

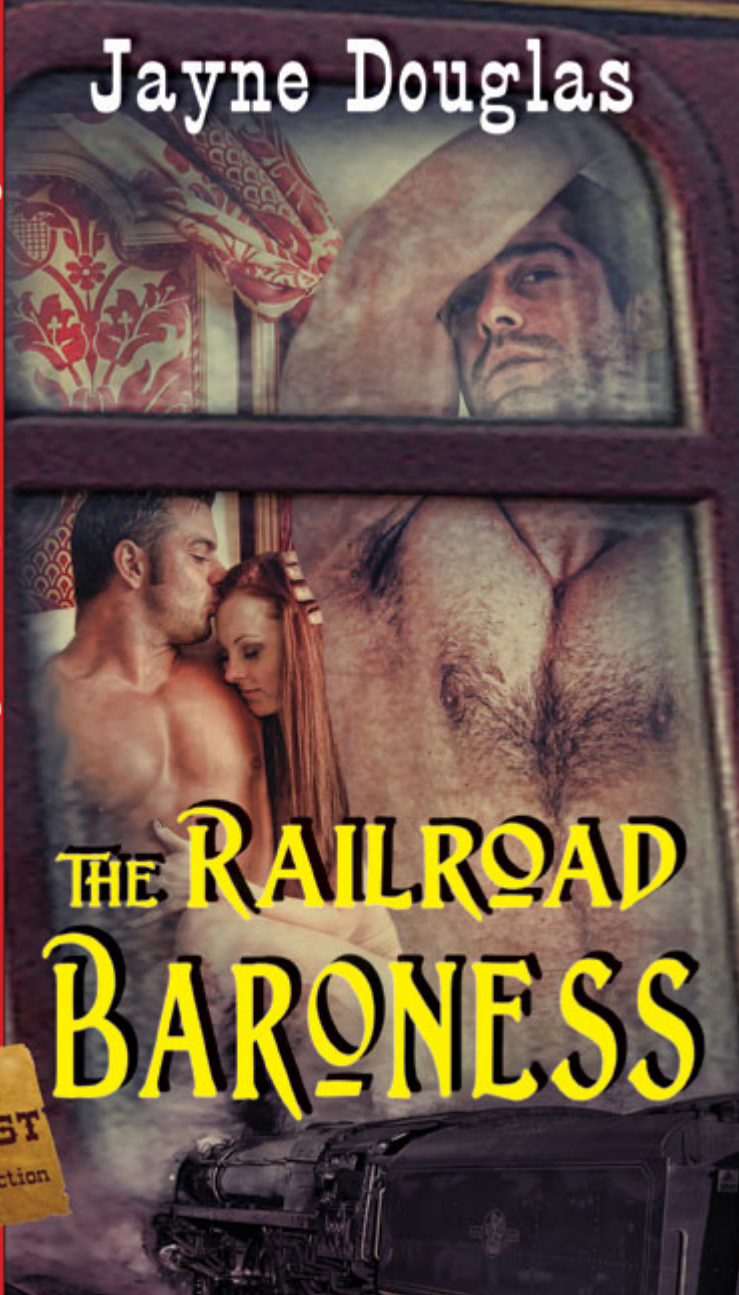
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Jayne Douglas

THE RAILROAD BARONESS



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During recent excavations in several abandoned western U.S. mining towns, a Siren editor/archaeology enthusiast discovered crates of old, tattered diaries and journals buried and lost for more than 100 years.

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THE RAILROAD BARONESS

The Lost Collection

Jayne Douglas

MENAGE EVERLASTING



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In 1862, an act of Congress granted land and subsidies to two railroads, with the goal of laying tracks across the country. The Union Pacific Railroad from the east and the Central Pacific Railroad Company from the west met at Promontory, Utah, on May 10, 1869, creating the first truly transcontinental railroad. The Golden Spike National Historic Site commemorates the event.

Dry-plate photography didn't come into wide use in the United States until the late 1870s, about a decade after the initial setting of *The Railroad Baroness*. Vastly superior to wet plates—which required the photographer to coat the glass plates, expose them, then develop the prints on the spot while still wet—dry plates could be exposed and developed at the photographer's convenience. I've taken the liberty of moving the technology back to make Conn Maguire's life a little easier.

While many resources were tapped in the writing of *The Railroad Baroness*, *Makin' Tracks: The Story of the Transcontinental Railroad in the Pictures and Words of the Men Who Were There*, by Lynne Rhodes Mayer and Kenneth E. Vose (Preager Publishers Inc., 1975), was of particular help. It's an amazing, and very readable, book.

-- Jayne Douglas

THE RAILROAD BARONESS

JAYNE DOUGLAS

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Chapter 1

“Huffing and puffing and belching a banner of black smoke, carrying a load of the demon drink and women of questionable virtue along with the much-needed supplies to lay the track West, far be it from this correspondent to dispute the iron beast’s well-earned moniker of Hell on Wheels.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

October 1867

“Here she comes.”

Charles Lowell Adams looked up from the sheaf of foolscap balanced on his thigh. Conn Maguire’s typically laconic observation, the distinctive Irish accent rolling the words together to form “harshecooms,” was freighted with anticipation.

Charles straightened on his folding stool as a roaring whistle sounded in the distance. The mule hitched to the boxy black carriage didn’t so much as twitch an ear. Charles’s horse, however, whickered nervously and tried to toss its head. Jerked up short by the halter tethered to the bench seat, the bay horse bared its teeth, mouthed the bit and gave another jerk before subsiding to flip its tail in restless

arcs. The mule gave the horse a disinterested stare over its shoulder, shifted its weight from one rear leg to the other and huffed out a sigh before stretching its neck to tear up a mouthful of yellowing grass. It chewed placidly as another whistle rent the cool fall air.

Setting his papers aside, careful to anchor them with a rock to prevent a stray breeze from blowing them away, Charles left his seat and joined his partner at the crest of the rolling hill they'd staked out. Using one hand to shade his eyes from the noonday glare, he looked to the east. The black, man-made beast rushed towards them on rolling feet, sun sparking off silver-brushed fittings as its tail snaked off into the distance. A thick column of smoke pearled away from the single stack on its head, a whitish-gray banner against a brilliant blue sky. It let out another roar, louder, closer, and for an instant, it was easy to believe the bellow came from the darkest pits. Easy to believe that hell on wheels was coming for them. Hallelujah, pass the whisky.

Charles snorted softly at his wayward imagination. Beside him, Conn bent to give the legs of the tripod holding up his boxy camera a final shake. Satisfied they were firmly planted, he grunted and stood up. Striding over to the carriage, he flung open the wooden doors at the rear of the custom-made vehicle.

"A hand here." It wasn't a request. Conn Maguire never requested anything. Charles slanted him a look but ambled over to join him. Pushing aside the black curtains that served as added protection inside the rolling darkroom, Charles grasped the scratchy rope handle on one side of the crate just inside. Conn mirrored his actions on the other and together they hoisted it out of the carriage. Watching each step, they carried the heavy crate and its fragile cargo to the tripod and carefully set it on the ground. Conn pried the top panel of wood free and leaned it against the side of the crate. Next, he folded back the heavy felt packing and carefully took a thick pane of glass from its slotted nest. With brisk efficiency, he slid the dry plate home in the camera's body. Then he hunched his brawny frame down behind the camera and flipped the black drape over his head and shoulders.

“So, what’s it to be then,” Charles asked. “A woman or a whisky?”

Conn grunted.

“You’re right. It is difficult to decide. The hard bite of alcohol or the tender nibbling of some lady fair.”

Again, an indistinct noise from under the drape.

“Care to wager on what sells out first?”

“Working here,” Conn finally said, impatience lacing his tone. Charles grinned. He knew how much it irked his friend to be distracted while he worked. It was why Charles did it.

Satisfied, he closed his mouth and waited. He figured Conn owed the boy he paid to keep a lookout for this particular train’s arrival a little something extra for giving them enough warning to move Conn’s equipment to the top of the hill beside the tracks. Charles was eager to see what the hell on wheels brought. It was always exciting when the supply camp moved up the line to set up at the end of the tracks.

Conn’s instinct for timing was, Charles noted, as impeccable as always. With practiced skill, the photographer removed the lens cap to expose the photo plate just as the creeping engine came even with their vantage point. Charles could make out the engineer’s soot-streaked face as he leaned out the side window. The engine’s whistle battled for supremacy with the squeal of metal wheel on rail as the engineer applied the brakes. The train slowed further in ragged shudders. Funnels of steam shot from the pistons as the iron behemoth stopped rolling with a final groan. Charles was so distracted by the noise he almost missed Conn’s shouted words.

“Charlie! Wake up, man!” Charles jolted around in time to take the glass plate Conn shoved at him, remembering to handle it carefully. Conn took another plate out of the crate and loaded it into the camera box. Reminded of his assigned task, Charles hunkered beside the crate, ready to take the next plate out.

“You need an assistant.”

Conn grunted. "Have you, don't I?"

Charles registered the protest more by rote than any real annoyance. In truth, Conn usually did his own carting and hauling. But when time was of the essence, such as catching the hell on wheels rolling into camp after months of—by comparison—living without the hint of civilized amenities, he really didn't mind lending a hand. He passed Conn the next plate.

A coating of dust dulled the paint of the locomotive. Once a gleaming black that would have made his father's valet weep with envy, it and the parade of cars were various shades of brown. The grime wasn't enough to hide the scrolling gilt letters painted on the engine's side that spelled out Great Western Rail Company. Their employer. While Conn was the company photographer for the western expansion project, it was Charles's job to keep the investing public interested in the effort. Without those moneyed investors, not to mention the intrigued voters who kept the Great Western Rail Company in the minds and hearts of the politicians the company needed to authorize payments and land allotments, they'd both be out of a job. Them and thousands of others.

The years of the war with the south had been lean ones for many. Soldiers weren't the only ones in need of a source of ready dollars. Farms and livelihoods had been devastated. The government coffers may have been depleted, but they weren't empty.

The politicians in Washington spoke long and eloquently about the need to unite the nation and give Americans a chance to heal the wounds of the past with hope for the future. They embraced the dream of opening the west. New lands, new purpose. Charles supposed it was much easier to dream when one wasn't wearing the same undergarments for weeks on end.

Above the immediate racket of escaping steam and cooling metal, Charles heard the distant shouts of the rail workers as they greeted the train's arrival. He again traded photo plates with Conn, storing the used one in the padded crate.

The two cars immediately behind the engine were loaded with wood and water to fuel the boiler. Then there were the supply cars, the ones that carried the raw materials to lay the track and feed and shelter the workers. Behind that came the true hell on wheels. The peaks of more than a dozen prebuilt and portable buildings arched out of the open cars. Unloaded and assembled into larger structures, they would give the men on the line the comfort of hot baths, fresh-laundered clothes, menus with a wider selection than salted beef and overcooked potatoes, liquor for those who wanted it and, most importantly, women.

Like an automaton, Charles handed Conn a fresh photo plate. Women. Lord, he'd never hungered for soft female flesh so much in his life. His cock stiffened at just the thought of scenting something other than unwashed—*very* unwashed—male, let alone touching it. He briefly closed his eyes and thought of burying his face in long, feminine tresses as he listened to quickening gasps of pleasure in response to the driving force of his plunging hips. The pressure behind the front placket of his trousers became abruptly uncomfortable. Charles forced his eyes open and his thoughts away from the painted women who made their living on the iron road. No doubt, his mother and sisters would be horrified to find out what had become of the gentleman they thought they knew.

His eye caught on the four cars bringing up the rear of the train. Unlike the others, which were dirty, dented and strictly utilitarian, these were painted a rich forest green. Yellow stripes, bright despite the obligatory coating of dust, flowed horizontally along the cars with elegant flare. Black wrought-iron railings surrounded the platforms at either end of each car.

The final car was the most glorious of all. Wide windows topped by shallow, decorative awnings dotted the sides. Interior drapes had been drawn across the windows. A large, elaborate monogram—TSW—was visible midway up the side of the car, near the rear railing. One curtain twitched aside, and Charles caught a glimpse of a

pale face peering back at them, there and then gone as the curtain dropped back into place. It was too fleeting to tell if the face belonged to a man or a woman. He was at least certain that it wasn't the mutton-whiskered face of Theodore S. Worthington, president and primary shareholder in the Great Western Rail Company.

Charles stared at the last car, wondering who it had brought. Then railroaders converged on the train to begin the mundane task of unloading it.

Conn tossed off the black fabric cape and stood up. He unloaded the used plate and returned it to the crate with all the care of a mother setting a baby in a cradle. Replacing the lid, he grasped the handle and looked at Charles expectantly.

"Well, then?"

Charles shook off his bemusement and gripped his own handle. "At your service, Mr. Maguire."

Together, they returned the crate to the carriage. Conn retrieved his camera gear and stowed it inside the confined space. While he did so, Charles folded up his stool and secured it to his saddle. Now that the train's whistle was silent, the bay had joined the mule in its desultory foraging of the wiry grass. Tipping the rock off his papers, Charles stowed the foolscap and pencil in his portable writing case. Slinging the strap over his shoulder, he went to the open doors of the carriage. Inside, Conn was already setting up his chemicals. Wrinkling his nose at the pungent odor that filled the gloomy, cramped interior, Charles suppressed a sneeze.

"You don't want to do that back at the crew car?"

"Too long. Better do it now, away from the swarm. There's just too many blasted people down there at the moment."

"Not interested in meeting the newcomers?"

Conn flashed him a rare grin. "Newcomers, is it? That what you're calling the womenfolk these days, Charlie lad?"

"Like you haven't felt the need for congenial feminine companionship every bit as much as I have."

Conn shrugged. "They'll still be there when I get back. Unlike you, my work won't wait. If I don't get these developed on the quick, might as well not've shot them at all."

"Fine, then." Charles repositioned the strap of the wooden writing case to rest bandolier-style across his chest. "I'll head in on my own. No doubt Worthington will want to see us as soon as he's settled."

"Oh, aye, the boss man himself. Fancy rolling carriage he came in on, no? You can let him know I'm hard at work, earning my coin from the company."

Charles flicked his fingers in a salute. "Certainly, sir. I'll see you when you get back."

"Get yer arse out of here," Conn said, reaching for the doors. Charles quickly stepped aside as his partner yanked them closed. He heard the inside bolt slide into place, a precaution against anyone opening the door and unwittingly destroying the undeveloped photographs with sunlight.

Shaking his head, Charles grinned, amused as always by Conn's rough comradeship. Who would have thought he'd ever come to call such a man his friend. Not his high-in-the-instep friends and family back in Boston. A Brahmin and a Paddy? The horror! But then, he'd never been one to do what was expected of him.

Charles untied his horse's lead and stepped easily into the saddle. Nudging the animal around, he guided it into a fast trot back to camp. As he did so, he couldn't get that pale face out of his thoughts. There was something familiar about it. Soon, he'd find out what.

Chapter 2

“Life is never still at the end of the line. Shifts of men work from early morning to late at night, shaping a sometimes unforgiving terrain to make way for the iron road. But there are moments of lightness, too.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

Lillian Worthington Cabot let the curtain fall back into place and faced the man seated on the settee at a right angle to her own. The custom-made furniture was as elegant as that found in any respectable drawing room in Boston. The difference was the clever latches that secured it to the floor of her private car. Like the rest of the car’s furnishings, the settees could be latched down for travel, or disengaged and moved to whatever arrangement suited best.

“I wish you would allow me to take care of this for you, Mrs. Cabot. The men here are quite uncivilized, I am sure. Not the sort a lady should have to deal with at all.”

“So you’ve said, Mr. Yorke,” Lillian said, stifling a sigh of impatience. “However, as my father’s emissary, it is my duty to meet with the men responsible for organizing all work on the rail line. He would expect nothing less, nor do I.”

Edward Yorke’s lips thinned in disapproval. It was quite an accomplishment, Lillian thought, when the man seemed to disapprove of so much. If not for the secretary’s perennially pinched expression, Yorke would be quite handsome, in a pampered sort of way. His dark brown hair, fussily trimmed moustache and ascetically thin features

fit the mold preferred by many women of her acquaintance. The well-polished boots and clothes tailored to emphasize his slender physique exuded an air of urbane civility. However, the man's recent tendency to go on at length with dire admonitions of propriety and predictions of disaster grated on Lillian's nerves. Unfortunately, she couldn't shake him. Her father mandated his presence. Considering Yorke's abrasive personality, Lillian doubted he'd be anything but a hindrance to the job at hand.

But with her father only just recovering from a fit of apoplexy, what could she do? She'd practically bullied the servants into defying his orders to pack for the trip while she convinced him to let her go in his place.

Ruthlessly, she let her father believe she needed the distraction, that Boston held too many painful memories of her life with Stephen. She suppressed another twinge of guilt. She consoled herself with the knowledge that Stephen wouldn't begrudge her the subterfuge. Her husband would have been the first to laugh at the way suitors, both respectable and not, began hounding her the instant she put off her mourning clothes.

"At least permit me to arrange proper appointments with the site boss and the other men while you refresh yourself from the journey," Yorke pressed.

"Mr. Yorke, the most refreshing thing I can think of at this moment would be to get off this car and into the fresh air."

The squeal of the brakes accompanied the sudden jittering of the car that made their teacups rattle in their saucers on the piecrust table between the settees. Yorke's knuckles turned white where he gripped the arm of his settee. His jaw tightened, and Lillian could swear she heard his teeth grinding. Why someone so patently afraid of rail travel would ever consent to work for a man whose business *was* railroads was beyond her.

Lillian affected not to notice his discomfort, unnecessarily smoothing the crisp fabric of her wine-colored skirts. Adjusting the

cream-colored lace peeping from the cuffs of the matching jacket, she said, "Aileen?"

Her longtime friend and companion looked up from her seat across the car, where she worked on an embroidery hoop. "Yes, Lillian?"

Aileen McCurdy's widowed mother was head housekeeper in the Worthington household, actually related through marriage by some coattail cousin of Lillian's mother. Of an age, Lillian and Aileen grew up friends and maintained the relationship despite the unconventional nature of it. Any reminder of the blurring of the line between servant and companion, such as now, never failed to elicit an expression of poorly concealed disapproval from Yorke. Ignoring him, Lillian said, "How do you feel about a walk once we arrive?"

"More than ready to leave this car and put my feet on solid ground," Aileen said with a heartfelt sigh. "I don't think my bones have stopped rattling since we left."

"I couldn't agree more."

Setting her needle in the fabric stretched over the hoop and gathering up her yarn, Aileen said, "I'll have one of the cook's lads fetch some warm water for us to freshen up a bit. Shall I collect your parasol for you while I'm up?"

"Just a bonnet and gloves," Lillian decided. "I'm sure the arbiters of fashion will have their eyes elsewhere. I'd just as soon not be encumbered while we take a stroll about the camp."

Yorke was outraged. "Stroll about the camp—"

Lillian stopped him with a cool-eyed gaze. "Yes, Mr. Yorke. I fully intend to walk around the camp. It is the middle of the day, Aileen and I will remain well in sight of the train, and I'm sure it won't take long for you to find Mr. Devereaux and bring him to me. We will be perfectly safe."

A flush rose in the secretary's cheeks at her refusal to be directed, and he lapsed into silence. Lillian let him stew. When the car at last jittered to stop, he pushed to his feet. His bow perfectly correct, he

said, "If you will excuse me, madam. I shall see about locating Mr. Devereaux." As if he couldn't help himself, he added, "Please take care."

She tipped her chin in acknowledgment. "Naturally, Mr. Yorke. Aileen and I won't be gone long. I'm certain if you locate Mr. Devereaux before we're back, it won't take much effort to locate us. After all, this isn't Boston."

"Exactly," he muttered. With that, he stalked out of the car, his disapproval of her as plain as ever. This time, she did sigh.

"Pushy pest," Aileen observed.

Lillian gave her a wry smile. "So you've said, more than once."

"It bears repeating." Aileen stowed her embroidery in the basket at her feet and stood up. Shaking the soft wrinkles out of her skirt, she said, "I'll see about that hot water."

* * * *

Charles guided his horse through the throng of men unloading the cars. He noted that the wash house was going up fast, the workers' efforts encouraged by an appreciative female audience. True, the laundresses made good money from men hard-pressed to find the time to wash their own garments. But the fact the women weren't averse to accepting coin for other, more intimate tasks, didn't hurt. He paid for his distraction when his horse sidled around a group of men unloading another shack from the hell on wheels, forcing him to grab for the pommel. Tipping his chin to acknowledge their shouts of annoyance, he continued on to the corral. Unsaddling the hack, Charles handed it over to one of the boys responsible for feeding and watering the camp's animals. Then he hoisted his saddlebags and writing case over his shoulder and started towards the head of the train. Beyond that, the crew car he shared with Conn and a number of senior rail managers and bosses sat on a spur off the main track.

He'd almost reached it when a flash of color caught his eye. Charles stopped in shock. A woman, her femininity jarringly evident in the throng of men, approached him. No, not a woman. A lady. The style of her wine-colored skirt and jacket perfectly complimented her slender figure. Creamy lace peeped from wrists and throat, the folds at her neck graced with an elegant pearl brooch. She wore a confection of a bonnet his sisters would swoon for. Tendrils of dark auburn curls framed either side of her face, and finely drawn brows arched over pale green eyes. He barely noticed the woman who walked at her side, except to note she was also respectably attired and of a similar age, perhaps mid-twenties or so.

The beautiful lady stopped in front of him.

"Hello, Charles," she said. Her lush lips curved in a pleased smile that sparkled in her eyes. His mind caught up with his frank physical assessment, and he finally placed her.

"Lillian," he said, inwardly wincing at the faint stutter he heard in his own voice. How embarrassing, to be caught ogling an attractive woman like some unschooled boy. She offered her gloved hand. Quickly, he took it and bowed over it as urbane as if they'd paused to exchange greetings while strolling through a park in Boston.

"I had looked forward to seeing you again. I just had not expected to become reacquainted so soon."

"A pleasure to see you again, of course, Lillian. It's been some time."

"Yes," she agreed. "You shocked everyone with your decision to approach my father and offer to write for him." She introduced her companion.

Charles greeted Miss McCurdy, then returned to her statement. "Not quite everyone was shocked by my interest in writing. I remember your kind words when a few of my articles appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*."

She waved off his appreciation with a delicate flick of her wrist. Charles was captivated by the line of pale flesh between her glove and

the lace cuff. "Nonsense. You are a wonderful writer, Charles. It takes true talent to convey one's views with both panache and honesty. That can be a rarity with all the bombastic political ranting and salacious reporting that seems to fill the newsheets every day."

He was surprised to feel his cheeks flush. "It is kind of you to say so. Regardless, I appreciate your father's trust in me. This is certainly an adventure I never envisioned for myself." Charles looked beyond her shoulder at the private railcar still hitched to the back of the train. It would be some time before the rest of the cars were unloaded and the Worthington cars could be added to the others on the spur. "Is your father about?"

The smile faded from her lovely face. "My father decided not to make the journey."

Charles couldn't conceal his surprise. "Why not?"

Lillian clasped her hands at her waist, her expression serious. She glanced around to ensure no one was close enough to hear their conversation. "It is not widely known, but my father suffered a fit of apoplexy."

Without thinking, he took her hands in his. "I am so sorry. How is he?"

Surprisingly, she accepted the familiarity, squeezing his hands in gratitude for his concern. "Thankfully, he is recovering. I expect he will be his old domineering self before we know it. However, the doctors insisted that he rest and allow his health to return at its own pace. They said if he doesn't, he could suffer a relapse."

Charles nodded in understanding. "I have heard it is so."

"That is why I insisted that he allow me to come in his place."

"I see." Though he wasn't certain he did. A raw and uncivilized rail camp was hardly the place for a lady of Lillian's caliber, escorted by her companion or not.

"It is vital that the excursion we have planned for the investors is a success. If anyone realizes that the foremost principle of the Great Western Rail Company is not in full control..."

Comprehension dawned. "Of course," Charles said. "I should have realized."

The Great Western Rail Company, like the other rail companies in the massive race to reach the eastward-bound lines of the California rail companies, relied heavily on outside money and political support. One of the ways to fire the enthusiasm of investors and lawmakers was to host periodic tours of the line, to prove how much progress was being made. Any hint of instability in the ruling ranks would be a blow to the company, financially and politically. Supporters could be a fickle lot when it came to funding.

In just a few weeks, dozens of important men and women would descend on the camp to be feted and ferried around in an exotic adventure into the wilderness. Ordinarily, Theodore S. Worthington would play host to the horde with his usual showmanship and style. With the old boy out of action, it made a kind of sense for his elegant daughter, widow of a war hero, to do the honors.

A breeze fanned an auburn curl free across Lillian's cheek. Her skin was pale as porcelain and just as lovely. The soft pink of her unpainted lips made the pale green of her large eyes even more luminous. Unselfconsciously, she caught the curl in two fingers and tucked it back under her bonnet. Charles's cock hardened at the innate sensuality of the simple gesture, then realized she had to let go of one of his hands to tend to her hair.

"Forgive me," he said, hastily dropping her other hand. "I was just so stunned to see you here. I don't know what I was thinking," he finished lamely.

She smiled again. "Oh, I think we're safe, Charles. The high sticklers aren't going to pounce on us out here for holding hands."

He grinned. "No, of course not. The martinets are not something I miss about Boston."

"I don't blame you." She gestured at his saddlebags and writing case. "Those must be heavy. I shouldn't keep you."

"I was only returning them to the crew car after helping Conn Maguire photograph the train's arrival."

"Oh, yes. I had noticed a photographer on the hill. I look forward to making Mr. Maguire's acquaintance," she added. "My father and I have been greatly impressed with his work for the company."

"He'll be pleased to hear that," Charles said, thinking Conn didn't give a rub for what anyone thought about him or his work.

"Well, as I said, I won't keep you. Once the commotion dies down, would you bring Mr. Maguire to meet me? I'd like to discuss the expedition with both of you."

"Certainly, although I can't promise the commotion will actually subside. The camp tends to be a busy place, and the latest additions won't change that."

Miss McCurdy softly cleared her throat. Lillian looked at the other woman and grimaced, obviously divining some meaning from the wordless sound. "Ah, yes. Thank you, Aileen." Her expression rueful, she said to Charles, "Perhaps you should see my father's secretary, Mr. Yorke. I believe he is busy arranging my schedule as we speak."

"Yorke."

Apparently, his attempt to keep his tone bland failed. She laughed, a low, inviting sound. "I see you've had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Yorke before."

"We are acquainted."

"Poor lad." Miss McCurdy's innocent expression belied the barely audible comment.

Charles quirked an eyebrow, but all he said was, "I'll be sure to make an appointment with Mr. Yorke."

"Excellent." Lillian tipped her chin in farewell. "It was lovely to see you again, Charles. Later, we must take the time to share the news from home. I had a lovely tea with your mother and sisters just a few weeks ago."

Charles thought of all the things he'd rather discuss with this beautiful widow, and his mama and siblings weren't among them. "I look forward to it."

"Then we'll be off," she said, turning away, her companion at her elbow. "Until later, Charles."

Charles watched them go, two butterflies among the dull moth tones of the workmen. His cock twitched, reminding him of exactly how long it had been since he'd enjoyed the pleasure of a lady's company. Lillian's beauty was the kind that always drew him—refined, but earthy, too. Her confidence and intelligence made her even more desirable in his eyes.

Before the war, she belonged to Stephen Cabot, and poaching other men's wives wasn't a game Charles played.

A widowed Lillian Cabot was another matter. Anticipation strummed through him. Whistling cheerily, he resumed his steps, thinking of Lillian's delicate fragrance and the creamy softness of her skin.

Chapter 3

“In the rough and tumble of the camp, the comforts of home are often worth their weight in gold. Freshly-washed clothes, a new pair of boots or well-cured tobacco all hold their appeal. But the most precious commodity of all for this correspondent? Apple pie.”
— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

Charles wiped the specks of lather from his chin with the towel and used the last of the lukewarm water in the jug to rinse his face. Testing the closeness of the shave with one hand, he picked up his coat and left the room he and Conn shared.

The bare-bones rail car had seen better days. Parked on a spur that jutted off from the main track, the rolling lodgings could be hooked up to an engine and easily hauled to the next stop on the line under construction. It housed about a dozen men, the precise composition of which changed fairly frequently. Surveyors, gang bosses, planners and designers, they worked with the crews, but were higher up the ladder than brute labor. Conn and Charles were among the mainstays. Their shared lodgings were smaller than Charles’s closet at home. A Spartan area in the center of the car served as de facto office and general gathering place, where the men conducted the necessary business aspects of their positions or played cards around the fat coal stove. One cabin served as Conn’s permanent dark room. The chemical stink that seeped under the door generally deterred the

curious. Most of their neighbors had learned to use the exit farthest from Conn's den.

As Charles left their cabin, he noted that the common area was deserted. Small wonder, when there were women, wine and song to be had in the newly sprouted town just steps away. Shrugging into his coat, he headed to the end of the car. As he'd expected, the door to Conn's darkroom was closed and locked, a slate message board dangling from the knob, "Working. Bugger off."

Ignoring it, Charles pounded on the door with his fist. He waited a moment for a reply. With none forthcoming, he applied his fist again.

"What?" Conn yelled. "You can't read?"

"Very well, actually," Charles said, not bothering to raise his voice

His partner's muttered, "Shoulda known," was clearly audible, as was his louder, "What is it?"

"I thought you might like to walk around our newly expanded camp. Get something to eat that isn't salt beef and over-boiled potatoes."

He thought Conn wasn't going to answer, but then came the unmistakable sound of a bolt sliding free. Conn swung the door open on a wave of fumes. Charles made a face and stepped back. "Good God, man. It will be a miracle if you're still able to father children in a few years after breathing that stench day in and day out. It can't be good for your lungs, let alone anything else a sane man might value."

"Like your pen ink is any better," Conn retorted. He wore the long duster he preferred while working. The battered old thing was virtually indestructible, as far as Charles could tell. The original dark brown of the durable cloth had since faded to a muddy grey. Conn swore it kept off the rain, fended off the cold, turned aside the thorniest brambles and was tough enough to snap a rattler's fangs. Charles suspected the last was pure exaggeration, but didn't call his friend on it. Conn never went anywhere without the duster. "Besides,

fathering children is overrated. There's more than enough running around as it is without adding my issue to the horde."

Conn pulled the door closed and used his key to lock it. He was fanatical about protecting his work. Charles could understand that. He was equally careful with his dispatches. A strong work ethic was one of the few things they had in common. Together, they headed for the outer door.

"You had a productive day?"

"What I could, until they started in on me."

"By *they*, I presume you mean the ladies. Why don't you take some photographs of them? It would keep them quiet."

Conn shrugged. "Then there'd just be more of 'em, wanting their own pictures. Anyway, got some nice exposures, I'm thinking. Building of a town."

"How do you think the shots of the arrival turned out?"

"Good."

Charles nodded. Typical Conn, without a trace of either boastfulness or hesitation. If he said it was good, it was.

Opening the door nearest to the camp, they were met by the completely novel sight of rustic civilization. Light blazed, men shouted, women laughed. Somewhere, an impromptu orchestra complete with tinny piano played a raucous tune. Conn and Charles exchanged grins.

"Food first?" Charles asked.

"Aye. My belly's so thin it's thinking my throat's been cut."

In perfect accord, they went down the iron steps and headed toward the makeshift canvas and wood town. As they walked, they passed the cars that had been added to their spur earlier in the day. The engine would soon roll back the way it had come, resuming its supply runs, but not all the cars would go with it. Among them was the extravagant private car that had brought up the rear of the train.

“Did you get a chance to meet Lillian Cabot?” Charles asked. “I was supposed to introduce you, but this is the first I’ve seen of you since this morning.”

“Is she the new madam, then?”

“I should say not!”

“Eh, no need to get tetchy. Why don’t you just tell me who she is instead of getting all high in the collar over it?”

“Mrs. Cabot is Worthington’s daughter.”

Conn raised his brows. “The old man’s brought his girl along?” As luck would have it, at that moment a feminine shriek of laughter rose from the din, followed by the boisterous catcalls of a number of appreciative men. Conn frowned. “Not exactly a good place for a lady.”

“No,” Charles agreed. “But Worthington suffered a fit of apoplexy, and Lillian stepped in to finish preparations for the excursion trip.”

“Big job.”

“Of any lady I know, I can’t think of one more capable than Lillian Cabot.”

“Like that, is it?”

“Yes.” Charles was surprised when the answer rolled off his tongue without thought. Considering it, he realized he meant it.

“And the mister?”

“Cabot died in the war. Shocked everyone when he signed up, though he’d always been a dashing sort. Stuck with his men until he was wounded. He didn’t even last to make it home to his wife. Infection, I think.”

Conn made a considering sound. “Can’t wait to meet her.”

Charles gave his partner an amused glance as they reached the first of the tents and shacks. “Like I said, she expected to meet you today. But of course, you stayed out with your camera, then locked yourself in your cave.”

Unperturbed, Conn shrugged. “It *is* my job.”

“Tomorrow, then. And besides, even if Lillian had been the new madam, what made you assume she’d want to meet you right off?”

Conn grinned cockily and spread his arms wide. “Experience.”

Charles snorted, but privately conceded Conn had a point. He might not be as tall as Charles, but he was a powerfully built man. Add his muscled physique with chiseled dark looks and deep blue eyes, and Conn had never lacked for female companionship when it was available.

They stopped outside the pulled-back flap of a large tent. Inside, men sat elbow to elbow at long tables, digging into plates heaped with food. The air was redolent with fried meat, fresh biscuits and, if Charles wasn’t mistaken, apple pie. His mouth watered. The fare the line cooks churned out was an unvarying menu of beef, bread, butter and potatoes, with the occasional game animal thrown in. Thankfully, now that the supply camp had moved up the line to join them, their options would be more varied, if costlier, than the bland fare included with their pay.

“Come on, Charlie,” Conn said, leading the way to an open section of bench. “I’m starving. Tomorrow’s soon enough to meet Worthington’s girl.”

Charles trailed after him, enjoying the thought of his friend’s reaction when he finally met the luscious Lillian Cabot. Conn would kick himself.

* * * *

Lillian unbelted her robe as Aileen drizzled scented oil into the water. Draping the silky garment over a tufted stool, Lillian went up the small risers beside the tub. Like the rest of the room, the extravagant copper bathing tub was paneled in rich, glossy mahogany. The low glow of the coal oil lamps made the bathing room feel like a warm cocoon. Dipping a toe in, Lillian hissed out a soft breath. It was almost too hot to bear. Almost. Steam heavy with the musky floral

scent she favored curled up from the surface. With an appreciative sigh, she stepped fully into the tub and sat down until the water lapped at the upper curves of her breasts. Resting against the raised back, she closed her eyes and enjoyed the total relaxation that beckoned. After a day spent traveling the sometimes less-than-smooth tracks, not to mention enduring Mr. Yorke's censorious presence, she needed it.

"Would you listen to that?"

At the sound of her companion's voice—part wondering, part shocked—Lillian cracked her eyelids open. "Listen to what?"

Before she said the last word, what sounded remarkably like a gunshot came from somewhere outside the private car. The rollicking laughter that followed it immediately dispelled her first thought, that someone had come to a violent end. At least, Lillian *hoped* that was what the laughter meant. Regardless, the unmistakable, if muffled, sound of music and singing continued unabated.

Aileen, folded towels clutched to her chest, watched her with a raised brow. "Maybe I'll just go check and make sure the doors are locked."

"You already checked twice."

"Aye. And maybe third time's the charm. Next you know, those ruffians will be knocking on our doors, bold as you please."

Ignoring Aileen's tone of doom, Lillian sank a little deeper in the tub. "Those ruffians are our employees. They're just having a bit of a frolic with the new arrivals."

"I saw some of those new arrivals, and I won't be guessing what kind of *frolic* they're about."

"Aileen, leave it. The war might be over, but that doesn't mean a lot of people aren't in desperate straits. You shouldn't begrudge those women what they have to do to get by."

The other woman pursed her lips but nodded in reluctant agreement. Lillian knew Aileen was well aware of what desperation could do to people. Satisfied, she closed her eyes again. She sensed it

when Aileen set the towels on the edge of the tub, then heard a small creak, and surmised that her friend had settled herself on the stool by the vanity table.

“I’d like to get an early start tomorrow.”

“I’ll make sure the chef is aware you’ll be wanting an early breakfast, then.” The nearness of Aileen’s voice confirmed her location.

“Best tell him to plan for an early start every day. There’s much to do, and little time to do it.” Lillian opened her lids just enough to find the washcloth and dip it into the bathwater. Thinking out loud, she rasped the cloth against her collarbone and said, “Maybe it would be best if Charles joins me for breakfast. And perhaps Mr. Maguire as well. I’d like to speak to them about arranging an outing or two for our guests into the surrounding area.”

“Into the forest? Isn’t that dangerous? I was talking to one of the servant boys earlier, and he told me of some fearsome animals they’ve seen hereabouts. These aren’t the tame parks of Boston, you know.”

“Oh, we’ll send armed guards with them, of course. I also thought a hunting trip might suit the men. Surely, the gunshots would scare off any dangerous predators. Plus, we add any game they bag to the menu, have the chef prepare some truly unique dishes for our guests.” Lillian idly traced her fingertips over the water as she thought. “Yes, that would work. And who better to squire them about than the company’s official correspondent and photographer?”

“Hmmm.”

Lillian turned her head to see Aileen’s pensive expression. “Hmmm, what?”

“You don’t think some of the guests might be put off by, ah, Mr. Maguire?”

“I don’t see how, as they’ve never even met him.”

“Neither have you, but that’s not what I’m getting at, as you well know.” Aileen’s light brogue thickened as it always did when she became riled.

Lillian thought this might be one of the drawbacks of having spent a goodly portion of their girlhood together. Aileen rarely bit her tongue when something was on her mind. Of course, Lillian considered that tendency a great asset, too. It only annoyed some of the time.

“We just ended one war over the rights of men. If they can’t accept the presence of an Irishman, then I’d really rather not do business with them.”

“And your father? Would he rather not do business with them?”

“Father’s not here. I am. Besides, Mr. Maguire’s photographs have garnered a lot of favorable attention in the newssheets, particularly his heartrending images of the prisoner camps. Our guests can’t deny he is very talented. The Great West Rail Company was fortunate to be able to hire him.”

Lillian had to swallow the lump that formed in her throat. Stephen had been dead more than two years, but talking about the war, even in passing, pained her. She supported his decision to enlist, and did everything she could to aid the war effort. It hadn’t helped Stephen.

