Jessie's Journey: Or, How a Girl Chased Her Dreams West

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Summary

Jessie Pride escapes the confines of her small midwestern town to make a new life for herself in the 1890s West. Human AU.
I can’t believe it’s almost been two years since I posted any fanfics, but I’m back with something new! This one actually came out of a conversation with my friend PoetLaurie, about the history of the Harvey Girls (among other western things), and eventually turned into a full-fledged story collaboration. We’re trying to stay as true to real history as possible—everything has been well-researched, and you can find many of the images that inspired us on my Pinterest board “Jessie’s Journey” at pinterest.com/yodelincowgirl. Our goal is to publish new chapters once a month, as our busy lives allow.

Toy Story still doesn’t belong to us, only this long-ago world we’ve created for them does. Enjoy, and please leave us kudos and comments!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Jessamine Jane Pride, you are going to accept his offer of marriage, and that's final!"

Jessie could still hear her mother’s irate voice ringing in her ears, more loudly than the clickety-clack of the train on the rails carrying her westward. She slumped in her seat.

"Sit up like a lady!"

Her rich, dour Aunt Molly - with all her rules of propriety and ladylike behavior - now stood next to her mother in her imagination, both scowling with disapproval. Jessie shook her head, trying to clear the unpleasant image from her mind. ‘Not anymore,’ she told herself.

It had barely been a month since she escaped the stifling prison of her aunt’s stately rowhouse in St. Louis, yet it felt like an eternity. Jessie’s mind couldn’t help but wander back to the chain of events that had led her to where she now found herself, being propelled toward a fresh start as much by her former life as by the engine that chugged ever forward.

Emily Pride marched into the family’s parlor at the sounds of raised voices and found her two children wrestling on the floor. She forcibly pulled her young daughter from the back of her brother, just as the girl had pinned him to the floor. Grabbing her son by the arm, Emily dragged both offspring across the room and practically threw them onto the stiffly upholstered settee.

"A lady does not yell. A lady does not hit. A lady does not manhandle her brother!"

Jessie sighed at her mother’s remonstrances and crossed her arms defiantly as she slouched into the seat. "A ‘lady’ don’t get to do anythin’ fun."

Emily bristled at her daughter’s perceived impertinence, and pointed angrily towards the staircase. "A lady sits in her room and reflects upon her disgraceful behavior!"

"Hmmph, thought she said a lady don’t yell,” Jessie mumbled, as she trudged toward the stairs. Woody failed to suppress a chuckle.
“Woodrow Pride, do not encourage your sister! You are not absolved from your part in this, young man.” The words faded behind Jessie as she stomped up the stairs and slammed her door shut.

Thus was the constant plight of Jessie’s childhood: facing her mother’s disapproval at every turn. From the start, she was willful, and stubborn, and independent - at least that’s what her mother called her, resentful that she hadn’t gotten the meek, submissive little girl she had expected. Jessie would much rather have trailed after her older brother than learn how to be a future wife and occupy her days with genteel pursuits. Passages read aloud from the leading etiquette manuals made no impression on her; neither did reminding the young girl of her “faults” and how she was supposed to behave if she was ever going to marry well.

Fortunately, Jessie had a close friend and ally in her brother, Woody. The two were inseparable. In their imaginations (and their backyard), they were the Roundup Gang, saving the good people of the western frontier from the crimes of outlaws. And when they were older, as soon as they were free from their studies and chores, they would sit together reading about the Wild West, about cowboys and bandits and ranches and raids, and dreaming about making lives for themselves there someday on a ranch of their own. That is, whenever their mother didn’t catch them at it.

"Such… crudeness... is not an appropriate subject for a lady, Jessamine.” Emily frowned at the sight of Jessie reading a newspaper article about a western shootout, and snatched it from her daughter’s hands.

Jessie flinched at the sudden action, then twisted her face in defiance. "Why is nothin' INTERESTING ever an appropriate subject?"

"NOTHING, Jessamine, NOTHING,” her mother chided, crumpling the offending literature with authority. “Must you speak like a country bumpkin?"

"But we ARE country folks, Momma. Aunt Molly is the only city-folk of our kin."

Jessie had only heard bits and pieces of family stories over the years, but she knew their rural life was a sore subject for her mother. Emily never failed to remind her that, just as her parents had expected her to make a wealthy match, she expected no less of her own daughter. Andrew Pride, the proprietor and owner of a general store, provided his wife and two children with a comfortable life in their small town of Walnut Grove, Missouri. However, it was Jessie’s Aunt Molly - Emily’s younger sister - who had found the greater fortune in matrimony. Molly relished retelling the tale of how she had only been out in society for a few months when she went to visit a friend in St. Louis, and returned home engaged to a wealthy banker. Cyril Hollingsworth was almost thirty years her senior, but their wedding was lavish; Jessie often studied the old family photo that sat in a frame in the parlor, showing Molly dressed in bridal finery and Emily with baby Woodrow on her hip, her face failing to hide the profound resentment in her heart. Molly’s husband died only five years into their marriage, leaving her a substantial inheritance and a spacious townhouse on Lafayette Square. Though Emily was the most socially prominent woman in their little community, she was nevertheless bitter over what she saw as an injustice. This drove Andrew to spend even more time at his store, leaving the Pride children at their mother’s mercy.

Aunt Molly, though not particularly generous by nature, often extended offers to the Prides to come visit her in St. Louis. Emily was not so ungracious as to refuse, despite her jealousy; such visits provided her children an opportunity to interact with a higher class of society, and a chance to achieve the status that had eluded her. Woody and Jessie, however, were not at all interested in stuffy social pursuits, and on one occasion in 1885, the two siblings sneaked off to see Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show, which was visiting the city. When Annie Oakley entered the arena, Jessie was captivated by the lively girl who performed daring tricks and hit targets better than anyone; and before they left,
Woody bought his sister a cabinet card with the sharpshooter’s image on it, which became a prized possession and a source of inspiration to the free-spirited teenager.

The show only added fuel to the fire for Woody. His dreams to travel west had never faded, even as life continued to be more locally-focused as he took on more responsibilities at his father’s store. He saved his wages and pored over newspaper ads before finding one for a deputy sheriff position in Texas. Telegrams were exchanged, and within days he was packed and heading west. Jessie saw him off at the station, wishing for all the world that she could accompany him. Amidst the tearful goodbyes of other passengers, he hugged her tightly.

“Are you gonna be okay here without me?” Woody’s brow furrowed in worry. “You know I’ll stay if you need me to.”

She forced a smile, not wanting him to give up on his dreams just for her. “Course I will. I’ll manage, anyway. You better write me when you get there and tell me all about the adventures you’re havin’.”

“And you better come out west as soon as I’m good and settled. This job is just a start; I’ll keep moving on ‘til we have what we’ve always wanted. You’re gonna have a ranch to help me run someday.”

“Don’t you worry; I’ll find a way.”

Finding a way, however, took longer than she’d hoped. Seven agonizing years followed of small town socials, St. Louis balls, and other gatherings meant to foster courtship and lead to matrimony - yet Jessie remained unmarried, not even betrothed. Suitors didn’t stick around for long, once they realized how headstrong she was - not that she was sad to see them go. Most of them bored her, with their mousy looks and bland personalities, only wanting a woman to keep house for them and bear them children. Jessie wanted so much more than that out of life, especially the more she read Woody’s letters. When a proposal finally came - and was refused - Emily had had enough. Now, her mother told her, at 25 years of age, Jessie would soon be considered unmarriageable, and something must be done before her options completely ran out. She was promptly shipped off to her aunt’s house in St. Louis, Emily and Molly taking matters into their own hands.

Jessie arrived at Aunt Molly’s in early November, expecting her aunt to force her to attend the numerous social events held during the holiday social season, in order to find a husband. Instead, only a few days after Jessie’s arrival, Aunt Molly requested her presence in the parlor. Once there, she was faced with a man who reminded her less of a person and more of a walrus.

“Jessamine, I’d like to introduce you to a personal acquaintance of mine, Mr. Wilfred Mayer. He was recently widowed and is in need of a new mother for his large family. I spoke to him of you and he thinks you should suit those purposes quite nicely.”

“She is somewhat plainer than you described her, Mrs. Hollingsworth,” the gray-haired and bespectacled man replied, staring at Jessie as if she was a purchase to be made. “And her frame seems a bit too slight for maternal proclivities, but yes, I believe she will do sufficiently. Arrangements will be made for the first of the new year.”

Jessie bristled as they spoke of her as if she wasn’t in the room, and steeled herself to speak in her own defense. “I am sorry, sir, but I am most definitely NOT suited to your purposes,” she spat out defiantly.

“Jessamine!” Aunt Molly gasped. “You will apologize for your incivility at once!”

“I’ll do nothin’ of the sort!” Jessie cried. “I ain’t some doll to be bought in a store! And I refuse to be
married off without my consent!”

Mr. Mayer raised to his feet, an offended scowl deforming his already-unattractive features. “I am not accustomed to being disrespected and insulted in such a fashion. You will receive no further calls from me, Miss Pride, I assure you.” He shoved his top hat onto his head with authority and addressed his hostess with a huff. “Good Day.”

No sooner had he exited the dwelling than Aunt Molly flew at Jessie in a rage.

“Are you aware how much Mr. Mayer is worth? I sincerely hope I can secure his forgiveness, and convince him that you’ll agree to marry him and be a suitably deferential wife.”

“But I don’t WANT to marry him! He’s older’n Pa, for cryin’ out loud! And all those etiquette books you and Momma made me read, even they said I don’t HAVE to agree!”

“That’s really only for young women, dear, with several prospects,” she snapped bitterly. “You are neither. And you are increasingly becoming a disappointment and a burden on this family.”

“Then, fine, I’ll support myself. I ain’t afraid of workin’; I’ve been helpin’ Pa in his store for a while now. I don’t need handouts from anyone, most of all YOU.”

“Working women are a disgrace. I won’t tolerate one of my relation. You WILL reconsider this match, and understand that this is your ONLY socially acceptable option.”

"I will NOT consider that man!"

"I cannot comprehend why you are being so impossible about this.” Molly massaged her temples, trying to fend off the headache that was beginning to set in. “When your mother was presented with her final option, she didn’t object. She did her duty and married him. And you, Jessamine, must follow suit and marry who we have chosen for you. We will not be responsible for your willful spinsterhood any longer!”

"Momma… and Pa?” The unhappy realization of her parents’ past hit her like a ton of bricks. Her father’s quiet sadness, her mother’s bitterness all made sense now, and she twisted her face in anger and resentment. History wasn’t going to repeat itself, not with her. "Blast your society and all its stupid rules! I'll be responsible for myself!"

Jessie stormed up the grand staircase to her room, tears hot on her cheeks, and slammed the door behind her. She knelt in front of the trunk she had brought with her - that had barely even been unpacked yet - and flung open its heavy lid with force.

“Where’s Woody’s letter?” she choked out between sobs, tossing the trunk’s contents on the floor around her, including a smaller leather suitcase she had carried on the train. “Where in tarnation is it? I need it!” At last she located the correspondence in the suitcase; she ripped it from its envelope, and unfolded it, frantically scanning it for the information she was seeking…

I know you’ve been looking for a way to come west. I might’ve found your chance - until I’m at a place where we can get that ranch started, at least. There are a chain of restaurants, called Harvey Houses, attached to the Santa Fe train depots. They're all over, but there are several here in California - you’d love California, Jess, I’ve never once regretted taking the Marshal job here. Anyway, they’re awful nice places - I visit them a lot in my travels, don’t know why I didn’t think of them before. They hire women ages 18-30 as waitresses, and it’s completely respectable work. The employment office is in Kansas City. You need to get out of there, and come west where you belong. Besides, I miss my wild little sis. Consider it, Jess.
“Ha!” She wiped the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. “Nothin’ but a burden to this family, huh? Not all of it. I’ll show them!”

Jessie rifled through her things to find the most serviceable of her clothes - solid skirts, print shirtwaists, a sensible pair of high-laced boots, underpinnings and nightgowns, and a traveling suit and hat to wear to the employment office - leaving the formal clothing she hated at the bottom of the trunk. She also grabbed her jewelry - in case she might need to sell it for living expenses - in addition to the cash she had brought with her, earned by helping in her father’s store. Most importantly, she set aside her most cherished possessions: a book about Buffalo Bill that Woody had sent her for Christmas several years prior, with the Annie Oakley souvenir and ticket stub from the Wild West show tucked inside, and all of Woody’s letters since he went west. Collecting everything but the clothing she’d need to wear on her journey, Jessie stuffed her necessary items into the leather suitcase, and set it aside while she wrote two letters - one to Aunt Molly, telling her goodbye and good riddance; and one to Woody, telling him she would soon be coming his way.

Dressed in the tailored navy blue skirt and matching bodice she had chosen the night before, her hair braided and pinned in a tasteful updo and topped off with a stylish hat, Jessie donned her overcoat and crept stealthily down the stairs and out the back door of Aunt Molly’s townhouse, under the cover of pre-dawn darkness. She hastened along the nearly-empty streets to the train station, where she purchased a ticket on the next train to Kansas City. There was no time to write a letter of introduction; she would just show up at the Harvey offices, and they’d hire her. There was no other option.

Jessie’s interview at the Harvey employment office was daunting, but successful; and having signed all requisite paperwork committing her to a year of service and attesting to her character, Jessie asked, please, if it was at all possible, could she be sent somewhere in California, to be close to her brother? Knowing that having family ties nearby would make her a better and happier worker, her request was granted. After a month of training in Topeka, Kansas, she’d be sent to Barstow, California, to be a “Harvey Girl” in a restaurant only recently rebuilt after a fire. Jessie managed to compose herself until she exited the building, but once on the street she let out a loud “Yeehaw!” She was finally heading west.

Jessie took in a deep, steadying breath then exhaled, and looked out the window at the wide, western landscape spreading out before her. The desert sands and mountains seemed to go on forever, and the clear blue sky was bigger and brighter than she’d ever seen. Surely the possibilities for her life were still as wide open? They had to be. If girls like Annie Oakley could make their own way in the world, Jessie Pride could, too. The promise of freedom and opportunity, for women as well as men, beckoned to her, and she accepted the challenge wholeheartedly.

“Barstow, California!”

The voice of the Conductor brought Jessie back from her daydream with a start. Her journey had been a long one - despite the fine rail accommodations her new employer had provided, her body felt the exhaustion of two days’ travel - but finally, she had reached her stop!

Jessie stepped off the train and looked up at the imposing wood-frame Santa Fe depot building rising in front of her, oblivious to the bustle of disembarking passengers on the platform. She breathed in the invigorating California air, for the first time. It was December, 1893, but there was none of the winter chill of her former home.

This was going to be her new life.
Harvey Houses actually existed; they were restaurants and hotels attached to Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe railroad depots throughout the southwestern United States, between 1876 and 1968. There really was a Harvey House in Barstow, CA, and we chose this location for our story because eventually it was named “Casa del Desierto” (mi floricta del desierto… get it?). However, at this point in history, it didn’t bear that name yet. Also, I grew up in Southern California, so I can write of the landscape from personal experience.

The long title of the fic is a reference to typical story titles of the late 19th century.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

One month later, and we're back with a new chapter, as promised! :) For reference images of historical things that inspired us in the writing of this chapter, don't forget to visit my "Jessie's Journey" board on Pinterest, account name yodelincowgirl. New relevant pins are added with each chapter.

As always, Toy Story doesn't belong to PoetLaurie or me. If it did, we'd be getting a full panel on Toy Story 4 at the D23 Expo in a couple weeks! :) Enjoy, and please leave us some kudos and comments!

Two very tired Harvey Girls trudged into their room on the second floor of the dormitory building. The last train had been delayed, and they had worked later than expected.

Jessie tugged at her tight, high collar. "Been more'n a month now, and I still can't get used to these uniforms. They're stiff enough to stand on their own!"

"Oh, come on, Jessie, they're not that bad," her roommate laughed. "Still, make sure you hang it up; don't want it to walk off," she added with a broad wink.

The first of the two to slip out of her outer garments, Jessie pretended that she was going to lean her uniform against the wall, but hung it with care instead, grinning at her friend. Despite the starched black dress and pristine white apron that she wore as her daily working attire, Jessie was getting accustomed to her life at the Barstow Harvey House. Her training in Topeka had served her well, and she had become adept at managing the onslaught of hungry travelers arriving on the daily trains, both at the horseshoe-shaped lunch counter and in the traditional dining room. Sure, she bristled at some of the rules of propriety imposed upon the Harvey Girls by their Manager, Mr. Kartoffelkopf - it was these standards that set the Harvey Girls apart from many other waitresses with questionable reputations, and kept them respectable, the girls were often reminded. Really, that aspect was no different from what she had left behind, Jessie grumbled to herself on occasion; but at least she was on her own now, in the West, where she'd always wanted to be. Something about the wildness of the desert felt like home to her, and stirred her spirit, and she resolved that she'd make the very best of the experience.

She was also happy to have made a fast friend in her roommate, Bo Peepe. A former schoolteacher from Kansas, Bo had arrived in Barstow barely a month before Jessie, and the pair had bonded instantly.

Even though the girls had only been rooming together for a little under two weeks, their living space - provided free of charge by their employer, along with meals, uniforms, and cleaning and laundry services - had become a cozy retreat from the hectic pace of the lunch and dining rooms and the comings and goings of the hotel guests and travelers in the main Harvey House and depot building next door. Between the two of them, the simple room already had touches reflecting their personalities: one of the first things Jessie had done upon arrival was put her cabinet card photo of Annie Oakley against the mirror of the dresser they shared; and while Jessie's bed was dressed with the standard-issue plain sheets and blanket, Bo had brought a quilt with her that added a homey feel.
Jessie emerged from behind the dressing screen, having exchanged her corset and petticoats for a billowy white nightgown, and sat on the edge of her bed. She unpinched her hair, letting the long, red braid that had been coiled tightly all day fall freely against her back. Bo had just taken her turn behind the screen, when both girls were startled by a hurried knock on their dorm room door.

Before either could say "come in" - let alone answer it - the door swung open with force. A trio of lacy and ruffly nightgowns blustered in, belonging to Trixie, Dolly and Bonnie, three of the other Barstow Harvey Girls.

Trixie was the first to enter, the white rag strips that held her curls bobbing up and down as she bounced with excitement. "Can you believe it? A dance! A real dance!"

"And on Christmas Eve! I won't even mind that I'm not at home," added Bonnie, flopping into a wooden chair. The youngest of the girls, Jessie had learned she was prone to what Barbie called 'flights of the imagination.' A dreamy look filled her large brown eyes, "Do you think someone will ask us?"

Dolly tossed her head, her dark hair still damp from a bath, "I don't care if I have to go on my own, I'm going!"

"What about you girls?" Trixie perched herself on the edge of Jessie's bed and leaned forward, eager for their response. "Aren't you gonna go to the dance?"

"It's hard to say, since we just learned about it," Bo said with a snicker from behind the screen, her reply muffled as she pulled her nightgown over her head. "But most likely."

Jessie fidgeted with the end of her braid and diverted her eyes from Trixie's pointed stare, which was now focused expectantly on her. "I dunno…"

Aghast at the answer, Trixie sat up straighter. "What do you mean you don't know?! You have to go!"

A beautiful blond in an elegant mauve dressing gown peeked her head in the room, saving Jessie from having to reply further. "Girls, you best be getting back to your rooms, before Mrs. K gives you a talking-to for breaking curfew!"

Barbie, the "wagon boss" and longest-employed Harvey Girl at the location - having been there a little over a year - helped keep the younger girls in line, along with Mrs. Kartoffelkopf, the manager's wife and self-appointed dorm mother. The Kartoffelkopfs were housed in a larger apartment suite on the first floor - adjacent to the common space known as the "courting parlor" - which they shared with their three young sons.

Bonnie pouted. "Awww, we were just talking about the dance!"

"Yeah, we have to convince Jessie to go!" insisted Trixie.

Dolly finished plaiting her long tresses and tied off the end with a scrap of purple ribbon. She pulled Bonnie from the chair, and nudged Trixie off the bed. "We can work on her more tomorrow," she asserted with her trademark matter-of-fact tone. "C'mon."

The three younger girls bade Jessie and Bo a hasty goodnight, and scurried back down the hall to their own rooms, giggling all the way.

"You really don't want to go?" asked Barbie, as she lingered in the doorway.
Jessie shrugged. "Gettin' gussied up isn't really my thing. 'Sides, I don't have anythin' to wear."

"Don't let that stop you! I have more dresses than I know what to do with," Barbie laughed merrily. "You're welcome to borrow one of mine, and whatever you need to go with it."

"Thanks!" She smiled at her friend's generosity. "I might take ya up on that. We'll see."

Once Jessie and Bo had their room to themselves again, Bo went back to making sure her uniform was suitably crisp and clean for tomorrow's shift. Jessie sat in silent contemplation for a few moments, before she finally spoke up.

"So whadd'ya think about this dance on Christmas Eve? Sweet mother of Abraham Lincoln, they're excited!"

After carefully smoothing the voluminous folds of black and white fabric, Bo hung her dress on a wall peg next to Jessie's for morning. "I think it could be fun."

"Maybe," Jessie scooted back against her pillows and hugged her knees to her chest. "It's just that I had my fill of fancy balls'n stuff back home. And I ain't here to meet a fella."

"I'm not either, really - not like some of the other girls are. But I still think we should go." Her hair loosened from its updo, Bo stood at the dresser mirror and began to brush through her soft golden curls. "I hardly think it'll be that fancy, and it is Christmas Eve, after all. Besides, what else will there be to do that evening, with everyone else out?"

"I s'pose." Jessie played with the hem of her nightgown, pondering, then turned again to her friend. "Bo, can I ask, why did ya come here? I mean, I know you said 'failed romance, usual story' - but what really happened? If ya don't mind, that is."

Bo sighed, and sat down on her own bed, facing Jessie. "No, I don't mind. You're the best friend I've got," she said warmly, "you might as well know the whole sad tale." Bo took a deep breath before she continued. "His name was Jasper, and he was working on the cattle drives near the town where I was teaching. I guess you could say I've always been drawn to the cowboy type. He was handsome, in a rakish sort of way, and he took notice of me at the Independence Day picnic last summer. I fell for him, and his lines, and even believed he meant it when he asked me to marry him. One afternoon, we were supposed to go for a drive, and he didn't show. I waited, and waited, and the next morning I went into town, only to be told by the owner of the livery stable that he'd settled his boarding bill for his horse and left town that morning. I could handle the broken engagement - but not the stares and gossip of all the women. They said something must've been wrong with me, if I couldn't keep a man. Or maybe I was just a ruined woman, living alone; who knows what improprieties I had committed. It was around that time I heard about the Harvey Houses. I suppose it was irresponsible of me to up and leave my teaching job behind," Bo chuckled at her impulsiveness, "but I figured if I was going to have an adventure, it was now or never. So here I am!"

Jessie got up and wrapped her friend in a fierce hug. "Aww, I'm sorry. What a ratbag! He didn't deserve ya anyway."

Bo returned the embrace. "It's ok, really it is, everything happens for a reason. I like it here, so much more than Kansas. I just thought I'd be settled down by now, married with a family. After being alone for so long, I'd love to have a whole flock of kids." She gazed wistfully out the window for a moment, then turned back to Jessie. "But fair is fair, now you have to tell me about this 'difficult family' you escaped from."

"Do I hafta?" Jessie groaned, flopping backward on her bed and burying her face in her pillow.
"Yes, because I have no family of my own, so I have to live vicariously through yours."

"You don't want mine, trust me."

"They can't all be bad."

Jessie sat up. "No, my brother Woody's the absolute best! I haven't seen him in five years though, not since he became a Marshal. When we were kids, we were always fascinated by the West - we even sneaked off to a Buffalo Bill show once, when we were stayin' at our stuffy ol' aunt's house in St. Louis. I got to see Annie Oakley, right there in person, and when we got home, he bought himself a rifle and we helped each other learn to shoot." She grinned at the fond memory. "I kept tryin' to get him to put somethin' on his head so I could shoot it off, and he wouldn't ever do it. He'd get so mad when I'd call him 'yella-bellied,' too," Jessie giggled. "Soon as he'd saved up enough, he left home and headed west, like we always talked about, gettin' small town sheriff work for a few years, until he got a job as a Deputy Marshal here in California. I miss him somethin' terrible, but we write to each other as much as we can - he's the one who said I should be a Harvey Girl. He's always bein' sent places to clean up trouble; last place he told me to send letters was San Diego, but that was a while ago, an' he said he was wrappin' things up and would let me know where his next job was when he got there. I left town before I heard from him, though," she let out a small sigh. "I wish I knew for sure where he was this time."

"He sounds wonderful. So did you come here in hopes of finding him?"

"Partly. Also, 'cause if I stayed at home, I woulda been married to some ol' fuddy duddy by now. It was all arranged, whether I liked it or not."

"Your parents were going to force you to marry someone you didn't want to?"

"Well, my Momma and my Aunt. My Pa, he tried. But whenever he'd stand up for us, Momma never paid him any mind. So he jus' kinda gave up, I think, 'cause it's easier than listenin' to Momma's complainin' and criticizin' all the time."

Bo frowned. "Sounds like your mother's rather a 'ratbag' too."

"Momma's always been about status. Ever since her sister married some rich ol' banker and got a fancy house in the city. She's just jealous. And I've never been interested in bein' the prim 'n proper 'lady' she wanted me to be - she made sure I knew how much of a disappointment I was, too, her 'n everyone else who put me down for not bein' able to catch a husband. I tried, at first - I really did - but if I thought a fella was nice enough, he stopped comin' around once he found out I had a mind of my own. And the only one who ever proposed, I turned him down cold." Jessie shuddered at the image in her mind. "Percival Pennington," she said, in a mock-aristocratic tone. "He was pale and scrawny and 'bout as interestin' as watchin' paint dry. Momma was furious, said I'd thrown away my only chance. She sent me to my Aunt Molly's in St. Louis, and they schemed to match me up with someone twice my age but with loads of money. I wasn't gonna stand for that! So I left in the middle of the night for Kansas City, and ended up here."

"That took a lot of nerve. Good for you, for getting away," encouraged Bo, reaching forward to squeeze her friend's hand. "There's nothing wrong with thinking for yourself. I'll never understand why some women have to be so cruel and judgmental."

"Me neither. I guess we're a just a couple'a good-for-nothin' outcasts, huh?" Jessie laughed. "I'm glad we found each other."

"So am I. Now, we better get some sleep, the breakfast crowd will be here soon enough."
"So what do we know about this case?"

"Not a whole lot." Woody looked over the document the partners had received from the Southern District Marshal in Los Angeles, with the limited information available on their next assignment. "A group of outlaws calling themselves the Huggins Gang has been stirring up trouble in Calico for the past several months. Started out with just some small-scale nighttime business robberies, but they're getting bolder. People are being held up in broad daylight, and they're starting to target Barstow now, too."

Buzz took the offered paper from his friend's hand, and began to scan it himself. "And they don't know who the leader is?"

"Nope, all we have to go on is this 'Huggins' name, which could be an alias. Seems they have really set their sights on terrorizing the town; and with the Santa Fe depot in Barstow being only ten miles away, they must've figured out that targets are easy, and numerous. The railroad is concerned that the gang will put their passengers in danger, and drive away business. That's why we've been called in."

"Sheriffs didn't give much else for detail." Buzz folded up the single sheet of paper - which contained everything that had been shared with their supervisor by Sheriff Varney, of Barstow, and Sheriff Hammond, of Calico - and tucked it in his coat pocket.

"We'll get more when we meet with them. I know Sheriff Varney from my old deputy days back in Texas. We were in a posse together, hunting down cattle rustlers. He's a good man; goes by 'Slink', you'll understand why when you see him. We've kept in touch all these years, and I have a hunch he requested the Marshal put me on this case." He sighed deeply. "Wish we could have stopped by the post office before we left San Diego, though."

"Still no word from your sister?"

Woody shook his head. "No, and I hope everything is alright; it's been over a month, and it's not like her to not respond. I'm sure our mother has something to do with it. From what Jessie said, our mother was hell bent on forcing her into marriage so she could finally be rid of her." He scowled. "That's deplorable!" Buzz's eyes widened in shock. "Why would she do such a thing?"

"You haven't met our mother."

"I think I am thankful for that!"

"Jessie has always been independent and free-spirited, and our mother has no idea how to deal with her. The harder she tries to force Jessie to submit, the more Jessie pushes back." Sadness clouded Woody's features, as he remembered countless nights when his sister had cried out of anger. "We always dreamed as kids of coming out west and making lives for ourselves. It wasn't easy for me to get away, but at least it was possible. Jessie's practically a prisoner to the social standards our mother has set. I told her about the Harvey Houses, hoping it would give her an out, but who knows if she'll be able to try."

"And your father?"

"He's powerless. I'm sure he'd stop it if he could, but he's as much under my mother's thumb as I was
when I still lived there. Took getting away to realize just how much; honestly, I feel sorry for him because I think he feels just as trapped as Jessie."

Buzz grasped his friend's shoulder encouragingly. "Maybe you could send your sister a telegram after we meet with the sheriffs. That might be more successful."

Woody's face brightened slightly. "Good idea; think I will do just that. So," he changed the subject, "will your mother be too disappointed that plans got changed? I know it's been a little while since your last visit, and this might be another long assignment."

"She understands. Are you too disappointed?" he needled.

"Of course! Do you know how long it's been since I had her cooking?"

Wishing he could partake in a home-cooked meal himself, Buzz smiled in agreement. "Hey, what about that girl you were calling on?" Woody shrugged in response to the question. Buzz lifted an eyebrow but then tilted his head. "For what it's worth, she didn't seem right for you anyway."

The comment was met with a chortle. "And what would you know of that, Mr. Buzz Lightyear who never pursues any girls?"

It was Buzz's turn to shrug. "There just haven't been any girls worth pursuing."

"There are plenty of them; you're just too picky, that's your problem."

"Maybe," he stared out the window into the dark. "No one's caught my interest yet, that's all."

"When you finally get around to being interested, what's left won't be very interesting," the young marshal gently chided his friend.

"I'll know her when I see her, Woody."

Woody stretched his long legs and pulled his hat down over his eyes as he settled back into the seat. "Well, who knows... maybe there'll be someone at this Harvey House we're stayin' at. The waitresses are all single," he added slyly.

Buzz barked a laugh. "And exactly the same: empty-headed and desperate for a husband. No thanks. You can have those girls all to yourself."

Chapter End Notes

Harvey Girls were housed in company dormitories, two to a room, with the exception of the "wagon boss" who got a private room. "Wagon boss" was another term for "head waitress" within the Harvey company, since they never referred to the girls as waitresses due to social stigmas of the time - waitresses were associated with the likes of saloon girls who associated freely with men. The chaperoned dorms, strict curfews, and guarded reputations were what made families a little more willing to let their daughters leave home and pursue employment in a Harvey House.

And Bo's last name isn't misspelled as "Peepe" - that was a choice we deliberately made, to make it more like an actual name, and less nursery rhyme.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

The past month, since our last chapter was posted, has been a busy one, for both PoetLaurie and me - we both attended the D23 Expo out in California! I also turned my vacation - which was a cross-country drive - into a sort of research trip for this story. My family and I visited existing Harvey House locations - we even stayed at one at the Grand Canyon, which had a museum on Harvey company history, and ate dinner in a former Harvey dining room. Barstow was one of our stops, as was Calico, and also the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame in Texas, with its exhibit on Annie Oakley and Wild West shows. There were a few other relevant locations we visited as well, but they won't be revealed until later in the fic. Many photos were taken along the way, and they'll end up on our Jessie's Journey Pinterest board (account name yodelincowgirl) as they're relevant to the story.

Unfortunately, despite our love for it, Toy Story doesn't belong to us... otherwise, we'd have leaked scenes from Toy Story 4 at D23! ;) Enjoy, and don't forget to leave kudos and comments!

The big, brass gong sounded outside the Harvey House entrance, as Mr. Kartoffelkopf guided the throngs of hungry travelers to fresh coffee and a hot breakfast inside. Jessie and Bo, who had been assigned to the more formal dining room for that day's shifts, stood ready to greet and serve their customers. As passengers found their way to tables and the girls began to take their orders, Jessie glimpsed the silhouette of a lone, tall man standing in the doorway. She looked up from the customer she had just waited on, so that she could direct the late arrival to a vacant table, and squealed with delight when she recognized a familiar face.

"Woody!"

Darting recklessly between tables, Jessie flung herself onto her brother in a fierce embrace.

"It's you, it's you, it's you! It's really you!"

"It's me," he laughed, returning his sister's hug. "Decided to take me up on my advice, huh?"

The joyful reunion was interrupted by the sound of Mr. Kartoffelkopf clearing his throat behind them. "Miss Pride, this is neither the time nor the place."

"I'm sorry, sir. This is my brother. We haven't seen each other in ages!"

"Yes, well, you'll have time for that after your workday is done," huffed the mustachioed manager. "The trains must be fed."

Jessie nodded her understanding obediently, then walked with her brother towards an empty table in the far corner of the dining room. Despite her duty to cheerful service, she couldn't help but look crestfallen, fearing Woody would be gone with the next train out of Barstow.
Years of being apart hadn’t dulled Woody's ability to pick up on his sister's emotions. "It's okay, Jess, I'm in town on a case, I'll be around for a while," he reassured her. "I'm staying here at the hotel, so we can catch up later tonight. But I sure could use some coffee, and some of that famous steak and eggs," he smirked, taking a seat.

"You got it!" As she spun around on her heels in a rush to get her brother's order, she ran smack into the marshal's partner, who had just made arrangements to have their horses unloaded from the train and boarded at the local livery stable for the duration of their stay.

Jessie stared at the man, noting he was handsome with a prominent chin. He stood tall, although not as tall as her brother. He was broad-shouldered and his shirt strained ever so slightly across his chest, beneath his tailored vest and frock coat. His dark hair was slicked back and she warmed under the gaze from his bright blue eyes.

Buzz, for his part, was transfixed and completely unaware that he also stood staring, and slack-jawed. Woody cleared his throat, "Cup of coffee, Buzz?"

"Uh… y-yes, please. Uh, miss," he snapped to reality with a tiny shake of his head.

"Sure thing." She noticed the hat he had let fall to the ground. "I think ya dropped somethin', mister." She handed him his black wide-brimmed Stetson with a friendly smile and hurried to the kitchen, sneaking a quick glance over her shoulder as Buzz settled across from Woody.

Despite rules against socializing during working hours, Bo's curiosity was far too piqued by the scene she had just witnessed to remain silent until the breakfast crowd had dispersed. As she and Jessie stood in the kitchen gathering piping hot plates of food on serving trays, she leaned in to whisper. "So who was that, who got such a warm welcome, hmm? That's not our usual way of greeting customers."

"It's my brother, Woody!" Jessie replied, in as quiet a tone as she could muster in such a giddy state. "He's gonna be in town for a while; stayin' here, too. We're meetin' up tonight after dinner, you hafta come with me and meet him!"

"I'd love to," replied Bo, a trace of relief evident on her face. "You didn't tell me he was so dashing."

"Woody? Dashing?" Jessie giggled, a bit perplexed, then balanced her heavily-laden tray above her shoulder and returned to the dining room.

The girls bustled to serve the train passengers in the short half-hour they would occupy the dining establishment. It was this cordial and efficient manner that Harvey Girls were becoming famous for, sending passengers on their way, well-fed and refreshed from a taste of the comfort and civility that lay many miles behind them at home. Jessie's mind wandered as she worked - she could hardly believe she was under the same roof as her brother again, after all these years - but she knew she didn't have time to stop and make small talk until the train had left the station.

Once the dining room began to empty, a few locals filed in, and Bo hurried to a table to wait on one of the new arrivals. She welcomed the unkempt man with a smile as she poured coffee into his mug, but before she could take his breakfast order, he grinned at her. "You one of today's specials, sweetheart?"

"Excuse me?" Bo straightened, taken aback by his comment.

"You heard me. Maybe I'm more interested in what else you can serve up," he continued with a leer. Woody pushed his chair back from the table, ready to confront the offensive man, when Jessie
passed by him, on her way back to the kitchen. She veered towards the table and stumbled, knocking into the insulting customer's chair and causing him to spill the freshly-poured coffee he was drinking into his lap.

"Oh, I'm so terribly sorry," she blurted out, a distinct lack of sincerity in her voice. She stepped aside and in front of Bo, putting more distance between the man and her friend.

"Why you little..." he wiped the scalding liquid from his hands as he jumped to his feet. Buzz also stood, prepared to intervene, but Mr. Kartoffelkopf was already intercepting the customer.

"Sir, you need to leave. Now."

"But - "

"Nobody speaks to my employees that way. You want to talk like that, there are plenty of saloons across the tracks. And from the smell of you, you're already familiar with them." The manager's face twisted in disgust. "Uncultured swine," he added under his breath.

The irate customer forcibly shoved his wooden chair against the table, causing dishes and silverware to clink against each other loudly. He stormed out of the Harvey House, muttering all the while. "Worthless biscuit shooters" was his final remark, before slamming the restaurant door on his way out.

The commotion over, Buzz sat back down and caught Woody smirking at him. "What?"

"Oh, nothing. You just seemed very... concerned."

Buzz colored. "Marshal reflexes."

"That so? Well, those reflexes were a mite slow for the blonde," he teased.

"Yours weren't," came the retort, and it was Woody's turn to blush. Buzz watched Jessie as she and Bo moved back to the counter, sure he saw a faint smile pulling at her lips.

The two marshals returned to their room in the depot hotel, after meeting with Sheriff Varney and touring the small railroad town of Barstow with him that afternoon. They had concluded their business with dinner in the Harvey House, and now both were ready to relax after their overnight journey and busy day.

Buzz took off his heavy black frock coat and hung it on a coat rack in the corner of the room along with his hat, then reached in his trunk of belongings for a book and proceeded to make himself comfortable on his bed.

"What do you think you're doing?" Woody asked, observing his partner's actions. "Aren't you coming with me to meet Jessie?"

Buzz peered over the edge of his book with wide, almost panic-stricken eyes. "I-I'd just be in the way... I mean... you haven't seen each other in a while... and, well..."

"Don't be ridiculous. I want to introduce you, and she won't mind." He could tell that Buzz was hesitating, and the corners of his mouth curled upward in amusement. "Buzz Lightyear, you're not scared of my sister, are you?"

"N-no. NO! Not at all."
"Alright then. Let's go, I don't want her to think I've forgotten."

"O-okay." Buzz set down his book and rose from the bed, then went to retrieve his coat and hat from the stand. In front of the dresser mirror, he buttoned the coat, smoothed its lapels, and brushed over the surface with his hands.

"You don't need to impress her, you know," remarked Woody, his grin widening.

Buzz deliberately placed his hat on his head, again scrutinizing his appearance in the mirror. "Oh, I-I know. But... the desert... it can get chilly in the evening. And... there was dust... from traveling."

Woody chuckled, and slapped his friend on the shoulder as they exited their room. "If you say so."

Jessie was sure she'd never worked a longer shift, or one that passed more slowly. Finally absolved of her duties, she blew into her dorm room ahead of Bo, already unfastening her apron. In her haste, the buttons trailing down the back kept slipping through her fingers, and she let out a frustrated groan.

"Slow down, Jessie," Bo laughed, as she batted her friend's hands away so she could undo the troublesome buttons. "I don't think he's going anywhere!"

"I can't help it, Bo; I haven't seen him in years and he's here! He's actually here!" She wriggled out of her uniform and tossed it onto the bed, quickly finding a skirt and shirtwaist to change into.

Bo deliberately picked up the crumpled dress and apron and hung them up properly, then began undressing herself while Jessie chattered away happily.

"I just can't believe it! What're the chances he'd end up in Barstow, of all places? I hope he's in town for a good long while! I'll tell those criminals - whoever they are - to just keep hidin' so he has to stay put." Jessie glanced in the mirror and hastily removed the hairpins that held her long braid in a neat updo - one of the first things she did after every long shift was over - and smoothed the flyaway strands around her face. She tightened the ribbon at the end of her now-free braid, before turning to Bo. "Ok, are ya ready... what're ya doin'?"

"I thought I'd freshen up a little." Bo stood in her corset cover and petticoats, rifling through her clothing, unable to decide what to wear. "It was a hectic day, and I need to fix my hair. I'll be along; don't leave your brother waiting."

"Freshen up? For Woody?" she snickered. "Don't take too long, okay?" If Bo answered, Jessie didn't hear it; she bounded out the door, down the stairs, and outside to the small park-like setting behind the Harvey hotel. Spotting Woody leaning on a porch post, she crept up, and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hey!" He turned to greet his sister, and they hugged again, this time getting a chance to savor the reunion. "Finally free?"

"'Til tomorrow, at least." She stepped back and held her brother at arm's length. He appeared much the same, perhaps a bit more weathered, but his brown eyes still held the same warmth she remembered. "Lookit you, all professional-like. You did it, Woody, everythin' we talked about as kids."

"Not quite everything; I'd like to be able to stay put someday. But it still beats back home." His expression shifted to one of regret. "I'm just sorry I couldn't help you get out of there sooner."
"But you did. You gave me this idea, didn't ya? It all worked out."

"How did you manage to get away?"

"Ya didn't get my letter?"

He shook his head. "No, I checked as often as I could; but then we had to leave San Diego for court in Los Angeles. I was beginning to get worried. So, what happened?"

"I ran off! Middle of the night, too. Can't you see Aunt Molly's face when she found out?" The siblings shared a laugh. "I figured just about anythin' would be better than the pompous ol' toad she was gonna make me marry. He looked like a walrus, Woody, and he was older'n Pa! So I went straight to Kansas City and got hired and sent here. I told 'em you were in California, but I didn't dream you'd show up in my dinin' room! What're you doin' in Barstow anyway?"

"There's been some trouble in Calico, and it's starting to spill over into Barstow, too. Buzz and I are here to help the local sheriffs figure out who's behind it all, and put an end to it, before the railroad is affected. Speaking of Buzz, where did he wander off to? He was just here. Buzz?"

Woody waved over his partner, who shot him a look that Jessie couldn't quite discern.

"You haven't been properly introduced to my sister. Jessie, this is my friend and partner, Buzz Lightyear. Buzz, my sister, Jessie Pride."

"E-evening, ma'am." The marshal's eyes darted around nervously. "It's just that - you see - I - uh, I must go."

"Please, stay." Jessie extended a hand to him. "It's awf'lly nice to finally meetcha in person. I've heard so much about you from Woody's letters."

"Really?" Buzz cautiously took her outstretched hand in his, noting its warmth as his fingers closed around it. There was a strange sensation in his chest, as if something clicked into place. He suddenly realized his grasp extended longer than was considered proper and he quickly released her hand as if it burned his skin. The lingering warmth from her touch was as good as a burn, and he closed his fingers over his palm, as if to preserve the sensation. "Woody's told me about y-you, too."

"Nothin' good, I'm sure," she joked, smirking at her brother.

"No, it's all been h-highly complimentary."

"Complimentary… you sure it was my brother you were talkin' to?" she laughed.

Just then, Bo approached from the direction of the dormitory, to find the three engaged in conversation.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I was just looking for Jessie. You forgot your coat." Bo handed the garment that was draped over her arm to her friend, with a twinkle in her eye. "I don't want to intrude..."

Jessie gladly slipped into the short wool jacket. She was surprised as how dressed up Bo looked - in a sweetly feminine day dress of white printed floral overlaid in lace, with pink and blue silk trim at the waist and high neck, and a delicate crocheted shawl wrapped loosely around her shoulders - but kept those thoughts to herself. "Nonsense, you hafta meet my brother! Woody, I'd like ya to meet Bo Peepe, my roommate and good friend. Bo, this is my brother, Woody Pride."

Woody tipped his hat and gave a small, gentlemanly bow. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance,
"Guess it's true what they say, that absence makes the heart grow fonder," he chuckled, with a wink at Jessie. "Oh, allow me to introduce my partner and fellow Deputy Marshal, Buzz Lightyear."

Buzz offered a polite nod in Bo's direction. "Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

"I trust you've gotten yourselves settled and found your room to your liking?"

"Yes, it's quite a nice establishment," he replied. "We're not usually fortunate enough to stay at a Harvey House on our assignments."

Woody gestured to a nearby area with benches. "Shall we sit down?" Bo sat on a bench and Woody motioned to the seat beside her, "May I?" She nodded in affirmation and he quickly raised his eyebrows at Buzz, knowing now he was forced to sit with Jessie.

Buzz shot a furtive look at Woody, fully aware of what his friend was up to. He wasn't, he admitted to himself, entirely ungrateful.

Jessie came up next to him, "Mind if I squeeze in next to ya?"

"Yes! No! No, wh-why would I mind?" He took a deep, steadying breath. "Please, sit."

She eyed him curiously as she sat on the bench, and he followed, somewhat reluctantly. Her mind had no time to dwell on his behavior, though. No sooner had Woody seated himself on his own bench than he reached into his unbuttoned coat and pulled what looked like a folded magazine from an interior pocket.

"Almost forgot I had this for you, Jess."

"A dime novel!" she snatched it eagerly from his outstretched hand. As she lowered herself back onto the bench next to Buzz, she accidentally sat upon his knee. "Oh, I'm sorry!" she smiled sheepishly at him, and slid back over to her half of the seat as he cleared his throat. She began flipping through the pages, which were filled with stories of daring western adventure. "I ain't seen one'a these in ages, not since long after you left home!" she grinned at Woody. "Once your subscription ran out, I didn't dare try to bring 'em in the house on my own. Remember the time Momma caught me with one? 'Vile rubbish,' she called it."

"Do I! I had to dig it out of the trash bin so I could read it myself," he laughed. "You should've known better than to hide it in that ladies' magazine. It was a dead giveaway when you were clearly enjoying it so much."

"We used t'love these!" Jessie's focus switched back and forth between Bo and Buzz as she explained. "When I was little, Woody would read the stories to me, until I could read 'em on my own. Some even had women in 'em, like Calamity Jane, Wild Edna, Hurricane Nell…"

"More like 'Hurricane Jess,'" Woody teased. "Really, though, I guess we can credit them with us eventually ending up west - them, and Buffalo Bill."

Jessie's green eyes brightened; she loved sharing her remembrances of one of the happiest days she'd known. "Oh, when we saw Buffalo Bill's show in St. Louis, that was the best day! Remember, Woody? We were shoppin' downtown with Momma when the parade went through town. I was 16, and she was makin' me get grown-up long skirts." Jessie wrinkled her nose at the thought. "But the
parade was so excitin'! We saw real cowboys, and a stagecoach, and Buffalo Bill right there on the street in front of us. Momma just fussed at us to get inside and stay away from those ruffians."

Woody chuckled. "Like that was gonna stop us!" He looked to Buzz and Bo, recounting the tale with a glint in his eye. "A few days later, Jessie and I got up early, under the guise of going to the city's big annual fair. Ma didn't want to let us go - "

"You told her you might meet a nice girl there," Jessie interrupted with a giggle, "and that made her reconsider. She was tryin' to fix up Woody back then. And she was so mad when we wouldn't take Aunt Molly's carriage!"

"She didn't trust us, but I told her that I was 22, and I could certainly chaperone my little sister. Besides, I'd been working in our father's store, so I could pay for the streetcar and the admission," Woody continued. "We got there in time for the 10:30 show."

Jessie became increasingly animated with the retelling. "We found seats in the grandstand just before it all started. Buffalo Bill, and all the cowboys and indians, rode around the arena. There was shootin' and ridin' and fightin' and rescuin' - it was like the characters we read about come to life! Only it was real people who could actually do these amazin' things. Like Annie Oakley, she was the best shot in the show, better'n the men! I knew right then and there that if she could be different like that, and still be somebody, so could I - maybe not at home, but if I could get to the West. We decided then'n there we'd get outta Missouri, somehow; it was all we talked about the rest of the day, walkin' around the fair. And sure enough, we did!" She grinned widely at her brother, proud that they had both accomplished what they set out to do so many years ago.

"Took us a while, but better late than never," Woody returned a smile in his sister's direction, part reciprocation, part mirth over the look of helpless wonderment on Buzz's face as he listened to Jessie speak. "That show gave me the kick in the pants I needed to pursue the life I really wanted."

Bo turned to Woody, and leaned toward him with piqued interest. "Jessie said you used to be a sheriff?"

"I was, for a couple years, right after I left home. First a deputy in Texas, then a full-fledged one in New Mexico."

"The safety of an entire town under your care," she glanced down and picked at an imaginary speck of dirt on her skirt, then lifted her blue eyes to his and held his gaze for a heartbeat. "What a noble profession."

Jessie noticed the light blush that colored her brother's cheeks and that he sat up a little straighter. She puzzled for a moment over what was transpiring between the two, then a crooked smile formed as realization hit her. A chuckle began to escape from her lips which she quickly covered with a small cough, not wanting to sabotage whatever effort Bo was putting forth.

"It kept me busy, that's for sure," Woody continued, recalling the lawlessness he fought in the small desert town. "But there was no chance of improving my circumstances, not in the middle of nowhere. So when I was recommended by a friend for the Deputy Marshal position here in California, I took it. Buzz and I became partners, and the rest is history."

"Life as a Marshal must be exciting."

The floodgates of storytelling having been opened by Bo's remark, the two men proceeded to regale the girls with stories of the bandits and outlaws they'd conquered in the five years since they first began working together. They particularly enjoyed talking about their most recent case: having been
sent to the vicinity of San Diego to apprehend One Eyed Bart and One Eyed Betty - who had robbed a train and dynamited a trestle bridge - before they could escape over the Mexican border. After an hour, Woody realized they had monopolized the conversation for perhaps longer than they should have.

"I'm sorry, we've been talking too much about ourselves. How about you, Miss Peepe? Are you from here, or do you have family in the area?"

"No, my family is..." she paused, "was from Kansas. They've been gone a long time," she added softly in answer to Woody's curious stare.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring up a painful subject."

Bo smiled reassuringly, "That's alright. You had no way of knowing. But thank you."

"I know how Jessie came to work as a Harvey Girl. Have you been one long?" Woody inquired further, trying to broach a less-sensitive topic. "It must have its own sort of excitement."

"Not very long, but yes, it does. Jessie has some wonderful stories," she gave her friend a pointed look.

Jessie caught the hint right away, "I sure do!" She shared stories from her time in training, making them laugh with her impressions of some of the more ridiculous customers she had encountered.

Buzz had been silent for most of the evening. He readily chimed in his part in some of Woody's stories, but otherwise he struggled to think of something personal to ask Jessie. He knew enough from Woody to know she wouldn't want to talk about back home, even in comparison to California. He opened his mouth, having finally settled on asking her how she liked the area, but his chance was lost when they were abruptly interrupted.

Mrs. Kartoffelkopf emerged from the shadows, at the edge of the Harvey House grounds, her shrill voice piercing the desert stillness. "Girls! It's almost ten; don't want to be out past curfew!"

"We'll be right there," Bo called in return. "Guess we should get back," she stood and met Woody's gaze without a hint of her earlier demureness, "It was a pleasure to meet you, Woody. I can see why Jessie adores you so much. I hope we will meet up another time?"

He dipped again in a short bow, "The pleasure was all mine, Miss Peepe. And I would be honored to spend more time with you."

Jessie, who had been marveling at the peculiar behavior of her brother and friend, grabbed Woody in another tight embrace. "You're gonna be seein' a lot of us, don't you worry!" Her voice softened ever so slightly, before she was willing to let go. "I'm so glad you're here."

"Me, too, Jess."

Once the siblings broke apart, Buzz cleared his throat. "I, uh, I enjoyed meeting you, Miss Pride."

"I enjoyed meetin' ya, too. And maybe next time you'll call me Jessie," she chided playfully.

"Heh, well, uh, I would like that. Meeting you again, I mean. And calling on you - I mean calling you Jessie; not that I wouldn't like to call on you - o-or call you J-Jessie."

A giggle erupted from her and she smiled at the young marshal. "Until next time, then."
Woody turned to Buzz as the girls disappeared into their dorm building next door. Buzz stood transfixed, his eyes locked on the location where Jessie had just been, looking completely dazed. "Guess you've seen her, huh?"

"Yeah." His head snapped in Woody's direction. "Wait, what?"

"You'll 'know her when you see her'? Admit it, Buzz, you're sweet on Jessie."

"W-well, I m-mean, I do find her c-charming." More was revealed in the tone of his reply than his actual words, a detail that was not lost on Woody.

"My best friend and my sister," he chuckled. "Who'd a'thunk?"

Chapter End Notes

Harvey House locations typically contained a horseshoe-shaped lunch counter with stools, designed for efficient service of meals in a very limited amount of time (usually a 20-30 minute break for train maintenance), as well as a more-traditional dining room with tables and chairs. Passengers were directed to the entrance by a large brass gong that was rung by the manager or a busboy. All were furnished with the finest in table linens, dishes, and silverware, and served high-quality food at reasonable prices, at a time when most eating establishments along rail lines were shoddy at best. Many Harvey Houses - as in the case of Barstow - also offered comfortable hotel lodging for travelers. Harvey Girls brought a bit of welcome refinement to the rough-around-the-edges western towns that built up around the depots, but they still occasionally contended with the era's negative view of waitresses (mentioned in the previous chapter's notes). "Biscuit shooter" was a somewhat-derogatory term for Harvey Girls, and was taken from a California newspaper dated December 1893.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

This chapter is the first to draw from research and observations made on my recent vacation - specifically the town of Calico, which is a real place and will be introduced here. More notes about it can be found at the end of the chapter, and of course be sure to visit our Pinterest board (the "Jessie's Journey" board under the account name yodelincowgirl) to see photos, both from the 19th century and today.

As always, Toy Story doesn't belong to us. If it did, we wouldn't be waiting so long for an update on Toy Story 4... this wait is torture! ;P Anyway, enjoy, and please leave kudos and comments!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"So Calico is directly northeast of here?" Buzz held his pocket notebook - with comments scrawled in it from the previous day's meeting - in his left hand, and a fork laden with eggs in his right. "I would have preferred that Sheriff Varney accompany us." He shoveled the waiting bite into his mouth.

"We won't have any trouble finding it. Slink said it's an easy hour's ride, about ten miles and mostly flat." Woody gulped the last of the coffee in his mug. "Besides, we can talk to plenty of townsfolk before he meets us at Sheriff Hammond's at noon."

The two marshals sat at the Harvey House counter, having waited to come downstairs for their own breakfast until the rush of the early-morning train had passed. In this less-frenetic atmosphere, it didn't take Trixie - who was serving as drink girl - long to notice that Woody's cup was now empty, and to hurry over to fill it with fresh, hot coffee.

"What brings you two to Barstow?" she asked as she poured, first for Woody, and then topping off Buzz's half-empty cup.

"We're in town on business," Woody answered simply, taking a sip.

"Oh, you'll like it here, there's plenty of stores, a post office, a public school, a mansion… and sometimes even parties." A flirtatious smile spread across her face, but when she noticed that Buzz refused to take his eyes off the notes he was jotting in his little leather-bound journal, she focused her efforts on Woody, leaning ever so slightly forward and over the countertop. "In fact, there's going to be a dance on Christmas Eve. If you're going to be here for a while, you should go. It sounds like it'll be a first-rate frolic!"

"Thank you for taking care of these gentlemen, Trixie," Bo interrupted, arriving with the second helping of french toast Woody had ordered. "I believe the two ladies at the end of the counter would like some more coffee as well," she remarked, glad to give the young woman a reason to step away from the marshals.

Trixie sighed a little but moved on, greeting the customers without any hint of annoyance.

Bo set the plate on the counter. "Here you are, Sheriff. I like a man with an appetite."
"I must admit, I am getting spoiled so far, by both the food and the service," he smiled.

"I know you boys are here on business, but if you want a more personal tour of Barstow, I know some decent tour guides." The twinkle in Bo's eye, and her intent, were not lost on Woody.

Buzz broke in, without glancing up from his notebook. "I think Sheriff Varney is arranging - OW!" he exclaimed, as Woody delivered a swift kick to his shin.

"That's mighty nice of you to offer, Miss Peepe. I'd hate for you to let me impose on your free time."

"Sheriff, nothing would please me more." She held Woody's gaze for a few moments. "Can I get you anything else, Mr. Lightyear?" There was no response, and Bo smirked when she saw his attention was arrested by Jessie.

A sudden cry of alarm and the rattling of dishes startled the nearby patrons. Arms piled with blue and white china, Rex stumbled backward in surprise as Trixie rushed into the kitchen, allowing the swinging door to nearly strike the young busboy. Jessie, whose last customers had just left the premises, happened to be standing an arm's length away, and she reached out and steadied him with her hands on his forearms. "Easy, Rex! Need some help?" she offered with a kind smile.

"Yes. Thank you!" he squeaked nervously. "I'm so afraid that I'm going to break them!"

"You don't hafta try and carry all of them at once," Jessie laughed, then took a share of the dishes and carried them into the kitchen, followed by Rex.

Buzz had followed the scene with apprehension, but didn't have time to dwell on it as Woody stood and disrupted his train of thought. "Welp, shall we get this wagon train a-movin'?"

"Yes, we want to make sure we have enough time to conduct our investigation." He set his napkin on the counter and followed his friend towards the exit.

Jessie had come back into the room and saw the marshals preparing to leave. She hurried over to greet Woody and Buzz, who were retrieving their hats from wall pegs near the door.

"Mornin' Woody... Buzz." She turned to her brother. "Sleep well?"

"Like a baby," he replied. "Almost slept through the train coming through."

"Wouldn't have guessed it, ya look like you could use more beauty sleep," she teased.

Expecting Jessie to ask him the same question as Woody, Buzz anxiously rehearsed the answer in his mind, while gripping the brim of his hat so firmly between his fingers that it was in danger of being bent into an entirely original shape. The question that came, however, was not what he had prepared for. "And how're you doin'?"

"Y-yes, thank you," Buzz blurted out, then realized his gaffe. "I-I mean... I'm f-fine." He hoped that his mortification wasn't evident on his face. "Heh. Guess the coffee hasn't taken effect yet."

Jessie giggled. "What kind of trouble are you fellas gettin' into today?"

Buzz shot a glance at Woody, who took the hint quickly and spoke up in response. "We're heading into Calico to talk to Sheriff Hammond. Probably will be gone the better part of the day. But we hope to be back by dinner."

"Be safe out there. Maybe we can catch up some more tonight?"
"I'd like that." Woody smirked, and threw his friend a side glance. "Wouldn't you, Buzz?"

Buzz's grip on his hat tightened. "S-sure."

Though she still didn't know what to make of Buzz's peculiar behavior, she found herself smiling at him. "'Til later, then."

The marshals donned their hats and exited the building, just as the last remaining breakfast patrons were departing as well. With the Harvey House in a temporary lull, the girls on duty retreated to an unoccupied corner of the kitchen and began to talk as they polished silver and folded napkins, in preparation for the mid-day arrivals.

"Did you hear, folks have been robbed in town!" Bonnie exclaimed, wide-eyed and dramatic. "Do you think the robbers'll hold up the Harvey House?"

"Maybe that's why those two marshals showed up," suggested Dolly.

"Speaking of, I told them about the dance this morning" Trixie squealed, changing the subject. "I wouldn't mind being on one of their arms. The shorter one's an absolute daisy!" she gushed.

"You got that right," Dolly concurred.

Bo couldn't help but smirk at the misguided gossip. "Sorry, girls, I think he's already taken with someone."

Jessie, who up to this point had been following the conversation intently yet silently, looked up from the spoon she was polishing. "Who?" The only answer she received was a pointed stare from Bo, her eyebrows raised to suggest that Jessie's intelligence was somewhat lacking.

"Oh well, the other one's handsome enough, too." Trixie shrugged.

Bonnie giggled. "But we know he has his sights set on Jessie!"

It was Jessie's turn to laugh. "Not me! He's my brother. He does have his sights set on someone, though." She returned Bo's pointed stare, and was sure she noticed a blush rise on her friend's cheeks.

Any potential romantic schemes thwarted, Trixie sighed. "Guess I'll just have to get Rex to take me."

"But you can't be courted by another Harvey employee!" Bonnie cried. "You'll both be fired!"

"Oh please, I don't wanna marry him," laughed Trixie. "We're just friends. We play cards together."

"Cards?" Bonnie gasped. "Oh Trixie…"

"Only Old Maid… and sometimes poker," she added slyly.

"So do you think you'll go with someone, Dolly?" inquired Bonnie.

"Well, I probably shouldn't go with anyone. My fiance wouldn't be too happy if he found out."

"Your WHAT?" The girls' voices rose in unison.

"My fiance, Antonio. We've been promised to each other ever since we were kids in Chicago," she explained matter-of-factly. "Our families were from the same village in Italy, and came over together shortly before I was born. They wanted a better life for us, and America's the land of opportunity,
you know."

Trixie was aghast. "How have you not told me this, I'm your roommate! And why would you leave your fiance behind to come here? Me, I'm here to get a man."

"I never would have figured you'd be one to settle down, Trixie," Dolly joked.

"Who says finding a man means settling down?" she asked with a rather broad wink. "It didn't for my parents; we've gone place to place for as long as I can remember. But you're not a bohemian like me, so why bother traveling so far if you already have a fella? I'm still mad that you never told me about him!"

"It never came up," Dolly shrugged. "And I needed to work; we're saving to start a winery. He's been working at a vineyard south of here."

"Besides, not everyone becomes a Harvey Girl just to get married. I sure wouldn't have left home if my family didn't need the money!" Bonnie chimed in. "Pa's crops failed, and with times being hard and all, it was the only way. They depend on the pay I send home. Hopefully next year will be better for them."

Bo picked up another piece of silverware and began to polish it. "Will you go back home if the crops improve?"

Bonnie's face turned thoughtful. "I'm not sure. I mean, I always figured I would, but now... I kind of like it here, having a job that's all my own."

Barbie had entered the kitchen in the middle of the girls' discussion, and she joined the conversation. "I'm not here for a husband either, although I wouldn't be opposed to one. I wanted an adventure, and figured I could see the country as a Harvey Girl."

"Same with us," Jessie added, gesturing to Bo and speaking on her behalf. "We were just lookin' for a change of scenery, and comin' west sounded like a good idea."

Outnumbered in opinion, Trixie conceded. "Well, I'm still hoping to meet someone here."

"While you wait for that special beau to arrive, why don't you and Bonnie and Dolly make sure the counter is sparkling for lunch?" suggested Barbie, gently asserting her authority.

The three girls gathered all the requisite supplies, and set out to polish the large wooden countertop, with Barbie trailing behind them to further prepare the public spaces for the next round of guests. Once the kitchen was silent - save for the rhythmic chopping of vegetables by the chef and the splash of dishes being washed across the room - Jessie paused thoughtfully, then spoke as casually as she could manage.

"Earlier... when you said that... Buzz... is taken with someone... who 'xactly were you meanin'?"

"Do you even have to ask?"

Jessie stared blankly at her friend.

"You, silly!" Bo chuckled. "Don't think I didn't notice."

"Notice what? That he can barely manage a full sentence around me?"

"And why do you think that is? He speaks to me without any trouble." Bo glanced up as the door
opened and Barbie breezed through, returning to the kitchen for some freshly-ground coffee to brew for the lunch customers.

"Huh." A tiny smile flickered across Jessie's face. "Guess I just figured he didn't know how to talk someone like me… ya know, odd."

"There are other reasons a man can't think straight around a girl." The tone of Bo's voice making her point clear.

Jessie's smile widened a bit. "He does seem real nice. And he's not bad lookin'."

"He's definitely not bad looking." Barbie agreed emphatically. Having obtained enough coffee grounds for the three large silver urns that sat behind the counter, she headed back out of the kitchen, pausing at the partially-open doorway. "And I think Bo's on to something; he barely took his eyes off you all through breakfast."

Alone again with Bo, Jessie tilted her head quizzically. "Really?"

"Really," Bo affirmed, then looked at Jessie with a mischievous glint in her eye. "Maybe he'll ask you to the Christmas dance."

Jessie scoffed at the remark, and waved her hand in dismissal. "If he does, it's only 'cause he just met me; he'll figure out what I'm really like and change his mind faster'n you can say 'uncle.'" She grinned at her friend. "Maybe Woody'll ask you."

"Believe me, there won't be a 'maybe,' if I have any say in it."

The marshals' ride to Calico, across the desert sands and low-lying brush, had been a mostly-silent one. After reviewing once more what few details they knew of the case so far, the pair carefully surveyed the surrounding landscape and familiarized themselves with the route they'd be following on their frequent travels back and forth between the two towns.

Buzz reined his horse Astronomo to close the gap between him and Woody, and the dapple grey trotted alongside chestnut Bullseye. "So, uh, this dance… that was mentioned this morning… I know it's not our usual course of action to attend social functions when we're on an assignment… but… what do you think about it? Do you think we could… uh… possibly get some leads if we attended?"

"I dunno, I doubt the outlaws have much interest in dancing."

"True. But… maybe… would they possibly target such an event? Do we need to be present to… you know… protect the citizens?"

"It's possible, I guess, but I don't think it's likely. Why are you so bent on going to this dance, anyway? You've never showed any interest before."

"Well, I mean, it is still Christmas… and you should be with family… so your sister would probably like it… and I'm sure Miss Peepe would too… and…"

Woody grinned at the realization of what his friend was getting at. "Enough, enough!" he laughed. "We can go. And speaking of, let's hurry up a bit. It's getting hot out here in this sun. C'mon Bullseye, yah!" He prodded the stirrups into his horse's side, and the pair galloped towards the Calico mountain range that rose above the horizon ahead of them.

The marshals arrived at the head of Wall Street Canyon, which led into Calico and was bordered by
the colorful mineral-rich hills that had inspired the settlement's name. Rustic wood-frame structures, housing businesses as well as residences, came more clearly into view as they rode slowly up the incline approaching the mining town's center. Finding the corral, they dismounted and guided their horses within the confines of its split-rail fences, to secure them for the duration of their stay.

Woody pulled his watch from his vest pocket to check the time, then tucked it back inside. "We have about two hours until our meeting with Sheriff Hammond. Why don't we start here and work our way through town?"

Stopping by business after business - saloons, hotels, and the variety of retail establishments that lined the primary thoroughfare - the two lawmen collected whatever information they could glean from the citizens, and Buzz recorded every pertinent detail in his pocket notebook. They had just finished speaking with the proprietor of one of the general stores when, on their way out the door, they were met by a short, rotund man with a welcoming face and a long white beard.

"Oh, pardon me!" he tipped his well-worn hat, then wiped his hand on his denim overalls before offering it to the marshals. "Never seen you two around Calico before. Name's Peter - Peter Gornik - but my friends call me Pete. Been here since the first silver strike back in '81, and I make it a point to get to know everyone who comes to these parts."

"Deputy Marshal Woody Pride, and this is my partner, Buzz Lightyear," he shook the miner's hand, and Buzz did the same. "We've been brought here to put an end to the robberies that have been plaguing Calico, and now Barstow."

"Ah, yes, it's such a mystery," Pete sighed, scratching his scraggly beard as if in contemplation. "I hate seein' my hometown all tore up with crime and fear. Folks here have been through enough the past couple years - used to be a town of 3,000, now we're hardly 300. Just can't seem to make a livin' in the mines these days. So if there's any way I can help you fellas, I'm at your service. Don't hesitate to look me up."

"Thank you kindly, we'll keep that in mind." Woody caught a glimpse of the clock on the store's wall. "Now if you'll excuse us, we have a meeting with the sheriff."

"Of course," Pete nodded, waving as the two marshals exited the store.

"He seems friendly," Woody commented to Buzz.

"Yes," he replied, a note of wary cynicism in his voice, "very friendly."

It was only a short walk up the steep, dusty street to Sheriff Hammond's office. Woody knocked on the unpainted wooden door to announce their arrival, then pushed it open and stepped inside ahead of Buzz. The small room held a desk, a table, and several chairs. A stove sat in the corner to provide warmth on the occasional chilly day, and "wanted" posters of notorious outlaws lined the walls. Sheriff Varney, who had also come from Barstow, stood with Sheriff Hammond to greet them.

"You must be the Marshals. Glad to have you here." The Calico sheriff strode forward and grasped Woody's hand first, then Buzz's. "No troubles getting here?"

"None, and we hope we can resolve this matter for you as swiftly, Sheriff Hammond," Buzz remarked.

"Please, call me Hamm," the portly sheriff said good-naturedly. "Would you like to start with a stroll around town?"

Woody shook his head. "We took the liberty of doing that before we came here."
"Let's get to business then," Hamm gestured to the empty chairs surrounding his desk, and everyone sat. "It's been a real nuisance, I don't mind telling you. Shame to see the town decline like this"

Buzz took out his notebook, and flipped to a blank page. "When did the trouble start?"

"About a year or so. This town was founded on silver mines just over a decade ago, and it prospered. At one point there were 500 mines, but they started running dry a few years back, at least what could be extracted by hand. The mines began to close not long after that."

"Why's that?" Woody asked.

"Too costly to get the equipment needed to go deeper. I'm sure some could have managed, but last year when the price of silver started to fall, the expense became too much to consider. It was cheaper to move where silver was still easily found than to stay."

"Silver's not the only thing in these hills," added Slink. "There's borate out there too, and some folks have been able to switch to that. One of the oldest town residents did, a prospector named Pete."

"We met him at the general store," Woody said. "He told us some of the town history you shared. Offered to help us if we needed."

"Yeah, that's Pete," concurred Hamm. "He lives pretty far outside of town, close to his mine, but he knows everyone and would help anyone out. Most of the kids in town see him as another grandfather."

"Do you think one of the locals is running the show?" Buzz looked up from his notes.

"Hamm and I," Slink interjected again, tilting his chair backward and resting his feet on the desk, "don't think any of the locals are the source. Like he said, most are leaving; those staying just want to live their lives and aren't looking for trouble, either to cause it or receive it."

Buzz frowned thoughtfully. "Who else would benefit from the robberies, though, if not someone local?"

"That's why you're here, to help us get to the bottom of it." Addressing both marshals, Hamm leaned forward and placed his hands on his desk. "So, where all did you go earlier today?"

"The businesses, mainly," answered Woody. "If you can take us to anyone else you think we should speak to, we'd be much obliged."

"Absolutely." Hamm stood and placed his bowler hat on his head. "I can introduce you to some of the people who were at the bank when it was robbed."

The two sheriffs and two marshals visited several of the modest wood and adobe houses that dotted the creases of the valley. They spent the afternoon obtaining statements from residents who had been affected by the gang's crimes, then the lawmen made plans to tour the existing mine camps in a few days and said their goodbyes. Woody, Buzz, and Slink retrieved their horses from the corral and began their return trip to Barstow.

An amber sunset made the surrounding mountains a contrast in shadows and light as the three men rode southwestward across the desert. Once they were done discussing the day's possible leads, Woody and Slink gladly took the opportunity of their more relaxed setting to reminisce about their crime-fighting days in Texas. The lower the sun sunk in the sky, however, the more concerned Buzz became about the time. He spurred Astronomo into a faster canter and edged ahead of the former colleagues, hoping that they would follow and pick up their pace as well. They didn't; and by the
time Slink split off in his own direction once they reached Barstow, dusk was rapidly falling.

The two marshals emerged from the livery nearest the hotel, their horses settled in for another night. Woody slapped a hand on his stomach. "C'mon, Buzz, I'm hungry! It's almost past my dinnertime."

"You could have thought of that before you and Sheriff Varney took a detour down memory lane." Buzz was on edge, and he knew his voice gave it away.

"What's the matter with you? We talked about important things, too!"

Buzz stopped, confronting his friend. "Don't talk to me about importance! Because of YOU, our plans for this evening are in jeopardy."

"What are you talking about?" Woody was genuinely perplexed.

"Right now, all I want to do is just get to the hotel. And you, my friend, are responsible for potentially delaying our meeting with Miss Pride and Miss Peepe." He pivoted on his heel and hurried ahead.

Realization dawned on Woody, and he snickered with a shake of his head. "You're a loony, sometimes, Buzz Lightyear," he murmured before jogging to catch up.

The Barstow Harvey House was a whirlwind of activity, packed wall-to-wall with train passengers and local dinner-hour diners, when Woody and Buzz finally returned from their outing. Despite the crowd, the two men managed to find a pair of vacant seats at the counter.

As he scanned the menu he had been given, Buzz found that his nervousness about talking to Jessie was getting the better of him. Although he was ravenously hungry after such an active day, his stomach churned and he felt as if he might not be able to down a single bite of whatever food he ordered. In an attempt to quell these feelings, he flipped the menu from front to back, over and over.

Jessie swept by on her way to the kitchen and stopped for a moment in front of the two marshals. "Are we still meetin' up after dinner?" she asked Woody. "Same place as last night?"

"You bet. You'll be bringing Miss Peepe, won't you?"

"Course I will," she smirked at her brother, then turned to Buzz. "I hope you'll be comin' along, too."

Badly distracted by his thoughts, it didn't even register that the girl at the root of his inner turmoil was in fact speaking to him. "Yeah," Buzz muttered abruptly, not looking up from the menu he wasn't actually reading.

"O... kay then," sighed Jessie. 'Well, that didn't take long. Shoulda known better;' she reprimanded herself sadly, as she walked away.

Buzz glanced upward, realizing that he needed to give someone his order. "Wait, where did the waitress go?"

"That wasn't the waitress... well it was, but not our waitress. That was Jessie."

Buzz's eyes widened in horror, and he buried his face in his hands with a groan. "She's going to think I'm a cad."

Woody chuckled. "No, she won't. Don't worry, you can make it up to her tonight."
Buzz took his shiny silver watch from his vest pocket. He flipped its cover open and glanced at it, then snapped it closed. Not a minute had passed before he repeated the process. "Shouldn't they be meeting us soon?" He tried to sound nonchalant, but time had seemed to crawl since they finished their meal, which was doing nothing to alleviate his nerves.

A wide grin spread across Woody's face. "Buzz Lightyear, I do believe you intend to pitch woo."

"Pitch… woo?" Buzz cleared his throat. "I just thought… I mean, aren't we... you know... asking the girls... to the, uh, Christmas dance in town?"

"I'm asking Miss Peepe. Asking Jessie is up to you."

Buzz stared in the direction of the dormitory, then checked his watch again. "Maybe we should wait by the door… to meet them right when they come out."

Woody laughed. "What, afraid someone else is gonna ask her?"

Buzz looked at his friend, incredulous that Woody was so oblivious to that possibility. "Yes! She seemed rather friendly with the busboy this morning."

"That kid?" Now Woody was the one to look surprised. His face softened, however, understanding that Buzz wouldn't know of Jessie's history when it came to men. "You don't have a thing to worry about, Buzz."

"But what do I say? I was thinking about it on the ride back from Calico and all through dinner, but nothing seemed right."

"I dunno, you'll think of something," shrugged Woody.

Buzz pondered in silence for a few moments, then sighed sadly. "Blast, I can't do it, it's too hard!"

"What's so hard about asking a girl to a dance?" Woody struck a gallant pose, his hand on his vest. "'Miss Peepe, I was wondering if you would do me the honor of attending the Christmas dance with me.' See? Nothing to it. I'll pretend to be Jessie. Go."

"O-okay, " he hesitated. "M-m-miss Pride... I w-w-as wondering... that is... UGH! I feel like an idiot."

"You ARE an idiot," Woody grinned wickedly, and pointed towards the hotel. "Hey, look, isn't that Jessie over there? Looks like she's talking to that busboy!"

"What? Where?!" Buzz spun around, searching somewhat frantically for her.

Woody burst into hysterical laughter, as Buzz learned that he had been tricked and she was nowhere in sight.

"You're mocking me, aren't you?" He shook his head at his friend, who was still doubled over with mirth. "You're a sad, strange, little man, and you have my pity."

"You don't need to be nervous, Buzz." Woody nudge his friend's shoulder in encouragement. "Just ask her. She's gonna say yes."

Chapter End Notes
We decided to introduce the idea of "drink girls" in this chapter, which were a common aspect of Harvey Houses - the main waitress would take the customers' drink orders, and based on how she left the teacup at their places, the drink girl would know whether to pour coffee, tea, or milk. Although these drink girls likely worked in both the dining room and at the lunch counter, research has been inconclusive; so we only utilized them here, as the counters were intended to provide the most efficient service for travelers. Also, when the Harvey Girls were between shifts, they were expected to stay busy, in preparation for the next wave of guests. Locations could be subject to inspection without notice, and everything was expected to be shining and spotless at all times.

Descriptions of Calico are made from both first-hand observations and historical accounts. Since Calico was restored and rebuilt in the 1950s, it's unclear how much it differs from the town that existed in the 1880s and 1890s, so we chose to work with the layout that exists today. The landscape itself, however, is still largely unchanged, as the area hasn't become very urbanized in the past century, besides the highways that cut across it. The town was indeed negatively impacted during this time, both by the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890, which led to reduced values of silver, and the Panic of 1893, a depression that affected the overall economy.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

We're back, with added fluff! While it's important to delve into other aspects of the story as well, it's always nice to get back to our favorite four, and spend a little time with them again. If you haven't been following our Pinterest board ("Jessie's Journey" under the account name yodelincowgirl), be sure to check it out! New pins have been added.

Toy Story still isn't ours. If it was, Toy Story Land would already be open for my trip to Disney World next week. If you're enjoying our story - and we hope you are! - please leave us some kudos, and don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss anything!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jessie and Bo stepped out into the brisk evening air, buttoning their coats to shield themselves from the nighttime chill that had fallen over the otherwise-warm desert. The two girls made a beeline for the seating area they had shared with Woody and Buzz the night before, but stopped short when they saw that Trixie, Dolly, and Bonnie - who had cajoled the kitchen staff into giving them bowls of ice cream - had occupied the very benches to which they were hoping to return. The men, however, had been watching for them to emerge from the dormitory building, and Woody waved his sister and her friend over.

"Guess we lost our spot," Jessie sighed to her brother, looking over to the trio of giggly girls who seemed to be glancing their way every so often. "There's always the parlor at our place, but some other girls are usin' that, too."

"Why don't we go for a stroll down by the river?" Bo suggested. "Jessie and I wandered over there last week on our day off. It's nice and quiet, and will be pretty by moonlight."

"Sounds like a perfect idea," said Woody, and the four started in the direction of the tall cottonwood trees that lined the Mojave River, which flowed a short distance behind the depot. As soon as they were out of earshot, Woody asked, "What's up with those girls?"

Jessie shrugged. "They're nice n'all, but there's gonna be a dance in town on Christmas Eve, and they're beside themselves with excitement."

"Oh we heard; the one told us about it this morning," Woody chuckled. "If didn't know better, I'd think she was baiting us to ask her."

"Trixie? Curly brown hair?" She made a face at her brother's nod. "She's such a flirt."

"Speaking of the dance," Bo stepped a little closer to Woody as they continued toward the river, "it sounds like a wonderful evening. I so love to dance, and don't get many opportunities to, working." She reached out and linked her arm through his. "I was hoping that maybe you would ask me, Sheriff."

Woody coughed; he was caught off guard by Bo's forward gesture, but not unwelcomely so. It took him a moment to collect his thoughts and continue. "Well, heh… funny you should say that, Miss Peepe, because I was already planning on it, if you would give me the honor of escorting you."
"I'd be delighted," she answered, holding onto his arm a little tighter.

The two walked along, savoring the sweet moment in the silence of their solitude. For Jessie, however, the silence wasn't so sweet. Buzz's gaze was focused straight ahead, with no appearance of planning to utter a word to her or anyone else, and Jessie's mind began to wander.

'I knew it,' she thought. 'I was right; Bo was wrong. I was stupid to think he'd ask me. He doesn't like me, he's just toleratin' his best friend's little sister. I'll just sit alone in my room on Christmas Eve while everyone else goes. It'll be a dumb dance anyway, an' I've had enough of those, thanks to Aunt Molly…'

"Here we are," Bo announced, breaking into Jessie's thoughts. "We have a good hour until we have to head back, shall we sit for a while?"

The river - which only rushed with water in the winter and spring months - shimmered with the reflection of the stars in the clear, cloudless sky, and its shadowy row of trees provided a feeling of seclusion from the buildings nearby. Once they had seated themselves on the sandy soil along the riverbank, Woody cleared his throat. "Buzz, wasn't there something you were going to ask Jessie? You told me to remind you…"

"OH! Y-yes. There was. T-that is..." Buzz's heart started pounding; every word, every sentence he had rehearsed in his mind all day long seemed to have instantly flown away. 'I can get through this,' he reassured himself, then turned to Jessie, who was sitting at his side. Those wide green eyes of hers meeting his didn't help one bit. "I w-wanted to... I m-mean... w-would you do me the honor... m-may I escort you to the Christmas dance?"

"Really?" Jessie was taken aback, and her face showed her shock. Having already convinced herself that Buzz wasn't interested in her, she tried to process what he had just said.

Buzz's heart sank at what he took to be a refusal. "W-well, y-yes… I mean, only if you w-want me to."

Realizing that he was sincere, Jessie grinned widely. "Are ya kiddin'?" She couldn't contain her natural exuberance over this happy and unexpected turn of events, and she grabbed Buzz by the forearm. "I'd LOVE to go to the dance with ya!"

Buzz inhaled sharply at her touch and felt his heart leap into his throat. Jessie mistook the reaction as disapproval, however, and quickly let go and looked away. "Oh. 'Scuse me." She reached for her braid and stared out at the river. "I get carried away sometimes. Momma always blamed my disposition on my red hair, said it made me fly off the handle. But I'm tryin' to change that, truly I am."

"Why?!" The force of his reply startled her, and she gaped at him in her evident surprise. Buzz softened his tone, "I-I mean… please, don't change. I think you're a b-bright young w-woman." He glanced at the long red braid that Jessie hadn't yet released from her grasp. "And your hair… it's just that… it's b-beautiful."

Jessie beamed, her green eyes sparkling in the moonlight. "Well, aren't you the sweetest fella I ever met."

"So everything's settled," Woody chimed in. "You'll just have to pardon a couple of marshals who don't have much time or reason to keep their dancing skills polished."

"Nonsense," Bo laughed. "We're not worried about your dancing, are we Jessie?" Her friend shook
her head with a smile. "You'll have to speak to Mr. Kartoffelkopf, though, and get permission to take
us. Everyone's going to the dance; no one will be working. But any sort of courting," she peered up
at Woody from beneath her long lashes, "has to be cleared with the manager. It's just a formality to
protect our reputations, part of being a Harvey Girl."

"Then we'll talk to him first thing after breakfast tomorrow." He smirked at his friend, who seemed to
be in a daze. "Right, Buzz?"

"What? Oh, yes, absolutely."

"How did things go in Calico? Any leads?" Jessie glanced at both Buzz and her brother.

Much to Woody's astonishment, Buzz responded without hesitation. "None yet," he shook his head.
"We talked to several people in town, but no one seems to know much about the gang."

"We'll be riding to another town tomorrow, a little southeast of here." Woody added. "Slink - sorry,
Sheriff Varney - hasn't heard of any robberies there, but it can't hurt to try."

"Why did you call the Sheriff 'Slink'?" Bo's countenance was lit with mirth.

Woody chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck, "Well, you've seen him right? Back in the day,
when I was just a deputy sheriff, he and I worked together off and on. He's so tall and lanky, but I've
never met someone who could fit into tight spaces like he did. We were sneaking up on this one
bandit, and somehow Slink managed to completely take the guy by surprise." The corners of his
mouth turned upward as the scene replayed in his memory. "But we had to crawl pretty much the
entire way, and it felt like his head always made it way before his feet did. If he ever invites you to
play checkers, don't; for a lawman, he's an awful cheat."

"Must be where you learned it!" Buzz snickered, and the girls joined him in his amusement.

"I don't cheat!"

"Oh, please," Jessie scoffed. "You always cheated when we were kids."

"Doesn't surprise me," Buzz grinned at her. "Care to incriminate him? I think we'd all enjoy hearing
that."

Woody held up his hands. "No, no we don't need to do that."

"Oh yes, we do," Bo shushed him. "Go on, Jessie."

Jessie told her favorite stories from their childhood, to the delight of Bo and Buzz and the chagrin of
Woody. He readily joined in, though, some times getting more laughs than his sister. Time passed
quickly and before the quartet knew it, the clock in town was chiming the quarter hour. "Tarnation,
already? Guess we better get back."

Woody helped Bo to her feet, but Jessie was already standing, preventing Buzz from doing the same.
He had managed to keep his nervousness around Jessie at bay while they were all talking together;
however, with goodnights approaching, it returned with a vengeance. He watched Woody offer his
arm to Bo, and cursed himself for not having the courage to offer Jessie his, so they walked along
quietly, side by side, toward the depot.

When they reached the dormitory building, Bo let go of Woody's arm, and he offered her his hand as
she took a step up onto the wood-plank porch. Once again, Buzz regretted his reticence, as he
watched Jessie follow her friend unassisted.
Jessie turned toward the men, as did Bo. "It's been really nice these past two nights, just gettin' out and socializin'. Anytime y'all are free, and we're not workin', you know where to find us."

"That's right, we're only a few steps away," added Bo, gazing pointedly in Woody's direction.

"We'll definitely take you up on that," he replied. "The company has been most welcome for us, too, hasn't it Buzz?"

"Y-yes, it has." Buzz braved a glance at Jessie.

"Well, we best be turning in," said Bo apologetically. "Thank you for another wonderful evening."

"I look forward to more, Miss Peepe. Goodnight, Jess."

"Goodnight fellas!" Jessie waved at her brother and smiled warmly at Buzz.

Buzz called out to her, just as she was disappearing from sight. "G-goodnight... " A small sigh escaped his lips as he watched the door close behind her.

Woody elbowed his friend, who was once again lost in a world of his own. "C'mon, we have another long ride ahead of us tomorrow." He chuckled. "You were a much better partner before you were hopelessly in love."

Buzz's head snapped around to face Woody. "I'm not in l-love."

"Uh huh. And I'm a yo-yo."

The following evening, Woody was lounging on his bed, absent-mindedly picking at the strings of his guitar. The men had retired to their hotel room after a busy day of investigations in Daggett, which had failed to provide any further leads on the Huggins gang. And with the girls stuck working much later than expected thanks to a delayed train, there was to be no socializing that night.

Buzz carefully fastened his portable exercise equipment to the door frame, attaching the hooks that held the tension apparatus onto the hinges and making sure the resistance was set properly. He proceeded with his daily fitness routine, stretching the rubber cording to build his upper body.

"Why do you use that silly contraption anyway?" Woody teased. "I do just fine at marshalin' without all those muscles. I think you're just trying to impress my sister now."

Buzz flashed him one of his wide, winning grins as he concluded his repetitions. "It worked, didn't it? She agreed to go the dance with me. Besides, being a marshal requires staying in top physical condition. I don't know how you keep your job."

His workout complete, Buzz detached the apparatus from the hinges, set it on the dresser, and excused himself to go down the hall to the shared bathroom to brush his teeth and wash before going to bed.

No sooner had Buzz left the room than Woody set his guitar aside and crept over to the dresser, then stared at the bundle of metal and rubber tubing. Maybe Buzz was right. Maybe his physique did impress Jessie, and were he to be of a similar build, Bo might be impressed as well. Besides, he'd never thought of a girl in quite this way before. Something felt different this time - it felt serious. He felt the urge to take care of her, to provide for her. Sure, he knew Buzz had been joking - but was he really that unfit? Woody impulsively grabbed the equipment and hurried back to the doorway. He'd watched his partner use this thing countless times over the past five years, so he had a pretty good
idea how to attach it, despite how much he'd made fun of him for it.

The one aspect Woody had failed to pay attention to, however, was the resistance. It didn't take long to attach the hooks, but pulling at the rubber cords caused an instant struggle. Woody's arms trembled at the exertion required to stretch the bands at a setting his much-stronger friend could easily master. It took every ounce of focus for him to repeat the motions, slowly and deliberately, working through the pain. So much focus that the gentle click of the turning doorknob broke his concentration.

Returning from the bathroom, in the hallway, Buzz heard a loud SNAP, then a SMACK, then an "OW!" clearly in Woody's voice. Cautiously opening the door, he found his fellow marshal sitting on the floor, a tangle of rubber cords next to him, rubbing his forehead.

"Silly contraption, huh?" Buzz chuckled, walking over to make sure both his partner and his exercise equipment were unharmed. "What are you trying to improve, your job performance or your reputation with Miss Peepe?"

"Let's just never mention this again, okay?"

Buzz pulled his friend to his feet, wearing a wicked smirk. "I make no promises."

Woody examined his injury in the dresser mirror. "Or I can just tell Jessie you're gone on her."

Buzz's eyes widened. "You wouldn't dare."

"Try me."

"You girls didn't waste any time finding suitors here in Barstow," Barbie laughed, as she gently lifted folded clothing from the large trunk that resided at the foot of her bed. "But then I've seen my share of girls come and go in the past year - although it's usually railroaders or ranchers that they fall for, not lawmen. Trixie will want to know your secret."

"It's not like we tried!" Jessie protested, her cheeks reddening slightly. The morning after being asked to the dance, she had reminded Barbie of her previous offer to borrow a gown. Barbie was all too happy to comply, and suggested it wait a few days, until the girls were all off during the breakfast shift. Now that she and Bo were there in Barbie's room, ready to make a selection, Jessie was starting to feel anxious about the whole affair.

"Speak for yourself," winked Bo. "What about you, Barbie? You shouldn't have any trouble meeting someone. How are you still single?"

"I'm picky, I guess," she shrugged. "I've had some gentlemen ask if they could call on me, but I'm waiting for that moment, you know? When there's no doubt that he's the one you've been waiting for; like we've known each other our whole lives, even though we've just met. Besides, my family is well off, so I can afford not to marry until it's right. And I got used to being independent while I was in college."

"I woulda liked to have gone to college, but there was no way Momma'd ever allow it," Jessie sighed.

"Well, you're getting a whole other kind of education as a Harvey Girl, one that will serve you just as well in life," Barbie smiled sincerely. "Now, let's find you something to wear for this dance!"

Jessie gawked in wonder at the pile of garments that lay strewn across her friend's bed. One of the perks of being head waitress was a private room, which helped provide storage for such an ample
wardrobe. "How in tarnation didja get so many dresses? Didja learn to make 'em at college?" She ran her hand over a silk taffeta that shifted in color as the light hit it.

"No, but fashion is a particular interest of mine," Barbie explained, "and since there's no social life to speak of in this tiny little town - short of the holidays - I spend my days off sewing." She gestured to a small shelf piled high with magazines. "I love the challenge of trying to copy all the latest designs."

"You sure do an excellent job of it." Bo examined some especially exquisite beadwork on a bodice. "You've got quite a talent; you should be a dressmaker, instead of working here."

Barbie modestly dismissed her friend's compliment with a wave of her hand. "I can sew alright, but I'm only copying other people's ideas. I wouldn't know where to start on my own. So," she turned to Jessie and clasped her hands expectantly, "do you see something here you'd like to borrow?"

"They're all so pretty…" Jessie carefully rifled through her available options, both on the bed and in the open trunk sitting on the floor next to her. "I can't decide."

"Okay, then, what's your favorite color? We can start there."

Jessie thought for a moment. "Ya know, Momma always picked out my clothes, and always such drab colors. I guess if I were to choose somethin' on my own, I'd make it bright, like yellow, or red." Her eyes fell on a yellow day dress still in the trunk, embellished with narrow ruffles and leaf green ribbon trim, and she picked it up. "This is nice."

"That would look lovely on you, but it's all wrong for December, and for a dance. You need something more festive. And formal."

"Oh, I don't wanna be too fancy," Jessie pleaded, setting the dress back down. "I just escaped from all that."

"But it's Christmas, silly! That's part of the fun. Here," Barbie stepped over to her sewing table, "this is what I'm wearing, see?" She turned around a dressmaker's form displaying a confection of an evening gown, made of pale blue silk damask, dripping in lace tulle. "I started working on it a couple months ago, in case there was something special for the holidays. It's a Worth design, and I'm almost done with the last little touches." Both of her friends oohed and ahhed in admiration.

"That's beautiful!" exclaimed Jessie.

"My old gown is going to look painfully outdated next to that," Bo lamented.

"I'm sure it won't, evening styles haven't changed that much." Barbie's eyes lit up, and she let out a gasp. "OH! I know! Speaking of old evening dresses… you said you like red, right?" She flipped open the lid of a second, smaller trunk next to her sewing table, and pulled out a bundle of rich red fabric. "How about this?"

Jessie took the neatly-folded pieces from her friend, and laid them on the bed. The skirt was made of a deep red silk with tonal roses printed on it, and the matching off-the-shoulder red velvet bodice was trimmed with white lace studded with tiny pearls at the neckline.

"I made that last year," Barbie continued. "I had just started working here, and the town put on a entertainment programme for the Christmas season. I didn't really know anyone yet, but I still went. Being a city girl, I also didn't think that I might be a little over-dressed for a theatrical in a small-town school building," she laughed at the recollection. "So this dress needs to be worn for a more appropriate occasion; one that's more… romantic," she added with a giggle.
Jessie blushed. "I dunno… it's an amazin' dress, and I do like it, but… it's just so… daring."

"Which is exactly why you should wear it!" added Bo. "All you ever wear is your plain uniform, or the simple shirtwaists and skirts you brought from home. This is your chance to make an impression on a certain someone," she gave Jessie a nudge.

Feeling the determined stares of her friends bearing down on her, Jessie relented. "Okay, if y'all say so."

"Yay!" Barbie clapped her hands with glee, and darted back over to the trunk, barely able to contain her excitement. "You best try it on, and make sure it fits. I have gloves, slippers, and a cape you can borrow, too."

It only took a few moments for Jessie to slip out of the clothing she was wearing and into the red dress, while Barbie gathered all its accompaniments. Without bothering to fasten it completely, Bo held the bodice closed in the back, and let Jessie look in the mirror. It fit her nicely, she had to admit.

"Here's the rest," Barbie set down the accessories on the bed.

"I shouldn't take your nice white gloves," protested Jessie, as she returned to her ordinary attire. "I was always gettin' mine dirty at home, I'd hate to ruin yours."

"I insist. I have so many pairs, don't even worry about it." Barbie paused thoughtfully. "You know, if you'd like some new clothes, I'd be happy to help with the sewing. We're pretty much the same size, and I have loads of patterns."

"That's awful nice of ya, but you don't hafta go to that trouble. My first payday's comin' up soon; I can just get somethin' store-bought."

"In town? Have you seen the choices there?" Barbie huffed with disdain. "It really isn't any trouble; it's not like I need anything new myself right now, and I enjoy having a project to work on. Tell you what, why don't we start with a new shirtwaist? You can find some decent fabric at the dry goods store, and we'll go from there. It's about time you dressed to suit yourself, and 'to thine own self be true.'"

Chapter End Notes

While yo-yos existed in the 1890s (they had been in existence for centuries, actually), they were known at that time as bandalores. The name "yo-yo" wasn't introduced until 1916, but we couldn't resist using Woody's line from Toy Story 2, so we took a little liberty there. Also, House of Worth was the premier dressmaker of the late 19th century, and Barbie's gown is based on a real image of one of their designs. You can find it pinned on our "Jessie's Journey" Pinterest board, but not Jessie's and Bo's dresses - not yet. Stay tuned for their reveal next month!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I'm gonna put it right out there: long chapter is long. This chapter has been a particular favorite of PoetLaurie's and mine ever since we started this fanfic; and we didn't want to have to either scale it back or break it into two parts, so we left it complete, in all its glory. I can recall my own excitement over extra-long chapters being published in the past, so I hope our readers will share that sentiment. :)

This is also an especially important chapter to consult our Pinterest board for (Jessie's Journey at account name yodelincowgirl). We did a LOT of research to make our 1890s dance as accurate as possible! While we tried our best to describe the attire of the partygoers, as well as the activity of the dance, the videos and images we've pinned will really help bring it to life - including actual performances of every 19th century dance that the main characters participate in.

Toy Story doesn't belong to us. If it did, we'd be planning a Christmas special where we could watch the gang celebrate on screen like they do in this chapter. ;) Enjoy, and please be sure to leave kudos and subscribe so you don't miss anything - there are so many more wonderful things to come!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"What was I thinkin'? I can't wear this!"

Jessie stared at the elegant red gown laid out across her bed and tugged anxiously at the braid that was draped over her shoulder. She and Bo were supposed to meet Buzz and Woody in the parlor downstairs in just thirty minutes, but she wasn't even close to being ready.

Bo turned from the dresser mirror, where she was putting the final touches on her hair, and arched a brow. "Is that your mother I hear talking? Forget her, and her silly rules. Think of a certain marshal's reaction..."

"You can play real dirty sometimes, Bo Peepe, ya know that?" Jessie smiled, then her countenance fell as her persistent self-doubts resurfaced. "I'll prob'ly just run him off anyway, once he gets to know me better. Nobody ever knows what to make of me."

"Nonsense, no talk like that tonight." Bo hugged her friend warmly. "It's Christmas Eve, and we have a dance to go to! Besides, I have a feeling this is going to be a good night for us both."

A dainty knock on Jessie and Bo's door was quickly followed by a click of the doorknob and Barbie poking in her elegantly-coiffured head. "You girls ready?" She glanced at Bo, who was now slipping into her gown, then Jessie, who had taken Bo's place at the mirror, dressed in only her underpinnings. The exasperated girl yanked at a hairpin and shook her braided hair loose, before brushing it out with frustrated force. Barbie's brow furrowed, and she entered the room, closing the door behind her. "Jessie, what on earth are you doing with your hair?"

"I dunno, thought I'd just braid it and pin it up like always, but it won't set right!"
"That's fine for work, but not for tonight!" Barbie pulled a chair away from the wall, and gestured for Jessie to sit. "Here, let me." She took the brush and hairpins out of Jessie's hand, and began twisting her fiery tresses into a soft updo. "It's not like you to fret over your appearance. You're quite smitten with this marshal, aren't you?"

Jessie was glad that the rising blush on her cheeks was hidden from Barbie's view. "I s'pose…"

"Don't lie to me, Jessie Pride! But I can't say I blame you," Barbie added with a giggle. "I wish I had someone equally dashing to escort me tonight. Lenny's a great friend, and looks out for me like a brother, but to have some romance in my life… there! Your marshal won't be able to resist."

Jessie stood and looked in the mirror, and grinned at Barbie's handiwork. Her hair was pulled back more loosely than usual, with a diminutive topknot peeking above the crown of her head, and her short bangs provided a delicately-curled fringe against her forehead.

"Now, let's get you in this dress." Barbie held out the skirt for Jessie to step into, and once she had donned the bodice, helped her fasten the dozens of tiny buttons that lined its back. "Do you have any jewelry to wear?"

"I have some; brought it with me in case I needed to sell it." Jessie reached into the nightstand drawer and pulled out a small oval box containing a dainty seed-pearl necklace, matching earrings, and a simple gold-and-garnet horseshoe ring.

"Oh, these are lovely!" Barbie picked up the filigree gold and pearl choker and let it lay across her fingers. "They'll look perfect with the dress - and the little starburst design is just charming. How could you ever think of selling them?"

"The necklace'n earrings, my aunt bought 'em for me to get gussied up and catch a husband," she groaned. "Not 'xactly sentimental. The ring though, my Pa let me have it when I liked it in his store. I wouldn't sell that." She pondered the ring for a moment before setting it back in the box.

Adorned with her pearl jewelry, as well as elbow-length white satin gloves and red dancing slippers to match the gown, Jessie once more scrutinized her appearance in the mirror, silently hoping it was enough to make an impression. Bo and Barbie appeared on her left and right, the faces of three friends in their best finery lined up in a row.

Barbie clapped her kid-gloved hands together gleefully. "Look at us, not too shabby for a bunch of spinsterly waitresses, huh? Let's knock 'em dead, girls."

Buzz and Woody had arrived early to the dormitory building, and were waiting in the parlor when Barbie swept down the staircase in her blue gown and ivory beaded cape. She greeted Lenny, the depot's night watchman who was accompanying her to the dance, and the pair walked out the door. Hearing a doorknob click in the living spaces above, Buzz's heart thudded against his chest. He was surprised that no one else seemed to hear its pounding, the sound was so loud in his ears. He paced to the bottom of the stairs, then turned and came back to where Woody still stood, waiting.

Woody smirked. "Buzz Lightyear, you're not worried are you?"

"Me? Noooo, no, no, no. Mm-mmm." He paused, "Are you?"

Before Woody could answer, the unmistakable sounds of footsteps and rustling fabric sounded from upstairs. The two men strode over to the base of the stairs, to discover Jessie and Bo descending. The girls smiled down at their companions for the evening, who were dressed in their best suits and newly-purchased kid gloves, looking as resplendent as two traveling marshals who didn't expect to
attend a social event possibly could.

Bo's golden hair was swept upward, with a few soft curls framing her face and brushing against her bare shoulders. The evening gown she wore, although several years old, still flattered her figure flawlessly, with its pink floral brocade of the bodice and draped skirt and train, and solid pink silk taffeta at the low, off-the-shoulder neckline and hem. Long white satin gloves covered her forearms, and a black wool shawl - an heirloom that had been embroidered by her mother with multicolored flowers - hung loosely from her elbows without obstructing the view of her dress.

Woody extended a hand and took Bo's in his as she stepped down to meet him. "Miss Peepe, you look stunning."

"This old thing?" Bo glanced downward and pretended to smooth the un-wrinkled fabric of her dress, then lifted her eyes to meet Woody's gaze and smiled flirtatiously. "I'm glad you like what you see."

Woody broke into an involuntary, stuttering laugh, then coughed in an attempt to cover it. "A-are you sure you want to walk? I'd hate for you to get such a nice dress all dirty. I'm more than happy to see if a carriage is available."

"No, it's just a short walk across the footbridge, over the tracks. But thank you," she linked her arm in his. "You're cute when you care."

Meanwhile, Buzz was transfixed on Jessie, who had trailed behind her friend down the staircase. A dainty red velvet capelet trimmed with intricate white lace and black beading covered her shoulders and partially obscured her red dress. Buzz thought he had never seen true beauty until that moment, and he felt his breath catch in his throat as she drew closer. Determined not to let any opportunities pass him by this evening, he chivalrously offered her his hand when she reached the final tread. "Good e-evening, Miss Pride."

"Please, call me Jessie," she took his hand and smiled sweetly at him as she stepped closer. "Miss Pride sounds so… stuffy. An' that's definitely not me."

"A-alright… Jessie." It was not only a matter of propriety that had kept him from speaking her name; the very use of it made him feel as if his knees would give out, as if it held power over him. But understanding her persistence on the matter, Buzz resolved to honor the request for that evening, and beyond.

Woody had been enjoying the scene that was transpiring between his sister and friend. He broke the silence that had fallen between them, as Jessie lingered with her hand in Buzz's, and addressed the small group. "Shall we?"

"Oh!" Bo exclaimed, "before we go… Jessie, would you be a dear and help me with my train? I don't want it to drag along the dusty street."

"Hmm?" Jessie's trance having been broken, she let go of Buzz's hand rather sheepishly. "Yeah, of course!" She stooped down next to her friend, and finding the ribbon that served to lift the gown's long train off the ground, she held it out so Bo could slip her wrist through the loop at its end.

Her dress now suitably arranged for walking, Bo once again linked her own gloved arm through Woody's. While the pair proceeded toward the door, again Buzz took his friend's lead and offered his arm to Jessie, with a shy smile. She gladly accepted with a grin of her own, and they followed Woody and Bo outside.
The December evening was cold, but not unbearably so, with the smell of roaring fireplaces and winter on the air. Stars twinkled in the clear sky above the arc of the depot lamplights, as the four strolled toward the footbridge that crossed the train tracks and led into the main part of Barstow.

Bo glanced at the slightly-swollen bruise on Woody's forehead, that she had noticed before but hadn't had a chance to inquire about. "May I ask how you got that goose-egg on your forehead, Sheriff? I hope you didn't have an unfortunate encounter with some outlaw."

"Oh, no, that…" he hesitated, "uh… I had read up on a new method of handling the pistol and I was practicing. There was a bit of kickback, that's all."

Jessie couldn't help but overhear the conversation that was occurring a few steps ahead of her, and narrowed her eyes dubiously at her brother's words. Before she could question him on it, however, Buzz saw her expression and became concerned. "Is something wrong?" he interjected.

"No! Not at all," she reassured him, telling herself she'd get the truth out of Woody later. "I'm really lookin' forward to this, aren't you?"

"Yes; it's not often we get to partake in social events while we're on a case."

Just then a rush of footsteps caught up with the quartet, as Bonnie, Dolly, and Trixie hurried by. Rex trailed a few paces behind the girls. "Wait for me!"

Once the group had passed the two couples, Trixie looked over her shoulder mischievously. She turned back to her friends, and a riot of giggles floated behind her, where Woody, Bo, Buzz and Jessie were walking.

As Trixie peeked at them again, Bo shifted closer to Woody. "I do believe we're being watched," she murmured. A wicked smile playing across her lips, Bo whispered something in Woody's ear; he conspired willingly in her game and and bent down, whispering a reply. Bo giggled herself, raising an eyebrow to Trixie as she did. The younger Harvey Girl quickly recoiled, and Bo smirked in triumph.

Jessie urged Buzz into a faster pace until they were level with Bo and Woody. "What did you say to him?"

"I asked him if he recalled the capital of Montana," her face was the picture of innocence, setting the four into gales of laughter.

It was a quick half-mile walk from the dormitory to the Barstow schoolhouse, where the dance was being held as a fundraiser, much like the theatrical performance Barbie had told the girls about from the year before. The windows of the wood-frame building were brightly illuminated, welcoming both carriage and foot traffic as locals, railroad employees, and visiting travelers arrived for the evening's festivities. The sounds of the small band warming up within filtered soft, inviting music out into the packed-dirt street.

A short flight of stairs led up to the building's entrance, and Bo and Jessie released their hold on their escorts and carefully raised the hems of their skirts as they climbed. Woody lightly grasped Bo's elbow to assist her, while Buzz's hand ghosted over the small of Jessie's back, lest she stumble. Once in the vestibule of the building, the men each paid their dollar admission per couple, and received tickets for the coat check and dance cards for the girls. Bo unwrapped her shawl from her shoulders, folded it over, and handed it to Woody. As he went to the small students' cloakroom that was serving as a coat check for the night, Buzz addressed Jessie. "Would you like me to check your cape for you, too?"
"Sure, thanks!" Jessie unclasped the capelet's velvet collar and removed it slowly, suddenly feeling very self-conscious in such a revealing dress. She held the bundle of fabric in front of herself for a moment, not quite ready to relinquish its cover. 'Here goes,' she thought and, with a deep breath, she pushed the cape towards Buzz.

As she had turned towards him, Buzz caught a glimpse of Jessie's bare shoulders and felt his breath evacuate his lungs. He swallowed hard as his eyes took in the sight of her, the deep red of the dress accentuating her pale skin; skin that was, Buzz tried not to notice, dotted lightly with freckles. In an effort to keep his gaze from travelling along the low neckline of the bodice, he instead focused on Jessie's delicate pearl earrings and matching necklace that lay nestled at her collarbone. The starburst design served as a final hit from cupid's arrow, and Buzz was surprised that he didn't fall to his knees. He was sure his hands were shaking as he reached out to take the cape from her hands, and with a great deal of effort, he stepped away to check the garment in the cloak room.

Jessie fidgeted with her fingers, unsure of what to make of his reaction. As she stared in the direction Buzz had gone, Bo tapped her on the arm. "Still worried you picked the wrong dress?" she needled softly.

"I dunno...he didn't say anythin'. D'ya think he likes it?"

"I'm positive of it," she winked.

Buzz returned to Jessie's side, and the quartet proceeded into the main classroom and community space of the schoolhouse building. The students' and teacher's desks had been temporarily removed, to provide ample room for the evening's event. Evergreen garlands, studded with bright red holly berries, spanned the doorways and windows. Vibrant red and green paper streamers radiated outward from the center of the ceiling, hanging loosely from the rafters and tacked to the walls, creating a cheerful canopy for the partygoers to dance under. On the raised stage opposite the entrance, a bower of ferns enveloped the quartet of musicians who were beginning to play familiar holiday tunes; while guests were busily filling every available crevice around the perimeter of the room, leaving the center free for the dancing that would commence shortly. Mistletoe clusters had been strategically placed for couples to stumble upon, and frosted-glass wall sconces cast a warm glow over the entire setting.

"This sure brings back memories," Bo sighed pensively, her attention drawn to the blackboards that were only partially obscured by the festive decorations.

"Why is that?" Woody questioned, puzzling over her distant expression.

"I used to be a schoolteacher, back in Kansas," she explained, then hastened to change the subject. "But I'd much rather be dancing here than supervising a class, that's for sure." Bo handed her dance card to Woody. "Care to fill this out, Sheriff?"

Woody took the small, folded-cardstock booklet, along with its little pencil attached by a silken string, with a grin. "People might talk if we only dance with each other."

"I'm not concerned if you're not," she tilted her head as she watched him scrawl his name on the lines next to each dance listed.

Buzz chuckled, his heart pounding once more as he looked at Jessie. "May I have the honor of being your sole partner, ma'am?" he affected a mock formality.

She giggled, handing him her dance card as well. "I'd be right honored, sir."
No sooner had the girls slipped their completed dance cards onto their wrists than the announcement was made for the Grand March. Following the lead of the head of the dance committee and her husband, guests paired up and promenaded across the floor in formation, men and women parading past each other then coming back together, marking the formal start of the evening. At its conclusion, couples took their positions in groups of eight for the first quadrille, with Woody and Bo, and Buzz and Jessie, finding the familiar faces of Barbie, Lenny, Trixie, and Rex in the crowd to accompany them.

After a bow from the gentlemen and a curtsey from the ladies - the customary beginning and end to every dance - they eased into the quadrille's simple, traditional motions being called by the band leader. Pairs stepped to the center of the square to meet and returned to their original position, then clasped hands and passed each other from one side of their little group to the other. When it was the girls' turn to join hands and cross over, Bo and Jessie couldn't help but share a giddy smile.

The strains of the quadrille music faded as the dancers came to a halt and dispersed. Bo consulted her dance card, while the four lingered. "A waltz is next!" she announced to her companions. "My favorite."

Being in the company of others had helped Buzz feel at ease during the march and the quadrille; but now, faced with a more intimate and romantic dance, he felt his prior insecurities return. Taking their place on the floor, Buzz and Jessie turned to each other with bashful smiles, as he rested his right hand gently on the small of her back. Beneath the fabric of his glove, his heightened senses discerned the stiffly-boned seams of her bodice and the curve of her waist, and he feared that his face matched the color of her dress.

Jessie felt the heat of Buzz's hand through her clothes and had to remind herself to breathe. She had been forced to dance many waltzes back in Missouri; however, none of them felt quite like this. She reached up, resting her left hand on Buzz's right bicep, and was caught off guard by the unmistakable definition of muscle hidden by his sleeve. Shaking her her head ever so slightly to bring her mind back to the dance, she placed her right hand in his extended left, and meant to keep her hold light and space between them as etiquette prescribed. But she was surprised to find, as Buzz's fingers folded over hers, that she was enjoying the sensation, and she pressed her palm closely against his. They fell in with the other couples sweeping across the floor, twirling in time with the music.

Where Buzz and Jessie were fighting nerves at the sudden close contact, Bo was calm as could be as she guided Woody's hand to her waist. She took his hand with certainty and they stepped off to the music together. Their eyes locked as they waltzed around the room, the happiness shining between blue and brown.

Worried that he was rusty after not dancing in this way for quite some time, Buzz had been trying to maintain his focus on leading Jessie around the floor. He braved, however, an impulsive glance at the girl he could scarcely believe he was with; and sensing Buzz's eyes on her, Jessie shifted her gaze from over his shoulder to meet them. The two both quickly looked away, but their faces shone with sheer delight. When the final strains of the waltz brought the dance to an end, they surrendered their hold on each other almost reluctantly.

The next two dances - a schottische and a waltz-quadrille - flew by in a joyful blur, as the couples came back together and rejoined their Harvey House friends. Buzz and Jessie's awkwardness was lessening with every turn, and whenever the dances required them to switch partners briefly, they discovered they were happy to find themselves back in each other's arms.

Once the waltz-quadrille had finished, Woody leaned in to Bo. "Would you care for something to eat or drink?"
"That would be lovely. You must be famished, since the kitchen closed early today for the holiday."

The pair left the dance floor arm in arm, passing by Buzz and Jessie, who were readying for the Esmeralda polka. When they neared the refreshment table - which was tucked away in a corner of the room - they broke apart, Woody to get some sandwiches and Bo to choose a few small cakes. The woman behind the table grinned warmly at Bo. "I was watching you two dance. How long have you been married?"

Bo blushed a delicate shade of pink. "Oh, we're not married; we only just met a little over a week ago."

"Well, you could knock me over with a feather! You certainly make a lovely couple!"

"Thank you," she ducked her head demurely and joined Woody, who was standing nearby, as the music started.

As the couples whirled around the floor, Bo observed Jessie and Buzz exclusively. They were clearly enjoying each other's company, and laughter was evident on both of their faces as they glided through the lively yet graceful movements of the polka. When the steps of the dance called for it, Buzz placed both hands on Jessie's waist and lifted her easily. Their eyes met and they beamed at each other in that brief moment, and the rest of the room seemed to fade away from their consciousness.

Bo couldn't help but smile as she watched Buzz lift Jessie into the air. It was obvious they only had eyes for each other; she knew her friend was falling hard and she suspected the same was true for Buzz. She leaned over to Woody and whispered a question, and was pleased by his favorable response. When the polka had concluded, Bo and Woody approached Jessie and Buzz. "May I suggest we switch partners for the redowa? I'm sure Jessie would like to share a dance with her brother."

"That'd be fun! Think you can keep up with me, Woody?"

"Think you can keep from stepping on my toes?"

Bo laughed at the siblings' banter, and Buzz offered her his hand.

The dancers eased into the redowa with a slow, traditional waltz, which would soon alternate with more spirited skips that made conversation difficult. "It's been a long time since we danced together at a party, Jess, and these are much better circumstances," Woody spoke between hops in the dance. As the pace evened out again, he continued, with a slight stammer. "So, uh, has... she... said anything about me?"

Jessie smirked wickedly. "Who?"

"You know," he groaned. "Your friend - Miss Peepe."

"I think she mentioned ya once or twice in passing," she lied, and her brother looked crestfallen. "Oh you know she likes you, Woody, I'm just messin' with ya. You really like her too, huh? I never saw ya all moony-eyed like this at home."

"I do, Jess, I really do."

"Just be gentle with her, 'k? She's sorta fragile, where relationships are concerned. Don't get me wrong - she can take care of herself - but her heart's been broken before." Jessie looked her brother square in the eye. "She's all alone in the world, and she's the first real friend I've had, 'sides you. Not
that I think ya wouldn't… but, be good to her."

"You know I will."

"I know you better," her light tone carried a weight of threat.

"Trust me, Jess; you have nothing to worry about."

Meanwhile, Bo was on a similar mission of her own, dancing with Buzz. She had kept silent for the first several measures of music, planning out what exactly she was going to say once the steps slowed enough again to be certain her words would be plainly heard and understood.

"Mr. Lightyear - if I can be so bold - I've noticed the way you look at Jessie - Miss Pride." An expression of surprise crossed Buzz's face. "She's my dearest friend, and she means a lot to me. I must know, must ensure that your intentions are honorable. Her heart is not one to be trifled with."

"I assure you Miss Peepe, they are," asserted Buzz. "I have nothing but the highest regard for Miss Pride."

"She's not like other girls, you know. She has a mind of her own. That often scares men away..."

Buzz smiled. "I noticed how she came to your defense, when a customer was disrespectful. I know she didn't trip," he admitted, chuckling at the shock on the young woman's face. "And I admire her spirit very much."

Bo nodded back at him approvingly, satisfied that her friend's suitor could be entrusted with her heart.

Elsewhere on the dance floor, the Pride siblings continued to skip along as the redowa drew near its conclusion.

"Ya never told me how ya got that goose egg on your forehead," Jessie queried, perhaps a bit too innocently.

Woody balked. "Oh, that. Well... uh... Buzz and I were out doing some target practice in the desert, and... uh... my gun recoiled and hit me."

"A pistol. Hit ya in the forehead," she looked at him incredulously. "After all your experience..."

"Yeah. Exactly." The song ended and Woody abruptly broke their hold. "Oh look at that, the dance is over. I better go find Miss Peepe."

Jessie was watching her brother scurry away as Buzz approached her. "May I have this dance?"

The couples joined together for another quadrille to complete the first set of dances on the evening's programme. Every time Jessie faced Woody, she took the opportunity to stare at him skeptically, delighting in the fact that he quickly avoided her gaze. She gave up on the game after a few figures, caught up in the rest of the dance.

The music subsided, intermission was announced, and the floor slowly emptied while couples drifted away for a brief rest and refreshments. "That was fun!" Jessie exclaimed.

"Did you see Mr. K? I haven't seen him smile so much before," Bo laughed.

Woody was looking around the room and spied Slink across the floor. He turned to Bo. "You haven't officially met Sheriff Varney yet, have you? Allow me to introduce you," he gently took her
arm and steered her towards his friend.

Jessie shuffled her foot as her eyes followed her brother and roommate walking away. She hadn't considered that they wouldn't stick around her the entire evening, to help ease the conversation in moments like she was now finding herself in. An awkward silence fell between Buzz and Jessie, neither of them quite sure what to say. They both spoke at once. "Would you like - " Buzz started.

"Did you - sorry, you first," Jessie let out a small breathy laugh, surprised at how flustered she had become.

Buzz smiled, himself a bit besotted. "I just wondered if you would like to find a seat for a while."

"That would be real nice, actually."

There were no vacant chairs, but they found an open space by a wall, tucked away from the crowd. Jessie looked around at the other women feeling, not for the first time, out of place in her dress. Her hands fidgeted, and she twisted her pinky finger.

"Jessie?" Buzz's voice broke into her thoughts.

She saw him staring at her, concern etched on his face. "Sorry, I jus'… I feel a little like I'm overdressed."

"You're not; you're p-perfect. I mean your dress is perfect. I mean… is it hot in here? Why don't I go get us some punch?"

Buzz hastily excused himself and walked over to the refreshment table, where he obtained two sparkling cut-glass cups of red liquid, and returned to the side of the room where Jessie was waiting. Another woman, however, was standing near her, and mistakenly assumed Buzz was walking in her direction. With light brunette hair styled in a classic chignon and dotted with flowers, and wearing a delicate gold and lace gown perfectly suited to the occasion, she was the picture of feminine refinement that Jessie's mother had wanted her to be. Jessie watched as this unfamiliar guest - a local, she presumed, or a holiday traveler who had joined the festivities - smiled coquettishly at Buzz.

"Oh, how kind of you, sir, for procuring me some refreshment," she effused, reaching for one of the cups. Knowing it would be in terrible taste to refuse to share with a lady, Buzz had no choice but to release the punch to her. The stranger took a dainty sip and peered over the rim, leaving no doubts as to her flirtatious intent. "I do hope you'll give me the next waltz, so I can express my thanks properly."

Jessie's heart sank. She was sure this was where she would lose the only man she'd ever truly been interested in, to the kind of woman she'd never be. All she wanted to do was to run all the way home to her dorm room and cry, but she stood there, watching, unable to move or look away.

"Thank you, ma'am, but all my dances are spoken for tonight," he replied, politely but firmly, and without hesitation. "I hope you have a pleasant evening."

The elegant stranger's jaw dropped, as she watched the handsome man who just turned her down deliver the other cup of punch to its intended recipient. Insulted by being rejected for someone she saw as inferior, in both appearance and status, the woman huffed away to find her next romantic conquest.

"I - I'm sorry about that, I have absolutely no idea why she thought that was for her," Buzz apologized, as Jessie took the cup from his hand, allowing her fingers to brush against his.
"S'okay. But I'm sorry you lost your own drink." Jessie paused for a moment before shoving the punch back in Buzz's direction. "Here, have mine."

"No, really, you enjoy it. I can get another later, if I'm thirsty. Although I'm afraid to go alone, that woman might steal it again," he joked, starting to feel a little more at ease around the only girl in the room who took his breath away. Nevertheless, while Jessie took a sip of punch, he racked his brain, trying to come up with another subject to converse upon.

There was a fanfare from the piano, then the band leader called out that intermission was over and announced the next dance, a fashionable two-step.

"Oh! This one is new. Should we try it?" Jessie looked at Buzz, a little unsure.

He hesitated, "I - I better sit this one out." Buzz could see a hint of disappointment on Jessie's face, and recalled what Bo had said before. Between that and the fact that he had promised to be her primary dancing partner the whole evening, he felt horrible letting her down. He sighed and shrugged, "I… just don't know it."

Jessie's shoulders relaxed, and she exhaled lightly in relief. "I don't either. We could learn together… or we can just stay here and talk."

"Why don't we sit this one out, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind at all." Suddenly, Jessie was jostled forward as someone bumped into her en route to the dance floor, and her remaining punch spilled over both of her hands, soaking into the fabric of the gloves. She gasped in alarm.

The stranger called out a pardon without stopping, earning a glare from Buzz who had instantly reached out a steadying hand to Jessie's arm. "Here," he took the cup from her.

"I knew I'd get these dirty; I always do," she shook her head ruefully and loosened the tiny buttons at her wrists, then pulled the gloves off, holding them from the fabric that was still dry. "What am I gonna do now?"

"I'll hold on to them," he offered simply. "They'll fit in my pocket."

"I don't want you gettin' punch all over your coat, though!"

He smiled, "Neither do I, so we'll just fold them carefully." Buzz took the gloves and folded them so that the soiled material wouldn't come in contact with his the lining of his frock coat, then tucked them in the pocket and spread his hands apart. "Voila; problem solved."

"Ugh, I've never been good with all this formal stuff. I hope Barbie isn't mad; those gloves are hers." She peered down, feeling more exposed than ever, then back at Buzz. "Does it look too bad with just my bare arms?"

"No!" his voice was higher pitched than he intended and he quickly cleared his throat. "N - no, not at all." In what felt like an eternity of silence, he again searched frantically for another topic of conversation. "So, uh, I hope it's not too difficult for you, being away from home for Christmas."

Immediately Buzz regretted his inquiry, fearing he'd upset her.

"Heck no, I love it here!" Now Jessie worried she might have been a little too exuberant, and tempered her answer. "Things were difficult at home. Life there was so stiflin', and confinin', it felt like livin' in a box. Momma never woulda let me learn this sort of dance." Buzz noticed Jessie had a far away look in her eyes, as she watched the dancers hop blithely across the floor, one that clouded
her face with a hint of the unhappiness she had endured before. He was immediately overcome with a desperate need to never let her feel that way again, ever. But just as quickly, Jessie smiled again, having pushed the unpleasant memories aside. "It's different here, though; here everythin's just so… open. It's like anythin's possible." She tried to read the expression that now spread across Buzz's features. "How 'bout you? You miss bein' at home?"

"I do miss my family, and our traditions, especially on Christmas Eve. I could really go for some of my mother's tamales," he chuckled.

"Tamales?"

"Yes, my mother, she's Spanish - Californio, she'd say. She can trace her family back for generations here in California, to some of the very first settlers from Spain. And my father was a trader on the old Spanish Trail. He met my mother, and decided to stay and make a home here," Buzz became concerned that Jessie might not approve of his native lineage, however, and he stopped. "I'm sorry, I don't want to bore you..."

"Are you kiddin'? Your family sounds way more interestin' than mine. Please, go on."

