

Two



I'm excited, nervous, and a little scared, but I know my plans are sound, and I won't ever have to depend on anyone again.

—From the journal of Olivia Carmichael

Five Weeks Later
Sacramento, California

“**F**ifteen more minutes to Sacramento, next stop,” the conductor shouted from the back of the railcar.

Olivia scribbled furiously to finish her latest diary entry. The need to finish writing about the past before she set foot in her future drove her to complete the entry before she reached her new destination.

The book, a gift from their teacher, had become a close friend and the safest place to capture her thoughts and opinions. She only had a bit more time to write out everything that had happened during the past few weeks. Events that led her to make a major redirected change in her life from

everything she knew. She didn't want to forget, but she didn't want anyone in her new life knowing about her past, either.

Even now, thinking about her parents' accident, followed by the loss of her home and social status, left an aching hole in her chest. She found it difficult to breathe. How could the society friends who gave to charity have no charity to give her? She shook her head. If she pondered it too long, her body would seize up, and she'd be unable to move.

Her new roommate at the training school, Jenny Millard, had found her this way numerous times and helped her snap out of her trance and keep moving forward. Barely. If it wasn't for Jenny, Olivia didn't think she would've survived the first week. But somehow, she found the ability to study, pass her exams, and not let anyone else know she was broken inside. The immense grief would overcome her at odd times. While sitting in class taking a test or in line for the noon-day meeting. The worst was at night. Sharing a room for the first time in her life, the noises, both inside the building they stayed in as well as outside, were new and unfamiliar. Gone were her routines and the people she cared for.

All of it made her head spin.

As the train swerved around a bend, the person next to her jostled her leg, causing the pencil to scratch across the page. She closed her eyes and pressed her lips together to hold back a retort. Additional jerking from the train forced her to pause writing and grip the book tightly to her chest. As soon as the tracks straightened out, she went back to writing. She wanted it all down and out of her head before the next stop. Before her new life began.

The train slowed to an abrupt halt, and Olivia raised her head. The loud commotion distracted her a few moments before she placed her pencil in her reticule. She hadn't paid attention to the five-minute warning, and now there was no

time to put her journal away as the passengers around her stood.

“Excuse me.” The older lady next to her pushed at her legs for her to move. She stood and stepped into the aisle. Several others were already pressing forward, and they caught her up within their path. She stumbled down a few rows before she stepped into an empty set of seats. Her traveling group passed, and she nodded at them.

“Livvy, where are your things?” Jenny stopped, holding up the passengers behind her.

“I had to move out of the way. I need to go back to my seat. Go ahead.” Olivia waved her hand. “I’ll catch up with you outside.” She pushed her way back through those still exiting, passing those sitting in their seats to travel to the next stop. Grabbing her luggage, she struggled to carry it all down the passageway as she hustled to the exit.

Bright sunlight blared in her eyes, and she halted in the doorway. She blinked, then searched until she saw her group crossing the street straight ahead. She blew out her breath. She’d follow behind in just a bit. After embracing this moment, where all the plans she wrote out in her journal would begin, she wanted to capture this juncture as it would be the perfect first step in following those plans.

* * *

LUKE TAYLOR STEPPED out of the Sacramento post office, his new path forward decided and sealed. His mailed reply to Evelyn Watson, the bride he’d picked from the few responses to his ad, was now with the postmaster. He, who had sworn off marriage, was joining the herd to slaughter. Not right away, but soon enough. There was no turning back now.

A lump formed in his throat, and he swallowed.

If all went to plan, she'd be here next month.

His stomach rolled, and he lengthened his strides along the boardwalk as he reflected on Evelyn's letter.

Clear and concise, she'd grasped what he asked for and accepted his terms. She didn't gush over how she would love him or mention any relationship expectations like the rest of the respondents. No, she wrote about handling the chores around the house. And teaching his sisters. Exactly what he wanted.

Why did the other potential mail-order brides think he was lonely and looking for love? They also assumed he had wealth because he lived near the gold mines. But the mines hadn't paid out the way the papers claimed. His ranch's success, one of the largest in the area, was because of his family's hard work.

