## BRIDE in the BARGAIN

DEEANNE GIST



Seattle, Washington Territory April 1, 1865

> ATTENTION BACHELORS! Due to the efforts of Asa Mercer, you can now secure a bride of good moral character and reputation from the Atlantic States for the sum of \$300. All eligible and sincerely desirous bachelors assemble in Delim & Shorey's building on Wednesday evening.

Joe Denton scoffed at the ad and scanned the rest of the page. The lopsided ratio of men to women once again filled the columns of the *Seattle Intelligencer*.

Glancing at the mantel clock, he shifted on the maroon-andgold sofa, then read the next page. The troops at Hatchers Run now had a series of signal towers along their entire line and almost every movement of the rebels could be observed. If Lee were to fall back in an effort to overwhelm Sherman, he would find Grant thundering close upon his rear.

The door to the parlor opened and the head of a small,

brown-haired boy poked around its edge. "I thought that was you I saw coming up the walk. You here to see my pa?"

"I am."

Sprout Rountree stepped inside and hitched up his short pants, revealing scuffed knees. His stiff white shirt was untucked, grassstained, and torn at the elbow.

"Looks like you've had a hard morning," Joe said.

Sprout puffed out his chest. "I've been practicing to be a lumberjack, just like you."

"You have?"

A grin split his freckled face. "I have. I chopped down Mama's tree out back all by myself."

Joe hesitated. "That sapling, you mean? The Chinese pistachio your mother ordered from the Sandwich Islands?"

"I dunno. Just a minute and I'll show you."

He darted out of the room and returned in another minute holding what was left of his mother's pride and joy.

Joe swiped a hand across his mouth. "When did you do that, son?"

"This morning. I used my pa's ax. It sure is heavy. But I got big muscles for a boy my age. Ever'body says so."

"They do?"

"Yep. You wanna see 'em?"

Without waiting for an answer he strode right up between Joe's knees and flexed his little arm. It wasn't much thicker than the sapling he held, but Joe assumed a serious air and scrutinized the boy's arm, squeezed his muscle, then whistled. "Very impressive."

The boy beamed. "Lemme see yours."

"I can't roll up my sleeve right now. I'm waiting to see your pa."

His little shoulders wilted. "Aw, please?"

"Not today, Sprout."

"Could you let me squeeze it, then? You wouldn't have to roll up your sleeves for that." Joe glanced at the slightly cracked door, then flexed, making his arm bulge.

Sprout's hand couldn't begin to encompass the muscle, but he squeezed what he could, his eyes huge. "Mine are gonna be just like that someday."

Ruffling the boy's hair, Joe chuckled. "I imagine they will. Until then, though, you might not want to chop down any more of your mama's trees. They aren't ready for the lumberyard just yet, and I'm not sure how she'd feel about you handling an ax."

"Then how am I gonna learn lumberjacking?"

"Well, maybe your parents will let you come out to my place sometime and help me."

His face lit up. "Can I go home with you today?"

Joe chuckled again. "No, not today but—"

"Sprout Rountree! Come here this instant!"

Burdensome footsteps followed the strident voice until the door to the parlor swung open. A young woman large with child stood at its threshold, her face pinched with anger.

Sprout eased back into Joe. "What's the matter, Mama?"

"What happened to my . . ." Her eyes went from the boy to the sapling he held in his hand. "Oh, nooooo!"

Placing his hand on Sprout's shoulder, Joe stood. "Afternoon, Mrs. Rountree."

She glanced at him. "O.B.'s in his office, Mr. Denton. You can go on in." She turned her attention to Sprout. "What have you done to my pistachio tree?"

The boy shrunk at his mother's tone. "I har-visited it, but I'll put it back if you want."

Joe didn't wait for her response. Instead, he picked up his hat and slipped through a connecting door leading to the library and office of Judge Obadiah B. Rountree.

A cloud of tobacco mixed with traces of lemon oil filled the room. Hooking his hat on a hall tree, he clicked the door shut behind him, cutting off the drama unfolding in the parlor. The judge, with his back to Joe, scribbled on a piece of parchment while sitting at an ornate mahogany secretary that had come clear around the Horn. His white shirt, entirely too big for his small frame, bunched beneath dark suspenders crisscrossing his back. Short black hair surrounded a perfectly circular bald spot.

