

Love Inspired HISTORICAL

His Prairie Sweetheart



ERICA VETSCH

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A Home for Her Heart After being jilted at the altar, Southern belle Savannah Cox seeks a fresh start out West and accepts a teaching position in Minnesota. But between her students' lack of English, the rough surroundings, and Sheriff Elias Parker's doubts and distrust, Savannah's unprepared for both the job and the climate. However she's determined to prove she can handle anything her new town throws her way. Elias gives it a week—or less—before the pretty schoolteacher packs her dainty dresses and hightails it back home. But no matter how many mishaps he has to rescue her from, Savannah doesn't give up. Yet the real test is to come—a brutal blizzard that could finally drive her away, taking his heart with her...

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“Thank you for your help, Mr. Parker.”

Savannah's lips were stiff, and straight vinegar tasted better than this particular slice of humble pie, but she got the words out.

He shook his head. “The kids can help you inside. If you need anything—not that I'm assuming you will—” he held up his hands “—but if you do, holler.”

He strode across the grass, leaving Savannah staring after him. His walk was powerful, his upper body swaying slightly, his arms swinging. Everything about Elias Parker spoke of hard work and capability.

But he wasn't to be trusted. No man was. Elias offered help one moment, but in the next, let her know he was certain she would fail. Girard had asked her to marry him, but at the last moment, he'd fled rather than go through with the wedding.

Even her father wasn't reliable, never home for more than a week at a time, always traveling, always putting business first.

No, a woman shouldn't put her trust in a man. She was better off on her own.

It might be lonely, but it was better than a broken heart.

ERICA VETSCH is a transplanted Kansan now residing in Minnesota. She loves history and romance and is blessed to be able to combine the two by writing historical romances. Whenever she's not immersed in fictional worlds, she's the company bookkeeper for the family lumber business, mother of two, wife to a man who is her total opposite and soul mate, and an avid museum patron.

His Prairie Sweetheart

Erica Vetsch



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Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me,
for in You my soul takes refuge;
in the shadow of Your wings I will take refuge,
till the storms of destruction pass by.
—Psalms 57:1

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Chapter One

Raleigh, North Carolina

August 1887

The humiliation. That's what the gossips of Raleigh were calling it. Rehashing it with delighted horror in the tearooms and front parlors of the city.

Savannah Cox kept her chin level and marched down the church steps, careful to slant her parasol to keep the August sun off her face...and if she was honest, to block out the looks. She put on her most remote expression, a reflection of the cold numbness that surrounded her broken heart. Agony at the core, a shell of ice around the pain, and proper manners covering all.

After all, a lady's pain was like her petticoat; she must never let it show.

Three weeks ago she'd ascended these same steps arrayed in bridal white, eager and naive, surrounded by bridesmaids and anticipation. Shame squeezed tighter than her corset. Would it always hurt this much? Would she forever walk in the ignominy of being a jilted bride?

Perhaps, but she wouldn't do her walking here.

Savannah climbed into the family carriage, ignoring her younger sisters' chatter. Aunt Georgette patted her neck and temples with a lace hankie. "Poor Savannah. You're being so brave. I'm just glad your dear mother isn't here to see..." She tapered off with more fluttering and patting.

Next to Aunt Georgette her sister, Aunt Carolina—broad, mannish and practical to her marrow—crossed her arms. "Nonsense, Georgette. Think for one moment what you're saying. You're glad Bettina is dead? Savannah will survive this, and the sooner everyone stops feeling sorry for her, the sooner things can return to normal. I, for one, think she made an expedient escape. If Girard Brandeis was so callow as to bow out at the eleventh hour without so much as an explanation, then he doesn't deserve our Savannah. Now, let's talk about something else."

Savannah stiffened. This was her chance. She'd dreaded introducing the subject, but she was running out of time. Inhaling a breath for bravery, she blurted out, "I wanted you all to know I've accepted a teaching position in Minnesota, and I'm leaving Raleigh the day after tomorrow."

Her sisters stopped nattering, Aunt Georgette dropped her hankie and a spark of something—was it admiration?—lit Aunt Carolina's eyes.

The coach lurched as the driver slapped the lines and the horses took off, harness jingling, wheels whirring.

"You've what?" Aunt Georgette found her voice first.

Savannah spoke with more conviction than she felt. "I said I will be teaching school this fall. In Minnesota. I leave on Tuesday."

Aunt Georgette blinked, and her face crumpled. "This is tragic. Think of the scandal. Savannah Cox, of the Raleigh Coxes, running off into the night to nurse her broken heart. Whatever will I say at the garden club, or the Aid Society, or at Priscilla Guthrie's soiree next Friday?"

"I imagine," Aunt Carolina drawled, "you'll say whatever gains you the most attention, and that you'll say it dramatically and with great frequency. Now sit back and be quiet. I suggest we wait until we're at home before we get further explanations."

Savannah shot Aunt Carolina a grateful glance, but she knew a reckoning was in her future. Father might be the titular head of the family, but not much happened without his sister Carolina's blessing. What if she forbade Savannah to leave? Did Savannah have the courage to defy her? What if she encouraged her to go? Did she have the courage to follow through on her plans?

Houses flashed by, and the horses' hooves clopped on the cobblestones. Aunt Georgette dabbed herself, her brows beetling, her lips moving as if rehearsing what she wanted to say. Savannah's sisters, Charlotte and Virginia, whispered behind their fans.

Church had been a nightmare, the first service since...the humiliation. Savannah hadn't heard a word the preacher said, had only mouthed along to the hymns and stared straight ahead the entire time, feeling the eyes on her, the speculations swirling.

Oh, Girard. Why? What was wrong with me that you had to run rather than marry me? What did I lack? Did you ever really love me? How did this happen? All the same questions ran round and round in her head like a waterwheel, tumbling and splashing and getting nowhere.

When they arrived at the house, mounting the steps to the three-story Italianate mansion the Cox family called home, Savannah headed straight for the room they jokingly called “headquarters”—Aunt Carolina’s sitting room.

One of the servants had closed the tall shutters against the sun, and the tile floor and soft colors made the room the coolest in the house. August in Raleigh was brutal. Because of the wedding, they’d put off their annual trip to the coast, and Savannah missed the cooling sea breezes.

Right now she was supposed to be on her honeymoon, a month-long sailing trip up the coast to New York City. She shoved that thought from her mind.

Aunt Carolina glided into the room—she never walked anywhere—and rang the brass bell on the desk. The maid came in, followed by fluttering, scuttling Aunt Georgette.

“Clarice, bring some lemonade.” Aunt Carolina took the pins from her cartwheel hat and eased it from her piled iron-gray curls. “I’m perishing in this heat. And tell the cook luncheon will be late.” She eased her comfortable bulk onto the settee and tugged off her lace gloves. “Sit, child, and start at the beginning.”

Savannah removed her own hat. She’d known a confrontation would be coming, but now that the moment was here, she wondered if she should just take it all back, pretend she’d never said it, claim temporary weakness of the mind. Aunt Carolina skewered her with a “get on with it” stare. Savannah swallowed and wondered where to start.

“She’s distraught, that’s what.” Georgette fussed with her fan. “She can’t be held responsible for anything she says or does when she’s in such extremis. Poor thing. I mean, the humiliation.”

The mention of that word steeled Savannah’s resolve. This was why she had to leave. She was smothering under a blanket of pity. Words popped into her head...or maybe poured out of her heart.

“I am not distraught. Nor do I have a nervous condition, though I might develop one if people don’t leave me alone.” Savannah dropped into a chair. “Aunt Carolina, I answered an advertisement I saw in the newspaper. You remember that client of Daddy’s who came to dinner, the one from Saint Paul? He had a copy of the Pioneer Press with him, and the moment I saw that classified advertisement, I knew I should apply. I have to get out of Raleigh, at least for a little while. If I don’t, I’ll forever be known as the girl who got left at the altar.” She clenched her hands in her lap, pressing against her legs through all the layers of fabric and hoopskirts to still the trembling in her muscles.

Clarice entered with a tray of glasses. Ice tinkled in the pale yellow liquid as she poured. Savannah loosened her fingers to accept hers, careful to hold it securely given the condensation already forming on the outside of the glass. She sipped the tangy sweetness, letting the cool lemonade ease the tightness in her throat.

“You’ve never taught school a day in your life. What makes you think you can now?” Aunt Carolina asked over the rim of her own glass. “And why Minnesota? If you want to teach, why can’t you find a school in Atlanta or Richmond or Charlotte? We have family and friends in those cities with whom you could stay. You wouldn’t be so alone that way.”

“I graduated from normal school. I have a teaching certificate. I’m sure teaching a few children won’t be beyond my capabilities. And I chose Minnesota because I want to get away and start fresh. If I stay with friends or family, I’ll still have to endure their questions and pity. I want to go where nobody knows me, nobody knows what happened.”

“Have you discussed this with your father?”

“How can I? He left the day after the wedding on his business trip and hasn’t been back since. Anyway, he’d only tell you to handle it, the way he does everything that isn’t work related.” She tried to keep the bitterness from her voice, but at Aunt Carolina’s frown, Savannah knew she hadn’t succeeded.

“If you only want to get away for a while,” Aunt Georgette interjected, “why don’t you go up to New York City? Your father offered to pay for the trip... Anyway, I think you should stay here with your family, where we can support you and look after you. I’m sure the scandal will die down eventually.”

“I don’t want to go back to New York. I’m supposed to be there right now with—” Savannah broke off, not wanting to say his name aloud, her heart once more sinking under a wave of pain and disillusion.

Aunt Georgette subsided.

“I can understand that.” Aunt Carolina drained her glass and set it on the side table. “However, Minnesota seems extreme. Where in Minnesota is this school, anyway? In Saint Paul?”

Savannah shook her head. “It’s in the western part of the state. A small town called Snowflake. It’s a small school, too. Less than a dozen students.” At the moment, that sounded blissful.

Aunt Carolina stared at her hard. That was the trouble with Aunt Carolina. She could hear all the things you weren’t saying and detect all the things you were trying to hide.

Finally, when Savannah was sure she was going to veto the entire proceeding, her aunt’s lips relaxed, and she blinked slowly.

“All right. I give my blessing, but it comes with a warning, too.” Her eyes narrowed. “You are trying to outrun your embarrassment, and I can understand that, but you’re also trying to outrun your self-doubt and hurt. You need to learn that while you can remove yourself from the circumstances, the feelings are going to go with you. You can’t run from what’s inside yourself, and it’s foolish to try. Until you deal with your feelings, they’re going to own you, whether here in Raleigh, in New York City or in the wilds of western Minnesota.”

But the feelings were too painful to address. If Savannah opened the door to them, they would swarm out and engulf her. What Aunt Carolina said might well be true, but for now, Savannah’s only hope for recovery lay in keeping her feelings locked up tight and escaping to a place where she could start anew.

* * *

“Why do I have to be here? I didn’t hire her.” In fact, this was the last place he wanted to be. Elias Parker hitched his gun belt on his hip and tipped his chair back to rest against the front of the jail. He reached down and ruffled Captain’s fur. The collie rewarded him with a nudge from his wet nose and a swipe of his rough tongue.

