



Heidi slipped out of the bed she'd shared with Ella as soon as the first rays of dawn filtered through the curtain. Her niece didn't stir. How the wiggly little girl slept so soundly was beyond Heidi's understanding. She'd lost track of how many times the child had rolled over almost on top of her or kicked her without ever waking. Sleeping on the hard wooden floor might have afforded her more rest.

She tiptoed to her trunk, glad she'd laid out clean clothes last night. She'd unpack later before every dress she owned had to be ironed. The dim room made it hard for her to dress quickly. Not wearing her bustle saved some time. Judging from the way Lily dressed, she wouldn't need a bustle until she went to town. She settled for tying her hair back with one of Ella's ribbons lying on the dresser. Properly pinning her hair would have to wait for better light.

Soft voices drifted down the hall. Good. Lily and Toby were awake. She made her way to the kitchen. Lily had left the lamp on the worktable. She lit it. If she could locate the coffee tin on the shelf next to the stove, she could grind the coffee and do something mature and useful. Which she desperately needed to do after yesterday.

Talking with Lily and Toby in the parlor last night had gone much better than the conversation at the dinner table had. Thank God they felt too sorry for her to be worried she had no idea how long she might be imposing on them.

But Mr. Bannister probably wondered if she had any more sense than her six year-old niece. He could think whatever he wanted. She wasn't interested in him or any other man who might come along. Heidi refused to become dependent on a man. After what *Vater* and *Mutter* had tried, she'd take care of herself and never rely on anyone ever again.

That is as soon as she could figure out how to keep her promise to herself. She'd have to find work in town soon as well as a decent boarding house. She owed Erich and Frieda for her stage ticket and didn't want to be a burden to Lily and Toby any longer than she could help. Surely, San Antonio had suitable jobs for a young woman.

Once she decided what kind of job she'd be suited for. Her father had grudgingly let her help with his ledgers after her brother's recent death. But how many other businessmen were like *Vater* and frowned on a woman working with ledgers or anything else that didn't concern caring for a household?

After locating the coffee grinder, Heidi sat at the worktable and took her frustrations out on the beans.

"Good morning."

Heidi jumped at the sound of Lily's voice.

"I didn't mean to scare you."

"I was thinking about jobs I might look for in San Antonio."

Lily smiled as she laid her hand on Heidi's arm. "Don't rush. I'd love some time for us to get to know each other again."

"So would I, but I need to pay Frieda back and—"

"We'll take care of that." Toby's boots clumped on the floor as he entered.

"But I never intended for you to do such a thing."

He grinned. "We know. This way you can take your time finding a good job and not settle for the first thing you find."

“*Danke*. Thank you.” She gripped the handle on the grinder. She was truly grateful for such unexpected generosity, but taking care of herself meant not owing anyone anything ever again. “I’ll repay you as soon as I can.”

“Only after you have money saved back for what you need.” Lily patted Heidi’s shoulder, then walked over and slipped her apron over her head as if everything were settled.

Except Heidi had never felt so unsettled. The more she puzzled over her future, the more her stomach churned. The coffee would be like dust if she kept this up.

Lily got the wood burning in the stove. “I’ll get the children up while this warms up.”

“What else can I do to help?” Heidi set the coffee pot on the stove.

“You don’t know how to make biscuits, do you?”

Heidi shook her head. Her sister had stopped doing more than speaking German when she’d run off with Harvey seven years ago. Something else Heidi would like to understand.

“I’ll show you how when I get back.”

Toby seated himself in his chair at the table. “You look as bumfuzzled as if Lily had grown wings and flown out of the room.”

“She’s so different than I remember. But somehow, she’s still the same.”

“Everyone changes over the years, especially people who’ve been hurt by loved ones.”

“What do you mean?”

If not for wanting to help Lily with breakfast, Heidi would have gladly taken a chair next to Toby and let him explain about the sister she did and didn’t know any more. Instead, she remained standing by the worktable.

His expression sobered. “I’ll let Lily tell you everything when she’s ready.”

“I hope that’s soon. I have so many questions.” She kept her

voice low. She wasn't sure if Lily would be upset or not to hear their discussion.

"Don't rush her." He spoke just above a whisper.