One day she was reading a letter from him filled with the usual anecdotes of hardship mingled with lighter moments. He mentioned only briefly the minor wound to his thigh, as if it were nothing more than a scuffed toe. The letter from Stephen’s commanding officer was written just a week later, but delayed by more than a month in transit. The wound festered. Then the fever came. They wanted to take his leg, but even in his pain and confusion he refused. The fever worsened, and Stephen fell asleep. He never woke up.

If only he’d let them take his leg. Surely, he’d known she would rather have him alive and with her than not at all.

She felt a gentle touch on her shoulder and blindly reached for Aileen's comforting hand. The revelry in the fledgling railway town sounded a world away.

Several long moments later, Aileen broke the silence.

"Mr. Lowell Adams seems a likely gentleman."

Grateful for the diversion, Lillian squeezed the other woman's hand and let go. "Likely for what?"

"Oh, any number of things," Aileen said dryly.

"Aileen, how bad of you," Lillian said, wetting the cloth and turning her attention to washing her arms. "One minute, condemning the ladies who entertain the laborers, the next, sizing up a gentleman for 'any number of things.'"

She hid a grin as her friend sputtered in outraged embarrassment. "I never—"

"Are you playing matchmaker?"

"No! And as if I would," Aileen said, getting to her feet and starting to pace the tiny space in agitation. "You can find your own man, I'm sure. Now my Mum, you could count on her to meddle in your affairs."

"Then I should have an affair with Charles?"

Aileen, finally catching on, whirled to face her friend with hands on her hips. "Lillian Worthington Cabot!"

Lillian's grin turned into a laugh. "But you're right, he does look like a likely fellow to have a mad, passionate love affair with. I'm sure it would be quite enjoyable. So tall and strong. Very manly, if I'm any judge of the cut of a man's trousers."

"Now who's being bad?" Aileen harrumphed and dropped back down onto the stool. Then she started to laugh, too.

Lillian watched the other woman fondly. Aileen tried to be so prim and proper. Despite her familiarity, she was always conscious of her position as companion and Lillian's supposed consequence. Absolutely loyal, she was the best friend any woman could ask for, and Lillian loved her dearly.

Aileen's laughter gradually changed to sporadic chuckles.

"To be perfectly serious, I am rather glad that Charles is here," Lillian said.

"Oh?" Aileen quirked a brow. "For a mad, passionate affair?"

The words brought with them an image of Charles's lean, athletic build and appreciative brown eyes. Putting it aside for the moment, she continued, "What I mean is, it will be good to have a man with his family connections here when our guests arrive. Can you imagine the disaster if Yorke is the only gentleman on hand?"

Aileen gave an exaggerated shudder. "I don't remember you mentioning Mr. Lowell Adams before today."

"You know his family. His elder sister is married to that soap magnate."

"The one with the cheeky lad who was chasing all the little girls at the park?"

Lillian laughed at the memory. "That's the one. Well, Charles is a bit of a black sheep. His father and mother wanted him to take an interest in the family's shipping concerns. Instead, he told them his older brothers were far better suited to the task than he would ever be, then deepened the insult by becoming a travelling correspondent. When the war began, he simply switched to chronicling tales from the war for various newspapers. It was quite the seven days' wonder. I'm sure the gentlemen in the party will enjoy hearing about his travels. And Mr. Maguire's as well, for that matter."

"Hmmm."

Lillian tipped her head back in exasperation. "There you go again. What is on your mind?"

"Nothing, just...hmmm."

"I'm sure." Lillian lifted one leg and briskly began to lather it with a tiny bar of her favorite soap. "Now, enough about that. It's getting late, and I still need to write notes for Charles and Mr. Maguire. You can have one of the chef's helpers deliver them."

"And Mr. Yorke as well."

Lillian sighed, squeezing the water from the cloth and setting it back on the rim of the tub. "I suppose I have to. That man is a trial."

"That he is."

Lillian glanced at the wall of the bathing room, as if she could see through it to the revelry outside. "I wonder how late that will go on?"

"All night, I imagine. We'll be fortunate to get any rest at all."

"It does sound like they're having fun."

"Fun like that, you don't need."

"Oh, I don't know." Lillian laughed lightly. "If anything, now's the perfect time to find a little enjoyment."

"Perfect in what way?" Aileen stood and held open a towel as Lillian got to her feet.

Wrapping the absorbent sheet around her, Lillian said, "I've grieved long enough." She didn't know when she'd come to that realization, but it was true.

"You have," Aileen agreed, surprising her. "Mr. Cabot was a fine man, a wonderful husband to you. Losing him was a tragedy, and that's the truth. You mourned as was proper. But now it's time to start living. He would want that for you."

Lillian smiled, glad of the support. "I think so, too."

"You have a plan, I suppose?"

"Well, we are far from Boston."

"Yes."

"On an adventure, if you will."

"Yes."

She shrugged into her robe and snugged the belt at her waist. "That's the thing about adventures. You never know what can happen."

And there was the athletic, manly Charles Lowell Adams close at hand. An adventure if ever she'd seen one.

Chapter 4

“It is easy to miss the comforts of home when in the wilderness a luxury is warm water to shave and sugar to put in a man's coffee. But when breathing in crisp mountain air untainted by coal smoke or the clatter of thousands of carriage wheels rolling down the street, one cannot help but think there are compensations.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

Aileen opened the door to usher in Charles and another man. Beside Lillian, Yorke rose from his seat at the private car's small dining table. She put the delicate china teacup back on its saucer and smiled in welcome.

“Good morning to you, Lillian, Miss McCurdy,” Charles said warmly, doffing his hat and hanging it on a hook by the door. Then, as an afterthought, “Yorke.”

His companion followed suit, also taking off a somewhat battered long coat to reveal a sturdy, muscular build with wide shoulders and lean hips.

Charles's eyes sparkled as he held Lillian's gaze. His lips tilted up at the corners, and he crossed the few feet to the table. Taking her hand, he bowed over it. “You look lovely, madam,” he said. The brush of his lips over her knuckles sent a tingle over her skin. Lillian thought of her private musings about an “adventure” involving the leanly handsome man and felt a blush of pleasure warm her cheeks.

Charles released her and indicated his companion. "May I introduce Mr. Conn Maguire?"

Black hair fell in curls over the photographer's pleasingly wide forehead. From the intensity of his perusal of her face, she suspected his cobalt blue eyes missed little. Not surprising, really, considering his chosen profession. Observation must be a vital skill. His cheekbones tilted along high ridges on either side of a fine-bladed nose. Even this early in the day, a hint of dark shadow touched his lean cheeks and dimpled chin. He wore a simple brown coat over a brown waistcoat and matching trousers, the pale oatmeal hue of his rough linen shirt making the weather-darkened skin at his throat appear almost bronze.

Conn Maguire was simply the most beautiful man she had ever seen, with a blatantly male sensuality. In her experience, attractive men tended to have a bit of the peacock about them, even if unconsciously. The Irishman showed no sign he expected admiration of any sort from her. He intrigued her. Instead of bowing over her hand, Mr. Maguire gave it a no-nonsense shake.

"Mrs. Cabot," he said, the lick of Irish in his voice much stronger than Aileen's.

"Mr. Maguire, I'm so pleased to finally meet you," she said. "I very much admire the work you're doing for the company. It is causing quite a stir back home in Boston and elsewhere."

His nod of acknowledgement was brief, as if he expected nothing else. It wasn't arrogance, she thought, but rather complete confidence in his own skill. Her interest in the Irishman heightened.

"You'll find that Conn is a man of few words, Lillian," Charles interjected with a chuckle. "It is fortunate his pictures speak for him."

The Irishman slanted his friend an unreadable look, but didn't comment.

"I see," Lillian said. Gesturing at Yorke, who had stood in impatient silence throughout the exchange, she added, "Mr. Maguire, Edward Yorke. My father's secretary."

Yorke accepted Charles's hand readily enough. His pause before granting the Irishman the same courtesy was noticeable, and it was clear he only did so because Lillian and Charles expected him to. Lillian pretended to ignore his snobbery. She had hoped his professionalism would keep a leash on his manners, but apparently not. She made a mental note to speak to him later about it. She couldn't have him insulting such a talented man as Conn Maguire. As well, considering how many Irish worked on the railroad, he could find himself in serious trouble in camp when simple courtesy would avoid friction.

Expressionless, Maguire took Yorke's reluctant hand. Judging by the secretary's wince, his grip was firmer than expected.

"Gentlemen, please be seated," Lillian said, signaling Aileen to alert the galley staff to begin serving. Picking up the teapot, she offered to pour.

At first, they spoke of inconsequential—her journey to the end of the line, the latest goings on in Boston, the reconstruction, a particularly sensational murder trial that was filling up the newssheets. Then they moved on to specifics of the railway company, including the progress of the crews and the challenges they'd overcome. Both writer and photographer impressed her with their knowledge and observations. Between them, it seemed they missed little. While spare with his words, Conn displayed a good sense of the work and, particularly, the workers. When he did speak, it was with authority. She felt so drawn to him, she invited him to call her Lillian. It seemed silly for him not to, when his friend already did.

She enjoyed listening to the Irishman's quiet voice. His deep tones suited him perfectly. She suspected the combination of sinfully handsome face and lyrical voice was a tempting lure to many a female heart—hers included.

Charles was no less a hazard. He sat at his ease, taking part in the conversation but not striving to dominate it, as Yorke was wont to do.

His eyes twinkled when he looked at her, as if they shared a secret joke. Yes, definitely a hazard.

In fact, between Conn Maguire and Charles Lowell Adams, it was easy to forget this wasn't merely a pleasant, subtle flirtation over coffee and pastries. If she needed a reminder, Yorke's almost palpable impatience provided it.

She caught Aileen's faintly amused expression as the woman drank her tea. Over the rim of her teacup, her friend looked from Conn to Charles, then back to Lillian, eyes full of suppressed laughter. The droll quirk of her eyebrow seemed to say, "Adventure?"

Lillian coughed slightly on a swallow of tea. Putting her teacup down, she nudged it away with her fingertip. "We have several weeks before our guests arrive," she said, forcibly concentrating on the task at hand. "I have some ideas on how to keep everyone entertained and interested, but I will need some help from you gentlemen, too."

"Certainly," Charles said. "Anything we can do to help."

"I hoped you'd say that," Lillian said. "Charles, I think you could show our guests the operations on the line in the best light. Explain things in, well, not simple terms, but in a way that will help investors and potential investors see the progress we're making."

Charles smiled. "I think I know what you have in mind. I can play native guide, if you wish."

"Lovely. And Conn." Lillian turned to the photographer, hesitated when she noticed how intently he watched her. His gaze, while not blatantly assessing, was certainly appreciative. Her belly quivered with answering appreciation.

"Yes?" he prompted.

Lillian felt her cheeks flush. "Now that the rail is past the plains and into the foothills of the mountains, the scenery here is undeniably beautiful. Do you know of some spots that might appeal to guests who enjoy the outdoors and more athletic activities?"

"Athletic activities?" A ghost of a smile touched his lips, and his expressive blue eyes confirmed the innuendo she heard in his tone.

Her cheeks grew even warmer. "Yes, such as hiking to some interesting locale, perhaps for a picnic. Nothing too strenuous."

Aileen, commenting that they could do with a fresh pot of tea, softly excused herself from the table.

"I'll have a look about and see what I can find," Conn said. "You'll need guards as well, though. There are bears and wild cats in the area, and I doubt that's the kind of scenery you'd like them to encounter."

"Definitely not. We'll take whatever precautions you deem necessary."

"What Maguire deems necessary?" Yorke interjected. "I beg your pardon, madam, but what makes him qualified to judge the safety of others? I believe it would be far better for the company to hire some expert guides and," he waved his hand as if searching for a suitable term, "strong men to assist them. I am certain such men can be found in the work crews or in an establishment in camp. Or perhaps it would be better to send for more men to join us before the excursion arrives."

His attempt at an ingratiating smile was more than a shade condescending. Lillian was only surprised he didn't attempt to pat her hand as he added, "It will be no trouble for me to make such arrangements."

She raised her brow at Yorke's open dismissal of her authority in front of Charles and Conn and his attempt to take charge of her plans. She wasn't averse to advice when it was solicited or informed, but she highly doubted Yorke was more knowledgeable about such things than she was. He, too, came from Boston. Her tone sharp, she said, "Conn is an experienced military man and a professional who is well-acquainted with the flora and fauna of the area, not to mention his reputation for handling himself in difficult situations."

Charles appeared to suppress a laugh, while Maguire stared at her in surprise. "And how would you know that, Lillian?"

“Gentlemen, please. Do you really think I would come all this way without investigating the resources at my disposal? More to the point, do you think my father would trust me to get the job done without fully informing me of everything I might need to know?”

Charles chuckled and tipped his head in a bow. “Well said, Lillian. Well said.”

“Thank you, Mr. Yorke, but I’m sure Charles and Conn are up to the task,” she said, speaking as if she didn’t notice his pique at her refusal to allow him to take control. “However, if you would ready those files we spoke of earlier, we can get started on our day.”

“Yes, Mrs. Cabot,” he said. Standing, he gave her a brief nod of farewell and left the private car, barely avoiding a collision with Aileen in the doorway.

Lillian hoped Charles and Conn didn’t notice the wink Aileen shot her way when she resumed her seat and informed them a fresh pot of tea was on its way.

Speaking with her friend about their plans for the day, she covertly watched the men. Their appreciation and interest was highly flattering.

Charles was a known quantity. A gentlemen to his fingertips, he was also bold and adventurous, with an easy charm and ready humor.

Conn was different. The word “gentleman” didn’t come to mind in describing him. Yet it was clear he shared other qualities with Charles. Boldness was one of them, obviously, and intelligence. She thought he could be honest to the point of bluntness. His wit was subtle, more subdued than his more gregarious friend, and she found that appealing, too.

She greatly admired the work of both men. Charles had a talent for drawing the reader into the most mundane situation with his words and making it exciting and exotic. Conn’s talent was more visceral. The medium naturally forced a quality of stiffness on the subjects. Yet where other photographers struggled with the limitations of their

art, Conn's use of light and shadow gave an undeniable depth to the two-dimensional images he created with his glass plates.

Yesterday, Charles had been at the top of her thoughts after their meeting. It was rather nice to know her libido hadn't gotten dusty from misuse. Now, Conn inspired an equally strong interest and physical response. It made her a trifle uncertain. How could she be drawn to both men? It had never happened to her before.

She had enjoyed the light, social flirtations that were expected of a comfortably married woman. After Stephen's death, everything changed. She accepted invitations, attended the expected parties and gatherings and played hostess for her father as though another woman stood in her place. Only Aileen seemed to notice, and perhaps her father.

Then she met Charles and Conn here on the literal fringes of the wilderness. For the first time as a widow, her flirtation was in earnest, enjoyable, exciting. She was having fun.

She told Aileen she wanted an adventure. Well, here it was. All she had to do was make the first move.

"So, gentleman," she said. "What are your plans for the day?"

"The tent town," Conn said.

"Me, too," Charles said. "It would be good to give the readers an image of life beyond the work crews."

Lillian laughed lightly. "I can only imagine. Aileen and I heard the revelry last night. It sounded quite thrilling."

"That's one way of describing it." Charles grinned, then grew serious. "But Lillian, it would be better if you and Miss McCurdy didn't go into camp once night falls. The goings-on can become quite rowdy."

"How would they be thrilling otherwise?" She appreciated Conn's chuckle of agreement. "Besides, Charles, I have Yorke to hover over me like a nervous nanny. Not you, too, if you please."

He raised his hand as if to fend off the accusation. "I stand corrected. You are your own woman, Lillian."

“Yes. I am.” And she hoped her smile was as promising as she meant it to be. Stephen had always said it was impossible to resist. She hoped he was right. She was quite ready to begin her adventure.

* * * *

Conn followed Charles down the steps, shrugging his coat into a more comfortable drape over his shoulders.

“Capable,” he said.

Charles glanced at him as they fell into step. Without consultation, they set off for the crew car and their lodgings. “I beg your pardon.”

“That is what you said about Lillian Cabot yesterday,” Conn said. “The most capable lady of your acquaintance, or something thereabouts.”

“She is.”

“Not denying it. Except for one thing.”

Charles raised a brow. “Oh?”

“That Delilah is no lady.” Before his friend could let loose with the fiery denial Conn knew was on his lips, he added, “She’s all woman. And I mean to have her.”

“Do you? Well, that’s just too damn bad, since I mean to court her myself. And I rather think your chances are fairly poor, if you can’t recall that her given name is Lillian, not Delilah.”

Conn snorted and shook his head. “Lillian is too tame. Delilah suits her better, a seductress with the power to bring Samson to his knees.”

Charles looked at him. “And you know this after sharing a breakfast meeting with her.”

“Don’t you?”

His friend’s hesitation was brief. “Yes. But it’s only fair to warn you that I’ve got the inside track on this contest.”

“How do you figure?” Conn felt his temper start to rise. “Because you’re not Irish?”

“Don’t be an idiot. Lillian, as I’m sure you realized, couldn’t care less. No, I mean because I’ve known her family since she was a girl.”

“You courted her?”

“Well, no.”

Conn spread his hands in a “so what” gesture.

“I just know her. And she knows me,” Charles said as they reached the steps of the crew car.

“I doubt it.”

“Well, I certainly don’t intend to step aside for you.”

“Nor I for you.”

“It’ll be the lady’s choice, then.”

“Agreed.”

“And no hard feelings when she chooses me.”

“Agreed. No hard feelings when she chooses *me*, you overconfident bastard.”

They shared a grin of mutual challenge and mounted the steps.

Chapter 5

“The opportunity for gentle pursuits can be limited in the camp. The men take their entertainment as it comes, even sharing friendly bets on the most whimsical distractions.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

The camp woke before dawn. For some, that meant only a few hours of sleep after enjoying the new entertainments available in the expanded town. The managers didn't care. They had deadlines to meet and weren't lax about rousting the men if necessary. A lot needed to be done before winter froze the ground and slowed the work crews to a chilly crawl. With the mountains looming, the back-breaking labor of digging tunnels for the tracks added to the list of tasks. Fortunately, the relatively new invention of dynamite would make that job easier than painstakingly chipping away at the stone. It was dangerous, though.

Conn crouched behind his camera and peered through the lens at a drover and his wagon. A group of men loaded railway ties onto the sledge-like wagon hitched to a pair of powerful-looking oxen. They worked in their shirtsleeves, muscles straining much-washed homespun as sweat glistened on their faces. The men hefted the heavy wooden beams to their shoulders with ease, quickly moving them from the stack of planed timber to the wagon. The teamster in charge of the oxen watched as a skinny boy of about twelve dug muck out from between the animals' toes.

A young woman not much older than the boy walked past, balancing a bulging basket of clothes on one hip. Her thin skirts and petticoats swirled around the tops of worn brown ankle boots, showing a bit of stocking. The first few buttons on her bodice were loosened, a concession to the heat of the morning sun and the fires around the large cauldrons of wash water the laundresses kept stoked all day. Flushed from exertion, her cheeks glowed a becoming pink, highlighting cornflower blue eyes. Tendrils of long black hair escaped the kerchief on her head.

The men paused in their work to appreciatively stare at the laundress, some calling out to her to stop and chat for a while. Her cheeks reddened, and she ducked her head. From her reaction, Conn guessed this young laundress was one of the few who did not make extra coin warming some man's bed after the washing was done.

The men groaned in disappointment when she continued on, hurrying her steps.

"I've got something I'd like that little Bridget to clean for me," one man said.

"Polish for you, you mean," another man said, sending the others into hoots of laughter. Some eyed Conn as if expecting a reaction to the derogatory term. Many of the newly arrived washwomen were Irish.

Conn moved his tripod and camera box so he could focus in on the boy.

Failing to get a rise from him, the men returned to their task. One hawked a wad of spittle on the muddy ground before selecting a tie from the pile. "You fellas notice the nice little Bridget that came in with the missus? Soft and round. I'd like me a piece of that," he said. The wagon bounced a little as he tossed the wooden beam in the back.

"Little skirt's with Worthington's daughter, Reuben," another worker said, a bit timidly.

The rest of the men looked at him pityingly. Conn efficiently exchanged plates before positioning his camera to focus on the sweating workers.

“Henry, my witless friend,” Reuben said. “As if it matters.”

The teamster barked out directions. A couple of the men hopped aboard the back of the wagon and scrambled atop the growing stack of ties. Their cohorts handed their loads up, and the men continued to pile the lumber. Reuben leaned against the side of the wagon, took a dirty kerchief from his pocket and swiped it over the back of his perspiring neck.

“I’ll tell you something about them Irish girls,” he said, his voice dropping to a mock whisper loud enough for everyone to hear. “Show ’em a pretty coin, and they can’t toss up their skirts fast enough. Doesn’t matter if they’re in the cribs,” he said, jerking a thumb in the direction of the tent town, “or acting hoity-toity with the missus. Mark my words.”

The other men snickered, not bothering to hide the expectation on their faces as they waited for Conn’s reaction. Again, he ignored them. He settled the last plate in the waiting crate as Charles ambled over to join him.

Just then, Reuben said, “Mind you, the missus is a fine piece, too. Imagine, a woman like that coming all the way out here. No husband, neither,” he said, grunting as he hoisted his load up to the waiting men. “And you know what that means.”

Apparently, his friends did, because their snickers turned to knowing laughs.

Charles frowned. “What the devil?”

Conn took the camera off the tripod and shoved it into his friend’s hands, out of harm’s way. “Hold this, would you?”

* * * *

Lillian twitched her pink skirts away from a pile of steaming dung, wrinkling her nose when the pungent scent filled the air. The low heels of her button-up boots sank a bit into ground as she and Aileen walked toward the tents that had popped up like mushrooms after a rain. Several dozen structures, some sturdier than others, comprised the fledgling town. Some were simple tents shared by the workers. Larger wood and canvas buildings housed supplies, offices for the planners and engineers and a sprawling cookhouse. Added to the existing shelters, the new structures featured a host of other attractions, including some rustic saloons and cafes. Erected in ragged rows, they formed a mock-urban order, complete with alleys and wider thoroughfares.

Aileen, holding her own skirts free of the churned-up mud, grimaced. "Are you certain you wouldn't like to go back and have a cup of tea?" Her tone made it clear that was the scenario she preferred.

"If I have any more tea, I'll float," Lillian said. Tottering over the deep ruts and divots that scarred the ground beyond the crushed stone cradling the raised tracks, she devoutly hoped she wouldn't twist an ankle. "Stop your griping. We can't stay cooped up all day."

Aileen made a noise that didn't sound like agreement.

"Besides, don't you want to have a look at the camp?"

"After what we heard last night?"

"Oh, you don't fool me. You're just as curious as I am."

Her friend chuckled. "Maybe. And your Mr. Lowell Adams did say it was better to visit during the day."

"Charles is hardly *my* Mr. Lowell Adams."

"Oh, no doubt. Don't think I didn't notice you batting your eyes like a shameless flirt. My mother didn't raise any fools, missy."

"Perhaps I was flirting with Conn."

"No p'rhaps about it," Aileen scoffed. "You were making eyes at both those lads. Your good mother, God rest her, would be shocked to her fingertips."

"I thought we agreed it's time for me to start living."

"Living, yes. Turning into a hussy, no!"

Lillian stopped walking. Aileen continued on for a few steps, then paused to see what was keeping her friend.

"Is that what you think? That I'm a hussy?"

Aileen's expression was immediately contrite. She put a gentle hand on the arms Lillian had crossed over her waist. "No, Lillian, of course not. What I think is you need to be careful. They both look like good lads, to be sure, but you know how men can be. They see a pretty face and they lose what wits they have. If you don't make it clear you favor one or the other, it can only lead to trouble."

Lillian nodded slowly. "Yes. You're right." After a few moments of silence, they resumed their pace. "This was a bad idea anyway."

"What was a bad idea?"

"My *adventure*. My father is depending on me. I can't disappoint him. I should just focus on what I need to do, instead of what I want to do."

"Oh, Lillian." Aileen blew an exasperated sigh out between pursed lips. "Don't listen to me. I think an adventure is just what you need. And, as you said, things will be much more difficult once we go home to Boston."

"What about two men and trouble and—"

Aileen waved a hand. "Never mind what I said. You're a good woman, and you deserve some happiness. That should be all I'm thinking about. There is no reason why you can't please both your father and yourself. You go ahead and have your adventure, be it with Charles or Conn or any nice gentleman who takes your fancy."

Lillian couldn't stop the laugh that bubbled forth. "So not only am I to slip into sin with the gentlemanly Mr. Charles Lowell Adams and the delicious Mr. Conn Maguire, but you're freeing my dance card for a third man?"

Aileen's laugh was rich and earthy, totally unlike the prim expression she habitually wore. "A dozen men, then. Just don't tell your father I was the one who put you up to it."

As they neared the first row of tents, Lillian heard Yorke's raised voice. Just the sound of his clipped, condescending tones made her head throb. From what they could hear, it was apparent he was dressing down some poor soul. She shared a commiserating look with her friend.

"Wonderful," Aileen said. "About that tea?"

"Much as I'd like to avoid the man altogether, it's simply not possible. Come on. Let's see what he's on about now."

They found him in the cookhouse, a large, squarish tent the next row in. Most of the flaps were open, lashed to the sturdy poles that supported the weathered canvas roof. Several smaller tents branched from the main structure like the wings of a house. Steam pushed out from beneath the lids of massive pots suspended from tripods over fire pits just outside the main tent. As Lillian and Aileen approached, a youngster scurried between the pits, adding coal or wood, and scraping the worst of the ashes into a rusty bucket. A steady stream of men passed between the flaps, apparently dropping off supplies or picking them up.

The workers eyed Lillian and Aileen as if they were fantastical creatures who inexplicably appeared in their midst. Stepping aside, they created a path for the two women to enter the tent unhindered.

Yorke, all his attention on the large man who stood before him, didn't notice them. With his broad shoulders and thick neck, the stranger looked more like a blacksmith than a cook. Rolled-up sleeves exposed hair-covered forearms roped with muscle. Lillian had no doubt he could crack the slender, polished Yorke in half with little effort.

Apparently not intimidated in the least, Yorke said, "You will work with the supplies you are given, O'Brien. Have I made myself clear?"

The man's eyes narrowed. "Very clear, Mr. Yorke. You want me to use meat I wouldn't feed to a diseased dog I didn't like to cook the meals for your work crews."

Yorke's face reddened, and he puffed up like a banty rooster. He opened his mouth, but Lillian cut him off before he could speak. "Mr. Yorke. Is there a problem?"

The secretary's head jerked, and he stared at her. "Mrs. Cabot." He said her name as if through gritted teeth. "No, madam, nothing I can't handle. You needn't concern yourself."

"Nonsense. You know I am interested in all aspects of my father's business." Lillian tipped her chin in greeting to the man who watched them. "Mr. O'Brien, is it?"

"Aye, missus."

"How do you do. I'm Lillian Cabot, Theodore Worthington's daughter. I take it you're the man in charge of the cookhouse?"

"Aye, missus." He gestured at the workers busy at various tasks around them. "Me and my men do the cooking for the crews. If they're off, the lads come and get their beef and taters from the tent. If they're working, the grub wagon takes it to them."

Lillian nodded her understanding. "And there's something wrong with the meat delivery?"

"You could say that." He gestured for her to follow him. Stopping at a work table covered with chopped-up beef, he used a knife to stab a chunk of it. He held the meat impaled on the tip up for her inspection. Lillian grimaced as the scent of rot tickled her nostrils. As she watched, something tiny and white wriggled free of the grayish pink mass and dropped to the ground. A maggot. Looking closely, she saw more of the things writhing in the hunk of meat.

Lillian lifted her hand to her mouth and took a quick step back. "Oh my." She exchanged a glance with Aileen, and hoped she didn't look as green as her friend did. Swallowing bile, she kept her voice even with effort. "I see what you mean. This was in the meat that arrived with us yesterday?"

“Aye,” O’Brien said, tossing the chunk back onto the pile with a disgusted flip of the blade. “Rancid as it is, the men’ll be running for the nearest bushes every breathing moment.”

She noticed he didn’t mention the maggot, just the putrefied state of the beef. She felt Yorke’s glower on the back of her head like a hot poker. “Mr. Yorke, please send a rider back down the line immediately to order a new allotment of beef. There is no way Mr. O’Brien can serve this disgusting offal to the workers.”

“But Mrs. Cabot—”

“Also, arrange a hunting party. Mr. O’Brien will need something in the pot until the next shipment arrives. It won’t be the beef and potatoes the workers are guaranteed in their contracts, but it will be something.”

Lillian stared Yorke down, daring him to argue with her in front of the men. He seemed to realize it. The anger smoothed out of his expression, if not his eyes, and he gave a jerky nod of agreement. “As you wish, Mrs. Cabot.”

Satisfied, Lillian faced the cook. “Mr. O’Brien, please dispose of the spoiled meat. I have no idea how such a horrible mistake came about, but it won’t happen again. If you have any problems, please let me know immediately.”

“Thank you, missus. That I will.”

She was about to ask if this was typical of the food shipments he’d received when the roar of cheers and shouts interrupted her. The reaction of the men around them was startling. Except for O’Brien, they fled the cookhouse like ants from a kicked-over hill.

“Oh, Lord,” Aileen muttered. “What now?”

“My goodness,” Lillian said. “What’s going on out there?”

O’Brien shrugged matter-of-factly. “Fight, most like.”

“A fight! Oh dear.” She started out of the tent, Aileen at her side.

Yorke hurried after them. “Are you certain this is wise, Mrs. Cabot? Perhaps I should escort you back to your private car.”

Lillian didn't waste her breath answering, just picked up her skirts and hurried toward the commotion. Yorke and O'Brien followed.

If the shouts hadn't drawn them in the right direction, the wall of large, sweaty male backs would have. A small figure darted from between two tents, almost bowling into Lillian and Aileen. "Watch it," Aileen yelled after the boy as Lillian stumbled against her. Without sparing a glance for the women, he dove into the crowd of men. Slick as an eel, he wriggled between their larger bodies and was soon out of sight.

Linking arms for stability, the two women ran on. A cloud of dust drifted in the air above the centre of the ring of men. As they neared, the cries of encouragement became more intelligible.

"Give 'im a right, laddie!"

"Watch yer gut!"

"Block! Youse gotta block!"

"I've got two bits. Any takers?"

The crowd reeled back with a collective groan. The roars of encouragement quickly resumed.

"Maybe we should go back to the car," Aileen shouted in Lillian's ear.

"And give Mr. Yorke the satisfaction of being right?" Lillian took a tighter grip on her friend's elbow, where it was tucked inside hers, and tapped on the broad, plaid-covered back in front of her. "Excuse me. Pardon me." When that got no reaction, she poked harder. "Sir!"

Finally, the man turned. It was hard to tell if his skin was weathered brown or simply dirty. She preferred the view of his back. Greasy brown hair tucked behind his ears, thick brows lowered over narrowed eyes, he barked, "Bugger off, ya ...". His words trailed off as he saw who had drawn his attention. His eyes trailed down her body, and his lips spread in a grin that showcased big, yellowed teeth. "Well, now, missus. Didn't see ya there." He leaned closer and said, "What can Harley do for ya?"

His breath was bad enough to make her hold her breath, but she stood her ground. "My friend and I wish to see what the commotion is about, Mister, uh, Harley."

"Do ya now? Well, I can surely help ya with that." Without another word, he wrapped one hard hand around her upper arm. With the other, he pounded on the backs of the men immediately in front of them. "Make way, fellas, make way!" he bellowed. They lashed out at him every bit as quickly as he had at Lillian and Aileen. After an instant of gap-jawed staring, the men parted to let the women through. By that expedient method, Harley cleared a path for them toward the center of the ring, clearly enjoying his role as guide.

"Now, yer in for a treat, ladies," he said. "Rube's been winding up that Irishman all week. Right proud of his hams, Rube is. Know I wouldn't like to go a round or two with 'im. But that Maguire's got some tricks up his sleeve. Seen 'im meself. It's the quiet ones you gotta watch out for," he said with a wink.

"I see," Lillian said faintly. Just then, Harley elbowed aside the last few men blocking them, and she got her first good look at the main attraction. A fistfight was nothing like she imagined. There was no circling, no gentlemanly trading of jabs, no elegant sparing as she'd seen acted out on stage from her theater box.

It rather looked like two dogs she'd once seen brawling in the street—ripping, tearing, vicious.

Conn's opponent was at least a head taller than the Irishman, a brute on two legs with an unholy grin and blood dripping from his nose.

Conn's black hair, the curls damp and defined with sweat, almost covered his glittering blue eyes. He shook his head to get it out of the way, and droplets flung free. Wetness touched Lillian's hand. She looked down and saw not a beat of sweat, but a drop of blood. Conn's hair wasn't wet with sweat. It was blood, from a cut over one brow. He swiped a sleeve across it, but otherwise didn't seem to notice.

Their gazes connected. Conn's eyes widened a fraction in shock. He didn't see the fist coming. It struck the side of his head. Lillian gasped, and Conn dropped to the ground. Beside her, Harley shouted in disappointment. "Come on, lad. Get up!"

The brute didn't do the gentlemanly thing and wait for Conn to find his feet. He hauled back and kicked him brutally in the stomach. Conn grunted. His opponent laughed and drew his leg back for another blow. "Stop!" No one listened to Lillian's cry. She started forward, but Aileen clutched her arm, stopping her.

"No, Lillian! You'll get hurt!"

"But I've got to do something!" She couldn't. She knew it. She could only watch in horror as the man kicked Conn again. Instead of writhing in pain as she expected, Conn grabbed the man's leg and held it. Then he punched the man in... The men around her winced as one. Even Lillian felt a stab of pity as Conn jerked the man's trapped leg, hooked his ankle with his foot, and felled the incapacitated man. Dust billowed as his opponent hit the ground. Lillian swore she felt it shake under her feet. Fast as a snake, Conn was on the man. Grabbing a fistful of his shirt, Conn began delivering a series of sharp, powerful jabs to his face and upper body, too fast for the other man to counter. Finally Rueben dropped his hands to his sides. Conn stopped immediately.

"Do you yield?" he growled.

The man nodded weakly. Conn leaned down, staring right into his eyes. He said something, too low for Lillian to hear. The man nodded again. Satisfied, Conn stood up.

The fallen man's friends rushed to his side. He refused their help and got up under his own steam. He and Conn exchanged another look. The stranger, blood-stained teeth flashing, smiled and raised a hand before loudly inviting his friends to buy him a drink to wash away his aches. They ambled off, as if nothing untoward had happened.

With the fight over, the spectators quickly dispersed. Lillian noticed that money changed more than a few hands. All the onlookers looked satisfied and entertained. None appeared shocked by what had just happened. None, save her and Aileen.

“Lillian.”

Surprisingly, the voice laced with shock and disapproval didn’t belong to Yorke. It was Charles. He stood before her, a bulky camera tucked under one arm, a wad of paper money sticking out of one fist. His winnings, she supposed.

“Charles,” she said, glad her voice didn’t quaver. “Aileen and I were just in the cookhouse when we heard the shouting. Naturally, we thought we should find out what the workers found so entertaining.”

“Entertaining,” he echoed. “Right. Well, you see...”

“Yes?” She lifted her brow, waiting. What could he say? They both knew a fistfight was no place for a lady. Yet he wasn’t in any position to dictate her actions, especially when she knew he was attracted to her and hoped to kindle a relationship between them. Plus, as Theodore Worthington’s daughter, she was the closest thing to his employer, making his position untenable.

A new voice broke their standoff. “You’ve got blood on your dress.” Conn’s accent was, if anything, thicker than it had been at breakfast. Sweat and blood dripped down the side of his face. The skin over one cheekbone was starting to redden. As she watched, he pulled up the corner of his shirt to swipe at the wound over his eye. The sight of his bare belly riveted her. The muscles rippled under his skin in stark definition, sprinkled with dark, tantalizing hairs that trailed away beneath the waistband of his trousers. Conn dropped the shirt back into place.

Lillian, mouth dry, tried to regain her senses. “What?”

“Blood. On your dress,” Conn said.

Lillian glanced down. He was right. A few specks of blood dotted the front of her dusty rose jacket and the paler pink of her skirts. “Oh. Yes.”

Conn shoved the tail of his shirt back into his trousers as if he did so in front of ladies all the time. Maybe he did. Well, if he could be so casual, so could she. "Are you hurt?"

He shrugged. "I'm fine. It was just a scrap. Man was asking for it." He looked at Charles, who seemed to have regained his composure. "So, Charlie? How'd we do?"

"Well enough," Charles said. Without further explanation, he handed over half the notes in his hand and some coins, then put the rest in his jacket pocket. Conn took the camera from him, and that seemed to be the end of it. "Ladies," Charles said. "May we escort you back to your car?"

Lillian tipped her chin up. Damned if she would let them see she was unsettled. Truthfully, now that she understood that the fight meant nothing to them, nor to any of the onlookers, it had been rather exciting. And that's what she hoped to find, wasn't it? Excitement.

"Actually, Aileen and I are in the midst of a tour of the camp." Ignoring Aileen's humph of disagreement, she added, "We're not ready to go back yet. It's a lovely day, and we have much more to see."

"Not that much," Conn said.

"If you'll excuse us, gentlemen. We must be on our way. Shall I tell the cook to expect you for breakfast?"

"Yes, please. Thank you for the invitation," Charles said. She noticed the discreet elbow he put to his friend's side.

"Yes," Conn said.

"Until then." With a nod, she turned on her heel and drew Aileen away.

"Breakfast? What was that all about?" Aileen whispered

Lillian shrugged. Her heart still pounded, racing from the fear she'd felt for Conn and the primal excitement that followed the fight. "Just getting on with my adventure."

"Adventure. You just be sure, Lillian, that you don't take on more than you can handle."

She glanced over her shoulder, concealed a smile when she saw that Charles and Conn stood staring after her. "I don't think I have."

"We'll see," her friend said darkly. "We'll see."

* * * *

Edward Yorke watched Lillian Cabot look on Lowell Adams and the Irishman with an expression full of more warmth than she'd ever shown him. Instead of disgusted by the grubby display, she seemed impressed by the Irishman's fighting skills, judging by the sparkle of interest in her light-green eyes.

Yorke had served her father faithfully for more than three years, and it was more apparent than ever that she had little use for him. He assumed she looked down her nose at him because he wasn't the fool her late husband was. A fool, because Edward Yorke wouldn't have left a woman like Lillian Cabot behind while he rode off to war and got himself killed. Instead of being seen as faithful and dependable, he suspected Lillian Cabot thought him a coward. Well, she'd come to regret her dismissive treatment of him.

