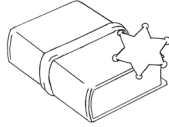


Two



What will I do with Fido? He has saved me countless times when I've been searching for clues, but sometimes his crazy behavior is too much. He gives great slobbery kisses, but I also need to remember the chaos he creates.

—From the journal of Lydia Spencer

Will stood frozen, unable to comprehend the chaos around him. Should he catch the dog to prevent him from causing more harm, or should he help Miss Spencer? He was closer to her, so he kneeled beside her. “Miss Spencer, are you okay?” He placed his hand under her elbow to help her up.

She flicked his touch away, sharp and dismissive. “I’m fine.” She pushed onto her hands and knees and groaned.

Even though her tone told him to back off, he hovered nearby. Just in case.

She raised herself to a sitting position and rubbed her ankle. It was obvious she couldn’t put weight on it. She

must've had a hard fall to injure herself that much. "Would you catch my dog?" She didn't look at him, but the words were clear, even if they were issued through clenched teeth.

"He's yours?" Was this the dog that had tripped her? Why did that not surprise him?

She glared at him. "Whether he's mine or not, he's chasing the other animals. Catching him would be the right thing to do. I can manage. Go." She shooed him away with her free hand.

He stood and glanced her way one more time.

She had managed to stand. Her eyes were wide and her hands out, as if saying, "What are you waiting for?"

Boy, she was prickly. For some odd reason, he wanted to needle her further, but he ignored the urge and searched the yard. Finding the commotion, he headed that way. The cow had knocked over a table, causing guests to scramble in different directions. Caroline and Rose, Luke's younger sisters, chased after each lamb. Caroline dove onto the larger one's back to catch it, and Rose jumped in front of the other to slow it down.

The dog stood in the middle, tongue lolling out the side of his mouth. This was all great fun to him. His ears twitched, and his head swiveled between the cow and lambs as if deciding which to chase first.

Screech.

A swirl of color launched at the dog.

Where did Bert come from and what was he doing? The dog was three times his size.

The dog growled.

Bert shrieked and flapped his wings in the dog's face, then pulled back.

Screech.

The dog sat. *Ruff.*

Screech.

Ruff.

Screech.

Were they having a conversation? Will strode closer.

Bert's beady eyes blinked at Will, then he circled the dog to stand behind him. Preventing him from escaping.

Everyone knew Bert was Washton's guard animal. He had proven himself multiple times to be reliable and a good friend. Will would have to give him a ride back to town. The ranch was a long distance away.

Screech.

Bert flapped his wings.

The dog lay down, swallowed, then glanced at Will, the whites of his eyes hinting how cute he could be when not causing chaos.

Will grabbed his collar. "You are meddlesome, aren't you?"

Ruff. The dog rolled over, wanting his belly rubbed.

Will's hand pinched between the dog's head and the grass.

"I've got him." Miss Spencer limped over and reached for the dog's collar. Her hand touched Will's, and a small spark traveled up his arm.

He pulled away. "Are you sure you can control him with your leg?"

Her glower indicated she did not appreciate his question.

But she was injured. This was a large dog. How would she manage him?

Her chin raised as she addressed the people nearby. "I'm sorry, everyone, for the commotion. I'm not sure how Fido got out. Come on, boy." She hobbled toward the ranch house.

Will glanced back at Chrissy, who nodded toward Miss Spencer. He closed his eyes. Why was he the designated one to follow her?

He cringed. This *was* what he signed up for. As the pastor in

the community, townsfolk looked to him to lend a helping hand, smooth ruffled feathers, and care for others. He also had to keep calm and know what to say in any given situation.

Except now, he wasn't sure if he could.

As he opened his eyes, guests were already putting the table back in place and conversing as if nothing had happened. Miss Spencer had made her way to the ranch house steps, leaning on the dog.

Bert trailed behind, ensuring Fido wouldn't escape.

Will moved in that direction. Joined them on the other side of the dog and reached for his collar. But in doing so, Miss Spencer lost her balance and hissed as she wobbled. He released the dog and grabbed her arm.

The dog growled at Will. Gone was the happy, frolicking puppy face. In its place was a snarling attack dog.

"Fido. Heel."

Will didn't dare move.

"He's very protective and doesn't allow strangers to touch me."