Joe ran a hand over his thick, wavy hair, letting out a silent sigh. Blond hair like his wasn't as apt to fall out, or so he'd heard. Perhaps he was safe.

A handsome tan volume of Shakespeare lying on the marbletop table caught his eye. Was it there for ornamentation, or did the judge actually read it? Joe shifted his weight to the other foot.

No more voices came from the parlor. He assumed the missus had taken Sprout to a private place for whatever she had in mind.

A robin with a brick-red breast and white throat landed on the windowsill, warbling a greeting. Joe caught a whiff of fresh air coming from the window. Spring had a distinctive smell and one he always welcomed. No other spot on God's green earth held such mild and equitable climate as did Seattle from April to November.

The bird darted off as quickly as he'd come, and the judge placed his pen in its holder, then blotted his writings.

"You in town to purchase a bride?" he asked, still sitting at his desk.

"I hardly think so," Joe said. "A man would have to be pretty desperate to let Asa Mercer choose his bride for him."

Standing, the judge turned and clasped Joe's hand. "I think it's a grand scheme. I hear he's collected money from almost three hundred men and is hoping to find two hundred more."

"Well, I won't be one of them."

"Have a seat, then, and tell me what I can do for you."

Joe eased his large frame into a dainty armchair. "I have news about my wife's death certificate."

Rountree brightened, settling into the chair facing him.

"Excellent. Let me have a look at it and we'll wrap up this whole mess."

"That's just the thing. I wrote to my brother back in Maine asking him to send me the certificate. I received his answer today." Joe removed the letter from his pocket and handed it to the judge. "He says the Kennebec County courthouse burned down and all the records with it."

"What about the doctor? Can the doctor issue another one?"

"Lorraine died ten years ago. Back then, the only doctors they had were itinerant. I'm not even sure they remember his name."

Rountree scanned the piece of parchment. "This complicates things, Joe. Tillney isn't going to settle for a letter from your brother."

Joe stiffened. "Are you questioning my brother's word?"

"Of course not. But those Land Donation Grants were very specific. In order to get the full six hundred forty acres, you had to have a wife."

"I did have a wife."

"You've no proof of that."

"I have a marriage certificate."

"That might have been enough to secure the land temporarily, but in order to keep it she needed to have made an appearance."

"She was going to. It's not my fault she died before she ever made it out here."

"No one's saying it's your fault. What we're saying is the intent of those donations was to encourage settlement. We can't settle unless we multiply. We can't multiply without wives."

"I was married when I signed up for the land. She would have come, Judge. I'd sent for her and everything."

Rountree blew out a huff of air. "There's no question in my mind your intentions were genuine. But the fact remains, it's been ten years and she's never shown up. In the eyes of the law, that makes you a single man, and single men only qualified for three hundred twenty acres, not six hundred forty." Tightening his hands on the arms of the chair, Joe reined in his exasperation. "She *died*. I can't do anything about that."

"And if you produce a death certificate, then I'm willing to rule in your favor. But even that is pushing things a bit. I certainly can't award you the land based on a letter written by your brother."

"What if someone from the courthouse writes it?"

"No, Joe. I'm sorry. The only thing the clerk would be able to attest to is that the courthouse burned down. That won't solve the problem of you needing a death certificate."

"The only reason I need one is because you say I need one. You can just as easily say my marriage license is enough."

Sighing, the judge removed the wire spectacles from his nose. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because so many men in the Territory—when their wives wouldn't come west—just divorced them. That constitutes a breach of contract."

"Well, I don't see any of *them* giving up their acreage."

"Maybe not around here, but rest assured, many a man has been required to produce a bride or risk losing his land. Still, I'm willing to let you keep the land if you present proof of your wife's death. But if you can't do that, then Tillney wins the suit and your three hundred twenty acres."

Joe jumped to his feet. "I've spent the last ten years developing that land. My entire lumber operation depends on it. I need it. Every acre of it."

"I can appreciate that."

