



A barking, lanky hound interrupted the uncomfortable silence as Mr. Bannister drove the wagon into the yard.

“Ruckus, hush.” Mr. Bannister admonished the black dog with white spots as he halted the wagon not far from the house.

“That’s an odd name for a dog.” Such an inane comment, but she had to say something to keep the man from guessing how nervous she was. If he hadn’t already suspected such a thing by the way she’d chattered on and on during the drive here.

Yet she’d been fascinated by cowboys and their ranches for years and couldn’t resist the opportunity to satisfy her curiosity. Especially since *Vater* and *Mutter*, for reasons only her parents seemed to know, wouldn’t tolerate so much as a mention of cowboys.

“Mrs. Grimes says the name suits the mongrel fine as much noise as he can make.” He reached to help her down.

A dark-haired little girl who had to be Lily’s daughter bounded out the front door. Thank God she and Lily had exchanged one set of letters the last month or so, giving her some information and a sliver of hope her sister would understand why she’d come. The dog ran to the child, his long

tail almost wagging his entire body. The girl stopped midgiggle from petting the hound and gaped at Heidi.

“Ella, go tell your ma and pa y’all have company,” Mr. Bannister said.

“Company?” She tilted her head as she continued staring in Heidi’s direction.

“Right. Now go tell your ma and pa.”

With the dog at her heels, the child trotted toward the house as the front door opened again. “Pa, Mr. Bannister says to tell you and Ma we have company.”

The brown-haired man Heidi supposed to be Toby clamped his mouth shut as he paused by the steps and considered her. “Yeah, looks like we do.”

His long strides ate up the distance between him and Heidi. He studied her up and down. Not frowning. Not smiling. Much like the reception she’d received at the general store.

She clutched her reticule with trembling hands. “I’m Heidi Schultz.”

“Lily’s little sister?”

“I can show you Lily’s letter in my reticule if you’d like to see it.” Heidi licked her parched lips as he continued staring.

Toby shook his head. “One good look at you says you’re who you say you are.”

The breath she’d been holding in whooshed out quickly as if she were wilting like a dried out flower. “I can explain why I’m here unannounced.”

“Why don’t you do that inside? Lily will be really unhappy with me if I keep you standing in the yard like this on such a warm day.” A slow grin spread across his face. “I’m Toby.”

“Pleased to meet you.” She hoped her forced smile didn’t look as stiff as her lips felt.

He took her arm and guided her toward the porch.

“I’ll bring her luggage in the house, boss.”

“Thanks.” Toby didn’t look back at his foreman as he and

Heidi reached the porch steps. "I'll be out soon to help unload the wagon so we can wash up for supper faster."

"Since y'all have company, I can eat at my place."

Toby turned just enough to look at Mr. Bannister. "Lily's planning on you eating with us." He opened the door for Heidi and allowed her to precede him inside. "Darlin', I've got one more surprise for you in the parlor."

"What?"

Heidi's whole being thrilled to hear her sister's still-recognizable voice coming from the back of the house.

"Just get in here, darlin'."

A little boy toddled in ahead of Lily. She gasped as she halted inside the doorway. "Oh, my ... Heidi?" Both hands covered her heart as she shook her head. Her slow smile grew into an ear-to-ear grin that lit up her entire face.

Heidi could only nod.

Lily closed the distance between them and enveloped Heidi in a fierce, smothering hug. She stepped back, her hands resting lightly on Heidi's shoulders "Let me look at you." Her eyes glistened with tears. "So grown up now."

"Ja." A torrent of German questions rushed out as she peered into Lily's shining eyes.

Lily shook her head. "I only speak English now."

"You do? Why?"

"We'll talk about that later." Lily beamed as she patted Heidi's shoulder. "First, that wonderful surprise letter from you and now seeing you here in person. You're the answer to years of prayers."

Heidi hoped her sister still felt the same after she found out her uninvited guest had come to stay, at least long enough to figure out what to do and where to go next. They had more to talk about than her sister realized.

Mr. Bannister walked through the door, carrying her carpet bag. Ella followed behind him. "Where should I set this?"

"Um, in Harvey's room. I'll make him a pallet in our room

tonight.” Lily let her arms go slack at her side as she glanced at her husband.

Toby nodded as he scooped the little boy in his arms and motioned for a staring Ella to come to his side.

“I’ll get your trunk in next, Miss Schultz.” Mr. Bannister paused long enough to look in Heidi’s direction.

