

Three



My reinjured leg is holding me back from the job I want to do. Why can't anything ever happen the way it's supposed to happen?

—From the journal of Lydia Spencer

Will could see Miss Spencer's eyes droop. She needed rest. The bundle in his hands had cooled, so it was time to take his leave. Besides, he hadn't talked about his past in a long time, and it added to the melancholy he'd had earlier. "I've wasted enough of your time." He raised the cloth. "I'm going to dispose of this and let you rest." He patted Fido's head. "You watch over her. She's all yours."

"Thank you." A small whisper echoed in the room.

He stopped in the doorway. But didn't turn around. "For what?"

"For the poultice. My ankle feels better. But also for sharing. I didn't mean to pry."

He raised his hand. "You are most welcome. It's nice to

think of my parents. Not of losing them, but of their memory. And the reminder God is good. He has blessed me even in the losses. There will always be loss in life, but how we cling to God is what helps us move forward.” The words rang hollow in his ears. He’d said them before. Many times, in fact. And had believed them.

But at present, they felt forced, and he didn’t know why. “Hope you feel better soon.” He closed the door partway and strode to the kitchen. He rinsed the cloth in the sink and placed it back in its spot, ready for the next person who needed a compress to heal a hurt.

Memories flooded him from his time in this house. The laughter around the table. The many meals shared with his adoptive family. Both before the flood and after, when they all shared their hurts, fears, and prayers. Daily reminders of God’s grace and blessings that came and went like the seasons did.

He remembered Luke’s anger. How stoic he became after his father passed. The way he and Luke each handled the day-to-day ups and downs after their fathers died. Watching those unfold had fascinated Will. He wanted to understand how two people who shared the same God responded in such contrasting ways. Was everyone’s faith the same? Or different?

Those questions were what drove Will to go to seminary. He wanted to make a difference in his hometown, with the people he cared about. Now, here he was, five years later, doing that. Or at least trying to. It was much harder than he anticipated. Not that the townsfolk weren’t receptive to his teaching. The church was full on any given Sunday. But life had a way of throwing a rock into the wheel as it rolled by, causing it to bend or break. And Will didn’t realize he’d been collecting rocks and how they could weigh a pastor down.

He didn’t mind knowing people’s personal business. In fact, he prayed for all the things he knew about. It was the

helpless feeling he had when he couldn't answer the *why*. Or couldn't fix the circumstances. Sometimes companionship was all he could offer, and it was never enough. Even though it had to be.

He shook his head and walked out the front door and back to the party. Luke saw him and headed his way.

"Everything okay?"

"I think so. Felt awkward seeing her in my old room. I used the poultice. She's resting." His gaze roamed over the gathering, then landed on Luke. "How long is she staying with you?"

Luke studied him. "I'm not sure. She's here for the wedding, obviously, but with her injury, we've encouraged her to stay longer. Possibly the entire summer. Olivia has recommended her as the schoolmarm next term.

"That's what Chrissy said. The board approved her then?"

"I'm not certain it's a done deal yet. She's from the same school Olivia and Jenny came from, and they can vouch for her."

"She was in Dicksonville before?"

Luke frowned. "Why all the questions?"

"Uh ... It's just good business to know the people in our community."

Luke nodded, a smirk spreading across his face.

Olivia approached them, and Luke's face lit up into a bright beacon of love. How different their worlds were now. How time healed hurts and new life abounded. The love that bloomed between Luke and Olivia, and also Ren and Jenny, was hard to miss. They each had hardships and hurts but found someone to share them with. A partner to have through the next round of life. The four of them moving on to a new chapter.

Leaving Will behind.

Those thoughts were not supposed to rattle around a

pastor's head. "Congratulations, again." He looked out at the field where the guests still mingled. No one could tell a cow, lamb, dog, and rooster had run through it earlier.

"Thank you, Will, for a beautiful ceremony. And your help in getting us to this moment." Olivia smiled up at Luke, who only had eyes for her.

Will grinned at his friends. "I'll leave you two to your moment." As much as he wanted to jump on his horse and ride back to town, he strode into the fray, picked up his guitar, and sat with the band.