He watched for a moment longer, very aware that his presence had been forgotten by everyone. Even the Irishwoman, Aileen McCurdy, ignored him. Disgusted, he strode away. At first, he'd felt a twinge of guilt about what his other employer required of him. Then Mrs. Cabot interfered in his dealings with the cook, O'Brien. It would have made his job easier if the crews became too ill to work. Not all of them, just enough to slow work on the line. But no, O'Brien had to kick up a fuss just when Mrs. Cabot stopped in for a chat.

Thinking about the way she looked at Lowell Adams and Maguire firmed his resolve about working against Worthington and the Great Western Rail Company. The money from the railroad's competitor was simply too good to refuse. And now, he'd get a different kind of satisfaction as well.

The lovely Lillian Cabot would regret dismissing Edward Yorke as unimportant.

Chapter 6

“The men bunk together in barracks-like tents. They eat together, sleep together, work together and game together. Privacy is very dear in a railroad camp. The wise learn to seize it when they can.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

Lillian turned down the lamp on her bedside table and nestled under the covers. Clouds had moved in, blocking the glow of the stars just barely visible through the glass skylight over her bed, and the chamber was very dark. After a few moments, she lifted her head to tug the thick braid of hair out from under her nape and toss it to the side on her pillow. That irritation dealt with, she closed her eyes.

Though she couldn't see the clock, she was certain minutes must have passed. She'd never noticed how stifling the room was. She flung back the heavy spread, leaving just the sheet to cover her. Folding her hands on her chest, she took a number of deep, slow breaths, willing sleep to come.

Instead, she thought of how Conn Maguire's eyes blazed blue, framed by a tangle of black curls and dirt-smudged, tanned skin sheened with sweat. She imagined that was what he'd look like, fierce and primal, a victorious Celtic warrior, as he loomed over her in this very bed. Oh, now there's a naughty thought!

Forcing the beautiful Irishman from her thoughts, she tried to concentrate on how tired she was and how much she needed to accomplish the next day. The next several days. Weeks, even.

Charles, gambling winnings clutched in one hand after Conn thrashed his opponent, had looked as appealing as a bashful boy caught dodging his lessons. She smiled at the memory. There was nothing boyish about his physique, though. The talented cut of his clothing showcased an athletic body, firm, trim and, she suspected, highly agile. Those long thigh muscles of his practically begged a woman to shape them with the palm of her hand. Would they be bare of hair or lightly furred?

Lillian snorted at herself and rolled to her side. Her own words came to her. *Not only am I to slip into sin with the gentlemanly Mr. Charles Lowell Adams and the delicious Mr. Conn Maguire...* She blamed Aileen for putting lustful thoughts in her head. Affairs with a dozen men, indeed! She had to admit, though, that Conn and Charles were each extremely desirable. A woman could do worse than end her celibacy with one of them.

But which one?

Lillian gave up the pretence of sleep and returned to her back. She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and worried it with her teeth as she considered the possibilities.

In her mind's eye, she imagined Conn stepping into her room. Charles followed close behind his friend. The men took up positions on either side of the door, like guards in a treasure house. Or a harem. Neither spoke. They watched her expectantly, as if waiting for her next move in the midnight dance.

Lillian felt a bit bashful just imagining them here in her private compartment. She knew it was foolish. Who would ever know? But this was different. While no novice to fantasy, this was the first time she'd dared put a face to an imaginary lover. It had seemed wrong to populate her sexual fantasies with men she might have to converse with at the next evening's social function. Then again, none of the men of her acquaintance tempted her like Conn and Charles did.

They began to disrobe.

Charles slipped off his coat and placed it neatly on a nearby chair.

Conn shrugged his duster off and let it drop to the floor.

Charles slowly unfastened his waistcoat and draped it over the coat. Then his fingers went to the buttons on his finely made shirt.

Conn unbuttoned the first few fastenings of his shirt, then reached back to grip the fabric at his shoulders and pulled the shirt off over his head. As he did, the ridges of his belly, which she'd noticed and enjoyed after the fight, rippled. He dropped the shirt carelessly on the floor to stand bare-chested. His golden-toned skin stretched taut over well-defined muscles made sharper by intriguing shadows her fingers itched to trace.

Lillian's chest rose and fell in increasingly ragged breaths as she savored the seductive scenario unfolding in her mind. She pushed the sheet down and away to join the spread. Unlacing her nightdress was quickly done. She pushed the sides apart, exposing her breasts in the darkness of the room. They trembled as her fingers grazed the sides of the sensitive mounds, blazing an exquisite path to the tinglingly erect nipples that topped them.

Charles removed his shirt and added it to the pile of his clothes. Leaner than Conn, his musculature was more subtle, yet just as appealing. What color would the hair on his chest be? Pale brown, like his hair? Darker? Or hidden gold treasure? The hair on the back of his hands was certainly fairer. She pictured her dream Charles with a smattering of crisp, golden-brown hair across his pectorals that arched down in a thin trail that disappeared beneath his waistband. A waistband he began to unfasten under her urging thoughts.

Dream Conn, lips forming a crooked smile as his blue eyes darkened with desire, briskly dispensed with pants, smalls, shoes and socks.

Lillian gasped and pinched her nipple. A thready moan escaped her parted lips as she arched her breast into the palm of her hand. Her other took a handful of fabric and tugged her skirt up her legs to her waist. She shifted restlessly on the mattress as cool air washed over

her skin. Her thighs rubbed together, further stimulating the throbbing flesh of her clit.

In her mind, she stared at Conn. He was beautiful. A very male animal, in every sense. His cock jutted out from a tangle of black hair at the apex of his thighs. She thought she could see the flushed skin of his balls, tucked up tight and hard under a handsome pole.

Her eyes flicked to Dream Charles as he skimmed trousers and smalls down his long legs, easily kicking free of shoes and the rest of his clothes. Where Conn was dark, he was light. She imagined the thin trail of golden-brown hair on his belly joining a thicker thatch of slightly darker hair around the base of an erect cock that was in perfect proportion to his long-muscled body.

Lillian pushed her hand between her thighs. Her fingers dipped into the wetness pooled between the swollen lips. She touched the pebbled bud of her clit and helplessly thrust her hips up. The thought of Conn and Charles watching as she did it spurred her on. Her finger rubbed tight, speeding circles around her clit, sliding through the juice of her passion. She pinched her nipples again and again until they pulsed with every beat of her heart. The bite of pain made her pleasure spike, and she loved it.

Almost in unison, her dream lovers took their cocks in hand. Wrapping long, masculine fingers around their heavy erections, they began to stroke themselves. Eyes hot and hungry, they watched as Lillian thrust her fingers into her cunny, keeping her thumb strumming her clit. Their hands fisted their cocks, jerking and pulling, rubbing and squeezing in a rising frenzy.

Lillian could barely hold on to the fantasy as pleasure roared through her. She let out a high, breathless cry as her hips rocked her cunny into her hand, drenching it in a wash of liquid heat that melted her bones. She imagined masculine groans and cries joining hers as her dream lovers reached their peaks with her, ejaculating thick, creamy semen into their palms so it ran over their fingers.

Panting, she felt tears of release trickle from the corners of her closed eyes. Gradually, the tension eased from her body. Her hand fell limp against her thigh. She suspected her nipples, if she could see them, would be bright red from her own pinches. Her belly quaked with the aftershocks of her release.

Lillian's breaths returned to a more even measure, and she opened her eyes. As expected, she lay alone in her pitch-black room, her dream lovers faded into memory for the night. She felt wicked and sated. Exhaustion urged her to do up her gown, pull the covers back up and fall asleep. Instead, she got out of bed and felt her way to the bathing room, and the cloth and water she knew she'd find there.

She wondered if Conn and Charles looked as she imagined them. She wondered if she'd find out firsthand.

Once more clean and properly gowned for the night, Lillian got back into bed. Pulling the covers very correctly over her shoulders, she couldn't help the satisfied smile that spread her lips.

Let the adventure begin.

Chapter 7

“The mountains are almost primal in their beauty, by turns stark and lush. There is the bold power of rugged rock and challenging terrain that makes a man want to conquer it. Then, with breathtaking suddenness, one stumbles upon a hidden waterfall in a fairy glade made for sweethearts.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

Lillian guided her horse through the trees, keeping close to Conn’s mount in the lead. She heard a mutter from the rider behind her, and twisted in the saddle to see Aileen swat the air in front of her nose. Swarms of buzzing insects met them as soon as they entered the forest. They seemed to have a preference for Aileen, since no one else was overly bothered by them.

The air was crisp and fresh. The pleasant bite of fir and pine needles blended with the greener scent of the leafed trees, which were beginning to take on the multi-hued palette of fall. By the time the excursion of railway investors and members of the press arrived, they should be able to enjoy the season in all its brilliant glory. The morning sun filtered through the branches to shine warmly on Lillian’s shoulders, making her glad for the shallow brim that shielded her face.

Charles, bringing up the rear of their small exploratory party, rode his horse with the easy grace of one raised to the saddle. Conn, imperturbable as ever, sat on his animal just as comfortably. She

imagined he perfected his skill during the war, riding all over the south with his photographic equipment strapped pillion behind his saddle.

“Are you certain this excursion might not be too strenuous for the ladies in the party, Lillian?” Aileen called to her.

“The glen Conn and I have in mind is not much farther,” Charles said. “And the path the ladies would take to reach it is a fairly gentle one. We’ll follow it back to camp, so you can see for yourself. This route is simply to give you an idea of what might appeal to the gentlemen who prefer hunting over hiking.”

“It does appear to be the kind of thing to make a hunter take notice,” Lillian said. The forest around them seemed alive with animals unused to human predation, despite the proximity of the railroad crews below. She noticed more than one rabbit, coat flashing the first signs of winter white, hop across the trail, and once a covey of game birds burst from the underbrush in a flurry of feathers and sound. The surprise made her glad for her mount’s rather unexciting disposition. Unlike the spirited animals she preferred to ride in Boston, the camp’s animals were dull, but dependable.

Without warning, they rode clear of the trees. Lillian gasped in delight. She pulled her mount to a stop beside Conn, who paused to wait. Aileen and Charles joined them. They sat in silence for long moments, looking at the tiny vista bounded by trees.

The woodland meadow was a jewel in the wilderness. Long grasses waved in the breeze, some tipped by blooms of scarlet, amber and palest violet. Across the meadow, the trees gave way to an escarpment of dark, craggy stone that had been invisible from the forest. It stretched high into the deep blue sky before giving way to more trees and shrubs at the top. In camp, it was easy to forget the line had reached the foothills of the mountains. Here was a stark reminder of the work the crews faced in the coming months. It was either go over the mountains or through them. Soon, they would begin

the first tunnel. Rather than daunting, Lillian found the idea impressive, thrilling.

Water flowed down the exposed rock in thin, glass-like sheets. At the base of the escarpment, it joined a larger course that frothed over a pile of fallen stone, sending up a rainbow-painted fog of mist before settling into a fast-moving brook that disappeared into the forest.

It would take only moments to walk from one side of the meadow to the other. Lillian was certain it was an ideal setting for a party of women to enjoy a picnic.

“What do you think?” Charles asked.

“I think it’s perfect,” Lillian said. “Absolutely divine.”

“Good,” Conn said. He nudged his horse into motion, which prodded the other animals to follow. When they reached the ribbon of water threading through the creek bed, Conn dismounted and came to Lillian’s side. Without a word, he held up his arms to help her down.

Lillian noticed Aileen’s wince of discomfort when Charles performed the same service for her. Her friend was more used to riding behind a horse, comfortably seated in a carriage, than on the back of one. “Aileen,” she said. “Why don’t you rest for a bit while I look around with Charles and Conn?”

“Good idea,” the young woman said on a sigh of relief. She shook out her skirts and walked to the stream’s edge. There, she settled herself on a large, round-surfaced boulder and gazed into the water.

“Shall we?” Charles’s voice drew Lillian’s attention to the arm he proffered.

Smiling, she accepted it. Conn, hands shoved in his pants pockets, fell into step as they strolled along the edge of the clearing. The rustle of leaves as the wind moved through the branches created a subtle, surf-like sound. The trees bordering the clearing were sparse, and it was easy to see between the trunks despite the lush vegetation that grew at their bases. The graduated shades of green in the distance reminded her of childhood games she’d played with her cousins at the seaside. The idea was to sit on the sandy bottom under the water and

see who could hold their breath the longest. While she played, Lillian liked to stare into the cold, clear water until the stinging salt made her close her eyes, captivated by the ever-deepening blue of the depths stretching into the distance. It was wonderful and terrifying at once. An adventure.

She looked at the men who paced on either side of her—and saw them watching her.

“Is this what you had in mind?” Charles asked.

She felt her cheeks flush at his innocent question when she was thinking about adventure and her fantasy and the two very attractive men who gave every indication they were at her disposal. “I beg your pardon?”

He chuckled and used his free hand to gesture around them. “Won’t your guests enjoy such a scenic, not to mention rustic, picnic spot?”

“Oh, yes, of course. It’s better than I imagined. I’m certain the ladies in the group will enjoy it immensely. The chef’s helpers could come ahead and set up the luncheon while the ladies take a more leisurely stroll. Conn, could you take photographs of the guests for them to keep as mementoes?”

Conn didn’t look pleased at the thought, but said, “Aye, if the weather is with us. I would need to bring my equipment ahead, as well.”

“Excellent.” Lillian looked across the meadow at Aileen. Her friend had removed her bonnet and, head tilted back, eyes closed, appeared to be enjoying the cool sunlight. It was highly unlikely she could hear their conversation.

Almost unconsciously, she tightened her grip on Charles’s forearm. It felt strong and firm under her fingers. A comforting heat seemed to radiate from him. The sun glinted on the light brown of his hair, and his mobile, masculine lips curved in a smile. She imagined what his skin would feel like without the barrier of coat and gloves.

Conn, a strong, silent presence, scanned the glade as they walked, gaze touching here, pausing there. She wondered if he saw everything as if through the lens of his magic wooden box, unconsciously framing it with an artist's eye. Then his eyes settled on her. His expression was as forthright as his words tended to be. She'd come to learn that if Conn thought something, he said it, politesse be damned. If he saw something he wanted, he wasn't shy about letting it show.

And he wanted her. She could see it in his eyes.

Lillian looked at Charles again. A more civilized veneer covered his expression, but it didn't dilute the intensity of the desire she saw there.

How in the world did she find herself in such a situation? All she'd wanted was to help her father in his grand project and give herself some purpose greater than the frivolous pursuits that seemed to occupy most of her friends and acquaintances. Instead, she felt drawn to these two very different, very desirable men.

Charles's hand settled over hers in the crux of his elbow. Languidly, his fingers traced hers ever so slowly. Lillian shivered in delight. If that was what a simple touch did to her, how much more exquisite would it feel to have his touch on more intimate areas of her body? Lillian's pulse sped up.

She felt a warm, powerful presence at her other elbow. Conn. Somehow, without conscious agreement, the three of them stopped walking. Charles's fingers continued their wooing of her hand. She had never realized how erotic such a simple touch could be. Her breast pressed against his biceps. Under her riding outfit, the gentle pressure caused the fabric of her chemise to rasp over her hardening nipple.

Conn, the heady, spicy scent of him teasing her nostrils, stood close enough that her skirts drifted against his legs. His hand settled against her lower back. With elaborate care, his palm glided up her spine. Lillian closed her eyes.

She spared a fleeting thought for Aileen. How did their little tableau appear to her?

It felt good to be touched by a man again. It had been so long. Erotic imaginings paled in comparison to the real thing. How could she have waited to experience it again? She knew how. Since Stephen's death, no one else she met made her long for the intimacies of the marriage bed. Charles and Conn did.

Lillian opened her eyes in time to see the men exchange a look filled with meaning. For some reason, it woke her to what was happening. Two men touched her, intimately, boldly. And she let them. Reveled in it.

She'd teased Aileen about taking both men as lovers, she'd even fantasized about it, but had she meant it? Could she really cast off the shackles of good society, of good breeding, of simple decency and wallow in a hedonistic affair of the flesh? Should she?

But then, this wasn't just about her. Conn's and Charles's feelings mattered, too. Maybe she should concentrate on her work, not her desires.

It was an effort to pull her hand away from Charles's arm, to step away from Conn's delightful caress. But she did it. Taking a deep breath, she faced them.

"We should start back."

"Don't run, Lillian," Charles said softly.

Instead of answering, she took a step to rejoin to Aileen without them. They were men. You couldn't expect them to think rationally at such times. She wasn't sure *she* was thinking very clearly right now.

Conn moved a single step to the side, blocking her. Charles flanked him, forcing her to face them both.

She quirked her brow, hoping to brazen them out. They were unmoved.

"Lillian," Charles said. "I've always held you in high esteem. As soon as I saw you again, I hoped you might be ready to leave your

mourning behind. I realize it has only been a few days since your arrival, but I hope you'll give this a chance."

"And I." Conn's nod was brief, decisive. "You'll return to Boston, to your life there. That doesn't leave us much time together. Why not enjoy it?"

The very conclusion Lillian had so recently come to. Life is short, and easily ended. Why not grab its pleasures when she could? She didn't allow herself to waver, though. Conn and Charles deserved better.

"Fine, then. You force me to be blunt."

"Please do," Conn said. "Truth is truth, no matter what pretty words you wrap it in. I prefer mine bare."

"Ah, Conn," Charles said. "Straight to it, as always."

"Gentlemen. Please."

"Pardon me, my dear. Please, continue."

"Yes. Thank you." Lillian sucked in a deep breath. "I find both of you very appealing. Very appealing," she repeated for emphasis. Charles's lips quirked slightly, as always ready with a smile or a laugh. Conn watched her with controlled focus. Neither appeared to be the least deterred.

"And it's because of that that I find myself in something of a quandary."

"How so?" Charles again.

"Because I find you both so attractive, I feel it's better if I...hold myself back from my preferences."

"I don't understand," Conn said. "Speak plainer."

Embarrassment fueled a spurt of temper. "Fine. I can't choose between you, so I'm not going to choose either of you. You're friends, and I don't want anything I do to strain that. Add to that the fact you have to work together, and with me for the next few weeks, and surely you see how impossible any relationship between two of us would be. Is that plain enough for you, Conn?"

Conn frowned. Ignoring her question, he addressed her statement. "Why must it be a choice?"

She couldn't help it. Her jaw dropped in shock. "I beg your pardon?"

Conn patiently repeated, "Why must it be a choice? Charlie and I aren't asking you to choose."

"Then are you saying...are you actually suggesting...both of you?"

"What we are suggesting," Charles said, "is that you give us a chance. Nothing more."

"Whatever happens between us will all be up to you, Lillian. Conn and I are drawn to you. You feel the same for us. Why not see where that takes us? Conn and I have been through a lot together. We are friends, yes. But if it's a choice between one of us not having a chance with you and neither of us having a chance, we'd rather change our options. Don't worry about coming between us."

Conn laughed softly at that, but Lillian didn't understand what amused him. She looked from one man to the other. What they were suggesting was unheard of. At least, she had never heard of such a thing. A woman who let more than one man court her was a terrible Jezebel. Everyone knew that. A flirt was little better than a jilt. Charles and Conn wanted something far more intimate than posies and poetry, though.

They stood silent and waited for her to decide.

They really seemed to want this. If she could have an affair with both men, with no recriminations, what an adventure.

She wanted this, didn't she? Her resolve firmed. Yes. She did. All she had to do was reach for it.

Straightening her spine, she looked straight at them. "All right, Charles. Conn. If you believe no one will be hurt, then yes. Let's see where this takes us."

They smiled.

Chapter 8

“A good doctor is worth more than gold in a rail camp. He is called on to set bones, stitch wounds and treat fevers. Without him, minor injuries can fester enough to kill a man. Aside from the head cook, he is the busiest man in camp.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

“Mr. Yorke, have you put in the order for a new shipment of beef for the cookhouse?”

“Yes, Mrs. Cabot.” Seated on the other side of the desk in her private car, he consulted his notes. “It will take a number of days for the order to be filled, then transported here via the next supply shipment.”

Lillian set her coffee cup back on its saucer and moved it away from the invoices awaiting her approval. She inked her initials on the bottom right-hand corner and flipped to the next sheet in the stack. “Good. It is entirely unacceptable for the company to receive meat in such a disgusting state. The Great Western Rail Company pays good money for its supplies. Maybe it’s time for us to look for new suppliers.”

“I am certain it was just an anomaly,” Yorke said.

“Still, it wouldn’t hurt to explore our options. I’ll speak with Mr. O’Brien in the morning. I’d like to hear his thoughts on the matter. After all, he is the one who must deal with the provisions on a daily basis.”

“He is...”

Yorke’s voice trailed off as Lillian looked up and quirked her brow. She could mentally complete the sentence for him. “He is only the cook.” Yet again she was reminded of why she disliked the man so much. Yorke was the most priggish individual she’d ever met in her life. Only a fool would blindly make decisions without making every effort to understand a situation. Lillian liked to think she wasn’t a fool.

“We are bound by the employment contract to provide the non-Chinese workers with their meat and potatoes, Mr. Yorke. I will not have the Great Western Rail Company become known for its shoddy treatment of the men. Shoddy treatment can quickly become shoddy work in the minds of investors, and the people we hope to attract as our clientele. And that, sir, will not do.”

“Yes, Mrs. Cabot.”

Lillian sighed. Even when the man tried to be agreeable, he sounded like it killed him to be civil to her. When her father hired him, he was bright, eager, attentive. While she didn’t like his obsequious manner, she admired his work ethic and dedication to her father. For some reason she couldn’t fathom, his attitude toward her had shifted in recent months. Instead of polite and correct, he could barely conceal his animosity. The only time it wasn’t obvious was when her father was in the room with them. Since the quality of Yorke’s work remained the same, Lillian never spoke of it. For her father’s sake, she must contrive some kind of working relationship with his hostile aide-de-camp.

Yorke made it so blessed *difficult*, though.

A rustle of fabric drew her attention to the settee. Aileen sat, craft basket at her feet, fingers flying as she worked on her embroidery. The young woman’s wan face and tired eyes made Lillian notice the hour. Goodness, it was past ten o’clock! No wonder Aileen seemed weary. After their outing with Charles and Conn, she must be exhausted.

Lillian set aside her pen. "I think we should call it a night, Mr. Yorke. It's been a very full day, and tomorrow promises more of the same."

He nodded and began to stow his papers in a sturdy leather satchel. Lillian picked up a bound stack of documents and handed them to him. "Please include these in the next mail delivery to my father."

"Of course." He tucked the packet under his arm and picked up his satchel. "Good night." Without a glance at Aileen, he nodded to Lillian and strode to the door. As soon as he opened it, a cacophonous roar of screams and yells rolled into the car.

"My word," Aileen said, placing her embroidery hoop on the cushion beside her and getting to her feet.

Immediately, Lillian stood and crossed the room to join Yorke. Motionless, he stared into the night. As she reached his side, Lillian realized what had so captivated the secretary. People ran everywhere. Where it should have been dark, it was light, the tent town lit by more than moonlight. A distinctive orange glow cast the scene in devilish silhouette. Something was on fire. Something big.

"Goodness." Lillian brushed past Yorke and started to descend the wrought-iron steps to the ground.

He jolted into action. "Mrs. Cabot!" She ignored him and hurried toward the tents. "Mrs. Cabot!" Yorke grabbed her elbow, yanking her to a stop.

She whirled on him. "What is it?"

"You must stay here. It is too dangerous for you to go into the camp after dark."

"Stay here? When we don't even know what's going on? When people may need help?"

Aileen, a shawl draped around her shoulders, hurried to join them. Seeing her made Lillian notice how frigid the night was. Aileen held out a second thick, woolen shawl. Gratefully, Lillian wrapped it around herself, forcing Yorke to release her arm.

“Mrs. Cabot,” he snapped. “At least allow me to find out what’s going on before you race headlong into the unknown.”

“By all means, please find out what has happened. Aileen and I are still going to see if we can help.”

He began to sputter another protest. Impatient with his dithering, she walked away. The muddy ground, ruts and divots frozen by the cold, made the going even more difficult than it was by day.

“Maybe it would have been better to wait to find out what has happened,” Aileen said, her voice breathless as she hurried to match Lillian’s longer stride.

“Perhaps,” Lillian said. “But do you really think I’d let that man know he might be right about anything?”

They shared conspiratorial grins. “Heaven forbid,” Aileen said.

By then, they had reached the first row of tents. Seeing the confused rush of men, Lillian experienced a strange sense of déjà vu. It was like the excitement that filled the air when Conn fought that brute, Rueben. However, this time the air was fraught with anxiety and fear, not the anticipation of bored men eager to be diverted by fisticuffs and wagering. Large, rough-looking rail workers jostled the two women in their haste to get wherever they were going. It was easy to surmise their destination was the fiery glow at the center of the tent town.

The first trickle of fear icing her spine, Lillian began to run, pulling Aileen behind her so they wouldn’t get separated.

It was a vision of hell.

Once full of orderly rows of tents, the heart of the action was a seething mass of humanity, of yelling men and crying women. Lillian barely noticed them. All her attention centered on the conflagration. She’d seen this particular collection of canvas-topped shacks unloaded from the hell on wheels and marveled at the ingenuity of the construct. Flames engulfed the structures in a bonfire of giant proportions. Flaming scraps of canvas dangled purposeless from thick

wooden poles, waving in the heat-driven wind of the blaze like hellish moss on a barren forest of the damned.

Someone had thought to stall the spread of the flames by taking down the neighboring tents. Orphaned ropes and piled canvas littered the ground. Something inside the conflagration crashed down, sending up a spray of sparks. The wind caught the embers, ever so gently wafting them out over the rest of the camp.

But all was not chaos. Some of the men formed a ragged bucket brigade, and more workers ran to join them. With surprise, Lillian saw Conn at the head of the line, directing the men. His voice, loud and strong, penetrated the cacophony. "Keep those buckets moving, boys! Rueben, get your lads in another line, or I'll hand you your arse again!"

Aileen touched her arm. "Look," she said.

Lillian followed her gaze to a group of women. About a dozen of them huddled together, some on the ground, many wearing just their nightclothes. Charles crouched beside one woman and held a tin cup to her lips. At last, Lillian thought. Something she could do. She headed for the group. Before she reached them, she noticed a young woman standing close to the burning tents. Too close.

"Miss," Lillian called. The other woman didn't respond. Fearing that the conflagration could collapse at any moment, sending up another dangerous hail of sparks, Lillian hurried to the woman's side. Putting her arm around the woman's thin shoulders, Lillian forcibly guided her away. Aileen, concern plain on her face, took the woman's other arm. She moved jerkily, like a clockwork figure, but allowed Lillian and Aileen to lead her to join the other women. She didn't resist when Lillian, afraid she would simply fall down, urged her to sit on the ground. Lillian knelt and began to search her unexpected charge for injury.

The young woman's feet were bare. Her skirts, indecently short, exposed slender calves and the curve of her knees. Black soot covered her face and arms, pale streaks of clean skin glistening through the

darkness where tears or sweat left their trails. It was difficult to make out her specific features, but Lillian thought she was probably quite a lovely woman. Lovely girl, she mentally amended as she more closely examined the young person she held.

Lillian surveyed the other women. Some wept, and others watched the fire with cold, cynical expressions. They were dressed like the girl. Or rather, barely dressed. It wasn't difficult to surmise what service these women provided to a camp full of men.

A long, angry red welt marred the girl's left forearm, which was exposed by her sleeveless bodice. Lillian handled the arm gently to get a better look at the burn.

"Poor lass," Aileen said. "What's your name?"

The girl looked at her uncomprehendingly for a moment, then whispered through stiff lips, "Meaghan."

"Meaghan," Lillian repeated. "Don't be afraid. You're away from the fire, you're safe. We'll get you mended in no time."

"Lillian!"

At the sound of her name, Lillian met Charles's startled gaze. He rose, bucket in hand. "What are you doing here?" He stalked toward her, a fierce glow in his eyes that had nothing to do with the fire.

She realized he was angry with her. "I came to help, of course." Still holding Meaghan's arm, Lillian felt a shiver wrack the girl's slender frame. She took off her shawl and wrapped it around her, careful not to touch the burn. Gently, she guided Meaghan's hands until the girl held it in place on her own.

"Help? It's not safe."

Lillian ignored that and looked pointedly at the bucket he held. "Is that water?" A chain secured the tin cup to the rope handle. "May I have some for this girl, please?"

Charles's eyes flicked to Meaghan, and some of the temper left his face. He set the bucket down and crouched beside Lillian to offer the girl a cupful of cold water. Lillian looked around. Conn and his bucket brigade were having some success. The flames had diminished

significantly, although the heat almost made their proximity unbearable. A number of men pulled what they could out of the wreckage, beating the licking flames out with strips of canvas scavenged from nearby tents.

Their initial shock waning, it was evident the exposure was beginning to discomfit the women. Their concerns seemed more physical, rather than any sense of outraged propriety. Lillian scanned their faces until she found what she needed. Leaving Meaghan to Aileen and Charles, Lillian rose and approached a woman the others had gravitated to. Older than Lillian, she was attractive in an unsubtle manner, from the skeins of blond hair that tumbled around her shoulders to the ripe curves shown to advantage in a surprisingly well-cut gown. She noticed Lillian's approach, but didn't move to greet her.

"Pardon me," Lillian said. "Are you in charge of these ladies?"

"I am." Her tone and the tilt of her chin dared Lillian to comment further.

"It appears some of your charges may be in need of medical care and perhaps other necessities, if the fire has claimed as much as it appears. Please allow me and my companions to assist you, Miss..."

"Mrs. Northrup," the woman said. It was plain Lillian's offer surprised her. "That is most...kind of you, Mrs. Cabot."

Lillian wondered how the woman knew her name, but realized it wasn't that unfathomable. She called Aileen and Charles over to join them. "Aileen, can you try to locate Mr. O'Brien in this melee? And Mr. Yorke as well. We'll need to get these ladies some alternate accommodations until their own quarters can be replaced." Aileen nodded and began to wend her way through the men battling the fire. "Charles?"

He gave her a half-smile, as if amused by the way she took charge of the situation. "At your service, Mrs. Cabot."

“Please gather Doctor Ritchards and his helpers, if they aren’t already about. He should examine these women, and I’ve no doubt some of the men will need his skills before the night is through.”

He bowed crisply, a soldier to an officer, and marched off to carry out her orders.

“Now, Mrs. Northrup,” Lillian said. “If you could dispatch some of your more level-headed ladies to scour the camp. We’ll need spare clothing, of course, but also blankets and sheets for bandages. And definitely more water for drinking and to soothe burns.”

“As you say, Mrs. Cabot. Violet. Sophia.” The two women who answered the madam’s call were as scantily garbed as the others, but they were dry-eyed and calm. They listened as their employer relayed Lillian’s instructions, then left to carry them out.

In short order, Lillian and Mrs. Northrup marshaled the women to move to a quieter location, farther from the heat of the dying fire. While burning with less intensity, it was clear it would take the men some time to fully extinguish it. Lillian convinced the proprietor of one of the newly arrived enterprises to make room for the ladies. She set to work, helping him shift boxes of tobacco, candies, jugs of syrup and canned peaches against the walls of his tent. With almost a dozen women crowded inside, quarters were cramped.

When Violet and Sophia returned, they led in a couple of men pressed into service to carry the fruits of their scavenging. Almost on their heels, Charles ducked inside with two more men in tow. One, short of stature, but with a solid compactness and an air of self-confidence, carried a large black satchel. He was young enough to have just left school, Lillian thought. Still, Charles’s introduction confirmed her surmise that this was the doctor, Evan Ritchards.

“Mrs. Cabot,” he said, bowing slightly over her hand as he shook it. The rich, rolling accents of the South flavored his words. “If you’ll forgive me, I only have a short time to spare for these ladies. I’ll take a quick look, but unless I find something requiring my specific attention, my assistant,” he gestured to the other man, “Collins can

see to them. Some of the men fighting the fire have been burned quite badly, and their injuries must take precedence.”

“Of course. I understand. Some of the ladies have been burned, but not severely. I think the shock of their ordeal is their greatest injury.”

“Not unexpected,” he agreed. With a parting nod, he left Lillian and Charles to make his way through the tent, Collins close behind him. Lillian watched to assure herself that, though Ritchards didn’t linger, he paused beside each woman. After speaking briefly to his assistant, then Lillian and Charles, he took his leave. The tent flap still stirred from his passage when a large hand shoved it open to allow Aileen to enter, followed by the hulking figure of the camp’s cook.

“Lillian,” Aileen said. “Mr. O’Brien believes he and his helpers will be able to assemble some quarters for the women to use for the immediate future from supplies he has on hand.”

“Aye, ’twould be fairly simple,” he agreed. It was hard to discern where his heavy black beard ended and the soot on his face began, evidence of his own efforts in fighting the blaze. If anything, he looked even more imposing without the food-stained apron tied around the barrel of his body. The muscles of his chest were clear under the damp fabric of his shirt, cuffs rolled up almost to his elbows.

“Excellent, Mr. O’Brien,” Lillian said. “I hoped you would be able to help.”

“Just give me a few more hours, missus, while me and the lads help with the fire. Then we’ll see about getting the doves in a cote.”

His words puzzled her. Aileen’s discomfited expression was more eloquent, and Lillian belatedly realized that by “doves” he referred to the prostitutes.

“Whenever you can will be fine, Mr. O’Brien. Until then, I would be grateful if you could spare a lad to perhaps prepare some food and drink for the ladies, to help take their minds off their ordeal.”

“Aye, that I can do. Just let me collar one of my boys, and he’ll set you up right.”

Lillian watched him leave, and noticed she wasn’t the only one. Aileen met her eyes and flushed, then busied herself with a flustered straightening of her skirts. Lillian opened her mouth to speak. Charles forestalled her.

“Now that the ladies are taken care of, perhaps you should consider returning to your quarters,” he said, holding his hand up when she would have protested. “You have arranged for food, drink, shelter and clothing to see them through the night. I am certain Mrs. Northrup can take it from here. In fact, I think it would be better if you left everything else in her hands.” He leaned close to her ear and whispered, “I believe you make her nervous.”

The warmth of his breath brushed against her skin, and she shivered. He smelled of soot and sweat and fading cologne, but under that his scent called to her, man to woman, virile male to acquiescent female. She couldn’t help thinking of what he and Conn had proposed, that she should indulge herself with both of them. Just the thought made her nipples furl in greedy anticipation.

Embarrassed that she could feel desire when there were far more serious matters to contend with, she sought out Mrs. Northrup with her eyes. The madam didn’t look nervous to Lillian. Instead, she appeared to be fully involved in a low-voiced conversation with Doctor Ritchards’ assistant as the man efficiently smoothed salve on a woman’s palm. Violet and Sophia, too, were busy. One moved about the cramped space with a bucket of drinking water, while the other handed out blankets and scavenged coats. Even John Smithers, the proprietor, had a task, unbending enough to open cans of his precious peaches to offer to the women. As Charles said, everything seemed well in hand.

“Since I’m not needed here, I should see if I can help Doctor Ritchards with the injured men.”

When she would have walked away, Charles stayed her with nothing more than the touch of his fingers, brushing aside a lock of auburn hair that had fallen against her cheek. She must look as disheveled as the women around her.

“Lilly,” he said, his voice low, intimate. Inexplicably, the diminutive sent a frisson of pleasure through her body. “Go back to your car. I know you want to help, but the urgency is over. This can be a rough and tumble place with rough and tumble men. Surely you realize that after you saw Conn and Rueben’s friendly tussle.”

That was too much. “Friendly tussle? I hardly think so.”

“Believe me, it could have been much worse. But we’re getting away from my point, which is that you’ll be safer in your private car. Let me and Conn be your eyes and ears here. I swear, we will keep you informed of everything that happens.”

She wavered. Where Yorke’s concern irritated, Charles’s touched a place deep inside her. It was true. Mrs. Northrup would likely prefer to carry on without her. It couldn’t be comfortable for her to deal with a woman of Lillian’s class, no matter her aplomb. And Doctor Ritchards impressed her as a capable sort.

Aileen’s evident exhaustion finally convinced her. Her companion would never leave the camp without Lillian. “All right,” she said to Charles. “But only if you promise to tell me the instant I’m needed.”

The corner of his slim, mobile lips quirked in a smile she couldn’t mistake for anything other than sensual. “Oh, I will. Rely upon it.”

Chapter 9

“In the hierarchy of the train camps, the site boss is king. He rules the work crews and the camps, enforcing deadlines, driving quality and making sure things in general go the way they should. He has the power of life and death over the men, sometimes literally. Woe betide the man who crosses the site boss.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

Lillian stared at Yorke and Thomas Devereaux, the site boss. As the man in charge of making sure everything ran smoothly, from crew assignments to ensuring construction met project deadlines, Devereaux carried a heavy load. Lillian knew her father liked and respected him. She even shared his feelings. Usually. When she wasn't faced with horrible news.

“Am I understanding this correctly? The dynamite is missing?”

“Not all of it,” Devereaux said. His bluff face showed his anger clearly, despite his effort to sound controlled. “A few cases.”

“I see,” Lillian said. “Exactly how many cases?”

“Five.”

“And the men guarding the munitions tent?”

“Left their posts to help fight the fire. The theft wasn't noticed until this morning, when one of the foreman arrived to make arrangements for some to be shipped up the line for his crew. They're to begin preliminary blasting of the tunnel tomorrow, and he wanted to make sure all was in order.”

“We’re fortunate he was so conscientious,” Lillian said. “Rather convenient that the fire was able to draw them away just after the dynamite shipment arrived.”

“Isn’t it?” Charles said, sotto voce. She looked at him. He and Conn were still at the breakfast table when Yorke and Devereaux arrived.

She turned back to Yorke and the site boss. “Mr. Devereaux, organize a search of the camp, a discreet one. Also, if you haven’t already done so, question the guards. Perhaps they made note of any unusual attention, anything out of the ordinary in the hours leading up to the fire.”

“Yes, Mrs. Cabot.” With a brusque nod, he left to set the search in motion.

Almost to herself, Lillian said, “I’ll have to write to my father and inform him of this.”

“Allow me, Mrs. Cabot.”