"Tillney knows how valuable it is." Joe raked a hand through his curls. "He knows that if he can win it, he'll not only get three hundred twenty acres of land, but he'll get skid roads, log chutes, water access, and enough lumber to last him for years."

The judge made no response.

"Are you making this difficult because Tillney's your wife's cousin?"

Rountree narrowed his eyes. "I'm going to ignore that remark, but our meeting is over." He stood. "Either you produce a death certificate or a wife, or Tillney wins."

"There is no death certificate!"

"Then I suggest you find yourself a wife."

"And how am I supposed to do that?"

"Mercer's holding a meeting tonight. Buy one from him."

Taking a step back, Joe gaped at the judge. "You cannot be serious."

"I don't care what you do. All I care about is upholding the intent of the grant." He shrugged. "Death certificate or wife. Makes no difference to me."

"Well, it makes a difference to me. Besides, it'll take Mercer months to go back east, convince five hundred Civil War widows and orphans to be brides to a bunch of lumberjacks, and then bring them all the way back here."

Rounding the chair, the judge removed Joe's hat from the rack. "He said it'll take him six months, so that's what I'll allot you."

"Six months might be enough for an average fellow, but you know Mercer. It'll take him twice that amount of time. I'll need a year, at least. Probably more."

Rountree pursed his lips, then gave a nod. "One year from today, then. If you don't have a bride or a death certificate by April 1, 1866, then Tillney gets the land." He opened the door. "Good day, Denton."

A

It was standing room only at Delim & Shorey's new building, which was dried-in but not yet finished. Men of all shapes, sizes, and occupations crowded the half-finished wagon shop. Most were lumberjacks, but Joe recognized several prominent businessmen from as far away as Olympia.

And right in the center was Asa Mercer, the president of the town's esteemed university, balanced atop a soapbox, lantern light

bouncing off his red hair and pale skin. Raising his hands above his head, he shushed the crowd.

Joe leaned against the wall. Several of the men with their backs to him sported an *XXX Flour* legend on the seat of their pants, having used the empty sacks to repair their worn-out clothing. What were those eastern women going to think when they got a look at this bunch?

"Over three hundred sixty thousand men have lost their lives so far in the conflict between the North and South," Mercer boomed.

The room quieted.

"And though we mourn our lost brothers, the surplus of widows and orphans is becoming an economic problem for our eastern shores."

Joe shifted his position against the wall.

"Yet here in the West, we are lacking the very commodity that they have in overabundance. As a service to both shores, I am volunteering to go east, collect five hundred ladies, and bring them back to you, the fine, upstanding men of the Washington Territory."

A great cheer rose.

"As with any venture, however, there are costs involved. I intend to solicit most of this support from our government, which feels responsible toward these misplaced women. My plan is to appeal to President Lincoln himself, who bounced me on his knee when I was but a lad. There is no question in my mind he will supply us with a discarded warship to transport the brides."

The men murmured to one another.

"To ascertain which of you will have the privilege of receiving these women as their matrimonial prize, however, a deposit of three hundred dollars will be required to defray the cost of your bride's passage."

"Three hundred dollars is an awful lot of money," one of the men hollered.

"In exchange for your deposit, I will give you a signed contract which will clearly state that upon my return, you will receive one eastern bride."

"Who picks the bride? You or me?"

"I will," Mercer answered. "But your contract will include what particulars you are looking for, and I pledge to thoroughly interview each lady and choose only those of sterling character."

Pursing his lips, Joe considered what qualities he'd need in a wife.

Honesty. Practicality. Nothing flighty or fragile like Lorraine. And she'd need to be able to handle cooking for his lumber crew.

His men could put in a full day's work in the wet, cold, and mud so long as they ended at night with a lighted abode fragrant with food. And if that food was prepared by a woman, well, he'd have the happiest crew this side of the Cascade Mountains.

"That's good enough fer me," another shouted. "I got nothin' else to spend my chicken change on. Might as well be a missus. Sign me up!"

The men converged on Mercer, all speaking at once, all anxious to plunk down their money.

Joe slipped a hand in his pocket and clutched the heavy bag weighing down his jacket.