“You’re here because I need your help. Because I have to go to Saint Paul to appear before the State Board of Education and don’t know how long I will be gone.” Elias’s brother, Tyler, straightened the lapels on his checked suit and adjusted the angle of his bowler hat.

Propping his boots on the hitching rail, Elias pushed his hat forward and crossed his arms. “Why are you dressed like a snake-oil salesman? You look like you just fell off a Baltimore bus.”

“And you look like you just fell off a wanted poster. I’m trying to make a good impression on the new teacher.” Tyler checked his watch. “The stage is late.”

“The stage is late eleven times out of ten.” Elias scanned the street from under his hat brim. As the town sheriff, it was his job to keep an eye on things and anticipate trouble—something not too difficult in a sleepy farm town like Snowflake. “Tell me her name again.”

“Miss Savannah Cox.” Tyler said it as if he was reading copperplate writing with lots of loops and whorls.

“And she’s from the Carolinas somewhere?” Elias grimaced. “Why’d you go and hire somebody from so far away?”

“Small matter of ‘nobody else applied.’ After the last two fiascos, I promised myself I’d find the perfect applicant, but Miss Cox was the only one who answered the advertisement.” Tyler fussed with his collar.

“Better to hire nobody at all than have another black mark on your record.” Or have a prissy girl arrive in town, flirting and leading you on one minute, and then decamping without a backward glance the next.

“The children can’t afford to lose another year of schooling while we wait for a better applicant. I’m counting on you to look after Miss Cox. I can’t be here often. I have an entire county to supervise. You’ll be right here all the time.”

“It’s not like I don’t have my own work to do, you know.” Which usually meant sweeping out the jail and making sure all the stores were locked up for the night. Snowflake was as quiet as a church on a Tuesday morning. Which wasn’t a bad thing because it gave Elias time to help his folks out on the farm. And evidently, time to babysit the schoolteacher. “How old is this woman, anyway?”

“I don’t know, but she had such a refined way of writing, and used such fine stationery, I assumed she was middle-aged or better. She sounded very mature in her application letter.”

Elias scratched his chin, feeling the rasp of whiskers he hadn’t bothered to shave that morning. A “mature” female teacher might set some of his anxiety to rest.

“Here comes the stage.” Tyler straightened and slipped his watch back into his vest pocket. He rubbed his hands together and scrubbed the toes of his shoes on the backs of his pant legs as if he were preparing to meet royalty.

The coach rocked into town and pulled to a stop across from the jail. Elias let his boots drop to the boardwalk and levered himself out of his chair, righting his hat and bracing himself to meet the new teacher. “Stay here, Cap.” He motioned to the dog, which subsided into a hairy heap beside the chair.

Elias formed a mental picture of the new teacher based on Tyler’s assessment. She’d probably be a dried-up old stick with a prunes-and-prisms mouth and no sense of humor. She could pose for the illustration in the dictionary beside the word spinster. She most likely carried a ruler and couldn’t wait to smack a kid’s hand for the slightest infraction. Elias foresaw a long winter ahead if Tyler made him look after her for the entire term. Then again, she’d probably take one glance at the living conditions and bare-bones schoolhouse and scamper back to where she came from.

He rounded the coach just as Tyler opened the stage door, and Elias braced himself to greet an old crone. Instead, a slender gloved hand appeared, and a dainty gray buttoned boot, followed by yards of light blue skirts. A decorative—if impractical—hat emerged, and then she stood on the dusty street.

Elias sucked in a breath and held it. Surely this wasn’t the teacher? He peered over her shoulder, expecting another woman to be perched on the seat, but no one else occupied the coach. He looked back at the young lady.

She was perfection.

Miss Savannah Cox.

In copperplate. With loops. And whorls.

His breath escaped slowly as every thought of crabby spinsters scattered like buckshot. If his teachers had looked anything like her, he might’ve enjoyed school a bit more. Come to think of it, he might be tempted to enroll again.

If she was a day over twenty, he’d eat his spurs. Fair skin that surely felt like rose petals, full pink lips, and those eyes...blue as Big Stone Lake, and about as deep.

But her crowning glory...that hair. Elias had seen some yellow hair before—this was the land of the Scandinavian immigrant, after all—but yellow didn’t seem the right word to describe hers. Gold? Wheaten? Honey? Flaxen? They all fell short.

“Are you Mr. Parker?” She said it “Pah-kah” in a Southern drawl as slow and sweet as dripping sorghum syrup. Elias stepped forward, but halted when he realized she was speaking to his brother.

“I’m Tyler Parker, the school superintendent. Welcome to Snowflake, Miss Cox.” He swept his bowler off his head and smoothed his hair like a boy in Sunday school. “We’re so pleased to have you here.”

Elias tucked his thumbs into his gun belt and leaned against a porch post, aiming to strike an I-am-not-bowled-over-by-a-pretty-face posture, even though she’d knocked him for six. As he strove for some aplomb, his mind raced. He’d never seen anyone less suited to teach the Snowflake school. If Tyler had any sense at all, he’d thank her kindly, buy her a return ticket and send her on her way. The poor girl would perish here before the first snowfall.

If she lasted that long. She might turn out to be just like Britta, who had stayed just long enough to break Elias’s heart.

Miss Cox squinted up at the bold sunshine and turned to retrieve her belongings from the stage. She withdrew a parasol and snapped it open. Elias blinked. The parasol exactly matched her dress, must’ve been created just for her outfit. He’d never seen the like. Where did she think she was, New York City?

Poor Tyler. He’d picked a winner this time. She was pretty to look at, but about as practical as a silver spoon when you needed a snow shovel.

She stared at the buildings lining Main Street, at Tyler who rocked on his toes and rubbed his hands together again, then finally at Elias, sizing him up from his boots to his hatband. His thoughts must’ve been evident on his face, because even though he touched his hat brim and gave a nod, her chin went up and she seemed to freeze. Lips tight, she looked around once more, as if hoping for city streets and fancy houses to appear. She didn’t glance his way again.

Elias shook his head. What was she expecting? A royal welcome? Brass bands and banners? What had his brother saddled him with for the next nine months? She looked tighter wound than a reel of barbed wire.

“Please—” Tyler took her elbow “—come up here out of the sun. You must be tired after your long journey. This is my brother, Elias. He’s the town sheriff, but for today, he’s tasked with seeing you safely ensconced in your new dwellings. He’ll take care of the baggage.” Tyler ushered her onto the boardwalk, making clearing motions ahead of them though there was nobody around besides the stage driver. Treating her as if she were a fragile pasque flower. That might be fine for Tyler, but she’d get no such coddling from Elias. She’d chosen to come to western Minnesota, and she’d have to learn to stand on her own two feet out here. Or go back where she came from. They needed a teacher, all right, but not one like this.

“Hey, Sheriff.” Keenan hopped down from the high stagecoach seat and coiled his whip, threading it up his arm and onto his shoulder. “Good traveling weather, but we could use some rain.” He spit into the street under the horses’ bellies. “That’s some looker I brung ya, huh?” His version of a whisper rattled the windows of the stage office, and Miss Cox’s already straight spine stiffened. If she put that nose any higher in the air, she’d drown in a rainstorm.

“Just get up there and throw down her bag.” Elias adjusted his hat. “I’m supposed to be the teamster today, getting her where she needs to go.”

“Her bag? You mean bags. They’re in the boot.” Keenan swaggered toward the canvas and strapping covering the rear compartment and began setting valises and trunks and bags on the porch.

Four, five, six, seven. “All of these?” She had more baggage than an empress.

“And one inside the coach, too.” Keenan shook his head. “She put up quite a fuss about being careful with that one. Must have all her china in it or something. She brought near everything else she must own. Maybe she’s planning on staying in the territory. It could be she hopes to snag her a husband while she’s here and set up housekeeping. Way she looks, I reckon they’ll be lining up. Won’t matter if she can’t cook a lick nor sew nor garden. A fellow might marry her just to have something that pretty to look at every day.”

Wonderful. This just kept getting better and better. Maybe she had come out here hoping for a husband. There were more men than women in western Minnesota, and a woman of marrying age got snapped up pretty quickly. Pity the poor sap who wound up with her, though. A man needed a helpmeet out here, a woman who could tend the house and garden and children, and help in the barn and fields if the need arose. Miss Cox hardly looked the type to pick up a pitchfork or hoe a row of potatoes. More likely to know how to pour tea and do needlepoint.

Elias gathered several of the bags and brought them to the steps. He staggered, just to get his point across to Tyler. Who needed all this stuff?

“Ah, good. You can load Miss Cox’s things in the buckboard.” Tyler slanted Elias a “behave yourself” older-brother glance, forbidding him any comment on the exotic import standing in the shade of the porch. “I will check in with you as often as I am able, Miss Cox, but Elias will make himself available to assist you in any way he can, should the need arise.”

“Sheriff Parker.” She held out her gloved hand, and Elias let her bags thump to the porch before taking her fingers for a brief clasp. “I’ll try not to be too much trouble, I’m sure.”

Ahm shu-wah.

Elias swallowed, steeling himself not to be swayed from his position by nice manners. He’d been down that road, much to his regret, and he had no desire to repeat his folly.

She turned to Tyler. “Mr. Parker, is this all there is of the town?” She looked both directions along Main Street. Actually, it was the only street. Twenty or so buildings, none of them grand, lined the thoroughfare.

Tyler cleared his throat. “Um, yes, for the time being. But we’re always growing. Snowflake is mostly a farming community, but we’re hoping to draw more commerce to town. Having a good quality school will go a long way in enticing family-owned businesses to our little settlement.”

“I see.” Her faintly bewildered tone said she didn’t see at all. She’d probably never lived anywhere with fewer than a thousand people within shouting distance.

“The buckboard’s over here.” Tyler ushered her up the street. “We’ll have you at your lodgings soon.”

Together, they walked toward the buckboard, and Elias, left with the baggage, forced himself not to stare at the graceful sway of her walk and the way her dress trailed and draped in layers and ruffles. He’d never seen a getup quite like that. She looked as if she should be at some garden club or tea party...not that he had any notion what women wore to tea parties, but her outfit had to be more suited to a social engagement than to traveling across the prairie.

“And which building is the school?” She had to look up at his brother, who wasn’t all that tall. Elias had a feeling he’d dwarf her, since he was half a head taller than Tyler.

“Oh, the school is north of town a ways. They built it there because that’s where the greatest concentration of children is. We’re almost up to a dozen students now.” Tyler smiled and held out his hand to help her into the buckboard. “I do apologize that I am unable to make the rest of the trip with you. I’m heading east on the stage for some meetings in the capitol. I’ll return as soon as I can, but you’ll be in good hands with my brother.”

Elias stowed bags and boxes on the backseat and floorboards. Miss Cox sat in the front seat like a little plaster statue, eyes forward, hands throttling her parasol handle, rigid as a new fence. He was just about to climb aboard when a shout shattered the sultry afternoon air.

“Sheriff, don’t forget this one.” Keenan stomped over, grappling with the odd-shaped box he’d removed from inside the stage.

“Oh, my.” Miss Cox fluttered like a bird. “I can’t believe I forgot. I must be more tired than I thought.”

