

Three



When I get to California, I plan to fend for myself. No father deciding everything for me. No servants to take care of my needs. No more misplaced trust in a fiancé. My future depends on my own independence. Just like our country claimed independence from England, I'm claiming independence from the male species.

—From the journal of Olivia Carmichael

From the steps of the train, Olivia let the warmth from the late afternoon sun seep into her soul and bolster her courage. Everything would be fine. She could feel it.

Breathing in deeply, it smelled ... familiar? How could that be?

She jerked her head back and opened her eyes. Yet only unfamiliar sights assailed her. Porters carried baggage out of the coaches while passengers boarded for the next destination. A handful of women in bright-colored dresses and heavily adorned hats walked along the wooden sidewalk across the

street and darted inside the shop facing the train station. Horses pulled wagons in both directions on brick and cobblestone-lined streets.

Olivia let herself relax. She didn't know what she'd expected but was thankful for dust-free roads. Cobblestones were more civilized and less dirty, in her mind. Hopefully, she found Washton the same.

Water sloshed from somewhere behind the train, reminding her of Cincinnati and the Ohio River. The familiar odor must be the Sacramento River. A slew of memories bombarded her, but she shoved them aside. The buildings, the roads, and the people were different.

She sighed. Maybe all these people would not pay her any mind.

"Extra! Extra! Read about the circus in town. Ten cents. Excuse me, ma'am. Would ya care to support a young boy and buy a paper?"

She turned toward the voice and gasped.

A boy with dirty blond hair held a newspaper smudged in black ink. He looked at her expectantly, his grin showing his missing teeth.

She cringed. "I'm sorry. Not today. But thank you."

Disappointment filled his face, and he ran off, his canvas bag full of papers bouncing against his back.

Her chest tightened. The few measly coins left in her reticule had to last till her first paycheck, whenever that would be. Maybe she could purchase one then. She clasped her hands and squeezed, then glanced about. Where did the other teachers go? The hotels were straight ahead. If she hurried, she'd surely catch them.

Pressing her hat on her head, she grabbed the handle of her portmanteau. Her hand slipped. Oh, her wretched sweaty palm! With no time to stash her journal, she tucked the book

under her arm and awkwardly lifted the case with both hands. As the journal slid, she squeezed her elbow tight against her side to hold the book in place then lurched from the train.

“Pardon me. Excuse me!” Olivia wove through the crowd, focused on the direction she figured the other teachers must have gone.

A gust of wind blew her hat backward into the air. She immediately let go of her portmanteau as she reached behind. Her journal landed on the ground with a hard scrape, pages opening this way and that.

She swung around and crashed into a solid warm body, the abrupt halt jostling her luggage until it hit something hard.

“Whoa, there, ma’am.” The voice had an earthy tone to it, masculine and deep. Or at least that’s what it sounded like with her ear plastered against his chest. The vibration tickled her cheek, and her hands grew warm where they rested on his ribs. The sensation traveled to her back where arms surrounded her and held her close.

He felt stable, strong, and secure.

She shivered but not from the cold.

And then, a different sort of panic took over.

* * *

THE FAINT SCENT of lavender permeated Luke’s brain as his leg throbbed. He glanced down, and his breath hitched. The lady he’d admired from afar was now nestled firmly against him. He flexed his muscles, and his heart sped up. She fit perfectly against his six-foot two-inch frame.

Alarmed, he dropped his arms and stared.

She stepped back and glared.

He blinked. Not the response he expected.

As he studied her, his world shifted. Even shooting

daggers, her eyes shined crystal clear. The color of the sk ... wait—what was he doing?

He checked the hat in his hand. “Excuse me, ma’am. I believe this is yours.”

She quickly snatched the headpiece from him. “Thank you, sir.”

“My pleasure, ma’am.” He dipped his head, but she bent to retrieve the book sprawled on the ground, then turned away from him. stood on her toes and searched the area.

No adulation or fawning. She paid him no mind, and for some reason, the desire to assist her further grew. He cleared his throat and spoke to her back. “The wind can be mighty strong in these parts, especially when trains arrive or depart. You might want to tie the strings a little tighter in the future.” He winced. No woman liked to be told how to dress by a stranger. His brain was addled, no two ways about it. Did sending for a mail-order bride make one lose one’s mind?

His comments caused her to whirl around, her beautiful blue eyes reflecting a hint of annoyance. Then she slapped her hat on her head and tied the strings, each movement harsh and overexaggerated, until the bow she made secured her hat so tightly, it caused an indentation in her chin. “Like this?” She raised her eyebrows. “Never mind. I really must be going.” She didn’t wait for a response, just turned and gathered her things.

“Are you looking for someone?” he asked.

Since her back was to him, her answer was muffled. “I don’t even know you.”

“I meant no offense, ma’am. I do understand hats and ribbons. My sisters have the same problem at times.” Why was he still talking to her? And about ribbons and hats?

She stopped, turned, and tilted her head, her voice calm and controlled. “Well, if you have sisters, sir, I’m sure you’re aware, sometimes there just isn’t time to tie the ribbons.”

He laughed—a great big belly laugh. He liked her spunk. He liked that she didn't bat her eyes at him. He liked *her*. “You've stated the truth of the matter. Caroline and Rose are always running late and leaving their ribbons untied.”

Her features softened, and the right side of her mouth lifted a smidge. She searched his face. For what? He didn't know.

Though he needed to go, he couldn't walk away without offering his help. His mother had drilled manners into him from a young age, so he reached for the luggage still in her hands. “I won't leave you stranded here. Where's your destination?”

She tugged her suitcase back, her expression wary, which irked him. He considered himself dependable. Then again, he'd want his sisters to exercise caution.

Stepping back, he raised his hands. “I meant no disrespect, ma'am. I know I'm a stranger, but let's pretend I'm a porter or something and can help you get to where you want to go. Then we can each be on our way. All right?”

Her gaze never faltered as he waited for her nod.

“What's the name?” He reached for the handle again and raised his eyebrow.

Before he could touch the handle, she set the suitcase down and crossed her arms.

“Your hotel. The name of your hotel?” He pinched the bridge of his nose. Even he knew asking a strange woman her name in the middle of a train station wasn't done. Of course, asking where she was staying was probably worse, but how else could he get her luggage there? “I just want to help, ma'am. I promise.”

She blew out her breath. “I believe the establishment started with an *O*.”

“You mean the Orleans?”

“Yes, that sounds correct. You really don’t have to help me.”

“The Orleans is not far, just two blocks straight down Second Street here.” He held her portmanteau with one hand and pointed with the other.

“Really, I can manage myself.” She touched his hand before he could pull away.

A fissure of heat traveled up his arm, and their eyes met in surprise.

Her mouth gaped open, and he heard her quick intake of air.

Or maybe that was him.

If he didn’t complete this errand soon, his wits might desert him entirely. He strode off, not bothering to wait. Was she alone? And why? If she was married, shame on her husband, because if Luke were her husband, he wouldn’t leave her to fend for herself.

Aggravated with his thoughts, he didn’t dare look back. He didn’t want to feel attraction to anyone. Attraction led to dealings of the heart. And once hearts were involved, one couldn’t control the emotions that swirled within the blasted organ.

By picking a mail-order bride, his mind chose someone to share his life and responsibilities with, not his heart. Of course, he loved his sisters, but he was born into that. Loving a wife? That was voluntary. And he planned to keep his heart locked up and the key firmly lost.