Buoyed by her response, he happily continued. "Well, that's actually why I don't know this dance. My mother made sure I knew how to do the social dances that were popular ten, fifteen years ago, but I haven't really had many opportunities to practice them since then. Besides those, I only really know traditional Spanish dances," he explained. "It's important to her, to keep our heritage alive, with how much the state is growing, and changing. And she loves her fiestas." Buzz grinned as an image of home flooded his mind. "Right now our house is probably full of cousins and neighbors, and she's making sure everyone is fed. She's probably shooing my father away from all the food, telling him to leave some for the guests, just like she did with my brothers and me when we were little. " He paused, and dared to look Jessie in the eye, who had been listening to him with rapt attention. "B-but since I can't be home tonight, I'm really glad to be here, with y-you."

She held his gaze, and her eyes seemed to sparkle with pure joy. "Me, too."

Mrs. Kartoffelkopf breezed past the two, in search of her husband who had stationed himself by the refreshment table. "Looks like someone is close to the mistletoe," she teased.

Buzz and Jessie both glanced upward, not realizing they had positioned themselves near a sconce with a cluster of the glossy white berries suspended from it. The pair blushed, and simultaneously became very interested in the floorboards. After a moment's awkward quietude, Jessie turned to Buzz with a beguiling expression. "Can I ask you something?"

Buzz's face flushed. "Uh… s-sure, anything."

She leaned in close, and spoke in a whisper, and Buzz hoped he could hear her low voice over the racing of his heart. "What really happened to Woody's face? I know he's a good shot. No way that's kickback, 'specially from a pistol."

"Oh," Buzz sighed, half relief, half disappointment. "Heh. Funny story, he tried to use my exercise apparatus while I was out of our room, and the rubber cording snapped back and the handle hit him in the face." He laughed at the memory.

'\textit{That explains why his shirt's so tight,}' Jessie thought to herself, her eyes darting briefly to the pull of the fabric across Buzz's vest and coat sleeves, then back up again. "Why in tarnation would he do that? Woody never did anythin' athletic before, 'sides liftin' crates for Pa and shootin' his rifle."
Buzz broke eye contact and looked down shyly before he answered. "I think your friend has, uh, made an impression on him. But please, don't tell him I told you."

"I won't; promise," she reassured him.

Woody and Bo came strolling over from the other side of the room, having missed the two-step themselves due to their conversation with the sheriff. When the quadrille had started, without any sign of Buzz or Jessie on the floor, they thought they best investigate what the rest of their party were up to.

Upon finding them, Bo was pleasantly surprised to discover that the earlier jitters between the pair had abated, and she smirked slightly. "I hope we're not interrupting anything."

"Oh, no, we were just talkin'," replied Jessie cheerfully, with a glance at Buzz.

"Sorry we disappeared for so long," Woody nudged his friend with an elbow, "but you know how it is when Slink and I get to reminiscing."

Buzz chuckled. "Boy, do I. That's all right, though; it's been nice to catch our breath."

Jessie opened her dance card and let out a startled cry. "Tumblin' tumbleweeds, how'd we miss the quadrille?" She cast a slightly-abashed look at Buzz, "Guess we must'a lost track of time."

"Guess so… but I don't mind." Buzz and Jessie were too engrossed in each other to notice the shared smile that passed between Woody and Bo.

Just then, Barbie sauntered toward the quartet with a cup of punch in her hand. "Having fun?" She was met with nods of affirmation all around.

"I'm surprised you're not still dancing!" Bo searched the floor over Barbie's shoulder. "What happened to Lenny?"

"Lenny had to get back to the depot to go on watch." As Barbie took a sip of her punch, she caught sight of Jessie's bare arms. "Oh, Jessie, you're not wearing the gloves! Tell me they didn't rip, or pop a button," she lifted her free hand to her mouth, distressed.

Jessie winced in embarrassment. "I'm so sorry, I spilled punch on 'em. I'll get ya a new pair though…"

"Don't be silly! They were old, I was just afraid they didn't hold up for you." She smiled kindly at her friend, who she could tell still felt terrible about the accident. "I mean it, don't worry about it, okay? If there's anything I have too much of, it's gloves. You saw my… my…" Barbie stopped talking mid-sentence, her mouth agape and her eyes locked on a well-groomed man who had just entered the room. He was easily the most lavishly dressed as the only man in a formal tailcoat, and his golden brown hair was slicked perfectly into place. "Who is that?"

She did not have long to wonder. The subject of Barbie's attention had also taken notice, and was soon standing in front of her, bowing gallantly. "Have we met? I don't believe I've had the honor of being introduced," he took her hand in his and brought it to his lips.

"I'm Barbie," she said breathlessly.

"Ken. Love your dress. Is that a Worth design?"

"It is; I made it," she gasped, as her heart skipped a beat. "Nice ascot. Is that charmeuse silk?"
"Absolutely. Nothing but the best. May I have the pleasure of your hand for the next dance?"

Barbie wordlessly implored her friends for guidance in this giddy turn of events; and all of them smiled and gestured encouragingly for her to accept. She turned back to Ken, "Yes, of course!" and she took his offered arm, as he led her out onto the floor for the schottische.

Jessie, Buzz, Woody, and Bo all shared a look with each other that went unnoticed by the fashionable couple. Woody was the first to utter everyone's musings out loud, "What just happened there?"

"Beats me!" Jessie shrugged. "I'm ready to get back to dancin'!" The band started playing and she sighed, observing the already-crowded dance floor. "Guess not jus' yet, though, since we're missin' another. Oh well; what's next, after this one?"

Bo reviewed her dance card. "A Spanish waltz; oh, that should be fun to do all together!"

Buzz chuckled, garnering perplexed stares from the other three. "Sorry, it's just... I find it amusing that it's called that when there's nothing really Spanish about that dance at all."

"Smart aleck," Jessie quipped playfully, without thinking. Her eyes widened in horror, fearing he would take offense, but to her astonishment Buzz let out a hearty laugh.

"Guilty as charged," he grinned and extended his arm to her without hesitation, which she held onto perhaps a little more closely than decorum prescribed.

They stepped closer to the floor to watch the remainder of the current dance, the rustle of skirts and footfalls sounding in time with the music. Dolly and Rex skipped past and Jessie turned her face to hide her laughter as she heard Rex exclaiming that his arms were too short to twirl Dolly. She tapped Bo on the shoulder and nodded towards the refreshment table where Bonnie was unsuccessfully trying to coax Trixie away from the eggnog.

"But it's so tasty! You should have some. I think I'll have some!" Trixie reached for another cup while Bonnie reprimanded that she'd had enough already.

Bo and Jessie raised their eyebrows at each other, amused at their colleagues' antics. "She'll regret that in the morning," Bo commented, lifting her shoulders as if to say "what is there to be done?"

The lilting strains of the Spanish waltz commenced and Jessie happily took Buzz's hand, as they paired with Woody and Bo to start. Even as they switched between multiple partners, they never lost sight of each other; and they relished the thrill that sparked between them whenever they came back together. During one of the passes where Jessie returned to his side, Buzz decided that any dance where he got to lock his eyes with hers was a good one.

With a shift to more spirited music, the galop that came next proved a challenge to the rapidly-tiring partygoers, yet Buzz and Jessie felt nothing but exhilaration. In a spirit of frivolity, the musicians increased the tempo of the routinely fast-paced dance with each passing verse, and many struggled to keep up. But Buzz's grip on Jessie's waist only tightened as they skipped across the floor faster and faster, and she couldn't hold back a peal of laughter. Their merriment continued through the following lanciers quadrille and Virginia reel, where they joined with Barbie and Ken, the latter of whom seemed completely at ease with his new acquaintances.

The band began to play the familiar first bars of the long-popular tune, "Home, Sweet Home," and recognizing it as signaling the traditional final waltz of the evening, couples took the floor one last time.
Jessie's mind wandered as Buzz now effortlessly led her through the maze of other dancers. Although the music was purely instrumental, the well-remembered lyrics played silently through her thoughts...

'Mid pleasures and palaces

Though I may roam

Be it ever so humble

There's no place like home

As the room flew past at her every turn, her gaze fell on Woody and Bo, who appeared as if they'd been in love forever; Barbie, as sophisticated as anyone she ever saw, even at her aunt's stuffy balls back in St. Louis; Rex trying his best to dance with Bonnie, while an exasperated Dolly attempted to steady a giggly and wobbly Trixie off to the side; her employers, the Kartoffelkopfs, letting down their professional guard to enjoy themselves in the name of holiday cheer. All people who knew, supported, and accepted her, exactly as she was.

'This must be what a real home feels like,' Jessie pondered. Once again, however, her mother's criticisms invaded her reverie, as she saw Woody and Bo glide by. 'It's not gonna last, though. Maybe for them, but not for someone like me…'

She looked at Buzz, hoping her face didn't give away the questions and turmoil that lay beneath. Yet when his blue eyes shone down on her, bright with affection, and he grinned at her with an undeniable ardor, Jessie's doubts melted away. She had a peculiar feeling that she was home, not just with her brother and her roommate, but with Buzz, too. And now, with so many miles between California and Missouri, her mother was powerless to take that away from her.

The final bows and curtseys complete, and their wraps retrieved from the cloak room, Jessie and Bo were both sorry to see such a delightful evening come to an end. They allowed Buzz and Woody to assist them with their respective outerwear before stepping out into the night air.

Now past midnight, the temperature had fallen since they first began dancing inside the cozy school building. Jessie hugged her bare arms against her stomach at the sudden chill, but the capelet she wore wasn't long enough to provide much warmth in the absence of gloves. She exhaled, her breath a puff of white on the air, and shivered visibly.

"Here," Buzz removed his black frock coat and held it out to drape it across Jessie's shoulders. He was surprised, however, when she eagerly thrust her arms in the sleeves instead, and wrapped it tightly around herself, bunching the cape up inside. He smiled at the endearing picture Jessie made, in a quirky hodgepodge of elegant ballgown and oversized menswear.

"I feel bad takin' this," she said regretfully, glancing at Buzz's crisp white shirtsleeves and apple-green vest, now exposed, "but I'm too cold to pass it up!" Without waiting for him to make the offer, she clutched his arm tightly, huddling close in an attempt to stay warm as they began their stroll back to the depot. "I wish I hadn't spilled punch on those gloves. Prob'ly shoulda picked a different dress, too; I wasn't really thinkin' 'bout the weather."

"You looked b-beautiful tonight, Jessie. I meant it before… when I said your dress was perfect. Red… suits you." The sincerity in his tone made her blush. She turned to him and their eyes met, a sweet smile passing between the two of them.

While neither were paying particular attention to their surroundings, Jessie failed to notice a rut in the
road, likely caused by the hoof of a rambunctious horse earlier that day. The pointy toe of Jessie's borrowed and slightly-loose slippers caught in the divot, and she stumbled, pulling Buzz along with her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice urgent with concern. He placed a hand over hers - which were still clinging to his arm - to steady her.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Jessie sighed. "Guess that's what I get for wearin' someone else's's shoes," she added, with a little laugh of embarrassment. Convincing himself that it was necessary to prevent any further mishaps, Buzz let his hand continue to rest against Jessie's the remainder of their walk home.

The distance seemed much shorter on their return, and before they knew it, the two couples were back at the Harvey Girls' dormitory. Buzz escorted Jessie to the porch, and she released her hold on his arm so that she could face him.

Any progress Buzz had made over the course of the evening, in regards to his confidence around Jessie, now departed under the pressure of a suitable goodnight. He inhaled deeply, and said the only words that came to mind. "I, uh, I hope you had a nice time."

"Oh, I really did," she looked up at him, her green eyes shining. "I dunno when I had such a nice Christmas."

"It's not quite Christmas yet," he ventured to tease, just a little.

"Yeah it is, it's after midnight," she giggled, and he smiled. "I honestly didn't know what the dance would be like; the fancy balls back in St. Louis were so boring and stiff, like no one really wanted to be there. But tonight was... different."

"How so?" he cocked his head nearly imperceptibly, hopeful that he might have played even a small part in the difference.

"I dunno, just... better. The dances were even the same sorta ones we'd have back home, but here... I just really enjoyed dancin' 'em, ya know?" A twinkle flashed in Jessie's eye, as she felt suddenly emboldened. "Hey, maybe... sometime... you could teach me one of those Spanish dances ya told me about?"

The corners of Buzz's mouth turned upward into a crooked grin. "Sure... I'd be happy to."

"Oh!" Jessie hastily began wriggling her arms out of the oversized coat. "Guess you need this back, huh?"

Buzz took the coat from her outstretched hand and stood staring, feeling rather helpless, not knowing how to bring such a perfect night to an end. Jessie paused for a moment herself, sharing his dilemma, then opted to take a chance. "Thank you for such a wonderful evenin'." She leaned in, rested a hand on his chest, and kissed his cheek swiftly yet tenderly. "Merry Christmas, Buzz."

Buzz felt the heat rising in his face, despite the wintry air. Again he grinned at her, "Merry Christmas, Jessie." She disappeared inside the dormitory with a wave, leaving Buzz equally dumbfounded and elated.

Woody had walked Bo farther away from the dorm entrance, both to give privacy to and have privacy from Buzz and Jessie. He, too, found the prospect of concluding such an unforgettable occasion to be rather overwhelming. As she turned toward him, he took one of her hands in his own. "Thank you for accompanying me to the dance, Miss Peepe."
"I think we're past those formalities now. You can call me Bo," she reached up to smooth the lapel of his coat with her free hand. "Woody."

"Alright… Bo," his heart swelling at the pronouncement of her name. "I hope you enjoyed the evening."

"Oh, I did. In fact, I found a lovely memento," she motioned to a piece of greenery on the pink fabric of her dress.

"Say, is that… mistletoe?" Woody leaned in to get a better look in the dim light. Bo answered his question by planting a quick but certain kiss on his lips. "Merry Christmas, Sheriff," she drawled with a touch of slyness, peering at him over her shoulder as she walked to the door.

Momentarily caught off guard, he watched after her, then burst into a wide, goofy smile. "Merry… Christmas..."

Back In their hotel room, Buzz and Woody lay motionless in their respective beds. The room was dark, save for a faint moonlight glow. Buzz's voice broke tentatively through the silence.

"Woody? You asleep?"

"Not with you talking, I'm not," he mumbled.

"You remember that song Mama taught you, on your guitar? You think you could play it again?"

"Maybe. I dunno, Buzz, it's been a while."

"You need to practice." Buzz's memory jogged, he rolled out of bed and shuffled over to the coat rack in the corner of the room. Locating Jessie's gloves in his pocket, he pulled them out and draped them over the back of a chair.

Woody sat up. "What's that sickening, sweet smell?"

"Jessie's gloves. After she spilled punch on them, I held onto them for her. They need to air out."

"Why do you still have them?" despite his sleepiness, the amusement was evident in Woody's voice. "Are you keeping them as a souvenir, Romeo?"

"I might keep them as a gag if you don't quit it," Buzz deadpanned. "I forgot that I put them in my pocket, alright? It's not like you weren't distracted yourself, saying goodnight to Miss Peepe."

"Well, Bo's pretty distracting." There was no doubt that Woody was grinning as he reclined back onto his bed.

"It's 'Bo' now, is it?" chuckled Buzz. "So were you too distracted to notice she slipped that mistletoe into your pocket?"

"She did not."

"Don't believe me, go look for yourself." Buzz settled himself back under his own covers. "All teasing aside, Woody, you two make a good couple - you suit each other, I mean."

Woody sniffed in acknowledgement. "Same could be said for you and Jessie."
Buzz responded with a permissive hum of his own. The happiness of the evening was still too close for the men to share with each other, but they each knew what the other wasn't saying and what hopes lay ahead.

Meanwhile, the girls were getting ready for bed in their dormitory room next door. Bo had changed into her nightgown and was folding her ballgown carefully. Jessie was already snug beneath her blanket, absent-mindedly staring at the ceiling, lost in a world of her own.

"As nice as it is to get dressed up, I think I'm glad we don't have to do it all that often." Bo lifted the lid of the trunk that sat at the foot of her bed, and gently laid the folded skirt and bodice of her ballgown inside.

"Mmmhmmm."

"Your dress seemed to be a hit tonight, and to think you were afraid to wear it."

"Mmmhmmm."

A mischievous look crossed Bo's face, as she latched the trunk closed then sat on her own bed. "And you're not even listening to me. In that case, I'll just take a ride through town in nothing but my petticoats."

"Mmmhmmm."

"I think you should come along. Buzz would like that."

Jessie raised up on her elbows, suddenly alert. "What? What about Buzz?!"

Bo laughed heartily. "Didn't I tell you it would be a good night?"

Chapter End Notes

The Barstow schoolhouse is described in an 1892 newspaper article as having a stage, which was a common feature of the time, allowing the building to be used both as a classroom with a supervisory post for the teacher's desk, and also as a community center for town meetings. The order of dances written here was taken from an actual 1893 dance card, with minor (yet still historically accurate) changes made by us for story purposes, such as including the two-step, which was still a new dance in 1893. Gloves were an important accessory at dances in the 19th century, and for a very practical reason: they kept the sweat and oils from a person's hand from soiling their partner's fine clothes, and men and women both wore them. Dance cards were also important, allowing a lady to keep track of who she had promised dances to; and while it wasn't necessarily proper for a man and woman to dance exclusively with each other the entire evening, in the case of public parties such as this, when they might not have known many people (or the strangers' reputations), it would be more acceptable. Buzz and Woody wearing ordinary day suits with frock coats is not really something that would have been done at the time, either - but with Barstow having a population of under 100 in the early-mid 1890s, it was very much still a frontier town, and not as many would have had any sort of formal wear like Ken does. Also, an ascot was not the type of necktie worn with a formal tailcoat evening suit - it would have likely been a bow tie, similar to today - but we couldn't leave out that line when Barbie and Ken meet, so we
took a few liberties. Buzz and Woody would have worn their hats to the dance, as men were rarely if ever seen out in public bareheaded, but for the sake of an already-long chapter we left out the details of them removing them in the dormitory parlor, donning them to walk to and from the dance, and checking them at the cloakroom along with the girls' wraps.
A lighthearted atmosphere permeated the Harvey establishment on Christmas morning, matching the festive greenery swags that festooned the walls throughout the lunch counter and dining room in honor of the holiday. This air of merriment had carried over from the previous evening’s dance, despite the girls being late to bed and early to rise - save for Trixie, who was still feeling ill effects from the eggnog that Dolly had tried in vain to warn her about.

With a sparse crowd on the morning train already having come and gone, and most locals remaining at home to celebrate with family in the morning hours, the Harvey House staff was left with little more to do than wait and talk. Even strict Mr. Kartoffelkopf made a yuletide exception and lifted the company rule on staying busy during down times; he looked the other way as the girls relived the happenings from the night before, so long as they promised to put a stop to their chatter as soon as any customers entered.

There was one prevailing question on everyone’s mind, and Dolly was first to blurt it out in the midst of their reminiscing. “Okay, Barbie, you have to tell us who that man was last night!” Bo and Jessie shared a smirk, recalling the dramatic scene that had played out right in front of them.

“His name is Ken - Kenneth Carson. He just set up a tailor shop in town a month ago, that’s why we’ve never seen him before; he’s been busy getting established.” A dreamy look swept over Barbie’s countenance, and she leaned against the counter as if in need of support. “When our eyes met across the room, I don’t know, but it was like the music swelled - at least for me it did. I haven’t seen anyone like him since the parties and balls back in Philadelphia, with such style, and charm. I was simply floored - he actually had an inverness overcoat, and a top hat, and a cane!” She sighed at the memory of the refined form Ken made, escorting her home. “I never dreamed I’d meet the likes of him here, not in little Barstow!”

The girls were so caught up in Barbie’s retelling that they failed to notice Woody and Buzz seat themselves at the counter, having indulged in the luxury of a little extra sleep after their late evening. Upon the men’s arrival, Mr. Kartoffelkopf stood to professional attention. “Back to work, girls,” he ordered, with a quick clap of his hands. “No socializing while customers are present.”
“Please, don’t worry about us,” Woody waved his own hand in dismissal. “We’re all friends here… and family,” he added, with a glance in his sister’s direction.

Giving a nod of assent - himself tired from an excess of revelry, and glad for the reprieve from a typical workday - Mr. Kartoffelkopf retreated to the kitchen, to check on the progress of the turkeys roasting for later meals.

Bo moved towards the counter, meeting Woody with a knowing smile. “You’re a welcome sight on Christmas morning, Sheriff.” She handed him a menu, her fingers playfully trailing over his ever so quickly as he took the card.

He grinned back at her, “I found your present, Bo,” patting the breast pocket of his vest, where the green leaves of the mistletoe peeked out. “Seems a bit unfair that I didn’t get you anything, though.”

“I wouldn’t say that; last night was wonderful. Now, what can I get you for breakfast?” After taking Woody’s order, she noticed that Jessie had sidled up in front of Buzz. With a sly wink, Bo excused herself to the kitchen to let her friend wait on the other marshal.

Jessie found herself suddenly gun-shy. The previous night had been something wondrous and new; but now, faced with what might be the first day of a lasting relationship, she was at a loss for words, and spoke the only greeting she could muster. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Buzz was struggling with the same matter of contention, and they both stared at each other for what felt like an eternity. Buzz’s gaze shifted from Jessie’s face, to her hands, as she played softly with her fingers. The first thought to cross his mind was how much he wanted to reach out and close his fingers around hers like he had done so many times the night before, but he knew now was neither the time nor the place. Fortunately, his daydreaming also served as a reminder. “Oh! I have your gloves.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled them out.

“I forgot you had ‘em!” she let out a small laugh as she reached across the counter to take the neatly-folded bundle. “Thanks for keepin’ ‘em safe for me.”

His expression relaxed into a smile. “It was my pleasure, Jessie.”

The two lapsed into silence again, this time a more comfortable one. Jessie started a little, realizing she was still holding the menu. “Here ya go; I’ll get ya some coffee while you settle on what you want for breakfast.”

Unbeknownst to Bo and Jessie, the other girls had taken an immediate notice of the two marshals calling the girls by their first names, as well as the new familiarity between them, and were watching the proceedings with keen interest. When Jessie emerged from the kitchen, having just placed Buzz’s order, Dolly practically pounced at her. “What did he have your gloves for?” she eagerly inquired, as Trixie and Bonnie drew closer.

“He held ‘em for me after I spilled punch on ‘em, that’s all…”

“I bet he slept with them under his pillow!” Trixie giggled, not too hungover to gossip.

“That’s so romantic!” gushed Bonnie.

Trixie leaned forward. “Are you two sparking now?”

Jessie rolled her eyes, exasperated with all of them. “Will you shush?” she pleaded, in a loud whisper. Her scowl morphed into a look of concern, however, as she noticed Bonnie’s face fall, and her tone softened. “What’s wrong?”
Bonnie sighed. “It’s just - I was okay when we were excited for the dance; but now that it’s over, and I don’t have anything else to think about, I’m really missing home. I haven’t sung a single Christmas carol… but if I was home right now, my Ma and I would be singing while I helped her cook dinner.”

Jessie rested a sympathetic hand on Bonnie’s shoulder. “Aww, it must be hard for ya.”

Woody couldn’t help but overhear the conversation that was going on nearby; he took a sip of coffee, then touched his napkin to his mouth and set it down on the counter. “I’ll be right back,” he said to Buzz.

“What about your breakfast?”

“Just have Bo leave it on the counter for me. I won’t be long.” He walked over to the cash register, where Mr. Kartoffelkopf was settling the morning’s accounts, and spoke with him in hushed tones. In a moment Woody had exited the restaurant facility and was headed in the direction of his hotel room.

“Where’s he going?” Bo asked Buzz, as she appeared with both Woody and Buzz’s breakfast plates.

“Beats me,” shrugged Buzz, eagerly eyeing the piping hot food that had just been placed in front of him.

No sooner had Buzz dug into his meal then Woody returned, guitar in hand. He smiled at the girls, “Anyone up for a few Christmas carols?”

Jessie’s eyes lit up at the discovery of her brother’s hidden talent. “Where’d ya learn to play the guitar?”

“It was pretty lonely in Texas,” he chuckled, as he leaned against the newsstand that lined one of the lunchroom’s walls and adjusted a couple strings. “So it was either this, or pick up some bad habits. What should we do first?”

“Do you know ‘Deck the Halls’?” Bonnie piped up instantly. “It’s my favorite.”

Woody grinned proudly. “Sure do!” He strummed a few opening chords and the girls all began to sing; even Trixie warbled along. Bo observed this all with shining eyes, delighted. Buzz, too, was watching, but his gaze was fixed on Jessie as she happily joined the chorus.

After a few carols, Woody lowered his guitar with a somewhat sheepish smile. “If you ladies don’t mind, I believe my breakfast is getting cold. I’d be happy to continue after I’ve eaten, though.” He leaned the instrument against the wall and returned to his stool at the counter.

“You do beat all, Sheriff,” Bo beamed, as she poured him a fresh cup of coffee. “What a thoughtful thing to do.”

He shrugged modestly, “It’s Christmas.”

“Thanks to you. I hope you can be persuaded to play when we have an opportunity to spend some time together.”

“For you, little lady, I could be persuaded to do almost anything.”

As promised, after breakfast Woody played more carols, this time with the addition of Mrs.
Kartoffelkopf’s shrill voice and the squeals of their three sons, all of whom had come over to partake in the musical interlude. The lull was not to last, however, as the crowds picked up with the coming of the lunch hour, and Buzz and Woody retired to their accommodations. All through the afternoon and evening, travelers filled the dining room and lunch counter, as well as Barstow families who were eager to take advantage of a quality Christmas dinner with all the trimmings that they didn’t have to prepare themselves.

When their shifts finally ended, a weary group of Harvey Girls trudged across the yard and into their dormitory building. Upon entering the parlor, Jessie jumped slightly when she heard her brother call out to her from the settee. Bo gave Woody a little flirtatious wave - which he reciprocated with a grin and a wave of his own - and continued up the stairs with the others, allowing the siblings to share a moment in private.

“What’re ya doin’ here?” asked Jessie, surprised. “Is everythin’ ok?”

“Everything’s fine,” Woody stood to greet his sister and handed her a parcel wrapped in plain white tissue paper, tied with a narrow red ribbon. “I just wanted to give you this, it being our first Christmas together after so many years.”

“Oh, Woody, you didn’t hafta get me anythin’!” she cried, accepting the present. “I have nothin’ for you; I don’t get paid for another week, and I haven’t had time to get into town anyway, and - “

“Knowing you’re finally out from under Ma’s thumb is gift enough for me,” he cut in with a smile, as she untied the bow and loosened the paper from its contents, revealing a box of pretty stationery, a fountain pen, and ink. “It’s nothing much, but I figured you had to leave that sort of thing at home, and you might be needing it.”

“Thanks a heap… it’s awful nice,” she hugged him appreciatively. “Although now that you’re here, I dunno who I’m gonna write to,” she laughed. “But it’ll definitely come in handy.”

“If nothing else, you can write clandestine letters to Buzz,” he teased with a wink.

Jessie crumpled the wrapping still in her hand, and tried futilely to conceal how much that idea tickled her. “Stop it.”

Aware that she was tired, he eased up on the joking. “What about Pa? You could write to him.”

Jessie’s voice shrunk. “He wouldn’t want t’hear from me.”

“You don’t know that,” said Woody gently, as he searched her face in an attempt to discern why she’d believe such a thing about their father.

“Yeah, I think I do,” she sighed. However, not wanting to sully the nearly-perfect happiness of the past twenty four hours with thoughts of the troubles she left behind, Jessie forced a smile and patted the presents she held. “Thanks again for these, I’ll make use of ‘em for sure. I best be gettin’ upstairs, though. Merry Christmas, Woody.”

Woody grasped his sister in a tight embrace; the unpleasant discussions about what happened back at home could take place another day. “Merry Christmas, Jess.”

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A little over a week had passed since Christmas, and the four had continued to meet up after the girls’ shifts, as often as schedules permitted. When Jessie and Bo finally shared the same day off, they planned an afternoon picnic with Buzz and Woody, along the banks of the Mojave River.
While Buzz spoke to Mr. Kartoffelkopf, telling him where he and Woody would be in case Sheriff Varney came looking for them, Woody waited for the girls outside of the depot. As he stared absent-mindedly at the mountains in the distance, Jessie came strolling up to him, picnic basket in hand and a broad grin on her face.

“You look proud of yourself,” observed Woody.

Jessie’s expression turned positively triumphant. “Got my first real paycheck today! Wouldn’t I love to shove that in Aunt Molly’s face. I’ll be responsible for myself just fine!”

“I never doubted that,” he chuckled. “Hey, is that a new hat?”

“Sure is! Got it when Bo’n I went into town this mornin’.” She tilted her head and peered from beneath the brim of the tan straw boater with its scarlet ribbon band. “Figured I needed somethin’ more outdoorsy than the one I brought with me. ‘Sides, it’s about time I picked out my own clothes, don’tcha think?”

Woody smiled warmly at his sister. “I haven’t seen you this happy in a long time, Jess.” He paused, as if debating whether he should speak what was on his mind, then decided to continue. “Honestly, I can say the same about Buzz, for as long as I’ve known him. I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but I think he’s falling for you.”

“Really?” she exclaimed, her eyes bright. “I mean, he doesn’t think I’m crazy or anythin’?”

“Oh, he knows you’re crazy.” Woody’s smile twisted into a wicked smirk. “But apparently he likes that in a woman.”

Jessie smacked her brother on the arm, hard. “I could still take you, ya know. And Momma ain’t here to save your hide.”

“Or tan yours.” Woody rubbed the sore spot, laughing in spite of the sting. “Where’s Bo?”

“Gettin’ a blanket for us to sit on. How ‘bout Buzz?”

“Checking in with the manager.” The door of the depot clicked open, and Woody glanced over his shoulder to see if it was his friend; it was. “Here he comes now.”

Just as Buzz approached the Pride siblings, Bo came striding over from the dormitory, a folded Harvey-issue woolen blanket draped over her arm.

Buzz reached for the basket Jessie was holding - heavily laden with sandwiches, fruit, cake, and lemonade, along with everything necessary for serving - that the girls had procured from the Harvey House kitchen. “Here, let me take that.” She released it to him gratefully.

The walk to the river was a quick and familiar one for the quartet, and it wasn’t long before they found an open plot in amongst the cottonwood trees for the blanket and set to enjoying their day. The bare, silvery branches of the trees intertwined in a lacy canopy over them, a magical setting that almost made the girls forget their workplace was so close by.

Comfortably sated from the food, Jessie leaned back against her hands, tilting her face up towards the bright blue sky. “It sure is a pretty day! And January at that!”

“Yup,” Woody agreed. “It was easy getting used to this kind of weather when I first came westward as a deputy.”
“That reminds me, I finished readin’ that dime novel. There was a bit in there about a sheriff an’ it reminded me of how we used t’ act out those stories,” she laughed.

Buzz shot an amused grin at his friend, “You did, huh?”

“Gosh, yes,” Jessie gushed, so her brother couldn’t deny it. “He was always the sheriff, too.”

“Big surprise,” Buzz coughed into his hand.

“Hey, you got to be the deputy, sometimes!” Woody chuckled.

“Well, don’t be shy, Sheriff,” Bo encouraged, placing the remains of their meal back into the basket and folding her hands in her lap, ready to give her full attention. “I want to hear more about this.”

Woody and Jessie entertained the others with various stories that had captured their youthful imaginations. The more they told, the more animated it became, until they found themselves play-acting once again.

Pantomiming pushing open a set of swinging saloon doors, Woody sauntered up to Jessie and tipped his hat. “Say, little missy, you notice any trouble around these parts?”

She stood tall and proud. “Nary a bit! Not with Sheriff Woody around!”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait! I got it! I got it! This is great! Okay!” he grabbed Jessie by the shoulders and she fell into a fit of giggles, the joy of their childhood games rushing back to her.

“The bandits got the critters tied up in the burning barn, and now for the best part!” his voice raised an octave, “Help us! The barn’s on fire!” then lowered again, “I’ve got ya, critters. No need to worry. Sheriff Woody saves the day again!” He jumped in the air triumphantly, but lost his footing as he landed and started to stumble backwards. Jessie caught him by the arm and steadied him.

“Whew; thanks, Jess.”

“Yeehaw! More like Jessie saves the day,” she crowed, as she reached to straighten her hat, which had fallen a little askew during the siblings’ antics.

“Wanna bet?” Woody seized the moment and impulsively stole Jessie’s boater from her head. “Haha, got your hat!”

Staring at him fiercely, Jessie clenched her fists by her side. “Woody Pride, you give that back!”

“You want it back, you gotta catch me first!” He took off like a shot, holding her hat up high.

“Hogtie the mail man,” she muttered, before tearing off after him.

Bo watched with Buzz as the two darted between the cottonwood trees. Once they disappeared from sight, she shook her head and laughed. “I’m so glad to see Jessie reunited with her brother. After what’s she told me, he was certainly missed.”

“I am, too,” Buzz concurred. “He’s worried about her for as long as we’ve been partners.”

Woody was back in minutes, victory on his face; his sister trailed only a few steps behind. “Ha! Still faster than you, even now.”

“Tarnation!” exclaimed Jessie, panting for breath. “I’d ‘a beat’cha fair and square, if it wasn’t for this blasted heavy skirt.”

“Honestly, Jessamine, such language!” Woody joked, imitating an air of sternness.
Jessie felt her chest tighten painfully as Woody’s words rang in her ears, not in his voice, but their mother’s. She barely heard him call her name before she spun on her heel and ran for a nearby cluster of trees. Woody cast a shocked look at Bo and started to follow, but Buzz held up his hand. “I’ll go.”

Buzz found Jessie seated against a cottonwood tree, hugging her knees to her chest. She was breathing deeply and he swore her cheeks were wet. ”Jessie?” he approached gently. “What is it? What’s wrong?” he lowered himself next to her, pulling his knee up to his chest, similar to the way she was sitting.

She shook her head, “Nothin’, I’m alright.”

“You don’t seem alright. Tell me, please.”

She let out another deep breath. ”What Woody said, the way he said my name just now… it was like Momma was standin’ there. And everythin’ started to close in on me and I couldn’t breathe. I know he didn’t mean to; how would he have known?” Her voice trembled and she shut her eyes. Buzz forgot his caution of propriety and laid a hand over hers. “I shouldn’t have taken it so personal; I know he was just teasin’. I guess I’ve just forgotten what it’s like to have someone love me instead of criticize me all the time.”

Everything in Buzz was screaming to gather her into his arms and never let go; to tell her how Woody wasn’t the only one who loved her; to march right up to her mother and ask how dare she try and smother such a fiery and independent spirit. He was desperate to tell Jessie that if he could only do one thing with the rest of his life, it would be to make her smile. But he couldn’t; not yet. So he was left reeling for something to say to fill the silent void.

"Thank you," she said softly.

"For what?" he puzzled.

"Just for comin’ over here and bein’ with me, makin’ sure I was okay. I guess I should prob’ly get back to make sure Woody knows that everythin’’s alright.” She turned the hand that lay under his, giving it a gentle squeeze.

Buzz felt a warmth rush to his cheeks, so he quickly stood. He kept the grasp on her hand, however, both as he assisted her from the ground and as they returned to Woody and Bo. When he caught Woody’s expression he hastily let go of Jessie’s hand, looking everywhere but at his friend in an attempt to avoid eye contact.

Jessie walked up to her brother, who had been standing with Bo, watching for them to come back. “I’m sorry I ran off like that.” She tugged at her braid anxiously. “But, the way you said my name, it kinda reminded me of Momma.”

“Don’t worry about it, Jess. I’m sorry I upset you; I certainly didn’t mean to. C’mere,” he pulled her in for a hug.

“I thought I was past it all, comin’ out here, fin’lly free of her. But I guess she messed me up more than I realized.”

“No one blames you, sweetie,” Bo soothed. “All her fault-finding, and trying to marry you off to someone you didn’t love… what was his name?”

“Percival Pennington.” Jessie contorted her face in disgust, barely able to utter the name. “Woody -
you never heard that whole story, how I ended up at Aunt Molly’s in the first place.”

“I can just imagine, knowing Ma. Last letter I got from you only said you refused someone, and got shipped off for the season.”

The two couples situated themselves on the blanket, and Jessie began to tell her tale. “Ohhh, there was so much more than I had time to write! He was perfectly awful, which means perfect by Momma’s standards. He was skinnier’n you, I think, and looked sickly-pale. His hair was all mousy and slicked down, which didn’t help his ears much. And he had NO chin! What was so awful was his high-falutin’ airs. He just looked so smarmy and it was like he was always lookin’ down on ya through his pinch-nose glasses, if not just straight through ya.”

Woody laughed, “I can see why Momma was so enamored. What did he do?”

“He was new in town - moved there to work at the bank - and started comin’ in Pa’s store. One day I just heard this ‘excuse me, miss’, and there he was. He wanted to speak with Pa, but he would not stop starin’ at me the whole time. Pa saw it was makin’ me uncomfortable, so he sent me to the back until he had gone. Imagine my surprise to come home the next day to find him sittin’ with Momma in the parlor!”

“How on earth did they meet up?” asked Bo.

“Who knows? Guess it’s kinda hard to hide where you live in a small town. And I prob’ly shouldn’t have let on that Pa was my Pa.” Jessie shifted and brought her hand to the ground for support, accidentally laying it right over Buzz’s. “Oh! Sorry!”

His face colored slightly. “No, it’s okay. Here, please.” Buzz moved his hand so the ground was free.

“Thanks,” she flushed, too, and found herself sorry that etiquette required him to move it. “Anyway, there he was, and Momma lookin’ all pleased with herself. She introduced him and said she’d given him permission to call on me. That next hour was torture; sittin’ there while they talked about me and over me. I didn’t want to encourage anythin’, so I tried keepin’ quiet. When I did speak up, Momma shot daggers out of her eyes; goodness knows what she must’a told him about me, but she didn’t mean for me to go and mess it up. I was so relieved when he left, and I expected to never see him again.”

“Let me guess: Ma made more of an impression on him,” Woody made a face.

She nodded, “Sure did; he came back for Round Two, but this time I was not havin’ it. Momma called me into the parlor but ‘soon as I saw him, I just turned and walked right up to my room. She was furious and laid into me somethin’ fierce. I reckoned that was worth it if it meant he’d finally leave me alone.”

“Are you saying he still didn’t?” Buzz was aghast.

“Nope! Came home a few days later to find him invited for dinner! And boy was that a fun meal - Momma wouldn’t let me outta that one. The way he pandered to her, liked to have made Pa’n me spew!” She gave her voice a nasal tone. “‘I do earnestly hope that when I have the fortune of marrying, that I may be blessed with a mother-in-law even half as delightfully charming as you,’” she mimicked.

“I think I’m gonna be sick,” Woody puffed out his cheeks. Bo giggled into her hand.

“Pa’n I just looked at each other, had to hide behind our drinkin’ glasses not to laugh outright. But it
got worse. This… Percival… asked if he could have a private audience with me in the parlor after
dinner - guess he assumed he’d been accepted into the family. Pa tried to save me - said we’d had a
busy day, and I was most likely tired from inventoryin’ a big delivery while we still had to deal with
customers, but Momma just shot him a glare and that was that.”

Woody felt a rush of anger followed quickly by guilt; if he had only gotten her out of there as he
promised, she’d have been spared such an ordeal. Buzz, for his part, was busily and futilely telling
himself he had no business being angry on her behalf.

“Well, y’all can imagine what happened next. He told me that he appreciated my reserve and
reluctance, and saw it as a sign of my virtue, and my wantin’ to make him prove his worth. He also
said he could tell I wasn’t interested in courtin’ and wanted marriage right away. So he jus’ flat-out
asked me. I must’ve looked like he was speakin’ a foreign language! Once I figured out what had
actually happened, I told him no, thank you, and got up to leave. The nerve’a him though - he said
he understood I was exhausted and wasn’t in my right mind, ‘cause women can’t handle the strains
of workin’ outside the home. An’ that he’d show me that he was earnest in his intent. ‘Percival
Pennington always prevails’ - he SAID that as I walked away! Can you believe it? Such a pompous
little…” Jessie cast a side glance at Buzz and caught herself before she finished the sentence in
profanity.

Bo burst out laughing. “I’m sorry, it just sounds like an exercise I’d have given the younger kids
when I taught. Percival Pennington was persistent,” Bo giggled again. “Positively preposterous!”

Woody grinned at her, “Primeval!”

“Pendejo,” Buzz said under his breath.

Jessie looked at him, “What?”

“Um… petulant.”

“He was all of those for sure. But it didn’t end there, either. He showed up again! And he didn’t
waste any time proposin’. Said he was there for an answer, once and for all, actin’ like I’d led him
on.” Jessie was getting visibly agitated, the color rising in her face. “I told him, I already gave him
an answer, and that answer was no! Told him, too, that I didn’t know when I’d ever made him think
I was even remotely interested in marryin’ him.”

“What did he do?” Buzz leaned towards Jessie, his hand twitching in want of reaching out to calm
her. Bo noticed the marshal’s reaction and smothered a smile.

“He jus’ left. Did’nt raise a fuss, although I ‘xpected him to. Just bowed, wished me a good night
and walked out of the door. The next day there was a letter, addressed to Momma, not even me. I
dunno what it said; ‘spose he made it all my fault somehow. But she was furious, an’ sided with
him.”

“Oh, Jessie, you didn’t tell me all THAT before,” Bo gasped. “What a weasel.”

“Well,” Woody said with a shake of his head, “I’ll say one thing for him: he was certainly out of his
depths. And you were out of his league,” he smiled tenderly at his sister. Buzz and Bo nodded in
agreement, the former more emphatically.

“The next day, I went to work at Pa’s store as usual; but when I got home, Momma was right inside
the door waitin’ for me. Said a carriage would be there to get me shortly, to take me to the train and
on to St. Louis. She’d packed my trunk while I was at the store, and wasn’t even gonna let me take
anythin’ else! I told her though, what would people say, if I was on the train without a bag to carry, wouldn’t that look bad? So she let me pack a suitcase, and I made sure to take my Buffalo Bill book, and all your letters, Woody.” She stared at her brother sadly. “When I came back downstairs, she said I wasn’t a part of the family anymore, and wouldn’t be ‘til I came home with a husband and stopped bein’ such a disgrace. She said Pa had agreed to everythin’, an’ I didn’t even get to tell him goodbye.” Her eyes filled with tears and she diverted her gaze downward, struggling with the painful memories.

“Jess… I didn’t know.” Realizing now the reason behind Jessie’s reluctance to correspond with their father, he reached out and rested a hand on his sister’s shoulder. “I just can’t believe Pa was in on it. Ma had to have been lying.”

Woody’s eyes met Buzz’s, and he was taken aback by the raw emotion he could read in his friend’s face. Buzz swallowed his anger and, for the second time that night, laid his hand over Jessie’s. She looked at him, then her brother, with a grateful smile, then gave her head a little shake and sighed. “I’m not even gonna get started on ol’ walrus face again. If Momma’d had her way, I’d be married and miserable right now, and certainly not here!”

Bo keenly observed that Buzz’s countenance fell at Jessie’s statement. It was clear how deeply he cared for her friend, and that his intentions were - or would be in time, at least - quite serious.

“Now, Jessie, you don’t think marriage is all bad, right? I mean, if the right suitor asked,” Bo innocently inquired.

“Oh, no, ‘course not! It’s just… well, between a weasel and a walrus… I like critters ‘n all, but I don’t wanna end up with one.” She laughed. “I want more than that, ya know? And Momma could never understand that.”

Bo’s covert glance caught Buzz’s relieved expression, her tactics having served their purpose.

“Well, one thing I think you can feel good about, Jess,” Woody grinned wickedly, “Percival is a much worse name than Jessamine.”

She laughed, a good honest laugh. “Might even be worse than Woodrow,” she winked.

Buzz blinked. “Wait… your name is Woodrow? How have I been your partner for five years and never known that?”

Woody rolled his eyes. “I’d rather you didn’t know it now; thanks a lot, Jess.”

She gave him a cheeky wink in response before Bo said, “I don’t think it’s so bad.”

“Much appreciated, little lady,” he responded, with a tip of his hat.

“What about you?” Jessie shifted, turning to Buzz. “I mean, ‘Buzz’ has gotta be short for somethin’.”

“It is,” he mumbled. But Buzz made the mistake of meeting Jessie’s gaze, and lost everything to the green of her eyes. “My full name is Bustillo. It’s a family name, on my mother’s side. It means ‘ox pasture’, if that’s not the most ridiculous thing. When I was a kid, I had trouble saying it; all I could get out was ‘Buzz’, so that just stuck.”

“You think that’s bad?” Bo chimed in. “Mine is Bothilde, after my grandmother. It’s Swedish and no one can ever pronounce it.”
“You win,” Buzz said affably. “For the record,” he turned back to Jessie, “I like Jessamine.”

“You might be the only one,” she sighed, “but thank you. I never felt like it was me, ya know? It’s so fancy and I’m, well… no one’s ever accused me of being that!”

“Isn’t it a flower?” Bo asked.

“You know, I think it is,” Buzz grasped his chin in thought. “It can be another name for jasmine. My mother insists on growing spanish jasmine - or jessamine - at the house; she’s always said it’s the most unpretentious flower. It’s very pretty; I’d say you have both of those things in common.” He colored quickly, realizing he might have said too much, but Jessie’s radiant smile put him at ease. He was too caught up in her reaction to notice Bo prodding Woody and nodding in their direction.

Having bade the girls goodnight after their picnic, Woody and Buzz sat in their hotel room, passing the last few hours of what had been a pleasant day. Woody was playing at his guitar as usual, this time picking out faintly Spanish notes in a deliberate manner. “Okay, remind me what all have we gathered this past week, at the Calico camps?”

Buzz, who had just finished his nightly workout, laid the equipment on the dresser and sat on his bed. He retrieved his pocket notebook from the nightstand, and flipped it open. “Well, according to the miners we talked to, the group is definitely known as the Huggins gang. There are at least seven outlaws involved, if not more. Besides the robberies in town, they’ve caused trouble in the camps, raiding the miners’ belongings and rations, but they’re always in disguise. And the only new names we have are nicknames… like Stretch, Twitch, and Chunk. Not much to go by.”

“They’re not making this easy for us,” Woody groaned. “What do you suggest we do next?”

“I’m not sure. We’ve never had this cold of a case before; usually we at least have a full name to go by, even if it is an alias. We could try the camps out near Daggett.”

“Do you have the map that Slink gave us handy?” asked Woody. “Are there any other towns in the vicinity?”

Buzz removed a small piece of paper from the back of his notebook and unfolded it. “Well, there’s Borax, which looks to be less than five miles from the Calico mines, and Waterman just to the west. Hinckley and Cottonwood are about ten, fifteen miles west of Barstow, and Minneola the same distance to the east.” He folded the map again and restored it to its prior location. “I guess we have no choice but to widen our radius.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right.” Woody got up from his bed, and propped his guitar in the corner near the window. “We can start investigating those towns tomorrow; let’s begin with the Daggett camps first, and work outward from there.” When he returned to his bed, his voice took a more serious turn. “We need to have a chat about Jessie.”

Buzz felt the blood leave his face, as if he was about to break out into a cold sweat, and his heart started racing. He closed the diminutive notebook, clutching it tightly in front of him as if it were a shield, and swallowed hard. “O-okay.”

“Don’t think I didn’t see you holding her hand earlier. I need to know your intentions toward my sister,” Woody insisted, his tone calm yet firm.

Buzz struggled to translate his feelings into a coherent answer, under the pressure of Woody’s unusually-formidable stare. The room seemed to be spinning as quickly as his mind. “Well, um… that is, I… you see, it’s…”
“I’m not mad, Buzz, I just want to know where things stand.” He paused. “Are you in love with her?”

The answer was a simple, single word that resonated through every fiber of his being, and yet Buzz was unable to actually speak it. His eyes met Woody’s, and that was all the confirmation he needed.

“Thought so.” Woody’s face softened. “It’s alright, Buzz, you have my blessing. It’s just that, well, I failed to look out for her before, and I don’t want to see her hurt again. Big brother instincts, ya know?”

Buzz let out the breath that he had been holding. “I would never… you know that… “

“I know. Honestly, I don’t think there’s anyone I’d entrust with her, besides you.” He chuckled. “And, for the record, you are allowed to hold her hand. I’m not gonna deck you for it. Consider this talk your permission… for that. But don’t get carried away,” he added, the seriousness returning to his voice.

His friend cracked a crooked grin. “You got it.”

Chapter End Notes

"Sparking" is a historical term for courting, or dating, but in some contexts it has more illicit connotations, which is why Jessie is so quick to shush Trixie. Cottonwood trees, which commonly grow along the banks of riverbeds in the southwest, have leaves that turn a vibrant yellow in the autumn, and are bare in the winter months. We are aware that the correct Spanish pronunciation of Bustillo is "booz-TEE-yo" not "BUZZ-till-oh" but there’s no saying how a child would mispronounce things, so we tried to find a name (actually in census lists at the time, as a first name) that would be close enough. The towns mentioned at the end of the chapter were real locations in the vicinity during the 1890s, although some have faded away with time and no longer exist in the present day.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year! We hope that you've had a wonderful holiday season and that your 2018 is full of wonderful things... including more chapters of our story! ;) Make sure you check out and follow our "Jessie's Journey" Pinterest board (username yodelincowgirl), where you'll find some videos in the Chapter 8 section that will be particularly useful.

Toy Story still doesn't belong to us. If it did, we'd have given everyone a sneak peek at Toy Story 4 for Christmas. :) Enjoy, and don't forget to leave kudos and subscribe so you won't miss any adventures in the new year!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"I'm sorry, Miss Pride, but I need you to take the rest of Miss Anderson's shift." Mr. Kartoffelkopf studied the schedule at his desk. "She fell ill at breakfast, and won't be able to work the remainder of the day."

"But sir, I have plans - "

"It simply can't be helped. You were the most recent hire, therefore the obligation to fill in defers to you."

"Yes, sir," she conceded sadly.

Jessie slumped out onto the back porch of the Santa Fe depot building, where Bo had just joined the marshals for another of the quartet's afternoons by the river. The men had been to see Sheriff Varney in town that morning, but had returned in time for their outing with the girls.

Bo called out as soon as she saw her friend emerge. "What did Mr. K want?" Noticing the crestfallen expression on Jessie's face, however, she became concerned. "What's wrong?"

"Bonnie's sick, I have to cover her shift."

"Oh no!" Bo gasped. "Do you want me to stay behind, too? I hate for you to miss the picnic."

"We can wait til another day, or until your shift is over," offered Woody.

"No, y'all go on ahead," she sighed. "There's no need to waste the food we already had 'em prepare for us, and it'd be spoiled by nighttime. I'll be fine workin', I'm just disappointed is all."

"Actually, I should review and annotate what we discussed with the sheriff this morning, so I think I'll stay behind as well," Buzz interjected. "But, if you'd like," he turned to Jessie, with a shy smile, "we could go for a walk later tonight, after you're done working."

"I'd like that a lot," she beamed, her spirits lifted by Buzz's suggestion.

Bo looked at Jessie, her eyes full of worry. "You sure you don't mind if we go without you?"
"Positive." Jessie leaned closer to her friend with a mischievous wink. "Enjoy the time alone."

Bidding Jessie and Buzz goodbye, Woody and Bo retrieved the basket of food from the Harvey House kitchen, and the pair strolled down to the edge of the Mojave River. They set up their picnic under the branches of the cottonwood trees which were now dotted with tiny buds in preparation for the coming spring. The sun was shining in a clear, vibrant sky, and the February air was cool without being cold - just the kind of weather that made people want to settle in California.

Bo lifted a bottle of lemonade from the woven basket that sat in front of them and began pouring the liquid into two little cups. "I feel so bad being outside on this beautiful day, when Jessie's stuck inside working."

"It's a shame for Buzz to miss it, too," Woody added, reaching for a sandwich. "But at least she seems to like her job well enough. You've never told me how exactly you came to be a Harvey Girl."

"Oh, I just needed a change from Kansas. I was getting tired of being a spinsterly old schoolmarm." "You're anything but spinsterly," Woody smiled at her sincerely. "But wasn't there anything else you could do in Kansas - I mean, not that I'm sorry you came west. I'm glad you did."

"I just needed to get away." Bo's gaze followed the gentle flow of the river that cut through the desert below, as she wrestled with whether she should reveal her past. The truth won out. "I - I had a broken engagement - if I ever really was engaged." Discerning an expression of shock on Woody's face, she immediately regretted her honesty. "But, it was nothing. Forget I even said it."

Bo had mistaken the reasoning behind his shock, however, assuming disapproval when it was in fact disbelief that anyone could treat her in such a callous way. Woody reached for her hand, and took it in his own. "No, it's not nothing. I'm so sorry. Would you tell me exactly what happened, if it's not too painful."

"I suppose you should know," she smiled, relieved by his concern and buoyed by his kindness. Bo recounted the same tale she had told Jessie, of Jasper the cattle hand who captured her heart then skipped town without warning, leaving her the brunt of cruel town gossip.

"I hope you know I would never do something like that to you, ever."

"I know," she smiled. "And I really know. I was swept up in the romance of it all with Jasper, so much that I was willing to ignore little signs that maybe it wasn't what I thought it was. But this, with you… it's different. Not that you haven't been romantic, but it's less fairy tale and more," she looked up in thought, "tangible, if that makes any sense." She turned to him again. "Although what doesn't make sense is how someone as wonderful as you isn't already taken."

Woody shrugged. "When I was at still at home, I had no interest in making connections there. And before I became a marshal, I wasn't in any one place long enough to think about meeting someone. There were other girls I called on, since I've been in California – not many," he added hastily, "but somehow it never felt, like you said, tangible. What I've felt, what I feel with you, it's just, well… right." He cleared his throat, as if to steady himself. "In fact, I wanted to ask you… if I could call on you… exclusively?"

Bo's face shone with happiness. "I'd like nothing more."

"This traveling life is starting to wear on me." Woody hoped that she would understand what he was alluding to, as he proceeded. "I don't have a place of my own; I'm always living in a hotel, or staying
at Buzz's family home between assignments." He sighed heavily. "A man gets to an age where he starts to think about settling down. When Jessie and I were kids, we used to talk about starting a ranch someday, and I'd still like to do that. But I have an obligation to see this case through, and I can't say how long it'll take."

"Good things are worth waiting for."

"I'll try not to make you wait too long." 'Or myself,' he thought as he looked affectionately down into Bo's blue eyes. Their faces were inching closer, tilting in anticipation, and Woody could feel his heart racing. Suddenly he lurched forward, pulled down to Bo as she hooked her arm around his neck. His lips met hers and he became aware of nothing else. He felt her start to pull away, but he wasn't quite ready for the moment to end, so he wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her back towards him. When they did break apart, both were flushed and breathing a little hard. "I do believe I've fallen in love with you, little lady."

Again came the sly smile Woody was beginning to recognize as a sign of very good trouble. "I think the feeling's more than mutual, Sheriff."

Back at the depot, Jessie's workday was finally over, and she bounded outside after changing out of her uniform. Darkness had fallen, but Buzz was waiting for her with an eager grin. "You seem happy to be done."

"We were as busy as hound pups at a rabbit hole! Have you seen Woody and Bo?"

He shook his head, "I haven't seen either of them since this morning."

Her eyebrows dipped in concern. "Same here. I thought she'd be in our room by now."

"And I assumed he'd show up for dinner. Maybe they didn't come back yet?"

"That was hours ago! C'mon," she started off on the usual path to the river, leaving Buzz to catch up. "We better go find 'em!" Together they hurried down to the river bank, where they came upon the missing couple. Bo was leaning against Woody, her head on his shoulder and his arm around her waist. They were happily chatting away, unaware of the impending interruption, or the late hour.

"Woody Pride, just what do you mean by this?" Jessie planted her fists on her hips, grinning at the sight.

Woody and Bo swung around in surprise then began laughing abashedly. He rubbed his hand on his neck. "Guess we kind of lost track of time."

Buzz chuckled at his flustered friend. "Yes, well, just so long as you left us some cake."

Woody and Buzz sat in Sheriff Hammond's office in Calico, along with Sheriff Varney, and the marshals reviewed their recent investigations and findings with their fellow lawmen. "As you can see, there's just not much to go on," Woody said with a frustrated sigh.

"Maybe I can help you out. There was an incident just yesterday," Hamm informed the others. "One of the Calico mine superintendents was traveling out to the camp to pay his miners, and he was overtaken and robbed of both his payroll funds and his horse. Wasn't shot or killed, thank goodness, but beaten pretty good."

"It had to have been someone who knew that the mining prospects were starting to look up around here, and when the men might be getting paid," Slink speculated. "To catch someone with that much
cash on him, it couldn't have been a coincidence."

"Do you think it was the Huggins Gang?" asked Woody.

Hamm nodded. "Matches their pattern, so I don't see it being anyone else."

Buzz was busily scribbling in his notebook. "How many assailants were involved?"

"Three that the victim saw. All with their faces covered."

"And they all got away?" Woody questioned further.

"Every one of 'em, without a trace. My deputies and I patrolled all the local watering holes, thinking we might catch someone, but no one ever showed up. Which means they have to have local connections and a very good hiding place. But where?"

"We've gone to every town we can in the immediate vicinity, but nobody has any information they can share - at least nothing they're willing to share." Buzz explained. "We just don't know where else to try. There's places like Victor, and Hesperia, and Needles, farther out; but we don't want to travel somewhere we'll have to stay overnight, not without a solid lead to make it worth our while."

Slink tapped his fingers on the desk. "I know a few other sheriffs throughout the county. Lemme send out some correspondence on your behalf," he offered. "If I get word that one of 'em's heard something, then you can go investigate further."

Woody gave his friend a nod of approval. "That would be much appreciated. But before we leave town," he turned to Hamm, "can you direct us to the home of the superintendent who was accosted? If you think he's up for visitors. We should speak with him personally."

As Sheriff Varney excused himself to head back to Barstow, Sheriff Hammond escorted the marshals to the home of the Huggins Gang's latest victim. Unfortunately for the lawmen, the attack had happened so quickly that the man's memory of specific details were hazy at best. He was able to offer one new bit of information, however: the bandit who had seemed to be the ringleader clicked a hard candy against his teeth as he talked, which had given off a strong smell of strawberries through the faded pinkish-red bandana that he used to conceal his features.

"Well, at least he was able to tell us something, even if it is kind of an odd clue," Woody prattled on, as he and Buzz strolled down the dusty street en route to the corral where Bullseye and Astrónomo waited for them. "I hope Slink has some luck with his colleagues. I hate to leave the area without a good reason, and if we have to take a train to get there... annd I'm talking to myself. Buzz! Wait up!" His partner had wandered in the direction of the general store, and Woody caught up with him as he stepped onto the front porch. "What are you doing?"

"Tomorrow's Valentine's Day; I thought I'd get Jessie something."

"Isn't that why I've been practicing the song?"

"Yes... but..."

Woody shrugged. "That's not a bad thought, actually; I should get something for Bo. I wonder what she'd like?" He walked to the place on the large counter where Valentine's trinkets had been displayed, and spotted some small heart-shaped boxes with chromolithographed scenes of children on them. "I've seen her eat chocolate cake... Bo'd like a box of chocolates."

"I don't know about that, Woody, we have an hour's ride back in full sun. They'll melt."
"It's February, Buzz."

"And nearly 70 degrees today, without any shade."

"It'll be fine," Woody picked up a box, ignoring his friend's warning. "What are you getting Jessie?"

Buzz rifled through a rack of colorful printed cards near where Woody had been browsing. "Just a card, I think... but I can't decide..."

"What about this?" Woody picked up an ornate valentine, encrusted in paper lace and embellished lavishly with die-cut flowers and silk fringe, that read 'An Offering of True Love.'

Buzz glanced at it quickly and shook his head. "No, it's too fancy, Jessie wouldn't like that. And it says 'love'."

Woody's brow furrowed. "But you do love Jessie, don't you?"

"Of course I do! But it's too soon to say so..."

"You're crazy, you know that? Here, this one's simple." He held up another card, with a pretty little girl in a pink dress who held a heart that said 'Valentine's Greetings.'

"Too impersonal. It should imply more, without saying it."

"This one's nice, then. 'With fond regard.' A little more personal, right?"

"I can't give her that!"

"Why not?"

"'With fond regard'? It makes it sound like I'm leaving and never intend to see her again. Besides, that winged baby is disturbing."

"It's a cupid, Buzz." Seeing that his friend was too engrossed in the card selection to reply - not to mention becoming increasingly overwhelmed with the pressure of finding the perfect message - Woody tapped the box of chocolates against his hand. "I give up. I'm gonna go buy these. We best be getting back to Barstow. I'll see you at the register."

Just as Buzz was about to despair of ever finding exactly what he wanted, his eyes fell on something with promise. His face lit up as he picked up the card, scrutinized its design, and read the inscription. With a grin pulling at his mouth and a little spring in his step, he headed to make his purchase and meet up with Woody.

Valentine's Day arrived at the Harvey House with almost as great a sense of anticipation as Christmas. The girls with beaus wondered how their men would observe the holiday, and those without daydreamed that a secret admirer might make his presence known. Even sensible Dolly - if she had been willing to admit it - hoped that she might receive a letter from her fiance. Restaurant patrons, too, had partaken in romantic gestures throughout the day, with many husbands and suitors stopping by the depot's newsstand to purchase one of the long-stemmed red roses that had been brought in specially for the occasion.

Knowing that they would be spending time with Buzz and Woody after their workday was over, Jessie and Bo remained mostly level-headed, and didn't expect any special attention when the marshals stopped in for their meals. Barbie, however, kept constant watch on the door, in case Ken
She only had to wait until the breakfast crowd had cleared. Ken entered, dressed to the nines, carrying a large brown paper parcel. "Mr. Carson!" Barbie let out a gleeful cry, as she dashed from behind the lunch counter to greet him. "How nice to see you."

He removed his hat with a flourish, tucking it under his arm. "Miss Roberts, the very person I came to see. This is for you. Happy Valentine's Day." He held the bundle out to her.

"Oh, Ken! For me? Really? You shouldn't have!" she hugged the present against her chest. "I'll open it the moment my shift is over."

He raised an eyebrow flirtatiously, "You'd be so cruel as to make me wait?"

Barbie blushed and giggled, sneaking a look at the girls who were eagerly watching the exchange. "Oh, all right." She untied the twine and carefully removed the brown wrapping. She gasped in wonder and delight as she saw the delicate lilac silk moire bodice bedecked with pearls and lace, and a matching skirt. "Is... is this a Worth?"

"It's a Worth copy, I'm afraid. I'm pleased you recognized it; nobody understands fashion around here, Barbie."

"It's beautiful! Did you make it?" She held up the bodice to examine it.

Ken inclined his head, "I did. It should fit you perfectly; I have an eye for knowing that sort of thing," he added without much modesty. "I hope you will give me the pleasure of seeing you in it some evening."

"Oh, I will!" She carefully folded the bodice and replaced it within the wrapping. "Why don't you stop by the parlor tonight? My shift will be over at eight; you could come for dinner, and I could meet you after?"

"If only I could; I have an engagement in town, I'm afraid, at Mr. Gallagher's."

Barbie blinked, "The saloon?"

Ken nodded affably, "The same. I'm meeting some gentlemen for a card game. They know I'm fairly new in town and were thoughtful enough to invite me. In fact, I should get back to the shop; I think I convinced one of them to let me fit him for a suit." He reached for her hand and pressed it to his lips. "I don't expect the game to last beyond half past eight; may I still call on you later this evening?"

"Of course," she assented, despite her qualms about his choice of companions. "I'll be awaiting your arrival in my new dress."

"Until then." With a saucy grin and a cheerful wave he left Barbie standing in the foyer, slightly conflicted.

Bonnie scurried over to get a closer look at the dress. "It's so lovely!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

Barbie looked down at the fabric and smiled. "It is! I better go put it away; the lunch crowd will be here soon." With a swish of her skirt, she disappeared to store the dress behind the counter, the giggles of her friends echoing behind her.

Hours later, the day's trains had come and gone, and the rail yard lay quiet as evening fell. Mrs. Kartoffelkopf stood on the porch of the dormitory building, scanning the surrounding area for her
three sons. Spotting them in the distance, by one of the railyard buildings, she called out to them, her voice loud and shrill. "Boys! Time to come in!" As she waited for the children to hurry over, the sight of Buzz and Woody caught her eye.

The two men sat on a bench outside of the depot, Woody's guitar leaning against the armrest in its case. The manager's wife was well aware they were waiting on Jessie and Bo to get off of work, and a smile tugged at her features. She patted her sons on the back, one by one, as they walked in the open door, and after directing them to go upstairs and get ready for bed, she slipped across the yard to the depot herself. Within a few minutes she emerged, wearing a triumphant grin. It wasn't long before the door burst open again, and a pair of excited Harvey Girls blustered out.

The two marshals stood, and Woody waved them over. "We weren't expecting you for another hour."

"We got let off early!" Jessie exclaimed. "It was slow; Mrs. K knew we had plans, an' thought we might like a head start. Mr. K was none too pleased that she asked him to let us leave, but he gave in to her," she giggled. "Whatcha doin' out here, anyway?"

"Just enjoying the fresh air," replied Buzz. "It gets tiresome always sitting in a hotel room."

"I reckon it does," she smiled, her eyes locked on Buzz's for a moment, before remembering that they couldn't go courting in their uniforms. "Ok, well, just let us go change, and we'll be right back!"

Buzz watched after Jessie as she rushed across the yard with her friend, and an idea that had been nagging at his mind all day finally won out with conviction. "There's something I forgot to take care of. I won't be long."

Woody returned to his seat on the bench, as Buzz strode toward the depot door. "Don't be long, we should meet the girls at their place."

Meanwhile, up in their room, Jessie and Bo were a flurry of petticoats as they readied themselves for their Valentine's date. Bo had laid the pieces of her second-best dress across her bed, and was comparing the two bodices that matched the single skirt, trying to decide which to wear. She settled on the more elaborate of the two, with larger sleeve puffs and white lace trim embellishing the shoulders of the blue-and-white stripe fabric with tiny pink flowers.

Jessie stood buttoning the front of her new shirtwaist that Barbie had just finished sewing and given to her a few days prior. Made out of a dainty white calico printed with swirling black branches and bright red berries, its voluminous sleeves and ruffled yoke were trimmed with a narrow band of matching red ribbon. She admired the effect in the mirror, then turned to don her black walking skirt that it had been designed to coordinate with. As she tucked the shirtwaist's peplum hem beneath the black wool and fastened the skirt's waistband, she addressed her friend. "Whatcha think the fellas have planned?"

"Hard to say. It's been a long time since I've actually looked forward to Valentine's Day."

"I never have." Jessie carefully tied a wide red bow - which Barbie had provided, out of her extensive stash of fabrics and trims - at the end of her braid. "Maybe Woody'll kiss ya." She wrinkled her nose. "I can't believe I just said that about my own brother."

"Maybe." Bo busied herself with collecting the extra blanket she had set aside for their outings, not wanting the blush rising on her cheeks to give away the fact that such an event had already happened. "Or Buzz might kiss you."
Jessie giggled. "I wish! C'mon, we won't find out just standin' here!"

When they exited their dormitory building, Woody and Buzz were waiting for them outside. Woody had managed to procure a spare lantern from one of the railroad workers while he had been waiting for Buzz's return, which he was carrying along with his guitar case.

Bo smiled widely at the case in Woody's hand. "You have your guitar!"

"We both figured Valentine's Day called for something special," Woody grinned, casting a side glance at Buzz, who stood with his left hand hidden curiously behind his back.

"Speaking of that - can we suggest a different location? Buzzard Rock," Buzz gestured with his right hand to a mammoth boulder in the distance, a darker shadow against the deep indigo of the evening sky. "It's only about a quarter-mile walk, over the bridge that crosses the river."

"Sure, I've been wonderin' about that big ol' rock!" Jessie consented. "'Sides, the other girls are full of themselves today, we don't need them meddlin'."

Realizing that, out the impossibility of concealing it on their walk, one surprise couldn't wait any longer, Buzz moved his hand from behind his back, revealing a single red rose, which he offered to Jessie. "This is for you."

Jessie buried her nose in its velvety petals, drinking in the rich fragrance. "I love roses! How didja know?"

"Lucky guess, I suppose," he laughed, reaching for her free hand and entwining his fingers with hers. He brushed the fabric of her sleeve with a finger, "Is this new?"

"It is! Barbie sewed it for me." She glanced down her new shirtwaist and then back up at Buzz, her eyes shining.

His eyes met hers, "I like the touch of red."

As they began their stroll, Buzz reached for the lantern Woody carried, allowing him a free arm to escort Bo. The lantern light helped to illuminate their path, although the bright moon shimmering on the river and reflecting off the silvery desert sands already provided the setting with a subtle glow.

Once they had reached Buzzard Rock, they spread the blanket on the ground on the side that faced away from the depot, so that Woody could have somewhere to sit while he played, and set the lantern safely on a flat section of ground. As he readied his guitar, the others joined him on the blanket.

"Oh, I have this for you, too," Buzz reached in his vest pocket and pulled out the card he had purchased the day before.

Jessie took it from his hand, and studied it intently. The die-cut valentine was shaped like a fan and decorated with vibrant red roses - not unlike the one Buzz had just given her - and its handle was tied with a blue bow. Text at the top read 'A token of sincere affection' in elegant lettering, and his name was inscribed on the back. Her face lit up at the memento that had been chosen so carefully for her. "Thank you, it's perfect." She scooted closer to Buzz, rested a hand on his arm, and kissed him softly on the cheek.

Before he could get caught up in playing and forget, Woody retrieved the small candy box he had concealed in his guitar case and handed it to Bo. "For you, little lady."
"Chocolates?" Bo squealed. "And such a sweet box. Let's open them and all have one." She eagerly lifted the lid of the heart-shaped container to find, instead of a dozen individual pieces, one large blob of melted and re-hardened chocolate. Woody let out a horrified gasp, and Buzz couldn't fight back a chuckle.

"Bo, I'm so sorry… I didn't know… I thought… "

"It's okay," she laughed. "It's the thought that counts." She leaned in and planted a comforting kiss on Woody's cheek. "You can make it up to me with some music, Sheriff." 

"That, I can do."

Woody's fingers moved deftly across the strings, as he started into the chords of 'Spanish Fandango'. The lively waltz tempo made the girls unable to sit still for long, and both Jessie and Bo jumped to their feet, itching to dance. They stepped out onto the packed-sand clearing near the rock, which made a perfect space for dancing. The two friends linked hands and twirled merrily, skipping in time with the music.

Buzz's eyes were fixed on Jessie's every movement. Before long, he also couldn't resist the urge to join in. Removing his hat before he stood, he walked over to the girls, bowing as he had on the dance floor nearly two months prior. "May I cut in?"

"Of course," Bo smirked knowingly and moved away, seating herself next to Woody.

With a giggle and a curtsey, Jessie took Buzz's hand. They easily assumed the waltz hold they had shared on Christmas Eve, but without the restrictive formalities of before. They seemed to almost float over their desert dance floor, beneath starlight instead of gaslight. When the song ended, they broke their hold, but kept their hands clasped together.

Buzz looked to Woody, and his friend nodded a wordless answer. He turned back to Jessie. "So, uh… remember, at the dance, back at Christmas… you had asked if I could teach you a Spanish dance? Well, if you want… "

"I'd love to!"

His shoulders dropped in relief. "This is called 'El Sombrero Blanco'. It's fairly simple, there are only a set number of steps and they repeat. I'll talk you through, but it shouldn't take you long to catch on."

He signaled Woody, who began to strum the song. Buzz bowed to Jessie and she returned it with a curtsey. He tucked his hands behind his back, "I turn to my left like this, and then my right, and you turn to your left and right, and we step around each other, facing the opposite direction." They performed this in time with the music, a lilting waltz melody. "Now turn and do the same, but the other way. Okay, next you dance backwards while I come towards you," he started that move with the same three-beat shuffling step he'd used from the start, as she stepped as in a waltz motion. After several beats he nodded, "And now we do that again, only I step backwards."

He dropped to a knee and held his right hand in the air. "Take my hand and circle around me. Once that's done, we switch places." Jessie laid her hand in his and followed his instructions. Once he had circled her, he pulled her to her feet and again tucked his hands behind his back and they repeated the opening steps to the dance. Jessie laughed as she turned in the same direction as Buzz before correcting her position. He grinned at her, "Good. Now reach over and place your hand on my shoulder, and I'll do the same, and we'll circle one way, then the opposite." She let out a giggle as Buzz stood behind her and put his hands on her waist and talked her through the next move, where
they peeked at each other over her shoulders, one moving to the left and the other to the right.

They repeated the series of steps from the start of the dance as Buzz instructed, Jessie's steps still that of a waltz, while his had become more percussive. He caught Jessie by surprise by drawing her into a more formal waltz hold. "You didn't tell me that was gonna happen," she scolded teasingly, as they swept across the sand for a couple bars of music.

"No, I didn't," he laughed. They completed the remaining steps, and the song came to its conclusion.

"Can we try the dance one more time?" implored Jessie. "I think I've got the hang of it now."

Buzz's grin turned into a smile of pure pleasure. "Sure. Woody?"

"Yup." Bo had settled in beside him when he begun the song the first time, and she was thoroughly enjoying both watching the couple dance and sitting with Woody as he played. This time, Woody was more confident with the tune, and added a flourish here and there as the mood struck him.

Jessie, a quick learner, was now more confident in her movements, too, adding a swish of her skirt as she circled Buzz. Without having to think too much about the steps, she and Buzz quickly became lost in the dance, and in the moment. Their eyes met meaningfully, intensifying the emotion and sparks that were coursing through them and between them. When the music ended a second time, Buzz dipped her playfully. Jessie let out a joyful laugh, and the moonlight illuminated her face, as if it glowed. "Mi florecita del desierto," he whispered.

A crooked smile spread across Jessie's face, and Buzz's eyes widened as he realized he had just said out loud what he'd been calling her in his mind for weeks. "What's that mean?" she asked.

"Oh!" he raised her to standing. "Heh… it means… my little desert flower."

"I like it."

“And the dance isn’t supposed to end like… that,” he continued, trying to cover his impulsiveness. “Instead, I would put my hat on your head, if it wasn’t over on the blanket.”

“How come?"

“Well, uh, the tradition of the dance is that if the lady keeps the hat on her head, she accepts the man as her suitor.” Buzz was grateful the darkness hid the blush that crept over his cheeks.

Jessie affected an all-too innocent expression. “You could go’n get it. I'll wait.”

He grinned sheepishly. “Another time.” Woody had already started playing the first notes of another song, one he had been practicing specifically for Bo, and Buzz wasn’t ready to leave Jessie’s side just yet. He held out his hand, and she took it; but instead of assuming a more customary dance position, she immediately moved in closer and rested her head on his shoulder and her hand on his lower back, surprising him with the sudden intimacy. He caught his breath and he reached around to place his hand on top of hers. His other hand pressed into her back and he leaned his head against hers, closing his eyes with a small, contented sigh. They swayed slowly, scandalously close, and didn't even notice when Woody began to sing softly to Bo, the words being only ambient noise.

_Sweetest love will come at last for you and I,_
_Sorrow deep will soon be past for you and I,_
_I'll be yours and you'll be mine, with a fond, pure love divine._
_The sun of happiness will shine on you and I._
Bo had been watching Woody play with rapt attention. His warm brown eyes met hers and the rest of the world seemed to disappear as he continued his serenade.

_Happy then we'll be sweetheart,_
_When we meet no more to part,_
_In the future, bye and bye,_
_We'll be happy you and I._

_Gliding down the stream of life, you and I,_
_Loving husband, faithful wife You and I,_
_Happy and contented rest, with the one we each love best,_
_We'll build a loving little nest for you and I._

_Happy then we'll be sweetheart,_
_When we meet no more to part,_
_In the future, bye and bye,_
_We'll be happy you and I._

The music stopped abruptly, and Buzz and Jessie stopped dancing as well - after continuing to sway in the silence for a moment, caught up themselves - only to notice Woody and Bo kissing. They shared a smirk, still holding hands. Buzz desperately wanted to follow Woody's example, and cupped a hand over Jessie's cheek. Jessie's gaze flickered from his eyes to his lips and she leaned in. The moment was quickly lost, however, as they flinched apart at the sudden intrusion of Woody's voice.

"Heh, sorry guys," he finally turned away from Bo. "We got a little distracted."

Buzz sighed, this time out of disappointment as he pulled his pocket watch to check the time. "It's about quarter to ten; we should get back," he looked apologetically at Jessie.

She met his gaze, feeling the same chagrin. "S'ppose so." As Jessie helped Buzz fold up the blanket, she favored him with a bright smile. "I sure enjoyed tonight. D'ya know any other Spanish dances? I wouldn't mind learnin' more."

"I know quite a few," he said, his tone much more cheerful.

Woody laughed, "Too bad I only know the one song."

When the quartet returned and came upon the dormitory porch, they could hear whispered voices from a shadowy corner. One of the voices belonged to Barbie, the other Bo recognized as Ken's.

"I."  
"Love."  
"You!" Ken's enthusiasm was evident, even in the hushed tones. "See, it's different every time."

"You're so smart," Barbie gushed.

Jessie stole a glimpse at Buzz's face and saw his nauseated expression. She quickly covered her mouth before she laughed and revealed their presence. Woody gestured towards the door somewhat urgently, "Why don't we go inside?"

The men bade their girls goodnight in the parlor and headed back to the depot. On the edge of the porch, Barbie and Ken lingered.
"When will I see you again?" Barbie queried, with a dainty tilt of her head.

"Oh, I'll see you tonight," Ken leaned closer, "in my dreams."

Barbie burst out in a flurry of feminine giggles and Woody and Buzz hastened their pace toward the hotel.

As they crossed the yard, Buzz glanced at Woody. "So let me get this straight. You can kiss Bo whenever you want, but I can only hold Jessie's hand?" he asked sardonically.

"Pretty much." Woody response was tinged with sarcasm, and Buzz couldn't decipher if he was serious or teasing. In response, Buzz punched his friend lightly in the arm and walked ahead. Woody stopped to rub his arm and Buzz smiled as he heard the soft "ow".

Chapter End Notes

The "busy as hound pups at a rabbit hole" line is an Annie Oakley quote that we couldn't help but hear in Jessie's voice. "Spanish Fandango" is a real song from the late 1800s, and a link to listen to it can be found on our Pinterest board. "El Sombrero Blanco" is also a real song and traditional Spanish Californio dance - a video of a couple performing it is on the board as well. Slow dancing as we know it today was considered vulgar in the 1890s, as illustrated in dance and etiquette manuals of the time - but the fact that manual writers felt the need to speak out against it meant that couples did sometimes dance "too" close. Woody and Bo's song "You and I" comes from public domain sheet music by Raymon Moore.
Chapter 9

Chapter by jessiejanelightyear

Chapter Notes

This is another long chapter, y'all. But it's a particular favorite of PoetLaurie's and mine, and we just couldn't bear to cut anything out, or split it into multiple parts, either. This chapter also introduces Buzz's Californio family, including his mother, who we have come to especially love in our writing of her. I've spent the past several months reading countless books and websites on Spanish-Mexican California history and culture - scholarly accounts, period novels, first-person narratives, even cookbooks - in an attempt to treat this aspect of the story with as much authenticity and respect as possible. Since our Spanish is limited, we've had to utilize Google Translate for Spanish dialogue, so please excuse any errors there. English translations can be found at the end of the chapter. Remember, our Pinterest board (Jessie's Journey on account @yodelincowgirl) is a great resource to see historical reference images that have inspired us!

Toy Story still isn't ours. If it was, we'd put an end to this awful waiting for news about Toy Story 4 and share something positive already. Enjoy, and please don't forget to leave kudos and subscribe so you don't miss any updates! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Waiting on the Barstow train platform, Jessie was dressed in the same blue traveling suit and hat and carrying the same valise as on the day she had first arrived. This time, however, she was ready to depart. The San Bernardino Harvey House - being temporarily shorthanded while a pair of sisters under their employ traveled home for a family occasion - had wired Mr. Kartoffelkopf, asking if two of his girls could be spared for a couple weeks. As roommates and known good workers, Jessie and Bo were chosen for the task; and despite their reluctance to leave their beaus behind, they were excited to see more of California.

While Woody and Bo said their goodbyes to each other, Buzz and Jessie stood nearby, hands clasped together, lingering as long as possible before she had to board the train.

"I'm gonna miss ya," she gazed into Buzz's blue eyes, a little sadly. "What're Bo and I s'posed to do with our free time without you and Woody around?"

"You'll find something," Buzz chuckled. "I grew up near San Bernardino, you know. You'll like it there, it's quite a modern city now. And these weeks will be over before you know it." He rubbed his thumb across the back of her hand. "But I'll miss you, too."

He caught a glimpse of Woody and Bo sharing an chaste parting kiss out of the corner of his eye, and looked down longingly at Jessie. He desperately wanted to do the same, but his mind was conflicted. 'Not here, not for the first time, not with all these people around,' he told himself, and yet part of him wanted to throw all that reserve aside, and send her on her way knowing fully how deeply he cared. Jessie's eyes met his, and she bit her lip lightly, her own mind full of the same tumult. Just as Buzz began to lean toward her ever so slightly, the conductor's voice boomed out the order to board, and Jessie threw her arms around him in an impulsive embrace. As they broke apart, she raised up on her toes, pressing a hand on one side of his face and her lips on the other. She let her
fingers trail down his cheek as she lowered herself. "See ya in two weeks." In a flash she had stooped to pick up her bag and rushed to join Bo.

The two-hour train ride south fascinated the girls as they wound their way through the valley of the Cajon Pass, with the rugged San Bernardino and San Gabriel mountain ranges rising imposingly on either side of their car. Lingering March snow capped the highest mountaintops like frosting, yet the valley was warm and sunny below. When they weren't lost in the view out the windows, they happily chatted about their marshals, and their work, and what exciting things they might do and see in a much more metropolitan place than Barstow. Upon their arrival in San Bernardino, they were greeted on the platform by a short and slightly rotund man with prickly brown hair that didn't seem to match his friendly face and effervescent personality. "Mein goodness, I'm so glad you girls have arrived," the man said, his voice warm and tinged with a faint German accent. "I am Mr. Igel, the manager here, and I hope you will be happy in my employ for the next few weeks." Jessie and Bo introduced themselves as well, as he led them to the entrance of the depot's lunch counter. "I'll get one of the other girls to show you to the dormitory building across the tracks, so you can get settled in."

Jessie and Bo adjusted to life in San Bernardino without any difficulty. The other Harvey Girls were welcoming, and the bustling lunch counter kept them busy. On their first day off, the two friends ventured out into the city, eager to do some shopping in a wider variety of stores than they had at home. The streetcar carried them wherever they needed to go, and they took their time peeking at window displays and browsing the merchandise.

For the first time in her life, Jessie was able to pick out her own clothing, and she felt dizzy with all of the options available to her. She eventually selected a cheerful yellow and red dress, a navy blue walking skirt with two shirtwaists to match, a tan leather belt, and a red hat that coordinated with it all. She also was finally able to replace some necessities she had been forced to leave behind in Missouri, including a comfortable wrapper, a dressing gown, and slippers. Bo did some shopping, too, albeit not as much as Jessie - she splurged on a pretty new spring dress, bonnet, and parasol. "Whadd'ya think the guys are up to?" asked Jessie, adjusting her hatbox and the pile of paper-and-twine-wrapped packages in her arms as they strolled down the sidewalk. "Hard to say, besides their investigations. They're probably getting more work done without us there," Bo laughed. "Just as long as that's all they're doin' while we're gone," Jessie muttered, thinking about Trixie's attempt to snag Buzz the day he first showed up in Barstow. "Don't you know absence makes the heart grow fonder? C'mon, let's go to the ice cream parlor, my treat."

Before the two girls knew it, their time as substitute Harvey Girls was coming to an end. As the lunch counter fell quiet on the Friday before they were to leave, Jessie was wiping down the countertops while Bo stood off to the side, folding napkins. Her daydreams were interrupted by the sounds of the front door opening and heavy boot-steps crossing the wooden floor. When she looked up to greet the new patrons, she was shocked to see who had entered.

"Buzz! Woody!" Jessie cried, rushing to where the marshals had seated themselves at the counter. "You're the last folks we'd a' expected to see! What're y'all doin' here?" She beamed happily at Buzz as his grin broadened at the sight of her. "Looking into a lead that Slink got for us," explained Woody. "Just came from the Sheriff's Office,
Jessie leaned closer to her brother and lowered her voice. "Did he have any information?"

"He did; it was worth the trip. Well, for that, and getting to surprise you," Woody said to Bo, who had heard Jessie's outburst and come to join the conversation.

"Have you had fun in San Bernardino?" Buzz asked Jessie.

"We have! Bo'n I went all over the city. Had to buy a bigger valise for all the new clothes I got, though," she said sheepishly. "I've never been shoppin' for myself before."

"You needed everything you bought," Bo chimed in. "So, what can we get you gentlemen?"

"Just some coffee," Buzz eyed the baked goods on display, "and maybe a slice of pie. My home is about an hour from here, and I want to surprise my parents. They don't know we're in town."

"We'll conveniently show up in time for dinner, like always," Woody chuckled. "We're staying nearby, though, just down 3rd Street at the St. Charles Hotel. We figured we'd stick around and travel home with you on Sunday. Do you both have to work tomorrow?"

"Nope, we have the day off to pack," replied Jessie, as she poured coffee for the marshals and Bo handed them each a plate with a generous wedge of pie.

Woody grinned. "Then how would you two like to go on a little excursion, and do some sightseeing?"

"That sounds delightful!" Bo exclaimed.

"Sure does!" Jessie nearly leapt with excitement. "Where to?"

"Redlands," answered Buzz, as he took a bite of pie, "to see the orange groves. The train leaves here at 10:45 in the morning."

"If you can introduce us to your manager, we'll talk to him and get everything squared away," added Woody. "I assume the rules are the same here as in Barstow?"

"They are, and that's Mr. Igel, over there," Bo pointed to the register. "He's much more easygoing than Mr. K; you won't have any trouble."

The marshals settled their bill, spoke with the amiable manager, and let the girls know their plans were set for the next day before they left the depot. Returning to their hotel four blocks away, they rented a couple of horses from an adjacent livery stable - having not wanted to upset Bullseye and Astrónomo with another train journey, their own steeds remained boarded in Barstow - and began their ride out to the Lightyear hacienda in San Timoteo Canyon. Once they had the privacy of the wide open landscape, Buzz deemed it safe to review what they had learned from the San Bernardino Sheriff earlier in the day, and opened the discussion.

"So the gang has stirred up trouble here, too, and were never caught. But what would have led them to leave a city with plenty of potential targets, and go someplace smaller like Calico?"

"Something must have enticed them to make the move, and it couldn't have been the depot, because there's one here. It has to have something to do with the mines."

"Do you think someone hired them out to cause trouble?" pondered Buzz.
Woody shook his head. "Nah, who would do that? Calico is suffering enough right now. Maybe they didn't know the plight of the mines, and thought they could get rich quick, robbing from the miners?"

"Hard to say. But this common factor of the strawberry candy is the oddest clue we've ever had."

With nothing further to rehash concerning the case, the two men rode on wordlessly for a while. Traveling familiar roads once again, so close to home, gave Buzz a feeling of contentment, and his mind wandered as they neared his family's property. "I think we really surprised the girls, don't you?"

"Yeah," agreed Woody, "and I'm glad it worked out that they have tomorrow off. It'll be nice to take them someplace special." He paused, deep in thought, then continued. "You know, Bo's told me a little about her past. She's had it kind of rough, and anything I can do to make her happy…" Needing to get things off his chest, Woody confided in his closest friend some of the details of Bo's life in Kansas. After relating the tale of Jasper the cowhand, he shook his head. "I just don't get it, Buzz… how would anyone be able to do that to someone like her?"

"I know the feeling," Buzz concurred. "How your mother could mistreat Jessie like she did, I'll never understand. I don't look forward to ever meeting her."

A smirk crept across Woody's face. "You intend to have to meet her someday, huh?"

"Heh. Uh... I just assumed that we'd cross paths at some point, you know, if she, maybe, visited you or something."

"My mother is not likely to come here, unless she had a very good reason."

"Oh. Well, I guess I'd just like to give her a piece of my mind," Buzz said definitively, then turned his focus firmly on the road ahead.

Estrellita Lightyear opened the heavy wooden door of her adobe-walled hacienda and squealed in delight. "Mi Bustillo! What a wonderful surprise!" She pulled her son into a fierce hug, and embraced Woody warmly as well. "Come in, come in, make yourselves at home. Your papá is in Los Angeles on business. Why he won't just retire and let your brothers run things is beyond me."

The men crossed into the cozy main living room - a homey hodgepodge of colorful woven rugs, antique painted furniture, and a few more recent pieces - and took a seat in a couple of comfortable chairs. Buzz's mother also seated herself, on the plush settee, and eagerly engaged the two men in conversation.

"It's been too long! You're still working in Barstow, yes?"

"We are, Mamá, and came into town on a lead. Hopefully we'll have things resolved before too much longer."

"You work too hard," she leaned forward and patted him on the knee. "You need to find a nice girl, settle down and stay put."

"Funny she should mention that, huh Buzz?" Woody flashed his friend an evil smirk.

Señora Lightyear clasped her hands expectantly. "Ay! A girl?" The color rising in Buzz's face gave
his mother all the answer she needed. "Mi corazón is in LOVE! What's her name?"

Buzz wished that he could sink into the cushions of his chair - not that he was ashamed or uncertain in the least of his feelings for Jessie, but he was painfully uncomfortable being grilled on personal matters.

"Her name is Jessie. Jessie Pride. Woody's sister, actually. She just moved to Barstow from Missouri this past December."

"And you've been calling on her how long?"

Buzz rubbed the back of his neck nervously. "Heh. Three months."

"Three months? And you didn't tell me in your letters? Shame on you! I want to know everything about her. Is she beautiful? What does she do? Are you going to propose marriage?"

'Ooh boy,' Buzz thought to himself. "And this is exactly why I didn't tell you, Mamá," he chuckled, before answering the barrage of questions. "Of course she's beautiful, and strong, and independent. She works in a Harvey House eating establishment. And… maybe, but not right now."

Woody reclined in his seat and rested his ankle on his knee, taking great amusement in his friend squirming in discomfort. Buzz took note, and acted accordingly.

"You know, Woody is practically betrothed himself," he reciprocated with a wicked grin of sweet payback.

"You, too? So much has happened since you were last here! Go on, tell me about her."

Woody shot Buzz a glare. "Her name is Bo, and she's Jessie's friend. They work together."

"They're actually at the San Bernardino Santa Fe depot right now," Buzz interjected, rescuing Woody from his mother's good-intentioned drilling. They've been filling in for a few weeks, while some other employees were on leave. We're going to take them into Redlands tomorrow, on the excursion train."

"And when will you be back from Redlands?" Estrellita's brown eyes shone with anticipation, a detail that was not lost on her son.

"Around two o'clock. Why?"

"For the fiesta, of course!"

Buzz looked at his mother skeptically, "I didn't know there was going to be a fiesta, Mamá."

"There is now, mi corazón," she answered with a wink. "Come straight here after your outing. I must meet the girl who has finally stolen mi Bustillo's heart."

When Jessie and Bo arrived at the depot the following morning, Woody was already there waiting for them. He greeted Bo with a quick kiss, taking her hand in his, then stepped back so he could admire her new walking suit that she had purchased on her shopping spree with Jessie. The white skirt was scattered with pink polka dots and had rows of pink and blue trim along the hem, and the bodice was a light shade of blue trimmed with white lace, topped with a pink jacket with voluminous sleeves. A pink floral-edged bonnet and parasol completed the ensemble. Woody smiled warmly at
her, "You're prettier than a peony today, Bo!" and took pleasure in the delicate blush that crept across her cheeks. "And aren't you spiffy, too!" he said to his sister, with a playful glint in his eye. "You're as bright as a sunflower."

"Don't tease," Jessie mumbled, fussing self-consciously with the fabric of her new best dress, which was a delicate yellow and red floral print with sleeves equally as puffy as Bo's, trimmed with red accents at the high collar and belt. Unable to reach for her braid in her usual instinctive gesture of comfort, she instead adjusted the decorative pin that was holding her new red hat with white ribbon and yellow flowers tightly against her upswept hair.

"I'm not, Jess," his tone softened. "That suits you far more than any of the boring clothes Ma always picked out. Buzz is gonna be beside himself."

Jessie glanced over her brother's shoulder and across the platform where travelers were gathering. "Where is Buzz?"

"Getting our tickets; he should be here any minute."

Jessie could feel the butterflies flitting about inside her as she saw Buzz approach, tickets in hand. He also was dressed in new attire - a sack suit in a subtle gray plaid, a more casual style than what the marshals often wore for work - but still donning his usual Stetson hat. She bit the corner of her lip as she smiled, "Howdy."

He grinned back, "Howdy yourself." Buzz was feeling the same elation as Jessie, happy to be reunited, even though the time apart had been brief. He reached for her hand, "I'm glad we could spend this day together; I've missed you."

"I missed ya, too," her face brightened as her smile widened. "You fellas sure look sharp! Didja get new suits?"

"Yup, do you like 'em?" Woody - who was wearing the same style as Buzz, although in a rich brown - grasped the lapels of his jacket proudly. "You girls weren't the only ones who took advantage of the city to get some new duds. And it's a good thing, too, or we would've looked like weeds next to the two of you."

At the conductor's bidding, the crowd of excursion passengers boarded the train that was set to traverse the sightseeing loop called the Kite-Shaped Track. The two couples found a pair of seats facing each other, and made themselves comfortable.

"It'll only take about twenty minutes to get to Redlands," Buzz said, as they waited to leave the station. "And once we're there, we'll have two and a half hours, which should be plenty of time to see the orange groves, and some of the town. It's built up considerably in the past several years, largely because of the citrus industry. We'll have to be back at the depot in time for the 1:15 train, though," he looked at Jessie almost apologetically. "I haven't been home since before the Barstow assignment, so my Mamá is insisting on throwing a fiesta this afternoon, and I, uh, I hope you don't mind, if we go there after…"

Jessie swung around in her seat. "Sweet mother of Abraham Lincoln, you mean we all get to come?"

The corners of Buzz's mouth turned upward in a crooked grin. "Of course. You'd really like to?"

"I'd LOVE to! I've read about fiestas, they sound so much better than the stuffy ol' parties from back home." She turned to Bo and Woody across from her. "Is that okay with y'all, too? To go to the fiesta?"
"Absolutely, I think it sounds like fun," Bo answered enthusiastically, reinforced by Woody's affirmative nod.

The train chugged into motion, and again the girls gazed out the train's windows, watching intently as the new city of Redlands gradually came into view. Having only been officially incorporated in 1888, the town benefited from many of the most up-to-date conveniences, such as the electricity that powered the streetlamps that lined its paved streets in the business district. Miles of shaded avenues were dotted with colorfully-painted and gingerbread-bedecked residences, and surrounding it all were orange trees as far as the eye could see. Jessie stared, enthralled, as the idyllic scene unfolded.

As soon as they disembarked the train, Buzz led the way as they hurried with the other excursionists to the waiting mule-drawn streetcar, which stood waiting to transport them to Cañon Crest Park - more commonly known as Smiley Heights - a popular tourist destination. Another short ride carried them to the the base of the hill where the park was situated, and where drivers sat in their carriages, ready to carry passengers on their panoramic view of the valley.

Buzz secured a vehicle for the two couples to share, and they began their ascent along winding pathways lined with towering palm trees and other lush, exotic greenery. The gentle plodding of hooves and crunching of wheels on packed earth provided the only sound as they took in the scenery on their climb.

"See that canyon in the distance?" At the crest of the hill, Buzz gestured to the verdant landscape below, framed by low-lying mountains and crossed by a snaking stream. "That's San Timoteo Canyon, where my family lives."

"That's where we're goin' for the fiesta?"

"Mmmhmm."

The trail through the park continued past a small lake, until it reached an overlook of another valley, on the opposite side of the hill. Jessie gasped and leaned over in the carriage, pointing down towards Redlands. "Just lookit all the trees down there! Can we go explore one'a the groves?"

Buzz rested a hand on her waist to steady her, as she continued to crane her neck for a better view. "I'm afraid they're all private property, and aren't open for tours."

"Oh, c'mon, can't we just kinda, ya know, walk into one a little? Please?" She pivoted in her seat and gazed at him with hopeful eyes. "I wanna see the blossoms and fruit up close."

"Marshals can't trespass," Buzz stated matter-of-factly, and Jessie rolled her eyes in mock irritation.

When they came back down from Smiley Heights, the quartet went to wait for the next streetcar to take them back to the depot, figuring that they could explore more of the city before they had to catch their train. As they stood idly at the stop, Buzz leaned over to Jessie, touching her arm briefly, "I'll be right back." She watched him cross the street and approach a gentleman working amongst the trees in a nearby grove.

A few minutes later, Buzz returned to the group, a look of triumph on his face. "Come on," he offered his hand to Jessie.

"Where are we goin'?"

"You wanted to see a grove, didn't you? That man I spoke with owns this one. He said we could take a brief stroll through the trees, and, because I had promised that we would take great care not to mar anything, he's allowing us to pick an orange a piece."
Without thinking, Jessie jumped at Buzz and hugged him fiercely. It was over in an instant, and she grabbed his hand, "What're we waitin' for? Let's go!" Buzz let out a "whoa" as Jessie pulled him forward, making a beeline for the grove, with Bo and Woody rushing to keep up.

The two couples ambled down the paths that separated the neatly-ordered rows of orange trees that made up the substantial grove. The trees were showy, green sprinkled with the orange of the fruit and the white of the delicate blossoms, and the sweet fragrance of the flowers was heavy in the air. Jessie was overwhelmed by the beauty of the trees, and stopped frequently to press her nose into any clusters of orange blossoms that were near enough to the ground.

"They all smell the same, Jess," Woody tutted, but not without amusement.

"Y'all go ahead then, I'm enjoyin' this!" she answered, not bothering to look away from the blooms at hand to address her brother. With a chuckle, Woody walked on ahead with Bo, arm in arm, leaving Buzz and Jessie alone amongst the trees.

"I can't believe this place," she effused. "I ain't ever seen anythin' like it."

"When I was a boy, my grandparents had a small grove on their rancho, out towards Los Angeles," Buzz reminisced. "When we'd visit, my cousins and I would have endless adventures among the trees, then we'd climb on each others' shoulders to pick oranges when we got hungry. I've always had a fondness for orange groves, because of that."

"If I had one of these growin' up, I think I'd have just lived in it!" Jessie stood on her tiptoes and reached up to grab a branch full of blossoms and pull them closer to bury her face in the intoxicating fragrance. Buzz stood transfixed, watching her with rapt attention. She turned around to face him, radiantly happy.

Jessie's countenance practically glowed, framed in a halo of white star-like flowers and illuminated by the California sunshine. No longer able to resist, Buzz took her face into his hands and kissed her soundly, without a second thought.

Up ahead, Woody turned around to see if his sister had finally caught up. He let out a low whistle. "Well... look at that."

Bo glanced behind, and was tickled by the sight. "It's about time." She used the handle of her parasol - which she had closed, not needing it under the shade of the trees - to gently guide Woody's attention back to her. "Don't stare. Come on, they'll catch up eventually."

Buzz suddenly pulled away, leaving Jessie feeling dizzy. "I, uh... I don't know what came over me."

"S'okay," she smiled, "I've been waitin' for you to do that since Christmas."

Buzz laughed. He brushed his thumb tenderly against her cheek. "I love you, Jessie."

"I love ya back." She tightened her arms around him and drew him closer for another kiss.

When they finally separated, Buzz grinned. "I've been waiting to tell you that since Christmas."

The quartet lingered in the grove, savoring the oranges they had been allowed to pick and enjoying the private paradise they had been permitted to explore, so much so that they lost track of time and found themselves racing to catch the streetcar back to the Redlands depot. They arrived at the station with little time to spare. "Glad we could catch the train," Buzz remarked in relief, as they all settled into the plush seats just as the engine whistle blew. The return trip took them past different sights, through the nearby towns of Mentone and Highland, and they made it back San Bernardino
by two o'clock as planned.

As soon as they were off the train, Buzz turned to the girls. "Wait here, we'll be back shortly."

Bo looked at Woody, "Where are you going?"

"We reserved a surrey last night, at the livery by our hotel," he explained. "It won't take us long to go pick it up."

Jessie smoothed her skirt, fussing with wrinkles that had formed in the cotton fabric while they were on the train. "Maybe I should go back and change while ya do that."

"You don't need to," Buzz smiled. "I like your new dress."

"Are ya sure it's okay?" she fretted. "I've never been to a fiesta before… and I'm meetin' your family…"

He reached for her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "You look perfect. We'll meet you on the street side of the depot in about fifteen minutes."

The girls were waiting under the shade of the portico when the rented surrey - shiny black with an extension-top roof to shield them from the midday sun - rode up with Buzz driving. He descended to assist Jessie into the front seat next to his, while Woody helped Bo up on the bench behind them. Once the men were situated as well, a clicking command and a snap of the reins set them on their way towards the Lightyear hacienda.

Leaving the urban center of San Bernardino, the landscape soon changed into rolling desert. Then, once in the shelter of the canyon, undulating hills lined both sides of the road they traveled, a patchwork of green and brown covered with grasses and brush waving in the light breeze.

Jessie was captivated. "I can't get over how beautiful it all is - the groves, an' now this? Ya really got to grow up around here?"

"I did. I had a wonderful childhood; we lived outside, practically. There's nothing better than being back home."

"Then why on earth didja leave and become a marshal, travelin' everywhere?"

"I didn't start out in the law. My father and brothers got in on the real estate boom in Los Angeles about fifteen years ago, and when I was of age, they expected me to join them. My two brothers and their wives, they live in the city; and my father has a flat over their real estate office, where he stays when he's working. I shared the flat with him, and gave it shot, but it wasn't for me - the business dealing, and everything getting built up so quickly. So I became an officer with the Los Angeles Police Department for a couple of years, until the corruption there got to me, too. Thankfully, I was recommended for a Deputy Marshal position by an acquaintance at the Athletic Club I belonged to, and Woody and I became partners shortly thereafter." He looked out over the canyon. "I've always felt more connected with this place than my brothers have - now they're getting involved with the oil drilling in Los Angeles, and they don't see anything wrong with destroying the landscape in the name of profit. The things I grew up with are disappearing, with all the people coming to California, and the expansion of the cities. Most of the ranchos we visited when I was a boy are gone. I'm all for progress - new inventions, technology and science, things like that - but it doesn't need to cost us our traditions."

"Speakin' of traditions… I've been readin' a little bit about Spanish history, sorta. Bo had a book called *Ramona*, she'd bought it when she first moved out here, and let me borrow it. She thought I'd
"Just don't tell my Mamá you've read that," Buzz chuckled.

"Why not?"

"She's not exactly pleased with how some of it was portrayed. That book has caused the old Californio families more harm than good."

Jessie silently hoped that Señora Lightyear wouldn't be as intimidating as the novel's Señora Moreno. "Well, I did think it was a little melodramatic. But the rancho seemed awful nice."

"Considering it was based on a real place, that was one thing that was fairly accurate," he laughed. "Maybe I can find something better for you to read, if you'd like."

"Sure, that'd be nice." She fiddled with her fingers absently. "Will all 'a your family be at the fiesta?"

"No, my brothers rarely visit. And my Dad is in the city working on a large property sale with them right now. So it'll just be my Mamá, and some of my extended family."

They fell into a comfortable silence as they continued on their journey, but Jessie's mind soon began to drift to the significance of her meeting Buzz's relatives, and it nagged at her nerves. Buzz was almost startled when she suddenly spoke, her voice small with apprehension, "What if she doesn't like me? Your Momma, I mean." The question was soft, being only for his ears. She didn't look at him, but he saw the worry on her face nonetheless.

"Are you kidding?" Buzz reached over and took her hand in his, "Jessie, she's going to love you." He didn't have any doubt about the matter, but found he was almost elated by the fact that Jessie was concerned about being accepted by his family. He remembered his mother's disappointment when neither of her daughters-in-law ever integrated themselves into that side of the family, preferring to stay aloof. Buzz tightened the grip of his fingers around hers, and smiled, "Trust me."

They turned off the main road onto a narrow dirt drive where, in the distance, a two-story adobe house with a solid wooden veranda rose amongst a cluster of shade trees. Jessie turned to Buzz, "This is it?"

"Yeah, it's small, I know."

"I love it!"

Buzz brought the surrey to a stop at the side of the house, and went to tie up the horse on a fence post by the garden. Still seated in the carriage, Jessie saw his mother come onto the porch, and went cold with fear as she instinctively mistook squinting at the afternoon sun to be a stern look on the woman's face. 'I should'a seen this comin',' she thought, 'It's Momma and Aunt Molly all over again.' The woman on the porch stood proudly, and even from the distance Jessie could see she had the bearing of someone who wasn't to be crossed.

Noticing an anxious look cloud her features again as she balanced her foot on the wheel to step down, Buzz reached out to her. "C'mere," he placed his hands on her waist and gently lifted her to the ground. She kept her hands on his shoulders and took a deep breath, then smiled bravely at him. He released her, but let his hand linger a few moments on her lower back in reassurance.

Joy broke across Estrellita's face as she realized who was in the unfamiliar carriage. She picked up the skirts of her deep purple dress and hurried towards them. Jessie had barely fixed her skirt when
she was suddenly enveloped in a hug.

"Ay, I am so happy you've finally come!" Estrellita's smile was warm and sincere, like a bright ray of sunshine that broke through Jessie's clouds.

"Thank you for havin' me," she was almost giddy with the sudden shift of emotion. On closer examination, she could now see that Buzz's mother exhibited none of the sternness she had feared; instead she found her to have a youthful spirit that was infused with kindness. Her glossy black hair had only the faintest touches of silver, and it was fastened in intertwining braids at the nape of her neck. Jessie looked back at Buzz, still grinning widely, as Estrellita put an arm around her shoulders and led her towards the house.

Jessie instantly felt welcome in the cozy atmosphere of Buzz's childhood home, and she tried to notice as many details as she could as Estrellita walked with her in the direction of the kitchen, chit-chatting about the evening's plans. She'd never been inside an adobe building before, with its thick, sturdy walls and rustic wood-beamed ceiling, and she found it utterly charming. When they reached the kitchen, Jessie was overcome by the irresistible aroma of all the food sitting on platters, waiting to be carried outside for the celebration: enchiladas, tamales, empanadas, frijoles, arroz, salsa, chili rellenos, adobo, albondigas, carne asada, chilaquiles, sweet cakes, buñuelos, and candies, all foreign to her, yet she was eager to taste the whole lot of it.

"When did you sleep, Mamá?" Buzz laughed, surveying the tantalizing spread of food as he entered the room with Woody and Bo. "It hasn't even been twenty-four hours since I left." "I slept enough," she winked, swatting his hand away as he reached for a sugar-dusted buñuelo. "It was worth it. Besides, your Tía Emelda helped. Now," she gave her son a harmless shove and gestured to Woody, "shoo, the both of you! Go find some of your cousins and carry the tables from the barn so we can set out all this food. I want to get to know your lovely girls."

Estrellita's affable nature and genuine interest in their lives put Jessie and Bo at ease, and the girls cheerfully conversed with her as she finished the last of the preparations for the fiesta's refreshments. When all was complete, they helped her cover the heavy wooden tables in the yard with tablecloths, and with the men they piled them high with the food and drink for the small crowd that was now starting to gather. Buzz's aunt and uncle, who lived adjacent to the Lightyear property, along with their children and grandchildren and whatever neighbors could attend on such short notice, began to fill their plates and find seats on the wooden benches that lined the hacienda's shaded veranda.

Woody and Buzz were among the first to help themselves to the repast, piling their plates with all their favorite dishes. Bo made her selections as well, following Woody's suggestions, but Jessie shrunk back a little when it came her turn to approach the tables. She leaned back to Buzz, "I dunno what to pick! It all looks so good, but… can ya tell me what's what?"

He smiled, "Don't worry, I'll help you." Under his guidance, Jessie selected a generous variety until her plate was filled to capacity. They found a bench off to the side of the porch to share with Woody and Bo, and Buzz continued his lessons, reminding her of what each item was and how to eat it.

Jessie had just started to eat the lone tamale that remained on her plate when Estrellita found them. "Here you are! That's not all you've had to eat, is it?" She placed her hands on her hips as her brows knitted together at the sight of Jessie's empty plate.

Buzz chuckled, "Don't worry, Mamá; she's had plenty, I've made sure."

"I had to try everything!" Jessie said enthusiastically. "I'm stuffed, too, but Buzz told me about these tamales back at Christmas, and I couldn't pass 'em by."
"So, what do you think?" Estrellita asked as Jessie took another bite.

"It's amazin'!" she exclaimed. "You gotta teach me how to make all 'a this! I mean - " Jessie stopped short, fearing she'd been too presumptuous.

"I'd be happy to," Estrellita laughed.

As the setting sun cast a fiery glow across the canyon, the well-satiated crowd at the fiesta began the preparations for dancing. Jackets and hats were removed and cast aside on benches, and colorful paper lanterns that spanned the yard between trees were lit, demarcating a clearing set aside as a makeshift dance floor. Buzz's Tío Héctor, who was to provide the music for the festivities, had pulled a chair up to the side of the dancing area, where he sat tuning his guitar.

Buzz excused himself and strode over to his uncle, where all Jessie could see was the smile illuminating the older man's face in response to Buzz's words. In a moment he had returned, and picked up his Stetson from the pile the quartet had made on the bench where they had been sitting.

"What're ya doin?" Jessie puzzled, when she saw him reach for his hat.

His eyes twinkled with mirth, and he took her hand. "C'mon."

By the time they'd taken the few steps to join other couples readying to dance, Jessie recognized a familiar tune. This time, however, words were being sung in accompaniment to the guitar, in a duet by Héctor and his wife, Emelda.

"Hey, it's the one I know!" Jessie exclaimed, and Buzz grinned. "An' there are words!"

"Yes, well, I'm not much for singing," he laughed. As they effortlessly moved through the steps that now came naturally to the both of them, Buzz translated the lyrics for her.

¿Quieres que te ponga mi sombrero blanco?
¿Quieres que te ponga mi sombrero azul?

"Remember what I said about keeping the hat as the symbol of accepting the suitor? He's asking if she would put on his white hat, or his blue."

When the chorus was sung the second and final time, Buzz removed his hat and placed it on Jessie's head. She giggled as the Stetson fell down to her ears, and she pushed it back off her forehead, but didn't remove it. "I'm keepin' this," she stated with conviction.

Estrellita had been watching the couple dance, overjoyed at Jessie's unexpected skill and the picture the two of them made together. As the sound of music faded into the chatter of conversation, Buzz's Tío Héctor took a break from his guitar long enough to find a cool drink at the refreshment table. Buzz noticed his mother whisper in her brother's ear as she handed him a glass, the both of them clearly glancing in Buzz and Jessie's direction with mischief evident in their features. No sooner had Buzz thought to himself, 'Mamá is up to no good,' than Estrellita blew past them on her way to speak to a neighbor who had just arrived, obviously guilty as charged.

"Teach her this one, mi corazón," she called out, casting a not-so-innocent smirk over her shoulder.

Back in his seat, Héctor began to pluck away at the unmistakable notes of El Jarabe, and Buzz sighed. "Oh boy."

Jessie couldn't help but discern the sudden panic in Buzz's eyes. "What is it? Is this one hard?"
"No… not particularly." A nervous little laugh escaped his lips. "But, at the end, the couple is supposed to kiss behind a hat. In front of everyone," he emphasized under his breath.

"Is that all?" Jessie grinned, taking Buzz's hat from her head and placing it on his. "You'll be needin' that, then." Realizing that he was still all too aware of the onlookers surrounding them, she reached for his hand and gave it an encouraging squeeze, like he often did for her. "Just go with it, Buzz."

"Ok," he smiled back at her crookedly, "follow my lead." With a deep breath, Buzz guided her to a more out-of-the-way corner of the dancing area and began talking her through the movements as Jessie swished her long, full skirt in time to the music. "Come close to me, and we lean in, then back away." Their eyes met and Buzz explained further. "It's like a game, almost kissing but not quite." When Buzz instructed Jessie to push him away playfully, as part of the dance, she did so with a teasing glimmer in her eye. With each pass they made by each other their faces drew closer; sparks flew as their eyes locked, Jessie's flirtatious smile mixed with the intensity of Buzz's gaze, and both of them felt increasingly like their knees could give out at any moment.

As the song drew near its conclusion, Buzz knew what was required of him. He removed his hat and held it up in his left hand, shielding his and Jessie's faces from the view of the others. Driven by the pent-up tension that had been building throughout the entire dance, Jessie took Buzz's face in her hands, kissing him impulsively. Emboldened by her action, Buzz's free arm found its way to her waist, and he pulled her closer, deepening the kiss. As he did, he lost all sense of his surroundings, letting the hand holding his black Stetson slowly fall to his side. It wasn't until the couple heard the gritos of Buzz's neighbors and kin - who had all concluded their own dancing and now directed their focus on them - that they came back to the realization that they weren't alone. They broke apart sheepishly, yet unable to hide the smiles that spread widely across their faces. Jessie snatched the hat from a still-dazed Buzz's hand and put it on her head with authority. "I told ya, I'm keepin' this."

Ready to take a break, Buzz and Jessie walked hand in hand away from the impromptu dance floor, as Tío Héctor plucked away at another song, El Charro. Crossing the yard, they passed Estrellita, who was wearing a triumphant expression. "Not a word, Mamá," Buzz chuckled, "not a word."

After stopping at the refreshment table for a plate of sweets to share, they came upon Woody and Bo, who stood with his arm wrapped around her waist, having been thoroughly entertained by the performances of the traditional Spanish Californio dances and songs.

"Are you having a good time?" Buzz asked his friends, as he shoved a puffy, round buñuelo into his mouth.

"We are," replied Bo. "Everyone's been so nice."

"How can we not have fun when you two are putting on a show for us?" Woody joked.

"Next time we'll hafta charge ya admission," Jessie quipped, linking her arm through Buzz's and leaning against him.

Buzz looked at Woody and shrugged, but grinned happily. Woody returned the look with a knowing smirk of his own.

As the quartet stood enjoying the festivities, Estrellita walked up to Woody and Bo, shaking her finger with a laugh, "What are you two doing just standing here? You haven't been out dancing yet!"

"Oh, we will, next song, I promise," Bo responded with a smile. "We've just been taking it all in."

"And eating," added Woody, his hand on his stomach.
The soft waltz melody of *La Barquillera* began, with Tía Emelda beckoning Estrellita to come and sing. She waved a hand back at her sister-in-law in modest dismissal.

"I am being summoned," Estrellita laughed. "Come, dance this one; I'll sing for them if you'll dance for me."

"How can we say no to that?" Woody obliged, offering Bo his arm. He turned to Buzz and Jessie. "You gonna join us?"

Buzz glanced at the half-full plate of sweets he still held in his hand. "Nah, we'll sit this one out."

The tables were turned as Buzz and Jessie observed from the sidelines as their friends swept across the rustic dance floor to the lively tune. Bo let out a peal of delighted laughter as Woody took her by the waist and whirled around unexpectedly. Their frivolity was catching and the other couples gleefully watched the pair.

"The music your uncle's been playin' is awful pretty, so's your Momma's singin'," Jessie commented, again tilting back Buzz's oversized hat on her head so she could get a better view. "What's this song about?"

"A girl and a boat," Buzz explained simply, popping the last buñuelo in his mouth and brushing the sugar off his fingers.

One of Buzz's cousins, who had arrived late to the party, approached as they sat on the veranda bench. He took a seat next to Buzz. "That was some dancing out there, primo." He leaned closer, nudging him with his elbow. "Es ella tu prometida?"

Buzz coughed, "Aún no." Trying to change the subject, he offered an introduction. "Jessie, this is my cousin, Tano."

"Pleased to meet you," Tano said sincerely. "You look like a vaquera, wearing Bustillo's hat."

She tilted her head. "A what?"

"A cowgirl."

Jessie was still grinning at the remark when a little girl of maybe four years old came running up to them on the veranda. The child threw herself on Tano gleefully. "Papá, you're here!"

"I am, mija. Were you good for your Mamá today, Carlota?" The little girl nodded enthusiastically, then turned to Buzz, holding out a little sprig of jasmine.

"Is that for me, Lote?" Buzz asked with a warm smile, taking it from her dimpled fingers. "Thank you, I'll put it right here," he tucked it in the upper pocket of his vest and patted it for emphasis. She beamed at the acceptance of her gift, and he could tell she was peering curiously at Jessie.

Jessie had been watching Buzz interact with his little cousin, and couldn't help but be affected by both his tenderness and the child's bright, inquisitive eyes. She smiled at Lote, who looked away shyly, but with happiness on her face nonetheless.

"Where's my hug?" Buzz asked the young girl, and she flung her arms around his waist.

Tano again lowered his voice, leaning closer to Buzz with a wink. "Será tu turno siguiente," he chuckled, then swept up his daughter and went off to find his wife.
Hoping Jessie wouldn't ask for translations of his cousin's teasing, Buzz stood and held out his hand. "Care to dance one more time? We probably should be leaving soon."

He stood and offered Jessie a hand, and they proceeded to the lantern-lit clearing where Woody and Bo were already beginning to dance to the soft waltz Tío Héctor was strumming. His wife stood next to him, singing the lyrics in accompaniment.

Jessie relaxed into Buzz's arms and they fell in with the other dancing couples. Again, she was curious about the translation of the song she was hearing. "I know I keep askin' ya this… but what's this one mean?"

"La noche esta serena... the night is serene. It's a love song." Buzz kept silent as another line was sung. "Tu dulce sentinela, te guarda el corazón... your sweet sentinel keeps your heart." Jessie gazed up at him, hanging on his every word, and he lost his focus for a moment, as they continued to dance. "De un corazón que te ama, recibe el tierno amor... from a heart that loves you, receive the tender love." They felt themselves inching closer, as the song came upon its final verse. "Como te amo, amame, bellíssima mujer... as I love you, love me, most beautiful... woman..." His words trailed off as he leaned in and kissed her softly. Unbeknownst to the couple, Estrellita was smiling victoriously at the reaction the song she had requested had elicited.

Woody and Bo came over to the pair as the dancing ended. "I'm afraid we better be getting back. It's an hour drive, and we don't want either of you girls to be late."

"It was good of Mr. Igel to let us have until eleven," Bo agreed. "I'm glad we could stay as long as we did."

The four returned to the bench where they'd left their hats when the dancing began hours ago. "I really do need my hat back," Buzz said with a smile, as Jessie reached for her red one. "But... here," he took the sprig of jasmine that his little cousin had given him and offered her that in exchange, tucking it behind her left ear as he lifted his Stetson off her head. "Will you accept that instead?" She nodded with a grin.

Woody readied the surrey, lighting its two lamps and making sure the horse was properly harnessed, while Buzz retrieved some things he wanted from his bedroom. A nighttime chill had fallen, which Jessie hadn't been bothered by while she was dancing. However, as she waited for the men, she found her lightweight dress didn't provide enough warmth, and she stood next to the their rented carriage with her arms hugged against her. Estrellita took notice, and disappeared into the house only to return a moment later carrying a colorful woven serape blanket, which she held out to Jessie. "Take this with you for the ride back to San Bernardino. It's only going to get colder."

"Thank you," Jessie replied, taking the folded fabric from her outstretched hands and running her fingers over its stripes of alternating colors. "But are ya sure? It'll be a while until I - or, Buzz - can return it."

"I insist," she smiled warmly. "You can bring it with you next time you visit." Noticing the heartfelt appreciation in Jessie's eyes, she pulled her in for a hug. "I'm so glad Bustillo brought you tonight."

"I can't say when I've had such a nice evenin'," Jessie gushed, as she returned the embrace, fighting back a touch of emotion. "Thank you again, for everythin'."

Buzz was pleased to find his mother and Jessie together when he returned to the carriage, carrying a long yet narrow wooden box with a handle and a small hardcover book.
"This is for you," he handed the book to Jessie, and she glanced at the novel's cover, which read *The Squatter and the Don*. "You'll get a little better insight from that one, than the other."

"Thanks!" Jessie replied, as he slid the wooden box under the back seat. "What's that?"

"My telescope," he grinned proudly. "I thought we could see what the stars look like from Barstow."

Jessie laid her hat, the book, and the blanket on the front seat, and Buzz offered her a hand up into the surrey, where Woody and Bo were making themselves comfortable on the rear bench. Once she was situated, he turned to his mother, who hugged him tightly.

"Ella es la única, mi corazón, y me gusta mucho. Has encontrado tu estrella guía." She patted his cheek affectionately. "Espero noticias de matrimonio pronto."

Woody had the best vantage point, from his position in the carriage, to see a blush rise on Buzz's face at his mother's words. Once his friend had climbed into the driver's seat, and the quartet had waved their goodbyes and started down the lane to the main road, Woody couldn't resist asking, "What'd she say?"

"Uh, she said safe travels."

Woody chuckled; he understood enough Spanish to at least catch the mention of *matrimonio*. "Sure, she did."

Ignoring Woody's ribbing, Buzz focused his attention on Jessie, who had just spread the blanket across her lap, with her hat and book on top of it.

"So, now that you've met my family, what do you think of *Ramona*?"

"Oh, they're wonderful! Nothin' like the folks in the story, all serious and moony all the time. Is that why ya didn't like it, stuff like that?"

"Yes… among other things."

"Like what?"

"It doesn't really matter…"

"C'mon, I wanna know… were you really upset about Alessandro?" she needled, with a playful glint in her eyes and her smile.

"Ha, no," he scoffed. "I was living in Los Angeles when it was first published. My eldest brother’s wife had always looked down on our Spanish heritage, until it became fashionable, thanks to that book. Suddenly they were having dinner parties to flaunt it, and trying to introduce me to their unattached friends. These women… they were only interested for the novelty of it all. They'd ask if I lived on a rancho, or want me to say something to them in Spanish. All I wanted to say was adiós," he groaned.

Jessie hugged tightly onto his arm and rested her head against his shoulder, snuggling down. "Guess I like the book more than I realized then, if it helped save ya for me."

"Heh, yeah," he chuckled, "that's a good way to look at it."

The lanterns on the carriage shone a dim beam on the road ahead, providing the only light for the travelers on their trip back to the depot besides the stars and moon that shimmered above them.
Woody and Bo rode quietly in the back seat, with his arm across the back of the seat as she sidled closer next to him.

After about a mile's distance, Buzz broke the silence that had fallen. "I was thinking, maybe we can go back out to Buzzard Rock sometime soon, and set up my telescope. What do you think?" His query went unanswered. "Jessie?"

Her head felt heavy on his shoulder, and he craned his neck as slowly and carefully as possible, so as not to disturb her. Finding that she was asleep, as he had suspected, he kissed her on the top of her bare head, his lips lingering against her soft auburn hair. With pleasant memories of a well-spent day to keep him company in Jessie's stead, Buzz drove onward through the darkness, towards the faint glow of San Bernardino on the horizon.

The sky was a crystal clear blue as Buzz and Jessie stood outside the San Bernardino depot the following afternoon, their luggage at their feet. They waited alone for the train to carry them back to Barstow; Woody and Bo had chosen to pass the the time in the waiting room inside, but Jessie wasn't ready to relinquish the scenery she'd come to admire during her short stay. She stared at the mountains in the distance, uncharacteristically quiet, which made Buzz concerned.

"What's the matter?" he asked, taking her hand in his.

"Nothin,'" she sighed. "I mean… I just didn't expect to like it here so much, and now I hate leavin'. Barstow's what I always pictured when I thought about the west… but this… it's better than I ever imagined. I love the palm trees, and the mountains, and everythin' we saw yesterday. I thought I liked the desert just fine, but I could really see myself livin' here, and bein' happy."