Elias scratched his head. Where was he supposed to fit that monstrosity? If he’d have known she was bringing enough stuff to supply an army, he’d have brought his pa’s farm wagon.

“Please, be careful. That’s fragile.”

He sighed and wedged the bulky parcel in so it wouldn't jostle, then climbed aboard and gathered the reins. Looking over at the jailhouse porch, he whistled. Cap shot up and bounded across the street. Elias scooted over and patted the seat between himself and Miss Cox.

Captain needed no second command. He leaped aboard and planted his furry rump on the hard bench. His tongue lolled and dripped dog spit, and he gave Miss Cox a friendly sniff.

She recoiled, eyes wide. "Get back!" She shrank further, looking ready to bolt.

"Whoa, easy, ma'am. He won't hurt you." Elias cuffed Captain on the shoulder. "He's gentle. You act like you've never been around a dog before."

Swallowing, she righted her hat and sat more upright, pressing against the far armrest so hard he thought it might break. "I haven't, especially not one so...big."

Captain grinned, showing a lot of teeth, his heavy tail pounding Elias's leg.

"Are you sure he won't bite?" Her voice trembled, and a little arrow of guilt pierced Elias. Not enough to overcome his scorn at such irrational fear, of course.

"Unless you're a bank robber, or a horse thief, or a stubborn sheep, he'll keep his fangs to himself. Cap's a first-rate shepherd and police dog, aren't you, boy?" The big collie tried to lick Elias's face, and he laughed, shoving him back.

Tyler frowned, fussing with his tie as he stood by the buckboard. "Perhaps you should leave him here."

"Nope. I told Pa I'd drop him off at the farm after I ran your errand for you."

"But Miss Cox—"

"Miss Cox will be fine. She'll have to get used to a lot worse than sharing a seat with a friendly dog if she's going to survive out here."

He chirruped to the sorrel mare, and the buckboard lurched, leaving Tyler behind. They soon reached the outskirts of town and headed north.

Miss Cox leaned forward to talk around Captain, who had his snoot in the air, sucking in the breeze created by their forward motion. "Where are we going? I thought we were heading to my lodgings."

Elias frowned. Did she think he was taking her on a sightseeing tour of the county first? "This is the quickest way to the Halvorsons'."

"The Halvorsons'?" Her parasol caught the breeze and jerked upward. She fought it down. "Is it always so windy here?"

"This isn't windy." She thought this was windy? "The Halvorsons are the folks you're boarding with. Didn't Tyler tell you?"

The dog leaned against her, and she pushed him away. "Boarding with a family? No, he didn't mention that. I thought I'd have a room at a boardinghouse or hotel."

"Got no boardinghouse nor hotel. Is that gonna be a problem? The stage hasn't left yet if you want to go back." He tried not to sound too hopeful.

Miss Cox pressed her lips together and shook her head. Even under the shade of her umbrella, her hair glowed in swoops and curls, all pinned up under a hat that had nothing to do with deflecting the elements. What she needed was a decent sunbonnet or wide-brimmed straw.

"How much farther is it?" She sounded tired, and Elias's conscience bit him again. After all, she'd come a long way. It wasn't her fault that she was unsuitable.

Or that she stirred up memories of Britta.

"Schoolhouse is two miles out of town on the north road. The Halvorson place is the closest farm to the school."

"And how far apart are the house and the school?"

He shrugged. "If you take the road, it's about a mile and a quarter around, but if you cut across the fields, it's about half a mile, I guess."

"A mile and a quarter. I suppose by buggy that won't be too bad."

Elias laughed. “Doubt anybody will fetch you in a buggy. Or a wagon, either. You’ll walk, same as the Halvorson kids. The students who live farther than a couple of miles will ride ponies. There’s a livestock shed and corral at the school.” He slapped the lines again, urging the mare into a faster trot. “There’s the schoolhouse. School starts on Monday, but I guess you know that.”

The clapboard building shone white in the sunshine, sporting a fresh coat of paint. Elias had been part of the work crew that had seen to the new paint job early last spring before planting time. The money for the new school building—a vast improvement on the old sod-and-log structure they’d had before—had come from a bequest, and Tyler had hoped it would be an enticement in hiring. So far, it had sat empty far more than it had been in use.

Just short of the school, Elias turned at the crossroads to head west. “The Halvorson place is over there. We’ll be there soon.”

“Could we stop at the school first? I’d like to see inside.”

She didn’t look particularly eager, but maybe she was just forestalling having to meet more strangers.

“Sure, if you want. Tyler gave me the key to give to you.” He turned the mare and headed toward the schoolhouse, wishing it was Tyler showing her around. It was his brother’s job, after all.

From the corner of his eye, he studied her again, frilly dress, lacy gloves, fancy shoes, remote touch-me-not expression. He’d give this “ice princess” a week before she hightailed it back to where she came from.

Chapter Two

The beastly dog leaned on Savannah again, and she gently elbowed him upright. Her dress would be covered in dog hair soon. His hot, moist breath puffed against her cheek, and his tongue lolled, dripping saliva.

But his brown eyes were friendly. Friendlier than his master’s. From the moment she’d stepped off the stage, she could feel the sheriff’s disapproval—which puzzled her. He didn’t even know her. Why should he take such an instant dislike?

The buckboard jerked to a halt in front of the tiny white building, and the sheriff jumped down, rocking the conveyance, forcing her to clutch the seat.

Thankfully, the dog followed him instead of breathing his doggy breath in her face anymore. “Thank you for stopping, Mr. Parker.”

“Call me Elias.”

Mr. Parker—Elias—sauntered around the horse to help her down. Savannah could feel him sizing her up...and to judge by the skeptical tilt to his brows, finding her wanting. She knew she wasn’t at her sparkling best, travel-worn and tossed into what felt like a foreign land. Her self-confidence had sunk to an all-time low ebb with Girard’s defection, and the sheriff was doing nothing to bolster it. She felt strange and a bit weepy, which wasn’t like her at all before her broken engagement, but now seemed to be her constant state.

Elias, on the other hand, exuded confidence. Tall, muscular and in familiar surroundings. Dark hair, gray eyes and, when he bothered to smile, deep creases in his cheeks. He’d probably never suffered a setback in his entire life.

“The school’s been closed up since last Christmas, when the teacher left town.” Elias tromped up the steps and opened the door. The hinges let out a terrific squeal. “It’s going to need a good cleaning before Monday.”

Savannah furled her parasol and stepped past him into the building’s foyer. A beadboard wall greeted her, with doorways on either side that led into the classroom. A crock stood in the corner, and several shelves with hooks ran along the walls. To the right of the entry door hung a rope, held to the wall by large metal loops. It ran up through a hole in the ceiling.

“School bell. Don’t ring it now, or folks will come running, thinking there’s an emergency.” Elias tipped his hat back on his head and tucked his hands into his pockets. “Schoolroom’s through there.” He indicated the doorway with his chin.

Great blocks of light fell through the western windows onto the hardwood floor. Three rows of desks took up most of the space. Not patent metal and wood desks but rough-hewn benches and long, slant-top desks with a single shelf beneath, clearly locally made.

On a slight platform sat a teacher’s desk and chalkboard, and behind the last row of desks, a small iron stove. Portraits of Presidents Washington and Lincoln graced the spaces between the windows, and an American flag hung proudly in the corner.

The air smelled stale, and dust covered everything and danced in the air. Savannah’s trailing skirt left a track as she made her way to the front of the room. Aware of Elias watching her, she sought for something intelligent to say. Nothing came to mind. She was too fuzzy-headed with fatigue.

The dog trotted up the aisle as if he owned the place, his nails clicking on the floor. He sniffed around the desks and sneezed. Savannah didn’t know much about dogs, but she did know they should stay outside. She kept a wary eye on him as she placed her hand on the back of the teacher’s chair. From here she was supposed to rule this little kingdom.

The crisis of confidence that she’d carried around since Girard had jilted her welled up and threatened to paralyze her. What had she been thinking to come so far from home?

“You might want to check out the list of rules for teachers. They’re posted by the blackboard.” Elias said it casually, but she sensed a challenge in his tone. Was she imagining things, or was she overlaying her insecurities onto him?

Scanning the paper tacked to the wall, she wilted inside. Clean the lamps, haul water, haul coal, scrub the floors and windows once a week, check the privies, clean the livestock shed, be circumspect in her behavior, attend church regularly, start the fire by seven each morning in cold weather so the room will be warm by eight. Savannah blinked. She’d never scrubbed a floor in her life, much less mucked out a stable or hauled coal.

This whole thing was a mistake. What had she been thinking? She wasn’t suited for any of this. The sinking feeling she’d been fighting for days grew in her middle. Fiercely, she battled it down. Somehow, some way she needed to regain her belief in herself. If she couldn’t do that, what future did she have anywhere?

“Tyler wanted me to give you this.” Elias spoke from just behind her, startling her. She whirled as he pulled a paper out of his back pocket. He walked to the desk, leaned over and blew, sending dust puffing into the air, then spread the sheet on the blotter. She followed him, trying to still her beating heart.

Her contract.

“You can fill it out now if you want.” He slid an inkwell and pen toward her. “Or you can read it over, think about it and weigh up if you really want to sign it. The stage will be back on Tuesday if you decide to leave.”

She frowned. “Why do you seem so eager for me to run away?” The man didn’t even know her. She might be a bit daunted, but he didn’t have to assume she was a failure before she even got started.

He parked his hip on the corner of the desk. “Maybe because I’ve been down this road before. The two teachers before you skedaddled the minute things got tough. The first one was a man—a city boy, I’ll grant you, but even he wasn’t tough enough to stick it out through one of our winters. The other was a girl.” Elias paused and rubbed the back of his neck. “She only stayed for a couple of months, and when she left, she didn’t even resign or say goodbye. Just hopped on the stage one morning and took off.” With a shrug, he paced a few steps down the aisle and then turned to look at Savannah once more. “She caused a lot of hurt...among the students and their families, I mean.

“And here you come, fresh from the South, a slip of a girl with a fancy paper that says she’s a teacher, but precious little else to recommend her for this job.” He took off his hat and swept his

fingers through his hair. “I hate to see the parents and kids get all excited, only to have you walk away in a week or a month because life out here is harsher than you thought. Not to mention that my brother has a lot riding on you. Better you call it quits now than disappoint everyone.”

“What makes you think I will disappoint everyone?” She spoke through her tiredness and the tightness in her throat. “I graduated first in my class from normal school, and though I’ve never lived in Minnesota, I assume other women do? If they can, so can I.”

He threw his head back and laughed, the strong column of his throat rising from his open-necked shirt. “Miss Cox, I doubt you share anything other than gender with the women around here. They’re hardy Norwegian stock, hard workers, practical and used to getting by without much luxury. From the way you dress and the amount of baggage you brought, I surmise you’ve never been within a stone’s throw of milking a cow or plucking a chicken or hoeing a garden.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m not being hired to do any of those things.” She snatched the pen, dipped it in the inkwell and signed her name before her courage could wilt entirely under his criticism. “I will teach school and follow the rules, and if I need help, I’m sure I can find someone who won’t be as grudging and skeptical as you are.” She snapped the pen down on the desk, snatched up her parasol and marched toward the door.