“Oh.” She waved a hand, dismissing Yorke’s offer. “Thank you, Mr. Yorke, but it’s best that I include this in my report. There are some other matters I need to address as well, and it may as well all go in the same missive. I would appreciate it, though, if you could track down whoever Mr. Devereaux has put in charge of aiding Mrs. Northrup and her ladies and make certain that they are well-settled.”

Brittle silence, and then, “You wish me to see that the prostitutes are settled? I beg your pardon, but I refuse to be associated in any way with such females, as should you, madam. A lady in your position must know better. If your father—”

“Yorke.” Conn’s voice, low as it was, held unmistakable warning.

“Lillian is simply showing compassion,” Charles said. His tone, while milder than Conn’s, was just as steely. “I am certain her father would do the same.”

“Yes,” Lillian said. “As am I. If you really feel uncomfortable doing this for me, Mr. Yorke, I’ll see to it myself. Those women

wouldn't be here if not for the railroad. Getting them back on their feet is the least we can do."

Yorke nodded stiffly. "I'll speak to O'Brien. If there is nothing else?"

"No, thank you. I'll be riding out with Charles shortly to visit the site of the new tunnel, so I likely won't see you until the evening meal."

"As you wish." Yorke stalked from the car, every step full of affront.

Satisfied he was beyond hearing, Lillian narrowed eyes on Conn and Charles. Gently tapping one fingernail against the side of her teacup, she said, "Gentlemen. While I appreciate your support, in future, please allow me to handle Mr. Yorke. It wouldn't do for him or anyone else to think I am not up to the task of managing my father's business, even if only temporarily."

Charles nodded his head in a faint bow of apology. "You're right, Lillian, my apologies. But it's hard to resist when Yorke is..."

"An ass," she finished. "I know. But my father trusts him as his secretary, and he really is much easier to manage with firm respect."

Conn chuckled and lifted his coffee to his lips. "Respect. Aye, I noticed how well he appreciated your respect when you ordered him to see to the lightskirts."

Exasperated, Lillian huffed out a breath. "Will you just let me handle him?"

The Irishman held up his hands in surrender. "Fine. Yorke's all yours."

"Thank you."

Conn pushed away from the table and got to his feet. "You two have your plans set for the day. I'd better be about mine."

His eyes touched on her mouth, and for a moment, Lillian thought he might lean down and kiss her. Instead, he gave a single, satisfied nod—one she interpreted as a promise to do just that, later—and strode from the car, leaving her alone with Charles. He, she noticed,

watched her face as well, lips tilted up at the corners in a satyr-like smile.

He set aside his napkin and got to his feet. Holding out his hand to help her from her chair, he said, "Shall we?"

A shiver tickled Lillian's spine, but it had nothing to do with fear or trepidation and everything to do with desire and anticipation.

What had she gotten herself into?

She took his proffered hand and looked at him through her lashes. "I'm looking forward to it."

* * * *

Plunging into the bustling camp, Yorke was so incensed he could barely see where he was going. The woman was beyond the pale. There was no other explanation for it. Her outrageous behavior had only gotten worse since they left Boston. Watching fistfights, breakfasting with that bastard Irishman, lowering herself to associate with whores. If only Boston's elite could see their precious Mrs. Lillian Cabot now. Her father's darling, her dead husband's devoted wife, the toast of society—only he knew the truth. Behind her sweet smiles and cultured façade, she was a tease. In Boston, he noticed the way the friends of her father and husband flocked around her in her widowhood.

Even here in the wilds, it hadn't taken her long to find new intimates. It was obvious Lowell Adams was taken with her. As for Maguire... Yorke's lip curled. Whatever could a lady in Lillian's position see in such a ruffian? Flirting with the man was unthinkable for a woman of her class, and yet there she was, sipping tea and laughing with him at her table.

Yorke roughly shoved a small figure out of the way when it didn't move quick enough to avoid him, his ears deaf to the boy's colorful curses as he stumbled and barely stopped from falling. However, the annoyance was a reminder that he likely shouldn't be so obvious

about his destination. Yorke glanced around. Convinced no one paid particular attention to him, he sidled between two tents. Swiftly, he navigated the canvas and wood maze until he reached the agreed-upon meeting place. Murchison was there ahead of him.

Seated on an upright barrel, the man whittled a narrow rectangle of wood with a knife that seemed too large for the task. Curls of pale wood covered the ground around his scuffed boots, testament to his wait. The man didn't look up as he approached. All Yorke could see was the top of a dusty brown hat covering brown-blond hair and an unshaven chin.

"You started the fire?"

Murchison shrugged, not taking his eyes from his whittling. "You said you wanted trouble. You didn't specify."

"So I did. I only asked to be certain."

"Do you really need to know?"

Yorke thought. His secret employers didn't care how he accomplished their ends, only that the work on the tracks of the Great Western Railroad was, if not stopped, at least slowed. There was government money to be made in land and mineral rights for the company that reached the goals set out by Congress. Of course, that money would only go to the first company to meet the government's deadline for completion. It was a race to the finish, and Yorke intended to do what he could to ensure the Great Western Rail Company didn't win it. He had had some second thoughts before leaving Boston, but Lillian Cabot's increasingly hostile attitude and condescending dismissal changed that.

"No," he said finally. "I don't."

Murchison unfolded from the barrel, revealing his height. He was so tall he seemed thin, though the width of his shoulders and chest belied that. He tucked the woodwork—Yorke thought it might be a whistle—into his back pocket. Idly, he thumbed the tip of his knife. The blade rasped against his work-roughened skin. His blue eyes were

cold, impassive. Yorke suppressed a shiver of unease, telling himself it was distaste that he had to deal with such an individual.

“Good, then,” Murchison said. “Don’t you worry about a thing, Mr. Yorke. I’ll take care of the details.”

Yorke nodded stiffly. Satisfied, the man left with a negligent finger touch to the worn brim of his hat. Neither man spoke a farewell. Such courtesy didn’t play a part in their relationship. They had been hired to do a job. That was all. With Murchison’s skills, Yorke was confident it would be completed in short order. He thought of the other man’s dead stare. This time, he couldn’t suppress the instinctive shudder. Lillian Cabot really had no idea what she faced.

Chapter 10

“Many site bosses are pleased to count the Chinese among their crews. They work hard, and skillfully, without complaint. Some have said that any race that built the Great Wall of China can build a railroad—a difficult point to refute.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

The ride from the main camp was an easy one. Charles was a good guide. He pointed out sights of interest along the way, explaining the tasks of the work crews they passed along with amusing or important anecdotes about some of the men in particular. When she asked about the armed guards watching over the crews, he assured her it was only a precaution after one of the men, a former Kentucky woodsman, came across signs of bear.

“It’s probably nowhere near us anymore,” Charles said. “They don’t like the commotion of the camp and the work details. But it’s better to be prepared.” She only noticed the rifle in the scabbard attached to his saddle when he patted it.

“I’ve never seen a bear outside of a travelling show,” she said.

“You wouldn’t want to,” he said. “They’re quite short-tempered, I understand.”

“Not unlike some people I know.”

They laughed, and continued on. Charles led the way up an increasingly steep, winding trail. The tricky ride again made Lillian grateful for her horse’s plodding steps. Who needed a spirited mount

in this challenging terrain? Trees and brush crowded in on both sides of the trail, and she imagined they hid a menagerie of wildlife. Even if something jumped out at them, she doubted her mount would startle at anything less than the bear Charles mentioned. The beast was so phlegmatic, it would take a lightning bolt from the Almighty to rock it back on its horseshoes.

A high, thin scream drew her gaze up. Shading her eyes, she squinted to see the silhouette of a great bird circling above. It flew too high for her to make out more than wide wings and mottled brown feathers against the deep blue of the sky.

“Believe me, it’s worth the ride,” Charles called over his shoulder.

She eyed the way his form filled out his jacket, and the sleek muscles of his thighs where they gripped his horse. “Oh, I believe it.” When he looked back, she only smiled sweetly.

“Right,” he said. He faced forward again in time to hold up an arm to protect his face from a springy branch.

Lillian laughed to herself, enjoying the subtle flirtation. The anticipation that had thrummed through her since Charles and Conn made their unconventional offer the day before seemed more electric than ever. It was one thing to fantasize about them in the privacy of her bed, but to consider being with the two men and know that, at a word from her, it could become reality was unbelievably exciting.

At last the trail evened out. The close trees edged back, and they rode out onto a small clearing at the top of a high bluff. A wide strip of short grass and tiny flowers carpeted the small platform made by nature. Charles dismounted. Helping Lillian from her horse, he secured their mounts to a convenient tree limb within easy reach of grass and leaves to keep them occupied. Taking a bundle from his saddlebags, he offered Lillian his arm. She curled her fingers into the bend of his elbow. Stroking her thumb delicately over the heavy fabric of his coat, she imagined touching the sensitive skin of his inner arm. He paused and stared down at her, the brim of his hat

casting a shadow over his upper face that failed to dim the fire that kindled in his eyes.

He hugged his arm against his side, surrounding her hand in his heat. Before she could move, he brushed her lips with a surprisingly chaste kiss. "Come," he said. "You'll like this."

"Of that, I have no doubt."

Grinning at her sally, he said, "Enough of that for now, Lilly, my little minx."

Drawing her forward, Charles urged her to the very edge of the bluff. It dropped away quite steeply. Lillian felt her stomach tumble as vertigo struck. Clutching Charles's arm, this time in both hands, she gasped. "Oh, my."

"It's perfectly safe," he said. "The engineers have been all over this place. If it wasn't solid, they would have had to reinforce it to prevent it from crumbling and blocking the tracks when the trains begin to rattle past alongside it."

Feeling a bit silly, Lillian loosened her grip. Of course he wouldn't lead her to the edge of disaster. For all his love of adventure, Charles was no one's fool.

Bucking up her courage, Lillian looked out on the vista spread below.

Some distance away, one of the Chinese work crews removed stumps from a cleared tract of land. Beyond the main crew, a smaller group of men worked close to a rocky face that dwarfed the bluff she and Charles stood on. From Devereaux's report and the state of the trackless railbed leading up to it, she surmised it was to be the start of their tunnel when blasting began the next day. Hard to imagine such a solid, imposing wall of rock as the tunnel it would become, thanks to the power of Mr. Nobel's thrilling invention. Without the dynamite, carving the needed route with the comparatively frail power of human muscle would take much, much longer.

Using just shovels, pickaxes, chisels and hammers, the Chinese work crew cleared the fledgling track bed with near startling rapidity,

using baskets and one-horse carts to carry away the excavated dirt and rocks. A number of white bosses oversaw the work, yet they were hardly needed. Lillian had heard that one of her father's rivals, Charles Crocker, insisted that his construction superintendant focus on hiring Chinese workers because of their proven talent for massive projects. Seeing their skill, she couldn't disagree.

A few figures bearing kettles suspended from yokes over their shoulders moved among the men with the hot tea they preferred to water. The Chinese crews had their own cooks, their own rations and their own food. Unlike the white crews, with their contracted beef and potatoes, the Chinese subsisted on a varied diet of vegetables, fruit, fish and several kinds of meat as well as noodles and rice. They were really quite efficient employees, she reflected. One didn't hear of the Chinese workers getting into fisticuffs in camp.

Charles released her arm and drew away. She looked at him inquiringly. He held up the bundle of fabric he carried under his other arm. "Allow me." After doing something she couldn't see, he gave the bundle a flip and it billowed open like a sail. A blanket, she realized. He quickly spread it on the ground. As he adjusted the blanket to his satisfaction, she noted that he still held a second, smaller, bundle. It must have been wrapped up inside the bundled blanket. In short order, Charles produced a small repast and jug of chilled, sweetened tea from the smaller package.

Smiling at his forethought, Lillian settled herself on the blanket and allowed him to serve her.

Even seated, the vantage point provided an excellent view of the scene and workers below. Lillian wondered if she should attend the blasting tomorrow, or if her presence would distract the crews that carried out the dangerous task. It might be possible to watch, if she stayed on the safety of the bluff.

She and Charles spoke briefly of their mutual acquaintances in Boston, but she quickly steered the conversation to the upcoming expedition. Some journalists were on the guest list, but most of the

people they would be squiring around for the excursion were investors, would-be investors and their spouses. Her father had commissioned a small fleet of private railcars. Unlike hers, each elegant car had space for a number of guests. Eventually, they would go into service on the new line. For now, they were a novelty that was certain to impress the men and women hoping to take a look at the swift progress the Great Western Rail Company was making in its push west.

Charles tipped his head back and swallowed the last of his sweetened tea. Then he picked up Lillian's parasol, slid it open and solicitously handed it to her. Lillian looked at him questioningly. While the sun was out, it was far from a light-dappled day. She'd brought the parasol along more out of habit than any need to fend off freckles.

"I think you'll want to have this," Charles said. She didn't know which intrigued her more, the husky timbre of his voice or the mischievous glimmer in his dark brown eyes. Regardless, she took the parasol and held it daintily over her shoulder to shield her face from the cool fall sunlight.

Charles looked at her pose with a critical eye. To her further surprise, he touched the handle and guided her hold on the parasol until the lacy hemisphere faced the workers rather than the sun.

"Perfect," he said. Before she could speak, he leaned forward and kissed her. Lillian smiled with delight at his surprising move, pleased when his lips spread in answering mirth without breaking the kiss. Charles's lips were soft and firm. Almost as full as her own, they were saved from any hint of femininity by the starkly masculine lines of his jaw and cheekbones. Lillian closed her eyes and let sensation steal over her. She hummed with pleasure as the tip of his tongue traced the seam of her lips. It glided back and forth, back and forth, teasing her with sensuous promise. Even when she finally parted her lips to let him in, he took his time. His tongue curled around hers with consummate skill, luring her into an almost forgotten rhythm.

A bang and a harsh shout from below jolted her out of the kiss. Lillian jerked upright, only then realizing she had been leaning into Charles with all the avidity of an affection-starved puppy. She watched the heat in Charles's eyes and decided he didn't mind in the least.

"It's all right," he said softly, his weight braced on one palm on the blanket as he sat close to her. "No one can see us up here. It's just you and me, Lilly."

Lillian's belly quivered pleasantly at the sound of the endearment in his passion-husked voice. She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth and weighed the risks of continuing down this road to passion. It was a tempting route to follow. She released her lip and looked at him steadily. She felt a feminine thrill when his eyes fastened on her mouth as if he couldn't help himself.

"Yes, Charles. Just you and me." And then she deliberately wet her lip with her tongue.

He didn't look triumphant, or arrogant, or even pleased. He just looked as hungry as she felt.

Lillian kept her eyes open as he came at her again, forgoing the slow, teasing, stroking kiss for a meltingly hot one she felt all the way to her belly, and lower.

Charles cupped her face in one strong palm. She was briefly surprised by the calluses on his palm and fingers, then realized it was from holding the reins without gloves to protect his hands, as well as from wielding his ever-present pen.

He smelled delicious. He felt heavenly. And he tasted divine.

A full participant in her own seduction, Lillian eagerly followed his lead. There was more to learn of this man from her world, who had walked away from an easy life to follow a more dangerous road. She hungered to learn why. To be frank, that same blend of the unknown and the unique drew her to Conn just as strongly. While two men could not be more unlike, the desire they inspired in her was oddly the same.

Lillian sighed as Charles's fingers traced her jaw, briefly dipping up to touch her lips where they met his. They both smiled. His hand trailed away, tracing a sensuous path down the column of her throat to the frilled lace secured at her collar with her mother's pearl brooch. Then he went lower, dragging his hand down until he cupped her breast through the stiff fabric of her bodice, corset and shift. She might as well be naked, so clearly did she imagine his hot skin pressing against her flesh. Her nipple budded into an almost painful knot. Charles made an approving sound low in his throat. Cradling her breast, he found the stiff point through the layers of clothing and flicked it with his thumb, brushing his nail over and around the hard tip.

Lillian couldn't stop the soft cry he caught in his mouth. He pulled the barest inch away from her lips, his breath hot against her mouth as he whispered, "Lilly, my sweet. You are a siren. A goddess."

Catching her breath, and her boldness, Lillian nipped his shaven chin. "Then you must be a woodland god, Charles. I swear there is something magical in your touch."

Chuckling a bit raggedly, Charles ducked his head, eyes following the metronome sweep of his thumb over her nipple, still sedately covered by her gown. "I wish I could strip your clothes from you right now and see what I'm touching."

Lillian purred. "What a lovely thought. Perhaps if we return to my private car..."

"In a bit. Just a little longer, my sweet, before we go back to the camp. After all, that annoying gnat Yorke might have found some vital correspondence for your immediate attention, or require your consultation on some matter, and then we would lose our chance."

"You're likely right. Very well. We'll linger, but only for a little while."

His pressed a hot kiss to her lips. "A little while is not quite enough for what I have in mind. Please say you'll stay longer, Lilly."

Meeting his hot brown gaze, she felt herself melt even more. “How could I refuse?”

Charles rewarded her with a licking kiss then settled his lips over hers in earnest. He continued to play with her breast, tormenting her with soft touches and bold caresses that she felt down to her toes. Lillian shifted on the blanket, almost gasping when the motion rubbed her thighs together and sent sparks of sensation shooting through her clitoris and beyond. She liked it so much, she did it again.

Charles must have sensed her need, because his hand left her breast and moved to her belly. Easing closer, lips never leaving hers, he traced the length of her thigh. The weighted fabric of her warm skirts was as thin as gossamer as he cupped her knee, gliding down to shape her calf, and reached the ruffled edge. In a blink, his fingers were under it, holding her ankle through her low boot. Then they began the return journey up her body, this time under her skirts and petticoats, over the delicate fabric of her drawers.

Lillian felt driven to protest. “Charles, we really shouldn’t.” Even she heard the reluctance in her voice.

His eyes met hers. His fingers continued their slow exploration up her thigh, caressing bare flesh. “Please, Lilly. Let me do this for you.”

Her eyes flicked to the front of his trousers, where a very obvious bulge had formed. “And you?”

His smile was both rueful and resigned. “Lord knows I should be used to it by now. First, I’m exiled here in the wilds where the most appealing bit of flesh around is Conn’s, and I vow, it’s not truly that appealing.”

His words surprised a light laugh from her. Shaking his head at himself, he continued, “And before I can even brace myself, the most beautiful woman in Boston arrives to play ducks and drakes with my poor, neglected manhood.”

“Neglected?” Lillian arched a brow. “Surely not entirely neglected, not for a man with such skills at...hand.”

It was his turn to chuckle. “No, not entirely. But enough, by God, to make me afraid I’ll disgrace myself, sweet Lilly. So have mercy on my monk-like state.” His touch persuaded as he continued to advance, ever so slowly, northward over her now quivering flesh. “Let me do this for you. If I can’t sink into you the way I truly want, allow me this.”

With his last word, his fingertips slid into the slit at the crotch of her drawers and touched the dainty curls that shielded her pussy, tickling and taunting her. With only a fleeting thought for the men below, Lillian sucked in a breath and watched him through lowered lashes. “How can a lady refuse?” she said at last.

“Thank you,” he said.

Then he proceeded to steal her mind.

Had she thought him heavenly? His touch was pure sin. With seductive ease, he glided his palm over the damp curls at the apex of her thighs. It felt so delicious she fought to keep from pressing her legs together to trap him there. Oh, it had been so long since a man’s sure touch had played over her most intimate flesh.

Lillian was so wet, Charles’s fingers glided with ridiculous ease along her cleft. Each pass of his calloused fingertips sent a shiver of delight racing through her. And each pass made something deep in her belly clench tighter and tighter. She fought to still the instinctive pulse of her hips as she sought a deeper caress. Charles, magician that he was, shifted closer so he could deliver what his touch promised.

She felt his eyes rove over her face, drinking in her every stifled gasp and moan. She was beyond caring, every particle of her being focused on pleasure.

“Sweet Lilly,” he crooned. “Unfurl your petals for me.”

Lillian was helpless to do anything else. Her fingers clenched around the handle of her parasol while her other hand fisted a handful of the blanket near the frothy pool of her skirts. Then Charles nudged the entrance to her channel, easily slipping two fingers into her dripping passage. Gently, he twisted his fingers with intimate skill, his

thumb firmly pressing her stiff nub as he plumbed her depths. Lillian dropped her chin to her chest and bit her lip to keep from crying out. She couldn't stop the tortured whimpers that escaped in rising pitch.

Charles spurred her on, both with his hand and his voice, praising her, promising her she was almost there, almost there, almost...

Lillian gasped out a soft cry, some part of her mindful of the workers going about their sweaty business. Shudders wracked her body as delight coursed through her veins like quicksilver. The effort it took to keep as still as possible was unbelievable. When the pleasure ebbed, she would have sagged forward if Charles hadn't caught her elbow to steady her. Harsh breaths hissed through her gritted teeth, and she became aware of Charles smoothing her skirts back into place to cover her ankles.

A distant part of Lillian was shocked that she still held the parasol.

Charles's face was stark with controlled desire, twin spots of color rouging his cheekbones. He studied her for a moment, not saying a word. Carefully, he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "I had no idea how true I spoke when I said you were beautiful, Lilly."

At a loss for words, she watched as, with jerky movements, he packed away their simple luncheon. Hesitating only long enough to discreetly adjust the erection bulging against the front of his trousers, Charles rolled awkwardly to his feet. He helped Lillian up and folded the blanket away. Within moments, Lillian found herself tossed back on top of her horse, reins in her hands. Charles eyed his saddle, glanced down at himself, then shook his head.

Quirking a half-smile up at Lillian, he said, "I think I'll walk for a bit."

She didn't know why that, of all things, had the power to make her blush. With the heat of it warming her cheeks, she said solemnly, "That might be for the best."

Chapter 11

“An army may march on its stomach, but drinking water musters a close second.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

“Well, hello there, Wyatt.” The woman followed the sultry voice out of the shadows to step into the low light cast by the lantern. The man standing guard—well, standing was generous—straightened nervously. Startled from his doze, he began to bring his repeater to bear. In their paddock, the sleepy horses shuffled uneasily at his sudden motion. The man checked when he realized what had awakened him was a woman, not some vicious wildcat come to terrorize the horses.

Relaxing, he let the rifle drop to cradle in the crook of his arm.

“What are you doing here?”

The brunette stepped closer. His eyes fell to the tempting sway of her hips, then veered up to the extremely low-cut bodice that exposed an impressive degree of pale white flesh, given the chill of the night air. Dark curls tumbled from a loose coiffure at the back of her head to swirl enticingly over and around those fleshy mounds. “Your friend sent me. Something about a debt? I’m Cara.”

“A debt? Can’t say as I recall...” He trailed off, as if realizing once he admitted no one owed him anything, the prostitute would leave. She was close enough he could smell the whisky, cigarette

smoke and musky woman scent that clung to her. She put her hand on his arm, the one not holding the gun, and squeezed it.

She smiled. "Oh my. Aren't you a big one?"

Her fingers trailed from his arm to his chest, then down. She stroked him with an experienced hand that made him stiffen to attention like a soldier facing inspection. He gulped. He hadn't had a chance to visit the girls yet. If this one was representative of the others, he needed to make the time.

"Why don't we walk over here, find some privacy. Then I can make good on your friend's debt." Without moving her hand, she tightened her grip and tugged like she held the end of a leash. Instinctively, he stumbled forward, almost dropping the gun in his haste to follow her.

Remembering the reaming they'd all gotten after Jones and Miller abandoned their posts in front of the supply tent the night before, he wavered. A glance back at the corral showed the dark, unmoving bulks of the horses. They wouldn't be so quiet if they sensed danger. Surely he could just duck between these tents right here for a few moments.

Qualms dispensed with, he hurried after Cara. As soon as she faced him, he noted she'd loosened her bodice, freeing her uncorseted breasts. They gleamed palely in the moonlight. Releasing his cock, she brought her hands up to pinch her own nipples, cupping her breasts until they spilled over her hands in offering to him. Wyatt grabbed her waist and hauled her close, burying his face between her breasts, not caring that the rasp of his beard likely stung against her bare skin.

Cara giggled and murmured encouragingly, her fingers quickly working at the fastenings of his trousers. As soon as they were open, she plunged her hand down the front of his pants to grab his cock. Wyatt grunted as she fisted him in her hand, jerking strongly against him. He fumbled with her skirts. Obliging, she helped him raise them. They'd barely lifted high enough to reveal her garters and

stockings when, looking around wildly, he spotted the crates stacked against the side of one of the tents. Shoving her to them, he forced her around and down, bending her over at the waist. She didn't utter a word of protest, just braced herself against the crates. He took himself in hand. Eager as a stripling with his first whore, he set his cock against her cunny and pushed inside.

He was still pumping frantically when the piercing whistle rent the air, followed quickly by the thunder of hooves and the panicked scream of horses.

Dazed, Wyatt gave a few more distracted thrusts before looking around to see what the commotion was—just in time to grab the girl and throw them both out of the way of the stampeding animals. Crouched on the ground beside the dubious shelter of the crates, Wyatt laced his fingers behind his head to shield it. Large bodies raced by them in the darkness, hooves kicking up an unseen cloud of dust that set both him and Cara coughing. In seconds, the horses had passed them. Wyatt scrambled to his feet and raced to the corral. It was empty. The gate swung crazily on its hinges. Inside the fence, the dying flames of the smashed lantern, inexplicably moved from the hook on the railing, sputtered out. Even as he stared, the sound of startled shouts and cries from men and equine alike rose in the night.

Wyatt stumbled around to face the noise, wincing as he noted the nearby supply tents now torn from their guy ropes, the kicked over crates and hoof-shattered barrels. As he watched, a rope popped free of a peg, and one of the canvas tents fluttered down like a deflated balloon—much like his cock at the moment.

“Oh, shit,” he said.

* * * *

Travis Murchison swung up onto the bare back of the horse he commandeered before the last animal left the paddock. The guard, mouth and pants agape as he took in the destruction, didn't notice as

Murchison skirted the area, keeping to the shadows. By the time the stampeding horses reached the center of camp, Murchison had left the pandemonium behind and headed for his next destination of the evening.

With the noise of the camp fading, and the bright moon and stars lighting his way, Murchison enjoyed the solitude while he could. Along the way, he briefly halted to retrieve what he needed. The horse shied a bit at the scent of blood, but Murchison subdued it with a tug on the rope halter he'd rigged and the prod of his heel in its ribs.

The camp relied on a small, lazy river for its water supply. Not deep enough to allow the passage of anything but small boats and shallow-draft barges with light loads, the water was nevertheless sufficient to suit the needs of the camp, even with the added population brought by the hell on wheels. Every few days, dray teams hauled empty barrels to the water's edge and full ones back to camp for drinking and cooking. Until the washerwomen arrived, the men had made their way there to clean their clothes and themselves—those who were so inclined, at least. During the day, the route to the river was significantly busier. Now, he had it to himself.

Moonlight reflected off the surface of the slow-moving waterway in sparkles and bangles like a mute fireworks display. Here, the river bowed in a lazy curve, sheltered from the current on one side by the crescent of a jut of land. As a result, a pool of almost still water was protected from the main flow, but refreshed by it as well. Tall reeds grew along the bank, except for where they'd been trampled flat by hooves and wagon wheels. Murchison slid from the horse's back and foot-tethered it. He dropped his burden by the water's edge. Sliding a long, wicked hunting blade from the scabbard at his waist, he knelt and worked quickly. He used thongs to secure rocks to the smaller bodies. The splash as they struck the water reminded him of trout jumping after fireflies.

Murchison wiped his blade on the ground and stood. Pushing through the reeds, he checked his other traps. What he found, he

served up the same as the rest of his cargo, weighting the bodies down, tossing them in the water.

The last trap yielded unexpected prey. A young deer. Ordinarily, its thrashing would have been enough to free it from a trap meant for much smaller animals. This time, it hadn't. The animal watched him through wide, terror-glazed eyes, its body quivering with tension. Panting breaths heaved its sides and white foam flecked its mouth. One foreleg was raw and bloody where the rope held it. The other bent at an odd angle, testament to the fury of its struggles in its attempt to escape.

Murchison looked at it for a moment. Then, almost crooning, he slowly reached for it. The deer tensed, tried feebly to evade his touch, but it was too weak. Murchison cupped its jaw in his hand. In one motion, he shoved the animal's jaw up, exposing the white fur of its throat. With his other hand, he plunged his knife in, deep. Hot fluid poured over his fingers as the animal trembled in his grip. Then, with nothing more than a sighing breath, it sagged in his hold.

Murchison slid his knife free and released its jaw. The deer's head made a hollow thump as it struck the ground. Murchison efficiently freed it from the snare and hauled it out of the reeds to the water's edge. It would take much more than the rocks he could quickly find here to weigh down the animal's body as he had the others. He scanned the area, eyes stopping on the skeletal shadow of a fallen tree, half in, half out of the water.

Cursing at the necessity, he pulled off his boots and socks. Picking up one of the deer's legs, he waded into the water with it, grimacing as the cold water drenched the lower half of his body. At least the deer floated. It took some effort to force it under the water, but he did until it was firmly lodged under the branches of the fallen tree.

Then he made his way back to the horse. Pressing as much water out of his clothing as he could, he put his socks and boots back on. Gathering up the evidence of the snares to dispose of on his way back to camp, he looked around. The river's surface was once again a

dance of light. It would be impossible to discern his prints from any of the others along the water's edge. There was nothing to say he'd even been here.

Freeing his horse, he mounted it and turned its nose back toward camp. Maybe he'd be able to gather one or two of the escaped horses along the way. Regardless, if anyone questioned him, he had this animal as proof that he was one of the men sent to retrieve the horses. Satisfied with his night's work, Murchison prodded his mount into motion. With luck, his clothes would only be damp by the time he reached camp. If he took his time.

Chapter 12

“The comforts of Mr. Pullman's sleeping cars are unparalleled. With sumptuous appointments and every convenience of the best parlors, it is no wonder they are called palatial. Truly, one has not experienced the rails at their utmost until one has enjoyed the experience of a private rail car.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

Two days after the incident at the paddock freed the horses, Lillian was informed of the contamination of the water supply.

One of the washerwomen, skirts hiked as she waded into the bend in the river to soak some particularly nasty items, saw a dead rabbit floating in the water. Using a stick to haul it out, intending to dispose of the body, she noticed a leather thong wrapped around its middle and the gaping slash at its throat. Then she stepped on something cold, furred and waterlogged. When she cried out in disgust, the draymen filling barrels at the water's edge came to investigate. They found over a dozen dead, rotting animals on the muddy bottom, weighted down by rocks. The deer they found by accident, when one of the men noticed a crow perched on a branch of the fallen tree, pecking at something not quite submerged.

They were fortunate to discover the sabotage so quickly. If the corpses rotted in the water for any length of time, Doctor Ritchards told Lillian, men would start getting sick. As it was, they would need

to send crews into the forest to retrieve water from the smaller streams, a far more labor-intensive task than relying on the river.

“Give it a few days for the taint to clear from the water,” Ritchards said to her now. “I’ve advised Devereaux to drain the remaining barrels in camp, in case they were drawn after the corpses were tossed in the river.”

They stood several paces from the water’s edge. Ropes tied to the branches of the fallen tree led to the traces of a heavy workhorse. At a shouted signal, the driver at the horse’s head urged it to pull, while the men in the water rocked the stubborn tree loose from the sucking riverbed. The bloated deer corpse bobbed to the surface like a cork on a stream, legs sticking straight and stiff from the barrel of its body.

Lillian swallowed and looked away. Unfortunately, her gaze fell on the smoldering funeral pyre of dead rabbits, raccoons, opossum and fox. The toast she’d enjoyed for breakfast tumbled in her belly. She felt a soft touch on her elbow. Charles, face concerned, said, “You don’t need to supervise this. Let the men do their work.”

Gratefully, she let him lead her back to their horses. A few of the animals were still missing—long gone, she suspected—but somehow the phlegmatic animal she used wasn’t one of them. Charles helped her up, then mounted his own horse. Ritchards swung aboard his saddle with the ease of a man well-acquainted with riding.

In accord, the three guided their horses toward camp.

“We have to find out who’s responsible for these attacks,” Lillian said. “The expedition will be here in just a few days. Aside from the safety aspects, the company can’t afford to have a disruption of this sort of...malevolence on display for our investors.”

“Devereaux is doing what he can,” Charles said. “He’s a good man, used to command. He was a sergeant in the militia.”

“Yes, Mrs. Cabot,” Ritchards agreed. “If anyone can get to the bottom of this, Devereaux is your man. From what I know of him, he probably takes this as a personal insult, not just his duty to see to the smooth running of the project.”

Lillian was reluctant to dispute their assessment of the site boss, but she had her father to answer to. “Even so, at the very least he needs help, either from a professional investigator or more men devoted to security. As for the water, Doctor Ritchards, please let me know as soon as you deem the river safe for the camp’s use.”

“Of course,” he said. “If you’ll both excuse me, I should continue my rounds of the worksites. Much easier to head that way now than later from camp.”

Lillian and Charles said their farewells. Ritchards, touching his hat, set his animal at a trot angling away from their path, ubiquitous black satchel bouncing at the side of his saddle.

Lillian sighed.

“Don’t worry, Lilly,” Charles said. “This will all get sorted out.”

She slanted him a glance. “How can you be so sure?”

“Like Ritchards said, Devereaux is a good man. If he weren’t, your father never would have entrusted him to lead the project.”

“True. He has spoken highly of him. In fact, if he didn’t feel so strongly about having a family presence here to greet the expedition, I think my father would have been content to leave it in Devereaux’s hands.”

He smiled encouragingly. “There, see? Let your father’s confidence guide you in this. You don’t have to handle every little thing, Lilly, though I’ve no doubt you could.”

She heard the honest appreciation under his flattery, and warmed. “You are a charmer, Charles Lowell Adams. Why hasn’t some lucky lady snapped you up?”

“Alas,” he said in mock-sober tones, “what woman would have a rogue like me?”

This time, she laughed. “Silly man. What woman *wouldn’t* have you? I’ve got eyes. I’ve got ears. I know all the ladies used to trip over their slippers to get you to notice them. That you’re not your family’s lapdog makes you even more appealing. A challenge to tame.”

“Is that what you want? To tame me?”

“Far from it! I like a little wildness in my men.”

“Men? So you’ve given more thought to our proposal, then?”

Lillian absently patted her horse’s neck as she thought. The saboteur worried her. The attacks were dangerous, potentially deadly. She should concentrate on catching whoever was responsible, then prepare to dazzle the expedition with the Great Western Rail Company’s potential. But if she chose not to become involved with Charles and Conn, to end her dalliance with that single wonderful interlude with Charles on the bluff, would they be any less of a distraction?

No.

She spoke decisively. “I’ve thought of it. And if you and Conn are sure this is what you want, that it won’t destroy your friendship, then yes. I will.”

“You will...?”

She knew what he wanted—her verbal agreement, so there could be no misunderstandings. Fine. That was the way she wanted it, too.

“I would like to embark on an affair with you, Charles. With both you and Conn. I would like that more than anything right now,” she added, unable to keep the husky note of desire from her voice.

His eyes full of promises, he smiled. “Good.”

As one, they kicked their animals into a faster pace.

* * * *

Lillian preceded Charles into her private car. Aileen, ensconced on a comfortable chair with a cup of tea and a book, looked up. While her quarters in another car were adequate, Lillian’s car was indisputably more comfortable, and Aileen knew she was welcome to it. When they entered, she quickly set her book on a small table and rose to meet them.

“Won’t you be seated, Charles?” Lillian invited, handing her jacket to her companion. While Aileen tucked it away in a chest, Lillian tugged off her gloves, then removed her hat. Those were efficiently stowed as well, while Charles went to the seating area.

“Aileen,” Lillian said, eyes never leaving Charles. He cut a fine figure in his dark brown suit. The color emphasized the paleness of his light brown hair and the warmth of his brown eyes. “Would you mind arranging for some tea, and perhaps sandwiches?”

“Of course.” Aileen’s hesitation was barely noticeable, but Lillian marked it with a significant look. Aileen was the one who had urged her to follow her desire on this trip, to leave her mourning behind. As if reading her mind, Aileen gave a small nod, as if in approval, then said, “I’ll be right back.”

Lillian felt gooseflesh raise on her arms when Aileen left and a wisp of cold air swept into the car. She hadn’t noticed the chill on the ride back from the river. The heat of the horse and her jacket must have kept it at bay. Then again, maybe her heated thoughts kept her warm.

Charles politely rose to his feet as she approached. Instead of the other settee or a chair, Lillian chose the settee he’d claimed. She settled her skirts and folded her hands demurely in her lap. Charles, still standing, glanced toward the door. “Would someone who boldly stroked me to pleasure just a few short days ago in front of an entire crew of men really stand on propriety now?” she asked.

The tips of his ears colored, but he chuckled. “No, I suppose not.” He sat down, even going so far as to stretch one arm over the back of the settee, behind her shoulders. The position spread the sides of his casually unbuttoned coat, revealing the matching vest and the white gleam of his shirt. His physique was lean, without the hint of a paunch. She itched to touch his chest and the supple muscles she’d imagined at play beneath the concealing fabric of his clothes. That wasn’t all she imagined. His loose trousers weren’t so roomy she failed to notice his cock stirring beneath the front placket.

Thinking of the pleasure he'd drawn from her body, an aching need began to throb between her thighs, reminding her of an emptiness only a man could fill. She couldn't let go of this need to touch, to be touched. To feel like a complete woman again.

A thick wave of sun-warmed brown hair dipped rakishly over Charles's forehead. Forget the society gentleman. This was a rogue she wanted to rumple even more. Her fantasy of him and Conn had left her breathless. Charles had shaken her with his bold, intimate touch on the bluff. Now it was her chance to muss his composure.

Lillian put her hand on Charles's thigh. Immediately, his muscles tensed. His sucked-in breath was more gratifying than any heated words. Lillian met his gaze. Brown eyes filled with liquid heat, and his jaw flexed. "Lilly, my dear. I'm not sure I can bear your touch right now and still be a gentleman," he warned.

"Who says I want a gentleman?" Before he could stop her, Lillian glided her hand up his iron-hard thigh. Charles watched her teasing progress with total concentration. Every inch sped his respiration that much faster. Hers picked up as well, as she planned what to do next. His hand fisted on the arm of the settee, knuckles white, tendons standing out under his tanned skin. The bulge in his trousers was more than tempting now. It was irresistible. Lillian watched his face as he hovered on the brink, all thoughts of propriety and where they were obviously gone from his mind. Then she touched him. His penis was a shaft of steel under her hand, searingly hot even through the wool of his trousers. Charles squeezed his eyes shut and groaned, a rush of air escaping through gritted teeth.