Buzz smiled, and gave her hand a squeeze. "I'll be right back." He quickly strode in the direction of the depot's newsstand nearby, and Jessie watched as he leafed through a postcard display on the counter until he finally selected one. While the cashier rang up his purchase, she saw him pull his notebook from his coat pocket and write something hastily, as if he was copying some information that was posted. Before long he was back at her side, and the train conductor was calling "all aboard!" for the northbound passengers. While Buzz picked up his telescope case and his own suitcase, Jessie scrambled to gather her two valises and her hatbox.

"Here," Buzz said, tucking the telescope under his arm, "let me take something."

Along with Woody and Bo, they fell in line behind other travelers and boarded the train. However, this time it was much more crowded, and there weren't two pairs of seats available together, so they each found seats where they could. Buzz and Jessie chose a spot at the front of the car, not facing anyone else, and he offered her the window seat.

Buzz reached into his pocket again, removing both his notebook and a postcard with a colorful image of orange trees, oranges, and blossoms in the corner. He took out his pencil, and using the notebook for support, scrawled in the corner next to the illustration, 'Te amo, mi florecita. Yours, Buzz.' He handed it to Jessie and she grinned.

"Oh, it looks like the grove!" She pointed to the handwritten Spanish. "What does this say?"

"Te amo… I love you. I thought you'd like to have something to remember your time here, until you can visit again."

"I love it, and, te amo, too." She gave him a quick kiss, not caring what the other passengers might think. "I sure hope I can come back. Hey, what were you writin' down at the newstand? You were
"Oh, that?" he seemed almost flustered that she had noticed, and he quickly shoved his notebook back into his pocket. "Heh, it was just something I remembered, a potential lead in the case. Nothing else."

The engine whistle blew and with a burst of steam the train lurched forward, as it began its journey to Barstow. Jessie reached for Buzz's hand, and they smiled at each other as their fingers intertwined.

Staring yearningly out the window, Jessie wondered if she ever would in fact get to return to this place that had so charmed her. The warmth of the sun touched her face and she closed her eyes, savoring the memories of a perfect day spent touring Redlands and with Buzz's kin - memories of something that felt, for the first time in her life, like a real home, and a real family. Buzz glanced at her, and rested his hand on his suit jacket, where it seemed as if his tiny memorandum notebook in the pocket beneath carried the weight of a brick. He let out a deep breath, his calm demeanor masking the fact that internally, his mind and heart were racing. He couldn't get to the Barstow telegraph office fast enough.

Chapter End Notes

When Jessie and Bo go shopping, the wrapper she buys was a type of casual dress worn at home. All places mentioned in this chapter existed in the 1890s. The Kite-Shaped Track route was run by the Santa Fe railroad as an excursion for tourists. There were two loops - a smaller one, that our characters take, between Redlands and San Bernardino, and a larger one that went all the way to Los Angeles. The songs performed at the fiesta are traditional Californio folk songs that can be found as historical recordings on our Pinterest board. There is also a video of El Jarabe (Son Y Jarabe) being performed. Although we have chosen to name Buzz's uncle Héctor, this is not an implication that we're connecting the 'Coco' and 'Toy Story' universes in any way (neither is his wife Emelda, which is not a misspelling, we have spelled it the way I've seen it in Californio family histories), we just loved the movie and wanted to pay tribute through some of Buzz's relatives.

Translations: Buzz and Tano - "Is she your fiancée?" "Not yet." "It'll be your turn next."
Estrellita to Buzz - "She is the one, my love [literally, my heart], and I like her very much. You have found your guiding star. I expect news of marriage soon."
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Surprise! This chapter is posted one day early! Since PoetLaurie is on vacation in Hey-way-eye at the moment, and I leave at the buttercrack of dawn tomorrow for Disney World (by way of an overnight in an 1888 hotel, hmm, wonder what that will inspire for the fic?), I thought it would be better to publish early rather than nearly two weeks late.

Be sure to check our Pinterest board (Jessie’s Journey at username yodelincowgirl) to see the new pins we’ve added for this chapter. Here’s a hint - we usually post pins a few days early, so if you follow it, you’ll get a sneak peek at what’s coming next!

Toy Story still doesn’t belong to us. If it did, Toy Story Land would already be open by now, and Jessie and Buzz would have a meet and greet together. Enjoy, and be sure to fave and follow so you don’t miss any future adventures!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Mercy, was it always this busy?”

Bo pretended to wipe sweat from her brow as the door closed behind the second trainload of guests for the day. Life in Barstow seemed more hectic than either she or Jessie remembered.

“San Bernardino made you soft,” joked Dolly. “Nah, they added another train to the schedule, right after you girls left. Boss wasn’t too happy about that, but what could he do? We missed you, that’s for sure! I don’t think we sat down much the last two weeks.”

As the girls straightened the lunch counter, Jessie took notice of the railroad men working outside, loading up the train. “Who’s that guy?” she pointed to a young man in a Harvey uniform hauling luggage with the porters.

“Who?” Bonnie’s gaze followed Jessie’s. “Oh, him? That’s Chester, the new bellboy. With the extra train, the hotel side was getting overwhelmed, too, so Mr. K hired him.”

“I see he’s from Kansas City?” Bo joined the conversation.

“Nope, he’s from around here. Guess he used to work in the mines, but with so many going under, he wanted to get out and get a new job before he was desperate and there weren’t any to be found.”

Jessie nodded; Buzz had mentioned how people in Calico were struggling, and she felt sorry for the folks who had been forced to leave their hometown in search of work. ‘I can’t imagine havin’ to leave like that, not when you wanna stay put,’ she thought as she precisely arranged gleaming silverware at each place setting. She reminded herself to be especially nice to Chester if she ran into him.

With the Harvey staff adjusting to the new, busier routine, a week passed before Woody, Buzz, Jessie, and Bo were able to do much more than say “good morning” or “good evening” to each other. At long last they were able to make plans to spend their next shared day off together, renewing their pastime of a picnic down by the Mojave River, and all were glad for something to
look forward to.

“Fin’ly!” Jessie exclaimed as she and Bo stepped out onto the dorm porch to greet their waiting beaus. “I thought today was never gonna get here.” She took a deep breath of the clear air of the early April day.

“Agreed.” Buzz assented. He was carrying the long, wooden box containing his telescope, but adjusted his grip on it so he could extend a hand to Jessie. He was forced to abruptly retract his hand as Ken came barreling up the porch steps, crossing between them.

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry,” Ken bowed quickly, touching his dapper straw boater. “Is Barb- Miss Roberts within?”

“She’s working,” Jessie answered in monotone, as she steadied herself on the railing.

“Oh, thank you!” With another pass between the couples, he ran away to the hotel as rapidly as he had approached the dorm.

Buzz offered his hand again, and this time Jessie was able to take it. He looked at her quizzically, but she just made a face and shook her head in response.

Bo gestured to Buzzard Rock, “Maybe we should hide behind the rock, so no one can come drag us back to work.”

“Hmmm, that’s not a bad idea, actually,” Buzz mused. “It’ll be better to be in as dark a setting as possible… to see the stars,” he added hastily as Woody raised an eyebrow. “There’s less light pollution in the desert… from the buildings… and the stars are brighter.”

Woody smirked at his friend, then passed his sister the lantern so he could hold onto both the quartet’s loaded picnic basket and Bo’s hand as they walked along. “I thought the depot seemed busier lately; glad it wasn’t just my imagination.”

“Oh no, you’re not imagining things,” Bo explained about the added train. “They even had to bring in a new employee, Chester, as a bellboy, to help keep up with all the extra hotel guests. Hopefully everything will settle down soon, once we’re all used to the change.”

The two couples crossed over the bridge, which now spanned merely a trickle of water in the wide bed, the Mojave River having all but dried up for the season while the girls had been away.

“Lookit, the trees have leaves now!” Jessie gasped in delight. The cottonwoods that flanked both sides of the riverbed were now covered in fresh green foliage and scattered with the puffs of white that gave them their name. “And the white blossoms! Kinda reminds me of Redlands,” she sighed. The group didn’t choose to set up their picnic in the thicket of trees, however; instead they continued on to circle the large rock. “It sure was nice that Mr. K kept your room for ya, while you were visitin’ us,” Jessie continued.

Woody nodded, “Yeah, we would’ve hated to lose that choice corner location. But I guess since the railroad’s paying for it, he didn’t want to take any chances of upsetting us or them.”

Bo’s eyes widened, “The Santa Fe’s paying for your room?”

“Yup. They wanted to make sure we were on site to keep a look out for trouble with the gang. And I’m sure not complaining about it.”

“Remember when I said we usually didn’t get to stay at such nice places?” Buzz chimed in.
“Usually for assignments as long as this one, we’d have to find an inexpensive flat or vacant cabin to rent. I’ll take Harvey House food over Woody’s cooking any day.”

Woody was spreading the blanket Bo had brought on the ground, but paused to look up. “My cooking is not that bad.”

Buzz rolled his eyes. “All you know how to make is salt pork and beans.”

“Which you don’t seem to mind eating!” Woody stood and put his hands on his hips defiantly.

“I can’t cook every night,” Buzz shrugged.

“Yeah, you can’t cook…” muttered Woody under his breath.

Buzz took a defensive stance. “Are you saying my stew isn’t good?” His friend opened his mouth and closed it again, unable to come up with a retort. “That’s what I thought. And don’t get me started on his coffee,” he leaned closer to Jessie, “you practically need to chew it.” She giggled.

“Well, next time I will only make enough for me,” Woody sulked, crossing his arms. “And while we’re on the subject of chewing, you chew your food too loudly.”

“At least I don’t snore like a freight train,” Buzz grinned, relishing upping the ante.

“I don’t snore!” Woody glanced hastily at Bo, as if a huge secret had just been revealed.

“Yeeaaaah you do.”

“Oh yeah? Well, what about you with all of your exercises? It’s bad enough you huff and puff while I’m tryin’ to relax, but then you leave that contraption sitting out.”

A wicked expression crossed Buzz’s face, “Yeah, but if I hadn’t, you wouldn’t have smacked yourself in the face back before Christmas, and that was pretty amusing.”

“Ok, boys, break it up, we’re getting hungry,” Bo finally managed to interject. She and Jessie had been rendered helpless with laughter watching the men go back and forth.

The four emptied the picnic hamper that had been prepared in the Harvey kitchen and spent the next few hours catching up, the girls sharing some of the more entertaining mishaps during their hectic shifts and the men discussing their frustrations over the lack of new leads in their case. As they talked, Buzz often stole a glimpse at the sun, wishing it could sink faster so that he could break out his telescope and show Jessie the stars.

When the sky finally darkened to the hazy purple of dusk, Woody stood. “I think I’d like to get away from this big ol’ rock for a bit. Care to go for a stroll?” He held out a hand to Bo, who took it and joined him to standing, then turned to Buzz and Jessie with an air of mock sternness. “You two behave yourselves. I’m leaving the lantern here, so I’ll be able to see if you don’t,” he winked broadly at his sister.

Jessie countered with a wink of her own. “We can always blow it out.”

Bo laughed, and waved, “Have fun looking at the stars. You comin’, Sheriff?” Woody’s face melted into a goofy grin and there was unmistakable pride on Bo’s face for having put it there.

Once the others had departed, Buzz wasted no time in unlatching the box that held his treasured telescope.
“That’s quite a contraption,” Jessie noted with interest, as she watched him carefully remove the shiny brass instrument and wooden tripod from their sturdy case. “Where’d ya get it?”

“My parents gave this to me for my birthday a couple years ago. It’s quite valuable; I’ve never used it away from home.”

“Well, I’m glad ya brought it here.” Jessie rambled on while Buzz busied himself setting up the apparatus. “Ugh, I wish we hadn’t run into Ken on the way out. Barbie’s been… I dunno… different since he came along, all moony like.” She hugged her knees to her chest and rested her chin on them. “She said her contract’s up soon; I wonder if she’s gonna leave because of him.”

“He seems to be around a lot; It looks like they’re pretty serious,” Buzz replied absentmindedly, as he fiddled with the telescope’s focus mechanism, one eye pressed to the lens.

“Yeah. Ken, Ken, Ken. It’s all she ever talks about anymore,” groaned Jessie. “It’s a little sickenin’ sometimes, t’ be honest. He wants to move to the city and open a dressmakin’ shop, prob’ly will take her with him. I’d hate t’think of the Harvey House without her.”

“At least Ken would be gone,” Buzz chuckled. “But I know you’d miss your friend. Okay,” he stepped back from the instrument. “It’s ready. Care to take a look?”

Jessie rose eagerly from the blanket and aligned her right eye against the lens, squinting closed her left. “Like this?” she asked. “What am I lookin’ at?”

“Let’s see,” he stared up at the inky blackness dotted with twinkling light. The moon was a mere sliver of silver in the Southern sky, and Buzz raised his hand in that direction. “See the moon? Look to the right; focus on the really bright star.”

“Okay… WHOA!” she jumped back, looking at the object in the sky, and then again through the eyepiece. “What is that?”

“That’s Mars,” he explained, laughing at her reaction. “Here,” he stood and put a hand on her back. “Let’s see what else we can find”. He guided Jessie to look at the Moon, enjoying her amazement at the visible craters and striations in the soil. When they had observed all they could through the telescope, the pair settled down on to the blanket and she leaned back against him as he pointed out constellations like Orion and the Swan and taught her how to find the North Star.

“This is amazin’. Where’d you learn about all’a this?”

“When I was little, my Dad would sit outside with my brothers and me after dinner, and tell us stories about the constellations. My brothers outgrew the myths eventually, but I’ve always been fascinated by the stars, and the planets. Have you ever read From the Earth to the Moon?” Jessie shook her head. “It was my favorite book growing up. Sometimes late at night I’d sneak out to the veranda, and stare up at the moon, dreaming of what it would be like to actually go there. Then I’d fall asleep, and my parents would find me the next morning, curled up on a bench.” He chuckled at the memory. “I guess it’s in my blood, though. My Dad, he shares my interest in astronomy - he used the stars to navigate when he was traveling on the trail, and he’s always told my Mamá that the stars led him to her.”

“It’s funny how life brings ya to where you’re s’posed to be. If I hadn’t been so miserable at home, I’d ‘a never run off, never ended up a Harvey Girl, never ended up in California, or with…” she faltered slightly, blushing, “with you.”

“Do you think you’ll ever go back to Missouri?” he asked with a tinge of apprehension.
“Heck no! I’ll be a Harvey Girl forever, if that’s what it takes to stay in California.”

“Well, this case feels like it’ll never be resolved,” Buzz laughed, relief washing over him at her reply. “So we both might be here forever.”

“I’m okay with that,” Jessie’s face brightened in a broad smile, causing Buzz’s spirits to soar. “Ya seemed so happy when we were at your parents’ place, though… ya think you’re gonna keep on travelin’, as a marshal?” she broached the subject somewhat tentatively. “It’s gotta be hard, livin’ outta a trunk all the time.”

“It is,” he sighed. “And missing holidays, and family gatherings. When the time is right,” he dared to look her in the eye, “I’ll move on to something more… settled.”

Her heart fluttered at the meaningful intensity of his gaze. “What, somethin’ more like a Sheriff?”

“I’m not sure, yet.”

Snuggled against Buzz’s shoulder, Jessie stretched her legs out next to his and wiggled her feet back and forth. “Maybe I can talk Woody into goin’ for that ranch, like we talked about as kids,” she pondered. “There’s so much open space out here. Can’t ya just picture me with critters, like horses and cows?”

“I can, actually; you do look like a vaquera in my hat, after all,” he grinned as he picked up his Stetson and set it down on her head. “You still want to keep it?”

She reached over and took a small bit of his vest in her hand, using it to pull him towards her. “What d’ya think?” Buzz’s mouth met hers in a very thorough answer.

Woody and Bo arrived back to find Buzz and Jessie lying on the blanket. Buzz was on his back and Jessie was curled up beside him, her head resting on his chest. They could hear him murmuring something as he raised his arm, tracing some shape along the canvas of the sky. Jessie giggled and lifted her head to whisper in Buzz’s ear, and he brought his hand down to brush the side of her face. Woody was sure he didn’t want to see what was about to happen next, so he pointedly cleared his throat, causing the pair to jump. “Sorry to interrupt, but we better head back so the girls don’t break curfew.”

Jessie smiled mischievously at Buzz, “I wouldn’t mind.”

“Neither would I, for that matter,” Bo batted her lashes at Woody, suggesting that they might have done more than just walking.

“Ok, well, I don’t want to get your boss on my bad side,” Woody responded, a bit flustered.

As they neared the dorm, Buzz and Jessie elected to make their goodnights outside, and Bo led Woody in to the parlor. “I had a real nice time, Sheriff.”

“I did, too,” he rested his hands on her waist. “It’s almost too bad you had to come back.”

“Why, Woody… what an incorrigible thing to say! I like it.” She raised onto her toes as he leaned down, but just before their lips touched, a series of hushed giggles floated around from the bend in the staircase. Bo lifted her eyebrow and the corner of her mouth pulled in a smirk. “Sounds like we have some spies,” she whispered to her suitor. She planted a chaste kiss on his lips, “Goodnight, Mister Pride.”

Woody smiled and tipped his hat, “Pleasant dreams, Miss Peepe.”
As soon as Bo rounded the corner to go up the stairs, she caught sight of a flurry of nightgowns fleeing the scene. She turned and met Woody’s eye, flashing him a coy wink before ascending the stairs.

Hope was stirring again in the dusty streets of Calico. There was talk that some of the larger silver mines might consolidate, which would enable work to resume. There were even rumblings of a narrow-gauge railroad possibly being built to connect the former boom town to Daggett.

It was these developments that led Buzz and Woody out to Calico to talk to Sherriff Hammond, on another of their regular meetings. With the rumors that prospects might be improving in the mines, crime had increased in Calico over the past several weeks. The marshals had shared with him the limited findings from their trip to San Bernardino upon their return, but while the strawberry candy continued to be a common thread, it provided no further clues to solve who the sugar-addicted culprit might be, or his cronies. With nothing further to discuss, the lawmen agreed to confer again in a few more days.

As they headed back to the corral to retrieve their horses and return to Barstow, Woody stopped in front of the general store. “I’m gonna duck in here for a minute. I need more Brilliantine.”

Buzz chuckled. “You and your hair. If you didn’t give it that ridiculous swirl, you wouldn’t go through so much of that stuff.”

“Gotta look good for Bo now,” he grinned, and the two men stepped up onto the store’s porch, where, once again, they ran into Pete Gornik stepping out.

“We’ve gotta stop meeting like this,” the friendly miner quipped, as he struggled under the weight of a particularly large parcel of foodstuffs. “How are you fellas this fine day?”

“Doing well, thank you, and yourself?” replied Woody. Buzz stood in observant silence.

“Couldn’t be better. Mighty glad to hear things are looking up around here! Town might get some life to it again. Well, I best be gettin’ back to my mine. Good day to you both!”

Buzz lingered, staring after him as he left, a slight scowl tugging at his brow. Woody nudged his partner, “You coming?”

In the store, Buzz let Woody wander off to find his hair tonic and instead went to talk with the shopkeeper behind the counter. The marshals had become friendly with the business owner since his business had been targeted by the gang a few months prior, and he had continued to work with them as much as he could. “Hey, Ned, about Pete, was he just shopping in here?”

“Pete Gornik?” the store owner asked, and Buzz nodded. “Yeah, he’s one of my most frequent customers.”

“Does he pay cash or buy on credit?”

“Cash mostly, although he’s used credit in the past. Brought it all current, though, a couple months back. You gentlemen been having trouble with Pete?” the man looked concerned, still a little wary after being one of the gang’s targets.

“Oh, no, not at all,” Buzz smiled reassuringly. “We’re just trying to get a good understanding of the miners’ situation. One more question, do you happen to have any strawberry-flavored hard candies on hand?”
“You know, I did; had a whole jar. Oddest thing, back when I was robbed, that jar was one of the things swiped. I haven’t replaced them yet.”

“That’s okay, can I get a few peppermints instead?” he covered quickly, not wanting to leave any hints that he might be referring to evidence. “For my girl,” he added with a grin.

“Of course,” the shopkeeper chuckled.

Woody walked up with a bottle of Brilliantine in hand, just as Buzz was leaving the counter. “Where are you going? I’m almost done here.”

“Just want to look into something across the street. It’ll only take me a minute; I’ll meet you at the corral.”

Tucking the little paper sack of peppermints in his coat pocket as he exited the store, Buzz strode quickly across the dusty main road and entered the town’s quiet assay office.

“How may I help you, sir?” a bespectacled man greeted him cheerily.

“Deputy Marshal Lightyear,” Buzz introduced himself with a handshake, “and I hope you can help me. I’ve been working with Sheriff Hammond on some local investigations, and I’d like to know if a miner by the name of Peter Gornik has brought any silver into your office lately.”

“Ah yes, Pete. I used to see him in here all the time, but it’s been a while. Let me check my book,” the gentleman consulted a large ledger at his desk behind the counter, and ran his finger down the columns as he turned page after page. “No, I don’t see that he’s been in at all in the past six months. I could get previous books out for you, and review those, if you’d like.”

“Thank you, but that won’t be necessary; I’m a little pressed for time at the moment. Could you tell me if he’s brought in any borate instead?”

“That, I’m afraid I can’t. You’d have to go to Daggett to find out that information; they handle all the borate processing there.”

“Much obliged.” With a nod and a touch of his hat, Buzz exited the assay office and quickened his pace to to the corral.

“What were you doing, anyway?” asked Woody, mounting his saddle.

“Just going with a hunch,” Buzz explained, as he checked Astrónomo’s saddle and followed suit, “I’ll tell you more on the ride back.”

In the privacy of the desert stretch between the two towns, Woody spoke up. “Tell me about this hunch of yours. Where did you go?”

“The assay office. Turns out Pete hasn’t brought in any silver since at least October, if not longer.”

“Yes, so? A lot of the miners haven’t. It’s hard times for the silver mines, at least it has been.”

“But I asked Ned about him, too. He said he brought his credit account current and has been paying cash… without any evident income from his mine.”

“I dunno, probably had some savings he tapped into. Or maybe he sold some personal possessions to get by. What about borate? Maybe he’s found some of that.”

“Maybe. Assayer couldn’t tell me; he only handles silver.”
“That’s probably all it is,” Woody postulated. “Pete’s harmless enough. A little strange, maybe, but harmless.”

“It still doesn’t add up, in my opinion,” Buzz held his ground on the matter. “Another thing, when the shop was robbed by the gang, they took the whole jar of strawberry candies.”

“Well, then we know where the one is getting his supply.”

After the subject had been exhausted, and the two friends had ridden along in silence for a while, Buzz broke through the rhythmic plodding of hooves on dirt with a question of his own. “Have you ever thought about life beyond being a marshal?”

“I have… ever since I met Bo, really. I think it might be time to start looking into that ranch Jessie and I talked about as kids, although back then it was a cattle ranch in Texas. Now, I’m leaning more toward staying here; I like California, after five years, it feels like home. Maybe a smaller dairy farm would be nice instead. What about you?”

“Well… remember all the orange groves when we were in Redlands? I’ve been thinking of starting a grove myself, especially after being at home last month. You saw what a booming business citrus has become there, and I’d rather live with the land than build it up like my brothers.”

“That sounds like a good plan.” Woody paused, then added, “I think Jessie would like that, too.”

“Yeah,” Buzz’s face reddened, but he couldn’t deny that her interest in the area had added fuel to the fire. “So cows, huh? Want to make your cowboy image more authentic?”

Woody tilted his hat down on his forehead mysteriously. “It’s already authentic,” he drawled.

Back in Barstow, the two marshals secured Bullseye and Astrónomo at the livery stable and returned to the Harvey House, so that they could relax in their room before lunch. At the foot of the stairs, Buzz excused himself to check at the depot’s telegraph desk for at least the fifth time that week.

“Why on earth have you been checking for telegrams so furiously lately?”

“Never mind that. Go ahead up, I’ll be right there.”

With a shrug, Woody’s long legs carried him up to the second story and to his room, where he slumped onto his bed, happy to have a few moments of quiet after a busy morning. He had only removed one boot when the door flew open with a start, and Buzz blustered in.

“We have to go back to San Bernardino, today.” There was an unmistakable sense of urgency in his demeanor, and his partner became perplexed.

“Is it the case? Is everything okay at home?”

“Everything’s fine.” Buzz pulled a small leather satchel from his trunk at the foot of his bed and began hastily shoving overnight necessities inside. “There’s a lead we can’t waste any time on. I’ll explain on the train. Pack your things, we’ll stay at my parents’ place.”

“You’re a puzzle today.” A befuddled Woody packed a similar canvas bag of his own and the two men went back downstairs to purchase tickets for the two o’clock train and eat a quick lunch before they had to leave. They spoke privately to Mr. Kartoffelkopf, assuring him that they would only be gone for twenty-four hours, and bade their girls goodbye with the promise they’d see them tomorrow afternoon.
Once they were seated on the train, Woody was impatient for an explanation. “NOW will you tell me what the heck is going on?”

Buzz reached into his coat pocket and handed him the folded telegram he’d received earlier.

‘Land still available. Advise you to come at once. Can visit property tomorrow and sign if satisfactory. Give me your word and I will meet you at the San Bernardino depot tonight. Dad.’

“From your father? I thought you said it was the case! What’s this about?”

“I never said it was the case, just that it was a lead,” he couldn’t suppress a grin. “When we left San Bernardino last month, I bought Jessie a postcard at the depot newsstand, because she was sad about leaving.” Woody nodded, and Buzz continued. “Well, I saw a notice posted, listing a homestead relinquishment in Redlands, 160 acres, and I had him look into it for me.” He paused. “For us… if you’d like to be partners. There’s plenty of land for both of us. But I didn’t want to tell you anything until I knew if the purchase was still possible.”

“So that’s what you were getting at this morning, asking me about the future,” Woody chuckled. “I think it’s a great idea, but what’s this gonna set me back?”

“The land is only $600, so $300 for each of us. Not sure why the price is so low; I expect it was foreclosed or the owners needed to move elsewhere in a hurry. Dad will have more information when we see him.

“You have this all worked out, don’t you?”

“Everything but your signature on a check.”

“Bad news, partner; that’s back at the hotel.”

With a smile of triumph, Buzz reached into his coat again and pulled out a small rectangular booklet, which he handed to Woody.

“Hey, how did you get my checkbook?”

“It wasn’t difficult, when you leave your belongings laying out all over the hotel room,” he laughed. “Maybe Bo will be able to keep you organized.”

“Maybe… but you’re in for it, if Jessie’s still like she was when we were kids; she’s no neater than I am.”

Buzz chuckled nervously, then looked down at his suddenly fidgeting hands. “Actually… speaking of Jessie… I would ask your father this, but from what I’ve heard of your mother, she’d make him refuse out of pure spite.” He took a deep breath, then faced Woody bravely, his expression full of earnest emotion. “I wouldn’t be looking into this land if I didn’t intend to ask Jessie to marry me, and I would like your blessing.”

The corners of Woody’s eyes crinkled in amusement. “Why’re you asking me?”

“I… I just explained why I didn’t think I should ask your father.”

“No, I mean, why are you actually asking? I gave you that months ago. You move so slow, you must’ve forgotten,” he teased.

“I move slow? I’m just waiting until we resolve this case. Besides, I don’t see you proposing to
“She and I have an understanding - not anything formal, though, not yet. I figured I’d hold off on that until the case was wrapped up, like you. I don’t know about you, but I’m more than ready to hang up this holster and settle down.”

“I am, too. Five months ago, I might have felt otherwise, but now…”

Woody looked at Buzz, a genuine smile of understanding spreading across his face. “Yeah. Hey, do you even know how to grow oranges?”

“Not at all. Do you know anything about cattle?”

“Nope,” he laughed with his friend. “Guess we’ll figure it out as we go.”

When they arrived at the San Bernardino depot, an older, slimmer version of Buzz was waiting for them. Zechariah Lightyear’s appearance differed from his son’s only in his lighter-brown hair that was now streaked with gray at the temples, and the neatly-trimmed beard that covered his strong chin. His blue eyes crinkled happily as he watched his son and his partner step down from the train, and he closed the pocket watch in his hand and slipped it back into his vest pocket as the pair approached. He greeted Woody with a cordial handshake and Buzz with a brief yet warm embrace. “Glad you could catch today’s train, son.”

“Me, too. Thanks for running interference on this. I’ve filled Woody in,” he said on the walk to the simple four-seater wagon that was parked and waiting at the front of the depot.

The men took their seats and began their drive out to the hacienda. “The property is a very good deal,” Zechariah elaborated as they rode along. “I took the liberty to look it over myself earlier today. The only reason I can see that it hasn’t sold yet is that it’s away from town, and everyone wants to buy in the heart of Redlands right now.”

“Do you know why the price was so low?”

“The family had to return East on short notice, and needed to sell fast. I’ve negotiated a full-price offer if they leave any furnishings and equipment in place. Have you thought about what you’d like to do with the city lots you own? Do you want me to go forward with the sale?”

“Yeah, there’s no need to hold onto them, not now. What do you think I can get for them?”

“Being on Bunker Hill, at least $3,500 for the one on Olive Street, and likely $2,500 for the one on Grand Avenue.” Zechariah saw his son’s eyes widen into saucers, and he chuckled. “Aren’t you glad I encouraged you to invest years ago when prices were low? I’ll start the sale process as soon as I’m back in my office.”

“Thanks, Dad. Oh… and can you do me one more favor? Can you not tell Mamá what we’re up to?” He turned to Woody in the back seat, “You, too, Woody. I don’t want to get ahead of things and have her all excited before anything’s official.”

“My lips are sealed,” Woody laughed. “You think I want her interrogating me, too?”

“Your secret is safe,” his father reassured him.

Upon their arrival at the Lightyear home, Woody and Buzz got out of the carriage at Zechariah’s suggestion, and waited out of sight while he took the horse and vehicle to the barn. Returning to the house, he gestured to the two younger men with a glint in his eye, and they crept stealthily to the...
veranda. Zechariah opened the front door, and called in to his wife. “I’ve brought some house guests for the night, my love!”

Estrellita came rushing from the kitchen to greet who she assumed would be business associates of her husband’s or perhaps cousins who were making a surprise visit from the city. She was stunned to see her son and his friend standing in her parlor, for the second month in a row.

“Bustillo! Woody! What are you doing back so soon?” she exclaimed. “Not that I mind one bit, but what a surprise!”

“We’re here on business, Mamá,” Buzz grinned as she released him from a fierce hug. “Just for tonight, though; we have to head back to Barstow first thing tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll take whatever visits I can get,” she said joyfully. “Dinner is almost ready, why don’t you go put your bags upstairs?”

Buzz and Woody retreated to their respective lodgings for the night - Buzz’s childhood room, and the guest room that Woody frequently occupied between assignments. However, the enticing aroma of the asado de buey being carried to the dining room below kept them from lingering, and they were soon seated at the table with the elder Lightyears.

“How is Jessie?” Estrellita didn’t waste any time asking, once they had begun their meal. “Have you proposed to that sweet girl of yours yet?”

“She’s fine… and not yet, Mamá,” Buzz laughed at his mother’s candor. “It hasn’t even been a month since the fiesta.”

“Why are you hesitating? You love her, don’t you?”

“Of course; that’s why I am waiting. I can’t think too much of the future until we’re done with this case. I’m not putting her in the same danger Woody and I have to live with.”

“Ay, mijo, I don’t like you living with this danger,” she sighed, shaking her head. “I hope you will be done with this work soon, and settle down somewhere safe!”

Buzz choked on his food at the remark. Zechariah could see the panic rising in his son’s eyes, afraid that the real reason for their visit might be wheedled out of him, and quickly responded. “So, Buzz, have you heard that the revival of the Olympic Games might actually be happening? I read just the other day that there’s a meeting being held in Paris this June.”

Buzz gulped a drink of water. “No! I haven’t! Wouldn’t that be something!”

Estrellita narrowed her eyes as her gaze darted between her son and husband, who were now busily conversing about sporting events. She continued to eat, but remained suspicious and did not bother hiding that fact.

Buzz spent a rather sleepless night in the familiar bed of his youth, staring at the ceiling and daring to contemplate the changes that could come as a result of the next day’s events. The following morning, the men rose early, and after eating a quick desayuno that Estrellita insisted upon, Zechariah kept up their guise and offered to give them a ride to San Bernardino to supposedly meet with the Sheriff and take the train back to Barstow.

Much to Buzz and Woody’s delight, when they reached the land, it turned out to be everything they hoped it would be. They explored the acreage and looked over the existing structures, and determined that it would serve their intentions quite nicely. With a shared glance of ‘are we really
doing this? ’ passing between the two friends, Zechariah pulled the already-prepared paperwork out of his monogrammed leather briefcase and within moments, names were signed and checks were written.

Zechariah drove the marshals to the San Bernardino depot, and bid them farewell with the promise that he’d wire them as soon as everything was finalized. As they chugged along northward back to their work, and back to their girls, Buzz and Woody discussed their potential designs for the property.

Happily occupied with their exciting plans, it seemed like no time had passed at all when the conductor began to roam the aisles booming, “BARstow! BARstow!” The two men collected their belongings and readied themselves to disembark. As they waited for the train to pull into the station, both shared the same thought.

‘If we could just solve this blasted case already, and get on with the rest of our lives...’

By the time April 1894 drew to a close, the depot’s staff was on edge. Tensions were brewing in the railroad industry, and a faction of Industrials had managed to capture a freight train in Barstow. Although the protesters had eventually been arrested, once released they continued to camp near the town, causing lingering concerns of more trouble. Now May, the marshals had another threat to worry about, in addition to the Huggins gang’s ongoing lawlessness.

The men nevertheless still made time for Jessie and Bo when their schedules permitted, as they all enjoyed their time together and needed a diversion from the stresses that nagged at them. One sunny afternoon, the two couples were seated on the benches in the yard between the dorm and the hotel, trying to decide how to spend the rest of the girls’ day off.

“I’ve been thinking,” Buzz addressed Jessie and Bo, “with all of the recent trouble, it might be good for you both to know how to handle a gun.”

"But Jessie alre- OW!” Woody cried out as he felt a sharp heel dig into his toes through his boot.

"Jessie was just sayin’ the same thing. *Weren't you?” Bo interrupted, stressing the last words to Jessie with a pointed look and a wink.

"Huh?” It took Jessie a moment to figure out what her friend was hinting at. “Oh! Y-yeah, I sure was. It is gettin’ a little crazy, and Mr. K. was talkin’ to Lenny yesterday about orderin’ some new guns. Might be helpful if we could use ‘em, just in case."

Woody flexed his still-smarting foot, “We can use our revolvers, that would be similar to anything he might supply Lenny with. Now we just need targets.”

Jessie jumped up. "I got it! I know just what to use." Buzz looked at her in surprise and she realized she had been a little too exuberant for someone who presumably had never fired a gun. "Well, I know the kitchen crew just threw out a bunch of cans. Those would work, right? It’s what Woody used back at home," she twisted the toe of her boot in the dirt, hoping to draw attention away from her gaffe.

“Those would be perfect,” Buzz concurred. “I’ll come with you; they won’t think twice about Woody and me wanting to use them for target practice.”

Once Buzz and Jessie were safely out of earshot, Woody turned to Bo, "What was that about? You almost broke my toes!"
"I'm sorry, honey," she kissed him on the cheek soothingly. "I know that Jessie's a good shot, but don't let on to Buzz about it. Let him find that out on his own, okay?"

"Oh...kay," he rubbed the back of his neck, confused.

Bo smiled, "Trust me. You'll see."

“Well,” he stood, “we’ll be needing the lantern, I suppose, and more ammunition. I’ll run upstairs for that before Buzz and Jessie get back.”

While Woody went on his errand, Bo hurried to her own room to grab their usual blanket for their desert outings. Before long the four had met up again by the benches they had shared before. Buzz and Jessie had succeeded in procuring a wooden crate full of discarded tin cans. The quartet took the short walk to the other side of the Mojave River, the shelter of Buzzard Rock being their favorite and usual hideout since their return from San Bernardino.

As soon as they were safe in the seclusion of the desert, Buzz went to set up some of the cans in an unobstructed clearing.

Bo came up behind Woody and rested her left hand on his hip as she drew his revolver from its holster. “Care to start the lesson?”

“Uh… yeah! Yeah, I, uh… Buzz, you got the cans in place?”

“Yup! You taking the first round?”

Bo faced the cans and pointed the firearm at the can on the far left. “Well, don’t just stand there, Sheriff.”

Woody grinned, and took his place behind Bo. He brought his arms around her and instructed her in holding the gun with her right index finger against the trigger. “Now you’re going to brace that with your left hand,” he guided her left hand up to steady her hold on his Colt Peacemaker’s wood-inlaid handle. “Good,” he affirmed, leaving his hands over hers.

Bo felt his breath hot on her cheek, and she paused before she spoke up, “And now?”

“Oh, uh, now you bring back the hammer, here, and then you can fire.” He watched her move the small lever back until it clicked into place. He stepped back, regretting that he had to release the embrace. “Aim for the can, then pull the trigger.”

She fired the gun and grazed the can. “That was good, Bo!”

“Can I let you in on a secret?” she leaned up to his ear, “I had a pistol when I lived on my own, back in Kansas.”

He smiled down at her, “I’ll have to watch my step around you, then.”

Her eyes glimmered with mischief, “See that you do.”

Jessie laughed quietly as she watched her brother become further twisted around her friend’s little finger. Her observations were interrupted by Buzz, “Ready?” He pulled his gun from his holster with a flourish, letting it spin on his finger before holding it out to her, handle first.

His weapon was the same reliable Colt model as Woody’s, but in a different style, and she took it from him, admiring the mother-of-pearl grip and the engraved silver of the barrel. Before Buzz could
show her anything, she had cocked the hammer, aimed at the can, and hit it just off center. She
turned back to an astounded Buzz and grinned, twirling the revolver on her own finger. “I might’a
learned a thing or two from Woody when we were kids.”

“MIGHT have learned?”

"I honestly didn't think I'd remember it, or I'd be so rusty… I mean, it’s been seven years, and I
learned on a rifle, not a revolver."

Buzz’s face broke into a wide smile, “I think you remembered enough.” He gestured to the
remaining cans, “As you were.”

Jessie resumed her position and shot each can, one right after the other.

“Show him what you can really do, Jess,” Woody called out.

“I used to be able to hit cans when Woody’d throw ‘em in the air,” she clarified to Buzz.

“Well, let’s see if you’ve still got it.” He grabbed some unused cans from the crate and tossed them
in the air, one by one. Each can came back to the ground with a hole in it.

After she hit the last one, she did a little jump and kick from the excitement, then caught herself and
smiled sheepishly. "When I was a kid, after we went to see Buffalo Bill, I tried to be just like Annie
Oakley. Woody was learnin’ to shoot with designs on bein’ a lawman, but I wanted to be a star.
He’d help me recreate stuff we saw at the show... and she did a little kick like that; guess more came
back to me than I expected."

“Are you done showing off, yet?” Woody asked, an affectionate grin taking any sting from the gibe.

“Maybe, if ya let me shoot somethin’ off your head.”

“Ha! Not on your life.”

“Shoulda figured you’d still be yella,” she teased with a playful wink.

Buzz laughed, “Your trick shooting is impressive, but it won’t help if your target’s at a distance.
Why don’t we try that?” He set up the cans a hundred yards from where Jessie stood.

Once he was back at her side, Jessie aimed for a can and fired, missing the can completely and
raising a puff of dust as the bullet ricocheted off the ground. She stomped in frustration.
“Tarnation!”

“See what I mean? If you’re firing at a distance, your accuracy will be off. You need to adjust your
sight lines,” he placed his right hand over hers, resting his chin on her right shoulder. He raised her
hand so she was aiming above the can. “Now fire.”

“Are ya sure? I’m not even pointed at the can.”

“Trust me.” She fired and there was an unmistakable metallic ding of the bullet striking its target.
Buzz pressed his lips to her neck quickly, “See? Adjusted sight lines, just like I said.”

“If I try again, will ya do that every time?” she murmured, keeping the interaction hidden from her
friend and her brother.

“Maybe,” Buzz smirked. “Fire a few more rounds on your own, and see if you’ve got the hang of
it."

With each attempt, Jessie became more skilled at judging her sight lines and hitting the mark. Buzz was beaming proudly when she sauntered over to him.

“Where’s my reward?” she purred, throwing her arms around his neck, the emptied firearm dangling from her fingers down his back. His hands grasped her waist, and he closed the space between them with a kiss.

“I can see you two,” Woody grumbled.

The setting sun was making any further shooting attempts progressively more difficult, so the men cleaned up the mess of cans and bullets they’d made while the girls spread out the blanket they’d brought and lit the lantern. Not ready to return to their place of work just yet, the four sat and chatted under the moonlight for a short while, until the grasshoppers that had been recently plaguing the riverbank began to swarm around the light from their lantern.

“These blasted bugs!” Jessie screeched, as she scooted backwards and swatted at the air. “I wish they’d go away already.”

“I wish Bonnie would quit going on and on about them being a omen of trouble,” Bo added. “They’re just a nuisance. But maybe we should head back and see if the parlor is free, instead.”

The two couples cleaned up their belongings and returned to the depot. They were approaching the dormitory when they heard clear raised voices through the open parlor window, and they paused as they drew near to the porch, trying to determine what to do next.

“That’s it, we’re through!” Barbie wailed from inside the building. “And give me back my scarf!”

“Ow,” whimpered Ken pathetically.

The girls outside looked at each other in shock as Barbie continued her tirade. “You told me you were done with the saloon! What about your savings, to start your own dress salon - OUR dress salon? You are squandering our security for the future! I cannot be associated with a gambler. I refuse to risk my reputation or my position here as wagon boss because of your poor judgment. I am from one of the best families in Philadelphia. I graduated from Bryn Mawr College with honors. I don’t need YOU!”

The dormitory door swung open and Ken stormed outside, not even noticing the others standing nearby. Jessie and Bo could hear their friend’s muffled sobs.

“We better go make sure she’s okay,” Bo sighed, giving Woody a quick kiss.

“Guess you don’t have to worry about her leaving now,” Buzz smiled, after kissing Jessie goodnight as well.

“Good luck,” Woody called out to both of them, and the two marshals headed toward the depot to turn in.

Buzz elbowed his friend as they ambled across the yard. "You keeping anything else secret about how amazing your sister is?"

Woody shrugged. "I didn't know that would impress you so much. And I never really had a reason to bring it up. Besides," he glanced over at Buzz slyly, "isn't it more fun to find out for yourself?"
"From the Earth to the Moon" by Jules Verne, published in 1867 (English translation), was one of the very first science fiction novels. The land for sale (the acreage, price, and what we eventually reveal is on it) was taken from a real 1894 property ad in a Los Angeles newspaper - $600 translates to about $17,000 in today's money, so still a very good deal. "Asado de buey" is basically roast beef (mentioned in an 1890s Californio cookbook); and "desayuno" is Spanish for breakfast, an important meal to the Californio families who traditionally worked their ranchos, which often included hot chocolate and corn tortillas. The first modern Olympics were held in April 1896, and were already being planned in 1894. There was a quite a bit of labor unrest during this time in American history, which the Industrials' uprising is a part of - the specific incident mentioned in this chapter was detailed in California newspapers of the time. The Colt Peacemaker .45 caliber single-action revolver was one of the most popular firearms among lawmen in the Old West - it was considered the "gun that won the West." Jessie's kick of celebration and frustrated stomp while shooting in the desert were both trademark characteristics of Annie Oakley's performances. And grasshoppers did actually swarm on the Mojave River in May 1894.
Chapter 11

June opened with a constant state of dread cast over the Harvey House staff. The labor unrest that had been affecting the country since Spring was no better now that it was Summer - in fact, it had intensified, and what had originally been limited to regional pockets of discord was now spreading out to even the farthest reaches of the West.

Although California hadn’t been as hard-hit by the Panic of 1893 - the worst depression the country had ever known - as other locales had, the railroad was carrying its continuing effects from elsewhere. Coxey’s Army, who had organized a march on Washington, D. C. from Ohio to lobby the government for assistance in the form of new jobs, had gained supporters on the West coast. On June 7, a train was seized outside of the town of Mojave by some of these unemployed “Commonwealers” - an offshoot known as Barker’s Army - who were trying to take the train all the way to the nation’s capital. They stopped in Barstow, where the District Marshal and a posse of deputies confronted them with a warrant, and over 200 people were arrested. Though the arrest was peaceful, it was enough to unnerve the townsfolk.

News had also been circulating of the discontent among employees of the Pullman Company in Chicago since mid-May, where factory workers had walked out of their jobs to protest reduced wages while rents in their required company housing remained sky-high. Support was building among members of the fledgling American Railway Union, which on June 12 called for a boycott on all trains that included Pullman sleeping cars, if no resolution was reached by the 26th of that same month. It held the potential to cripple train travel and become a nationwide crisis.

The air almost buzzed with anticipated tension as Jessie worked the counter for breakfast. She was pouring coffee for an older gentleman, who met her with a kindly smile. “ Been a bit of excitement in these parts of late, hasn’t there?”

“A bit,” she smiled back.

“Well, I wouldn’t worry too much about it. I’ve lived in this area for a while now, and things always have a way of working out.”

Woody and Buzz entered the room, surprised to see the familiar face at the counter. Buzz hung back while Woody approached the man and greeted him with a friendly handshake, “Mr. Gornik! What
brings you this far out of Calico?"

"Now, Marshal, how many times have I told you to call me Pete?" He lowered his voice and leaned closer, "Word is there’s gold out in Daggett. Thought it couldn’t hurt to find out if there was any truth to that."

"I’ve heard those reports myself. I hope you find what you’re looking for!"

Pete rose from his stool and gestured to Jessie, "As I was just sayin’ to this nice young woman, things have a way of working out. Good day, Marshal, ma’am." He tipped his hat - which he had retrieved from a peg on the wall - and left the depot.

"You know him?" Jessie asked as she poured coffee for the now-seated marshals.

Buzz nodded, "He’s a prospector from Calico. We’ve spoken with him a few times when we were out there."

"He sure seems like a nice old man." Woody added, but Buzz reserved comment.

The conversation was halted as Trixie rushed in from outside, having delivered some morning provisions to the railroad staff who weren’t able to come in to the counter. She was waving a printed flyer in her hand excitedly. "Did you hear?" she exclaimed, out of breath. "There’s a troupe of actors in town and they’re putting on a play! And not just any play, but Shakespeare! I can’t believe it, right here in this tiny little town. My parents used to take us to plays when I was a kid, and I couldn’t get enough. The costumes and scenery… if I could be a part of that, I’d jump at the chance." She shoved the piece of paper in her co-workers’ faces. "This weekend, look!"

The other girls clustered around her and peered over her shoulder at the advertisement. All were atwitter at the prospect of a cultural diversion in the sleepy western settlement.

"Much Ado About Nothing," Dolly read out loud.

Jessie looked askance as a rather unladylike snicker escaped Bo’s lips. "What?"

"Oh nothing, I’ll tell you later," she smirked.

Mr. Kartoffelkopf scowled at the outburst from his post at the register, where he had been ringing up the last of the morning’s travelers. "Professional behavior, ladies. May I remind you there are shifts to be worked on weekends as well as weekdays."

"Oh, please, you have to let us go!" implored Trixie. "Nothing this exciting ever happens here in Barstow. Just Friday and Saturday night; we don’t even have to go Sunday for the matinee. Please, Mr. Kartoffelkopf, please?!!?"

The manager sighed; he knew he’d hear no end of it if he didn’t consent. "Alright. Half of you can go Friday; the other half Saturday. Work it out amongst yourselves and let me know what you decide. But curfew still stands!"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir!" Trixie squealed.

Buzz and Woody overheard the commotion as they nursed the final sips of their breakfast coffee. It wasn’t long before Jessie and Bo came over to them, anticipation sparkling in their eyes.

"Ya wanna go see a play Saturday night?" Jessie’s hands were clasped hopefully.
“Do we have any choice?” Woody laughed. His sister twisted her face in response.

“You’re terrible, Sheriff,” teased Bo. “I used to teach Shakespeare to my older students. This is an enjoyable one, you’ll like it.”

“If you say so,” Woody grinned back in jest.

“I can’t say I’m a Shakespeare aficionado, but I wouldn’t mind going,” Buzz chimed in. “What time?”

“It’s at seven. Bonnie and Trixie and Dolly are goin’ on Friday. Barbie’s still not over Ken, so we can’t talk her into comin’ with us.”

When the weekend finally arrived and it was time for the first round of Harvey Girls to go to the play, they could barely contain their excitement. At six o’clock sharp - the time Mr. Kartoffelkopf had designated for the theatergoers to be excused from work - the trio of friends blustered out of the depot and rushed to change in the dorm.

The next morning, once the tables were ready and all the staff had left to do was await the arrival of the first breakfast guests, the Harvey Girls - all but Trixie, who as of yet hadn’t shown up for work - gathered behind the counter to read the latest news. The top headline was about a local crime that had happened only a few days prior.

“Where’s Odessa Canyon?” questioned Bonnie, as she leaned over Dolly’s shoulder, who was holding the newspaper.

“I think it’s out by Calico,” she responded. “This says the man was a banker in Calico, at least. But he was found shot and robbed, out in the desert. Probably foul play, but no clues to suggest who might have done it.”

Jessie and Bo glanced at each other, their eyes wide with concern.

“Should we be worried?” Bonnie looked up, her countenance pleading with her friends for reassurance.

“Nah, Calico’s an hour away, and he prob’ly had a lot’a money on him,” Jessie replied with a comforting smile. “Nobody’s gonna think we’re rich enough to rob.”

Trixie had walked in to hear just enough of Bonnie and Jessie’s discourse; and she slouched against the counter, the bags under her eyes giving away the fact that she had gotten very little sleep the night before, if any. “How can you care about that when the theater is in town?”

“Nice of you to grace us with your presence,” Dolly remarked, as she folded the newspaper and stashed it beneath the counter. “You’re lucky Mrs. K has been lax on curfew checks; I sure wasn’t covering for you.”

Before Trixie had time to respond, the unmistakable sound of a train whistle sounded outside, and all the girls stood to attention. In no time, hungry passengers had descended upon the eating establishment.

After the breakfast crowd had dispersed, the girls began to ready the tables for the next round of guests. When the dining room was in proper order, they moved on to the counter, and Trixie quickly sidled up to Jessie and Bo. “Oh, I’ve been dying to tell you about the play! It was just swell! And wait’ll you see the lead. He’s actually from England and a real knockout,” she leaned her elbows on the counter and rested her chin in her hands. “R. Maximus,” she breathed dreamily. “The way he
spoke his lines… ‘I do love nothing in the world so well as you’ and oh, what was the other one? Oh! ‘I will live in thy heart, die in thy lap, and be buried in thy eyes’. I sure could go for some horizontal refreshment with him.”

“TRIXIE!!” the other girls cried out in aghast unison.

“PLEASE tell me that’s not what you were doing til nearly dawn,” groaned Dolly.

“You were out all night with him?” Barbie’s face and tone smacked of disapproval.

Trixie giggled at the reaction. “Maybe we were, maybe we weren’t.”

“Last we saw her, she was hanging out by the back door, talking with him,” Bonnie explained to the rest. “So Dolly and I came back on our own. How late did you come back, Trixie?”

“Late enough. But he told me that the evening was glorious, and that I made him question everything he knows.”

“Well, I guess he knew how to get here, because look who just walked in,” Dolly gestured to the doorway as a few of the actors, including R. Maximus, entered.

Trixie flew to the counter to wait on them, which came as a relief to the other girls, who weren’t sure they could make eye contact after the girl’s earlier comments.

“Good afternoon, Trixie!”

“H-hi.” She stared adoringly at the tall, dark-haired man, who was strikingly handsome. A throat-clearing ‘ahem’ from Dolly brought her to the present. “What can I get you for lunch?”

“To gaze upon your beauty is all the sustenance I require,” he replied, his voice a rich, warm baritone made elegant by his accent.

Jessie coughed into her hand to cover up a laugh, and Dolly put on an expression of mock nausea. “Come on, we better help her.”

Trixie hovered around the counter while the actors finished their meal, enjoying their stories of traveling and performing. She sighed as they stood up to go. Maximus reached across the counter and took her hand, “Will I see you tonight?”

“I can’t, I’m working,” Trixie bit her lip, and her eyes darted around the room. She turned back to the actor. “But I can meet you at the stage door afterwards,” she spoke softly and hastily, lest the others hear.

“Farewell, Trixie,” he brought her hand to his lips. “My heart will burn bright until the moment of your return. Tonight, around nine thirty.”

Later in the afternoon, as Jessie and Bo prepared to leave for their turn at the performance, Jessie approached Barbie. “Ya sure ya don’t wanna come with us? It might help get your mind off… things.”

“No, I don’t want to be a third wheel, and I really don’t need to watch a romantic play, either,” her brows knit in faint disgust, “especially when he might be there. You have fun, though; you can tell me about it more objectively than Trixie,” she added with a chuckle.

It wasn’t long until Buzz and Woody were greeting Jessie and Bo at the dormitory door. All four
were dressed in their best attire, which they hadn’t had occasion to wear since their outing in Redlands three months prior.

They began their stroll into town, and Jessie spoke up as they crossed the footbridge over the tracks, out of earshot of the railyard workers. “I’ve been meanin’ to ask, that murder in the paper - is that why y’all were out in Calico all day yesterday?"

“Yeah,” answered Woody. “Hamm wanted us to help him with the investigation.”

“Was it the gang?” she continued.

“Evidence is inconclusive, unfortunately,” Buzz said. “The paper printed all the known information.”

“First the train robbery a few weeks ago… now this. If it is them, I don’t like it one bit,” Bo shook her head, as she recalled an out-of-town incident the Huggins gang had perpetrated just before the Commonwealers’ trouble. “They’re getting far too daring.”

“Nobody was hurt in the train robbery,” Woody placed his hand over Bo’s, which was linked through his arm, “and we don’t know if the gang was involved in the shooting. They haven’t killed anyone before, that we know of.”

Buzz could see the concern in Jessie’s eyes, and gave her hand a squeeze. “No need to worry about this tonight,” he smiled warmly, “we’re on top of it. Just enjoy the play.”

“At least one of us should,” joked Woody. “Verdict’s still out for me.”

After a short and pleasant walk they arrived at the makeshift theater, housed in the community’s school building that had also been the locale of the Christmas dance. At the door, tickets were purchased, and seats were secured inside.

“This place brings back memories,” Bo commented as they waited for the performance to begin. “We haven’t been back in here since Christmas.”

Jessie grinned at the recollection. “That was such a fun night!”

“You know,” Buzz started, and Jessie pivoted to face him, “I nearly fell to my knees when you turned around to hand me your cape, and I first saw you in that dress.”

“Didja really?” she beamed.

He reached for her hand. “I did.”

“I can vouch for him,” Woody laughed. “He was a goner.”

The lights dimmed, and three of the cast members entered from the side of the stage, setting the plot in motion. The audience was held rapt with attention, especially when R. Maximus delivered his monologue as Benedick. Jessie and Bo sat on opposite ends of Buzz and Woody, often elbowing their respective partners to silence the snickers that peppered the performance. At one point, Bo had to rouse her beau when she noticed his head bob drowsily out of the corner of her eye.

When the two couples walked outside after the play’s conclusion, they noticed an oddly familiar form hanging around towards the back of the building.

“Isn’t that Trixie?” Buzz pointed out, gesturing at the shadowy figure in the darkness.
“Yeah, she’s dead gone on that Benedick fella,” explained Jessie, and Buzz snickered at the name, just like he and Woody had done so many times throughout the evening. Jessie rolled her eyes.

“What did I just watch, anyway?” Woody quipped, as they headed back to the depot. I’ll give them the ‘nothing’ part.”

Buzz let out a chuckle at his friend’s remark. ‘I’m with you on the ‘nothing’, I’ve had enough Shakespeare for one day… or longer.”

“I don’t think the title means what you think it does, boys,” Bo laughed, as she looked at them both mischievously.

Woody’s eyebrows furrowed. “How could it mean anything but what it is?”

“In Shakespeare, words don’t always mean what they seem to on the surface. Or I should say, they don’t mean only what they seem to.”

“Is that why ya giggled over the poster?” Jessie grinned, joining in on the conversation. When Bo nodded, her friend prodded further. “So, you gonna explain, or just leave us hangin’?”

Bo exhaled, having opened up this can of worms that she now had to clarify. “Well, Shakespeare was often directly bawdy, but sometimes he disguised it. The word ‘nothing’ in the title means both nothing and - ” she paused, blushing slightly, “well, it also referred to a certain area of female anatomy.” When Jessie stared back at her blankly, Bo added, “You know, thing versus no thing?”

Buzz and Woody let out hearty guffaws, and Jessie burst into a fit of giggles. “Wouldn’t Aunt Molly like t’know that all the culture she was exposin’ us to was really dirty! Ya didn’t teach your students that, didja?”

“Not officially, no,” Bo winked. “I might have mentioned it to one or two students that I thought could handle it. Besides, it’s not all double entendre; there are plenty of phrases used today that are thanks to Shakespeare.” She ticked off on her fingers, “There’s ‘good riddance’, ‘fair play’, ‘love is blind’, just to name a few.”

“Huh, maybe we’re more cultured that we thought,” Jessie nudged her brother, noting the look of immense pride on his face as he gazed down at Bo, in awe of her knowledge.

Sunday’s workday came as usual, albeit with Trixie showing up even later than she had the day before. And oddly enough, to her friends, she seemed much calmer and closed-lipped about the visiting troupe than she had been the day before. As Jessie and Bo recounted the performance for Barbie - leaving out that they had seen Trixie lurking in the shadows - the others hinted at their starstruck friend’s unusual demeanor.

“You’re awfully calm for someone whose fella is leaving town today,” Bonnie pointed out.

“Who says he’s my fella?” her face reddened furiously.

“Staying out with him two nights in a row says something,” muttered Dolly. She had become visibly weary of her roommate’s dalliances, and the position they put her in.

Trixie crossed her arms, “Can you blame a girl for wanting to have a little fun? It’s not as though we get the chance all that often.”

“You won’t find it fun to be out of a job,” Barbie scolded. “Train’s pulling into the station, ladies. Get to your posts.
The rest of the day ran with the clockwork-like precision that Harvey establishments were known for; even Trixie maintained her best professional manner despite her exhaustion. With the theatrical troupe performing their final show that afternoon, and set to depart on the first train out of Barstow on Monday’s schedule, the girls’ lives would soon be back to normal. Or so they thought.

The following morning, Dolly showed up for work with a letter in hand, which she held out to Barbie. “We’ve got a situation…”

I've run off with Max. I'm going to be an actress! Sorry to leave you and the girls in the lurch. I’ll write when we get to L.A. xoxo Trixie

By the end of June, the threatened Pullman boycott had come to pass, and the Santa Fe was the hardest hit of all the railroads. As expected, trains were backed up for days, seriously delaying the transportation of passengers, freight, and U. S. Mail.

July Fourth arrived with no fanfare. The depot was still in the midst of the strike, and any plans its staff might have had to celebrate the holiday, whether in town or on their own, were regretfully discarded. With cantankerous stranded customers to cater to, and a picket line on the tracks that they didn’t dare cross, those in the Harvey House were just as stuck as the Pullman car occupants.

“The first Independence Day since I’m really independent, and everythin’s cancelled,” Jessie grumbled as she slumped down onto a depot bench next to Buzz, resting her head on his shoulder. Evening had fallen, and the day’s turmoil - the new normal in Barstow - had temporarily settled.

“At least they got one train out today,” Bo smiled at her friend from the adjacent bench, where she was seated with Woody. “That’s some progress.”

“I s’pose. I do feel for the strikers, they’re just tryin’ to fight the greedy ol’ rich folks and get what they’re due, even if it’s a pain in the neck.”

“Pain or not, it’s illegal, Jess. They’re interfering with the mail,” Woody interjected.

“Yeah, well, it’s interferin’ with the workers’ lives that they can’t get paid fair!” Jessie snapped at her brother.

“Okay, you two, that’s enough,” Buzz held up his hand. “I’m all for the railroad owners taking a hit; they’ve stolen enough rancho land from my relatives over the years. But arguing won’t solve anything. We’re all tired, and on edge.”

“Ugh, I know,” Jessie sighed. “I just need to get away from the depot for a while.” She looked at Buzz and Woody, “but you fellas hafta stay here, and help keep an eye on things, don’tcha?”

“It’s been a little quieter since that relief train left. Why don’t you and Buzz go out to Buzzard Rock?” offered Woody. “Bo and I can stay here, or walk down by the riverbed - if that’s okay with you,” he deferred to Bo.

“That’s fine. My head’s been hurting since this afternoon, anyway. I don’t mind staying closer to home.”

“You sure?” Buzz asked his partner.


Bo giggled, and reached out for Woody’s vest, tugging him toward her. Their lips met, and he
willingly reciprocated the kiss. When they pulled apart, Bo grinned at Jessie and Buzz. “There’s one less thing on that list. Have fun!”

Buzz and Jessie had only stepped a few yards away from their friends when he stopped in his tracks. “Wait, shouldn’t we have something to sit on?”

“I really don’t care; I just wanna get away,” Jessie’s eyes pleaded her desperation for an escape. “We don’t have as much time as usual as it is.”

“Still, we shouldn’t be just sitting out in the sand. Why don’t you go get Bo’s blanket real quick; we won’t need a lantern with this full moon tonight.”

Jessie darted off to the dorm, and was back at her marshal’s side in a flash. He took the blanket from her, she grasped his free hand, and the couple hastened across the desert expanse, toward their usual hideaway.

“Long day, florecita?” Buzz smirked, amused at the almost-frantic pace of her steps.

“It’s this strike. Everyone’s grouchy from bein’ stranded in the heat. Coffee was too cold, then too hot. One guest didn’t like the food touchin’ other food on the plate. The silverware was dirty, except it wasn’t. They can’t understand why we’re only servin’ ‘em two meals a day, when it’s been a week already and there’s no end in sight. Would they rather we run out, and have no food at all? One passenger even acted like we were responsible for this whole mess and backed it up by pointing out the white hair bows of our uniform. He actually made Bonnie cry! It’s a good thing Mr. K stepped in, or I’d’a given him a piece of my mind and then some.”

He chuckled, “Good thing; I don’t want to have to negotiate your release from jail.”

“She’s still convinced it’s all because of those grasshoppers, even though they’re gone now,” Jessie said with a short laugh.

“The way Bonnie’s mind works is a mystery of science.”

The two reached the rock, and Jessie flopped down onto the blanket that Buzz had spread out for them. He sat down next to her, and she continued her much-needed venting session.

“To top it all off there was this little snot of a boy in a high chair - if he wasn’t at least seven, I’ll eat my boots. Ate like a horse for half price, too. He spent the whole meal tryin’ to get me mad.”

“Oh, I’ve seen him. He’s been staying in the hotel, and ‘shoots’ me every time he passes me in the hall. *El pequeño mocoso*,” Buzz’s face twisted in annoyance at the thought of the badly-behaved child, “that means ‘little brat.’ But why was he trying to make you mad?”

“His grandmother apparently told him that redheads have fiery tempers and he thought it meant my hair would actually burst into flames.” Buzz let out a snicker and she poked his side, “Sure, you can laugh. He wasn’t throwin’ peas at you all through the meal.”

He wrapped his arm around her waist, “Maybe he just didn’t know how to do it right.”

She looked up at him with a warning glare, “Don’t you dare.”

He laughed again and kissed the top of her head, “No, ma’am; wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Hmph,” her tone was skeptical, but nevertheless she snuggled against her beau’s shoulder. “I just wanna sit here a while, and stare at the stars, and enjoy the quiet. No customers yellin’ about every
little thing, no strikers shoutin’ ‘scabby’ at the trains… just quiet.”

The couple sat silently, in one of those moments when words need not be spoken. Yet not even Buzz’s comforting embrace could soothe all the ills wrought by current stresses. After some time had passed, Jessie abruptly bolted upright, and began tugging at her hair.

“Ugh, Bo’s not the only one; this whole day’s given me a headache, too, and this hair ain’t helpin’.” She began taking the pins from the heavy braid that she hadn’t bothered to let down before, then pulled the ribbon from the end and raked her fingers through in an attempt to unbraid it. “Tarnation,” she grunted, as the tangles were getting the better of her frazzled nerves.

“Here,” Buzz gently lowered her hands, “May I?” She nodded and he shifted to sit behind her. He was almost dumbstruck by the sight of her hair hanging loose to her waist. The gleam from the moonlight gave her hair a soft glow and his hands ghosted over it, almost reverently. He worked unhurriedly and gently, easing the knots from her tresses. Small noises of contentment escaped Jessie as Buzz repeatedly combed his fingers through her untangled hair. “There; feel better?”

She shook her head, “Still hurts.”

“Where?” He turned to look at her.

“Here,” she pointed to her temple. Buzz smiled and pressed his lips gently to the offending spot. “Here,” she moved her finger to her forehead and Buzz followed. “Here,” pointing to her cheek. After Buzz pulled away, she put her finger to her lips, “Definitely here.” Buzz took her chin in his fingers and slanted his mouth against hers.

He drew back slightly after a few minutes. “What about here?” he asked, his voice low. Jessie inhaled sharply as he delicately brushed her hair aside and put his lips on her neck, gently sucking at her skin. As he continued his ministrations, Jessie found it hard to remain upright. His hand dropped to her back and she leaned against his arm heavily. Their lips met again, and Buzz slowly lowered her onto the blanket they had been sitting on.

Jessie ran her fingers through his hair as he returned his attention to her neck. One of his hands still spanned her back, and she gripped his bicep. He was heavy against her, and she felt a rising desire to feel more of him. She loosened the hand he had resting on her hip and brought it up to her breast. Even though several layers of clothing separated her skin from his, she felt the heat from it nonetheless.

The move caught Buzz by surprise, but he was fighting the same hunger. His mouth met hers mercilessly and he moaned into the kiss. Jessie returned the affection more than willingly, wanting nothing more than to lose herself completely to the moment. He felt the inside of Jessie’s leg brush along the outside of his and he forced himself to pull away from her. “We have to stop,” he panted.

“We don’t,” Jessie protested and reached to pull him back down.

Buzz caught her hand, “No, we do.” He could see the look of hurt confusion on her face and he pressed his lips to her knuckles. He released her hand and cupped her cheek, running his thumb gently across it. “I gave my word of honor to your employer that I would respect your reputation. Beyond that, I promised Woody that I wouldn’t overstep my bounds.” He smiled tenderly at her, “Most importantly, I love you too much to risk compromising you.” His smile turned into a toothy grin, “And I would very much like to do that right now. But Woody’d know; I’m a bad liar and he’s a good shot.”

Jessie laughed, “So’m I, if you remember.” She reached up and kissed him softly. “But I s’pose
you’re right.”

Buzz raised himself and sat back on his heels, then offered a hand to pull Jessie up to sitting. As she straightened her shirtwaist, Buzz took his watch from his vest pocket. He held it at several different angles before he was finally able to read it, thanks to the moon being obscured by dense clouds that had only recently rolled in.

“Uh, Jessie? Your curfew is at ten, right?”

“Yeah, why?”

“We need to go. Now,” he held the watch towards her, and she could see that the time read quarter past ten.

“Sweet mother of Abraham Lincoln!”

Jessie stood in haste and rebraided her hair, while Buzz folded the blanket they’d been sitting on and draped it across his arm. There was no time to waste, and they headed back toward the depot nearly at a run. The pair hadn’t even made it to the bridge before the sky opened up and the clouds that had gathered during their outing unleashed a fierce downpour.

Jessie normally would have appreciated the sweet smell of creosote that the desert rain brought out in the air, but there was no time to enjoy such pleasantries now.

“Do you think you’ll be able to get in alright?” Buzz asked as they drew closer to the depot, his voice raised to be audible over the deluge.

“I hope. They lock the door, but Trixie said she climbed the trellis when she was sneakin’ in after bein’ out with that actor. An’ Bo’n I never lock the window. Just hold onto the blanket for me, ‘k? One less thing to worry about.”

When they reached the dorm, they parted with a quick kiss. Jessie stood at the base of the trellis, that was attached to the side of the porch away from the depot and the Kartoffelkopfs’ living quarters. She took a deep breath and grasped the wooden latticework beneath the rain-wet leaves of the climbing bougainvillea that adorned it. “Here goes,” she whispered to herself.

The climb was an easy one, despite the slick surface, and Jessie cautiously and stealthily crept along the porch roof, steadying herself against the second story of the building as she made her way to her own window on the opposite side. The window was closed, as she expected due to the rain, so she pushed on its frame - and it didn’t budge. Peering inside, all was dark, and Bo was fast asleep. Jessie tapped lightly on the window - as much noise as she dared make - but the sound was no louder than the raindrops already beating against the glass, and her friend didn’t stir. Jessie brushed her dripping bangs away from her forehead and tried again, still to no avail. “Blast!” she cursed under her breath, then retraced her steps across the roof and down the trellis.

No sooner had Jessie’s boots hit the ground than she was met face to face with Lenny, who was standing on the porch. She let out a gasp.

“Lenny! I’m so sorry, but can ya let me in? I lost track of time, and…”

The depot’s watchman chuckled as he rifled through his keys to find the right one. “It’s okay, I ran into Marshal Lightyear. I had noticed someone scaling the roof of the dormitory, and he told me it was only you, and asked rather sheepishly if I could make sure you got in safely.” With a swift turn of a key and click of a doorknob, the dorm door was opened. “Don’t worry, I won’t rat you two out. But you should take off your shoes, so you don’t leave wet footprints,” he suggested with a smile.
“I’ll lock up behind you.”

“Thanks a heap!” Jessie exclaimed, as loudly as she could under the circumstances. “I owe ya one.”

Following Lenny’s advice, she removed her footwear and tiptoed in stocking feet across the foyer and up the stairs to her room, stepping deliberately so as not to elicit a creak from stair tread or floorboard. She slowly turned her own doorknob, and once she was finally safe, inside and undetected, she let out the breath she didn’t know she’d been holding.

Sensing another presence in the room, Bo wakened and sat up slowly, rubbing her eyes. “Jessie?” She immediately recognized her roommate’s deflated leg-o’-mutton sleeves and heavily-waterlogged skirt walking past the foot of her bed. “Jessie! You’re soaking wet!”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t make it back by curfew, and thought I could climb in the window, but it was locked.”

Her friend brought her hands to her mouth in horror. “Oh, Jessie, I’m sorry! The rain was coming down so hard, I was afraid it would leak if I didn’t lock it. Did you get in trouble with Mr. K?”

“Nah, Lenny let me in,” she flung her wet clothes over the dressing screen that she had changed quickly behind, and emerged wearing a dry nightgown. “‘Sides, it was worth it,” she added with a wicked grin.

Bo smirked. “Jessie Pride, what have you been doing?”

“Nothin, really,” she shrugged, as she snuggled down into her own bed and pulled up the covers beneath her chin, “but not for lack of tryin’.”

Meanwhile, in the adjacent hotel, an equally-soaked Buzz walked through the door. His cotton shirt clung to his arms, transparent, and rainwater was dripping from his slick, dark hair. He draped the wet woolen blanket over the back of a chair, and fervently hoped that his partner wasn’t aware of the time.

Woody sat on his bed, polishing his revolver. He looked up over the barrel and raised his eyebrows suspiciously. “Isn’t it past Jessie’s curfew?”

Buzz felt the heat rising to his face. “Yes, it is, b-but… funny story… we… uh… got caught in the rain.”

Woody spun the cylinder, as he reloaded it with cartridges. “That better be all you got caught in.”

“Heh… uh… I- I’m gonna go get dried off,” he hurried out of the room.

The door closed hastily and Woody fell back on the bed, helpless with laughter.

“We have to run out to Daggett today. We’ll be back after lunch sometime.”

“Be careful out there.”

Buzz set down his cup, and Jessie let her hand brush his. It was the most affection they dared display while they were both on duty; yet the recent chain of events made her feel as if she needed even the briefest of comforting contact.

By mid-July, a couple weeks after it had started, the Pullman boycott was finally over. However, there was a lingering sense of apprehension hanging around the Harvey House, thanks to all the staff
had been through. Although Barstow hadn’t seen the levels of violence and vandalism other depots had dealt with, they had been shaken by the foreboding presence of numerous armed deputy marshals and federal troops who rode the trains and got off at each stop to stand guard as the strike progressed. To further complicate matters, the impasse brought about by the boycott had prevented the Harvey company from sending a replacement for Trixie, and the dining facilities remained shorthanded. Still, the girls managed, even as train travel picked up again now that the rails were open.

In this whirlwind of activity, the hours since the marshals’ departure for Daggett had flown by. Now midday, the lunch counter was bustling, with every seat occupied by travelers. Jessie, Bo, and Barbie all had their hands full keeping up with the orders, performing a kind of dance as they maneuvered in and out of the kitchen. The sounds of pleasant conversation filled the room, accompanied by the clink of flatware and glasses. Without warning the doors swung open and a group of masked men flooded in, “Alright, nobody move; this is a hold up!”

Male and female customers alike cried out in fear as the bandits spread across the room, revolvers drawn. One of the outlaws stepped forward, clearly the leader. “Ladies, if you would be so kind as to remove your jewelry. Gentlemen, your wallets. You,” he pointed at Mr Kartoffelkopf, “go to the back; get bread, potatoes, and no funny business!”

As the gang moved among the patrons, Jessie glanced across at Bo and Barbie, the latter of whom was white with terror. Mr. Kartoffelkopf came back from the kitchen, lugging a flour sack filled to the brim with provisions. He threw it across the counter with a deep scowl. “New guns in my office, if I could just get there,” she heard him mutter.

“If you can get one, get two,” Jessie murmured.

The manager shot her a look. “For who, exactly, you? You’re not Annie Oakley, Miss Pride, and I’m not interested in helping you make a spectacle of yourself.”

Jessie fought to keep her tone even, “I know how to shoot.”

“Absolutely out of the question. And even if I were to arm someone, it wouldn’t be a woman, much less one of my employees.”

“Quiet back there!” one of the robbers yelled. “You got access to this register?” he directed at Bo, gesturing at the ornate brass cash register that sat on the newsstand counter.

Mr. Kartoffelkopf volunteered, “I do.”

“Then open it.”

The laughter that had been so prevalent had been replaced by sobs. An older lady at the counter was crying as one of the men rid her of her wedding band while two others waved their weapons at her, mocking and laughing at her fear. Jessie charged out from behind the counter, her fists clenched in anger. She had only taken a few steps when one of the men noticed her. “You aren’t going anywhere,” he growled menacingly.

“Yeah? Who’s gonna stop me?” she met his glower, not moving.

He leveled his revolver at her, “Go on; back behind the counter.”

“Now Jonesy,” drawled the man Jessie took for the leader, “we don’t need any bloodshed.” He looked at Jessie appraisingly, and clicked the piece of hard candy in his mouth against his teeth. The sickening scent of sugary-strawberry wafted in her face along with his menacing breath. “We do
need a woman’s presence back home, though. Don’t you agree?” He leered at her, bursting out in maniacal laughter as he used the end of his wooden cane to lift the hem of her skirt. Jessie kicked the cane away, which only resulted in louder cackles of evil humor.

Jonesy let out a raspy chuckle, “Sure, boss.” He grabbed Jessie by her upper arm and tried to pull her forward.

“Let me go, ya big varmint!” As she was fighting back, a man ran into the room, his face obscured by a bandana like the others.

“Lawmen are coming! Better run, boys,” his voice wavered with panic.

Another outlaw, with bulging, bug-like eyes, twitched in agitation. “Told ya we shoulda hit the dining room first! More money in there!”

The leader spat his command, “No time! Get the hell outta here, now!”

She saw Jonesy was distracted by the commotion and seized the opportunity, landing a solid punch to the man’s right eye. He shoved her away roughly, sending her sprawling to the floor as the gang scattered.

Buzz and Woody ran into the depot, followed closely by Sheriff Varney and his two deputies. “We’ll go after the bandits, Marshal. You two take care of everyone here.” They came into the lunch room, greeted by slight chaos. Buzz’s brows dipped as he saw Jessie standing up and brushing her skirt as Bo hovered anxiously over her.

Woody held up his hand, “All right folks, please just calm down. I know you just had a fright, but we need everyone to sit down so we can find out exactly what happened. Mr. Kartoffelkopf,” he looked to the manager, “how many of your employees were present?”

“Oh girls, what an awful experience for you! The marshals just want to ask some questions. Once
you’re done, you of course are excused from the rest of your shift.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Kartoffelkopf,” Bo said levelly, “but that won’t be necessary for me.”

“Me, either,” Jessie stated, “I’m fine to come back to work. I’d rather do that, if you don’t mind.”

She smiled, “If that’s what you’d like, I appreciate your dedication. I’ll let my husband know.”

Once the door was closed, the professional pretense was dropped and Buzz hurried over to Jessie. “Are you alright?”

“I’m mad, that’s what I am! I could’a helped, Buzz!” She railed on about her employer’s obstinance.

Woody knelt before Bo and took her free hand, “Are you okay?” he ran a thumb gently over her hand.

She offered him a smile, “Yes; guess it’s just hitting me now, what happened.”

He turned to Barbie, “And you, Miss Roberts?”

Jessie’s voice broke in before Barbie could answer. “An’ then he said he wasn’t interested in helping me make a spectacle of myself. As if I’d suggested that I wanted to stand on the lunch counter in nothin’ but my drawers and do the two-step!”

The room was silent until Buzz coughed and thumbed his nose. “Yes, well... I’m, uh, I’m sure that would have served as an effective distraction. But I think I’m glad it didn’t come to that.”

Jessie stared at him for a moment, then finally giggled. Buzz gestured for her to sit and she perched herself on the arm of the sofa.

Woody started, “Now, why don’t we just start from the beginning. Miss Roberts, could you tell us what happened?”

Barbie took a deep breath and wiped a tear from her cheek, “The shift was just like any other, maybe a bit busier. I think the train might’ve been more crowded than usual.” She continued on, “The way they were waving around their guns, I’ve never been so afraid. When one of them grabbed Jessie, I thought I would faint.”

Woody and Buzz both looked sharply at Jessie. “What!?” Woody asked, turning towards her.

She shrank a little under her brother’s scrutiny. “A couple’a the robbers were really scarin’ this one lady, an’ no one else was gonna stop ‘em!”

“Jessie, these men have murdered someone!” he flung his arms wildly.


The parlor door flung open and Woody and Buzz immediately drew their revolvers. As he did, Buzz reached his other arm out as a shield in front of Jessie. They lowered their guns and shoulders in relief as Ken came running into the room, “Barbie! I just heard the news. Are you alright?”

“Oh, Ken!” she jumped off the sofa and into his arms. “Ken, it was just awful! I… I can’t take it anymore! Robberies and bandits and murders… take me away from this place, Ken; take me awayyyyy!” she sobbed into his shoulder.
“Darn it, Barbie… I know we’ve only known each other a few months, but let’s get married. I’m done with playing poker, I promise. That weasel Purvis at the saloon, he cheated me, thought I was a pushover. I don’t want anything to do with gambling again, ever. I’ve learned my lesson.” He took his hands in hers, and their eyes met, his displaying earnest emotion. “Marry me and we’ll build a fashion empire, together.”

She looked at him, then to Jessie and Bo, her two closest friends. Jessie smiled encouragingly and gave her a thumbs up. Barbie’s face illuminated with happiness, and she turned back to Ken, “Oh Ken, of course I will!” She giggled as Ken escorted her from the parlor, the door closing behind them.

“Well, I guess that interview is over,” Woody grumbled as he returned his gun to its holster.

Buzz stared down at Jessie, “Yours isn’t. Please continue.”

She made short work of the story without leaving out details. When she mentioned the leader’s words and actions she paused, “It was sorta strange, when he was talkin’ I could swear I smelled strawberries.” She heard Buzz and Woody both inhale sharply and continued, “’Anyways, they must’a had someone keepin’ watch, because right then he came runnin’ in. That distracted Jonesy and he ain’t gonna be able to show his face for a while. I got him right in the eye,” she boasted. “He pushed me down so he could run, an’ that’s it.”

“Jess, that was dangerous,” Woody gently scolded.

She gaped at him incredulously. “They were terrifyin’ that poor lady, Woody! Someone needed t’help!”

He held up his hand quickly in response to her glare, “I know, but hear me out. I’m proud of you for wanting to step in, but you were outnumbered. And if no one was willing to help her, they might not have helped you if you needed it. You don’t want to make yourself a target, especially given that I’m your brother.”

Bo laid a hand on his arm, “You said these men murdered someone. Was it that man they found in the canyon?”

Buzz shot another look at Woody before answering Bo’s question. “Yes. We’re sure this gang was behind it, but that information was supposed to be confidential. We don’t want it getting out; hopefully that will help lull them into a false sense of security.”

She frowned, “Do you think they’ll try and rob the depot again?”

“No,” Woody shook his head, “I doubt it, anyway. They’re going to have to lay low for a while after today’s close call. And if Jessie got that one as good as she says, and I’m willing to bet you got him better,” he added with a grin at his sister, “he’ll definitely have to stay hidden. We’ll be keeping an extra eye on this place, don’t you worry, little lady.”

There was another knock at the door and Rex poked his head in. “Excuse me, Marshals, sir, but I’m supposed to tell you that Sheriff Varney wants you to come down to his office.”

“Thank you, Rex,” Woody waved at the young busboy in dismissal.

Bo stood, “We’d better get back to work, anyway. And you should change your apron, Jessie.”

Jessie scowled as she saw the marks on the white fabric, “Tarnation. I feel bad for whoever has to clean my uniforms.”
Woody pecked Bo on her cheek, “We’ll be back for dinner. If you need us…”

She smiled, “I know just where to find you, Sheriff.

Jessie pressed her lips and then her cheek to Buzz’s, uttering the words that had become habit for her over the past tumultuous month, “Be careful, ‘k?”

He turned her face and caught her lips against his, “You, too, florecita. And no dancing on the counter unless I’m here to see it,” he winked.

She laughed, “No promises.” Her gaze lingered on him as he brought her hand to his lips before she and Bo left to attend to their duties. Woody saw Buzz staring after Jessie, a clouded look on his face. “Come on, Buzz,” he clapped his hand on his friend’s back, “let’s go.”

Their meeting with Slink took up the rest of the afternoon, leaving Buzz and Woody barely enough time to get back to the Harvey House and secure seats in the dining room for dinner. Before heading up to their room, Woody managed to stop Bo long enough at the counter to say that they would meet up with her and Jessie after their shift was over.

Back in their private quarters, Buzz was furiously pulling the straps of his exercise apparatus while Woody looked over their notes. “I don’t like it, Buzz. They’re getting bolder, that much is plain. One or two robbing the bank or the post office, but seven of them? They definitely know by now why we’re here, but how did they know we weren’t at the hotel to pull that kind of heist? I’ve been thinking about it, and in the last few months, the gang seems to strike when we’re out of town. We were in Calico when the train was held up in June, and now this. But the only way they’d know that is if they had an informant somewhere here in town.” He glanced up at his friend, “If you don’t take it easy, you’re going to pull the door frame out of the wall.”

Buzz dropped the cords. “I know. It’s just… I can’t stop thinking about what happened earlier. What might have happened.” He balled his hands into fists, his mind replaying the details of the leader’s advances on Jessie.

Woody gave him a sympathetic smile, “Jessie’s pretty resilient; she can take care of herself.”

“Blast it, I know that!” Buzz shouted. “Sorry,” his voice immediately dropped in volume, “but you heard what she said. What if I’m putting her at risk? If the gang has a spy who knows when we’re here, and when we’re not, what else might they know?”

“If you’re putting her at risk, so am I. Don’t worry, Buzz. I think the girls are pretty safe here, and Jessie’s not going to go looking for trouble.” Woody’s mouth formed an “o” and his eyebrows lifted. “Say, though… we could use their help.”

Buzz narrowed his eyes warily, “What do you have in mind?”

“Nothing that would put them in harm’s way, I promise.” He outlined his idea to his partner.

“Yes,” Buzz nodded slowly, his fingers curled around his chin as he contemplated Woody’s proposal. “Yes, I think that would be harmless enough. We’ll ask them tonight.”

Later that evening, Bo and Jessie were changing out of their uniforms before meeting the men. As Jessie slipped the black bodice of her uniform down over her shoulders, Bo let out a gasp. “Oh, Jessie!”

Jessie followed her friend’s gaze to her own left arm. Bruises had formed from where the bandit had grabbed her earlier. “Confound it! Oh, what I wouldn’t give t’get another shot at that rotten son of
“…” she grimaced. “Don’t tell Buzz or Woody, okay?”

The four met outside and strolled down to the now-dry riverbed; everyone was exhausted from the day’s events, but the copse of cottonwood trees would provide the privacy they needed for their conversation. Once they were seated, Woody began, “We’d like to ask a favor of you girls, if we may.”

“You know we’ll do anythin’ to help,” Jessie eagerly replied. Bo followed with a nod of consent.

“We have reason to believe that there’s an informant on the premises,” he continued. “The gang must have known that Buzz and I would be away today, just like when they held up the train between here and Minneola last month. Have you seen anyone acting suspicious, lurking around the depot or spending a lot of time at the counter?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” Bo replied. “But we’ve been so busy since Trixie left, we could have missed something.”

“We know you’re both very busy when you’re working,” Buzz interjected. “But if you happen to notice someone who looks like they might be eavesdropping, please take note of everything you can about them, and let us know as soon as possible.” He turned to Jessie, who was sitting at his side. “And DON’T engage them. This gang is far more dangerous than we realized.”

“We’ll do our best. So… if we’re in on this, can ya tell us what ‘xactly happened in the desert?” Jessie asked. “Ya know you can trust us to not say a word.”

Woody looked to Buzz, not wanting to commit the same misstep as before. “Well, it was a clerk from the bank in Calico - the paper should have told you that much,” he explained, after getting his partner’s silent approval. “Apparently, he had gone to collect on a mortgage debt from one of the miners - Pete Gornik, you met him at the counter that one time. Anyway, Pete said he paid him, but the gang ambushed the clerk out in the desert on his way back to town, shot him and stole the mortgage money and his personal belongings. Hamm was called in by the bank manager, when his employee never returned, and he and his deputies found him in the desert with a piece of strawberry candy laying nearby. Hamm sent his deputy to get us.”

“I remember that!” Jessie blurted out. “Y’all were whisperin’, and ya left for Calico, and that was the day the train got robbed!” Her face grew serious, and her voice smaller. “Wait, so the strawberry I smelled… that’s why y’all were so upset? The one who went after me was the… murderer?”

“Him, or one of his accomplices,” Buzz said, rubbing his thumb across her hand that he was already holding and looking her intently in the eye. “That’s why you mustn’t interact with any of them, or anyone you have even the slightest hunch could possibly be involved with the gang. They seem to be getting desperate; and we’re not sure what could be motivating these attacks, besides provisions being low in Calico due to the strike.”

“I know times have been hard, but why now?” Bo questioned. “The mines have been struggling for ages, but I thought things were finally turning around, what with gold being found and the strike over with.”

“I have my suspicions.” Buzz met Woody’s gaze, a stubborn resolve in his eyes. “Woody doesn’t quite see things the same way I do, but we’ll get to the bottom of it soon, one way or another.”

“Just keep a lookout, that’s all we ask,” Woody’s glance shifted between the two girls who meant more to him than anything in the world, “but play it safe. And don’t say anything to the others; we don’t want to cause a panic.”
Jessie smiled first at her brother, then at Buzz. “You got it.”

Chapter End Notes

There was, in fact, that much drama in Barstow during the summer of 1894. While the theatrical troupe’s visit is fictional, the uprisings (and gold discovery) are not, and all of those details come from newspaper accounts of the time. Coxey’s Army was also known as the Army of the Commonwealth in Christ, hence the term Commonwealers. The Pullman Strike, or boycott, crippled railroads in the midwestern and western states between June 26 and July 11 of 1894, with the effects lingering some days after. In solidarity for the plight of the Pullman employees, members of the American Railway Union refused to service trains pulling Pullman sleeping cars. The mention of the white bow in the Harvey Girls’ hair is a reference to strike supporters wearing white ribbons - although for the girls, it was just an everyday part of their uniforms. Also, children in high chairs got their meals for half price at Harvey restaurants, hence Jessie’s reference to the boy being close to seven - customers often abused the discount.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Don't hate us for this one. ;)

As always, be sure to visit our Pinterest board ("Jessie's Journey" under username yodelincowgirl) to see what we've added for this chapter. We've also added a "Maps" section for reference throughout all the chapters. I'll be adding both hand-drawn and historical maps to this section throughout the fic.

Toy Story still doesn't belong to us - if it did, we'd know already if we're getting a Toy Story 4 teaser with Incredibles 2. Enjoy, and please remember to leave us some kudos and subscribe so you don't miss what happens next!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a tearful group of Harvey Girls who stood on the depot platform, waiting for the train to arrive that would both bring their first round of passengers for the day and take their friend away to her new life in Los Angeles.

Barbie had given her notice to Mr. Kartoffelkopf, agreeing to stay for two weeks so that she could train Dolly - who had the longest tenure and a good work ethic - to take over her role as wagon boss. During that time, she had packed up her large wardrobe, while Ken sold his shop and secured lodgings and marriage arrangements for the couple for when they arrived in the city. Now - the picture of refinement in an elegant gray and mauve traveling suit - the bride-to-be hugged each of her friends tightly as they said their goodbyes.

“I’m going to miss you terribly, both of you,” she gushed to Jessie and Bo as she embraced them fiercely in turn. “You have to promise to keep in touch, okay? I’ll write as soon as I have our new address. I want to hear all about your marshals, and you must let me make your wedding gowns when that day comes.” As both girls blushed and grinned back sheepishly at her, Barbie laughed through her tears. “Oh, please, I know it’ll happen, we all do. You’ll be next.”

“If you say so,” Jessie giggled, her heart secretly leaping at the thought. “But listen,” she leaned closer, lowering her voice and casting a side glance at Ken, “he better treat ya right, or I’ll be huntin’ him down in the city to give him what for.”

“Everything’s fine now,” Barbie smiled at her friend’s concern. “He’s kept his word… and I’ll be making sure he continues to,” she added with a wink.

The whistle in the distance led to more hasty hugs and farewells and reminders to write often, followed by a flurry of black and white fabric as the working girls took their posts inside.

The mood felt different, with two new employees having arrived to fill the void left by Trixie and Barbie. Although the existing girls were welcoming to the new additions, they couldn’t help but miss the camaraderie they had all shared before.

In the midst of all the change, Jessie and Bo had still made time for Buzz and Woody when they could; however, now they had to meet somewhat on the sly, so as not to alert the suspected and still
unknown gang informant, and as a result their outings were not as frequent as they had become accustomed to. On the evening after Barbie’s departure, secret plans had been made with the men to lift their spirits, and the two girls walked casually down toward the Mojave River, enjoying the dusky summer night air. Jessie squinted in the direction of the shadowy cottonwoods that lined the dry riverbed. “Where’d the guys say they’d meet us?”

Bo motioned to a nest of trees several yards ahead, “Down around here, I think. I think I see Woody just ahead.”

As the girls approached, Woody grinned. “I was starting to wonder if we were being stood up!” He greeted Bo with a kiss on the cheek.

“Now, Sheriff,” she favored him with a sly look, “would I do that to you?”

“I told her to walk faster!” laughed Jessie. “Dolly’s doin’ a good job as wagon boss, but things are still a little rocky, so we were late gettin’ back to the room.”

“If you ran down here, it would be noticeable and raise suspicions,” Buzz reminded her gently, “and until we know who that informant is, we need to be careful.”

“I know,” she scrunched up her nose playfully and stood on her toes to plant a kiss on his lips. “Anyway, we’re here now, so no talkin’ of work tonight, not from any of us.”

Woody nodded, wrapping his arm around Bo’s waist. “Agreed. Come on, let’s take a stroll.”

The four walked, mostly in silence, reveling in each other’s company; a pleasure that had been in short supply for the past couple weeks. Buzz and Jessie hung back from Woody and Bo to have their own privacy just as much as give it. She rested her head on his shoulder as they ambled among the trees, wishing they could spend hours in that little haven.

The idyllic scene was not to last for either couple, however, as time progressed and demanded their return to the hotel. While they stood among the trees saying their goodnights, before taking their separate walks back to their respective lodgings, Bo let out a small sigh.

Woody gazed down at her attentively. “What is it, Bo?”

“Nothing,” she smiled faintly at him, “I’m just looking forward to more peaceful days.”

He planted a soft kiss on her forehead. “They’re coming, Bo; I promise.”

The girls hastened to the dormitory and began their bedtime routine, Bo being the first to visit the shared bathroom in the hall while Jessie dressed for bed in their room. Jessie took her turn to wash up after Bo, and when she returned from the bathroom, she found her roommate was already asleep. She closed the door softly and switched off the overhead light, leaving only the small lamp between their beds to illuminate the room. Jessie had just picked up her hairbrush from the dresser and begun brushing her loose tresses when there was a tap at the window. She looked towards it as there was another tap, followed swiftly by another. “What in tarnation?” she murmured, setting down her brush and tiptoeing over to the window.

She peered into the night and could barely see a lanky form silhouetted among the shadows. ‘Woody?’ Her brow dipped in concern. She moved away from the window and extinguished the light before she slipped from the room, loosely tying the ribbon belt of the robe that she wore over her nightgown. She crept down the stairs, not wanting to alert either of the Kartoffelkopfs that she was about after curfew. She slowly unlocked the door, wincing as the mechanism clicked. After a few seconds, she sighed in relief, and poked her head out the door to the back porch. “Woody?”
Jessie whispered. There was still no sign of him, and she let out an inpatient huff.

“Woody! Where are you?” she gathered her dressing gown more closely around her to ward off the chilly air as she moved further into the yard. “Woody, come on, it’s past curfew. This ain’t funny.” Suddenly she was seized from behind, a hand clamping over her mouth to muffle her startled yell.

“I ain’t Woody,” a voice rasped in her ear as her arm was twisted behind her. “Lotso still wants that woman’s touch, all the more now he knows you’re the marshal’s sister.”

Jessie struggled as best she could against her assailant as he fought to drag her away from the dorm building. She tried to stomp on his foot, but her slippers were useless against his boots, just as her screams were useless against his hand.

“She’s mine,” the bandit chuckled as he tightened his grip on her arm. “Lotso still wants that woman’s touch, all the more now he knows you’re the marshal’s sister.”

“Let her go,” Jessie’s eyes flew wide as Buzz’s voice broke in and he stepped from the shadows.

She made a pained noise as her would-be abductor tightened his grip on her arm. Buzz’s revolver gleamed in the dim light as he raised it into view. “I said, let her go.”

The bandit chuckled, “You may as well lower that gun, Marshal. We both know you can’t fire it without hitting the girl.”

There was the click of a revolver from behind them. “I can,” came Lenny’s firm voice. “Do as the Marshal says.”

Jessie looked at Buzz, her eyes filled with fear as the man made no move to release her.

Without warning, he shoved her towards Buzz, who caught her as she stumbled forward and pulled her away to safety. Lenny struck the man with the handle of his gun, knocking him unconscious. Buzz tossed a pair of handcuffs to Lenny, then turned to Jessie and cupped his hand on her cheek, his eyes searching her face, “Are you alright?”

She nodded, although her heart felt as if it was going to pound out of her chest. Before she had a chance to say anything, Woody came running into the yard, followed by Mr. Kartoffelkopf, both armed.

At the sight of the incapacitated attacker, Woody let out the breath he’d been holding. “Well done, Lenny.”

Mr. Kartoffelkopf immediately took notice of Jessie. “Miss Pride? What are you doing here?”

“This man was trying to abduct her,” Buzz gestured to the form on the ground.

“It’s past curfew. Why were you out here at all?”

“I heard a tappin’ on the window,” Jessie explained, shakily. “It looked like Woody in the dark, an’ I knew he’d only be tryin’ to get my attention if it were somethin’ really important. So I came downstairs, but he wasn’t in the parlor or on the porch. I thought he was jus’ playin’ around, but once I was far enough away from the building, he –” her voice caught in her throat and she fought to take a normal breath. The warm strength of Buzz’s hand on her lower back seeped into her skin and she let out a deep breath. “He grabbed me. But how did you know?” she glanced up at Buzz.

“You know our room looks out towards your dormitory building. I saw you in the window and I could see the figure in the yard. It did look like Woody, only I knew it wasn’t because he was in the room with me. We came downstairs, and found Lenny with Mr. Kartoffelkopf in his office. I had him come with me while Woody secured the area.”
Lenny had handcuffed the bandit while Jessie was giving her account. “Let’s see who we have here,” he pulled the bandana from the man’s face.

“Chester?” Mr. Kartoffelkopf took a step forward.

“You know this man?” asked Woody. “Come to think of it, he does look familiar.”

“He’s one of my bellboys.”

Jessie gasped, “He’s one of them.” She looked between Woody and Buzz, “He’s in the gang.”

“Jess,” Woody frowned, “are you sure?”

“Yeah. He told me that Lotso still wanted a woman’s touch. Lotso must be the leader’s name!”

“I remember that comment,” Mr. Kartoffelkopf interjected, ”from the hold up,”

She turned to Woody. “He knows you’re my brother. I dunno if he’s told anyone, though.”

Woody’s eyes met Buzz’s as they both realized a crucial clue in their case had been revealed. “Looks like we found our informant.”

Jessie shivered and rubbed her hands along her arms. Buzz noticed, and addressed her employer. “I think Miss Pride’s been through enough tonight. With your permission, sir, I’ll see her to her room?”

“Of course, Marshal.”

Placing his hand on her back again, Buzz ushered Jessie back to the dorm. As soon as they were in the secluded parlor, he pulled her into a fierce embrace which she was all too quick to return. They clung to each other wordlessly, finding much-needed solace in each other’s arms. After a few minutes, Jessie pulled away. “You should get back, ‘fore they think we’re up t’ somethin’.” A smile flickered across her face.

Buzz rubbed his thumb over her cheek, “Jessie… I-“

“I know.” she reached up to kiss him softly, and Buzz’s hands found their way to her back, as he drew her closer. Despite the evening’s anguish, Buzz suddenly became aware of an unfamiliar sensation. His fingertips could discern soft flesh beneath the lightweight fabric of Jessie’s nightgown and robe, freed from her heavy corset, and her long, loose hair brushed softly against the back of his hands. When they separated, he looked down at her with a crooked grin on his face.

“What?” Jessie smiled at Buzz’s expression, her amusement distracting her from the strain she’d been through. “What’re ya grinnin’ at?”

“Nothing… it’s just, I’ve never seen you dressed like… that… before.”

She glanced down at the sliver of white cotton and lace that was peeking out from beneath her red dressing gown, then back up at Buzz. “D’ya like it?”

“It would be ungentlemanly of me to say so… but also to lie.”

She grinned herself, raising on her toes so she could give him a quick kiss. “Go on, git, I’m sure Woody’s waitin’ on ya.”

“But I said I’d see you to your room,” a tinge of disappointment was in Buzz's voice.
“I don’t wanna risk the other girls seein’ ya, ‘specially with me in my nightclothes. They’ll hear about everythin’ in the morning as it is, and I don’t want a thousand questions ‘bout it.”

He nodded in understanding. “We’ll escort the assailant down to the Sheriff’s office. I’ll talk to Woody and Sheriff Varney; word will get out about his arrest, but we’ll keep you out of the reports.”

Her eyes clouded with worry. “Please, be careful out there.”

“Always am.” Buzz pressed his lips to her forehead and took her hand in his. “Now try to get some sleep.” He gave her hand a firm squeeze before returning to the yard. Jessie watched him leave and then made her way silently back to her room.

She closed her bedroom door carefully so as not to wake Bo, who had mercifully slept through the whole ordeal. Jessie knew she would have to tell her best friend what had happened, but she didn’t want to right now. She tried to lay down on her bed, but sleep wouldn’t come, not as long as she knew Buzz and Woody were out there in the night, escorting a criminal who might have had accomplices waiting nearby.

Pulling a chair to the window that faced the hotel, Jessie opened it and sat down, resting her elbow on the sill and her chin in her hand. She stared out into the inky darkness, listening for any tell-tale sounds and watching for the marshals’ return. After a while, she thought she could make out Buzz, Woody and Lenny striding across the yard; but it wasn’t until she saw the light flicker on in the corner hotel room, and the two familiar forms moving in silhouette against the blinds, that she could finally breathe a sigh of relief.

Reassured that her beau and her brother were safe, Jessie hung her dressing gown on a wall peg, and climbed between her covers. Still, her mind was unsettled in the solitude, and a multitude of scenarios ran through her thoughts. She knew that the resolution of the case would take Buzz and Woody away to who knows where, and change everything. But she also knew that she couldn’t bear this constant anxiety much longer.

A few days had passed since Chester’s arrest. Jessie went about her job as always, her energetic nature buoying her above the apprehensions that lingered, even though she found herself looking over her shoulder more often than before.

One night, the four sat out on the benches in the yard, no longer in need of clandestine gatherings. There was an air of optimism, as the marshals had been successful in obtaining information from Chester. “I can see why they called him ‘Chatter’,” Woody chuckled.

“He talks, that’s for sure, whether we’ve asked him anything or not,” Buzz snorted in annoyance, “but, he did at least give us the number of men in the gang and their nicknames. There are eight in total, so I don’t think they were all here for the hold up. But that Lotso is the leader, just as you said, Jessie.”

Bo’s brow knitted pensively. “Do you think it’s safe, keeping him here in Barstow?”

“As long as we can get information from him, he’s staying here. Besides,” Woody stretched his arms, his tone confident, “he’s in the jail and is well-guarded. He can’t do any harm from there.”

“Don’t get cocky,” Buzz warned. “You were wrong about Gornik, remember?”

Jessie’s gaze darted between the men, “That nice old man that was here that one morning? Is he part of the gang, too?”
“No,” Woody shook his head, “but he’s not what he lead us to believe. Fine,” he rolled his eyes as Buzz made a noise. “He’s not what he led me to believe. Turns out that he hasn’t turned in silver or borate for months. Something strange is going on with him, but we have to tread carefully in confronting him since we don’t have anything concrete.”

“I’m sure you fellas will get to the bottom of it. After all, with your marshalin’ and Buzz being a cop in the city for so long, it’s not like you’re new to this,” Jessie smiled encouragingly at her brother and her beau. “Oh! Speakin’ of the city, we heard from Barbie! They’re married now and they got a small place to get their store started.”

Buzz opened his mouth to respond, but they were all surprised by the sudden arrival of Slink. “Sorry to interrupt folks, ma’am,” he took the brim of his hat in his fingers and nodded to both Jessie and Bo. “Marshals, I need you to come with me. There was a telegram from Sheriff Hammond and we need to discuss it right away.”

Buzz rose from his seat, taking Jessie’s hand as she stood as well. “Guess we’ll have to continue this later.” He kissed her cheek, “Sorry to be running out.”

She squeezed his hand in reply, “Duty calls. Be careful.”

The following morning was bustling with passengers; yet as Jessie and Bo worked, their minds were uneasy, and filled with questions as to why the sheriff’s message was so urgent and what had kept the marshals away during breakfast. When a lull had fallen between the breakfast and lunch crowds, the two men entered, their faces serious.

“Miss Peepe, may I have a word with you?” Woody approached Bo. “In private,” he added in a low voice.

Bo’s countenance fell at the grave expression on his face, “I can meet you in the parlor in a few minutes.” He nodded and she stared at his back as he walked away. She returned her focus to the table she was setting, hurrying to finish the task.

By the time Bo was able to sneak back to the dormitory building, Woody was already in the parlor waiting. “I’m sorry,” she said as she closed the door. “One of the new girls needed help and caught me just as I was almost out the door. Woody? What is it?”

“We’re heading to Calico tomorrow; we leave at first light.”

Bo’s blue eyes widened, “You found them?”

He shook his head, “Not exactly. Remember that prospector we were talking about yesterday? He’s in deeper than we realized and we think he was behind the murder of that banker, although he had the gang do the dirty work. We’re close, Bo, I can feel it. I just –” he swallowed, “I don’t know what we’re going to run into. But I couldn’t go without telling you.”

“I see,” she turned away, wanting to hide the sudden feeling of dread.

“Bo,” Woody stepped towards her, resting his hand on her back. “Bo, I promise that I’ll -“

“Don’t,” she looked at him. “Don’t make that promise, not when you don’t know if you can keep it.”

He took her by the waist and pulled her towards him so her hands came to rest on his chest. “Bo Peepe, I will do everything I can to make it home to you. That much I can promise.”
“I’m holding you to that, Sheriff,” she brought her lips to his, hoping it wouldn’t be the last time.

Meanwhile, as Woody had been meeting privately in the parlor with Bo, Buzz had escorted Jessie out to the back veranda of the depot building, where they stood, talking in hushed tones.

Jessie’s eyes were full of worry. “Will it be just you and Woody?”

“No. Sheriff Varney is coming with us, and bringing one of his deputies. We’ll meet up with Sheriff Hammond, and he’ll have another deputy with him as well.” Buzz took her hands in his, and rubbed his thumbs lightly against them soothingly. “We’ll have plenty of backup, and he’ll be outnumbered. There’s nothing to be concerned about.”

“How can you be sure?” her tone was skeptical.

“I’m always sure,” he grinned, as he leaned in to give her a kiss. When they pulled apart, he spotted Woody and Bo crossing the yard from the dorm.

“Did Buzz tell you?” Woody asked Jessie.

“Yeah,” she sighed. “You two better take care out there.”

“We will, Jess,” he drew his sister in for a hug. “But you probably won’t see much of us the rest of the day. If you could have our dinner sent up to our room, at the usual time, we’d appreciate it. We’ll be busy preparing for tomorrow.”

The girls went back to work with heavy spirits. When Mr. Kartoffelkopf asked Jessie to deliver some box lunches to railroaders, she was grateful to get outside for a while. The railroad men were always friendly and respectful to the Harvey Girls, and she’d gotten to know several of them during her time in Barstow. She was on her way back from her errand when a deep voice boomed out from the steps of a Pullman car.

“Miss Jessie! How are you on this beautiful day?”

“Carl!” she exclaimed, as she quickened her pace to greet the man, a well-liked Pullman Porter who regularly worked the overland route in California. “I’m busy as ever; how’ve ya been?”

“Excellent,” he boasted, holding out his coat sleeve proudly. “Earned my stripe for ten years’ service last week.”

“Congratulations!” she smiled warmly, genuinely happy for her acquaintance's achievement. “Your family must be so proud of you!”

“They are. I wrote them about it, since I haven’t been home since the strike.”

“What? But that’s been over for a month!”

He shrugged, “We’ve been just as busy playing catch up. The railroads want better service, in the hopes it’ll make people forget about all of the trouble. It shouldn’t be too much longer, though, before I’m able to get back to Los Angeles and see my sons. That’s what keeps me going, the thought that soon I’ll see my Billy and Junior again.”

“Well, I’m sure they can’t wait to celebrate with their pa,” she tilted her head, then followed Carl’s line of vision as she noticed that his attention had suddenly been directed elsewhere.

His brow furrowed into a scowl as he muttered under his breath. “Sassafras.”
“Is somethin’ wrong?”

“You can’t work this job for as long as I have without learning how to read people,” Carl explained, “and I don’t like what I gathered from those men,” he raised his chin, gesturing further down the railyard, “those, on the bridge there, crossing over the tracks. They’re up to no good, and I’d keep an eye out for them if I were you.”

Jessie could only make out dusty, faded clothing as the two men disappeared farther out of sight - nothing that struck her as particularly recognizable or remarkable. But she trusted Carl’s judgment, and pressed the matter further. “Why d’ya say that?”

“Well, I was right inside the car here, and the door was open, but they couldn’t see me. They stopped to talk, thinking they were alone - something about going to the jail to see someone called Chatter.”

Jessie let out a gasp, and tried to conceal the sense of foreboding rising within her. “Thanks for tellin’ me. I’ll keep an eye out for them. Safe travels, Carl!” She hurried back to the hotel, determined to find either Woody or Buzz and pass on the porter’s information.

Mr. Kartoffelkopf intercepted her in the foyer. “What took you so long?” he snapped. “Never mind, I don’t want to know. Just get back to the counter and get to work.”

Jessie clenched her fists in frustrated anger, but she didn’t have time to act on her worry in the midst of a busy lunch crowd. She jumped into service, all the while watching the window out of the corner of her eye, in case someone suspicious should walk by. After the passengers had been fed and sent on their way, she was wiping down the counter when two scraggly-looking men passed just outside, staggering and laughing in a drunken stupor. With her wet rag still clutched tightly in her hand, she darted toward the hotel lobby and out the back door.

Jessie turned her back to the men as they rounded the corner, and pretended to busy herself at scrubbing the windowpanes as she listened. She assumed they were headed to the two horses that had been tied to one of the trees out by the river, but they talked loudly, too inebriated to care that their voices carried.

“Wait’ll they hear what we found out!”

“Good ol’ Chatter, still makin’ himself useful, even if he did get captured trying to grab that waitress.”

Jessie squinted at the outlaws, studying their faces as they continued on their way, one of them bursting into an intoxicated giggle, “Those lawmen, comin’ for old Stinky Pete… don’t even know we’ll be there. They ain’t gonna know what hit ‘em.”

The bulging bug-eye of the other bandit twitched as he joined his partner in laughing as they passed out of sight. Jessie’s hand flew to her mouth; she recognized the man with the twitch as one of the gang members who had held up the hotel. Her breath quickened as the implications of their conversation sunk in. “They’ll walk into a trap,” she whispered. Just as she resolved to find Buzz and Woody, a train whistle pierced the air and she could hear Mr. Kartoffelkopf banging the gong to draw the passengers to a hot meal inside.

Jessie scurried to her post, running into Bo, who noticed her agitation. Jessie just shook her head, not having time to explain. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as Jessie tried to focus on the job at hand, all the while the gang members’ words rang in her head. She reminded herself constantly that the men were not leaving until the following morning, which meant there was plenty of time to warn
them. It did little in the way of reassurance.

The passengers had finally left and all after-dinner work had been completed. Jessie was lingering in the hotel lobby, waiting for the other girls to go back to the dorm, when Bo caught up with her.

“Jessie, what are you doing?”

She told Bo about the overheard conversation. “They’re gonna get ambushed, Bo! I gotta get upstairs to warn ‘em.”

“Jessie, you can’t just go up to their room! If a patron saw you, you’d be reported and then most likely fired!”

“I know, but how else am I gonna… Rex!” she cried, spotting the busboy. “Rex, I need your help. Can you please go get the marshals and tell ‘em I need to talk to ‘em right away?”

“They’re not here anymore,” he stated, matter-of-factly.

Jessie paled. “Wha-what?”

“They took dinner up in their room. I went to get the dishes and Marshal Lightyear said they were leaving. Oh! Here,” he dug into his pocket and handed a folded paper to Jessie. “He asked me to give that to you. Excuse me,” he toddled away.

Her hands shook as she took the note and opened it where Bo could see it.

Jessie – We had to alter our plans and leave for the Sheriff’s office in Calico much earlier than originally intended. I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you this in person. Don’t worry about us; we will be back by tomorrow afternoon. Remember: I’m always sure. Te amo, Buzz

“Oh no… no, no, no… Bo, what’m I gonna do? They have no idea that the gang is gonna be there!” Her expression was fraught with fear.

Bo placed her hand on Jessie’s shoulder, “Come on, let’s get back to our place. We’ll figure something out there.”

Back in their room, Jessie paced back and forth frantically. “It’s no use, Bo. The telegraph office is closed, and there’s no other way to get word to ‘em. The only thing to do is ride out after ‘em.”

“Just how do you expect to manage that?”

“I’ll rent a horse from the livery; there’s always someone there,” she said as she rifled through her trunk to find money. “Calico ain’t that far, only ‘bout an hour ride, and I’ll make that horse ride like the wind.”

Bo frowned, “It’s awfully risky, Jessie.

“Bo, I can’t just stay here, knowin’ that they could be killed!”

“I know that, it’s just… if you get caught…”

Jessie paused, “Well, I just won’t, that’s all. There,” she finished buttoning her shirtwaist, having changed out of her uniform. “D’ya still have your pistol?”

“No, I sold that when I came here,” Bo replied apologetically. “I didn’t think I’d need it anymore.”

“Blast,” she reached for her braid and tugged at it. “I’ll figure somethin’ out. I’ll hafta wait until
everyone’s been in bed for a while, then I can sneak out, get the horse, ride out to Calico, warn the
guys, and be back before anyone knows I’ve been gone.”

Jessie anxiously passed the time moving between her bed and the chair she had set near the window.
Bo stayed awake as long as she could to keep her distraught friend company, but after a while
sleepiness overcame her. It had seemed to take longer than usual for the Harvey House to settle
down for the night, to the point where Jessie had begun to wonder if Mr. Kartoffelkopf suspected
something; it was well after midnight before he returned to his apartment and then even longer before
she could no longer hear noises emitting from the hallway. She pulled at her braid intermittently as
she let more time pass. When she could see the kitchen light up as the staff came in to begin
preparing the day’s food, she used that as her cue.

She slipped out of her room, boots in hand, and crept out onto the porch. There she sat to lace up her
boots, looking up at any noise, lest Lenny appear. Jessie hoped he would help her if she had to
explain her intentions, but as a Harvey employee, she couldn’t run the risk that he would have to
report her. She ran silently across the yard and knocked on the kitchen door.

Light streamed out as one of the cooks opened it, first a crack, and then wider, “Miss Pride! What
are you doing out there at this time of night?”

She stepped closer with a bashful look, “I lost my locket. I wore it under my uniform and I didn’t
notice until late last night that it was missin’. It wasn’t in my room, so it must have fallen off during
my shift.” She bit her lip, “It belonged to my grandmother. I couldn’t come over after curfew, but I
thought, since everyone’s asleep… I just didn’t want to risk a passenger findin’ it in the mornin’.”

The cook smiled kindly, “Come on in, then. Do you want any help?”

“Oh, no, thank you. I’d hate to take ya away from your work.”

“Start in the manager’s office. If anything is turned in, he keeps a box in there of the items. The
door should be unlocked.”

Jessie could hardly believe her luck. “Of course! Thank you.” She smiled brightly and hurried to
Mr. Kartoffelkopf’s office, checking around before opening the door and closing it as quietly as
possible. She searched drawers and shelves for the revolvers before finally finding them and
choosing one to borrow. Checking to make sure it was unloaded, she tucked it into her garter, letting
the volume of her skirt conceal it. She shoved a box of bullets into one of her skirt pockets and made
sure the room looked undisturbed before hastily exiting through the front door.

The night was warm as she crossed the railyard and ran as fast as she could to the livery, surprising
the attendant. She asked for the fastest horse, making an excuse of a family emergency.

“Must not have far to go, then,” he made conversation as he accepted her money.
“What?”

“No luggage. Figured you must not be riding out too far.”

She sighed in relief, “Not too far, just out Calico way.”

He gave a nod of acknowledgement, “Shouldn’t be a tough ride, not with the moon as bright as it is.
Just mind you watch out for coyotes, miss.”

“I will, thank you.” She skillfully mounted astride the horse and rode a little ways out of town before
she stopped to load the revolver. “Sure hope I don’t need this. C’mon, pal; let’s see how fast you
can go.” She jabbed her heels into the horse’s sides, spurring it into a gallop.
As she rode into Calico, the church clock chimed four times. Jessie jumped off the horse, hastily tethering it to the post outside of the Sheriff’s office. She ran up and burst through the doors, but only a deputy was there, standing with his gun at the ready. “Where are the marshals?”

“I beg your pardon, miss?”

“Marshals Pride and Lightyear; where are there?”

“They’re out on a job with Sheriff Hammond. How can I help you?”

Jessie stared at the deputy in horror, “Ya mean they already left for the mine?”

He stiffened, “How do you know…?”

“I’m Marshal Pride’s sister. Please, they’re all headin’ into a trap.”

“I think you better start over, beginning with why you think this,” he settled back into his chair.

She stomped her foot in agitation, trying hard not to let tears form from the frustration. She hastily told the deputy everything, “So ya see, ya gotta warn ‘em.”

“I’m afraid I can’t leave. Sheriff Hammond took the other deputy and the town can’t be left unprotected.”

“Then tell me how to get there.”

He barked a laugh, “You? I can’t let a civilian go on official business. Oof!”

Jessie had grabbed his lapels and pulled him toward her, and he gulped at the murderous look in her eyes. “Where’s that mine?”

Directions in hand, Jessie fought her ever-increasing panic as the horse was forced to tread slowly over the rocky, hilly terrain. At this pace, she knew it would be almost an hour before she reached the mine, and there was little chance she would intercept the lawmen. Coming up from the southwest, she reined the horse to a stop as she recognized Astrónomo at the base of a hill. She guided her horse to the others and dismounted, “Stay here,” she whispered as she tucked the paper into the saddlebag.

Gunfire echoed from the rocks and Jessie’s head jerked up. Clutching the revolver, she scrambled up the hillside, trying to stay as low as possible as she scanned the area. She found herself along the top of one of two ridges that flanked the pathway to the mine. There were large rocks all along that path and she could see Buzz, Woody, and the rest of the lawmen hunkered down behind these rocks for protection as they engaged the gang members. The sky was already beginning to lighten as Jessie looked to her left where she saw the entrance to the mine, a rough wooden door at the top of the hill.

Just before she glanced away, a figure darted from the mine entrance to one of the rocks on the ridge opposite from where she lay. She watched as he worked his way down, closer to where the lawmen were crouched. The early morning light glimmered off his rifle and Jessie caught her breath in her throat. The man was invisible to Buzz and Woody and had a clean shot at both of them. Jessie aimed her revolver at the man, remembering Buzz’s lesson about distance and adjusting just before she pulled the trigger. The man staggered forward, falling from the ridge to the path below.

Buzz looked in the direction of the gunshot and felt the shock run down his spine. “Jessie?”

Unthinking, he rose just enough to expose himself and immediately felt a sting on his arm as a bullet
just grazed it. He fired back, striking Lotso squarely in the chest. “Jessie’s up on that ridge,” he called to Woody over the din.

“What the hell is she doing here??”

“I don’t know! But she’s taking some fire, which means they’re not paying as much attention to us.”

Jessie flattened herself to the ridge and slid back as much as she could as bullets ricocheted around her. “Real smart, Jessie,” she mumbled. “Fat load a’ good you’ll be if you can’t get to where ya can see anythin’.”

The gunfire died away and she slowly crept back up. Buzz and Woody were conferring with Slink and his deputy and Jessie could see the bodies of the gang members fallen along the ravine. She raced back down the hill, coming around and up the path.

As soon as Buzz saw her, he ran to her, catching her in a tight embrace. “What are you doing here?”

“I had to come; they were plannin’ an ambush,” she rattled off the story as Woody approached, of Carl warning her of the men, the bandits’ conversation by the depot, how she ended up in Calico. “When I got there an’ you were gone… I had to do somethin’.”

Buzz rested his hands on her shoulders. “I’m so glad you’re safe.” Then he noticed the revolver in her hand and frowned, “Where did you get that?”

“I mighta borrowed it from Mr. K’s office,” she scuffed the toe of her boot in the dirt.

“Oh boy; well, we’ll deal with that when we get back. Come on,” he placed his hand on her lower back, “we’re not done here, yet.”

As the lawmen inspected the bodies, Jessie hung back against one of the rocks. Woody gestured towards the mine entrance, “I’m gonna check out the mine; then we should ride up to the house, if the old prospector hasn’t run out by now.”

“I’ll come with ya,” Jessie jogged up to him. “Two’s better than one.”

He looked at her, pondering for a moment before agreeing, “Alright.” Together they climbed the hill, Woody turning to offer a hand to Jessie, helping her up the last steep slope before the entrance. She followed him, ducking under the door frame. There was already a lantern lit in the cavern and Jessie could see the wooden beam structures that held up the hollowed out passageways. “It looks like this place hasn’t been used in ages,” she commented.

“It’s been used, just not for mining. Apparently the gang was using this place as a hideout, with Mr. Gornik’s permission. I’m willing to bet there’s still stolen goods from the store in Calico here somewhere. Watch your step,” he cautioned, motioning to shattered glass. “I’m gonna check down this tunnel. Can you check that one? Not far; you want to stay within the light.”

She nodded and followed the tunnel down several yards until the light was giving out. “Doesn’t look like there’s anythin’ down this way,” she called back. The dim light was suddenly extinguished and she heard a kind of thumping noise and a grunt. “Woody?” Jessie gingerly made her way back to the main area, trailing her hand along the wall. She stepped back as she heard a man’s voice and recognized it as that of the prospector.

“It’s a dangerous world out there, especially for a U.S. Marshal. You should have just stayed down with the rest of your men.”
Jessie could hear Woody grunt as she followed the sound. “No wonder they call you ‘Stinky Pete’; you let those bandits believe you’d make them rich. Instead, you used them and kept all the reward. That hardly seems fair.”

She peeked around the bend of the tunnel and could see Woody laying on his back, Pete standing over him, pinning him to the ground with a foot on his chest.

“Fair? I’ll tell you what’s not fair; spending a lifetime working my fingers to the bone and watching everyone else come in and take it away! Well, my waiting has paid off and you’re not going to mess it up for me now!” He brought the pickaxe to the top of Woody’s right shoulder and yanked savagely, opening a gash as the marshal cried out in pain. Pete raised the pickaxe over his head, “Happy trails, Marshal.”

“NO!” Jessie screamed and fired her revolver. The bullet struck and Pete staggered back, dropping the tool to clutch his wounded hand.

The prospector glared at Jessie before breaking into a sprint, pushing past her as he made for the exit of the mine. Jessie ran to Woody and helped him up, “Oh, Woody.” The crimson bloom was already spreading across his shirt.

“I’m okay,” he said through clenched teeth. “Come on, we gotta go after him.”

They didn’t get far before they heard Pete railing against lawmen. Just outside the doorway, Buzz, Slink, and Hamm had caught the old man, and were attempting to subdue him.

Woody rested his left hand on his hip, “Looks like you’ve got a date with justice.”

Pete spat on the ground, “You’re not out of danger yet.” He managed to break free, striking a stone along a section of the door. There was a bright burst of light and a loud crashing sound as debris filled the air.

Buzz stood coughing against the dust that hung in the air. His blood ran cold as he looked back at the mine entrance, now a pile of rubble and rock. He pressed his hands against the mound of stones that separated him from the Pride siblings.

“Woody! Jessie!!”

Chapter End Notes

BUM BUM BUMMMMM! We couldn’t resist a good cliffhanger. ;)

Being a Pullman Porter was a respectable and desirable occupation for African American men in the late-19th and early-20th century. They assisted the passengers in the Pullman cars, helping them with their luggage and other needs; and after they earned their stripes for each five years of experience, they often managed their own cars, without a Conductor’s supervision. Yes, skirts could have pockets in the 19th century - and Jessie would certainly be practical and choose styles that had them. Odessa Canyon is a real place near Calico, and all the action and locations of mine entrances and such have been derived from actual topographical Google Earth photos of the area.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

So how did that cliffhanger turn out, hmm? ;) Read on and see!

Don't forget to check out our Pinterest board (Jessie's Journey under the username yodelincowgirl). Besides the usual chapter pins, we've also added a couple new boards since last chapter - one with maps and floor plans for the places described in the fic; and another with the books we've used for reference in our writing.