She’d show him.

Savannah wanted to slam the schoolhouse door, but her aunt’s training in the fine art of being a lady came to her rescue in time. She climbed aboard the buckboard, snapped open her parasol against the ruthless sun and searched her reticule for her fan. Flicking it open, she cooled her hot cheeks.

He strolled down the steps, his shaggy canine on his heels, and took his seat with a long-suffering sigh, as if humoring a toddler in a tantrum.

Which made Savannah want to bite a nail in half. Sheriff Elias Parker would know the meaning of the word determination before this school year ended.

“Do all your fans and parasols match your dresses? Is that what’s in all these bags and boxes?”

That’s what he wanted to talk about? “Some of them match. I can’t see why it’s a concern of yours.” She regretted her sharp tone at once, but then again, he’d made no bones about how he felt about her qualifications. He seemed to think he could sum her up just by looking at her, so why couldn’t she do the same?

He fell silent.

When they finally approached a cluster of small buildings, Savannah found herself praying Elias would drive right by. A tiny abode, the size of the summer kitchen of Savannah’s house in Raleigh, sat in a dusty yard, and though it had a peaked, wooden roof and log walls, part of it appeared to be built right into a small hillside. Surely this wasn’t one of those horrid sod houses or dugouts of which she’d heard? Chickens pecked along a fence, and a row of laundry hung out on a line for all the world to see.

The sun bounced off the whitewashed cabin, nearly blinding her. At least the paint made it look clean and tidy. But it was so small. How many people lived here?

Too close for Savannah’s comfort, a pair of pigs rooted in a sty next to a sturdy-looking barn. The barnyard smells rising up in the summer sunshine had her flapping her fan. How did anyone stand it, especially in this heat? Not a tree broke the horizon for as far as she could see, though fields of corn and wheat rustled in the breeze. What she wouldn’t give for some decent shade and a glass of iced lemonade.

A woman emerged from the house, wiping her hands on her apron. She had her blond braids wrapped around her head like a halo, and her smile was sweet.

But her calico dress was faded and drooping, and she wore...wooden clogs on her feet. Savannah glanced at her traveling costume, the fine sateen cloth, the ivory lace and her kid gloves. She’d thought it serviceable enough when she donned it at the hotel that morning, but now she understood what Elias had meant about her parasol and fan matching her dress.

“God kveld, Elias. Er at den nye læreren?” The woman greeted Elias and bobbed her head, smiling at Savannah.

“Ja, dette er hun.” Elias hefted a couple of her bags from the back. “Hennes navn er Miss Cox.”

Two children, both fair and sun-browned, tumbled out of the house. They skidded to a stop when they spied Savannah. Surely they would be her students, as they were both school-aged. Perhaps ten and twelve? The girl found her voice first, firing a rapid question at Elias. He replied, and Savannah understood not a single word.

“Pardon me.”

Elias turned, and she motioned him over. Setting her bags in the dirt, he went to her side. “What?”

Lowering her head and her voice, she whispered, “It’s rude to speak in another language and leave someone out of the conversation. Why aren’t you using English?”

From this close, she could see the blue flecks in his gray eyes and the beginnings of a beard shadowing his slim cheeks. When he leaned in, she smelled sunshine and cotton. “We’re speaking Norwegian because the Halvorsons don’t speak English.”

A strange trickling feeling started in her chest—probably what was left of her courage draining out. “Are you jesting?”

“Nope.”

“I’m to board with a family that speaks no English.”

“They’re the closest family to the schoolhouse.” His shrug made her want to scream. She’d traveled across the country, leaving everything she knew, and he was going to dump her with a family that didn’t even speak English?

Then the little girl edged over, eyes sparkling, freckles spattering her nose. She reached up gently, as if sensing Savannah’s fear, and took her hand. “Du er pen. Mitt navn er Rut. Du vil dele rommet mitt.”

Savannah looked to Elias.

“She says she thinks you’re pretty, that her name is Rut, and that you will be sharing her room.” He continued to unload the bags. “This fellow is Lars, Rut’s brother, and this is their mother, Agneta Halvorson.”

Savannah remembered her manners, slipped from the buckboard and went to Mrs. Halvorson. “I’m pleased to meet you. Thank you for welcoming me into your home.” She took the older woman’s work-worn hand in hers.

Elias translated for her, and Agneta beamed, motioning for them to come inside. As Savannah entered the small house, the smell of something rich and meaty greeted her. Her stomach gurgled, and she put her palm to her middle, her cheeks heating. But Agneta just laughed, a delightful sound like bells. She spoke to Elias, pointing to a steep stair in the corner. Lars and Elias staggered up with Savannah’s baggage, and Rut’s eyes widened as they went out for another trip.

Agneta put her hand on Savannah’s shoulder and directed her to sit at the table. She did as she was bidden, surveying the room. The walls had been painted pale blue on the upper half and a rusty red-brown on the lower. Small-paned windows let in a little light, but the room was dim. A large fireplace and hearth of a construction she’d never seen before took up one corner, and a long table with benches sat before it. Two small cabinets hung from the walls, painted with flowers and scrolls, and a large sideboard with fine carvings took up one wall. In the corner, with a sheet curtain hanging around it to separate it from the rest of the room, sat a bed covered in a pretty quilt.

Rut sat across from Savannah and propped her chin on her palm, staring.

Through it all, Agneta chattered away as if Savannah could understand every word. Savannah tugged off her fingerless lace gloves, folded them with her fan and tucked them into her handbag. Her parasol leaned against her leg, and she caught Rut eyeing it. Mother and daughter exchanged a few

words and Rut nodded. She popped up and went to Savannah, holding out her hand, then pointing to Savannah's hat, bag and parasol.

"Oh, you want to take them?" Relieved at understanding at least one thing, Savannah reached up and removed her hatpin, easing her fascinator-style hat from her hair. "I must look a mess, what with traveling and the ride from town." She smoothed her hair up from the base of her neck, wishing she was at home so she could sink into the claw-footed tub and wash away the dirt and tiredness.

Elias and Lars clattered down the steps, and Lars went outside right away, leaving the door open. He dropped to his knees and Captain bounded up, licking his face and tumbling him backward into the dirt. From the sound of his laughter, the boy didn't mind.

"There's just the one case left. But there's no more room upstairs." Elias put his hands on his hips. "What's in that thing, anyway? Oh, wait, I forgot. It's none of my business." He shrugged. "I'll bring it in, but it will have to stay down here."

When he'd brought the case in, he set it near the bottom of the stairs. "I have to be going. I promised my pa I'd stop by his place. He owns the next farm to the north of here, about a mile or so."

Strange that she had to force herself not to grab hold of his arm and beg him not to leave her. Savannah barely knew him, and they hadn't exactly been cordial to one another. And yet she wanted him to stay.

Perhaps she was seeing things that weren't there, perhaps it was her tiredness putting thoughts into her head, but she thought she glimpsed a triumphant, challenging gleam in his eyes, as if he was daring her to beg him to take her back to town.

She gathered the last bits of her dignity, put on her remotest expression—the one that her sister Charlotte called her "queen look"—and said, "Goodbye, Mr. Parker."

* * *

"I'm telling you, Pa, you never saw such a proud bit of goods as that new teacher. Tyler must be out of his mind. And he's laid it on me to look after her while he's courting the bigwigs in Saint Paul." Elias unbuckled harness straps as he talked.

Pa leaned on his pitchfork. "She can't be that bad. She has the qualifications to be a teacher, doesn't she?"

"Oh, she's probably got some paper that says she passed her classes." Elias led the mare to the watering trough. "But that doesn't mean she's ready to take on the Snowflake School. She's too young, too Southern and too pretty."

Pa's eyebrows rose. "Since when did being pretty mean you couldn't teach school?"

"Since Miss Savannah Cox hit town. I'm telling you, Pa, she won't last a week. You should've seen her, nose in the air, frills and ruffles and a skirt that trailed the ground, parasol and fan and fancy hat. I'm sure she doesn't own a decent pair of boots or a coat. It probably never gets below freezing where she lives. She had enough baggage to stock a general store. And she's tiny, too. Just a little bit of a thing. How's she going to tote the coal and water and break a path through the snow across the fields come January?" He turned the mare into the corral and forked some hay over the fence before following his father to the house.

"Evening, Mor." Elias kissed his mother on the cheek. "That smells good."

"It's agurksalat and kjøttboller. Vash your hands." She dished up the cucumber salad and meatballs, setting the dishes on the table. "Tell me about da new teacher."

Over dinner, Elias did, repeating everything he'd told his father and nearly everything he'd thought about Savannah.

By the time he was finished, his mother was looking at him in that way she had that said she was disappointed in him, that he'd done something wrong.

"You say she vas cold and distant? You say she looked like da 'ice princess'?" Ma began clearing plates. "And how many times haff you left your home and family and traveled a long vay to a place vere you do not know da language or da customs or da climate? This new teacher must be frightened

and lonely, and you are telling me you did not make her feel velkommen?” His mother shook her head, her gray eyes sad.

A hot, shameful prickle touched Elias’s skin. His ma must’ve felt that way when she’d left her native Norway to come to America. Lonely and strange, not speaking the language, not knowing the customs. What a dunderhead he must’ve looked, enjoying Savannah’s discomfort, driving away from the Halvorsons’ so sure in his mind that he had been wasting his time. Well, he was sure that he’d been wasting his time, that she wouldn’t last long in the job, but he could’ve been nicer about it.

“I just don’t want a repeat of last year, that’s all.” He scrubbed his palms on his thighs under the table. “The kids deserve better than that.”

His parents shared a long look. Surely neither of them had known how he felt about Britta, about the plans he’d been making to court her? The plans that had been shattered when she’d left without saying goodbye.

Pa picked up his newspaper and dug his spectacles from his overalls pocket. “Your ma’s right. And anyway, who says the new teacher can’t adapt? Your ma didn’t know a lick of English when we met, but that didn’t stop us from communicating.” He winked over the top of his paper, and Ma blushed, as she always did. “Tyler must have faith in this Miss Cox to do the job. It’s up to us in the community to make sure she feels welcome and to help her in any way we can. Just because one or two teachers didn’t last doesn’t mean this one won’t.”

Ma looked Elias hard in the eyes. “Tomorrow you will be nice to da new teacher. You vill go to da school where she vill be cleaning it for Monday, and you vill invite her to our house for dinner after church on Sunday, ja?”

“Ja, Mor.”

Elias accepted the slice of apple pie she handed him. He would be nice, he would look after the new teacher until Tyler returned to take over the job and he would pass along his parents’ invitation, but he would also stay aloof. He couldn’t risk getting too close to an outsider who wouldn’t last past the first frost.

Chapter Three

The Halvorsons rose before the sun, and Savannah rose with them. Her muscles ached from the bouncy stage ride and the night spent tossing on a rope-strung, straw-tick bed for the first time in her life.

How she missed her feather and kapok mattress and her down pillows. She missed her sisters’ chatter as they dressed. And she missed the familiar house sounds of the servants carrying tea trays and tapping on doors. Most of all, she missed sleeping in on a Saturday morning.

