

Two



I enjoy visiting different communities, checking in with acquaintances and ensuring their wellness. Making sure they have what they need to survive. I hope I'm making a difference in their lives.

—From the journal of Alex Sinclair

Traveling south of Washton

Now that the initial excitement of leaving had subsided, the cold, wet weather sank in and took root, causing Sarah's bones to ache. Using the slicker as a shield, she placed her hand on her stomach, wishing it wasn't so sensitive to movement. She hadn't thought about this part. She didn't want to be a burden and have to stop frequently to settle the queasiness. Doing so would not endear her to the man next to her.

The wagon rattled slowly through yet another turn, the darkness providing the illusion they traveled in a circle, which

did not help her cause. Each bend looked the same. Felt the same. Sarah had never traveled this far south before. Yet Mr. Smith seemed to know exactly where they were going. That brought about a small comfort.

Mr. Smith's gaze caught hers. "Comfortable, lass?"

Chilled, drenched, and exhausted, but she wouldn't complain. "As comfortable as I can be."

He nodded. Water fell from his hat brim. "Aye, you'll get used to it."

She smiled back, not wanting him to see her as incapable of dealing with the elements.

He faced forward again, and so did she, her eyes unable to focus on anything in the darkness. It almost made things unreal. As if she wasn't embarking on the biggest adventure of her life.

He hummed. A hymn, if she wasn't mistaken.

Happy to focus on something other than her fickle middle, the melody filtered through her mind as his deep baritone lingered on the end of the refrain. He emitted a lovely sound.

A peace enveloped her and she closed her eyes.

The wagon jerked and her eyes flew open. The quick turn caused her stomach to flip. She clung to the side of the buckboard, holding on for dear life. She had to find something to take her mind off the movement. "Thank you for the slicker. I'm not as chilled."

He glanced her way before steering the horses through a dip in the trail. "Glad to hear it. Are ye still shivering?"

"A bit. But it's better."

He nodded. An awkward silence pressed on in the darkness.

She fought to stay awake while she clung to the wagon seat under the blanket. Would it be rude to doze off? Could she even? Although sleep might ease the dizziness, she didn't want

to be startled awake every so often. Her stomach wouldn't do well managing that. It wouldn't do well no matter, so she had to find a way to handle the movement. She gulped down an air bubble.

Miles passed, and the wood particles pressed into her hand as she fought for control of the contents of her dinner. She hoped not to ask to stop. But the queasiness persisted. Yawning, she wished the sun would rise so she could see. The darkness on the open trail was thick, making it difficult to know how far they had traveled from Washton.

"Whoa, Bear." Mr. Smith pulled on the reins. The wagon rocked to a halt.

Sarah sat up. "Why are we stopping?"

"Need everyone to take a break." He jumped down from the wagon and began unhooking his horse. "We're carrying a lot of weight, and it's important to stop frequently."

She let out a quiet exhale and closed her eyes, letting the relief from the stillness settle in. Did he have any idea this was what she needed?

"Dae ye want to walk around a bit?" His voice was in her right ear and she jumped, her stomach retreating from its earlier complaint. "Sorry, didn't mean to spook ye."

She willed her heart to calm again. "No, I'm okay. I'll stay right here."

"Suit yourself. We'll be off soon." He walked away. Then came back and handed her something. "Here. Eat this."

His eyes searched hers as she took the soda cracker he offered.

He had noticed.

Nibbling on the gift, she watched him reconnect his horse and climb back into his seat, causing the wagon to dip.

"Hiya."

They lurched until they moved into a steady roll.

Sarah glanced at the man sitting next to her. He was big and brawny yet refined in his manners. He settled in the wagon seat as if he had been in that position for years. His large, strong hands gripped the reins in a firm hold. Hands that could hurt someone of her size. Was she safe with him? She dismissed the thought. He'd been so gentle when he wrapped the blanket and coat around her. He acted concerned. For her. Grateful someone cared, she released her breath. After all she'd gone through, she hadn't had much time to think.

New questions arose. Where were they going? How long did he stay in one place? But she kept any questions to herself, for a smidgen of fear he would turn back if provoked. For all she knew, he was going in circles on purpose till she asked to go home.

But where was home?

She didn't have one. Not really. Not since her parents died in that awful flood five years ago. Leaving her no choice but to live with another family and work on their ranch. But then she fell in love with Michael, and they made plans to leave. Make their own way. Plans that died along with him six months ago. There hadn't been time to grieve. Not when chores beckoned, including nursing his ma who got sick soon after.

A tear slipped down her cheek. This was not what she planned. What they planned. How was everything now so different? Unfamiliar and a little frightening? She gathered the slicker around her tighter, yearning to get out of her wet clothes. But she only packed two other dresses. And since the rain kept coming, she didn't want to soak a second wardrobe.

A cold tremor flowed up her spine. Sitting this close to Mr. Smith, the man seemed much larger than when she stood in front of the wagon store he'd set up near the ferry. He had shared stories of his travels, and she had wanted to know more. Never did she think she would become a part of them.