Toy Story still isn't ours. If it was, we'd already have a clip of Toy Story 4 (an update any day now would be nice!). Anyway, be sure to leave us some kudos, and subscribe so you don't miss anything! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Woody! Jessie! Jessie, can you hear me?!?" Desperation strained Buzz's voice, as he frantically and futilely tried to pry the pile of crumbled boulders from the mine's entrance with his bare hands.

Inside the mine, Woody and Jessie had hurriedly turned away as the doorway collapsed and filled the constrained space with dust and debris. Woody reached out for his sister in the fog, and rested a hand on her hunched back. "You hurt?"

She coughed and shook her head, then looked back to where the opening had been. "What happened?"

"He must've had dynamite set. Buzz!" Woody called back, hearing his friend's voice through a tiny gap between two of the rocks. "We're okay."

Pete's cackle could also be heard inside the cramped passageway, and it sent chills up Jessie's arms. "Not for long you aren't; there's more where that came from," he shouted viciously. "Hope you like the place, Marshal; you'll be spending a long time in there."

The siblings shared a look of wide-eyed horror. Woody pressed his lips together in a thin line in thought, but his face smoothed as inspiration struck, "There's another entrance. Buzz!"

"I heard. We'll meet you there."

Woody took Jessie's hand, "Come on, we probably don't have a lot of time."

"Where are we goin'?" Her vision had adjusted to the darkness and she could see a rough-hewn opening ahead of them.

"There's another doorway, on the western side. At least, I hope there still is."

She pulled back as Woody started forward, her sight fixated on the gaping black hole ahead. "You sure about this?"

He met her eyes with a leveled gaze, "No. Let's go."
As they hastened down the corridor, the darkness began to recede, and Jessie breathed out in relief, knowing the door was near. She heard a strange hissing sound and slowed. "What's that noise?"

Woody stopped and scanned their surroundings. "Oh no," his shoulder dropped and he pointed to a small flickering light just behind them. "It's a fuse. He must have had some sort of blasting cap so he could blow this door on a timer. We gotta hurry!" The siblings broke into a run the last few yards to the door, where Woody skidded to a halt, teetering as he reached a very rickety scaffolding. Jessie caught him by the back of his shirt and pulled him toward her. "Whew; thanks, Jess." He glanced again at the fuse and then at his sister, "We only have a few minutes, and it looks like we're going to have to climb down. I'll go first; follow my steps."

He gingerly lowered himself from the platform until his foot came to rest on one of the support beams, then let out a breath, "Ok, here goes." Creeping out onto the wooden support, he held on as best he could with his left arm, and felt the wood creak as Jessie's weight came to rest on it after him. The pair inched their way down the sloping beam, the scaffolding shuddering with the momentum of their movements, until Woody's foot suddenly slipped and he lost his hold on the structure.

"Woody!" Jessie yelled as she reached for her brother. She grabbed his right arm and his hand closed around her forearm, causing him to cry out in pain as the wound on his shoulder tore open slightly. Jessie tried to lift him back to the beam, but the action only further aggravated the gash.

Woody looked down to the hillside below and then back up at his sister. "Jessie, let go of the beam!"

She blinked in surprise, "What?"

"That dynamite's gonna blow any moment. We're going to have to jump."

"Are you crazy?!"

"It's only about seven feet, we'll be fine," he adjusted his grip on her arm.

Jessie shook her head frantically, "No; no, there has to be a better way."

"There is no other way! Look, just pretend we're in one of those dime novels."

"But the good guys always lived at the end of those! We don't know if we will!"

He shot her an encouraging smile, "Well, let's find out, together!"

She gaped at him in disbelief, bit her lip, then closed her eyes tightly in brave resolution and released both her hold on Woody and the scaffolding. Her feet hit the slope and she tumbled backwards, the loose rocky soil sliding with her. No sooner had she come to a stop than the dynamite exploded and she shielded her head against the rain of dust and pebbles.

"Woody?" Jessie pushed herself up from the ground, searching for her brother. He was on his back a few feet away, his left hand pressed to his wound. "Woody!" she scrambled to her feet and ran to help him as he started to stand.

"I'm okay," he grunted, letting Jessie pull his left arm around her shoulders. "Guess we must be the good guys, huh?"

Jessie laughed, "Guess so." She braced herself as Woody leaned heavily against her. "Come on, we need to get you help. Buzz!" she called out, seeing him running up the canyon road. "He's bleedin' pretty bad."
As soon as the distance was closed between them, Buzz pulled a small pocketknife from his vest and
opened it. "Here, hold still. Hope you aren't attached to this shirt," he glanced at Woody.

"I think it's pretty much a lost cause," he grimaced. Jessie stepped aside, and both siblings watched as
Buzz carefully cut the left sleeve from Woody's shirt, slid it off his arm, and tied it around the wound
as a tourniquet. "Thanks, Buzz. That should hold long enough."

The trio made their way to the horses and joined the sheriffs, who had been taking account of the
gunfight's aftermath. Sheriff Hammond gestured towards Woody's arm. "You better get him back to
town, Marshal; the little missy, too. We can take care of things from here."

"That 'little missy' saved our hides," Slink scolded gently. He smiled and tipped his hat at Jessie,
"Much obliged, ma'am."

Buzz turned back to Woody, "Alright, cowboy, let's get you fixed up."

"I'll ride on ahead, fetch the doc and meet you at the hotel," Jessie reached for the reins of the mare
she had borrowed from the livery.

"No." Buzz's curt response caught her off guard and she stared at him, letting the leather straps fall
from her grasp. His expression shifted to one of tenderness, and he rested a hand on her shoulder.
"I'm not ready to let you out of my sight just yet." Jessie's mouth went dry at the intensity of his gaze
and she simply nodded. "Jessie, you get on Bullseye," Buzz pointed to the light brown horse with
the spiky mane, "Woody, you ride with Jessie."

"Wait a second, how am I gonna get the horse back to the livery?" Jessie fretted. "I ain't leaving her
here!"

"I'll see she gets back," Slink reassured her. "It's the least I can do."

Jessie smiled at the sheriff, "I sure appreciate it. Howdy, Bullseye," she petted the horse's side and
placed her foot into the stirrup, but Buzz halted her action. He leaned in close, his hand closing over
hers, "You did it, Jessie," he whispered with an admiring grin. "You saved us all." A proud smile
spread across her face, and she swung up into the saddle and held the horse still as Buzz assisted
Woody up behind her. After his partner was settled, Buzz handed him his brown Stetson hat, which
had been left lying by the rock they had crouched behind.

“My hat!” Woody took it from his friend’s grasp and placed it squarely on his head.

“What’s a cowboy without his hat?” joked Buzz, as he mounted Astronómo, then clicked the horse
into motion.

The three set off on their journey back to town. They took their time traversing the sandy terrain, so
as not to cause Woody any unnecessary discomfort. As they rode, the sun rose higher in the sky, and
Woody realized just how late into the morning it must be. "Jessie!" he exclaimed over his sister's
shoulder. "Your shift at the hotel!"

She shrugged, "I know. Between that and takin' one of the guns, I have a feelin' I'm in for a world of
lecturin'. I hope Mr. K ain't too mad when I explain things to him. But I ain't sorry for what I did, so
I'll just have to face the music."

The breakfast rush was in full swing when they arrived in Barstow. Buzz secured Astronómo's reins
to the porch post on the rear of the depot building before coming to Woody's aid in dismounting from
Bullseye. "Here," Buzz motioned Jessie over once she was on the ground, "you help Woody. I'll
take the revolver." Jessie handed him the gun she had tucked into her waistband before her escape
from the mine, and he held the door open so she could assist her brother inside. Holding Woody's good arm over her shoulders, she staggered a little as he relied heavily on her support.

Bo had been watching the window anxiously all morning from the dining room, hoping for any sign of the return of her beau and closest friends. Fear had gripped her when she spotted only two horses approaching across the desert horizon; but when she finally caught a glimpse of all three coming up the depot's back veranda steps, she raced to the foyer to meet them.

"Woody!" Her joy at seeing him alive switched to panic as soon as she noticed the bright red stain on his shirt sleeve. Her hands flew to her mouth, "Oh, you're injured! What happened?"

"Just needs a few stitches; I'll be fine," he reassured her. "But I'd be much obliged if you brought me some coffee after I've gotten cleaned up. I'll tell you more then. It's been quite a morning."

She cupped his face in her hands, as if trying to prove to herself that he was really present. "We're not supposed to go to the hotel rooms, but I don't care today. I'll sneak away after breakfast. I'm just so thankful you're okay!" She released Woody and looked to Jessie, "You too, and I'd hug you both if you weren't such a mess and I wasn't in my uniform!"

"THERE YOU ARE!" Mr. Kartoffelkopf roared as he saw Jessie, but he stopped short at the sight of the wounded Marshal. His tone softened, "Back to work, Miss Peepe, your tables are waiting."

"We need the doctor," Buzz stepped between the manager and Jessie, as Bo rushed back to her post. "Please have someone go get him and direct him to Marshal Pride's room."

Mr. Kartoffelkopf summoned Rex and told him to fetch the doctor, "And be quick about it! Now, as for you, Miss Pride…"

Buzz held his hand up, "I need to speak with you first. Jessie, take Woody upstairs."

"Alright, but I want you," he pointed at Jessie, "in my office as soon as you have the Marshal settled. Right this way," he extended his arm, guiding Buzz toward his office. Once as they were ensconced inside, with the door closed behind them, Mr. Kartoffelkopf exploded with anger. "That girl is a thief! She stole…"

Buzz calmly set the borrowed revolver on the desk, "This is yours, I believe."

"Yes! I want to press charges and see her prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law! This is the last thing I needed, after that Pullman strike nonsense last month, and the hold up."

Buzz sat down and motioned to the desk chair, "Please, have a seat." His request took Mr. Kartoffelkopf by surprise, but the manager sat down and Buzz continued. "I understand your anger, but as you can see, the weapon was not stolen. And I think it's important that you know why Miss Pride took it. You know that Marshal Pride and I were brought in in response to the rise in activity of the Huggins gang, and we have been working with Sheriffs Varney and Hammond. Miss Pride was running an errand for you yesterday, correct?"

"Yes; the boxed lunches needed to be delivered to the railroad men. Normally I would send a busboy or bellboy to do that, but as you know, I'm one short."

Buzz explained how Jessie came to hear about the planned ambush. "Miss Pride knew we were bound for Calico in the morning, to act upon a break in the case, and believed she had sufficient time to warn us. When she came looking for us after her workday was over, we had already left. She had no way to get word to us but to ride out to Calico herself, so she purchased use of a horse. And yes, she took a revolver and ammunition; she didn't plan on using it and thought she would return well
before the breakfast shift, before she or the gun was missed. And she would have, had we not departed early for the mine. At that point, she had two options: return to Barstow, be on time for her shift, and hope that everyone, including her brother, came out of things alive; or ride on to our location and try to still warn us. She chose the latter and, to be frank, saved our lives. Miss Pride is a formidable shot and was able to eliminate one of the gang members who was in hiding. Without her assistance, it's more than likely that none of us would have returned. Your revolver is returned, as you see." Buzz paused and traced his finger along the arm of the chair, "I will advise you that one of the lives spared by Miss Pride's selfless actions is that of your own Sheriff. I very much doubt you will find an ally in him should you still wish to press charges."

Mr. Kartoffelkopf cleared his throat, "Yes, well… that does put a different perspective on things. But she still has to face consequences for her actions as my employee!"

"She expects nothing else, I can assure you. I'll let her know you're waiting to speak with her."

Buzz left the office and found Jessie pacing the floor, nervously playing with her braid. "Take a breath, and find me on the porch when you're done."

Jessie cast one last look at Buzz, who gave her an encouraging smile before she let the door close with a soft click.

Buzz opened his pocket watch and glanced at it, not for the first time since Jessie had been called into Mr. Kartoffelkopf's office. She had been in there for over ten minutes, and he hoped the manager wasn't being insufferable, as much for his sake as hers.

Finally, Jessie stormed out onto the hotel porch, her mouth drawn into a thin line and her brow furrowed.

"What happened?" Buzz asked, unfolding his arms and standing up from the bench where he had been waiting.

"I'm fired, that's what happened," she fumed. "While my intentions were noble, my actions were a gross violation of the Harvey Girl code of conduct by which I agreed to abide as an employee," she mimicked Mr. Kartoffelkopf with a scowl, before her shoulders sagged in defeat. "I just dunno what I'm gonna do now, Buzz," she looked up at him with such an expression of hopelessness that Buzz instinctively rested his hand on her lower back. "I can't go home, again, I just can't! I won't go back to that box; back to over-stuffed chairs and over-stuffed people, sittin' all prim and proper and silent until I'm married off," her voice rang with panic and bitterness.

"You don't want to get married?"

"No, I do, but I want it to be…" she hesitated, as if reconsidering what she was about to say. "I want it to be on my own terms, my choice, not one made for me by people who don't know me or even care what I want. B'sides, there's no one for me if I go home. I would never see Woody, or Bo, or you again and – and I don't think I could bear that."

Buzz smiled gently, "There is another option."

Jessie sniffled and tilted her head slightly, "There is?"
"Mmmhmm. There was a homestead in Redlands, and... well, Woody and I bought it. There's room there for him to trade in his holster for Holsteins." He chuckled at his own joke. "And there's an orange grove there for me."

"Sounds perfect," she sighed wistfully. "Think ya can let me have a little corner of the barn?"

"I think I can do better than that," he took her hand in his. "My father has always said that a man is only as good as the woman standing next to him. I can't think of anyone I'd rather have standing with me than you, Jessie." He gazed ardently into her green eyes, now filled with hopefulness. "It's your choice, but if you'll have me, I'm yours. Will you marry me?"

Jessie let out a gleeful squeal and jumped at him, pulling him into a kiss that would have shocked her former employer had he been watching. Buzz forgot all sense of public propriety as he pulled her closer, his hands spanning her back. When they broke apart, both were breathless. "Is that a yes?" he grinned.

"Oh, you bet your boots it is!" she laughed. "Ya really bought the place?"

"We really did! But you can't tell Bo," he gave her a serious look. "Woody's planning on proposing to her and telling her about the ranch today, too. So don't say anything to her, not about that, not about us. Not until Woody's had his chance to talk to her."

"How on earth am I s'posed to keep this a secret? Oh don't worry," she squeezed his hand, "I promise not to breathe a word, but he better ask her soon or I'm gonna just burst!"

Buzz chuckled and brought her hand to his lips. "Well, seeing as your afternoon is freed up, would you like to help me return Bullseye and Astronómo to the livery?"

"Sure thing; then I can explain that Sheriff Varney's bringin' the other horse back in a bit." She glanced down at her dusty skirt and shirtwaist stained with her brother's blood, then reached up to pick at the tear in Buzz's sleeve, where the bullet's graze had done more damage to the fabric than the flesh beneath. "We look a fright," she giggled at their shabby appearance. "Guess the owner's gonna be puzzlin' over what kinda 'family emergency' I had!"

Jessie tentatively opened the dormitory door and peeked inside. The parlor was empty, and she couldn't hear any stirrings from the manager's living quarters. Breathing a sigh of relief, she stepped into the foyer; but no sooner had she clicked the door closed behind her than Mrs. Kartoffelkopf came darting out from her apartment. Jessie recoiled slightly, expecting another lecture, but instead was met with an embrace.

"That was a brave thing you did today, dear," she released her hold on Jessie and smiled at her sincerely. "I know my husband has been hard on you about it, but I told him he's not putting you out on the street. You can keep your room with Bo until your replacement arrives, and still get your meals here, too. No worries there, alright?"

Tears welled up in Jessie's eyes at the unexpected kindness. "Thank you," she reciprocated the smile, "I appreciate it, and I promise I won't be any trouble. Now, if you'll excuse me, I best get cleaned up."

Upstairs in her room, Jessie slipped out of her soiled clothing and laid it on the bed. She turned around in front of the mirror, grimacing at the fresh purple bruises that now dotted her skin, then scrunched her nose at her old blue shirtwaist, crusted with brown stains where Woody had leaned against her on the ride back. "Welp, that's done for," she sighed. Donning her dressing gown and
grabbing her jar of shampoo cream from the dresser, she headed down the hall to wash off the grime from her adventure.

Freshly dressed in a casual blue calico wrapper - more concerned about comfort than style in her exhaustion - and her towel-dried hair pulled back into her signature braid, Jessie made her way over to the depot. She sneaked in the back door of the kitchen, which was busily preparing for the impending influx of lunch guests, and requested a couple plates of food to take upstairs and share with Woody. Once the tray was piled high with victuals and utensils, she proceeded into the hotel and then upstairs to her brother's room. Her skills acquired as a Harvey Girl allowed her to gracefully balance the tray laden with food while she turned the knob and gave the door a nudge with her hip.

"Ready for some lunch? C'mon, ya hafta get your strength back up!" Jessie set the serving tray down on the small table by the wall and went over to Woody's bed - where he lay shirtless, his shoulder bandaged and arm bound to his chest - then helped him to sitting and adjusted his pillows behind his back.

Woody smiled at his sister, the unmistakable aroma of what she'd brought him reaching his nostrils. "I won't protest a Harvey steak."

Jessie returned to the table, and quickly cut Woody's food into small pieces he could manage one-handed. After situating the dish securely on his lap, she took her own plate and sat on the edge of Buzz's bed, facing her brother. "How ya feelin'?"

"Smarts like hell, not gonna lie," Woody answered between bites. "But the doc said it coulda been a lot worse, and I'll be back to myself in a few weeks' time. How about you, Jess? You holding up alright?"

"Now that you'n Buzz are safe, and the gang is gone, I am," she sighed. "I dunno, Woody. When we were kids, and readin' all the Wild West tales of outlaws and bandits and lawmen, it seemed so excitin'. Now that I've lived it, I can do without the 'wild' part'a things, thanks. I'd like some peace and quiet for a while."

"You and me both," Woody chuckled.

The siblings savored their meal, along with the first real sense of calm they'd felt in weeks; and when they were finished, Jessie took the plates and placed them back on the tray. She helped Woody get more comfortable on his bed, then stretched out herself on Buzz's, allowing all the built-up tension to melt away in her repose. She stared at the ceiling for a moment before speaking. "Have ya gotten to see Bo yet?"

"Yeah, she slipped up here in between trains."

"And?" Jessie rolled over on her side, and Woody could feel her eyes boring holes into the side of his face.

"And what?" he turned his head, smirking at her.

"You know darn well 'and what'!"

"I guess I should be asking you the same thing about Buzz. You know something."

"I know about the land… and…” her beaming face gave away the rest.

"And… are congratulations in order?"
"Maybe. Are they for you?"

"Maybe…"

She pushed herself up on her elbow, "Woody Pride, are ya marryin' my best friend or not?"

"I am."

"Woowwweee!" Jessie whooped in delight, and flopped back down on the bed. "I'd hug ya if it wouldn't hurt ya! Can ya believe it? We're fin'ly gonna have the ranch we always wanted. Well, not quite like we dreamed it up, but I think it's even better." She snuggled down into Buzz's pillow, breathing in the lingering, comforting scent of his hair tonic in the cool fabric. "I know it is."

"I'm happy for you, Jess, you and Buzz. Do you know how much torture it's been for him, these past few months? He's been beside himself wanting to tell you about the land. But we agreed to wait until - Jess?" He had looked over only to find his sister sound asleep. "Well, I might as well do the same." Before long the fatigue of the past 24 hours had caught up with Woody as well.

After a few hours had passed, Woody woke to the sound of heavy boots as Buzz entered their hotel room. Woody pressed his finger to his lips and nodded over to his partner's bed, and Buzz's face softened into a smile as he saw Jessie sleeping there. He eased the door closed and walked to the side of his bed, then reached out and brushed aside a strand of red hair that had come loose from Jessie's braid and fallen in her face while she slept. She stirred with a small, contented sigh, but didn't awaken.

Woody moved his legs to allow Buzz room to sit on the end of his bed. "Is everything taken care of with the prisoners?" he asked in a hushed tone.

"Yeah, Pete's joined Chester in a cell here in town. I wired the U. S. District Court and told them that we'd be bringing them to their facility in a couple days. Figured you should stay put one more day, to heal."

"I'm fine, Buzz," he moved in the bed, and winced.

"That a fact?" Buzz tossed his friend a skeptical, but amused glance. "Even so, you could use the rest. Hamm and Slink are going to go with us, in case their testimony is needed; and to help with the transport, considering your injury." He watched Jessie's breathing rise and fall peacefully. "How long has she been asleep?"

"Probably a good two hours. She needed it, and she sure earned it. I owe her one." Woody smiled up at his friend. "I hear you finally popped the question."

"Yeah," Buzz couldn't help the proud grin spreading across his face. "And you and Bo?"

Woody's grin was equally as wide. "Yeah."

Buzz moved to his bed to sit, facing his now-fiancée who was curled up on her side, hugging his pillow. He gently placed a hand on her shoulder. "Jessie," he spoke softly.

Jessie's eyes fluttered open slowly, as they adjusted to the late-afternoon light that was shining through the hotel window and casting a broad rectangle on the wooden floor. "Buzz, what are you -" she sat bolt upright, "Woody! I was s'posed to be takin' care of Woody! I'm sorry…"

"I dozed off too," her brother chuckled. "No harm done."
Jessie tried in vain to smooth her unkempt hair that was in a tangle from her slumber. She looked apologetically at Buzz. "I'm a mess."

"You're beautiful."

"In this house-dress?" she fussed with her simple wrapper.

"Especially in that. I can get used to you looking exactly like this every day, in our house."

Jessie laughed dismissively, but a smile and blush crossed her face just the same. "You should get some rest. I'll take the dishes back downstairs. Should I bring ya dinner later?"

Woody shook his head, "I'd rather come down to eat."

"How ya gonna get a shirt on?" she questioned, indicating his restrained arm. "I don't think Mr. K would be too happy if ya showed up half dressed. Although Bo might not mind," she added with a wink.

Buzz laughed as Woody reddened. "One of my shirts should fit you. We'll make something work, but Jessie's right about the dress code. Why don't we meet you out at the benches for dinner?"

"That'll work. Then Bo can join us after she's done workin'. Sleep well," she kissed Buzz on the cheek, then picked up the tray as he held the door open for her. "An' you, feel better!" she called out to her brother, before Buzz closed the door behind her.

Once the tray had been returned to the kitchen, Jessie peeked around the corner of the empty lunchroom and cautiously crept up to the counter where Bo was standing. "Is Mr. K around?"


"Well, you seem awful happy for someone whose fell'a got his shoulder in stitches." Jessie couldn't take the suspense any longer. "Oh, hang it all, Bo, I hafta tell ya! Buzz 'n I are engaged! An' I know you are too, 'cause I was up with Woody. Can ya believe it?"

"Oh Jessie, I'm so happy for you," she beamed. "How is Woody doing?"

"Sore, but otherwise good. He's prob'ly fast asleep again, him and Buzz, both."

"I know I tried to warn you about not going, but... I'm really glad you did. If you hadn't gotten there in time..."

"Well, I couldn't jus' give up, so I found a way!" She cocked her head quizzically, watching Bo casually fold napkins. "I still don't see how you're so calm about bein' engaged!"

"Well, Woody and I have been sort of promised to each other since February. Today just made it official."

"Since FEBRUARY?! Bo Peepe how DARE you not tell me somethin' like that for six whole months! You're marryin' my brother, an' we're gonna be sisters!"

"And this is why I didn't tell you then." Bo laughed merrily. "Didn't want to put the cart before the horse."

Jessie heard the doorknob click in Mr. Kartoffelkopf's office. "I better vamoose. Meet us out back when you're done tonight, Woody's already gettin' sick of bein' cooped up."
Jessie, Buzz, and Woody were all seated on the benches in the depot yard - the same benches where they had gathered on their first night together nearly eight months prior - when Bo came meandering over from the dorm, having changed out of her uniform at the end of her shift. The August night was warm and clear, and although the two couples would have liked to have walked out to Buzzard Rock, to celebrate their mutual engagements in a more private setting, Woody's strength was not up to par just yet. His attire wasn't suited for an outing, either; one of Buzz's larger shirts was draped across his shoulder, covering his immobilized arm, which was still too painful to ease into a sleeve.

Woody used his good arm to push himself to standing so that he could greet Bo properly. They shared a quick kiss and then sat down together on the bench.

"I'm sorry for the way I'm dressed, this was the best I could do under the circumstances."

Bo gently rested her hand on the one of his that was peeking out between buttons on the shirt's placket, and was careful not to jostle his injured arm. "I like it. It makes you look tough."

Jessie grinned at her brother and soon-to-be sister-in-law. "What a day!" she exclaimed, slouching comfortably in her seat. "Sure am glad we're all back out here, together. I guess we have some plans to make, though. Do you fellas know what you're gonna do next, 'bout the prisoners and all?"

"We'll be in Los Angeles for a few weeks, until we're not needed anymore for testimony against the remaining gang members," answered Woody. "And we have to give our resignation to the District Marshal."

"How 'bout the ranch?" she eagerly inquired.

"We'll head there when we're done in the city. There's a lot of work to do on the property before we can earn a living off of it, let alone have either of you live there." Woody shifted his position and grimaced as he moved his arm. "Let's just hope I'm up to swinging a hammer by then."

"I can help," Jessie sat up taller on the bench. "I ain't afraid of work."

Bo chimed in, "Neither am I."

"But there's only one house, that needs some work itself, and I don't think we all want to be living on top of each other," replied Buzz, his tone showing his regret that they couldn't take the girls up on their offer. "It's going to be roughing it enough for Woody and me, while we get the place ready."

"The house is going to be ours," Woody explained to Bo. "Buzz and I talked it over and - "

"I had some property in Los Angeles," Buzz interjected, turning to Jessie, "which I sold, and made a nice profit on. So we can build a house of our own. Nothing too grand - I have to use some of the proceeds to add more acreage to the grove - but, big enough. If that's okay," he deferred.

"A new house?" Jessie was a little dumbfounded at her luck. "'Course it is!"

"So, how long are we looking at, 'til all the work is done?" Bo queried.

"Well, between fixing up one house and building another, adding to the barn, and Buzz planting more trees," Woody pondered for a moment, "we should be able to get everything ready in about six months' time."

Jessie leaned forward, and her wide, hopeful eyes darted between Woody across from her and Buzz by her side. "Can't I please help with the ranch somehow? Bo can stay here an' work, but what am I s'posed to do 'til then? Maybe I can get a job in a shop or somethin'..."
Bo reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out an envelope, her face shining with satisfaction. "You don't have to do any such thing. I got a letter yesterday from Mr. Igel, but with everything that happened, I never had a chance to tell you. He remembered us fondly, and felt bad that we've been having such a hard time of things here - it's been all over the papers in San Bernardino. Anyway, two of his girls are leaving at the first of September, one to get married, the other to go back home. He's requesting we transfer there, if we're interested."

"That would be great, but what about me losin' my job here? Won't that change his mind?"

"I doubt it, not him. But I'll explain you weren't in the wrong, and see if we can get a six-month contract."

"Oh! An' then we'd be close enough to work on the ranch on our days off, too!"

"So do I tell him yes?" Jessie nodded her head enthusiastically, and Bo addressed her fiancé. "Woody, will you help me send the telegram tomorrow?"

"You betcha." He counted on his fingers, on his good hand. "So I guess that means a March wedding? If that's alright with you," he acceded to his betrothed with a smile.

"March is perfect, and I vote for a double wedding," suggested Bo. "At our new home. If Jessie and Buzz like that idea."

Jessie looked at Buzz, and both grinned in agreement. "Will the orange trees be in bloom then, like when we visited the grove?" she asked him.

"It's the same time of year, so I'd expect so. They're mature enough, just need a little pruning."

Bo patted her hands on her knees with authority. "That settles it. And six months gives us time to plan a proper wedding."

Jessie's mind was reeling. She entwined her fingers with Buzz's and rested her head on his shoulder. "This time yesterday, I didn't know if I was gonna survive the mornin'… now I've been fired, hired, and engaged, and we're plannin' a weddin'. How that's all happened, I can't quite reckon."

Two days later, Jessie and Bo stepped into the morning light, the latter dressed for the impending breakfast shift. Buzz and Woody were talking with the porters, making arrangements for their trunks and horses to be loaded for the first train. Jessie waved them over as they concluded their business. "Everythin' all set?" she greeted Buzz with a kiss.

"Yup, just need to go to the Sheriff's office to meet Slink, then we're off to L. A."

Bo trailed her fingers lightly down Woody's right arm, still in a sling, "Are you sure you're healed up enough for this?"

Woody smiled to reassure his fiancée, "I'm fine, Bo. The doctor said limited movement is okay."

"Which is good, because I'm tired of dressing you," Buzz grinned. "Don't worry, Bo; I promise to keep an eye on him, two, if I can spare them. Here," he handed Jessie a small scrap of paper with an address for Z. Lightyear & Sons, Real Estate on Spring Street. "We'll be stayin' at my father's flat until the trial's done. You can write us there, but wire us if you need to reach us in a hurry."

Jessie tucked the paper into her skirt pocket, "I'll prob'ly write ya every day, although it's gonna be an awf'ly boring few weeks until we get to San Bernardino. Well, for me, anyway; Bo at least has a
"You know where my books are," Bo winked at Jessie as she adjusted her apron.

Buzz clasped Jessie's hand, rubbing his thumb across it. "I don't want you to worry, but there's a chance you might have to testify, if the cases go to trial. It'll all depend on how they plead to the charges."

"I ain't worried; just let me at 'em! I'll do anythin' I can to make sure those varmints get locked up for a good long time."

The determined look on Jessie's face caused Buzz to laugh, "If they knew who they were up against, they'd probably plead guilty." He leaned down and kissed her softly, "We better go. I'll write you as soon as we get settled."

Woody bade goodbye to Bo before he hugged Jessie. "Guess you'll be using that stationery to write those clandestine letters, after all," he smirked wickedly.

"You're lucky you're already hurt, else I'd make you pay for that," she returned the teasing smile. "Be careful, and we'll see ya in a few weeks!"

The two weeks passed, and before long Jessie and Bo found themselves once again on a train bound for San Bernardino. Both watched pensively out the window as the desert town they had called home for nearly a year faded into the distance. "It sure was nice that Bonnie and Dolly could see us off," Jessie wiped a tear from the corner of her eye.

Bo nodded, dabbing at tears of her own with her lace-edged handkerchief. "I will miss those two. Hopefully we'll see them at the wedding."

A few hours later, the girls stepped off the train and were greeted by a jovial Mr. Igel. Jessie shyed back, unsure of his reaction; but any concerns she harbored soon vanished as he greeted her with a wide smile.

"Miss Peepe wrote me all about what happened in Barstow. Just shameful... that old Kartoffelkopf would terminate your contract for so noble a gesture. That you were willing to risk so much to help someone, even in the face of such danger... you have proven yourself worthy to me. A young lady of your character deserves a second chance."

Jessie was practically dumbstruck by the compliment. "Can you... uh, can you write that down in a letter? Honestly, I got family that'd never believe that was said of me."

The manager laughed heartily, "Certainly, if you'd like me to. Now why don't you two frauleins head over to the dormitory building, and Mrs. Davis will get you settled in your new room. I'll have someone bring over your luggage shortly."

Bo and Jessie made the trek across the metal footbridge that traversed up and over the railroad tracks, leading to the employee buildings. As they towered high above the rails, Jessie peered over the edge.

"I'd forgotten about this contraption. Sure is a long way down..."

"You'll get used to it. You'll have to, we'll be crossing it for six months!"

The two girls were welcomed at the door of the dormitory building by the kindly matron they had met during their previous sojourn there back in the spring. She escorted them to the room they'd be sharing, from now until they left as brides, then excused herself to let the roommates make
themselves at home.

As Bo took off her hat and set it on the dresser, Jessie walked over to the window and flung open the sheer lace curtains. Outside, a vibrant, modern city stretched before her view, full of the life and color that sleepy little Barstow had been lacking. A chorus of horse hooves and wagon wheels and the rhythms of a busy transportation hub filtered up to their second-floor lodgings. Bo stepped up alongside Jessie to share in the scenery.

"Just lookit this place," Jessie turned, beaming at her best friend. "It's like all sorts'a wonderful things are possible for us now. We had good times in Barstow, but this..." She watched the green fronds of a palm tree sway, in the yard of a colorfully-painted house a few blocks over, and gazed at the mountains looming in the distance, which were mottled with the shadows from the puffy white clouds overhead. "I never dreamed we'd be back here, not for keeps."

Bo encircled her arm around Jessie's shoulders, and grinned warmly. "And it's just the beginning."

Chapter End Notes

This may seem like the end of their story... but it's not! Jessie still has quite a bit of journeying left to do. Consider the next chapter to be the start of Volume 2, if you will.

Historical Notes: Yes, you could set off a fuse with a timer back in the 1890s - in fact, the leading fuse brand was Bickford, which amused us for being so close to Binford (you know, Tim Allen, Buzz - anyway, I digress). In a previous chapter, we explained that a wrapper was a casual dress worn typically at home, and those made of printed calico were most practical. And Harvey Girls did transfer from one Harvey House to another - sometimes by their own request (after they'd been working for a while), other times by the choice of a manager. A transfer to a popular location could be a promotion of sorts - or you could be sent to a less-desirable assignment due to poor service or behavior.
A week had passed since Jessie and Bo’s arrival in San Bernardino, a week that had brought disappointing letters from their fiancés in Los Angeles, informing them that court matters were taking longer than expected. Both Pete and Chester had pled guilty to all charges, which saved Jessie from testifying, but the Judge needed time to determine sufficient sentences for their long list of offenses.

The girls were happy in their new environs, though; the bustling crowd of an urban setting kept their workdays busy and interesting. One sunny morning Bo was lost in her thoughts, absentmindedly straightening the counter’s place settings for the lunch rush, when a familiar voice met her ears.

“Well, you’re a sight for sore eyes, little lady.”

Her eyes darted up and she smiled widely. “Woody! I thought you wouldn’t be home for a couple more days!”

“Sentencing was this morning, and we took the first train we could. Hamm and Slink are escorting the prisoners to San Quentin this afternoon.”

Jessie had just stepped out of the kitchen, and raced over to greet her brother and Buzz, who stood beside him at the counter. “So, is it all over? What happened?”

“Gornik was arraigned before the court on an indictment of accessory to the fact, assault with the attempt to maim, assault with a deadly weapon, first-degree assault, and two counts of attempted murder. Your former bellboy Chatter’s indictment was a combination of accessory before and after the fact, attempted kidnapping, and second-degree assault,” Buzz rattled off the technical terms of the charges matter-of-factly, as Jessie stared, blankly and puzzled, in response.

Woody chuckled at his sister’s legal bewilderment. “Pete got thirty years, Chester ten. Turns out ol’ ‘Stinky Pete’ - that’s what the gang called him - had quite a racket going on, and he’s paying for it now. Neither of them will ever be able to bother us again.”

“Oh, good,” she breathed a sigh of relief. “So,” she asked both of the men, “when do we get to see our future home?”

The corners of Buzz’s mouth turned up crookedly at Jessie’s enthusiasm. “When do you both have a
“Day off?”

“Day after next,” she eagerly replied, “and we can take the 7:45 San Bernardino and Redlands Railway out there in the mornin’, if you’ll pick us up at the station. ‘Course it doesn’t run too late, neither does the Santa Fe, so we’ll hafta ask ya for a ride back here in the evenin’. I’ve been studyin’ the timetables, waitin’ for y’all to get back,” she added proudly.

His smile broadened, tickled by her resourcefulness. “That’ll be perfect, and it gives us a day to brush off some of the dust around the place and get our things unpacked. Speaking of,” Buzz glanced at the clock on the wall, “we should be heading out; we’ve got a drayage wagon waiting to take our trunks to the homestead, and we need to get Astrónomo and Bullseye introduced to their new home, too.” He reached across the counter, and rested his hand on Jessie’s. “We’ll catch up soon, floricita.”

After bidding the girls goodbye and pausing briefly to reintroduce themselves to Mr. Igel, Woody and Buzz walked out to the street side of the depot, where they had been instructed to wait for their horses and the wagon to be brought around. Woody consulted his pocketwatch as they both watched in the direction of the tracks. “I suppose we should have just saved the time and taken the train directly to Redlands, but it was worth it to see the girls.”

“I’m not complaining,” Buzz grinned at his friend, just as they spotted Bullseye and Astrónomo being led toward them. He slapped Woody on the back good-naturedly. “You ready for this, cowboy?”

“You betcha. Let’s go home.”

Two mornings later, Jessie raced down Third Street to the railway station, with her friend trailing a few steps behind. She held her straw hat against her head as her pace quickened and her skirt swung out behind her. “C’mon Bo, we don’t wanna miss it, or we’ll hafta wait two hours for the next!”

The girls paid their 30-cent fare each, and boarded the small local rail car that made regular daily trips between San Bernardino and Redlands. Their commute wasn’t long, but it felt like an eternity to the pair as they waited for a proper reunion with their men. As soon as the train chugged to a stop at the Redlands station, and she could see Buzz and Woody standing on the platform, Jessie didn’t even wait for Bo before she took off like a flash.

Leaping off of the last step of the passenger car, she sprinted over to Buzz, flinging herself into his arms. He lifted her into an embrace, the momentum from their impact forcing them into a spin. “You have no idea how much I’ve missed you,” she gushed.

“Oh, I think I can imagine,” he grinned down at her, before sharing a quick kiss.

Meanwhile, Bo had made her way over to greet Woody. She linked her elbow through his. “How’s your arm, Sheriff?”

“Almost healed, just can’t raise it all the way yet.” He leaned down to plant a kiss on her lips. “But better enough to wrap around you.”

“That’s what I like to hear. Now, do we get to see where we’ll be living, or not? I’m beside myself with suspense.”

Buzz and Woody led the girls over to a shiny new four-seater surrey, with Bullseye harnessed to the front.
“Is this yours?” asked Jessie, as she admired the carriage’s upholstered seats and fringe-trimmed flat roof. “It’s spiffy!”

“It’s all of ours. We got it yesterday,” Buzz boasted. “At the Columbus Buggy shop on Third Street. The ranch came with a basic farm wagon, but we needed something for all of us.”

“And you didn’t come and say hello while you were just down the street from us?” Bo playfully chided the men.

“What, and ruin the surprise?” Woody took Bo’s hand with a smile and assisted her up into the front seat, then climbed up after her. Buzz and Jessie followed suit in the backseat.

“Lettin’ Woody drive for a change?” Jessie teased Buzz, as her brother snapped the reins and the two couples started their twenty-minute drive to the homestead. “Ya sure you can trust him?”

“Maybe,” Buzz chuckled, “but he has to learn his way around here sooner or later.”

Jessie snuggled against Buzz’s shoulder and entwined her fingers in his. “I don’t mind. So how’re you fellas holdin’ up in a big empty house?”

“It’s not totally empty, a little furniture was left behind. Nothing any of us will likely want to keep, though. It’s pretty outdated.”

“They were willin’ to leave their stuff?”

“Well, from what I understand, they inherited property back east. The previous owner sent his wife and children ahead, along with the things they wanted to take with them, and he stayed to handle the sale. He only held onto some basic furniture to get by, and the pieces that were too cumbersome or worn to bother transporting. Dad negotiated the furnishings with the purchase, so at least we had something to start with.”

“Why would anyone want to leave this place?” Jessie sighed, as she observed the neatly-painted wood frame houses, ornamented by citrus and palm trees, that lined the road they traveled.

“Missed their family, I guess,” conjectured Buzz. “And a lot of people come out here on promises that orange-growing is an easy way to get rich. They soon find out it takes more work than they were expecting.”

“They just don’t have our determination,” she grinned. “Have ya been to see your Mama yet? I know she’s itchin’ to find out where things stand with us. Every letter she’s been hintin’ at it, and I’ve been leavin’ it to you to tell her.”

“No, I was thinking we could go out there on your next day off, and tell her in person.”

“You like makin’ your poor Mama wait an’ suffer?” Jessie scolded gently.

“No… but do you know what her reaction is going to be?” Buzz laughed. “I’m not going into a dangerous situation without backup.”

The surrey turned off the main road and onto a somewhat overgrown dirt lane. Navel orange trees closed in around them as they rode along, and before long, a house came into view. Standing two stories tall, with pointed gables and gingerbread trim framing its roofline and broad front porch, it looked homey and welcoming despite its peeling paint.

Bo grabbed Woody’s arm as soon as the structure caught her eye. “Oh! Woody! Is that our house?”
“Sure is,” he grinned proudly. “It’s not quite ten years old, and is good and solid. Nothing wrong with it that a paintbrush and dust rag can’t fix.”

“And some modern conveniences,” Buzz offered from the backseat.

“Yeah, we’ll see.” Woody parked the carriage on the curved path in front of the house, and the men assisted their fiancées down from their seats. “I’m just gonna put Bullseye in the barn, I’ll be right back.”

While they waited for Woody to return, Jessie looked around, taking in their surroundings. She turned to Buzz, “So where’s our house gonna go?”

“To the left of this one, I’m thinking; and we’ll widen the driveway for both to share.”

“It’s awful pretty out here,” Jessie gazed dreamily at the setting of her future home, captivated by the verdant rows of trees that surrounded the property in orderly rows. “You’d never know that town was so close. Feels like we’re in our own little world.”

Woody came striding over from the barn. “So, do you want to see the house first, or the land?”

“The house, silly!” Bo immediately replied.

The four stepped up onto the porch, and Woody opened the front door, letting Bo enter ahead of him. She paused in silence as she took sight of the rooms that would soon be the scene of her daily life. At first glance she could see that the house was bare and in need of some cleaning - having been without a woman’s touch for quite a while - but at the same time was full of potential. An oak staircase with carved newel post ascended from the foyer, and Bo walked past it slowly, her hand sliding across the wood paneling that accented the wall beneath the stairs. The girls caught a glimpse of the secondhand furniture clustered near the fireplace in the parlor - a faded sofa, two carved-and-upholstered chairs, and a small marble-topped table with a kerosene lamp - as the quartet headed straight back towards the kitchen. Woody pushed open the kitchen door, and held it for the others to pass through.

“The stove looks good, but they didn’t leave us anything to cook with,” Bo remarked, looking at the bare shelves that lined the wall space between the deep sink and the large cast-iron cookstove. “At least there’s an icebox, and a serviceable table.”

Woody nodded in agreement, “We won’t be able to wait until the wedding to furnish this place, and I don’t expect you to live with the old worn-out furniture that’s here, either. In fact, Buzz and I were thinking we all could go into town after we’re done showing you around, and you can pick out the pots and things we need for the kitchen, to start. Redlands has some nice shops.”

“Oh, I’d love to! And I’d be happy to cook whenever Jessie and I are out here helping. It’s been so long… and I need practice,” she added with a wink.

They proceeded into the adjacent dining room, a sunny space with stained oak wainscoting, a box-bay window, and a corner fireplace. It sat empty, but Bo could already envision it full of family dinners and conversation. From the dining room they crossed through the doorway into the parlor, and Bo instantly let out a high-pitched squeak.

Her exclamation took Woody by surprise. “Uh, is that a good sound?”

“A piano!” she cried, rushing to a corner of the parlor that had been hidden from her view when she walked past through the foyer. “You didn’t tell me there was a piano here!”
“I didn’t know it mattered,” he shrugged. “We were just gonna sell it.”

“Woody Pride, don’t you dare!” She rolled the stool out from under the keyboard and sat down, then raised the cover from the keys. “I had an upright piano just like this in my schoolhouse in Kansas. I used to play for the children, and I gave lessons to some of the girls in town. But many nights I’d stay late just to play for myself.” Bo let her fingers ghost over the keys, as if willing herself to remember the notes. Slowly she began to play a favorite melody, and after only a few mistakes, her hands moved nimbly across the keys yet again as the song increased in tempo.

Jessie came over to stand alongside her, enjoying the lively tune that filled the room. After the first verse was played, and the chorus began, her face lit up. “Hey, I know that song!” As she started to sing the lyrics, Bo joined her in unison.

*Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do*
*I’m half crazy all for the love of you*
*It won’t be a stylish marriage*
*I can’t afford a carriage*
*But you’ll look sweet upon the seat*
*Of a bicycle built for two.*

“I’m surprised Ma let you learn that song, Jess,” joked Woody, once they had finished singing. “It doesn’t seem like the sort of song a ‘lady of refinement’ should sing.”

“She couldn’t control what other folks played,” Jessie grinned, “or lock me up at home when our old school friends invited me to their parties. *What would people say?*” she mocked her mother’s tone.

Her brother smiled his approval. “Why don’t we see the upstairs?”

From the parlor, the four crossed the foyer and climbed the stairs. They entered the largest bedroom, in the front of the house, which held only an old-fashioned spindle bed, a stool with a lamp on it, Woody’s trunk, and his guitar leaning in the corner.

“Don’t worry, Bo, we’ll get new furniture for in here, too.”

“I’m not worried; this bed can go in the spare room. There’s a closet, I like that.”

They peeked into another smaller and unfurnished bedroom next to the first, then moved to the two in the back. One was also empty; and the other contained Buzz’s trunk, the familiar box containing his telescope, and a pile of both Buzz and Woody’s bedrolls from their Marshal days on the floor with a kerosene lamp next to it.

“You’re sleepin’ on the floor?” Jessie asked her fiancé, her voice tinged with concern.

“Yes, but it’s okay, I offered. I didn’t think Woody should be on the floor while his shoulder is still healing. It’s only temporary; my parents have an extra bed, I’ll get it when we visit next week.”

As they walked back towards the stairs, Bo opened one last door off the hallway. “Is this the bathroom?” She peered inside and saw a sink, and a tub, but no toilet. “Where’s the water closet?”

"There’s an outhouse out back,” Woody said nonchalantly.

Bo’s face fell, the first disappointment in her otherwise-perfect house. “Not that I had indoor plumbing in Kansas, but… well, we’ve gotten kind of spoiled by the modern bathrooms in the Harvey dormitories. Why is there no water closet?”
“Back when this place was built, there were only pipes for water, but nothing for sewage.”

“Now there are,” Buzz chimed in. “Public sewer’s been in place in Redlands for almost two years, but Woody’s fighting me on sharing the cost of bringing the pipes out here,” he remarked with a smirk at Jessie. “Whatever we build, it’s going to have a modern bathroom, and electric lights. Might as well modernize this house, too, while it’s being fixed up, and we’re laying the lines for ours. But no, Woody likes living in the past,” he teased.

Woody rolled his eyes, already weary of the topic he and his friend had been debating for weeks. “I said I’m thinking about it.”

“Thinking about it?” Bo planted her hands on her hips. “Buzz is right, Woody. it would be easy to add while their house is being built. Why on earth would we not update our home while we have a chance? Do you want us to raise our family in a backwards house, without modern comforts?”

“Yes. I mean, no. I mean…”

“You can keep your outhouse, but I want a water closet, for myself and our future children.” Bo addressed Buzz, “I’ll pay for our share out of my own savings, if that’s what it takes.”

Woody held up his hand, knowing this battle was lost. “No, that won’t be necessary. We’ll add the water closet. Now, why don’t we go outside?”

After coming down the stairs, the two couples exited through the kitchen and descended from the stoop into the backyard. Bo looked out towards the barn. “What’s that patch of dirt?”

“Just dirt, why?”

“It’d be the perfect place for the garden. Pretty close to the houses, but without worrying about stepping off the back porch into the lettuce bed.”

“Tarnation,” Jessie exclaimed, “there’s so much to think about! Oh, but I bet Estrellita could probably give us some good ideas for what to plant.”

Buzz laughed, “At least. If you’re not careful, she’ll do all of the planting for you. Come on,” he placed his hand on her lower back and led her toward the left of the garden space where a medium-sized box of a building stood, leaving Woody and Bo behind. “I want to show you the packing shed. This is where we’ll be cleaning and packing up the oranges to sell.”

“We? Ya mean, I’ll get to help with it?”

“More than help; traditionally, the packing house is run by women. Not to say I won’t be in there, too, but…”

Jessie bounced with excitement as she grasped his arm, “Sweet mother of Abraham Lincoln! How soon do we start?”

“Easy, florecita!” his eyes crinkled with mirth. “It’ll be some time before we get a real harvest. The navels that are already here need to be tended to, and I want to plant some Valencias - they ripen in the summer, so that way we can have more of a year-round income. But you’ll get your chance to be involved, I promise.”

“Can I see inside?”

Buzz shook his head, “Not yet. It was left in severe disarray. There is a window though,” he took
her hand and they walked to the side opposite the barn.

Jessie stretched on her tiptoes, but couldn’t see over the windowsill. Buzz knelt down, and helped her stand on his bent leg. She peered in through the dirt-crusted panes. “You weren’t kiddin’ about the mess!”

“It needs to be modernized, there’s no electricity or plumbing in there,” he said as he helped her back to the ground, then stood and brushed the dry dirt off his trouser legs.

“We can get some good sturdy shelves to hold supplies. I helped Pa with that at the store, so it won’t be at all hard to organize.”

He smiled at her with a mixture of affection and pride, “So you think you’ll be able to manage this part of the operation?”

She grabbed his lapel and pulled him towards her, “Just you watch me.” His chuckle was muffled as he closed the distance between them.

Meanwhile, Woody had strolled with Bo to the backside of the barn, where he rested his hand against the wooden siding. “She’s in pretty good shape, considering. We’ll need to make sure the inside pens are still sturdy, for the horses and to have a milk cow or two until I can get my full dairy herd. We’ll add a wing for about forty head of cattle, along with a milking shed. Over here,” he gestured to a large dirt expanse outlined by a post-and-rail fence, “is the barnyard for the horses, and the cows until we can send them out into the unfarmed land to pasture. And I thought we’d build up an area here, behind the barn, for chickens.”

“Can I get some sheep, Woody, please? I’ve always wanted sheep. I don’t need many, maybe three?”

“I don’t think that will be a problem.” He staggered backwards slightly as she expressed her thanks with an exuberant kiss.

Just as Woody and Bo passed through the barn’s back door, Buzz and Jessie approached from the side facing the packing shed, and the four met inside, where the farm wagon that came with the property was stored. Jessie proceeded over to the stalls where Bullseye and Astrónomo resided, and stroked their manes affectionately in turn. “Is there anythin’ else to see?”

“Not really - nothing you can’t see another day,” Woody leaned against the side of the wagon. “The farther reaches of the property are next to the mountainside, and are too rocky to plant anything on. But there’s a stream, and it’ll be good grazing land for the cattle.”

“If you want,” Buzz turned to Jessie, “you and I can go for a walk after we get back from town. I can show you the grove, and where I want to plant the Valencias.”

“And while you do that, Woody and I can set up our kitchen,” Bo suggested. “At least enough for you boys to fix yourselves some meals.”

Having seen enough of the outbuildings and their environs, the two couples ambled leisurely back to the house, where they sat on the stairs of the back stoop.

“You boys did a great job buying this ranch,” Bo said once they were settled. “The house is just charming.”

“I’m glad you like it; I do, too,” Woody beamed. “With some fresh paint, and new furniture. It’ll be good as new.”
“You’ll be needin’ all those bedrooms,” Jessie smirked at Woody.

“I know,” he said, smiling at Bo, and unfazed by his sister’s insinuations.

Bo returned her fiance’s smile, an understanding passing between them. “So what about a name for the property? We can’t just keep on calling it ‘the ranch.’”

“Well, I had an idea about that, and Buzz and I have been discussing it... remember how when Jessie and I were kids, we called ourselves the Roundup Gang in our games? What about Roundup Ranch?”

Jessie’s eyes lit up. “We did always talk about havin’ a ranch of our own. I like it!”

“Me, too.” Bo stared thoughtfully out over the expansive yard, lush groves framing it on either side. “And the wedding will be perfect here. I think it's fitting.”

“If it’s outside, we don't have to decorate so much, either. The blossoms’ll do that for us!” Jessie enthusiastically concurred. “But we do need to have dancin’ after,” she cast a sly, sideways grin at Buzz.

“If it's an afternoon wedding, we can.” Bo extended her hand, as if pointing out the scenery she could picture in her imagination. “We can set up a dancing area out back, over there, with streamers and paper lanterns. And we’ll have some refreshments closer to the house. Or should it be a dinner? But then where would everyone sit? Oh, we’ll have to figure out who to invite...”

Jessie looked to her brother, who along with Buzz had gotten a rather befuddled expression on his face as the girls’ excitement took over. “Speakin’ of invitin’ folks, didja write home yet?”

“I did, but I haven’t heard back yet. I thought you and Pa were writing?”

“We are, but this sorta news involves tellin’ Momma too, and I ain’t doin’ that,” she sighed. “Guess we shouldn’t get carried away and make this thing too big - since it's the bride’s parents’ job to pay for a weddin’, and we can’t count on that happenin’. Bo’n I have talked it over, and we both have savings from our work, so we can - ”

"Buzz reached for her hand. “It's our wedding, not yours alone. I think Woody would agree; we’re happy to share the expenses.”

“But the groom’s not supposed to, Bo got a book t’help us plan, and it says so - ”

“Hang that book,” Woody interrupted. “And if Ma says a word, I'll set her straight.”

Bo glanced at Jessie, then the men. “But Jessie and I do intend to contribute, to the wedding and getting the houses ready.”

“We have plenty of time to build the second house and get things situated on the ranch. What about a honeymoon?” Buzz added, looking down at Jessie with a glint in his eye.

“I’m fine just stayin’ here;” she shrugged.

“Stay here on the ranch? Really?”

“Well, yeah. It’d be nice to go somewhere an’ all, but... but this is gonna be my first real home, at least the first place that really feels like home, and I think I’d rather make memories here, ‘specially that first night,” she added with a flirtatious smile at Buzz.
“I’m fine with that, too,” assented Bo. “A honeymoon would be nice, but it isn’t necessary; it’ll waste money we can use to get started. Besides, I just can’t wait to be living here, in my own house,” she linked her arm through Woody’s, “with you.”

Woody smiled fondly at his fiancée. “We’re not talking the Grand Tour of Europe,” he chuckled, addressing the whole group. “We could always spend the first night at home, and then leave the next morning. It only has to be a couple days; we don’t have to be extravagant. Life’s gonna get busy come spring, for all of us, what with the grove and the cattle. It’d be nice to have a little getaway, before we have to roll up our sleeves and get to work.”

“It’d be fun, we just don’t need it is all,” Jessie said, and Bo nodded in agreement.

An inspired grin spread across Buzz’s face. “I’ve got an idea. I have a friend from my officer days who might be able to help us out. I’ll write him tonight.”

The heavy wooden door of the Lightyear hacienda opened to an ecstatic Estrellita, who pulled her visitors into a warm embrace. “Bustillo! Jessie! I’ve been waiting to hear from you since your father said you left the city.” She craned her neck to look over the couple’s shoulders and onto the veranda. “Just you two? Where are Woody and Bo?”

“Bo had to work; and Woody said he needed to get some work done,” explained Jessie.

“I think it really pained him to say that, too,” Buzz added with a chuckle. “You know how he feels about your cooking.”

“I’ll send some food for him; that boy is too thin. But where are you staying? Did you just get into town? Come in and fill me in on everything!” She guided the pair into the parlor, visibly scrutinizing Jessie’s left hand in search of clues to an impending announcement as she closed the door behind them. “Is the case done, mi corazón?”

“Yes, Mamá, that’s why we’re here, in fact. But first… if I wanted a piece of Abuelita’s jewelry, could I have it?”

“Sí, of course, but why? If you need money, you can always ask us…”

“No! I’d never ask for that reason. It’s just… you see… well, heh…” he smiled at Jessie and took her hand. “I’ve asked Jessie to be my wife, and she said yes.”

Neither Jessie nor Buzz were ever able to quite describe what happened next. She flew at them, a rush of Spanish falling from her mouth as she gathered them both into fierce hugs. She peppered Buzz’s face, then Jessie’s, with kisses.

Buzz pulled away, laughing, “Mamá, even I can’t understand what you’re saying! Besides, you’re gonna scare her off,” he winked.

Estrellita waved a dismissive hand at her son’s ribbing, her countenance beaming. “Ah, your Papá will be so sorry to be away on business again! He’s been wanting to meet you, mija.”

“Really? He knows about me?”

She took Jessie’s face in her hands lovingly. “Of course he does! We knew this day would come for our Bustillo, from the moment I met you.”

“I’m going to get this jewelry before I forget,” Buzz interjected. “You can tell Mamá all about your
new job,” he added to Jessie with a smirk, then he disappeared around the corner in the direction of his parents’ bedroom.

Buzz knew exactly what he was looking for, as he opened his mother’s inlaid rosewood jewelry chest that sat on top of her dresser. He carefully rifled through her collection of gold and gems, until the piece he had had in mind finally caught his eye. ‘That’s just the thing. I’ll have it reset into something that suits her,’ he thought, then stuffed it triumphantly in his vest pocket and closed the lid.

He returned to the parlor to find the two women sitting and talking, Jessie on the plush Spanish-style sofa, and Estrellita in the upholstered armchair across from her.

“Did you find something?” Estrellita eagerly inquired.

“I did.” He pointed a finger at Jessie. "No peeking! Turn around."

Jessie feigned innocence, “What?”

“I know you, florecita. Turn around.”

She huffed, but complied. Buzz stood in front of his mother and hunched over, drawing the trinket carefully out his pocket so that she could see. Estrellita nodded. “Perfect choice, mijo.”

“Can I turn around now?” Buzz and Estrellita both laughed at Jessie’s flustered impatience.

“Wellll…. I guess we’re done,” he teased. He patted the pocket that concealed his mysterious treasure for emphasis and sat on the sofa next to Jessie, extending his arm behind her.

“Good, ‘cause you didn’t tell your Mama the other news. Woody and Bo are engaged, too! We’re plannin’ a double weddin’ for the spring, March likely.”

“Oh! How exciting. And where are you going to live? Have you decided, Bustillo? You have your property in Los Angeles - you're not going to be traveling, with a wife at home?”

“Actually, remember when Woody and I were here back in April, and I told you it was for business? It was - personal business,” he grinned proudly. “I sold my city lots, and we bought 160 acres near Redlands. Woody wants to start a dairy, and Jessie and I are going to establish an orange grove. There’s a house already there that Woody’s taking, and I’m building a new one.”

Estrellita exploded in another symphony of Spanish and English, delighted to learn how close they would now be. “But how did you manage to sell your lots in the city so quickly?”

“Dad took care of it for me. Helped negotiate the purchase for us, too.”

“Your Papá knew about this for two months? Ay, he’s going to have to answer to me for keeping such a secret,” she laughed. She turned to Jessie. “Your family must be so happy, mija. They’ll be coming west for the wedding?”

Jessie clasped her hands nervously. “I’m not sure. Woody wrote ‘em, but we haven’t heard.”

“Jessie’s mother is… difficult.” Buzz rested a hand on his fiancee’s shoulder and gave her a reassuring smile. “But it’s okay, the four of us will do just fine planning things on our own.”

“Please, let me help, mijos. What can I do?”

“Well, I’d like it to be just like the fiesta, with the lanterns and the dancin’… and the food! Could ya
maybe help with the food? If that’s not too much trouble…”

Estrellita shone with joy and pride that her future daughter-in-law was so fond of her heritage. “Of course! And I know Tío Héctor would be honored to coordinate the music. Do you know if there’s anything special Bo would like to have included?”

“Not off the top of my head - we haven’t talked about anythin’ that specific yet - but I’ll find out. Her Ma was from Sweden, if that helps.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” she dashed a happy tear from her eye. “Oh, I’m so happy that you two will finally be wed and so close and…” she jumped up to hug the couple again. “Now, let’s see, we have the food and the music taken care of, what else is there? Bustillo, what about tables and chairs? Will you need those?”

Buzz blinked, once again feeling off-balanced by the fury of wedding discussion. “Uh...we will need them, for sure. We have the kitchen table at Woody’s that might work for some food, but nothing much. Which reminds me, would it be okay to take some furniture back today? Mainly a bed.”

Her brow furrowed, “You do not have a bed?”

“There was only one, and I let Woody have it.” He could feel the strength of his mother’s disapproving stare. “The bedroll was fine for me until I could get out here.”

“Ay, Bustillo, sleeping on the floor,” she shook her head. “It’s kind of you to think of your friend, but you will hurt your back. One of your brothers’ old single beds is upstairs in my sitting room. Will that do?”

“Of course, but I don’t want to take it if you’re using it,” he deferred.

She shook her head. “Only as a daybed to read on occasion. Gives me an excuse to buy a new bed lounge like I’ve been wanting,” she added with a wink. “What else do you need? Chairs? A table? What have you been keeping your clothes in?”

“We have chairs, and a table. My clothes are in my trunk. But I do have a closet.”

“Tsk, that’s no good. You will take a dresser with you, too. I assume you came prepared?”

“Sí, Mamá, I brought the wagon. And I could use a bedside table, if you’ve got one to spare.”

Estrellita led Buzz and Jessie up the stairs to the second floor, and into the open, airy center room that once was her sons’ playroom and now served as a sewing and reading retreat of her own. In it, along one wall, sat a dark wooden bedstead with a tall rectangular headboard and almost-as-tall footboard.

“This is the one, mijo,” she gestured. “It’s only big enough for one, but someday your son can have it,” she added with a mischievous smile. “There’s a dresser in the corner; I only have a few lengths of fabric stored in it. Let me clear it out for you.”

“Only if you don’t need it -”

“You need it more, mí corazón.”

While Buzz and his mother negotiated over furniture, Jessie wandered over to the window that overlooked the rear of the house. A table and chairs that rested below the sill caught her eye, and she
brushed her hand across the rustic wood surface that had seen many years of use. The table had a natural top and vibrantly painted yet worn green legs, and the two chairs that were pushed beneath it were painted a bright red, accented with delicately painted flowers along the back slats and legs.

“Do you like that, mija?”

Estrellita’s voice startled Jessie, and she nodded. “It’s beautiful! I’ve never seen a table like this.”

“My abuela painted it. I remember sitting at it as a niña, thinking it was the loveliest thing I’d ever seen.”

“If we’d had something like this when I was growin’ up, I’d’a probably wanted to stay at the table longer! Didja leave your Mama with anythin’, or are we haulin’ the house back with us?” she teased Buzz, missing the twinkle in Estrellita’s eye.

Buzz held up his hands defensively, “Hey, she was trying to push it all on me, not the other way around!” He grinned affectionately at his mother. “Thank you, Mamá. I better get the wagon loaded; I still have to take all this to the ranch and get Jessie back to the Harvey House by ten o’clock.”

“You sure ya got all this yourself?” Jessie asked. “I can help, ya know.”

“I can manage; I’ll take the bed apart, and the rest isn’t bad. Go, make more plans with Mamá,” he chuckled. “Besides, she’s been dying to get you in the kitchen.”

Estrellita gave her son a kiss on the cheek and took Jessie’s hand, “Come on; while he does the heavy lifting, we will make dinner, and find something to serve at your wedding.”

Jessie hurried into her dorm room, not even waiting for Bo to catch up. She flew behind the dressing screen, changing hastily out of her uniform and into her nightgown and robe. It was late, and she was tired, but none of that mattered. She had an important project to work on. By the time Bo entered the room she shared with her friend - not even five minutes later - Jessie was already sprawled out prone on her bed, her nose buried in a book.

“You sure were in a hurry,” Bo laughed. “Does this have anything to do with Buzz stopping by today?”

“He got a house plan book from the builder! Told me I get to pick, just hafta keep it under $2000.”

Bo stole a peek over her roommate’s shoulder. “I don’t envy you having to narrow it down. They all look nice.”

“Well, I don’t want any of those hoity-toity rooms like in my Aunt’s house - no drawin’ room, no study, nothin’ for servants, that’s for sure - so that helps. Just so long as I have a nice parlor and dinin’ room, a big enough kitchen, a bathroom inside, and a couple’a bedrooms, I’m good. But I’d love to have a big porch.” She flipped each page eagerly, and savored the details of each design, wanting to make sure she didn’t miss the perfect house.

Several minutes had passed, and Bo was standing in front of the dresser mirror brushing her hair, when Jessie let out a gasp.

“What is it? Did you find the one?”

“Yeahhh…”
“Let me see!” Bo sat down on the edge of Jessie’s bed and leaned over to take a closer look. “Oh, that’s beautiful! Look at the turret, and the porch is huge!”

“And that’s ‘xactly what I love! But it’s $500 over budget. I can’t ask Buzz to build that! ‘Specially when the stuff that makes me like it is stuff I don’t need. It’s... frivolous.”

“When are you going to stop hearing your mother’s voice in your head?” Bo rested a hand on her friend’s shoulder. “It’s not frivolous if it’ll make you happy to live there.”

“But it’s so much more than he said!”

“It’s really not that much more, not in the scheme of things. It wouldn’t hurt to show him. You never know, he might’ve just been frugal to start.”

“No… unless… maybe I could ask for some extra shifts, to make a little more money to contribute? If I gave up my days off for a while…”

“And never see Buzz? Or me? We have a wedding to plan, and work to do on the ranch, you know. We can’t leave it all to the men, you never know what they’d do!”

“I know.” Jessie stuck a slip of paper from the nightstand in the book to mark the page, set it aside, and flopped over on her back. “Ugh, why can’t anythin’ be easy?”

Several unsettled days passed for Jessie until the girls’ next shared day off, when Woody and Buzz picked them up at the Redlands depot for another day of fixing up the farmhouse and land. Jessie had brought the plan book with her, as Buzz had requested, but still wasn’t sure how she was going to broach the subject of the over-budget house she really wanted.

After their short ride, Woody brought the surrey to a stop at the side of the house. “Wanna help me put the horse and carriage away?” he asked Bo with a smirk. Buzz and Jessie shared a knowing look in the back seat, and Buzz descended, offering Jessie a hand as she stepped down and reached for the large, hardcover folio from beneath the bench seat.

The couple entered the house through the back door into the kitchen, as the carriage drove forward into the barn. Jessie set down the heavy book and looked around at the polished wood trim and shelves which were now stocked with the necessities of cooking. She let out a low whistle. “Wow, the place looks great! How’d ya get it all tidied up without us?”

“My family showed up to pitch in two days after we told Mamá,” Buzz laughed. “We couldn’t have gotten this much done without them, not this quickly. The first floor has been thoroughly scoured, along with the bedrooms we’re using. But they ran out of time to do the other two.”

“Bo’n I can clean those today, then. How’s outside comin’?”

“They helped out there, too. The packing shed and barn are cleared, but Woody and I need to finish the chicken coop so we can start having some fresh eggs around here. That’s what we’re going to work on today. But before that… where’s the plan book? Did you decide on a house?”

Jessie tentatively picked up Cottage Souvenir No. 2 from where she’d laid it down on the kitchen table. “I dunno…”

“The builder wants his book back - he needs to get started soon. If he doesn’t have the plans we want on hand, he’ll have to order them. We just have a little over six months before the wedding, we’re on a tight timeframe.”
“You could help me pick, ya know.”

The pressure of a deadline was wearing Buzz’s usual patience rather thin. “Don’t put this on me, Jessie. You’ve had that book for days.”

“Don’t put this on you? You’re pretty willin’ to put in all on me, when it’s your house, too!”

“Look, all I’m saying is, you’re probably making this harder than it needs to be.”

“It’s just... this is where we’re gonna live... forever, ya know? It has to be perfect.”

Buzz’s face softened. “Okay, why don’t you show me the one you liked best, and we’ll start from there.” He slid a chair out from under the table for Jessie to sit, and she set down the book as he pulled up a chair next to her.

She opened the folio on the marked page of her favorite, Design #23, but her resolve failed. She stared at her dream house longingly for a moment, not knowing that Buzz was studying her expression, then flipped to much-simpler Design #12 instead, and pivoted the book in his direction. “Here, this one’s good.”

Buzz studied the page carefully. “Is that really your favorite? It’s a lot below budget, and I thought you wanted a big porch.”

“I don’t need the porch; it’s better to save the money. ‘Sides, this one’s got the right kinda rooms inside.”

Buzz’s fingertips found the sliver of paper peeking out further back in the book, and he turned to it. "But this one is better outside, isn’t it?"

"Yeah…” Jessie confessed, glad at least that he’d found her favorite plan and brought it up himself. “But it’s $500 over what you told me.”

"But, if you could have any of them, this would be the one you want. Right?"

She nodded. “It looks like… like home. But, that’s just me bein’ silly… we don’t have to…”

He studied the details of the plan. “We can do this.”

“I already… wait, what?”

"We can make this one work. I like it, too.”

Jessie’s eyes brightened, radiant with hope. “Really?!?

Buzz smiled widely. “Really.”

“But what about the price?”

“That includes labor. So, Woody and I will do a little more of the finish work ourselves. And we can opt out of the wood paneling in the parlor and dining room, and just do plaster.”

“An’ I can work more hours, contribute more - ”

“That’s not necessary.” Buzz leaned across the table and kissed her tenderly. “You don't have to be sensible always, florecita, not anymore. This is going to be our home, it’s worth a little extra charm.”
“You’re the best, ya know that?”

“I do,” he flashed a toothy grin, then pushed his chair away from the table and stood. “I’ll take the book to the builder tomorrow, and tell him we’ve made our choice. I really should get to work on the coop now, but I don’t want to go out to the barn and… disturb anything,” he raised an eyebrow.

“Bo’n I best get started on this scrubbin’, too, but I don’t wanna go get her, either.” Jessie snickered.

Buzz lingered by the kitchen window, rolling his shirt sleeves above his elbows and pushing his undershirt sleeves up as well. He was relieved when he noticed Woody and Bo strolling over, hand in hand, only a few minutes later. “Barn in good order?” he asked with a smirk, when they walked through the door.

“Uh, yeah… let’s get the coop finished,” Woody hastily replied.

Buzz gave Jessie a quick kiss on his way out the door. “If I get this done soon enough, we can go for one of our walks in the grove after dinner.”

She reached out and traced her finger along the button placket of his shirt. “Ya better hurry up, then,” she said with a coy smile.

As the men strode out to the barnyard, Woody turned to Buzz. “Walks in the grove, huh?”

“And it takes two to park a carriage?” his friend countered.

“Fair enough.”

Inside, Jessie and Bo rolled up the sleeves of their own shirtwaists and donned the full-length aprons they’d purchased especially for their work on the homestead. As they gathered the supplies they’d need to clean the bedrooms, Bo marveled at how nice the house looked and Jessie explained about her future in-laws’ assistance. With buckets of sudsy water and rags in hand, the two girls climbed the stairs and set to work.

After about an hour’s time, Jessie sat back on her heels and wiped her forehead with her bare forearm. “Okay, I think this room is good’n cleaned out, no more dust hidin’ in these corners. Whadd’ya want me to tackle next?” She turned to face her friend when no answer came. "Bo?"

Bo snapped her head around quickly, turning away from the window she had been focused on. “Sorry… I was… distracted.” But she couldn’t resist stealing another sideways glance outside.

Jessie draped the rag she was holding over the edge of the scrub bucket and rose, then went over to where her friend was standing. "And jus' what in tarnation is so interest-ing… oh."

Outside, their fiancés had been hard at work. The heat of the September afternoon had gotten the better of them in their manual labor, and thinking that no one was watching, they had discarded their vests, buttoned shirts, and even their undershirts over a stall railing inside the barn. They now stood on the shady side of the barn, in the girls’ view, taking a break to cool off. Jessie was focused on Buzz, as she caught her first glimpse of the defined muscles she’d felt with every embrace.

The girls stared for awhile in silence, until Jessie finally spoke. "Think we need to take ‘em a drink? It looks… hot… out there."

"I think it's getting hot in here, too,” Bo added, fanning herself with the rag in her hand, and both girls erupted into a fit of giggles.
Chapter End Notes

Historical Notes: Credit for determining Pete and Chatter’s charges goes to my hubby, who works in criminal justice and has been our consultant on those sorts of topics, since formal legal proceedings haven’t changed that much since 1894. The San Bernardino and Redlands Railway was a commuter line between the two cities, starting in 1888. The girls could also have traveled the Santa Fe route for free as employees, but this smaller line took regular trips throughout the day. Redlands was a modern city in the 1890s, and the references to public utilities are based upon info found in newspapers at the time. The two houses are based on real plans, Woody and Bo’s from an 1884 design, and Buzz and Jessie’s from a very popular 1891 plan book (both can be found on our Pinterest board).
Another little delay with posting… sometimes life just gets busy, despite our best intentions. But we’re still much committed to posting every month! :) Don’t forget to visit our Pinterest board (Jessie’s journey under account name yodelincowgirl) - there are new pins to help illustrate every chapter! Toy Story still doesn’t belong to us… if it did, there’d have been a sneak peek at Toy Story 4 by now. Enjoy, and please be sure to subscribe/bookmark and leave us some kudos!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

My Sweetest Buzz,
A whole week until I see you again - it feels like forever when the customers are so fractious. They tell me it’s these Santa Ana winds that make people crazy. Poor Kitty, she has such a timid voice, and the other day there was so much commotion in the kitchen, the cooks could hardly hear her above the din. That reminds me of a funny story. You remember how we call the cook “Sarge” because he runs the kitchen as if he’s in charge of a battalion? Well, apparently he has a sense of humor after all. Daisy and Hannah have been sneaking cranberries every chance they could get, even though we’ve been forbidden from eating them. Sarge called us all in to the kitchen today and opened the ice box, where the cranberries had been stored in their crock. There were a few left, but there was also a dead mouse in there! It gave Daisy and Hannah a fright, but Sarge just laughed. He planted it there to teach them a lesson. Bo and I are skeptical it will do any good, but it was funny and I’m laughing all over again as I write about it.

I hope you aren’t getting these blasted winds at the ranch. You’d think the breeze would cool things off, but they make it feel like an oven. I have on my thinnest nightgown but the fabric is still clinging to every bit of my skin. Having my hair up helps, but my bare neck is lonely without your lips to keep it company.

Jessie’s focus was distracted from her writing by the sound of a clicking latch and a heavy wooden lid hitting the metal footboard of her roommate’s bed. "Whatcha doin’, Bo?" she asked, setting down her pen and turning to face her friend.

Bo glanced up from where she knelt next to her open trunk. She had been carefully removing its contents piece by piece and setting them aside. "I might ask you the same thing. Your cheeks are quite the shade of pink."

"Oh," Jessie brought her hands to her face. "N-nothin’. Must be from the heat."

"Sure it is." Bo chuckled, a knowing smirk tugging at the corners of her mouth. "Don’t worry, I won’t read over your shoulder."

Jessie smiled sheepishly, and hastily changed the subject. "Whatcha lookin’ for, anyway?"

"I was looking for this.” Bo lifted out a small, round, wooden box, from which she carefully took a diminutive wire crown that was covered with tiny dried leaves.

"What is it?” Jessie rose from the desk where she’d been writing, and went over to sit on the edge of
her friend’s bed.

Bo cradled the heirloom lovingly in her hands. “A Swedish bridal crown. It was my mother’s.”

“Can I ask… what happened to your family?” Jessie asked cautiously, as Bo came to sit beside her. “We’ve been friends for goin’ on a year now, and we’re gonna be sisters soon - unless it’s too hard to talk about.”

“It was cholera,” Bo sighed, her voice small. “There was an epidemic that swept through our town. My mother, father, sister, and brother all fell ill, but somehow I was spared. I was only 15, and had nobody else… but my schoolteacher had always been kind to me, and she took me in. I lived with her for a year and a half, until she married and moved away. That’s how I became the town’s teacher myself, at 17.”

“I’m so sorry,” Jessie wrapped her friend in a tight hug. “But you’ve got family now.” She reached over and gently touched the brittle, brown foliage that lined the wire frame. “What’re these leaves from?”

“Myrtle. I wasn’t allowed to take many belongings from my home, for fear that they’d carry the disease along with them. But I made sure to save this - I remember my mother showing it to me, and explaining the tradition, and telling me how it would be mine someday, for my own wedding. We even had a myrtle bush planted outside, for that purpose.”

“You’re gonna wear it, aren’t ya? You could fix it up like new with some fresh leaves.”

“I’d like to, but I don’t know where to get myrtle around here.”

Jessie’s eyes twinkled, and she patted her friend on the arm. “I’m sure you’ll think of somethin’. Now, I better finish this letter to Buzz.”

The week passed more quickly than anticipated, thanks to busy days at the lunch counter, and on the girls’ next shared day off the men picked them up at the Redlands station as usual. The couples’ ride to the ranch was pleasant, since the Santa Ana winds had dissipated, at least for the time being.

“What needs to be done today?” Jessie asked Buzz as he guided Astrónomo along the road, but he didn’t immediately reply.

Woody picked up on his friend’s hesitation and chimed in. “The parlor wallpaper came in; I thought you and I,” he nodded to Bo, “could take a look at it, maybe start getting it put up.”

Buzz cleared his throat and turned to Jessie. “I, uh, I thought we might go out into the grove first. I haven’t had a chance to check if the winds damaged any trees, and it would go faster with two.”

Jessie shrugged, oblivious to his air of nervousness. “Sure!”

“And when we’re all done, I have a treat for you boys,” Bo gestured to the basket at her feet. “You’ve been working so hard, I thought I’d make a roast for dinner.

“Bo, you’ve already won my heart,” Woody joked, “You don’t need to keep enticing me. But I’m not going to complain, either.”

Once they had arrived at their homestead, and the horse and carriage were safely returned to the barn, the two couples set about their plans. Woody and Bo waved from the back stoop as Jessie and Buzz walked out to tour the grove.
Inside the kitchen, Bo put the roast in the ice box and set about unpacking the remainder of the basket’s contents, but Woody took her hand in his, “Come with me a moment.”

“I should get the rest put away,” she protested.

“It’ll keep a minute.”

As Woody led her into the foyer and up the stairs, she raised an eyebrow, “You better not have any mischief in mind, sheriff.”

“Well, I did think we could go up to the bedroom… sadly, not for mischief. There’s some work needing done; I figure both of us can handle it pretty quickly.”

“Oh well, maybe next time, then,” she batted her eyelashes.

Woody let Bo go ahead of him, hanging back slightly as she came to a dead stop in the doorway. Her hand flew to her heart as she spied the faded blue wooden chest at the foot of the bed. She knelt before it, her fingers running over the delicately painted white and pink roses. “Where did you…?”

He knelt beside her, “When we were in Los Angeles, at a secondhand store. The tag said ‘Swedish wedding chest.’ I’ve had it hidden in the attic, waiting for the right time to give it to you. Do you like it?”

“I love it,” she whispered. “It reminds me of the chest my mother had. It was burned with everything else after the sickness.”

“Open it up.”

She looked up at him quickly, then lifted the lid. The interior was also painted with floral rosmaling, but it was the small royal blue oval box sitting in the middle of the otherwise-empty trunk that caught her eye. She picked it up, opening the hinged lid. Nestled in a divided velvet cushion was a delicate gold engagement ring, its filigree band framing a solitaire buttercup setting that held a modest quarter-carat diamond.

Bo stared at the ring, speechless, as Woody extricated it from the box and tenderly placed it on her finger. “Did I do okay? I thought it looked like something you’d like, and…”

His sentence was cut short as Bo pulled him into a kiss, her newly bedecked hand curved around his neck. “Does that answer your question?” she beamed when they pulled apart.

“I have one more surprise for you, outside. C’mon.” Woody helped her up and ushered her downstairs and out the front door, where they stopped on the porch.

“What am I looking for?” she asked, looking around.

“Over here, around the side.” The pair proceeded down the porch steps and towards a small green shrubbery. The loose dirt surrounding it gave away that it had only recently been planted.

Bo’s free hand immediately rose to her mouth, as tears welled up in her eyes. “Myrtle! But how did you - ” she barely managed to choke out.

“Jessie wrote Buzz, and explained that you needed it for the wedding. It’s small now, but with five more months left to grow, you should have all the leaves you’ll need.”

Bo threw her arms around her fiance. “You sweet man, you,” she spoke through happy tears against
his shoulder. She pulled back and kissed him soundly, expressing her gratitude without saying a word.

As Woody and Bo had been heading for the house, Jessie and Buzz had started off toward the grove. Jessie linked her fingers through Buzz’s, and after they had ambled together along the dirt path that led from the barn to the tree line for several minutes, she stole a sideways glance at him. “You’re awful quiet today. Is everythin’ okay?”

“I’m fine. Everything’s fine.” Still, his voice gave away an unsteadiness that she hadn’t noticed in months.

“You sure?”

“Positive.” He smiled down at her as they strolled further out into the grove, down the orderly lanes of trees. When they were fully ensconced in the glossy dark foliage, he stopped and faced her with an earnest, almost anxious, expression in his eyes.

Jessie cocked her head quizzically. “Okay, really, Buzz, what’s goin’ on?”

He grinned at her timorously, and fumbled inside his coat until his hand emerged holding a diminutive red heart-shaped box, the lid inscribed with ‘THE GIRL OF MY HEART’ in gold lettering. “This is for you.”

Jessie gently took the tiny box from him, and carefully unfastened the metal latch that held it closed. She opened it to reveal her own engagement ring nestled in a cream-velvet cushion.

“Oh, Buzz, it’s beautiful!” she exclaimed, gazing admiringly at the delicate piece of jewelry. Its gold etched band held a clear, bright, round turquoise center stone, flanked by two smaller diamonds, all in open floral-pronged settings.

“You really like it?” His eyes shone with hopefulness.

“Course I do!” She smiled at him coyly, “You gonna put it on my finger, or what?”

Buzz reached for the ring and slipped it from the box. Jessie extended her left hand, and his own trembled as he slid the gold band on her finger, fully aware of the happy significance of the moment.

“So this was made from the jewelry you got from your Mama?”

“Yes, an earring that belonged to my abuelita - my grandmother. They were her favorites, and Mamá felt terrible when she lost one. I thought it would be nice to give it a new life, as a ring for you.”

Jessie tilted her hand back and forth, watching the diamonds sparkle in the sunlight. “It’s just perfect. And it’s worth all the teasin’ and secrets that day, too.”

He beamed, all apprehension vanished now that he knew the ring met with her approval. He gave her hand a confident squeeze, “I’m glad you think so. And speaking of teasing,” he pulled her against him, “I got your letter.”

“Yes, and?” her lips twisted into a playful smirk.

“And I think you should have worn your hair up,” he pushed her heavy braid away from her neck as her giggles floated out amongst the trees.
The two couples were seated in the parlor after dinner, gathered around the glow of the kerosene lamp. Buzz and Jessie lounged on the sofa, reading, while Bo embroidered and Woody picked at his guitar in the two chairs flanking the table. They had a few hours left to spare before the girls had to return to the Harvey House, but darkness had fallen and there was no work left to do for the day.

Jessie leafed through the pages of the book they had been consulting for their wedding plans. “Hey, Bo?”

Her friend didn’t look up from her needlework. “Hmm?”

“We prob’ly should decide on flowers for decorations an’ all. Whadd’ya think about all this ‘language of flowers’ stuff? Think it matters with what we pick?”

“I don’t know… it wouldn’t hurt to look up the ones we were considering.”

Jessie turned a few pages. “Here’s myrtle - for your crown. Says, ‘love.’ That’s good! Lemme check orange flowers.” She traced her finger down the alphabetized list. “‘Your loveliness equals your purity.’ And, ‘chastity.’”

Buzz chuckled from behind his copy of *The California Fruits and How to Grow Them*, and Jessie elbowed him playfully.

“What else is white?” Bo suggested.

“Daisies… I like daisies… they mean ‘innocence.’” Another snicker escaped Buzz’s lips. “Will ya stop it?” Jessie hit him lightly on head with the book, and they both laughed.

Woody paused in his strumming. “Do I really want to know why that’s so funny?”

“Here… jasmine, spanish jasmine…” Jessie shoved the page in Buzz’s face. “That’s ‘sensuality.’ Better, Mr. Giggles?”

“Much.” Jessie leaned in and they shared a quick kiss. “Florecita.”

“It’s a good thing I don’t have to tell Buzz to behave himself anymore,” Woody quipped jokingly, without looking up from his guitar.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re always kiddin’ us,” Jessie groaned.

“Yeah, but Buzz knew when I was serious. We had a talk about it.”

Jessie’s brow furrowed. “When was that?”

“Back in Barstow. When things first started to happen between you two.”

“So… the desert…” She scowled at the memory of a heated moment cut short. “What made ya think you could tell him what he could and couldn’t do?”

“It wasn’t *him* I was thinking of so much, Jess.” Woody laughed, but his sister wasn’t amused.

“Are you callin’ me a loose woman???” the book slipped to the floor with a thud.

“In your morals, no. In your emotions… let’s face it…”

“So ya don’t trust me, is that it? Ya think I can’t keep my emotions in check… but you weren’t
around for all the times I had to sit and listen to Momma talk about me to everyone who stopped in, tellin’ ’em all my faults, all of my failin’s and I didn’t speak a word. I sat there like a statue and none of ‘em knew how mad I was or tore up I was.”

“Look, that’s not what I meant,” he bristled at her rising ire. “I was just looking out for you -“

“Lookin’ out for me?!? I… I thought Buzz was just bein’ a gentleman, and respectin’ your friendship, and not wantin’ to ruin his best friend’s sister. But you actually told him not to touch me? For cryin’ out loud Woody, we’re adults, and if we did wanna be… reckless… that’s our business, not yours!” She turned to Buzz. “Anythin’ else he made ya promise that I should know about?!? What else in our lives did he decide for us?!?”

Woody groaned. “I don’t understand why you’re so upset…”

Jessie flew off the sofa and lunged at her brother, but Buzz caught her arm. “You don’t understand why I’m upset?!? You were meddlin’, jus’ like Momma… expected me to not know how to behave… and you don’t know why I’m upset?!? I thought you were different… I thought you were the only family I could trust. But you’re no better’n the rest of ‘em!”

Jessie broke free from Buzz’s grasp and darted across the parlor, through the hall, and out the front door before anyone could stop her. Buzz turned to Woody sharply, anger blazing in his eyes.

“Oh, Woody, how could you?” Bo softly chastised.

Woody was baffled by everyone’s reaction. “C’mon, I was just looking out for her, big brother instincts, ya know? I didn’t think - “

“No, you didn’t,” Buzz snapped. “Stay here, in case she comes back. I just hope I can catch her before she decides to take one of the horses out this late.”

Buzz rushed to the kitchen, grabbing a lantern from the shelf and lighting it with a match. He strode swiftly out into the backyard, holding the lantern in front of him to illuminate his path and any possible sign of his fiancée. “Jessie! Jessie, where are you? It’s just me, please come out!”

He first swept through the barn, but Jessie was nowhere to be seen, only Astrónomo and Bullseye safe in their stalls. Next, he proceeded to the now-cleared packing shed, which also held no signs of her presence. Buzz then headed out into the grove, and became more frantic as more time passed with no clue as to Jessie’s whereabouts. After a half hour’s searching, he decided to check the barn one more time, to ensure that the horses were still there, and to saddle up and cover more ground on horseback if necessary.

This time, when Buzz entered the barn, he took more care as he walked past the parked surrey and work wagon. He was just starting to climb the ladder and investigate the hayloft when he heard a choked-back sob emanating from the nearby stalls.

“Jessie?” he leapt from the lowest rung of the ladder and rushed over to the source of the sound. He peered first in Astrónomo’s stall, then Bullseye’s, where he found Jessie sitting against the wall, her knees to her chest, and her face streaked with tears. Bullseye was nuzzling at her hair, concerned by her emotion. “Jessie!” Buzz knelt next to her and cupped her face in his hands. “I’ve been so worried, I looked for you everywhere. Have you been in here the whole time?”

Jessie nodded feebly, then melted into her fiancé’s arms. “Why’d he do it? Why couldn’t he trust me? Why’d he have to be as bad as the rest?” she choked out.

“Shhhh,” Buzz stroked her hair soothingly, “I don’t know. But I know he didn’t mean to hurt you.
Will you come back to the house? It’s almost time to take you back to San Bernardino."

She pulled back and shook her head furiously, then wiped her wet eyes with the back of her hand. “No. I ain’t goin’ anywhere near him. I ain’t goin’ back in the house.”

Buzz sighed. “Ok. Let’s get the surrey ready and you can wait outside.” He helped her to standing and once the carriage was harnessed, they returned to the house, with Jessie sitting in the front passenger seat in a stony silence.

Inside the kitchen, Buzz found Bo pacing the floor. She rushed over to him, “Did you find her? Is she okay?”

“She’s unharmed,” he briefly told her about finding Jessie in the barn. “She won’t come in, though,” he lowered his voice so his words were for Bo’s ears only. “She doesn’t want anything to do with Woody at the moment, not that I blame her.”

“I’ll gather her belongings,” she hesitated, “I hope this will blow over quickly, but I’m not sure it will.”

He nodded, “I know. She’s pretty hurt.”

Bo looked at him, her chin set determinedly, “It may be up to you and me to see things get patched up.”

“Including getting Woody to apologize. I’ll do what I can with him.”

“And I’ll do my best back at the dormitory. Let me go fetch our things. I’ll tell Woody you’re driving us back tonight and that it would be best for him to stay here.”

Buzz looked at her with no small degree of respect, “You’re a shrewd tactician, Bo Peepe.”

“When you’ve spent as many years teaching in a one-room schoolhouse as I have, you learn a thing or two about handling disputes.”

It was a very somber wagon ride back to the Harvey House. Jessie spent most of the time with her head on Buzz’s shoulder as he drove, and Bo sat quietly in the back seat. When they pulled up to the front of the depot building, Buzz tied Astrónomo to the hitching post as he escorted the girls through the depot and to the footbridge, where he watched until they safely reached the other side and waved from the entrance of their dorm.

Upon returning to the ranch, a weary Buzz trudged from the barn to the kitchen, where he poured himself a glass of milk and grabbed a leftover roll from dinner, sitting at the kitchen table to calm his grumbling stomach before bedtime. Hearing his friend’s entrance, Woody made his way into the kitchen, and stood at the doorway.

“Get the girls back home?”

“Yes,” came the terse reply.

“What was up with Jessie, huh? She really overreacted tonight. I mean, I have a right as her brother to look out for her, and she was just being unreasonable - “

Buzz had held his tongue through Woody’s self-righteous ramblings, but finally he interrupted, as calmly as he could manage. ”You know, it really wasn't fair, what you said to Jessie. You haven't seen her since she was a kid, but she has grown since then. And it's not fair to me, either. To have
said it once or twice? That’s fine. But beyond that… we've known each other how long, Woody, and you really think I would act in any way towards Jessie that would result in her ruin?"

“No, but - “

“You owe her an apology.”

“Why should I apologize when I did nothing wrong?” Woody snapped back defensively. “I should’ve known you’d take her side. I’m going to bed.”

Meanwhile, in the girls’ dormitory room, Bo climbed into her bed and looked over to her friend, who lay on her side, clutching her pillow. She knew Jessie was not yet asleep, although her back was to her. “Jessie… about earlier.”

“I ain’t talkin’ about it, Bo. And I ain’t gonna talk to Woody, either.”

“You can’t stay mad at him forever.”

“Watch me.”

The following week, Jessie and Bo’s days off didn’t coincide, and Bo traveled to the ranch alone to help Woody with more decorating. However, on Jessie’s free day - still not ready to face her brother - she and Buzz decided to visit Estrellita instead. It was a welcome break for her, as even her friendship with Bo had become somewhat strained, due to Bo persistently attempting to act as a mediator between the siblings. Any time she so much as mentioned Woody’s name, Jessie either changed the subject or met the conversation with a stubborn refusal to discuss it.

The Lightyear hacienda was a soothing retreat, and Jessie’s anxiety lessened when Estrellita hugged her warmly at the door. “Mija! I was so glad when Buzz said you’d be coming today.

Jessie returned the embrace, “I’m sure glad I had the chance. I’ve been wantin’ to learn some of your recipes.”

Buzz kissed his mother on the cheek. She looked at him with concern, “What is wrong, mi corazón? You both seem tired.”

He cast a quick glance at Jessie, who had stepped aside to lay her hat and small leather handbag on a parlor chair. “Woody and Jessie aren’t seeing eye to eye right now. It’s been almost two weeks and it’s starting to wear on all of us.”

“Well, maybe if he wasn’t being such a horse’s rear end,” Jessie interjected, returning to Buzz’s side.

“Siblings can be difficult,” Estrellita smiled warmly. “Remember how you and your brothers used to bicker, mijo? It’s probably just the pressure of the wedding planning and getting the ranch ready. It’ll all blow over long before the wedding.”

“I ain’t even so sure I wanna share my weddin’ day with him now,” Jessie grumbled.

Estrellita gave her son a sympathetic look, understanding now the severity of the disagreement. “Things do have a way of working out, it just takes time. But enough of that, you didn’t come here to dwell on unhappy things. Why don’t I show you how to make bunuelos?”

“Mamá, you always know just what to say,” Buzz grinned.
When the time came for both girls to return to the ranch the following week, it was a hesitant Jessie who stepped off the commuter train at the Redlands station. She caught her brother’s eye in the distance, and both instantly looked away. The couples greeted each other separately, and it was an uncomfortable drive to the homestead with Buzz at the reins.

The tension continued once all four found themselves in the house for the first time since the siblings’ altercation. Desperate for some peace, and to break the deafening quietude that filled the room, Buzz addressed Jessie.

“I need to do some pruning in the grove, do you want to help with that?”

“Sure… if we’re allowed to be in the grove alone,” she added under her breath.


Buzz and Bo shot each other a look of shared frustration, as he and Jessie left the house and headed out onto their property.

They stopped first at the pruning shed, where they picked up a ladder and a pair of pruning shears used only for the orange trees. They also grabbed a couple burlap sacks in which to collect the clippings.

“I’ve gotten about an acre pruned since the winds died down, but we still have four left. Even if we can just get a quarter acre done today, it would be a help,” Buzz explained as they walked toward the area to be tended. “You can hold the ladder and help me gather the fallen branches.”

Both set to work, and made good time of it with another pair of eyes to spot unkempt branches that needed trimmed, and another pair of hands to pick up the clippings that fell. Jessie held the ladder steady as Buzz ascended and descended tree after tree. After they had finished one, he paused to scrutinize his work as he and Jessie gathered clippings.

“Blast, I missed a branch!”

Before Buzz could say otherwise, Jessie jumped to action. “I’ll get it for ya!” She tossed down her sack and rushed over to the ladder that still leaned against the trunk, grabbing the clippers on the way.

”No, Jessie, I don't want you up there!” But no sooner had he dropped his own clipping bag than she was halfway up the ladder, partially obscured by the thick foliage. His eyes widened, the scene he watched seeming to unfold in slow motion. As she lifted her foot to place it on the next rung, her skirt came between the sole of her boot and the ladder. She slipped as she tried to make contact, and he raced to her as she barely managed to regain her balance, ripping the sleeve of her shirtwaist on a thorn as she scrambled to right herself. “Jessie!”

“I’m okay,” she groaned, lowering herself cautiously down the ladder. “But my shirtwaist ain’t. Hope Bo can fix it,” she sighed, as she fiddled with the torn flap of calico.

Relieved that she was safely back on the ground, Buzz’s voice took a stern tone. “Don’t you realize what could have happened? I had a perfectly good reason for not wanting you on that ladder!”

Jessie was taken aback by the sudden change in her fiance’s demeanor. “Then you should’a told me what it was before! All you said was ‘no’ and I am so sick of bein’ told what I should and shouldn’t do, jus’ because I’m a girl. I heard that my whole life, but I didn’t think I’d be gettin’ it from you, too. I thought we were partners in this.” She turned away, her fists clenched, and stomped to a nearby tree, where she flopped down with a huff, folding her arms across the top of her bent knees.
Buzz sighed and walked over to her, but she refused to look up at him. She looked weary, worn down by weeks of conflict with her brother, and now this. He gently tapped the toe of her boot with his own, then the other. “Hey.” But there was no verbal reply, only the tightening of her grip on her knees.

He knelt in front of her and placed his forefinger and thumb on her chin, raising her head to meet his gaze. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes flashed with anger, but she did not turn away as he kissed the tip of her nose.

“You want to know why I didn’t want you up there?” he asked gently. “Because in all the studying I’ve done about grove operations, I’ve read horror stories of people - men - losing an eye on a branch or thorn, or falling from a ladder and breaking their neck, while they were pruning the trees,” he explained. “And I love you too much to risk you getting injured, or worse. You understand?” She nodded. “You scared me half to death, and I reacted badly, out of fear. I’m sorry. I have no doubt that you are capable of pruning, or doing anything I can do. And, if you want, I can show you how to do it properly. Now,” he extended a hand to assist her to standing, “why don’t we go get something to eat before we try to do any more work?”

She reached for her braid and tugged at it. “Do we hafta go back to the house?”

“Yes, unless we want to get weak and fall over from starvation,” he chuckled. “C’mon, you have to be around Woody sometime.”

“Okayyy,” she rolled her eyes. “I’ll try.”

Jessie’s faint glimmer of resolution to make peace soon faded when she entered the house and was met with a glare from Woody at the doorway to the dining room, where he and Bo had been painting. He caught sight of the dust on her skirt and the tear on her sleeve. “Doesn’t look like you were doing much work out there,” he sneered.

“What’s that s’posed to mean?” Jessie stood defiantly, her hands on her hips.

“You know what I mean.”

“Nothin’ happened out there.”

Woody scoffed. “If you say so.”

Jessie’s brow furrowed into a deep scowl. “You callin’ me a liar?”

“If the boot fits.”

“Say that again,” she balled her hands into fists and pulled her arms back.

Aware that the confrontation was escalating quickly, Buzz stepped in between the two siblings, placing a hand on each of their shoulders in an attempt to keep them apart. “Calm down, both of you!”

Woody shoved against the pressure of Buzz’s hand, leaning in towards his sister. “If. The Boot. Fits.”

“That is IT!” The trio stopped in shock and slowly turned their eyes towards Bo. There was a fury on her face and in her voice as she strode across the room. “I have had just about enough of this! Sit down, now, the both of you.”
Jessie slowly uncoiled and let Buzz guide her to one of the chairs. Woody stayed standing, rooted to his spot on the floor. Bo looked at him, raising an eyebrow delicately, maintaining eye contact until he slumped in surrender. He pointedly sat on the far end of the sofa, putting as much distance between himself and Jessie as possible.

“This has gone on long enough. You’re both miserable and, honestly, you’re making Buzz and I just as worn down. You,” she pointed at Jessie, “haven’t slept a full night in two weeks, and I know you miss your brother, even if you’re too stubborn to admit it. You’re not completely innocent in all of this, although I understand why you’re upset. Woodrow Pride, you plant your rear end back in that seat!”

Woody froze, his hand pressed into the arm of the couch as he started to stand. He had thought Bo would defend him to his sister, and now the opposite of that seemed to be happening. If that was how things were going to be, he saw no reason to be subjected to this, and decided to slip out, as Bo’s back was to him. Under her icy stare, he slowly lowered himself onto the cushion, folding his arms sullenly.

Bo turned now to her fiancé. “I don’t understand you. You have shown yourself to be one of the kindest men I have ever met, and not just with me. I’ve seen how much you care for Jessie. When you first showed up in Barstow all those months ago, it was obvious how happy you were that she had gotten out from under your mother’s thumb. And now here you are, acting just like her!” She took a breath, satisfied that her words made Woody visibly blanch. She looked back and forth between the siblings, “Maybe you meant well, Woody, but you need to acknowledge that your actions were damaging. You have both been acting like children, and it stops today.”

The silence fell heavily, and neither Woody nor Jessie diverted their attention from the floor. Bo and Buzz shared a questioning glance, wondering if any of the words had had an effect.

Woody’s eyes flickered up and met Jessie’s. Although the tension level had subsided, there was still a shared defiance as neither was willing to be the first to apologize. Woody finally looked at Bo, “You’re right, this has been rough. I’m sorry for the stress it’s caused around here.”

Bo stared at Jessie, who nodded in return, “Fine.”

Realizing it was as close to a peace accord as likely at the moment, Bo favored them both with an encouraging smile, “Good. Now, let’s put this aside and focus on being a family again.”

The following week, on another day off not shared with Bo, Jessie decided to venture out to the ranch alone, in spite of the prior conflict. She expected that there would be lingering uneasiness between herself and Woody, but Bo’s cutting remarks from that last night had not left her head. She knew it was something they’d both have to work through sooner or later if they were going to live next door to each other in a few short months, and she would give it her best effort.

While Buzz went to speak to the building crew who were busy at framing their new house, Jessie pushed open the back door of the Pride kitchen and stepped inside. She retrieved her work apron from a hook on the wall, all the while glancing around the room for any sign of her brother. Realizing she was alone, she set her hat and handbag on the table, and as she slipped on her apron she spotted an open letter in her mother’s handwriting, addressed to both her and Woody. Her heart pounded as she picked it up and slid the white paper from the envelope and unfolded it to read its text. She stood there transfixed, as harsher words than she had anticipated leapt from the page as if to attack her:

*Jessamine, you have disgraced this family by your rash and unthinking behavior. Your shameful conduct with Mr. Mayer subjected your aunt to scorn, to say nothing of the vicious gossip that*
spread once people knew you ran off in the middle of the night, like some fugitive. And then to find out that you not only took employment, but as a waitress in some God-forsaken town in the wilderness! I did not think you could sink lower than you had already, but I should know by this time to not underestimate you. Woodrow might have spoken highly of the man you are to marry, but frankly, the judgement of any man who would voluntarily take you for a wife is questionable. Your father's position in town might not provide us with much stature, but we cannot afford to lose what dignity we do possess by acknowledging your marriage with our presence.

Woody entered the kitchen from the hall, and instantly noticed his sister standing there, her face white, her eyes wide and welling up with tears. He quickly realized the source of her anguish as soon as he saw the paper in her hand, and any remaining resentment from their quarrel quickly faded at the sight of his sister’s distress.

“I’m so sorry, Jess, that letter just came yesterday, I was gonna tell you - ”

“I didn’t reckon Momma would come, but Pa?” The tears now streamed down her cheeks, and Woody instinctively wrapped his arm around his sister, as she let the letter fall to the table.

“Yeah, that surprised me, too. But we’ll make the best of it; we still have each other.”

She looked up at him, “Do we?”

Woody’s face softened, “Of course we do. I lost sight of that and I’m sorry. I should never have interfered as if I didn’t trust you and Buzz.”

“I’m sorry, too.” Jessie fitfully wiped the tears from her eyes with the back of her hands. “Does Buzz know?”

“He knows I got the letter. I didn’t let him read it, or he might go all the way to Missouri to give Ma a piece of his mind,” he chuckled, trying to cheer her, but the wound was still too fresh and too deep to be affected by his attempt at humor.

“Pa and I have been writin’; he told me how proud he was of me, for my job, and how much he approved of Buzz. I know he’d come if she’d let him, but she won’t, she’s just gonna hold a grudge against me forever ‘cause I didn’t do what she wanted.” She hung her head, fighting with herself to hold back more tears, not wanting her mother to get the upper hand, even from so many miles away. “I never thought he wouldn’t be here to give me away.”

“Hey. “ Woody squeezed her arm, hugging her toward him, and she rested her head on his shoulder. “Whadd’ya think I’m here for, huh?” She sniffed and wiped her eyes again, and Woody grinned mischievously. “Besides, after all those years of torture, I’ll gladly give you away.”

Jessie finally laughed through her tears, and looked up at her brother. “You’re not gettin’ rid of me that easy. We’re gonna be neighbors, ya know.”

“True, but at least now I can lock the door.”

Chapter End Notes

Letter writing was an important form of communication between couples in the 19th
century, even when they saw each other relatively often, and many times the contents were anything but innocent. The anecdote about the Harvey Girls stealing cranberries is inspired by an actual event, and the mention of the clothing was also inspired by an existing letter. The Santa Ana winds are a real natural phenomenon that impact Southern California in the fall and winter months, and October is a particularly brutal season. Engagement rings weren’t always diamond solitaires - in the past, other stones that held meaning were suitable as well. The California Fruits and How to Grow Them' was a real and very popular handbook that was read widely by citrus growers in the late 1800s.
Lookit that, this chapter is on time! :D

Buzz's family makes another appearance this month; and again, we've researched the history and traditions carefully to make it as respectful and accurate as possible, under the limitations of information available online and in the few books on Californio culture that we've been able to find. And while we've tried our best to describe things clearly in the scenes with them, this is a chapter where our Pinterest board (Jessie's Journey under username yodelincowgirl) will be especially useful.

Toy Story still isn’t ours. If it was, there’d be tons of Toy Story stuff in the stores already. Enjoy, and don't forget to leave us some kudos and subscribe so you don’t miss future chapters! :)
so much catching up to do!”

Jessie and Bo took off their hats and overcoats - which they had needed in the morning chill of the early November day - and went to give their former co-worker a hug. No sooner had Bo embraced Barbie than she realized something felt different around her friend’s midsection.

“Barbie… are you…”

“Expecting? I am,” she smiled, resting her hands on her small-but-expanding belly, which was artfully hidden under the billowy fabric of the loosely-draped front of the gown. “It was quite a surprise, when we’re just trying to get our salon started. But enough about me right now,” she pulled Jessie toward her for her turn at a hug, “I want to show you your dresses! Please, take a seat.”

As Jessie and Bo sat on the edge of one of the hotel room beds, Barbie walked over to her trunk - which she had brought along despite it being only a two-night stay in San Bernardino - and took out two sizeable sheets of paper with color drawings and swatches of fabric and lace pinned to them. “These are more detailed than the rough ones I sent you in my letters.” She handed each to their respective owners, and sat down opposite her friends, eager to see their reaction. Jessie and Bo both studied the sketches carefully, and their faces lit up in turn as they realized the designs were just as they’d hoped they’d be.

“I love it, really I do!” Jessie exclaimed, running her fingers over the small square of silk fabric intended for her design. “I’ll be honest, I was a little nervous that Ken would make it fancier’n I’d want, but it’s just dressy enough for a weddin’.”

“Didn’t I tell you I’d rein him in?” Barbie giggled. “You said no dripping lace, and the only lace on it will be nice and flat. How about yours?” she looked to Bo.

“Oh, it’s perfect! Thank you so much, Barbie, we couldn’t have such nice dresses if it wasn’t for you. I only wish you could be our maid of honor.”

“An old married woman, big as a house by then?” she laughed merrily. “Never fear, you can count on me to be there with your dresses and to help you both get ready on your big day. Now, let’s try on your bodices and get them fitted.”

Both Barbie and Jessie slipped out of their shirtwaists while Barbie retrieved the bodice samples and a miniature case of dressmaker’s tools from her trunk. The two brides-to-be tried on the plain muslin mock-ups over their corset covers, and Barbie fussed, tucked, pinned and marked with chalk, until she was certain the fit was just right.

“Have you thought about underpinnings for the wedding?” Barbie asked, with a mischievous glint in her eye.

“Not really,” Jessie shrugged. “I figured I’d just get some new combinations and petticoats at the store in town by then.”

“I’ve been working on my trousseau,” Bo interjected, “I have a sewing machine in our room - like you did back in Barstow - and I’ve been sewing here and there when I can find the time. But I hadn’t thought of anything special for the actual wedding day.”

“Well, if you want…” Barbie leaned closer, “I can make up new corsets for you both, to coordinate with your dresses. You know, for effect.” Bo and Jessie looked at each other with a smirk, and nodded in agreement at their friend. “Of course, then you both might end up like me, in this condition, on your honeymoon,” she laughed, resting a hand on her stomach.
“I wouldn’t mind,” Bo readily admitted. “Woody and I are planning on starting a family right away.”

“I would,” Jessie confessed, almost reluctantly. “Don’t get me wrong, I want kids someday; but I just got started on livin’ my own life, I wanna enjoy bein’ just with Buzz for a while, ya know?”

“Do I ever,” Barbie sighed. “Not to say we’re not excited for the baby, but I was hoping we’d have some time to really get ourselves established first, and… well, I thought we were being careful… but my dear, sweet, clueless husband…”

“Careful?” Jessie looked at Barbie quizzically. “I mean, I ain’t totally naïve… but I didn’t know…”

“There are ways to be safer, yes… when you use them properly,” she added under her breath. “I’ll write down some suggestions for you before we say goodbye tonight. But what I really want to talk about is what you two have been up to since I left! Letters don’t suffice, I want to hear it all. Oh! And let me see your rings!”

Jessie held out her left hand first. “Mr. Igel - our manager - he’s nothin’ like Mr. K. He’s been nice enough to let us wear ‘em at work, and not have to take ‘em off.” Bo extended her own hand next, as Barbie oohed and ahhed over them both.

The three girls seated themselves again on the hotel room beds, as Jessie and Bo proceeded to fill in their friend on the events of their lives in the past three months since they’d seen her last. They told of the shootout, and their proposals, and the progress on the ranch in far more detail than they’d been able to share in writing. They also discussed what they’d all heard from their former fellow Harvey Girls in Barstow, expressing the hope that Dolly and Bonnie would be able to attend the wedding so they all could catch up properly.

“Are any of the girls from your job here coming?”

“No, we weren’t plannin’ on invitin’ any of ‘em. I mean, they’re nice an’ all…”

“But they’re so young,” Bo finished the sentence.

Barbie laughed, “We were that way too, once, you know.”

Bo shook her head, but her voice was filled with mirth, “Not that young. Jessie’s right, they’re very nice, but they have their own lives established and we’re so busy with our own plans. There’s just not much opportunity for closeness.”

“Not kindred spirits like we were, hmm, girls? We all had something special in Barstow, it’d be hard to recreate that.”

“What about you?” Bo said to Barbie. “How is big city life?”

“It’s marvelous. Our dress salon is small right now - so is our apartment - but we’re getting a good client base built up, and hope to be able to move into a bigger place before the baby arrives. I’ve got my sights set on Bunker Hill.”

“What didja name your shop again?”

“Couturiere Côté Ensoleillé,” Barbie waved her hand with a flourish as the French words rolled off her tongue. “Ken creates all the designs, and I manage the accounts. We have two seamstresses right now to help us with the sewing. Oh, goodness gracious, look at you both still sitting there in your mock-ups!” All three stood, and she unpinned the back openings so Jessie and Bo could take them
The clock on the wall struck noon as Jessie was fastening the last of the buttons on her shirtwaist. “Glad we’re not workin’ the counter right now; there’s a lunch rush startin’, I’m sure.”

“Speaking of lunch… I don’t know about you two, but I’m famished. Are there any good restaurants in town?” Bo and Jessie both looked at Barbie incredulously, and she giggled. “I guess that’s a silly thing to ask a Harvey Girl, isn’t it? We’ll ask at the front desk on the way out of the hotel. Just let me get changed into something more appropriate.”

“We’re not exactly dressed to go to a nice restaurant,” Bo fretted, glancing at her own simple dotted shirtwaist and skirt, then at Jessie’s similar attire. “We could go back to our dorm first -”

“Nonsense, you both look darling. And we don’t have to go anywhere formal. Maybe we can do some shopping, too, and find some accessories for your wedding ensembles.”

Barbie rifled through the contents of her trunk, then quickly changed into an outfit that she selected to complement her friends - a lace-embellished mauve-pink and teal silk shirtwaist with a softly gathered front and peplum which helped conceal her midsection, and a sweeping teal skirt.

After donning their hats, the three girls made their way down to the lobby, where Barbie spoke with the desk clerk about dining options. “Well, he said we have several choices on Court Street, right down Third - the Commercial, the Kentucky, and the Barnum Restaurants all have private ladies’ parlors. The Barnum has Spanish cuisine,” she added, “I’ve come to enjoy that, thanks to living in Los Angeles. How about we try there?”

Jessie chuckled, following Bo’s nod of assent. “Fine by me, but I’d wager it ain’t nothin’ like Estrellita - my future mother-in-law - can make. Just you wait’ll the weddin’!”

The friends conversed some more as they took the pleasant two-block walk to the restaurant, and continued their reminiscences throughout their meal. “You know, it was about a year ago now that we met,” Bo said to Barbie, as they were all finishing the last bites on their plates. “And a year next month since Jessie joined us. Isn’t it surreal that here we are, now, married or about to be?”

“And you with a youngin’ on the way!” Jessie chimed in, somewhat in awe. “Not to mention your own shop. When’d we get grown up enough for all of this, huh?” she laughed.

“Overnight, it seems,” smiled Barbie. “And yet our time in Barstow feels like eons ago. Let me settle this check - ” she raised her hand in protest as both her friends reached for their purses, “I insist - and then we can do some proper bridal shopping.”

The brilliant sunny afternoon was a perfect complement to the girls’ spirits as they wandered down the sidewalks of D Street, stopping to peer in store windows and occasionally venturing inside if the merchandise on display lured them further within. Barbie paused outside the window of a stationary shop. “Oh, would you just look at that engraving! Have you ordered your invitations yet?”

“We have,” answered Bo. “We’re still working on the wording, but there’s a store in Redlands that we’re using.”

Satisfied with the answer, Barbie guided them further down the street. When they came upon a shoe store named The Red Front, Bo stopped. “Can we go in here? I do need a nice pair of shoes to go with my dress.” As they perused the stock, Jessie stopped short, her attention arrested by a pair of ladies’ boots.

Bo had started to ask Jessie her opinion on a delicate pair of slippers when she found her friend was
no longer beside her. “Jessie?” she walked over to where Jessie stood and noticed what had caught her eye. “Ohhhhh. Yes. Buy them.”

Jessie looked uncertain, “You think?”

“Listen to Bo,” Barbie joined the girls, laying a hand on Jessie’s shoulder. “Buzz won’t know what hit him when he sees you in those.”

“Y’all are bad influences, you know that?” a wide grin spread across her face as she glanced around, “Help me find a clerk.”

Back on the sidewalk, Jessie happily swung the box containing her new boots as they strolled a little further. “Have either of ya noticed a jewelry store? Bo an’ I were talking about needin’ to pick out weddin’ bands still.”

“Wasn’t there one back on Third?” Bo pondered.

“Well, we probably should make our way back towards the hotel, anyway,” suggested Barbie. “Let’s make that our last stop.”

The girls backtracked up D Street, turning left onto Third. When they reached the storefront with “Moore’s Jewelers” in golden letters on the window, Barbie grasped the handle of the door and pulled it open with a graceful sweep of her hand. “After you.”

The shop was a well-appointed one, carrying a wide selection of watches, jewelry, silverware, and clocks, in long glass display cases as well as shelves behind the counter. As the three were bent over the glass case holding the store’s wedding ring choices, Bo noticed several bands that were much wider than the others. “Why are these so different?” she wondered aloud.

“Those are for men,” Barbie replied. “It’s becoming more the fashion for men to wear wedding bands, too.”

Bo turned to Jessie, “Maybe we should show these to Woody and Buzz. Do you think they’d be interested?”

Jessie cocked her head thoughtfully. “I dunno, but I kinda like the idea.” As the others moved on to another display, she lingered at the glass case, still scrutinizing the rings inside, until she let out a gasp.

Bo rushed over from where she had been browsing, followed by Barbie. “What is it?”

“Look!” Jessie pointed to a golden band, about a quarter inch wide, delicately engraved with what clearly were meant to be orange blossoms. “That’s it! That’s the one. Oh, I gotta bring Buzz here!”

“That couldn’t be more perfect, Jessie,” Bo smiled. “Come with me for a minute, though, I found something else you might like.” She led Jessie to a case featuring an array of earrings, and pointed to a tiny pair of filigree gold studs, each with a single small ruby-red stone in the center. “They’re not much, but I think they’d look sweet on you. We all know you like wearing red.”

“They are real pretty.” Jessie pondered for a moment, then smirked at both her friends. “You two gotta stop tellin’ me to buy things today.”

“You’re only starting to build your wardrobe,” Bo laughed. “And you won’t be spending your days in uniform much longer. Soon you’ll be a grower’s wife.”
“I know. I’ll get em’. If someone holds my boots.”

Content with the purchases made, and ideas gleaned from Barbie’s artistic sense of style, the girls were nearing the St. Charles when they passed a florist shop. “Flowers!” Barbie exclaimed. “What about flowers?”

The urgency in her friend’s voice made Jessie snicker. “Don’t worry. We’re mostly usin’ what we’ve got around the ranch. I’m gonna have orange blossoms, and Bo’s got her myrtle already planted. There are roses left from the old owners, too, but Estrellita’ll bring some from her garden if ours aren’t bloomin’ enough, along with some jasmine. Anythin’ else we need, we’ll get from the florist in Redlands.”

Barbie sighed wistfully, “I have to admit, all this wedding talk is making me regret that we eloped. I might just have to throw an anniversary gala next year instead.”

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Jessie was barely able to contain herself when she caught sight of the redwood framing rising tall among the orange trees, as the surrey turned from the main road and traveled the lane leading deeper into the Roundup Ranch property. As soon as the carriage came to a stop, she leapt recklessly from her seat and raced over to her house under construction. Buzz walked up to join her as she stared in awe at what was clearly the complete shape of her future home.

“We’ve got walls!”

“That’s a rather important detail,” Buzz chuckled at her enthusiasm. “We kind of need them to hold up the roof.”

“Ya know what I mean,” she shoved his arm lightly. “They’ve really made a lot of progress since last time I was here.”

“The windows should be installed in the next week or two. Once everything’s enclosed, more of the interior work can begin.”

“It’s all so excitin’,” she sighed, “but so big! I didn’t reckon the house would be this big, somehow, in my imagination.

Buzz’s brow furrowed. “What’s wrong, florecita, don’t you like it now that you see it in person?”

“No, I love it... it’s just...” she clasped her hands nervously in front of her, “how am I s’posed to take care’a all that? I dunno the first thing about keepin’ house. Momma ‘xpected me to marry some rich ol’ fogy with servants, she never taught me anythin’ all that practical. I can clean some; I did hafta help with chores. But I can’t hardly cook, not anythin’ good. All I know how to make are the buñuelos your Mama taught me.”

"I can live on that,” he flashed her a toothy grin.

"I'm serious, Buzz."

"I am, too,” he kissed her on the forehead, amused by her exasperated expression. “I'm not marrying you to get a housekeeper. I'll pitch in, do my share, and I know Bo will help you learn, so will Mamá. Besides,” he rested a hand on the small of her back, “you know a lot more than you’re giving yourself credit for. When I showed you the packing shed, you knew the best way to organize it, remember?”

She nodded reluctantly, “Yeah, but that was ‘cause of workin’ at Pa’s store.”
“Exactly. You just apply the same knowledge to the house. It’s a bit bigger in scale, but same premise. And don’t count out all your experience as a Harvey Girl, either. I have complete faith in you.”

“I’m glad someone does,” she laughed. “So, what time are we ‘xpected for the fiesta today?”

“We should probably leave soon,” he reached for her hand and rubbed his thumb across it. “Mamá is expecting everyone around one o’clock, and I told her we’d help as the guests arrive.”

“Guess we better find Woody and Bo, then,” Jessie looked to Buzz with a playful wink, and the two strode over to the farmhouse. They entered its front door, closing it loudly and walking heavily across the floor while talking in raised voices, lest they catch the other couple unawares in a private moment.

Woody appeared in the parlor doorway. “What’s with all the racket?”

“Well, we didn’t want to walk in on anything,” Buzz replied with a wicked smirk, as he and Jessie joined the other two in the parlor.

“What did you think we’d be up to, in fact?” Bo feigned innocence.

“I don’t even wanna guess,” Jessie groaned.

Buzz retrieved the gift he’d purchased for his Tío Héctor - whose 60th birthday the fiesta was celebrating - from where he’d left it in the kitchen, and the two couples returned to the surrey they had parked in the driveway out front. Soon they were on their way, Buzz at the reins behind Bullseye, having given Astrónomo a rest after plowing the land for new grove acreage the previous day.

Their drive through San Timoteo Canyon was delightful as usual, especially with a soft breeze on the balmy autumn morning; and they arrived at the Lightyear hacienda to find it humming with the hustle and bustle of an impending party. They could hear Estrellita and Emelda through the open kitchen window, busy with finishing up the dishes and accompaniments that couldn’t be prepared the day before. Héctor sat at his post near the wrought iron barbecue spit that had been set up in the yard, proud to be tending to his duties as family asador in charge of the large side of beef roasting over the fire.

“What’s that amazin’ smell?” Jessie paused and took in a deep breath.

“The barbecue,” Buzz explained, waving at his uncle as they walked toward the front door. “Last fiesta you were at, there wasn’t time to put one together properly. But it’s tradition.”

“Can we do a barbecue for the weddin’?”

Buzz grinned. “Sure, if you want.”

Having heard the carriage pull up and the click of the opening door, Estrellita came rushing from the kitchen, wiping her hands on the full-length apron that covered a very different outfit than Jessie had seen her wear before. Lace and embroidered details on a short-sleeved white blouse peeked out from beneath the flour-dusted gingham apron, along with the hem of a long, vibrantly-colored skirt. Her sleek, dark hair was braided and coiled into an updo, crowned with a large, intricately-carved tortoise shell comb.

“Ay! You’re here!” After a round of welcoming hugs, Estrellita immediately reached for a folded stack of clothing on one of the parlor chairs, and handed it to Buzz. “Here, Bustillo. You can change
in your old room upstairs.”

“What about Dad?” he asked, taking the clothing from his mother. “Is he dressing up, too?”

“Not this time, he had to close on a sale this morning. But he’ll be in on the afternoon train. I tried to get him to bring your brothers, but they said they couldn’t get away,” she shook her head in disappointment.

Jessie studied the bundle in Buzz’s hands curiously and traced her fingers along the braided trim and gilt buttons that edged the folded pants-leg. “Is this an antique?”

“No, but it’s a replica of one. I sewed it for him, after the style of mi Papá’s,” Estrelitta looked at her son with a teasing twinkle in her eye, “All of Bustillo’s athletic pursuits made him likely to burst the seams on the original.” She sighed, “You look so pretty today, mija, I almost feel bad asking, but would you like to wear something traditional today, too? I put a few pieces together for you - since you’re part of the family now, you know. But only if you want to.”

“Really?” Jessie’s face lit up, touched by the offer. “I’d love to! These clothes’ll keep,” she glanced at the tan floral shirtwaist, deep green Spanish jacket - as the store had advertised it - and russet skirt she’d chosen for the occasion.

Estrellita beamed at the response. “Then come upstairs with me. You two,” she turned her kindly smile to Woody and Bo, “please, make yourselves at home.”

Buzz let his mother and fiancée ascend the stairs ahead of him, and as the two women passed Estrellita’s sewing table, she reached for another pile of similarly-folded fabric. She led Jessie into the guest room and pushed the door closed behind them. Jessie quickly undressed to her underpinnings, and Estrellita helped her in the proper arrangement of her new attire.

“Bustillo told me you like red, and yellow,” she explained, as Jessie slid the soft white chemise-style blouse over her head, and down over her corset cover.

“I do,” Jessie examined the intricate floral embroidery that accented the neckline in her favorite colors. “Did you sew all this, too?”

“I did. This is a camisa. Now, the enagua.” Jessie raised her arms and Estrellita eased the skirt over Jessie’s head and down over her white petticoats and the hem of the long blouse, tying the gathered band at her waist.

Jessie swung its fabric back and forth in admiration. The two-tone design featured a wide, red, floral-printed woolen panel topped by a solid yellow cotton band at the hips. “I could get used to dressin’ like this,” she remarked. “Is this what ya used to wear all the time, before?”

“Before the Americans came, yes, this was how mi Mamá dressed every day at home on our rancho. She and my older sisters had beautiful gowns of the latest fashion for fiestas and bailes. Fabric was very expensive to import back then, though - even calico for a wrapper - so our everyday dress was simple. Of course, I was only a young girl when California became a state, so fashions had changed by the time I met Bustillo’s father. But those of us who can still remember the early days cherish the memory of them.” Estrellita smiled at the bittersweet recollections as she picked up a red silken sash and tied it around Jessie’s waist, then handed her a long scarf, woven in shades of blue. “This is called a rebozo,” she explained, as she helped arrange it around Jessie’s shoulders. “It’s like a shawl. You’ll need it later tonight when it’s cooler outside.” She stood back to admire her handiwork. “You look lovely, mija. But one last thing… would you indulge me, in letting me braid your hair with some ribbons? I think you’ll like it.”
Jessie nodded, and Estrellita pulled up a chair for her to sit, then slipped out of the room for a moment to find some matching ribbon on her sewing table. She returned to her post and proceeded to style the long auburn tresses, making use the hairpins Jessie had used to secure her single braid in a simple updo that morning. Before long, one braid became two woven with yellow ribbon, both twisted and pinned into a low knot.