Rubbing her neck, she strained to see in the dim light of the loft. A single, small-paned window at the end of the room showed the grayish-pink light of the coming dawn. Mrs. Halvorson called up the stairs again.

The loft was divided into two rooms, not by a wall, but by a curtain of pillow ticking material strung on a wire. On the far side lay Lars’s portion of the upstairs space, a fact Savannah had been conscious of as she tossed and turned last night.

Rut rolled out of her side of the bed and plucked her dress off a peg. She glanced over her shoulder with a quick smile, said something Savannah couldn’t understand and began dressing. Savannah slipped from beneath the quilt, ducking to avoid hitting her head on the steeply sloped roof. She wrapped herself in the shawl she’d laid close to hand the night before, and searched through her luggage until she found the valise she thought contained her most serviceable skirts and blouses.

Rut tapped Savannah’s shoulder, raised her eyebrows and pointed to the buttons up the back of her dress. “Vennligst?”

“Oh, of course.” Savannah began to do them up for the little girl. Through the curtain that divided the room came rustling and bumping, followed by clattering down the steep staircase.

Rut soon followed, leaving Savannah some privacy in which to dress and fix her hair. She found herself banging her elbows on the roof, barking her shins on the many boxes and bags, and struggling in the cramped space to find what she needed. She would have to bring some organization to her possessions if she was really going to spend the school year here.

She paused. Of course she was going to spend the school year here. She'd signed a contract, given her word. And besides, admitting defeat before she even started wasn't her way. Why, Aunt Carolina would never let her live it down if she quit this soon.

Shaking out a tan-and-blue-plaid blouse with a minimum of lace, she paired it with a businesslike brown skirt. The severe lines of the front fall and the spare draping and gathering to the bustle would surely be suitable for a schoolteacher. Digging farther, she found the box containing her new, high-topped black boots, the most serviceable footwear she'd ever purchased. Almost no heel, sturdy laces and dull black leather. Savannah wrinkled her nose as she stuck her boot-clad foot out and surveyed the results. Her sisters would laugh.

Fully dressed, she eased down the precipitous staircase into the kitchen. Mrs. Halvorson stood at the cupboard slicing bread, her back to Savannah. There was no sign of the children, and Savannah didn't know how to ask where they'd gone. How was she ever going to survive here when she couldn't talk to anyone?

Except Elias Parker, who thought she should be sent back where she came from before "big, bad Minnesota" did her in. Savannah grimaced and pushed Elias to the back of her mind.

"God morgen."

Mrs. Halvorson's greeting pulled Savannah out of her thoughts, and after a pause, she replied, "Good morning, Mrs. Halvorson."

The woman beamed and pointed to herself. "Agneta."

"Good morning, Agneta. Please, call me—" she put her hand on her chest "—Savannah."

"Sa-vah-nah."

"Yes."

Agneta reached into the sideboard and handed her some cutlery, then motioned to the table. Grateful for a job to do, Savannah set the table, taking the stoneware plates from the shelf where she'd seen Agneta put them after washing up last night. As she found tin cups, Agneta beamed and nodded. Again this morning she had her braids crisscrossed atop her head, giving her a girlish appearance. Her apron covered most of her dress and had been embroidered with cheerful yellow-and-red flowers along the hem.

Just as Savannah placed the last cup, Lars and Rut came in. Lars carried a small pail of milk, which he handed to his mother before washing up at the basin beside the door. Agneta took the milk, poured some through a piece of cheesecloth into a pitcher, then the rest into a pair of shallow pans on the sideboard. Per Halvorson came in and opened the door that went into the dugout portion of the dwelling. A dank, cool, earthy smell rolled out, and Agneta carried the pans inside.

The children tugged out the bench and sat at the table. Savannah took the place she'd occupied the night before, and when everyone was seated, Per bowed his head. Though she couldn't understand the words, Savannah was grateful. At least she had been placed with a family that prayed together.

A small wave of homesickness crept into her heart. This morning, Aunt Carolina, Aunt Georgette and Savannah's sisters would be sitting on the back veranda sharing breakfast. The girls would be home from the Minton Ladies' Academy for the weekend. The day would include shopping and tea downtown, perhaps a few calls upon friends. The evening would hold a symphony concert, or a stroll through the city gardens, or buggy rides with some of the young men in their set.

"Sa-vah-nah?"

She looked up. Agneta held a plate of thinly sliced meat for her.

"Oh, I beg your pardon." She took a piece of the meat and passed the plate to Rut. Bread followed.

Sandwiches for breakfast? She had to expect that, along with the language, the customs and food would be different. With a slight shrug and a mental note to do everything she could to blend in to her new surroundings, Savannah buttered her bread and slid the meat between the two slices.

Rut giggled and Lars stared.

Savannah stopped, her food inches from her lips. “What?”

Agneta scolded the children, who had the grace to look abashed. They fell to eating, and Savannah noticed that they placed their meat atop the bread and ate it with a fork. Open-faced sandwiches.

Heat prickled her skin, and she slid her top piece of bread aside and picked up her fork. Painfully aware that she’d made some social gaffe, she found her appetite had fled.

The Halvorsons spoke little during meals, and as soon as they’d finished eating, they sprang up. Agneta pointed to Rut and Lars, then a large basket beside the door. She showed Savannah the contents: a scrub brush, soap, rags...cleaning supplies. Agneta waved in the direction of the school, made a wiping motion with one of the rags and pointed to Savannah and the children.

“Oh, thank you.” Savannah had wondered about how to get the school clean and ready for Monday. Evidently, Agneta had thought ahead.

They went by road instead of cutting across the fields, which were high with corn and wheat. Lars brought along a small bucket of water, and Savannah couldn’t think why, since she had noticed a pump right by the school. Rut and Savannah carried the basket between them, and Rut chattered the entire time, as if Savannah could understand her perfectly. Evidently, she thought total immersion into the language was the best way to teach Savannah Norwegian.

The belfry appeared first over the waving corn, then the white school building. A horse and buckboard stood out front, and someone sat on the steps. A loud bark erupted and a furry streak shot toward them, bounding and wagging and wiggling.

The collie, Captain. Lars set his bucket down, dropped to his knees and embraced the dog.

Elias rose from the porch, long and lean, his hat pushed back, revealing his dark hair. “Morning.”

Savannah and Rut arrived together, and they set the basket on the ground. Rut clattered up the steps and took Elias’s hand, swinging on it as she gazed up with bright eyes. He winked at her.

“Thought I’d come and make sure there isn’t anything that needs fixing, broken boards or loose hinges.” He motioned to a small toolbox he’d brought. “With the place sitting empty for so many months, there’s bound to be some issues.”

Savannah nodded, unsure if she was glad or annoyed. With him here at least he could translate for the children, but it felt almost as if he didn’t think she was even up to the task of sweeping out the school without his supervision.

Entering the school, she was again hit with the smells of dust and stale air. She moved to the closest window and tugged on the sash. It didn’t budge. Glancing over her shoulder to make sure no one was watching, she looked for a lock, but there didn’t seem to be one. Savannah braced herself, pressing the heels of her hands against the frame, and pushed again. With a groan, the window came up an inch and stuck.

“Here, let me help you with that.” Before she could move out of his way, Elias stood behind her, his arms coming up on either side. He raised the window with ridiculous ease, but all Savannah could think was that he smelled like shaving soap.

She wanted to bolt. One of the things she had loved about Girard was the smell of his shaving soap. Her chest ached and her breath snagged as she closed her eyes against the now familiar pain of his desertion.

“Are you all right?” Elias asked.

Her eyes popped open and warmth flooded her cheeks. “Um...yes. Just...” She stopped, unwilling to reveal that much about herself. “I was debating where to start on the cleaning. I think

I'll work from the top down. Cobwebs first." She glanced at the dusty webs along the ceiling and in the corners, trying to gather her composure. When would she stop feeling so raw? When would the hurt ease?

Girard, you've left me in a shambles. Even though I wouldn't have you back if you came gift-wrapped with a guarantee, I can't help feeling the loss, the hole you created in my life, in my heart.

Elias said, "I'll open the rest of the windows, then you should come out with me to see how to work the pump. You're going to need plenty of water for scrubbing today."

"I know how to pump water." Indignation colored her tone. Her foundations were crumbling enough without him assuming she was an idiot.

"I imagine you do." He shoved up another window sash, letting in the morning breeze. "But this pump is a bit temperamental. Best you let me show you the right way."

As if there was a wrong way to draw water. "I know you think I'm a simpleton, but I assure you, I have reached the age of twenty-one without your help and oversight. I can operate a simple water pump."

He stopped pushing up the next window, his hands dropping to his sides. "All right. How about you show me then?"

"Fine." She stalked into the cloakroom, snatched the empty bucket from under the water crock and strode outside. Lars still tumbled with the dog in the long grass, but Rut was already busy with a broom, sweeping the steps.

Savannah kept her chin in the air as she rounded the building, aware of Elias behind her. The pump stood twenty yards to the west of the schoolhouse, surrounded by a wooden platform. Sunshine had warped the boards a bit and a few nails stuck up, pulled loose by the wood shrinking over time. She dropped the bucket beneath the spout with a clank and grabbed the iron handle.

Up, down, up, down. Though she pulled and pushed with all her might and the pump squealed and squeaked, no water came out. Elias stood to the side, arms crossed, face bland. Savannah blew a few wisps of hair off her forehead, regripped the cold iron and tugged with vigor.

Still nothing.

She let her hands drop. An uncomfortable prickling raced across her skin. She couldn't even pump water. What was wrong with the wretched thing? What was she doing here?

Slowly, she forced herself to look Elias in the eye, prepared for his gloating. He would have every right, since she'd shoved his offer of help back into his face.

"Are you done?" He had one eyebrow raised, the very picture of long-suffering patience.

Nodding, she stepped back. He turned and put his fingers to his lips, letting out a piercing whistle that brought both children and the dog at a run. A couple of quick words to Lars in Norwegian had the boy running back to the school and returning with the small pail he'd brought from home.

"This pump hasn't been used in a while, and like I said, it's temperamental. You have to prime it with a little water, even if it's only been a couple of days. Always remember to fill a bucket on Friday afternoon before you leave, so it will be ready for Monday morning." He took the pail of water from Lars and poured it carefully into the top of the pump, working the handle gently at first.

When the water from the pail had disappeared, he gave half a dozen strong pulls on the handle and was rewarded with a gush of water from the spout. He filled the larger bucket, but dumped it on the grass in a rusty, brown arc. After another bucketful, the water ran clear and clean.

Savannah forced herself to remember her manners. "Thank you for your help, Mr. Parker." Her lips were stiff, and straight vinegar tasted better than this particular slice of humble pie, but she got the words out.

He shook his head. "The kids can help you inside. I'll sluice down the privies and make sure the lean-to and corral are tight while you clean. If you need anything—not that I'm assuming you will." He held up his hands. "But if you do, holler."