Luke stopped at the corner, caught his reflection in the barber shop glass, and grimaced. Women expected more than what he could offer. Some have said he was handsome, but he was only a man. A man who took his responsibilities seriously and wanted nothing to do with romantic notions, especially after Sarah, his so-called former fiancée, left him and the girls behind and forgotten. No, for him, marriage encompassed only two motivations—help raise his sisters and provide a woman's influence as they grew.

Something, he reluctantly admitted, he couldn't provide.

He'd marry, but he wouldn't fall in love or deal with someone who wanted to fall in love with him.

He pulled the brim of his hat lower and moved on. A bead of sweat dripped down his back from the late summer heat. In another month, the temperatures would cool off. He couldn't wait.

As he headed toward the train depot, he passed the hotel, then the ice cream shop, grinning at the way the children

pressed their faces against the glass as they looked inside. But as he approached the dress shop, his smile faltered. Guilt washed over him. Caroline and Rose hadn't been shopping once since Ma died two years ago. And he hadn't realized the omission until just this moment.

His feet stopped in the doorway. He had no idea how to shop for dresses. Nor any interest. They could wait another month, couldn't they?

"Excuse me." A lady's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Pardon me, ma'am." He grabbed the brim of his hat and inclined his head. Stepping aside, he allowed room for a lady with an enormous fake bird on her hat to enter the shop. A young girl turned to look at him over her shoulder as she followed her mother inside. He remembered Caroline at that age, and guilt pressed harder against him. She had grown so much this past year, taking on more responsibilities around the house and helping raise Rose. All while handling the death of their ma with strength and resilience.

Was she really almost thirteen? He shook his head. Even though she believed she could handle anything, Luke knew she needed a lady around to guide her.

He crossed the street to where he'd left Admiral, his horse.

Ranching he understood, but parenting and marriage were a different story. Lately, when Caroline's moods swung back and forth like his bull's tail, he'd skedaddle out of the house to tend the cows. At least those he could understand. Womenfolk? He knew nothing about them. Ma had managed all those matters before.

Yes, he was doing the right thing—for his sisters' sake. They needed a ma, and Evelyn Watson would fit the bill. He shifted his hat back and scratched his head. As much as he needed this woman's help now, he wished to prolong the inevitable as long as possible.

He picked up the pace. Now that the railway had connected the entire country, his future steamed forward as fast as the Overland Flyer. The new expansion shortened the time it took to travel West by several weeks. And with those shortened timetables, Evelyn's appearance would arrive faster than a calf chasing his mama.

A shiver coursed through Luke. If only he had more time or didn't need to marry at all. Marrying someone for convenience didn't sit well with him, but he would not open his heart to more pain. People he loved died or left, and he wouldn't take any more risks than necessary.

Cutting through the station, he dodged folks coming and going on that newly arrived passenger train while remnants of smoke puffed out the smokestack. A group of ladies descended and moved straight across the platform, chattering and oblivious to those around them.

A young boy darted in his path. Luke jerked to the left. "Whoa!"

"Sorry, sir," the boy called as he ran away.

Luke acknowledged the apology and then observed his surroundings.

A young lady stood at the exit of the passenger car. Loose strands of blonde hair blew around her face, but she didn't swipe them away. Instead, her eyes darted back and forth before she set her things at the top of the steps.

Why did she pause? Did she need help? A strange protectiveness surged inside him.

She closed her eyes, tilted her head back, and a small smile spread across her lips.

An unbidden awareness engulfed him as everything around him faded into the background except her. Would Evelyn glow like this woman? He swallowed, smothering the spark that struck his heart. He wanted none of this awareness

floating through his veins. What he wanted was a wife to manage his home and help raise his sisters, not a pretty lady who would drive him to distraction.

He forced himself to move but couldn't help watching her out of the corner of his eye. Sweat broke out on his forehead. If Evelyn looked anything like this woman, he'd indeed be distracted.