“I used to wear my hair like this all the time when I was your age. Go, look, tell me what you think.”

Jessie stood and glimpsed herself in the dresser mirror, turning her head from left to right to get a better angle. “I do like it! I’ve never been so good at fixin’ my hair, but I think I could actually manage this.”

“I’m sure you could,” Estrellita patted her on the shoulder. “I better get downstairs and help Emelda finish up.”

“Thank you… for goin’ to all this trouble for me.”

“It was no trouble, mija,” she smiled sincerely from the doorway.

Once Estrellita had left the room, Jessie took a few moments to lay the clothes she had been wearing more carefully on the bed. She stepped out into the second-floor common area, unaware that Buzz was sitting on the new chaise lounge that his mother had bought to replace the bed she had given to him. He instantly stood when Jessie entered.

She was startled by her fiancé’s unexpected presence. “What’re you doin’ up here still?”

“Waiting for you. I wanted to see how Mamá dressed you.”

“Whadd’ya think?” she posed flirtatiously, one hand on her hip.

His countenance displayed his obvious approval. “You look beautiful, florecita, as always… like you belong in those clothes. And your hair looks pretty like that.”

Jessie blushed faintly. “Well, ya don’t look too shabby either.” She took in the striking and distinguished figure he made, in his own native attire. His dark blue calzoneras trousers were artfully embellished with golden braid and fastened along the outside with gilt buttons, hanging open in a flare from the knee down, and botas - leather boot-like coverings - peeked out from the open seam. A green silk sash was tied around his waist, and he wore a white shirt and black knotted tie beneath a short military-inspired jacket in the same blue and gold as the calzoneras. To complete the ensemble, a tall, tan straw sombrero rested atop on his head.

The corner of his mouth turned upward in a crooked smile. “Yeah?”

“Yessir,” she reached for his hand and pulled him toward her, and they wrapped their arms around each other. “I could get used t’those tight pants.”

The rumbling of wagon wheels and the plodding of horse hooves drew Buzz and Jessie apart and to the window, where the voices of arriving fiesta guests floated up to meet them. Members of the long-standing Sepúlveda and Lugo families - close relations on Estrellita’s side - joined other Californio relatives and friends, as well as local acquaintances who were more recent transplants from elsewhere in America.

The couple hastened down the stairs and out onto the front porch, where Estrellita - the consummate hostess - stood greeting her visitors. Buzz came to stand beside her, and introduced Jessie to his
many tíos, tías, primos and childhood friends as they arrived, quite a few of whom had traveled from as far as Los Angeles, where his grandparents’ rancho had been located. Most wore modern-day clothing, but a few donned traditional ensembles similar to the hosts’, as the family relished the chance to relive los días pasados - the bygone days of their youth.

Once groups began to form across the rancho grounds, and conversations filled the air, it didn’t take long for the men of the gathering to stir up excitement about a horse race around the property. Jessie’s interest was piqued as she heard the commotion and call for action.

She turned to Buzz. “A horse race, really?!”

“Yes, they’re a common part of fiestas. There’s a course around the perimeter of the land that’s been used for racing here, for as long as I can remember.”

“Can I race too? Please?” she stared at him, her eyes bright and hopeful “I can go get Bullseye, and -”

Jessie’s plea was cut short when one of the men - who Buzz didn’t recognize, and assumed was a neighbor - laughed sarcastically. “Girls can’t race horses.”

Buzz scowled, but replied as politely as he could muster. “She’s a good rider; we’ve ridden across our ranch property together several times, I can vouch for that.”

“If you say so,” the stranger muttered, and walked away.

“Woody!” Jessie waved her brother over, from where he had been standing off to the side with Bo, taking everything in. “D’ya mind if I ride Bullseye?”

“Of course not, but we didn’t bring any riding tack with us. You don’t want to ride bareback, do you?”

“I’m sure there’s a saddle I can borrow.”

One of Buzz’s relations had overheard their discussion. “If Doña Estrellita has a sidesaddle in the barn, I’d be happy to get it for you,” he volunteered.

“We don’t have a sidesaddle handy, I’m afraid,” Estrellita gave Jessie a knowing wink. “Will one of the standard saddles do?”

“Sure will, never have cared for sidesaddles anyway.” She unfurled the rebozo from her shoulders, and handed it to Buzz. “Hold this.”

“Be careful, florecita.”

“I’m a vaquera, remember?” she grinned. “Now, kiss me for luck.”

After a quick, chaste kiss from Buzz, Jessie went with Woody to ready Bullseye for the race. In the stable yard, she easily hoisted herself up and astride the saddle, then arranged her skirt and petticoats as modestly as possible, unable to hide her high-laced brown leather boots that remained fully visible as she rested them in the stirrups. Taking the reins, she guided Bullseye to the starting line, joining the group of men, the majority of whom looked askance at the surprising entry. She leaned forward and stroked the side of Bullseye’s head. “We can do this, fella, you’n me. Make me proud.”

With a firing of a revolver into the sky, the riders were off. They followed the worn path that had served as a racing route at fiestas for more than thirty years. Although Jessie was unfamiliar with the
course, she remained undaunted as she maintained a steady pace in the middle of the pack. Over low-lying hillsides and across arroyos the competitors galloped, jockeying for position.

Buzz kept a watchful eye on the horizon, craning his neck as he waited anxiously for the first horse to appear. Standing in the midst of other eager spectators, he heard the voice of the neighbor who scoffed earlier at the idea of Jessie racing. “That girl was foolish to attempt this. Women can’t race. She’ll never make it.”

Woody noticed the combination of fear and resentment flash in Buzz’s eyes, and rested a hand on his shoulder. “Jessie knows how to handle a horse. I have a feeling she’s gonna show them a thing or two.”

Just then the thundering of hooves grew louder, and the first steed crested the hill. The fiesta guests cheered, but none louder than Buzz when he noticed Jessie in third place. She sat hunched forward and slightly raised in the saddle, a look of fierce determination on her face. With a joyful shout he pumped his fists in the air, bursting with pride, as Woody and Bo whooped and hollered along with him.

“Where did she learn to ride like that?” Buzz asked Woody over the din of the crowd.

Woody shrugged. “Beats me. We kept a couple horses at home, for Pa to make deliveries for the store. She and I would go riding when Ma wasn’t paying attention. It’s always come naturally to her.”

The racers approached the home stretch, but as they drew nearer to the side of the house where the race would finish, Buzz’s brow dipped with concern as he saw that the horses were barreling straight toward a split-rail fence.

“Blast,” he gasped anxiously, “that fence is new since the last time they raced here. If I’d known there was a jump, I’d never have encouraged this.”

“Like that would have stopped her,” Woody laughed.

“Can Jessie jump?” asked Bo, now worried herself. “Will Bullseye cooperate?”

Woody’s eyes met hers, “Guess we’re gonna find out.”

All three held their breath as Jessie neared the obstacle… then flew over it with grace and skill, even using the momentum of the leap to improve her ranking. In the closing stretch she dug in her heels, urging Bullseye faster and faster until she overtook the second place rider, then the first, whose own horses had tired from maintaining such a long lead.

As Buzz stood transfixed, he felt a slap on his shoulder, then a strong squeeze, and turned to see his father. Zechariah smiled, “So, where’s this girl of yours, son?”

Buzz pointed at Jessie, her red hair aflame in the afternoon sun as she neared the finish. “There,” he beamed.

The champion of the race, Bullseye galloped across the finish line - which was demarcated by a tree - and Jessie instantly reined him in and walked him to the side, away from the other competitors who were still coming in. Buzz, Woody, Bo, and Zechariah approached as she bent forward in the saddle, hugging Bullseye’s neck and thanking him for his hard work.

Buzz looked up at her, so proud he was likely to burst. “You did it, Jessie!”
Jessie flew from the saddle and into her fiancé’s arms, kissing him soundly in her excitement, oblivious to the other people present. When they pulled apart, she realized two familiar faces were looking on, as well as one somewhat unfamiliar one. Her eyes widened, mortified, when she recognized the face from photographs she’d seen. Buzz handed her her rebozo, and she wrapped it tightly around herself, wishing it would swallow her up completely so she could hide.

Buzz cleared his throat. “Uh, Jessie, this is my Dad. Dad, well… “ his face shone in a mixture of blush and grin, “this is my fiancée, Jessie.”

Zechariah let out a genial laugh. “That was quite a victory! It’s easy to see why Buzz fell for you. Pleased to meet you, my dear.”

Jessie’s embarrassment faded under the influence of his genuinely affable nature. “I’m happy to fin’lly get to meetcha, too. Buzz has told me so much about ya.”

“Has he now?” Zechariah smirked at his son. “Did he tell you I used to win all the fiesta races, back in my youth? Looks like we’ll be keeping that winning spirit in the family.”

“I’ll certainly try!” she chuckled. “Oh, speaking of, I best take Bullseye back, for some rest.”

“He can go in the barn for a while,” Zechariah suggested.

“I’ll take him, Jess,” offered Woody. “You go get something to eat, you’ve earned it. Bo and I will meet you there.”

The carne asada had just been brought from the spit on a large wooden board when Buzz and Jessie reached the food tables in front of the house. Next to an enticing spread of salsas, fresh tortillas, enchiladas, empanadas, chiles rellenos, tamales, and frijoles, Estrellita and Tia Emelda stood shredding the piping hot beef for serving.

Estrellita grabbed Jessie in a hug as soon as she spotted her standing nearby. “That’s my girl! I was watching while I was bringing the food outside, and almost dropped the enchiladas when you won. You showed those fanfarrónes how it’s done.” She instantly caught Buzz and his father sampling multiple dishes from the repast. "Stop that, both of you; you need to leave some of the food for the guests!"

Zechariah picked up an empanada and took a bite. "Of course, my love, but shouldn't we make sure it's good first?"

"Are you doubting my cooking now?" Estrellita stood defiantly, a glint in her eye and her arms crossed.

"Never!” her husband retorted playfully. “But we must check that it hasn’t been tampered with. The welfare of our friends and family is at stake.”

Jessie glanced at Buzz and giggled. He smiled, “What?”

“Your folks… I ain’t ever seen mine so much as smile at each other, let alone tease.”

The fiesta guests were starting to make their way over to the feast, and Jessie, Buzz, and Zechariah fell in line amongst the rest. Woody and Bo soon joined them, and the two couples sat on a nearby bench with their plates of food, while Zechariah excused himself to wish his brother-in-law feliz cumpleaños.

The four sat and talked happily as they ate, discussing the fiesta decorations and dishes they wanted
to incorporate into their wedding celebrations, along with their own they wanted to add. Buzz was first to devour the servings he had taken, and went back to the table to replenish his plate. Jessie gazed intently as he walked away, and Bo followed her line of vision with a sly smirk tugging at her lips.

“What’s so fascinating, Jessie?” she questioned her friend.

“Huh?” Jessie’s head snapped around to face Bo. “N-nothin’.”

“You should see if he can keep that suit at your house,” Bo remarked casually, taking a bite of tamale. “You seem to like it. Especially the pants.” Jessie blushed in response, but was unable to deny it.

Buzz had returned to his seat, and Jessie had finished her own meal, when Estrellita came walking up to their bench. “Have you had enough to eat?”

“Oh, plenty for now, I’m stuffed,” Jessie answered, along with the others.

“Good,” she smiled, gratified. “Then can you come with me for a moment, mija? I have something else for you, for the wedding.”

“Sure.” Jessie flashed Buzz a smile and left him in the company of Woody and Bo.

Estrellita led Jessie into the hacienda, through Zechariah’s office to the right of the parlor, and into the master bedroom in the back of the house - a room she hadn’t set foot in before. “You might as well sit, I have to find it first,” she laughed, then knelt in front of a painted wood chest and lifted its lid.

Jessie perched herself on the edge of the bed that filled a good bit of the room - one in the style that had been fashionable three decades prior, with its elegant, heavily-carved mahogany headboard and half-tester canopy. She looked around at the furnishings that were much like the rest of the rancho residence, a hodgepodge of Spanish-Mexican heirlooms and contemporary American pieces, a true representation of the Lightyears’ life together. Sheer lace curtains fluttered freely at the open window, letting in the fresh autumn air and the sounds of laughter and music from outside.

“Ah! Here it is.” Estrellita rose to standing and brought a small bundle over to Jessie, sitting down beside her. “I was going to give this to you later, but I figured today was as good a time as any, while you were here. I thought you might be needing your ‘something old.’ Go ahead, open it.”

Jessie carefully unfolded the fabric that had been offered to her, revealing as she did a beautiful, fine expanse of white lace. “It’s awful pretty… what is it?”

“My wedding mantilla… if you already have a veil, or don’t want to wear one, you don’t have to take it, I won’t be upset. But since I had no daughters of my own, I thought maybe you’d like to wear it.”

“I’d be right honored, thank you!” she embraced her future mother-in-law gratefully, then picked it up again. “How does it go?” Once Estrellita had shown her the front of the mantilla, she hopped up off the bed, and walked to the dresser mirror to try it on. As she stood arranging the lace - which was still as crisp and white as when it was first worn over thirty years ago - upon the crown of her head, an unexpectedly deep voice sounded from the doorway behind her, and she turned.

“What memories that brings back,” Zechariah chuckled, as he walked over to his wife. “Last time my eyes beheld that piece of lace, we were young and giddy and just starting out in life. Now look at us.”
“Only older in years, mi alma,” she looked up at him with affection. “Still young, and very much in love. Just like our Bustillo and Jessie.”

“You are going to be a beautiful bride, my dear. And you will make our son so very happy, I am confident of that. In fact, there’s something I’d like to share with you. Would you sit?” Zechariah gestured to the edge of the bed, next to Estrellita, then pulled up a wooden chair from the corner of the room to face them. Once all were seated, he continued.

“Buzz has told you how he used to live in Los Angeles, and work with his brothers and me at the real estate office, yes? And that he became a police officer not long after?” Jessie nodded. “But did he tell you how all that came about?” To this question, she shook her head. “Well, the business office life was not for him - that I’m sure you can understand, knowing him as you do. But he is a good son, and gave his best effort to become part of the family business, to make me happy. He lasted about a year, before it started to wear on him. He lived with me, in my flat above the offices, so I saw it happen firsthand. He wasn’t himself. He became withdrawn, and stopped going to his athletic club, just would retire to his bedroom and close the door in the evenings. That was around November of ’85 - “

“Si, and when he came home for Christmas, I noticed the change,” Estrellita interjected. “He tried to put on a good face for me, but I could see the emptiness and sadness in his eyes. Poor Bustillo, I would make him yerba buena - mint - tea, to try and soothe him, but he’d just sit and stare blankly into space. We were so worried about him.”

“When we went back to the office after the holidays, he was much the same. Until the great flood of ’86 struck Los Angeles in January. The river waters rose rapidly in the early morning hours, overtaking a good part of the city. Bridges and railroad tracks were washed out, and buildings were swept away. Our street was on higher ground, so we weren't affected as severely as some, but the worst of it was only a few blocks to the east, visible from the windows of our second-floor flat. When I awoke, Buzz was already putting on his overcoat, to see what he could do to help with the rescue efforts. It was the first life I’d seen in him for nearly three months. Hours went by, and I became concerned, so after I was certain our business was safe from damage, I went out in the city to look for him and offer any aid I could myself. There he was, in the midst of the action, working alongside the police officers and firemen, with a clear purpose. I’ll never forget his face in that moment. He never saw me in the crowd, and I never told him I was there.”

Jessie was gripped by the story. She leaned closer to her future father-in-law. “So what happened?”

“He came home just as dusk was falling, and apologized for being gone so long. He was soaked through, and freezing - but invigorated. The next day I sent him out with money, to secure provisions for those who had lost their homes, and distribute them on behalf of our business. Again he returned late, with his old spirit restored. It wasn’t long before he came to me, to say he had decided to join the police force - he was concerned he was letting me down, leaving the family business - I assured him his brothers and I would manage, as we had done before, and that he must do what was right for him, and go where his heart was.” Zechariah leaned forward himself, and rested his hand over Jessie’s paternally. “The reason I tell you all this, my dear, is I have only seen that look on my son’s face three times in his life. That day in the flood; when he first laid eyes on the ranch property; and when you came racing up on horseback this afternoon. You are his new purpose.”

“We have a phrase en mi familia - estrella guía - guiding star. You are his guiding star. I could see that plainly, the first time he brought you home.” Estrellita wrapped an arm around Jessie’s shoulder. “I know your parents aren’t coming for the wedding - Bustillo told me, mija, and I’m so sorry. I hope you know that you will always belong here, with us. No matter what your own family has put you through in the past, in just a few months you will be our family - you already are.”
Jessie could feel the catch in her throat and hot tears welling up in her eyes as Zechariah spoke in turn. “And if you need someone to escort you on your wedding day, I would be happy to stand up for you,” he smiled warmly.

“Thank you,” Jessie replied, choking through her words, “so much. Woody already offered t’give me away, but that you would want to…” Her emotions finally overtook her, the dam of tears breaking through, and Estrellita tightened her embrace.

When Jessie rejoined Buzz a few minutes later, he could see that her eyes were red and puffy, and her cheeks still wet, yet there was a lightness in her step as she came toward him. His own eyes narrowed skeptically as he studied her contradictory appearance and demeanor. “Jessie? Are you alright? What did Mamá want?”

“Nothin’... well, not nothin’ exactly… it was weddin’ stuff, stuff i can’t tell ya,” she responded hesitantly, not wanting to give away any hints of her bridal accoutrements.

“You sure that’s all? You look like you were crying,” he puzzled.

“I was, but happy tears,” she reassured him.

Buzz placed his hand over hers and kissed her on the forehead; she laid her head on his shoulder as she stared contentedly in the direction of the dancing area. The main meal having been served, Tío Héctor had completed his duties as asador, and now sat at the head of the packed-earth clearing with his guitar, getting things situated for the evening’s music and dance with his compadre on violin and another friend with a second guitar. The paper lanterns which delineated a dance floor had been lighted while Jessie was inside the hacienda, and the dusk that was now falling made for a magical scene. The scene in front of her was one of family, and friendship, as all around them were groupings of people talking in a blend of English and Spanish, animated with laughter and jollity. When the first song began to play, she looked up at Buzz with a broad grin. “Let’s go dance.”

Buzz instantly recognized the tune, a traditional dance well-suited to such a large group. “This is La Jota Vieja, it’s like the Virginia reel. Woody, Bo, you can learn this one.”

“It’s new t’mee too. C’mon!” she urged her brother and friend, and the four joined the crowd that was gathering in formation. Buzz guided them through the steps as they circled round.

The next song played was El Sombrero Blanco, and Jessie was thrilled to be able to perform the now-familiar dance yet again. Despite her offer to teach them the steps, Woody and Bo excused themselves from the floor, and let Jessie and Buzz enjoy the moment amongst the other Californio relations who knew the motions well. The couple painted a picture that made Estrellita’s heart swell with joy, as Jessie swished her enagua in tune with the music and Buzz placed his sombrero on top of her head.

After El Sombrero Blanco had finished, and Jessie and Buzz had gone to stand with Woody and Bo, their attention was drawn to the group of musicians, where Tía Emelda had Tío Héctor by the hand. Both were laughing as she tried to lead him to the dancing area, and when the other guitarist began the melody for a dance called a son, joined in by the violinist, he finally acquiesced. Leaning his guitar against the stool he’d been sitting on, Héctor followed his wife to be the lone dancers on the floor.

Emelda began dancing alone, stepping gracefully and holding her skirt with both hands, raising it just high enough that her feet were visible. Héctor moved with measured steps closer to her, clapping his hands above her head, then stepping away and allowing her to come toward him again. They continued to move forward and back in this way, at one moment dancing together, another alone, a
glimpse of old California brought back to life in their antiquated attire. The guests cheered and shouted gritos at the guest of honor, in respect and admiration of the couple’s skill, which was as lithe as someone many years younger.

When their performance was concluded, Héctor walked over to Estrellita, clapping his hands before his sister and compelling her to take her turn at the son. She willingly obliged, and showed the same agility and grace as her sister-in-law. Pulling a handkerchief from her skirt pocket, she waved it at her husband, summoning him to join her. Many years of attending fiestas and sharing his life with Estrellita had made Don Zacarías - as his Californio relations called him - a skilled dancer as well, and he proceeded to clap and step with a flourish, much like Héctor had done. Again, the crowd voiced their appreciation of their hosts’ display, and Jessie turned to Buzz, smiling gleefully over the fun his parents were having.

The next tune played was for la contradanza, another that Woody and Bo were able to join in on. The four returned to dancing, and remained on the floor for las quadrillas. Laughing and talking happily, their faces reddened from the activity and merriment, the two couples walked away from the lantern-lit clearing and headed towards the refreshment table when las quadrillas came to an end. Pouring themselves cups of punch, they sat on a nearby bench while they waited out the following song and caught their breath.

Buzz caught the eye of his cousin Tano standing nearby with his wife Josefa, and the couple came over to greet him. In her arms she carried their month-old infant son.

“Congratulations!” Buzz stood and clapped his cousin on the back good-naturedly. “A son. And you teased me I’d be next,” he added with a chuckle. Tano shrugged.

The other three joined him in greeting Buzz’s primos, each of the girls making a fuss over the sleeping little bundle. “He’s just as cute as a button,” Jessie cooed. “What’s his name?”

“Alberto José; Berto for short,” Josefa answered, swaying absentmindedly as she spoke. “We’d have been here sooner, if he hadn’t been so fussy. The carriage ride over finally got him to sleep.” She looked out at her daughter, Lote, playing off to the side with the other children who had come to the fiesta. “We’ve been so cooped up this past month, but we weren’t going to miss Papá Héctor’s birthday.”

The current song came to a conclusion, and a familiar jarabe tune started to play. Buzz and Jessie set down their cups, and she took his hand. “Shall we?”

Josefa looked at Tano wishfully. “It feels like ages since we danced,” she sighed. “But I can’t wake Berto.”

Bo’s eyes lit up. “I’d be happy to hold him for you.”

“Oh, I couldn’t,” Josefa protested, glancing at her husband. “He’s probably going to cry, and I don’t want you to miss out for a cranky baby.”

“I don’t mind a bit,” Bo smiled. “Woody and I don’t know this dance anyway. Please, it’d be my pleasure.”

“Alright then. Thank you!” She carefully transferred the infant into Bo’s arms, then followed Buzz, Jessie, and Tano to the dancing area, peeking over her shoulder a few times on the way.

Woody and Bo returned to the bench where they had been sitting, and Berto stirred when they sat, aware of the lack of movement and the fact that he was no longer being held by his mother. He
whimpered, then started to wail, the helpless cry of a newborn.

“Shhhh,” Bo soothed, rocking softly back and forth on the bench, like Josefa had been doing on her feet, in the instinctual way that comes upon holding a baby. Before long, her gentle voice and comforting motion had eased the infant back to sleep.

Woody watched his fiancée in awe. “How did you do that?”

Bo gazed up at him, beaming, a blush rising on her cheeks.

“You’re a natural, Bo.” He wrapped an arm around her waist - careful not to jostle the sleeping baby - and drew closer. The two were soon lost in talk of their hopes and dreams for the future.

The jarabe slowed into a waltz, and Buzz and Jessie began to sweep effortlessly across the packed-dirt dance floor. When they passed the corner closest to where Woody and Bo sat with baby Berto, they both took notice of the familial vignette and grinned at each other widely.

“Just look at them,” Buzz chuckled. “If Woody wasn’t gone before, he is now.”

Jessie giggled. “I betcha two bits we have a nephew or niece nine months after the weddin’.”

“I’ll take that bet.”

After the waltz was finished, Buzz and Jessie headed back to the bench near the front porch where they had left their friends. Woody had moved even closer to Bo, and they sat, their heads inclined towards each other so their foreheads touched as she hummed a soft melody over the infant in her arms. The intimacy of the moment made Jessie pause mid-step, suddenly reluctant to break the spell that surrounded the couple.

Their footfalls caught Woody’s attention and he raised his head with a small shake, returning to the present. “Is the dance over already?”

“Yes, and then some,” Jessie replied, tickled by her brother’s dazed appearance.

Tano and Josefa approached as well, and thanked Bo for taking such good care of Berto. As they stood and talked, Estrellita and Emelda emerged from the hacienda carrying dulces from the kitchen - buñuelos, sopapillas, puddings, sweet pumpkin, chocolate, and fresh fruit. Zechariah helped them by adding to the spread a birthday cake and bottles of wine. Following a birthday toast of “Salute!” to Tío Héctor, the guests feasted for the second time that night.

As they sipped wine and nibbled on the sweet treats, Buzz and Jessie couldn’t help but notice a change in Woody and Bo’s behavior. The less publicly demonstrative of the two couples, she clung to his arm more closely, and he frequently leaned in to deposit a kiss on her lips or her cheek.

“You want any more wine?” Buzz asked Jessie, as he headed back to the table for a few more buñuelos.

“Nah, I better not,” she sighed, watching Bo trace her finger across Woody’s vest enticingly. “One of us has to keep a level head.”

Hearing the first notes of El Shotís Viejo, Buzz popped the last buñuelo in his mouth and brushed the sugar off his hands. “There won’t be many more dances tonight. Hey cowboy,” he nudged Woody, “you coming?”

“Hmm? Oh. Yeah,” he gallantly offered his arm to Bo, “may I have this dance, little lady?”
“Why of course, sheriff,” she purred in response, and Buzz and Jessie twisted their faces at each other in feigned disgust.

The fast-paced schottische - a favorite of the Sepúlveda family - was followed by Las Blancas Flores, and the two couples settled into the lilting waltz, while its romantic lyrics were sung in harmony by Héctor and Emelda. As they danced, Woody and Bo held each other a little closer than society prescribed, but in the relaxed setting, nobody batted an eye. Buzz and Jessie, however, took note, and wondered what their drive back to the depot was going to be like.

Following the waltz, Estrellita and Emelda led the guests in the singing of “Adios, Adios Amores,” the signal that the evening’s festivities had reached their end.

“I’m glad that Mr. Igel gave you a later curfew tonight,” Buzz said to Jessie, as they walked back to the hacienda. They helped Estrellita carry the last of the dishes into the kitchen, and while the men put the benches and tables back in the barn, Jessie and Bo helped take down the lanterns and extinguish their flames. Buzz and Jessie met back up on the porch, and were heading upstairs when Estrellita stopped them.

“Don’t waste time changing, mijos, just take those clothes with you. It’s late enough already.”

“You sure?” Jessie glanced down at the skirt she realized she’d come to love. “I don’t wanna take your things…”

“They’re yours; you have many more fiestas in your future.”

Buzz and Jessie retrieved their street clothes from the upstairs bedrooms, and after they had said their goodnights to Estrellita and Zechariah, and ensured no further help was needed, they walked around the side of the hacienda to find Woody and Bo standing beside the carriage. She leaned against the seat and had Woody’s tie clutched in her hand, pulling him toward her.

With a clearing of his throat, Buzz made their presence known to the amorous couple.

Woody flinched, aware they weren’t alone. “Bo! Not in front of Buzz!” he gasped in a loud whisper.

Ignoring his protests, she closed the distance between them. “Eh, let him look.”

“You two gettin’ in, or are ya walkin’ back to San Bernardino?” Jessie quipped, as she climbed up into the passenger seat, while Buzz tended to Bullseye, making sure Woody had hitched him properly to the carriage in his distracted state. Woody assisted Bo into the back seat, and they settled in cozily for the ride back to the depot.

Jessie rested her head on Buzz’s shoulder, tired yet happy after such a full day with his family. As she gazed out at the stars, and at the clouds that shone in the moonlight and cast shadows across the hillsides, she couldn’t help but overhear Bo’s muffled words to Woody:

“Whadd’ya say I get someone else to take my shift tomorrow? Jessie can cover, and I’ll come home with you tonight…”

Jessie sat upright at the sound of Woody’s stuttering laugh, and looked at Buzz, confirming that he’d heard what she did. His eyes pleaded for her to intervene, and she turned sharply in her seat.

“Oh, no, ya don’t! You’re comin’ back to work with me. If I hafta stay respectable, so do you,” she cast a glare at her brother “‘specially YOU.”
Woody slumped dejectedly in his seat, unable to argue with his sister’s logic, and Bo snuggled silently against him without protest.

Back at the depot, the men escorted the girls to the footbridge that led to their dormitory, where the two couples kissed goodnight. As Woody and Bo lingered a little longer than usual, Jessie grabbed her friend by the elbow. “G’night, fellas. C’mon, you.” She nudged her up the stairs and across the bridge, as all the while Bo peered longingly over her shoulder.

The dormitory parlor was dark when they entered, having been allowed an hour extension thanks to Mr. Igel’s trust in them. The pair crept upstairs to their room, careful not to disturb the other girls or Mrs. Davis, and quickly changed into their nightgowns. Once they were both in bed, Jessie turned to her friend. “What in tarnation got into you tonight, Bo? Was it the baby? It’s like ya lost all control’a your senses under his tiny powers.”

“I don’t know, Jessie, I’m just ready.” An embarrassed laugh escaped her lips. “Oh, what was I thinking? I’m glad you made me come home with you.”

“Well, ya got four more months, then ya can get good’n knocked up.”

“Jessie!” Bo gasped through her laughter.

Jessie pulled her pillow from beneath her head and tossed it at her friend with a snicker. “Why don’tcha stuff your nightgown and pretend?”

"I won't do any such thing! Besides," she threw the pillow back with a laugh, "it's not the same."

“I know.” Jessie fluffed the pillow and laid back on it in her bed. “Just think if I hadn’t stopped ya, though. Never mind your reputation, Barbie’d like to kill ya if she had to redo your dress, or finish it sooner.”

“That probably frightens me more than anything!” Both girls erupted into a fit of giggles as Bo reached to extinguish the light.

Woody sat at the kitchen table, where papers were spread out with numbers scrawled all over them in orderly columns. He leaned back, sighed, and ran his fingers through his hair, then slouched over the table again and began working at more figures.

Bo silently entered the room, carrying a basket of shirts that needed ironing. She set it down on the floor, then went about standing up the ironing board and checking the heat of the sadirons she’d left to warm on the stove. Woody crumpled a piece of paper and sat back again, and she couldn’t help but read his body language.

“Woody, honey, is everything okay? You seem tense.”

“Yes, it’s just… remember how I told you Buzz and I were thinking about bringing on a foreman for the ranch? Someone to help us keep an eye on the cattle and the grove acreage? Well, I wrote to Slink; he’s ready to get out of the law, and he wants to take it on…”

“Oh that’s wonderful. You know him so well, and we all like him. Plus his experience as a sheriff is added security.”

“It is… but now I need to add some living quarters above the barn addition. The builders said it’s no trouble to put on a second story, but it is an extra expense.”
“I thought you said we were okay financially?”

“We are - and Buzz is contributing, too - it’s just, I want us to stay that way. I still need to buy the cattle, and cover construction costs.”

“You know I have savings, Woody. I’ve been working for more than ten years, I’ve put away a nice little nest egg.”

“I just figured your money would be pin money, you know?”

“*My* money? Isn’t it *our* money?” She stood with her hands on her hips. “All these years I’ve worked, saved, so I could hopefully put it towards a real home someday. And now my money is only good enough to stock the house, not to actually build it?”

“That’s not what I’m saying…”

“Then what are you saying?”

“Look,” he sighed. “I didn’t want to say anything, but I was hoping I could cut costs somewhere, so that I could give Jessie some money to help her with personal expenses for the wedding. I know the bride’s family usually is responsible for wedding costs, and well, I’m the only family she’s got right now.”

Bo’s indignation melted away with his explanation. “That’s sweet of you, but she doesn’t expect it. And you don’t have to do it all on your own. I thought we all were paying for the wedding together? Scandalously modern as that notion may be,” she laughed. “We don’t have to change any plans.”

It was a week later when Woody peered cautiously into the relatively-empty depot lunchroom and scanned it until he spotted his sister. He waved to her and gestured for her to come to where he was standing in the doorway.

With a confused frown Jessie set down the rag she was using to wipe off the counter, and strode over to her brother.

He smiled and led her just around the corner of the entrance, out of sight of the Harvey House staff. “Hey, Bo’s not around, is she?”

“She’s in the kitchen, polishin’ the silver. Ya want me to get her?”

“No, actually. The furniture we ordered for the dining room is in, and I thought I’d pick it up so it’s in place when you two are out at the ranch tomorrow. I’d like it to be a surprise.”

“Oh, okay. Buzz isn’t with ya, to help?”

“Nah. The store’ll put it into the wagon for me, and he’ll help me unload it when I get home. Tano stopped by today, offered to help with anything he needed, so they decided to get the rest of the soil plowed for the valencias before the nights get any colder.” Woody reached into his coat pocket, then handed his sister an envelope. “And this came for you, so I thought I’d drop it off real quick since I was here.”

“Thanks.” She started to open the letter - which she noticed was in their father’s handwriting - as she continued to speak to her brother. “Can ya check and see if my sewin’ machine is in, too, while you’re in town? I’d like to get started on Bo teachin’ me and… oh...”
“What is it, Jess?” he asked with concern, knowing the effect past letters from home had had on her.

“Pa sent me money for the weddin’,” she explained, somewhat in shock, as she held up a check written in a generous amount. “He still ain’t comin’, says ‘you know how your mother is,’ but at least it’s somethin’, I guess,” she sighed as she handed her brother the slip of paper. “Can ya take this back with ya for safe keepin’? I don’t wanna leave it at the counter. Buzz’n I can go to the bank in Redlands tomorrow, after we all go ring shoppin’.”

Woody took the check from his sister and whistled softly. “If Ma found out about this, he’d never hear the end of it. I dunno, Jess, there might be hope for the man yet.” He tucked it safely in his pocket, “I’ll check on your sewing machine. See you girls in the morning!”

Bright and early the next day, Jessie and Bo met the men out front of the depot, ready to venture into town. They took their surrey to Moore’s Jewelers on Third Street, where the girls had browsed with Barbie a few weeks prior. Once inside, Jessie immediately took Buzz’s hand and pulled him to the counter where she’d seen the orange blossom-etched band.

“That’s the one,” she pointed through the glass, beaming. “Ain’t it perfect?”

“It is,” he grinned back at her, just as a sales clerk approached them.

“How may I assist you?” he greeted them cordially.

“My fiancée would like to see this one,” Buzz pointed at Jessie’s selection in the case.

The man unlatched the glass case and handed Jessie the narrow gold band. She admired it thoughtfully, then slid off her engagement ring so she could try it on properly.

“It can be resized, of course,” the clerk explained, as Jessie held out her hand to appreciate how it looked on her finger. “Are there any others you’d like to try on?”

“No, this is the one, I’m certain,” Jessie looked to Buzz, and he nodded.

“We’ll take that one. But I’d like to see this simple, wider one, there.”

Jessie’s expression was one of delighted surprise. “You’re gonna get a ring, too?”

“I thought so, yes.”

The sales clerk handed Buzz the smooth gold band, and he slid it on his finger as Jessie had done. “What do you think?” he turned to ask her, extending his hand.

“I think it’s just as perfect as mine.” She held her hand next to Buzz’s, the two gleaming bands they’d be wearing forever, after just a few short months, sitting side by side.

“So we’ll take these two, then, in our sizes of course.” Buzz handed the clerk both bands, who went to write up their purchase as Jessie slipped her engagement ring back on her finger.

“You two know whatcha want?” she asked Woody and Bo, who were now taking their turn at the counter with a different clerk.

“I don’t think we’re as decisive as you, in this instance,” she chuckled.

Buzz waved Jessie up to the counter, for the jeweler to ascertain her ring size, as her brother and friend made their own selections. Before long, their purchases had been finalized as well, and the four were seated in their surrey, headed to the homestead.
Bo leaned forward to address Jessie, who rode in the front with Buzz behind the reins. “Did you get the one you had liked when we were shopping with Barbie?”

Jessie pivoted in her seat. “I did! Buzz got a ring, too.”

“So did Woody.”

Buzz glanced at Jessie, not fully taking his eyes off Astrónomo and the road ahead. “When you wrote me about going to the jewelry store, and what Barbie had said about the men’s rings, Woody and I got to talking about it. We both liked the idea. It shows our commitment as a couple, not just yours to me.”

“You’re the sweetest, ya know that? But you fellas better watch out,” Jessie laughed. “All the girls are gonna know you’re off limits.”

“Maybe we like being off limits,” Woody grinned at Bo.

Bo smirked coyly, linking her arm through his and kissing him on the cheek. “Maybe you don’t have a choice, sheriff.”

Chapter End Notes

Lots of notes this time! About Barbie's talk with the girls - yes, birth control did exist in the 19th century (and even earlier). By the 1890s, rubber was cheap and plentiful, and while contraceptives were technically illegal under the Comstock Law, "rubber goods" were still readily available in drug stores across America under code names people understood. At this time in history, women could marry without having to fear immediate pregnancy. Côté Ensoleillé is French for Sunnyside. All the stores mentioned in the girls' shopping trip, as well as the restaurant, come from places named in 1890s newspapers. Buzz's traditional clothing comes from historical suits worn by Californio men and their descendants; Estrellita's and Jessie's attire is based on the best conjecture of historians, as Californio women's clothing wasn't as well preserved or documented. At the time of the story, and even for decades prior, the Californio men and women would have worn the popular styles of the day; they only donned the clothing of their ancestors for special occasions, as a way to honor and remember their heritage. Horse racing was a common event at Californio fiestas, as the horsemanship of the ranchos' vaqueros was widely celebrated. Just like in the earlier fiesta chapter, all the food, dances, and songs mentioned come from historical sources of the time - if a dance isn't thoroughly described, it's because we haven't been able to locate a written description or video performance of it. The flood of 1886 was a real natural disaster that struck Los Angeles. The idea of having a foreman or caretaker on the ranch comes from a memoir of a woman who lived on a ranch in late 1800s California. "Pin money" was a 19th century term for women's spending money, or the allowance a woman's husband would give her to stock the house with groceries and buy (or make) clothing for the family. And finally, wedding rings weren't universally worn by husbands in the late 1800s, but there are numerous bridal photos of couples showing the man wearing a ring as well.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

I’m so sorry for the delay in posting this, but life interfered most rudely this past month. My only-3-year-old MacBook gave up (long story, ugh), and it was a stressful two weeks of futilely trying to fix it, finally getting it backed up after countless fails, and ultimately replacing it - right at the time we needed to be polishing this chapter and getting it published. Because this is being posted late - and because next month I’ll be at Disney World at the beginning of the month, anyway - expect the following update in mid-November.

Be sure to visit our Pinterest board (Jessie's Journey at username yodelincowgirl) - there are quite a few images on there to help illustrate this chapter, as well as some music.

Toy Story still doesn't belong to us - if it did, we'd have some more cheerful teasers about Toy Story 4’s plot instead of all the dramatic clues Tim Allen has given us (oy! the stress!). Enjoy, and don't forget to subscribe/bookmark and leave us some kudos!

Mrs. Davis knocked on the door of Jessie and Bo’s room, then with a click of the knob pushed the door open gently.

“Just checking in for curfew,” the dorm mother said with a smile. “And you have a letter, Jessie.” She pulled a small envelope out of her apron pocket, and handed it to Jessie, who was sitting on her bed reading a book.

“Thanks!” Jessie glanced at the envelope, “Oh! It’s from Estrellita! My fiancee’s mother,” she clarified.

“How is the wedding planning going, girls?” Mrs. Davis looked over at Bo, busily embroidering a large expanse of fabric on her own bed. “I have to admit, you two will surely be missed when that time comes.”

“It’s going well; three more months, and our homes will be all ready,” Bo replied cheerfully. “Although I wish I had three more months to finish this; it’s a Christmas present.”

“I’m sure you’ll get it finished in time.” the dorm mother encouraged. “Now, I better go visit the other girls. Goodnight!”

As soon as Mrs. Davis had left and closed the door behind her, Jessie proceeded to open Estrellita’s letter. She gasped with delight as she read its contents.

“What is it, Jessie?” asked Bo, her eyes still focused on her needlework.

“She’s invitin’ you’n me for Christmas! She wants us both to spend the night there, said she and Zechariah will come in and talk to Mr. Igel sometime this week about it.” Jessie folded up the letter and slid it back into its envelope. “I better write her back, right now. Oh, wouldn’t it be swell to stay somewhere other than a dorm for a night? And have a real family Christmas!”
“Nothing sounds more wonderful,” her friend concurred. “Do you think Mr. Igel will approve it, though?”

“Well, we’re the only ones with anyone local to visit. None’a the other girls will need to go home. I sure hope he says yes.”

The San Bernardino Harvey House was quite a different place than the Barstow one had been, as many locals stopped in for a bite while out on their shopping excursions in the city, their hands full of brown paper-wrapped parcels. It was on a particularly busy day the following week that Jessie and Bo glanced at the opening door to see the elder Lightyears arriving at the eating establishment as promised. They smiled when they caught Jessie’s eye, and she waved to them in greeting as they headed toward Mr. Igel’s office. Both girls turned to each other and shared hopeful smiles that the meeting would turn out in their favor.

It was about twenty minutes later when Estrellita and Zechariah emerged, followed by Mr. Igel. They made their way over to the counter wearing the grins of bearers of good news.

“Everything is set for Christmas,” Estrellita announced happily. “We let your manager know that we will take good care of you both in our home.”

Overtaken with excitement, Jessie started to leap for joy, then remembered the constraints of her workplace’s rules of behavior. She smoothed her apron in an attempt to cover her gaffe. “So, what did he say?”

“You’ll be free after lunch on Christmas Eve, and all day Christmas - to return by curfew, of course,” explained Zechariah, as his eyes followed a slice of pie that was being served by one of the other Harvey Girls to a nearby patron.

Bo noticed his line of sight, and smirked. “Why don’t you both sit, have some coffee and pie? You haven’t lived until you’ve had Harvey pie.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Zechariah swiveled a stool for Estrellita to sit, then eagerly followed suit. After making their selections, Bo disappeared in the kitchen to retrieve their order.

Jessie giggled, as she poured hot coffee for them both. “Buzz could never resist the pie back in Barstow. He’n Woody still stop by here for a piece now an’ then, when they have stuff to pick up for the house.”

“And as an excuse to see you, no doubt,” Estrellita winked. “You look darling in your uniform, mija. It’s difficult work you do, taking care of all these customers; I commend you for it.”

Jessie smiled modestly. “I get by.” She looked up as the door opened, and watched a couple of weary Christmas shoppers head to a pair of empty seats at the other end of the counter. “I best go tend to those folks; Bo’ll take good care of ya. See ya in a couple weeks!”

The festive appearance of the lunch room mirrored the spirits of the Harvey Girls on Christmas Eve. Evergreen swags spanned the window, tied with red bows and dotted with red berries, and brilliant scarlet poinsettias decorated the counter. Even though the throngs of travelers and locals kept them constantly on their toes, to Jessie and Bo it felt as if time was crawling until they could leave for the Lightyear hacienda.

As soon as the last of the lunch patrons under her care had finally left the premises, Jessie approached her manager, trying vainly to disguise her eagerness. “Are Bo’n I free to go, Mr. Igel?”
“Yes, you are. And may you both have a very Merry Christmas,” he added with a kindly smile.

“Thank you!” both girls replied in unison, “Merry Christmas to you, too!” In a flash they were out the door, a rush of black and white fabric hurrying across the footbridge to the dorm.

Their overnight valises having been packed the day before - containing their nightclothes and attire for Christmas Day - Jessie and Bo hurried to change out of their uniforms. When Jessie turned from hanging her uniform carefully on a peg on the wall, Bo was standing there, holding out a carefully-wrapped parcel of white paper tied with red ribbon.

“A present?” Jessie took the offered gift. “Oh, but Bo, I didn’t get ya anythin’! Just Buzz, like we decided, and his parents for havin’ us, and now I feel terrible...”

“Stop, and just open it,” Bo silenced her apologetic ramblings. “It was no trouble, really, and I thought you might want what’s inside, today.” She grinned in anticipation as Jessie untied the ribbon, removed the straight pins holding the paper together, and unfolded it to reveal a red woolen hand-knit turtleneck sweater with huge puffed sleeves.

“It’s gorgeous!” she exclaimed as she held it up in front of herself, then pulled her friend in for a hug. “When didja have the time to make it?”

“When you were were working and I was off - I got a lot done out at the ranch. I made myself one, too. Mine’s white.”

“Let’s wear ‘em today!”

Dressed in their new sweaters and their best skirts, the girls donned the heavy, long overcoats they had purchased for their chilly evening drives home from the ranch, and set out to catch the 4:35 train to Redlands.

Their ride on the little commuter railway they’d come to affectionately call the “Dinkey” was a lighthearted one, as other passengers were full of holiday cheer, many on their way to visit family and friends as well. “Have a Merry Christmas, ladies!” the portly conductor wheezed as the girls stepped off the train.

“You, too!” Bo called back cordially. The men were already on the platform to greet them, and offered to take their bags. Jessie willingly handed Buzz her valise, but clutched the paper-wrapped parcel she carried close against her when he reached for it.

She smiled teasingly, “Ya can’t have this, not ’til tomorrow,”

“I could still carry it,” Buzz suggested with a sly smirk.

“So ya can squeeze it and shake it? Nope. This stays with me.” Once Jessie was seated in the surrey, she still held the package on her lap, wary of her fiancé’s curious glances.

The drive to the hacienda was full of talk of holiday festivities and house progress, and before they knew it, the surrey was rolling up next to Buzz’s family home. The men helped the girls down from the carriage, and the four retrieved their luggage and walked toward the veranda. Having heard the approach of the surrey, Zechariah flung the heavy door open and welcomed them warmly.

“Merry Christmas, all of you! Your mother’s in the kitchen; she’s ready to feed you, I’m sure,” he looked to his son with a glint in his eye, and laughed. “I know Woody knows where to go, but if you girls like, I’ll show you to the room you’ll be sharing tonight.”
The girls nodded, and Buzz handed Jessie her valise, that he’d been carrying along with his own. “I’ll take the surrey to the barn and get Astrónomo settled for the night while you take your things upstairs,” he gave Jessie a quick kiss and headed back out the door.

When Jessie and Bo returned downstairs several minutes later - minus their coats and hats - Buzz and Woody were seated in the parlor, waiting for them.

Jessie smirked at Buzz, “Don’t worry, I hid your present real good.”

“Don’t forget, this is my house,” he retorted with a chuckle.

“An’ I’ll tell your Mama on ya, if ya go snoopin’.”

Their playful banter was interrupted by Estrellita’s blustery arrival from the kitchen. “What’s this I hear about telling Mamá? Bustillo, you better be behaving, today of all days - unless you want coal for Christmas” she laughed, turning to address everyone. “I’ve got an early dinner ready for you; I imagine you’re hungry, and in need of some warming up after your travels.”

The three couples made their way to the dining room, where the table was lit with candles and adorned with sprigs of pepper berries and greenery in honor of the season. Zechariah took a seat at the head of the table, and Estrellita hurried around as the others sat along either side. She busied herself with serving everyone bowls of piping hot sopa de fideos, as a first course in addition to the remainder of the meal already on the table.

“Sit, my love, eat. We’re just family here tonight; we can serve ourselves,” Zechariah gently chided. As his wife smiled and shook her head at him, then fixed herself a bowl of soup and took a seat opposite him at the foot of the table, he turned to his son. “How is the grove coming? Are you ready for winter?”

“As ready as I can be,” Buzz sighed. “I’ve joined the Local Association of Orange Growers, and have gotten some good advice from them. The acreage to be planted in the spring is plowed, and it’ll have to be again before the trees can go in. We just have to hope for mild temperatures… and that I can come up with a name for our brand before the first harvest,” he chuckled.

“Have you had any ideas, mija?” Estrellita asked Jessie.

“Nary a one,” she shook her head. “I’m leavin’ that up to Buzz, but he’s givin’ me final veto power.”

“I know you’ll come up with something. How about the ranch? Does it have a name yet?”

“That, it does!” Jessie was quick to answer. “We’ve named it Roundup Ranch.”

“The name comes from Jessie’s and my childhood,” Woody chimed in to explain. “We used to call ourselves ‘the Roundup Gang’ in our games. We thought it was fitting, and Bo and Buzz agreed.”

“I like it, too,” replied Estrellita.

Zechariah addressed Woody. “How about your dairy?”

“The barn addition is almost finished. I’ll have my full herd of cattle in a few more weeks, so I can get things up and running before the wedding. An old friend of mine is moving in to be our foreman first of March.”

“And March will be here before we all know it,” Estrellita smiled, then turned to Bo at her right and passed her a pie dish containing pasteles de pollos. “Oh, I have all the ingredients you wrote me
about for breakfast tomorrow. I’ll be up early in the morning to show you where everything is.”

“Oh, thank you.” Bo’s eyes shone with appreciation as she took a helping of the offered casserole. “I’m so looking forward to baking again.”

Buzz’s focus darted upwards from the bowl of frijoles making the rounds, that he was serving himself from. “Breakfast?”

“Lussebullar - or, Lucia buns,” she explained. “St. Lucia’s Day is celebrated in Sweden every December in honor of, well, St. Lucia. It marks the beginning of Christmas and is a celebration of light at the darkest time of the year. My mother used to tell me stories from when she was a girl, and while I was growing up, we carried on those customs. The eldest daughter gets up early in the morning and, wearing her nightgown and a crown of lit candles and greenery, brings coffee and Lucia buns to her family.” Her face softened into a smile, “I remember the first year Mother let me be Lucia for the family, when I was old enough to be trusted with wearing the candles; I was so proud. The buns are a sweet bread, made with saffron to give them a yellow hue. I learned to make them as a little girl, but I haven’t had an occasion to in years. Estrellita was kind enough to indulge me when I asked if I might make them here.”

Buzz wrestled between wanting to support his friend’s cherished heritage and longing to experience onto his own family traditions. “Will there be buñuelos, too?”

Estrellita laughed. “Yes, mi corazón, but we will have those later tonight.”

Buzz breathed a sigh of relief, and resumed eating his dinner. “So who’s going to be here tomorrow, Mamá?” he asked between bites.

“Your Tío Héctor, and Tía Emelda. Tano and Josefa and the niños. And us, of course.”

“Are Buzz’s brothers comin’? enquired Jessie. “I’m startin’ to wonder if they really exist,” she added with a giggle.

“Ay, they exist,” Estrellita grumbled, then muttered some incomprehensible Spanish under her breath.

“They’re spending Christmas with their wives’ families in the city,” Zechariah stated. “Although they did the same last year. We expected them to be here, but plans changed.”

“Plans,” Estrellita harrumphed. “The only way I get to see my grandchildren is to go to where they are,” she sighed. “Alejandro and Eduardo have forgotten their roots in favor of their society life. They WILL be at your wedding, though, if I have to go to Los Angeles myself and drag them back by the ear.”

The remainder of the meal passed in pleasant conversation - with no more discussion of absent relations. After everyone had finished eating, Jessie and Bo helped Estrellita clear the table and wash the dishes, then joined the men in the parlor. A fire glowed in the fireplace, and they all settled in upon the room’s comfortable furnishings to enjoy each other’s company.

Buzz extended an arm across the back of the sofa where he and Jessie were seated, and she leaned comfortably against him. “A year ago, right about now, we were gettin’ ready for the dance. Who coulda imagined then that we’d be here now?”

“I could,” he lowered his hand to rest on her shoulder, and brushed across it softly with his thumb.

“So could I,” Bo agreed, with a smile in Woody’s direction. “I knew that night it was the start of something special, for all of us.”
“Tell me about this dance,” Estrellita piped in, with a curious twinkle in her eye. “All I know is that you met at the Harvey House. Bustillo never mentioned a dance.”

“It was Christmas Eve, at the schoolhouse in Barstow,” Jessie began. “It was the first time the fellas were officially... our suitors, you could say,” she blushed faintly. “They escorted us, and all our friends from the depot were there, too.”

“It was a lovely night,” Bo reminisced. “And it was fun to get dressed up.”

“Speak for yourself,” laughed Jessie. “Our friend Barbie - you’ll meet her at the weddin’ - she dolled me up in one’a her old gowns. It was pretty, but awful fancy for me.”

“Nonsense,” Buzz interjected, “it was perfect for you.” He turned to his parents, “It was red velvet, trimmed in white lace, and the neckline was just off her shoulders...” his face reddened when he realized the detail he’d given in his description, and he saw the corners of his father’s mouth turn upward in a crooked grin. “She, uh, looked very... nice.”

“Sounds like you made quite an impression on mi Bustillo that night,” Estrellita chuckled.

“Oh, she did,” Woody eagerly offered, his expression full of mischief. “You should’ve seen how nervous he was. He could barely utter a sentence.”

Jessie and Buzz were both feeling rather self-conscious at the sudden attention, and Estrellita took note. “How would you all like to relive those old memories a little? What was something you danced to there? A waltz?”

“There was the Spanish Waltz,” Bo suggested. “Although Buzz told us that it’s not really Spanish.”

“No, the dance isn’t, but the tune is similar to la contradanza de Los Angeles.” She got up from her seat in her cushioned rocking chair, and walked over to the piano. “I know that one well. Come on, get up, there’s room!” she urged them jovially. “Just push the sofa a little to the side.”

Buzz and Woody carefully shifted the sofa, so as not to displace the carpet on the floor, and the two couples stood facing each other as Estrellita played the first notes. The girls fought back giggles, feeling a little silly to be curtseying in the parlor, but they still happily took advantage of the opportunity.

The two couples haltingly moved through the motions of the dance, mis-stepping here and there as they struggled to remember the steps without the assistance of a caller or other dancers to guide them. They laughed whenever they bumped into each other or turned the wrong way, and after a few bars decided to just waltz for the remainder of the song.

Estrellita pivoted on her piano stool once she was finished playing. “Seeing you four together, it brings back so many happy memories of our courtship,” she said with a wistful sigh.

“How didja meet?” questioned Jessie, as the men returned the sofa to its original position and they all resumed their former seats in front of the fire. “Buzz has only told me a little.”

Zechariah leaned back in his recliner, as if preparing himself for a lengthy tale. “I was a livestock trader on the Old Spanish Trail. I arrived in Los Angeles with my party in December of ‘55, bringing sheep from New Mexico, along with fine wool blankets and silver. I ventured out to Estrellita’s family rancho, and was interested in trading with them for some of their horses, mules, or cattle. I was only 21, and my Spanish was poor - she overheard me struggling in my negotiations and boldly came to my aid.”
“Ay, mi primas and I were quite taken with this handsome stranger with his brilliant blue eyes,” Estrellita chimed in with a smile. “And since I had been fortunate enough to learn English, I took pity on him, and helped him make a good deal with mi Papá.”

“She was so beautiful, and had such a keen sense of business - I was instantly smitten. And her family was very gracious, they insisted I stay with them for a while, to get some proper rest from the trail and some good food. Estrellita helped me polish my Spanish - “

“I taught him to dance, too,” she grinned. “But he was so shy! I had no idea that he cared for me. When he left to return to New Mexico with his party, I feared I’d never see him again.”

“Little did she know that my entire time on the trail, I could think of nothing but her. I made up my mind then to make a living for myself in California. As soon as I’d received my share of the profits, I headed west again and set up a general merchandise store in Los Angeles - to cater to the American newcomers who weren’t as self-sufficient as the rancheros. I wrote to her father, expressed my intentions, and asked his permission to call - “

“And then one day he shows up at the rancho, and walks right past me on the veranda, without so much as looking me in the eye!”

“Because I knew if I did, I’d lose my nerve, my love,” he chuckled. “I went straight to see her father, and once I had discussed my financial prospects with him, I received his blessing - under the condition of Estrellita’s approval, of course, and a lengthy engagement upon our betrothal, which was customary.”

“He came back out to me on the veranda, looking rather terrified, took my hand, and said, ‘yo quiero te,’ she laughed at the memory. “He meant to say ‘yo te quiero,’ which means ‘I love you,’ but he was so nervous he mistakenly said he wanted tea.”

“Guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, huh?” Jessie looked up at Buzz, who just grinned sheepishly in response. “So how didja end up out here, away from the city?”

“Back in those days, Los Angeles was a very rough city. Estrellita’s family supported of our engagement, but wanted to know that she would be settled somewhere safe when we married. She had told me of her fond memories of visiting her cousins at Rancho San Bernardino in her youth, so when this property became available in late ’57, I purchased it. I spent the following year building this house, selling my shop in the city and establishing a new one in San Bernardino, and dabbling in sheep raising.”

“This has been our home for 36 years, and it has been a happy one. We were married in December 1858 - almost three years to the day from when we met - and Alejandro was born in 1859, Eduardo in 1861. When Bustillo was still a child, Hector lost his share of our parents’ rancho, so we sold him some of our acreage and he took over the sheep. Mi familia lost so much in the drought - all their cattle, their livelihood - that hardly anything is left now of the acres they used to own. As the youngest, Hector and I were left with no inheritance, save for the heirlooms I’ve held onto.”

“It wasn’t until I started helping Estrellita’s family negotiate the sale of parcels of their land that I realized I could have a career in real estate, and do well at it. I opened my office in 1880, when Alejandro was of age to start into business himself, and Eduardo joined us soon after.”

“And then sales started booming, and kept my men busy in the city - but it has given us a comfortable life, and I can’t complain, despite the time spent apart. Now, Bustillo,” Estrellita smiled at her son, “we must convince your Papá to retire, so we can have frequent nights like this one after the wedding.” She stood and patted her husband on the shoulder, then walked over towards the
doorway to the dining room and kitchen. “Why don’t I get some Christmas Eve treats for us? And then maybe we can have a little more music? Woody, would you like to play? I can get my guitar for you.”

“I’d love to - but I brought my own; it’s upstairs, I’ll go get it.”

“Bo can play the piano, too,” Jessie volunteered her friend. “She’s very talented.”

“Oh, I don’t know about talented,” Bo modestly replied. “But I can find my way around the keys.”

“We could make it a duet,” suggested Woody, from where he was now standing at the base of the stairs, on his way up.

“How can I say no to that?” Bo grinned.

Jessie hopped up from the sofa to follow Estrellita into the kitchen, and in a few moments all reconvened in the parlor, the two women carrying trays of buñuelos and piping hot mugs of champurrado, which had been simmering on the stove.

After partaking of their share of the sweets, Woody picked up his guitar, and offered a hand to Bo as they both rose and stepped over to the piano. Bo seated herself on the stool, Woody leaned against the side of the upright, and the couple began to play *Deck the Halls*.

Jessie instantly sang along with her brother and friend. Estrellita also joined in the singing, but when she noticed her son and husband sitting silently, she furrowed her brow. When the song concluded, she turned to them both. “Where is your holiday spirit?”

Zechariah chuckled. “Don’t you know by now? Us Lightyear men draw our artistic lines at dancing, my love. We are enjoying listening to you all.”

Buzz shrugged, and Woody and Bo struck up another song, the musical entertainment continuing until the clock on the mantel struck eleven.

Estrellita noticed the time, and addressed Buzz. “We should probably turn in. Your Papá and I are going to Misa de Gallo; we’ll be leaving about three o’clock in the morning.”

“What’s that?” Jessie asked, genuinely curious, as they all stood to head to bed.

“Christmas mass - church service, before dawn. It means ‘mass of the rooster.’”

“Christmas mass - church service, before dawn. It means ‘mass of the rooster.’”

“We wouldn’t have minded goin’ to church with ya. We brought our best outfits -”

“I want you and Bo to have a relaxing Christmas at home,” Estrellita patted Jessie lovingly on the cheek. “You work hard, mija, you have earned the rest. Besides, we have many more Christmas Eves to spend together.” She turned her attention to Buzz. “You better behave while we’re gone. Don’t get my Jessie into any trouble.”

“Mamá!” Buzz gasped, half in shock, half in amusement. He cast a teasing grin at his fiancée. “More like you should tell her not to get me into trouble.”

“Hey!” Jessie cried in response, as Estrellita laughed merrily at them both.

Several hours later, Jessie still lay awake, curled up on her side. The house was silent; the elder Lightyears had not yet risen to dress for their outing, and the only sound she could hear was the soft breaths of Bo from the other side of the bed. Jessie rolled over and squinted at the alarm clock’s
shadowy face - it read 1:30 in the morning. She knew she should be asleep, but the events of the day kept playing through her head. Too full of happiness, Jessie eased out of the bed, put on her robe and slippers, and grabbed her overcoat from where she had left it draped over a chair. She padded softly down the stairs, across the darkened parlor, and slipped out onto the veranda.

Buzz opened his eyes at the sound of light footfalls passing by his door. He rose, slipping a pair of trousers over the long underwear he had worn to bed. As he poked his head out of his door, he saw a flash of a red braid leaving the house. Buzz bent to grab a pair of boots, carrying them as he crept out to the porch, his own frock coat in hand. He found Jessie sitting on a bench on the far end of the veranda. “Jessie?” he spoke softly, not wanting to startle her or raise anyone else from bed. “Why are you up? Is something wrong?”

She smiled, “Nope, everythin’s fine. I couldn’t sleep.” She stared out thoughtfully across the yard, at the moonlit shadows cast by the trees. “The day was so wonderful, just celebratin’ and bein’ with your folks… I can’t stop thinkin’ about it, so I figured I’d come out here so I don’t wake Bo.” She suddenly realized why he might be up. “Oh no, I didn’t wake you, did I? I was tryin’ to be so quiet.”

“No, well… it wasn’t because you were being loud. I was already awake, that’s why I heard you.” He chuckled. “Did you ever have to share a bed with Woody?”

"Not since we were little, why?"

Buzz rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Good luck to Bo, I swear..."

Jessie giggled. "I remember he did have a tendency to fling his arms around."

"Yeah, well add six-foot-three to that tendency.” Buzz shivered, the chill cutting through the thin knit wool of the exposed top half of his longjohns, and noticed a strange expression cross Jessie’s face as he extended an arm to slip on his coat. “What?”

Her eyes were transfixed on his undergarments, which clung to his muscular form; he had unbuttoned the collar halfway down his chest upon retiring to bed, and now the placket pulled open slightly as he moved. “It’s just,” she grinned, recalling a similar situation, “I’ve never seen ya dressed like that before.”

Buzz matched her grin and mimicked what had been her reply at the time, “Do you like it?” She cocked an eyebrow in response and he let out an amused laugh. “Scoot over,” he sat next to her, stretching his arm behind her so she could lean against him. They sat in silence, looking up at what stars were visible beyond the roof. “Remember how I said that Mamá and Dad would find me out here at night? This is where I would sit.”

“It’s nice,” she snuggled against him, “I can see why you’d come here all the time.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say all the time. You know that balcony you can see on the side of the house?” He continued after she nodded, “Dad had that installed after I decided I couldn’t see enough from here and decided to find better viewing areas elsewhere.”

Jessie turned her head to look at him, “Where didja go?”

“The first time, the roof. There was too much light coming through the windows. I knew Mamá and Dad were still awake, but I didn’t think they’d hear me if I climbed onto the roof over the kitchen. I made a grave miscalculation, because Mamá was in the kitchen and came to see what the noise was.” He laughed softly, “She read me the riot act, in two languages!”

“I can jus’ picture it,” she laughed with him. “And the second?”
“I was forbidden from climbing on the roof, but I knew how to get to the spot where Dad would take my brothers and me to teach us about the stars. So I snuck out of bed and went there. When Mamá came to check on me, she found me gone, but wasn’t worried. Until I wasn’t in any of the usual places. Dad finally realized where I might be and came looking for me. I thought they were going to tan my hide, but I think they were just relieved to have found me. Shortly after that, Dad had the balcony built and told me ‘no more excursions. You can see all the stars you want from here’.”

Jessie laughed again, “How old were you when you did this?”

Buzz mused, “About eight, I think.”

“I wouldn’t mind bein’ able to see more stars,” she pushed herself up from the bench. “Show me where you’d go with your Dad?”

“How old were you when you did this?”

“Well, I ain’t tired, so why not? B’ sides, it’s been ages since we went star-gazin’.”

He nodded, “All right. It’s not far.” He put his boots on over his woolen socks and reached to entwine Jessie’s fingers in his own. “This way.”

The couple walked hand in hand out across the front yard, in the direction of the more rustic landscape that edged the property. They stepped gingerly across a narrow stream bed - Jessie being careful not to get her delicate, leather-soled slippers wet - and climbed up and over a low-lying and rocky hill. Once they were on the other side, completely out of sight of the house, Jessie rested against a large boulder, tilting her head up to the sky. “This is better; I can see why ya came out here.”

Buzz stood next to her, “I loved the lessons Dad gave. Do you remember the stars I taught you?”

She studied the sky and pointed out a few constellations, much to his delight. Away from the warmth of the hacienda’s hearth, the coolness of the night air seeped through her clothing, and she shivered, rubbing her hands over her arms. “Come here,” Buzz gently positioned her in front of him so he could wrap his arms around her waist.

Jessie leaned against him, grateful for the warmth, and continued naming the stars he had shown her. For each star she named, Buzz deposited a small kiss along her neck, blowing gently on the skin. She closed her eyes as he brushed her braid to the side, “Don’t tease.”

“Why not?” he pressed his lips behind her ear.

“You shouldn’t start somethin’ you ain’t gonna finish.”

“Who says I’m not going to finish this?”

Jessie turned in his arms to face him. “That a threat?” she raised an eyebrow as she slid her hands through the opening of his shirt and ran them over his chest.

His eyes flickered to her lips as he leaned in, “A promise.” His mouth moved against hers, at first gently, then with increasing pressure. As the kiss deepened, she whimpered into his mouth and brought her arms up around his neck. He was just as desperate to have her as close as possible, and tightened his embrace until she was pressed up against him. Several minutes passed before they broke apart, breathing hard and no longer bothered by the chill of the night air.

“We should probably get back to the house,” Buzz panted, his nose rubbing against hers.
“’Fraid your Dad’s gonna come lookin’ for ya?” she grinned.

Buzz chuckled and kissed the tip of her nose, “Not him; I doubt he’s even awake yet. Woody, on the other hand…”

“Eh, let him show up,” Jessie lifted herself on her toes and kissed him softly. “I ’ppose I should be gettin’ to bed, though. Thanks for bringin’ me here.”

“Merry Christmas, florecita.” His eyes grew wide. “Floricita! That’s IT!” he punched the air with his fist.

“What’s it?” she backed up, laughing at his sudden and uncharacteristic exuberance.

He took her hands in his, “The name of the grove. I’ve been racking my brain trying to think of what to call it, but the answer was right in front of me this whole time. We’ll call it Florecita del Desierto. What do you think?”

Her face was lit with happiness, “It’s perfect.” They sealed the agreement with another kiss before walking back to the house, their arms around each other’s waist.

The hacienda was still dark when they returned, and they pushed the door open carefully, lest they wake anyone inside. The couple let out a gasp when they noticed Estrellita standing in the parlor, dressed elegantly in preparation to leave for the church service at St. Bernardine’s, and carefully hanging paper cones full of turrón candy on a spindly spruce tree.

Estrellita flung around and instinctively grabbed a brass candlestick from a nearby table, brandishing at the perceived intruders. Buzz threw his arm out to shield Jessie. “Mamá! It’s just us!”

“Ay! Bustillo Zacarías Lightyear! Me asustaste hasta la muerte!” his mother scolded, after realizing who had entered.

“Shef you put the candlestick down? You’re making me nervous,” he chuckled, as Jessie fought back giggles.

“Hmmph. You deserve it, after scaring me like that. What were you doing out there anyway? It’s nearly three in the morning. I tell you not to get into trouble, and what do you do? You wander off in the middle of the night. I know it must’ve been your idea, not mi angelita Jessie,” she teased.

“We went for a walk,” Buzz answered matter-of-factly.

Estrellita’s eyes twinkled with knowing mischief. “I hope you enjoyed your ‘walk.’”

“We did,” he replied, not missing a beat. “Besides, didn’t you promise Jessie’s boss you’d chaperone her? And you and Dad are about to leave us here all alone,” he joked.

“Ay, you’re adults, I trust you to behave… for the most part,” she winked.

Jessie no longer could fight back the giggles that had been threatening to overtake her. “I couldn’t sleep -”

Estrellita’s mirthful expression changed to one of concern. “Is the bed not comfortable, mija? I put new feathers in the tick…”

“Oh, no! It’s soft as a cloud, an’ Bo’s out like a light. I’m just caught up in all the Christmas excitement is all.”
“I used to be the same way,” she patted Jessie on the shoulder, “but now, get back to bed, both of you. I cannot finish this with you here, it’ll ruin the surprise.”

“I think we already know there’s a tree,” Buzz said with a smirk.

Estrellita swatted her son’s arm. “Hush, you. Now, vamos!”

Buzz and Jessie climbed the stairs to the second floor, and paused in the open area between the bedrooms, where Estrellita’s sewing machine and lounge sofa sat by the window. As they lingered in the dark space, illuminated only by the moonlight that filtered through the windows and cast faint rectangles on the wooden floor, Buzz pulled Jessie toward him, holding her in an embrace.

“Oh, I’ll just sleep on Mamá’s sofa. I’m not going back in there to be a punching bag,” he groaned.

“Don’t blame ya. Wish I could curl up with ya, though,” she added with a sigh.

“Yes, but you wouldn’t fit. It’s barely big enough for me.”

“I know that,” she rolled her eyes teasingly. “It’s just gonna be nice when we don’t hafta say goodnight anymore, and can fall asleep together.”

“Nope,” Buzz laughed, and kissed her forehead. “Goodnight, florecita.”

The irresistible aroma of fresh baked bread wafted upstairs to greet the sleeping guests of the Lightyear household on Christmas morning. Jessie woke alone in the spare room, Bo having risen hours earlier to tend to the holiday baking. She dressed quickly in the smart brown tweed skirt and green plaid shirtwaist she had brought with her, deciding not to bother with the matching suit jacket since they were staying in. By the time she arrived downstairs and followed her nose to the kitchen, the men were being ushered into the dining room with serving dishes of food in hand.

Once the family was seated and savoring their breakfast - with a unanimous round of praise to Bo for her lussebullar - Buzz turned to his mother. “Is it still okay if we head out to the ranch after we’re done here, like we talked about?” Estrellita nodded.

Jessie looked up in surprise. “Leave? But I wanted to help cook, and learn more recipes -”

“Do you girls want your presents, or not?” Woody chuckled. “Besides, we won’t be gone long. Just long enough to exchange gifts.”

“Why can’t we do that here?” Bo puzzled.

“You’ll see,” her fiancé answered with a smirk.

As soon as the breakfast table was cleared, Jessie and Bo donned the jackets to their ensembles and retrieved their overcoats, hats, and the men’s gifts from their room upstairs, and the four left on their way to Roundup Ranch. At their own property, they pulled up in the driveway in front of the houses, leaving Astrónomo hitched to the surrey for the return trip.
Only moments after entering the Pride farmhouse, and the girls setting down the gifts they’d brought with them, the men stopped them before they could remove their coats.

“Not so fast,” Woody reached for Bo’s hand. “Come to the barn with me for a minute.”

“Woody!” Bo replied in feigned shock, and not a little flirtatiously. “Now? But what about the presents?”

“You’ll see,” he grinned.

The couple took the short stroll out to the barn, Bo clinging to Woody’s arm all the while. “I don’t know what you’re up to, sheriff.”

Woody didn’t respond, just smiled to himself as he opened the barn door and led Bo to a stall that had a rustling sound coming from it.

“Oh, did you get the first of the dairy herd?”

“Not quite. Why don’t you go look?”

She peered around the corner of the stall and was greeted by three pairs of shining eyes peeking out from wooly faces - two ewes and a ram.

“Sheep! Oh, Woody, you got me my sheep!” She threw her arms around him, kissing him impetuously, then unlatched the gate to the stall so she could get acquainted with the animals. She stroked their soft heads. “Aren’t you three just the most precious things?”

Meanwhile, as Woody and Bo had been taking their leave to the barn, Buzz escorted Jessie over to their house. Completely clad in siding, all that remained of the exterior work was detail painting; and as he pushed open the front door, Jessie could see warm wood trim and floors, and freshly plastered walls that awaited paint and wallpaper.

“What’re we doin’ in here? It’s empty.” She ran her hand across the oak newel post at the bottom of the stairs. “Didja just wanna show me the progress? It’s really lookin’ nice.”

“Sort of. Close your eyes.”

Jessie grumbled playfully but obliged, and heard what sounded like a faint rustle as Buzz removed a piece of fabric that had been draped over a window frame nearby.

“Okay. Open them.”

Jessie opened her eyes to see Buzz’s hopeful expression, as her gaze shifted next to him and fell on a panel of stained glass in the arched window above the lower landing of the stairwell. It was a rich shade of cobalt blue, with an entwined “J” and “B” in red and green in the center, surrounded by a field of golden stars.

Jessie’s hand flew to her mouth. “Oh, Buzz… it’s just beautiful. I had no idea you were gonna put in somethin’ like that.”

“That’s why we had to come out here, now,” he smiled proudly. “It wouldn’t have looked like much without daylight shining through it. You do like it, don’t you?”

“Course I do.” She took his face in her hands and kissed him soundly. “An’ I’m gonna love lookin’ at it every day.”
The first round of gifts having been exchanged, the couples came back together in the farmhouse parlor. No sooner had Buzz seated himself next to Jessie than she shoved her own curious parcel in his direction. “Your turn! Open it!”

He smirked at her enthusiasm as he untied the red ribbon and unpinned the white paper that enveloped the gift within, then carefully lifted it away to reveal a cardboard box holding a brand-new Kodak A Daylight camera.

Jessie bounced on her seat as he read the text on the box, then lifted the lid to see the little black apparatus inside. “I saw ya lookin’ at one in the window when we were shoppin’ in town... and I know how ya always want the latest modern thing... an’ I thought you could take pictures at our weddin’, too!”

“I have been wanting one. But how did you - “

“Well, I got money saved up from workin’, and when Pa sent me weddin’ money, then I was able to getcha somethin’ nicer for Christmas. The man in the store said that model was best ‘cause ya don’t have to change the film in a darkroom.” She suddenly became concerned by his silence, and her voice shrunk. “Ya don’t think it was foolish of me, do ya?”

“No at all,” he grinned reassuringly. “I’m just surprised. If you hadn’t beaten me to it, I would have gotten a camera myself after our first harvest.”

Jessie beamed. “Well now ya don’t hafta.” She turned to the others. “Okay, Woody. I wanna see you open yours from Bo!”

Bo handed her own package to her fiancé, and Woody unwrapped it carefully as well. He removed the paper to find an expanse of soft folded felt, embroidered all over with colorful scrolls and floral embellishments.

“It’s a covering for our bed,” Bo pointed out, showing him the “W” and “B” that had been artfully sewn in the center.

Woody unfolded it partially to admire more of the delicate handiwork. “You did all this by hand? It’s amazing… Wait a minute, isn’t this what you’ve been sewing out here? I thought you said it was for Jessie?”

“I had to, honey. If I didn’t work on it on my days off, there’s no way I’d have gotten it finished in time.”

Jessie giggled. “We really gotcha on that one.”

Buzz stood, his camera in hand. “I hate to rush things, but we should probably be getting back.” He patted the box, flashing a smile in Jessie’s direction. “This is coming with me, though. Might as well read up on how it works.”

The Lightyear hacienda was full of family and festive preparations when the four arrived for Christmas dinner. Tía Emelda and Josefa were busy in the kitchen, as Zechariah, Tío Héctor, and Tano played with Lote and baby Berto in the parlor.

Having overheard their arrival, Estrellita came out from the kitchen to greet them in the parlor. She was especially interested in Jessie’s reaction to her present from Buzz.

“So, do you like your window?”
“I do, very much. Wait - you knew?”

“Do you think Bustillo could have made such a big decision on his own?” Estrellita’s eyes twinkled, and she let out a chuckle. “Ay, the drawings and glass samples I’ve seen, and talked him through.”

“Well, ya did a good job helpin’,” Jessie smiled, then realized that more decorating had been done in the couple of hours they had been away. “The tree looks real pretty!” She scanned its branches, tipped with diminutive candles in tiny metal holders along with the colorful paper cones filled with candy she had seen the night before. Surrounding the base of the table upon where it stood, next to the usual bucket of sand for candle emergencies, she then spied a somewhat familiar-looking decoration. “Estrellita?”

“Si, mija?”

“What’s the flower?” she gestured to the pointed red plant. “We have some back at the Harvey House, but I don’t remember seein’ ‘em anywhere else before.”

“That’s a poinsettia. They’re native to Mexico but named for the man who brought them up to this area.” She smiled softly. “We know them as ‘Flores de Noche Buena’, flowers of the holy night, or the nativity. There is a legend of a young girl who had nothing to bring on Christmas Eve to offer Jesus but weeds. Still, she brought them to the church and there, they bloomed into the beautiful poinsettia. Emelda brought me these today; she has some growing over by their house. Now, I’d better see what help I can be with dinner.” At that moment Lote came running over to Jessie, wildly waving her new doll.

With a laugh, Jessie scooped her up and sat down on the sofa with Bo. Lote rattled on about the doll’s pretty bisque face and limbs, soft hair, and cloth body, and pointed out every feature of its dress to the two girls.

“Did Santa Claus bring you your doll?” Bo asked.

Lote’s eyes widened, and her voice was hushed with excitement. “You believe in Santa?”

Bo laughed, “I do, but my mother always called him Julkomten.”

“That’s a funny name!”

“It is, but you see, my mother was from Sweden, which is way on the other side of the globe. They have a different language, and that’s how they say Santa’s name.”

The child nodded sagely, “You know he has flying reindeer??”

“In Sweden, they say he rides a goat.”

“A goat?” Lote giggled.

“A goat! The children call him Julbocken, or the Yule Goat. Santa rides him from home to home to bring the gifts. When I was little, I wanted to leave out a carrot or something for him. I thought it was an awfully big job, having to cart Santa and all of the presents around.”

“Did you ever see the goat?”

Bo shook her head, “No; I always somehow fell asleep before he’d get to our house.”

Lote let out a sigh filled with all the disappointment a four-year old can feel, “I did, too. I kept
looking for the reindeer last night, but I didn’t see any.” She turned imploring eyes to Bo and Jessie, “They are real, aren’t they?”

Jessie nodded, “Of course they are.”

“Familia!” Estrellita appeared in the doorway, “Time for dinner.”

Lote extricated herself from Jessie’s lap with a delighted squeal and the two girls shared an amused look as Buzz and Woody joined them.

The family gathered in the dining room for an expansive repast, where once again candles and greenery made for a convivial holiday setting. Both traditional Californio and American dishes were laid out on the table, from one platter piled high with steaming tamales to another with golden-roasted turkey. Every chair was filled, much to Estrellita’s delight, and the room echoed with joyful merriment as they partook of the meal.

After dinner, the women retreated to the kitchen to take care of the dishes, and when they returned to the parlor with the men and children, they were delighted to find the candles ablaze on the tree.

“Is it time for presents?” Lote squealed.

“Don’t be greedy,” her mother Josefa chided gently, “you got plenty of nice things this morning.”

“Ay, Pepita, she is just being a child,” Estrellita laughed, “and she knows her Tía wouldn’t forget her.”

“Oh! Speakin’ of, I forgot somethin’ upstairs; I’ll be right back.” As Jessie scurried up to the guest room, the rest of the group took their seats in the parlor. When she came back downstairs, she walked up to where Estrellita and Zechariah were seated, and handed them a wrapped present. “This is for ya both.”

“Mija, you didn’t have to get us anything! We told Bustillo not to this year, to save your money for the ranch.”

“He didn’t even know I got this,” she admitted. “Sides, I really appreciate you havin’ me here.”

“It was our pleasure,” Estrellita smiled sincerely. “And I’m sure we’ll love whatever this is.” She unwrapped the gift to discover a beautiful embossed velvet photo album, with many embellished slots inside. “Oh, it’s lovely.”

“I saw ya had lots of family photos around the house,” Jessie explained, “an’ I gave Buzz a camera for Christmas, so you’ll be gettin’ plenty more,” she giggled, glancing at her fiancé with the open camera box and manual still next to him.

Meanwhile, Lote was squirming impatiently, wondering what and where her present might be. Zechariah grinned at her, “Do you remember which room is my study?” The little girl nodded earnestly. “If you go in there, a red ribbon might lead you to something special.”

Lote set down her doll carefully next to her mother, then was off like a flash to the room off the parlor. Tied to a chair spindle by the door she found a slip of paper labeled with her name, the terminus of a long, narrow satin ribbon that was entwined throughout the room. She followed it with a determined focus, until she found herself underneath Zechariah’s desk - and staring at a beautiful painted-wood doll bed topped with a handmade patchwork quilt.

“I found it! I found it!” she came racing back into the parlor. “Oh, Tía, Tío, thank you!” She set the
bed down on the floor and enveloped them both in impulsive hugs, then proceeded to carefully test out the bed with her cherished doll.

“We haven’t forgotten you, mi corazón, or Jessie,” Estrellita said to Buzz, once Lote was settled with her toys. “Once you’ve chosen your dining room furniture, have the store send the bill to us. That will be our Christmas gift to you, and our wedding gift.”

“Mamá, you don’t have to - “

“We want to. Besides, that way we can make sure you have a table large enough so you can host all of us for some holidays, too,” she winked. “Now, how about some more music before you girls have to get back to work? Héctor? Woody, would you like to accompany him?”

“I don’t think my skills are quite up to par,” he chuckled, “but I’d be happy to give it a try.”

The two men obtained their guitars and situated themselves comfortably to play, while Estrellita plucked the little cones of candy from the tree and distributed them to her guests. After agreeing on their first song, Woody and Héctor began to strum and pick at the strings of their instruments in harmony, while the others sang along - save Buzz and his father, who still politely refrained and instead enjoyed listening to everyone else. Bo had offered to hold Berto, and she cuddled him on her lap while Lote sat contentedly between her parents, savoring that she didn’t have to share them with her baby brother for a few golden moments.

Jessie snuggled against Buzz, where they were sitting together on the small divan by the fire, and he leaned close to her ear. “Are we going to have more trouble on our hands tonight?” he asked, as he noticed Woody grin in Bo’s direction, and Berto’s tiny, chubby, hand clasped around Bo’s finger.

“Nah, I read her the riot act las’ time,” Jessie snickered.

Before long, the idyllic holiday came to a close, and with it the time for the girls to return to their dorm. While Jessie and Bo took turns stuffing each other’s voluminous puffed sleeves into their overcoats, Buzz and Woody carried their baggage out to the waiting surrey; and after many expressions of thanks for the wonderful time they all had enjoyed, the two couples were on the road to San Bernardino.

The girls returned to a lively atmosphere at the Harvey dormitory, lights ablaze in the common parlor and laughter and music greeting them as they opened the door. Mr. Igel had brought out his phonograph for the Harvey Girls’ entertainment, and Mrs. Davis had prepared holiday treats for them all to share.

“I hope you both had a pleasant holiday,” the kindly manager said when they entered. “Come, join us, we have cookies and I was just about to put on another song.”

Jessie and Bo set down their valises and removed their hats and overcoats, then pulled up chairs alongside the rest of their coworkers. Mrs. Davis rose from her seat and brought over a tray of frosted gingerbread, from which the girls gladly took their share.

“So what did your fellas give you for Christmas, hmm?” Daisy prodded, as they took bites of their treats.

“Woody gave me three sheep,” Bo answered. Faced with the puzzled expressions of the other girls staring back at her, she chuckled lightly. “I had told him I wanted sheep. It’s okay, it’s a good present.”

“How about you, Jessie?” Hannah enquired. “Did you get something nice?”
“A window - a special stained glass window, for our house,” she added quickly, before anyone could get confused. “It has our initials in it.”

“We should be grateful for our gifts. They are all around us,” Kitty pensively interjected, as the room looked at her, somewhat perplexed.

Daisy shook her head, then turned again to Jessie and Bo. “So, are you two ready to give up your freedom soon?”

Jessie’s brow furrowed at the unexpected question. “Give up our freedom?”

“You know, when you get married. I’m never going to get married,” Daisy stated resolutely. “I can’t imagine having someone tell me what I can and can’t do, deciding my life for me.”

Bo immediately spoke up. “Woody and Buzz aren’t like that at all.”

Daisy shrugged, “S’pose you found good ones, then.”

“We sure did,” Jessie asserted.

“Do they have any brothers?” Hannah giggled.

Before either girl could respond, a wax phonograph cylinder scratched to a start, and music began to play. “This is a particular favorite of mine,” Mr. Igel remarked.

A lighthearted song sounded out of the large horn-shaped speaker that rose from the top of the instrument. Jessie’s face lit up the more she listened; although she couldn’t decipher the language, she was charmed by its unique sound. “What kinda singin’ is that?”

“Yodeling,” he answered proudly, then sung a few notes along with the recording to demonstrate. “It’s traditional to my homeland - Germany, and the Alps.”

“I like it!”

February was drawing to a close, and with it, the preparations for the Prides and Lightyears to set up housekeeping. Woody and Bo’s house looked as good as new, with fresh paint and wallpaper throughout; and all the main rooms were now furnished to their tastes, with the cast-off pieces that had been left by the previous owners now relegated to a spare bedroom. All that remained to add were the little personal touches - photos, embroideries, and other sentimental knick-knacks - that would fill the bare spaces in due time.

Buzz and Jessie’s house wasn’t quite as complete, but the couple was making progress. Although they were still waiting on a few more furniture deliveries, they were turning their present attention to the recent arrivals for the master bedroom, and had just finished putting the last of its pieces in place. The walls were covered with a deep blue wallpaper dotted with dainty golden stars, and an iron-and-brass double bed sat in the middle of the room, between the windows. A carved-oak dresser, two matching nightstands, and an upholstered chair completed the suite, along with fluttery lace curtain panels and roller shades in the windows.

“I’ll move myself in here one day this week,” Buzz remarked, as he tugged at the crisp sheet on the bed they had just made together. “No need to stay at Woody’s anymore, now that our place is livable. He and I can bring over the furniture I’ve been using, too, and set it up in the spare room. I’ll get your sewing machine set up in there, too, if that’s where you want it.” He turned back to Jessie and noticed she was staring absentmindedly out into the expanse of the room, her arms hugged
around her waist. “Jessie? What is it?”

She met his gaze and smiled back at him, “It’s just really happenin’, isn’t it? This is our place, really ours.”

He walked over to her, placing his hands on her arms, “Happy?”

“Whadd’ya think?” she grinned and grabbed his collar, pulling him into a kiss.

His hands slid to her back, drawing her closer. Knowing that soon she would be his wife and this was their home filled him with contentment and he was only too happy to return the affection.

Jessie moved from his lips and began working her way up his jawline, knowing she caught him off guard by the way her shirtwaist was now bunched in his hands. She was enjoying teasing him as she blew lightly on his skin before bringing her lips to the spot. She reached his earlobe and tugged it gently with her teeth, eliciting a low growl from him.

It was his turn to catch her by surprise as he lifted her against him, crushing his mouth against hers. They fell onto the bed where the series of heated kisses continued. Jessie pulled at his shirts, releasing them from where he had them tucked into his pants. Her hands ran beneath the fabric and against the hard muscles of his bare stomach and chest, something she’d been aching to do for months.

Buzz hurriedly unfastened the buttons of her shirtwaist and pushed it away so he could gain access to her neck. He pressed his lips along the dip in her collarbone and worked his way along the exposed skin. Jessie’s skin erupted in goosebumps as he gently unfastened the top few buttons of her working corset and undergarments. Buzz left a trail of kisses from the hollow between her breasts up along her collarbone, ending just below her jaw. “Te amo, florecita,” he breathed against her neck, his hand sliding beneath her skirt and up the outside of her thigh.

Jessie caught his ear in her teeth again, her hand running through his hair as her hips brushed against his. She let out a considerable gasp as his hand slid between her drawers and skin, her back arching at his touch. Her nails raked lightly across the back of his neck before she brought her hands to his waistband. She fumbled as she undid the first button and her breath hitched as she spoke his name.

“Buzz?” came his name in the much different voice of Woody, followed by the sound of the back door closing. He walked through the vacant first floor, and stopped at the bottom of the staircase before calling out again. “Buzz? Jessie? You in here?”

Buzz pulled away from Jessie just enough, placing a hand over her mouth. “Yeah, we’re in the bedroom. Just, um… making sure the mattress is in place.” He winked broadly at Jessie.

Woody’s footsteps stopped abruptly and there was a long pause as realization set in. “Okay, well, when you’re finished, uh, Bo’s got dinner ready.”

“Yeah, we’ll be there in a few minutes.” Woody’s footsteps were much faster on his exit and Buzz looked at Jessie, whose green eyes were crinkled in amusement. Buzz moved his hand away from her mouth as he fell against her, their laughter echoing through the room. He brushed a stray lock of hair from her face and kissed her tenderly. “Guess we better make ourselves presentable.”

“Do we hafta? I mean, you did say a few minutes… and don’t you even start in on my reputation,” she smirked at him, thinking back to a certain night in the desert.

“Hmph, I’m starting to think you have a reputation as a temptress,” his eyes lingered on her face. With a sigh, he stood and pulled Jessie up from the bed. He tucked his shirts back into place and
fastened the last few buttons on Jessie’s shirt, letting his fingers brush along her cheek. “Just a few weeks, florecita.”

“And then we’re locking the door,” she deposited a swift kiss on his lips and took his hand. “C’mon, before he starts thinking we’re getting too much of a head start on things.”

Over at the farmhouse, Bo looked up as Woody entered the room. “Weren’t they over there?”

“No, they were; just… occupied.”

Bo’s brows dipped in confusion momentarily and then lifted in comprehension. She approached Woody with a sly smile. “Now why didn’t we think of that?”

He smiled back at her and trailed his fingers down her arm, “’Fraid it’s too late, now; they’ll be over in a few minutes.”

“They won’t be here for long,” she hooked her arm around his neck and drew him in for an enticing kiss. “We can continue this after dinner. Maybe the sheep will just happen to escape from their pen, and have to be found…”

“Yes, ma’am,” he agreed enthusiastically, if a little dazed.

Bo stood by the table in her dorm room, admiring an ornate pink-and-white fluted glass dish on a silver pedestal. She turned it in her hands, studying the delicate painted floral design. “It was nice of the girls to chip in and buy us such pretty baskets for wedding presents.”

“It was,” Jessie agreed, as she finished carefully wrapping her own - identical to Bo’s, except with a yellow-and-white bowl - and placing it in the trunk that she had bought during her time in San Bernardino. She stood, and pulled her dressing gown a little more tightly around herself. “It’s hard to believe this is our last night as Harvey Girls.”

“You’re not going to miss it, are you?” Bo laughed.

“Nah, I can’t wait to marry Buzz. And I’d rather be your sister than just your roommate. But it’s been fun, ya know? In spite of the hard work.”

“It definitely has.” Bo picked up her bridal basket, and proceeded to secure it in her own trunk like Jessie had done. “Well, I think I have just about everything packed; I’ll put the last things in in the morning.”

Jessie stepped over to the dresser, and reached carefully for two little pieces of cardstock that were tucked inside the mirror’s frame: her souvenir photo of Annie Oakley; and the postcard Buzz had gotten her after their first visit to Redlands. She smiled softly as she ran her fingers across the meaningful slips of paper.

“It’s been an adventure, gettin’ to this point. But this is the first time I feel like I’m really goin’ home.”

Bo came up behind her friend and squeezed her shoulders, “I know exactly what you mean.”
The “Dinkey” actually was the nickname of the San Bernardino and Redlands Railway, because of its diminutive size. The pasteles served at dinner - in the context of my 1898 Spanish-Mexican cookbook - is a sort of casserole or savory pie with a pastry crust.

Estrellita and Zechariah’s backstory refers to the drought that hit Southern California in the 1860s, which decimated the rancheros’ cattle and further burdened them financially, when they were already struggling to pay the heavy taxes the American government had imposed on their landholdings since annexation. It was these circumstances - along with the litigation required to prove the ownership of their land grants, which cost dearly in legal fees - that led to the Californios being forced to subdivide their ranchos and sell off parcels to make ends meet. The “yo te quiero” and “yo quiero te” lines come from an actual historical account of a confused suitor. Bunuelos and champurrado (a rich hot chocolate drink) were traditional Californio Christmas treats. Miso de Gallo can also refer to midnight mass on Christmas Eve in the Catholic church, however in several historical references specific to the Californios, I found that it was often held just before dawn. Estrellita's Spanish when Buzz and Jessie startle her is "you scared me to death!"

Turrón is a Spanish nougat or brittle candy made with almonds and honey, and was also mentioned in historical accounts of the holiday season. Christmas trees of the 19th century often had small gifts and treats hung from them, as the only real wrapping paper available was plain white paper held in place by straight pins and tied with ribbon. It was common to have a bucket of sand, as well as water, near the tree to extinguish any flames should there be a mishap with the candles. Pepita is, in fact, the nickname for Josefa. The ribbon-trail hunt Lote goes on for her present was an actual 19th century game for children to find their gifts. We aren’t being redundant with the amount of at-home music in these chapters - in the days before radio and television, pianos, organs, guitars, phonographs and any other form of at-home music were popular family entertainment - not to mention music was integral to Californio culture, as well. And the “working” corset mentioned is one that was made for comfort and flexibility - they were also called sensible, health, or reform corsets. They didn’t have the heavy boning found in traditional corsets, and often fastened with buttons up the front rather than hooks - it would have been something practical for Jessie to wear when she knew she’d be moving furniture and working more actively in her new house. Credit for all the Swedish cultural research in this chapter goes to PoetLaurie, because I’ve got my hands plenty full researching the Californio history!
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Better late than never, right? I am SO sorry this chapter is a month late - but between both PoetLaurie and I having to replace our laptops, her move, and my family vacation, there was no possible way we could get it published on time. I hope you'll find it worth the wait, though!

Don't forget to check out our Pinterest board, "Jessie's Journey" under username @yodelincowgirl. You'll definitely want to see some of the clothing described here, as well as the other pins that inspired us for this particular chapter.

As always, Toy Story still isn't ours. If it was, Bo would have been in the 'Toy Story 4' trailer - but I'm not mad she wasn't, I love it anyway! Enjoy, and be sure to leave us some kudos and subscribe/bookmark so you don't miss anything!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Here they come!”

Jessie shielded her eyes from the bright morning sun, and pointed down the road at the sight of both Buzz and Woody approaching the depot - the former driving the surrey, the latter the ranch’s work wagon. She and Bo had already said their goodbyes to their fellow Harvey Girls, as well as Mr. Igel and Mrs. Davis, and had been waiting out front since their belongings had been brought around by some helpful porters. Now, they were impatient to get going, and eager to get settled in their houses before their nuptials the next day.

The men slowed to a halt in the depot’s streetside driveway, and worked together to load both girls’ trunks and bags into the back of the work wagon, along with Bo’s sewing machine, which she had been using in their dormitory room. After everything was secured, Woody helped Bo up onto the wagon seat, and Buzz and Jessie went to ride in the surrey.

“Is Slink all settled in?” Bo asked, as they rode out of the city and started down the more rural road that led to Redlands.

“Yeah, he seems to really like the place. Buzz and I have been showing him around this past week. The ranch will be in good hands while we’re on our honeymoon.”

“I never doubted that. We’ll have to make sure to have him over for dinner every now and then.”

Up ahead in the surrey, Buzz pulled a piece of newsprint out of his vest pocket and handed it to Jessie.

“What’s this?” she asked, as she unfolded the clipping. “Oh! Our marriage licenses were published! Guess we can’t back out now, huh?” she joked with a wink in Buzz’s direction. “It’s kinda odd seein’ our names in the paper, though. An’ here Aunt Molly always said that the first time my name was in the papers would be ‘cause of a scandal.”

“She might not be wrong,” Buzz teased. “Should we make sure she gets a copy?”
Jessie giggled. “Maybe. Too bad it had to say Jessamine.”

“Our full names were necessary for legal purposes,” explained Buzz. “Woody has a copy for Bo; I don’t expect her to be any happier about the names than you are,” he laughed.

Jessie re-folded the paper and slid it into her handbag. “Good thing we could put what we actually go by on our invitations, or nobody woulda known who was invitin’ ‘em!”

When they turned down the lane to the ranch, the significance was lost to no one as the girls arrived home - permanently so - for the first time. Aware that everyone’s time was at a premium, Woody and Buzz hastened in unloading the trunks to their respective houses, so Bo and Jessie could unpack - and pack for the honeymoon - before the wedding preparations began in earnest.

As soon as Buzz and Woody deposited her trunk in the upstairs hall, Jessie set to work. After changing into a more-serviceable wrapper than the good shirtwaist and skirt she’d donned that morning, she filled the dresser drawers Buzz had left vacant for her, as well as her share of hooks in the closet, with her clothing and belongings. In the midst of her busyness she noticed that Buzz had put crisp, clean sheets on the bed for her, and had covered it with the beautiful handmade crazy quilt that had been given to them as an early wedding gift by Tío Hector and Tía Emelda.

Jessie was placing the last of her honeymoon clothes into her satchel when she heard the rumble of wheels coming down the lane. She stepped over to the window and pulled aside the lace curtain to see Estrellita and Zechariah driving up, their wagon full of the folding tables and benches they used for their fiestas. She latched her luggage closed, set it on the floor by the door, and hurried down the stairs to greet them.

Estrellita caught Jessie up in a hug, “Mi hermosa hija! Finally I see you in your home! Did you have enough time to get settled? We set out earlier than expected,” she leaned in with a twinkle in her eye, “I think Zechariah was just as anxious that I get here as I was.”

Overhearing his wife’s comment, he gave Jessie a hug of his own. “I was merely concerned for her well-being. If she fussed with the wagon one more time, I thought the supplies might tumble right off.”

Their future daughter-in-law let out a giggle, “Well, I’m sure glad ya got here in one piece, then. Where are the rest?”

“Héctor and Tano will be along in the afternoon, to start the pit for the barbecue. They’ll have to keep an eye on it all night.”

“What about Emelda, and Josefa?”

“They’re finishing up the baking. They’ll come out with the men later, bring the cakes and sweets, and go home with us after dinner.”

Buzz and Woody approached from the direction of the barn, where they’d been tending to the animals, Buzz offering his help to his friend so that they could both be free for the remainder of the day. Slink was with them, and in no time all the tables and benches had been hauled around to the backyard where the ceremony and reception were to be held.

Preoccupied with getting things set up in the backyard, nobody noticed a small buggy drive up out front. Jessie and Bo both spun around when they heard a familiar voice calling out from between the houses.

“Yoohoo! Is everyone back here?”
“Barbie! You found us!” Jessie ran to greet her friend - who, despite her advanced pregnancy, was
dressed elegantly in a teal-green silk dress accented with frothy white lace - and held her at arm’s
length after a welcoming embrace. She whistled at the sight of Barbie’s dramatically bulging belly.
“Just look at ya now! That’s gonna be a big baby!”

“Don’t I know it! It was a challenge designing a suitable ensemble for the wedding, that’s for sure.”

Bo joined them, and also greeted Barbie with a warm hug. “Oh my goodness, Barbie! How many
more months to go?”

“Two.” She rested her hand on her stomach like a shelf. “And I’m definitely ready. So many styles
I’m dying to wear again… not to mention all the little frillies to dress up the baby.”

Jessie looked around. “Where’s Ken?”

“At the buggy. He’s got the boxes with your dresses; he just was waiting on the word for where to
take them.”

“The house with the turret’s mine,” Jessie said proudly, “an’ that’s where we’ll be dressin’
tomorrow. C’mon, we’ll show ya around both our places, before we get to decoratin’ proper.”

Barbie directed Ken to carry the wedding gowns into Jessie’s house, as Jessie led the way, opening
the front door and showing Barbie into the foyer.

“Oh, this is just lovely!” she gushed, then turned to her husband behind them. “Ken, can you be a
dear and carry those upstairs for us?”

“Okay!”

Jessie led Barbie through the first floor, with Bo at her side, the three friends happily chatting and
catching up on four months’ worth of news and gossip since they’d seen each other last. When they
reached the swinging kitchen door, Jessie pushed it open to find Estrellita unloading several baskets
of groceries she’d brought along with her.

“Don’t mind me, I’m just getting some things ready, to save time tomorrow morning,” the older
woman smiled as the girls entered.

“Estrellita, this is our friend, Barbie. She was the wagon boss - head waitress - when we came to
Barstow. Barbie, Estrellita, Buzz’s mother.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Estrellita replied warmly, “It is a mark of your friendship that you’d travel in
such a state! It could not have been a comfortable journey.”

“Barbie woulda been our bridesmaid, under other circumstances,” Jessie laughed. “As it is, she’s
why we’ve got such nice dresses. She has her own shop in Los Angeles; you won’t believe the
things she can do with fabric and thread.”

“I can see her handiwork now,” Estrellita’s voice rang with admiration as she looked at the dress she
was currently wearing. Eyeing Barbie’s figure, she pursed her lips thoughtfully, “You are carrying
just like I did with my boys. I wouldn’t be surprised if you find yourself with a son, soon.”

Ken wandered into the kitchen; having delivered the dresses upstairs, he followed the voices to the
back of the house. “There you are. You want me to go help with the setup?”
“Yes, please. Oh, before you do, come meet Buzz’s mother. This is my husband, Ken. He’s the other half to our business.”

Ken cordially shook Estrellita’s offered hand, and his eye immediately traveled to the simple, traditional Californio-style camisa she wore, paired with her long skirt. “That embroidery is exquisite! Did you do it yourself?”

“This?” she had to look down for a moment, to recall which of her old camisas she’d put on that morning. “Oh, yes, I sewed it years ago; it’s so much more practical to dress like this when we have work to do.”

“Hey Babs, what do you say we incorporate embroidery like that in our next design?”

“That would be stunning,” Barbie agreed readily. “Now, I think we best get these gowns fitted one last time, in case we have to make any adjustments.”

“You wanna come see ‘em?” Jessie asked Estrellita, as the three girls stood in the doorway, ready to exit the kitchen.

“No, mija, I want to be surprised with the full effect tomorrow,” she winked.

Jessie once again led the way back through the first floor and up the stairs, to where two large boxes had been left in the upper hall. The two brides-to-be each picked up a box and carried them into the master bedroom, where they lifted the lids to find folds of elegant fabric and trim. Carefully removing the bodices, skirts, and corsets from their packaging, Jessie and Bo gushed over their completed wedding dresses, thanking Barbie for bringing their visions to life.

They quickly slipped out of their simple wrappers and into their gowns, and were pleased to find that they fit perfectly. Bo carried her garments into the spare room, where she’d be sleeping that night and dressing the next day, while Jessie refolded hers and laid it carefully back in the box, lest Buzz come back in the house before the wedding. Once they were dressed again, the girls proceeded back down the stairs and out the front door to show Barbie Bo’s house.

After the second half of their home tour was completed, the three girls stepped out of the Pride farmhouse’s kitchen door to find rows of benches and tables in the backyard.

“Is this how you wanted them?” Woody called out as they walked toward him. The tables and seating had been arranged behind his own house - in the open expanse leading toward the kitchen garden and outbuildings - leaving the space behind Buzz and Jessie’s home free for dancing. The ceremony was to be set against the backdrop of the grove’s snowy blossoms, off to the side of the property next to the Lightyear home.

“Looks good to me,” Jessie said, surveying the layout. “We can bring out our kitchen tables and chairs tomorrow, too, after the cookin’ is done. Guests will be standin’ out by the trees for the weddin’, so when we come outta our house we can just walk across the yard here. Do we know where exactly we’re standin’, though? We need to know where to walk to... and where to put everyone, and the minister!”

“Why don’t we do a rehearsal?” suggested Barbie. “All the society weddings have rehearsals nowadays.”

“This ain’t even close to a society weddin’,” Jessie laughed.

“She has a point, though,” Estrellita chimed in. “It won’t do to have you come out looking confused. We can walk through it once the rest of mi familia gets here.”
No sooner had those words been spoken than Lote came tearing up to greet them, her long dark hair flying behind her.

“Is it the wedding now?” she squealed, launching herself at Jessie, who pulled her in for a hug.

“Tomorrow,” she giggled at the girl’s enthusiasm. “We’ve still got a lot to do.”

Josefa followed closely behind her daughter, carrying Berto. “You should have seen her the day your letter arrived,” she laughed. “She’s been beside herself with excitement. Every morning, ‘is today the wedding?’”

Bo greeted Josefa with a friendly embrace, pinching Berto’s cheek affectionately. “I’m so glad she wants to be part of the ceremony.” She lowered her voice, “Jessie and I are going to make a wreath for her hair to match the flowers in our bouquets. Do you think she’ll like that?”

“She will love that.”

“What needs to be brought in from your wagon?” Jessie asked. “I think we can let the fellas finish up out here.”

The women made quick work of unloading the different baskets of food for that day’s dinner and the next’s festivities and carrying them into the Pride house. Jessie sat a basket down on the table in Bo’s dining room and lifted the corner of its fabric cover, revealing a glimpse of delicate sugar-coated cookies.

Emelda swatted her hand lightly with a laugh, “No peeking! Those are for the reception.” She turned to Bo, “Show me around this kitchen of yours; Estrellita says that’s where I will be cooking tomorrow, and we have food to prepare for tonight.”

After a few hours’ work, and a quick walkthrough of the ceremony, everyone felt satisfied that the property and the participants were ready for the momentous occasion that awaited them. The women retreated to Bo’s kitchen to gather the accompaniments for the dinner of guisado de gallina that had been simmering on the stove since Emelda’s arrival, while the men went out to the barbecue pit to check on Héctor and Tano’s progress. Bo was standing on her back porch with her hands on her hips, looking over the scene with satisfaction, when Woody came striding across the backyard, his long legs carrying him ahead of the rest of the men. “It all looks wonderful,” she pecked him on the cheek as he joined her. “Dinner’s ready; can you help us carry out the food?”

Family and friends gathered at the tables in the backyard, and their meal was a cheery one, filled with stories of past weddings and celebrations that carried on until the sun had dipped beyond the Western horizon. Noting the hour, Zechariah stood. “Friends, I believe that it’s time to make our way back home. Besides,” he added with a grin, “the brides and grooms need their sleep.”

Everyone pitched in to help clean up, and the wagon was readied for the trip to the hacienda. Héctor and Tano bade their wives good night - Tano reminding Lote to be a good girl for her mother - and retreated to tend the barbecue pit overnight.

Estrellita gave both Jessie and Bo a kiss on the cheek, before climbing into the front seat of the wagon. “We will be back early tomorrow morning. I want you both to go to bed early, you hear me? No staying up late,” she wagged a finger at them, all threat removed by the smile on her face.

Barbie and Ken were next in the line to bid their friends farewell. “We should be here early, too. We’re staying at the Hotel Windsor in town. Ken?” she called to her husband who had become preoccupied with adjusting the spacing between some nearby benches, “come with me.”
“Oh, okay! Good night, ladies and gents!” he waved to the group. As they walked back to their buggy, Ken turned to his wife, “So are you wearing the high-button boots or the beaded slippers tomorrow?”

Jessie and Bo shared a look of pure amusement before turning their attention to their fiancés.

“I’m going to go down to the pit to sit with Tío Héctor and Tano for a while,” Buzz said to Jessie, as they stood together in the moonlight, her arms around his waist and her head on his shoulder. “It’s tradition for the men to talk around the fire.”

“I’ll go with you, maybe see if Slink wants to join us,” Woody interjected. He leaned down to give Bo a lingering kiss, “See you tomorrow, little lady.”

“We have a few more things to do in the house anyway,” Bo replied with a smile, then turned to Jessie. “You coming?”

“Yeah.” Jessie tightened her arms’ grasp around Buzz’s waist, and looked up to kiss him.

“Tomorrow night we don’t hafta say bye.”

The corner of his mouth turned upward in a crooked smile. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Jessie and Bo disappeared into the back door of the Lightyear house, and the two soon set to their task at the dining room table, where Bo had left the basket of wire and myrtle clippings she had gathered earlier in the day, along with her bridal crown. As she twisted the branches and leaves, attaching them to the cherished heirloom with the fine florists’ wire, Jessie busied herself at embellishing a simple wreath for Lote to wear as flower girl.

“Am I doin’ this right?” she asked her friend, showing her the first few greens attached to the frame.

Bo glanced up from her own work long enough to take note. “Looks good to me. We’ll add the orange blossoms to it in the morning, when we pick them fresh for everything else. And we’ll have to make the boutonnieres then, too.”

The two worked while they conversed happily about wedding details, and discussed plans for the honeymoon they’d be sharing. After about an hour had passed, Jessie sighed, and set the wreath down on the heavy oak table.

“Well, I reckon this is done. I think I’m gonna go take a bath before I head to bed.”

“I’ll be along soon; I just have a few more bare spots to cover on this crown.”

Meanwhile, outside, Buzz, Woody, and Slink had wandered down to the pit near the garden, where Tano and Héctor sat, sipping coffee and nibbling on the bizchochos Emelda had left for them. They sat down on the cool, hard dirt next to the glowing fire of the pit.

“So you have to watch this all night?” Woody asked, as he crossed his legs and made himself comfortable.

“Sí, the fire has to be constantly tended, to keep it at the proper temperature,” Héctor explained, staring downward into the three-foot-deep pit of glowing rocks and wood. “The roast will go in in the morning, and will be covered so it can cook slowly and be ready in time for the feast.”

“Papá takes great pride in being the family asador,” chuckled Tano. “I’m learning my way around the barbecue, though. I can hold my own.”
“Well, I’ll be leaving this pit here to try my hand at it myself,” Buzz said. “I plan to put it to good use this summer.”

The five men sat and talked later than they perhaps should have, Woody and Slink entertaining Buzz’s relatives with tales of their Texas lawmen days. Finally, Héctor pulled his watch from his vest pocket and squinted at it in the dim firelight.

“It’s after midnight; you two better get back to the house,” he suggested. “I don’t want to be blamed for you being tired on your wedding day.”

“Or your wedding night,” Tano elbowed his cousin, casting him a teasing grin.

The two grooms stood and dusted the dirt off their trousers, and after saying goodnight to Héctor and Tano, and seeing Slink back in the direction of his lodgings, they began their walk across the yard to the Pride house.

Woody looked out across the dark expanse as they ambled along, cautious of the benches and tables that would soon be crossing their path. “You know, it’s funny how life turns out. When I was first told you’d be my partner, I wasn’t so keen on it,” he admitted pensively. “You, some big city cop; and me, coming from the rowdy cow towns.”

“I didn’t know what to make of you, either,” Buzz laughed. “You were pretty standoffish at first. There were times I thought you might shove me off a cliff.”

“If I could have gotten away with it,” joked Woody. “You were pretty full of yourself; mister athletic club showoff,” he continued with his good-natured ribbing, before his tone took a more sincere turn. “And now look at us, about to be brothers,” he grasped Buzz’s shoulder, giving it a friendly nudge. “Looking back, I honestly wouldn’t have had it any other way.

Buzz turned to his friend, and smiled widely. “Me either, cowboy.”

Bo slowly opened the door to Jessie’s bedroom and peeked inside, only to find her friend snuggled cozily between the sheets, clutching her pillow. With a mischievous smile she crept over to the window and reached behind its lace curtain to raise the roller shade, filling the room with morning sunshine.

“Time to get up!”

Jessie roused with a start. She had stayed awake longer than she should have the night before - caught up in the anticipation of the wedding and the excitement of her first night in her own house - and hadn’t had the faintest idea how to set Buzz’s new alarm clock. “What time is it?” she asked in a near panic.

“Almost noon.”

“WHAT???”

Bo grinned widely, her eyes twinkling with mirth. “Just kidding; it’s only eight. Breakfast is ready downstairs.”

Jessie scrunched her nose at the prank. “Have I mentioned ya have a real mean streak? How long have ya been up?”

“An hour,” Bo shrugged. “Estrellita said to let you sleep.”
“She’s here already, too? Tarnation, Bo!” she flipped the covers aside and jumped out of the bed.

Her friend let out a snicker. “The wedding’s not ‘til three o’clock; we’ve still got plenty of time.”

Jessie threw on a wrapper and hastily rebraided her hair, then hurried downstairs where Estrellita was busy at the stove, starting to prepare the food for the evening’s reception.

“Your new bed must be comfortable,” Estrellita teased, as Jessie entered the kitchen and pulled up a chair at the table along with Bo. “I saw Bustillo and Woody when we got here; they were working in the barn, tending to the cattle, but they left to get the bouquets from the florist just a few minutes ago. I’ve brought flowers from my garden for the tables; they’re in the dining room.”

“Thanks!” Jessie took a bite of the chorizo and eggs Estrellita had made, followed by a sip of coffee. “We best be puttin’ up the last of the decorations, so we can start gettin’ ready ourselves.”

After placing their emptied plates in the sink, the girls gathered the paper lanterns and twine from their stash of wedding supplies on the dining room table. Jessie grabbed a step-stool from the kitchen, and they headed out the back door.

The grass-covered yard was still damp with dew, but the bright blue sky dotted with cottony clouds promised a day of perfect Southern California weather. Wooden posts had been set up the day prior, to demarcate the dancing area, and it was on these that Jessie tied the twine, then began to suspend the colorful lanterns between them. As they worked, they noticed Lote peering out Bo’s kitchen window, and in a moment she was out in the backyard, racing toward them.

“Is today the wedding?” the little girl bounced up and down, unable to contain her excitement.

“Yes, it’s finally today,” Bo laughed. “And you can put on your pretty new dress in just a few hours. Would you like to help us?”

Lote nodded, taking seriously the task offered to her. Bo gave her a lantern, and directed her to hand it to Jessie.

The girls were thus occupied when Barbie swept into the backyard, dressed in a loose-fitting wrapper of richly patterned silk. Ken trailed behind her, his arms full of wedding gifts and a valise containing Barbie’s more formal attire and accessories.

“I’m here to work, girls! I brought my own gown to change into later - along with your presents from us. Just tell me what you need us to do!”

“Well, if it’s not too much for ya, there’s tablecloths and fresh flowers in the dinin’ room at my place,” suggested Jessie.

“Well, if it’s not too much for ya, there’s tablecloths and fresh flowers in the dinin’ room at my place,” suggested Jessie.

“Perfect!” Barbie and Ken went into Jessie’s house to deposit his parcels, then got to work gathering the linens and draping them over the tables that were set out behind the Pride house. A mismatched assortment of the best lacy and embroidered cloths from Estrellita’s and Emelda’s collections, they made for a cheery and homey look. When they were finished, Barbie called out to her friends, “What do you want the flowers in?”

“Estrellita brought us some vases and pitchers to choose from,” Jessie yelled back from her perch on the ladder. “Should be near the flowers in the dinin’ room.”

Jessie and Bo were just finishing up with the hanging of the lanterns when the work wagon pulled up the ranch’s lane, past the Pride house and onward to the barn. It wasn’t long before Buzz and Woody came strolling towards them, the former carrying a large box with the bridal bouquets nestled
inside.

“Oooh! Lemme see!” Jessie rushed over and grasped the edge of the box, tugging it lower so she could peer inside. “They’re so pretty! Bo, c’mere! We just need to add our own orange blossoms and myrtle.”

Barbie overheard the commotion, and seeing the men’s arrival, also hastened - as quickly as she could in her condition - over to the two couples. “No, no, no! You can’t see each other before the wedding, it’s bad luck! Gentlemen, you need to go!”

Bo waved her hand dismissively. “It’s not like we’re wearing our wedding dresses already; it won’t do any harm.”

Estrellita stepped out on to the back porch of the Lightyear house, holding a platter of food that she was taking to Héctor and Tano at the barbecue pit, and was taken aback when she saw the brides- and grooms-to-be interacting. “Ay! You shouldn’t be together now! What are you doing?”

“I’ve been trying to tell them that!” Barbie piped in desperately.

Estrellita nodded to Ken, “Please, take the box of flowers into my son’s house. And YOU,” she gestured at Buzz,” get inside, NOW. I will take care of the rest out here. Vamos!”

With a chuckle at his mother’s insistence, Buzz handed the bouquets over to Ken, and went with Woody into the Pride house, the men’s headquarters for wedding preparations.

Jessie turned to Bo. “Whadd’ya say we go cut me some orange blossoms? Buzz made me swear I’d only take ‘em from one tree,” she giggled, “so it won’t take long.”

“Keep an eye on them, Barbie, dear; make sure they behave,” Estrellita said with a wink, as she headed off to the fire pit with Tano and Héctor’s provisions.

Jessie and Bo were quick at their task, filling a basket with enough of the tiny, fragrant blossoms to tuck in both Jessie’s bouquet and her hair, with enough left over for Lote’s crown and Buzz’s boutonnière. With a final glance across the backyard, and satisfied that things looked as ready as they possibly could, the girls retreated into Jessie’s house to tend to their last-minute floral projects and their bridal toilettes.

The lively scene inside the home was peppered with a chorus of girlish giggles, belying the friends’ age and Barbie’s maternal appearance. Jessie carried Barbie’s valise upstairs for her, where she and Bo donned their dressing gowns in preparation for their friend to help them arrange their hair.

“Do you have a curling iron?” Barbie asked, as she unlatched her bag on Jessie’s bed, and began to remove its contents.

“Bo’n I both do,” answered Jessie, “just gotta get a lamp from the kitchen to heat ‘em up, since Buzz’s been so set on using the electric lights up here.”

“I brought mine, too, with a portable heater,” Barbie offered. “But if your mother-in-law is cooking anything even half as delicious as what we ate for dinner last night… maybe Bo and I should come downstairs with you.”

“Sure,” Jessie grinned at her friend, whose dainty appetite had increased exponentially with her pregnancy. “I told ya you’d love her cookin’!” She paused with curiosity as she studied the rest of the things Barbie was retrieving from her luggage. “What’s all that?” she asked, glancing at a collection of small jars that were peeking out of a satin pouch.
“This?” Barbie picked up the bundle, and opened it to reveal its contents further. “Just some rouge, and powder, and cosmetique.” She smiled reassuringly when she saw the shocked look on her friends’ faces. “It’s perfectly acceptable nowadays. All the society ladies wear it; and so will you today, if you’ll let me show you how natural it really looks. It’ll create the most wonderful effect.”

“If you say so,” Jessie shrugged.

Barbie cocked her head. “Do you really think I’d make you look painted, today of all days?”

The two brides brushed out their hair and descended the staircase. Jessie reached for a simple lamp, some fuel, and matches from the kitchen pantry - kept on hand for when Buzz’s modern technology failed them and they needed to rely on simpler lighting - and set it on the table. She then grabbed a spoon and stole a taste of the frijoles Estrellita had simmering on the stovetop.

“You must be hungry; let me fix you something to eat,” the elder woman said, as Jessie flashed Barbie and Bo a knowing smirk. She gestured for the three friends to sit at the kitchen table, and gathered bowls and spoons for serving. “I was going to go check on the men soon, too, and take them some food; I’m sure Emelda is still busy making the tortillas for tonight. I have some pozole here, if you’d like.”

Estrellita scooped three helpings’ worth of the rich stew from the large pot she’d been keeping warm all day, to fortify the family and friends in their wedding preparations, and set them in front of the girls. “The enchiladas are ready to go in the oven, and the tamales are cooking. I’m going to take the rest of the pozole next door, and get dressed myself over there,” she said, as she used dishcloths to shield her hands from the hot pot as she lifted it from the stove. “I should be back in a half hour or so, mija; if you need anything, send Barbie.” She winked broadly, an echo of her son in the gesture.

Josefa opened the screen door of the Pride kitchen as Estrellita approached. After setting down the pot of pozole on an empty stove burner, Estrellita walked into the parlor to find the men sitting in conversation, Woody intently studying his boots and her son looking rather ill at ease.

“What have you been saying to our Bustillo?” she gently chided her husband, who she noticed had cut his sentence short the moment she entered the room.

“Just some fatherly advice, my love, preparing him for married life,” he answered.

Estrellita shook her head and laughed. “As if you were some expert. You were as nervous as a schoolboy in front of his class. It’s a good thing I took matters into my own hands,” she winked at Buzz.

“Mamáaaa…” Buzz wanted to sink into the floor; instead of his mother rescuing him from the conversation, she pushed the door open further. His mortification was eased somewhat as he observed the sudden discomfort on Ken’s face.

“But enough,” Estrellita waved her hand and spoke the magic words that removed any interest in the previous subject: “There’s pozole in the kitchen; help yourselves. I’m going upstairs to get changed.”

Estrellita returned downstairs twenty minutes later, resplendent in a regal gown of rich plum-purple silk trimmed in elaborately scrolled black soutache braid, with a matching hat in her hand. The men were finishing their meal in the dining room; and as soon as she set foot in the kitchen to check in with her sister-in-law, Lote ran over to her.

“Tía! Your dress is so pretty!” the little girl squealed.
“Gracias,” Estrellita replied with a warm smile. “But yours will be the prettiest. Would you like to go put it on now?” Lote nodded her head emphatically. “Why don’t your mamá and abuelita go upstairs with you? I think we have more than enough tortillas,” she said to Emelda and Josefa, with gratitude for their help.

As the women and children retreated upstairs to one of the spare bedrooms, Estrellita walked into the dining room, where the men sat at the end of the table not occupied by the food for later. She turned to Zechariah, “You should probably go get Héctor and Tano; we’ve only got about an hour now until the guests start arriving.” Estrellita watched out of the corner of her eye as Buzz lifted the lid of one of the baskets of food that was closest to him, and peeked inside. “What you’re looking for isn’t in there, mi corazón,” she laughed. Grabbing the cloth napkin that was sitting next to Buzz’s bowl, she reached into a different basket and pulled out four buñuelos. She wrapped them up and handed them to her son. “Share these with Woody. And you two need to be getting ready now, too,” she added, while she headed for the kitchen door. “Don’t get any sugar on your suits!”

“Mamá, I think we’re more careful than that,” Buzz scoffed with a chuckle.

“So what are your suits, anyway?” Ken asked as the two grooms rose from their seats.


“Oh, no, that’s not appropriate for a wedding,” Ken gasped in shock. “You need full morning suits - frock coats, dark vests, and gray trousers. And hats.”

Woody caught a glimpse of the aggravation in Buzz’s eyes, and shrugged in response. “Well, they’re appropriate enough for us. Besides, if you try and tell Bo and Jessie that the wedding’s off on account of fashion, we’ll all end up in funeral attire instead,” he deadpanned. “C’mon, Buzz.”

At the neighboring house, Estrellita knocked on the frame of Jessie’s open bedroom door. “It’s only me. Can I come in?”

“‘Course,” Jessie called back. “Barbie’s just finishin’ my hair.”

She stepped inside and over to the chair where Jessie was seated and Barbie stood placing the last hairpin. “Oh, don’t you look lovely,” Estrellita complimented Barbie, who was already dressed in a pink-and-white striped confection, artfully draped with luxurious white lace down the front. “You can hardly tell you’re in the family way.”

“That was the intent,” Barbie laughed, “but thank you.” She patted Jessie on the shoulder. “You’re ready for your dress; I’m going to go see if Bo needs help buttoning hers. I’ll be right back.” Passing through the doorway that led into the adjacent bedroom, she left Jessie and Estrellita alone.

“May I help you get dressed, mija?”

Jessie smiled tenderly at the woman who was more a mother than she’d ever known. “I’d really like that.” Soon she was clad in the skirt and bodice Barbie had made, and she gave a twirl. “How do I look?”

