.

She glanced around to see if anyone was watching her, then caught herself and choked back a bitter laugh. No one knew her in this town. Not a single solitary soul. A more remote location for her new "teaching opportunity" could not have been found. Not unless the Alaskan Wilderness had been an option. If it had, she was certain she would have been stepping from a train onto a vast frozen tundra about now.

Meanwhile, back at Franklin College, Professor Jeremy Fowler had been given a strong reprimand, a renewed professorship—and was sending out wedding invitations. But without her name on them. She swallowed the bitter taint on her tongue. She should have been accustomed to the unequal standards by now, but she wasn't.

Eyes downcast, she waited for a carriage to pass, then started across the street.

"Beg your pardon, ma'am, but trunks are claimed on down the way there."

She turned to tell the steward she was only running a quick errand, but it wasn't the steward addressing her this time. Judging from the man's rain-slicked duster and weathered wide-brimmed hat, he wasn't employed by the railroad. And she was certain she'd never seen him before. She would have remembered if she had.

Handsome hardly began to describe him—which, at one time, might have been enough to pique her interest. Not anymore.

The man's expression seemed open and honest, especially his smile. "I noticed you getting off the train just now, and . . . well, ma'am, this part of town isn't the friendliest. Just wanted to

make sure you knew where you were going. 'Cause if you don't, sweet lass"—a twinkle lit his eyes as he slipped into a flawless Scottish brogue—"you might soon be findin' yourself somewhere you're not wantin' to be." Laughing softly, he gave the brim of his worn cowboy hat a tug. "That advice comes free, compliments of my grandfather, Ian Fletcher McGuiggan, God rest his soul. He used to tell me that every time I stepped foot out the door."

Molly could spot a flirt as fast as she could a roach on a wall. Being a professor of Romance Languages, as they were often called, tended to attract men of that persuasion. But there was nothing flirtatious in this man's manner. Quite the opposite. Sincerity punctuated his tone, as did familiar Southern roots.

"It sounds as if your grandfather was a very wise man, sir."

"He was that. Ornery as the day was long, but you'd be hard-pressed to find a kinder, gentler soul who ever walked this earth."

It took Molly a second to realize she was smiling. Then another to realize the response was genuine this time, not the brittle fabrication she'd forced in recent weeks.

Judging from this stranger's accent, she guessed him to be from Tennessee. Or South Carolina, perhaps. Definitely educated. He'd been out of the South for a while, telling by the gentler drawl. But he certainly had his grandfather's brogue mastered.

His expression turned wistful. "Not a day goes by that I don't think about him."

"And wish he were still here with you," Molly added, sensing what he hadn't said.

"Yes, ma'am." He tilted his head. "I take it you had a grandfather of similar character?"

"A father, actually . . . God rest him." And not a day had gone by that she hadn't wished he were still with her. Yet, at the same time, for the past few weeks she'd thanked God daily that he wasn't. Her punishment was great enough without being made to live it through her father's eyes.

"My condolences to you, ma'am." He removed his hat, and his voice went soft. "Was his passing recent?"

"A year ago . . . yesterday. He'd been ill, so I knew his time was close. At least I had an opportunity to say good-bye," she whispered, struck by the intimacy of their exchange. And in the train depot of a forgotten little town in the Colorado Territory, no less. Her father had said that their good-byes weren't forever, that they were only for now. But at times they certainly felt more final than temporary.

The man stared, saying nothing, and she waited for a feeling of awkwardness to set in at the lengthening silence. But it didn't. The oddest sense of ease flowed between them, and something told her such a situation wasn't an unusual occurrence for him—this tendency not to fill every moment with words, despite his having approached her first.

She hadn't expected such chivalry so far west, especially considering some of the brutish men she'd met on her two-week journey.

"Well . . ." He returned his hat to his head, and his coat shifted in the process, revealing a badge pinned to his vest beneath. "My apologies if I've kept you from your business, ma'am. Good day to you, and I hope you find Sulfur Falls to your liking."

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask him what he knew of Timber Ridge, but seeing the badge was enough to silence that urge. She wanted nothing to do with another man in authority, however genuine and kindhearted he seemed. "Good day, sir. And thank you again for your concern."

Avoiding the muck and mire as best she could, Molly continued on across the street, resisting the nudge to glance back at the lawman. A cargo wagon barreled down the street, and

the driver, his whiskered cheeks bulging, showed no sign of stopping. Giving him a hard stare, Molly paused in the middle of the street until he passed. Uncouth rabble . . .

The main thoroughfare was scarred and deeply rutted. It made for interesting walking, especially in her heeled boots.