"Shhh," she soothed, even as she shaped him with her palm. "Let me do this for you, Charles. Let me do this for me."

Lillian couldn't help squirming closer. She faced him, free hand braced on the firm settee cushion as she focused on the up and down glide of her hand over his erection. Heat rolled off him in waves, more warming than the coal stove. Abruptly, Charles's hand clamped over hers. Instead of stopping her, he wrapped his fingers over hers,

pressing her palm harder against him, much harder than she would have held him on her own. He bared his teeth in a sensual grimace, letting her know that if it hurt, he liked it. He slid down on the settee and spread his knees wide to grant her even more thorough access. Moving her hand in harsh, abbreviated jerks, he showed her the rhythm he wanted. Hectic flags of color touched his cheeks.

Lillian didn't want to miss a moment of his pleasure, but couldn't resist pressing nipping kisses along his jaw.

"Ah, yes, love," he gasped, tilting his head to the side to offer her his neck. Lillian followed the silent invitation along his jaw until she reached his ear. She nipped his lobe, startled when he shuddered and groaned louder. She wouldn't have thought it possible, but he hardened even more under her palm, growing bigger, longer. Thrilled with the sensual discovery, she sucked his earlobe into her mouth. He trembled. "Now I know one of your secrets," she breathed in his ear.

The soft clink outside the door warned her. She'd almost forgotten to listen for it. Quick as a flash, Lillian pulled away from Charles. She grabbed the lap robe off the back of the settee and flipped it over his waist and thighs.

"Wha—?"

"Hush," she said, leaving her place beside him to sit on the other settee. "Aileen's back with the tea."

Charles jolted up from his sprawl. He almost dislodged the lap robe, grabbed for it just as the door swung open. Aileen pushed the tiny portable tea cart into the room. Not looking at them, she secured the door behind her and continued in. The tantalizing aroma of spices reached them, along with the more subdued scent of steeping tea. "Sorry for the delay," she said. "The chef insisted I wait while he heated some of the meat-stuffed pastries. He said the day was too cold for simple sandwiches."

"How thoughtful," Lillian said, hoping her voice was steady. If she sounded odd, Aileen gave no indication of it. Her companion settled the cart in place near the seating area.

“Oh dear,” Lillian said. “I forgot you prefer coffee, Charles. Aileen, would you mind?”

“Not at all,” the woman said, starting off on this new errand.

“Aileen, dear,” Lillian said, halting her. “Would you be so good as to see if the chef has any of his spice cookies as well?”

“Excellent idea,” Aileen said. The door had barely closed behind her before Lillian rejoined Charles on his settee. “Now,” she said. “I think we were about here.”

Charles stopped her words with his mouth, pressing his lips against hers and thrusting his tongue between her teeth. Lillian eagerly returned his heated kiss as she fumbled the lap robe aside and again took possession of his thick erection. While she stroked his hardness through his trousers, his hands fought past her skirts to glide up her legs. When he came to her knees, he hooked his hand under one and guided her to straddle one muscled thigh. Lillian gasped as the new position opened her to his roving touch. Without hesitation, Charles loosened the ties and tugged down the waist of her drawers to slide his hand against the bare flesh of her belly and lower. Lillian couldn't resist twitching her hips forward as he threaded his fingers through the damp curls at the apex of her thighs.

Her hand tightened on his erection through his trousers. Then she recalled that this was supposed to be her game, not his. Her fingers fumbled with the buttons at his waist, quickly slipping them free. His manhood thrust through the opening and into her palm. Lillian tore her lips away from Charles's to look at what she held. Thinking of her late-night fantasy, she noted that the pubic hair at the base of his erection was a familiar shade of golden-brown, and smiled. Avidly, she watched as a bead of liquid formed on the flushed tip of his penis. She slid the pad of her thumb through it. His stiff penis twitched and throbbed.

“Siren,” he gasped. “Ah, God. What you do to me.”

Lillian smiled. "What you do to *me* is nothing to complain about." She rocked her hips against his probing fingers, purring at the bubbling sensation of pleasure his experienced touch elicited.

Charles dragged his hand free of her drawers, grasped her waist and lifted her fully over him. Startled by the sudden move, Lillian gave a short cry of surprise and gripped his lapels. Charles guided her knees into place on either side of his hips. He quickly dealt with her skirts, bunching the fabric around her waist. It frothed over his thighs, hiding their lower bodies from view. But, oh, she felt him, a hot, hard length that nestled in the damp furrow between her legs. His hips thrust against her, rubbing his thick erection along her slit. The friction against the taut bud of her clitoris was excruciatingly pleasurable. Lillian was only too happy to follow his lead, looping her arms around his neck.

Charles's hands disappeared beneath her skirts. She felt the tug at the waist of her drawers, heard the faint rip of fabric. Then his hot erection touched her exposed flesh. They moaned in unison. But Charles didn't guide himself to her. Instead, he stilled her restlessly thrusting hips with wide palms, fingers digging into her flesh. His kiss on her lips was gentle. Lillian stared into his deep brown eyes. The fire was there, just banked, controlled.

"Lillian, are you sure?" he asked. "I want this. God, how I want this! But only if you want it, too."

She gave a trembling laugh. "You are uncertain of my desire?" Deliberately, she rubbed her dripping, swollen cleft against him. Both shuddered in reaction. Breathless, she ordered, "Stop being so noble."

He made a hungry sound and changed his grip, helping instead of hindering her. Lillian rose up on her knees, glad for the support of the hard cushions. Bracing her hands on his shoulders, she swayed tantalizing just above his jutting flesh, teasing them both. Charles tucked his chin against his chest and closed his eyes. "Lilly," he said, the sound of her name clipped and harsh. "I'll spill."

"Help me," she said.

Without further prompting, he slid one hand between her legs. His knuckles brushed her inner thighs as he tucked the broad tip of his erection in that perfect place just behind her clitoris. Lillian couldn't wait anymore. Trusting that he was just as ready as she was, she thrust down, impaling herself partway on his shaft.

The cry of pain was instinctive, and wholly unanticipated. It had been years since she'd felt a man's stiff penis in her body, but she was no virgin. Yet it was almost as if it *was* the first time. Blessedly, like then, the discomfort quickly faded, washed away on a tide of excitement.

"Lilly," Charles said, the glaze of passion clearing from his eyes. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to hurt you. Maybe we should—"

"No." She hurriedly kissed him to stop his protests. "I'm fine Charles, really. It's just been a long time for me."

To prove she was ready, she lifted up, then sank back down. By the third thrust, she managed to take all of him. She was sorry she didn't have time to savor the moment. Aileen could be back at any moment. Charles, protest forgotten, eagerly helped her find a fast, hard rhythm, lifting his hips to meet her every downward thrust. One wide palm covered the small of her back, holding her lower body close. His mouth was hot and hungry as she devoured his lips.

She felt insatiable, as if an unruly beast had been set free inside her and it demanded more and more. The only thing more satisfying would be to feel her naked breasts pressed against the hard, straining muscles she felt through his linen shirt.

They rocked together faster and faster. Each jarring motion forced a whimpered cry of need from her throat. Remembering his earlier reaction, Lillian freed his mouth and pressed hot, sucking kisses along his jawline and throat. Charles pushed his head against the tall back of the settee. Seeking more leverage, Lillian let go of his shoulders to grip the padded back. Straightening her arms, she watched his expressive face. He cried out as she ground against him, spiraling down his cock with a twist of her hips.

“Lilly,” he said. “Lilly. Lilly.” His fingers tightened on her hips. He jerked upward spasmodically, and she felt his cock throb powerfully. His long, low groan of satisfaction triggered her own release. Her fingers clutched the settee, and she bore down, grinding her clit against him as delight burst out from her core. Lillian stiffened. Her thighs quaked, and she bit her lip to stifle her shout of pleasure. Charles’s release seemed to go on forever, each pulse of his flesh sending renewed tingles through her body.

It was long moments before Lillian became aware that she lay limp against Charles’s chest, her nose pressed into the damp flesh of his neck. Lazily, she tasted him with the tip of her tongue. He sighed and settled his arms more firmly around her bare rump, hugging her close.

As her passion-fogged thoughts cleared, Lillian realized Aileen should be back by now. Considering she’d been lost to everything but Charles, Aileen could have come in and retrieved her book for all the attention Lillian would have paid her. Thank goodness she hadn’t. As close as they were, she’d really rather not rub her friend’s nose in her slide from propriety, which was quickly gaining speed. Reluctantly, she pushed herself upright.

Charles studied her from slitted eyelids. His lips were swollen and inviting. His hair formed damp brown curls over his forehead, and his eyes were dark and slumberous. He smiled lazily, fingers tracing patterns on her buttocks under her skirts, the picture of a well-sated man.

When it became clear she wished to stand, Charles freed his arms from her skirts and gallantly steadied her by her elbows. His lids lowered as his softening penis slid from her cleft. Lillian ignored the empty feeling and let her skirts drop into place. They were sadly rumpled, the small, fashionable bustle over her bottom unmistakably askew. While she fought with it, Charles stood, tucked himself back into his trousers and refastened them.

“Lilly, I—”

“Charles—”

They both smiled as they spoke at once, Charles ducking his head like a bashful schoolboy. This was a far different Charles from the rakish black sheep whispered about in the drawing rooms back home, or the correspondent who sent such insightful articles from the worst battles of the war or word portraits of the railroad construction that were both amusing and insightful. Who would ever imagine Charles Lowell Adams at a loss for words around a lady? His reaction pleased her.

“Ladies first,” he invited.

“Oh, really?”

He blushed at her innuendo, but laughed good-naturedly.

Smile fading, Lillian glanced at the door where she expected Aileen to appear at any moment. When she looked back at Charles, a small frown had replaced his good humor. “Charles,” Lillian said. “Please forgive me if I say the wrong thing. I’ve never been in a situation such as this before.”

Charles reached for one of her hands and pressed a gentle kiss to the back of it. “I know, and I’m honored.”

“Yes, well,” Lillian said. “This has been one of the most amazing days of my life.”

“Mine, too. I look forward to many more of them with you.”

“As to that...”

Charles looked at her without speaking. Then, “You don’t wish to continue our...liaison?”

“It’s not that,” she said hurriedly, taking his hand and twining their fingers. “It’s just that, well,” she struggled to find the right words, “are you sure this will work?”

Apparently seeing her distress, he guided her back down to the settee and sat beside her, never letting go of her hands. His eyes intent, he asked, “Will what work?”

“You. Me. And Conn.”

“Ah,” he said. His expression cleared, and he looked at her with affection.

Feeling young and inexperienced when she most definitely was not, Lillian said, “I just want this so much, want you both so much. But not if I would come between you. I’ve seen how much you care for each other. You’re closer than many brothers.”

“Lilly,” he said, putting an arm around her and hugging her close. “You’re right, Conn and I have been through a lot together, and that’s created a special bond between us.”

She nodded against his chest. Fingers touching her chin, he urged her to look up at him. “Normally, I wouldn’t talk about this with a lady,” he said, “but you deserve to know. Conn and I, we’ve shared women before.”

Her eyes widened, and a blush of heat washed over her face. Voice faint, she said, “Oh.”

His arm tightened around her. Tenderly, he kissed her. “But that has nothing to do with you, Lilly. It sounds trite, I know, but you really are special to us. What we shared in the past, that was just physical, something our bodies did and we enjoyed. With you, it’s different. We both want you, singly, together, however we can have you, however long we can have you. Do you understand?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then let us prove it to you, my beautiful Lilly. Let us show you how good it can be. Trust us.”

Looking at him, feeling the strength of his embrace and sensing the honesty behind his words, Lillian’s trepidation faded. Grabbing hold of her normal poise, she kissed Charles with slow deliberation. He closed his eyes and tipped his head, following her lead, throat rumbling with a barely heard moan. Pulling away, she cupped his cheek in her palm, smoothing her thumb along his damp lips.

“All right, Charles.”

* * * *

Aileen walked through the camp, more at ease than she would have expected. The hard-scrabble lot who filled the railway encampment were not the sort she was used to associating with. In fact, they were rather the sort she avoided at home in Boston. Raised practically side-by-side with Lillian in the affluent household of a good man was quite different from the way many women of her class experienced life. So was it any wonder she found the workers, men and women, here a little off-putting?

Well, not all of them. Sean O'Brien didn't put her off at all.

Discomfort...that was another matter, if one defined discomfort as a bewildering attraction she'd never experienced before.

Aileen knew very well what was going on in Lillian's private car, or at least had a fair suspicion of it. So, she'd made herself scarce.

She didn't begrudge her friend whatever happiness she might find with Charles Lowell Adams. She rather hoped she could find her own happiness.

As she neared the cook tent, she heard Sean's booming voice call out to someone. Certain of her welcome, she smiled and picked up her pace.

Chapter 13

“Laying track is a dangerous business. Many men have suffered gruesome injury and even death in the endeavor. Yet they face wild animals, floods, extreme weather and the hazards of every construction site in the effort to push civilization West for the good of all.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

On Tuesday, a day short of the minimum waiting period Doctor Ritchards decreed as necessary to ensure untainted drinking water, the small river's level dropped noticeably. Men sent upstream to investigate reported a rough dam of rock, mud, trees, and other debris blocked the main flow of the river. It appeared the stolen dynamite had been used to tumble the better part of a sizable cliff into the waterway. Behind the dam, the river had flooded its banks. Devereaux authorized a detail of men to use some of the remaining explosive to blast a way through the blockage and set the river back on its proper course before too much damage was done.

On Wednesday, O'Brien discovered the new meat Lillian ordered had been liberally laced with vinegar and dead rats stuffed in the sacks of potatoes stacked outside the cook tent.

On Thursday night, shortly after the dinner hour, a stack of railway ties was set ablaze. While men swarmed to put out the fire, a worker spotted an ominous orange-yellow glow behind the tree line. They raced into the forest. Flames wreathed a number of tall, old

pinetrees, the resin-sapped trees going up like Christmas candles. With the scent of lamp oil heavy in the air, it was simple to deduce what drove the speed of the fire. Devereaux set the men to clearing a zone around the burning pines. They felled trees as fast as they could, some wielding axes and saws, others hauling the timber away to starve the fire of the fuel it needed to spread into a forest-consuming monster.

A forest fire would force them all to flee the area. It would be nothing short of a disaster for the company's schedule, let alone the cost in lives.

Mrs. Northrup's ladies, so recently victims of the arsonist, rallied to help, standing ready with water and bandages as needed to succor the men battling the flames and sparks.

Devereaux's quick, cool-headed response averted disaster. Still, the firefighting efforts exhausted men who should have been surveying, staking and laying track.

On Friday, more men arrived at the camp, reporting directly to Devereaux. He immediately assigned them to guard duty, patrolling the camp twenty-four hours a day in teams of two.

The unceasing attacks took their toll. Tempers flared at the least provocation. Friendly fistfights became brawls without warning. Men grumbled about moving on and finding work elsewhere. Progress on the line slowed.

Lillian winced when the knock came early Saturday morning. With the camp in an uproar, she hadn't had time to pursue her affair with Conn and Charles beyond that single, glorious interlude with Charles on this very settee. The camp was in a shambles, yet she felt sorry for herself because she couldn't indulge in a passionate affair with two sinfully attractive men. If only that were the extent of her problems.

"Missus, the boss sent me to fetch you," called the crackling adolescent voice of the boy Devereaux used to run messages. When neither she nor Aileen answered immediately, Billy knocked again. "Missus?"

Lillian closed her eyes and stifled a groan. She hoped it wasn't another fire. She thought she'd never get the scent of charred wood out of her hair and clothes. "I'm afraid to open the door," she said, only partly joking.

Aileen grimaced in commiseration, but got to her feet. "I'll get it. Just a moment," she called out when the boy renewed his pounding. "I'm coming!"

Seated in a chair beside her, Yorke said, "Mrs. Cabot, perhaps it's time to consider returning to Boston. It is not safe for you to stay here any longer."

Lillian rolled her eyes as her patience frayed. "Oh, Mr. Yorke, would you please stop? For the last time, I'm not going anywhere. And," she hastily added when he opened his mouth, "if you say one more word about it, you can forget about ever stepping foot in this car again while I'm here."

Yorke snapped his mouth shut and glared. "I am only trying—"

She held up her finger in a silencing gesture and said, slowly enunciating each syllable, "Not one more word."

Aileen opened the door to let in an agitated youngster. Billy's wiry body almost vibrated with energy. Fear, excitement, urgency, anxiety, all combined in his expression.

"Miss," he said, the words tumbling out in his haste to deliver his message. "Doc says the missus needs to come right away. There's been an accident, down the tracks."

Lillian got to her feet as Aileen asked, "What kind of accident?"

"Don't rightly know, miss. But it's bad. Some kind of explosion or something. Some of the men, they been hurt."

Lillian felt her breath stop in her throat. "My God," she said. Then, forcing herself to move, she grabbed her cloak and hurried to the door. "Of course we'll come." Aileen was already snatching up her own cloak. Lillian left Yorke to follow or not. She didn't really care which. The man had proven he was no use in a crisis.

Billy took the stairs two at a time, his impatience palpable as he waited for the ladies to descend more cautiously in their skirts and heels. As soon as their feet touched the ground, Billy set off for the tent Doctor Ritchards used as his surgery. Icy raindrops stung her cheeks. The weather had turned cold, the rain and grey clouds adding to the misery. Lillian absently pulled her hood over her head to keep her hair dry. She thought somewhat grimly that they could use the damp. It would make it harder for the villain stalking the camp to set the fires he had such a penchant for.

The dash through camp left the women gasping by the time they reached the surgery. Each breath instantly became a small puff of white ice crystals. Lillian shivered, tugging her now-damp cloak tighter around her.

Billy held aside a flap, and she and Aileen ducked inside. Not unlike the aftermath of the fire that destroyed Mrs. Northrup's canvas brothel, patients filled the tiny surgery. It was reminiscent of another scene, too—the hospital where Lillian volunteered during the war, helping the broken men there piece together their bodies and lives. Shaking off the memory, Lillian brought her mind to the present crisis. About a dozen injured men, most of them Chinese, occupied the cots and stood or lay in various states of distress. Some waited quietly, obviously cut and bruised, but not badly enough to need immediate attention. Others sprawled on makeshift pallets, ashen faces and bloodied limbs testament to the more serious nature of their wounds. One or two lay still, unconscious. Or so Lillian hoped.

Ritchards and his assistant moved among the men with the efficiency of battlefield physicians, assisted by a pair of Mrs. Northrup's girls and a slight, elderly Chinese man.

Lillian was about to offer her assistance when a commotion at the entrance drew her notice. Two men carried a third on a stretcher. Conn was one of the men bearing the stretcher. Lillian felt a leap of fear as their eyes met. Had he been in danger from whatever happened to these other men? Was he hurt? Her eyes did a quick inventory of

his body, but she didn't see any blood or bruising, just what she recognized as Conn's habitual stoic and slightly disheveled appearance.

As soon as he settled his burden, he came to her.

"Conn," she said, touching his arm, but wanting to throw her arms around him. "What happened?"

"Bastard found another use for the explosives he stole," Conn said. "Set them where the men were working to clear the tunnel. Their own charges triggered the hidden ones."

"Good Lord have mercy," Aileen murmured. Her hand slipped into the crook of Lillian's elbow. Lillian put her hand over her friend's, grateful to accept and share comfort.

"And the men?" Lillian asked.

Conn shoved a hand through his dark hair, and for the first time, Lillian noticed the fine dust that dulled the shiny locks. His coat and clothes, too, were dirtier than the usual wear and tear caused by a man engaged in physical labor who wasn't too concerned if he got dirty while doing it. "They were clear of the tunnel for the blast, but not far enough away to miss the shrapnel when the other charges blew." Conn looked around the tent at the injured men, then back at Lillian. "Think most of them'll be all right, but we're damn lucky it wasn't worse."

Lillian ignored the profanity. "And you?" At his puzzled glance, she nodded at his hair and clothes. "You look like you were pretty close to the blast when it happened."

He shrugged. "I'm fine. I was set up to take photographs of the blasting, so I was already out of the way of the worst of it."

Squeezing Lillian's elbow to get her attention, Aileen said, "I'm going to see what I can do to help the doctor." Nodding, Lillian watched her go. And she noticed, when Conn did the same, the tiny trickle of blood almost hidden under the hair flopped over his forehead. She must have made a sound, because he immediately faced her.

“Conn,” she said, her hand reaching up to brush his hair aside. “You *are* hurt.”

A shallow gash started just below his hairline and disappeared above the slight widow’s peak at the top of his forehead. From the smudges on his skin, she could tell he’d wiped away the blood with his sleeve until it mostly stopped bleeding. Now, just a bit of red welled sluggishly from the edge where the wound was deepest. She imagined some chip of stone or splinter of wood caused it.

He shrugged. “I told you, I’m fine.” But he didn’t move away from her touch, either. He also let her take his arm and lead him to a nearby table of supplies, where she quickly splashed some water from a pitcher into a basin. Taking off her cloak to give herself room to work, she hastily bundled it in a roll and set it under the table. Then she took a clean rag, wet it, and began to dab at the cut.

It probably stung, but Conn didn’t so much as twitch. Instead, his deep blue eyes watched with single-minded intensity as she fussed over him.

Finally satisfied that he had been cared for, she concentrated on rinsing out the rag. “I’d better see what I can do to help Doctor Ritchards. And then,” she sighed, “I’ll need to talk to Mr. Devereaux again, and visit the site ...”

Conn’s warm hand cupped her elbow. The electricity of his touch silenced her words more effectively than anything else could have at that moment. “Delilah, hush. Take a breath. One thing at a time.”

Briefly distracted, she said, “Delilah?”

Smiling crookedly, he leaned closer. In a rolling whisper that teased her earlobe, he said, “Lillian is a prim, proper, very correct lady. Delilah is all fiery, delightful, delicious woman. It suits you better, I’m thinking.”

“Really?” The sign of whimsy from such a self-contained man pleased her beyond words. Then one of the injured men cried out, and the weight of responsibility pressed down on her. She put the rag

down and met Conn's gaze. "I wish I could slow down, but I can't. There is too much to do. So many people depend on me."

"And that is different from any other day how?"

"Well." She couldn't think of anything to say. "Well."

He gave her a significant look, as if she'd proven his point. "Devereaux went hot-foot to the worksite as soon as news of the explosion reached him. I passed him on the way here. Help Ritchards. I'll get back, talk to Devereaux, and he'll find you as soon as he returns. Does that suit you?"

With his offer, she felt a little of her burden lighten. Both he and Charles seemed to have a knack for that, helping without taking control of everything. "I'd really appreciate that, Conn. Thank you."

He nodded and took his leave.

"Oh, wait," she said, touching his chest without thought. "If you could also find my father's secretary and tell him to come to me, I'd appreciate it."

Conn nodded again, then was gone through the flap.

Lillian walked to Ritchards' side and got to work.

* * * *

Seething, Yorke waited until Conn was out of sight before stepping around the side of the tent.

Lillian, hand boldly on the Irishman's chest, didn't even notice Yorke's arrival.

At first, he didn't notice her, either. He stared at the injured men sprawled around the tent, bloodied and moaning. It left a sour taste in his mouth. Sharing company information was one thing, resorting to thuggery was something else. Unfortunately, sometimes there were no other alternatives. That's where Murchison came in. And, after all, they were only Chinamen.

Then he noticed the intimate tableau, with Maguire standing far too close to Lillian, and her not uttering word of protest. Protest? No, she boldly fondled him in public.

He ducked out before they could see him, then circled the tent until he came alongside them, separated only by the canvas wall. He heard them clearly, the way she called him by his Christian name and Maguire, the bastard, referred to her by the kind of salacious pet name that would better fit one of that bawd Northrup's whores.

It was obvious there was something between them. Bile and bitterness rose in his throat. She had not so much as a glance for him, but that Irishman easily commanded her attention.

And then she told Maguire to fetch Yorke as if he were a lapdog or lowly servant just awaiting her summons.

He felt the last twinge of guilt die in his heart.

Chapter 14

“The innovation of photography has allowed many of us a glimpse into exciting doings we may otherwise never experience. A true photographer is an artisan of his craft. And, dare I humbly say, a complement to those of us in writerly professions, rather than a replacement.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

Lillian was shocked to find that instead of enervated by her day, she felt invigorated.

Devereaux, following the personal recommendations of his most trusted men, pressed more workers into guard duty as he prepared to implement a detailed plan to catch the villain plaguing the camp and work crews. If nothing else, Lillian hoped the sheer number of eyes on the lookout would unmask the culprit.

With Yorke’s help, she penned an account of the latest happenings for her father—carefully worded so he wouldn’t order her home out of fear for her safety—while assuring him that all would be resolved by the time the excursion party arrived in a few days. Naturally, he wouldn’t receive her letter until after the fact, but she did her duty in informing him, as promised.

That task done, she dismissed Yorke for the night. Aileen, pleading fatigue, retired to her own cabin shortly after the evening meal.

Now, Lillian forced herself to concentrate on Conn. Or, rather, on his work. The idea was to put on an art spectacle of sorts for their guests, then provide each with a unique photograph as a souvenir of the excursion.

Lillian looked at the contrast of her hand, pale and slender, alongside Conn's on the desk. His was wide and tanned, with blunt, masculine nails tipping lean fingers that appeared as limber as a pianist's. Conn slid the photograph they were examining aside so she could see another image. This one was of a group of Chinamen working at the mouth of the newly begun tunnel, little more than a dimple in the face of the cliff. Even caught frozen in time, the vitality and commotion of the scene was evident. Dirty and dust-grimed, some carried empty baskets to the cliff wall, while others hurried away with baskets brimming with rocks and debris balanced on their heads. Sweat glistened on their faces, expressions focused and weary all at once. One man, clay pots of tea dangling from a yoke over his shoulders, had stopped beside another to tip some of the steaming hot beverage into a waiting cup.

"Captivating," Lillian said, glancing up to meet his eyes.

"Yes," he said. "You are."

He gave her plenty of time to avoid him. She didn't even try. She leaned forward to hurry the moment when their lips finally met. At the first touch of his mouth, she gasped. His kiss wasn't hesitant in the least. No tentative brush of his lips over hers, no inquiring glide of his tongue, questing for entrance. The moment his mouth came down on hers, his palm cupped the back of her head to tilt her face to the precise angle he wanted. Lillian closed her eyes and let him drag her against him as their tongues tangled in fierce passion. Conn rumbled a sound in his chest that she instinctively knew was approval.

Nimble fingers raced over the fastenings of her gown. Without a word of protest, she helped him slip the sleeves from her shoulders and push the heavy fabric down her sides and over her hips to pool on the floor. He freed her from corset and petticoats just as nimbly.

Effortlessly, he lifted her free of the puddled fabric and moved them both a few steps away before setting her down. Briefly, he leaned away to watch his hands mold and shape her full breasts through the fabric of her chemise, the cloth so sheer it revealed the dusky coins of her nipples and the mahogany triangle at the apex of her thighs.

Lillian reached for his clothes to undress him. He allowed it just long enough for her to unfasten his waistcoat and tug his shirt from his trousers before he loosened the ribbon of her chemise and that, too, joined the rest of her clothing on the floor. She stood before him in nothing but stockings, garters and the pretty, low-heeled slippers she wore inside her private car. Eyes smoldering, he raked her with his gaze. Dipping his head, he took her mouth in a second ravenous kiss. Eagerly, she submitted to his blatant domination. Again he picked her up. Her arms looped naturally around his neck as he walked her a few more paces back. She flinched in surprise as her spine abruptly met the cool wood paneling of the wall.

Conn's hands left her, but only for the breath it took to unfasten his trousers and release the hard shaft of his cock. The blunt tip nudged between her thighs, just touching the wet, slippery nub of her clitoris. Lillian whimpered as the soft touch sent electricity sparking through her core. Without thought, she lifted one leg and twined her heel behind his knee, opening herself wider to his possession. She rubbed herself demandingly against him. Her juices quickly coated his shaft as her wet slit glided along his hard length. The slippery friction teased the bead of erect flesh in her cunny, adding to the jolts of pleasure that encouraged her to move faster, harder. They both groaned. He hooked his arm under her thigh and hoisted her leg higher, around his hip, then took his cock in hand and placed it exactly where she needed it most. Then, poised at her entrance, he guided her other leg up and around, supporting her with hands splayed under her bottom. She flexed her hips, trying to entice him in, but he mastered her easily, holding her still in his grip.

He dragged his mouth from hers, kissing along her jaw until his breath rasped harsh and exciting in her ear. "Delilah, my sultry temptress," he said, the Irish in his voice thick and thrilling. "I must have you. I can't wait."

And with that, he jerked his hips forward, thrusting his cock into her to the hilt. Lillian gasped. If she hadn't been with Charles just a few days before, and so wet for Conn, it would have hurt. Instead, she felt only a twinge of discomfort that was quickly drowned in a wave of desire. She made a soft sound of surrender. If she'd been standing, the edge of roughness would have made her knees weak. Pleasure jumbled her senses until all she could focus on was Conn, huge and powerful inside her. The broad head of his cock throbbed with every beat of his heart. She longed to touch him, feel him hot and heavy in her palm, taste him in her mouth.

She didn't have time to relish the wish. Conn set up a driving rhythm, hard and fast. He pushed his face into her neck, beard-roughened cheek rasping against the tender flesh of her throat. Lillian tightened her thighs around his waist and tunneled the fingers of one hand through the soft curls at the nape of his neck. Sweat soon slicked his skin and his heat enflamed her. She felt drunk on the male, musky scent of him. His thrusts rocked her up and back against the paneling as he pounded into her. She was so aroused he slid in and out of her without effort, only the tight, eager clasp of her inner muscles providing any resistance. Seeking more leverage, she flailed one hand out until she touched the scrolled brasswork of one of the lamps mounted on the wall beside her. Gripping it tight, she held on, feeling the pleasure start to come over her, through her as she trembled on the edge of release.

Conn's hands clutched convulsively on her buttocks and he dragged her back and forth on his shaft with tight, caressing strokes. His cock throbbed and jumped and she felt the spurts of his release begin as he muffled a shout of satisfaction against her shoulder. A massive tremor wracked his body. In increments, the tremors eased.

He relaxed against her, chest heaving. The curly black hairs on his chest grazed her tight nipples with each breath. She couldn't help squirming her lower body along his still-hard shaft, couldn't stop rasping her nipples against the muscled planes of his chest.

Disappointment tickled her awareness, but it was easy to ignore. She found the self-contained Conn's loss of control flattering in the extreme. Her own release hovered tantalizingly close, and Lillian was certain it wouldn't take much more to find it, once he recovered enough for a second attempt.

Conn nuzzled her throat, then placed a warm kiss on her lips.

"Ah, my Delilah. You make me feel like an untried lad. But unlike an untried lad," he said, loosening the clasp of her thighs around his hips, "I at least know how to make it up to you."

He dropped to his knees and looked up at her with a wicked grin. Bemused, she let him settle one of her legs over his broad shoulder. Then he spread her nether lips with his fingers, leaned in and gave her a long, luscious lick. The sensation was so sudden, so startling, so exhilarating that she couldn't bite back the scream. He chuckled against her, the bass rumble of his laugh sending vibrations of ecstasy shooting through her body.

Once more, instinct took over. He didn't stop the urgent flexing of her hips as she rode his mouth. He continued to lick her, nipping the tight nub of her clitoris and sliding his tongue over her sensitized flesh. He seemed to sense exactly what she needed, using teeth and tongue and lips with the skill of a master seducer. The knowledge that she was wet with both her own moisture and his seed as he pleased her finally tipped her over the edge. She uttered a long, wavering cry.

Panting, wrung out from the power of her release, Lillian was surprised to notice she clutched the lamps on either side of her head in nerveless fists. The rest of her weight balanced on shaky legs that had somehow settled over Conn's solid shoulders, straddling his face.

His wicked mouth continued to play along her quivering flesh, gradually slowing until his sizzling touch became soothing and she could take a full breath again.

Conn sat back on his heels, letting her weight slide away until she stood on wobbly legs, arms widespread as she held the lamps. Small aftershocks sending zips of delight over her skin, she looked down at his dark, beautiful face. He hung his head briefly, and she noted that his cock once more jutted strong and proud through the opening of his trousers. Conn shook his head, as if searching for his thoughts. He stood and, in one motion, scooped her into his arms.

The kiss he pressed on her mouth was rich and earthy with their mingled taste. "Now, let's get serious about this, shall we?"

Serious? Goodness, was the man joking? If his lovemaking were any more serious, she'd lose what little wits she had left. Lillian laughed breathlessly, hoping the wondering note in her own voice sounded less like a giggle to him than it did to her. She was still laughing when he carried her from the car's main room into her bedroom and tossed her on the bed.

His weight settled on her, his mouth claimed hers, and she forgot all about blood and dynamite and distraction. Conn was here, and that was enough.

Chapter 15

“The best measure of how a camp runs is how the men react to the unexpected. There’s always something unexpected.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

Pain crashed through Lillian’s head. She lay stunned, trying to understand what had happened. A dark shadow loomed over her. Hard hands gripped her shoulders, yanked her close. The scent of him, the touch of his bare skin on hers, cleared some of the fog from her thoughts. Conn held her cradled in his arms, his worried voice calling her name. Lillian touched her temple, winced as a new shard of pain split her head. Her fingers came away wet.

“Delilah.” Conn’s voice, thick with worry. “Love, speak to me.”

Warmth enveloped her as he wrapped a thick coverlet around her upper body, never shifting her from his lap. She could barely make out his features in the gloom.

“I’m all right,” she said, suspecting it wasn’t the full truth. She barely heard her own voice, as if cotton batting filled her ears. “What happened?”

“An explosion.” He tilted her chin, hissed as he noted the wound on her temple. She felt a trickle of wet slide down her cheek. Blood, she realized. “Bounced you out of bed. I think you hit the side table on the way down.”

His voice was louder, clearer. The blast must have affected her hearing.

“Can you find your nightclothes in the dark?” he asked. “A wrap?”

She started to nod, remembered the pain, and said, “Yes. I think so.”

“Good. Better not to light the lamps.” He gently set her on her feet. The wool carpet felt scratchy and cool under her soles. She took a step, stumbled. Conn’s hand on her elbow steadied her. “Careful. I think the blast tilted the car. Hold on to something until you get your bearings.”

“All right.” Lillian was glad the car was off-kilter and not her balance from the hit to the head. Conn guided her hand to the edge of the bed. As she cautiously felt her way around it to the wardrobe on the other side, she sensed him collecting his own clothes off the floor and starting to dress.

“We need to get outside,” Conn said. “I don’t want to stay in here in case the bastard has any more surprises for us.”

Lillian reached the wardrobe and opened one door, holding it propped ajar with her shoulder as she felt inside for clothes. She grabbed the first shift she felt and slipped it over her head. The muffled sound of yelling outside the car spurred her on. Feeling cool cotton under her hand, she took the day dress from a hook and put it on, fleetingly grateful she could fasten it without even the unrestrictive corsets she favored. An acrid odor touched her nose. Reflexively, Lillian coughed. In an instant, Conn was at her side. “Fire,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“Shoes,” she said. Bending over, she sorted the jumble of footwear in the bottom of the wardrobe by touch. “I can’t go out barefoot.”

“Hurry.”

“All right, I’ve got them.” Lillian shoved the warm slippers under her arm and snatched a light cloak off another hook as Conn pulled her away. Leaving her chamber, they headed for the main room. A flickering glow lit it, both through the windows and around the

exterior door. The unsteady light cast ominous shadows around the dark shapes of tumbled furniture and a haze of smoke.

Arm tight around Lillian's waist, Conn changed direction. They hurried down the narrow corridor, past the bathing chamber attached to Lillian's room. The hall ended at another door. Conn let go of her and searched for the locks. Brushing his hands aside, she reached to top and bottom, sliding the bolts back. Conn yanked the door open and pushed Lillian ahead of him. The observation platform was just large enough for a small table and two chairs. Surrounded by an intricate wrought-iron railing, it was intended to give the passenger another view of their journey, and there were no stairs to the ground.

"Hold on," Conn said, just as he swept Lillian into his arms and sat her on the railing. Holding her wrists, he lowered her to the ground with easy strength. As soon as she found her feet, he let go. Then he climbed over the railing and jumped, landing lightly at her side.

Lillian brushed the dirt from her feet and shoved them into her slippers. Impatient to get going, Conn took her cloak and swirled it around her. Again taking command of her waist, he steered her around the side of the car—where they almost collided with a tall, muscled shadow. She bit back a scream of surprise.

Hands clutched her close. "Lilly!"

She almost sagged with relief as she recognized Charles's voice, then Aileen's.

"Lillian! We were so afraid," her friend said, tears thickening her words.

"We're fine," Lillian said. "Just a bit banged up."

"Lillian's bleeding," Conn said. "She needs the doctor."

"What?" Charles's hands began a roving exploration of her body, searching for injury. "Where?"

"It's just my head," Lillian said. "I bumped it. I'll be fine."

"But we must have Doctor Ritchards look at it immediately," Aileen said.

"Soon," Lillian said. "First, tell us what happened."

Charles glanced over his shoulder, toward the front of the car. "It looks like someone set off a blast under your car," he said. "The explosion was enough to knock the car off the tracks a bit, and it started a small fire, blocking the main entrance to your car. The men are working to put it out."

"We should let them know we're out, then," Lillian said. "So no one is hurt attempting to get into the car that way."

"Aye," Conn agreed. "Let's go. We'll tell them me and Charlie jumped the railing and broke in from the rear to get you out."

"Just a moment," Aileen said, then explained, "Your gown." She nimbly fastened the front closure of Lillian's dress the rest of the way. In the rush to get out of the car, Lillian hadn't given it another thought. Emergency or no, it wouldn't do to greet the men with her dress hanging open and her shift exposed.

"Oh, my," Aileen tsked. Using the edge of her cloak, she dabbed at Lillian's face. "Your poor head. Mr. Maguire is right. The doctor should examine this."

When Lillian next looked up, Conn was gone. She heard his raised voice as he spoke to the men fighting the fire, assuring them that Mrs. Cabot was out of the car. Charles, who had waited a few steps away, offered Lillian his arm. Grateful more for the emotional support than the physical, Lillian took it. Aileen at their side, they went to join the men. The chill of the night breeze under her swirling skirts made her self-consciously aware of her naked state under her gown and cloak. Strange how something as simple as a lack of stockings and drawers had the power to do that.

Lillian couldn't believe the saboteur had actually targeted her car. What if she and Conn had been in the sitting room when the blast went off? Or the car had tipped over? They could have been killed.