As the strains of a new song began, Will strummed along, allowing the music to soothe his soul. Maybe that's what bothered him most. Everyone moved on, and Will had to stand by, congratulate them, and then go back to his unchanged life.

The plan he set for himself when his parents perished all those years ago. He wanted steady and calm. And he believed the clergy would provide that. Spend time in God's word all day. Offer encouragement to others. Hold someone's hand when they struggled. Pray for people.

Will looked up from his guitar, watching the folks he'd known his entire life dance to the music.

Pastor Kenneth had been there for him. Solid. Continuously fed Will wisdom and grace. Allowed him to cry. Listened. Boy, was he a good listener. Will didn't want to look weak in front of his sister or the Taylors, but with Pastor Kenneth, he could cry, with anger or with tears. And then he'd steer Will to the Bible to find answers in Scripture. That is what he wanted to do for others. Why he became a pastor.

He *was* doing those things. But the role had other responsibilities he hadn't considered. All the eyes watching him. Insisting he needed a wife. How he should reword a sermon. There wasn't enough music. There was too much

music. The seats were hard to sit on for the length of his message.

Did people think they were being helpful when they made these statements? Sure, he needed to know what his flock liked and disliked. He didn't want to lose people because of something he could change. But each of those comments hit like a boulder instead of a pebble. Then they would walk out the door and not return until seven days later. Seven days for him to ponder each word, pray about things, and make adjustments. But the following week, they didn't like any of the changes he made.

Wasn't church about hearing God, feeling God, and worshipping with God and the community? Did any of his churchgoers think on those things? Or was everything about the individual elements taking place during the service? If they told him these things to his face, what weren't they telling him?

Will had thick skin. He had to for this role. He also had to have compassion. And patience. Some saw him as the young boy he once was. Others reminded him of his parents and what great ranchers they were and how much their loss was felt. He knew that one. He missed them too. Every day. To lose his home and his family in one big swoop stayed with a person. Always.

His gaze kept finding the window of his old bedroom as he strummed his guitar. How did Miss Spencer get under his skin? He should walk away and not give her another thought. But something held him here, in this place. His heartbeat skittered in an odd pattern, but not the same rhythm as the music. This was louder, more persistent.

It felt as if a storm was brewing all around him. Not at all the calm and steady he wanted.

* * *

LYDIA AWOKE TO SHOUTING.

She sat up and winced. Swinging her legs around, she placed her feet on the floor. Her leg was sore, but her ankle looked less swollen, and the twinge as she moved her foot was minor compared to last night.

The raised voices in the kitchen continued, and she forced herself to stand and hobble to the door, leaning on the handle as she opened it.

“All the eggs were missing.” Rose waved her right arm in the direction of the hen house.

Lydia smiled. Rose was so full of energy and took everything seriously.

“All of them?” Evelyn spun to face Rose.

Rose scrunched her face. “Well ... most. This is all I could find, and I checked every single nest.” She held out a basket.

Evelyn peeked inside. “That may not be enough for breakfast.”

“That’s what I thought. Usually there are too many for me to fit in here. Why would that happen?”

“I’ll prepare breakfast, and you can ask your brother when he comes in after his chores.” Evelyn took the basket and pointed at the larder. “Pull out the salt for me and set the table.”

Lydia leaned against the doorframe. Why would that many eggs be missing? Several questions clanged around in her brain. She wished she could walk to the henhouse and see for herself, but she needed to stay off her leg as much as possible today.

Evelyn glanced up. “Good morning, Miss Spencer. I hope Rose’s shouting didn’t wake you.”

Lydia shook her head. “I was already awake.” She pushed herself off the wall. “What can I do to help?”

“You just rest that leg of yours so you can heal. Soon enough you’ll be healthy and whole and can help all you want.”

She wanted to be healthy. But whole? That was a word for someone else’s life. Ever since her mother passed, she hadn’t felt complete, so she assumed that would be the way of it for all time. “You are very kind. Could I borrow Rose to help me a moment?”

Rose bounded over to her. “Do you need to lean on my arm again?”

Heat rushed to her cheeks. She disliked depending on others. “Yes, ma’am.” She leaned on Rose as she put pressure on her leg. Thankfully it didn’t hurt more after her tumble yesterday.