A rather large and odorous *deposit* loomed in her path, and she managed a quick side step to avoid it. From the plentitude of droppings, it looked as though a herd of cattle had been driven straight down the center of Main Street. *Unbelievable.*

Thankful to have reached the boardwalk unscathed by man or beast, she climbed the stairs and cut a path down the uneven plank walkway, apprehension nipping her heels. Standing in front of the shop door, she pulled her father's pocket watch from her reticule. The stage for Timber Ridge was scheduled to leave within the half hour, and she still needed to facilitate the transfer of her luggage. So little time.

Gathering her flagging nerve, she opened the door.

A gentleman stood behind the counter sorting through a drawer. Not until Molly saw him did she realize how much she wished a woman were there to assist her with her purchase. An image of her father rose in equal measure with the voice of reluctance within, and her stomach knotted tight. "*Well done, Dr. Whitcomb,*" her father had whispered as she'd paused beside him on the stage, diploma in hand. "*A father could not be prouder of his daughter.*"

That had been four years ago, and still the words, and the memory, resonated within her. Yet for an altogether different reason now. Knowing what her father's opinion of her recent choices would have been made her question what she was about to do. But knowing what her future held if she *didn't* carry through with this decision silenced the voice of hesitation.

The store clerk looked up. "Good afternoon, ma'am. How may I help you today?"

She glanced at the clock on the wall behind him. Best get directly to the point. "I'm interested in—" she took a deep breath—"purchasing a ring."

"Ah . . ." The man's expression brightened. "You've come to the right place, then, madam. Brentons' offers the finest collection of rings in all of Sulfur Falls."

Molly tried to look impressed.

He eyed her. "Let me guess. . . . Your taste runs more toward . . . rubies."

She shook her head, trying to find the right words. Her request was going to be harder to say aloud than she'd thought. "What I'm interested in is—"

"No, no!" He smiled. "Don't tell me." He gave his chin a thoughtful rub. "Sapphires," he said, expression hopeful.

He seemed a nice enough man and she hated to dash his hopes, but she could feel the seconds ticking. "No, sir. Those stones are lovely, I'm sure. However, I have something more specific in mind. And I'm pressed for time, so if you'll allow me to—"

"Diamonds!" He beamed. "I should have known. Come, follow me! We have a handsome assortment of them right over here."

The stagnant air inside the store grew thicker as Molly formed her next sentence. "I'm not looking for a ring with a stone, sir. I'm looking for something much . . ." She swallowed, hearing the jingle of his keys. "Simpler."

Bending to unlock one of the cases, he stilled, then slowly straightened. "Oh . . . I see." He gave a soft chuckle. "Let's go about this a different way, then, madam. Why don't you describe the type of ring you're looking for, and I'll show you what we have in that style."

Her mouth felt as if it were stuffed with cotton picked fresh from the bole, and she bit the side of her tongue, just a little, in order to trigger the mouth's natural response—a trick an elder

professor had passed along moments before she walked in to teach her first college-level course. “What I’m looking for is a wed—” Her voice broke. She couldn’t say it. But she had to.

She couldn’t bring herself to look the salesman in the eye. *Lord, please forgive me. Again.* “I’d like to look at your wedding bands, sir. Nothing ornate. Your most simple band will do.”

He stared. “I see,” he whispered, doubt filtering through his expression. He glanced past her. “Will your . . . husband be joining you today? To help make this purchase?” He said it almost hopefully, as if wanting to give her the benefit of the doubt.

“He will not,” she answered softly.

The salesman gave her an appraising look before walking to a case at the back of the store. “We customarily have an assortment of silver and gold bands, but the only silver bands I have right now have stones mounted in them. So singling out the *cheapest* bands we have—”

Did she imagine his emphasis on that word when he looked up at her?

“—you have two choices.” He laid two rings before her, his manner becoming a touch brusque.

Eager to finish, she picked up the ring on the right. It was lovely. Shiny gold with delicate etchings that gave the finish a brushed look. “What’s the cost of this one, please?”

He told her, and she tried not to put the ring back too quickly. Three months of her new salary as a schoolteacher! She picked up the ring on the left. It had a sheen but lacked the artistry and depth of color. “What about this one?”

He didn’t answer immediately. “That one is . . . four dollars.”

Well, that definitely suited her budget better. She held it at varying angles. “Why is this one so much less expensive?”

“Because it’s not pure gold. It’s only brass with a thin gold coating.”

She inspected the ring more closely, then pulled off her gloves and slipped it on the fourth finger of her left hand. A perfect fit, as though it had been specially made, waiting for her. Running the scenario through her mind again one last time, and arriving at the same conclusion as before, she knew she had no choice. “I’ll take it, thank you.” She quickly counted out the bills, laid them on the counter, and turned to leave.

“Not to belabor the point, ma’am. But you do realize that the ring you’ve bought is not real?”

Molly paused at the door, her hand on the latch, his words lingering in the silence as their meaning took deeper hold, along with the weight of her choice. She didn’t look back as she opened the door. “Yes, sir. I’m fully aware of that fact.”