

Two



Today, I'm traveling by train for the first time. It's very cramped and smelly, but the view is amazing. So many different landscapes within each state we travel through. I can't wait for my fresh start in California.

—From the journal of Jenny Millard

A hard jerk startled Jenny awake.
“Train station. Washton stop. End of the line,”
the conductor yelled.

Jenny shook the cobwebs from her head and stood, holding her bag close. She limped toward the exit, gingerly stepping down from the train. Not a single person greeted her, like the other passengers, so she hobbled around them to get out of their way. Her pinched feet throbbed, but she was used to the pain. She was more worried about the reception she would receive from Livvy, even though Livvy said she would always be there.

She glanced up at the sky as the midday sun shone on her face. School would still be in session, right? Should she approach after or during? What if her assumption she could stay with Livvy was all wrong?

With no other option, she had to try. She inspected her front and made sure her coat was properly buttoned. Her valise at her side, she headed away from the station with a smile pasted on her face. As she moved across the street, two ladies passed her with a friendly nod.

Jenny stood a little taller.

Stepping onto the wooden planks of the boardwalk, she passed along the side of the livery before stopping at the corner. Livvy had shared that the schoolhouse was beyond the church, so Jenny headed in that direction. She crossed the main street and continued on the boardwalk, eyes scanning the planks so she didn't trip.

Halfway, she set down her luggage to catch her breath and look around. According to her letters, Livvy's experience was different from her own. Her friend loved Washton, and the people here seemed to love her back.

What she wouldn't give to have had a town like this.

Water splashed against the shore from the nearby Sacramento River. The waterway was wide and vast, reminding her of the Bible story of the Red Sea. Why that reminded her of a Bible story, she had no idea. Maybe because of the newly painted building with the giant steeple sprouting out of the roof. As she studied the small structure, Jenny lifted her gaze to the cross at the top.

She had always wanted to attend church. But her family rarely had time for church or reading the Bible, like so many other families she knew. So, her youthful yearning to learn about God was replaced with a basic understanding. Jenny

knew He was there. She just figured she was insignificant in His eyes.

Jenny couldn't stand there all day, so she picked up her luggage and gingerly stepped forward. Across the street, a gentleman exited the church doors slowly, placing something in his front shirt pocket. He strode across the middle of the street, and Jenny breathed a sigh of relief she would not encounter him on the boardwalk.

Her toe caught on something, and with her hands full, down she went. "Ow."

A few moments later she heard strong, solid footsteps approach. A gust of warmth engulfed her. "Are you hurt, miss?"

Jenny's gaze landed on soot-covered pants, then traveled farther up into the profile of a giant man with dark hair and dark eyes full of concern. He was the gentleman she saw exit the church doors. And he held her gently. She swallowed, not out of uneasiness, but because of the sensations she had never experienced before.

He leaned forward till his gaze met hers. "Are you sure you're not hurt?"

Her breath caught. Then she blinked and glanced down at his arms where they held her. Gentle and so full of care—for her. They were so inviting. Warmth flooded her on the inside as much as the outside.

Her gaze shot back to his, and the concern in his face lit a flame inside. What mesmerizing eyes. She could stare into them all day long. And they were close to hers. So close, in fact, she saw mottled skin under his right eye and cheek as if he had been burned a long time ago. She understood burns since she had done the laundry for her family of nine, along with her siblings. One of them received a burn one time that left a spot of discoloration, but nothing like this. What had hurt him?

He squinted, as if the sun was too bright. It broke her daydream.

"I don't think so, sir, but thank you." She tried to push herself up, but he hovered too close for her to move her arm.

As she struggled, he reached down, picked her up, and set her on her feet.

Heat rose to her cheeks as she quickly brushed out her skirts and set herself to rights.

He continued to stare at her without saying anything.

Her cheeks warmed. "Really, sir. I'm fine. I'm more embarrassed than anything."

He moved his hand behind his back, but continued to search her face. The way he focused on her was quite endearing. Jenny hadn't had many people fuss over her in all her twenty years. Not a family member, nor a friend, and especially not a handsome stranger.

She smiled shyly back at him, but he didn't respond in kind. Instead, he stepped back and made a sour grimace. "Well, if you don't need anything more, I'll be going now. Good day, miss." And he turned to walk away. After two steps, he glanced over his shoulder and then continued on.

Jenny didn't know what to think. But before she lost her nerve, she called out, "Sir, I'm looking for a friend. She is the schoolteacher here, Miss Livvy Carmichael. Do you think you could help me find her?"