“*Dan*—thank you.” Despite her nerves, she must remember not to speak German. Why not, she’d dearly love to know. So many questions she must ask as soon as she could.

The shocked looks Lily and Toby had exchanged as soon as the foreman said the word trunk told her she needed to think of a way to explain things quickly. She swallowed hard, as she tried to decide how to accomplish such a feat.

“*Vater*—uh—Papa intended to force me to wed. Mama too. I can’t imagine spending the rest of my life with ... with someone like Johann. He’s not interested in God. And Papa and Mama didn’t believe me when I told them and ...” She bit her trembling lip as she stared into her silent sister’s eyes. “Your letter. It was so warm and loving. I ... I came here.” The words tumbled out. How she prayed they made sense to Lily and Toby.

“You poor dear. You have no idea how well I understand.” Lily patted her cheek.

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JETHRO PUSHED through the front door with the trunk hoisted on his shoulder. Miss Schultz had packed a lot more than paints, but neither the boss nor Mrs. Grimes acted surprised to see the good-sized trunk.

“Better set that in Ella’s room so you don’t have to move it again.” Mr. Grimes tipped his head toward the bedrooms. “Then we’ll tend to the supplies.”

“Sure.”

He took care of the trunk as quickly as possible. The sooner Jethro could get outside, the happier he’d be. The boss and

missus had matching furrowed brows. And one glance at their guest's tear-filled eyes assured him he didn't want to end up in the middle of whatever the woman was involved in. He'd had more than enough of his share of uncomfortable family situations after the war.

Mr. Grimes followed him outside. He glanced at Jethro after slinging a flour sack over his shoulder. "Good thing you went to town today."

"Glad to hear that. I wasn't the least bit sure about bringing Miss Schultz here." Jethro grabbed the coffee tin and lard.

"Her father planned to force her to marry. She balked and ran to us." Mr. Grimes shook his head. "Doesn't sound like my stubborn father-in-law has changed. His wife either." He turned toward the house. "I might tell you that story another day if Lily doesn't mind."

"Sure, boss." Jethro answered out of habit as he followed Mr. Grimes. What he was sure of, he needed to figure a way to fix his own supper. "I found a cook and enough men to start roundup next week, except I told one of them to ride out and talk to you first."

Mr. Grimes halted a few feet from the porch steps. "Why?"

"I ran across a Ben Tyler who said he rode with you on your first drive. I didn't promise him a job because he already smelled of whisky just after noon."

"I'll talk to him if he shows up." As if that settled everything, the boss headed inside.

Jethro's mind worked harder than his body did carrying in groceries as he tried his best to think of some way to eat at his house. "I don't mind fending for myself tonight since your wife wasn't expecting her sister."

Mr. Grimes shook his head as they carried the last of the supplies toward the house. "Lily's got plenty fixed, and I wouldn't want to hurt Heidi's feelings if she thought you stayed away because of her."

“I hadn’t thought of that. I’ll be back in as soon as I tend to the horse and wagon.”

“I’ll help you.” The boss grinned.

Jethro couldn’t smile back.

He’d left Georgia to forget family difficulties and misunderstandings. Sitting at the table listening to whatever the Grimes needed to talk about would probably ruin his appetite since he didn’t want to be so much as a silent listener to any kind of family discussion.

Sooner than Jethro liked, Mr. Grimes took his usual spot at the end of the table while Jethro seated himself across from Miss Schultz and Ella. He forced a stiff smile at the pair. Miss Schultz’s pretty lips twitched up slightly. As quickly as the sparkle left her light blue eyes, she might not be any happier to see him than he was to be looking at her. What she thought about him shouldn’t be the least bit worrisome, except he’d done nothing but assist her all afternoon. She should at least have the decency to like him.

No, she didn’t have to do that. And he didn’t have to like her no matter how pleasant-looking she was right now. He’d be better off not taking a liking to such a talkative woman, especially one who could be bringing all sorts of trouble with her.

He welcomed closing his eyes and bowing his head as the boss thanked God for the food and sending Miss Schultz to them. Jethro hoped the Grimes family could stay so grateful for acquiring their unannounced guest and whatever difficulties she may have brought with her.

“I have another aunt.” Ella beamed at him as Mr. Grimes passed the cornbread to Miss Schultz.

“Yes, you do.” He concentrated on the bowl of stew in front of him.

“You have to finish telling me how Frieda and her husband managed to get you out of New Braunfels.” Mrs. Grimes grinned

as she set small pieces of beef on the highchair tray for Harvey to grab.