Three hundred dollars. It was a fraction of what his land was worth, but he still hated to part with the coin. If he had time, he'd go east himself. But he couldn't leave. Not now. The weather was warming and in another couple of weeks, he'd be driving logs down Skid Road as fast as his crew could cut them.

"Why, Joe. I thought you'd be staying away from here on principle." J.J. McGilvra, a pioneer lawyer, offered his hand. "Change your mind, or have you come to stare down your nose at the rest of us?"

With a sigh, he pushed himself off the wall and shook with

McGilvra. "To be honest with you, J.J., I don't know what I'm doing here."

The lawyer gave him a curious look; then the two of them took their places in the line that wrapped around the room three times.



## *Granby*, *Massachusetts December* 13, 1865

ATTENTION WIDOWS & ORPHANS! The S.S. *Continental* is nearly ready for sea and as my party is not yet entirely complete, I offer the following terms to those wishing to make the voyage through the Straits of Magellan to the Washington Territory. Passage at the very low rate of \$200; poor girls, \$50. Positions as domestics, teachers, or nannies guaranteed. Apply to A.S. Mercer, Emigrant Agent, W.T., No. 91 West Street, New York.

Fifty dollars. Anna Ivey had that exact amount sewn into the hem of her shift. But it wouldn't be enough. She would need to pay for travel to New York, plus a room while she waited to embark.

Escaping to the West sounded so appealing, though. The scars of the war would be here for many years—both in industry and the minds of the people. But on the Pacific, she felt sure the handclasp would be a little stronger. She reread the ad. She'd always assumed the Washington Territory was a land of wild beasts and gold hunters. At least until she'd read Mr. Mercer's pamphlet on the topic.

According to him, the Territory was a promised land where all of nature breathed purity and healthfulness. A land that possessed all the qualities and characteristics necessary to produce happy homes.

She hooked a tendril of hair behind her ear. She'd almost forgotten what a happy home was like. Almost.

She skimmed the *New York Tribune* article concerning Mr. Mercer's mass exodus of women.

This is the grandest female excursion ever inaugurated and will no doubt be very beneficial in its results. Mr. Mercer seems like a wholesouled, honest man, and has no object in view than the good of the community of which he is an honored member.

The gurgling of a pot trying to throw off its lid penetrated Anna's consciousness. Jumping from her stool, she gathered a corner of her apron and hurriedly lifted the lid off a batch of brilla soup.

The steam gave a great belch that smelled of turnips, thyme, and onion. Leaning back until the worst of it escaped, she stirred tonight's first course for the occupants of Pitchawam House.

"Looks to be a hungry crowd," Helen said, rushing through the door with a tray of empty mugs, her circular braids pinned against her round face and ears.

"Well, the brilla is ready," Anna said. "So you can serve it while I finish up the mutton and potatoes."

The girls worked in silence, the pings and clatters of their culinary operations a duet of soothing sounds. Finally, Helen lifted a tray of full soup bowls, then whisked back out the door. Bending over a clear fire, Anna turned the cutlets. The door opened behind her.

"That was fast," she said. "Is something wrong?"

When Helen didn't respond, Anna glanced over her shoulder, then quickly straightened.

"Mr. Dantzler. We didn't expect to see you until later this evening."

Tugging on his jacket with one hand and smoothing his glossy brown hair with the other, he gave her a lazy smile. There was no question he was handsome. There wasn't a prettier face or more striking physique in all of Granby. But he'd changed since returning home from the war. And Anna had no regard for the man he'd become.

"You can call me Hoke when we're alone, Anna."

She swallowed back her retort. It wouldn't do any good and she didn't want to burn the mutton. Still, she tried not to bend over quite so far when she returned her attention to the cutlets.

She finished flipping the meat, then hastened to a bowl of steaming potatoes and began to mash them.

"You're looking rather flushed, my dear." He strolled to her side and placed a heavy hand on her neck. "Perhaps you'd like to step out of this heat for a few minutes? Take in some fresh air?"

"I'm fine, thank you." She strained against his hand.

Tightening his hold, he leaned in. "Don't pull away from me when I touch you." The stench of ale laced his breath.

She forced herself to remain calm. "I can't mash the potatoes when you're so close. I need more room."

He pulled the bowl from her grasp and turned her toward him. "The potatoes can wait."