She shivered. Charles's hand settled over hers. He gently squeezed her fingers. "I've got you," he said, lips touching her temple in a surreptitious kiss.

As they approached the front of the car, Lillian got her first look at the damage. The men appeared to have the fire under control. Lanterns lit the scene, showing the big iron wheels at the front of the car dug into the gravel of the track bed instead of resting on the metal rails. Only a few flickering flames remained of the fire, though the cherry-red glow of heated metal glowed like demon eyes in the night. Black scorch marks trailed up the side of the car, marring the fancy paintwork. The scrolled stairs, twisted from the blast, dangled precariously from the platform. Lillian was no expert, but she suspected it would be some time before the engineers would be able to repair her car for the journey home.

Conn, broad shoulders identifying him even in the huddle of men snapping out the last wild flames with heavy blankets, was in the thick of things.

"Mrs. Cabot!" Yorke left the fringes of the group and hurried toward them. Ignoring Charles and Aileen, he took Lillian's free hand in both of his. "Thank God you're all right!"

Despite his concerned tone, his eyes roved over her in cool assessment. Noting her tumbled-down hair, his lips pursed in disapproval.

"I'm fine, thank you, Mr. Yorke," she said, resisting the urge to pull away. "Just a bit shaken up."

"Good. Shall I send for the doctor?"

Charles answered before she could. "Please do, Yorke. Have him attend to the crew car. Mrs. Cabot and Miss McCurdy can wait there, where it's warm."

"Of course," the secretary said stiffly.

Lillian eased her hand from his hold and let Charles guide her away. She really should stay and watch, question the men, inquire if anyone had seen someone suspicious lurking around her car. Yet, inexplicably, she couldn't stop shaking. All she could think of was waking, hurt and confused, the acrid bite of smoke in the air. Strangely, it wasn't her own safety she feared for, but Conn's.

Conn, however, had seen them through it with decisive calm, acting quickly to get them out. Even more impressive, once they were out, he immediately came up with a way to explain his presence at her side. No one would suspect he had been in her bed when the blast hit.

No. Charles and Conn, working in concert, saw to the safety of her person and her reputation.

They were men to rely on.

Reaching the crew car, Charles handed her up the stairs and ushered her inside a distinctly male purview. He guided her to a rocking chair in front of the wood stove, inviting Aileen to settle in another one. Then he went to the stove and poured out two mugs of something thick and strong.

"It's not brandy, but this will help," he said, giving a mug to each woman. Lillian sipped automatically, grimaced at the bitter taste of the unsweetened coffee.

Shrugging off his coat, Charles draped it over her shoulders. It smelled like him, both the tang of his cologne and the scent that was distinctly Charles. His warmth, trapped in its folds, seeped into her. He knelt and, without a thought to Aileen's presence, slid his hands under her skirts and began to briskly rub her bare calves. It felt wonderful. His warmth made her realize how chilled she'd become without her stockings. Lillian slid Aileen a glance, but her companion appeared unfazed.

They were in a long room, so narrow it was almost a wide hallway. Windows lined one side, showing the lights of the camp. Doors lined the other, leading to the private quarters of the men who shared the crew car. Lillian wondered which belonged to Charles and Conn.

Aileen set her mug on the floor beside her rocking chair and stood up. "Mr. Lowell Adams, can I assume the other kettle on the stove is filled with hot water?"

He looked at Aileen, then the stovetop. "Yes."

“Then if you’ll fetch me some cool water to take the heat off it, and some clean cloths, I would appreciate it. I need to clean the wound on Lillian’s head to get a closer look at it.”

Charles brushed the hair away from the side of Lillian’s face, tilted her chin with the edge of his hand. “It seems to have stopped bleeding,” he said. Getting to his feet, he went to one of the doors and opened it. He soon was back with a plain porcelain pitcher and basin set, a couple of small towels draped over his forearm.

Aileen accepted them, then took charge of Lillian. She swabbed the entire right side of her friend’s face, methodically rinsing the cloth in the basin as she worked. The water quickly turned dark pink. Lillian, certain she must look a fright, was glad she couldn’t see her face.

Doctor Ritchards arrived as Aileen dabbed the last of the moisture from Lillian’s skin. After a quick, but thorough, examination, he said, “You won’t need stitching. Cool compresses, to keep the swelling down, and rest will take care of things.”

Ritchards took a brown bottle from his satchel and gave it to Aileen. “Laudanum for the pain, in moderation, if Mrs. Cabot needs it.”

Her companion nodded, then saw the doctor out. Charles, who watched from a window as the men worked at Lillian’s car, came to her. “You heard what the doctor said. Rest.”

Taking her mug, he set it down and helped Lillian to her feet. Leading her to one of the doors, he opened it to reveal a small room. Two bunks, two tall bureaus and a small writing table filled the space.

“You can stay here in my bunk for the rest of the night.”

As he settled her on the edge of one bunk, Lillian looked past his shoulder to where her friend waited with the bottle of laudanum. “But Aileen...”

“Can stay in Conn’s bunk there,” he said, pointing to the matching bunk. “The other men who stay in the crew car can find different quarters for the night, to ensure your privacy, and Miss McCurdy will

be right here for propriety's sake. Now, the doctor said you needed rest. Lie down, and try not to worry."

Lillian shared his smile. Once more, the men in her life were taking charge. If only she could work up the energy to mind. "All right, Charles. But I warn you," she said, trying for stern, but unable to quite make it in the face of his obvious concern for her well-being, "tomorrow, I'll be back to myself again, and I'll expect to have a hand in determining what has happened, and what must be done."

"Fair enough." With a short bow of his head, he left her alone with Aileen.

Putting the laudanum on the writing table, Aileen took Charles's coat from around Lillian's shoulders, then her cloak. "Mr. Lowell Adams is right," she said. "Rest is the best thing for you right now. Your poor head must be aching."

"A little," Lillian said.

"Do you want me to brew some tea and put a splash of laudanum in it?"

"No, I don't think so. You know how it upsets my stomach." She touched her hair, felt the crust of dried blood and grimaced. "What I'd really like is a bath."

"Not going to happen tonight, I'm afraid. But you wait here," Aileen said, gently pushing her down onto the bed. "I'll get some more hot water and we'll sponge the worst of it out."

In short order, marginally cleaner hair curling damply around her face, Lillian let Aileen bully her into reclining. As soon as her head touched the pillow, she felt every ache and pain in her body. She must have rattled more than her head when she fell out of bed. Exhaustion dragged her down, weighting her limbs. Her eyelids fluttered shut as she felt Aileen remove her slippers and pull up the covers. They, too, smelled of Charles. Comforted, Lillian gave up the fight and let sleep take her.

Chapter 16

“Like any small town, a rail camp has its share of bad apples. It’s usually not too difficult to sort them out from the good.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

Yorke saw Murchison standing at the edge of darkness, observing the efforts to subdue the flames sparked by the explosion. The man lifted a cigarette to his lips. The tip glowed cherry red in the night as he sucked in a long drag. Yorke spared only a hurried glance around to ensure no one was watching before joining the other man.

“An explosion?” he whispered harshly as soon as he was certain Murchison could hear him. “Right under Mrs. Cabot’s car? What were you thinking?”

At first, Murchison was so silent Yorke thought he might not answer. He took another drag on his cigarette, blowing out an acrid cloud of smoke on a leisurely exhale. “I was thinking you wanted the Cabot woman to cry off on this expedition she’s planning. I was thinking you said to step it up, no matter the cost. What better way to send the woman screaming back to Boston than to give her a little scare?” His voice lowered menacingly. “And I’m thinking it’s not a wise thing to draw attention to me right here, right now. Not too clever for a clever fellow like yourself, Mr. Yorke.”

Yorke felt a flush rise on his cheeks at the not-so-subtle reprimand. Shoving aside his trepidation at the other man’s animosity, he reined in his anger. “Afraid, yes. Injured, no. The last thing we

want is for Worthington to hire a private army to keep his precious daughter safe. Bad enough she's released the funds for Devereaux to hire more guards."

Murchison shrugged, dropping his cigarette to the ground and crushing it out with the toe of his boot. "Easy enough to avoid." He stared over Yorke's shoulder and said softly, "It's other fellas I'm more concerned about."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the Cabot woman wasn't alone in her car when I lit the dynamite. Has a taste for the Paddies."

Yorke felt his spine stiffen. "Mrs. Cabot was...entertaining Maguire in her car?"

Murchison's lips twitched into a leer. "Entertaining. Yeah, I'd say what they were doing was downright entertaining."

Outrage swept through Yorke on a cold tide of bitterness. Lillian Cabot was not just flirting with Maguire and Lowell Adams. She'd taken a filthy Irishman to her bed. He thought of how she clung to Lowell Adams as the man led her away to the crew car, and wondered if Maguire was her only lover. He tasted bile at the memory of how she spurned his respectful advances, yet found Maguire and Lowell Adams acceptable.

"Perhaps I was too hasty," he said, forcing the conciliatory words out past his anger. "You're right. It's time to send Mrs. Cabot screaming into the night. That'll be the quickest way to put an end to her plans for the investors' excursion. And without a steady influx of money, work on the line will stall."

"Speaking of money, the job's changed. So's the price."

Yorke narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I've gotta avoid more guards, get more creative with my little projects," Murchison said. "And now you want me to set my sights on a specific lady, a lady whose pa has the pockets to buy whatever he needs to make my life difficult."

"I never told you to target Mrs. Cabot's railcar!"

“Now you have. And it’ll cost you.” Murchison pinned Yorke with cold, merciless eyes. “Unless you want me finding another employer? One who might be interested in what I have to say about what’s going on in this camp?”

“Blackmail?”

Murchison shrugged. “Business.”

Yorke struggled with his outrage. He should have known better than to trust Murchison would keep to the terms of their bargain. The man was no better than a common outlaw. “Fine. You’ll get your money.”

“Good.”

“But here’s what I want you to do—”

“Yorke,” Murchison said, his eyes on the private car. The flames were out. “How’s about you worry about your end of things, and I’ll worry about mine.”

Without another word, he slid into the shadows and disappeared. Yorke shot a glance over his shoulder to see what had sent Murchison into the night. Lowell Adams and the Irishman were part of the group examining the damage to the Worthington car. The two men stared in his direction.

Yorke felt his lip curl. Lillian had welcomed the Irishman into her bed, and probably that blue-blood Lowell Adams as well. It made him sick. Pivoting on his heel, he stalked toward camp. Murchison was proving to be an unreliable partner. Maybe it was time to make alternate plans. Then, if Murchison couldn’t get the job done, by God, he would. And Lillian Cabot would regret refusing Edward Yorke. In fact, it was time he treated her like what she was. A whore.

* * * *

Charles swung down the crew car’s steps, finally letting the fury he’d concealed from Lillian take over his thoughts. His hands clenched into fists, and he stalked toward her private car. Now that

the fire was under control, some of the men had dispersed. By the lantern glow, he noted a number of engineers examining the mangled undercarriage. Fortunately, the surrounding vegetation was sparse. Other than the wooden ties supporting the tracks, there was little to burn outside the car. That, and the fact the dynamite was set at the front, away from the rear sleeping compartment, was all that had saved Lillian and Conn from serious harm.

He thought of the blood on Lillian's face, and his temper spiked.

The fires, spoiled water and food, even the attacks on the tunnel crews had been troublesome, dangerous. But the attack on Lillian's car smacked of something else. Something more sinister. Charles knew the extremes men would go to in the name of greed and wealth. Or even simple competitiveness. It wasn't hard to speculate on a motive for the attacks, if not the specific perpetrator. Slowing the advance of the Great Western Rail Company left room for its competitors to reach the western shipping routes first. The company that did would reap the lion's share of government and private grants, not to mention access to lucrative trade with Japan, China and the rest of Asia.

A motion in the shadows drew his attention. It was Yorke, speaking to a man Charles didn't recognize. In his months traveling with the work crews, he'd come to recognize many of the men on sight, if not by name. The stranger must have arrived with the influx brought by the hell on wheels.

Yorke and the stranger stood apart from the others, almost hidden by the darkness away from Lillian's car and the work lamps. Only Yorke's pale jacket gave them away. The other man wore a long, dark coat similar to Conn's duster. A deep-brimmed hat concealed most of his face. His height dwarfed the slighter Yorke, who wore a pinched, angry expression. The other man watched impassively as Yorke gesticulated.

Abruptly, the stranger looked up and met Charles's gaze. He said something to Yorke, then vanished into the darkness. Yorke stared

after him, then glared at Charles and stalked toward camp. Charles watched him go. He'd never liked Worthington's secretary.

He wasn't the only one interested in Yorke's unusual meeting. Conn, the rough blanket he'd used to beat out the fire draped over one shoulder, followed the secretary's retreat with hooded eyes.

"What was that about?" Charles asked.

"Don't know." Conn was silent for a moment, then, "Yorke seem like the kind of man to chit-chat with his sort?"

"No. Now that you mention it, he doesn't."

"Think I'll have a talk with Devereaux. See what he knows about the man."

"Good idea. Lillian's in our cabin for the night with Miss McCurdy."

Conn nodded his approval. "Expect Delilah will be able to get back into her car tomorrow, once it's aired out and the mess picked up."

Charles shoved his hands in the pockets of his trousers. "I don't think she should be alone until whoever is doing this is captured."

"Agreed. She won't be."

They eyed each other. "Turns then?" Charles said.

Conn shrugged. "Or not. Doesn't bother me if you stay in the car too."

"We'll have to be careful. We can't take chances with Lilly's reputation. She's a brave lady, but..."

"Then we won't be seen going into her private car. Unless you don't think you can sneak in?"

"I can go undetected just as well as you can, old man."

"There you go, then."

Chapter 17

“Hard work and hardship await many a man who works on the line. Far from family and home, and the comforts to be found among such, it can be more than some men can bear. But others thrive on the adventure of it all.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

A shadow moved in the mirror. Lillian, arms uplifted to her coiffure, stilled. Her heart jumped as she realized her vulnerability, alone in her car, clad in just her flimsy underthings. The attack on her car the night before should have made her more wary.

Turning her head sharply, she saw Conn lounged in the doorway, one arm negligently braced on the frame. He’d discarded his coat, and stood in shirtsleeves and trousers, the simple waistcoat emphasizing a lean, well-muscled torso. His dark eyes gleamed hotly in the lamplight filling her chamber and she felt her heart beat faster for an entirely different reason.

“You startled me,” she said, voice breathy, devoid of the sharp tone she intended.

“Oh, don’t mind me, Delilah,” he said. “You carry on. Charlie and me aren’t about to leave you on your own while there’s trouble in the camp.”

“Ah, I see. So it’s for my own good that you’re here.”

“Well,” he said, “not entirely your own good.” His lips curved in a wicked, anticipatory smile she recognized all too well. “I’m thinking you don’t mind so much, in any case.”

“No,” she said, concealing her own smile. “I don’t mind. Why don’t you come in, then?”

“In a bit. I rather like the sights from here.”

Lillian shrugged delicately. “Suit yourself.”

She shifted on the tiny stool in front of her vanity and turned back to her mirror. Moving her head just a bit, she was able to watch Conn’s reflection. Knowing he was watching had an immediate effect on her body. Electric desire coursed through her veins. A flush pinkened the pale flesh of her breasts where they swelled above the low, loose bodice of her chemise. Her nipples, already aroused by the simple sight of him, beaded to an almost painful hardness. Wet warmth gathered between her thighs and her belly clenched as she remembered what it felt like to have Conn mastering her body, his hard fingers clenching her hips and buttocks as he pounded his hard cock into her.

She almost groaned at the thought. Closing her eyes, she forced herself to take a few measured breaths. In her mind’s eye, she saw Conn’s hot, all-seeing gaze on her as he watched from the doorway. What would it be like to make him lose his control?

Biting her lip, Lillian lifted her hands to her hair. She couldn’t look at him. If she did, she’d weaken. Methodically, she removed her pins, dropping them one by one into the waiting dish. As she worked, one strap of her chemise slid down, catching just below the curve of her shoulder. Leaving it there drew the near-transparent fabric tight across her breasts. She heard the rustle of fabric as Conn shifted his stance. Flashing a quick look in the mirror, she noted his hands were balled into fists. So, not as calm as he appeared. A bit more sure of herself, she pulled out the last pin. Loosened from restraint, her hair fell in fat, glossy auburn curls to her shoulders. Drawing her fingers through it, she spread it like a silk cape over her shoulders.

Then she touched the slender satin bow that secured the top of her chemise. The bow unravelled with one solid tug. Moving as if unaware of her audience, Lillian turned her torso so Conn had an unimpeded view, both of her profile and her face and chest in the mirror. The satin ribbon glided through the eyeholes. The bodice sagged further, helped along as she seductively caught the drooping straps and pulled it open. Playfully, she slid her wrists under the straps in a parody of bindings, trapping them. Then she looked at Conn through lowered lashes.

His pose of negligence gone entirely, he stood straight and tall, hands at his sides, tension visible in every muscle and sinew. The hard bulge of his cock looked huge. In two strides, he was at her side hauling her to her feet. His mouth came down on hers without preliminaries. His tongue jabbed at the seam of her lips, conquered as she eagerly parted them to let him take what he wanted. With mind-numbing skill, his tongue stroked and played with hers as his hands pulled her body flush against his. Satisfaction burned through Lillian. Here was the primal man who made her melt.

When he leaned back, his chest heaved with harsh breaths. He caught her wrists in his hands, and only then did she remember the straps holding them beside her breasts. Voice gravelly, he said, "Oh, Delilah, what a little tease you are. You need some taming, I'm thinking."

In a blink, he picked her up and tossed her. Before she could squeal in surprise, she landed safely on the thick mattress, legs sprawled wide. Her bared breasts trembled and she wished he would suck and bite her aching nipples. Instead, leaving her hands trapped in the straps, Conn reached under her chemise and unfastened her pantalettes. Whipping them off, he dropped them to the floor. Cupping her buttocks in one wide palm, he flipped her skirt to her waist. Bracing herself on her elbows as best she could, Lillian pushed up in time to see Conn thread his fingers through the damp red curls of her cunny. Finding her clit with his thumb, he pressed against it.

Her head fell back on a long gasp. Two long, masculine fingers filled her, sliding in her juices. Her hips began to rock against his hand as he teased and played.

Then he stopped, and she wanted to scream in frustration.

“Now, about that taming,” he said.

She watched, dumbfounded, as he stood up. He went to her wardrobe and rummaged inside it. When he turned back, he held a fistful of stockings. Lillian stopped breathing. Did he mean to do what she thought he did? Oh, God.

“Delilah,” he said, his tone chiding her inattention.

She looked from his hands to his face. While his voice was soft, his expression was anything but. Arousal made the hard planes of his face sharper, more impossibly beautiful than ever. He was like some Celtic god of nature, full of lust and raw masculine power. She didn’t know whether to spread her thighs in welcome or clench them together to ease the aching need to feel him there.

He didn’t give her a choice. Freeing her hands, he slid the chemise down her hips and off. Then he rolled her to her belly. The bed dipped under his weight. She sensed his big body come over her, felt the scratch of wool against her bare skin as his knees sank into the mattress beside her hips. Though he sat on his heels, she felt the hard shaft of his erection settle into the hollow between the cheeks of her buttocks. Leaning over, he caught one of her hands. With economic motions, he bound her wrist with the silk stocking, then secured it to the head of the bed. The second was accomplished just as quickly, just as surely. She pulled experimentally on her bindings. They were snug, but not too tight.

Conn’s hands slid between her breasts and the bed to cup her. She moaned her excitement. Nipping her shoulder, he whispered, “Now there’s a good girl, Delilah. Somehow, I knew you’d fancy this.”

“Conn,” she said.

“Give yourself over to me, and all will be well. Trust me?”

He waited. Lillian felt the pound of his heart through his clothes as he lay against her back, and the matching throb of his cock against her buttocks.

She nodded.

Placing an almost chaste kiss on her cheek, he breathed, "Good."

He backed off her. Before she could protest, he held her hips, urged her to her knees. With a bit of maneuvering, he worked the dark-hued coverlet off the bed, lifting her so he could bare the brilliant white sheets underneath. "Perfect," he said, almost to himself. "I want to see every move you make, my luscious Delilah."

The bed dipped again, and this time, he crowded up close behind her. She rocked back on her knees, rubbing against his cloth-covered cock—and felt the sharp slap of his hand on one bottom cheek. "Ah, ah," he said. "None of your teasing." Even as he spoke, his palm rubbed the sting away. His soothing stroke roved from her bottom to between her legs. He spoke a crude word of praise and she quivered.

His other hand moved against her as he worked the fastenings of his trousers. She made a soft cry as his cock slid between her thighs to nestle in her wetness. He felt broad and thick against her. She couldn't help it. She moved, riding his length, loving the feel of it sliding against her slit. He tilted his hips and on the next glide slid into her cunny. The wool prickled against the tender flesh of her bottom with each thrust. He reached his arm around her waist to toy with the hard nub of her clit.

Lillian twined the stockings even tighter around her wrists, taking up the slack to get more leverage to thrust back against Conn's steel-hard belly and thighs. He let her, and they pounded together like the pistons of a train. Release tore a cry from Lillian's throat. It roared through her, exploding from her cunny, through her belly and over her breasts in a sizzling wave of sensation. Her thighs and arms quivered with the force of it and she couldn't stop thrusting herself on Conn's shaft. Gradually, her mindless motions eased. She slowed, stopped.

Only then did she realize Conn's beautiful cock was still hard and hot inside her. Gasping for breath, she glanced over her shoulder.

Conn knelt, head bowed, chest jerking with the force of his exhalations. Heat rolled off him in waves.

"Conn?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he took one last, deep, cleansing breath. And opened his eyes. The deep blue irises looked black and liquid. Never taking his eyes from hers, he traced one finger along the crease of her buttocks. He didn't stop until he touched the rosette of her anus. A bolt of desire shot through her, and Lillian flinched. His gaze sharpened, apparently recognizing her acceptance of the intimate touch. With a circling fingertip, he caressed the tiny hole. Lillian began to pant with renewed excitement.

"Do you like this, Delilah?"

She could only nod.

With gentle force, he breached her hole with his fingertip. "And this? Do you like what I'm doing to your pretty little arse?"

She bit her lip. It had been so long since a man had done that to her that it stung more than a bit, but oh, it felt so good.

He didn't seem to need an answer. With controlled force, he began to move against her, thrusting into her dripping cunny with his cock as first one, then two fingers thrust into her back hole. Lillian whimpered and tilted her hips, wordlessly begging for more. He gave it to her. His fingers left her and the broad, moist head of his cock touched her anus. Stilling her hips with one hand, he pressed against the ring of muscle. The pain intensified, but so did the pleasure. The bulbous tip breached her and they both moaned. Conn said something in a language she didn't understand. With steady pressure he pulsed his cock against her, leaning in, easing back, until finally he slid all the way inside.

Lillian dropped her head, all her attention on the delicious, stretched-tight feel of Conn possessing her totally. He ran a palm down her spine and she arched like a cat. Conn growled and tangled

his fist in her hair. Leaning forward, he turned her face and gave her a hungry kiss.

“Sweet, Delilah,” he said, coasting his lips over her cheek and down her neck, breathing deeply of her scent.

He released her hair and braced his hands on her hips. With complete control, he drew his cock from her in a torturously slow glide. He pressed back in just as slowly.

“Ah, Conn,” she said, hips writhing in his hands as he forced her to accept what he gave her, at his own pace. “Please. Please.”

Conn’s laugh was low and dark. “What the lady wants.” He slammed into her, rocking her forward on her knees. Lillian cried out, so overwhelmed she felt weak from delight.

Conn didn’t wait for her to sort out the sensations. His hips pounded against her, slapping into her buttocks. Her bottom burned. Charges of energy seemed to shoot from her anus to her clit to her breasts, a thrilling circuit that feed on itself, growing stronger and stronger. Conn’s fingers dug into her, adding to the pleasure-pain.

Low grunts that seemed ripped from his throat accompanied each powerful thrust. Lillian clutched the stockings around her wrists and held on. He shoved a hand between her thighs and cupped her. His fingers found her clit and pinched her with exquisite pressure. It was too much. Lillian screamed. She began to buck against Conn, ignoring the bindings on her wrists, his steadying hand on her hip, his masterful fingers on her clit. She heard Conn’s hoarse shout, felt the spasming of his cock inside her rear passage as he gave up his seed, then was swept away by her own spasms.

Conn fell against her, crushing her into the bedding. His jagged breaths sounded loud in her ear. His hand stroked up her arm in a rough caress. He freed one wrist from its silk binding. Bringing it to his lips, he placed a gentle kiss on the ring of reddened flesh.

“My poor one,” he whispered. “So delicate. I’ll have to take more care next time.”

“I’m fine,” she said, just as softly. “Just sleepy.”

He freed her other wrist and kissed it, too.

Ignoring her denial, he said, "I'll take more care."

He lifted up from her. She sighed as his softening cock left her. He was back in a moment. She roused when she felt the damp cloth between her thighs, then along the crease of her buttocks, washing her with soft tenderness. He shushed her protest. She sensed his movements as he stripped, too weary to open her eyes and enjoy the sight. He slid into bed beside her and rolled her into his arms.

"Sleep now, Delilah. I'll watch over you."

As she drifted off, she felt him smooth the damp hair away from her face and touch his lips to her forehead.

Chapter 18

“Though available in the East for decades, travel by rail to the West is an entirely novel experience. It must be experienced to be believed.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

Aileen suggested the simplest solution to conceal the blast damage, green tablecloths appropriated from the serving staff. Secured around the bottom edge of Lillian’s private car, they fell in festive swoops all the way to the ground, hiding both the mangled wheels and the scorch marks left by the explosion and fire. The car still sat askew on the tracks—there simply hadn’t been time in the few days since the blast to hoist it back onto the rails, even if the wheels could be brought sufficiently into alignment—but the decorative folds of fabric gave it an elegant appearance of semi-permanence. No one arriving with the excursion group would suspect the damage hidden behind the drapery. The twisted wrought-iron steps were replaced by wooden risers complete with railing, all painted a crisp green to match the car.

Another tent town of sorts sat on the far side of the cars aligned on the spur, some distance from the workaday camp. These tents, however, had the holiday appeal of a beachside installation or an exclusive garden party. The excursion’s train pulled an elegantly appointed dining car, study with bookcases and comfortable leather chairs, and tiny private quarters certain to titillate for pure novelty’s

sake, but Lillian planned to entertain the company's guests outside the rolling cars, too. Large chintz cushions, gauzy draperies and delicate furniture graced the tent reserved for the ladies to share tea and conversation. Thanks to Charles, the tent set aside for the gentlemen had a distinctly masculine appeal, with sturdy portable chairs, wooden benches and a heavy liquor table complete with cigar cabinet. By day, the sun would glow through the canvas of the dining tent and provide warm shelter for luncheons.

Now, with evening approaching, lanterns strung from the solid supporting beams added a whimsical touch, glittering off the polished silver and sparkling crystal wine glasses. Arrangements of fall flowers collected from the area decorated the tables and tall, free-standing braziers took the chill off. The sun set earlier in the foothills, limning the trees and craggy mountains in gold as dusk approached. With it came the train chugging toward camp, wheels squealing and whistle screaming with escaping steam as it slowed to a crawl.

Lillian, Aileen on one side, her men on the other, waited with outward calm. Yorke had yet to appear, or send an explanation for his absence. Lillian mulled the idea of suggesting her father find a different job for the man. It was apparent he couldn't work with her.

Brass buttons marched in a double row down the front of Lillian's fitted royal blue jacket over skirts of the same hue. The fabric fell gently to the ground, brushing the toes of her black boots. Gathered up at the sides, it formed a small bustle that emphasized the curve of her bottom. Her thick auburn curls were tamed in an elegant twist under the matching military-style hat perched on her brow.

She was well-acquainted with most of the people that comprised the excursion, both socially and through her father's business connections. Usually confident of her ability to handle most any situation, her nerves felt stretched to the limit. What if the saboteur targeted the excursion? Devereaux insisted his men were ready to pounce on the villain at the first sign of trouble. Indeed, a number of his guards patrolled the area now. Their vigilance soothed her

concerns, but she knew how vital the excursion's success was to the next phases in her father's project.

With aching slowness, the engine squealed to a grating halt, its massive momentum daunting even so. A conductor jumped out of one of the trailing cars to put a footstep in place.

The first guest stepped down from the car. Lillian's welcoming smile was unreserved. Wilbur Hartendy hailed her with an upraised arm, a wide smile parting the walrus-like whiskers on his ruddy cheeks.

"Lillian, my dear. You look as lovely as always." He held out his hand to a slender woman of his own age with silver hair and bright blue eyes. With his help, she descended the stairs, and the couple made their way to Lillian. Close friends of her parents', she'd known them her entire life.

"Aunt Horatia," she said, taking the other woman's hands in a warm clasp and kissing her lightly on one paper-thin cheek. Wilbur bent for his own kiss, his whiskers tickling Lillian's lips as she pecked his cheek. "Uncle Wilbur."

Her pleasure was genuine. Their solid and respectable presence assured her of at least two allies to help win over any reluctant investors.

"You know Aileen, of course," she said. They greeted Lillian's companion with friendly familiarity, then turned questioning gazes on the two men. "And Charles Lowell Adams."

"Ah, right," Wilbur said. "Didn't recognize you at first, my boy, though I don't know why. You have the look of your father about you. But it's been some years."

"Yes, sir," Charles said, shaking his hand. He greeted Horatia with easy charm, and included Conn in the introductions. "Allow me to present my friend, Conn Maguire. The man's an artist with a camera."

When the older couple greeted the Irishman without so much as a lifted brow, both expressing admiration for his work, Lillian released

a pent-up breath. Horatia and Wilbur were only two people, true, but their influence had the power to set the tone for most of the others in the excursion.

Satisfied that Charles and Conn could cope on their own, she faced the passenger car with renewed enthusiasm as another couple descended to the ground.

"Mr. and Mrs. Daniels," she said. "I'm so thrilled you were able to come. Please tell me your trip was a pleasant one."

Swept up in the social niceties of her familiar duties as hostess, Lillian forgot her irritation with Yorke's conspicuous absence.

* * * *

As a general rule, Salome Northrup did not get involved in matters that were clearly none of her concern. She was a businesswoman, plain and simple. As she'd learned, discretion was almost always the better part of the bottom line. However, in this case, her business had been directly affected by the incidents plaguing the camp since Mrs. Cabot's arrival. Her tents burned to the ground. Her girls terrorized. It was more than hazards of the trade. And, to be frank, having so many men expropriated for guard duty and so many others restricted by curfews created a serious dent in her income. Besides, she liked Lillian Cabot. The woman wasn't too hoity-toity to offer help where it was needed.

She stepped forward, holding out both hands in welcome to the large man as soon as he entered the reception area of her new main tent. "Tom, thank you for coming."

Devereaux bussed her cheek with genuine affection. "Sorry I can't stay, Sal. Mrs. Cabot wants us to keep a particular eye out while her guests are here. They're down for dinner now, but I should get back."

"I understand," she said. "That's why I asked you to come, actually." He raised his brows in question. Instead of answering, she

spoke to one of the women seated in calculated dishabille on a nearby settee. "Bettina, will you play hostess for a little while, please?"

Certain her request would be followed like the order it was, she led Devereaux into her private quarters. Comfortable and feminine, they were plain compared to the more opulent décor of the public areas where the girls entertained the paying customers.

He settled himself in a comfortable chair, took off his hat and rested it on his knee. While he did so, she went to the liquor cabinet and poured a glass of whisky. "Do you know a man named Travis Murchison?" she said, handing Devereaux the glass. Then she sat in a facing chair and folded her hands in her lap.

"Murchison?" He took a swallow of the liquor and considered. "One of the mule-skinners, isn't he?"

"That's what he'd like you to think."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I'm certain he's doing more than driving wagons."

Devereaux frowned, all business. "Explain."

"One of my girls told me he hired her to service one of your men. Said it was to pay a debt."

"On the job? I'll have his head," Devereaux growled.

Sal gave him a feline smile. "I think she already did. But you know that's not so strange. What is strange," she said, looking at him meaningfully, "is *when* he hired her. It was the night the horses stampeded through the camp."

"And I'm guessing you mean it was *exactly* when the horses escaped, and the man we're talking about is Wyatt Smith. No wonder he didn't notice anything out of the ordinary before the stampede." Devereaux snorted. "Murchison hired your girl, you say?"

"Yes." She shrugged. "I didn't really think anything of it at the time. I got my portion of the transaction and that was the end of it. It was only when one of the girls mentioned seeing that prig Yorke talking to Murchison that I began to wonder."

"Yorke? Worhington's man?"

“The very same. I wondered what in the world could bring that annoying fop to talk to a rough sort like Murchison. So I started asking around, and when I found out that Murchison arrived on the same train as Mrs. Cabot and Yorke...”

“You got suspicious.”

“Let’s just say my instincts told me to pay attention.”

Devereaux pushed to his feet and set the empty whisky glass on a table. “Well, Sal, your instincts are good enough for me. I’ll have some of my men round up Murchison, find out what he knows.”

The madam stood as well. “I hope I’ve helped.”

“Didn’t hurt,” he said, putting his hat on. Then he gave her a lingering, arousing kiss that belied his age and no-nonsense demeanor. “See you later?”

Sal ran her hands over his firm chest and a belly that she knew wasn’t as paunchy as it looked. “Please.”

She escorted him to the reception area and watched him confidently stride out of the tent, a man on a mission. Satisfied she’d done what she could to repay her debt to Lillian Cabot, she resumed her hostess duties, hoping that the upheaval in camp would end soon and business could resume its usual, very profitable, patterns.

Chapter 19

“Railroad guests can expect to be treated to the best of everything.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

Most of the guests, though excited by their arrival, retired to their private cabins early with the promise of special activities for the next day. While her father would see to running the numbers with the investors back in Boston, Lillian planned to give them insight into all aspects of work on the railroad, from scouting and surveying to actually laying track and blasting at the new tunnel.

But she didn't want to think of that now. Practically shoving Aileen out the door, Lillian hurried to her room to change out of her clothes. Foregoing a nightdress, she selected a thin silk robe and nothing else. Fingers trembling, she pulled the pins from her hair, freeing the auburn tresses to tumble around her shoulders. Her green eyes looked huge and luminous in the mirror of her dressing table. Her hard nipples pushed insistently against the silk of her robe. Lillian shifted on the cushioned stool, and her thighs rubbed together, slick and slippery with the moisture of her excitement.

Pressing her fingers to her flushed cheeks, Lillian closed her eyes and willed her heartbeat to slow to a less frantic pace.

It was impossible.

She stood up in a rush and went to the doorway. Leaning against the frame, she waited. Twining her fingers together in a nervous dance, she waited. Biting her lip and taking deep breaths, she waited.

When the soft knock came, she gasped.

Barefoot, Lillian ran lightly to the rear door and unbolted it. Conn and Charles, silent as wraiths, stepped into the hall. Charles bolted the door. Conn pulled her to him and claimed her mouth. Lillian sighed and melted against his chest. Growling with sensual hunger, he plundered her lips as if he couldn't get enough. When he finally let her go, Charles moved to take his place. He ran his lips over her throat, pressing gentle, loving kisses in a trail to her mouth, where he lingered and played until her fingers sank into the fabric covering his shoulders.

Charles swept her into his arms and led the way down the corridor to Lillian's room. Conn prowled after them, his eyes locked to Lillian's as she peered over his friend's shoulder. Then they were in her bedchamber, and Charles slid her body down his until her feet touched the carpet. The room seemed small, the size of it overpowered by the presence of two strong, virile men.

Lillian barely noted it. Conn demanded all her attention. He cupped the back of her head, tilting her face to his as he took command of another kiss, tongue boldly thrusting against hers. Charles's body was a warm presence against her back, fingers nimble as they reached around her waist to untie the sash of her robe. The instant it loosened, he parted the robe and slipped his hands inside to palm her breasts. She gasped into Conn's mouth. He slanted his lips harder against hers, as if demanding his share of her attention. It hardly mattered. She wouldn't have noticed if the Four Horsemen broke down the door and galloped through the room. Every sense was on these two beautiful, attractive, delicious men and what they did to her.

Charles stripped the robe from her, tugging her arms away from Conn's neck so he could slide the sleeves down and off. Shaping her waist with his hands, Charles knelt and pressed biting kisses to the curve of her derriere. Lillian jumped a little, the move pressing her

even more tightly against Conn's body. He thrust his hips, teasing her belly with the hard shaft of his cloth-covered cock.

Then, he was gone.

Before she could protest, Charles stood and whirled her into his arms, lowering his lips to hers. Instead of controlling the kiss, as Conn did, Charles let her kiss him as she wished. She sucked his tongue and teased it with taunting touches of her own.

She heard the rustle of fabric behind her but was immediately distracted when Charles moved his hands down her body to cup her mound. One hand on her buttocks, holding her steady, he parted her nether lips and glided his fingers along her wet slit. Lillian tilted her hips and rode his fingers.

Charles tore his mouth free. "That's it, Lilly, my beauty," he rasped. "Take what you need from me. Take your pleasure." His fingers never stilled, rubbing the stiff bud of her clit with relentless skill. When he dipped his head to lick and bite her nipple, she couldn't hold back. Fingers digging into his coat sleeves, she cried out, helplessly shattering as she felt her own liquid drench his hand. He continued his sensual massage, easing her down from glory with a touch that threatened to arouse as much as it soothed.

When at last he eased his hand away, she gave a lusty sigh of satisfaction. Her eyelids were heavy as she watched his light-brown head at her breast, enjoyed the tug of his mouth on her nipple.

"Delilah." Conn's tone was dark, sensual. She looked over her shoulder. He waited, naked, on his knees in the centre of her bed. No supplicant, this. He seemed more like some pagan fertility god wreathed in shadows. The starlight through the glass ceiling glinted on his tawny flesh, kissing the curve of a biceps here, the point of a masculine nipple there. His cock rose long and proud from the tangled nest of dark hair at his groin. His dark blue eyes glittered black in the gloom.

Charles straightened and nuzzled her cheek. "Go to him," he said.

Anticipation surged in her so strong that, for a moment, she couldn't move. Both men had said they could share her, but she hadn't really believed them. As if reading her mind, Charles smiled the secret, wicked smile he reserved just for her. "Don't worry. I'll be right behind you."