“Beautiful, but then I’d say that anyway. There is something I might add, if it’s not too presumptuous.” She reached into a pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. “Your ring is something blue, your dress is your something new. The mantilla could be both borrowed and old, but I don’t know if I am ready to admit just how old it might be,” she laughed. “I have something that might work, though.” She unfolded the cotton fabric and held it out towards Jessie.

Jessie took the open bundle and saw a pin nestled in the folds of Estrellita’s handkerchief. It was a
little star made of silver that had darkened with age, and its framed setting was filled with vibrant turquoise stones of varying sizes. “Oh, Estrellita… it’s so pretty!”

The older woman put her hands gently on the younger’s shoulders, “It was my grandmother’s. She gave it to me on my wedding day, and now I’d like to give it to you. You are mi Bustillo’s guiding star; it is only right you should have the pin now.”

“Estrellita…,” she swallowed against the lump in her throat, “I don’t know what t’say!” She held the pin towards her future mother-in-law, “Would you pin it on?”

“It would be my pleasure.” She centered the star at the seam of the collar so it sat at the hollow of Jessie’s throat. “There. It suits you,” she pecked the bride-to-be on her cheek. “Now, would you like me to help you with the mantilla, too?”

Jessie answered with a wordless nod, as she stood admiring the pin on her dress in the mirror. Estrellita artfully draped the fine lace over Jessie’s head and shoulders, framing her face with its scalloped edges. When the elder woman stepped back to admire her handiwork, she happened to notice the time on the bedside alarm clock and let out a small gasp. “Ay! Guests will be arriving any moment!” With a squeeze of Jessie’s hand and another kiss on the cheek, she left through the door just before Barbie came back in.

Barbie’s hand flew to her mouth. “Ohhhh, look at you! Between you and Bo, I’m going to be just a mess of tears. I do hope Ken brought an extra handkerchief! But here, let’s take care of these final touches.” Barbie took one of the few remaining orange blossoms from the dresser, and tucked it in Jessie’s updo, then adjusted the lace mantilla that was serving as her veil one last time. “There. Just wait until Buzz sees you. Now, I better go tell everyone that we’re nearly ready to get started.” She hugged her friend - gently, so as not to ruffle either of their attire - and exited down the stairs.

Alone in her room for the first time all day, Jessie paused at her dresser mirror. The sight of herself as a bride staring back in the glass caused a catch in her throat. She had never been one to play at fairytale games as a child; but youthful daydreams of her someday-wedding had always included visions of her father walking her down the aisle. She reached up to touch the star brooch that was fastened at her collar - an unplanned but cherished addition to her ensemble - and for a moment her mind wrestled with the pain of being cast off by her own family, in contrast to the joy of acceptance in her new one.

Bo peeked in the doorway, breaking into her thoughts. “You ready? Time to go.”

Not wanting to cloud Bo’s happiness with her bittersweet musings, or let them ruin such a happy day, Jessie took a breath and forced a still-sincere smile. “Yep.”

She stepped out onto the second-floor landing with her friend, and the two girls smoothed their skirts as they readied to walk down the stairs, to where Buzz and Woody waited in the foyer below.

The two grooms stood by the front door, in their new three-piece suits they had purchased for the occasion - Woody in timeless black, and Buzz in a stylish dark gray.

“What does this remind you of, standing at the bottom of a staircase, waiting on these two to come downstairs all gussied up?” Woody asked, his eyes twinkling with the happiness of the day. Buzz chuckled in response, but before he could answer, the sound of footfalls upstairs diverted their attention.

Bo was first to descend. Her bridal gown was of a white silk dotted with delicate pink flowers, lavishly trimmed with valenciennes lace and ruched satin ribbon on the bodice and at the hemline
and cuffs. Its dramatically puffed sleeves and sweeping skirt with short train created the stunning hourglass effect that was so in fashion. On her head she wore her mother’s cherished crown, now wrapped with fresh, green myrtle, and a plain white veil pinned beneath it, that hung down her back. Jessie’s pearl starburst earrings served as her something borrowed. Woody stood taller at the sight of her, and his chest swelled with pride at the knowledge that this breathtaking woman soon would be his wife.

When Jessie's eyes met Buzz’s, and she saw the joy in her brother’s and best friend’s faces, all thoughts of those who weren’t present faded from her mind. Everything and everyone she needed was right there, in that moment.

Buzz, meanwhile, stood transfixed as his bride appeared in the bend of the stairs. Her dress was not what he had pictured when he thought of this day, and yet he couldn’t imagine her wearing anything different. Although it featured the same voluminous sleeves and graceful skirt as Bo’s gown - minus the train - there the similarities ended. Its simple but elegant lines were made in a cherry-red silk faille, with white beaded-lace trim on the gathered bodice, a wide ribbon belt and ribbons streaming down the front sides and back, and diminutive bows perched on each shoulder. The intricate patterns in her white lace mantilla popped against the vibrant backdrop, and to Buzz, she was simply radiant. He thought Jessie couldn’t possibly be any more beautiful than before, but to his astonishment, there she was.

Jessie grinned at her fiance’s slack-jawed expression as she stepped off of the final tread. “Guess ya like the dress.”

“Yeah,” he exhaled with a crooked grin.

The two couples crossed the foyer into the dining room, where their bouquets and boutonnières awaited. Jessie reached for the simple button bouquet she had prepared - a single red rose framed with orange blossoms - and pinned it on Buzz’s lapel. Bo did the same for Woody, his being a pink rose accented with sprigs of myrtle. Jessie picked up her bouquet of white roses and orange blossoms, and untangled its long, narrow, white ribbon streamers knotted with rosebuds so that they would hang freely in front of her skirt. Bo grabbed her own bouquet - an old-fashioned posey of concentric pink and white blooms, edged in lace - and Buzz held the door open as all four exited onto the back porch.

Josefa and Lote were waiting when the four emerged. The little girl wore a dainty white lace dress, with a blue satin sash and blue bows on the shoulders much like Jessie’s gown. Josefa handed her daughter the basket of rose petals she’d been holding for her. “I’ll go tell Papá Héctor it’s time for the music. Be good, Lote.” She smiled at Jessie and Bo, “You both look so beautiful.”

The four stepped down from the porch into the yard, and Woody offered Bo his arm. “Shall we?” he asked with a wide grin.

“You bet,” she beamed in response, as she linked her own arm through his.

Behind them, Buzz and Jessie followed suit; the elder of the two would take the lead in both the processional and the double ceremony.

“I’m glad they have to go first,” Buzz whispered to Jessie, as he rested his hand momentarily on hers. “That way, Woody can make the first mistake.”

“I heard that,” Woody replied back to his friend.

It wasn’t long before the soft familiar strains of the bridal march - played in beautiful simplicity on
Hector’s guitar - sounded out across the expanse of the yard. Lote walked ahead of the two couples with all the solemnity and grandeur a four-year-old could muster, suited to the fairy princess she was certain she was, as she scattered her white petals on the grass.

The guests had assembled in two groups, forming an aisle for the couples to pass through on their way to the small table that had been set at the edge of the grove as a makeshift altar. Jessie and Bo spotted the faces of Dolly and Bonnie in the crowd, and smiled as they walked by. Barbie was daintily dabbing her eyes with Ken’s handkerchief; and Slink stood poised with Buzz’s treasured Kodak in hand, having been trained on its use with the purpose of serving as photographer for the day.

The clusters of fragrant, white blossoms set against the trees’ vibrant green foliage made for a captivating canopy over their nuptial setting - a much more sentimental and suitable backdrop than any bridal bell or arbor they could have constructed themselves. When they reached the altar and stood before the minister, Buzz and Jessie moved to either side, to fulfil their duties as best man and bridesmaid. Vows and rings were exchanged by Woody and Bo first, with promises to love and cherish - and the distinct omission of the word obey.

Then it was Buzz and Jessie’s turn to come forward, and Woody and Bo stood beside them in support as the same vows were repeated, the same eternal pledges made. When their rings had been slipped on each others fingers, and they had been pronounced husband and wife, they joined Woody and Bo in turning to face their family and friends. The jovial minister spoke out to the crowd, then to the couples.

“I am pleased to present to you for the first time, Mr. and Mrs. Woodrow Pride, and Mr. and Mrs. Bustillo Lightyear. Gentlemen, you may kiss your brides.”

Woody looked to Bo, and her blue eyes shone up at him. He leaned down and planted a kiss on her lips, innocent yet full of meaning. In the same moment, Buzz raised his hand to brush Jessie’s cheek. She drew closer and their lips met, sealing their bond.

As Héctor played the recessional, the quartet made their retreat down the aisle arm in arm, with Woody and Bo leading the way again.

While the newlyweds began to mingle with their friends and relatives, who were all eager to express their congratulations, the wedding feast was set out on the long row of tables that had been set up the day prior. Héctor and Tano carried over their substantial cut of barbecued beef and proceeded to carve it, while the women brought out dishes of their usual fiesta fare - tamales, enchiladas, salsa, frijoles, and freshly-made tortillas. At one end of the spread sat a separate table of sweets - a modest wedding cake for each couple, buñuelos, fresh fruit, and a basket of little, round, sugar-dusted cookies that Estrellita told Jessie were a traditional wedding treat.

A tall man and an elegantly dressed woman approached Buzz and Jessie, who were standing to the side. Slighter of frame, but with the same unmistakable chiseled features - albeit concealed behind a dark mustache - Jessie knew this must be one of Buzz’s brothers.

“Congratulations!” Alejandro slapped his sibling on the back. “Welcome to the club of old married men,” he laughed, then extended a hand to Jessie. “I’m his brother, Alex; and this is my wife, Lavinia.”

“How do you do?” the prim, brunette woman responded with a friendly yet reserved nod.

“I’m awf’lly pleased to finally meetcha,” Jessie gushed to them both. “I’ve seen your pictures and heard plenty about ya.”
“All good, I hope,” Alejandro winked at Buzz. Just then he was interrupted by a tug at his coat. A meek little girl, no more than five years old, looked up at Jessie with wide eyes; and a boy, only a couple years older, stood quietly beside his sister. In fact, they were so silent, Jessie had failed to even notice them before. “These are our children, Gertrude and Walter. Say hello to your new aunt.”

“Hi,” the child spoke shyly, and her brother echoed the greeting.

“Howdy,” Jessie smiled kindly. “Have you seen Lote around? I bet she’d like some playmates.”

Gertrude hung her head. “Mother said I mustn’t soil my new dress playing.”

Jessie perceived a shadow of her own childhood in the little girl’s limitations, and stooped down to speak to her on a personal level. “Well, she brought her pretty new doll with her, I betcha she’d share. That won’t muss a thing.” Gertrude smiled back at the suggestion, then gazed longingly up at her mother.

“Very well,” Lavinia sighed. “Walter, you may go with her; but I only want to see either of you sitting on the benches like the proper children you are.”

While the two children scampered away, another couple came walking towards them.

“So this is the girl who finally stole our little brother’s heart,” Eduardo called out with a chuckle, as he strode over to join his siblings, his wife on his arm. Although his hair was a lighter shade of brown than the other two men, he was also tall and still obviously a Lightyear.

“It just takes the right girl to bewitch a man, right Eddie, dear?” the young woman giggled, grasping her husband’s arm more tightly, “and rein in his rakish ways.”

“As my charming wife has given away, I’m Ed,” he also held out his hand in greeting. “And this is Caro.”

“The petite and vivacious blonde pulled her in for an unexpected hug. “Your dress is just stunning - isn’t it Vinnie?”

“It’s quite a bold choice in color,” her sister-in-law replied drily.

“Oh, Vinnie, you’re too hung up on what’s usual,” Caroline laughed lightly. “Don’t mind her,” she leaned closer to Jessie, “she’s a good sort, just not very creative. But I like it immensely.”

“Thank you,” Jessie replied, still a little uneasy with all the attention and compliments she’d been receiving as a bride. “I know white’s more common, but we all decided our weddin’ clothes should be somethin’ we could wear again.”

“No, it was smart of you,” Caroline gave her a genuine smile. “My wedding dress is sitting in a trunk, useless. I must ask, wherever did you get it? It looks like the work of a dressmaker, not a department store.”

“My friend Barbie - she and her husband have a dress shop in Los Angeles. She’s here somewhere - I’ll introduce you to her later.”

Emelda walked up behind Jessie and rested a hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but the food is ready, and the brides and grooms get to fill their plates first.”

Buzz and Jessie excused themselves and met Woody and Bo at the repast, and the four piled their dishes with all their favorites, as well as the beef that had been barbecued to perfection.
As the guests were scattered about the benches, chairs, and porch steps enjoying their meals, Estrellita and Emelda disappeared inside the Pride house, only to emerge a few moments later carrying two large baskets. They both walked over to where the newlyweds were seated, at a table that had been set aside just for them.

“We have a surprise, mijos,” Estrellita grinned proudly, as she lowered the basket she held so Buzz could peek inside. He lifted its hinged lid and smiled as broadly as his mother when he saw what it contained.

“Cascarones! When did you have time to make all these?”

“The day you first brought Jessie home to meet us, your Mamá said, ‘Start saving eggshells, Emelda, we are going to have a wedding,’” his aunt laughed. “We’ve been working on them ever since.”

“Eggs?” Jessie leaned over to take a look for herself, and saw dozens of brightly colored shells.

“Sí, it’s a game of sorts,” Estrellita explained. “There are tiny bits of tinsel and colored paper inside - like confetti. The purpose is to sneak around and break them over each other’s heads. We’ll get it going once the dancing starts.”

“I’m gonna get you good,” Jessie goaded her brother from across the table, “just you wait!”

“Not if I get you first,” Woody retorted with a smirk.

Buzz raised his hands to silence the competitive siblings. “Now hold on a minute, there are rules to this. You don’t smash them on each other with force. You crack them with your hands above the head, and let the confetti fall out. And no throwing, either.”

Woody slumped in his seat. “Well, that’s no fun.”

Estrellita made her way over to Woody’s side of the table. “Ay, but it is. It’s all about strategy,” she winked at Jessie. “The fun is in the challenge. Now, would you like to cut your cakes? Then you’ll be free to enjoy the rest of the night.”

Woody, Bo, Buzz and Jessie made their way to the dessert table, where the two wedding cakes - homemade by Emelda, yet very elegantly decorated with real white roses and orange blossoms - sat waiting. Each bride made the formal first cut, so that the rest could be sliced and either served there or placed into small white favor boxes tied with ribbon, for those guests who preferred to take it with them.

“Pardon, y’all,” Slink approached the table. “But did you still want a group photo? The sun will be setting soon.”

“Yes, we do,” answered Buzz. “Thanks for remembering, Slink.”

Everyone was ushered around to the front yard, where they stood with the two houses in the background. Slink backed up far enough to get the entire gathering in the frame, then took two photos for good measure. The crowd dispersed while the two couples posed for photos on the steps of their houses, then returned to join the reception in the backyard, the girls removing their veils so that they could better take part in the dancing.

Héctor had pulled up a chair beside one of the lantern posts, and was getting comfortably situated with his guitar. Estrellita and Emelda made the rounds with the baskets of cascarones, explaining to those who were unfamiliar with them how the game would be played once the dancing was underway.
Dusk was falling, and the multicolored lanterns had been lit, creating a cheerful setting. The cascarone baskets had been set to the side, and when Hector played the first chords of music, couples started to file onto the grassy floor.

Starting with a quadrille that everyone could join in on, partners held their eggshells lightly in their hands, cautious not to crush them while they waited for an opportunity to catch an acquaintance unaware. Emelda held her grandson Berto as she watched the merriment unfold, so that Tano and Josefa were free to participate in the much-loved family tradition.

Jessie didn’t waste any time in crushing her first cascarone over her brother’s head, as they passed each other in formation. She giggled as the sparkly confetti clung to the brilliantine in his hair, and shone against the black of his suit coat.

“Oh, very funny!” Woody yelled out to her, once he realized what had been done. “Just you wait.”

After the quadrille came a waltz, and couples worked in tandem to hit their intended targets. Eduardo and Caroline swept past Buzz and Jessie, drawing close enough to bedeck his brother in spangles. While Jessie was distracted, giggling at her husband, Woody had a chance to get his revenge on her. As she sputtered in frustration of him getting the upper hand, Buzz couldn’t help but admire the rainbow of flecks in her hair.

“What?” she groaned, half-exasperated, half-amused.

“Do you know how cute you look, all covered in confetti?”

“That ain’t the point!” she scrunched up her nose. “That varmint of a brother’a mine…”

“You got him first,” Buzz grinned. “But we’ll get him again.”

This continued throughout the next several dances, as family and friends, husbands and wives, all took turns in surprising each other with a glittery shower. Tío Héctor alternated between a selection of lively Californio songs and more common tunes known to everyone, and was relieved by a musically-inclined family friend every now and then so that he could dance with his wife as well. Jessie and Woody’s competition carried on as long as the cascarones held out, with the latter wearing just a bit more evidence at the end of the game than his sister.

Ready for a break from the dancing, the two couples stepped away from the lantern-lit area, and headed toward the refreshment table. After taking cups of punch, Woody turned to his wife. “Buzz and I better go talk to Slink about a few last minute things, for while we’re on the honeymoon. We’ll be right back.”

Glancing around, Jessie and Bo spotted Barbie, Bonnie, and Dolly sitting on a bench nearby. Refilling their punch, they strolled over to join their friends. The five Barstow Harvey Girls - both former and present - were happy to be reunited.

“How long has it been since we were all in one place? Too long!” Barbie exclaimed, as the two brides sat on a bench perpendicular to where the other girls were sitting.


“Dolly!” gasped Bonnie. “Be nice. Besides, Barbie’s the most successful of all of us now.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Barbie modestly replied. “I’d say Bo and Jessie have done quite nicely for themselves here.”
"I’m just so glad you all could come to the weddin’!” Jessie enthused. “I’m surprised Mr. K gave you the time off,” she said to the younger two girls.

“I think Mrs. K pretty much made him,” Bonnie giggled. “Said he owed it to you for the way he let you go.”

“So where’s your fiance, Dolly?” asked Bo. “You certainly could have brought him.”

“Antonio wanted to come, but he’s busy finishing up on our house and vineyard in Cucamonga, so everything’s ready when we get back from our own wedding in Chicago this summer.”

“Cucamonga - that’s close here, ain’t it?” Jessie inquired.

“Closer than Barstow, that’s for sure. We’ll be able to see each other more often.”

“What about you, Bonnie?” Bo interjected. “Will you be staying on in Barstow?”

“I think I’ll go home when my contract’s up,” she sighed. “It won’t be the same once Dolly leaves; and my family’s farm is doing much better now, so I can afford to go back.”

“Those plans might change, if Mason has anything to say about it,” Dolly smirked.

The three elder girls puzzled in unison. “Mason? Who’s Mason?”

“A railroader who’s awful sweet on Bonnie. They’ve been spending quite a bit of time together on her days off.”

Bonnie’s cheeks blushed crimson at Dolly’s explanation. “We’re just friends, that’s all.”

“Mmmhmm. Are you going to take a box of cake with you to put under your pillow? Bet you’d dream of him.”

Jessie took pity on Bonnie’s embarrassment, and changed the subject. “Have ya heard from Trixie, Dolly?”

“She’s written me a couple times. She’s still with the theater troupe; they alway seem to be traveling. And she’s still smitten with that actor.”

The conversation was halted by the men’s return from their conversation with Slink. “Hello, ladies, nice to see you all together again,” Woody greeted the group. “It brings back memories of some excellent meals. Now, may we steal our wives to dance with them some more?”

“Be our guests,” Barbie waved her hand gracefully, gesturing her permission.

“I think ya just wanna try to get me with more cascarones,” Jessie quipped at her brother, as Buzz took her hand. “Ya prob’ly stashed a couple somewhere.”

“No; but that’s a good idea for next time,” Woody added with a smirk.

Héctor began to play a soft melody, with his wife’s vocal accompaniment, and the two couples stepped beneath the lanterns to join the other dancers. Jessie relaxed into Buzz’s arms, and as they skipped across their grass in tune to the song, she listened pensively.

“I don’t think I ever heard this song before; it’s pretty. What is it?”

“La Mágica Mujer. It’s about an enchantress. Fitting, for you… my temptress,” he grinned.
Jessie rolled her eyes at his teasing, but couldn’t help returning the smile. “You’ve really gotta teach me some Spanish. What’s she sayin’?”

“A beautiful and magical woman… charmed me with only her look. Is she a vision? Or is she an angel without equal?” His tone became more serious as the song progressed, and his eyes didn’t leave his wife’s countenance. “With a burning kiss… she killed me with her coral lips. She gave all her love to me… in my arms reclined. Come to me… I want to give you a thousand and a thousand kisses… The one who loves you will always be yours.”

She stared up at him, returning his ardent expression. “So, even if I’m a temptress, you’re gonna love me for always?”

“Always, forever, infinity,” he looked back down at her with an unwavering gaze, “and beyond.”

The night was growing late, and the bridal couples were fighting off the weariness that comes with a full day of preparation and celebration. Jessie and Buzz decided to sit out the next song, and stood off to the side of the dancing area, nearest the grove’s trees. The smell of the orange blossoms was intoxicating on the night air, and he stood behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. They stood there in silence, watching their friends and relatives still enjoying themselves, and enjoying the peace of their own moment together.

Jessie noticed her new father- and mother-in-law waltz by beneath the lanterns, Estrellita finally having given herself permission to stop waiting on guests and join in the festivities.

“I can see where ya get it from,” she said thoughtfully, as she studied the elder Lightyears’ faces, lit with merriment and still bright with affection for each other after so many years of marriage. “I hope we have that someday, what your parents have.”

Buzz rested his chin on her shoulder, and deposited a kiss on her ear. “We already do, florecita.”

As the time crept well past midnight, the guests began to approach the quartet, to once again offer their best wishes on their marriages and to say their farewells. Barbie begged their forgiveness for not staying til the end, on account of feet that could no longer bear to be in her pointed slippers - but not until securing promises that they would visit her in the city as soon as possible. Dolly and Bonnie had an early train to catch back to Barstow in the morning. Lote was growing sleepy, as were Gertrude and Walter, so Buzz’s family decided it was time they take their leave as well, and retreat to the hacienda where the visiting relatives were staying for the night.

Estrellita tied on her hat, then pulled each of the four in for warm, congratulatory hugs. “I want you to promise me that you won’t touch a thing in your houses, besides what you need for your travels,” she addressed them all. “We will come back tomorrow, to take care of the dishes and gather our belongings. I’ve already told your foreman friend to expect us.” She singled out Jessie from the others, and cupped her daughter-in-law’s face in her hands. “Eres nuestra familia ahora, mija. You are our family now. Never forget that.” Estrellita stepped back, and with Buzz’s assistance raised herself into the seat of the carriage next to Zechariah. “Have a wonderful time on your honeymoon!”

The two newly-wedded couples stood together in their front yard as they watched the parade of carriages drive away. When the last of the lanterns faded from sight at the end of the lane, Bo turned to Woody with a saucy glint in her eye. “Well, what are you waiting for, Sheriff?” She took him by the hand, and lead him in the direction of their house.

“Night!” Jessie called out; but before she could make the same retreat with Buzz to their own home, she suddenly found herself swept off her feet and in her husband’s arms. “Hey!” she giggled, as he carried her effortlessly across the yard.
Bo pushed open her front door and reached for Woody’s collar, tugging him inside as the sound of Jessie’s giddy laughter floated across the breeze from the Lightyears’ front porch.

Both doors closed with the click of their locks.

Chapter End Notes

It is a common misconception that pregnant women never went out into public during the 19th century. Although pregnancy wasn’t flaunted, only the wealthiest of women could afford to confine themselves, and most went about their daily lives as much as possible. It was customary for the groom to pay for the bridal bouquet in the 19th century, hence the guys going to pick those up. Curling irons in the 1890s were most commonly heated by fire - either on a little portable stand, or with a attachment to the top of a lamp chimney that you could place the tip of the curling iron into. These tools were necessary as curled bangs were very much in style. Cosmetics were becoming more mainstream at this time - powder, rouge (for cheeks and lips), and cosmetique (which was used as mascara) were available in catalogs such as Montgomery Ward and Sears. Jessie’s red dress isn’t an abomination by Victorian standards - practically-minded women did marry in colored dresses that could be worn as their best dress thereafter, instead of spending a large amount of money on a white dress that could only be worn once. Cascarones - which are also a part of Mexican culture - were a part of celebrations in Californio culture as well. Many times the act of breaking the eggs over someone’s head was an act of flirtation, but it could be done to friends as well. Cucamonga was a center of Italian wineries and vineyards in Southern California during the late 19th- and early 20th-centuries. Wedding cake was often placed in little white favor boxes as described here, and could even be sent to those who couldn’t attend. It was a popular superstition for a girl to sleep with a box of wedding cake under her pillow, for it was said she would dream of her future husband. And the lyrics quoted by Buzz to “La Mágica Mujer” are a simple translation of the real words.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Well, you can blame the holidays for another late chapter! It's going to take a few months to get caught up, but we're not going to neglect the story. Just look for two or three chapters to be posted closer to the middle of the month, while we get back on track.

Be sure to visit our Pinterest board, "Jessie's Journey" under username yodelincowgirl. There are tons of pins this chapter to help illustrate the scenes!

Alas, Toy Story still doesn't belong to us. If it did, we'd have that new Toy Story 4 trailer already, and some merchandise with Jessie on it! Enjoy, and please subscribe/bookmark to stay updated on the next chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Buzz nudged open the heavy wood door of their house, and carried his wife across the threshold. Once they were inside the entry hall, he set Jessie down on her feet, then took a moment to close and lock the door behind them.

Finally alone, he turned to face his new bride, and cupped her face in his hands tenderly. “Welcome home, Mrs. Lightyear.” He drew her close in a fervent kiss, one that had been building up all day. Jessie wrapped her hands around his waist, bringing their bodies closer together, as the kiss grew in intensity.

She pulled away, but only to reach for his hands; and she stepped backwards, guiding him across the hall and towards the bottom of the staircase. Buzz once again swept her up into his arms, and carried her up the flight of stairs and into their bedroom.

When they reached the side of the bed, he set her down to standing. Jessie took hold of his suit jacket and tugged him toward her, kissing him again. As her kisses began to trail along his jaw, he spoke heavily in her ear. “We really need to do something about all these clothes.”

“Jus’ rip em off,” she purred, with a heated breath in his ear.

“Mmmm, but we paid quite a bit for them,” he sighed. “Can’t do that.”

They separated reluctantly, and Buzz walked over to the chair in the corner by the fireplace. The full moon shone through the window next to their bed - the roller blind still open from earlier that day - providing the room with its only light. He removed his jacket and hung it on the back of the chair, sat to remove his shoes and silk socks, then stood and carefully unbuttoned his waistcoat, before laying it on the cushion. Jessie unpinned the now-wilting sprigs of orange blossoms that had been arranged in her hair and placed them on the dresser, then proceeded with her clothing. He turned to see her struggling with the long row of buttons trailing down the back of her bodice.

“Here, let me.”

She stepped back to the bedside, and Buzz’s fingers slowly began to loosen the constraints of his
wife’s clothing, taking his time and savoring the moment.

Jessie grew impatient. “Hurry up, will ya?”

Buzz just smirked, as he unfastened the last two loops, and guided Jessie’s red bodice down over her bare shoulders. He held it for her as she stepped out of the skirt, then draped both pieces across the chair where his vest and suit coat lay. When he returned to face her, his breath caught in his throat. Jessie stood in her white, lacy underpinnings, her red hair and the exposed fair skin of her arms seeming to glow in the moonlight that was streaming through their bedroom window.

He lunged toward her, a desperation in his eyes, only for his hand to be pushed away when he reached out to her. Jessie grinned wickedly.

“Not so fast. Lemme unfasten your shirt and tie. Best let me return the favor.

Jessie sauntered behind Buzz, her hand trailing enticingly across his chest as she did so. Now she took her own sweet time unfastening his buttons, one by one.

“You almost done? There weren’t that many.”

Leaving the top button fastened, she stepped back in front of him, and he immediately went to pull her in for a kiss. As their lips were about to touch, she spoke softly. “Still have to take off your tie, ya know.” She fiddled with the knot, once again teasingly taking her time. “Seems to be stuck.”

Buzz impulsively reached up himself and tugged the offending knot loose with force.

Jessie pulled the tie away, letting that article of clothing drop to the floor, then reached behind his neck to unfasten the top button of his shirt. She grasped the shirttails, taking hold of the knit undershirt beneath it, too, and pulled them up and over his head - until she was met with resistance.

“Ow, ow! Buttons!”

Jessie let go, and Buzz reached beneath his dress shirt and unfastened enough undershirt buttons to allow him to finish the job his wife had started. He quickly yanked both articles of clothing over his head, and tossed them toward the chair behind him, while Jessie babbled apologetically.

“Are ya ok? I’m so sorry, I forgot! I -”

Buzz silenced her fretting with a passionate kiss, and proceeded to reach behind her, loosened the waistband of her petticoat, and let it fall away. He then - much more quickly than the bodice - unbuttoned the front of her corset cover, and pushed it away from her shoulders, as she unfastened the button fly of his trousers. Her hands reached behind and slid beneath the waistband, across his buttocks, and he let out a gasp.

“I - I really should put those with the rest of my suit,” he whispered with regret. Buzz hurriedly pulled off his dress pants and long underwear in one fell swoop, threw them carelessly towards the chair where the rest of his garments had been discarded. He turned to once again catch sight of his new wife - wearing only a white, lacy combination with red ribbon trim beneath a scarlet corset; matching red stockings with white embroidery; and red, high buttoned boots - standing there saucily, with her hand on her hip.

“Damn, Jessie,” he exhaled, all propriety cast aside.

She grinned in triumph for a moment - and at the irresistible sight of her completely disrobed husband, his muscular form finally exposed to her view - but was distracted by the very thing
intended to get his attention. She wiggled a foot and lifted it to fiddle with her boot buttons. “I gotta get these off. Blast these things, they seemed like a good idea at the time… “

“Oh they are… you can leave them on…”

She sat on the edge of the bed. “They’re really pinchin’ me, though, been on my feet too much today.” She raised a leg and pointed her toe in Buzz’s direction. “Please? It’s a pain to bend down to unbutton ‘em in this corset, it’s laced tighter’n usual. Unless you want the corset to go…”

“The corset stays,” Buzz answered quickly, his eyes still fixed on his wife. He sighed at yet another delay, but realized he could make the most of the situation. He knelt at her feet, resting back on his heels, and lifted one of Jessie’s feet onto his thigh. He unfastened her boot buttons one by one, then slid the shoe off her foot and set it on the floor. As he began the process with the second boot, Jessie reached to remove her stocking, until Buzz stopped her with a hand on hers.

“No. Let me do that,” he almost pleaded.

As soon as the second boot had been taken off and set aside, Buzz turned his attention to the stockings. Raising up on his knees, he let his hands slide sensually up Jessie’s leg, and just beneath the hem of her drawers, until he felt the garter holding them up beneath his fingertips. Jessie gasped at the sensation of her husband’s touch and twisted her fingers into the bed sheets. He took hold of the garter and the edge of her stocking, and as he rolled it downward, slowly and deliberately, he planted soft kisses on the bare, alabaster skin he was revealing, first on one leg, then the other.

He tossed the second stocking to the side and rose to his knees. Jessie took his face in her hands, drawing him into a hungry kiss. Her arms wrapped around his neck and he slid his arm behind her back, pulling her up against him. He stood just enough to move them fully onto the mattress; once there, nothing else existed but the immediateness of each other.

The pre-dawn light filled the bedroom and fell upon the sleeping newlyweds. Jessie was curled against Buzz, her head and right hand resting on his chest. His chin was propped on the top of her head and his right arm curled around her shoulders. The chattering of birds broke into Jessie’s sleep and her brows dipped at the interruption. Her eyes fluttered open and she smiled softly, seeing Buzz’s left hand encasing hers, the wedding band glinting in the soft light. The bedsheets were draped over them at their waists, the only covering for either of them, and Jessie found she could not remember when they’d finally fallen asleep. She let her eyelids close as she snuggled against her husband, but the moment was short lived as the alarm clock sounded its shrill alarm.

Jessie groaned in protest as Buzz released her to silence the alarm. He turned back towards her and caressed her cheek, “Morning, florecita.”

“Mornin’; d’we have to be up already?”

He laughed softly, “Much as I hate to say it, yes.” He kissed her forehead and then her lips. “Come on, our honeymoon awaits.”

Outside, the rising sun cast a faint rosy glow across the ranch as Buzz stepped onto his front porch, dressed to travel, with baggage in hand. He breathed in the crisp air before striding over to Woody, who was hitching Bullseye to their four-seater surrey.

“Morning.” Buzz placed his and Jessie’s valises in the rear of the vehicle.

Woody gave Bullseye a pat, and looked up to greet his new brother-in-law. “Hey.”
“Sleep well?” Buzz smirked.

“Sleep at all?” Woody countered with a teasing grin. Buzz’s face flushed at the thought of his wife’s brother being privy to their private matters, and he chuckled nervously, looking down at his shoes.

Woody’s long legs carried him to his front porch and back in only a few steps, his and Bo’s luggage now in hand. He walked to the back of the carriage where Buzz still stood, and placed his own bags inside, then rested an elbow against the side of the wooden vehicle and looked Buzz in the eye, as if to ask a very serious question.

“Can you tell me, why do women wear so many confounded layers?”

“Got me,” Buzz commiserated. “But I have a newfound resentment towards buttons.”

Meanwhile, Jessie and Bo were in the Pride kitchen, assembling a basket of provisions for their honeymoon travels.

Bo didn’t look up from the bread she was slicing, but smiled as she spoke.

“So… was the red as well received as you hoped?”

Jessie blushed. “Let’s just say I’m glad we’re takin’ the train, and not ridin’ horses.” She immediately regretted the candor of what she had just said, and her eyes widened.

“Jessie!” Bo gasped, then burst into laughter at her sister-in-law’s mortified expression. “It’s alright, I know what you mean,” she winked. “Woody asked me yesterday where my something blue was, so I told him he’d find out later. My new corset and chemise also made quite an impression.”

“Ohhhkay,” Jessie started laughing, too. “I don’t need any details. He is my brother.”

“Fair enough,” replied Bo. “One thing, though - Woody had the most ridiculous-looking nightshirt on, poor dear. Never thought much about men’s bed clothes, but it looked like a dress! Did Buzz wear one, too?”

“No…”

“Well, what did he sleep in?”

“Not a whole lot of anythin’,” Jessie smirked.

Bo cleared her throat. “Alright then.”

Jessie turned to her sister-in-law. “Is it everythin’ you hoped for? Bein’ married?”

“Absolutely,” Bo replied without hesitation. “Couldn’t be happier. How about you?”

A joyful grin brightened Jessie’s features. “Even better.”

The two couples arrived at the Redlands Santa Fe depot well in time to catch the 8:20 train to Los Angeles. Slink had followed them on horseback, so that he could take their surrey back to the ranch, and bade them goodbye with plans to meet them upon their arrival home Sunday evening.

The Lightyears and Prides boarded the coach car and settled into seats facing each other for their hour and a half ride to Los Angeles. From there, they would catch the 10:15 train to Santa Monica,
where they would be spending their honeymoon. As the engine chugged out of the depot, they eased into conversation.

“I hope Slink makes it home before Mamá and Dad show up,” Buzz remarked with a chuckle. “It’ll be nice to come home to all the wedding things cleaned up, though. I bet we’ll find our pantry stocked, too.”

Jessie rested her hand on her husband’s arm. “I’ve been wantin’ to ask… why did your brothers introduce themselves as Alex and Ed yesterday? I thought they had Spanish names, like you.”

“They do,” Buzz sighed. “Alejandro and Eduardo - they Americanized them once they moved to Los Angeles permanently. I know Mamá’s always been a little hurt by it.”

“I can see how different they are from ya, though. And your sisters-in-law.”

“Alejo has always been the staunch one; he feels the weight of carrying on the family business, I suppose. Lavinia hasn’t helped any - she’s not a bad person, just a little too concerned with appearances.”

“Well, your other brother sure is the opposite!”

“Lalo was quite the man-about-town before he met Caroline. Rode the coattails of Dad’s and Alejo’s successes and lived it up in the city. He’s starting to settle down now, though, thanks to her. They’ve only been married a couple years.”

“She seemed real nice.”

“She is. But they’re all so wrapped up in society life, there’s not much time for anything else, including family.”

Jessie shook her head. “I do feel bad for the kids. Your other sister-in-law reminded me a bit too much of Momma the way she kept ‘em in line.”

“You should try and call them Gertie or Walt sometime, and see Lavinia’s reaction,” Buzz laughed.

“So, tell us about this cottage we’re staying at,” Bo broke into the couple’s conversation. “All Woody told me was that your old officer friend lent it to you - and what to pack, of course.”

“Well, we’re lucky to have it. Apparently a couple years ago, the Southern Pacific built tracks along the beach, and most of the other cottage owners tore theirs down. Nesbitt decided to hold on to his, though, since it was one of the nicer ones, and see if his family could get a few more years’ use out of it.”

“Blasted Southern Pacific. Figures,” Jessie muttered, “clutterin’ up a pretty beach with railroad tracks.”

Buzz reached for his wife’s hand, and gave her a reassuring smile. “At least we’ll be right on the ocean. And it should be plenty private, if there aren’t many cottages left. He said the trains don’t come through enough to be that much of a nuisance.”

“Besides, Jessie and I are used to the sound of trains at all hours, aren’t we?” Bo winked.

“He didn’t ask much at all for us to rent it from him, either, not when I told him it was for our honeymoon.”
“That’s for sure,” Woody readily agreed with his brother-in-law. “Five dollars for three nights is a steal.”

The newlyweds made their connection in Los Angeles, and a little over an hour later the train pulled into the Santa Fe depot in Santa Monica, just south of the main part of town. The four disembarked and began their walk up Ocean Avenue toward the location of their accommodations.

Buzz and Woody carried the four valises; Jessie held securely onto the strap of Buzz’s camera case that hung from her shoulder; and the basket containing the food for their stay swung from Bo’s arm. Jessie’s white dress with red trim and sailor collar - which she had purchased specifically for their getaway - fluttered in the sea breezes that swept up from their left, and with her free hand she steadied her straw boater as she gazed out across the horizon.

“Lookit, Bo, it’s the ocean! Didja ever see anythin’ like it?”

Her friend joined her in staring out across the glimmering water as they strolled along, sporting her own blue-and-white nautical-inspired dress for the occasion. “Not even close.”

After a four-block walk, they reached the foot of Arizona Avenue, where Buzz had been told they’d find stairs leading down from the bluffs to the shoreline below.

“Nesbitt called these the ‘99 steps’ in his letter. Said the cottage is whitewashed, and will be just about twenty yards to the right at the bottom.”

“We have to go up and down these stairs to get everywhere?” Woody asked, a little dismayed, as they began their descent down the towering, wood-frame staircase.

“Looks that way.”

The railroad tracks traveled beneath the stairs, and hugged the edge of the palisades that rose as an imposing cliff behind the shoreline. When the two couples reached the bottom, they quickly spotted their rental cottage, as it was one of just a few holdout stragglers dotting the sandy expanse.

They trudged across the sand, luggage in hand, and as they drew closer, they could make out the finer details of where they’d be spending their honeymoon. It was a simple wood-frame structure, raised on low piers in case of high tide, with a porch overlooking the ocean. Two doors led from the porch into two separate living quarters, each with windows facing the beach and the sides of the building. Buzz handed Jessie her own valise so he could fumble in his coat pocket for the keys he’d been sent with instructions for use of the vacation home, and once each of the doors had been unlocked, each pair retreated into their respective lodgings.

The interior was as sparse as the exterior, perhaps even more so. Each side featured unfinished wood plank flooring and plain whitewashed walls, with thin muslin curtains on the windows. A small wood-burning stove sat next to the exterior wall, and the only furnishings were a pair of chairs, a small table, a double bed with a nightstand and oil lamp, and a washstand.

Jessie dropped her bag on the floor with a thud, as Buzz set his down on the bare mattress. “This is nicer?” she exclaimed, more in dismay than disappointment. “I’d hate to see what the bad ones looked like. I see why we had to bring our own sheets and towels.”

“Oh boy,” Buzz took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. “I knew it would be rustic… but not this rustic. I can talk to Woody; since it’s off-season, we might be able to find a room in a hotel for a reasonable price.”

“Nah, if they’re okay with it, I am, too,” Jessie smiled, as she wrapped her arms around Buzz’s
waist. “We’re together, and right by the ocean, what more do we need?”

He returned the embrace and leaned down to kiss her lightly on the lips. “Lunch. I’m starving.”

They met Woody and Bo back outside on the porch, and Buzz looked to his friend with a concerned expression. “Are you two okay with staying here?”

“I don’t have a problem with it. It’s no worse than some of the places we stayed at on our marshal cases,” Woody shrugged.

“It’ll be like camping,” concurred Bo. “And I think it’ll be fun.”

Captivated by her view, Jessie stared out at the waves that were breaking gently against the sand only a few yards from where they were standing, then turned to the others. “Before we head into town… Bo, wanna go wadin’ real quick?”

“Sure… do you mind?” she asked the men, and both expressed their approval.

Jessie pushed open the door to her own side of the cottage, and the two girls made quick work of slipping out of their boots and stockings. They stepped gingerly down from the porch into the cool, soft sand. Both glanced down at their feet, then at each other. With a burst of giggles the two hoisted their skirts up and took off running towards the ocean.

They stood on the wet sand, and squealed as the cold saltwater swept over their feet, then withdrew with the tide.

“It feels like we’re movin’ with the water!” Jessie gasped, as she lifted her skirts a little higher so that she could see her feet sinking into the sand.

The two girls stood like that for several minutes, both enjoying the sensation of the ebb and flow and surveying the shimmering expanse that lay before them. When they decided they’d had their fill of wading for the time being, they turned to see Buzz standing behind them on dry land, his Kodak in hand, and a wide grin on his face.

“You’re gonna be doin’ this the whole time, aren’t ya?” teased Jessie.

“You got it for me,” Buzz laughed.

After the sand had been brushed from the girls’ feet, and they were dressed again in their stockings and boots, Buzz returned his camera to the safety of the cabin, and the four set out to explore the main business district of Santa Monica. As they stood at the base of the imposing staircase they had descended earlier, Woody looked up and let out a groan.

“I have a feeling these are gonna get real old, real fast.”

Jessie shoved her brother playfully on the arm as she passed him and headed up the stairs. “If Bo’n I can do this in skirts, you can handle it.”

Their stroll down Ocean Avenue, between Arizona and Oregon Avenues, was a quiet one. On their right was Linda Vista Park, a long, narrow expanse overlooking the palisades out toward the ocean; and to the left was an orderly row of residences and boarding houses. When they neared the intersection of Utah Avenue, businesses began to populate the street fronts. The first they noticed were the Neptune Garden and the Pacific Garden restaurants.

“Those both look promising,” commented Buzz. “Although Nesbitt did say we have to get fish
dinners at the Pavilion. I was thinking maybe we could do that tonight; he said it was near the Hotel Arcadia.”

“That’ll be fine with - what is THAT!?” Jessie pointed at a structure that towered over them.

Buzz followed her finger. “That must be the Observation Wheel. I remember reading that it was built last year.”

“I’ll bet you can see for miles from the top! Let’s go,” she grabbed his hand and barrelled forward to reach the ferris wheel.

“What about lunch? Jessie!” Woody called out, as his sister and brother-in-law took off at a quickened pace. Once he and Bo caught up with them at the base of the structure, he held back. “That looks like a death trap. What’s stopping it from tumbling off the cliff and into the ocean?”

Jessie rolled her eyes, “Fine, stay on the ground, but we’re goin’.”

Bo slipped her arm through Woody’s. “Come on, Sheriff. I’ll protect you.”

His face relaxed into a smile and he and Bo stepped up, paid their fee, and waited for the four-passenger car behind the one Jessie and Buzz were in. “If we’re going to see for miles, we don’t want your head in the way,” Woody called up when he saw Buzz’s curious glance. They took their seats once their car lowered into boarding position, and Woody tensed a bit as the wheel began its slow revolution, but Bo rested her hand on his with a comforting squeeze.

Jessie bounced slightly in her seat as the car she shared with Buzz rounded to the apex of the wheel. “Would ya look at that!” she gazed out at the ocean water that glistened in the sunlight, then took notice of a long, dark line extending out into the sea, further up the coast. “What’s that, out there?”

“The Long Wharf. They’re hoping to make Santa Monica the main port for Los Angeles. Trains go out there to pick up cargo from ships; that’s part of why the tracks were laid on the beach.”

“Ohhh. Well, it sure is pretty out here.”

“It is. This whole area used to be a rancho that belonged to Mamá’s relatives, and I remember visiting them before there was any town at all. But they sold it when I was little.”

“That’s too bad. Wish I coulda seen how things were before,” she gazed thoughtfully out into the distance, imagining the landscape free of the modern streets and structures. “Must’a been somethin’.”

The wheel returned to the ground, and Buzz held the door open for Jessie, then took her hand as she exited onto the platform. “How’d you hold up, cowboy?” he teased, as Woody and Bo climbed out of their car after them.

“I survived. And it looks like the next couple streets over have a lot of shops. Let’s go find something to eat there.”

A short walk led them to the New York Lunch and Ice Cream Parlors in the Bryson Block, on the corner of Utah Avenue and Second Street. Fortified by a filling meal of sandwiches and ice cream, they took their time wandering the paved sidewalks of the small city, browsing the curio shops and other businesses that existed to cater to the local and tourist trade alike.

“Lookit!” Jessie exclaimed, as they passed a storefront labeled Fowler Cycle Co. “They rent bicycles! Can we try that one day?”
“I don’t see why not,” answered Buzz.

Satisfied that they’d visited enough of the city’s shops for the day, and having determined where the Pavilion restaurant was for dinner, the honeymooners decided to go back to their cottage to settle in and freshen up. When they were ready to head back out, they opted to bypass the 99 steps and instead traverse the sandy shore to the restaurant. It was an easy stroll across the beachfront and boardwalk, and in fifteen minutes they had reached their destination.

It was hard to miss the Pavilion Restaurant. It was a whitewashed wood-frame building that sat at the top a walkway and stairs leading from the beach. A large sign across the roof’s ridgepole proclaimed its name, and lettering on the shingles advertised John Wieland’s lager beer for five cents. Woody held the door open as the others walked through, where they were greeted cordially and led to a table.

The room in which they were seated featured a wall of windows overlooking the ocean, and the four enjoyed a view of the sunset along with the fish dinners the establishment was renowned for. When the men had finished their five-cent beers, and the check was settled, they all headed back out into the moonlit night.

Both couples strolled arm in arm along the boardwalk that led from the base of the Pavilion’s steps out to the open sand. Without the summer crowds, the setting was serene, and they walked in silence until Jessie spoke.

“That must be the beach house our waiter told us about,” she pointed out, as they passed an impressive two-story structure with twin towers, halfway back to their cottage.

“North Beach, yeah, that’s the one where they’re installing a new heater in the plunge,” Buzz answered after a quick glance. “Too bad it’s not open for swimming - but we could see what else they have inside.”

“We can keep that in mind for another day,” Jessie smiled up at her husband.

Back at the cabin, the two couples bade their goodnights and retreated to their rooms. Inside their own accommodations, Jessie had slipped into her nightgown and eyed the front window as Buzz stood draping his suit carefully over one of the chairs, wearing only his long underwear that he intended to sleep in. “D’ya think it’s gonna get really cold tonight?”

“Probably not more than it already is. Why?”

“I was jus’ thinkin’ it might be nice to leave the front window open, t’ hear the waves.”

Buzz nodded, “I think that would be nice.”

The two curled up in the bed, their breathing mingling with the sound of the breakers crashing onto the shore. Not long after, Jessie became aware of another sound, moving in a conflicting rhythm. Her brows dipped and then arched as she realized what she was hearing. She lifted her head and met Buzz’s eyes, his face wearing the same expression.

He broke into a chuckle, “On the other hand, maybe we should keep the window closed.” He slid out of bed and crept across the floor in his bare feet, then latched the window shut and hurried back to climb between the sheets.

“Prob’ly for the best,” she grinned, as she snuggled against her husband, her fingers tracing the unbuttoned placket of his undershirt. “We don’t want ‘em hearin’ us, either.”
The morning sun was rising, but the two newlywed couples slept soundly in their primitive lodgings. No alarm clocks had been brought along on their travels; they had no schedule for their time in Santa Monica other than to follow their whims each day. They were so cozy in their slumber that they didn’t hear a distant rumble in the distance, that grew ever closer and louder, until it was right upon them.

Jessie’s eyes shot open, her heart racing until she realized the sound she heard and vibrations she felt were only a Southern Pacific train headed to the long wharf.

Buzz grumbled at the rude awakening, and released his hold on Jessie to roll over and consult his pocket watch, which he’d left on the small table next to the bed.

“What time is it?” she asked groggily.

“A little past seven. Don’t know if there’s any point in trying to go back to sleep; I’m wide awake now.”

“Are we gonna have that blasted train go by every mornin’?”

“It’s freight, so the timetables won’t tell us anything. We’ll see tomorrow.” Buzz sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, then walked over to where he had left his suit the night before. He slipped his trousers on over his long underwear, snapping the still-attached suspenders over his shoulders. “Want to go sit on the porch, florecita?”

Jessie wrapped herself in her red dressing gown, then followed her husband outside. The lack of other beachgoers - the few remaining cottages dotting the shore being vacant - gave the couple complete isolation. They sat together on the edge of the porch, Buzz’s arm around Jessie’s waist and her head on his shoulder, letting their still-bare feet brush the sand. All that could be heard was the soothing motions of the waves; but after only a few moments, their interlude was interrupted by a click of a latch behind them.

Woody peeked out his door, having heard the adjoining one open. “Guess we’re all up,” he laughed. “Mind if we join you?”

Bo brewed coffee over the small wood-stove in their room, in the small pot they’d brought with them, and all four carried chairs out onto the porch to share a simple breakfast together.

Buzz peered up at Woody, over the rim of his tin mug. “So, did you have the window open last night?”

“Yeah,” he replied. “Why do you ask?”

A smirk spread across Buzz’s lips, and Jessie fought back a snicker. “Just wondered.”

Bo sipped her coffee, “What are our plans for today?”

“Well, there’s the park; and Jessie wanted to rent cycles,” Buzz said.

“There’s also Arch Rock,” suggested Bo. “It would be nice to see some of the natural sights outside of the city.”

“I wanna go swimmin’ at some point,” Jessie chimed in. “Bo’n I got the cutest bathin’ suits, just wait’ll you see ‘em.”

“Why don’t we go for a swim this morning, then?” Woody offered. “And we can rent a carriage in
the afternoon and ride out to Arch Rock.”

“Sounds perfect.” Bo set her cup down on the porch next to her chair. “I’ll go see what the water feels like.” She walked the several yards to the water line and lifted her dressing gown and the hem of her nightgown underneath to dip her toes into the surf. She yanked them back almost instantly with a startled cry.

“Bit cold?” Buzz called down with no small degree of mirth.

“Just a bit!” she called back just as merrily as she walked up the sand to the cabin. “Colder than it was yesterday, it seems - or else Jessie and I were just too excited to care yesterday. Maybe we should switch our plans, and try swimming in the afternoon.”

“I don’t know that it’ll be that much warmer…” Buzz mused. “Ow!”

Jessie had jabbed her finger into his arm, “We bought the suits, an’ we’re usin’ ‘em!”

Woody jumped in to try and keep the peace. “There are other public bath houses in town, besides the one that’s closed,” he suggested.

“I didn’t come here to swim with a bunch’a strangers indoors. We’re here at the ocean, and I’m gettin’ in it, cold or not,” Jessie set her chin, and both men knew the battle was lost.

Buzz held up his hands in surrender with a chuckle, “Yes, ma’am! I really wouldn’t want to pass up the opportunity, either. Let’s go find Arch Rock; we passed a livery in town yesterday. We’ll swim later today.”

After a carriage had been secured from the Union Livery on Second Street, it was only a half-hour drive out to the well-known natural landmark, five miles away - an arched rock formation that was large enough for carriages to pass beneath. True to form, Buzz had brought his camera; and after some self-conscious protests from his wife, he took some photos of her under its shelter.

The two couples didn’t linger very long at Arch Rock. With Buzz at the reins, they headed back by way of the Santa Monica Canyon - another natural site popular with tourists - as well as the Long Wharf, which was the ultimate destination of the freight train that had surprised them that morning. Once the rented carriage had been returned to the livery, the Lightyears and Prides disappeared in their cottage rooms to change for their anticipated swim.

Buzz smiled crookedly as Jessie donned her bathing dress. Its short red puffed sleeves were trimmed with navy blue, to match the wide collar at the neckline. The matching skirt that concealed the bloomers underneath barely reached her knees, and her exposed legs were covered with navy blue stockings. Buzz wore short knit trousers, fitted and reaching to his knees, as well as a sleeveless top in the same material. The ensemble was well-suited to his athletic build.

Jessie’s smile mirrored Buzz’s, “Maybe you can wear that around the house sometime.”

“Only if you promise to do the same.”

They stepped out onto the porch, and when Woody joined them, Jessie let out a giggle. “What?” he furrowed his brow at his sister.

“You’re nothin’ but arms’n legs in that bathin’ suit!”

Bo appeared in the doorway and embraced him from behind, her hand running up his chest, “I like it.” She winked at Jessie, who was having trouble not displaying her unease. “Come on, Sheriff;
let’s go for that swim."

“Wait a minute, before our suits get wet…” Buzz disappeared into his room, then came back outside. “Go, stand near the water for me, all of you.”

“Buzz!” Jessie groaned. “I wanna get in, not pose for pictures!”

“Just a quick one.”

Jessie, Bo, and Woody walked a few steps away, and stood, Woody in the middle, one arm around his wife’s waist, the other around his sister’s shoulder. As Buzz sized up the image, a well-dressed couple came strolling down the beach and stopped to speak to him when they noticed what he was doing.

“Would you like to be in that photograph, too, sir?” the gentleman asked. “I have one of those Kodaks myself; I know what to do.”

Buzz handed him the camera. “Thank you, I’d appreciate it.” He walked to where the trio was standing and began to pose them on the wet sand. “Woody, you get on that end with Bo on your right. Jessie, you stand here. No, Woody, keep your arm around Bo’s waist. It’ll look nicer than around her shoulder. That should work, if I just stand here,” he took his place to Jessie’s right, draping his left arm over her shoulders, and looked down to examine his handiwork. He frowned slightly. “Woody, you need to take a half-step baa-AWHOAA!” Buzz flung his right arm out as he stumbled backwards. He’d been too preoccupied with getting everything just right that he didn’t notice a wave had come in until it took out the sand from beneath his heel. He righted himself quickly, although he had grabbed Bo’s right shoulder in doing so. Jessie was the first one to break into giddy laughter, falling slightly against Bo as she did. The rest, including Buzz, were quick to join in, and at that moment the gentleman took their picture.

He handed the camera back to Buzz after they had composed themselves for another photo, “I think I captured you all laughing. I hope so, anyway. Enjoy your swim!”

Buzz thanked the man and bid him farewell, returned the camera to the cabin, and jogged back to the shore to join the others. All four inhaled sharply when the cold water touched their feet, then their calves, as they walked into the ocean.

“I’m not going in any further than this!” Woody cringed. “It’s freezing!”

Although Buzz was no more comfortable than his brother-in-law, he offered more experience with the Pacific. “It won’t be so bad once we’re in… just so long as we stay in.”

Within a few minutes, they had become accustomed to the cold water, and were starting to enjoy the sensation of being submerged. They stood waist-deep in the saltwater, rising and falling as the gentle waves brushed against them. With a playful grin, Woody swept his hand across the surface of the water, flinging droplets on his sister.

“Watch it!” she called back, returning the splash with a giggle. The siblings carried on with their splashing game for several minutes, until Woody screamed out in panic.

“My ankle! Something’s got me!” he cried, as he kicked frantically in the water, his long limbs flailing wildly as he tried to shake off the mysterious attacker. While he wasn’t paying attention to his surroundings, a wave came up behind him and knocked him off balance. As he fell, his legs few upward and Buzz caught sight of the offender.

“It’s just seaweed, cowboy,” he chuckled, as he easily unwrapped the greenish-brown matter from
Woody’s ankle.

“You could’ve warned me about these things,” Woody muttered, as he raised to standing.

Buzz’s laughter grew more hearty at the sight of his friend, his soaked swimsuit sticking to his lanky frame, and his formerly impeccably-styled hair plastered to his head. “I haven’t been in the ocean in years; I honestly wasn’t thinking about it.”

Bo crept closer to her dejected husband, and kissed him on the cheek. “You were quite a sight, honey,” she couldn’t help but snicker.

“Ugh, tarnation!” Jessie groaned from behind her own husband. “I was tryin’ not to get my hair too wet, since we hafta go to dinner soon.” Her close proximity during Woody’s frantic kicking and ultimate tumble had soaked her completely. Her bangs, having lost their curl, were stuck to her forehead, and her red bathing suit clung to every curve of her figure.

Buzz was suddenly very glad for the depth and temperature of the water. He cleared his throat, “Yes, well… maybe we should get back to the cabin to get dried off.” He took Jessie’s hand without waiting for her reply and hurried them both back into the cabin, leaving Woody and Bo in his wake.

The pair emerged from their room some time later, dried off, dressed, and still with a hint of flush to their cheeks. Buzz adjusted the strap of the carrying case for the camera on his shoulder as Jessie knocked gently on the door to Woody and Bo’s half of the cottage.

Bo opened the door, already dressed for their outing, “Woody’s just trying to fix his hair. Where are we off to first?”

“Buzz wants to go up to Linda Vista Park while there’s still light, so he can take more pictures. After that, I think we should go check out that Pacific Garden place. It looked pretty interestin’ when we peeked in yesterday. There’s a restaurant in there, too, for dinner.”

“We’re not getting on that wheel again, are we?” Woody popped out behind his wife, as if the mention of food magically summoned him.

“It wasn’t that bad,” scoffed Jessie. “C’mon; an’ you might wanna stay away from the killer seaweed,” she grinned as her brother stuck his tongue out.

Linda Vista park was located along the top of the bluffs that lined the Santa Monica shore. The park was only a few years old, and Jessie decided she liked the scruffiness of it. There was a dirt path that wound along groupings of cypress and eucalyptus trees and benches dotted the path, some close to the edge of the bluff. Jessie and Bo posed on one of the benches for Buzz while Woody paced anxiously behind him.

“The Hotel Arcadia really is a grand looking building,” Bo nodded to the looming structure to their south.

“It does look fine, doesn’t it?” Jessie’s eyes followed the shape of the building to the pointed spire in the center of the roof.

Buzz snapped a picture, “We could still see if they have rooms available, if you girls want.”

Bo and Jessie both shook their heads. “I like our accommodations just fine,” Bo smiled. “Besides, we didn’t pack for a stay at a luxury hotel.”

“I’m happy where we are, too,” Jessie agreed emphatically. “I’d rather be sleepin’ right by the
ocean, than in some ‘xpensive room where ya can’t really enjoy it.”

“I’ll second that!” Woody clapped his sister on her shoulder. “Come on, let’s go check out the Pacific Garden. I think I saw a shooting gallery there, and I say a little sibling competition is in order. That is, if you’re not too scared,” he needled.

“You callin’ me a coward?” her green eyes glinted with a mixture of humor and challenge.

“My money’s on Jessie,” Buzz steered his wife in the direction of the business district. “Let’s go.”

It was only a brief walk down Ocean Avenue to the long rectangular building housing the Pacific Garden complex. The front windows were emblazoned with the words Pacific Cafe and a large sign hung over the entrance to the restaurant. Aside from the eatery, there was also a bandstand and the shooting gallery Woody had mentioned.

“Come on, cowboy. I’m ready to show you what’s what,” Jessie plowed ahead to the gallery, her chin set in anticipation.

The shooting gallery was a long, narrow pavilion. At one end was a counter where a row of .22-caliber rifles were resting, waiting for the next guests eager to prove their aim. At the other stood a metal structure with targets of varying sizes. Large shapes were spaced evenly along the bottom and top two corners. Smaller targets lined the center and moved from side to side. Also in the center was a rotating circle with animal shapes perched along the outside circumference.

Jessie and Woody took great pleasure as each edged the other in made shots - the targets sounding out with a satisfying ding each time they hit their mark - and the siblings ended up evenly matched. “Best two outta three?” Woody suggested.

“How about we all just take a turn this time?” countered Bo. “Then let’s go to the restaurant before the dinner crowd takes all of the good seats. I’d like to walk back through the park, if we can, before we head back.”

“That’s a good idea,” Buzz paid the fare for one more round. “Best shooter buys dinner!”

The sun was just dipping below the horizon when they returned to the cottages. Not ready for the day to end, the men collected driftwood from the beach, as well as twigs and brush back along the palisades - to preserve the small supply of wood in the cabin for the stoves - and built a fire on the sand, a safe enough distance from the cottage that there would be no danger from sparks. The air was still, and cool without being cold, and the two couples sat together on the sand, enjoying the peacefulness of their surroundings.

Jessie looked to her brother. “Can ya believe this is the first real vacation we’ve ever taken? At least I’m guessin’ ya never took one after ya left home.”

“When would I have had time?” Woody laughed. “Besides, the joyless way we were brought up, we weren’t accustomed to the idea.”

“Yeah, visitin’ Aunt Molly hardly qualified.” She then addressed Buzz, “how ‘bout you?”

“A vacation? No,” he chuckled. “I was always too focused on my work to take any time away, unless visits to family count. Woody and I had a few cases that brought us close to the sea, but it’s not like we had the time to enjoy it.”

“Ya woulda if we’d been there,” Jessie teased, resting her head on her husband’s shoulder.
“I’ve been on a vacation, you know,” Bo interjected, with a somewhat-proud smile. “It was back in the summer of ’92, a year before I became a Harvey Girl. I went to a Chautauqua.”

Woody leaned back, resting an arm behind his wife. “I’ve heard of those. Aren’t they some sort of educational resort?”

“Yes. I’d been teaching for ten years, and was starting to feel stifled in my small town. The Beatrice Chautauqua wasn’t too far over the border from Kansas in Nebraska, so I took some of my savings and went. You think our honeymoon cottage is rustic… I camped in a tent for ten days!”

Jessie sat up, her interest piqued. “Ya camped? All by yourself?”

“I did! It was lovely, and inspiring, and peaceful in its own way. I went to lectures, and concerts, and boating on the river. I ate my meals in the dining hall, and met some very nice people. And I got to hear Susan B. Anthony speak on woman suffrage! What an impression she made on me. I didn’t quite know how I could go back to my solitary life in Salemsborg after that. But I did, and the next summer, I met… well, you all know that story,” she let out an embarrassed laugh. “I thought he was the change I was looking for.” She turned to look up at Woody. “Turns out, it was you.”

“Salemsborg, is that where ya lived?” Jessie enquired, wanting to know more of her sister-in-law’s story. “Sounds like a Swedish name.”

“It is. A lot of Swedes settled there. I was actually born in Illinois, but my family and I left there when I was two years old. My mother had heard of these Swedish settlements being established in Kansas, and she desperately wanted to go. My father loved her just as desperately, so we loaded up our wagon and left. It was quite an adventure for my sister and me across the prairie. And my mother was expecting my little brother, but she didn’t let that stop her.”

“Wait a minute. You’n your family were pioneers? When would that’a been?”

“1868. I only have faint memories of our little sod house we spent that first winter in. My father built us a more traditional wood-frame home in the spring.”

“All these years we’ve been friends, an’ I didn’t even know you’d lived the kinda life Woody’n I read about as kids! You were holdin’ out on me Bo Peepe - er, Pride!”

“It never really came up,” she shrugged. “It was just my childhood, and a happy one at that.”

Woody grinned with admiration. “You never cease to amaze me, little lady. What else are you going to surprise me with?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Speaking of surprises,” Buzz leaned in, his lips against Jessie’s ear, “you didn’t bring that red corset, did you? I wouldn’t mind repeating that.”

A smirk tugged at her own lips, and she responded with a soft yet sultry tone. “If I told ya, it wouldn’t be a surprise, now, would it?”

Woody coughed, having heard the exchange. “There are some things you don’t need to share, you know.”

“Oh, please,” Jessie waved her hand dismissively at her brother, “it ain’t like you two don’t have the same idea. Least we learned to keep our windows closed tonight.”
Woody’s eyes widened as the realization hit him. “Wait… so that’s why you asked that this morning?” he gaped at Buzz.

Buzz grinned wickedly and put an arm around his wife’s waist. “Have a nice night, cowboy,” then they turned and disappeared into the cottage.

The rumble of a freight train and the rattling of windows woke the sleeping honeymooners with a start for the second day in a row. More prepared than they had been before, but still irreversibly awakened, the two couples rose, dressed, and met on the porch for breakfast.

Woody leaned back in his chair and crossed his ankle over his knee. “Well, we have a lot of time to kill today, too, since we’re up so early. Where to first?”

“I reckon we shouldn’t try swimmin’ again,” Jessie laughed. “Least not this vacation.”

“Did you want to rent bicycles today?” suggested Buzz.

His wife’s face lit up, and she turned to her brother and sister-in-law. “Yeah! Y’all game, too?”

“I’m up for the challenge,” Woody answered.

“So am I,” agreed Bo. “Although I don’t have the slightest clue how to ride.”

“I learned at the Athletic Club; there were cycles available for members’ use. It’s not that difficult. I’ll show you what to do. And we can always just rent a pair of them, and take turns.”

The girls both opted for the simple shirtwaists and skirts they’d brought along, instead of their seaside dresses, and once everyone was dressed and ready for the day’s outings, they made their daily trek up the 99 steps. From Ocean Avenue, the four turned onto Utah Street and walked the block to Second, where the Fowler Cycle Company shop was located right past the corner. They entered and made their way to the counter, where they were greeted by a welcoming clerk.

Buzz took the lead. “We’d like to rent some cycles, please.”

“Certainly. They rent for 25 cents an hour. How many would you like?”

“Just one men’s and one ladies’.”

“Are you interested in lessons at all?”

“No, thank you. Just the two cycles will suffice.”

After their rental bicycles were brought around by the clerk, Buzz and Jessie pushed them the short block’s walk to Linda Vista Park. “This should be a nice, quiet place to learn,” he remarked, once they were standing on the park’s dirt walkway, next to a vacant bench in a secluded area. “No carriage traffic to worry about, and not many pedestrians, either. Who wants to go first?”

“Why don’t you and Jessie take the first ride?” Woody offered. “It was her idea, anyway.”

“You’re just chicken,” she grinned mischievously at her brother.

“No, I just don’t want you breathing down my neck for your turn,” he retorted with a smirk.

Buzz slipped his camera strap off his shoulder and set the device on the bench. He then removed his suit jacket, and draped it over the camera case. “Watch these for me, will you Woody?”
Better dressed for the athletic activity, he held onto the handlebars of the ladies’ bike and instructed Jessie how to position herself on the seat and keep her balance. After a few passes of him running alongside her for security, he finally let go and she made her first wobbly, tentative pedals on her own.

“I’m doin’ it! Buzz, look!”

He beamed as his wife gained confidence with each turn of the wheels. Flinging his leg over the seat of his own rental, he quickly caught up with her as she sped down the path.

Once Buzz and Jessie had ridden out of sight, Woody gestured toward the bench where Buzz had left his belongings. “Shall we?” They took a seat and made themselves comfortable. “This is a nice place, huh?” he asked, his arm resting around Bo’s waist.

Bo nestled against her husband as they sat together under the canopy of green. “It is, and I’m very glad you and Buzz insisted on a honeymoon. But I’m glad we’re going home tomorrow; I’m ready for our real life to begin.”

Woody looked at her, a slight crease in the middle of his forehead, “It might not always be easy. But I promise you, Bo, I’m going to do everything I can to provide for you.”

She pressed her fingers against his mouth, “I’m not concerned. I’ll be making butter and cheese for all of us, so I can always make more to sell; and we’ll have the eggs, too. Don’t you worry, Sheriff, we’ll get by.”

“As long as you have faith in me, little lady,” he took her hand and kissed her fingertips, “I won’t give it another thought.” He leaned in, finding her lips ready for his.

A short while later, Buzz and Jessie came ambling back down the path, walking between the bicycles. “Admit it!” Jessie crowed, “I beat ya!”

“You only won because you took up so much room on the path that I couldn’t pass you!”

“Well, all’s fair in love and war,” she grinned.

He laughed, “But not in bicycle races!” They came into sight of the bench and stopped short at the scene.

Woody and Bo were quite oblivious to the pair’s return. Bo must have been wearing light rouge on her lips, Jessie noticed; there were the faintest of lip prints on Woody’s face.

“A-HEM,” Buzz coughed, enjoying the effect as Woody and Bo jumped and separated with a laugh.

“You two want to try these out, or should Jessie and I take another turn?”

“Oh hush,” Woody rose, offering his hand to Bo. “We had to do something while we waited for you.”

“C’mon cowboy, I’ll get you started, and Jessie can help Bo.”

Buzz and Woody were stationed close to the bench for a quick lesson, and Jessie held the bike for Bo a little ways off to allow for wobble room. Buzz glanced up and quickly reached for his camera to capture the moment between the girls. Jessie was bent over the bike, holding the handlebars to help steady her sister-in-law. Bo, for her part, was perched on the seat, her skirts raised just high enough that the lacy edge of her drawers peeked out from under the fabric.
That detail did not go unnoticed by Woody, who teetered and lost his balance enough that he had to extend both legs to the ground. Buzz called out, mirth ringing in his voice, “Bo, I don’t know what you did to this man, but I’m not sure he’s in any state to ride this thing!”

She giggled as she rode forward the few feet, “Well, he better get in one, or I’m leaving him behind! Come on, Sheriff!”

“Lead the way, ma’am,” he called out, pushing off to catch up with her.

Jessie walked up to Buzz’s side, and he draped his arm across her shoulders as they watched the pair pedal away. He leaned down and murmured, “Should we follow their example?”

Jessie cast a coy smile up at her husband, encircling her arm around his waist as they turned towards the bench.

Before two hours had passed, both couples were able to take another turn on the bicycles, and found their enjoyment increasing with their skill. When the time came to return to the shop, they walked the cycles back over to Fowler’s, where Buzz and Woody handled the bill while Jessie and Bo wandered around the showroom, browsing the shop’s wares.

“That was a lot of fun. I wouldn’t mind gettin’ wheels of our own.” Jessie reached for the tag hanging from the handlebar of the nearest bicycle, and cast a grimace at her friend. “Guess that won’t be any time soon, though. Tarnation!”

Bo glanced at the price herself, and raised an eyebrow. “Why don’t we go look at that rack of clothing, instead? I think I see sweaters like the ones I knitted for us.”

The girls flipped through a selection of athletic apparel - the sweaters Bo had pointed out, as well as puffy woolen bloomers and matching jackets. “I can see how they’d be easier to ride in,” Jessie remarked, scrutinizing the full-legged pants with gathered ankles, “but they look a little silly. What’s this?” She lifted what appeared to be a skirt off of the rack, and held it up.

A clerk overheard her query and approached them with a cordial smile. “That’s a divided skirt. It’s very convenient for cycling, and more suitable to wear for errands in town than bloomers. Some adventurous ladies even use them for horseback riding.”

Jessie’s eyes lit up, and she grinned at her sister-in-law. “That’s perfect! I’m gettin’ one.” The clerk helped her locate a navy blue version of the style in her size, and the girls followed her to the counter to complete the purchase.

Buzz smirked at his wife as she stepped up next to where he and Woody were settling their rental bill. “Dare I ask what you found?”

Her face lit up at the excitement of her discovery. “A skirt I can use for ridin’ around the ranch! Don’t worry, I’ll use my spendin’ money I gave ya to hold onto this mornin’. Can I have it?”

“Like I could tell you no anyway,” he laughed as he pulled out his wallet.

Jessie arranged with the cashier to pick up her skirt when they came back for dinner at nearby Neptune Gardens later in the day, then turned to the others. “Shall we go do some more explorin’?”

Their travels took them further down Ocean Avenue to the Hotel Arcadia - a location they’d admired from afar, but hadn’t yet taken the time to explore. It was more imposing up close, a building of obvious refinement situated on the bluffs overlooking the Pacific. The spire Jessie had noticed earlier she now realized was an observation tower, as she could see the figures of hotel guests moving about
inside. The street side of the hotel was landscaped with rose bushes, stately palms, and other tropical plants; and the wide paths normally filled with patrons were only sparsely populated since it was the off-season. As the Lightyears and Prides meandered through the grounds, Jessie couldn’t help but feel the eyes of the finely-dressed hotel patrons upon her, especially the elegantly dressed women. She unconsciously smoothed her skirts and leaned closer to Bo, “I feel a bit underdressed.”

Bo smiled sympathetically, “I know what you mean. But you know what? I don’t believe they’re any happier than we are, in spite of their finery.” She linked her arm through her new sister’s, “All the money in the world wouldn’t make our little getaway any more enjoyable.”

There was a long set of stairs on the northern side of the building that led to the boardwalk and beach below - the same ones they had used two days prior to go to and from the Pavilion Restaurant. The two couples descended to the walkway that lined the oceanfront side of the Arcadia, taking in the view of the ocean and old abandoned pier as they did. They found that the boardwalk was dotted with a wide variety of entertainments, including a photography studio.

“Lookit!” Jessie grabbed the attention of the other three. “C’mon, let’s get a picture all together.”

The inside of the studio was simple; the photographer welcomed the four and guided them to a recessed area with a backdrop that was painted to look like a beach. “You said you’re on your honeymoon, yes?” the man asked and they responded affirmatively. “I know just how to pose you. Why don’t you remove your hats so your faces are more visible?” Woody and Buzz were directed to stools that were just slightly elevated behind the ones on which the girls were seated. Bo leaned just slightly against Woody, her left arm resting along his leg so her wedding ring was visible. The photographer then had Buzz bring his arms around Jessie’s shoulders, and her hands up so that he was holding them. He stepped back behind the camera, making adjustments to its focus. “Yes, this will be very nice. Hold still, everyone!”

The picture taken, the four retrieved their hats, and were instructed to come back in a few hours. “The varnish on the tintype will be dry by then. And you’ll get four copies of the picture.”

“Four!” Jessie looked at Buzz happily, “We can give one to your parents. Won’t your Mama love that!”

“I’ll have the fourth copy sent back home,” Woody said, as straightened his signature brown Stetson on his head.

His sister scoffed, “What, so Momma can throw darts at it?”

“I’ll send it to Pa; he’ll make sure she doesn’t destroy it.”

Bo giggled, eliciting confused expressions from the Pride siblings, who missed what she found so humorous. “Don’t you see? If you send that to her, decorum will require that she places it in the parlor.” She sighed as she continued to receive blank stares. “The parlor… where people will see it when they come to call. Imagine how she’ll stew when people compliment her family!”

Woody and Jessie shared a revelatory look and grins slowly spread over their faces. Jessie nodded enthusiastically. “Send it. But we better make sure it’s in a frame she’d like, so she doesn’t have any excuse!”

The four left the studio, and Buzz gestured towards the old pier that still jutted out into the ocean, just a few yards off of the Arcadia grounds. “I saw something back this way I wanted to check out.” Only a few steps away from the covered walkway, and across from the pier, was a long structure set up for bowling. They peered inside, where the wooden floor was polished to a high shine and there
were dividers to separate the multiple lanes of play.

“Bowling!” Woody eyed the rack of bowling balls off to the side. “I’ve always wanted to try this.”

The cacophony of the game took some getting used to, and Woody sent more than one ball into the gutter; but so did the others, so there was no teasing remark made. There was plenty of laughter as they each felt awkward learning the unfamiliar motions, but they eventually found themselves adapting to the swing and release of the heavy ball and aiming more successfully at the pins.

They finished the set and headed back out into the sunshine. Bo’s cheeks were pink from laughter, “I never knew how satisfying it could be to knock things over with a ball.”

“I wouldn’t mind trying it at home. Think we can get the chickens to hold still?” Woody grinned.

Buzz chuckled, “It’s worth a shot.” He pulled his watch from his vest pocket to check the time. “We still have about a half hour before we can get the tintypes. Why don’t we explore the rest of the boardwalk?”

As they approached the farthest end of the walk, they could see a large tent and hear the sound of music. Under the canopy was a steam-powered carousel, and Jessie instantly noticed the horses that bounced back and forth as the base rotated.

“A merry-go-round!” Bo exclaimed. “Let’s do that to pass the time while we wait for our photos.”

“There aren’t any other adults on it, though,” observed Woody warily.

“Oh, who cares about that?” Jessie dismissed his hesitation. “Let’s go!”

The men paid the nickel fares, and as the carousel slowed to a stop, and the previous patrons disembarked the ride, the honeymooners made their way onto its circular wooden platform. The horses were arranged in pairs, and they chose two sets that were adjacent to each other.

Woody placed his hands on Bo’s waist, and gave her a boost up onto the vibrantly-painted saddle; she smiled down on him flirtatiously as she situated herself sidesaddle and took hold of the reins. Meanwhile, Jessie had hoisted herself effortlessly astride her own colorful wooden pony, and the men took their places next to their wives.

The merry-go-round lurched forward into motion, and Woody grasped his horse’s neck tightly as it rocked with increasing momentum. Bo caught sight of her husband’s panicked expression and grip and giggled. “Didn’t you know they jumped, honey? Weren’t you paying attention?”

He let out a nervous laugh as he loosened his hold and righted himself. “Guess I missed that detail. I’m okay, now.”

The music from the carousel’s barrel organ was lively and cheerful, and the two couples enjoyed every moment as the ride moved along. After several minutes had passed, it slowed to a stop, and Woody helped Bo down from her horse. Jessie looked to Buzz - more playfully than in any real need of assistance - and with a crooked smile Buzz placed his hands on her waist and lifted her down as well.

It was finally time to head back to the photography studio to pick up their tintypes, which were packaged nicely in little white mats embellished with red borders and stamped with the photographer’s information on the back. Woody handed two to Buzz, and tucked his two in his coat pocket. “Let’s go get your skirt, Jess; I’m ready for dinner.”
The Prides and Lightyears climbed the boardwalk stairs by the Arcadia, and headed back down Ocean Avenue. They returned to the bicycle shop for Jessie’s previous purchase, and then walked around the corner to Neptune Gardens, which was right across the street from the Pacific Gardens, where they’d eaten the night before.

“They sure got a lotta ‘gardens’ ‘round here,” Jessie remarked, as they entered the establishment. The smell of food mingled with that of new construction and fresh paint, the restaurant having only recently reopened after a fire several months prior.

When they finished their dinner, and stepped out into the evening, the sun had set; and the city’s modern electric streetlights illuminated their way as they strolled toward the 99 steps and their cabin.

“You want to build another fire tonight?” Woody asked, when they neared the turnoff for their stairs.

“Sure. might as well,” answered Jessie. “But I think I’d like to go for a walk on the beach, since it’s our last night here’n all. You get it goin’, we’ll sit with ya when we get back.”

Buzz and Jessie dropped off her parcel in their cottage room, and while Woody gathered kindling and started the fire on the sand in the same place as the night before, the Lightyears headed out for their stroll, hand in hand. The further they traveled away from the glow of the Arcadia behind them in the distance, the quieter the night became. They were completely alone; the only sound was the gentle crashing of the rolling surf, and the only light was that of the brilliant moon and stars reflecting off the sea. Jessie leaned her head against Buzz’s shoulder with a small sigh.

“Tired?”

“A little, but not too bad. Just takin’ it all in. I’ve really enjoyed bein’ here.”

“You don’t like it too much, do you?” Buzz chuckled. “I kind of already bought into the last place that struck your fancy.”

“Nah. It’s nice to visit, but I can’t wait to get home. Even if I don’t know what in tarnation to do around the house,” she let out a soft laugh. “You sure you’re ready for my amateur housekeepin’?”

“I’m new at this, too, you know. We’ll figure it all out together.”

“How did you’n Woody manage all this time you’ve been livin’ at his place?”

“Mamá’s been over a lot, keeping us fed and in clean clothes, while we’ve been busy getting the property ready. And then whatever you and Bo did to help on your days off, of course. Bachelor life is not one of many comforts.”

“Well, I don’t reckon I’ll do much better, least not at first.”

“If Woody’s cooking hasn’t done me in yet, I doubt yours’ll be the one to do it,” he laughed as his wife swatted his arm. “Don’t worry, florecita; we’re in this together, and we’ll handle everything the same way.”

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Buzz’s eyes blinked open and adjusted to the sunlight filtering through the thin cotton curtains on the cabin’s windows. Jessie’s head was nestled against his shoulder, and he kissed the forehead peeking through her wispy auburn bangs before reaching for his pocketwatch on the nightstand.
Sensing the movement, Jessie stirred, and extended an arm across his chest, snuggling down closer. “What time is it?”

“Half past nine. Must not be any trains to the wharf on Sundays - at least not early ones.”

“Thank goodness for Sundays!”

After savoring the chance to linger and wake up gradually, the couple slipped out of bed and dressed for the day, then began to gather their belongings to prepare for their trip home later that afternoon. When they heard stirrings on the front porch, they went out to join Woody and Bo.

“Y’all packed?” Jessie asked, as Bo carried out some mugs of coffee.

“Just about,” Woody answered, as he took a cup from his wife.

“What’cha wanna do today, before we go?”

Bo sat down on one of the chairs Woody had brought outside. “Well, our train’s not until two thirty; we have some time.”

Woody took a sip. “I’m only climbing those stairs once today, and I don’t think we should be hauling our bags around town.”

“What about the North Beach Bath House?” Buzz suggested. “It’s not far, and we haven’t been there yet. The plunge is closed, but there’s a restaurant inside owned by the same people as the Pavilion, and maybe some shops.”

It was a short walk from their cabin to the Bath House, which was the equivalent of three city blocks away. The large, painted wood-frame building rose tall above them on the boardwalk, with a wide porch framed in a colonnade of arches facing the ocean, and arched windows and two square towers on either corner of the upper floor. They climbed the short flight of stairs leading up to the veranda, and Buzz opened the door so that they could all enter.

Inside the spacious main room of the first-floor, inviting stands of souvenir merchandise sat on the perimeter, while two sweeping staircases led to the second floor. Although the left wing of the building - containing the large plunge pool and sky-lit dressing rooms - was closed for renovations, the right wing was still free to explore. The two couples peeked into a ladies’ parlor, an expansive ballroom, and a photograph gallery before returning to the souvenir stands to do some shopping.

Jessie was immediately drawn to a stand featuring ruby-red-and-clear glass, in every shape imaginable. Cups, vases, pitchers, candy dishes, toothpick holders, salt and pepper shakers, as well as other forms, all lined the shelves and sparkled under the electric lights that illuminated the building.

“Ain’t it pretty?” she asked Buzz, picking up a tumbler and turning it in her hands to admire the smooth, transparent red of the main surface and the clear cutwork pattern that made up its base.

The shopgirl behind the counter smiled warmly at the couple. “Are you visiting?” she asked.

“Yes, but we leave today,” Jessie replied, returning the friendly smile. “We’re on our honeymoon,” she added proudly, yet with a hint of blush.

“Oh! Congratulations!” the young woman exclaimed. “If you’d like to get a memento, all of these pieces can be etched for free, with anything you’d like.”
Jessie turned to Buzz, and he nodded his approval of the idea. The pair looked over the different options, and decided on a small vase, to hold fresh-cut roses from their garden. After instructing the clerk to engrave it Jessie & Buzz, Santa Monica, 1895, they stepped over to the booth where Woody and Bo were browsing.

Bo was in the process of choosing a souvenir of her own. Torn between which she wanted more, she was admiring both a china plate decorated with views of the city, and a silver spoon embossed with Santa Monica on the handle and an ocean scene on the bowl.

“Why don’tcha think about it while we eat lunch?” Jessie suggested. “You can get yours while we pick up ours.”

They ascended the staircase to Eckert & Hopf’s Restaurant on the second floor. The room overlooked the ocean, through the row of arched windows they’d noticed from the outside, and the quartet partook in just as delicious a meal as they had enjoyed at the same proprietors’ famous Pavilion three days prior. They talked and laughed over the events of their weekend away, and after settling their check, returned downstairs to conclude their shopping.

Bo was still undecided, and as both Woody and Jessie tried to help her make her selection, Buzz rested a hand on his wife’s lower back. “I’ll go pick up our vase. We should be getting back to the cottage soon.”

The Prides having chosen the porcelain plate, and the Lightyears with their ruby-flash glass vase in hand, the newlyweds headed back to the cabin to retrieve their bags and make their final trek up the 99 steps and down Ocean Avenue to the Santa Fe depot. Once they had boarded and taken their seats, Buzz reached inside his jacket and handed Jessie a piece of cardstock.

Jessie took the postcard, which like the one he’d given her a year prior, was inscribed with Te amo, Buzz. “For old times’ sake,” his eyes twinkled, as she looked at the signature and the print of the North Beach Bath House where it had been purchased. “We’ll come back sometime, when it’s warmer. But next time, we’ll stay in a hotel.”

The train ride back to Los Angeles, then on to Redlands to catch the 4:20 home, was a quieter one than their trip out. Buzz passed around little paper bags of peppermint curls and molasses taffy he’d bought at the same time as the postcard. Jessie and Bo made plans to share the dinner burden for the next several days, so that Jessie could get more accustomed to cooking, then the two couples retreated to their own musings as they watched the landscape flash past the car’s windows.

At the Redlands depot, Slink was waiting as promised, and he untied his horse from the rear of the surrey so that he could ride along and meet them back at the ranch. It was a weary but happy group of travelers who pulled up to the barn.

“Welp, guess I better figure out somethin’ for us to eat,” Jessie sighed, as Buzz helped her down from the surrey and handed her her valise.

“You can both come over, and eat with us,” offered Bo.

“Nah, I gotta start sooner or later; ‘sides, you’ll have your hands full enough helpin’ me cook dinner tomorrow,” she laughed.

Jessie and Bo walked up to their respective houses’ back doors while Buzz and Woody handled putting away the horse and carriage. No sooner had Jessie set down her luggage than she caught sight of a pot on the stove and a note tucked under the lid’s handle, scrawled in an elegant hand.
Mijos,
I hope you had an enjoyable honeymoon. I didn’t think you’d want to be bothered with cooking after your travels, so enjoy this pozole, and please share it with Woody and Bo.
Con amor,
Estrellita/Mamá

Jessie lifted the lid of the pot; a little bit of steam escaped as the delicious aroma reached her nose. Just then Buzz walked through the door himself, and chuckled when he noticed what his wife was up to. “Mamá’s been here, I see.”

“It’s still warm! She musta stopped by while Slink was waitin’ for us at the depot.”

Buzz opened the pantry door and found it stocked with jars of salsa and other fresh provisions, just as he had suspected. “She’s making good use of the key I gave her. We might not need any groceries for a few days. I wouldn’t be surprised if Woody and Bo’s pantry looks the same.”

“We’ll have to thank her proper. Now, let’s get this over to Woody and Bo’s before she starts makin’ somethin’ herself.”

“You disappointed you didn’t have to cook?” Buzz asked, with a glint in his eye, as he picked up the pot from the stove.

“You kiddin?” she shrugged and grinned. “Tomorrow’s good enough.”

Chapter End Notes

Men’s fancier dress shirts could fasten in the back, and have a more decorative front placket. We’ll assume here that Jessie helped him pick out his wedding attire, so she knows this shirt buttons differently than his normal ones. Combinations were an undergarment worn beneath a corset to protect both the skin from pinching, and the corset fabric from the oils from the skin. It was a combined sleeveless top and drawers, which were open for convenience, considering that women wore heavy layers of skirts and petticoats that would be difficult to remove when using the restroom. The Southern Pacific and Santa Fe railroads had a bitter and competitive rivalry in the late 1800s, so as former Harvey Girls and employees of the Santa Fe, it’s likely Jessie and Bo would harbor resentment toward their competitor. All of the places mentioned in Santa Monica are based on historical record. It was common for families to camp out in basic wooden structures or even tents at the beach - often the women and children would stay all week during the summer months in such structures, while the men continued to commute back and forth into the city. $5 is about the equivalent of $150 with modern inflation. Bicycles were all the rage in the 1890s, and they were very pricey - a “moderate” priced one at $40 is the equivalent of $1200 today. Women sometimes wore puffy bloomers to ride, so that their skirts wouldn’t get tangled in the wheels or chain. The merry-go-round as described is one that could be moved and set up in different locations - since the one mentioned in newspapers of the time was a steam carousel, and no photos show a permanent pavilion structure, we chose a model that could have been installed under a tent for the beachgoers. Lastly, the chautauqua mentioned in regards to Bo is also based on historical fact. Originating from the educational retreats held at Chautauqua, NY - which featured lectures, classes, concerts, and other enriching and wholesome activities - similar resorts of learning sprung up all over the country, from the late 1800s to the
early 1900s.
Chapter Notes

I'm sorry this chapter is a little later than planned! All the news coming out about Toy Story 4 has kept me very busy with my blog, which unfortunately has taken me away from my fanfic writing. Hopefully next month we can be more on schedule!

Don't forget to visit our Pinterest board - Jessie's journey under username yodelincowgirl - to see all the pins that relate to this chapter. There are more for this one than any other chapter so far!

Toy Story isn't ours. If it was, we'd have the freaking Toy Story 4 trailer already! What's up with that? Anyway, be sure to subscribe and bookmark so you don't miss any future updates. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The smell of chicken sizzling in the oven greeted Buzz and Woody at the back door of the Lightyear house, as they returned home from their errands in town, having picked up supplies for the ranch along with both couples’ mail.

Buzz entered first to find his wife standing at the stove, where Bo was guiding her through the steps of making potato croquettes. He kissed Jessie on the cheek. “What’s for dinner?”

“Roast chicken, and potatoes, and snap beans,” she beamed proudly. “An’ nothin’s gotten burnt yet!”

“She’s doing splendidly,” Bo praised her sister-in-law. “Between your mother’s help, and mine, Jessie will be ready to host her own fiestas soon.”

“Don’t get ahead of things,” chuckled Jessie. “I just wanna be able to keep Buzz’n me fed.”

Woody walked over to greet his own wife with a quick kiss. “I’ve got a package here for you, something from Sweden.”

Bo eagerly took the brown twine-wrapped parcel from her husband and scrutinized at the writing on it. “Oh, it’s from my uncle Lars! I wrote him back around Christmastime that we were getting married. I knew he wouldn’t be able to come, though. How sweet of him to send us a present!”

“We’ve also got a package from Ma, addressed to all of us,” Woody said cautiously, wary of his sister’s reaction.

“Can’t be anythin’ good,” Jessie muttered, without looking up from the frying pan she was tending. “Might as well open it and see.”

“Let’s not ruin our appetite,” he laughed. “We can open it after dinner. Speaking of, how much longer ‘til it’s ready?”

“Sooner’n later, if you make yourself useful and set the table, an’ let me finish cookin’,” she fussed at her brother.
“Yes ma’am,” Woody retorted good-naturedly. “C’mon, Buzz, show me where you keep your dishes; I’m starving.”

The piping hot food was carried into the dining room, and they all sat down to enjoy the feast Jessie had prepared with Bo’s help. The two had been collaborating on dinners since returning from the honeymoon, taking turns at each other’s houses, and Jessie was finally starting to feel confident enough to manage her own kitchen.

“I really love the dining room set you picked out,” Bo remarked, admiring the furniture that filled the room as the serving dishes were passed. The long, rectangular oak table, which was covered with a turkey red damask cloth, had six high-backed carved chairs arranged around it, and four more chairs along the wall waiting to be used when the table was extended for extra guests. A matching carved oak sideboard sat between the leaf-green-curtained windows. The walls were decorated in a golden-yellow wallpaper with green sprigs and stylized flowers with touches of red, an oak fireplace with a mirror above the mantle was in the corner, and a simple scrolled-brass chandelier with dainty glass globes cast electric illumination on the entire space.

Jessie took the plate of croquettes from her sister-in-law. “We’re so grateful to Estrellita and Zechariah for gettin’ it for us. We could’a never gotten one this nice, along with all the other furniture we had t’buy.”

“So did you put anything in those yet?” Woody asked, nodding toward the two elaborate pickle and condiment castors off to the side on the dining room table. Sitting on ornate silver bases with scrollwork handles, one held a ruby glass container for serving pickles, the other a variety of three different bottles for various salad dressings and sauces. Both pieces were embellished with painted white flowers and had matching silver lids.

“Not yet. I will, if someone shows me how to make pickles,” Jessie stared pointedly at Bo.

She scrunched up her nose in disgust. “That won’t be me, I can’t stand the things.”

Buzz shook his head. “I don’t know what my brothers were thinking in getting us those. Lavinia and Caroline definitely did the shopping.”

“Least they got us red ones,” Jessie chimed in. “They may be fancier’n than we’ll ever need, but they sure are pretty to look at.”

“Speaking of fancy, have you done anything with the globe Barbie gave you yet?” Bo asked, as she took a bite of chicken. “Leave it to her to give us something all the way from France,” she laughed. “I haven’t a clue how I want to arrange the little trinkets inside.”

“Didn’t she say someone gave her one as a weddin’ gift? Must’a been where she got the idea.” Jessie glanced at the glass globe de mariée that sat on the sideboard, resting on a scrolled and gilded base. A little red velvet pillow, on a golden platform surrounded by gilt flowers, was centered under the dome, and a small cardboard box of accessory pieces was next to it. “She gave us some sorta instructions with ‘em,” replied Jessie. “Weren’t the mirrors for how many kids ya want? How many’a those ya puttin’ in?” she smirked at her sister-in-law.

“Ha, ha, depends on how many she gave me,” Bo replied to the friendly teasing.

“You can have some’a mine, if ya need more,” Jessie giggled. “I’ve been dryin’ the orange blossoms I wore in my hair for the weddin’ for mine. An’ you can put pictures in ‘em too, she said. Buzz’ll keep us in plenty’a those,” she flashed a grin at her husband.
The meal concluded and was deemed a great success. Once the dinner dishes had been cleared and washed, the four gathered in the Lightyears’ parlor to open the packages that had arrived in the mail. With soft yellow-and-green sunflower-print wallpaper, and coordinating border along the ceiling with red accents, it was a cheerful space that reflected Jessie’s personality and echoed the colors of the adjoining dining room, that was visible through the open pocket doors. Red draperies hung at the windows, and a plush red sofa, armchair, and rocker provided comfortable seating near the corner fireplace that matched the one in the adjacent room. A green carpet covered the wood floor, and a small oak table held a lamp to supplement the delicate electric chandelier overhead. On the opposite side of the room, a combination bookcase and fold-down desk, with carved oak details and a glass-doored cabinet, held the couple’s small library of books and trinkets.

Jessie plopped down next to Buzz on the sofa. “Why don’t you open yours first?” she suggested, turning to Bo, who had taken a seat in the rocking chair. “We all know it’ll be better’n what Momma sent.”

Bo untied the twine and carefully tore into the paper that surrounded the object, to reveal a leather-bound journal. “It’s a notebook of some sort,” she puzzled, as she turned the first few pages. Her hand flew to her mouth once she realized what it contained. “It’s recipes,” she choked out, “family recipes, all written out in English for me.” As she flipped through page after page, memories came flooding back. “Knäckebröd, palt, ärtsoppa med fläsk, köttbullar, kåldolmar - all things I remember my mother making. Oh, this is wonderful.”

“I guess I know what’s for dinner tomorrow,” Woody grinned, as he leaned back into the armchair and crossed his ankle over his knee. “Will we be going into town for groceries after I tend to the cows in the morning?”

“Maybe,” she laughed through happy tears. “Dare we see what’s in yours?”

Jessie shook her head, and snuggled down closer next to Buzz for moral support. “I ain’t lookin’. You open it, Woody.”

“If I must,” he smirked. In ripping open the package, another book was revealed, but this time it was a store-bought publication. “Relations of the Sexes. Well, this should be interesting.” A piece of paper was peeking out between the pages, and he slid it out and unfolded it, then read the brief note to the others.

_Your father received the photograph you sent following both of your marriages (such an uncouth pose, which I expect was Jessamine’s idea), so I suppose congratulations are in order. Since you refuse to listen to my guidance, perhaps you will follow the advice of an expert on marital matters._

Bo rolled her eyes. "What was so uncouth about it?"

Jessie shrugged. "Me bein' in it, I s'pose."

“It must have pained her to acknowledge that the wedding actually happened,” Woody chuckled, as he refolded the paper and slipped it back inside the cover of the book. “Shall we see what this ‘expert guidance’ is?” He turned to the synopsis and began to read some of the subjects touched upon in the book. “Polygamy? Free Love? Prostitution? Who does she think we are? Uh, I don’t think I want to read this after all.”

Bo yanked it from his hand. “Oh, give it here, I’ll read it.” She turned to the page that he had been perusing. “Husbands and wives cannot read this book without obtaining higher ideas of the institution of marriage, and of the sacredness of their duties and obligations in it.” Well, that sounds promising,” she winked. Scanning the introductory chapter and finding nothing that entertaining, she
continued to the next one. “Chapter 2, Sexual Physiology. Pfft, too much about plants and insects; that’s no fun. Oh, wait a minute,” Bo giggled, and blushed slightly. “I don’t think I want to read about anatomy out loud. We all know what that looks like. Let’s skip ahead a bit.” She flipped through the book some more. “Well, since Woody doesn’t want to hear anything from the interesting chapters: Chapter 10, Chastity.”

“That sounds like what Momma would promote,” Jessie snickered.

“Here we go. ‘Much of the seemingly uncontrollable demands of a sexual nature upon men, both unmarried and married, are due to false modes of living, and habits of uncleanness about the organs of generation. Frequent and thorough bathing of all the parts in cold water, not only to remove, but to prevent the accumulation of irritating substances about the glands, will often not only cure these difficulties, but actually prevent them.’

“Well, the ocean was pretty cold, and it didn’t prevent anything,” Buzz said aside to his wife with a chuckle.

Bo raised an eyebrow at the overheard comment, and continued. “‘Then, again, a man’s habits in eating and drinking have much to do with this matter. The use of highly spiced, heating and stimulating foods and drinks, may be enumerated among the directest causes in exciting the sexual impulses. A plainer diet will often be found to remove troubles of this sort.’ Sounds like you’re in trouble there, Jessie,” she grinned at her sister-in-law. “Unless Estrellita has an ulterior motive with some of the recipes she’s been teaching you.”

Buzz laughed outright, “I’m not sure I’d put that past her.”

A few pages later and Bo started to laugh so hard, tears streamed from her eyes. “What? What??” Jessie leaned over. Bo handed her the book with a shake of her head and pointed to the culprit that had rendered her helpless.

“‘Fix it in your mind that a sensual idea is dangerous and harmful; then the instant one comes it will startle you. By an effort you change the subject immediately,’” Jessie read out loud.

“Can’t -” Bo giggled, “can’t you just picture this? Someone walking down the sidewalk and all of a sudden, OOOH!” she flinched, her eyes widening and her mouth forming a perfect “o” of surprise. She fell back into giggles as the men joined in the mirth.

“How are folks s’posed to take this stuff seriously?” Jessie asked, fighting through her own laughter on the subject. She continued to read through the chapter while her sister-in-law composed herself. “It is idle, over-fed people who suffer most from all animal excitements. Work hard, or by brisk walking and gymnastics give yourself two or three good sweats every day, and eat plain, nourishing, unstimulating food. Go without supper. Retire early and rise early. Drink freely of cold water both on rising and going to bed, and sleep in pure air.’ Well, the plain food explains a lot about Momma’s cookin’. But I dunno,” she elbowed her husband, “the exercisin’ does you no good. Must be the food’s fault, for causin’ ‘excitements,’” she winked.

“I’m okay now,” Bo panted, recovering from her fit of humor. “Hand it back over, I want to read more of this for myself. Oh no,” she started to snicker again, as she tried her best to read, “there’s more to this. ‘Write on a card a number of words, each suggesting a subject of interest or a familiar train of thought. When an impure notion obtrudes itself, the idea of danger which has been associated with it will arrest the attention; the card is taken out, and a glance at it will help to shift the switch at once.’ So now you’re startled,” hysteries seized her again, “and you whip out a card to change the subject?”
“Better I whip out a card than something else,” Woody quipped, without realizing what he was about to say. His face suddenly took on the same startled expression as Bo had affected a few moments earlier.

“WOODY!” Bo shrieked with laughter, “Oh, honey, no…”

“I mean… oh, heck,” he shook his head with a chuckle.

Buzz and Jessie collapsed into each other in a heap of hilarity, almost falling off of the sofa.

“Let’s find a different chapter, huh, Bo?” Woody managed to eke out once he had recovered himself.

Bo wiped her eyes, “I’m not sure it can get much better, but I’ll look. Chapter 11, Marital Abuses.” She turned the pages silently for several minutes.

“Did it get boring?” asked Jessie. “I’m missin’ the giggles.”

“No, this chapter has some sound advice, actually: not to take advantage of your wife on the wedding night, or after. Not that that concerns any of us,” she clarified, “but still good to express.” She read on a short while longer. “Well, I’m afraid I have some bad news for you boys.”

“What? Do we have to carry pictures of our abuelas in case the cards don’t work?” Buzz joked.

“It says that ‘if men were reasonable and just, both to themselves and to their wives, once a month should content them.’”

Woody smirked, “No one has once accused me of being either reasonable or just.”

Bo made a face at her husband. “Oh dear, it says we shouldn’t occupy the same bed, or even the same room, not if we want to ‘gather all the delicate aroma of mutual passion.’ And forget about undressing in front of each other.” She looked up, “Guess you better get to building me my own dressing room, Sheriff.” Her eyes scanned the page, “Oh for heaven’s sake, of all the ridiculous…”

“What now?” Jessie asked.

“It says, and I quote, ‘there should be the same outward show of decorum, one towards the other, that there was in their unmarried days.’ So even when you’re married, you should act as if you weren’t.”

Buzz grinned crookedly at his wife, thinking back to certain nights in the desert. “It’s not like there was that much decorum, so I might be all right with that.”

“Well, I ain’t,” she retorted, giving him a gentle poke in the ribs.

“Chapter 12 seems to have some good points, too. It’s on Marital Uses…” she skimmed the pages, “it’s saying women’s sole purpose in life shouldn’t just be bearing child after child, without choosing to do so, and wearing themselves down in the process… and that women should be allowed to decide when they want to become mothers.” After a pause to read more, she continued. “Wow. Chapter 13, The Limitation of Offspring… it’s not denouncing preventive measures, either. ‘This desirable knowledge is within the reach of nearly every married woman; and I have an unwavering hope and belief that the time will come when it may be published openly to the world, with the full knowledge that humanity will be better, rather than worse for it.’”

“There is no way Ma read that whole book,” Woody remarked with a chuckle. “If she knew it contained such enlightened notions, she’d never have sent it.”
Jessie saw that Bo had closed the volume. “Is that it?”

“No, but the last chapter is on parenthood, so we can look at that when it’s relevant,” her sister-in-law answered with a smile.

“Well, we’ll hafta send Momma a thank you note.” Jessie’s remark was met with surprised looks. “I haven’t laughed that hard in ages.”

Jessie rolled over in bed to find the other side vacant. Rubbing her eyes, she raised up on an elbow and struggled to see the time on the alarm clock in the dark bedroom. The sun hadn’t risen yet, and the clock read quarter past five.

She groggily sat up, pausing for a moment to let herself fully wake, then swung her feet around to hit the floor. Sliding on her slippers and dressing gown, Jessie shuffled out the bedroom door in search of her husband. The bathroom door was open, but no light was on; so she instead followed the faint glow radiating up the stairwell from the first floor.

She found Buzz in the kitchen, sitting at the table, with his citrus guides and publications strewn out in front of him, open to the pages referencing how to best pack an orange crop. Already dressed in a sturdy pair of trousers and a striped work shirt, he held a mug in his hand.

“There ya are! Whatcha doin’ up already?” she asked, as she reached to pour herself a cup of the coffee that he’d already brewed on the stove. “I thought we were gettin’ up at six. Sun won’t be up for at least another hour, and your family won’t be here til closer to seven.”

“I couldn’t sleep. I just want everything to go smoothly today,” he sighed.

Jessie sat down at the table, pulling the other chair close to him, and rested her hand on his. “It will. You’ve been studyin’ how to run this harvest for months, and you’ve gotten good advice from people from the Association. All the pickin’ is done; and goodness knows I’ve read enough about the sortin’ and packin’ to feel like I know what I’m doin’ today,” she laughed, trying to lighten her husband’s mood. He was the steady one of the pair, and she didn’t like seeing him so anxious.

“We’re in this together, remember? And Woody and Bo, and your family - they’ll all be here to help.”

“There’s just so much riding on this, you know?” he sat back in the chair and ran his fingers through his hair. “This crop has to produce our income for the year. Without a decent profit, we can’t expand the grove with more navels and valencias - and I don’t want us to be struggling, either.”

“The trees look so much better than they did when you bought the place; they were so scruffy and scraggly before. We’re gonna have plenty of good oranges to get us by, you’ll see.” She stood, and bent to kiss him on the top of the head. “Buck up, or you’ll get me worryin’ that you’ll tumble off a wagon today. Since you’ve got the stove all started, why don’t I make us a nice, big breakfast?”

The couple sat down to a fortifying meal of scrambled eggs, bacon, and griddle cakes in preparation for the day’s work ahead, and reviewed Buzz’s notes one last time on what each of them had to supervise and accomplish. Once the dishes were washed and put away, Jessie retreated up to the bedroom to change into a serviceable shirtwaist and skirt, then grabbed a blue-checked apron from the kitchen upon her return downstairs. She heard the faint rumble of wagon wheels at the end of the lane, and the opening of the front door as Buzz went to greet the arrivals.

The grove side of the ranch had been a bustle of activity over the past week. The oranges had to be picked in advance of packing day, so that they had time to cure, allowing excess moisture to leave...
the rind to prevent rot in transit. Tano had already been out to help once before; Buzz and his
cousin, along with Woody and Slink had spent a long, arduous day up and down ladders, carefully
snipping the fruits from the branches and hauling them loosely-packed in field boxes to the packing
shed. Jessie had helped wherever she could, bringing them supplies and provisions; and she assisted
Buzz as they checked on their stores of fruit during the curing process afterwards and prepared all the
supplies for packaging and transport. Tall stacks of 12-by-26-inch crates, with a middle divider, sat
ready and waiting to be filled - each of them embellished with a label reading Florecita del Desierto
Brand, Redlands, CA in a colorful graphic with a vibrant red rose.

This, however, was the day it had all been leading up to. The oranges being stored in the spacious
shed would be sorted and packed, and delivered to the Redlands Association of Orange Growers to
fulfill an order submitted by the Southern California Fruit Exchange. In the process they would see
how many of their oranges were of sufficient grade to be included in the order, and how many
showed bruising or other blemishes that had been revealed by the curing. If all went well, they would
also be paid for their crop.

Buzz stood out by the lane, directing the three wagons containing his parents, Tío Héctor and Tía
Emelda, and Tano and Josefa and the children, to pull around to the back of the property, near the
shed. He then walked around the side of the house to follow them, and Jessie exited through the
kitchen.

“Mija! Where do you want the food?” Estrellita called out as soon as she saw Jessie emerge.

“We’ll just put it in my kitchen, and we can set up the table outside later,” she answered, as she
walked over to help her mother-in-law with the dishes she had brought. Emelda and Josefa also
carried contributions - a wealth of provisions to feed both men and women who would be working
up an appetite all day long. “Thank you for all’a this.”

“You’re welcome, always. You and Bustillo have been too busy for you to be bothered with
feeding us today,” Estrellita smiled, as she set her basket down on the kitchen table, and ran her hand
across its weathered wooden surface. “I like seeing mi abuela’s table being put to such good use
again.” The table and chairs were the very ones that Jessie had admired at the Lightyear hacienda
months prior - the table with its green-painted legs and weathered finish, and the two chairs painted
red with flowers and natural woven-straw seats. Estrellita and Zechariah had brought them to the
house as a surprise in the weeks leading up the wedding.

“I’m tryin’ to take good care of em,” Jessie replied, as she admired the furniture’s colorful details.
“They might just be my favorite weddin’ present.”

“They have served the family well for generations; you can’t do them any harm, you can only give
them more stories to tell. Now,” she grabbed an apron from the basket in front of her and tied it
around her waist, “tell us where we are needed.”

Having heard the commotion, Woody and Bo joined the crowd gathering in the backyard, and Slink
strode over from his apartment above the barn. Everyone circled around Buzz and Jessie as they
gave out their instructions for the work at hand.

“All the crates of oranges in the shed need to be emptied and sorted, then packed more securely by
size and quality,” he began. “Jessie will supervise the sorting and packing - and Mamá, Tía, Josefa,
and Bo, you’ll help her with that. Meanwhile, the rest of us will be nailing the tops on the crates as
you fill them, and loading them into the wagons.”

As the crew of family and friends dispersed to their designated tasks, Bo grasped Jessie by the arm,
and held her back from the others. She spoke to her sister-in-law in a low whisper, her eyes darting
around to make sure no one was near enough to overhear. "I don't think I better be lifting any heavy crates."

Jessie’s brow furrowed. "Why not? Ya used to lift plenty’a heavy stuff at work."

Bo met her gaze with a pointed stare, and Jessie’s own eyes widened as realization hit her. "Bo! Are you - "

"Shhhhhhh! If Estrellita finds out... but yes, I’m pretty positive."

"Does Woody know?"

“No, and don’t you dare tell him! There’s enough going on that has to get done today, and the last thing I want to do is draw attention away from that when Buzz needs everyone’s help - especially Woody’s. I’ll tell him tomorrow."

Jessie bit her lip, every fiber of her being wanting to scream out and jump for joy. “I’m going to be an aunt!” she squeaked out.

“Yes, you are, now will you shush?” Bo giggled.

The two girls joined the others in the shed and immediately got to work. The men had begun carefully emptying the oranges from their field boxes into long bins for the women to work from. Next to these bins sat angled tables to hold the crates being filled, and stools to sit on as needed.

“What can I do?” Lote asked Josefa, feeding off the excitement that was in the air. “Can I help?”

“You can help by being a big girl and taking care of Berto for me,” her mother smiled, as she set the baby on a blanket nearby, where there were no tools or crates handy for him to pull down on himself. Lote slumped in disappointment, but obeyed.

While her female relatives got situated, Jessie walked around to each individually, giving them private lessons in grading. “The best ones are called ‘fancy,’“ she explained to Bo first, selecting one out of the pile to demonstrate. “See how it’s really bright, and smooth? Next step down is ‘choice,’” she pulled out another example, “an’ that should still have a good color and skin. Then ya grab one of these sheets of tissue here,” she reached for the stack of thin wrappers on the table, “and wrap it around and twist it, like so. Stick with the same size and quality in a crate, and pack ‘em secure, so they won’t bounce around on the wagons. If they’ve got any bad marks on ‘em, though, put em aside - we’ll keep those for ourselves; they’ll still taste good.” Once everyone was comfortable with the instructions, Jessie took her own post and began sorting and packing herself.

Before long, the team of packers had developed a rhythm, and the men kept watch and were ready to whisk away the boxes as soon as they were filled. Outside, they nailed on a lid and lifted the heavy crates onto the waiting wagons.

Jessie was intently focused on her task when she sensed eyes on her, and looked over to see Lote peering over the edge of her crate. “Can I help?” the little girl asked hopefully.

Josefa caught sight of her daughter at Jessie’s station. “Lote! Where is your hermano?!?”

"Over there" she gestured nonchalantly to the corner, where baby Berto was seated inside an empty crate, babbling away happily.

“Ay!” his mother gasped. “Take him out of there! He’ll get a splinter.”
The other women all laughed at the picture Berto made, his merry, chubby face peering over the edge of the box as Lote shuffled over to him and lifted him out.

“I don’t mind if you hafta stop, and take the kids out to play,” Jessie said to Josefa, who was making sure her son was unharmed by his unusual accomodations. “I appreciate all the help you’ve given us already.”

“I’m kind of enjoying it, actually,” Josefa admitted, “it’s so different from what I do everyday at home. But these children…”

Bo stood, and stepped over to where Josefa sat on her stool. “I can take him for a while, if you don’t want to stop. He and I are old friends, you know,” she reached out to gently pinch the baby’s cheek. Berto readily went into her arms, and Bo took him outside of the shed for some fresh air.

Jessie grinned as she caught glimpses of her sister-in-law through the window, walking back and forth, talking to the infant and cuddling him in her arms. She felt privileged to be the only one to share the secret knowledge that made Bo’s time with Berto that much more meaningful. ‘She’s practicin’, that’s what, and none of ‘em have the slightest inklin’,’ Jessie giggled to herself.

When the wagons were full, Buzz and his relatives delivered the first load to the Orange Growers Association for processing, while Woody and Slink stayed behind to help the women with the boxes. A second wagonload was ready to be loaded when they came back, and this time Woody and Slink joined the others in taking the crates into Redlands proper. Meanwhile, the women returned to the Lightyear house, to prepare the evening’s feast.

While she worked in the kitchen with the others, warming food and gathering plates and utensils for the meal at hand, Jessie was anxiously on alert for the men’s return. As soon as she heard the caravan pulling up near the barn, she raced out to see her husband.

“So?” she asked tentatively, as he climbed down from the wagon’s seat. “How’d we do?”

Buzz’s face broke out into a wide grin. “We made $2500. I wish it could have been a little bit more, but I’m satisfied. With what I still have saved from the city lots, we’ll be fine. And we can still plant the navels and valencias we planned.”

“Woohoooo!” she shouted, throwing her arms around her husband’s neck and kissing him soundly. When she pulled away, she rested her hand on his chest. “C’mon, dinner’s waitin’.”

Estrellita and Zechariah had brought one of their folding tables, which the women had set out behind Jessie and Buzz’s house and filled with food and dishes while the men were away. Kitchen chairs had also been carried out from both the Lightyear and Pride houses, and the rest of the group sat on the porch steps or the ground. It was a casual picnic of sorts - and one well earned by all the participants.

The sun was setting, and the meal had concluded, but everyone still sat chatting, not quite ready to bring the pleasant spring day to an end. Jessie and Buzz looked out over this gathering of those closest to them from their seat at the top of their porch stairs, his arm around her waist and her head on his shoulder. A sense of pride and accomplishment washed over him, and he kissed his wife softly on the top of her head. Jessie turned to look up at her husband with a smile.

“We did it, florecita,” Buzz grinned back, kissing her again, this time on the tip of her nose. “I didn’t know exactly how we’d pull it off, but we did. We might make this whole thing work after all.”

“I told ya we would,” her smile widened. “And next year, it’ll be even bigger.”
“Yeah,” he chuckled. “Guess we’ll have to bring in even more help. Speaking of, I better get the checkbook, and pay everyone for their time.”

“Don’t you dare,” Tano stopped Buzz as he stood, having overheard what he said. “I don’t expect anything, and I know Papí feels the same. We were happy to help you get started.”

Buzz’s brow dipped. “You sure? You helped with all that picking last week, too.”

“All I want is a crate of those oranges,” his cousin chuckled, slapping him on the back. “Help me grab some seconds and put them in the wagon.”

Jessie helped her female in-laws gather the serving dishes they had brought with them, while the men loaded crates of imperfect oranges in Buzz’s relatives’ wagons and hitched up their resting horses for the drive home. Both groups met by the barn, to say their goodnights.

“We’re so proud of you both,” Estrellita gushed, as first she, then Zechariah pulled both Jessie and Buzz in for hugs. “We never doubted you’d make a success of this, and you’ve proven us right.”

“And I expect you to keep us in oranges,” Héctor laughed, patting his nephew on the back affectionately.

“You got it,” Buzz grinned. “We can’t thank you enough - all of you.”

Emelda and Josefa exchanged embraces with Jessie and Bo, and Jessie hugged Lote while Bo kissed Berto’s rosy cheeks. “Nighty-night, sleep tight, my little friend,” she said softly.

The men helped their wives up into their respective vehicles, and Buzz, Jessie, Woody, Bo and Slink watched and waved as they pulled away from the barn and drove past the houses and out of sight.

“I’m gonna call it a night, y’all,” Slink said with a yawn. “Those cows’ll be callin’ us early enough.”

Buzz offered his hand. “Thanks for everything, Slink; I couldn’t have done it without your help.”

“Anytime,” he reciprocated the handshake, then turned to face his other friend. “See ya in the mornin’, Woody.”

As Slink disappeared into the darkness of the yard, Buzz sighed and looked to Jessie. “Well, I guess we better straighten up the shed before it gets any later.”

“We’ll come help,” offered Woody. “It’s been a long day for all of us. The more hands, the sooner we can all get some rest.”

The four took the short walk over to the packing shed, and Buzz flipped the switch inside the front door to turn on the overhead electric lights he had had installed at the same time as the house construction. The illumination revealed a state of disarray, left when the men had rushed off with the produce to make the end-of-day delivery deadline and the women had gone to prepare dinner.

Jessie started by gathering the empty crates that were scattered throughout the space, then began straightening the tables and stools where she and her female relatives had done their work. Buzz busied himself stacking the crates his wife had brought him, while Bo put away the smaller harvesting tools that had been left out by the workers.

On the other side of the shed, Woody set to rearranging a rather-teetering group of crates that had been piled up earlier in the day. “Do you want these with the others?” he asked his brother-in-law.
Nah, they’re fine there for now,” Buzz answered from his perch near the top of a folding ladder, where he was surveying the room for any remaining loose boxes to add to his tower. He noticed one next to where his sister-in-law was standing. “Hey, Bo,” he called, “could you hand me that crate next to you?”

“Sure,” she moved to pick up the long wooden box.

“I’ll get it, Bo! You shouldn’t lift it,” Jessie blurted out, then hurried over to retrieve the crate for her husband.

Woody stopped what he was doing and turned to his sister. “What do you mean, she shouldn’t lift it? Bo, what’s going on?”

Jessie winced and cursed her flub under her breath. “Dammit.”

Bo instantly flashed her sister-in-law an unmistakable look, and Jessie’s eyes met hers with a plea for forgiveness.

“Woody, honey,” Bo set down the canvas sack she’d been folding, and walked over to her husband, whose eyes were full of concern. “I was going to tell you tomorrow morning over breakfast,” her cheeks reddened at what she was preparing herself to say, “but it seems as if, well,” she reached for his hand, “we have a little Pride on the way.”

Woody stared blankly at his wife, blinked, then finally mustered the composure to speak. “Already? Are - are you sure?”

“As sure as I can be,” she smiled. “You’re happy, aren’t you?”

“Happy?” a broad grin broke across his features. “Of course I’m happy! It’s what we were hoping for!” He kissed Bo and gently placed a hand on her stomach. “When?”

“January, if my figuring is right.”

“You should sit down. Here!” In his haste to pull out a stool for his wife, Woody backed into the stack of crates he’d been tidying, which fell to the floor with a crash. “Sorry! Oh! We’ll have to go get some paint, and start getting the nursery ready…”

“See why I couldn’t tell him?” Bo called out to Jessie, who was giggling at her brother’s reaction. “He’d have been utterly useless all day.”

Buzz walked over and picked up the mess that Woody had created, while his brother-in-law continued to fuss and fret over his wife. “He’s pretty useless right now,” Buzz chuckled, then slapped Woody on the shoulder. “Congratulations, cowboy. I’m happy for you both.”

Jessie came hurrying over, and gave Bo the hug she’d wanted to give her that morning, then embraced her brother. “NOW I can say it as loud as I want! I’m gonna be an AUNT!”

Bo shared an amused look with Buzz, “The cat’s not going back in this bag.”

"Not a chance. You think they’re bad, wait’ll you tell Mamá,” he grinned. "Congratulations, Bo."

The letter came in May. Barbie and Ken were now the proud parents of a son, Thomas, who weighed in at ten pounds at birth.

“I knew it was gonna be a big baby!” Jessie remarked, as she and Bo read through it together.
But the gracefully-scrawled epistle contained more than just a birth announcement. As promised, the couple was hosting a first anniversary gala in July, to make up for their lack of a formal wedding. And the Prides and Lightyears were invited.

*You must come, girls, I won’t have it any other way! I’ll get you both rooms at the Hotel Melrose, so there won’t be any other expense than your train fare. I’ll help you figure out what you all can wear, too, so don’t fret about that for one minute. Ken can even rent formal attire for Buzz and Woody, if you like. Do write and tell me you’ll be there!*

“It’s not my kinda thing, but Barbie is a good friend,” Jessie said, as she folded the piece of paper and slipped it back into the envelope that had been addressed to both of them. “At least there’ll be dancin’.”

“I think it’ll be fun. Almost like our first evening out together back in Barstow. I just hope I can squeeze into something passable by then,” Bo rested her hand on her uncorseted belly, still small, but starting to fit uncomfortably in her dressier clothing. “I can’t wear a wrapper to a ball.”

“If anyone will have suggestions for ya, Barbie will. You’ll just hafta write and tell her.”

“It’s still a little early, but I don’t have much choice,” Bo sighed.

A few weeks later, Jessie and Buzz were sitting on their front porch, poring over nursery catalogs and pricing out trees for their grove addition, when Bo came strolling over. “Woody got the mail when he was in town today, delivering the milk. There was nothing for you two; but Barbie wrote me back, Jessie, she’s going to have dresses waiting in her shop for us, for the party! She says that since she has so many extra samples sitting around, it’ll be no trouble to rework a couple of them to suit us. Here, read for yourself.” She handed her sister-in-law the envelope.

Jessie scanned its contents, then gave the letter back to Bo with a smile. “Well that’s a relief. I was gonna ask her for help anyway. I s’pose we should take her up on rentin’ the suits, too. I’ll send a letter of my own off this week.”

“I don’t know if I trust Ken to choose clothing for me,” Buzz remarked over the edge of his catalog.

“Barbie’ll keep him in line,” Jessie laughed.

When the day came to travel to Los Angeles for the celebration, the Lightyears and Prides took the Santa Fe from Redlands, with Slink’s assistance at the depot as before. They arrived at La Grande Station in the city at half past one in the afternoon; but unlike their honeymoon, when they had to transfer trains on the platform, this time they exited the train and proceeded into the impressive building. Its exotic design, constructed only two years prior in red brick and topped off with a Moorish dome, suggested the Orient. The two couples traversed the station’s dramatic interiors, both girls a little in awe at the scope of it all.

“This ain’t nothin’ like the depots we worked at,” Jessie gaped.

“Look, over there, it’s a Harvey House,” remarked Bo, as she pointed in the direction of the visible lunch counter. “Can you imagine how much busier our days would have been in a place this big?”

“I don’t think I wanna!” her sister-in-law laughed.

They made their way outside, under the substantial portico, and onto the street where carriages waited to transport passengers throughout the city.

“Do we want to get a hack?” asked Woody, as he glanced out at the waiting vehicles.
“No, the trolley will be fine, and cheaper.” Buzz scanned the area until he found what he was looking for. “Over there,” he gestured, “we can take the Consolidated Electric.”

Bags in hand, they boarded the streetcar and took the quick trip up First Avenue, to the base of Grand Avenue and the edge of the Bunker Hill neighborhood where Barbie resided. When the trolley reached their stop, Woody gently moved Bo to the side, “Here, let me get down first. It’s a big step and I don’t want you having any accidents.”

She gave her husband a loving-but-amused look. “It’s the same height as it was when I got on here. I’m pregnant, not porcelain. You know that, right?” she squeezed his hand as she stepped down to the street.

Once they had disembarked from the trolley, they began their short walk uphill to the Hotel Melrose, which was Barbie and Ken’s home, and also where their friend had secured lodgings for them for their stay in the city. The men carried the luggage as their wives took in the sights.