"Perhaps, but what about your guests?" She lifted her gaze. "Will they be able to wait?"

His aqua-violet eyes fell to half-mast. "Mrs. Hamm can handle them."

She banked the panic that began to crawl up her spine. Usually

all she had to do was mention his patrons and he'd leave her alone.

"Just the same," she said. "I'd best finish up."

"I believe I'll decide what is best. And I think that removing you from the heat of the kitchen would be best." His attention strayed from her face to the frayed neckline of her bodice.

She took a step back, but he encircled her waist with his arm.

"Stop it!" she hissed, squirming and pushing against him.

"Marry me, Anna." He buried his face in her neck, his hands groping.

"No!" Tucking her head, she dodged his lips but could not escape his foul breath or his hands. "I've told you. I've no intention of marrying you or anyone else. Not ever."

"Fine!" he exploded, shoving her back against the table only to pin her there with his arms. "In fact, that's even better. We'll dispense with the formalities altogether." He edged closer, sealing the distance between them. "Let's go upstairs."

"No!" She struggled and kicked but could not break his iron grip. "Move! Let me go!"

"I don't think so, my dear." Grabbing her waist, he pitched her over his shoulder, opened the door to the stairwell, and headed up the back stairs. The smell of burning meat was cut off at the slamming of the door behind them.

She pounded her fists against his back. "Put me down! I mean it, Hoke. Put me down this instant!"

He took the steps two at a time.

She screamed, but he threw her down on the halfway landing, cutting off her cry and knocking the breath from her.

"You want a fight, little girl, then that's what you'll get. You can scream all you want, but nobody can hear you while we're in this stairwell, and even if they could, they wouldn't do anything."

She sucked in a great gulp of air, but before she could release another scream, he slammed a hand against her mouth.

"I'm through with these cat-and-mouse games. You need a husband. You have no family, no home, and when I'm through with you, you'll have no options. You're going to be my wife, so you might as well stop struggling." He stretched out, pinning her beneath him. "You'll enjoy it, pet. I'll make sure of it."

His sweaty hand smothered her. She managed to pull in some air through her nose, but it smelled of his alcohol-riddled breath. In an effort to calm him, she stilled, her heart thundering in her breast.

"That's better. Now. I'm going to take my hand from your mouth. If you let out so much as a peep, I'll have to hit you."

Her eyes widened.

"Don't think I won't. You've lovely features and I'd hate to mar them, but I'll not tolerate any insubordination." He searched her face in the dim light. "Do you understand?"

She nodded.

He slowly peeled his hand away. "There. That's a good girl. Now, we're going to stand and walk up the rest of these stairs, then down the hall and to my chambers."

"Don't do this."

Brushing some loose hair from her face, he smiled with tenderness. "Don't worry, Anna. We'll marry. But first, we're going upstairs." He paused. "Are you ready?"

Gathering her wits, she prayed for courage. "There's something you should know before we proceed."

He cocked an eyebrow.

"There is no question that you can hit me and force me to your will. You are bigger and stronger. But if you do, then you'd better never go to sleep."

He frowned. "I beg your pardon?"

"I mean it, Hoke. If you do this, you'd better never, ever, not even once, close your eyes for a bit of rest. Because the moment you do, I'm going to slip down into the kitchen, get the meat hammer, come back to your chamber, and break your arm. Your right arm. The one you swing with."

He blinked.

The door at the bottom of the stairs opened. "Anna? Where the devil are you? It's time for the main course and the cutlets are burnt."

"Let me up," Anna whispered.

"Anna?" Helen placed a foot on the bottom step. "Are you up there?"

After a slight hesitation, Hoke rolled off her.

Scrambling to her feet, Anna rushed down the stairs, past Helen's astonished face and straight out into the alley. Ignoring the icy slap of winter, she continued to run until she reached the tiny attic room she let at the Hadley House.

AK.

Anna yanked her carpetbag from underneath her bed, unbuckled the latch, and widened its mouth. It wouldn't take long to pack. She'd sold everything of value she owned except her mother's watch pin. All she had left was a spare dress, a second set of underclothes, her seashell collection, and her father's letters.