His tone was gentle in spite of his serious words. This man must love Lily dearly, judging from what she'd seen the short time she'd been here. If only someone cared so deeply for her.

No. She'd take care of herself. She'd thought *Vater* and *Mutter* loved her no matter what, but they'd proved otherwise. Since her brother's death, they cared more about finding a good man to take over the wagon works than looking for someone to cherish her. So, she'd guard her heart from dangerous longings that would only obligate her to another person.

Toby interrupted her musings. "You must be thinking some deep thoughts. You haven't said two words in the last minute or so."

"I do have a lot to think about."

"You can think out loud with Lily or me any time you'd like. We're praying for you."

"*Danke*—thank you."

Her worrisome thoughts made her forget not to speak German, but Toby didn't look upset. She walked over to check the coffee pot that didn't need checking. Her brother-in-law's kind words warmed her through and through, but independent people didn't make it a habit to think out loud with others. No matter how talkative she'd always been and preferred to be. Another change she simply had to make.

Her comfortable yet uncomfortable silence lasted until Lily and the children came in the room. Ella headed straight for Heidi as Lily carried in a still sleepy-looking Harvey.

"I like having an aunt who stays here." Ella wrapped her arms around Heidi's waist in a fierce embrace.

Heidi bent to return her niece's hug. "Thank you." If only everything were as simple about this visit as the little girl thought.

Ella stepped back to grin up at her. "I already told Ruckus you're staying longer than Aunt Charlotte and Uncle David do."

"Charlotte's my sister. David's her husband. Since she's got two boys to keep up with now, you won't see her riding over here wearing her trousers, boots, and spurs." Toby's eyes twinkled.

"Oh." Heidi had no idea how to reply to such remarks.

Lily set Harvey on the floor by Toby's chair. "Ready for your first try at biscuits?"

"Yes." She took the other apron from the nearby hook and slipped it over her head. Her simple day dress was much nicer than Lily's calico one. But if Lily or Toby noticed, they didn't say anything.

"Biscuits are Toby's favorite part of breakfast, but they're not hard to make." Lily set a bowl on the worktable. "And Charlotte only wears trousers while riding on their ranch. Toby is teasing you."

Heidi nodded, still not sure how to respond to any mention of a woman who wore trousers anywhere. Yet Toby teasing her the way her brothers had warmed her heart. Lily and Toby had already accepted her. More importantly, neither had tried to talk her out of eventually living in San Antonio alone.

Lily showed her how to mix the flour, baking powder, and salt in the bowl while Ella set the table.

"Lily and I were talking about your problems after you went to bed." Toby watched Heidi's first efforts with biscuits more closely than she wished.

Simple, or not, she didn't want to ruin one of his favorites. But, her curiosity over what he might say next took her attention away from watching Lily making a well in the flour mixture before adding milk in the middle. Lily handed Heidi the spoon.

Toby picked up his cup of coffee. "We think you should stay here a little while before looking for a job in town in case your pa finds out which stage you took."

"You do?" She shuddered at the thought of Papa finding her.

“We do. Knead the dough with your fingers. It’s messy but makes delicious biscuits.” Lily demonstrated before letting Heidi finish.

“Owen and Doris Hawkins know some of Lily’s story and are the only ones who know you’re with us. They won’t tell anyone. So, if your pa comes to town looking for you, he’ll think you’ve gone on somewhere else when no one has seen you or knows who you are.” Toby’s brown eyes looked as serious as his words sounded.

“How long should I wait?” What a terrible time for her nose to itch. She swiped at it with the top of her hand.

“We’ll think and pray about it.” Lily floured a spot on the worktable. “Roll the dough out about half an inch thick and cut it with the biscuit cutter.”

The back door opened as Lily wiped her sticky hands on a damp rag. “Good morning, Jethro.”

“Good morning.” Mr. Bannister walked inside and hung his hat on a hook by the door but remained standing as she and Lily finished breakfast.

Strange. Did this man take all his meals with the family? Did she have a big flour spot on her nose from scratching it? She could feel a loose strand of hair on her left cheek. If only she’d known she needed to properly pin her hair. *Stop it*. She didn’t care what kind of impression she made on this man or any other.

“Mornin’, Jethro. Whoa, son.” Toby rose to snag Harvey as the little boy toddled toward the hot stove.