But when things went awry over the past twenty-four hours, this was the only option she could think of. She was fortunate he agreed she could tag along.

Mr. Smith hummed another familiar hymn. “For the Beauty of the Earth.” His low baritone vibrated along the wagon seat, bringing comfort to her ice-cold body. If she wasn’t freezing, she’d have joined in. Anything to ignore the motion of the wagon. Although the cracker helped.

Soon Sarah’s eyes drooped, the swaying of the wagon lulling her to sleep. No longer able to fight the pull, her head found a solid place to lean on, and she allowed herself to relax and rest.

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THE MOMENT MISS BAKER placed her head on his shoulder, Alex forgot about the rain and the cold, forgot about the darkness, and forgot about his loneliness.

He shouldn’t allow her to lean on him, but she needed rest and a break. After seeing her cringing and barely holding herself together with each turn, he pretended his horse needed a break. How did she expect to travel long distances if she suffered from wagon sickness?

His palm brushed over his day-old whiskers as he pondered the question burning in his gut. What possessed her to leave everything behind and go off traipsing around with a stranger? Was something so bad that she had to run away? And how long before she would ask to go home?

The desire for an answer to these questions surprised him. Usually, he kept his distance from anyone’s personal business. Yet he wanted to know, and he didn’t want to disturb her slumber, so he kept driving. Past the community called Davisville, where he would’ve normally rested, instead

changing his plans to stop at the next town on his route. He concentrated all his energy on the muddy road until the sun's light began to peek over the rise behind them, making it easier to see problem areas.

An hour later, Miss Baker stirred. And then the pressure on his shoulder lifted. The damp chill enveloped him from where she had rested her head.

"Where are we?" she asked while pushing back the slicker and revealing disordered red hair, which had dried in all sorts of directions while she slept.

"A wee bit to Silveyville."

She furrowed her brow.

"Southwest from where we started."

She tilted her head.

He sighed. His simple answers weren't enough for her. At least he knew something about this area. "We're following the stagecoach route. The one used by the Pony Express riders when they were late for the steamboat bound for San Francisco. Silveyville was one of their stops."

She sat up a bit straighter. "Oh ... I've heard of the Pony Express." She glanced around in confusion. "There's not much here."

"We haven't reached town yet."

She nodded. "Have we been traveling all night?"

"Aye, lassie." His arms could barely move.

"Aren't you tired?" She peered at him in the growing sunlight.

"Aye." He let the word linger in the stillness of the morning.

"Why didn't you stop?"

Alex looked at her. Her large green eyes stared innocently back at him. No hidden questions, no manipulation. Just pure curiosity. How could he answer this delicately? "Well, lass. I

didn't think you'd be happy with me handling you while you were asleep, so I decided to keep going."

She bit her lip and turned her head away. It was obvious she hadn't thought about the fact she was alone with a grown man in the middle of nowhere.

"Thank you." She reached over and touched his arm. Warmth spread to his fingers. "Thank you for treating me with respect and being a gentleman. This may sound foolish because I barely know you, but I trust you."

Alex coughed into his hand, trying to cover the startled breath he almost let out. True, he was a gentleman in every sense of the word, but ladies did not just ride off with any gentleman without her family's consent. And if word got out now, she would surely be ruined. Although out west the rules were ever changing since women could own a business and support themselves without a husband.

"Does your family know you ran away?"

A fire lit up a fleck of gold in her pretty green eyes. "I did not run away."

He raised his right hand in surrender.

"For your information, I am old enough to make my own choices."

He'd let the topic drop, for now, but he had a right to know about her family and what might be chasing after them.

"What happens now?" She brushed at the blanket.

"Well, I'll set up my shop. While you go and see if you can find someone willing to take you in."

Her eyes widened.

"You did say you needed a ride to the next town. This is a town, although a wee one." He shrugged.

Her eyes narrowed. "How long do you plan to stay at this stop?"

"Why are ye asking?"

“What if I can’t find a place, can I continue on with you? Maybe I could help in your wagon. I’m a hard worker. And I’d like to learn about what you do. Where do we get all of these items to sell? How do we replace them once we sell them?”

He pulled up on the reins. Cleared his throat. “Let’s get something straight, Miss Baker.”

“It’s Sarah.”

He glanced off in the distance and took in a deep breath. “Miss Baker. Dinnae fash yerself over my business. You’re riding along for a short time, so there’s no ‘we’ in it at all. Understand?”

She shrugged her shoulder as if she didn’t believe him.

“Also, you will not need to help. Once I stop, you may go explore, shop, or whatever it is you want to do and stay away.”

As he spoke, her bright, beautiful smile slowly transformed into a frown. And by George, he didn’t like how that made him feel. He flicked the reins to move his horse again, his eyes searching far down the road, wishing a town would appear soon.

His protective instincts and a need to make her happy settled into his chest. He had to be rid of her and fast, before he became unable to send her away at all.