He strode across the grass, leaving Savannah staring after him. His walk was powerful, his upper body swaying slightly, his arms swinging. Girard had been graceful, with a long, easy stride and loose limbs, but he lacked Elias's muscular shoulders and chest, tending more to the lean side in build. More intellectual than physical. Everything about Elias Parker spoke of hard work and capability.

But he wasn't to be trusted. No man was. Elias offered help one moment, but in the next, let her know he was certain she would fail. Girard had asked her to marry him, but at the last moment, he'd fled rather than go through with the wedding.

Even her father wasn't reliable, never home for more than a week at a time, always traveling, always putting business first.

No, a woman shouldn't put her trust in a man. She was better off on her own.

It might be lonely, but it was better than a broken heart.

* * *

Trust a woman to kill herself just to prove a man wrong. Elias hammered another nail into the corral fence, jerking the board to make sure it was tight. Savannah Cox had scrubbed and polished and sorted and cleaned all morning without a break and without a word.

She'd feel it tomorrow, he figured. No way was she used to hauling buckets of water or washing windows or scrubbing floors. Not with her manners and clothes and all.

Elias picked up his toolbox. His brother had better appreciate this.

Miss Cox headed back to the pump with another bucket. She'd shed her jacket and rolled up her sleeves, making her look a little more approachable. Water gushed from the pump and hit the bucket, tipping it over. Elias chuckled as she righted the pail and held it up with her foot. Why didn't she use the knob on top of the spout like a normal person?

Probably because she didn't know sic 'em from c'mere when it came to practical matters. She hadn't even known how to prime a pump in the first place. He'd had to force himself not to laugh out loud at her consternation. And her apology had nearly choked her.

Still, she had apologized, which was more than some folks would've done. He watched her tote the full water bucket, leaning away from the weight as she hefted it up the stairs and into the schoolhouse.

Captain lay in the shade beside the porch, but he sat up when Elias drew near. "Hey, Cap. You're sure working hard." The dog trotted over and put his nose under Elias's hand, inviting a pat. "Shall we go in and see the progress?"

Captain's nails clicked on the entryway floor, and the smells of vinegar and soap prickled Elias's nose.

"Don't bring him in here." Savannah knelt in one of the doorways into the schoolroom, a scrub brush in her hand and a pail of soapy water on one side, a bucket of clean water on the other. "Dogs don't belong inside, and if he marks up this floor, you're going to be the one scrubbing it next."

Still touchy.

Elias put his hand on Captain's ruff. "Sorry, boy, the boss has spoken. Outside." He pointed to the door and snapped his fingers. Captain gave him a sorrowful look but turned around, clicking his way out.

Elias went to the other doorway and surveyed her progress, inhaling the aromas of lemon polish and lye, vinegar and ammonia. Every surface gleamed. She'd accomplished more than he'd thought she would.

Stubborn or efficient? Maybe both?

Savannah dipped her scrub brush in the bucket again, scooting backward toward the door. The boar-bristle brush scraped against the floorboards in rhythmic circles. She rinsed with a cloth from the clean-water pail. The floor glistened damply, but when it dried, it would be dull until she waxed it properly.

The bow on her apron, so perky this morning, had gone limp. Her rolled up sleeves revealed pale, slender arms. The brush looked too big for her small hand, and her neat hairdo had become a bit bedraggled, with wisps escaping the braided knot at the back of her head.

“Where did the kids get off to?”

She wiped her forearm across her brow, sitting back on her heels. “I sent them on home. They worked hard all morning, and there wasn’t much left for them to do once I started on the floors.”

Flo-ahs. Why was it that every Southerner made one-syllable words into two? Still, it sounded kind of cute when she did it.

“I mended the corral fence and tightened a couple of loose boards on the privies. And I took a scythe to the grass. You won’t have to mow here. Tyler has a contract with Ole Oleson to cut it once school starts. There’s some hay in the shed, but a couple of the farmers will deliver more soon. And Tyler will see that coal’s delivered before it gets cold. The coal shed is a lean-to on the back of the schoolhouse, but you have to go outside to get to it.” He pointed to the coal hod by the stove. “Usually, one of the older boys is in charge of keeping the stove supplied, but you’ll have to light the fire in the mornings.”

“I saw that on the list of teachers’ duties.” She switched arms for scrubbing, her movements slower.

“Is there anything inside that needs fixing? Might as well tend to it while I’m here.” He held up his toolbox. “Any loose floorboards or wobbly desks?”

She scooted the buckets backward the last few feet, and he edged back through the doorway. With a couple swipes, she finished the floor. He reached for her elbow to help her up, an instinctive gesture. Her skin was soft and warm, and so smooth, as if it had never seen the sun, never been scoured by cold wind. As delicate as a flower petal.

When she was on her feet, she eased her arm from his grasp, rolling down her sleeves and buttoning the cuffs. “There is one thing that needs fixin’.”

“Oh?” He focused on her face again.

“One of the shelves here in the cloakroom. There’s a broken bracket and the shelf tips.” She reached out and rocked the empty shelf. “I would hate for anything to fall on one of the children.”

Elias bent to survey the damage. The bracket hung by one screw. “This will be a quick fix.” Digging through his toolbox, he found a screw that would work. “If you’ll hold the shelf steady, I’ll fasten it back together.”

Savannah took hold of the shelf, and he went to his knees to work on the underside. Soon the job was finished and he stood. “You’ve done a good job today. The place looks great.”

“You sound surprised.” Her chin went up a notch.

“Don’t get all defensive. I’ll admit I didn’t think you’d ever been on the business end of a scrub brush, but you proved me wrong.”

She rubbed her shoulder, blushing a bit. “Would you believe me if I said I had never washed windows before today? Rut had to show me how to use the vinegar and newspaper. I tried it first with soapy water and it looked terrible.”

“You got the hang of it. Everything’s bright as a new penny now.”

A smile touched her lips, but when she looked at her skirt, dirty and water-splotted, the smile faded. “If my aunt Georgette could see me now, she’d have a fit of the vapors.”

Vay-pahs.

“Everything will be shipshape as soon as you wax the floor.” He put his hands in his pockets and leaned against the now-sturdy shelf.

“Wax the floors?” Her eyes went wide.

“Sure. You scrubbed off the dirt and most of the old wax. Soon as everything dries, you have to put down a new coat of wax to protect the floors.” Elias pushed himself off the shelf with his shoulder and opened a cupboard in the corner. “Tins of wax are in here along with rags.”

“Does it have to be done today?” Savannah sounded forlorn and her shoulders drooped.

It really should be done before school started on Monday, but he didn’t have the heart to tell her. “How are you making out at the Halvorsons?”

She shrugged. “Fine. They’re all very nice. I just wish they spoke a little English or I spoke a little Norwegian.” She spread her damp hands, palms up, and something caught his eye. Every fingertip had a callus along the edge.

Now where had she gotten calluses, and in such odd places?

She gathered cleaning supplies, returning them to the basket she’d brought. He picked up the water buckets. “I’ll sluice these out for you.”

When he returned, she had the basket and his toolbox on the porch.

“I’ll give you a ride back to the Halvorsons’.” He put a full pail of water just inside the door to prime the pump on Monday.

Once they were headed down the road, he remembered what his mother had asked him to do. “Say, tomorrow, after church, my ma would like to have you over to dinner at our place. Well, my folks’ place, but I’ll be there for Sunday dinner.”

Savannah didn’t answer right away, and he began to be irked. Was she too good to have dinner at his parents’ home? His ire rose. If that’s how she was going to be, then fine—

“I’d like that. Tell her thank you for me.” Graciously said.

He calmed down.

She shielded her eyes from the sun and looked up at him. “Will your brother be there, as well?”

Elias frowned. “No, he’ll still be in the Cities. Why?”

“I looked through the desks and shelves, and there are hardly any school supplies. I couldn’t find chalk or ink or paper. There’s a ruler and a new attendance book in the teacher’s desk, but that’s about it. If I’m to have nearly a dozen pupils, I’ll need some slates and readers and tablets at the very least.”

He pulled the buckboard to a stop. “You do understand how things work out here, right? This is a poor school district. The kids bring the supplies they have at home, and if they don’t have any, you make do.”

Savannah’s eyebrows rose, and she looked at him as if he was a simpleton. “How can the children get a proper education if they don’t have the tools they need? There’s not even a dictionary or globe in the school. Not to mention the condition of the few readers and spellers I found.”

“I guess that’s why they need a teacher as smart as you.” Elias slapped the reins, sending the mare into a trot, and smothering a smile at her gasp of outrage.

For a teacher, Miss Savannah Cox sure had a lot to learn.

[Chapter Four](#)

Elias chirruped to the mare, the Sunday morning breeze whipping up the sorrel’s mane as the buckboard rolled along. Normally he would ride his saddle horse, but he was supposed to bring Miss Cox to his parents’ home for dinner after church.

Early mornings were the best, when everything was clean and new, the sun fresh in the sky and birds awakening in the long grass. The day promised to be another scorcher, but for now, the temperature was tolerable.

Ahead, the church steeple pierced the sky. He loved that the church was the oldest building in Snowflake, the first permanent structure erected by its inhabitants when they’d reached their new home on the Minnesota prairie.

And he liked being a deacon in the church, responsible for the building and grounds. He liked being the first one there on a Sunday morning to unlock the door, to spend a little time in prayer as he swept the steps and made sure the hymnals were straightened in the racks.

The varnished brown doors opened without a sound, and he left them wide, letting in the fresh air. Six pews on either side of a central aisle led to the pulpit. His boots sounded loud on the red-painted floor, and he glanced up to the pale blue arched ceiling with exposed white rafters like ribs.

In an alcove behind the pulpit, the church's prized stained glass window glowed in the sunlight. Ruby, turquoise, emerald and gold pieces of glass created flowers and vines around a cross. The window had come all the way from Germany, paid for by the saving and scrimping and generosity of the small congregation.

Elias opened windows, propping them with short pieces of wood to allow the cross breeze to circulate. In winter he hauled coal and had the place toasty by the time the first parishioners showed up, but in summer his job was to get the building as cool as possible.

People began arriving, neighbors and friends, greeting one another, filing into their customary seats. The pastor came in, holding his big Bible, his thinning hair combed over his pink scalp. His little wife, her hair in tight silver curls, edged into her front-row pew.

All the while, Elias kept an eye on the doorway. The Halvorsons were late. Per Halvorson had a well-earned reputation for being early, often arriving at the same time as Elias and helping ready the church, but today there was no sign of him.

Had something happened? Was there an illness in the house? Everyone had seemed fine yesterday when he'd delivered Savannah home.

His parents entered. Pa nodded and put his hand on Ma's lower back, guiding her to a seat. Elias liked that about his folks. They weren't inappropriate, but they were affectionate toward one another in small ways, even in public. If he ever married, Elias wanted to still be that close with his wife after almost thirty years.

Ah, there was Per Halvorson, but his normally sunny face looked like a thundercloud. He ushered Lars and Rut ahead of him, and Agneta hurried in behind.

Where was Savannah? Hadn't she come? Surely she was a churchwoman. Tyler would never hire someone to teach who had no faith...