Screech.

Bert flapped his wings and squawked at the dog and its owner.

"Bert is a little protective of me as well." Will placed his hands on his hips.

She narrowed her eyes. "Then we're at a standstill. Why don't you take your rooster, I take my dog, and we go separate ways? That should solve the problem."

He narrowed his eyes. "Is that how you see it? I see it as more of a challenge. I like challenges." What was he saying? He truly did *not* like challenges. At least he hadn't before now. Somehow this one burrowed under his skin, and he was not about to let it fester there. "We all have to learn to get along with one another, animals and people alike."

She shook her head. “I don’t need a sermon right now, Pastor. Move your bird.”

Will glanced at Bert, who stood unblinking in front of the dog.

“He’s not *my* bird. He’s sort of the entire town’s rooster, and he does what he wants. But I’ll try.” Will sighed. He would be the bigger person here. Again. “Bert. Let him pass. It’s okay.”

Bert’s head swiveled toward Will, but his eye remained on the dog. He flapped his wings to move back.

Screech.

Ruff.

The dog burrowed down on his front paws.

“Come on, Fido.” Miss Spencer whistled, and the dog leaned against her leg, leading her to the first step.

Will stepped forward to help her, but she’d already maneuvered herself using the railing to get to the door. Most people would welcome assistance, but Miss Lydia Spencer was unlike any woman he’d ever met. Tough. Independent. Unfriendly. And worst of all, she ignored him.

Somehow not holding her attention caused all sorts of weird emotions inside of him.

“We’ve obviously started off on the wrong foot, so maybe we could start again.” Why was he speaking? He’d only irritate her more. But his mouth wouldn’t listen to his brain. “I’m not going anywhere, so you might as well let me help you.”

Her back stiffened, but she continued up the porch.

Why couldn’t he let things be? He didn’t want a complication like Miss Spencer in his life, so why was he not walking away?

* * *

LYDIA WINCED and pulled herself to the top step of Luke's porch by sheer will. Her thigh throbbed along with her ankle. She must've reinjured it. Which would set her back with her plans. How was she to go after the bad guys when she couldn't walk or run?

She refused to look over her shoulder at the pastor as she opened the door and dragged Fido into the house. "Why, Fido? How did you get loose? Why did you have to make a scene?"

Fido sat and stared at her, his eyes bright with excitement. He leaned forward and licked her hand.

"No, I will not pet you. You caused quite a stir. And ruined Luke and Olivia's party." She blinked her eyes and then closed them, willing the forming tears to recede. A trick she learned during her childhood years when she had to hide her emotions when in front of her father.

Fido turned, headed toward her room, and disappeared inside.

Lydia's shoulders sagged. She placed her hand on the wall and hopped along until she reached the doorway to her assigned room. Hopping to the bed, she climbed onto it in the most ungraceful way. The relief to her body was immediate, even with her entire leg throbbing.

Laughter erupted outside as the chatter of the guests continued. Even though she was a guest, she didn't know anyone. She was a stranger on the outside looking through a window. The light inside beckoned her, but she didn't want to go in. Or did she?

This town was messing with her mind.

She had never been so welcomed anywhere before. Not in the family she grew up in, not in the teacher school, and not in the town where she was assigned. She assumed it was her.

Tears threatened again, and she blinked them away. She blew out her breath. Looking through the glass and not being

on the inside was familiar, yet not what she wanted. It was why she'd joined the Pinkertons. With the agency, she could do something. Use her skills and her position for good. And escape her past in Cincinnati.

But her stupid injury was holding her back.

The front door opened, and she groaned. All she wanted was to be left alone.

Fido rose from the blanket in the corner and left the room.

Grrrrr. Ruff.

Fido's bark alerted her to a stranger in the house. But she didn't have any strength left to get up. Hopefully, Fido would be enough of a deterrent.

"It's okay, boy. You're a good protector. I'm checking on your owner. Which room is she in?"

Lydia wanted to hide. Couldn't the man take a hint? She had hoped it was only a family member who would walk by and not pay any attention to her. But no, it had to be *him*.

"Miss Spencer?"

Lydia sat up, and pain shot through her leg. "Ouch."

Footsteps pounded down the hall, and Pastor Baker appeared in the doorway. To her bedroom.