Lillian walked to the bed. It wasn't reluctance that slowed her steps. It was pure feminine instinct, the innate knowledge of a temptress. Of a goddess. With Conn's and Charles's attention devoted to her, their eyes devouring her, their expressions hungry and lustful, she certainly felt all powerful.

She settled one knee on the bed. Conn held out his hand. "Come to me, Delilah." The Irish was thick in his voice. The sensual sound of it alone sent pleasure coursing through every part of her body.

She took his hand and allowed him to help her onto the bed. Once there, he kept tugging, pulling her forward until he could lift her up and settle her knees on either side of his. Then he lowered her onto his thrusting shaft, sinking deep inside her with the single thrust. Lillian moaned. Conn growled in pleasure and seized her mouth in a hungry kiss at the same instant he began to thrust in earnest. His strokes were powerful as he held her steady for his invasion. Each jab of his cock sent a jolt of pleasure through her body. She tried to help, bracing herself on his shoulders and pushing down to meet his thrusts.

Conn's beautiful face was stark with lust, his eyes burning blue sapphires as he stared into her face. Need coiled tighter and tighter in her belly. Lillian closed her eyes and gave herself up to his masterful possession of her pleasure. White lights danced behind her lids, growing brighter and brighter. She knew she cried and whimpered with the pleasure of it, but didn't care.

Conn whispered dark praise in her ear, telling her what a sweet cunny she had, how tight she held him, how she needed what he was doing to her, and he would pleasure her until she couldn't take one. More. Stroke.

She sank her nails into his skin, holding tight as she quaked and shivered against him. He was in her to the hilt, the raw sensation of his pubic hair and the hard, round spheres inside their soft sac rubbing intimately against her sensitized flesh inflaming her even more. She ground herself against his loins, brazenly rubbed her diamond-tipped breasts against his chest as she wallowed in the pleasure he gave her.

The lights behind her eyelids burst in an explosion of color, and Lillian screamed in ecstasy. A lifetime passed while she fought to breathe, to do anything more than love what he did to her.

When she could, she realized Conn was still hard inside her. A fine tremor wracked his body, yet his hands were tender as he caressed her back with long, gliding strokes of his palms. He kissed her eyelids, her cheekbones, nipped at her lips. "Are you ready?"

At first, she thought he spoke to her. *Ready for what?*

Then Charles said, voice a shade unsteady, "I'm ready."

Conn's hands left her back and guided her loosened arms to tighten around his neck. Charles, bare skin hot against her back, moved in behind her. He touched the globes of her bottom, massaging them in strong palms. The sensation was strange, to have one man caress her while another was hard as steel inside her. Then Charles's thumb pressed against the tiny rosette of her anus. A thrill of expectation zinged through her. She tensed and gave a sobbing cry.

Charles soothed her with a soft sound. "Don't be afraid. Conn and I want to be with you like this, together, but I'll stop if it hurts you."

"No," she whispered. "Not afraid." It was all she could manage.

Conn groaned and dropped his forehead against hers. "No, Charlie, she's not afraid," he said. "She likes it. Loves it. She just clenched me so hard it almost made me spurt. Hurry, man."

Reassured, Charles pressed his thumb harder against Lillian's anus. Both she and Conn moaned as one, he in reaction to her reaction. Restlessly, his fingers kneaded her waist and thighs. Lillian began to press excited little kisses on his jaw and neck, sucking and nibbling his flesh. Without conscious thought, she began to rock in his

lap, a slow ride on his cock and back against Charles's gentle probing as he tested her tiny hole, widening her, preparing her. She felt it when he exchanged his thumb for his finger, then two. All the while, Conn's cock pulsed like a second heartbeat inside her, heightening the sensation of Charles's anal play.

Finally, he pulled out his fingers and replaced them with the head of his cock. She was already so wet, they had prepared her so well, that Charles only needed her own moisture to ease his way. He pushed the tip of his cock against her, hard, then harder, until he surged past the ring of muscle. He gave her a moment to accustom herself to the feel of him. He was so careful. So sweet. She didn't know if she wanted to ask him to take his time so she could feel every inch of his beautiful cock, or tell him to take her hard, now, NOW! Oh, but what he was doing felt so delicious she couldn't think. Easing back slightly, Charles pushed ahead a fraction of an inch, then another, and another, until at last his belly touched her bottom.

Lillian had never felt so surrounded.

Conn's furred chest touched her erect nipples, making them furl so tight they almost hurt. His muscled abdomen pressed against her softer belly. Strong thighs supported her weight as if it were nothing.

Behind her, Charles's lean form pressed into her from shoulder to bottom to thighs. She kept one hand on Conn's neck, but couldn't resist reaching back to feel Charles's sleek skin. She touched his thigh, followed it to where his hip curved into her bottom leaving no space between them. Tracing the round globe of his rear cheek, she stretched back until she could follow the dip down between his legs, where she could just, barely, touch the downy soft skin surrounding two tightly drawn spheres. He sucked in a breath and ran his hands restlessly along the length of her thighs, where they tightened around Conn. Charles settled his face against the curve of her neck and breathed deeply, as if memorizing her scent.

“God, you feel good, Lilly,” he said. His hands moved from her thighs and up her body to tease the edge of her breasts, where they weren’t crushed against Conn’s chest.

Conn seemed to take his friend’s words as a signal. He moved, thrusting his hips and pushing his cock inside her passage in short, hungry jabs. After a moment, Charles followed his lead. With Lillian straddling Conn’s lap, Charles had more room to maneuver, more leeway to pull out and plunge back in. Soon, they found a rhythm that worked for both of them, and began thrusting in earnest tandem.

Lillian struggled to keep her hand on Charles’s thrusting buttocks and hold tight to Conn’s neck, willing captive as they moved against her, inside her. She gasped at the burn of sensation. Anal sex was a special thrill for her, but only when aroused to the point that she could ignore the discomfort. Conn and Charles had taken care of that, and more.

In no time, it seemed as if the three lovers could sense each other’s motions before they happened. Lillian leaned into Conn a bit to give Charles more leverage. Charles held her hips, to increase the sensation of her clit rubbing intimately with each of Conn’s shallower thrusts. Conn gripped her thighs and eased them wider so both he and Charles could plunder even more of her.

Conn bared his teeth, an expression of pure pleasure tightening his features as a growl rolled up from his chest. He lost the rhythm he’d found with Charles. She felt his erection jerk and the hot spurt of his semen.

As Conn came, Charles lurched into Lillian. He grunted and groaned his own release, grinding his hips against her.

The feel of the two men spurting inside her was too much. Lillian’s arm tightened convulsively around Conn’s neck, her thighs clasp his in an unbreakable hold. Her other hand tightened on Charles’s buttock, trying to urge him deeper into her shuddering rear hold. Her head fell back against his shoulder as the force of the most powerful release she’d ever experienced took over her body. Her

inner muscles clenched around Conn's cock in her cunny and Charles's in her bottom. They moaned in pleasure. "Yes," Conn hissed. "Again!" She felt it as her release, unbelievably, prolonged theirs.

Long moments later, Charles slumped against her back. The tension humming through Conn's body eased, and he, too, went almost boneless. The three of them panted for breath. Lillian felt hot and giddy and exhausted all at once. Finally, heart pounding, she said, "Oh, my."

Conn laughed. It was the first time she'd heard more than a chuckle from him. It was a wonderful sound. "Oh my?" he asked, and laughed again.

Charles joined him, then Lillian. "I guess I should say, 'Oh, my, you virile gods of female pleasure. I am so honored!'"

"You're welcome," Charles said. She felt a little pang of regret when he sat up and his sated cock slid from her body. He gathered her in his arms, and she lost Conn's softening penis, too. She didn't feel very sorry, though, since they were occupied with pulling down the covers and settling the three of them in her bed, one man on either side. It was a close fit, but they managed.

Briefly, Charles left the bed. When he returned from the attached bathing chamber, he held a damp cloth. Lillian sighed with pleasure when he began to cleanse between her thighs. Conn traced lazy patterns on her belly, not seeming the least perturbed.

They did it naturally, without discussion, as if there was nowhere they'd rather be than right here with her.

Being Conn and Charles, they tussled a bit, Conn grumbling that Charles was hogging the covers, but they soon settled down. Again without speaking their plans aloud, they arranged Lillian to their satisfaction, bottom nestled against Conn's belly, cheek pressed to Charles's shoulder.

Exhausted, satisfied to her fingertips, Lillian smiled to herself. How could she have had qualms about this? It was heaven.

* * * *

“He’s not there, sir,” the man reported. “His gear isn’t there either, just a bedroll on his cot. The men he’s assigned to bunk with say he usually doesn’t stay in their tent. They assumed he was knocking boots with a little laundress or one of Northrup’s girls.”

Devereaux frowned. “Organize a group to search the camp, Smitty. I want Murchison found, and now.”

Smitty had been with Devereaux since the beginning of the project. First a farmer, then a soldier, he was the sort who did what needed doing, no questions asked. Now was no different. He nodded curtly and left the tent Devereaux used as an office. Devereaux took his timepiece from his pocket. It was late. Mrs. Cabot’s guests were long since abed, and so was the lady herself. The bustle of the swanky dinner and then the socializing that followed prevented him from reporting the latest development to Mrs. Cabot. Now, it would have to wait until morning.

The search for Murchison moved beyond the tents into the woods, where they finally had some luck. Some of the men stumbled across a cold firepit. A more intensive search uncovered stashed saddlebags with two changes of clothes, shaving gear and a tin of chaw. Clods of dung, a feed sack and conspicuously cropped grass and shrubbery showed where a horse had been hobbled. Devereaux, when he arrived at Smitty’s summons, looked the Spartan campsite over and came to the conclusion that one of the missing horses wasn’t missing at all. His suspicions about Murchison crystallized. He thanked his lucky stars Salome Northrup chose to involve herself.

Then he issued new orders and settled in to wait.

Murchison rode in just before dawn.

The horse sensed them first. Used to the scent of men, it wasn’t unduly alarmed, but its curious whicker as it approached Devereaux’s hidden men alerted Murchison. He jerked on the reins, brutally

pulling the animal's head around as he kicked its ribs. Startled, the horse half-reared, dancing in fear and pain as its rider urged it to run. Smitty leapt from behind a tree to grab at the bridle. Before he could touch it, Murchison lashed out with one heavy boot, the nervous horse's bulk adding impetus to the blow. Smitty grunted as air left his chest in a whoosh.

"Murchison!" Devereaux stepped from cover and faced the man on the horse. The early morning sunlight, just beginning to streak through the trees on pale ribbons of light, glinted off the gun he held steady in his hand. "Get off the horse. Now!"

Without hesitation, Murchison pulled a revolver from the holster at his hip. He attempted to level it on Devereaux, but the horse, further unsettled by the sudden appearance of more than half a dozen men on all sides and Murchison's desperate sawing on the reins, had had enough. Squealing, it reared up, forelegs thrashing the air. Murchison, fighting to keep control of the gun and reins and hold his seat on the panicking horse, was thrown forward in the saddle.

Smitty, a grim look on his face despite his wheezing attempts to regain his air, reached for the bridle again just as Murchison forced the horse back on all fours. This time, he turned his gun on the man at the horse's head.

"No!" Devereaux lurched forward, the sound of the double-blast muffled in the tight confines of the makeshift camp. Smitty reeled back, a sheet of blood seeming to instantly cover a too-white face. But Murchison wasn't unscathed. Slumping on the horse's back, he cursed blackly. Thick blood ran over the fingers of the hand he held tight against his side, where Devereaux's ball had struck.

With a shout of anger, Devereaux grabbed a handful of the man's shirt and tore him from the saddle. Murchison landed on the loamy ground with a cry of pain, a grimace twisting his features. The horse, eyes rolling wildly, began to buck. Men on all sides ducked and dodged the flying hooves. Devereaux stood his ground, meaty hand fisted in Murchison's shirt in case the wounded man was fool enough

to try to get away. The horse abruptly stopped bucking. With a final equine scream, it tore away through the trees, sending men leaping for fresh cover as it crashed heedlessly over brush and saplings in its frenzy to escape.

Devereaux felt Murchison move beneath his hand. Furiously, he shoved the man to the ground, kicked him over to his stomach, ignoring both the cry of pain and flurry of renewed cursing. "Shut the fuck up," he said. Gesturing with his chin, he ordered some of his men to take charge of the prisoner. "Make sure he's not going to bleed out before the hanging," he said. Then he went to Smitty's side.

Two other men had eased the young man to his back. The sight of Smitty's blood-streaked face and ashen features made Devereaux shake his head. Murchison had been too close to miss when he pulled the trigger.

Then, one of the men leaning over Smitty's still form let out a whistle and said wonderingly, "Lucky bastard."

Devereaux crouched on his haunches. "What is it?"

Grinning, the man tilted Smitty's head down so Devereaux could see. A bloody furrow made a new part in Smitty's dark brown hair, a glint of white bone barely visible in the morning sunlight. "I think it just grazed him. That's what all the blood's from. He's still breathing, still warm." He met Devereaux's eyes. "We'll need the doc to look at him for sure, but I think he might be all right."

Devereaux let out a relieved breath. "Then you two get him to Ritchards as fast as you can." Nodding, the men carefully hoisted Smitty up, sharing his weight, and started back to camp.

Devereaux watched Murchison with cold eyes.

Hands secured behind his back, he knelt, listing to one side as he favored the gunshot wound. From the look of the bloody checked-cotton wrapped around his waist, some quick thinker had used one of Murchison's spare shirts from the saddlebags to bind it. Devereaux stood over the man, willing him to look up. When he did, Murchison

sneered. Pain etched in grooves in his cheeks, turning the sneer into a sickly look of defiance.

Devereaux felt his own cheeks spread in a grim smile. "Bring him," he said. "Let's find out what he's been up to."

* * * *

Yorke watched in silent rage, almost unable to believe his eyes. Almost.

The golden-pink fingers of dawn touched the blue-black sky as the last stars winked into oblivion. His wool coat did nothing to stop the frigid morning air from searing the skin of his face and hands. His ears and nose felt numb. The discomfort vanished the instant he saw movement at the door of Lillian's private car. Not one shadow. Two.

Yorke sank back to shelter against the low bush he'd chosen as cover.

He didn't have to see their faces to recognize their voices. Conn Maguire, that filthy Irishman. And Charles Lowell Adams. Both men leaving Lillian's car at the break of dawn. Both in high spirits. Both, obviously, her lovers. At the same time.

Fury held him motionless until they passed on their way to the crew car. They were long gone from sight when he left his hiding spot. On stiff, wooden-seeming legs, he walked to stand beside Lillian's car. The sun broke the horizon, making the curtained windows blaze like squares of beaten gold. Not a whisper of sound reached him. He guessed Lillian was exhausted from her night of debauchery.

With cold precision, he turned on one elegantly shod heel and made his way into camp.

Chapter 20

“The forests of the western mountains are a hunter’s paradise, with game of all varieties finding refuge under the trees. They populate the area with startling abundance, and can reach much greater size than their eastern cousins.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

“Mrs. Cabot has promised that whatever we bag will grace the dinner table tomorrow night,” Charles said, speaking over his shoulder to the group of men trailing him. A Winchester lever-action repeating rifle, Oliver Winchester’s improvement on the old Henry rifle, cradled comfortably in the crook of his arm, he held aside a low-hanging branch and continued up the faint trail. His tall riding boots protected his lower legs from brambles. It was cool under the shade of the trees, but the exercise warmed him. While green predominated the foliage, the coming of fall was evidenced by the blush of orange, red, and yellow that touched the leaves. It was easy to imagine how spectacular the colors would be in a few weeks or even days.

A few of the men in the excursion opted to stay behind while the ladies picnicked with Lillian, so the hunting party comprised just under a dozen of the male guests. A few of Devereaux’s men walked with them, there to keep an eye out for hostile wildlife and play porter.

Charles’s thoughts went to Murchison, the man Devereaux had taken into custody early that morning. At first, he stubbornly refused

to respond to the site boss's questions. Then efforts to interrogate him proved useless when a fever brought on by the gunshot wound first made him delirious, then unconscious. Ritchards said barring the risk of infection, he would survive. Even so, it would be days before he would be lucid enough to tell them anything about his efforts to waylay work on the rail line or any possible accomplices. Charles particularly wanted to know about his connection to Yorke. Until he had some answers, Charles intended to keep a closer eye on Worthington's secretary.

"I can't remember the last time I went on a good hunt," Wilbur Hartendy said. He followed a few paces behind Charles. Despite his girth and age, he walked with the careful steps of a seasoned hunter and handled his gun with sure hands. "Shame there's no hounds to flush some birds."

"In this tangle, I think it would just be a confusing muddle," Matthew Daniels offered. The man was closer to Charles's age, a contemporary of his older brothers. Charles knew him from Boston, but had never socialized closely with Daniels and his wife. Still, he seemed like a pleasant enough fellow.

"Quite," Charles said, forcing himself to concentrate on his duties as de facto host instead of brooding about Murchison. "Besides, you won't find many hunting hounds out here unless you bring them yourself."

"Nice to get a break from the ladies," Hartendy offered, smiling genially at the chuckles his observation elicited. "Mrs. Hartendy's a splendid woman, but I will admit to some satisfaction that we've managed to escape the drawing room, so to speak."

Charles stopped walking and gestured for silence. Using hand signals, he directed the men's attention ahead. The dun-brown hides of a small herd of deer made them hard to see without effort. Upwind, they had yet to scent the men.

"Anyone have a taste for venison?" Charles whispered on a breath of air. He moved aside, taking care not to disturb an inconvenient

branch or make a sound that would alert the deer. He sized up the men with him, selected the one who had the most eager look in his eyes. "Williams? Care to take the shot?"

The man, once-red hair faded to the rust-blond of middle-age, smiled widely. "Don't mind if I do," he said, just as softly as Charles had spoken. He moved up to stand beside Charles while the others gave them room. Then he lifted his gun to his shoulder.

* * * *

Lillian watched Conn load a prepared plate in the box of his camera and admired his forbearance. The trio of ladies sat posed on and about a boulder beside the stream. The miniature waterfall danced in the background, sending up a mist of moisture that sparkled like gold dust in the sunlight and gave the scene a fairyland appeal. The women, proper matrons from Boston society, dimpled like girls as Conn worked.

"I'll be expecting you to make this worth my while later, Delilah," he muttered from under the black cape of the camera.

Lillian smiled. "Of course, Conn," she said for his ears only. "Do you have something particular in mind?"

"Oh, I'll think of something, I'm sure, while I'm readying the photographs for your lady friends." He flipped off the cape and gestured to his subjects that they were free to go. Removing the exposed plate, he crouched to slide it into a carrying case. Looking up at Lillian, his agile lips quirked in a devilish smile. "Count on it."

She suppressed a shiver of delight and strove to keep her expression from giving everything she thought and felt away to anyone who might glance their way.

Clearing her throat, she looked around the clearing. The three ladies had rejoined the others on the blankets and folding chairs set up at the picnic site. Not all the ladies on the excursion had elected to

join the outing, so Aileen had stayed behind to ensure they were kept well-entertained with gentler pursuits.

Lillian made a mental note to congratulate the cook for his repast, which combined the informality of a garden luncheon with the elegant touches of chilled wine and dainty confections. Feminine laughter and chatter filled the glade. Her guests appeared unbothered by the subdued presence of men with guns stationed on the perimeter. She suspected they assumed it was simply a precaution against wildlife instead of what truly concerned her—that Murchison hadn't worked alone. It stretched belief that he could cause so much damage on his own. And then there was the prostitute who saw Yorke speaking with the man.

Lillian shivered for an entirely different reason. She'd never liked the man. But without proof, she hesitated to do more than agree to have Devereaux's men watch his movements. With luck, they would quickly compile irrefutable evidence she could then present to her father in private. The last thing they needed was to have the investors discover there was trouble within the company.

She fell in step with Conn as he carried the case of plates to his portable darkroom. The ladies enthusiastically embraced the plan to have their portraits taken for keepsakes of their adventure in the west. Lillian had no doubt they enjoyed being the focus of the virile Irishman's attention as much as they liked the thought of showing off their pictures to their friends back home. They might consider him far beneath their social stratum, but the matrons weren't beneath envisioning a dalliance with a handsome man.

Conn opened the doors at the back of the hearse-like carriage. Putting the small crate on the floor, he shoved it further inside. To Lillian, he said, "Make sure your ladies stay away from my gear."

"Definitely."

He chuckled. "My camera equipment."

"That's what I meant."

He hummed his disbelief. "Right. And meanwhile," his fingers grazed her waist, urging her closer behind the shield provided by the open doors. "I'll be thinking on how you can best repay me for putting up with these twits." His lips touched hers in a brief caress that made her wish for nightfall. Setting her back a pace, he chuckled his fingers softly under her chin. "Best get to work so I can take a couple more portraits before we need to head back."

"Good idea." She turned to go, but he caught her hand. His thumb brushed over her knuckles in soothing strokes.

"Delilah, lass, all will be well. Charlie's keeping an eye on Yorke with the hunting party, and Devereaux's men are on the lookout, too. Lord knows I'd rather just pound the bastard into a pulp, but you said your Da wouldn't like that. Fair enough. We'll get enough on Yorke to satisfy your Da, and things'll be right again before you know it."

Grateful for his understanding, she squeezed his hand. "I know. Thanks, Conn." She heard laughter, and one of the women called her name. "I'd better get back to my guests."

"You do that," he said. "Remember, I'll be thinking on something special for tonight."

Lillian laughed a bit breathlessly. "How could I forget?"

Conn jumped into the back of the carriage and pulled the doors closed. Lillian listened to the bar lock from inside, and sighed. Yes, she really couldn't wait for tonight. Dismissing the problem of Yorke from her thoughts, she put on her hostess face and walked toward the picnic area. "Ladies, would anyone care for a game of cards?"

The cracking echo of a far-off gunshot made her steps falter. A covey of birds, startled by the unexpected sound, burst from the treetops and wheeled above the clearing in a flurry of motion too hectic to discern individuals. Lillian and the other women watched the avian display until the disgruntled, squawking birds found perches in a new stand of trees.

"I think the fearless hunters have bagged something for your table, Lillian," Aunt Horatia said.

“Either that or, knowing my own fearless hunter’s proclivities, scared it away,” another woman observed dryly.

The women laughed appreciatively. Conversation quickly resumed, gunshot and ensuing aerial display forgotten.

The sunlight in the glade dimmed, and Lillian looked up. A gray cloud drifted across the sun, obscuring it. The wind, until that moment relatively still, gusted across the glade, rippling the knee-high grass and wildflowers like waves on a lake, and she smelled rain in the air. The cool breeze pressed Lillian’s skirts to her legs, teasing tendrils of hair loose from her coiffure to tickle her cheeks and neck. Then it was gone. The sun, free of the cloud, shone just as warmly. But she noted a flock of storm clouds gathering along the horizon. Shaking off her unease, Lillian tucked the loose strands of hair behind her ears and resumed her steps. “Now, about those cards?”

* * * *

“Ballocks!”

It wasn’t clear who uttered the expletive, but all the men turned to stare at Edward Yorke, whose precipitous shot had sent the small herd of deer bounding through the trees and out of sight before anyone else could attempt to take one down.

Yorke flushed. “My apologies, sirs,” he said. He looked down and kicked at the ground, as if in disgust. “Slipped on a damn root.”

“Well,” Wilbur Hartendy said. “Could have been worse, Yorke. Last thing we need is to carry someone back to the ladies with a ball stuck in him.”

Yorke wasn’t fooled by the man’s conciliatory tone. An avid hunter, Worthington’s confidant expected others of his sex to share the same enthusiasm and skill for the sport. Men like Charles Lowell Adams and the others in their party.

Yorke would be more put out if he’d aimed for the deer and missed.

He pretended not to notice Lowell Adams brushing bark chips off the sleeve of his coat, and the speculative glance the other man threw his way. His shot had indeed gone awry, but only in the sense that Lowell Adams moved at the last moment. It wasn't because he'd lost his nerve, Yorke told himself.

He'd been on edge since learning of Murchison's capture. What if the man talked? But then he reasoned that if Murchison did, Devereaux's men would have taken him into custody. Perhaps the hired thug had a code of ethics that prevented him from naming Yorke as an accomplice. Thinking of the other man's extortion following the attack on Lillian's railcar, Yorke was skeptical. It was irrelevant anyway. Murchison had set the fires, touched off the explosions, spoiled the water and countless other things. What had Yorke done? What could they *prove* he had done? Nothing.

Still, he wouldn't be in this position if it weren't for Lillian and her lovers. It was all Lillian's fault. The amoral bitch. Rage washed over him. His fingers clutched his gun so tightly his knuckles whitened, and he felt light-headed. Yes. It was all Lillian's fault.

When he next looked up from his tangled thoughts, most of the others had moved ahead in search of new prey. All except Hartendy. Yorke realized he must have stood there quite some time in silence, staring at nothing. He fought down his roiling emotions and tried to think.

"I know you're a better shot than that, Yorke," Hartendy said, his expression full of polite concern. "Is something amiss?"

Yorke thought quickly. "Yes, sir, I believe there is." Without speaking, he looked in the direction where he could hear the rest of the party moving ahead. Hartendy followed his gaze, brow lowering quizzically.

"Well, what is it?"

Yorke hesitated, feigning second thoughts, then spoke. "I'm not quite sure how to put this. I feel that my employer would want to

know, but I don't want to pry in family business..." He trailed off meaningfully.

Hartendy's frown deepened. "Family business? What the devil are you talking about? Out with it, man."

"Ah, well, sir, it's about Lowell Adams. And Mrs. Cabot."

"Lowell Adams and Lillian?" The frown cleared from the older man's face, and he chuckled. "I think I see what you're getting at. I'll admit he's a little rough around the edges, but Lowell Adams comes from a good family. Daresay Worthington wouldn't mind having him for a son-in-law, so long as he makes Lillian happy."

"That's just it, sir," Yorke said. He kept his face solemn despite the disgust he felt even mentioning Lillian Cabot and Lowell Adams in the same breath. Hartendy would go apoplectic if knew the Irishman was involved in what the older man obviously saw as a fortuitous romance. Yorke considered tossing that little gem out there, but decided against it. He had a feeling Hartendy wouldn't believe another word he said if he so much as intimated at such a licentious dalliance. "I've heard he was something of a cad back in Boston. Frankly, I've seen nothing since our arrival to change my impression of him. I fear he may be simply dallying with Mrs. Cabot."

The frown came back to Hartendy's face. "Is that so? Perhaps I should have a chat with the man, then, on Worthington's behalf."

"Would you, sir?"

"Of course." As he spoke, Hartendy gestured for Yorke to join him as he started after the rest of the party. "No trouble at all."

"If I might suggest—"

"Yes?"

"It might be best to talk to Lowell Adams in a less formal setting. I know he enjoys a good game of cards."

"Capital idea. I'll put it to him as soon as I see him."

"And his friend." Yorke controlled the automatic sneer with difficulty. "Maguire. I've found it's sometimes useful to get the measure of a man by seeing the company he keeps."

“Too right. I’ve found the same to be true myself. I’ll suggest to Lowell Adams that we pass a few hands tonight after dinner, and I’ll make sure this Maguire fellow joins in, too.” Hartendy raised a hand in silent greeting as they neared the others. In a low voice, he said to Yorke, “Thank you for letting me know, Yorke. Good man. I am very fond of Lillian, and Worthington would want me to look out for her while I’m here. Poor girl’s gone through enough since losing Cabot.”

Yorke contented himself with a nod. The older man was as fond of his cards as he was of hunting and riding. As Worthington’s secretary, it was the kind of thing he was expected to know about even his employer’s closest confidant. He had no doubt Hartendy would keep Lowell Adams and Maguire occupied well into the night.

And while they played cards, Lillian would be all alone in her private car.

But not for long.

Yorke stopped walking. He frowned as he tried to see beyond the thick foliage of a gently swaying tangle of bushes and vines, certain he’d seen something moving away from the trail. A cool gust of wind touched the back of his neck and set the leaves in motion again. Around them, the forest held the usual whistles, chatters and trills of birds, animals and insects. Nothing out of the ordinary.

“Eh, what is it, Yorke? Are you coming?”

Shaking off his unease, Yorke rejoined the waiting Hartendy. “I thought I saw something. Another deer perhaps.”

“Maybe, but I rather think they’ve flown the area after that gunshot.” Hartendy thumped Yorke good-naturedly on the shoulder. “No matter. Once we catch up with the others, I’m certain we’ll get another go at something else for the game bag.”

Yorke nodded, casting a final glance over his shoulder at the now-still clump of greenery. Nothing there.

He listened to Hartendy’s jocular retelling of a particularly thrilling hunt and thought about his plans for the luscious Lillian Cabot.

Chapter 21

“Poker is a game of both skill and chance, and you need both to win the hand. The wise gamesman also knows when it’s time to put down his cards, gather up his winnings, and leave the table.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

Lillian pulled the cover high on her shoulder and shifted to her side. As she did, the skirt of her gown twisted, the delicate fabric tangling uncomfortably around her legs. She thought to yank off the nightdress, then sighed. What was the point? Charles and Conn, roped into a card game by Uncle Wilbur, the old cardsharp, would likely be at the tables until dawn. While sleeping in the nude with her men felt perfectly natural, it was less so when she was alone. Besides, it was chilly in the car without their muscled bulks to keep her warm.

Rather than lay awake missing them, she forced her breaths to slow, reaching for the comfort of sleep. After the excitement of the last few weeks, she certainly needed it. Not that she regretted her sleepless nights on account of Charles and Conn. Or didn’t eagerly look forward to more of the same. She smiled, sure she must look like the cat that ate the cream. They were competitive men, and when they chose to compete in bed they were incomparable. She sighed. The arousing memories did nothing to help her relax.

Lillian rolled to her back and stared up at the skylight and the glittering stars beyond. Not a cloud veiled their brilliance. They winked and sparkled like white diamonds on a swath of indigo silk.

The soft click of a lock woke her. The familiar sound of a door closing down the corridor made her heart race. More awake with each breath, she pushed up on one elbow and looked expectantly toward the doorway. "Charles? Conn?"

As if summoned by her voice, a shadow appeared in the black hallway just outside her room. Lillian's heart leapt into her throat. She couldn't make out his features, or more than the rough outline of his body, but she knew it wasn't one of her men. Menace rolled off him like a wave of heat from a fire. She sucked in a harsh breath, more terrified than she'd ever been in her life. A stranger was here, in her car, in the middle of the night. And she was all alone.

With panic-driven speed, Lillian kicked the covers away and leapt out of the bed, hand reaching for the bedside lamp, a glass, anything to defend herself with. He was on her in an instant. He threw her back onto the bed. Lillian screamed. Fingers dug into her throat, changing her scream to a coughing gasp.

She heard fabric rip, felt the chill of the room touch the bare skin of her breasts where the man's body wasn't pressed against her.

"What's the matter, Mrs. Cabot? Getting choosy about your lovers all of a sudden?" At first, she didn't recognize the words or the voice. All she could take in was the moist heat of his breath against her ear, the fingers pinning her down by her neck, the other hand roughly exploring her breasts. Lillian gripped his wrist in both hands and fought to pull his hand from her throat. Her skirts worked against her, the tangled fabric limiting her struggles.

She felt the hard rod of his erection jab painfully into her belly. The evidence of his excitement made her shudder in revulsion.

With a burst of strength, she forced his hand a fraction of an inch from her neck and sucked in a desperate breath of air. He grunted and exerted more force. Before he could regain his stranglehold, she sank her nails into his wrist and forearm through his coatsleeve. He shouted a curse and reared up in pain. As he did, the dim glow of

starlight briefly illuminated his face, and she got her first good look at him.

“Yorke!”

Rage contorted his features. Teeth bared, eyes narrowed to slits, a vein pulsing visibly on his forehead, he didn’t even look sane. “Yes,” he growled. “I would have given you anything. Treated you like a queen. Instead, you’re a filthy whore. Well, now you can be my whore.”

Without warning, he backhanded her. Pain exploded from Lillian’s cheekbone, and she tasted blood. The room spun, and she closed her eyes. She heard more fabric tear, knew he was ripping the nightdress from her limp body. She wanted to fight him, but her arms and legs refused to move with any co-ordination.

He roughly shoved her thighs wide and settled himself between them. His hand reached between their bodies as he fumbled with the fastenings of his trousers.

Lillian knew she had to do something, but couldn’t think what. A grunt of satisfaction told her when he succeeded in freeing himself.

* * * *

Conn looked up from his cards and scanned the room. He stiffened.

Not bothering to be quiet, he said, “Oi. Where’s Yorke?”

The chips fell from Charlie’s hand as he, too, looked around the room. “Bastard’s gone,” he said.

Without a word, they tossed down their cards and shoved away from the table. Striding over to another group of players, Conn demanded, “Where’s Yorke?”

Startled by Conn’s dangerous tone, the men looked at one another. “Tossed in about twenty minutes ago,” one said.

“Shit.” Conn spun away to follow Charlie, who was already heading for the door.

“What’s going on?” Wilbur Hartendy called after them.

Conn heard Charlie begin to answer, then cut himself off with a clipped, “We’ll explain later.”

They burst through the door. Forgoing the steps, Conn leapt to the ground. As he did, one of Devereaux’s men approached. “Did you see Yorke leave the car?” Conn demanded.

“No,” the guard said. He held a long-gun like he knew how to use it. “But the man assigned to patrol this area missed his last check-in. I came to see if he was held up in the crew car for some reason, but another lad’s gone to alert Devereaux, just in case.”

“We don’t have time for this, Charlie,” Conn said impatiently. He started to run toward Delilah’s car, his friend fast on his heels, shouting at the guard that Yorke had slipped away and to round up Devereaux’s men.

Her car was silent, dark. Nothing looked out of place.

Then they heard the scream.

* * * *

Lillian tightened her grip on Yorke’s penis, twisting as hard as she could. Even groggy with pain, she had enough strength to make him howl. He lashed out at her, more from reflex than design. His fist connected with her chest hard enough to make her lose her breath. Lillian’s fingers reflexively loosened, and he tore himself away. She didn’t wait for him to regain his senses. She half-rolled, half-stumbled to stand on the other side of the bed.

When he looked at her, his eyes were incandescent with rage. “You *bitch!*”

Yelling in fury, he came at her over the bed. Lillian leapt back, hips crashing painfully into her dressing table. Glass bottles clanked together. Without looking, she grabbed a perfume bottle and hurled it at his head. She missed, grazing his shoulder. Her next missile clipped his ear. The delicate glass shattered. Her desperate fingers touched a

book. He was almost on her when she threw it. The sharp corner struck his cheek. His hands stretched out, fingers curled into claws.

Grimly, Lillian prepared to grapple with him.

Then Yorke was gone.

“You bloody bastard!” Conn’s voice, usually so quiet, filled the room. A thunderous crash shook the car. Then another.

She startled at the warm touch of someone’s hand on her bare arm. “Lilly?” Then his scent enveloped her with his embrace.

“Charles,” she said, clinging to him. Strong arms gathered her close.

She heard a meaty thunk and Yorke’s cry of pain. “Going to kill you, you filthy fucker,” Conn growled.

“Conn,” Charles said. When his friend didn’t answer, just, from the sounds of it, continued to beat on Yorke, Charles called his name more sharply. “Lilly needs you.”

That, at last, seemed to penetrate. The sound of fist pounding flesh paused. Lillian heard Conn’s ragged breathing and Yorke’s whimpering pleas.

“Toss him outside for Devereaux’s men to handle,” Charles said. “Then come back here. Lilly needs you,” he repeated, as if certain that was the only thing that would penetrate Conn’s fury.

Conn grunted his assent and dragged Yorke from the room. He was back in moments, easing Lillian from Charles’s arms and into his own with a gentleness that belied his violence of moments ago.

“Ah, my Delilah,” he crooned. “Tell me you’re all right.”

“Conn,” she said. She reached for Charles, and he took her hand. “Charles. I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t come.”

Charles kissed her knuckles. “We’re here now.” He let go of her hand. She heard him rummage around, then strike a match. Conn drew her to the bed, sat down and settled her in his lap as the soft glow of the wall lamps grew brighter.

When they saw the scraps of her nightgown, they exchanged murderous looks. Hands still gentle, Conn took a cover from the bed

and wrapped it around Lillian. Charles sat beside them. She clutched his hands and cuddled against Conn's chest.

"Did he hurt you, love?" Conn asked.

She shook her head. "Nothing that won't mend."

"Then he did hurt you," Charles said, violence coloring his voice.

She squeezed his hands and brought them to her face, rubbing his knuckles along her sore cheek. "Just bruises," she insisted. "I'll be fine."

"Do you want us to fetch the McCurdy lass? Bring another woman for you to talk to?"

She looked into Conn's eyes with a trembling smile. "No. Maybe later. Right now, I just want to sit here with you two. Is that all right?"

Conn's arms tightened around her. "More than all right. We'll sit here as long as you need us."

Charles kissed her fingers. "We're not going anywhere."

Chapter 22

“Despite the beauty of the mountains, it can be a cold, deadly glory. Far from the tame parks of the city, the beasts reign supreme. Treat them with respect, and they will respect you.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

Yorke didn't feel co-ordinated enough to get his feet under him, though Maguire didn't give him a chance to try. Clutching a fistful of coat and shirt, Maguire dragged him out of Lillian's room, down the corridor and through the darkened sitting room. Throwing open the outer door hard enough to slam against the side of the car, Maguire shoved him through and down the stairs. Instead of catching him, the group of men waiting there stepped back. Yorke cried out as he landed on his belly on the hard ground, pain jolting through his body. His face burned and throbbed where Maguire's fists had pounded it. The bloody nicks from shards of glass were barely noticeable in comparison to the overall general ache that covered him from head to toe from the beating and fall to the ground. It all paled to insignificance compared to the pulsing agony between his legs where Lillian had mangled his manhood.

“Watch him,” Maguire growled. Then he went back inside, likely to coddle the precious Mrs. Cabot.

Yorke gingerly began to roll to his side. Rough hands grabbed him, jerking him to his feet by his arms.

“You heard the man,” a harsh voice Yorke recognized as Devereaux’s said. “Find somewhere to stash him away from the guests until Mrs. Cabot decides what to do with him.”

Yorke tilted his chin to look up at the other man, squinting when he realized one of his eyes wouldn’t open fully.

“God, would you look at this mess.” The site boss scanned Yorke’s body, disgust plain on his face. “Fix yourself. The last thing we want to look at is your pasty dick.”

Yorke realized a single button preserved what was left of his dignity when the men holding his arms shoved him away. They watched with derision as he refastened his trousers with fingers that felt like sausages. Then they dragged him around the edges of camp to the storage area near the paddock and tossed him in a tent lit inside with a few lanterns.