Ella guided her brother over to the corner. “Play with your blocks.”

After Heidi put the biscuits in the oven, she tucked her loose hair behind her ears. Ella’s hair ribbon was not serving its purpose well. She hadn’t worn her hair down in front of anyone but family since her sixteenth birthday. Not impressing Mr. Bannister was fine, but she didn’t want him to think ill of her. A woman living alone in San Antonio would still need to guard her reputation.

The men discussed the roundup next week. Heidi tried her best to listen to Lily's instructions about how Toby liked his fried eggs while catching what the men were saying.

She helped Lily put the food on the table then took the chair next to Ella. Mr. Bannister gave her a perfunctory nod as he seated himself. Good. She didn't want him paying attention to her. But did she look so disheveled he'd ignore her?

Toby blessed the food. Lily passed the platter of eggs and bacon after taking small portions to put on Harvey's highchair tray.

"How many cowboys do you need for a roundup?" Heidi peered over at Toby after filling her plate.

"About a half dozen, plus a cook. Then we get together with other ranchers and help each other."

"It all sounds so intriguing."

"That's one way to describe it." Toby gave her the same indulgent-looking smile she'd seen from him last night.

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INTRIGUING WAS A BETTER description for the woman sitting across from him than for the roundup she was asking about. The flour on her turned-up nose drew his attention to her lively blue eyes. She ducked her head as she forked her eggs. A loose strand of medium blonde hair fell across her face. Whatever she'd used to tie it back wasn't working too well. Quite a contrast from the fashionable-looking woman he'd brought here yesterday. Although her apron couldn't hide the dress that resembled one of Mrs. Grimes's Sunday best.

He quickly studied his own plate when Miss Schultz raised her head. Maybe she hadn't noticed him watching her. Something he couldn't make a habit of doing. He had no interest in her and didn't want her to get any wrong ideas.

"Mr. Bannister told me a roundup can last three weeks or more."

“That’s about right.” Mr. Grimes grinned as he buttered a biscuit. “You did a good job with your first biscuits. Your coffee’s good too.”

“Thank you.”

Her first biscuits? The woman couldn’t cook? Even he could make decent biscuits. Surely, her mother had seen to teaching her housekeeping and cooking. But all she’d talked about yesterday was painting and drawing. This woman must be pampered and spoiled beyond words or reason.

“I brought my pencils and oil paints. The evening sun yesterday was gorgeous. I’d like to capture that in a drawing or on a canvas.”

“I always thought you had talent. I’m glad you’re still drawing.” Mrs. Grimes gave her sister an adoring smile.

“My seventh-grade teacher insisted Papa and Mama see I had lessons.”

“Good. I want to see what you can do.”

“Thank you.”

The conversation about drawing and painting continued. If anyone noticed Jethro didn’t contribute a word, they didn’t say anything.

“Can you draw a picture of Ruckus?” Ella turned her full attention to her aunt.

“Of course. Animals make wonderful subjects. I’d like very much to draw or paint longhorns too.” Heidi glanced at Mr. Grimes.

“Only from a good distance. They can be cantankerous. A charging bull would tear up more than your picture.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. But I’d like to find a way to paint them.” She took the last bite of her eggs.

Mr. Grimes set his empty coffee cup down. “I’ll have to think how.” He turned his attention to his wife as he scooted his chair back. “Jethro and I’ll fix the roof on the cook shack this morning. Jethro says Josiah, the new cook, should be here this afternoon, so we’ll load the chuck wagon after lunch.”



“All right.” Mrs. Grimes finished washing Harvey’s sticky hands with a damp rag.

“Thanks for a good breakfast.” Jethro rose to follow his boss out the back door, glad he had a full day’s work to do. So far, he’d been lucky not to be a party to any discussion of Miss Schultz’s problems. He’d like to keep it that way.

Plus keep his distance from a woman he considered too pretty for his own good. Her bright blue dress emphasized her clear blue eyes, making her look as nice as the pictures she’d talked about painting. Even with flour spots on her nose and her hair coming loose. But if he ever married, he wouldn’t want a spoiled wife who didn’t know how to cook. A man couldn’t live on pictures alone, no matter how attractive the painter might be.