Fido pushed past his legs and into the room. The dog approached her, whined, then licked her hand.

"Traitor," she said.

"Are you okay? I knew you were in pain. You hid it well." He hustled toward her, took one of the extra cushions, and placed it near her leg. He reached for her foot and froze. "Uh ... may ... could ... you?" His hands hovered near her ankle.

As much as she wanted to lift her leg herself, she couldn't. She plopped her head on the pillow and closed her eyes. "Just move it quickly, please."

His gentle touch sent warmth up her leg as he lifted it onto the cushion. And then the sensation was gone.

“Let me find something to set on that. I’m not sure what you did, but it looks sore.”

Her eyes flew open. “You looked, Mr. Baker?”

His eyes found hers, and his face became blotchy red. “You’re injured.”

“Are you a doctor, Mr. Baker?”

“I’ve dealt with lots of injuries over the years.”

“But a lady’s?”

“I took care of my sister and others, so yes, a lady’s. Let me get something to put on that, and we can continue with the questions.” He left the room as if he’d done it many times before.

She laid her head back and closed her eyes.

His bootheels clicked on the floor as he entered the kitchen. A single cupboard door creaked open. Lydia heard the water pump handle squish together and then the rush of water pouring from the spout. He must’ve spent some time here to know his way around so well.

She didn’t trust men in general, but Pastor Will didn’t deserve her ire. He didn’t have to come inside and check on her. But he did. And he helped prop up her foot. Maybe she could be nicer to him. The throbbing in her ankle had subsided with her foot up. She breathed deeply to relax her body, similar to how Miss Beecher taught her student teachers to slow their heart rates.

A warm sensation touched her leg.

“Oh,” she cried out.

“Trust me, this will feel better in ten minutes.” Mr. Baker shifted in all directions. “We need something to secure this in place. Or I could stand here and hold it for you?”

She dropped her jaw. “Surely you don’t believe this is in any way proper. You’re in my *bedroom*.”

He glanced around, a strange expression on his face. "Actually, it was my room first."

She blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

He chuckled. "This was my room. When I lived here."

That explained a few things. "When did you live here?"

A shadow passed over his face. "When I was seventeen. But I had been here many times before that. Luke and I were best friends growing up. We were always over at each other's houses."

"But why did you move in at seventeen? Did you have a fight with your father?" She didn't know why she asked such a personal question. At seventeen, she hadn't left by choice. That decision had been made for her.

He stiffened. "A fight?" His eyes narrowed. "Is that what happened to you?"

"What gives you that impression? I have seen many men set off from their homes at that age, ready to take on the world." The world she grew up in was full of arrogant males who thought they knew best at seventeen.

He grimaced. "I wish that was all that happened."

She settled on her elbows. Somehow, she knew she wasn't going to like his explanation. "You don't have to talk about it."

"I'm usually the one who asks the questions and does the listening. It's sort of nice to have someone else who doesn't know my past ask about it." He pointed to the chair in the corner. "Mind if I sit? I can hold this poultice on your leg more easily that way."

She nodded, then watched as he pulled the chair to the bed, sat, and resettled the cloth on her foot.

He sighed. "Much better."

How could he be so calm? She waited. For some reason this side of him was not the first impression he gave, and she wanted to hear his story.

“Both my parents perished in the flood of eighteen sixty-two. The same one that took Luke’s pa. My sister, Sarah, and I moved in with the Taylors so we had a home. Our family farm flooded and was unusable.”

Lydia placed her hand over her mouth. She still hoped to have a conversation with her father. Someday. That they could be on good terms after she proved herself to him. But Mr. Baker couldn’t do so. Her heart ached for him. “That must’ve been hard.”

He studied the floor. “It was. But I was thankful for the Taylors. They welcomed us and helped us in our grief.”

“Is this why you became a pastor?”

He shrugged, and the cloth shifted. “Partially. I wanted to before that. I enjoyed having discussions with Pastor Kenneth all the time. I loved discussing theology.” He laughed. “Where some people fall away from God during tragedy, I turned to Him. And He carried me through. I found strength and solace, grace and patience. And I wanted to share that with others. I left to go to seminary three years later.”

She studied him. A man with a caring heart. Gentle and patient. Her opposite in so many ways. Why did she find his words soothing?