Savannah came through the doorway, and Elias's breath hitched. She looked just as if she'd stepped off the cover of the Godey's Ladies' Book his mother liked to pore over. The pale green material of her dress shimmered as she walked. Tucks and frills and furbelows everywhere, even more elaborate than the dress she'd worn on the stagecoach.

And her hair, that ripe-wheat-in-the-summer-sun hair, was swept up and back on her head to a mass of ringlets and curls tucked under a pale green hat that sported ostrich-tip feathers.

Heads turned, eyes widened, elbows hit ribs and whispers scurried through the air. She paused in the doorway. Most seats were full, and the pastor was headed to the front. Mr. Petersen plucked the single string of the psalmodikon as the pastor took his hymnal and found the correct page.

Savannah caught Elias's eye, pink flying in her cheeks. Her eyes asked, Where do I sit?

He moved to the door and took her elbow. "Good morning." The congregation got to its feet, rustling and moving. "My mother would be pleased if you sat with us."

Savannah gave him a grateful nod, and he led her up the right-hand side of the church, letting her enter the pew before him to sit beside his mother. Elias edged in after her, and when he sat, her voluminous skirts brushed his leg.

It seemed to take forever for her to arrange her furred parasol, her handbag, her fan and her Bible. Elias waited, holding the hymnal as the congregation began to sing. At last she was ready, stood, and grasped her half of the book.

She took one look and gave him a bewildered glance. Of course, the hymnal was written in Norwegian. All around him the hearty voices of farmers and housewives and children sang of the Rock of Ages in their native tongue, but Savannah was mute.

Elias sang, but his mind was on her. Overdressed, nearly late, and everyone around her spoke a different language. What kind of church experience would this be for her? Why hadn't Tyler found someone from this part of the country to be the new schoolteacher? The poor girl had to be miserable.

Then she began to hum the tune. Her eyes closed, as if the music was seeping into her soul.

Elias sang softly so as to be able to hear her. She had a nice voice. Admiration rose for her. Worshipping in spite of the unfamiliar surroundings.

The song ended and they sat. She fussed with her skirts again, arranging them just so. Why did women wear such cumbersome garments? When she turned to smile at his mother on her left, the ostrich feathers on her hat brushed Elias's head. He leaned away, swatting them out of his face, but the tickle made him sneeze.

"God bless you," she whispered, oblivious to the cause of his predicament. "What is that instrument?" She looked at where Mr. Petersen sat.

"It's a psalmodikon. Most Norwegian churches have one."

She nodded and watched as Mr. Petersen played it while the offering was gathered in.

The sermon was probably excellent, but Elias had a difficult time concentrating. Her dress rustled with her every movement, and every time he inhaled, he breathed in her perfume. Roses? Violets? Some sort of flowery, girlie smell. In profile, her pert little nose tilted up a bit at the end, and her lashes skimmed her cheeks when she blinked.

He caught a movement down the way—his father leaning forward with a one-eyebrow-raised look and a nod Elias's way.

Which was when Elias remembered telling Pa that the new teacher was pretty. That was Pa. Subtle as a sledgehammer through a windowpane.

Evidently Pa wasn't the only one who thought Miss Cox pretty. After church, everyone flocked around, waiting for an introduction.

"This is Peder Bergdahl. Peder, Miss Cox, the new teacher." Elias spoke in Norwegian, translating for Savannah.

She nodded to the burly young man. "A pleasure."

"This is Samuel Eggleston. Miss Cox."

Knut Dotseth.

Jespar Rosedahl.

Magnus Haugen.

Every bachelor in the county. Elias shifted his weight and looked at his watch as, one after another, they elbowed each other out of the way to meet her.

Then came the families with children. He translated greetings and pointed out her students. The women hung back a little, whispering, eyes troubled. Elias caught snatches of their comments, and he found his jaw tightening.

Savannah excused herself and sought out Mr. Petersen. Thankfully, he spoke a bit of English and was only too happy to show her his beloved psalmodikon. He pointed out the flat stick marked with the finger placements for various notes and the pegs for tightening the single string. Savannah nodded, asked a question, and Mr. Petersen beamed. Stepping aside, he motioned for her to go ahead.

Elias was amazed. Sven Petersen never let anyone touch the musical instrument. He'd made it himself as a young man in Norway and brought it to America. He cherished and guarded it and played it with loving care.

Voices stilled as Savannah played, picking out the tune to "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." She never missed a note, and when she finished, everyone was smiling. Her own smile was especially bright, and Elias sucked in a breath. How had she conquered the instrument so quickly? She hadn't known what one was before, and yet she played it well.

Finally, only a few families remained, including the Halvorsons. Per Halvorson took Elias aside. "You need to tell her we leave for church at nine-thirty and not a minute after. Never have I seen a woman take so long to prepare for church. The dress, the hat, the shoes. And then the hair. Did you know that women heat up an iron stick and wrap their hair on it to make curls?" He snorted. "If God did not give you curls, then why do you want them? Straight hair is good enough for church

if it is what God gave you. You tell her.” He crossed his arms, and Elias got an image of what Per had endured that morning.

“I’ll let her know.”

“Yes. Already I think I am going to have to add a room to the house for her belongings. Never have I seen a woman with so many things. There is no room in the loft, no room anywhere for the boxes and cases. She brought enough for five years. Do you think she will stay even one?”

Elias shrugged. “I hope so, for the children’s sake. They need schooling. But it will be hard.”

Per nodded. “It is good for the children to be in school. I hope she is a good teacher. She will teach them fine manners and good English if she can stay. They will become real Americans, not rough Norske farmers.”

Savannah stooped to say hello to little Ingrid Langerud. Ingrid would be Savannah’s youngest student this term. The child, big-eyed, twirled the end of her blond braid as she gazed at her teacher. Savannah took Ingrid’s hand and drew it to her skirt, letting the little girl feel the heavy, shiny fabric. Ingrid’s shy smile had Elias smiling, too. Women and their fripperies. It sure started young.

“You were right.”

“Huh?” Elias turned to where his father had taken Per’s place.

“She’s pretty.”

He slanted Pa a sideways glance. “And she’s small and from the South and green as spring grass.”

Pa chuckled. “She might surprise you.”

“What makes you say that?”

He shrugged. “It’s just that most women are full of surprises. You think you know them. You think you can predict how they’ll act or what they’ll say, and then, wham! Out of nowhere, they surprise you. Your mother’s done it to me a thousand times.”

“This one seems pretty cut-and-dried. Just cleaning the school yesterday about did her in. She didn’t even have the stamina to finish the job properly. The floors got washed, but they didn’t get waxed.” Elias shook his head. “The first time she has to shovel a path through the snow to the coal shed, she’s going to collapse and call it quits.”

Pa glanced out the window. “No sign of snow yet, though. And the floors will be fine for another week, I’m sure. You should go fetch her, so we can head home for lunch. Your ma cooked special most of yesterday.”

When he approached, Savannah looked at Elias as if he was a lifesaver and she was drowning. “Are you ready to go?”

“If you are.”

He followed her outside into the sunshine. She popped open her pale green parasol. How many of those things did she have?

As they drove toward his parents’ place, Elias asked, “How did you like church?”

She shook her head. “I couldn’t understand the words, but the feeling in the room was familiar. God speaks all our languages. I worshipped, the rest of the congregation worshipped. It was good. I especially enjoyed the music.”

Elias didn’t know how he would’ve fared under the circumstances, if he’d been dropped into a church service where they spoke only Russian or Italian or some other language he didn’t know. He’d have been too distracted to worship—and, if he was honest, disgruntled at not being able to understand what was going on.

“I did have a question, though.” She slanted the parasol back on her shoulder. “What’s the reasoning behind the color scheme inside the church? I’ve never seen one painted like that before.”

He shrugged. “The colors are symbolic, I guess. The sky-blue ceiling represents heaven.”

“And the red floor?”

He grinned. “Like I said, symbolic.”

They traveled in silence for a while as Elias tried to decide how to broach the subject Per Halvorson had asked him to tackle. This really should be Tyler's job, running interference between his teacher and her landlord.

"Savannah, about this morning. Per wanted me to talk to you."

"He seemed out of sorts. Did something happen to upset him?" She adjusted her skirt to keep it from flapping. "He's been nothing but kind until this morning."

Elias eased his tight collar. "Well, the thing you have to know about Per is that he hates being late, especially to church."

"We weren't late. We arrived precisely on time."

"Well, to Per, on time means fifteen minutes early. He's known for coming well ahead of time to any function. He thought all your primping made him late today. I'm just giving you a little warning to either cut some of the getting-ready steps, or start sooner, that's all." Elias shrugged. "Is that what you wear to church where you're from?"

Her look got a little frosty and her chin went up. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing now? Surely it's acceptable to wear nice clothes to church? You're wearing a suit and tie."

"Well, there's nice clothes and there's nice clothes. But what I'm trying to say is, you need to be ready to go to church earlier so Per can get there at a time when he's comfortable."

"Fine, why don't you tell me when that is? I asked several times when we needed to be ready, but nobody in the house understood me."

"Per said he wanted to leave his house by nine thirty. If you could make it earlier, that would be even better. To Per, on time is late."

"I didn't know I was making him late. In the future, I'll be sure to be ready sooner." Frustration colored her voice. "But there isn't anything I can do about my wardrobe, and I wish you'd stop twitting me about it. It isn't a crime to wear the latest fashions or have nice clothes."

"It is if you're the only one for a hundred miles dressed like that and it makes the mothers of your students feel like you're lording it over them that you're better off than they are."

Her mouth fell open. "Is that what you think I'm doing? Is that what the ladies think?"

"They were whispering about it, about how they never saw clothes like yours, and how you were a foreigner who must be rich, and what were you doing way out here nearly to the Dakotas." The hurt in her eyes had him backtracking. "I'm not saying you're lording it over them, I'm just saying that might be how they feel."

"That's wonderful." She sank back into the seat. "Without speaking a word, I've managed to alienate at least half the county."

Elias propped his elbows on his knees, wishing Tyler was here to take this whole situation off his hands.

* * *

The women thought she was a snob. Savannah didn't know whether she wanted to scream or cry. How was she supposed to disabuse their minds when she couldn't even talk to them?

What if they got Elias's brother, Tyler, to fire her? Where would she go? She couldn't face Raleigh yet, and she'd hate to admit failure in her first job before she even got started.

"Here's the farm. Pa homesteaded it right after the war. He held on through the grasshopper years, and now it's doing pretty well. When the option came to buy the two sections to the west, Tyler and I purchased them, and we run the farm together." Elias turned the horse in through an open gate. "We run sheep and cattle and raise wheat and corn. I raise and train a few horses every year and help Pa on the farm when I can."

"And do you live here?"

"Sort of. Since I'm the town sheriff, I have a room on the back of the jail, but half the time I stay out here. It's only a couple miles from town, and I have a part-time deputy, Bjorn. He lives in town,

so he keeps an eye on things.” Elias shrugged. “Upholding the law isn’t too difficult in Snowflake. There’s usually time for a bit of farm work.”

A pretty frame house with flowers in pots on the porch sat at the end of the drive. A few trees had been planted, giving the place a settled, homey look. A large barn with lots of fences took up a big part of the farmyard, and beyond the barn, crops stretched far away.