With the sly cunning of a trapped animal, Yorke lay limp where they dropped him. Even when one man prodded him with the toe of a boot, setting off another lightning bolt of pain, he refused to move.

He heard a sigh. “Guess we’d better get the doctor. Pansy-ass fop can’t take a little smack.”

“Gotta admit, that Irishman’s got fists like boulders,” another man observed.

“Since this one’s got a head like one, probably cancel each other out.”

Laughing, they left the tent. Yorke cracked a lid to make sure he was alone. And saw a man tied to a cot. Murchison. A heavy chain hobbled his legs at the ankles. It was attached by another short length of chain to one of the thick poles supporting the roof of the tent.

It was just as obvious the chain was unnecessary. Murchison, his complexion deathly white under the stubble of his beard, didn’t seem at all the fearsome thug now. Greasy sweat shone on his face, and a bluish gray tinge circled his lips, which twitched slightly, as though the unconscious man spoke to ghosts. Bright blood speckled the white bandage wound around his torso.

Apparently Yorke needn't have worried that Murchison would talk.

Too late now. His best option was to steal a horse, supplies, and strike out on his own. He needed time to think. To plan. He was confident Lillian wouldn't lodge a complaint with the authorities or her father. Men were rarely, if ever, punished for their indiscretions, especially men of his social class.

Worthington might make things difficult for him in Boston, but Yorke had no intention of returning to that city. He may have failed in his ultimate task here, but he had managed to be a thorn in the side of the Great Western Rail Company for a while, at least. He was certain his other employer would be able to make use of his talents.

All he needed was to find a way to reach someone in authority.

Yorke began to lever himself up from the ground. His left arm crumpled. Pain exploded from his wrist, and he let out a short, sharp cry before he could stop himself. It must be sprained. Gritting his teeth, Yorke used his right arm to get himself up. He shuffled toward the door flap, careful to keep close to the canvas wall. Peering out, he spied a man standing guard just outside.

Smiling grimly, he edged along the wall until he reached the back of the tent. Crouching down, he grasped the bottom edge of the canvas. It took some effort, but he pried up a small section of the heavy material. With only a pause to ensure his suspicion was correct, that no guard patrolled the perimeter of the tent, he wriggled under the canvas. By the time he was through, his clothes clung to him, drenched in a wash of fresh sweat. His body was a solid scream of pain. Ignoring it, he consoled himself with thoughts of visiting Lillian someday, once he was settled in his new life. Thinking him long gone, she would never expect it. And then they could resume their acquaintance.

He scuttled away from the tent to crouch behind a convenient stack of crates. Using what cover he could, he made his way as swiftly and as quietly as he could toward the corral.

The sound of approaching voices stopped him.

“Maguire laid into him pretty good,” Devereaux said. “Don’t really blame him. Maguire and Lowell Adams caught him attacking Mrs. Cabot.”

“Maybe I should check on her first, then,” Ritchards said.

“Had one of the lads fetch her companion, Miss McCurdy. She said Mrs. Cabot is a bit bruised and upset, but nothing she can’t handle. Said she’d send for you if she needs you. Strong woman, that Mrs. Cabot.”

The men’s voices faded as they moved away from Yorke. Soon, they’d reach the supply tent, find Yorke gone, and sound the alarm.

Two more men stood guard at the paddock. After the stampede, Devereaux wasn’t taking any chances, it seemed.

Yorke considered the situation. Then, deciding speed and surprise were his best weapons, he shoved at a stack of crates beside him, anxiety giving him strength. The crates toppled, falling against the side of the tent and caving it in. Without waiting to see the results, Yorke sprinted away, only stopping when he came to another stack. He didn’t bother with silence. He wanted to attract attention. Yorke only wished he had a fast way to start a fire. Still, he wasn’t disappointed. The men guarding the paddock shouted as they noticed the tents around them swaying and bobbing, heard the crashes and thuds as crates tumbled against each other and to the ground.

Hefting their guns, they bolted in the direction of the last stack Yorke tumbled. While they inspected that, debating a hurried search of the area together or singly, as one man went for help, Yorke belly-crawled under the bottom slat of the fence into the corral. Selecting what he knew to be a docile mount, he led it to the rail, using its body to shield him from the guards until he was close enough to open the gate. Using a fistful of mane, he hauled himself to the animal’s back and kicked it into a startled run. The guards appeared too late to do more than yell as the horse thundered past.

Yorke hunched over the animal's neck, clinging tightly with his uninjured arm and both legs, struggling to guide it without reins and stirrups. An experienced rider, he maintained enough control to force it away from the camp and toward the tree line. If he could make it there, he could hide out for a few days and plan his next steps. Once the furor over his escape died down, he'd sneak back into camp and either reclaim his belongings or rifle the supplies for what he needed.

Moonlight shone cold and harsh through the canopy, emphasizing the contrast between dark and light. The shadows loomed blacker, the moon's glow silver bright. Instead of making it easier to navigate the woods, it was harder to discern the true path from illusion. A distant shout made him peer over his shoulder. Then another. It was easy to surmise a search party was in the making.

Yorke ducked to avoid a low-hanging branch and sneered, confident his intelligence would see him through. Relying on Murchison to implement the plan had been his mistake. He saw that now. If not for the other man, Lillian and her lovers would never have stopped him.

The adrenaline rush of his escape ebbing, the pain of Maguire's beating made itself felt in a myriad of aches and pains, some more insistent than others. He couldn't breathe through his nose, and his chest ached with every inhalation. Blood crusted in his moustache made it itch, but when he touched it, he accidentally brushed his nose. The resulting agony made him believe it might be broken.

With Devereaux's men likely to be in hot pursuit at any moment, shelter was his priority. He hadn't explored much, but thought there might be caves higher up the slope. As long as he kept the camp at his back, he'd be fine.

The horse abruptly sidled, surprising Yorke into clenching both fists in its mane. His injured wrist protested with a white-hot blast of pain. He attempted to tuck his arm close to his chest to shield his wrist from further jolts.

“Damn animal,” he bit out, mentally cursing the rush that didn’t give him time to saddle the animal.

Snorting and making abbreviated neighs of distress, the horse danced and jiggled in place. Impatiently, Yorke dug his knees and heels into its sides. It took a few mincing steps. Without warning, it reared back and away. Yorke, torn strands of mane stuck between his fingers, was tossed off like a sack of potatoes. He hit the ground, the impact knocking the air out of him. Winded and gasping, he stared as the squealing horse disappeared back the way they had come.

Once he realized it was really gone, that he was alone and on foot in the woods with a search party on his tail, pain quickly morphed into fury. Angrily, he swatted at the spiky shrubs hemming him in, ignoring the sting when the raspberry bush’s barbs scratched his hands and face as he got to his feet.

The sound of a coughing grunt made his blood run cold. Behind him, he heard the rustle of leaves and branches. Something made a snuffling sound, and another coughing grunt. It was coming closer. His neck prickled with dread as a primal certainty filled him. If he didn’t get away now, right now, he was dead.

Yorke took a single step. The animal growled.

A heavy weight hit the middle his back with the power of a mallet. Yorke landed on the ground, hard. Something sniffed his head, his neck. Hot, moist, foul-smelling puffs of air ruffled his hair. A deep, throbbing rumble almost too low to be called a growl seemed to vibrate his bones. Then he sensed the animal backing off. He listened, but couldn’t hear it breathing. Maybe it was gone, or had lost interest.

Yorke choked down a cry of helpless fear. Putting his hands under him, weakened wrist forgotten, he prepared to crawl away. Before he could move, claws dug into his side and flipped him to his back. Yorke screamed. A huge shape loomed over him. Reflexively, he tried to scrabble away. A paw the size of a dinner plate settled on his chest, cutting off Yorke’s panicked screams as he lost the ability to inhale. The weight on his chest grew heavier as the creature leaned

closer. At that moment, a beam of moonlight struck its head. Yorke saw sagging jowls dripping with saliva, glistening white fangs surrounded by black lips and small, glittering eyes.

Yorke quaked with terror, and his bowels let go. Almost without volition, his arms and legs flailed, and he began to slap and punch and kick at the animal, not knowing where he struck, if he struck. The grizzly took its paw off his chest, and Yorke sucked in a gasp of mountain air. Then, almost casually, it smacked Yorke's head, taking a good portion of the side of his face off with its claws.

Then, painfully, it began to feed.

* * * *

The search party's horses alerted them to the danger. When they tried to follow Yorke's trail, the animals refused. Then the stolen horse came tearing through the trees like all the hounds of hell were nipping at its heels. The search was called off until daylight. They didn't find Yorke, but the single bloody shoe—foot included—and bedraggled scraps of a once-fine suit coat convinced Devereaux he needn't waste the manpower on further investigation.

Chapter 23

“A railroad is a project the scope of which we won’t likely appreciate until years after it is complete, if then. It is comprised of hard work, determination, and vision every bit as much as it is wood and steel and stone. And a touch of the human soul.”

— Charles Lowell Adams, *Dispatches from The Iron Road*, Great Western Rail Company

Loaded down with equipment, Conn concentrated on walking softly. It was several hours before dawn, and the camp had finally settled in for what remained of the night. A faint whistle heralded the approach of one of the sentries, and he froze. With Yorke dead and Murchison incapacitated by fever, the danger had lessened. Even so, Devereaux intended to keep up the sentry details until the excursion guests departed for their return trip East in the morning.

The remaining days of the expedition had been a rousing success, and Delilah was pleased. Some of the potential investors were put off by Yorke’s defection and gruesome demise—it was impossible to keep that a secret from them, and Delilah hadn’t even tried—but most were impressed by the Great Western Rail Company’s operation and prospects. If anything, the intrigue added cachet to the investment opportunity, from a purely social standpoint. The true test would come when their guests returned to Boston and entered negotiations with Worthington, but Delilah was optimistic that would go well and Hartendy, her father’s friend, agreed.

True, Conn's current employment was dependant on the company's longevity. But that was never high on Conn's priority list. He only cared about the expedition's success because it was so important to Delilah.

Right now, he just wanted to reach her side without getting the squinty eye from the whistling guard.

While Conn appreciated Devereaux's thoroughness for Delilah's sake, it was a nuisance for a man intent on seduction.

Finally, the guard moved on. Conn hefted one of his smaller crates higher on his shoulder and resumed his cautious pace. When he reached Delilah's car, he went up the wooden steps, careful not to knock the equipment into anything. He secured the door as the sound of a low moan drifted from Delilah's room. His cock, randy beggar that it was, recognized the sound before his mind did. His woman was aroused.

Conn took only the time he needed to pry off his shoes before padding catfoot to her room. He stopped in the doorway, captivated.

Charles had lit the wall lamps, casting the scene in a warm glow. Delilah's pale flesh glistened like living gold in the lamplight. Since he'd left the bed, Delilah and Charles had shifted to a new position. Now, Delilah's head was to the foot of the bed. Her lush auburn curls dangled over the edge, almost brushing the carpet. She lay on her back, pretty breasts hard-tipped and pointing to the ceiling. Her hands, fingers curled into tiny fists, lay on either side of her head. Her beautiful face flushed with passion, she moaned in need, the sound bringing Conn's cock to ready attention.

Charles, hands bracing her upturned knees wide, lay between her thighs. Conn could only see the burnished golden brown of his friend's hair, but from the tortured pleasure evident on Delilah's face, he could imagine very well what Charles was doing. The remembered tang of her silky petals made him lick his lips.

They were sensuality incarnate.

Just as softly as he'd arrived, Conn eased away from the door. Fingers feverishly working the fastenings of his clothes, he stripped, uncaring of where the individual pieces fell. With the dexterity of long practice, he assembled his equipment and brought it to Delilah's room. The couple on the bed was too caught up in each other to notice as he erected the tripod and fastened the box camera in place. Putting the crate of dry plates within easy reach, Conn prepared the flashpan. He wished he could rely on the lamplight to capture the perfection of the scene, but didn't want to risk it.

Delilah tangled her fingers in Charles's pale brown curls. Her hips thrust toward his hidden face, breasts quivering with each shaky exhale of breath as she neared her release. Her sexy, broken cries filled the room, as rich and enticing as the sea-salt scent of sex. Conn gripped the base of his cock, forcing his own release back. As soon as he was certain of his control, he devoted his attention to taking the perfect photograph.

Delilah tossed her head back, mouth open on a throaty cry of satisfaction. Her face seemed to glow with the power of her release, lips lush and pouty, cheeks sweet as any rose, pale green eyes a sliver of color under the fan of her lashes. Contained lightning blazed from the flashpan as Conn took the shot, certain to his bones it was the most perfect photograph he would ever produce.

Delilah's eyes blinked open. She stared at Conn, her expression a complicated blend of rapture and confusion. Charles looked up briefly and grinned. "I'll take a print of that, friend." Then he tipped Delilah's hips toward his mouth and wrenched another passionate cry from her.

Limbs trembling with held desire, Conn set the equipment aside.

Delilah's cry had subsided into soft mewls of pleasure. A gloss of sweat glistened on her pretty breasts, and Conn longed to lick it from her skin.

Charles released her knees. They sagged wider, creating a welcoming cradle as he crawled up her body. Delilah languidly twined her arms around his neck, and he obligingly sank into her kiss.

Almost at once, they sighed in unison. Charles's hips rose and fell in an age-old rhythm, setting a hard and fast pace. Delilah twined her legs around his thighs. Watching them, Conn leaned against the doorjamb and fisted his cock. Now that he could pay attention to it, it was easier to keep the lusty beast in check. Liquid trickled from the tip, but other than that, it obeyed his unspoken command to wait. Wait.

He had always been a possessive man, be it of things or of women. While he and Charlie had shared women in the past, at first, he wasn't so certain he could share Delilah. But the sight of the beautiful red-haired temptress writhing in his friend's arms convinced him of the rightness of it. He loved the way she reveled in sex with either of them, both of them. She was uninhibited, glorious. Her body seemed tuned to theirs like no other's. Conn wasn't a man of fine words and poetry. That was Charlie's world. But he knew what they had found together was rare and priceless and worth the cost, whatever it might be. And he wouldn't let that go.

So maybe he was still possessive when it mattered most.

His friend's broad shoulders began to quake, and he lost his rhythm, pounding into Delilah's willing body in a frenzy. A guttural masculine cry twined with Delilah's feminine tones. Ruthlessly, Conn ringed his thumb and forefinger around the base of his cock and squeezed to stem his own release.

Charlie slumped against Delilah. She murmured wordlessly, languidly lifting a hand to pet his damp brown curls.

Conn released his cock. It throbbed with thwarted urgency, a ravenous beast only temporarily subdued. He pushed away from the doorway and walked to the bed. Stretching out beside the drowsing couple, he propped his head up on one hand. In slow deliberation, he glided his palm along Delilah's thigh where it still held Charles tight

against her and smiled as her lithe muscles flexed beneath his touch. As if sensing his presence, Charles rolled his head on Delilah's shoulder to meet Conn's gaze.

"We really should let the lady rest," he said, voice husky with repletion.

"I think it's you who needs the rest," Conn said. Noticing the green eyes watching their byplay from under lowered lids, he smiled. "You're not tired, are you, love? Promise I'll go gentle with you."

Charles chuckled softly and nuzzled her throat. "Ah, I felt that," he said, flexing his hips in a lazy thrust. "You like what he's saying, don't you? No, Maguire, Lilly's not too tired."

Delilah swatted Charles's bare ass. "You think you're just so clever."

Charles grinned and pushed up on his arms, exposing the pretty pink flush on her breasts. "Hey, don't blame me for what your body does when he talks to you like that." Still laughing, he rolled off her to settle on her other side.

Conn immediately took his place between her welcoming thighs. Her slit was slick and hot. His cock nestled against her unerringly. In one smooth motion, he slid all the way inside her, enjoying the way her eyes closed and she sucked in a breath. She felt swollen, and he knew she must be sensitized to an exquisite degree.

He took her mouth in a fierce kiss, wild at the thought of Charles watching them. Delilah submitted eagerly. He manacled her wrists with his fingers, his hold gentle but unbreakable. Her breath hitched, and he felt her pulse leap. He drew her hands up beside her head and held her there. Only then did he end the kiss. Keeping his hips tight against hers, he lifted enough to stare into her eyes. Sparks of excitement and renewed passion danced in their depths, making them sparkle in the lamplight.

He slanted a glance at Charles, who watched them avidly. "Well, Charlie. You brought our little temptress twice. I'm thinking she'll have her woman's pleasure from me three times before I'm done."

“You will, will you?”

“Count on it.” He pressed his lips to Delilah’s forehead. “Just lay back, love, and I’ll give you a proper fucking.” The deliberate vulgarity made her sheath spasm around him.

Conn shifted, spreading his knees until her thighs draped his. The motion pushed him a fraction of an inch deeper into her body, and they both sighed. Clamping down on his control, he lifted enough to put his mouth above one plump nipple. “What lovely tits you have, Delilah.” He caught her nipple between his lips and sucked, hard.

She bowed up on the bed, held down only by his hips and his grasp on her wrists. Conn laved his tongue over the creamy flesh of her tits, sucking and nipping her nipples until they were hard points. She squirmed on his cock, trying to entice him to fuck her. He thrust just once, enough to pin her to the mattress and still her rocking hips. She submitted immediately, pushing her breasts eagerly toward his mouth. As she did, her moans became cries, and she began to quiver. He only sucked harder. Her cunt clamped down on him, and he felt a wash of scalding wetness drench his cock. Taking deep breaths to calm himself, he watched her expression twist in pleasure as her hands curled into fists. Slowly, the tremors stopped, and she relaxed against the mattress.

Satisfied, he sat back on his heels, careful not to pull his cock from her. She was tight and giving at once, so sensitized even that small motion made her moan. Conn let go of her wrists. She opened her eyes, but didn’t move her hands.

Conn looked at Charles. Impressively, despite his friend’s unmistakably powerful release with Delilah just a short time ago, his cock showed signs of renewed interest. Conn waited until Charles met his gaze. Smiling smugly, he said, “That’s one.”

A breathless laugh broke their challenging stare. Delilah wiggled against Conn enticingly. “You said something about three?”

“My word on it,” Conn said. He clasped her hips, fingers digging into her lush bottom, and raised her up. Then, with just the power of

his arms, he guided her up and down his shaft in a slow fuck that made his balls tighten. She lay lax, letting him do what he would. Her breasts jiggled in a distracting rhythm. As enticing as they were, he preferred to watch her face. Tiny auburn curls framed it, sticking to her damp, rosy cheeks. Her lips parted. She touched the upper bow with the tip of her tongue and groaned.

“Oh, Conn,” she said. “Oh. Mmm.” He changed the angle of her hips, tilting her until the hard nub of her clitoris rubbed along his cock with each thrust. Delilah tossed her head, pale white throat curving in a vulnerable arch he longed to taste. Another time. Closing his eyes, Conn tucked his chin against his chest and jerked her over his cock, harder, faster.

“You are so fucking good, Delilah,” he crooned. “Your tits. Your ass. Your sweet little cunt.” Again, his crudity set her off. Tears of pleasure squeezing from the corners of her eyes, Delilah’s voice rose in a breathless scream as she reached her peak.

“Two,” Conn said through gritted teeth. Shivers wracked his body, made him palsy like an oldster in the cold. He couldn’t hold off much longer. He couldn’t hold off at all.

With a growl, he pulled free of Delilah’s body while she still pulsed around him. Flipping her to her belly, he pulled her to her hands and knees. She wobbled. His hands roved up her chest to cup her breasts in hard hands. He squeezed once, twice. That was all he could take. Gripping her hips, he guided his cock to her cunny and pushed inside. With the last bit of his sanity, he moved one hand to tease her clit with his fingers as he fucked her.

Delilah mewled and pushed back against him, eagerly cushioning his driving thrusts against the softness of her ass. When he opened his eyes, he saw that Charles had left the bed. Standing in front of Delilah’s face, he stroked her hair, nudged her lips with his cock.

“Sorry, Maguire,” he said, groaning as Delilah sucked him inside her mouth. “You win. I can’t wait.”

“Win, hell,” Conn said, the words choppy. “Who fucking cares?”

Delilah's cunt clamped down on him with brutal force, her cry of release muffled by Charlie's cock. "Three," Conn said.

With that, he hunched over, wrapped one muscled arm around Delilah's waist and let himself go with a harsh shout. Dimly, he heard Charlie's muttered curse and knew the three of them were irrevocably joined in that one moment.

* * * *

Charles blew out the lamps, plunging the room into darkness. Sinking back beneath the covers, he molded himself to Lilly's back, while she in turn cuddled into the curve of Conn's arm. Gradually, his eyes adjusted to the faint starlight that came through the windows above.

He was almost asleep when he heard her whisper, "I don't want this to end."

Conn stirred. "Then it won't," he said, voice gruff.

Charles smoothed his hand along Lilly's thigh. "It won't," he agreed. "Do you love us?"

"More than I ever dreamed possible," she said.

"Good," Conn said. "Love you, too, Delilah."

"And I love you, Lilly. I have some ideas on how we can make this work. If you don't like them, I'll think of something else until you do. Whatever it takes, this won't end. Trust us?"

Lilly shifted to her back so she could cup each man's jaw in her hands. Drawing Conn forward, she kissed him sweetly. Then, looking deep into Charles's eyes, she urged him to her and brushed her lips over his in a loving caress. "All right."

Epilogue

San Francisco, July 1873

“Will there be anything else, sir, madam?”

“That will be all for now, thank you,” Charles said. The waiter, attired in strictest black with a blindingly white waistcoat, nodded and moved away from the table.

The dining room was filled with people enjoying a late luncheon or treat of coffee and sweets from the well-stocked dessert cart. Sunlight shone through the large, multi-paned windows facing the bustling street. A steady throng of pedestrians strolled by, out for an afternoon’s shopping or errands or just to see and be seen.

“I must admit, I am very intrigued with those open-sided passenger cars of Mr. Hallidie’s,” Lillian said as she tipped the silver teapot over Charles’s cup. Curls of steam floated up from the fragrant stream of amber liquid. “Can you imagine being one of the first passengers? How exciting.”

Charles watched as she served and prepared her own tea. “It is intriguing, I’ll grant you, but I’d much rather observe their debut than be an active participant.”

“Charles, you surprise me. A bold man like you shying away from a little risk.”

“A little risk? Lillian, you’ve seen Clay Street, have you not? You wouldn’t catch me going up and down it in a horsed carriage, much less those cars pulled by metal cables. A horse at least has some self-interest in avoiding a crash.”

“Now you sound like one of those faint-hearted souls who refuses to ride the trains because they’re afraid of a crash or boiler explosion or whatever.”

Charles pulled a long-suffering face and let out a mock put-upon sigh that made her laugh. “If you really want to stay until Hallidie gets his Clay Street Hill Railway running, we can certainly delay our itinerary a few weeks. I’m sure Conn would love to document the debut.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, darling, but you’re sweet to offer up the sacrifice.” Under the concealing skirt of the tablecloth, she touched the tip of her shoe to his leg and teasingly caressed him out of sight of the rest of the diners. He grinned at her over a forkful of cake. Lillian folded her hands innocently on the table for the benefit of anyone watching. “Besides,” she continued. “We’ve much to do. My father is expecting to see Conn’s photographs of the proposed construction sites and surrounding areas. As soon as he returns with the last of them, I’ll prepare the reports and we can set things in motion to buy the land for the first of the hotels.”

“I’ve no doubt your father will be pleased with our selections.” Charles placed his hand on hers, stilling her fingers where they toyed with a silver spoon from the tea service. “Stop your fussing. Your plan to build a line of hotels linked with the rail company is a solid one. I have every confidence in you, as do Conn and your father.”

“They will be nothing on the scale of this Palace Hotel we’ve been hearing about, of course. Much smaller, more personal.”

“Just what the frugal, yet respectable, traveler needs,” he said. She was grateful he didn’t mention he’d heard it all before, as had Conn and her father and pretty much anyone else who got her going on the topic. She couldn’t help but be nervous, though. She didn’t want to let her father down. More important, the hotel line was the first project that truly belonged to Lillian and her men. The concept was theirs, worked and reworked until all three were satisfied. Each had their

roles in it, and it cemented the idea of the three of them as a team, through business and friendship, in the eyes of the world.

While completely unaware of the specifics of the relationship Lillian and her husband shared with Conn Maguire, Theodore Worthington, like everyone else of their acquaintance, had come to accept that whatever involved Charles also involved the Irishman. Conn was seen as a confirmed bachelor, so impervious to female wiles and matrimonial lures that he preferred to live and work out of a suite attached to the home of Charles and Lillian Lowell Adams. Eccentric, yes. Unusual, yes. But as his long-proven friendship with Charles was seen as a powerful bond, most accepted their arrangement without qualm. How a man chose to run his household was his business.

Lillian rarely thought of Edward Yorke, her father's onetime secretary who had lost his honor, his sanity and, ultimately, his life. But when she did, it was with the satisfaction of knowing he had failed to destroy her while she survived to be blessed by the love of two wonderful men. Perhaps it was petty of her, but there it was. She looked at Charles. He stared across the dining room, apparently interested in something beyond the dining room windows. He had grown a moustache, which she rather liked. A shade darker than his light-brown hair, it framed his lips in a very pleasing manner, she thought. His brown eyes caught hers.

"And what are you smiling at, Mrs. Lowell Adams?"

"You, of course," she said. "What else?"

"Well, naturally. A wife should stare adoringly at her husband. It's expected of the weaker sex."

"I should have said something else. I don't want you to get a swelled head."

He wagged his brows and said in a low voice just for her ears, "I thought you *liked* my swelled head."

"You are a very bad man."

"How fortunate, as you like that, too."

She laughed softly. He did have a point. “Oh,” she said, leaning toward him over the table in her excitement. “Aileen and her Mr. O’Brien are keen to manage one of the hotels.”

“The letter you received yesterday?” he asked.

“Yes. I can’t imagine what made it slip my mind.” She gave him a significant look.

Charles’s eyes heated at the reminder of how they’d spent the evening, but he only said mildly, “Excellent. Do they have a preference?”

“Not especially, although perhaps not too far down the line from Boston. Aileen would like to be able to bring the children to visit her mother without too much of a trip.”

“We’ll discuss it with the O’Briens when we return home, then. I’m certain we can come to an arrangement that suits us all.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out his timepiece, and consulted it. “My dear, forgive me, but I’ve completely forgotten about an appointment. We must hurry if we’re to make it.”

Lillian frowned. “What kind of appointment? You didn’t say anything about an appointment at breakfast this morning.”

“It was something that came up rather suddenly. I’ll explain it all to you in the carriage I’ve ordered.”

Mystified, but agreeable, Lillian allowed Charles to help her up and lead her out of the dining room into the sumptuous lobby of their hotel. Charles nodded in greeting to acquaintances, but didn’t stop to chat. The doorman held open a door and Charles whisked her through. Outside, he guided her to a rather large, old-fashioned covered carriage. The shades were drawn and it was impossible to see inside. Lillian was certain it could comfortably carry a good portion of the guests in the dining room. It looked entirely out of place in front of the upscale hotel.

Lillian glanced at Charles. “It’s too bad you weren’t able to get an open carriage. It’s a lovely day for a ride.”

"Perhaps that is something we can do later," he said. Waving off the driver, Charles opened the door and handed his wife into the carriage.

Lillian gasped as strong male fingers gripped her free hand and hauled her up the rest of the way. Startled eyes settled on the figure partially concealed by the gloom inside the ancient carriage.

"Conn!" Squealing, she launched herself at him, barely noticing as Charles climbed in and closed and locked the door. The carriage lurched into motion, sending her tumbling into the Irishman's arms. He caught her easily, immediately hauling her against his chest. His mouth came down on hers like a starving man feasting at a banquet. When he ended the kiss, they both gasped for breath.

"Conn," Lillian said. "You weren't supposed to arrive until tomorrow."

"Finished up early," he said. "Sent Charlie a telegram and he said he'd arrange to have me picked up." Grinning at his friend, he said, "To tell the truth, was going to thrash you for not bringing Delilah to the station to meet me, but this is nice, too." He shifted Lillian in his arms, settling her more firmly on his lap.

A thrill shot through her as she recognized the hard, very telltale length of his cock under her bottom. Nuzzling Conn's neck, she nipped his earlobe and saw Charles watching with a very pleased-with-himself expression. "You do know how I like surprises," she said to him.

Conn cupped the back of her neck and tipped her face up to his. Again, he kissed her, only slightly more controlled as his tongue stroked inside her mouth, tracing her lips, touching her teeth, grazing the roof of her mouth. "Ah, Delilah," Conn groaned. "I've missed you, love. Two weeks apart is two weeks too long. Charlie, next time you can take the away work."

With sure hands, he unpinned Lillian's hat and tossed it aside. Nimble, he began pulling the pins from her hair, freeing the long coils. Her hands roved over his chest, under his coat. His heart

thumped strongly against her palm. They exchanged deep, wet kisses that she felt all the way to her soul. Oh, how she'd missed him. She felt Conn's hands move over her bodice, easily freeing buttons and ties. Shoving it open, he began to unfasten her corset. Lillian wasn't slow, either, flipping his buttons free until the panels of his shirt hung open and she could run her fingers through the coarse hairs over his strong pectorals and flat belly.

Conn lifted his head. Lillian, not inclined to leave his taste for a moment, simply moved her lips over his jaw and down the cords of his neck. "How long do we have," she heard him ask.

"We've got as much time as you need," Charles said. Slitting her eyes as she licked Conn's throat, Lillian saw Charles on the seat opposite. The hands fisted on his thighs belied the relaxed sprawl, as did the deep-brown eyes that swam with barely controlled heat. "The driver will keep going around the city until I tell him to take us back to the hotel. I implied we had business to discuss, and didn't want to be disturbed."

"Good," Conn said, his voice vibrating with need. Urgently, he gripped Lillian's thighs and shifted her until she straddled his hips. Her skirts, he unceremoniously bundled up around her waist. They both groaned as their pelvises pressed together, her softness meeting his hardness.

With a few more quick adjustments, he was able to move her corset and shift out of the way, baring her breasts. The tight fit of the fabric framed them, forcing them together in twin pale mounds tipped by the hard, thrusting tips of her aroused nipples. His palms covered her. Lillian cried out, her hands going up to press his harder against her breasts. "Oh, Conn," she said. Without further urging, he shaped and molded her breasts, tugging and pinching her nipples. "Love, that feels so good."

"Tastes good, too," he said, hands catching under her arms until she rose up on her knees and he could take one thrusting nipple into his mouth. He growled as he suckled strongly at her breast, teasing

her nipple with flicks of his tongue. Lillian held his head to her, rubbing her thumbs along the planes of his cheeks as they hollowed with the force of his sucking. He released her and moved to her other breast. As he lave that peak, she saw the wet gleam on her flesh and realized Charles must have lit the carriage's interior lanterns.

Charles, relaxed pose gone, sat straight in the corner of his bench. One hand still fisted his thigh, but the other cupped the obvious erection behind the placket of his trousers. His expression stark, he watched Lillian and Conn as if he couldn't look away.

It was hard to focus with every suck of Conn's mouth on her breast sending shocks of pleasure to her core, but Lillian still asked, "Charles?"

He smiled tightly. "I'm all right, Lilly. I've had you to myself for two weeks. Let Conn greet you properly."

Just then, Conn's hand found the slit in her drawers and his fingers glided through the damp curls of her pussy to touch the tiny pearl of her clit. Lillian gasped, then bit her lip. Wickedly, he swirled his finger around and around the hard nugget of flesh. The combination of his taunting finger on her cunny and his devilishly talented mouth on her breast soon had her thrusting her hips against his, seeking relief for the passion that was taking over her senses.

Without thought, Lillian scrabbled at his waist until she found the fastenings for his clothes. Roughly she tugged them open, lifted up slightly to give him room, then sighed in satisfaction when the steely rod of his cock slid into her palm. She ran her fist over him, barely able to contain him in her grasp, giving the bulbous head at the tip an extra squeeze. This time, Conn was the one who gasped. His mouth went slack on her breast and his breath fanned over her damp skin in harsh exhalations.

Conn bore it for a few moments before cursing. "Christ, sweet Christ." Tearing his hand free of her drawers, he gripped her hips and pulled her up until the tip of his cock met the entrance of her dripping cunny. Eagerly, Lillian held his shoulders, sinking her fingers into the

fabric of his coat. "If it's a fucking you want, Delilah, I'm yer man," he said, accent so thick the words rolled together. With that, he simultaneously yanked her down and shoved his hips up, impaling her on his thick erection in one motion.

He swallowed her scream of pleasure in his mouth. Holding her tight against him, he waited, motionless. When she subsided to whimpers, he released her mouth. He bit down on her bottom lip, just shy of pain. In a voice that sounded like it rolled all the way up from his belly, he ordered, "Now ride me."

With his strong hands supporting her waist, Lillian rode him. Holding his shoulders, she ground down on his cock, twisting her hips and pumping, faster and faster. Their breathing grew harsh, ragged. Lillian couldn't stop the eager cries that escaped her throat. Conn tried to kiss her into silence, but it was apparent his mind wasn't on the task. Lillian began to quake, arms shaking, thighs shivering, as the coil in her belly wound tighter and tighter. She glided up and down his slick shaft, bumping her clit against the base of his cock with each downward thrust, her lust spurred on by the rasp of his trousers on her inner thighs.

"Conn, oh, Conn," she chanted. And then it was too much. Her lower body convulsed. Pressing her face into the sweat-dewed curve of his neck where the masculine musk that was all Conn was strongest, Lillian screamed. Lightning raced through her body, releasing bolts of ecstasy that came one after another.

The aftershocks seemed to go on forever. When the last one faded, she lay limp against his chest, arms loosely twined around his broad shoulders. Smiling, she rubbed her cheek along the column of his neck.

Conn shuddered. His hands flexed on her waist and his head drooped to her shoulder. Another tremor shook his body. Lillian felt it deep inside, where his cock throbbed, hard and hot. Without asking, she knew what he waited for. Pushing herself upright, she looked into

his dark, dark blue eyes. Kissing him softly, she whispered, "I love you."

Then, legs only a little unsteady, she rose from his lap. His cock slid from her body. It gleamed wet in the lamplight, a ruddy red pole. She trailed a finger down its length and he briefly closed his eyes. "Delilah," he growled, voice full of warning. "I'm going to paddle you."

"Later, love," she said. "It will be my pleasure."

Resting a hand on the wall of the still-moving carriage, she faced Charles. His features were tight with restrained passion. Sweat gleamed on his face and he breathed harshly through slightly parted lips. Lillian reached for him. He tensed as she unbuttoned his trousers. "But Conn," he said weakly.

"Is getting what he wants," she said, reaching inside his trousers to release his cock from his underclothes. "And so am I."

Charles didn't need any more urging. Pulling her down for a kiss, his hands went under her skirts to free her petticoats. She felt Conn assist him. The two of them made short work of her clothes, between them yanking off gown, bustle, corset, shoes, stockings and shift until she was naked for all but her embroidered drawers.

Feeling shaky again herself, Lillian said, "This will take a bit of logistical planning. How fortunate that you ordered such a big carriage."

Charles tried for a grin, sensual anticipation putting an edge on it. "Why do you think I did?"

"There is that." Lillian shoved him down until his back met the carriage seat. Then, still wearing her slitted drawers, she crawled atop him and mounted his upthrust cock. She felt Conn settle on the cushioned seat just behind her, between Charles's sprawled thighs. Unceremoniously, he ripped her drawers open, exposing her backside. Hand on her neck, he pushed her down until her breasts met Charles's chest.

Staring into her eyes, Charles cradled her face in his palms and kissed her. It was as soft and gentle as Conn's was hard and demanding. They each thrilled her in their own way, each met a need she never knew she had. Until them.

Conn's fingertip touched her bottom hole. Lillian gasped and wriggled on Charles's cock, and that made him gasp. Conn put a wide palm on the small of her back, holding her captive for his exploration. His finger met no resistance as he sank it into her anus past the second knuckle. He pumped it, twisted it. "My wicked, wicked Delilah. I'm going to sink balls deep into this sweet little hole. Just the way you love it. And you do love it, my little demoness, eh?"

Lillian panted with excitement. "Oh, God."

He chuckled and entered her with two fingers. Charles trailed kisses over her cheeks and throat. Lillian struggled under Conn's implacable hand to move, to pump, to ride Charles's cock and Conn's fingers.

Conn leaned over her. She felt him, hair-roughened thighs and chest hot against her flesh, and distantly wondered when he'd stripped off his clothes. "What do you want me to do?" he whispered. His fingers left her and his cock touched her softened back passage. "Tell me, Delilah. That's all you have to do."

"Conn ..."

"Tell me."

"I want you to take me. You and Charles. Take me. Have me. Love me."

"Oh, Lilly," Charles said. "Lilly, we love you so much."

"Yes," Conn agreed. "Love you, sweet lass."

Conn forged into her, thick head sliding past the slight resistance. His chest rubbed over her back as he thrust into her bottom, short, strong jabs that rocked her against Charles. Her hands held Charles's shoulders, bracing her against Conn's thrusts as he seated himself all the way inside. The sensation of fullness was satisfying in a way she could likely never explain. It was just right.

By unspoken signal, Conn and Charles began to move in unison. Charles thrust his hips up from the seat into her cunny. Conn, heat streaming from his bare skin, rocked into her ass. It was a struggle to hold still, when what she wanted to do was glide all over them like a cat rolling in catnip. Their moans and grunts as they labored under and over her fired her senses. As if conjured by magic, her pleasure returned tenfold. Lillian cried out as the erotic wave rolled through her and she felt Charles and Conn swept along in its path. Charles's hands clenched on her thighs, dragging her pelvis as tightly to him as he could. At the same moment, Conn pressed against her ass in one long push, a couple of uneven pumps, and a final shove. The dual sensation of their cocks jerking and trembling as they shot their seed deep inside her welcoming body dragged Lillian down with them into the deeps of desire.

Conn collapsed on Lillian's back. Charles huffed out a breath, but accepted the weight of both lovers without complaint. With Charles's heart drumming against her breast and Conn's thumping in time with it against her shoulder blade, Lillian could almost believe their three hearts were one.

As it should be.

Lazily, she stroked her hand along what she could reach of Conn's thigh. Charles's chin, she nibbled, then kissed.

"I love you," she said. And knew that whatever happened, whatever triumphs and challenges came along in their lives, the three of them would face it. Together.

THE END



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