They headed out the door and to the outhouse. Rose chatted the entire time while Lydia did her business. Which was a blessing as Lydia focused on not jostling her leg. When she opened the door, Rose bounced back her way and into position.

By the time they entered the house again, sweat covered her brow, and she leaned more heavily on Rose. How she despised weakness. How was she supposed to be independent if she needed help all the time?

When they reached the kitchen, breakfast was on the table, and everyone had gathered by the chairs. Why would they wait for her? Rose led Lydia to her adopted spot and held on till Lydia was seated.

“Thank you for helping me,” she whispered to Rose.

Rose grinned, then leaned forward and hugged Lydia around the shoulders.

Lydia froze. She wasn’t used to hugs. Or any type of

physical contact.

“Rose, you’re making our guest uncomfortable,” Evelyn scolded.

“No, it’s okay. I’m still a little awkward with my leg paining me.” She tilted her head so that it rested on Rose’s. “Thank you. You are a very sweet girl.”

Rose released Lydia and sat in the chair next to her. She glanced at Lydia, and a shy smile appeared.

Lydia put all her energy into a grand smile for the girl along with a wink. She didn’t want to make her second-guess her impulsive show of affection. Rose was too young to know self-doubt would creep into her heart and swallow all the life out of a person.

“Let’s pray.” Luke sat at the head of the table holding Olivia’s hand.

Everyone bowed their heads.

“Dear Lord. Thank you for your provision. Thank you for my beautiful wife and the family and friends who have joined us around the table. Bless this food and this day. Amen.”

Amens rose in unison around the table. Even though there weren’t many eggs, the table was full of warm food.

Olivia placed her hand on Lydia’s arm. “We would love to have you join us for church this morning, but if your leg is still bothering you, don’t feel obligated to attend.”

Lydia wiped her mouth with the napkin to gain time to respond. After her discussion with Pastor Will, she was more curious than ever what type of service he led. If for nothing else, she’d like to see him at work. She also wanted to get off this ranch and explore Washton. Being unfamiliar with the area was to her disadvantage if the crime boss hunting Olivia’s non-existent inheritance came to town. Lydia was supposed to keep an eye on things and prevent anyone from getting hurt. She also wanted to arrest the man who had caused chaos in

several lives back in Cincinnati and here. A headache formed from her clenched jaw.

“Lydia?” Olivia squeezed her arm.

She shifted in the chair, and a sharp pain shot up her leg. A low hiss escaped her.

“Are you okay, Miss Spencer?” asked Caroline.

Her cheeks heated as she winced. “Still in some pain.” She glanced at Olivia. “I’m thinking today is not the day for me to try church.”

Olivia smiled. “Those pews are not for the weak. If your body hurts sitting at this table, it may hurt worse sitting in the wooden bench. Take the time you need to rest. That’s why you’re here, right?”

Lydia sent Olivia a knowing look. They all knew she was there for more than rest. She was the only one who could identify the man who was after Olivia and the funds he thought she had.

Before Lydia could say more, Rose tapped her on the arm. “I’ll pray really hard you heal fast.”

“That’s very nice of you, Rose. I appreciate the prayers.” Lydia nodded, then picked up her fork. Why would this girl pray for *her*? Why would any of them? She glanced around the table. Their open acceptance touched her.

Her eyes itched. She couldn’t allow attachment. She was here on a mission. If prayers would help the healing, maybe she should pray too. Her body couldn’t fail her or this family. Not now. Not when she could finish this threat once and for all.

“Luke?” Rose turned toward her brother.

“Yes, pumpkin?” Luke smiled at his youngest sister.

“A whole bunch of eggs have gone missing today.” Rose’s eyes widened, and her arms swung in a circle.

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I went to collect the eggs like I normally do, and all of the

nests were empty, except for the hidden ones shoved way in the corner.”

Lydia added the last bit of detail to her mental list. “Did something happen to the birds?”

Rose shook her head. “No, they seemed annoyed I was there checking. As if someone else had already been there.”

Luke’s gaze met Lydia’s. An unspoken question came through loud and clear. Was the person they hoped would not arrive here? And if they were, why would they take so many eggs?