If only she could board here, she would have a bedroom she could stand upright in.

Savannah struck down that ungrateful thought. The Halvorsons were generous to board her, and she should be thankful, cramped loft or not.

Mr. and Mrs. Parker met them at the door. “Come on in, Miss Cox. We’re sure glad you’re here,” Mr. Parker said in greeting. He was tall and broad like Elias, with silver dusting his dark hair and crow’s feet showing at the corners of his eyes.

Mrs. Parker nodded and smiled. “Ja, ve are glad. Tyler vas very happy to haff a teacher for this fall for the barn.”

Savannah blinked, both at the word and the accent. “I’m sorry. The barn?”

“Oh, my pardon. Elias?” Her brows scrunched together as she looked to her son.

“Barn is the Norwegian word for children.”

“I’ll tuck that away to use on Monday.” Savannah smiled at Mrs. Parker. “Perhaps I can come to you for some lessons in speaking Norwegian. I think I will need them in order to best teach the barn. Now I understand how it is that Elias speaks fluent Norwegian and English.”

“Yep.” Mr. Parker beamed, putting his arm around his wife. “I am a blessed man to have found my sweet bride fresh off a boat from Norway. I grabbed her up before anyone else could.” His pride in his wife shone in his eyes.

The meal was delicious, though Savannah had never seen food prepared the way Mrs. Parker had done it. Creamed rutabaga, dilled cucumber and a roasted meat, either beef or lamb, she wasn’t sure.

“Elias...” Mr. Parker sat back after patting his wife’s hand. “Why don’t you take Miss Cox outside and show her around. I’m sure she’d enjoy a bit of a walk after a meal like that.”

Savannah laid her napkin aside. “Let me help clear the table first.”

“Nonsense. I can help my wife clean up. You go get some fresh air.”

Elias pulled out her chair for her and held the door.

“Son, while you’re out there, walk round the sheep, will you? Captain’s keeping watch. They’re in the close pasture.”

“Yes, sir.”

Savannah and Elias strolled past the sapling trees toward the barn. A breeze brushed her cheeks, and though it was warm, she was grateful for it. Without any wind, the day would be stifling. How a place this warm got the name Snowflake, she’d never know.

“Captain watches the sheep all by himself? I mean, with no shepherd?” She tilted her parasol to shade her face.

“Yep. Pa can’t afford to hire a shepherd just for the couple hundred sheep he runs, so he relies on Captain to look after the flock. He has another dog, too, but she’s expecting puppies any day now, so Pa’s keeping her close to the house. I’m not sure if he was as excited about his own sons’ births as he is about this litter.” Elias bent and plucked a long grass stem from along a fence line, bending it and snapping off little pieces as they walked.

“You said you have horses here?”

“Sure, almost a dozen head right now. They’re in the pasture behind the barn.”

“Could we see them?” Savannah lifted her hem to step across the dusty ruts left by farm wagons.

“You like horses?”

“Oh, yes. I’m a very good equestrienne. Many Southern women are. I had riding lessons from the time I was a child.” A pang hit her heart. Girard had taken her riding many times. It was one of the things they shared, a love of horses.

“Too bad you’re not dressed for it. I’d saddle up a couple of horses. We could ride round the sheep that way.” He threw away the last piece of grass stem.

“It wouldn’t matter how I was dressed if you had a sidesaddle. I’d risk my Sunday silk for a chance to ride.” It had been much too long since she’d been on horseback.

“Are you serious?” He tilted his head, studying her.

“Of course I am.”

“I forgot, you’re always serious.” He shrugged. “As it happens, we do have a sidesaddle. If you’re sure, I’ll bring in the horses.”

Elias ducked into the barn and emerged with a pail half-full of grain in his hand and two halters slung over his shoulder. “Come around this way.”

At the pasture gate, he whistled and clanked the handle against the bucket, shaking the oats. Heads came up from grazing, and several horses started toward him. Bays, chestnuts, a gray with a black mane and tail.

Elias scattered some of the grain on the ground, shouldering his way among the horses. “Which one would you choose?”

Savannah eyed them, knowing he was testing her. “The buckskin with the blaze. He looks like he could move.”

“Hmm, you’ve a good eye. That’s my horse, Buck. And you’re right, he’s fast. But he’s not a lady’s mount.”

“How about the gray mare?”

He paused. “She’s new, and I haven’t ridden her much. I bought her over in Pipestone for a broodmare. She’s got good lines, and I think I’d get some nice foals out of her. But she’s a quick mover and she likes to run.” He frowned. “Maybe I should put you up on my ma’s horse, Gresskar.” Pointing at a round little chestnut with a shaggy mane and knobby knees, he reached for the halter on his shoulder. “Gresskar means pumpkin.”

“I told you I could ride. I’d like the gray. She won’t unseat me.” Savannah gripped her parasol. The man didn’t think she could do anything. “What’s her name? The gray?”

“Elsker.”

Was that a blush reddening his cheeks?

“Elsker? What does that mean?”

He shrugged, not meeting her eyes. “Elsker means ‘love’ in Norwegian. She came with the name. I didn’t give it to her.” Elias busied himself getting halters on Buck and the gray mare. He dumped the rest of the grain on the grass for the horses left behind, and led the two mounts through the gate. “You’re sure you want to do this? You’re not dressed to ride, and if you get thrown, your dress will never be the same.”

“I’m sure.” She put conviction into her tone.

In short order, Savannah closed her parasol, leaning it against the barn wall, and went to Elsker’s side, patting the mare Elias had saddled and speaking softly to her. While Elias was busy tacking up his horse, she checked the girths, making sure they were tight. The plain saddle bore only a scant resemblance to her ornate velvet-and-leather one at home, but it was serviceable and well cared for.

“I’ll give you a leg up since we don’t have a mounting block.” Elias bent and laced his fingers for her to place her knee into. He lifted her easily, and soon she was gathering her skirts, tucking them in, fitting her foot into the stirrup and picking up the reins. Elsker sidled a bit, tossing her head.

Soon they were walking down a farm track, side by side. Savannah thrilled to the movement of a horse beneath her again, letting her body sway with Elsker’s long-legged stride. The mare toyed

with the bit, swishing her tail, sending Savannah all kinds of messages that she felt good and would like to move out of a walk.

“The sheep are in here.” Elias stopped at a gate, leaning down to unlatch it and pull it open for her to ride through, all without getting off his horse. Buck pivoted like a seasoned professional as Elias closed the gate behind them.

The sheep grazed in a bunch near the center of the pasture, and Captain rose from the tall grass, loping over, his tongue lolling and his tail curving up, like a great bottlebrush. Elias pulled to a stop, and Captain rose on his hind legs, planting his forepaws on Elias’s knee. The collie licked his hand and gave a bark before bounding away toward the flock.

Elias stood in the stirrups, counting heads. “It’s a well-fenced pasture, and the dogs keep predators away, but it’s always a good idea to count noses.”

They rode completely around the flock, and Elias, finding nothing amiss with the sheep, opened the gate again. “There’s a creek about a mile east of here. Let’s head for that. Are you comfortable trotting?”

She tried not to be offended. He didn’t know her very well, after all, but his condescension grated. “I’d be more comfortable at a canter.” Savannah lifted the reins and put her heel to the mare’s side. This was all the cue Elsker needed. She picked up her feet, leaping into a gallop.

Elias shouted, but Savannah leaned forward, urging the mare on. The wind whipped against Savannah’s cheeks, pulling at her hair. Her hat gave up the fight, flying off, and her skirts flapped against the horse’s side.

For the first time since she was left standing at the altar, Savannah felt as if she could leave the hurt behind and be free, if for only a little while. Free of the stigma of being a jilted bride, free of her fears and insecurities. Embracing the wind, skimming over the ground, exulting in the rushing speed... A laugh escaped her throat, surprising her.

Hoofbeats pounded the ground, and she glanced back. Elias urged his buckskin on, yelling, but the wind tore his words away. As he drew nearer, Elsker stuck her neck out, eating up the ground in long bounds, determined not to be passed. Buck fell back.

Savannah noticed a gully ahead. It wasn’t wide, but it was deep. That must be what Elias was shouting about. With a reckless abandon that telegraphed itself to her mount, she leaned forward, her hands high on the mare’s neck. With a huge leap, Elsker soared over the ditch, landing gracefully on the far side and galloping onward. At the horizon, trees appeared where the creek must be. Savannah eased back in the saddle, gently pulling the mare up, asking rather than demanding.

Elsker resisted for a moment and then dropped to a lope, then a trot, then a walk, tossing her head and prancing, her sides pumping. Savannah patted the mare’s warm neck, pleased and exhilarated.

Elias pounded up on Buck, his face like a thundercloud. “What were you thinking? You could’ve broken your neck!”

Savannah tried to make some sense of her hair, which had come loose from its pins and lay about her shoulders in a tumbled, curly mess. “I was in no danger. I saw the ditch in plenty of time and knew we could jump it easily.” She patted Elsker again. “This is a very fine mare.”

“You knocked about ten years off my life. I saw myself trying to explain to Tyler how I killed his teacher on the eve of the first day of school.” Elias didn’t seem to be quite over his temper yet. “That was a foolish thing to do.”

Savannah blinked. He really was upset. “I told you I was a good rider. There was nothing to fear.”

“You raced an untried mare over unknown ground with no thought to prairie dog holes or gullies or anything else. You knew I was hollering at you to stop, but you just kept going faster. You have no idea of the dangers you could encounter here. This isn’t a bridle path in some city park, you know.” He whipped off his hat and slapped his thigh. “What if you’d come up against a barbed wire fence?”

The mare wouldn't have seen it in time, running full out like she was, and you'd have come a cropper for sure. As it is, you had no idea how that mare would react to having a woman in flapping skirts on her back. What if she'd started bucking, shied or flat out run away with you? Plenty of danger to you, but what about the danger to the mare? You could've killed her along with yourself."

Savannah held up her palm to stop the flow of words, remorse flooding her as she realized the truth in his tirade. "I'm sorry. I didn't think. It just felt so good to be riding again, and the mare wanted to go." She dropped her hand and gripped the reins.

"Walk her and cool her out a bit before we get to the creek." He pressed his hat back on his head and nudged Buck into a walk.

Savannah wanted to say that she knew enough to cool out a horse before allowing it to drink, but she clamped her mouth shut, aware that she'd transgressed. She followed Elias across the open ground and down the creek bank, keeping Elsker to a leisurely walk, feeling the mare's breathing slow.

They arrived at the water's edge. Elias slid from the saddle, then reached up for Savannah. His hands spanned her waist, and when she kicked free of the stirrup, he lifted her to the ground. How many times had Girard done the same for her after a ride? But Elias had bigger muscles, broader shoulders. Where Girard had worked inside at a desk, in a job with few physical demands, Elias worked outside, helping on his father's farm, keeping law and order in Snowflake. Handy with tools, good with animals, a man of the land. Girard had been suave in any social situation, quick to smile and flatter. Elias said exactly what he thought, pulling no punches.

She drew herself up short. Comparisons got her nowhere. And anyway, why should she care? She was over love and romance forever and beyond noticing how handsome and virile a man was.

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