She lifted the false bottom of the bag. The bound stack of correspondence she'd hidden was still in place. Slamming the divider down, she effectively shut the contents from her view, but not from her mind.

Every letter her father had sent was written on her heart. She laid her spare dress on the bed, placed several pouches of seashells in its center, then quickly rolled them up inside it. All the while, the closing line of her father's final letter repeated itself in her mind like a mantra.

"Don't you realize that when you and Leon argue and misbehave, the rebel bullets come closer to me? But if you and Leon are good, then God will take care of me and bring me home safely." Her behavior had been particularly reprehensible the day that letter had arrived. The horror she'd felt at its contents still ricocheted through her. She'd immediately promised God that she would change and had begged Him to bring Papa home.

He'd brought him home all right, in a big pine box. And no one but she and God knew her actions that day had killed him, just as surely as they had eventually killed her mother and little brother.

Cramming the dress into the bag, she gave no regard to its condition, then swiped up her underclothes. She may think Hoke despicable and without honor, but she didn't wish him dead. And that's exactly what would happen to him or anyone else if they got too close.

So she'd leave. She'd go to the Washington Territory and secure a position as a domestic, a schoolteacher, or a nanny. But she'd never marry and she'd never have children. The risk was simply too great.

Latching the bag, she touched her chest to be sure her watch pin was in place, then grabbed her cape. The stagecoach office was just up the road. She'd secure a ticket to Amherst. From there, she'd catch the Boston & Maine to New York City.

A.

A corner of Anna's cape whipped back, allowing the frigid New York wind to beat against her tattered woolen gown. Clenching the edges of her cape with one hand and her carpetbag with the other, she stopped in front of a modest brick building on West Street.

The markings on a square plaque next to the entrance were worn and difficult to read. The first numeral was either an eight or a nine. She squinted but couldn't make out the second.

A mule-drawn dump cart full of coal crunched past on the snow and ice, pulling Anna's attention to a sign across the street where the American Express Company's deliverymen came and went. When Ladies Or Children Are About To Cross The Street, As They Are Frequently Uncertain And Confused In Their Movements, TEAMS SHOULD BE BROUGHT TO A FULL STOP UNTIL ALL UNCERTAINTY IS REMOVED.

Anna looked up and down the walkway but saw no evidence of any women, and she certainly couldn't imagine children in this part of town. Gone were the street vendors along with the carriages and sulkies carrying gaily dressed patrons about town. Instead, commercial vehicles, dray carts, and delivery sleds populated the streets, their drivers yelling out curses to both their animals and each other.

She turned her attention to the plaque once again, but with no more luck deciphering it than before. Still, building number 93 was next door. So this should be it. Placing her hand on the oversized doorknob, she pushed.

A gust of wind jerked the door from her hand and crashed it against the inside wall. Hurrying across the threshold, she dropped her bag and used both hands to close the door. Leaning against it, she pressed a hand against her frozen nose and tried to wiggle her toes.

The dim entryway led to a series of doors and a narrow staircase. The building wasn't much warmer than the outdoors, but at least there was no wind. She blew onto her gloved hands, then rubbed them together.

"Hello?" Her breath produced a puff of condensation while her voice bounced off the silent walls. "Is anyone here?"

A muffled shuffling from down the hall was followed by the creaking of a poorly oiled door. A swath of light cut across the hall, illuminating the tall, thin man who stepped into it.

"May I help you?" he said.

She straightened, shaking the snow from her skirts and retrieving her bag. "Yes, please. I'm looking for Mr. A.S. Mercer."

"I'm Asa Mercer." He moved toward her.

She didn't know what she'd been expecting, but this lanky young man with a shock of red hair wasn't it.

"Good afternoon, sir. I'm Miss Anna Ivey. I saw your ad in the *Tribune* and am here to inquire about passage to the Northwest."

He quickly took in her shabby clothing but gave no visible reaction. "Excellent." He took her bag. "If you would join me in my office?"

His "office" was no larger than the cook's closet at Pitchawam House. After hooking her bag on a peg, he hurriedly gathered numerous papers from a stool.