“So this is Bunker Hill,” Jessie commented, as impressive gingerbread-encrusted and turreted residences came into view.

“It’s the most fashionable neighborhood in the city; no wonder Barbie wanted to live here,” her husband answered. “Alejo and Lalo live just two streets over, on Flower.”

“Is this where your lots were?” Jessie asked, a little wonderstruck.

Buzz nodded. “I had one on this street, and one on Olive, the street we just passed. We’ll have to walk by later and see if anything’s been built on them yet.” He noticed his wife admiring her surroundings, and smiled. “Would you have liked living here?”

“Here? Nah. The city’s fun to visit, but it’s too busy. I like our ranch best.” She sighed. “These houses are awful fancy. I’m not sure how I’m gonna manage at this party if all the folks are from ‘round these parts.”

“Don’t forget Alejo and Lavinia, and Lalo and Caroline will be there,” Buzz reminded her, “so you’ll at least know them. Be thankful you introduced them to Barbie at the wedding,” he chuckled.

It was only a half a block’s distance until they reached their destination: a four story building with an arbor demarcating the entrance and the name “Melrose” in large letters across the roofline. Vibrant pink bougainvillea climbed up the arbor’s columns and across the balconies on the upper floors.

Bo looked up at the name, then at the rest of her group. “This must be it. Barbie said she’d meet us inside.”

The four entered the spacious lobby, and glanced around until they spotted Barbie, sitting in a chair and reading a magazine. She immediately noticed her friends, stood, and hurried over to meet them.

“You’ve made it! Oh, I’m so happy to have you here. Look at you!” she placed a hand on Bo’s stomach as she hugged her friend in greeting, then turned to embrace Jessie. “Let’s get you checked into your rooms, and then I can take you to meet Thomas, and we can go to my salon. I can’t wait to show you around!”

Barbie escorted the Lightyears and Prides to the front desk, where they were given their keys and room assignments. They ascended the stairs to their rooms on the second floor, which were across the hallway from each other. Barbie waited in the hallway while the two couples entered their lodgings to deposit their bags.
Jessie darted over to the window and pushed aside its gossamer curtain. “Lookit this view!” She stared out over the expanse of rooftops and streets, framed by the mountains far in the distance. “You can see for miles!”

“This is the highest point in the city,” Buzz remarked, setting down their valises. “That’s why it’s such a prime location.”

The quartet met Barbie back out in the hall, and their friend led them back down the stairs.

“We don’t live in the annex,” she explained, as they crossed the lobby. “Our apartment is next door.” They stepped outside and walked up the stairs leading to the broad, curved porch of a Queen Anne mansion, topped with two rounded towers. “There’s a walkway that connects this building to the hotel, but I want to take you in this way, for the grand entrance, you know.” Barbie pushed the heavy front door open to reveal a sumptuous foyer with ornate woodwork, and guided them up the staircase to the door of their home.

“Where’s my sweet little Thomas? Mary, I’m back!” Barbie called out as they entered the apartment’s equally-elegant parlor. The nanny appeared from a door down the short hallway, carrying a plump, pink infant. “There’s my boy,” Barbie cooed, as she took him into her arms. “Bo, Jessie, this is our Thomas.”

“Oh, Barbie, he’s precious,” Bo effused, smiling at the blond, blue-eyed, two-month-old wearing a long, white, lace-trimmed gown.

“I know you want to hold him,” her friend winked.

Bo took the baby without further prodding, cradling him in her arms. “Look at his little curls! You are just the dearest little thing, aren’t you?” Thomas, meanwhile stared incessantly at Jessie, his mouth twitching.

Barbie looked between her son and her friend, “Looks like you have an admirer. It must be your hair; I’ve never seen him stare at Mary that way, and her brunette hair. Go on, he won’t bite!” she gestured for Bo to pass Thomas on to Jessie.

“Mind his head,” Bo instructed as she placed him in her sister-in-law’s arms.

Jessie gazed down into the wide, blue eyes that were still transfixed on her auburn hair. “You are a cute little critter, ain’t ya?” She brought one of her fingers up to his dimpled hand, and he promptly grabbed it. “Tarnation, he’s got quite a grip!”

“Careful, Buzz,” Woody joked, as the men had been watching the scene play out. “She might get ideas.”

“Ha!” Jessie stuck her tongue out at her brother, “Not jus’ yet, thank you. Not all of us are in such a big rush.”

He chuckled, “Well, it looks good on you, Jess, whenever it happens.” He glanced over at his brother-in-law, who was wearing a soft expression on his face as he kept watch on his wife.

“As thrilled as I am that Thomas loves you, we better get to the salon, if we’re going to get your dresses fitted today,” Barbie sighed, then looked to Buzz and Woody. “Ken has your evening suits there, too, for you to try on. Mary, we’ll be back in time to have dinner with our friends.” She took Thomas from Jessie’s arms, and peppered his tiny face with kisses before handing him over to the nanny and escorting her guests back out the door.
They caught the trolley at the Grand Avenue stop, and rode the line to Spring Street, where Barbie’s shop was located. A busy thoroughfare populated with numerous shops, restaurants, offices, and other businesses, it was full of the life of a bustling metropolis.

“Dad’s real estate office is on this street,” Buzz commented to Jessie, as they stepped off the streetcar and began their stroll.

“Where?” she squinted into the distance.

“Over there, by a block or so,” her husband waved further up the street. “It’s too late to stop in today. But if you want to visit while we’re in town, we can find another time.”

Barbie stopped in front of a brightly painted storefront, with large glass display windows flanking a center door. In each window was a beautiful dress on a form, framed by an arch of artfully-draped fabric. The seamless panes of plate-glass were painted with the name Couturière Côte Ensoleille in ornate gold lettering.

“Here we are!” Barbie announced cheerfully as she pushed open the doors to her shop. The large windows and mirrors emphasized the sunny interior, which was richly decorated with white paneling and gilt touches in the French style, its drapery and upholstery in shades of mauve, green, ivory, and gold. There were delicate tables and plush chairs scattered strategically around the expansive space, where women would sit for consultations, and ornate crystal-and-brass chandeliers gave the space further illumination. A few sample gowns were on forms for viewing, but the bulk of the designs were in large books that were prominently placed on a higher table intended to draw the customer’s eye. A series of fitting rooms lined the rear wall, separated by exquisitely patterned curtains. Nestled in the corner was a raised platform lined by mirrors, ready and waiting for the next woman to be fitted.

“Barbie, this is somethin’ else,” Jessie turned a slow circle, taking in the room.

“This is where we meet with customers to design their dresses, and do any fittings. All of our sewing is done upstairs, and that’s where the storage is, and our business office, too. Do you really like it?”

Both girls smiled broadly at their friend, so proud of her accomplishments. “It’s wonderful!”

Ken came down the staircase in the back corner of the building, opposite the mirrored platform. “I thought I heard you, Babs! Welcome to Couturière Côte Ensoleille!” He greeted the four warmly.

“Come on,” he gestured to Woody and Buzz, “I’ve got your rental suits upstairs. Just want to make sure they fit well. And it will give us something to do while Barbie takes care of your wives.”

“I’m so excited to show you your gowns!” Barbie squealed, as she took both of her friends by the hands, while the men disappeared upstairs.

The dressing rooms were completely private, and spacious enough to accommodate multiple people. Barbie pushed aside the fringed velvet curtain of one enclosure to reveal two dress forms wearing the ballgowns she had prepared for Jessie and Bo.

Jessie’s eyes widened at the sight of hers. “Is that -”

“The dress from the Christmas dance? Yes!” she clapped her hands giddily; the anticipation of this surprise had been building up in her for weeks. “Of course it was three years out of date, so I updated the bodice for you - and I think you’ll be more comfortable in it, the way it is now.”

Jessie moved closer to the form, and reached out to touch the fabric of the garment. The skirt indeed
remained unchanged - its red silk taffeta printed with roses, and pleated taffeta-and-velvet trim at the hem, was as recognizable as ever. But now, instead of the off-the-shoulder style that had left Jessie feeling so exposed, the red velvet bodice featured a higher curved neckline and short yet large puffed sleeves, made of solid red taffeta in the latest fashion. Barbie had somehow found fabrics to match the existing ones perfectly, and had carefully removed the lace, velvet, and pearl trim that had edged the neckline of the original design - as well as the rosette that decorated the waist - so that they could be incorporated in the new one. “Oh, I love it! Wait’ll Buzz sees it. I won’t mind gettin’ fancied up in this.”

“I’m so glad! And Bo, obviously, this is yours.” She gestured to the other form, displaying a pale blue gown that was much more loosely draped than Jessie’s. “It’s called a reform dress - I found the style infinitely useful when I was in the same condition.” The full sleeves of Bo’s garment were very similar to Jessie’s, but edged with wide, white lace at the bottom, and rows of the same intricate lace trimmed the modestly-scooped neckline. A ribbon in a slightly-darker shade of blue curved upward beneath the gathered bust line, and below the ribbon, the dress’s silk satin draped freely to the floor in a single, flowing sheath.

“It’s lovely!” Bo gushed, as she admired the fine fabric and lace. “Please say it was a sample, and you didn’t make it just for me.”

“I actually made it for myself, and never got a chance to wear it,” her friend smiled. “I wasn’t feeling well enough to attend the event it was for, and I couldn’t exactly display maternity wear in the salon. So, now you get to benefit from it,” she laughed.

The girls quickly slipped out of their traveling dresses and into the gowns Barbie had made for them. She helped them fasten their back closures and then scrutinized their fit.

“Yours fits nicely, Jessie,” Barbie remarked, as she smoothed her hand lightly across the fabric and fussed with the seams. “Making this bodice lace up the back helps, too. Now, let’s look at yours,” She turned to Bo. “Hmm, I was a lot larger at three months along than you are, apparently. But that’s an easy fix.” Barbie pinched the fabric in on the sides and secured it with some pins that had been stuck in the top of the form, then stood back. “There. The ribbon gives you a bit of a waistline, even if it’s raised, but I still want it to fit properly for you. I’ll send this upstairs for alterations, and it’ll be boxed up and in your room in time for the party tomorrow. Same for yours, Jessie - unless you want to take yours now.”

“Nah, I’d rather not, cause then Buzz’ll wanna see it. I wanna keep it a surprise.”

“I like that idea,” Barbie winked. “Did you bring your red boots like I suggested?”

“I did, and it was hard sneakin’ those in my bag without him seein’. I thought you’d jus’ find me somethin’ that they’d go with, I never expected THIS dress.”

“Well, I want it to be YOURS now, after tomorrow - both of you, you’re welcome to keep them.”

Jessie’s eyes widened. “Oh, Barbie, are ya sure? It’s such a nice dress, an’ all the materials…”

“Absolutely positive. They suit you both so well, and you’ve always been so supportive of me, long before this place even existed. Now let’s get you changed back into your street clothes and check on the men. We should be getting back to the Melrose for dinner.”

After hugs of sincere gratitude were exchanged, and Jessie and Bo were changed out of their formal wear, the girls joined their husbands out in the open room of the salon. Barbie took a moment to speak to one of her staff, with instructions on the gowns left in the fitting room, then met the others.
Ken had been chatting with Buzz and Woody, and she walked over to him, resting a hand on his arm.

“Ken, dear, I’m going to accompany them back. We still have so much catching up to do!” she smiled warmly at her friends, then looked back to her husband. “Hurry home as soon as you lock up; we’ll all have dinner together.”

Barbie left with the Lightyears and Prides, and the three couples convened later that evening in the elegant dining room of the Hotel Melrose. Buzz and Woody found themselves becoming more comfortable conversing with Ken, under the shared interests of entrepreneurship and family, and the meal was spent pleasantly among friends.

The next morning, the quartet joined Barbie in her apartment for breakfast. Ken had gone into the shop for a few hours’ work, but she had stayed home to oversee party preparations.

“So, what are you going to do to pass the time today?” Barbie asked, as she cradled her infant son on her lap. “I don’t imagine either of you girls have seen much of Los Angeles yet.”

“We don’t need to sightsee; we’re here to help you with whatever you need help with,” Bo offered.

Jessie nodded. “It’s the least we can do, after all your help with the weddin’.”

Barbie waved her hand dismissively. “I have professionals coming in to decorate, and dinner is being catered by the hotel. All I have to do is supervise,” she smiled. “I insist, you must get out and see my city.”

Once breakfast had concluded, the two couples bade Barbie goodbye - both Bo and Jessie fussing over Thomas before leaving - and headed out to explore Los Angeles. They paused on the front porch of the mansion before proceeding to the trolley stop, to coordinate their plans.

“So where would you like to go?” asked Buzz, specifically turning to the girls for whom it was their first visit. “Is there anything you’d like to see?”

“Is there someplace historical?” Bo suggested.

Jessie’s face lit up. “Yeah! Any of the old Spanish history?”

“Sure,” her husband smiled. “We could go to the Plaza, and then just take things from there.”

Hopping on the trolley, they made the trip to the center of old Los Angeles, a landscaped circular plaza bordered by landmark structures from the city’s past. Buzz acted as tour guide, pointing out colonial El Pueblo de la Reina de Los Angeles, as well as the ancestral adobe homes of the Avila and Lugo families and the Pico House hotel. They decided to visit the Plaza church, Nuestra Señora La Reina de Los Angeles, where he proudly named relatives who had attended there decades prior. Jessie especially listened with rapt attention, and sincere fascination in the heritage she’d married into.

As they stepped back out into the late-morning sunshine, Buzz addressed the others. “I think we’ve seen all the most important places. Spring Street is just a block over, and Dad’s office is only a couple blocks down that, if you still wanted to stop in,” he said to his wife. “And if you don’t mind,” he quickly deferred to Woody and Bo.

“No, that’s fine,” Woody quickly assented. “Not like it hasn’t been my home away from home here in the city.”
After a pleasant walk they reached the storefront - reading *Lightyear and Sons Real Estate* in gilt lettering across the window - and Buzz pushed open the door and ushered everyone inside. The space was modest in size but tastefully furnished, with chairs by the front windows and a wooden railing to create a more private area for the roll-top desks toward the back of the room. At one of the desks sat Lalo, who immediately rushed over and opened the railing’s gate as soon as he realized who had walked in.

“I didn’t expect to see you til tonight!” he cordially shook both his brother’s and Woody’s hands, and greeted the women equally warmly.

“It’s Jessie’s first time in the city; Bo’s, too,” explained Buzz. “I’ve been showing them around.”

“So what do you think of Los Angeles,” he inquired with a smile.

“Big, but I like it!” Jessie answered her brother-in-law. “We just came from the Plaza.”

“Dad’s not here, is he?” Buzz chimed in.

“No, he went home last night. And Alex is out with a client right now.” The bell on the door rung as it swung open, and a well-dressed couple entered. “I better go help them. Sorry to cut this short, but I’ll see you all at the party tonight.”

Back out on the sidewalk, the four paused. “I’m getting hungry, care to grab some lunch?” Woody proposed to the others.

Buzz thought for a moment. “Hunter’s Restaurant is just a couple blocks down Spring. That used to be one of my favorites when I lived here.”

As the couples strolled down the street, they took note of places they wanted to stop by after they’d eaten. Following a fortifying meal, they returned to the afternoon sunshine and resumed their window shopping.

“I saw a phonograph parlor about a half a block back. Can we go there?” Buzz asked the rest of his party, before they began their trek back up Spring Street.

“That sounds like fun,” Bo readily agreed, and Woody and Jessie nodded their approval.

It didn’t take them long to locate Tally’s Phonograph Parlor at 245 S. Spring Street, and they went inside the long, narrow room, which was full of modern contraptions to delight Buzz’s sensibilities. On the left stood a row of kinetoscope machines; in the middle Biograph mutoscopes; and on the right, phonographs where you could listen to the latest music.

“How do these work?” Jessie asked her husband, as they approached the tall, wooden apparatuses on the left.

“Well, you look in here,” Buzz pointed to the viewing piece that sat on the top of the wooden box, “and you can see pictures inside that move like real life.”

“Really, it moves?”

“It sure does. Find one you’d like to watch.”

As Jessie browsed the titles on the front of the kinetoscopes, Woody called out to her from several machines away. “Hey, Jess, I think you might wanna see this one.”
She hurried over to investigate, and let out a squeal of joy. “Annie Oakley! Outta the way! Buzz! Gimme a nickel!”

Woody laughed at his sister’s excitement, and held up his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay, but I’m watching it after you. I was at that show, too, you know.”

Jessie peered down into the viewing area as the short film began to play. She watched, completely captivated, as her hero successfully shot targets, first on a board, then tossed up into the air by her assistant husband. “I can’t believe I’m seein’ her again!” she gasped. “This is amazin!”

After the four had watched their fill of moving pictures, they went to the other side of the parlor, where the phonographs were situated. Taking seats at the tables where the machines sat, one per customer, they selected songs and paid their fare to listen, then raised the rubber tubes that the music played through to their ears, so as not to disturb the other patrons.

Jessie smiled as the cylinder on the phonograph scratched to life, and she recognized the song as the familiar one she’d hoped it was.

Bo leaned over and nudged her sister-in-law, having noticed the tickled expression on her face. “What did you find?”

Jessie removed one of her earpieces. “One’a the yodels Mr. Igel played! It’s called the Cuckoo Song.” She quickly replaced the earpiece and continued to listen.

When Bo’s song had finished playing, she stood and tapped her husband on the shoulder. “Woody, honey, they have sheet music,” she gestured over to the display along the wall. “Let’s get something new.”

While they browsed the titles - and ultimately selected After the Ball and The Sidewalks of New York, which Bo had listened to on the phonograph - Jessie and Buzz lingered by the phonographs.

“You should hear this one,” Buzz said to Jessie, as she set down the earpieces when her yodeling song had concluded. “I think you’ll like it, it’s called La Paloma.” Once he had paid, she took his seat and placed the listening tubes up to her ears.

Her face lit up as the soft Spanish melody played. “It’s real pretty. It sure would be nice to dance to. Think we could get sheet music and have Woody or Bo learn?” she asked with a smirk.

“I can look,” Buzz grinned in return, as he went to browse the rack with the others while she played the rest of the cylinder’s recording.

Once their sheet music purchases were made, the couples exited the store and returned outside. The sun was warm and bright, and Bo fanned herself. “I’m terribly thirsty, is there someplace we can go to get a cold drink?”

Buzz surveyed their surroundings. “Merriam & Company is only a few doors down - it’s a department store. They have a nice soda fountain. We could go there.”

Bo smiled gratefully. “Sounds perfect.”

The store they soon entered in was a palatial one. Despite the enticing array of merchandise on display, they hastened to the location of the store’s refreshment establishment, which was named Ramona.

“Nice name,” Jessie giggled to her husband as soon as she noticed the sign. “Think we’ll find
Alessandro in here, too? Maybe that’s him behind the counter.”

“Don’t start with that,” he chuckled.

The decor was cheerful, in the fashionable french style much like Barbie’s salon. Panels lined the wall in three shades of rose, edged in gold and copper beading and ornamented with floral festoons; and a dramatic cove ceiling was embellished with hand-painted floral designs. But the unmistakable focal point of the room was the soda fountain itself, elegantly constructed in marble and large enough to seat as many as thirty guests.

Woody glanced off to the side, where rich lace curtains and portieres partitioned off the store’s ice cream parlor. “Do you want ice cream?” he asked his wife. “Or just a soda?”

“Just something to drink would be nice,” she replied, and the four took their seats at the counter to place their orders.

Sitting on the tall stools, they enjoyed watching as their concoctions were made, a mixture of carbonated water and flavored syrup from porcelain jars, mixed in a tall glass and topped with frothy whipped cream. Jessie and Buzz both chose Coca-Cola, while Woody selected sarsaparilla. Bo ordered a banana flavored soda, and the other three looked at her in slight bewilderment.

“What?” she shrugged. “It sounded good.”

Refreshed by the cold drinks, and ready to head back toward the trolley stop that they’d caught with Barbie the day prior, they continued to stroll along Spring Street. Suddenly, a poster outside of a theater they had passed but paid no heed to earlier caught Jessie’s eye, and she paused as she studied it more carefully. Its title read The Importance of Being Earnest in a fanciful script, and the chromolithographed illustration showed two couples in fashionable contemporary clothing.

A few steps ahead, Woody called back to his sister. “You coming, Jess?”

“Yeah… just, Bo, can ya come here real quick?” Her sister-in-law obliged, followed by the men. “This actress, right here,” Jessie pointed to the poster, “does it look like -”

“Trixie!” exclaimed Bo.

“That’s what I thought!” Jessie concurred. “Let’s go see if she’s inside!” She rushed over to try the handle of the theater door, and found it to be unlocked.

“Jessie, wait! Do you think we should go in there?” her brother hesitated, as she opened the door.

“What’s the worst that can happen, they ask us to leave? C’mon, let’s go!”

Once inside the building, the quartet found its lobby vacant; yet the sound of lively music floated out from deeper within. It seemed to be a reputable establishment, decorated with elaborate gilded woodwork and rich wallcoverings. The doors to the auditorium opened freely as well, and Jessie led the way down the aisle, toward the stage.

The room they found themselves in was expansive, and featured the same ornate flourishes as the lobby. Private boxes flanked the stage on either side, with rows of plush seats filling the main floor. The stage’s proscenium was equally grand, framed in a fanciful gilded arch and a red velvet curtain - which in its open state revealed a troupe of performers lounging onstage.

The piano music stopped and a man’s voice projected out from the group. “Can we help you? There’s no performance today.” But before any of the visitors could answer, a kimono-clad actress
spoke up in their stead.

“JESSIE! BO! Is that you?!?!” Trixie cried, as she leapt up from her chair and raced down the stairs that led to the auditorium floor from stage right. The closer she got to them, the more certain she was, and she flung herself at them in impulsive hugs, then stepped back at arm’s length. She gazed in admiration at her friends’ new summer attire: Bo’s pink dress with puffed sleeves, that skimmed smoothly over her slightly-expanded belly; and at Jessie’s yellow dress, with equally dramatic sleeves, a yellow-and-red plaid yoke trimmed with red piping, and matching yellow sash printed with tiny red flowers. “Don’t you both look smart?!? I could never have DREAMED I’d see you here today! What on earth are you doing in Los Angeles?”

“We could ask you the same thing,” Bo laughed. “Last we heard from Dolly, your troupe was traveling.”

“We were, but we landed this production, and this theater,” she boasted. “It’s a new play, and I’m one of the leads, along with Max. We’re playing Jack and Gwendolen. So, why are you in the city, anyway? Do you live here now?”

“No, we live in Redlands,” answered Jessie. “We’re here visitin’ Barbie, she opened her own dress shop, with Ken.”

“Barbie’s here in LA, too? I’ll have to look her up.” Trixie grinned, “And you’re all married now, I see.

“We are, since March,” Bo replied proudly.

“Not like that’s any surprise; you four were the talk of the Harvey House back in Barstow. I guess that’s good, though, since you’re obviously knocked up,” Trixie winked at Bo. “Hope that happened after the wedding,” she giggled.

Bo was eager to change the subject, as she felt eyes staring down at her from the stage. “How about you and Max?”

“Oh, we’re still together - not married, though. We have a little flat on the other side of town.” Max appeared on the stage, and Trixie took notice, her eyes lingering on his form. “There he is; life with him is very... satisfying.” The emphasis on that last word did not go unmissed and the girls stood speechless. Jessie glanced at Buzz, who looked at her with a raised eyebrow. She pressed her lips together and quickly looked away before she snickered at her husband’s expression. Trixie continued, unfazed and unaware of the impact her words had. “So what about Dolly, and Bonnie? I haven’t stayed put long enough to get any letters from them in months.”

“Dolly’s in Chicago right now, gettin’ married herself. But she’ll be livin’ close to us when they come back to California,” Jessie filled in her friend. “Bonnie’s still in Barstow, far as we know; although she said she might be goin’ back home. Dolly was teasin’ her about a fella named Mason, but I dunno how serious she was.”

Realizing that the intruders were friends, the pianist had resumed the melody he’d been playing when the four walked in. Jessie paused in her conversation with Trixie. “What’s that music he’s playin’?” she questioned, her interest piqued by its lively, syncopated sound. “It’s awful fun.”

“That?” Trixie turned to glance at her colleague on stage. “Oh, that’s called ragtime. He just got the sheet music a couple days ago, and hasn’t stopped playing it since. It’s the latest thing.”

Max had been laying out props for their next scene but now approached Trixie. “There’s my
goddess,” he called out, beaming with admiration as he drew closer.

“Oh, stop,” she blushed. “Max, these are my friends Jessie and Bo, and their husbands. We were Harvey Girls together in Barstow.”

He extended his hand in greeting to each, an act that was cut mercifully short since he was in a state of undress. He was wearing black trousers, but only an undershirt that was left unbuttoned. Max turned back to Trixie, “We need to get back to rehearsal.”

“Ohhh, so serious,” she teased.

His face brightened, and he let out a peal of laughter. He caught her around the waist and deposited a kiss on her neck, completely unconcerned with the presence of strangers. “Now you must go try on your costume so I might gaze at you with full and rapturous pride.”

She giggled again, “I’ll be right there.” She watched him walk away with a contented sigh and then turned back to her friends. “Guess I better go. The show opens in a week, and there’s still so much to do. Do you think you’ll be able to come? It’s sure to be a real corker!”

Bo gave her friend a sympathetic look. “We won’t still be in town. But we’ll make sure to tell Barbie. I’m sure she and Ken would love to attend!”

“That’d be swell! Oh, it was so good to see you!!” Trixie threw her arms around each of the girls. “Wait a second!” She ran up to the stage, tore a page from the back of a script and grabbed a pencil. “Here, give me your addresses.” The girls scribbled down their address for her, and she did the same for them. With a wave, Trixie bounded back to Max and the rest of the cast.

As soon as they were outside, the four shared a moment of pause. “Well, that was different,” Woody was the first to break the silence.

Bo shrugged. “Trixie always said she wanted to be a bohemian. She got her wish.”

Jessie nodded, “Yeah, and she seems really happy, so that’s good. ‘Sides, that’s prob’ly a more fun crowd than the society ladies we’ll be around tonight.”

“How mad do you think Barbie would be if we ditched her party and came here instead?” pondered her sister-in-law.

Buzz’s face was skeptical; but Woody mused, “Would it get me out of wearing the tails?” The four broke into laughter and the awkward mood dispelled.

Bo linked her arm through her husband’s. “Oh, no you don’t. I have every intention of seeing you dressed up and getting to make all of the other women jealous.”

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“Speaking of,” Buzz checked his pocket watch, “We should stop in at that florist’s shop before too long if we want flowers for tonight.”

Their floral purchases in hand, the four caught the trolley back to Bunker Hill and retreated to their respective rooms to get ready for the evening’s festivities.

Buzz unlocked his hotel room door and pushed it open, letting Jessie enter ahead of him. She instantly rushed over to the bed, where two large boxes lay.

“Our clothes are here!” she exclaimed.
“I should hope so,” Buzz chuckled at his wife’s outburst. “Although we would cause quite the stir if we appeared in our birthday suits.”

She ignored his teasing and didn’t miss a beat. “Wait’ll ya see my dress. It’s the best surprise! For once, I don’t mind so much gettin’ gussied up.”

The couple set to undressing and changing into their formal attire. While Buzz unpacked and began to put on the evening suit he had tried on the day prior, Jessie stood at the dresser mirror in her petticoats, brushing her hair and twisting it into the updo Bo had taught her and practiced with her in the weeks leading up to the event. She took the flowers they’d bought on their outing, and tucked a single red rose and some sprigs of white jasmine into her hairstyle on the left-hand side. Dabbing a faint touch of rouge on her lips and cheeks, and a light dusting of powder on her face - also lessons rehearsed with her sister-in-law - she finished her toilette with the perfume she’d bought especially for the occasion.

Buzz watched his wife as she darted past him and dug into the bottom of her valise, pulled out her red leather boots and button hook, then sat on the side of the bed. He smirked, “I was wondering when I’d get to see those again.”

“Just you wait,” Jessie winked. She fastened the rows of narrow straps that buttoned up her ankle, and once the boots were on, she removed the lid from the dress salon’s box, and carefully lifted out the garment pieces one by one. She stepped into her skirt, then arranged it over the petticoats beneath, before retrieving the bodice from the box. Slipping her arms into the puffed sleeves, she turned to her husband. “Can ya lace this up the back for me? Pleeeease?”

Buzz set down his tie on the dresser and went to help his wife. He began to thread the silken cords through the eyelets, adjusting the tightness as she requested.

“I know it’s a pain,” Jessie apologized, “but there’s no way I could do this myself. It ain’t like my corset.”

“That’s okay,” Buzz answered, a smile evident in his voice even though she couldn’t see it, “just so long as I get to undo this later.” Jessie giggled. “Wait a minute,” he stepped back slightly, still holding onto the laces. “The skirt… the dress… is it the same as…”

“The Christmas dance? Yep!” she beamed. “I was waitin’ for ya to notice. An’ it’s mine to keep, too!”

“Well, then I guess we’ll have to find another excuse for you to wear it. All done. How does that feel?”

“I can breathe, so good enough,” she gave her husband a quick kiss of thanks and went to retrieve her pearl jewelry from her luggage, while he finished with his collar and tie and pinned on the red rose boutonniere that they had chosen to match Jessie’s flowers.

As she stood fiddling with the clasp of the dainty necklace, Buzz came up behind her. “Here, let me,” he offered, taking the ends of the gold chain and fastening it closed for her. He straightened the chain against her skin, and deposited a soft but lingering kiss at the nape of her neck.

Jessie inhaled at the sensation. “Do we hafta go to this party?” she breathed as she turned to face her husband. “We could just stay in.”

He wrapped his arms around his wife’s waist and pulled her toward him. “And deprive me of my chance to show you off?”
“I s’pose I don’t mind starin’ at you in that suit all night, either,” Jessie grinned, resting her hand on the crisp white dress shirt and fitted vest beneath the black tailcoat her husband wore. “Almost makes dealin’ with the fancy folks worth it.”

Meanwhile, in their room across the hall, Woody and Bo were finalizing their own party preparations. As Bo tucked the last of the pink freesia blossoms she’d bought into her hair, Woody stood next to her at the dresser mirror, struggling with his tie.

“I never liked these penguin suits back when Aunt Molly made me wear ‘em, and I still don’t,” he grumbled, yanking the crooked bow untied.

“Here, honey, let me,” Bo offered. She soon had the fabric tied into neat little bow, and reached for the sprig of freesia that had been set aside for his boutonniere. Pinning it to his lapel, she smoothed his jacket collar and straightened his vest, then stepped back with a smile at her husband’s dapper appearance. “If I had been around back at your aunt’s, with you dressed like this, I would’ve snatched you up.”

“I suppose I’ll tolerate it, then, for you,” Woody grinned in response. “Hey, what are Buzz and I supposed to do with these suits tomorrow?”

“Barbie said to leave them in their boxes at the hotel’s front desk.” Bo turned one last time and studied her appearance in the mirror, then fussed with the drape of the fabric around her midsection. "Do you think I show too much?” she fretted, as she turned sideways and scrutinized her silhouette further. “I know Barbie made this to hide her own pregnancy, but I feel like everyone will notice the minute I walk in the door.”

“You’ve been hoping and praying for a baby from the moment we got married, and now you don’t want anyone to know?” Woody chuckled, as he drew closer and rested his hands on his wife’s waist from behind.

"You know how judgmental society women can be, gossiping that I shouldn’t be seen at a formal occasion in the family way. I just don’t want to call attention to it.”

"Well, if your goal is to be unnoticeable, there’s no hope for that, because I’m not going to be able to take my eyes off you," he kissed her on the the cheek. “C’mon, let’s see if Buzz and Jessie are ready.”

The parlor was already bustling with party guests when the four entered. Gold ribbons and paper streamers were draped from the chandelier to the outer edges of the room, and flowers adorned almost every surface. In the far corner of the room, a giant paper moon backdrop was set up and a photographer was positioning a couple in front of it. “You have to give Barbie credit,” Bo said as she looked around the room, “she certainly has a flair for this.”

“Incoming,” Buzz murmured to Jessie just as Caroline approached with Eduardo, Alejandro, and Lavinia in tow.

“Jessie, darling, how wonderful to see you again!” she pecked her sister-in-law on the cheek.

“You clean up good, little brother,” Alejo complimented Buzz as he shook his hand. “To think you gave up this life to work on a ranch.”

Lavinia’s greeting was civil, but decidedly cooler than Caro’s. “When you entered and I saw you in red, I thought you might have been wearing your wedding dress.”

Caro rolled her eyes, “Vinnie, don’t be such a pill. Besides, it’s clearly a different dress; look, the
neckline’s totally different and the fabric has a rose pattern. It’s lovely; wherever did you get it?”

“Barbie made it, from an old ballgown that was a favorite’a mine,” Jessie told her the story of the Christmas party when she was a Harvey Girl. “It was such a surprise when she showed it to me; I almost couldn’t believe it was the same dress!”

“Well, it’s lovely, and I can see why it would have made such an impression. It really suits you.” Lalo leaned in to whisper something to his wife. “Are they?” she glanced in the direction of the room’s entrance. “Excuse us, please. Vinnie, come see who’s here!” They left to go greet other friends, but there was no time for the Prides or Lightyears to feel their absence. Barbie and Ken were suddenly there, with baby Thomas.

The party’s hosts were sumptuously dressed, as could be expected of such rising stars in the city’s fashion scene. Barbie’s artistic gown had a princess-seamed bodice and skirt of shimmering golden silk satin, with v-shaped accent of black lace at the low neckline. Its massively-puffed elbow-length sleeves were also gold silk, overlaid with the same black lace, which also dripped down from the edge of the sleeves in long ruffles. Wide velvet ribbon, tied in bows at each shoulder and trailing all the way down to the hem, created dramatic accents to an already-striking ensemble. Ken’s evening suit, although matching in cut to the other men in attendance, stood out with a golden vest to match his wife’s dress. Their infant son donned a traditional white baby gown, but its lacy trimmings were threaded with gold ribbon.

“Oh don’t you all look exquisite!” Barbie gushed as she hugged Jessie and Bo, and Ken shook the men’s hands. “We’re just letting Thomas say hello to everyone before we send him home with Mary. Make sure you go get your picture taken at the paper moon - it’s our paper anniversary, you know. I’ll be mailing the photographs out to everyone.”

As Barbie and Ken whisked their baby away to the next group of guests, the four looked to the photo backdrop across the room, then back at each other.

Woody held his hand out, as if gesturing for the others to lead the way. “Might as well.”

They waited their turn as another couple finished their photo session, then Woody and Bo stepped up first. A crescent moon hung in front of a platform seat, set against a background of clouds and stars. The photographer slid a set of stairs up in front of the moon, and Woody took his wife’s hand to assist her up the steps. She took a seat, and the photographer guided Woody to sit next to her, swinging his legs to the back of the set piece and putting his hands around her waist from behind. Bo reclined slightly into her husband’s embrace, and the photographer smiled. “Yes, yes, that’s nice. Hold still, please!”

The photo complete, the couple climbed down from their perch and Buzz and Jessie took their turn. The photographer sized them up thoughtfully. “Let’s do something different with you two. Ma’am, take a seat on the moon, will you?” Buzz offered his wife a hand, and she positioned herself on the crescent. “Now, sir, let’s have you stand here.” The man rolled over a stepladder that he angled against the moon. Buzz perched himself on the lowest rung. “Perfect. Now, take your lady’s hand, and look each other in the eyes lovingly.”

The two did as told, all the while fighting back the laughter that was threatening to overtake them both in such a contrived scene. Jessie raised her free hand to her mouth to stifle a giggle.

“Hold that pose,” the photographer called out, and Buzz and Jessie obliged. “Thank you, that’ll do nicely.”

As Buzz helped his wife down from the moon, she leaned in and spoke in a low whisper, “Well, that
felt ridiculous.”

“You felt ridiculous? I was on a ladder to the moon,” quipped Buzz, as he let out the chuckle he’d been keeping in.

“You had it easy. I was facin’ the camera.”

When they wrapped up their photo session, the hotel staff was starting to usher the guests into the dining room, so the Prides and Lightyear couples fell in with the procession to dinner. The tables in the room they had eaten in the night before with Barbie and Ken had been pushed together to form two long rectangles. Barbie had taken painstaking care when she drafted the seating charts, placing Buzz, Jessie, Woody, and Bo near her and Ken, and also in close proximity to the other two Lightyear couples.

“Least we’re not sittin’ with strangers,” Jessie remarked gratefully, as they located their place cards at one of the tables. “That was awful nice’a her to look out for us like that,”

They took their seats, and also took in the sights of the room, which looked quite different from the previous evening. The same gold ribbons and paper streamers from the parlor spanned the pillars in swags, and were accented with floral bouquets. On the tables, elaborate silver epergnes dripped with even more flowers, and the fine silver and crystal of the place settings glittered under the electric lights. Jessie thought she’d never seen anything like it, and she nudged Woody, who was seated to her left. “Aunt Molly’s parties never looked like this! I bet her eyes’d bug right out of her head if she could see us now.”

“I almost wish she was here, just to see that,” he muttered back.

“I’m glad she’s not! I dunno how I’m going to keep track of which fork to use when,” she eyed the flatware apprehensively.

The room was soon filled with the tinkling of silverware on plates as the food was served and conversation rose from the guests. “Well, I cannot understand why the city council would think we should be asked for pay for a new library,” a woman’s voice filtered down from the head of the table. “The one in City Hall is sufficient.”

“They hired another woman to be head librarian,” a man scoffed, “Women have no business being in such positions. After all, look at all that happened with the last librarian!”

Barbie inserted herself into the conversation, “Yes, let’s look at that. I mean, after all, how terrible it was that she increased the library’s collection from twelve thousand books to over three hundred thousand!”

“But the books she chose! Really, that french novel was beyond scandalous.”

“Then the library committee shouldn’t have approved it,” Barbie retorted airily.

The man who has spoken earlier leaned forward, “They shouldn’t have to check on the suggestions from the librarian. But what can you expect from the same woman who smoked cigarettes?”

“And keeps her hair short and goes out without a hat!” the woman practically whispered, as if the very idea was too heretical to be spoken at normal volume.

“As if that is any measure of a person’s character,” Barbie said firmly but politely. “It was shameful that that Reverend slandered her under the guise of prayer. And dishonorable of the City to renege on the funds that were due her, after the improvements she made for Los Angeles. The library is far
more accessible now, and not only for those of us who live here. By abolishing the membership fee, so many more can now turn to the library to improve their lives. Those who live outside of the city can benefit from the library, too, with those delivery stations she set up. And you certainly cannot dispute that the children, our next generation, stand to gain the most. After all, yes, she lowered the age to twelve, but not as a free-for-all. They have to maintain a certain grade average on exams before they’re allowed to use the library, which gives them a lesson in responsibility. As the great author Mark Twain says, ‘Learning softeneth the heart and breedeth gentleness and charity’, and I think we can all agree that the world can use more of that.”

Jessie had been watching the tête-a-tête with increasing interest. She knew Barbie’s education and upbringing led her to a more progressive stance and waited to see just how she would respond. Her chest was bursting with pride as she watched the nay-sayers deflate as their argument was rendered moot by Barbie’s well-stated facts.

Following a course of delectable desserts, Barbie rose from the table, indicating that it was time to withdraw to the expansive parlor, where the furniture had been removed from the center of the room in preparation for dancing. The guests made their procession out of the dining room, to continue with the evening’s entertainment.

Four musicians now sat in one corner, and lively melodies soon filled the space as couples paired up and took to the floor. Jessie eagerly led Buzz out for the first waltz, while Woody and Bo planned to sit out the more strenuous dances in favor of the slower quadrilles and schottisches.

Throughout the evening, Jessie waltzed and galoped not only with her husband, but with her brothers-in-law in turn; while Buzz danced with his sisters-in-law on occasion as well. Woody and Bo joined the three Lightyear couples for a quadrille, and despite Lavinia’s aloof demeanor, the dancing was enjoyable, and Jessie found herself increasingly at ease with her new relatives.

After the quadrille concluded, all four couples retreated to the refreshment table to quench their thirst. “I’m ever so grateful you introduced me to Barbie at your wedding,” Caro said to Jessie, as the ladies of the group took seats on the plush furniture that edged the parlor. She glanced down at the elegant cream-colored dress she was wearing, sprigged with pink roses, its bodice and full sleeves accented with leaf-green velvet and ivory lace. “This is one of her creations. And she’s a delightful person, too. I keep asking her to join the Friday Morning Club with me, but she says she’s still a little too busy with the salon to be involved with a club. Vinnie doesn’t want anything to do with my club,” she wrinkled her nose at her other sister-in-law, who scoffed silently and continued sipping her champagne punch. “‘You and your progressive ideas,’ she says. But I keep telling her, she’s going to have to give in sooner or later, because all the best society ladies are in it. And we know that’s all that matters, right Vinnie?” she giggled.

The dancing and socializing lasted well into the night, a happy celebration to match the occasion. Woody and Bo had taken a seat on the side of the room when her feet protested, content to simply watch the merriment from afar. Before long, Bo found it hard to keep her eyes open and her head dropped against her husband’s shoulder. She jerked herself upright instantly, “Sorry, Woody.”

He rubbed his hand over hers, “Come on, little lady; we should get you back.” He helped her stand and they went over to find Buzz and Jessie. “I’m going to take Bo back to the room. You two staying?”

“Yeah, at least for a little bit longer. See you in the mornin’,” Jessie gave her brother and sister-in-law a quick hug.

Back in the room, Woody removed his jacket and then turned his attention to his wife. “Here, let me help.” She had already unhooked the back panel of the dress, providing easy access to the buttons.
He held the dress with one hand and offered her his other as she stepped out of the fabric. “You looked beautiful tonight,” he said as he set the garment aside. “But then, you look beautiful all the time.”

“You’re sweet, you know that?” she smiled as she unfastened her maternity corset. “Can you get my nightgown, please?” A few minutes later, she was dressed for bed and found Woody had pulled the bedding aside for her. No sooner had she settled between the covers than she was sound asleep, happily exhausted from the night’s revelry.

Woody meanwhile had stripped down to his longjohns and returned his rental suit to its box. He turned, expecting to find his wife still awake, and smiled softly at the sight of her. He doused the lights and carefully crawled into bed, so as not to wake her. Brushing a ringlet of hair from her face, he leaned in and kissed her forehead, “Sweet dreams, Bo.”

An hour later, Buzz and Jessie were treading up the stairs. “Here,” Buzz paused just before their room, “get the key from my pocket. I cannot stand this collar one more minute.” He reached up and undid the bow tie so he could unfasten the stud that held the tall, starched collar closed in the front. “It was a nice party, huh?”

“It was,” Jessie agreed as she unlocked the door, “in spite of all my worryin’ about gettin’ on with folks. I don’t know how Barbie and Ken find the energy to keep goin’, though; I’m beat!”

Buzz ran his hand down the lacing of her gown as the latch clicked, “Maybe we should have skipped the party.” He punctuated his sentence with a gentle tug on the cord.

She pushed the door open and turned to her husband, “I ain’t that tired.” She took hold of his undone bow tie and pulled him into the room.

Chapter End Notes

The ‘Relations of the Sexes’ book is a real historical publication in the public domain, and it’s pinned to our Pinterest board if you’d like to read through it for yourself. Many of the characters responses mirror our own when we read it! The processing of oranges evolved throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, from all the work being handled by the grower and his family, to becoming more like a factory assembly line after the turn of the century. We’ve tried to find a middle ground between the methods for this chapter, without going into too much detail. In the mid-1890s, the Southern California Fruit Exchange (which would become Sunkist) was new, and provided a way to distribute the citrus more efficiently with the help of local associations of growers. Buzz, being modern-minded, would have embraced this; yet with the grove being smaller for their first crop, he could have gotten by with more old-fashioned (and less costly) help than the outside crews that would be required later. Harvests averaged between 200 and 300 boxes per acre, and the spring 1895 price per box for navels was around $2, so with Buzz’s initial five acres, that’s where we got his $2500 - the equivalent of $74,000 in today’s money, and a nice profit (despite the fact some will go back into more trees and supplies). The locations mentioned by name in Los Angeles (except Barbie’s shop, of course) are based on real places as found in newspapers, directories, and photos. Apartment hotels, like the Hotel Melrose, provided living quarters with catered meals in urban settings. Edison really did make a film of Annie Oakley shooting in 1894; it’s on our Pinterest board as well. Ragtime was just becoming popular in the mid-1890s. The
music had been played on the grounds of the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, and the first sheet music for the genre was published in 1895. Paper moon photos were popular around the turn of the century; and the first anniversary is considered a “paper” one. Tessa Kelso was the head librarian of the Los Angeles City Library from 1889-1895; Clara Bell Fowler succeeded her. In May of 1895 (only a couple months before this chapter), the city of Los Angeles put a vote to the electorate to secure funds of $50,000 for a stand-alone building, but it fell short of the required 60% majority. The library remained in cramped quarters in City Hall until 1906. Maternity corsets were worn in the 19th century, but they did not compress the stomach; they were shaped to accommodate a growing pregnant belly, and provided back and abdominal support.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Thanks to PoetLaurie and me being at Disney World, this chapter's a little later than intended. But better late than never! We're planning to get the next one posted around mid-April.

Check out our Pinterest board (Jessie's Journey at username yodelincowgirl) to see the images that inspired this chapter!

Toy Story still doesn't belong to us. If it did, Toy Story 4 wouldn't be such a complete mystery! That trailer was fantastic, but I still want to know more. Anyway, enjoy, and remember to subscribe and bookmark so you don't miss any future chapters!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a fitting night for Halloween as the Prides and Lightyears drove up the lane to Roundup Ranch, returning home after an evening spent helping with a church social. A nearly-full moon shone down from a starry sky, which was streaked here and there with wisps of clouds that shimmered in a silvery glow.

Jessie held tightly to the jack-o’-lantern on her lap and leaned forward between her brother and sister-in-law, who were riding in the front with Woody at the reins. “Hey, how much pie ya got left there? Wanna have some when we get home? It was rough starin’ at it all night and not gettin’ a chance to eat any.”

“There’s enough left for us all to have a slice,” Bo answered, turning slightly in her seat, “but can’t we just have it with dinner tomorrow? I’m pretty tired from being on my feet so much tonight, and I still have to take care of Billy, Goat, and Gruff.”

“I didn’t know you named them,” Woody remarked, not taking his eyes off the road.

“Where’ve you been?” Jessie giggled at her brother, then looked to her sister-in-law. “How ’bout I check on the sheep, then we can have pie at our place, an’ they’ll be my dishes to wash.”

“I suppose…” Bo yawned.

“C’mon, it’s Halloween!” Jessie nudged. “An’ it’s such a pretty night, we can sit on the porch. ‘Sides, ya only got a couple more months left of bein’ able to do whatever ya want. Jus’ for a little bit?”

Bo smiled. “Okay.”

Woody pulled the surrey up to the barn and helped Bo down, while Jessie handed over her pumpkin to Buzz and went to tend to Bo’s sheep, making sure they were secure in their pen for the night. The four came back together in the Lightyears’ kitchen, where Jessie gathered plates and utensils and doled out slices of pumpkin pie, which they all carried out to the front porch.

While Bo sat on the porch swing, and the men brought over the pair of wicker chairs that sat by the window, Jessie disappeared into the house, only to emerge a moment later carrying her lit pumpkin
with its gleaming grin. She set it down next to the front door, and joined Bo on the swing.

“Tonight was fun, don’tcha think?” Jessie asked the others, as she took a bite of pie. “All the kids seemed to have a good time. Wish we coulda done stuff like that when we were younger,” she said to her brother.

“You didn’t get to celebrate Halloween?” Bo asked the siblings.

“Nah, Ma never let us go out with our friends in town,” Woody shrugged. “Pranks and ghost stories and apple-bobbing were uncouth.”

Bo shook her head. “She’s uncouth. I remember the girls in my class always giggling about their fortune-telling games and who they were supposedly going to marry. It’s all harmless fun.”

“How ‘bout you?” Jessie turned to her husband. “Didja do anything for Halloween when you were growin’ up?”

“Not a whole lot, living out in the country like we did. There wasn’t that much trouble to get into. Once in a while there were parties or bonfires.”

“Speaking of fires, my fingers still sting from helping with that snapdragon game,” Woody chimed in. “Whoever came up with the idea that picking raisins out of flames was a good idea?”

“Your jack-o’lantern was a nice addition to the decorations, Jessie,” Bo glanced at the flickering face nearby. “The hall looked perfectly mysterious with the lights dimmed and carved pumpkins all around.”

“Which made it that much harder for the kids to find the nuts we hid for them,” Buzz laughed. “I’m sure folks will be discovering them for weeks to come.”

As they silently took the last bites of their dessert, a sharp cry sounded out in the distance. Everyone’s ears perked up, and Jessie was first to question, “What was that?”

“Probably just a coyote in the foothills,” Woody remarked dismissively.

“I don’t know,” replied Buzz, a thoughtful, serious tone to his voice. “Sounded like La Llorona to me.”

Jessie cocked her head quizzically. “La-what?”

“La Llorona. The weeping woman. Mamá used to tell my brothers and me her story to keep us in our beds at night,” he chuckled.

“And you’re not going to share it with us?” Bo smiled. “I think tonight calls for a suitably spooky story.”

“Okay. Well, it’s an old folk tale, that goes back at least a century, if not much longer. There was this beautiful young woman named Maria, who caught the eye of a handsome, wealthy ranchero. They were married, and she bore him children. But one day, she saw him with another woman, and went mad with jealousy and rage. In her crazed state she drowned her children, only to fall deeper in despair once she realized what she had done. She took her own life, and because of her murderous deeds, she was forbidden from entering the gates of heaven until she had found her lost children. Now her ghost wanders along the riverbank in a long, white gown, wailing ‘Ay, mis hijos!’ and searching for them - or others, to replace them.” His voice lowered for emphasis. “She’ll take living people, if she has to.”
“There aren’t any big bodies of water here,” Woody scoffed, trying to sound nonchalant despite the evident uneasiness in his expression. “Just the stream out in the far corner of the property.”

“Water is water,” Buzz answered solemnly. “All my parents’ land has is a stream, and yet she still told us the story as a warning.”

“You’re just messin’ with us, right?” Jessie looked wide-eyed at her husband. “I mean, it’s just make believe, ain’t it?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen her, but several of my classmates growing up swore that they had, or one of their relatives had. I didn’t take my chances - except when I couldn’t resist stargazing, and I’m fortunate she didn’t come for me then.”

“I don’t believe any of it,” Woody stated, sounding none too convinced.

Bo stood, rather clumsily thanks to her increasing girth, and set her plate and fork on the swing. “Since this is the ‘night when fairies light,’ I think I better be heading to bed. It’s almost the witching hour, and I don’t want to turn into a pumpkin - even if I already look like I swallowed one.”

Woody also rose from his chair to take his wife’s hand, and bidding Buzz and Jessie goodnight, the Prides descended the porch steps and walked the short distance to their own home.

Worn out from her busier-than-usual day and late night, it took Bo no time to fall asleep once her head hit the pillow. Her husband, however, laid wide-awake staring at the ceiling, his thoughts unsettled and his imagination running wild. ‘You’re being ridiculous, falling for Buzz’s fairy tales,’ he told himself futilely. ‘There’s no such thing as the La-whatever-he-said.’ Just then, a gust of the Santa Ana winds rattled the window sash, and Woody pulled the covers tightly up under his chin. “Bo?” he squeaked out feebly, but his wife was too sound asleep to hear.

Meanwhile next door, Jessie tossed and turned in her own darkened bedroom, unable to fall asleep herself. The haunting story Buzz had told played over in her head as well, and every moonlit shadow on the wall or rustle of the leaves outside tricked her mind into believing they were goblins come to life. With a heavy sigh she buried her head in Buzz’s shoulder, unintentionally rousing him from his slumber.

“What’s wrong?” he mumbled groggily, draping an arm loosely around her waist. “Are you okay?”

“I can’t sleep,” she groaned, frustrated. “I know it’s silly, but that ghost story’a yours won’t stop goin’ through my mind.”

“I’m sorry, I was only trying to get into the spirit of things,” he kissed her on the forehead. “Maybe some warm milk would help?”

“Maybe.” Jessie laid in the darkness for a few moments, then sighed again and freed herself from her husband’s embrace so she could sit up. “Guess it’s worth a try.” She let her bare feet hit the wood floor, but before she left the room she stepped over to the window by Buzz’s side of the bed. Peering behind the shade - just to make sure the things she had heard were only her overactive imagination - she noticed something curious next door. “Huh, light’s on at Woody’s too, in the kitchen. Guess I’m not the only one spooked tonight.”

Buzz got out of bed, and joined his wife as she raised the shade for a better look. Just then Woody appeared in his own window, staring out into the emptiness with a cup in his hand. “Since we’re already up, want to have a little fun?” he suggested, grinning down at Jessie with a wicked glint in his eye.
"I kinda ain’t in the mood," she replied, her voice weary with exhaustion.

“No, not that,” he laughed. “You said you never got to play Halloween pranks when you were a kid. Want to make up for it by messing with Woody?”

Her tired eyes brightened a little at the idea. “Whatcha got?”

The couple formulated their plan. Grabbing a folded white sheet, they went downstairs to the kitchen, where Jessie stood still as Buzz carefully dusted flour across her face and smudged soot from the stove around her eyes. Once he was satisfied with her appearance, she draped the unfurled sheet over her head and shoulders like a veil. Holding it closed at her throat with one hand, and a lit lantern in the other, she stood at the opened back door and waited as Buzz crept out onto the porch, stooping down below the railing height so Woody wouldn’t be able to see him. He watched the neighboring window closely, and when he was certain his brother-in-law’s back was turned, gestured to his wife. “Okay, go!” he called out in a loud whisper.

Jessie tiptoed onto the porch, down the stairs, and across the backyard toward the nearest edge of the grove. As soon as she was well-situated along the tree line, Buzz reached down to the ground below and grabbed a handful of dirt, which he tossed lightly at the Pride kitchen window to get Woody’s attention. The soil rattled against the panes, and when Woody appeared in silhouette, Buzz crouched low, barely peeking over the porch railing, to watch the scene unfold.

Out in the grove, Jessie weaved in and out of the trees, slowly and deliberately, making sure the sheet concealed her red hair and the lantern cast an eerie glow on her countenance and the white nightgown she wore. As she walked along, she let out the occasional mournful moan, loud enough so that Woody could hear across the yard. After a few moments had passed - enough to believe that she had her brother’s attention - she cried out in the way Buzz had coached her, shrill and clear, “Ay, mis hijos!”

From Buzz’s vantage point on the back porch, he had an excellent view. Woody had almost immediately caught sight of the curious figure in the distance, and the more he watched, the more terror-stricken he became. At Jessie’s piercing scream, the cup of milk he’d been holding flew out of his hands, and in a tangle of flailing limbs he stumbled to the floor, in his haste to extinguish the light and leave the kitchen before the weeping woman knew he had seen her.

When Jessie returned to her house, she found Buzz laying on his back on the porch, his knees up and hands on his head, hysterical with laughter.

She pushed the sheet away from her forehead, draping it around her shoulders, as she watched her husband convulsing in his mirth. “What? What happened? Did he see me?”

“Ohhh,” Buzz wiped the tears from his eyes and attempted to catch his breath, “he saw you.”

“Well?” she put her hand on her hip, “what did he do?” He shook his head and kept on laughing, and Jessie rolled her eyes. “Fine, I’m goin’ back t’ bed.”

“No, wait!” Buzz scrambled up from the porch and followed his wife into the house, still snickering.

The next day, Jessie and Bo were in the Lightyear kitchen preparing lunch together while the men finished their morning chores.

“Woody’s been acting so strangely today,” Bo remarked, as she mixed together a bowl of chicken salad. “When I woke up this morning, he had his head completely under the covers. And when I
came downstairs, there was a spilled cup of milk on the kitchen floor, and a pan of scalded milk on
the stove. That sure wasn’t pleasant to clean up. Woody’s usually more considerate than that if he
fixes himself a snack or a drink late at night. Something must be bothering him, but he keeps insisting
he’s fine.”

Before Jessie could fess up to her late-night conspiring with Buzz, the two men entered the kitchen.
As was to be expected, Woody looked like he hadn’t slept a wink, his eyes heavy and shadowed
with dark circles.

As Bo assembled sandwiches, Jessie hurried to open a jar of peaches she had canned in the summer,
and in her haste she accidentally dropped its metal lid into a bowl sitting on the kitchen table, making
a clattering sound. Woody jumped nearly a foot off the ground at the sudden noise, and his wife
noticed instantly.

“Woody, honey, you’ve been on edge all day. You have got to tell me what’s going on!”

“Nothing’s going on,” he sighed, “I’m just tired.”

Buzz turned to his brother-in-law. “Did you see something in the grove when you were up in the
night, cowboy?”


“We have a confession to make,” Buzz chuckled, turning to his wife.

“Ay, mis hijos!” Jessie draped a handy dish towel over her head and wailed dramatically, albeit at a
lower volume than the night before.

Woody’s brow dipped in a scowl. “It was YOU! You scared me half to death!”

“We know,” Buzz laughter broke out more heartily now. “I saw you fall down in the kitchen in
your hurry to turn out the light.”

“So that’s why I found the kitchen in a mess. You two are just terrible!” Bo tried to scold for her
husband’s sake, but she was fighting back giggles herself. “Whatever made you do it?”

“I couldn’t sleep; I was spooked by the story, too. We noticed Woody was up - but scarin’ him was
Buzz’s idea!” Jessie rattled out her husband.

“And you were a more than willing accomplice,” he countered the blame, laughing all the while.

“Just you wait,” Woody muttered, crossing his arms, “I’ll get you both good someday, you’ll see.”

“Come on, honey, lunch is ready,” Bo kissed her disgruntled husband on the cheek. “You’ll feel
better after you eat something.”

The four made their way into the dining room, where they all sat down to a simple but fortifying
meal. As they helped themselves to the spread of chicken salad sandwiches on wheat bread, Bo’s
Swedish knäckebröd crackers with sliced cheese, and spiced peaches, Woody broke into sudden
laughter. “Oh, I must’ve looked ridiculous last night. I thought it must be a snake in my boot, what I
was seeing, but I hadn’t had a lick to drink.”

“I’ve seen you in that state, and trust me, this was better,” Buzz chuckled.

“Yeah, well, you can’t talk. Remember our first case we finished, and celebrated with a little too
much beer in L. A.? Walking back to your Dad’s place, and you thought you saw ‘Marie Antoinette and her little sister’ in a shop window?”

“Hey, those headless mannequins were disturbing,” he laughed. “Or they seemed so at the time. But at least I had an excuse then. This time, you were sober.”

The sun had not yet risen on Christmas Day when Buzz and Jessie returned to their house, having attended the traditional Miso del Gallo church service with Buzz’s relatives. Although the hour had been too early for Bo and Woody to accept Estrellita’s invitation to join them, Jessie was happy to share in her new family’s traditions.

The couple had only slept a short while the night before - having to be dressed and out the door in the wee hours of the morning - so they decided to climb back into bed so that they wouldn’t be too tired for the rest of the day’s festivities. Changing out of their Sunday best, Buzz slipped between the covers in his long underwear, while Jessie unpinned her braid and undressed down to her combination and stockings, not bothering to don her nightgown again for only a few brief hours of rest. She snuggled up against her husband, and in moments they had both dozed off.

Jessie, however, didn’t sleep for long. After about an hour, as the sun was starting to filter into the room along the edges of the window shades, her eyes popped open, the excitement of the day overtaking her. Woody had brought her present for Buzz over from its hiding spot in the Pride homestead while they had been away, and left it concealed in the parlor for Christmas morning. She was impatient to reveal her surprise.

She looked to her husband, who was still fast asleep. She sighed, then tossed and turned a bit, hoping it might rouse him. When that failed, she rolled on her side, then ran her fingers up and down the buttons on his undershirt, as if they were hopping from one to the other. Buzz only flinched a little at her touch, without waking, and she flopped onto her back. “Tarnation! Wake up already!”

Buzz suddenly spoke, “I woke up when you started tossing around. I just wanted to see what else you were going to try.” He laughed as Jessie brought her pillow down across his face with a gentle whack.

“Jus’ for that, maybe I won’t give ya your present!”

He wrapped her in an embrace and nuzzled her neck, “You’re the only present I need.”

“Oh, knock it off,” she swatted him lightly, laughing. “C’mon; I’m hungry. Sooner we do gifts, the sooner we can get over to Woody’s an’ eat!”

The pair descended the stairs in their robes, feeling all the excitement of the holiday as if they were children. Instead of the anticipation of receiving, it was the giving that they looked forward to. Just outside the parlor doorway, Jessie pulled Buzz to a halt. “You gotta close your eyes.”

“Why?”

“Jus’ close ‘em. Don’tcha trust me?” She stared at him until he followed her instructions with an exaggerated sigh. “An’ don’t go peekin’,” she took his hands in hers and guided him to the center of the room.

Buzz dutifully kept his eyes closed as Jessie walked away and he heard the click of a latch, followed by a strange metallic scuffling sound.

“Okay, open ‘em!”
His eyes opened and went wide at the sight of the phonograph that now stood beside his chair. It sat on a polished oak case emblazoned with a golden scroll reading “The Graphophone,” and a japanned tin horn projected from the top of it. “Wha- how-,” he looked at his wife, who was beaming with pride. “Where did you have that hidden?”

She rocked back on her heels, “Woody’s attic; he brought it over while we were at church. An’ I know these aren’t cheap, but I knew I wanted to getcha a phonograph ages ago, so I saved up for it back when I was still workin’ at the Harvey House. Woody’s been hidin’ it for me, jus’ waitin’ for Christmas. An’ look!” she pulled out the wax cylinder she’d been holding behind her back. “‘La Paloma’! An’ there’s more, too.”

Buzz was already inspecting the mechanics, and he placed the cylinder on the post. “Now we don’t have to wait for another fiesta to dance.” He cranked the handle to activate the gears, and scratchy music filtered from the horn. Buzz held out his hand to his wife, “Shall we?”

They swept around the room to the soft music emanating from the new contraption, spinning and swaying as they dodged the furniture they hadn’t bothered to move. When the song ended, Buzz finished their dance with a kiss and stepped aside. “Now, it’s my turn to give you your gift. Go ahead,” he gestured to the sofa, “sit down.”

Reaching from behind the Christmas tree that sat in the corner of the parlor, he pulled out a rather sizeable bundle concealed in plain white paper. He handed it to Jessie, and she eagerly untied the narrow red ribbon that encircled it and unfastened the straight pins that held the paper together. Inside, she discovered a wide-brimmed felt hat, a bright crimson red with a white band and edged in white leather whipstitching.

“Oh, it’s jus’ perfect!” she instantly placed it on top of her head. “Where’d ya find somethin’ like this? It’s so different.”

“It’s a vaquero hat - or in your case, a vaquera,” he grinned as he took a seat next to her. “I thought you might like to have something more practical to wear outside, for when you’re working with Woody and me on the ranch. Mamá gave me the name of someone who could make it for you.”

Jessie leapt up so she could admire her new hat in the mirror on the combination bookcase, tilting it on her head at just the right angle. “I love it!” She returned to the sofa and planted a quick kiss on her husband’s lips.

“It suits you, florecita. But that’s not all…”

“Wait, I thought we were only gettin’ each other one thing!” she protested. “I don’t have anythin’ else for ya.”

“Can’t I spoil you a little bit?” he smiled, as he pulled a tiny box out of his robe pocket and handed it to his wife. “Here.”

She lifted the lid to reveal a diminutive heart-shaped locket in sterling silver, embellished with an engraved horseshoe and tiny garnets. “Oh, this is awful pretty, too!”

“Open it. The real gift is inside. Speaking of things that aren’t cheap,” he laughed.

She looked at him curiously from beneath the brim of her hat, and opened the latch of the locket to reveal a small strip of paper. She unfolded it so she could read its inscription: **Good for a horse of your own after the next crop. Te amo, Buzz.**

Tears welled up in Jessie’s eyes, which were wide with disbelief. “My own horse? Really?”
“Really. We won’t have to add to the grove acreage this coming spring, so we can afford it.”

“Are ya sure?” her voice wavered, still stunned by what her husband had just offered her.

“Positive. Unless you’d rather have a bicycle,” he teased.

“No! I want a horse!” she laughed through her happy tears.

Buzz’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “On second thought, a bicycle doesn’t need to be fed, or groomed, or shod. Maybe that would be a better idea.”

“Stop it, will ya?” She leaned in to give her husband a grateful kiss, before he could carry his joking any further. “I’m gonna wear both a these today. We best be gettin’ over to Woody’n Bo’s. I wish she’d take it easy an’ let me cook breakfast for us all, but she insisted on doin’ it herself. Said she wants to still feel useful.”

“Bo’s used to being so busy, these last few weeks of her pregnancy are wearing on her, I’m sure. You know Mamá will pamper her this afternoon.”

It wasn’t long until the Lightyears were dressed and ready to go, and they grabbed their present for Woody and Bo on their way out the door. They opened the kitchen door at the Prides’ to the smell of fresh-baked Santa Lucia bread as well as the sizzling of sausages, eggs, and potatoes on the stove.

“Merry Christmas!” Jessie yelled out as they walked inside. She enveloped her brother and sister-in-law in hugs, while Buzz expressed his own holiday greetings. “You better let me do somethin’ to help, you’ve worked hard enough,” she fussed at Bo.

“Everything’s ready, so you can start carrying the food in. Woody’s already set the table for me.”

The four sat down to a festive feast in the Pride dining room. It was a cheerful space, with walls covered in soft blue and gold leaf-strewn wallpaper and the ceiling edged with a matching border of urns and fruit. Even on a winter day, the room was full of sunlight, thanks to a box bay window, which was covered with sheer lace curtains, the heavier slate-blue draperies having been pushed aside. Although it wasn’t needed in the bright morning sun, an electric chandelier hung from the center of the ceiling, brass with scrolls holding scalloped frosted-glass shades. A mahogany sideboard sat along one wall, topped with a mirror and decorated with curved carvings, and the dining room chairs that weren’t in use sat around the perimeter of the room. Bo had decorated the table with her best white lace cloth and a vase holding sprigs of holly, and the corner fireplace was decked in holly branches as well. When they had finished eating, everyone helped clear the table, then they made their way into the parlor to exchange presents.

The parlor carried on the same light and airy feeling as the adjacent dining room. Although Bo had chosen furniture in a dark mahogany stain to match the piano that came with the house, the other colors were soft in contrast. Scrolls and wreaths of dainty pink roses on an ivory background accented the walls, topped by a coordinating border of rose swags on a base of light blue. Rose-pink curtains flanked the windows, with lace panels beneath, and a blue patterned rug covered the wood floors. A carved wood frame sofa, armchair, parlor chair and rocker were grouped near the front windows, upholstered in a floral tapestry that complemented the colors in the room. Although an electric chandelier hung from the ceiling, a small accent table with a lamp sat near the furniture, to enable the reading of the books found on the spinning bookcase in the corner opposite the fireplace. And squeezed in the midst of this along one wall was a generously-sized Christmas tree, draped with popcorn-and-cranberry garland Jessie and Bo had strung together, die-cut paper and tinsel ornaments, and diminutive candles fastened to the branches with little tin holders.
Before anyone sat down, Woody looked pointedly at Jessie. “Didn’t you want to show Bo something at your house?”

She winked at her brother. “Oh! Yeah! Bo, you need to come see the phonograph!”

“I was with you when you bought it, and it’s been in my house ever since. I doubt it changed colors this morning."

“No, silly, but ya haven’t heard it!” She grabbed her sister-in-law by the hand. “C’mon!”

The two girls darted out one front door and into the other, Bo trying to keep up as Jessie hurried her along. “I can’t move that fast right now!” she panted, as Jessie led her into the parlor.

Jessie put on a cylinder, cranking the handle like Buzz had done so that it would play back. As they listened, and Bo sat on the sofa, Jessie peered out of the side window every few seconds. The moment the song ended, she offered a hand to help Bo to standing. “Okay, ya heard it, let’s get back!”

“You have me completely confounded this morning,” Bo laughed, as they walked back to her house, as quickly as she was able.

Inside, the reason for Jessie’s diversion revealed itself. Bo gasped when she discovered a beautiful oak hooded cradle sitting in the middle of the parlor, simple in its lines but well finished. Woody stood next to it with a very pleased grin on his face. “Merry Christmas, little lady.”

“Oh, Woody!” Bo’s hands flew to her mouth as she realized it was handmade. “You - you made this? For me?”

“With Buzz and Slink’s help, yes,” he smiled. “Do you like it?”

“Like it? It’s beautiful,” she started to cry as she rocked it back and forth, and Woody walked over, taking her by the hand and leading her to the sofa, the nearest place for her to sit.

“I didn’t mean to cause such a fuss; I don’t want you to go into labor on Christmas,” Woody chuckled as his wife made herself comfortable.

“I’m not,” she laughed. “So this is why you kept putting off buying one? I’ll admit, I was getting worried we’d run out of time.”

“It was hard keeping it a surprise, let me tell you!”

“Well, it was very much worth the worry, honey,” she tugged at his vest as a sign to lean down so she could give him a kiss. “Now, why don’t you light the tree and pass out the rest of the gifts? We’ll have to get going soon.”

As Woody took care to light the individual candles that were clipped to the ends of the tree branches, Jessie looked to Buzz. “We never lit our tree this mornin’,” she said with regret. “We got too caught up in the presents.”

“We can light it when we get home tonight,” he smiled. “It’ll look better in the dark.”

They all took a seat to open their packages, which were wrapped simply in white paper and ribbon in much the same way Jessie’s hat had been. Jessie and Bo had decided to exchange handmade gifts between the two couples, to save money, so each was curious to see what had been made for them.
“You go first,” Bo said to Buzz and Jessie.

Jessie unfastened her wrappings to reveal a shirtwaist that Bo had sewn for her. In the latest fashion with hugely-puffed sleeves and a high collar, it was mostly white, but was accented with a yellow yoke and yellow cuffs, and fastened with a row of dainty pearl buttons. The yoke was edged in red piping, and was accented with embroidered red swirls, as were the wide cuffs.

“Oh, Bo, it’s jus’ the prettiest thing! I can’t wait to wear it. Thanks a bunch!”

“I’m glad you like it. I tried to use your favorite colors.”

“I really do. An’ you’ll have to show me how to do this kinda stitchin’,” she ran her fingers across the delicate swirls. “I’d like to put that on some other waists.”

“Is it my turn now?” Buzz grinned, as he eagerly took his turn at opening his present. Inside, he found a sporty hand-knit turtleneck sweater, made out of fine wool in a soft, steely gray. “Wow. You made this?” he asked his sister-in-law as he draped it in front of his chest, somewhat in awe.

“I did. Thought it would come in handy on those cold mornings in the grove. And the pattern called it an ‘athletic sweater.”’

“It’s great. Thank you,” he replied sincerely.

“Saved the best for last, huh?” Woody quipped, as he took the gift that was marked with his name in his wife’s handwriting. He unfolded the paper to uncover a handmade cotton work shirt, sewn in a vibrant gold and red plaid.

“This is really nice.” He held it up for a better look. “I don’t know if I wanna wear it for working, though, I’d hate to mess it up. I’ll keep it for better occasions.”

“I know it’s not much, after what you gave me, but…”

“Are you kidding? I like my shirt, but you’re about to make me a father, Bo.” He wrapped one arm around her waist to pull her close. “That’s the best present I could ever ask for,” he kissed her temple as he gently caressed her stomach with his free hand. He felt a kick beneath his fingers. “See? Our little sweet pea agrees with me.”

“Okay, open ours now!” Jessie bounced in her seat, as Buzz handed over the parcel. “I hope it’s not cheatin’ that it’s for both ‘a ya, but you’ll see why.”

Together Woody and Bo untied their package to find a sizeable bundle of frothy white, in the form of a hand-crocheted blanket and booties. “Jessie!” Bo exclaimed, as she unfolded the soft blanket. “I didn’t know you could crochet!”

“I didn’t either,” her sister-in-law laughed. “But I wanted to make somethin’ special for my niece or nephew - ‘specially when I knew Woody was makin’ the cradle. I tried knittin’ first -”

“I don’t know how many flying balls of yarn I dodged during that attempt,” Buzz chuckled.

Jessie shot her husband a look and continued. “Anyway, when that didn’t work, I figured out how to crochet all by myself! It ain’t perfect, but it’ll keep the lil’ one warm.”

Bo overlook the fact that the blanket wasn’t quite square, appreciating the meaning behind it. “It’s just lovely, you did a wonderful job. And these booties! You’ve been busy.”
“One’s bigger than the other,” Jessie pointed out sheepishly.

“That doesn’t matter; it’s the love you put in them that counts. Thanks, Jess,” her brother smiled.

Buzz stood, “Not to rush things, but we should get going if we’re going to make it to Mama’s before lunch. I’ll take these back to the house and get the carriage ready.”

“Don’t forget the presents; they’re in the spare room,” Jessie handed her husband her parcel. “I’ll help Bo get things cleaned up here.”

Several minutes later, the four made a merry picture as they began their travels to the Lightyear hacienda. Bo pulled her cloak tighter around her figure, “I hope Slink’s having a nice visit with his family.”

“I’m sure he is,” Woody wrapped an arm around her, enjoying the freedom of Buzz being in the driver’s seat. “I’ll have to tell him, when he’s back next week, that our one calf was moping around the yard when he didn’t show up to feed him.”

“Poor Slink,” Jessie laughed, “I wonder how mama cow feels about bein’ replaced!”

They arrived at the hacienda to a much larger gathering than the year before: Lalo and Caroline, and Alejo, Lavinia and the children, were all visiting from Los Angeles, Estrellita having insisted on their presence in honor of it being Buzz and Jessie’s first Christmas as husband and wife. Héctor and Emelda had come over as well, along with Tano, Josefa, Lote, and Berto, and the old adobe house was veritably bursting with holiday cheer. Even Lavinia was seen to crack the occasional smile; and as expected, Estrellita made sure Bo had the most comfortable chair and didn’t let her lift a finger.

Darkness had fallen when the two couples returned home to the ranch, parting at the barn with good night and Merry Christmas, and heading to their respective houses. Tucked under Jessie’s arm was their present from Buzz’s parents: a ceramic pig painted with a floral design. It had been in the family for as long as Buzz could remember and was a treasure he had loved as a child.

“Where are we gonna put this critter?” she asked as Buzz unlocked the back door.

“How about in the parlor for now? There’s room on one of the shelves,” he switched the light on and stepped back to hold the door open for Jessie.

“That sounds good. I would like to find it a home in the kitchen, since that seems to be the traditional spot for it.”

Buzz chuckled, helping Jessie out of her coat, “I don’t know how traditional it is, at least outside of our family. I’ll get these hung up and meet you in the parlor. Why don’t you pick out another cylinder; I’ll get the tree lit and we can have another dance?”

“I’ll find some music, but you know what I really want? To sit together and just be. It was such a full day of hustle an’ bustle and I’m ready for some quiet.”

He bent over and kissed her lightly, “We can do that, too.”

Soon the parlor was awash in the soft glow of the candles strategically clipped onto the branches of the tree. Buzz had turned off the electric lights so they could appreciate the effect, as the flames made the glass and tinsel ornaments scattered amidst the garland seem to sparkle. The soft strains of *After the Ball* filtered from the phonograph horn, and Buzz sat on the sofa next to his wife. He held his arm aloft so she should curl up on the sofa, snuggling against him. When the familiar song drew near its conclusion, Buzz kissed Jessie on the forehead. “I need to get up before it reaches the end; do
you want me to put on another song?"

“Nah, or you’ll jus’ have to get up again. Quiet’s good, too.”

Once Buzz had returned to his seat they cuddled back down together in contented silence, enjoying just being in each other’s company. Buzz’s fingers trailed along the back of her neck, at the edge of her hairline, causing her to stir. “Sorry, did that tickle?” he asked, amused at her reaction.

“No, it’s jus’…” she looked askance at the combination bookshelf where the pig sat. “I love your Mama to pieces, you know I do… but that pig.”

Buzz stared at it puzzledly. “What about it?”

“It looks like it’s judgin’ us,” she said with a giggle.

He looked back to the face and noticed how the mouth slanted in a way to give a disapproving expression. “You’re right!” He turned back to Jessie with a wicked grin, “Let’s name it ‘Emily’.”

“Buzz Lightyear, you’re terrible!” she shrieked with laughter. “But it’s perfect, so let’s.”

“Do we need to turn it around?”

She blinked, “Why?”

“Well, it might not approve of this,” he punctuated the sentence with a deep kiss. Jessie whimpered into his mouth, shifting until she was atop his lap. A few minutes later, Buzz broke away, “We should probably move this to the bedroom.”

“Agreed. But put out the candles, first.” She stood, then leaned down to plant an enticing kiss on her still-seated husband’s lips. “I’ll be upstairs, waitin’.”

Jessie entered the back door of the Pride house to find the kitchen vacant. Her sister-in-law was usually to be found there, busily baking or ironing or tending to some other domestic task, but she was nowhere to be seen. Her brow dipped in concern, and she proceeded down the hallway, calling out ahead. “Bo? Ya in here?”

“I’m in the parlor, Jessie.”

She found Bo sitting in her favorite plush rocker, her feet raised on a tufted ottoman that Woody had bought for her when pregnancy began to make her feet uncomfortable. There was a weariness in her expression that Jessie picked up on right away.

“You okay? Ya don’t feel like the baby’s comin’ do ya?”

“I’m fine. No pains; just tired. Tired of being stuck in this house, and practically as large as it.”

Jessie sat down on the sofa next to the chair, and smiled warmly at her sister-in-law. “You’re almost there. But what would help ya get through today? I can make dinner tonight.”

“That would be wonderful. I just wish… I mean, soon the baby will be here, and I’ll be in confinement for a while… it would just be nice to go somewhere, you know? Anywhere. Just get out of the house, maybe for the last time before we have this little one to take care of,” she rubbed her hand lovingly on her swollen belly.

“How ’bout I go talk to the fellas? It’s a pretty day; maybe they’d be up for a trip into town. I’d take
ya myself, but I don’t wanna be alone with ya away from home, in case ya go into labor,” she admitted with a laugh. “We haven’t been to San Bernardino in a while, maybe they’d have somethin’ nice for the baby in one’a the shops.”

“I like that idea,” Bo smiled gratefully at her sister-in-law. “It’s been ages since we browsed at Livingston’s.”

“Then it’s settled.”

It didn’t take much convincing to get Woody and Buzz to agree to an outing, especially when met with Jessie’s determination. The men freshened up from their morning work, and before long the two couples were riding in their surrey behind Bullseye, on their way to the city.

When they arrived in San Bernardino, Woody pulled up in front of the S. E. Livingston dry goods store on Third Street, and secured Bullseye to a cast-iron hitching post along the curb. The large store, with its inviting show window teasing what could be found inside, sold a wide variety of apparel and household items. Jessie and Bo had done much shopping there during their Harvey Girl days, and it was exciting for them to return to one of their favorite local haunts.

Upon entering, the girls headed straight toward the store’s display of dress fabrics and Butterick sewing patterns. On the way they were distracted by other racks, including one of velvet capes.

“Oooh, these are on sale,” Bo gasped, running the plush fabric between her fingertips. “But what do I need a new cloak for now? My old one is fine. I need baby things - and dresses that fit me again. C’mon, let’s go look at patterns.”

The men, who had followed their wives as they made their beeline, glanced around the store as the girls settled in to browse the Butterick case. Focused on the task at hand, Jessie and Bo were oblivious to their husbands’ presence; and Woody tapped Bo on the arm to get her attention.

“Buzz and I are gonna look around. Will you two be okay?”

“We’ll be fine. If we’re not here when you come back, check the dress goods department.”

The two sisters-in-law had fun making their selections, deciding what new clothing items they might need for Spring, and what color fabrics they might want to sew them in. Jessie settled on a single new shirtwaist pattern; while Bo piled up a stack consisting of a day dress, a skirt, a shirtwaist, an infant’s house-sack, and an infant’s dress.

Jessie looked at Bo and smirked at her ambitious choices. “You sure you got enough there?”

“I don’t know how long it’ll take me to lose the baby weight, so yes,” Bo laughed. “At least this way I can make something new if I need to, without having to wear my maternity dresses anymore. Goodness knows I’m tired of wearing the same outfits all the time! Let’s pick out some fabric.”

It was at the dress goods counter where Woody and Buzz found their wives a short time later. Jessie held a single yardage of yellow printed calico, along with the necessary trim and notions to complete her garment, while Bo was still getting the last of her selections cut by the clerk.

Woody glanced at his wife’s pile of merchandise, somewhat warily. “Uh, are you gonna have time to sew all those, with the baby?”

“The baby has to sleep sometime. And you can take your turn and give me a break, you know,” she looked at him pointedly, yet with a smile.
“Yes, ma’am,” he chuckled.

After the girls had procured all their sewing needs, the two couples wandered the store together, looking at its large selection of household linens, readymade apparel, shoes, handkerchiefs, gloves, and other goods and sundries. Buzz picked up a couple pairs of socks that were on sale; and Bo paused in the shoe department when she spotted a diminutive pair of infant boots, patent leather with a row of tiny buttons.

“Look at these!” she picked one up and held it in front of Woody’s face. “Aren’t they the sweetest little shoes you ever saw?”

“They are,” he grinned at his wife’s effusions, “but we kind of need to see what size the baby wears first. And, you know, is big enough to actually need them.”

“Oh, I know that, but I can’t wait until we can buy some.”

Seeing nothing else that they couldn’t live without, the four made their purchases and left the store. “Is there anywhere else you’d like to go?” Jessie asked her sister-in-law, when they had returned outside with their brown-paper packages. “If you’re up to walkin’, that is.”

“We can do a little window shopping; I’m not ready to go home quite yet. Besides” Bo laughed, “maybe some walking will make this baby come already.”

“Then maybe we better not,” fretted Woody. “I’d rather he or she didn’t arrive ‘til we’re back home.”

“She’ll be okay for a little bit,” Jessie dismissed her brother. “Which way you wanna go?”

The four headed slowly up Third Street, until they came upon a shop with an ornate baby carriage in the window.

“That’s sure pretty,” gushed Jessie. “Ya don’t have a buggy.”

Bo studied it through the glass. “We don’t really need one, not yet at least. It’s not like I’ll be walking the baby into town.”

“But I know ya wanna look anyway,” Jessie smirked at her sister-in-law. “C’mon.”

They stepped inside the store - with the name Shafer Bros. emblazoned on its sign and window lettering - to find a wide array of home furnishings, both new and secondhand. They made their way through the showroom until they found the selection of baby items.

“This one’s nice,” Woody pointed out, as he ran his hand along the intricate woven-reed structure of the carriage. Inside it was cushioned and upholstered in silk, and an attached silk parasol edged in lace provided shade for the child that would ride within.

“It’s very nice, honey, but look at the price,” Bo cringed.

Woody looked at the tag and his eyes grew wide. “Oh, heh, yeah,” he proceeded over to some other infant furniture nearby. “We are going to need a highchair though.”

“We will, and I do like some of these,” remarked Bo, as she lifted the tray on one of the tall chairs and set it back down again. “It’s nice that they come in a darker finish to match our furniture. We may have to come back here when our sweet pea is old enough to use one.”
“How about this?” Buzz called the couple over to where he was standing nearby. “Isn’t it clever?” He wheeled around the circular contraption with a seat suspended in its center, raised on pivoting casters. “Says it’s a baby walker.”

“Can’t ya see the lil’ one goin’ all over the house in that?” Jessie giggled.

“It’s not a bad idea,” Bo pondered. “Might let me get some things done when the time comes. I’ll definitely keep that in mind.”

Not prepared to make any expensive purchases that day, the Prides and Lightyears exited the shop and paused on the sidewalk before traveling any further.

“Where to next, Bo? This is your day,” Woody asked.

“I’m getting kind of hungry, honestly. We left without even thinking about lunch. Maybe we should just go home.”

“You wanna go to the Harvey House for lunch?” Jessie suggested. “It’d be nice to see Mr. Igel, and whatever girls are still workin’ there.”

Bo peered down at her belly then gave her sister-in-law a skeptical look. “I’d like to, but do you think I’ll even fit at the counter?”


“Not that you ladies aren’t excellent cooks, but I could certainly go for a Harvey meal for old times’ sake,” Woody grinned.

“Then let’s go!”

They returned to their surrey and made their way down Third Street to the depot, parking the vehicle out front of the building. Inside, the lunch room was much as they remembered it - the marble counter gleamed as brightly as ever beneath the electric chandeliers that hung overhead, and potted plants accented the open space. It was a novelty for the girls to sit in the pivoting stools on the customer side of the counter, after so many months spent bustling behind it.

“Mein goodness!” Mr. Igel came hurrying out of his office as soon as he realized his two former Harvey Girls had entered. “What a wonderful surprise to see you both! How is life in Redlands?”

The two girls greeted their former employer warmly, as did the men, and they filled him in on their ranch. He in turn told them which of their former co-workers remained and which had moved on in the nine months since they left. Hannah - the only Harvey Girl they knew who happened to be working that day - came out from the kitchen to say hello, and the two couples enjoyed the delicious food that they held such fond memories of from nearly a year prior.

After their meal, they climbed back into their carriage. “Anywhere else, little lady?” Woody deferred to his wife, before giving Bullseye any commands to start moving.

“No, I think I’ve had enough excitement for today,” Bo smiled. “But thank you all for indulging me. It’s been delightful to get out.”

“I do want to stop by the post office on the way home,” her husband remarked, as he clicked and nudged his horse into motion. “Might as well while we’re out. It’ll only take a minute.”

When they reached the Redlands post office, Woody parked the surrey out front and hopped down
from the driver’s seat. “I’ll be right back.” Moments later he was hoisting himself back up into the
vehicle. “There wasn’t much mail, just this letter from home. If you don’t mind, I’m gonna read it
real quick before we go - I’m always curious about what Ma’s gonna have to say.”

“I don’t wanna know,” Jessie groaned from the backseat, “but go ahead.”

He quickly ripped open the envelope and unfolded the paper inside. It didn’t take him long to scan
its contents, since the text was brief and to the point. As the reality of the words on the page hit him,
Woody exhaled as if all the air was leaving his lungs. “Ma’s coming.”

“What do you mean, your mother’s coming? Is this you getting back at us for Halloween?” Buzz
asked, as he saw his wife’s eyes widen with fear.

“Believe me, I wish it was,” he slumped in defeat.

Bo snatched the letter from her husband’s hand. “Give me that.”

Jessie’s throat tightened as the idea of confronting her mother sunk in. She felt herself falling into a
state of panic, and was powerless to prevent it. “No. No! She can’t! I can’t see her again!”

“Shh, it’s okay, florecita,” Buzz reached for his wife’s hand and rubbed his thumb across it
soothingly. “You better start driving, Woody. We need to get Jessie home.”

Fully aware how this news would impact his sister, Woody guided Bullseye forward with a tug at
the reins and hastened in the direction of the ranch.

“Shit.” Bo folded up the letter and shoved it back into the envelope with force. Woody turned to his
wife, shocked at her profanity. “Keep your eyes on the road, Sheriff. How on earth am I supposed
to get the house ready, and entertain that woman for two weeks, and deal with having a baby, too?”

“You don’t have to entertain her. I’ll see to that. And I’ll help you with the house. If things get too
bad, I’ll take her to the Hotel Windsor.”

“We had everything all set for Jessie to help me with the baby,” Bo continued with her rant, as if she
hadn’t even heard her husband speak. “And it’s not like your mother is going to be any real help.
She doesn’t want to help us; that’s a pack of lies so she can come out here to snoop and meddle.
She’s just going to get underfoot and cause upset for everyone. I wish you hadn’t even told her we
were expecting.”

“Can’t we do somethin’ to stop her? We can’t let her come here! We just can’t!” Jessie felt her chest
tighten, and with her free hand she reached around for her braid and tugged at it for comfort. “Can’t
ya write her, tell her ya don’t need her help?” she pleaded with her brother.

“I’m afraid not, Jess. It wouldn’t do any good if I tried. By the time the letter got there, her train
would have already left.”

Buzz’s brow furrowed. “How soon are we talking, here?”

“Next Thursday,” Woody replied solemnly.

“Next week?!!” Jessie burst into hopeless tears, and Buzz extended his arm across the back of the
seat, wrapping it around his wife as she buried her head in his shoulder.

The four rode along, their silence only occasionally punctuated by Jessie’s sniffs. What had
moments earlier been a time of joyful anticipation for the family was now clouded with a sense of
impending dread.

Chapter End Notes

The idea of a Halloween social thrown by a church - along with the typical decorations, refreshments, and games - comes from society articles found in newspapers of the time. Snapdragon was a crazy Victorian game where a bowl was filled with raisins and brandy then lit on fire, and players had to snatch the flaming raisins from the bowl and eat them. We were inspired to incorporate the La Llorona legend into the fic after we researched the folklore behind the song as it appears in Coco. This folk tale of the weeping woman has been around for centuries, and is widely known and told throughout Mexico and the American Southwest. There are many variations based on the region and storyteller, so I tried to summarize the most commonly-found version. The “night when fairies light” line is from the (public domain) poem “Halloween” by Robert Burns. Knäckebröd is a cracker-like crispbread that is traditional to Sweden. Having a “snake in your boot” is a 19th century euphemism for being drunk - referring to hallucinations in an intoxicated state - so of course once we learned that, we had to put it in the story somewhere! In 1895, phonographs were just starting to become attainable as home entertainment for the middle classes, costing in the range of several hundred dollars by today’s prices. They played wax cylinders instead of the records we know today. Even though both the Lightyears and Prides have electricity, in the 1890s wall plugs were very uncommon, so their Christmas trees would have still had candles on them. Electric lights on Christmas trees weren’t common until after the turn of the century. In case you might have forgotten, Emily is Woody and Jessie’s mother. The stores named in San Bernardino existed at the time, and details have been taken from period newspapers. An infant’s “house-sack” is a little jacket, and both boys and girls wore dresses as infants and toddlers in the 1800s, for ease of diaper changing. Bo cussing isn’t anachronistic - most of the swear words we use today were well established the late 1800s. The inspiration for this instance came from one of Annie Potts’ lines in “Pretty in Pink” - if you haven’t seen it, watch it, she’s fabulous, and all we can hear is Bo!
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

We're back with a new chapter, and not so late this time! Actually, we had a lot of fun writing this chapter, and have had big chunks of it written for quite a while, so it didn't take us long to finish it up. We hope to stay more on track from here on out!

Be sure to visit our Pinterest board (Jessie's Journey under username yodelincowgirl) to see the images that served as inspiration for this chapter.

Toy Story still isn't ours. If it was, we'd have another trailer by now, or a new clip from Toy Story 4! Enjoy, and be sure to subscribe and bookmark so you don't miss future updates!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sunset sky was streaked with vibrant orange and violet as Jessie stood outside the Redlands depot, wringing her hands nervously. Every now and then she either stole a glance at her chatelaine watch that hung from the belt of her skirt, or stared down the rails in search of a train that was not yet in sight.

Buzz walked up to her, having hitched Astrónomo and their surrey to a post out front. He could see the anxiety written all over his wife’s face, and she looked to him with pleading eyes.

“Why’s it late? It’s just prolongin’ the agony.”

“Your mother’s train should be here soon, florecita.” Buzz placed a reassuring hand on the small of her back. “It’ll be okay. I’m here; you don’t have to be alone with her.”

“Why did Bo have to feel poorly today, of all days?”

“Because she’s nine months pregnant,” he laughed.

“I just wish Woody coulda fetched Momma instead. Or let me sit with Bo, or somethin’.”

“You know he’s worried about Bo; she’s bound to deliver any day. He doesn’t want to leave her side, and I couldn’t leave yours, in the same circumstances. You understand that, don’t you?”

“I s’pose,” Jessie sighed. “I still think he coulda come, and left me with Bo. Even if she went into labor, I coulda sent Slink for the doc, and Woody woulda been home long before the baby was born.” She gazed down the track again, lost in thought for a moment. “Last time I saw Momma, she was scowlin’ as I left for Aunt Molly’s. We’d fought somethin’ fierce. Not like it’s gonna be a happy reunion, ‘specially when she’s expectin’ Woody, not us.”

An approaching whistle and an ever-increasing rumble announced the arrival of the Santa Fe train. Jessie compulsively smoothed her skirt and plaid shirtwaist, straightened her hat, tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear - anything that she thought might make her mother less likely to criticize her appearance. Then she began to run her fingers across the tiny turquoise star brooch she wore pinned at her collar - which she had donned at the last minute before leaving for the station, to remind herself that at least one mother approved of her.
“You look beautiful, florecita.” Buzz grasped her hand, to keep her from fidgeting any further. “Nothing your mother says can change that.”

The massive steam engine chugged to a stop and the passengers began to filter off the cars. It didn’t take long for Jessie to spot her mother in the crowd; Emily Pride hadn’t changed much in the two years since she’d last seen her daughter. A tall woman with an imposing air, her features exuded more prickles and thorns than maternal warmth. Her severe, almost gaunt, face peered out from beneath a black feathered hat that tied beneath her chin; and although her mousy brown hair was not unfashionably styled, it had more dull gray streaks than Jessie remembered. She still seemed to wear a permanent scowl, and as she stalked down the platform in her charcoal-black walking suit, she peered haughtily down her beak-like nose as the other travelers jostled past.

Drawing nearer to the waiting pair, her frown deepened. “Where’s Woodrow? I thought he was coming to pick me up.”

“Nice to see you too, Momma,” Jessie muttered. “Bo is under the weather, so I’m afraid you’ll hafta ride with us.” She took a deep, steadying breath. “This is my husband, Buzz.”

Buzz tipped his hat politely, and lied. “Pleased to meet you, ma’am.”

Emily made it no secret that she was scrutinizing her new son-in-law. He seemed to be the picture of courtesy and gentility, handsome and well-built, and neatly dressed if not expensively so. There was nothing to find fault with in his outward appearance, so she turned her critical eye to her daughter instead. She looked Jessie up and down; but since Jessie had taken extra care in dressing that morning, in preparation to face her mother, Emily fixated on the only thing that really stood out to her: the silver and turquoise star, which was easy to spot against the more-subdued navy blue tones of Jessie’s shirtwaist.

“Gracious, Jessamine! What possessed you to get such a pin? It’s positively primitive.”

“It was a weddin’ gift from Estrellita,” Jessie responded timidly.

“From whom?” she snapped, as if her daughter was speaking nonsense.

“Buzz’s mother. It’s an antique.”

“It belonged to my great-grandmother,” Buzz interjected, seeing Emily was not placated. “My great-grandfather gave it to her. He always said she was his guiding star.”

Emily sniffed in disapproval. “I suppose it’s the thought that counts.”

Buzz observed his wife’s distressed expression and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. He turned to his mother-in-law. “I’ll have a porter help me bring your trunk around to our carriage. Would you like to ride up front?”

“No, that’s quite alright,” she curtly replied.

“We’re parked just around the corner.” He reached out his free hand, “I can take your valise, if you’d like.”

She pulled the bag closer to her, as if protecting it from a potential thief. “No, thank you. I can manage it quite well on my own.”

Buzz raised an eyebrow at his wife, an understanding passing between them that this would be a difficult drive home.
Once the trunk was securely strapped to the rear of the carriage, Buzz offered a hand to Emily and then Jessie as they climbed up into their respective seats. He set Astrónomo into motion and they headed out on the road to Roundup Ranch.

Jessie shifted tentatively in her seat to face her mother. “How is Pa?” she asked with a small voice, her concern for her father’s welfare outweighing her intimidation.

“He’s well, I suppose,” answered Emily, her tone cold. “He wanted to come here, too, but I absolutely forbade it. Trust his staff to run the store while he was away? Ridiculous. We would have been robbed blind.”

“Last I knew, Pa had good folks workin’ for him,” Jessie countered, albeit shakily. “It woulda been nice to see him.”

She stared her daughter down with a steely glare. “If you hadn’t run off like a gypsy, you could have seen him every day.”

Jessie’s defeat was evident as she turned back to face forward, her countenance pale. Buzz immediately spoke up to change the subject, “I’m sure things are greener and warmer here than you left back in Missouri.”

“Yes; but I can’t say I approve of all this exotic shrubbery.”

“They’re palm trees, they’re everywhere in southern California,” he explained, straining to sound somewhat respectful.

“I like ‘em,” Jessie mumbled in quiet defiance.

“I should have expected you to live in a place that’s wild and untamed.”

No one attempted to socialize any further, and the rest of the drive was spent in a strained silence. Thankfully, the distance they had to travel was a short one, and before long the surrey was pulling up the ranch’s driveway. Once Buzz had parked it in the circle out front of the houses, he walked around to Jessie’s side of the carriage. Knowing how his wife was struggling in her mother’s presence, he made a point to approach her first. She stood, and he placed his hands on her waist, lifting her down. “Finally home, florecita.”

“What was that you called her?” Emily scoffed, having eavesdropped from the backseat.

“Florecita. It’s a Spanish word… it means little flower. She is named after a flower, after all.”

“More like a wallflower… or a wild weed. I should never have let my sister suggest a name for her. ‘An elegant name will gain her entry into society,’ she told me. Hmmph.”

“Ma! You’re here!” In a merciful interruption, Woody appeared on his front porch, and with long steps strode over to his family in the front yard. Emily jutted her cheek out towards him, and he gave it the required kiss. “I hope you had a pleasant trip.”

“It was tolerable.” She squinted at Bo, who had come outside with Woody but remained standing on the front porch, her hand braced against her lower back. “This is your wife, I assume? Since she didn’t come over to meet me.”

“Yes, I’ll introduce you properly, she’s just not feeling too well today. The baby could show up anytime.” Woody gestured toward the trunk strapped to the back of the vehicle, and looked to his brother-in-law. “Buzz, would you mind?”
“Of course. Jessie, do you want to put the surrey away?”

Jessie nodded, and while the two men worked together to carry the trunk into the Pride house and upstairs to the spare bedroom, Jessie hopped up into the driver’s seat and cast her sister-in-law an apologetic glance. She drove around to the barn, and once she had gotten the vehicle parked inside, and had unhitched Astronomo and secured him in his stall, she stroked the horse lovingly, leaning against his neck.

“What are we gonna do about Momma, huh boy?” She giggled as Astrónomo nuzzled her. “Ugh, two whole weeks.” Bullseye whinnied in the next stall over, and Jessie turned at the sound. “Oh, you’ll get your turn to see her too, fella, just you wait.” She gave Astrónomo a kiss on the nose and went over to make an equal fuss over her brother’s horse, finding solace in the animals she so loved. Taking a moment to check on Bo’s sheep before leaving the barnyard, she returned to her own house, and proceeded to cook dinner for herself and Buzz, having had enough of her mother’s contempt for one day.

Next door, Woody and Bo were readying their dining room for their own dinner, while Emily placed foodstuffs she’d brought from home on the pantry shelves without offering any assistance to the couple. Earlier in the afternoon, Jessie had helped Bo get a beef roast in the oven, along with some carrots and turnips, and had even left her with some fresh-baked ginger cookies for dessert. Once everything had been taken out of the oven and plated to serve, Woody let Bo lead the way to the table, and he held the chairs for both his wife and mother to be seated.

For the most part, Emily had been attempting to make a good first impression on her new daughter-in-law, who - despite her casual appearance in a neat yet shapeless wrapper - she supposed was a worthy wife for her son. Bo presented the image of traditional ladylike refinement and domesticity that Emily esteemed, even if she did have the misfortune of coming into the marriage without a wealth of riches to contribute. Bo, in turn, had promised Woody that she would try to make the best of the situation, and was putting forth a valiant effort to be as good a hostess for her mother-in-law as she could be in spite of her condition - and in spite of her not really wanting her houseguest to be there in the first place.

The meal commenced with small talk of the train journey, as well as news about relatives and townsmen back home. Bo watched curiously as Emily turned down the slice of roast that Woody offered her, and only helped herself to a couple spoonfuls of vegetables, which she left sitting on the plate.

After several minutes had passed, Emily finally cut into a carrot and took a small bite. “I don’t know if Woodrow told you, but I follow a special diet. I never partake of meat, or hot food. These carrots are quite good, though.”

“I wish I could take credit for this delicious dinner, but Jessie made it all,” Bo remarked without even thinking; but she couldn’t help but notice that Emily stopped mid-chew when she realized she had unintentionally complimented her daughter’s cooking. With a mischievous glint in her eye, Bo continued. “Jessie’s really been a wonderful help to me these last few weeks, especially with the cooking and laundry. I don’t know how I would’ve gotten by without her, with Woody being so busy with the dairy.”

Emily set down her fork. “It seems that there is some sort of spice on these vegetables. I cannot tolerate spices. Thank goodness I had the foresight to bring some Graham biscuits and flour with me, so I can have some satisfactory nourishment here. Besides,” she directed at Bo, “in your state, you shouldn’t be eating anything but fruit, nuts, and occasionally milk, according to Dr. Kellogg’s writings. Certainly none of the stimulants Jessamine cooked into this meal.”
“I’ll eat what I see fit, thank you. But we do have fruit in the kitchen. There are a few oranges left from the grove - that reminds me, honey,” Bo turned to Woody, “we need to see if Jessie and Buzz can spare any more right now. I’ve been craving their oranges.” She faced Emily with a saccharine smile. “They had such a big order from the growers’ association last year, I’d hate to deprive them of their crop when they’re likely to have an even better harvest this spring.”

“Citrus doesn’t agree with me,” Emily grumbled.

“What a shame,” Bo sighed dramatically. “There are also the cookies that Jessie brought over.”

“I do not consume sugar, either,” she stated firmly.

“That’s fine,” Woody laughed, a little nervously, trying to diffuse the brewing tension. “Jessie made ‘em at my request anyway. Bo’s spoiled me with her baking, even since before we were married, and now since she hasn’t been able to do as much, I’ve had a hankerin’ for some sweets.” He smiled at his wife. “I don’t even know how Bo’s managed to do as much as she has, to keep the house in such good order. If I was in her place, I’d never get off the sofa.”

“Your home is nicer than I expected, Woodrow. At least you seem to be doing well for yourself.”

“Did you notice Jessie and Buzz’s house when you arrived?” Bo didn’t miss a beat. “This house was here on the land when we bought the property; we just fixed it up. But they built theirs brand new, and it’s lovely.”

“That explains the garish tower.”

Bo let out a slow breath and pressed her tongue between her molars, glancing towards her husband.

Woody took the hint and leaned back, patting his stomach. “I am stuffed. Bo, honey, why don’t I help you get things cleaned up?” He looked at his mother, who showed no intentions of making the same offer, then rose from the table and pulled out his wife’s chair. When the couple had finished putting away the food and washing the dishes, they retreated to the parlor where they found Emily perched stiffly on the sofa next to the lighted lamp, working on embroidery that she had brought with her.

The three spent the evening quietly in the parlor, Woody reading the latest issue of Hoard’s Dairyman while Bo worked on some knitting for the baby. He didn’t try to spark any conversation, not wanting to stir up another showdown between the elder and younger Mrs. Prides. When the time came to retire upstairs, he went with his mother to make sure her accomodations had everything she needed, while Bo readied herself for bed.

Woody closed his bedroom door and turned to his wife, who was sitting on the edge of the bed in her nightgown, brushing her hair. He hung his hat, which he carried in his hand, on the footboard of the bed. “Well, I think Ma’s settled in. But of course she had to complain how outdated the furniture was in the spare room, compared to the parlor. Not like she gave us much time to get a room ready for her to stay in.”

“She should be grateful we held onto the furniture that came with the place, or she’d be sleeping on the floor,” Bo groaned. “And what’s with this diet of hers? You didn’t warn me about that.”

“She was eating like that when I was a kid; I had no idea she had kept it up all these years. Being a Grahmamite, she called it - I guess this Kellogg guy she mentioned promotes the same thing. Like she said, no meat, no sugar, no seasoning, nothing hot. No butter, and hardly any milk or eggs. Just vegetables, fruit, crackers, bread, and water.”
Bo gaped at her husband, aghast. “Did you and Jessie and your father have to follow her diet, too?”

“No, Pa put his foot down about that, at least. He insisted we have milk and cheese, and meat - although it was always boiled and bland. The only treats we ever got were those he smuggled home for us. That was the one saving grace of going to Aunt Molly’s in St. Louis - she had a cook.”

“Oh, Woody, I can’t eat your mother’s miserable food while I’m stuck on bed rest! What about the groceries you bought?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t let any of that go to waste. If she refuses to cook what we’re used to, I’ll talk to Jess. You know she’ll help us out.”

Undressed down to his longjohns, Woody crawled into bed, and Bo slipped between the sheets to snuggle up against her husband. “This is going to be a long two weeks,” she sighed. “I’m sorry, honey, I know I said I’d behave, but I couldn’t help myself tonight. She’s such a pill.”

Woody chuckled. “Yeah, I thought you said you weren’t going to say anything when she made her comments.”

“I wasn’t going to, but then I realized I’d be mute for her entire visit.”

“Just don’t get yourself upset, okay?” he placed a hand gently on her stomach.

“Who’s upset?” Bo grinned. “Except maybe your mother. Did you see the look on her face when I talked back to her? That’s the only part about this that’s any fun.” She rested her hand on top of her husband’s. “I’m just sorry that one of the first people this little one will have to encounter is her.”

Woody leaned in and kissed her softly. “We’ll make sure she’s one of the last people, out of everyone who’s here.”

“Send Buzz to get Estrellita,” she giggled, still picturing her mother-in-law’s face contorted in offense. Woody joined in and then stopped.

“Wait, no,” his voice became low and serious. “No, because that means I would be left alone with Ma while he gets her, and I’m going to need some moral support.”

“There’s one good thing - at least she’s distracting me from worrying about giving birth.” Bo nestled her head against her husband’s shoulder. “Let’s hope our sweet pea joins us sooner than later. Then maybe your mother won’t feel the need to stay so long.”

The next morning, Bo was preparing breakfast, stopping every so often to massage the pains that were shooting through her back and swollen belly. Emily blew into the kitchen and took it upon herself to gather the dishes and silverware required to set the table. She did not, however, offer to assist with the cooking or urge Bo to sit and rest. Bo tried to be hospitable anyway.

“Good morning.” She grimaced as another cramp struck her, and contorted in an attempt to relieve it. “I think this baby is just about ready to make an appearance.”

Emily saw an opening in the conversation, and broached a subject she had been dying to discuss since the previous evening. “You know, I do find it rather strange that Jessamine isn’t also with child.”

“I’m sure she will be when they’re ready. They just haven’t chosen to start a family yet.”
“Not ready?” Emily scoffed. “If she wasn’t neglecting her marital duties, there would be no matter of choice.”

Bo couldn’t prevent a laugh from escaping her lips. “I can promise you, there’s no neglect. They adore each other.”

“Well, then, I suppose she waited too long to marry, and is now too old and unable to bear a child. I should have expected as much.”

“I’m three years older than Jessie.” Bo felt a rush of exhilaration in refuting her mother-in-law’s gossipy complaints. “She still has plenty of time.”

“Hmmph. I shouldn’t be surprised that she’d end up essentially immoral. If she doesn’t watch herself, he’ll be likely to leave her, and soon. Men don’t want wives who won’t produce children.”

‘The nerve of this woman!’ Bo thought to herself, and proceeded to reply as civilly as she could. “You can go on telling yourself that, if it makes you feel better,” she said to Emily, affecting a sickeningly-sweet intonation. “But I’ve never seen a couple more in love than those two, besides Woody and myself. I’m sure you know that the book you sent us as a wedding gift asserts that there is no immorality in limiting family size, and endorses perfectly honorable ways of preventing conception.”

Emily was the picture of incredulity. “The book I sent you does NOT say any such thing.”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, it does.” Bo placed her spatula on the stove and shuffled across the hall to the parlor, returning with the questionable book in hand. ‘Here it is. Page 267. ‘Women should have knowledge of these means in order to save them from the terror and dread which, if they would admit the truth, four out of every five would confess, overcloud and destroy the happiness of all their child-bearing years—embittering affection and killing passion. They should have it, that there may be light, and hope, and love, in their homes—and even conjugal delight; for I cannot conceive that that which is so eminently desirable and honorable in a man, should be valueless and shameful in a woman. They should have it that they may not have offspring forced upon them before they are ready for them; that the little ones may be welcomed with love, and desire, and joyful expectancy.’”

She clapped the book closed for emphasis and set it down with force on the kitchen table. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be serving breakfast.”

Woody walked into the dining room just as Bo entered, carrying a platter laden with eggs and sausage. “Bo, honey, you shouldn’t be carrying that!” He took it from her hands and set it on the table, then pulled out a chair so she could sit. “Ma, why didn’t you help her? I thought that was why you said you wanted to be here.”

Emily didn’t bother to look up from the package of plain brown crackers she had carried into the room. “She seemed to be managing quite nicely on her own.”

A silent, tense meal was spent among the three, with Woody thinking he had to remember to ask his wife later what had been said to make his mother even more sullen than usual. While Emily retreated wordlessly to the parlor and her needlework, Woody helped Bo clear the table and saw to it that she was settled comfortably in her rocking chair, then left to go about his daily routine of caring for his cattle.

When Woody came back to his house several hours later, with Buzz and Jessie in tow, he found its occupants much as he’d left them. Bo had fallen asleep; and she woke, realizing that she had failed to start her preparations for the midday meal. She struggled to raise herself from her seat, and Jessie walked over and planted her feet, then gave her sister-in-law a helping tug upwards.
“C’mon, I’ll help ya.” She leaned closer and spoke in a low whisper. “‘Sides, it’ll keep me clear of Momma.”

In the kitchen, Jessie pointed at the table. “You, sit. I’ll bring ya everythin’ you need.” She rounded up the necessary ingredients and utensils to make some simple sandwiches with the previous night’s leftovers, then laid them out in front of her sister-in-law. Jessie had no sooner sat down to help with the assembly herself, than Bo raised slowly to her feet.

“I need another knife. I’ll just get it my - OH!” Bo’s sentence was cut short by a gasp.

“What was that?” Jessie’s eyes darted upward from the bread she was slicing. “You okay?”

“I… think my water just broke.”

“Sweet mother of Abraham Lincoln!” She took a deep breath and steadied herself. “Okay. What do I do? Tell me what to do!”

“Well, the boys are going to have to figure out their own lunch. I need to get upstairs, to bed.”

The men were lounging comfortably when Jessie appeared in the parlor doorway, Bo leaning heavily against her.

Woody shot to his feet. “Bo? What’s wrong?!?”

“Woody, honey, the baby’s coming.”

“Now?!?” he cried, as if they hadn’t been expecting this day for the past nine months.

“Now.” She took in a sharp breath as another contraction seized her. “I’ve been carrying this child for a while, where did you think this would end up?” Even in her discomfort, Bo’s voice was laced with amusement.

Her husband lost all composure as he darted frantically around the room, not quite knowing what to do. His arms flailed as he ran from one corner to another, “I mean right now? Already?”

“I think the labor pains started last night.”

Jessie gave her sister-in-law a look, “An’ you didn’t say anything?!?”

Bo shrugged, “I didn’t want to worry anyone, in case it was a false alarm.”

Woody’s spastic movements hadn’t slowed. “It’s just… I mean… what do we do? What do we need?”

Buzz and Jessie shared a glance, and realized they’d have to take charge. Buzz rose from his chair and put a steadying hand on his brother-in-law’s shoulder. “Calm down, cowboy, I’ll go get the doctor. You and Jessie get Bo upstairs.”

“I don’t see what the fuss is about, women give birth every day,” Emily muttered, completely unmoved by the whirlwind of excitement going on around her.

“It’s their first!” Jessie exclaimed, as she passed a laboring Bo over to Woody for support, and started up the stairs to the master bedroom, more worried about her sister-in-law than her mother’s negativity in the moment. “That’s plenty to make a fuss about.”

“Not like you’ll ever know,” her mother mumbled under her breath. But much to Emily’s
disappointment, Jessie was too preoccupied to hear.

Noontime sunlight was shining brightly into the master bedroom when the three reached the second floor - a room that was already light and airy by design. The walls were covered in romantic ivory wallpaper strewn with pink roses, and lace curtains hung in the windows. The white-enameled iron bed continued the delicate appearance with its scrolled embellishments on the headboard and footboard, as well as a half-tester canopy draped in pink damask to match the roses. An oak dresser sat against one wall, a chair rested in the corner by the front windows, and at the foot of the bed was the blue floral-painted Swedish chest that Woody had bought for Bo when they were first engaged.

Jessie immediately went for the hand-embroidered coverlet on their bed, folding it carefully and storing it inside the trunk. “Bo, where did you put your sheets?”

“In the dresser, bottom drawer. Woody, honey, my nightgown is with the sheets. Can you help me into it?”

Woody assisted Bo in changing from her wrapper while Jessie stripped the bed and donned the clean apron that had been stored with the bedlinens. Bo had gone over the bedding arrangements with her previously, and she recalled the steps they had discussed, covering the mattress with a rubber sheet, followed by a cotton sheet. She repeated the layer of rubber sheeting and topped it with the draw-sheet for Bo to lay on, which was a bedsheet folded several times on itself. “There,” she set the pillows along the headboard. “All set for ya.”

Bo eased herself onto the mattress with her husband’s help, and he sat down beside her. “Where is Buzz with Dr. Blythe already?” he fretted.

“He hasn’t been gone that long,” Jessie reassured her brother, “I’m sure he’ll be back soon. Here, give me a hand with this a minute, will ya?” Together they moved the chest from the foot of the bed to an out-of-the-way corner. Woody returned to sitting on the bed with his wife and proceeded to rub her back, while Jessie cleared off the chair that sat by the window.

Soon enough there was a knock at the bedroom door announcing the doctor’s arrival, followed by Buzz, who lingered just inside the doorway.

“Mrs. Pride! It’s nice to see you,” Dr. Blythe greeted her warmly. “I hear this baby of yours is ready to make its grand entrance.” He shook hands with Woody, who now stood next to the bed. “Are you staying in the room, Mr. Pride?”

Woody looked to Bo, surprised by the question. Knowing his propensity for worry, she smiled bravely at her husband. “I’ll be fine, and in good hands between the doctor and Jessie. And sooner than you know it, we’ll have our sweet pea.”

He bent down and kissed her tenderly, running his hand over the crown of her head, “I love you, little lady.”

She gave his forearm a squeeze. “I love you, too, Sheriff.”

Buzz gently grasped his brother-in-law’s elbow to lead him out of the room. Woody looked over his shoulder one last time at Bo, before Buzz pulled the door closed and the doctor began giving instructions to Jessie.

Time seemed to tick by at a snail’s pace as the men waited downstairs for any word on the baby’s progress. In the Pride parlor, Buzz sat on the sofa, flipping through the latest edition of the Citrograph newspaper. Woody, however, found it impossible to sit quietly in his distressed state of
mind. Unable to focus on reading with his brother-in-law’s anxious and constant pacing nearby, Buzz folded the paper and set it down next to him. “You’re gonna wear a hole in the carpet,” he teased, as he watched Woody tread back and forth. His friend looked back at him with wide, worried eyes. “I’m sure everything’s fine,” he reassured the very-expectant father. “But I think I better get a telephone installed before next time.”

“Next time? I can’t think of a next time right now. I have to get through today.”

“You know there’ll be a next time,” Buzz chuckled. “And when it does happen, I hope Bo won’t wait until the last minute to tell us she’s in labor. Do you realize how hard it was to find Dr. Blythe on a Friday afternoon? Fortunately I ran into Mrs. Gillis from church, and she said she’d seen him tending to an injured neighbor not a half hour prior. She asked after Bo, by the way; and sent her regards. But I wasn’t sure I’d be able to find him and get him back here in time.”

“Well, Jessie and Slink and I have delivered calves; I guess we could’ve managed somehow,” Woody joked, despite his nerves. “But I’m glad we didn’t have to.” He stepped over to the parlor doorway and stared upwards in the direction of the stairs, listening for any sign of what was going on. “Why is it taking so darned long?”

“It’s only been a few hours. Why don’t you get yourself a drink, or something to eat? It could still be a while.”

Woody sighed, and followed his brother-in-law’s advice. He was just getting a cup down from the kitchen shelf when he heard his mother bluster in from the hallway. He caught a glimpse of her heading towards the back door, carrying a slip of paper in her hand, and turned to confront her, puzzled. “Ma? Where are you going?”

“I have some grocery errands that need to be run in town, and I was going to give orders to the help.”

“The help?” Woody stared at her blankly for a moment. “You mean Slink?”

“Your farmhand, yes.”

“Our ranch foreman - and good friend. He’s not ‘the help.’ Besides, he’s busy enough doing both his work and mine, so that I can be here for Bo and the baby. We have a pantry and icebox full of perfectly good food; you can make do with what we have on hand until I can take you to the store myself.”

“And when might that be?”

“Tomorrow? Next week? Whenever my wife and child don’t need me more.” He noticed her heading toward the parlor. “And don’t bother asking Buzz, either. I want him here.”

Emily turned on her heel with a huff and departed in the direction from whence she had came, while Woody poured himself a cup of milk, drank it, and returned to the parlor.

“What was all that about?” Buzz asked when his brother-in-law entered, wearing a perturbed expression. “I heard your mother go storming back up to her room.”

“She was going to order Slink around, and send him on personal errands - today of all days. And you can thank me for telling her not to pester you; that’s where she was headed next.”

“Much obliged,” he nodded. “C’mon, it’s so nice out, let’s go sit on the front porch for a bit. The window’s open, so we’ll hear if Jessie comes down with news. Besides,” he lowered his voice,
“you’re better off where your mother is less likely to find you.”

The two men stepped outside, where Buzz took a seat in one of the wooden rockers. Dusk was starting to cast its shadows over the ranch; however, the crisp air and serene blue haze didn’t do anything to ease Woody’s agitation, and he resumed his frantic pacing.

“Sit down, cowboy; take a load off. All that pacing won’t make the baby come faster,” Buzz laughed. Woody, however, didn’t stop his restless motion, and the incessant clomp, clomp, clomp of his heavy boots on the wooden floorboards started to wear Buzz’s patience thin. He rubbed his temples. “Really, if you don’t stop that, I’ll take your boots and throw them in the cow pasture. Don’t think I won’t do it.”

Woody stopped and looked at his brother-in-law, the fear evident in his face. “See how you feel when it’s your wife. If something went wrong,” his voice cracked, and he was unable to finish the sentence.

Buzz smiled sympathetically, stood, and walked over to his friend. “Nothing’s going to go wrong.” He placed an arm around Woody’s shoulders, and held his other hand out in front of him, as if gesturing to make a grand point. “Soon, you’ll be a father, and you’ll be sitting around the hearth with the family you two have always dreamed of. Now,” he slapped him on the back, “come sit, before I have to make good on my threat.”

Although Woody couldn’t keep from staring at the window, and listening for any faint noise to come from inside, he sat as he’d been instructed. Buzz tried to steer the conversation to plans for the ranch and reminiscences of their marshal days, topics that would keep his brother-in-law distracted. As they talked, they heard a rumbling of hooves and wheels traveling up the lane. Buzz rose, and waved to the visitor as they pulled their buggy up the driveway. Realizing it was Mrs. Gillis, the same lady he had crossed paths with in town, he gestured to Woody and they both walked over to greet her.

“How is Bo?” the kindly woman asked, as they neared the vehicle.

“She’s doing well - at least I hope she is,” answered Woody honestly.

“Never you fear, she’ll pull through,” Mrs. Gillis smiled warmly. “And your little bundle will be worth all the worry; that I can guarantee, too. I won’t keep you,” she lifted a basket from the seat beside her, “but I wanted to bring you some food, so you wouldn’t have to think about that tonight.”

Woody reached for the basket. “That’s mighty kind of you, thank you.”

“You’re most welcome. Give Bo and Jessie my best.”

With a wave the visitor drove back down the lane, and Woody and Buzz went inside to dig into the welcome feast she had provided.

Up in the master bedroom, Jessie had heard the spare room door slam in the back of the house and wondered what upset her mother this time, but she was too busy to be troubled by it. She was occupied with keeping her sister-in-law comfortable, and distracting her with lighthearted conversation to keep her mind off her travails. By the time night had fallen, Bo’s labor had progressed to the point where delivery was imminent. She was laying on the bed at an angle because of the footboard, and her forehead was beaded with sweat from the exertion required with each push. Jessie gave her her full attention, sitting behind her to serve as her support, and massaging her shoulders and back. “C’mon, Bo, you can do this.” Bo let out a cry of pain and pulled hard on the sheet that was tied to the one corner post of the footboard, her face contorted as she followed the doctor’s instruction to bear down.
Bo’s voice was joined by a higher-pitched cry as the baby entered the world. She fell back against Jessie, panting.

Jessie looked up at Dr. Blythe, who was beaming. “It’s a beautiful, healthy girl,” he announced. There was little time for Jessie to celebrate as the doctor needed the ligatures she had prepared for him earlier. She eased Bo back against the pillows, and handed the threads to him so that he could cut off the umbilical cord. The task completed, he carefully passed the infant to Jessie. “Time for baby’s first bath. Well done, Bo; you did wonderfully.”

As the doctor tended to Bo, cleaning up the afterbirth, binding her stomach, and removing the soiled bedclothes, Jessie sat on the trunk and held her new niece in her lap. She wiped her delicate skin gently with a damp cloth, taking great pain to support the newborn’s head. “Hey, sweetie pie, I’m your Auntie Jessie,” she said softly through happy tears. “And I’m gonna love ya and spoil ya somethin’ fierce, just you wait and see.” The little one wriggled and turned red as she let out a tiny wail. “You just cry all ya want, you’ve had quite a day. There,” she dabbed at the baby’s cheek, “You’re all clean. I think it’s time you met your Momma!”

Jessie wrapped the infant in a soft blanket and took her over to the bed. She sat down next to Bo, who turned her head so that she could see her daughter, and weakly reached up and brushed a corner of blanket away from the baby’s cheek. Tears welled up in her eyes. “Just look at her. She’s really mine. Hello, sweet pea.”

Fighting back more tears of her own, Jessie looked down at her sister-in-law with a wide smile, “Ya fin’lly got your family, Bo. An’ speakin’ of, should I go let Woody know he’s a dad, or should we let him suffer a little longer?”

Bo laughed, “Go get him.”

After handing the infant to Dr. Blythe for a final check, Jessie removed her apron and tossed it on the floor with the other soiled clothes, then bounded down the stairs to find everyone in the kitchen, including her mother. She grinned as Woody stood, almost knocking his chair over. “Hey Pa, wanna see your kid?” Her brother blew past her, and Jessie could hear him taking the stairs two at a time. She let out a giggle, “He didn’t even wait to ask if it was a boy or a girl.”

Buzz chuckled, “Well, what is it?”

“Oh Buzz, she’s the most precious pink little girl you ever did see! And I got to wash her and hold her first! Wait’ll ya see her. I think she looks like Bo. I best get back up, doc wants to tell Woody ‘n me how to take care of Bo while she’s recoverin’.”

Upstairs, Jessie paused in the doorway to the bedroom and smiled softly as she saw Woody tucking a clean comforter around his wife, who now held a sleeping baby next to her in the bed. Her brother looked up and beckoned her in, looking as if he might burst with joy. “You’ve met, but not been introduced. Jessie, this is Penelope Kjierstin Pride; Penny for short.”

“Penny. She’s just perfect,” she caressed her niece’s head, which was covered in the finest blond hair. “What’s left for us to do, Doc?”

Dr. Blythe gave the three specific instructions for the rest of that day and overnight. “I’ll be back in the morning to check in on both mother and baby. In the meantime, you should wait another three hours before nursing. And you,” he shook Woody’s hand, “should make sure your wife gets ample rest.”