* * *

REN FROZE. His heart beating overtime. He turned around and saw the vulnerability on the face of this beautiful young lady and couldn't say no. And even though he did not know who this Miss Carmichael was, he would help this woman find her. Because he couldn't walk away.

She should be frightened of him. Most women were.

But instead, she'd asked for his help.

Half of him wanted to run and hide and never see her again, but the other half of him wanted to stay. To see how long before she was repelled by his ugly scars.

He should not be anywhere near here. The only reason was because he spent his lunch hours in communion with God at the church alone, which allowed him to avoid attending church on Sundays.

The wind blew, and she pulled her cloak tighter around her. The material must be thin, since it appeared to have seen better days. Not that he judged her—he just noticed things. That's how it was. He watched more than he participated.

Which was why it didn't escape his notice that her worn carpet bag looked like it carried everything she owned. And the dark circles under her eyes, causing the shadows around her thin face, told him she had eaten little lately. The way she felt in his arms confirmed that too.

His accelerated heartbeat urged him forward, so he took two steps toward her. "Yes, I can help. Let's check the schoolhouse first to see if your friend is there."

Relief flooded her face, and Ren found himself pulling his shoulders back, enjoying playing the hero for once. It wasn't something he had ever had the chance to do. Back home, the kids he grew up with mocked him or avoided him. And that didn't change as he aged. Which, so far, wasn't the case here. Although he didn't venture out much.

A blur of color came from around the corner.

Squawk.

The young miss glanced over her shoulder, screamed, and ran around Ren, hiding behind his back.

He waved his arms. "Shoo. Get out of here."

A rooster spread his wings and eyed him wildly. Then, he paced the ground, his beady little eyes focused on Ren.

He had never seen a bird act so peculiar. He stepped closer and glared at the mongrel.

The cranky bird stopped and stared back. Then he squawked, moved his head back and forth, and ran off in the direction he came.

Satisfied the threat was over, Ren picked up her suitcase.

She rushed toward him and tried to pull it out of his hands. "I can manage."

"You don't have to do everything on your own. It would be my honor to help. I'm Ren, by the way."

Curiosity sparkled in her eyes. "Wren like the bird? It's an unusual name."

"It's actually short for Clarence, but don't let anyone know." He whispered the last part and gave what he thought was a smile, but it felt more like a grimace. He had had little experience putting a pleasant look on his face, so it felt completely unnatural.

A beautiful smile bloomed from her lips as if the secret was a big deal. "My name is Miss Jenny Millard."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Millard." He nodded, secured his position to her right side, and led her toward the schoolhouse. By the faint sounds of the children, they should find it soon.

The boardwalk ended, and they stepped onto the dirt road. Together, they followed it around the side of the church. He carried her belongings while she kept pace alongside him. His heart hadn't been this full in forever.

She'd looked so pretty standing on the pathway all by herself, with her straight dark hair clipped in back and her cute little hat perched on her head.

Cute? He frowned. He had never thought of cute things in

his entire life. He needed to focus on something else. Anything. But the only thing that came to mind was how to hammer metal on an anvil or to explain he was new in town and didn't know too many people. With no idea how to broach either topic and get a conversation started, he climbed the hill in silence.

She faltered, and he placed his arm under her elbow. Heat traveled up to his neck, but he didn't remove his arm. It was an honor to offer assistance.

The path straightened, and the children's voices grew louder. Good. They'd found the school quickly. Now to find the teacher so he could be on his way.

His chest tightened. Was it because he didn't want to say goodbye to Miss Millard? Or was it because the schoolyard brought about an influx of memories he'd rather not remember? Of course, this schoolhouse looked nothing like the one he'd attended. Gideon had mentioned the town had to rebuild it after the latest flood. It stood so tall and sturdy now, with a group of men working on the final touches. Ren couldn't imagine it damaged.

The children settled outside on the ground in a half-circle facing a woman who was most likely the sought-after Miss Carmichael. She sat on a tree stump. And that crazy bird paced back and forth right behind her.

Would the animal attack? Should Ren shout "Watch out" or something to warn her?

But as he focused on the scene, the teacher paid the rooster no mind. And the rooster clucked as he paced, stopping and looking at the students, as if he watched over them—or made sure they paid attention.

Had he been hit over the head with a six-pound rounding hammer? It could be the only answer to what Ren was seeing in front of him. And the only explanation for why he forgot all

about his self-imposed isolation to help the black-haired beauty standing beside him. And for the mixed-up feelings on the inside, which he couldn't identify.

He might have to tell Gideon he was too sick to finish work today.