“I hid under a tarp in the wagon bed all the way to their house while Papa and Mama were at a concert Tuesday night. I stayed away from the windows while inside Frieda’s house.”

“But how did you get on the stage without being recognized?” Mrs. Grimes paused with her spoon in the air as she waited for an answer.

“I waited until today to leave, because we all assumed Papa would be checking the stage depot. Erich bought my ticket and walked the back streets to the stage with me as if he were the one leaving. I wore the most awful sunbonnet to hide my face. I intend to burn it.”

The boss cleared his throat as Jethro continued to stare down at his food. A sunbonnet wasn’t considered awful around here. Mrs. Grimes almost always wore hers when doing chores outside.

“I’ll gladly take another bonnet to use while weeding the garden.” Only Mrs. Grimes could still smile so sweetly at someone who’d pretty much insulted her, no matter how unintended the slight had been.

“Oh, uh, I’ll be happy to give it to you.”

“Thank you.”

Miss Schultz shook her head. “No, thank you both for taking me in. I don’t want to even think about living the rest of my life with someone like Johann Merkle only because Papa thinks the man can one day take over the wagon works for him.”

The lady’s exaggerated shudder made Jethro wonder how she kept from spilling the water sloshing in the glass she’d just picked up. Good thing she had sense enough to steady it with both hands. She should consider becoming an actress on a stage somewhere.

“He sounds as bad as the man Papa and Mama chose for me years ago.”

The somber look on Mrs. Grimes’s face almost made Jethro

shudder. The boss hadn't sounded as if he cared much for his in-laws. Like him, Jethro couldn't think much of someone who treated their daughters the way these ladies were talking about.

"Worse, at least *I* think he is. He's only been in town about three months, so he's still more like a stranger to me even though he saved Papa's life from a runaway horse and buggy. No matter how decent a man he may be, he's already thirty years old."

Jethro almost choked to keep from laughing at the long-winded, wide-eyed woman. She would make a superb actress. His father had been twelve years older than his mother, but they'd had a very happy life. Until his father was murdered.

Mr. Grimes chuckled.

His wife gave him her usual adoring smile before returning her attention to her sister. "Toby will be thirty in a few months."

"But you'll be going on twenty-six by then. And I ... Oh my. I sound awful, don't I?" She turned her huge woeful eyes on her brother-in-law.

He shook his head, smiling as indulgently as he did when Ella said something amiss. "I wouldn't be interested in a young thing like you even if I were looking. Lily's the only woman I'll ever want."

Miss Schultz straightened up dried out-jerky-stiff the way she'd done when riding in the wagon. "I'm nineteen and long past a child." Her eyes got even bigger as she clapped her hand over her mouth. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have said it like that. I—"

"Heidi, dear. Let's change the subject." Mrs. Grimes grinned as she placed pieces of cooked carrots on her son's tray.

Miss Schultz nodded before finally taking a sip of her water.

A woman who could out talk a politician had no business looking so serenely fetching once she was quiet. Sometimes Jethro wished for a loving woman who could make him as happy as Mrs. Grimes made the boss, but the lady sitting across the table from him was not that kind.



“I’m looking forward to learning as much as I can about your ranch. Mr. Bannister was kind enough to tell me all sorts of things on the drive here.”

The sparkle returned to her eyes as she tossed a becoming smile first in Mrs. Grimes’s direction and then toward the boss.

Jethro finished his stew as quickly as he could without gobbling it like a starving man. “Mrs. Grimes, that was delicious as usual. I need to get back to my place and finish putting away my own supplies.” He scooted his chair back. “You still plan to start fixing the roof on the cook shack in the morning?” He paused for Mr. Grimes’s answer.

“Yeah.”

“Then I’ll see y’all tomorrow.”

He forced his boots to saunter out the back door instead of doing a fast trot. Whatever family problems the Grimes needed to talk about, he thanked God he hadn’t ended up in the middle of any such discussion. He’d been fortunate to only have to listen to Miss Schultz’s ramblings on sunbonnets and older men.

But he couldn’t help feeling sorry for a lady having to leave home and everything else familiar the way she had done. The Yankees had forced plenty of hard changes on a boy who’d had to become the man of the house at fifteen when they killed his father.

Jethro shook his head, willing the bad memories to leave him alone, as he shoved open the door to his house. He could sympathize with Miss Schultz, but his sympathies were all he’d give such a talkative woman. She was the complete opposite of what he’d pray for if he seriously wanted a wife one day.