“Yes, sir, I’ll do that. Thank you, Dr. Blythe. I’ll walk you out to the barn, by way of the kitchen.
You must be hungry.”

Buzz passed the other two men in the upstairs hallway, and peeped in the bedroom doorway before knocking softly, almost apologetically. “May I come in?”

Before Bo could answer with anything more than a nod and a smile, Jessie was already pulling him in by his hand.

“Buzz, come meet your niece, Penny! I don’t think I’m ever gonna get tired of sayin’ that. We’re really Aunt and Uncle!”

He laughed and kissed her temple, “We are. Congratulations, Bo; she’s beautiful.” Buzz turned back to his wife. “I’m going back to our place; Woody doesn’t need me for anything else, and I’m sure Bo’s ready for peace and quiet for a bit. Make sure you get something to eat from the kitchen; Mrs. Gillis brought a ton of food earlier, and you haven’t had anything all day.” He gave his wife another quick kiss before disappearing back out into the hall. “See you at home.”

Waiting for Woody to return so that Bo wouldn’t be left alone with the baby, Jessie watched as Penny stirred and her blue eyes fluttered open. “Mind if I hold her once more, before I hafta leave?”

Bo moved her arm to the side so Jessie could pick up the infant. “Of course not.”

Jessie was crooning over Penny, who was now staring up at her, when Emily barged in.

“I presume I am permitted to see my grandchild now, since I was never informed you were receiving visitors?”

“It’s been a bit busy in here, as I’m sure you can understand,” Bo responded flatly.

Her mother-in-law sniffed, “I understand it’s a girl.”

Emily had been watching Jessie swaying instinctively back and forth, her face lit with happiness as she cooed over the infant. Without much warning, Emily marched over and took the baby from her daughter. “A sensible name. She should grow into a real asset to society, that is if her aunt doesn’t taint her with her folderol.”

Bo witnessed Jessie’s face go white and her demeanor crumble. She held her hand out to her sister-in-law and gave her fingers a squeeze, “Thank you for today. I couldn’t possibly have done it without you.”

Jessie smiled slightly, “Nature would’a taken over.”

“You know what I mean,” Bo smiled in return. “You were such a comfort to me; no one else could have been that.”

She gave a small nod and slipped out of the room. Once Jessie was gone, Bo looked back to Emily, “I’d like my daughter back, please. I’m very tired and need to sleep. I’m sure you need to be getting to bed, too.”

Emily ungraciously returned Penny to her mother and left the room. Not caring whether her mother-in-law was still within earshot, Bo cuddled her daughter to her. “Don’t you worry, min älskling; there’s far worse people you could be like than your aunt.”
Woody was in the kitchen when Jessie passed through. “Hey, howdy, hey Aunt Jessie! Hey,” he noticed that there was not even a flicker of a smile on her face. “What’s wrong?”

The title she’d been so pleased to take felt empty after her mother’s harsh comments. She didn’t want to detract from her brother’s elation, though, so she simply shook her head and tried to force a smile. “Nothin’; just really tired all of a sudden.”

“I don’t wonder! You didn’t eat all day; sit,” he gently pushed her into a chair. “Mrs. Gillis brought by some of that egg salad she’s famous for.”

She managed to eat a few bites of the sandwich he handed her before setting it down and rising from her seat. “Sorry, Woody; guess I’m just not that hungry. I’m gonna get home and go to bed. Oh,” she stopped in her tracks, “I forgot to get the dirty sheets’n stuff upstairs. They can’t stay in the house.” She turned towards the kitchen door, but her brother stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

“I’ll take care of that. You’ve done so much already,” he gave her a grateful hug. “Get some sleep. And thank you, for everything today.”

Jessie exited out the back door and made the short trip across the moonlit yard to her own home. Buzz was sitting in the parlor, reading while he waited for her, when he heard her enter the kitchen and trudge across the hall and up the stairs without a word. Assuming his wife was exhausted from the day’s trials, he switched off the downstairs lights and followed her up to their bedroom.

Jessie was in bed, on her side facing away from the door, when he entered the darkened room. He quietly undressed and slid between the covers beside her, spooning up to his wife and wrapping an arm around her waist. As he laid in the stillness, he heard a faint sniffle and realized that she was not in fact asleep.

“Jessie? What’s the matter?”

“Nothin’.” Her quavering voice gave away that she wasn’t telling the truth.

“You wouldn’t be crying if it was nothing.” He rubbed his hand in circles on her back. “Did something upset you with the birth?”

“No ‘xactly. I’m just thinkin’ maybe we shouldn’t ever have any kids.”

Buzz was stunned by the statement. “Why would you think that?”

“Well, I’d just ruin ‘em. If I don’t ruin Penny, too.”

Buzz turned her towards him and wiped away the tear stains that streaked her face. “Who put that idea into your head?” he asked, knowing the answer already.

“Momma. She said that Penny would be an ‘asset to society’ as long as I didn’t ruin her with my ‘folderol’. An’ maybe she’s right, and I’d be a terrible aunt… and mother…” Jessie was overtaken by emotion, the hurt fresh on the surface.

It took everything Buzz had to not break the door down at the Pride house to go give Emily a piece of his mind. But there was Jessie, in his arms and sobbing. “Shhh,” he whispered, stroking her hair. “Shhh, florecita, don’t give that any more thought. You’ll be a wonderful mother. And I hope any children we have take after you and your ‘folderol’; I rather like it.”

She looked up at him and gave him a watery smile, “Mean it?”
He kissed the fresh tears from her cheek, “Every word.”

With a contented sigh Jessie snuggled against her husband, allowing sleep to remove the last of the sting from her mother’s barb.

The days following Penny’s birth passed quietly on the ranch, but the Pride household still felt a little turned upside down as Woody and Bo adjusted to parenthood. Buzz couldn’t help but chuckle at his disheveled, sleep deprived brother-in-law, even as he helped him by taking over as many duties with his cattle as he could, so the new father could spend more time at home with Bo and their daughter.

Jessie spent her days at the Pride house, cloistered with Bo in the master bedroom whenever Woody couldn’t be spared from his dairy chores. It was a safe haven, as Emily didn’t have much patience for the fussing of infants, and she let her son deliver the mediocre food she prepared up to the room at breakfast and dinner time. At noonday - when her mother’s diet regime didn’t prescribe a meal - Jessie prepared a tastier lunch, bringing it straight upstairs concealed in a basket.

The evenings, however, were spent apart. While Woody and Bo were subjected to Emily’s bland cooking, Jessie and Buzz enjoyed their own dinners at home, blissfully free of her mother’s forbidding presence. Late one afternoon, Jessie was standing at the stove stirring a pot of red chile sauce when she heard a knock at the front door.

“I’ll get it, florecita.” Buzz stepped away from the sink, where he had been helping Jessie by washing the dishes, and strode down the hall to greet the visitor, dish towel in hand. He opened his door to find his mother-in-law standing there, looking unpleasant as usual.

“I need a cup of milk, if you please. Woodrow isn’t back from tending the cows yet, and I cannot wait for him to return before preparing the meal.”

“That’s no problem.” Buzz didn’t fail to notice her eyes cast downward in judgment at his rolled-up sleeves and the towel in his hands. “If you’ll just come back to the kitchen with me, we have some in the icebox.”

Buzz led the way, intending to serve as a buffer between Jessie and her mother. He pushed the door open into the kitchen, and as Emily entered the room, her shoulder brushed against a shelf on the wall. The painted pig that had been a Christmas gift from Buzz’s parents - and had since found a home in the kitchen as Jessie intended - teetered on the edge, and he reached out to steady it.

“Watch out for Emmmm - ” Jessie blurted out, too concerned about the safety of her cherished family trinket to consider her mother’s reaction.

Buzz spoke up quickly. “M-marranito. It’s Spanish for ‘little pig.’” He shot Jessie an almost imperceptible smile in response to the grateful look she gave him for covering her near-gaffe. Emily’s facial expression so closely mirrored that of the pig that Jessie had to turn away to keep from laughing.

Jessie returned her focus to her sauce, while Buzz walked over to the icebox. He pulled out a bottle of milk and handed it to his mother-in-law. "Here you go, all yours."

She took it without offering any thanks, and turned towards Jessie at the stove. "What is that horrid smell?"

Buzz knew her intent was to criticize Jessie’s cooking, and wasn’t about to let her get away with it. "Well, if you came through the yard, sometimes the cows get loose. Maybe you stepped in a cow pie."
Emily’s face twisted in disgust. Buzz held open the kitchen door, and wasted no time in escorting her back to the front door. Once he was back in the room, he and Jessie let out the laughter they had been trying to contain.

Jessie went over to the shelf and straightened the pig on its perch. “I think I love this lil’ critter even more than ever.”

On the first day that Bo was able to come downstairs for dinner, Jessie wanted to do something special for her, while still wanting to avoid her mother’s insults as much as possible. She arranged with Woody to cook dinner at home in her own kitchen, and carry it the short distance next door that evening. And since Estrellita had taught her that tamales were a dish suited for special occasions - and had also proudly taught her how to make them - Jessie figured her new niece was a celebration worthy of the effort. The sleeves of her red wrapper rolled up above her elbows, and wearing an apron, Jessie toiled away at the arduous task of grinding corn.

Buzz walked up behind his wife, placing his hands on her waist and depositing a kiss on the side of her neck.

“Not NOW, Buzz,” she fussed, barely suppressing a giggle. “I gotta get this done…. d’ya want tamales tonight or not?”

“You’re all I want,” he purred in her ear, continuing with his playful advances.

Jessie was finding it hard to resist, teasing or not. “Yeah… well… I think Woody n’ Bo will be none too happy if we don’t show up with dinner. “

Buzz laughed and kissed her on the cheek. “Okay, I’ll get the laundry.” The sky was growing increasingly dark, and threatening the clean, dry clothing hanging outside on the line. He grabbed the empty wicker basket by the back door and headed into their backyard.

Next door, Bo sat in her parlor rocking chair, nursing Penny. Emily came storming in from the kitchen, having witnessed Buzz’s actions through the window.

“Jessamine’s husband bringing in the laundry? Can’t even manage her own household, I see. He was washing dishes when I went over for milk the other day! What kind of man does a woman’s work?”

“You don’t seem too concerned when Woody helps me with things,” Bo remarked, not too tired from new motherhood to still enjoy getting a little rise out of her cantankerous mother-in-law.

“Well, that’s different, you’re in a delicate condition. Jessamine is just… slothful. And her husband shouldn’t tolerate such idleness.”

Bo fought to rein in her temper, considering her infant daughter had just fallen asleep in her arms. “How do you know she’s being idle? Can you see through their walls?”

“I know my daughter.”

“I don’t think you do, really.”

Hours later, Jessie was bustling around her kitchen, finishing the last details on the food she’d been busy preparing all day. The tamales sat in their pot, ready to be transported to her brother’s house, and as she added dressing to the lettuce salad she’d assembled earlier, her mind began to wander, contemplating the evening ahead. Jessie’s heart started to race, her throat constricted, and her limbs
felt as if they were going numb as she succumbed to an overwhelming sense of panic. She collapsed into one of the chairs at the kitchen table, and buried her face in her hands.

“I can’t do it, Buzz, I can’t!” she cried out to her husband, who had just entered the kitchen with a small basket of ripe oranges he had picked at Bo’s request. “I can’t go over there and have dinner with Momma, and be captive to her insults. Not after the stuff she’s said already, ‘bout me and Penny, on top of everythin’ else. I just can’t!”

Buzz set down the basket by the door and went over to his wife. “Shhh, Woody and I will be there, and Bo,” he pulled a chair up next to her, and rested a comforting hand on the small of her back. “You don’t have to face her alone. And I know you want to see Penny. She loves her Aunt Jessie.”

“Can’t you just take the food over?” she choked out between jagged, hyperventilating breaths. “I’ll stay here. Bo’ll understand, and I can go see Penny tomorrow - ”

Just then the back door swung open and Woody breezed in. “Hey guys, I thought I’d come see if you needed help carrying the feast over… Jessie?” his expression changed to one of concern at the sight of his sister slumped over the table. “You okay, Jess?”

“She’ll be fine,” Buzz replied, rubbing his wife’s back. “She’s just a little upset about having to sit through dinner with your mother. She said some pretty cruel things to Jessie the day Penny was born.”

“Yeah, I know, Bo told me,” Woody sighed. “Jess,” he stepped closer and put a comforting hand on his sister’s shoulder. “I know this is rough - believe me, I know how she is. But you’re gonna have to stand up to her sooner or later.”

Jessie shook her head. “I never wanna see her ever again. I can’t take it anymore.”

“Hey,” he stooped down so he could look his sister in the eye. “I promise you, for all those years I wasn’t there to save you from her, that I will never let her walk all over you again. You understand?”

Jessie feebly nodded.

“You know why she said those things after Penny’s birth? Because you were proud, and happy, and deservedly so. Misery loves company, so she tries to bring you down, with whatever ridiculous thing she can think up. Next time she says something to you, really think about how much sense it actually makes.” Woody smiled kindly at Jessie. “That’s how I learned, after a while, to let what she said to me go in one ear and out the other. Let her see how happy you are here. Don’t take her words to heart, Jess. Don’t let her get under your skin.”

“I dunno if I can do that.”

“Can you maybe try, for me? And for Bo? She was looking forward to us having dinner together.”

Jessie sighed deeply and untied her apron. “I s’pose. But I’ll hafta change outta my wrapper first.”

“Why? You’re not going over to impress anyone, you’re going to have dinner with your family, dressed like you normally would.”

“Momma’ll have somethin’ to say about it.”

“Let her. She’ll have something to say no matter what.”
It wasn’t long before the food was gathered and the three came walking through the Prides’ kitchen door, Woody carrying the pot full of freshly-steamed tamales, and Jessie and Buzz with the accompaniments. They set everything down on the kitchen table and proceeded into the parlor, where Bo sat rocking baby Penny. The instant they entered, Emily looked down her nose at her daughter, with disdain and disapproval.

“Really, Jessamine, a common house dress? Couldn’t you have dressed more appropriately for dinner?”

Jessie shot Woody a look, and he instantly spoke up. “Why should she? We never get dressed up at home.”

“We’re family, we don’t waste time on formalities here,” Bo added, with a warm smile for her sister-in-law.

“Family is no excuse to neglect common decency. And that garish color! Without my guidance, you dress like a harlot.”

“How can I look like a harlot in a wrapper?” Jessie asked weakly, completely dumbfounded at her mother’s accusation.

Buzz stepped in, with a calming arm around his wife’s waist. “Jessie looks beautiful in red, just like she did at the first dance I had the honor of escorting her to, and just like she did at our wedding.” He cast a steely, defensive gaze at his mother-in-law.

Jessie’s head snapped around at her husband, a look of desperation on her face. Once realization hit him, he stared back at her with wide, apologetic eyes. The bit of knowledge she didn’t want her mother privy to had been revealed, and the reaction was as expected.

“Your wedding dress was RED, Jessamine?”

She braced herself to reply. “Yeah, because why would I spend all that money on a white dress I could only wear once? Figured I might as well be practical and get somethin’ I could wear again.”

“Well, I suppose it wasn’t… appropriate… for you to wear white anyway…”

Anger flashed in Buzz’s eyes. “How DARE you impugn - ”

Woody placed a steadying hand on his best friend’s shoulder. “Honestly, Ma, if she was gonna fool around with anyone, it would’ve been Buzz. But he’d have married her anyway, so what should you care?”

“Woodrow! Such things aren’t discussed in polite company.”

He shrugged. “You’re the one who brought it up.”

“Why don’t we sit down to dinner?” Bo suggested, casting a smile of solidarity at her sister-in-law. “We don’t want it to get cold and have all of Jessie’s efforts go to waste.”

While Buzz and Jessie went to arrange the food they brought for serving and transport it into the dining room, Woody steadied Bo - who was still a little wobbly after a week’s bedrest - and helped her get situated comfortably at the table. He returned for his daughter, who was laying in her portable bassinet basket in the parlor, and carried her in to be close to them during the meal. Once Penny’s basket was safely positioned between Woody and Bo, he pulled up his chair and joined the others for the meal he’d been anticipating all day.
The four eagerly passed the tamales around, as well as the salad of lettuce, tomatoes and cucumbers Jessie had also made, tossed with a dressing of olive oil and vinegar Estrellita had taught her. As they filled their plates, Emily lifted a lone tamale from the serving platter as if it was something to be feared. “How is one supposed to eat such things?”

“You just unwrap ‘em and eat what’s inside” Woody explained. “They’re delicious.”

“Jessie’s a wonderful cook,” Bo chimed in, “she’s learned quite quickly, considering that you never taught her anything useful at home.” Ignoring Emily’s glare, she continued. “Really, you should try them; they’re a lot of work, and it was so sweet of her to make them for us.” She beamed at her sister-in-law.

Emily poked at the corn husk, trying to reveal its contents with only the use of her utensils, as a proper lady should do. “Really, Jessamine, only you would concoct something this unusual.”

Buzz bristled, his defenses up, both for his wife and his heritage. “My mother taught her to make them. They’re a traditional Spanish dish.”

“Young mother? She’s -”

“Castilian, yes. Californio - a native Californian, as am I.”

“I should have known,” she harrumphed. “I cannot eat such foreign fare, it will most definitely give me dyspepsia. Besides, highly seasoned foods lead to... stimulation... and wanton behavior.”

Jessie stifled a giggle, starting to realize now how ridiculous her mother’s accusations actually were. “They’re not spicy, Momma, I made ‘em mild for Bo.” Pausing, she took a breath and resolved to take Woody’s advice to heart. “And it’s ill-bred to find fault with the food you’re offered.”

“As it is to insist that a person partake in a dish they have refused,” her mother snapped in retort.

“Suit yourself. Leaves more for the rest of us,” Woody responded, reaching for another tamale and smiling proudly at his sister. “But nobody’s cooking anything else when Jessie worked so hard already. There’s always bread and butter in the kitchen. Or your crackers.”

Emily begrudgingly took a spoonful of the lettuce salad Jessie had made as an accompaniment to the tamales, making a show to scrape off as much of the dressing as possible. “Jessamine, you might like to know that Mr. Pennington is doing quite nicely for himself these days. He’s the youngest president the bank has ever had. Of course, none of that matters, now.” She turned to Buzz. “Oh, but you wouldn’t know...”

He met her gaze without wavering. “Mr. Pennington, was that -”

“One of Jessamine’s few suitors, yes.”

“Yes, I know that. Someone you tried to force her to marry.” Buzz looked to his wife, “Jessie, was that the weasel, or the walrus?”

“The weasel,” she replied matter-of-factly, before placing her loaded fork in her mouth.

Emily chose to ignore the remarks and continued with her report. “He’s also recently engaged to Miss Pye,” she added pointedly at Jessie, “and if you recall, never was there such an example of feminine refinement and accomplishment as she.”

“An abstraction from the Ladies Home Journal, no doubt,” commented Buzz. “Personally, I’m
“Hey Ma, come to think of it, you tried to match me up with her before I left town. She didn’t have much of a mind of her own, just agreed with everything I said. What’s the fun in that?” Woody quipped, grinning at Bo.

“She’s perfect for Percival, then,” Jessie snickered.

Emily’s disgruntled expression didn’t escape anyone’s notice, and both couples fought back the mirth that was threatening to burst forth.

“Speaking of arranged marriages,” Bo spoke nonchalantly, yet with her gaze focused squarely on Emily. “I’m sure you followed the Consuelo Vanderbilt and Duke of Marlborough nuptials in the paper this past November.”

“I did, it was all very fascinating.” A faint glint of enthusiasm sparked in Emily’s eyes, as a subject of great interest to her had been broached. “I have followed all the marriages of American heiresses to titled royalty abroad. My sister and I had high hopes for Jessamine when she was younger, but alas, all the money and training in the world couldn’t turn her into a lady worthy of a prestigious match. My sister has one of the finest houses in St. Louis, you know, and many prominent connections.”

A mocking laugh escaped Woody’s lips. “Aunt Molly’s loaded, but she’s no Vanderbilt.”

Bo disregarded her mother-in-law’s resentful scowl, and continued. “I imagine Alva Vanderbilt is an idol of yours... selling her daughter into a loveless marriage for a title, like she’s a piece of property, for her own fame and glory.”

A deathly silence fell on the dining room, and it felt as if all the air had been sucked from the space. Emily set down the fork she was holding. “Excuse me?”

“Well, you seem to hold her in very high esteem. And isn’t that what you and your sister tried to do, with Jessie? Or am I misunderstanding your _selfless_ intentions?”

Not even Emily knew how to reply to this brutally honest and accurate evaluation of herself. “Well, I never,” she muttered under her breath.

“No, I don’t imagine so.” Bo calmly took a sip of water and smiled around the table. “Seconds, anyone?”

“Don’t get filled up on the tamales, we brought dessert, too,” Jessie said enthusiastically, eager to divert the conversation away from herself. “Wait’ll ya see what it is!”

Buzz stood and pulled out Jessie’s chair, and he headed into the kitchen while she gathered bowls and spoons and set them on the dining room table. Buzz returned carrying a large bowl, heaped with freshly made ice cream.

“Ice cream! What a treat! Where did you ever get it?” Bo exclaimed, as the two resumed their seats, Jessie spooning the delicacy into individual dishes while Buzz passed them around.

“We got an ice cream freezer in town last week, it was an after-Christmas sale!” Jessie boasted. “Buzz’s been itchin’ for an excuse to try it out, so he made this while I was makin’ the tamales. It’s jus’ plain vanilla, but we’ll learn how to make more flavors by summer.”

“I was wondering why Buzz asked me for fresh cream this morning,” Woody chuckled. “We’ll
have to make this more often. Maybe I’ll put you to work as a side business for the dairy,” he teased
his brother-in-law.

“I don’t have enough to do, with all the new acreage?” Buzz laughed. “But I’ll gladly lend you the
freezer. If I give you a lesson first,” he smirked.

Emily pushed away the bowl that Buzz had set at her place. “I should expect Jessamine to squander
money on such an unnecessary contraption. You have to learn to control her, and put a stop to her
foolish flights of fancy.”

Buzz’s brow dipped. “It was my idea, actually. And as long as we can afford it, I don’t see much
point in depriving ourselves of pleasures.”

Again Woody couldn’t stop himself from laughing outright. “Control Jessie?” he smiled at his sister.
“I’d like to see someone try.” He reached over and took his mother’s unwanted dessert for himself.

The two couples fell into pleasant conversation, while Emily sat sulking over the failure of her
remarks to cause discontent among them. When she could tolerate it no longer, she stood. “If you
will excuse me, I’m going to retire to my room. And I’ve been meaning to tell you, Woodrow, that
mattress is not suitable for decent sleep.”

“I used to sleep on it myself, Ma, it’s plenty soft.”

“Precisely. It’s indecent.”

Without so much as a goodnight or goodbye to the rest of the party, she sulked out of the dining
room, and soon her footfalls could be heard heading upstairs. The four looked at each other and
grinned widely.

“I do believe we won that round,” Bo winked.

After Jessie and Buzz had helped clean up dinner and retreated to their own home, Woody and Bo
lingered in the parlor, not wanting to wake Penny who slept soundly in her father’s arms. Woody
looked down at his sweet, slumbering daughter, and chuckled lightly. “You know, as soon as we lay
her in her cradle, she’s gonna wake up, and there’ll be no sleep for us again tonight.”

“Don’t I know it,” Bo sighed. “But we’ll survive.”

“And you gotta stop stirrin’ up trouble with Ma, if you want me to survive her visit,” he teased his
wife.

“Me?” she smiled innocently. “You tell me to behave, but you contributed that Vanderbilt
comment.”

Woody’s eyes crinkled with amusement. “If the boot fits.”

Next door, Jessie stood at her bedroom window, with its sheer lace curtain pushed aside, and raised
the shade and the sash. It was an unseasonably warm night for January, and she breathed in the fresh
air, the incoming breeze making her soft cotton nightgown flutter ever so slightly.

“Looks like Momma’s still up - that’s late for her. Prob’ly readin’ some etiquette book, findin’ the
next flaw to pin on me tomorrow. Ya know,” she stared thoughtfully out into the tranquil darkness,
“Woody was right, she makes no sense. I never had a beau at home - least none that I really cared
for much. I hardly paid any mind to the fellas back then, so how’d I turn to into a fallen woman all of
a sudden?”
Buzz walked up behind his wife, and wrapped his bare arms around her waist, his chin resting on her shoulder. “Her window’s open. Wanna mess with her?” He nuzzled Jessie’s neck. “Let’s show her how far I’ve dragged you down.”

“Buzz!” she gasped, turning around in his arms. “I don’t want her hearin’ us!”

“That’s not what I meant.” He grinned wickedly. “Not for real, anyway. I say we put on a show, for her benefit.”

“You and your ideas,” Jessie smirked. “I reckon I’ll pay for this later… but she won’t be able to resist snoopin’.”

“Wait here.” Buzz slipped out of the bedroom and down the stairs, appearing a moment later with the phonograph from the parlor. He set it on the floor, then cranked the handle and set the cylinder to play. The soft tune of *La Paloma* sounded out of the tin horn, and Buzz held out his hand.

“Music at this hour has to mean something scandalous, right?” he smiled crookedly.

The couple fell into a slow, romantic dance, making sure that their steps carried them past the open window on more than one occasion. They couldn’t help but snicker at their game, and the reaction it was likely to elicit.

When the song concluded, they stepped close to the window. Although Buzz wore his long drawers, he had taken off his woolen undershirt when he had gotten ready for bed - and the voluminous folds of Jessie’s nightgown, as she stood positioned in front of her husband, disguised the fact that he wore any clothing at all. They wrapped their arms around each other, and Jessie leaned close, their lips nearly touching. “What now?” she whispered.

Buzz kissed her softly, and let his hands slide southward, tickling her as he did so.

Jessie let out a squeal. “Buzz!”

He grinned, “That did the trick.”

“Is she watchin’ us?”

“Ohh yeah, leaning in and everything.”

“Quick, pick me up!” Jessie flung her arms around her husband’s neck and her legs around his waist as he lifted her.

Buzz trailed kisses down his wife’s neck. “Mi florecita del desierto!” he growled, loud enough for his voice to travel.

Across the side yard, Emily’s window slammed shut, and the curtain swept closed with force. Buzz dropped Jessie down on the bed and stretched out beside her, where they laid together on their backs, laughing hysterically.

“Well, tomorrow should be fun,” he managed to say as he caught his breath. “Can’t wait to hear the comments.”

Jessie giggled. “We can jus' blame dinner.”

The couple settled into their usual arrangements in bed, and Jessie rolled over on her side, facing the bay window. Buzz spooned up behind her, drawing her close. After a few moments of silence, he propped himself up on one elbow, and rested his chin on her shoulder. “So this Percival guy…
president of a bank, huh? Think he’s good at ferreting out deals?”

“Buzz,” Jessie groaned.

“I dunno, I might be worried now that you’re going to weasel your way out of our marriage.”

“Buzz!” she turned her head to face him, and fought hard against laughing; he was clearly too pleased with himself and his jokes.

“What? I think there’s weasel -able doubt on the matter.”

“That is IT!” she pulled the pillow from behind her head and twisted around completely, pummeling him with it.

Buzz laughed with her and eventually caught her wrist. The pillow temporarily subdued, he pulled her against him in a kiss, and Jessie gave in easily, letting the pillow drop to the side so she could focus her full attention on her husband. Any doubts Buzz might have actually harbored about his wife’s happiness faded quickly into the night.

Chapter End Notes

Emily’s diet is based on that developed by Sylvester Graham in the 1830s, which had its share of followers throughout the 1800s, with his ideas carried on by John Harvey Kellogg later in the century. The Grahamite diet consisted of bland meals comprised of vegetables, fruit, and bread or crackers made with whole-wheat-and-bran graham flour - the precursors of graham crackers today. Meat was forbidden, no seasonings were allowed, and the food was to be eaten lukewarm - Graham believed that meat, spices, and hot food led to sexual impulses. Cold baths and hard straw mattresses were also prescribed, as even soft featherbeds promoted immorality. Details in the birth scenes come from several book on childbirth procedures published in the 1890s. Although births typically occurred at home, the goal was to have as few people (and distractions) in the room as possible. Contrary to popular belief, husbands could be present for the birth, but it was ultimately the choice of the mother - more typical was a close, supportive friend, and a nurse might assist in some cases as well. Long periods of bedrest - or “lying-in” was called for after giving birth, which we slightly shortened for the sake of not having them endure Emily for any longer than necessary (plus, Bo would probably be a little rebellious, and antsy to get out of bed). Min älskling is Swedish for “my darling.” Calling the ceramic pig “marranito” is a reference to the Mexican marranitos cookies (so yummy!), that are shaped like little pigs. Although oranges are usually harvested in the spring, by mid-January there would be some ripe on the trees and able to be picked. When Buzz refers to tamales as a Spanish dish, that’s because Mexican cooking was referred to as Spanish in the 1890s, and someone with such long-standing Califorino heritage as Estrellita would consider herself Castilian, descended from some of the earliest settlers from Spain. In fact the surname Sepúlveda, which we have given her as a maiden name, has roots in the Castile region of Spain. Consuelo Vanderbilt was a famous American heiress, and in November 1895 she married the broke but titled Duke of Marlborough, a loveless match that was forced by her pushy, ruthless mother Alva. In the late 1800s, there was a trend of penniless noblemen in England - who needed funds to maintain their expansive ancestral estates - marrying the daughters of American millionaires for their dowries. Home ice cream
freezers - as we know them today, in the hand-crank variety - existed in the late 19th century and were readily available in household stores and the Sears catalog.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

We're back with another chapter! And right on time at the middle of the month, too. Here's hoping we can do the same next month, because with Toy Story 4 hitting theaters on June 21, we'll have to get the story updated so we can enjoy being useless after watching the movie. I can't believe it's almost here!

Don't forget to visit our Pinterest board (Jessie's Journey under username yodelincowgirl) to see what images inspired aspects of this chapter. We're always adding new ones!

Toy Story still doesn't belong to us. If it did, we'd get one more trailer for Toy Story 4, but I don't see that happening at this point. Enjoy, and don't forget to subscribe and bookmark so you don't miss any future updates!

The unmistakable sound of an approaching carriage caught Emily’s attention as she fussed with the clothing in her trunk, preparing for her departure in a few days’ time. Wondering who could possibly be visiting, she rushed to the smaller of the two front bedrooms, which was situated next to Woody and Bo’s and had been furnished as baby Penny’s nursery. She was surprised to see a small two-seater runabout pulling up the driveway, occupied by a fashionably-dressed woman of approximately her own age.

Baffled by this unknown woman’s presence, Emily watched, transfixed, as she alighted from the carriage and walked not to Woody’s house, but Jessie’s. “Someone of her stature, paying a call at that hovel?” she scoffed, speaking to no one but herself. “It must be a mistake, or a business matter.”

Nevertheless, on the off-chance that the mysterious guest might also show up at the Pride residence, and suddenly self-conscious of the plain home attire she wore, Emily rushed back to the spare bedroom to change into the best dress she had brought along with her. She donned the the gray wool ensemble embellished with silver scrolls of embroidery and black trim that was packed at the bottom of her trunk; rather somber, yet still suitably refined, it featured the smaller and more pointed shoulder puffs of several years prior. After looking in the mirror and smoothing her hair, Emily was satisfied that her appearance was now worthy. The opportunity to associate with someone of superior social standing, and to make a sufficient first impression, was not one to be wasted.

When she arrived downstairs, Buzz and Jessie were carrying baskets in the direction of the kitchen, and Woody stood in the hall talking to his visitor. The curious woman wore an elegant dress and matching hat in a rich shade of purple, and carried herself with poise and grace. She slipped off her pristine kid gloves to reveal a sparkling band of amethysts on her left hand, and a dramatic star sapphire on her right, then removed her hat and handed both accessories to Emily without a word.

Estrellita left Emily standing dumbfounded in the hall as she stepped into the parlor to greet Bo, followed by Woody. “There she is!” she exclaimed, while maintaining a quiet enough voice to not startle Penny. She stooped down to give Bo a hug where she sat in her rocker, then peeked at the newborn who slept against her mother’s shoulder “Que linda pequeña! Oh, Bo, she is just beautiful. Penny, yes?” Bo nodded. “Although I have to say,” Estrellita turned to Woody with a teasing smile,
“your daughter looks not a bit like you, and entirely like your wife.”

“I know, and I’m fine with that,” he chuckled. “You can’t improve on perfection.”

She sat down on the sofa, adjacent to Bo’s rocker, and leaned forward. “I come bearing gifts. Josefa and Emelda send their love, and said to tell you they’ll come by to visit next week. But they wanted me to give you this today - they thought you’d rather have it sooner than later.” She pulled a folded bundle from the shopping tote she had set at her feet and handed it to Bo.

With Estrellita’s help, Bo used her free hand to unfurl the fabric, revealing a baby-sized quilt, stitched in soft cotton calico in delicate colors and with dainty embroidered accents. “It’s lovely! And it’ll fit perfectly in the cradle Woody made.”

“Jessie helped with that detail,” Estrellita winked. “And this is from me; not as fancy, but hopefully equally as useful.” This time, when she took the parcel out of the bag, she unfolded it herself, and held what turned out to be a long woven scarf in front of her. “It’s a rebozo, and it can be worn as a sling that will let you carry Penny hands-free when you have work to do. I know it doesn’t look like much, but I used one just like this when my niños were little, and it was an enormous help. I will show you how to tie it before I leave today. I also brought dinner - enchiladas, and frijoles, and buñuelos for dessert. Bustillo carried it all into the kitchen already, and I made sure to threaten him not to touch!” She looked to Buzz and Jessie, who were now standing near the fireplace, with a teasing smile.

While this scene had been playing out, Emily had inched closer to the center of the room, her curiosity consuming her as to who this woman who was so close with her children could possibly be. Woody watched his mother with amusement, and when there was a break in the conversation cleared his throat to get the room’s attention. “Estrellita, I’d like you to meet Jessie’s and my mother, Emily Pride. Ma, this is Buzz’s mother.”

Estrellita rose from her seat and stepped over to extend a hand, graciously yet coolly. “I am Maria Estrella Rosalia Sepúlveda de Lightyear. Mi familia calls me Estrellita. You may call me Doña Estrella.”

Buzz smothered a smile with his hand as his mother rattled off her full name, leaving his mother-in-law to blink as she tried to absorb it.

Emily squared her shoulders, determined to have an equally formal air, “How do you do.” She shook Estrellita’s offered hand, but no longer than propriety demanded. “What a surprise to meet you here. How kind that you would come to call as if it were your own grandchild.” Her mouth twisted around the word, making it perfectly clear she saw it as anything but.

Estrellita’s face broke into a bright smile, “Ay, Woody has been like one of the family since the first time mi Bustillo brought him home. They looked out for one another as Marshals, keeping each other safe. How could I not welcome him into my home and my heart?”

Woody observed as his mother responded with a smile that hardly reached her eyes. He felt the room take on a sudden chill and coughed nervously.

“It’s such a lovely day, why don’t we go sit on the front porch?” Estrellita turned from Emily towards Bo. “I’m sure you’re tired of being cooped up in the house.”

“Yes, that would be delightful,” she laughed. “I’ve seen enough of these four walls to last me quite some time. Would you like to carry Penny while Woody helps me outside?”
“I thought you’d never ask!” Estrellita’s eyes twinkled as she gently and carefully lifted the infant. “Hola, bebé bonita,” her voice was soft and lilting, and Penny didn’t fuss in the strange woman’s arms. “I’m your Tío’s Mamá. We are going to be great friends.”

Jessie and Buzz had been hanging back, letting Woody and Bo take the lead in their own home, and had also been entertained by Emily’s appalled expression as Estrellita cooed over Penny. Buzz held the front door open for the two elder women, then he and Jessie walked over to their own house, to carry over the two wicker chairs from their front porch for extra seating. Emily instantly took a seat in one of the two rockers; and once she was outside, Bo occupied the other - but not until Woody had moved it to the opposite side of the porch from his mother. Estrellita and Woody both made use of the wicker chairs, while Buzz and Jessie settled themselves comfortably on the stairs.

After transferring Penny back into her mother’s arms, Estrellita shifted her position so she could address Emily. “It’s a shame that you and your husband couldn’t come to the wedding last year. Your children looked absolutely stunning on their wedding day. Jessie made a beautiful bride, and Woody was very handsome. It was such a joyous occasion; it must have been so hard on you, knowing you had to miss it.”

“Yes, well, we were simply unable to leave. My husband owns the largest mercantile in our town, and he couldn’t shut it down and lose that business while we both traveled across the country.”

“I know how it can be when your husband can’t get away from his successful business. In truth, my husband Zechariah and I came to the mutual agreement years ago that, no matter what, one of us should still be present for our children’s special occasions, even if the other cannot. Family should always transcend societal expectations, don’t you agree?”

Before Emily could respond, Bo chimed in. “I certainly do.”

“He would have come with me today, but he’s in Los Angeles at the moment. He and my two elder sons have a prosperous real estate office in the city.” Estrellita clasped her hands in a way to show off her sizeable rings for Emily’s benefit. “Alejandro and Eduardo - my other boys - are negotiating a deal to purchase some oil-rich property, and they wanted their father’s expert assistance with the finer details.”

“Dad’s helping them with that?” Buzz grumbled, rolling his eyes.

“Your Papá is torn, mio,” she sighed. “He doesn’t like it any more than we do, but he doesn’t want your brothers to get swindled in the deal, either.”

“I don’t understand how this is a bad thing; oil will bring them wealth, won’t it?” Emily interjected.

“It will; but at the cost of destroying the beautiful California landscape with ugly oil derricks,” Estrellita lamented. “All the wealth in the world won’t bring you happiness if it comes at the cost of remembering who you are and where you came from. I firmly believe that is why our children are making quite a success of themselves here. The dairy is prospering, and the grove is growing by leaps and bounds because they respect the land, rather than extort all the value from it.” She winked at her son and daughter-in-law, “I know Bustillo and Woody wouldn’t be able to accomplish half of what they do without their wives. You would have been very proud of your daughter last spring, to see how expertly she managed the packing of their first crop. I was there to help - so was Bo - and because of Jessie’s knowledge, none of us damaged any oranges, so they went for the highest price.”

Buzz leaned over to his mother, whose chair was close to where he sat. “Lo estás poniendo un poco grueso, Mamá.”
Seeing Emily’s suspicious look, Estrellita laughed and playfully batted her son away. “My son; he says I’m embarrassing him. But then he’s always been shy of accepting his due praise. I’m sure he didn’t even mention that he had one of highest selling crops for a new grove owner, and on his first harvest, too!”

“With the men’s success,” Emily found the word was rather difficult to utter, “and how busy their work must keep them, I’m surprised that I saw your son helping Jessamine with her duties around the house. Laundry and dishes, to be exact,” she added, raising an eyebrow in disdain.

Estrellita patted her nearby son on the shoulder. “Good. I’m glad to hear it. He was raised to be helpful and considerate.”

Disappointed that her criticism wasn’t received as she’d hoped, Emily continued. “Perhaps Jessamine participating in manual labor is why they have no child of their own yet. I’m sure you would have expected a grandchild by now, as well.”

Jessie felt her face flush at her mother’s repeated attempts to turn Estrellita against her. She knew that her mother-in-law loved her, but she felt the gnawing of doubt that she might question if she was really good enough for her son.

“Nonsense,” Estrellita dismissed the remark. “Her work in the grove has nothing to do with it. Parenthood is their choice to make, not mine. But when they do decide to honor me with a grandchild, I know I’ll want to be as much help as I can, and let that precious niño know how loved he or she is.” Her brown eyes briefly met Jessie’s green, and any fear evaporated as quickly as it had appeared. “I imagine you’ll be missing Penny terribly when you leave in a few days. If I were in your shoes, I’d be holding that sweet little girl every minute I could. Did you bring something for her to remember you by, after you go home?”

“No, actually, I -” for the first time, Emily visibly faltered. The moment did not last long, however. “Since so many of my son’s decisions were made without my knowledge, I did not know what the child might need. I felt it best to come visit and assess the situation; then I can act with clear judgment.”

“I’m sure your husband will be able to help you find the perfect gift once you’ve returned home,” Estrellita maintained a cordial tone, despite Emily’s increasingly churlish one. “Woody said you live in Missouri; it must have been fascinating, getting to see the country on your journey here.”

“I don’t care for traveling. Long hours on an uncomfortable train, surrounded by other passengers of questionable reputation. It’s not proper for a lady, and certainly not alone.”

“I traveled alone, to go to a Chautauqua,” Bo jumped into the elder women’s conversation with a shrug. “I didn’t mind it one bit.”

“You traveled alone, when you were unmarried?” Emily glowered with disapproval, first at Bo, then at her son.

“What was she supposed to do, Ma, pass up a great chance to further her education just because she didn’t have a husband?” Woody laughed. “Not my modern gal.”

His mother regarded him with a disdainful sniff, “Yes, well, in the event of emergencies, I suppose it can’t be helped, but for women to travel alone to become commonplace… such modern ideas are what will destroy the home, you mark my words.”

Suddenly the air was pierced with the sharp wail of a newborn. Bo cuddled her daughter close,
“Shhhh, shhhh Penny darling, everything’s all right.”

“D’ya think she’s hungry?” Jessie leaned forward, wanting to be of help, but not sure how.

“It hasn’t been that long, but maybe.” Bo managed to discreetly unfasten the buttons of her wrapper, ignoring the appalled look from Emily. Penny, however, showed no interest. “Guess not.”

“Maybe she’s dirty? I can go get ya a diaper,” her sister-in-law suggested.

Bo shook her head, “No, she’s fine.” She laughed slightly, “We’d know otherwise. Come on, sweet pea, tell Mama what’s wrong.” The infant continued to cry, her fists clenched and her face red. “Woody, what could be the matter?”

“If you ask me,” Emily interjected haughtily, “It’s this air.”

“We didn’t.” Woody stood, glancing down at his wife. “I have an idea. I’ll be right back.” Disappearing into the house with a swing of the screen door, he emerged only a moment later carrying his guitar. “Let’s see if this’ll help, sweet pea.”

He returned to his prior seat and began to pick and strum at a soft tune, a favorite of Bo’s and one that he’d played many times in her presence while she had been expecting. As she rocked baby Penny, the cries gradually softened to muffled whimpers, then faded to a faint murmur as the infant drifted off to sleep. Bo kissed her daughter on the forehead, and looked at Woody, beaming. “It worked!” she whispered. “Keep playing, so she’ll stay asleep.”

Woody nodded, and in honor of Estrellita’s visit, he started into the notes of Las Blancas Flores. The time the four had spent at the Lightyear hacienda since purchasing the ranch had broadened his repertoire, having learned many traditional old-California songs to supplement the cowboy ballads of his sheriff days and the sentimental love songs he’d practiced for Bo.

Buzz couldn’t help but grin at Jessie as the familiar melody began. “Care to dance, florecita?” He rose from his chair and offered a hand, which Jessie eagerly accepted.

“You betcha!” The couple skipped down the porch stairs and out into the front lawn, where they began waltzing in time to the music. Caught up in the moment herself, Estrellita softly sang the tune’s Spanish lyrics.

Woody shifted from one song to the next, and the strains of El Sombrero Blanco filtered into the afternoon air. Estrellita favored him with a broad smile and bounded down the stairs, “I haven’t heard this song since your wedding!”

“Must be your dress!” Jessie joked, “You wore it then, too.”

“Well, I save it for only the most special occasions,” she winked. “But we don’t need a special reason to dance, do we?”

Buzz laughed and extended a hand to his wife, “Absolutely not.” The trio danced, Buzz and Jessie doing the traditional steps, and Estrellita dancing around them with swishes of her skirt. Woody continued playing and shared a smile with Bo, who was trying to hold in her mirth so as not to wake Penny. None of them were paying any attention to the deepening scowl on Emily’s face.

Estrellita returned to her seat as Buzz and Jessie sat back on the steps. “Ay, that was fun,” she fanned her face in an effort to cool down, then turned again to Emily, “Do you and your husband enjoy dancing?”
Jessie and Buzz were the only ones close enough to Woody to catch the stifled choking sound he made as he set his guitar down.

Emily drew herself higher in her chair, “We do not. It is my belief that dancing leads to a decline in morals and as a married woman, engaging in such frivolity would be considered unseemly, if not irresponsible.”

Estrellita shook her head regretfully. “How much you miss. Music and dancing have brought nothing but joy in my culture for generations. Speaking of, it is almost time for dinner and I should get the enchiladas in the oven so they’re warm for you when you’re ready.”

“You’re staying for dinner, I hope!” Bo looked at her, her eyes earnest and hopeful.

Estrellita rested a loving hand on her shoulder, “If you’re still up to company, then it would be my pleasure.”

“You’re not company,” Bo smiled back, ”you’re family.”

“Well, then, let me do all the work.”

Jessie jumped up from the step. “I’ll help ya! I know where everythin’ is.”

While the two women retreated to the kitchen, the others lingered on the porch without much conversation. Once the food was heated and ready, Jessie came to get them, and they all convened in the dining room.

As the meal progressed, Estrellita noticed that Emily was merely picking at the small portions of food on her plate. “You’re not eating. Are you not feeling well?”

Emily was finding herself torn between despising this woman and still wanting to keep up appearances. “No, I am fine,” she answered tersely. “I am on a very restrictive diet and it does not allow for such… rich dishes.”

“Ay, I had no idea!” Estrellita moved as if to push her chair away from the table. “Can I prepare something else for you instead? It would be such a shame for you to miss a dinner with your children.”

“No, thank you,” snapped Emily. “I am quite accustomed to fending for myself.” She punctuated her statement with a quick glare at Woody. “I shall find something suitable to eat afterwhile.”

The others continued with their feast, and when dinner was over, Estrellita motioned to her son. “Bustillo, would you and Woody take care of the dishes, please? I would like to show Bo the rebozo and will need Jessie’s help.”

The girls retired to the parlor and Jessie served as a model while Estrellita showed Bo how the fabric draped around the body and fastened. “Make sure it’s tight enough across you that she can’t slip out. There! That’s all there is to it. Now, you try.”

Emily stood sullenly in the doorway, watching the three women interacting so comfortably with one another as Bo settled Penny into the sling.

“This is wonderful! It’ll help so much when I’m able to get back to helping Woody with the calves, and tending my sheep. Thank you so much, Estrellita!”

“I hope it’ll be very useful for you,” she kissed the young woman on the cheek. “I’m afraid I better
start my drive home. It was so good to see you, and this niña,” she tenderly caressed Penny’s head. “You know if you need anything, I’m happy to help.”

“I know, and I can’t tell you how much we appreciate you.”

Estrellita touched Jessie on the arm, “Walk me out, mjia?” She held out her hand to Emily as she approached the doorway, “Have a safe journey home.” The words were met with a begrudging reciprocation of the handshake and a curt nod.

The two women exited by way of the hall to retrieve Estrellita’s belongings, then proceeded to the kitchen, where they grabbed Buzz on the way out the back door to assist with his mother’s carriage. Just outside the barn, Jessie and Estrellita talked while Buzz went to get her horse.

“Well, mjia, do you think I made an impression?” Estrellita asked with a glint of mischief in her eye.

“I know ya did,” giggled Jessie. “I don’t know which I liked more, her face when you first introduced yourself or her face when you were dancin’! That was priceless.”

Estrellita’s expression grew serious. “How did you ever live with that woman? When Bustillo said your mother was difficult, I had no idea of the extent. Pugnacious is more like it.”

“Now ya see how I ended up out west.”

She cupped her daughter-in-law’s cheek in her hand. “And we’re thankful for that, although I’m sorry it was due to such unpleasant circumstances.”

Once Estrellita’s horse was harnessed to her buggy, and the headlight lanterns were lit for the drive home, Buzz walked over to where his wife and mother were standing. “Are you plotting more schemes?” he laughed. “I knew just what you were up to when you showed up today, Mamá, dressed to the nines like that. Not that it wasn’t fun to watch.”

“Well, I’m mighty grateful,” Jessie smiled.

Estrellita pulled her daughter-in-law in for a tight hug. “Hold your head high, mjia. She’s only here a few more days, and then you can get back the the happy life you all share.” She embraced her son as well. “And give that sweet little niece of yours lots of love for me.” Estrellita climbed up into her carriage and took the reins in her hands. “I’ll see you both soon. Que pases buenas noches.”

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Jessie and Buzz raced down the lane leading up to the ranch houses, Bullseye and Astrónomo’s hooves rumbling like thunder on the packed-earth road, stirring up a billowing dust cloud in their wake. Jessie sat astride Bullseye’s saddle, and her feet bounced outwards in the stirrups as the couple alternately jockeyed for the lead, laughing all the while. As they approached the houses, they reined the horses’ gallop in to a canter, then a trot, then slowly walked the pair back to the barn.

Emily heard the commotion of hooves and voices from her seat in the parlor. She watched disapprovingly from the front window, then set down her needlework and scurried to the kitchen to spy on the pair’s further behavior.

Buzz had already dismounted from Astrónomo, but Emily peered through the window just as Jessie effortlessly swung her leg over the saddle and stepped down herself. She frowned at her daughter’s attire, which consisted of a mustard yellow shirtwaist dotted with red and brown sprigs, a brown split skirt that reached her ankles, and sturdy tan cowboy boots peeking out from beneath the skirt’s hem. Jessie’s cheeks were flushed from the excitement, and nearly matched the red of the vaquera hat that Buzz had given her and she now wore proudly. Before she entered the barn, Jessie stroked
Bullseye’s face and planted a kiss on his nose - she had come to love her brother’s horse as if he was her own - then led him to his stall. Both she and Buzz emerged from the barn a few moments later, in the midst of a lively discussion.

“I won, admit it!” boasted Jessie.

“You did not win, you cheated,” Buzz countered. “You cut me off!”

“So? What’re ya gonna do about it, huh?” She flashed her husband a saucy grin, and he scooped her up in his arms bridal-style. “Hey! Put me down!” Jessie giggled and kicked her feet, but Buzz maintained his hold on her. “Let me go, ya big varmint! Let me go this instant!” She took her hat off and smacked him with it, but he didn’t flinch.

Buzz walked over to the watering trough, still carrying his wife, and held her hovering over it. “Put you down? Are you sure?” He pretended to loosen his grip and let her slip ever so slightly.

Jessie let out a shrill squeal. “NO!” She grabbed the back of Buzz’s vest and clutched it tightly, her eyes as big as saucers. “Nonono, Buzz! Don’t you dare!”

He turned away from the trough, and laughed heartily. “You’ll get your payback later, don’t you worry.”

“Promise?” Her eyes shone with a coy glimmer, and he responded with a crooked smile. Buzz pulled her toward him in a kiss, as she released his vest from her grasp and wrapped her arm around his neck, letting the hand that still held her hat fall to her side.

Still watching from the kitchen window, Emily rolled her eyes. “Depravity!” she muttered, and returned to her seat in the parlor, lest she be caught at her eavesdropping.

Within moments, the back door of the Pride homestead flung open. Jessie and Buzz strode through the kitchen and up through the hall, deposited their hats on the rack by the front door, then greeted the rest of their family in the parlor. Two weeks had passed since Penny’s birth, and Bo was anxious to get back into her old routine, so Jessie had offered to help her cook that night.

“Hey there, sweetie pie,” Jessie cooed at Penny, stooping down to touch a tiny pink hand. “Let’s give you to your Daddy, so I can give your Momma a hand with dinner.” She gently took her niece from Bo’s arms and kissed her soft forehead. “Unless Uncle Buzz wants t’hold ya?”

“I’ll take her ‘til she cries,” Buzz chuckled, and Jessie carefully transferred Penny into his arms.

“Aww, but it’s such a cute little cry,” Jessie grinned at the sight of her husband, the bright-eyed infant seeming even tinier in his strong embrace.

“Try hearing it at 3 a.m. and see how you feel about it,” Woody laughed, as Jessie and Bo swept past him on their way to the kitchen.

“What on earth was that indecent scene outside?” Emily said brusquely, before the girls could reach the doorway.

Jessie rolled her eyes, and both she and Bo stopped. “Buzz’n I were out checkin’ on the grove. We were jus’ havin’ fun.”

Ignoring Jessie’s reply, Emily continued. “And WHAT are you wearing, Jessamine? Are those trousers? What kind of man wants a woman who wears trousers? And men’s boots? And rides a horse like a man would?”
“I’ve got no problem with Jessie’s clothing,” Buzz answered protectively, “in fact, I like it.” Emily, however, shook her head, implying that her son-in-law was as irrational as her daughter.

Jessie groaned at her mother’s reaction. “It’s called a ridin’ skirt. I ain’t got time for that sidesaddle nonsense. And these boots are much more practical for ridin’ and workin’ on the ranch.”

“Jessie sewed the skirt herself,” Bo bragged. “I think it’s charming.”

“Well, perhaps if she’d married a man who could afford store bought clothes -”

“We can afford store bought clothes just fine,” retorted Jessie in her own defense. “I jus’ couldn’t find what I wanted in the stores ‘round here, and don’t have time to go to the city for it.”

“If it isn’t available for purchase, that should be taken as a sign not to wear it.” Emily sighed dramatically, rubbing her temples as if a headache was coming on. “And that hat you were wearing is utterly ridiculous. Really, Jessamine, I don’t know why you still surprise me with your outlandish behavior. You’re turning into one of those radical New Women.”

Jessie placed her hand on her hip. “I do believe that’s the first compliment you’ve ever given me, Momma.” She ignored the shock on her mother’s face and turned her back. “C’mon, Bo, you tell me what you need me to do,” she leaned in to whisper, “and get me outta here.”

Dinner was not a quiet affair; by now the four had decided that there was no reason to withhold their conversation in deference to Emily’s silence. While the young couples dug into the baked chicken, mashed potatoes, and gravy, Emily gnawed on her crackers, which she had brought to the table in protest of the meal being served. Bo took no small amount of pleasure in noting that the more they laughed, the more furious the gnawing became, and took the opportunity to bring up a subject of conversation that was likely to get a great rise out of her mother-in-law.

“Speaking of New Women,” she spoke up, “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking while I’ve been stuck here in the house. Woody, honey, remember that Contemporary Club I found out about in town? I think in a few months, when Penny’s a little older, I’d like to join.”

“I think that would be a great idea,” her husband readily agreed.

Bo turned to her sister-in-law. “Jessie, would you want to come to a meeting with me? See if it’s something you’d like, too?”

“I dunno, me ‘n other women, I’m not ‘xactly the ladies club type.”

Emily let out a faint, bitter, laugh from the other end of the table, and Bo shot her a sideways glare.

“I don’t think it’s that type of club at all,” Bo smiled at Jessie. “I’m sure you’d be welcome and fit in just fine. Mrs. Gillis belongs. Besides,” she paused for emphasis, “with the amendment for woman suffrage on the table for the election later this year, women in California need to band together to get it passed.” She had the satisfaction of hearing Emily nearly choke on her cracker.

“I fail to see why such clubs are even necessary for women,” Emily managed to assert her opinion, after taking a drink of water. “A woman’s place is her home, and participation in such,” her mouth drew up in a sneer, “gatherings is an assault on her femininity.”

“Men have their clubs and symposiums, and yet no one accuses them of being less gentlemanly for it. I fail to see why it should be any different for a woman,” Bo shrugged and looked across the table to Jessie. “What do you say?”
Jessie took note of her mother’s expression at Bo’s marked indifference. “I’ll think about it. But I’m happy to help your cause if ya need it, even if I don’t wanna join.”

After dinner, Jessie helped Buzz with the dishes - a welcome reprieve from Emily’s watchful eye - while Woody and Bo settled into the parlor with Penny. As they crossed the hall, Buzz let his hand trail across Jessie’s back. “I’ll grab our hats.”

“Allright. We’re headin’ home,” she stepped into the parlor and over to the basket holding Penny. “See ya tomorrow, sweet pea.”

“I do hope tomorrow you’ll be more properly attired, Jessamine,” Emily seized her chance to get in one last jab at her daughter. “Honestly, such a masculine appearance, it’s no wonder your husband,” she nodded to Buzz, who now stood in the doorway, “is frustrated.”

Jessie gaped at her mother in utter disbelief. “Make up your mind, Momma. Am I indecent, like ya said before? Or am I not enough of a woman for my husband? Can’t rightly be both.” Without waiting for an answer, she stalked over to Buzz, grabbed the front of his shirt, and pulled him into an intense kiss.

Buzz was caught off guard momentarily at the unusual display of affection in front of Woody and Bo, but he quickly realized what Jessie was doing and was in no mood to argue. He let the hats drop to the floor so his hands could span her back as he fell into the kiss.

After a few moments, they pulled away from each other. Jessie turned defiantly to her mother, “Does he look frustrated to ya?”

“Such vulgarity, Jessamine!”

She shrugged as she picked up the hats, putting hers on and handing Buzz’s to him, “C’mon, Buzz, we’re leavin’.” She spun on her heel and walked away.

“Kay.” He flashed Woody and Bo a look, put on his hat, and followed after his wife.

The back door closed, and Emily sat embroidering furiously in a stony silence.

Woody and Bo couldn’t help but burst into hysterical laughter, both at what Jessie had done and Emily’s ensuing reaction. “I’m glad Buzz met his match in Jessie,” Woody managed to say, as he wiped tears from his eyes.

“And Jessie met hers in him,” agreed Bo, “they’re so good for each other.”

“They’re disgraceful is what they are,” Emily snarled. “I suppose it’s for the best that Jessamine is still childless. I don’t want any half-breed Spaniard grandchild.”

A deathly silence fell on the room, Woody and Bo rendered speechless by Emily’s cruel words.

“That was uncalled for, Ma. There is NOTHING wrong with Buzz, or his relations,” Woody firmly stated. “His mother is from one of the best families in California, and his father’s real estate business is thriving. In fact, I’d venture to say they’re far more upstanding than any of the lunkheads you tried to force on Jessie. And for your information, he has saved my life on more than one occasion.”

“A dog might protect a man, but that doesn’t mean you seat the mongrel at the table.”

Bo couldn’t contain her anger at her mother-in-law’s barbs any longer. “How DARE you?!? I have listened to you be nothing but insulting to them since the moment you arrived, but I will not tolerate
you being so vile and hateful, not any more!"

“I beg your pardon?!”

“Well you don’t have it. You will keep a civil or a silent tongue in our house, or you will leave!”

“And just where do you expect me to go?” Emily looked to Woody with all the confidence that her son would be a voice of reason.

"No, she's right, Ma. If you want to stay under our roof, you'll never speak like that about my sister or brother-in-law again. If you can't handle that, I'm happy to hitch up the wagon and take you into town. There are nice hotels there where you can stay the last few nights before your train home."

Emily sniffed, ignoring his remarks. “While I find your wife rather inconsiderate, Woodrow, at least you didn’t commit yourself to any of that foreign nonsense.”

“Foreign nonsense?” Bo shot to her feet. “My mother was from Sweden. She was the FARTHEST thing from NONSENSE I have ever known. So yes, I suppose that makes me FOREIGN NONSENSE too, and I’m proud of it! I lost my entire family to sickness when I was still a child, which also makes me an orphan. Would you like to disparage that as well? Or the fact that I worked as a schoolteacher and a Harvey Girl before Woody and I married? I worked with Jessie; that’s how he and I met.” Tears filled her eyes. “If you’d taken the time to get to know me - any of us - instead of constantly grasping for things to criticize, you’d realize that! Woody, and Jessie, and Buzz, they’re the ONLY family I’ve got. And I’ll be damned if I am going to put up with another minute of your rancorous tongue!” Her voice faltered, the emotion finally overcoming her, but she stared down her mother-in-law in defiance.

Woody rose to his feet, wrapped an arm around his wife’s shoulders and squeezed her arm soothingly. “Bo, sweetheart, shhh, it’s not good for you to be so upset.” Penny started to fuss in her bassinet, wakened by the raised voices, and sensing the tension in the room. “Sit back down, I’ll get her.” Woody picked up his daughter and nestled her against his shoulder, patting her and bouncing gently in an effort to quiet her cries, while his eyes shot daggers at his mother. “I think it would be best if you turned in for the night.”

Meanwhile, over in the Lightyear parlor, Buzz was sitting on the sofa attempting to read as Jessie paced on the carpet in front of him, her boots thudding on the floor with each step.

“Is this a family trait? You look like Woody did, waiting for Penny to be born,” Buzz joked, setting down his book.

“I’m… I’m mad, Buzz! I’ve had it with Momma bein’ here. All that awful stuff she said tonight… I can’t take it anymore!”

“I know. But you need to calm down. C’mere.” He extended an arm across the back of the sofa, inviting her to sit with him.

Jessie took the invitation, resting her head on her husband’s shoulder as his arm encircled her waist and he let her vent her frustrations.

“She makes no sense! Where in tarnation did she get the idea you were frustrated with me?” She hesitated a little. “You’re not, are ya?”

“Never,” he kissed her temple. “I love my florecita.”

She stretched her arm across his chest and sighed. “I know I just gotta get through one more day
with her. But what’s she gonna come up with tomorrow? She’s prob’ly gonna blame me for that big earthquake Pa wrote us about. Like I sent it all the way from California.”

“Look, if you want her to stop, you have to keep standing up to her. It’s only going to get worse until you show her she has no power over you,” he rested his hand on her arm that was still draped across him. “Tonight was a very good start.”

“Yeah, but I’m sure she’ll read me the riot act for it.”

“Then read it right back. Find that girl who stood up to the Huggins gang back in Barstow; I know she’s still in there.” He gave her an encouraging squeeze. “If you could take on outlaws with guns, you can handle Emily Pride.”

The next day, Jessie pushed open the front door of the Pride house to find things unexpectedly quiet. She peeked her head in the empty parlor. “Bo? Ya down here?” Receiving no answer, she turned back to the hall and called up the stairs, “You up there with Penny?” Still no one responded, and she continued her search. “Huh. Wonder where she coulda gotten to?”

Unfortunately the answer came from her mother, who emerged from the kitchen just as Jessie was leaving the dining room. “Bo took the baby in that… sling contraption… out to see to the sheep.”

“Oh. I’ll go find her out there, then.” Jessie headed back towards the hall to make a hasty exit.

“Honestly, Jessamine. I certainly didn’t have high hopes for you, but a Spaniard ?”

Jessie stopped in her tracks and turned on her heels, anger flashing in her eyes. “No, Momma; a kind, gentle, good-hearted man who just happens to have Spanish heritage.” Realizing this was the confrontation her mother’s entire visit had been leading up to, she braced herself to speak her mind. “Yesterday you were sayin’ that I wasn’t a good enough wife, and now you’re bellyachin’ that I married Buzz at all. I don’t understand you. I fin’lly got everythin’ I ever wanted - a husband who loves me for ME, and a home in the West like I always dreamed. Can’t ya be happy for me, for that? Or is it ’cause it's not what YOU wanted?”

"You could have had so much more than this, Jessamine, if you hadn't been so willful and rebellious and turned your back on those of us who were looking out for your best interests!"

"MY best interests? When did you or Aunt Molly EVER have MY best interests in mind? My whole life you've been tryin’ to squash me into this mold of the person ya think I should be, instead of acceptin’ me for the person I am. And when ya couldn't change me, or force me to marry some fuddy-dud YOU approved of, ya shipped me off to Aunt Molly so she could sell me into a marriage where I woulda been treated like a slave! For what, money? A stuffy life’a riches that I didn’t even want? Money ain't everythin’ Momma; love is. THAT’s what I got. An’ I’m sorry that you didn’t, but that’s never been my fault.”

Emily stared aghast at her daughter, the words piercing in their truth. “In all my years…” her voice trembled and she paused. She set her chin and looked at Jessie coldly, “It seems you have made your decisions, Jessamine. I’ll leave you to live with them.”

Jessie’s resolve didn’t falter. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

Without so much as a sideways glance, Emily swept past where Jessie stood and stormed up to her room.

The bedroom door closed with something just shy of a slam and Jessie let out a breath. She expected
tears but instead felt a sense of lightness, the words she spoke holding years’ worth of repressed emotion. Walking back through the kitchen, she left the house and headed towards the barn. ‘Might as well see if I can be of any help out there.’

She found the others inside the main area of the barn, Bo having brought Penny to see her father after the sheep had been tended to. They all looked up as Jessie entered, Woody immediately noticing something was different. ‘Jess? Everything okay?’

The first thing out of her mouth was a laugh, albeit a slightly shaky one. ‘Yeah; I jus’ gave Momma a piece’a my mind.’

‘Now this I gotta hear,’ he set down the rake he had been using to clean the horse stalls and shared an amazed glance with Buzz.

She related the whole tale to her eager audience, looking apologetically at Buzz when she repeated her mother’s derogatory comments about him. When she was finished, he closed the distance between them and kissed her soundly. ‘I’m so proud of you, Jessie,’ he held her chin between his thumb and forefinger.

‘I had a feeling something like this was gonna happen,’ Woody patted his sister on the arm. ‘She was on a tirade last night and you should have seen her face; Bo gave her what for and she just about choked on it.’

‘Guess maybe she was none too pleased with that kiss, huh?’ smirked Jessie.

‘That’s putting it mildly,’ Bo grinned.

Buzz leaned down to Jessie’s ear, ‘That’s all right; I was.’ She giggled and swatted at him lightly.

‘I s’pose she wasn’t gonna leave tomorrow without sayin’ her piece.’

‘But she didn’t expect you to say yours, Jess,’ her brother smiled. ‘And I’m so glad you did.’

When Woody returned from the Redlands depot, he found his family waiting for him in the Pride parlor, Buzz and Jessie on the sofa, and Bo rocking Penny. He collapsed into his favorite chair as if to emphasize his relief.

‘Well, she’s on her way home. And we survived.’

‘ Barely,’ Jessie laughed. ‘She have any final complaints before ya sent her off?’

‘No, she hardly spoke the whole drive. I think she’d had just about enough of us as we had of her,’ he chuckled.

Bo kissed Penny on her little velvety head. ‘I knew she was going to be unpleasant, but… wow. Why on earth is she so bitter?’

Woody shrugged. ‘She’s a very unhappy person, has been my whole life.’

‘She never wanted to marry Pa,’ added Jessie. ‘Aunt Molly told me that before I left. Guess she’s held that against Woody’n me all these years.’

‘And I remember hearing stories how because it was wartime, she couldn’t have a fancy wedding like her sister’s,’ Woody continued. ‘Aunt Molly had this lavish life in the city that Ma envied, and here she and Pa were starting out in some new town called Possum Trot - the name was changed to
Walnut Grove before Jessie was born. But he had a secure profession, and wasn’t gonna get shipped off to fight. The army didn’t want him on account of him being too tall.”

“Pa’s always joked if he was shorter we mightn’t have existed,” Jessie giggled. “And Momma’d call him crude for sayin’ it.”

“There were battles fought in Springfield, too, which wasn’t that far away. Not like things were easy in St. Louis either back then, but Ma and Pa were kind of in the thick of it. One battle was fought only a couple months before I was born.”

“But once the war was over, weren’t things better?”

“Sure, the town grew, so did Pa’s store, and we always had a nice house. But it was never enough for her, never what her sister had. Pa wouldn’t let her hire servants, said it would be a waste of money living in a country town, and he didn’t want to look pretentious to his customers. I think that’s part of why she took on that Graham diet, to get back at him for having to cook herself.”

“Poor Pa,” Jessie sighed. “Mustn’t be easy for him now that we’re not there for company. He’s gotta deal with her moods all on his own.”

“He’s fine; I reckon he’s used to it by now. The store keeps him busy, and Ma visits Aunt Molly more often than not.”

“Yeah, guess her bein’ here has given him a nice break. But since she’s outta our hair now,” Jessie hopped up from her seat, “who wants enchiladas?” she beamed. “Dinner at our place!”

Chapter End Notes


A runabout is a small, two-seater carriage. Although I haven’t seen Californio-specific references to babies being carried in rebozo shawls, there are Mexican images from the 1700s and 1800s; and since Mexican and Californio culture was so closely linked, and rebozos were widely worn by Californio women, we took the liberty of assuming it’s a custom that Estrellita would have been familiar with. “New Woman” was the name given - sometimes in a derogatory way - to those women in the late 1800s and early 1900s who took on more modern pursuits. Anything that took women outside of their traditional home-and-family sphere - such as bicycling, working at a job, belonging to ladies’ organizations, or campaigning for woman suffrage - would fall under this category. The idea was often ridiculed in newspaper cartoons, showing women wearing masculine-looking bloomers and towering over weaker men. There is a fault line in the area of Missouri where we have Jessie and Woody’s family being from, known as the New Madrid seismic zone. There was a 6.6 earthquake in 1895, near their hometown, which caused damage for miles around. The Civil War’s Second Battle of Springfield, MO was fought in January 1863; this would have been shortly before Woody was born. Walnut Grove, MO - which we have made the Prides’ hometown - was called Possum Trot until 1866.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

I hope y'all have seen Toy Story 4! Oh my goodness, I loved it, and have seen it twice already. Now that the movie's finally here, we should be able to get back on our first-of-the-month posting schedule for the rest of these chapters!

Remember, our Pinterest board (Jessie's Journey under username yodelincowgirl) has lots of great new pins each chapter, to show where some of our inspiration has come from! This chapter's board has quite a few.

Toy Story still isn't ours. If it was, we'd know whether there was a 5 in the works.
Anyway, enjoy, and be sure to subscribe and bookmark so you don't miss anything!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

A visibly worried Bo stood in the entry hall of her home, dressed for an outing and clutching her infant daughter close to her chest.

“Yes, I’m fine. Are ya sure you’re okay with this? ‘Cause it sure seems like ya ain’t,” Jessie laughed.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you; you know I do,” Bo kissed Penny’s little blond head. “But we’ve never left her before.”

“It’s your anniversary. You’n Woody deserve some time just the two’a ya, before ya forget how to speak in anythin’ but baby talk.”

Bo cracked a feeble smile. “But it’s your anniversary too, and I don’t want to impose…”

“Takin’ care’a Penny is never imposin’,” Jessie smiled back sincerely. “And it’s not like you’ll be gone all day. C’mon, hand her over, Woody’s out front with the surrey.”

“Oh, be good for your Aunt Jessie and Uncle Buzz, sweet pea,” she gave the baby one more kiss, “Mama and Daddy will be back in an hour.”

“Take your time. We’re gonna have fun. Now, go!”

Penny had spent so much time with her aunt and uncle in her first two months of life that she barely let out a whimper when her mother left. After about fifteen minutes had passed happily, however, Penny started to cry. Jessie stood from where they’d been sitting with her on the sofa, and started walking her back and forth, bouncing gently up and down.

“What do you think is wrong?” Buzz asked, concerned.

“She’s not hungry, Bo made sure she was well fed before they left. She might be tired. Unless…” Jessie reached up under the baby’s voluminous skirts. “Yep. She needs changin’. Can ya hand me a diaper?”
“A what, now?”

“A diaper… they’re in the basket over there by the chair.”

Buzz started rifling through the frilly wicker basket of baby supplies. “What does it look like?”

Jessie rolled her eyes. “I know you’ve seen us changin’ her! Do ya wanna hold Penny while I get everythin’ together, then?”

Buzz looked askance at the wailing and not-particularly-clean infant.

“Oh for cryin’ out loud, she’s just wet, not soiled.” Jessie passed Penny to her husband, and while he held his niece rather like a football, she gathered the necessary supplies and spread out a cloth on the floor for a changing area. Taking Penny back from Buzz, she carefully laid the baby down, and lifted up her long white dress so she could unfasten the cotton diaper. "Ya sure you wanna have one of our own? Because if ya think you won't have t'lift a finger and I'll do all the work, I can promise ya right now there’ll be no Buzz Junior."

“I don’t mind helping, but it’s not like I know what I’m doing here. I can count the times I’ve held my brothers’ and cousins’ kids on one hand.”

“I didn’t know what I was doin’ at first either; I learned from watchin’ Bo. C’mere.” She patted the floor next to her. “You wanna try?”

Buzz knelt tentatively next to his wife, who had already removed the safety pin from the folded fabric.

“If Woody can do this, I know you can,” she smirked. “Stay here with her, I’ll get a damp cloth. Just don’t let her kick off her diaper.” In a moment Jessie was back with a soft, wet washcloth. “Ok, ready? Slide the old one out from under her; Bo said to put it in the can on the back stoop and she’d take care of it later.” She handed Buzz the wiping cloth. “Now clean her off. There ya go. That can go with the diaper when you’re done.” Penny’s fussing had quieted down as soon as the wet garment was removed; she now looked up at her uncle with wide, curious eyes. Jessie grabbed a clean cotton diaper from the basket, then passed it over to Buzz. “Fold this into a square, then a triangle.” She handed him another piece of fabric; this one she had folded herself. “Put this in the middle, it makes it more absorbent. That’s right. Ya ready to put it on her?”

“I suppose,” Buzz laughed a bit nervously at the sight of the wiggly infant in front of him.

“Grab her ankles in one hand.” Jessie giggled as her husband tried to accomplish the feat. “You’re not gonna hurt her; here, like this,” Jessie demonstrated, and Buzz grasped the little feet gently as he awaited further instructions. “’K, now lift her behind, and slide the diaper under. There ya go. You can let go now. All ya gotta do now is pin it.”

“Pin it?” he balked as he took the open safety pin from his wife’s hand. “I don’t want to do that. What if I poke her?”

“Ya won’t, so long as you’re careful. Bring the point up between her legs, then wrap each of the side ones over. See how it all overlaps? Just pin through all that in the middle. Use your hand to protect her tummy.” Buzz took a deep breath, tried… and succeeded. “Ya did it! See, was that so hard?”

“I guess not,” he chuckled. “Just takes some practice.”

“There’s my Penny-girl, fresh as a daisy,” Jessie cooed as she picked up the infant, who was
favoring her aunt with sweet smiles. “Say ‘thanks, Uncle Buzz, for my clean drawers!’” Once her
niece was nestled in the crook of one arm, she held out her free hand. “Gimme the dirty cloths, will
ya? We’ll take em out back, won’t we sweetie pie?”

Buzz had just folded the changing-cloth and returned it to its proper location when he heard a knock
at the door. He answered it, to find his mother on the other side, holding a basket. “Hola, mijo. I
went to your house first, but no one was there, so I thought I’d try here. Where are Woody and Bo?”

“Out for a drive. We’re watching Penny.”

“Ay, where is the little angel?” She handed the basket to Buzz and made her way into the parlor,
just as Jessie was entering with Penny in her arms. Estrellita made a fuss, and the baby rewarded her
with a crooked little grin. “Look at her, she’s getting bigger every day! And even more like her
Mamá, too. Those curls! And such big blue eyes.”

“There’s still not a lick of Pride in her,” Jessie laughed, swaying instinctively to keep her niece
happy. “Watch her start actin’ like Woody.”

“Save us all, if that’s the case.” Buzz quipped, as he returned to the room where the women were,
and stood next to his wife, who let out a snicker.

Estrellita shook her head good-naturedly at her son’s joke, then turned to her daughter-in-law. “Oh, I
brought dinner for you, mija; I left a basket of your own in your kitchen. Neither of you girls should
be cooking on your anniversary.”

“That’s mighty kind of ya, but I woulda figured out somethin’ later.”

“Well, now you don’t have to.” She patted Jessie on the arm. “I should be going.”

“Already?” Jessie looked a little disappointed at her mother-in-law’s hasty departure.

“So, I need to run some errands in town, now that the food has been dropped off. Besides,” she cast
her son a wink, “it looks like you two are getting some excellent practice in today, and I don’t want
to interfere with that.”

“Mamá,” Buzz groaned, “don’t start.”

“I am teasing, mi corazón. In your time. But you both make a lovely picture with this precious
niña.”

Hugs were exchanged, and Buzz walked his mother out. When he came back into the parlor, he
found Jessie sitting on the sofa with Penny on her lap. He sat down next to her, extending an arm
around his wife’s shoulders. They sat together for a few minutes, their only words those said softly to
the baby, until Jessie spoke up.

“I know your Mama was givin’ us a hard time… an’ I was messin’, too, about the diaper… but, do
ya ever really think about it?”

“About what?”

“You know…”

He smirked at her sudden shyness of the subject. “You mean a cousin for Penny?” Jessie nodded.
“Yes, I do.”
She smiled. “Well… I was thinkin’, maybe once we have that first Valencia harvest… it’s still a couple years off, I know, but that way I can help ya with gettin’ everythin’ ready for that first.”

“I think that sounds like a perfect plan, florecita,” he rubbed his thumb across her shoulder and kissed her on the top of the head. “Besides, by then, we should be able to hire some extra help for the grove when we need it.”

“But I’m still in charge of packin’,” she asserted.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” he grinned. “I’m sure Mamá will give you a new rebozo, anyway, so you can train up our little grove helper early.”

Jessie giggled at the thought. “This is nice, sittin’ here with her, you’n me.” Penny had her dimpled little fist in her mouth, and Jessie gave her niece a tender squeeze. “But I’m not quite ready for how tired Woody’n Bo are all the time.”

“Me neither,” Buzz laughed. “And with as much as I’ve teased him for it, I know I’ll be getting it right back when it’s our turn.”

About an hour and a half after their departure, Woody and Bo returned home. As soon as she entered the house, Bo made a beeline for her daughter, and Jessie handed the baby over willingly.

“Mama’s home, min älskling. Were you a good girl for your auntie and uncle?”

“Good as gold. Didja have a nice drive?”

“Yeah, we went up to Smiley Heights, drove through the park,” Woody answered for both of them, as his wife was too busy lavishing affection on their child. “Although we only seemed to be able to talk about Penny,” he chuckled.

“I can’t help it, I missed her,” Bo laughed in return. “But it was nice to get out for a little while.”

“Oh, Mamá brought by some food; it’s in the kitchen,” interjected Buzz. “And she brought us some, too, so we better get home and tend to it.”

“That sounds swell. I’m starving, so I’m gonna go dig in to ours,” Woody walked over to Bo, who was now seated with Penny, and rested a hand on her shoulder, “I’ll get everything ready for dinner.” He looked to Buzz and Jessie, “Thanks, you two. We appreciate it.”

“Yes, thank, you,” Bo repeated. “Now, go enjoy your own anniversary!”

The Lightyears took the short walk next door to their house and entered the kitchen, where Jessie immediately went for the basket that sat on the table. “Let’s see what your Mama made for us!”

“Hold on a second,” Buzz reached out and gently pushed her hand away from the handle, “she fixed that basket for a reason. I asked her to make us a picnic dinner.”

“A picnic? You rascal, you! I thought we weren’t gonna do anythin’ much.”

“Yes, well, it’s been a long time since we sat out under the stars. I thought it would be a good way to spend our anniversary. Like the old days.”

“When we had to sneak around just to find a few minutes alone together,” she wrapped her arms around his waist. “I’m glad we don’t hafta worry about curfews anymore.”

“Mmm, but stargazing is still nice,” he returned her embrace and kissed her softly.
“I better go upstairs and change, this wrapper ain’t exactly fittin’ for a special occasion.”

“I’ve told you before, I like you in a wrapper.”

“Yeah, well this one’s got a little spit-up on the shoulder.”

“Good point. I’ll gather the rest of our things.”

Jessie broke free and darted down the hall and up the stairs. When she returned a few minutes later, Buzz was ready with a blanket, a lantern, and his telescope box, along with the picnic hamper.

Dividing the items to carry between the two of them, they headed out to the farthest reaches of the ranch property, still untamed and not yet planted in orange trees or used for cattle grazing. Finding a spot near the foothills, they spread out the blanket and set up their feast.

Tin plates were piled with the food Estrellita had prepared - a Spanish potato salad in an olive oil dressing; albóndigon with salsa; and slices of cake, the same kind that had been served at their wedding, but baked fresh for the occasion. She had also included a bottle of agua fresca, which Buzz poured into glasses for them. As they ate, they reminisced over their wedding day, laughing at memories of the cascarones and smiling as they recalled sweet moments shared with family, friends, and each other.

Once their meal concluded and all had been put away but their drinking glasses, Jessie reached into her skirt pocket. “Here,” she shoved a little box in Buzz’s direction, a wide grin on her face. “Happy anniversary!”

He smiled back as he lifted the lid, to find a sturdy silver chain, with a clasp at one end, a bar at the other, and a small pendant hanging off of it by a smaller length of matching chain. On one side of the polished silver circle was a crescent moon and a starburst, set with the tiniest of blue paste stones, and on the other was an artfully engraved entwined J and B.

“A watch fob, this is really nice,” he leaned forward and gave her a quick kiss. “Thank you, florecita.”

“It’s a locket, too - I thought with all’ a your picture takin’, ya might have somethin’ to put inside,” she added proudly.

“I’m sure I can think of something.” Buzz slipped his hand into his trouser pocket to pull out an equally small box, which he handed to his wife. “And this is yours.”

Jessie took her turn in raising the lid of her own gift, and smiled when she saw what was inside. “Oh, wow, Buzz, they’re awful pretty!” She ran her fingers over the two dainty golden buttercup-set stud earrings, set with clear stones. “They look almost real.”

“They are,” Buzz grinned, as his wife’s eyes widened in shock. “Don’t worry, I didn’t spend all our savings;” he chuckled. “There were some diamonds left in the earring I had your engagement ring made from, so I thought these would be a fitting anniversary gift.”

“I love ‘em!” Jessie raised up on her knees and kissed her husband, then sat back down and began to unscrew the backs of the earrings she was wearing so she could change into her new ones. As she did that, Buzz picked up his telescope case and flipped open the latch, then proceeded to set up the stand. The sun had slipped beneath the horizon, and a sliver of moon was shining in the early evening sky. Jessie lit a lantern while Buzz finished arranging the apparatus and focusing it so they could see clearly.
The couple took turns looking through the lens. Buzz quizzing Jessie on the constellations he had taught her in the past, and Jessie proudly recalling most of them. When they had had their fill of stargazing, Buzz returned his telescope to its case and they stretched out on the blanket, Jessie’s head on her husband’s chest, and his arm around her shoulder.

He kissed his wife on the forehead. “It’s such a nice night tonight, just like last year.”

Jessie raised her head so she could purr in his ear, “That’s not all that’s just like last year.” She guided his hand from her shoulder to her waist, hinting at what was hidden beneath her shirtwaist and skirt.

Buzz cocked an eyebrow. “Oh, really? How much the same are we talking about, here?”

She smirked at her husband flirtatiously. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Helpless to resist his wife’s coquetry, he closed the distance between them, kissing her soundly. The mood was heightened by their romantic setting, so much like their earliest evenings alone in the desert, and he rolled her over on the blanket as their kisses intensified. Her hands spanned his back, pulling him closer, and when his own hand crept beneath the hem of her skirts - and felt the embroidered details on her stockings just above her boots, and the heavy lace edging her combination - he recognized just what she had been teasing before. “Maybe we should head back to the house,” he breathed against her neck.

They collected themselves and quickly gathered their belongings, then began the walk back to their home. In the distance, they could hear Penny’s wailing through an open window.

“Penny’s a sweetheart, but I’m glad it’s still just the two’a us, for a while longer,” Jessie mused, as they drew nearer to their back porch. “It’s been the best first year, with you.”

Buzz held open the door, and smiled warmly at his wife as she passed through. “And it’s only the beginning, florecita.”

In the kitchen, Jessie flipped on the light switch and began putting away the food that was left in the picnic basket. As she checked to make sure it was empty and went to close the lid, she was caught off guard when her husband grabbed her from behind and lifted her bridal-style.

“Hey!” she giggled, clinging to his neck while he carried her over to the light switch and turned it off with his elbow.

“You’re not the only one who can do things like last year,” he grinned, then headed upstairs with his bride.

Buzz stepped into his sunlit dining room and glanced quickly at the table. “Where is it?” he asked Jessie, who had just carried in a bowl of scrambled eggs.

“Where’s what?” she replied innocently.

“The paper. You usually put it on the table.”

“I dunno, guess it didn’t come this morning,” she shrugged, and fought back a snicker when she saw her husband’s somewhat panicked expression.

He turned and headed back toward the doorway. “I’m going to look on the porch. Or maybe it fell into the rose bushes...”
“How much is it worth to ya?” Buzz stopped and turned to his wife, who was standing with her hand on her hip, smirking. “Why don’tcha just come an’ sit down?”

When he came back over to his chair and pulled it away from the table, he discovered the April 8, 1896 edition of the *Citrograph* on the seat waiting for him. He quickly sat down and scanned the front page until he found the news story he’d been hoping for.

“How!” exclaimed Buzz, “America took first and second in the 400, Burke and Jamison. And Garrett won the shot put. Our team is sweeping the games!”

“Have some breakfast,” Jessie giggled, as she seated herself and began to fill her plate. “Don’t we hafta inventory the shed today?”

“Yeah, just let me finish reading this. Looks like Clark, Garrett and Connolly took first, second, and third in the long jump, too. And Garrett already won the discus, and Connolly the hop, skip and jump, on the first day of competition. So let’s see, how many medals is that for us now?” He started counting on his fingers.

“It’s a good thing we had an earlier harvest this year, or you’d be worthless right now,” she teased.

“This is a moment in history, the first Olympic games since ancient times. And many of the events they’re holding there, I competed in during my Athletic Club days. I won medals, you know.”

“I have no doubts,” she grinned.

“I took first in the quarter-mile both years I competed, first in the 100 meter in ’84, and second in the 100 in ’85. I participated in the high jump, too, and got second in that in ‘84.” Buzz continued to share stories of his past athletic triumphs, and once their meal was finished, he helped Jessie clear the table and wash the dishes before they headed outside for the day’s work. Stopping first in the barn to check on the horses, Jessie walked up to the stall containing her new pinto horse, Buttercup. Buzz had kept his Christmas promise, and as soon as they had the proceeds in hand from their latest crop, he had bought her a horse of her own.

“Hey fella,” she stroked his nose, and he nuzzled against her. In the next stall over, Bullseye peeked his head over the gate, trying to get Jessie’s attention. “Oh, don’t worry, Bullseye, you’re still my best boy, too,” she laughed. “We just gotta make sure Buttercup knows he’s part of the family now, don’t we?”

Woody entered from the direction of the cattle stalls. “Hey guys, what are you up to today?”

“We’re gonna sort through our supplies in the shed, see what all needs to be replaced since the harvest,” answered Jessie, “that is, if I can keep Buzz’s mind on the grove, and not the Olympic games.”

“Oh, yeah, I saw that in the paper, it’s going on in Greece, right? Sounds pretty interesting.”

“If I was only ten years younger,” Buzz sighed wistfully.


“Yeah, I could’ve. I won the quarter-mile race in my Athletic Club’s field day back in ‘84 and ‘85, and I could do it again now. I bet I can run as fast now as I did back then.”

“You can’t,” he laughed outright. “Especially not now, in your old age.”
Buzz puffed out his chest, stepping closer to Woody. “Can.”

Woody pointed a finger defiantly, nearly poking his brother-in-law in the eye. “Caaaan’t.”

The two men faced off, and Buzz issued a challenge. “Wanna wager, cowboy? I could still run a race with my eyes closed. And beat you by a long shot.”

“Alright then,” Woody leaned in, “prove it.”

“I know!” Jessie interrupted the men’s increasingly-tense showdown. “Why don’t we settle this after lunch, proper-like. Buzz, you can figure out a track, and y’all can run a race. After we get our work done.”

“Good idea, Jessie. But I don’t think we better challenge Woody to anything farther than 100 meters,” he crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow at his brother-in-law.

“I can run any distance you throw at me,” Woody snapped back.

“Is that a fact? Quarter-mile it is, then.”

“C’mon, Buzz, we’ll show ‘im later.” Jessie took her husband by the arm and led him out of the barn, in the direction of the shed. She struggled to keep him on task as they counted crates and labels and checked canvas sacks for rips - all he wanted to discuss was the potential courses for a makeshift track and how handily he was going to beat Woody at this challenge he’d brought on himself.

At midday, Woody entered his kitchen to find a confused Bo waiting for him. “Jessie popped in to say she and Buzz were going to have lunch at their own place today, so they could get ready, and to meet them out back at two. What’s going on?”

“Buzz and his bragging,” her husband grumbled. “Thinks he’s as good an athlete as the college boys competing in those Olympic games over in Greece.”

“He probably could keep up with them. But what does that have to do with you?”

“I… called him out, and he challenged me to a race.”

“You never learn, do you? Well, that’s going to be fun to watch,” Bo smirked. “You better take a seat, you’re gonna need your sustenance, Sheriff.”

At the designated time, the Prides were emerging onto their back stoop just as Slink was striding across the backyard from the barn. “I couldn’t miss this,” he chuckled, approaching his old friend.

Moments later, the screen door swung open at the Lightyears’, and Jessie skipped down her porch steps and over toward her brother’s house. “Buzz is gettin’ ready. He said he’d be out in a sec.”

“Getting ready? What getting ready is there to do?” Woody scoffed.

“Dunno,” his sister shrugged. “But I heard him diggin’ through his old trunk upstairs while I was cleanin’ up.”

With a clack of the screen door closing yet again, the waiting group turned to see Buzz coming towards them, dressed in a curious outfit. He wore a white cotton shirt, sleeveless and collarless, and matching white knee-length trousers - both of which fit rather snugly. On his feet were tall red stockings and thin-soled lace-up oxford shoes, and on the front of the shirt were pinned five ornate gold and silver medals, which glimmered in the sunlight with every step he took.
“Nice socks, Hercules,” commented Woody, as Buzz joined the others.

“At least I didn’t come out naked,” Buzz flashed a wide grin, “like the classical Greeks.”

His brother-in-law rolled his eyes. “You’re not far from it.”

“I ain’t complainin’,” Jessie couldn’t help but giggle. “Ya didn’t tell me ya still had that getup in your trunk.” Her eyes traveled, and she smiled crookedly. “Was it always so… tight?”

“No… but it’s been over ten years since I last wore it for Athletic Club events. Alright. So,” he clapped his hands together for emphasis, “we’ll start between the houses. I figure a loop around the backyard - along the lane to the barn, across the back of the garden, turning at the packing shed and down by the edge of the grove, back to here - is approximately a quarter mile, give or take. Hold these, florecita,” he unpinned his medals and handed them to his wife, along with his pocketwatch. “Use the second hand to time me. And you can count us down - unless we should make it more official, with a starting pistol.”

“This is plenty official,” Woody said as he stepped over to the designated starting spot, centered behind the two houses. “I’m ready, if you are.”

Buzz joined him, and assumed the crouched starting position of a seasoned runner. “You running in your boots, cowboy?” he glanced smugly up at his brother-in-law, who stood upright, yet with his arms out in readiness.

“You worry about your own footwear. Count us down, Jess.”

Bo sat down on the top step of her stoop with Penny on her lap, and Slink leaned against the railing. Jessie raised her hand and began to count backwards from five, and with a loud “One!” the two men were off like a flash.

Buzz instantly took the lead, and Woody’s arms and legs flailed wildly as he tried his best to keep up with the polished form and speed of his friend. As they rounded each corner, Woody fell back a little further. When they reached the finish line where Jessie still stood, Buzz was clearly the victor.

“Fifty-six seconds!” Jessie called out to her husband as he raced past her. “You want yours, Woody?” she yelled as her brother ran by.

“I’m good,” he huffed, as he stood, hunched over and panting.

As soon as Woody had caught his breath and righted himself, Buzz mimicked his gesture from earlier in the day, and pointed with emphasis. “Can!”

“Yeah, yeah, okay…” muttered Woody. “I just wasn’t prepared is all.”

“Let’s face it, I’m only five seconds slower than I was in my twenties. I was right and you were wrong. Own up, cowboy.”

“Fine, but I still think I could take you.”

“I wanna try!” Jessie jumped into the debate. “Can we all run again? Please?”

“Women don’t take part in the games, Jess,” Woody stated matter-of-factly.

“So? They can at ours. Whadd’ya say?” she turned to her husband.

“I’d like to see what you can do,” he smiled at his wife.
She grinned back, then faced her brother. “You chicken, Woody? ‘Fraid of bein’ beat by a girl?”

“Not on your life,” he squared his shoulders.

“We’ll see.” She looked to the spectators nearby. “‘K, who’s gonna start us?”

“I will,” Slink stepped over to the line and pulled out his own watch.

Bo rose and drew closer to the action. “Beat the pants off ‘em, Jessie.” Penny babbled her own unintelligible words of encouragement from her mother’s arms.

Jessie tucked up her skirts into the waistband of her wrapper, leaving her legs unencumbered from the knees down, and assumed the crouched position she’d just seen Buzz take. “Line up, fellas!”

Woody groaned. “Oh, come ON!” After a momentary pause of consideration, he yanked off his boots, tossing them to the side, and copied the two Lightyears in their stance.

“Ready, y’all?” Slink counted down like Jessie had done, and sent the trio off running.

Buzz again went out in front, but Jessie caught up with him easily, and they remained neck-and-neck as they followed the impromptu racecourse. Woody trailed farther behind than before, and as they neared Slink at the finish, Jessie held onto her lead by a slight margin, with Woody lagging quite a distance behind Buzz.

“HA!” Jessie cheered in celebration at her victory. “What were ya sayin’ there, Woody?”

Buzz laughed, wrapping an arm around his wife’s waist. “I think you hiked up your skirts as a tactic to distract me.”

“It worked, didn’t it?” she giggled, returning the teasing as she loosened her skirts and let them fall back down to her ankles. “I’ll hafta use that more often.”

“I coulda beat you easy, if I hadn’t just run against Buzz,” her brother wheezed, finally able to respond. “You knew that, too.”

“You sayin’ I didn’t play fair?” Jessie’s tone changed from playful to affronted, with a flash of fire in her eyes.

“I’m saying I want a rematch,” Woody snapped sullenly, matching his sister’s glare.

“Fine,” Buzz sighed. “But not right now. We’ll do it tomorrow morning, when you’re both fresh. Then there can be no accusations of an uneven playing field.” He placed a hand on the small of his wife’s back. “Let’s go get a drink inside, and cool off.” As he led her away, he shared an exasperated glance with Bo.

Later that evening, Buzz sat at his desk in their upstairs spare room, going over the grove’s inventory figures he and Jessie had tallied earlier in the day and calculating orders for new supplies. His wife came through the door from the hall, carrying his folded athletic clothing from the prior competition.

“These are clean an’ dry. Where d’ya want me to put ‘em?”

Buzz didn’t look up from his work. “They can just go back in my trunk. My shoes are by the bed, and my medals are on the dresser, if you want to get those, too.”

“‘K.”
She set down the garments on the rounded trunk lid and slipped through the doorway that adjoined their own bedroom. When she returned a moment later with the other items in hand, she unlatched the lid and lifted it open.

Kneeling on the floor, Jessie began poking through the trunk’s contents. “Is there any particular way ya want these in here?” she asked.

“Not really. They can be just laid on top.”

After she had placed the athletic accoutrements carefully inside, she then pulled out something else that had caught her eye. “Ya still have these ol’ things?” She held up a pair of horseshoe-shaped handcuffs, with the key dangling from one end, and recalled the night she’d witnessed them used on her attempted assailant. “What didja keep them for? Ya worried things are gonna get rowdy on the ranch?”

“No,” he chuckled, “but I bought those myself, so I didn’t see the point in throwing them away.”

Jessie dropped the cuffs back in the trunk and reached for another interesting object. “Hey, your U.S. Marshal badge! Shouldn’t ya have turned this in, Mr. By-the-Book?” she asked him with a smirk.

“For your information, they let me keep it, for my service,” he retorted with a smile.

“Likely story.” Jessie stood, and fiddled with the bodice of her wrapper before she walked over to her husband. “I think this looks good on me, don’t you?” She pointed to the shiny star affixed to her dress, grinning mischievously. “Sheriff Jessie. Or, Marshal Jessie.”

“That’s a rather frightening thought,” he teased, pivoting his desk chair to face her. “You, with all that power.”

“I’d use it to hogtie Woody for bein’ such a pill,” she grumbled, as she seated herself on her husband’s lap. “The nerve’a him, accusin’ me of cheatin’! Not my fault he was too tired.”

Buzz wrapped his arms around her waist, as hers entwined around his neck. “As good a friend as he’s always been to me, he’s also always been a sore loser. Just promise me one thing,” he tugged his wife closer. “Make sure you beat him tomorrow.”

“I’ll wear a ridin’ skirt, that’ll help,” Jessie grinned down at him. “Unless you’d rather I make ya distracted again.”

“I’m always distracted,” replied Buzz, pulling her in for a kiss.

The next morning, the two couples met again in the backyard, with Slink joining them to see how the Pride siblings’ competition was going to play out. Ranch work could wait until this dispute was settled once and for all.

“No running uniform today?” Woody remarked, when he realized that Buzz was dressed in his typical work shirt and trousers.

“I’m not running today.”

“What’s the matter? Don’t want your wife to beat you again?”

“My pride can take it,” he chuckled. “It’s yours we have to worry about.”
Jessie - who had, in fact, donned a riding skirt for ease of motion - crouched down with her brother at the designated location, while Buzz consulted his pocketwatch. “I’ll count you down,” he watched and counted as the second hand moved, “okay… GO!”

The siblings raced around the previous day’s course, Woody fighting with all his might not to let his sister get too far of a lead. He tried to overtake her, but as they approached the finish line, she kicked into gear and darted ahead of him, winning by several yards.

Woody bent over, trying to catch his breath, and extended a hand of congratulations. “I gotta hand it to you, Jess, you beat me fair and square. I’ll say uncle.”

“Thanks, Woody,” Jessie accepted the offered handshake, and yanked her brother upright with a smile. “I’ll try not to make ya say it again til ya actually are one.”

The door to the Pride kitchen opened with a creak, and Buzz set down a burlap sack next to the wall as he entered. Not finding anyone in the room, he proceeded into the parlor, where Woody sat in his chair, reading the newspaper.

“I got the rock salt to make ice cream later. Is Jessie here? I didn’t bother to check at home.”

“Yeah, she and Bo are upstairs getting Penny bathed and dressed to go. Was there any mail?”

“Not much, and it’s good I went into town when I did. Everything was starting to close up for the July Fourth festivities.” He reached inside his suit coat and pulled out a couple envelopes from his pocket. “This one’s for you,” he handed one envelope to his brother-in-law, then studied the writing on another. “Do you know why a Mrs. C. Hollingsworth from St. Louis would be writing to Jessie?”

Woody bolted to his feet and leaned in close. “Shhh! Gimme that!” He snatched the letter from Buzz’s hand. “That’s Aunt Molly.”

Buzz looked at him, confused. “But it says C, not M.”

“Her husband’s name was Cyril.” He began to loosen the seal, and slid out the contents. “This can’t be good. We haven’t heard a word from her, not even for the wedding.”

_I didn’t think it was possible for you to be more of a disappointment. I was wrong to underestimate you. Your mother spent several weeks with me following her time at Woodrow’s house, and gave me the full account of your inexcusable behavior. I was already loathe to leave you any sort of inheritance in my will, following your condemnable actions regarding Mr. Mayer. Now, I can assure you, you are no longer considered deserving of any sort of bequeathal, as I can barely even consider you a relation. Dressing in scandalously masculine clothing, failing to show your mother the respect she deserves, and marrying a foreigner of questionable descent - utterly disgraceful._

_In addition, I have recently found myself in the position of needing to build a new residence, as my row house in Lafayette Square was destroyed by the Great Cyclone this past May - not that you or Woodrow would care about such a plight befalling me. I am relocating to Vandeventer Place, as I cannot abide the ugly view of the park, now practically devoid of trees. Therefore my resources will be dedicated entirely to ensuring this new abode is built to the standards I am accustomed to living in, which will not leave me much beyond my necessary expenses. So, as you can see, my decision is made even simpler due to such financial hardships._

_You may inform Woodrow that he can thank you for his disininheritance as well. Perhaps if he taught his insolent wife some manners, I would reconsider - however, I fully expect your influence is to be_
blamed for her behavior. You both chose the life of backwoods farmers over the status and material comfort I could have provided, and you now must find your own way in that life, with no assistance from me.

“What a load of horse…” he muttered as he made a beeline for the dining room, the document still in his hand. He opened one of the top buffet drawers and pulled out a writing tablet and envelope, a pen, and ink. Sliding out a chair, he sat down and began scribbling furiously. “Hardships, my eye! She’s not hurting, and she’s not gonna be anytime soon. She’s just trying to make Jessie feel guilty, that’s what. I won’t let her, either; not after Jessie finally got up the gumption to stand up to Ma.”

Buzz reached for the letter where Woody had dropped it on the table. “Mind if I look?”

Woody’s gaze remained focused on the task at hand, his pen scratching across the blank paper. “Be my guest. But you won’t like it.”

As Buzz read, his scowl deepened with each sentence. “Foreigner,” he mumbled, “someone might want to inform her California has been a state since 1850.” When he was finished, he crumpled it in anger. “How did you and Jessie ever come from that family?”

“We got out.” Woody blew on his handwriting to dry the ink. “That should do it; we can drop it in a mailbox this afternoon. I’ll throw Aunt Molly’s letter in the stove. Jessie’s not gonna see it. She’s not even gonna know about it.”

“Know about what?” Jessie appeared in the doorway, her eyes wide with concern. Bo was just behind her, holding Penny.


“If it was mine, I’ve got a right to know what’s been said about me,” she interrupted.

Her brother shook his head. “You don’t wanna know.”

Jessie stared him down. “Yes, I do.”

Woody looked to Buzz, who reluctantly smoothed out the crumpled letter and handed it to his wife. Jessie’s hands trembled and face paled as her eyes scanned the page. “Okay,” she said with a shaky voice. “Lemme see what you wrote back.” Woody passed the paper over to her, and she read her brother’s words.

It’s so nice of you to finally grace us with a letter, after over a year of marriage and the birth of my first child have already come and gone without a word. For your information, I intercepted this letter before Jessie could see it. I won’t allow you to demean my sister any further than you already have. I’m sure Ma didn’t bother to tell you how insufferable she was to all of us while she was here - and I talked back to her too, more than Jessie did, to protect my family. That’s what family does. So don’t worry about your inheritance, we won’t be losing any sleep over it. We’d rather be happy in our “backwoods farmer” life than be beholden to you any day.

“That’s good,” she sighed, as she set both letters back down on the table.

Buzz stepped closer to Jessie and rested a hand on the small of her back. “She’s just trying to get under your skin. Don’t give her words any more thought, florecita, she’s not worth it.” Jessie
nodded weakly in response.

“You know what this means, Jess?” her brother smiled reassuringly. “That YOU got under Ma’s skin. You got the better of her, and she knows it, so they lashed out by taking away the only thing that matters to them - money. What they don’t realize is that we’re the winners here.”

“Woody’s right,” Bo came forward. “What we all share, money can’t buy. Now, put her out of your head, and let’s go have fun at the parade.” She reached for the wrinkled paper on the table. “But I’m reading this nonsense first.”

“Just when I think I’m past all’a their fault-findin’…” Jessie shook her head.

“You are,” Buzz hugged her closer, kissing her on the forehead. “And you’ll feel better as soon as we get into town. Let’s go grab the picnic basket while Woody finishes up here.”

The two couples, with baby Penny, convened at the barn a few minutes later, where Woody harnessed Bullseye to the surrey and Slink met them to follow them into downtown Redlands on horseback. After their short drive, they found a place to park the carriage on Citrus Street, which was just around the corner from where the parade was set to travel down Orange Street. Once the horses were safely tethered to hitching posts, the group headed in the direction of the community’s patriotic celebration.

As they walked down Citrus Street, the lively melody of Sousa’s Liberty Bell march grew increasingly louder as they approached the city’s center known to locals as the Triangle - due to the intersection of the other two streets with Cajon Street - where the Redlands Band was playing beneath the city’s flagpole for the gathering crowd. With each note of the happy music, Jessie felt her spirits lifting, and soon her aunt’s harsh words were a distant, faded memory. Her step lightened to nearly a skip, and she grinned as she took in the festive atmosphere her hometown had taken on for the holiday. American flags adorned nearly every building, windows were draped lavishly with bunting, and streamers and paper lanterns spanned the street from rooftop to rooftop. Everywhere on the sidewalks and brick-paved road fellow citizens were dressed in their finest, as families rushed to secure a spot to watch the parade that would soon be starting.

Penny, who was perched comfortably in her father’s arms, watched bright-eyed as all the activity bustled around her. Next to father and daughter, Bo carried a parasol, white and lacy to match her summery white dotted muslin dress, which was ruffled and trimmed in pink. Jessie had donned her own favorite summer attire - the same yellow and red dress she’d worn to Barbie’s the previous July.

“Your new dress turned out awful pretty,” Jessie complimented her sister-in-law. “I couldn’t keep somethin’ with all that white clean for ten minutes.”

“I remember how many aprons you went through as a Harvey Girl,” Bo laughed.

At the Triangle they turned onto Orange Street and found a place along the curb where the five adults could comfortably stand.

“So what time is the three o’clock parade?” Woody asked the others, and was met with blank stares all around. “Uh, forget I said that.”

Slink chuckled and consulted his pocketwatch. “Should be comin’ any minute now.”

Before long the sound of a marching band floated down the street to greet the waiting throng, and the gleaming instruments and colorful uniforms came into view to the tune of the Washington Post
march, also by Sousa, whose rousing music was ideally suited to the occasion. *Semper Fidelis* and *The Thunderer* soon followed, as more bands were interspersed with community floats - wagons lavishly decorated with bunting, flags, flowers, and signage - promoting local businesses and organizations or carrying costumed figures such as Liberty and Uncle Sam. In addition to music and vehicles, the Cycling Club rode their wheels; the city’s fire department showed off their equipment; the police rode on horseback; and citizens waved flags and cheered for the soldiers who marched by, including a contingent of Civil War veterans.

After the last of the parade had passed by, the crowd dispersed, and the Lightyears, Prides, and Slink made their way back to the surrey, where their picnic basket waited for them. They traveled across town to Cañon Crest park, and took the drive up the hilly terrain until they came upon the open lawn area where other families had gathered for the holiday. Spreading out the blankets they had brought along, they set out the feast of chicken salad sandwiches, egg salad sandwiches, pickles, watermelon, strawberries, and lemonade that the girls had spent the morning preparing. An afternoon of happy conversation was spent among friends and family, and when the sun began to sink lower in the sky, they packed up and returned to the ranch.

As they walked from the barn to the houses, with Slink in tow, Bo looked at her lively little daughter and sighed. “I really wish Penny hadn’t fallen asleep at the park, there’ll be no putting her to bed now.”

“It was the fresh air, and the excitement of the parade,” opined Buzz.

“Since she’s up anyway, let her have some ice cream, and watch the fireworks.” Jessie took her niece’s hand. “You’d like some’a your Uncle Buzz’s ice cream, wouldn’t ya Penny-girl?” The baby grinned a drooly smile at her aunt. “See? She agrees. Might as well not fight it.”

“Easy for you to say,” Woody groused. “Think of us when we’re still up at three in the morning.”

“Can’t say I will, we’ll be sleepin’,” Jessie smirked. “Buzz’n I will get the ice cream stuff goin’. Why don’tcha get things set up in the yard out front while we do that?”

A half hour later, Buzz and Jessie emerged from their house, Buzz carrying his ice cream freezer and Jessie with the necessary bowls and spoons. Woody and Slink had set up the same picnic blankets from earlier on the front lawn, and carried out Penny’s baby swing for her to sit in. The six-month-old swung happily in the wooden-frame contraption, pushed every now and then by her father, as she observed everything the adults around her were up to.

Buzz checked on the contents of the freezer, and gave the handle a few extra cranks to make sure the dessert was the right mixture and consistency. Removing the top, he scooped out servings into the bowls Jessie handed to him, and she in turn passed them around.

“Oh, you put peach in it this time!” Bo pointed out, as she took a bite. “It’s delicious. Want to try some, sweet pea?” She offered a tiny spoonful to her daughter. Penny’s brow furrowed as she processed the new taste and sensation, then she smiled widely and reached her hands out to her mother, wanting more. “Looks like we’re going to need another bowl, Buzz,” Bo laughed.

Their treat finished, and the bowls and freezer having been carried back inside the Lightyear kitchen, Woody got out the box of sparklers he’d bought for the occasion. “I thought we could have a little fun with these while we wait for the fireworks to start.”

“Oooh, gimme one!” Jessie exclaimed, reaching to take one from her brother.

Lighting a match, Woody ignited the thin metal stick then held it a safe distance from his daughter.
“Look, sweet pea,” he said with a lilting voice, “see the lights?” He became too caught up in the little girl’s fascinated expression to notice that the sparkler was burning very low on its wire. “Ow!” He cursed as he shook his pained hand, and Penny burst out in infectious baby belly-laughter at her Daddy’s antics.

“Hey, do that again, Woody, she liked it,” grinned Buzz.

Woody looked askance at his brother-in-law as he nursed his burn. “You do it yourself.”

They lit the remaining sparklers, both for Penny’s amusement and their own, until the boom and flash of the city’s first rocket of the evening burst forth in the night sky. Woody lifted his daughter from the swing, and everyone took a seat on the blankets so they could thoroughly enjoy the show. Jessie reclined against Buzz, and he wrapped his arms around her waist; Woody held Penny on his lap, while Bo leaned against his shoulder; and Slink sat nearby.

The city was close enough that the ranch provided a clear view of the red, white, and blue that illuminated the darkness above them. Penny watched, mesmerized, as the colors changed and the starbursts spiraled, twinkled, and faded. When the fireworks reached their grand finale, she let out a squeal of delight at the explosion’s riot of color and light.

Slink stood slowly, stretching out his stiff limbs from sitting on the ground. “Thanks for includin’ me in your day, y’all. I’m turnin’ in. See ya in the mornin’, Woody.”

“Anytime, Slink.” The others said their goodnights to their friend, and Woody turned to his wife. “Well, we better attempt to get this little one to bed.”

Penny kicked her legs as Woody passed her to a standing Bo, so he could stand himself and pick up the blankets and sparkler remnants from the ground. Buzz grabbed the swing and helped carry it back to the Pride house, while Jessie held the door for everyone. In the light of the parlor, Penny’s twinkling blue eyes made it clear she was still raring to go.

Woody stared at his energetic baby, who was now crawling across the floor after her toys, and his brow dipped. “Is it just me, or does she seem even more awake now than before the ice cream?”

Jessie shared an amused smile with Buzz. “We best be gettin’ home. Good luck.”

As they crossed the yard to their house, Jessie giggled. “Maybe we shouldn’t have given Penny sweets so late at night. They’re gonna be up for a bit.”

“Bo allowed it,” Buzz shrugged. “But isn’t that what aunts and uncles are for?”

The rooster’s cry pierced the September morning twilight and Bo stirred in bed, her eyes opening. She took in a deep breath, enjoying the moment where the house and the world outside were still. Woody shifted, and she draped her arm across him as he made to rise from the bed. “Shh. No one else is up yet. Penny doesn’t need me, the cows don’t need you… you could just stay.”

Her husband smiled, but with a hint of regret. “I wish I could, little lady. But Slink and I have a lot of work to get done in the barn if we’re going to get the milking done today.” He removed any sting from his words with a kiss on her hand.

Bo sighed with a crooked smile, “One of these days, I’ll get you to stay put. Help me make the bed, then.” She rolled over and reached for her dressing gown, then looked across the mattress at her husband as he tugged the sheets into place. He had long ago switched from a billowy night shirt in favor of a pair of cotton drawers, but swore her to secrecy when he admitted that Buzz was right.
about them being more comfortable and practical. As he came around the foot of the bed, he grabbed his hat from the bedpost and set it on his head. “I didn’t realize,” she approached him, placing her hands on his sides, “that when I married you, I was also marrying that hat.”

“This hat’s seen me through a lot,” he grinned at her. “I can’t just give it up now.”

“Gotta love you for your loyalty, Sheriff.” She pecked him lightly on the lips. “What do you say to some breakfast?”

“If you’re cooking? Yes, please. I’ll look in on Penny.”

She gave him a sly look, “Smart, too. How’d I get so lucky?”

After a breakfast of “eggs with a hat” - a joke which did not go unnoticed or unappreciated by Woody - he gave his wife one last kiss. “See you for lunch.”

She reached up, taking the brim of his hat in her hands to straighten it on his head. It had started as a joke, since his headwear always ended up crooked, but had since become a morning ritual. “Tell my sheep I’ll check on them later.”

The day passed much like any other on Roundup Ranch. With Penny being occupied by her afternoon nap, Bo was busy kneading bread dough in the kitchen. Woody came in, taking a break from the cattle to get a drink. He slipped his free arm around Bo’s aproned waist and deposited a kiss on her cheek, “There’s my foxy wife.”

She looked up at him in confusion, “Foxy?”

He smiled, “It’s a new term popular on college campuses; Slink was telling me he read about it in the paper. Apparently it’s used to describe someone you think is attractive.”

“This is what you consider attractive?” she laughed and gestured to her flour-covered apron, hands, and arms.

“Always will,” he kissed her again, this time on her lips. He drained the last of the water from his glass and set it in the sink. “I better get back; one of the cows is giving us a lot of trouble with the milking today.” He paused by the door, “What, isn’t my hat crooked?”

Bo wiped off her hands and reached for the brim like always, but instead pulled the hat down so it covered his face. With a giggle, she dodged his attempt to grab her.

“Hey, you got flour on my hat,” Woody knocked at the offensive spot with the side of his fist. “You might pay for that later, Bo Pride.”

“Promises, promises,” she winked and waved him out the door.

Once again the house and the world outside were quiet and growing dark; outside as the sun disappeared below the horizon, and inside as Bo extinguished the lights in the house. Penny had been put to bed, and the only other sound was the lapping of water as Woody took his bath upstairs. As Bo walked past the staircase, she heard him call down to her.

“Can you come up here a minute? I left the soap on the sink and can’t reach it.”

She went upstairs and stopped short just inside the bathroom door as she saw the real reason Woody had wanted her. In the bathtub sat her husband, wearing nothing but an especially over-satisfied smile and his hat. He traced small circles in the water’s surface, “Care to join me?”
“What a tempting offer,” she took a few steps toward the tub, while unfastening the belt of her wrapper. She let the belt fall to the floor as she approached Woody, not breaking eye contact. He reached his hand out for her, but she swiftly grabbed the hat from his head and jumped back. “You know,” she held the hat up to inspect it, “I don’t think you’re the only thing that needs a good scrubbing.”

“Bo… what are you doing?” Woody fidgeted nervously.

“It’s just your hat is so dirty; did you let the cows trample it into the mud? Here’s the flour from earlier. It won’t do for you to have such a dirty hat on your head when you’re so nice and clean,” she grinned at him. “I’ll just go give it a dunk in the rain barrel while you finish your bath.” Bo hurried out of the room to the sound of the water sloshing as he struggled to get out of the tub.

“Bo… Bo…. Bo, come on…” Woody hastily wrapped a towel around his waist and chased after her as she ran down the stairs. He thought he had gotten her cornered behind the dining room table. “Ha, gotcha. Now give me my hat back.”

“Come and get it,” she ducked under his outstretched arm, evading capture yet again, and made a bee line for the stairs.

Woody was in hot pursuit, discarding the towel at the foot of the stairs, too focused on saving his hat. He finally caught his wife in their bedroom, wrapping his arms around her waist as she tried crawling across the bed to prolong the game. “Now I’ve got you,” he breathed, his face inches from his wife’s. The short distance was closed quickly and the hat soon fell to the floor, forgotten as the object of desire, followed not long after by Bo’s wrapper.

The couple tumbled along the mattress, Woody ultimately getting pinned by Bo. After several minutes he turned his head and mumbled about needing to empty the tub.

“It can wait,” Bo nuzzled his neck.

He rested his left hand on her hip, resisting her affections with a Herculean effort. “I left my wet towel on the floor downstairs, too. If I don’t take care of them now, I won’t do it at all.” His eyes closed as she silenced his protests with a kiss. Just as quickly, they flew open as he heard a clicking noise. He looked up and saw one handcuff around his right wrist and the other around one of the posts of the painted-iron headboard. He turned to Bo in bewilderment.

“You’re not going anywhere, Sheriff.”

Once again, he looked at his restrained wrist. “Wh-where did you get those?”

“They’re yours. What do you think of your foxy wife now?” she leaned in.

He smiled weakly at her, “I think I don’t have the keys to these cuffs.”

“What?” she stopped short, not entirely certain she understood him.

“I don’t have the keys to these cuffs.”

“What?!” Bo clapped her hands over her mouth and sat straight up. “Why do you even have them, then?”

“I dunno, I just tossed them somewhere,” he shrugged. “I never thought anyone would think to use them. Why did you think to use them?”
“You’re always out of bed so quickly in the morning, and I… I just wanted us to be able to enjoy
some time together without you being Mr. Responsible.” Bo glanced from her husband’s face to his
now-restrained wrist. “Well, that’s just great. What’re we going to do? Maybe I can pick the lock
with one of my hairpins. I’ve read about that.” She retrieved a hair pin and knelt on the mattress next
to Woody. She inserted the pin into the cuff attached to the headboard, but it kept slipping out as
Woody kept shifting. “Would you just hold still?”

“I’m just trying to help!”

“You want to help? Stay. Still. This is hard enough as it is.” After a few minutes of maneuvering
the pin within the locks on both cuffs, it became clear that it would not work. “I think the pin is too
small, and I don’t know that we have anything larger. Oh, Buzz!” She sprung up from the bed and
grabbed her robe.

“Whoa, whoa, wait a minute! What’d you mean ‘Buzz’?”

“He was a Marshal, wouldn’t he have handcuffs, too?”

“Maybe. But…”

“Then he’d have to have keys, right?”

Woody grew somewhat panicked, “Bo, no. You can’t tell him about this!”

She gave him the same exasperated look that Penny received when she misbehaved. “Well, it’s
either that or we break the bed. Don’t worry, I’ll be right back! Just don’t wake Penny, or we’ll be in
a different kind of trouble.” Slippers in hand, she hurriedly snuck out of the house.

Bo wrapped her dressing gown tightly over her undergarments and raced over to the Lightyear
house. She took a deep breath before turning the doorbell rather frantically.

It took a couple minutes before she heard the sound of bare feet padding down the stairs and the
door’s lock unlatching. Buzz stood on the other side, in his own robe, with Jessie dressed similarly
on the stair landing behind him.

“Bo? What’s wrong? Is Penny okay?”

“She’s fine…”

“Is it Woody?”

“Nooooo…”

Jessie came the rest of the way down the stairs to join her husband. "Then why in tarnation did ya
come tearin’ over here in a tizzy and scarin’ us half to death?"

"We… uh… have a… predicament… and I hope Buzz can help..."

Buzz’s brow furrowed. “What kind of predicament?”

Bo looked to Jessie, much preferring explaining it to her, but took a deep breath since both were
present.

"Uhhhh… well… do you still have your old handcuffs?"

"Yeah. Why?"
Bo dodged the question. "Is the key for yours the same as for Woody’s?"

“It’s the same model, but I’m not sure if it’s the same lock. Can’t he come over tomorrow, and I can help him with whatever the issue is?"

“Not exactly,” she fiddled with the tie belt of her dressing gown. “He’s rather… stuck… at the moment.”

It didn’t take long for the couple to figure out what Bo was getting at, dressed as she was so late at night, and considering her flustered state. "BO! YOU DIDN’T!" Jessie blurted out in shock, trying not to burst into giggles.

"Oh, but I did!” Bo buried her face in her hands. “I found them in his trunk when I was putting something away the other day, and… how was I to know he lost the key?"

“Wait here, I’ll go get mine,” replied Buzz, fighting back laughter himself. In a few minutes he returned, with a small silver key in hand. “I don’t know if it’ll work on his, but it’s worth a try. Do you want me to come over and try myself?”

“NO!” she cried. “No, I’ll be fine. Thank you. I’m sorry for this.”

Bo held the key up to Woody as she re-entered the bedroom. “Let’s hope this works.” It did and soon he was freed from his shackles. Bo set the key and cuffs on the dresser and sunk onto the edge of the bed. “I’m sorry, Woody. This isn’t how I wanted it to end up.”

He laughed, “You don’t need to apologize to me.”

“You’re not mad?”

“Nah. The longer I lay here, the funnier it got, actually,” he sat up, running his hand down her back tenderly. “I’ll know to watch out from now on; you’re pretty devious when you want to be.”

“I’m pretty mortified right now,” she gave him a dubious look.

“You asked me earlier what I thought about my foxy wife,” he tugged her robe from her shoulder, pressing his lips against her skin. He brought his hand to her cheek and turned her face towards him, claiming her lips against his as the answer.

The following morning, Bo was cleaning up the breakfast dishes as Woody stood near the back door, putting on his boots. He fished something out of his pocket, setting it on top of the ice box near the door. “Here’s the key; don’t forget to give it back to Buzz.”

“I had to ask for it; you can give it back.”

“No way! I’ll never hear the end of it if I do that.”

Bo turned towards him. “I think you can share in some of that.”

“If you hadn’t have used the handcuffs on me, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“If you hadn’t been more preoccupied with your cows than your wife, I wouldn’t have needed to!” she folded her arms across her chest and looked away.

Woody was stunned momentarily. “Well, you shouldn’t have used them if you didn’t know where the key was!” he settled back on his heels, satisfied he had won the argument.
Bo’s eyes went wide and she rounded on her husband, “Well, you shouldn’t have kept them when you knew there wasn’t one!!”

Woody’s mouth opened and closed a few times before he slumped slightly in defeat. “Point taken,” he conceded sullenly.

She walked over to him, reaching up to adjust his hat like always. She caressed his cheek and gave him a small smile.

His face softened into a tender look, and he picked up the key and tipped his hat as he headed outside. But as Woody took the walk across the yard, the key weighed in his hand like a brick. “I’m not looking forward to this,” he muttered to himself as he trudged toward the barn, where he found Buzz and Jessie inside with the horses. Jessie was brushing Buttercup, and Buzz was tending to Astronomo, when he approached them sheepishly.

Jessie stopped what she was doing, rested an elbow on the edge of the stall, and flashed her brother a wicked grin. “Good mornin’.”

Woody ignored his sister and handed the key to his brother-in-law. “Here’s your key.”

Buzz smirked, his eyes glinting with trouble. “I thought you might have brought it over earlier, but I figured you got tied up.”


“No need to get keyed up, cowboy.”

Woody scowled at his now-broadly-grinning friend. “You done?”

“I thought I was exercising restraint.”

With a roll of his eyes Woody trudged off in the direction of the dairy, leaving Buzz and Jessie laughing hysterically in his wake.

“And here I always figured you were the wild one of you two girls,” Buzz said, after he had reined in his mirth.

“Yeah, who’d a’thunk?” Jessie giggled in return. She reached across the stall divider to nudge her husband in the arm, looking up at him with a wink. “Just don’t lose that key.”

Chapter End Notes

Watch fobs were widely-worn men's jewelry, a sort of accessory on a decorative chain that they could hang their pocketwatch from and attach to their vest. The first modern Olympics were held in April 1896 in Athens, Greece. Americans followed reports of the games avidly, in newspapers all over the country, and the event became quite the craze. Buzz’s uniform is as described in an article about the Los Angeles Athletic Club from 1883, and the events he mentions were held at the club’s field days throughout the 1880s. Athletic award medals weren’t worn around the neck on ribbons like today, they were more like pinned hanging badges. The “Great Cyclone” was a massive tornado that hit St. Louis in May 1896, and destroyed the neighborhood we had Aunt Molly living in. The Fourth of July festivities are based on those described in newspapers.
throughout California in the mid-1890s - including an article on Redlands, which indicated the street their parade traveled on. Baby swings did exist in the 1890s - they were just wooden versions of what we’re familiar with today. “Egg with a hat” is an egg cooked within a hole cut in a piece of toast.

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