He looked to the right and left, but there was no clear surface to set them on. His half desk was completely covered, and rolls of paper had been crammed into every pigeonhole above it. Even the floor was covered with his papers.

Giving her an apologetic grin, he set the stack on the floor next to the stool and held out a hand. Taking it, she picked her way across the room and settled on the stool.

"Now," he said. "Tell me where you are from."

"Granby, Massachusetts. I've only just arrived, so please forgive my appearance."

His long legs filled the space beneath his desk. "No need for apologies, Miss Ivey, is it?"

"Yes. Ivey with an *E*-Y."

Picking up a pen, he wrote her name in lovely script across the top of a fresh piece of parchment. "Tell me, Miss Ivey, why do you wish to emigrate to the Washington Territory?"

"I read your pamphlet, *The Great North-West*, and found myself caught up with the idea of going to this Eden you've described."

Pleasure touched his rust-colored eyes. "You read my booklet?"

"I did, sir. I have it with me now, though it is quite dog-eared, I'm afraid."

He smiled. "Can you write as well as read?"

"Proficiently."

He made a note on the paper, dipped his pen in an inkwell, then held it poised. "And your family?"

"My ancestors are Scots, though my parents grew up in England. They came to America in fifty-one. I was four at the time."

"Your father's occupation?"

"He stained and embossed wallpaper." She rubbed her arms beneath her cape. "Actually, he invented a machine that made his handiwork unnecessary. His employer claimed and utilized the invention. So the very thing my father placed all his dreams upon proved to be the rock which destroyed his livelihood."

"I see." Mr. Mercer shook his head in sympathy as he continued to write. "What did he do then?"

"He joined the war."

"Ah. He's home, then?"

"No, he was killed at Antietam."

Mercer continued to write. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you."

"How is your family faring without him?"

She lowered her gaze. "Shortly after he died, my brother joined up as a drummer. He didn't last even a year. But it was disease that killed him, not the rebels. My mother . . ." Anna swallowed. "She never recovered."

"You are orphaned, then?"

"Quite. And destitute as well, I'm afraid."

He paused in his scribblings. "You have money for the passage, though?"

She moistened her lips. "I do not." She had spent a fair portion of her funds for the train ticket and needed more still for lodging.

He laid down his pen.

"I could pay you once I arrived and secured employment, though."

Mercer began to shake his head, so she rushed on.

"I saw in your ad that work as a domestic, teacher, or nanny was guaranteed. I'm not a trained teacher, though I am very wellread and believe I could teach. But I'd be better suited as a domestic or nanny. You see, I took charge of our home almost from the moment my father enlisted. After he was gone, I held many jobs, the latest as a cook for a popular inn in Granby."

He'd placed his pen back in its holder and had moved his notes to the side, when her last comment stalled him. "A cook, you say?"

"Yes. I prepared the menu and all courses for the morning, noon, and evening meals, having only Sundays off."

"You can cook for large crowds?"

"I can. And I'm most accomplished at it."

Mercer leaned back in his chair. "Well. We aren't taking any passengers on credit, but there is one man who wanted a br—, a woman who could feed the men who work for him."

She straightened. "Well, I daresay he'd be very pleased with me."

Mercer gave her a quick appraisal. "I daresay he would."

"How many men does he employ?"

"He's a lumberjack. I'm not sure how many men are involved in his operation. No more than a dozen, I'd say, if that."

A lumberjack. The word conjured up visions of pine forests, fresh air, and wilderness—something far removed from the bustling city, the aftermath of the war, and Hoke Dantzler.

"Goodness," she said, a flicker of anticipation whisking through her. "I could feed a dozen men with one hand tied behind my back."

He rubbed his hands against his legs. "Well, he was very specific with his request. So, if I allowed you passage, it would be on the condition that he paid your fare upon arrival and you would then have to work off your debt for him."

"I'm agreeable to those terms, if he is."

Mercer said nothing. Just stared into space. She could see his

inner struggle. Was he worried she wouldn't measure up to her new employer?

Sitting a little straighter, she forced herself not to squirm.

Finally, he turned again to his desk and retrieved his pen. "Very well, Miss Ivey. I will draw up your papers and award you passage to the Washington Territory on the S.S. *Continental*."